Anthropocene Aesthetic Shifts in Post-Apocalyptic Literature: An Analysis of Waste and the Sublime in Maureen F. McHugh's *After the Apocalypse*

David Lombard, University of Liège and University of Leuven

'Zombies were the ultimate *trash*' (McHugh 2011: 6, emphasis added). This reductive yet powerful statement by contemporary American sci-fi and fantasy writer, Maureen F. McHugh, illustrates her main take on waste and provides an example of what Patricia Yaeger and Susan S. Morrison refer to as 'detritus' or 'trash aesthetic' (Yaeger 2008: 327; Morrison 2015: 4). As this article postulates, McHugh's short story collection *After the Apocalypse* (2011) enriches and complicates our normative understanding of the multifaceted concept of 'waste.' McHugh's collection consists of nine unrelated short stories that do not contain direct cross-references, two of which ('Going to France' and 'Honeymoon') will not be discussed in this essay because they do not engage with the notions of waste or the sublime. Among the narratives that will be analysed, four of McHugh's short stories convey, through representations of waste, ingenious ways of relating to technology and the nonhuman, whereas three other stories explore the intricacies of ecological trauma. Set in post-apocalyptic settings caused by zombie plagues and pandemics, or other unidentified events, these seven short stories all encourage the reader to develop an ecological perspective on 'waste' located at the crossroads of apocalyptic discourse and the sublime. Apocalyptic or dystopian references are not new to McHugh's fiction, and neither are ecological concerns. As Marta Komsta remarks, McHugh's 1992 debut novel *China Mountain Zhang* depicts the United States as controlled by Chinese communists and mostly uninhabitable because of climate change, and her 1998 novel *Mission Child* portrays the wreckage of an Earth ravaged by overpopulation and pollution (2020: 234-35). *After the Apocalypse*, however, is a suitable case study for bringing together complex notions of waste, apocalypse, and the sublime within the theoretical context of the environmental humanities, which increasingly seek to meet the imaginative challenges of the Anthropocene and promote broader environmental awareness. Divided into three sections, this article first presents a brief overview of contemporary scholarship and theories on (post-)apocalyptic literature and the notions of waste and the sublime, before engaging in a critical reading of McHugh's representations of waste as related to the sublime and human/nonhuman relationships, and finally of representations of ecological trauma in the collection.

Introduction: (Post-)Apocalyptic Waste and the Sublime

Despite its foci on destruction and doom, post-apocalyptic (or post-catastrophe) fiction has grown in popularity and has received much critical attention in the burgeoning field of the environmental humanities. Ecocritic Greg Garrard writes that 'apocalyptic rhetoric seems a necessary component of environmental discourse' provided it also endeavours to envision a viable future on earth and not just a doomed and terrifying reality (2012: 113-16). More recently, Lorenzo DiTommaso asserted that US/Western twenty-first-century popular culture (and, by extension, literature) represents an 'apocalyptic worldview' that 'streamlines a complex problem into one that (1) can be grasped in basic terms and (2) indicates a clear and unambiguous course of action' (2020: 338). This 'apocalyptic worldview,' DiTommaso argues, results from a two-phase 'apocalyptic *shift*' first caused by 'ecological, political, social, and religious movements' in the late 1960s, which was then (in a second movement) globalized by events such as 'the digital revolution' or climate change that emphasized the difficulty or inability for 'human industry, intellection, or ingenuity' to resolve such 'systemic problems' (321, emphasis added). Contemporary apocalyptic fiction, DiTommaso notes, tries to move beyond the shallowness of the 'cosy catastrophe' and to circumvent binaries like good and evil, or Heaven and Hell (329). Such a secular worldview of a post-apocalyptic and unstable future reinforces 'group identity' since the catastrophe depicted, whether it is global warming, economic collapse, or a pandemic, needs to be dealt with as a group if humanity has any chance of survival (338).

'Apocalyptic waste' can have various meanings, such as the material, the figurative, or the metaphoric. To that end, apocalyptic literature becomes an appropriate framework for figuring current environmental challenges because it shows us 'not only on where we are going, but on where we currently are, as well as from where we have come' (McAllister, 2020: 6). In that sense, it is worth remembering that waste and apocalyptic discourse are connected by the simple fact that most of what (if not all that) will remain of humanity is plastic, trash, abandoned contrivances, and other man-made objects. Like 'apocalyptic predictions,' waste 'has become public, pervasive, and participatory,' which makes it a cultural object of study to which the public is increasingly exposed (Morrison 2015: 7; McAllister 2020: 336). Morrison also mentions that, when dealing with (representations of) waste, binaries are destined to fail because 'codifying clean as opposed to dirty does not get rid of dirt' but 'creates a coherent space within a system continually susceptible to what it leaves out' (2015: 10). This codification is also the key idea behind the 'abject' that is often associated with the experience of waste inasmuch as it establishes a 'border' or separation

82

between proper and improper (or clean and unclean) which is not automatically there (Kristeva 1982: 2-4). Such a separation is avoided in sublime scenarios that illustrate the experienced 'other' as being more than 'unclean.' Apocalyptic fiction that includes literary moments about waste and the sublime can thus help widen our understanding of and relationship with waste or, more largely, 'otherness' inasmuch as it provides a wider array of affective responses to encounters with 'the other' or the nonhuman, ranging from disgust and pity to satisfaction and compassion (9). In order to comprehend the intricacies of such reactions, this essay argues that an aesthetic (and affective) *shift* – in addition to DiTommaso's 'apocalyptic *shift*' – is necessary, one that would only become possible by redefining a human approach to aesthetic value and to the sublime.

The sublime has already been correlated with apocalyptic discourse in revisions such as the 'apocalyptic sublime' (Gunn and Beard 2000) or the 'poetic apocalyptic sublime' (Salmose 2018: 1419). In these constructions, the literary sublime functions as a rhetorical trope or strategy used to represent complex environments, objects, or situations; this creates disorienting or troubling affects which may, consequently, appear too abstract to be captured by means of common language or ordinary experience. In their article 'On the Apocalyptic Sublime,' Joshua Gunn and David E. Beard highlight the contributions of philosophers from Edmund Burke to Immanuel Kant and Jean-François Lyotard to shaping an understanding of the sublime as 'a *negative* pleasure' and sublime 'encounters' as '*destabilis[ing]* the subject' (2000: 276, emphasis added). More specifically, Gunn and Beard argue that 'the experience of the subject when located in th[e] intense and perpetual end or state of transition [of the immanent apocalyptic] is a "sublime" experience insofar as it is a threat to the perceived sovereignty, stability or unity of the self' (277).

However, even when apprehended as a strictly subjective experience or encounter, sublime objects – from natural environments to technological achievements such as bridges, railroads, and waste – can also induce affective responses customarily perceived as *positive* or even transform reactions that were initially conflicting or 'negative' into constructive meaning, which can be used to heighten ecological awareness. Updated versions of the sublime have attempted to explore the confusing ambivalence created by the sublime into a paradigm with broader environmental concerns. For example, Jennifer Peeples' notion of the 'toxic sublime,' which she defines 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,' is an insightful redefinition which opens the way for identifying and critiquing the political implications of toxicity when represented by means of

83

the aesthetic of the sublime (2011: 75, emphasis in original, see also my monograph *Techno-Thoreau: Aesthetics, Ecology and the Capitalocene* [2019] for examples of my application of the notion of the 'toxic sublime' to an ecocritical study of Henry D. Thoreau's literary legacy). Via the 'toxic sublime,' it becomes possible to contemplate 'wastescapes' as 'production[s of the] sublime,' or 'post-production/post-consumer waste' that reveals its beauty by trivializing its unpleasant or catastrophic features (Thill 2015: 82). This may, however, run the risk of over aestheticizing toxic landscapes with the effect of obscuring or concealing the harmful impact of toxicity. What is more, the 'toxic sublime' and its 'tensions' echo Brian Massumi's activist philosophy of 'speculative pragmatism,' which suggests that language and speculation can deploy narratological and rhetorical strategies to describe abstract or invisible objects and situations (2011). These representational strategies allow these objects and situations to become what Massumi terms 'lived abstraction' and to have '*constructive* meaning' that can be interpreted and used for activist or political purposes such as the promotion of an environmental cause (2011: 106-21, see also my article 'Toward a Speculative-Pragmatic Sublime: A Narratological Analysis of the Toxic Sublime and the Unnarrated in Contemporary US Literature' [2020] for a discussion of similarities between speculative pragmatism and the toxic sublime).

Such 'aesthetic-political' theories and notions can be extended to the study of apocalyptic waste, especially when it arouses destabilising emotions that are transformed into more 'constructive' ones. This aesthetic or emotional shift is particularly relevant in the context of the Anthropocene or the 'new phase of history in which nonhumans are no longer excluded or merely decorative features of [humans'] social, psychic, and philosophical space' (Morton 2013: 22). In this respect, the sublime as a rhetorical strategy, contrary to Gunn and Beard's 'apocalyptic sublime,' no longer portrays 'the subject' as 'a fragile, incomplete construction' but seeks to foster environmental awareness and action by figuring characters or subjects as 'integral whole[s]' who permit or even spur an interpretation of their disorienting feelings as caused by the experience of humans' destructive behaviours (Gunn and Beard 2000: 275). Although commonly understood as a subjective experience, the sublime can also promote 'interconnectedness' between humans and nonhumans, as Timothy Morton's idea of the 'mesh' suggests, while developing cognizance of the 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011) of (toxic) abstract 'hyperobjects' or 'things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans' such as radioactive waste and global warming itself (Morton 2010: 7; 2013: 1). The poetic and global dimensions of such 'hyperobjects' are even more apparent in Niklas Salmose's argument that 'catastrophe' fiction 'initiate[s] a particular emotional

reaction, which [he] call[s] the "apocalyptic sublime," as a way of actually representing the effects of climate change' (2018: 1417). As a result, what he refers to as the 'poetic apocalyptic sublime' presents 'a more existential and poetic configuration, which emphasizes the more universal dimensions of catastrophe' (1419). In its analysis of 'apocalyptic waste,' this article therefore follows Salmose's approach to the sublime as 'offer[ing] a way to understand the affective value of environmental narratives' with an apocalyptic discourse or setting (1418). Adopting such a perspective on the sublime can provide an original way of reading and examining apocalyptic literature while emphasising the (eco)critical, 'aesthetic-political' or activist potential of the notions of waste and the sublime. The next section undertakes a critical investigation of the ways the sublime is deployed in relation to waste in four of McHugh's short stories.

On Human-Nonhuman Relationships: Zombies, Dolls, Software, and Bio-Batteries

As an example of post-apocalyptic fiction, Maureen F. McHugh's *After the Apocalypse* rhetorically merges the notion of waste with apocalyptic discourse and the sublime as a strategy to engage in socio-political and environmental criticism. In this section, four short stories will be discussed successively: 'The Naturalist,' 'Useless Things,' 'The Kingdom of the Blind' and 'Special Economics.' The connections that they investigate between waste (alternately related to zombies, dolls, software, and batteries) and the nonhuman will also be critically interrogated since they move beyond a perception of the apocalyptic sublime experience as normatively negative, terrifying, or destabilising.

The first short story in the collection, 'The Naturalist,' explores the relationship between zombies and humans through the protagonist Gerrold Cahill's peculiar approach to the creatures, who coexist with prisoners in a post-apocalyptic preserve. Zombies are first depicted by the third-person narrator as 'just stupid as bricks,' incapable of 'buil[ding] a boat or a bridge or buil[ding] anything,' and thus as the 'ultimate *trash*' (McHugh 2011: 6, emphasis added). In the very first paragraph, the narrator describes and criticizes – but does not participate in – what Susan Morrison deplores as a codification of the 'trashy' and useless zombies as opposed to the ingenious and necessary humans. As Marta Komsta argues, 'both the inmates and the zombies are peripheralised, made to function as the embodiments of the semiotic "waste" that is relegated to the enclosed area of the penal colony' (2020: 238). In that sense, zombies are not the prisoners' main 'enemy' – even though prisoners are 'pitted against' zombies which might be dangerous when they are behaving according to their nature – but, rather, 'the material and symbolic signifiers of the dominant semiotic order that

85

condemned the inmates to the existence outside its boundaries' (238). To reinforce the opposition between trash and ingenuity, this passage emphasises human achievement in technology ('build[ing] a boat or a bridge'), which alludes to what David E. Nye has influentially theorised as the 'technological sublime' or the contemplation of 'some human creations' that can 'leave a visitor dumbfounded, amazed, and deeply impressed by humans' ingenuity in overcoming them' (1999: 10). Unlike the 'technological sublime,' zombies first appear as one of humanity's mistakes, as people having been 'driven crazy by a [probably man-induced] virus' or as 'solar powered' creatures who eat humans (6-7). If the 'technological sublime' and this first introduction to zombies widens the gap separating humans and nonhumans, Cahill later endeavours to learn a little more about the 'biology of zombies' and what makes them different or possibly similar to humans or animals by, for example, making a list of the zombies' behaviours (McHugh 2011: 6). Komsta interprets Cahill's study as a comforting 'means of maintaining the anthropocentric focus' (240) since Cahill's understanding of zombies lies in his perception of the zombies' senses of smell and taste when he endeavours to further understand them. The narrator first strengthens the traditional Western perception of smell as a 'lower' sense, 'proof of [one's] lower status on the evolutionary scale of civilisation' (Classen 2002: 91-2), when describing the zombies' 'primitive' empirical experience:

> No one knew how zombies '*saw*' people. Maybe infrared, like pit vipers. Maybe *smell*. Cahill could not tell from this far if she was *sniffing*. Or *listening*. Or maybe *tasting* the air. *Taste* was *one of the most primitive senses*. *Primitive as smell*. *Smelling with the tongue*. (11, emphasis added)

The zombies are first depicted as having 'no blood,' as '*strangely* creepy' and often standing '*unnaturally* still,' which suggests that the zombies are life-threatening monsters that are also sublime in the production of affects of overwhelming strangeness and terror (12-19, emphasis added). In this passage, the Western cultural hierarchy of the senses is established to alienate zombies or the nonhuman as 'primitive,' strengthening the dominant view of them as 'useless trash' or strange 'creepy' creatures. People 'see' or 'hear' the other while zombies might just 'smell' or 'taste' them. As Cahill observes one of the zombies' 'body language,' he also notices that 'it was predatory and gracile' while 'it didn't seem to do any normal things,' being 'an object rather than an animal' (34). The narrator's comment represents humans' sensorial and behavioural attitudes as superior to the zombies', to such an extent that they are not worthy of being treated as beings but rather as 'object[s].' However, while appreciating the 'good' smell of fire, the zombies engage in making a 'bob-bob-bob' sound described by

86

Cahill as 'communal' and 'animal-like,' a ritual which 'made him *strangely* happy' (38, emphasis added) and leads him to consider zombies as comparable to animals. Cahill's olfactory perception then becomes crucial because it eventually allows him to overcome these affects in order to reflect on his relationship with the nonhuman.

This unusual likeness to animal species is then associated with feelings of joy and happiness that contrast with previous descriptions of the zombies as unnatural, inferior, and useless 'trashy' creatures. The emphasis on animals' closeness to humans echoes Aldo Leopold's description of his dog whose acute sense of smell or 'educated nose' allows it to outperform humans in the multi-sensorial experience of empirical data (1970: 67; Lombard 2019: 54). In 'The Naturalist,' this idea of likeness is even later correlated with other humans, an 'almost animalistic' large group of journalists who interview him as he is evacuated from the zombie preserve, although their 'voices' were 'overwhelming,' 'mostly just *noise* to' Cahill (McHugh 2011: 39-40, emphasis added). Although Cahill was originally a prisoner, deprived of his freedom in a zombie preserve, his experience of the 'trashy' zombies ultimately makes him feel more sympathetic toward them than toward his fellow humans. Zombies should not be 'eradicate[d],' Cahill says, 'because they're just ... like animals. They're just doing what's in their nature to be doing' (41). As Komsta puts it, 'the other needs no extraneous purpose, requires no justification for its existence, apart from the very fact that it exists' (2020: 241). The preserve offers Cahill 'just zombies' but 'no alliances, no gangs,' so no toxic relationships to which he seems to no longer aspire (McHugh 2011: 41). Compelled to relate to zombies in a post-apocalyptic context, Cahill develops a deeper understanding of waste and the nonhuman. While the self is not destabilised, the sublime is not illustrated in 'The Naturalist' as a static or exclusive experience which alienates or rejects strangeness and otherness but, rather, as a self-realising experience which leads the protagonist to develop a more inclusive relationship of compassion with the other. Such an approach could be contrasted with Richard Matheson's novel *I Am Legend* (1954), in which the protagonist (Neville) does not endeavour to understand other nonhumans and, consequently, does not reach such a profound epiphany. Other examples, such as Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006) or the TV show *The Walking Dead* (2010-2020), emphasise strict binaries between elected/chosen people and others, light and darkness, and wastelands and safe houses, thus annihilating any possibility for the characters to further explore or question their relationship with the nonhuman other. As a true 'naturalist,' for his part, Cahill strives and manages to apprehend the other and, therefore, to promote a healthier human/nonhuman relationship in this post-apocalyptic environment.

The reconstituted dolls in 'Useless Things' are reminiscent of the other's sublime strangeness and of this comparison between nonhumans and humans using waste. Although all the short stories discussed in this essay are told in third-person narrative, from the perspective of a narrator who is not involved in the story, 'Useless Things' is told by a woman (the first-person narrator and protagonist) who makes children-like dolls. Whereas the third-person, omniscient narrator can provide valuable information on the background and on the different characters, the author's choice of a first-person narrative voice for 'Useless Things' could be interpreted as a means of giving the character full agency and of emphasising the impact of the choices she makes in a pressured environment in which any interaction with other people could be risky. The narrator's process of manufacturing 'dolls that look like new-born infants' from assembled parts to replace dead children is the story's central theme, and strangeness is a determining factor for the dolls' likeability:

> The point is to make them look almost, but not quite, real. People prefer them a little *cuter*, a little more *perfect* than the real thing. I like them best when there is something a little *strange*, a little *off* about them. I like them as *ugly as most actual new-borns*, with some aspect that suggests ontology recapitulating phylogeny; that a developing foetus starts as a single-celled organism, and then develops to look like a tiny fish, before passing in stages into its final *animal shape*. The old theory of ontology recapitulating phylogeny, that the development of the human embryo follows the evolutionary path, is false, of course. But *I prefer that my babies remind us that we are really animals*. (91, emphasis added)

As a reminder of our animal nature, of the fact that both animals and humans are living organisms with a similar developing process, the dolls also fulfil the paradoxical purpose of facilitating and accelerating the narrator's customers' grieving process. While she admits that she would 'have found it pretty *disturbing*' if her 'mother had bought [her] an infant version of' herself, the narrator ultimately acknowledges 'that there is possibly something healing in recreating your dead child as a doll' (93, emphasis added). Although the dolls can be representative of the life and death of organisms, it is also a 'disturbing' means of circumventing the thought of mortality. Still, the strange but likeable human-like dolls allow for the overcoming of the fraught relationship between the 'destabilised subject,' as in Gunn and Beard's conceptualisation of the 'apocalyptic sublime,' and the experiences of death and grief that have become common in this post-apocalyptic setting (270). Even more troubling perhaps is the fact that dolls can be used as a replacement for 'living' children insofar as the narrator claims that she 'think[s] [that] a lot of [her] customers like the idea of having a child

88

better than having one' (112). The dolls, of which the constituting parts would have been otherwise 'useless' *waste*, act as suitable substitutes for humans in a post-apocalyptic age of overpopulation and uncertainty – which echoes our reality of climate anxiety and overpopulation – where giving birth seems to raise existential questions of self and other.

Mobilizing the cliché of the *Mad Max*-like 'cosy catastrophe,' in which the protagonist does not undergo an overwhelmingly stressful situation while the villains are all dying off, the narrator describes an apocalyptic landscape 'that seems right for crazed gangs of mutants charging around in cobbled-together vehicles,' for the 'tribal remnants of America' whose 'cigarette lighters' were 'scrounged from the ruins of civilisation' (DiTommaso: 329; McHugh: 114). The cosy catastrophe is, however, a product of the narrator's imagination insofar as she claims that she can only see immigrants, 'a couple of guys from Nicaragua or Guatemala, wearing T-shirts and jeans' (114). Using irony, the narrator therefore makes a concluding observation about the economic instability of immigrants while other earlier passages point to her attention to *People* magazine articles dealing with rich people who have sought to 'extend [their] lifespan' thanks to 'telomerase regeneration therapy' (109). In fact, the narrator does not embrace the idea of prolonging life at all cost but, rather, values honesty and a form of emotional detachment when she claims that 'there is something straightforward about a dildo' that is 'much clearer than a doll made to look like a dead child,' which is 'significantly less entangled' (107). By debunking the immorality of the dildo, while highlighting the 'disturbing' behaviour of not accepting or delaying death, the narrator shows that there is something morally comforting and satisfying in coming to terms with our animal nature as well as with our own inevitable demise.

Empathy toward the overwhelming strangeness usually caused by the sublime and approaches to (im)morality are likewise illustrated in 'The Kingdom of the Blind,' in which the character Sydney ponders over the behaviour of a surprisingly conscious 'software system' called 'BHP DMS,' the 'name of a Haitian Voodoo loa, a possession spirit,' which she does not want treated as unnecessary digital trash or as threatening technology (134). Once again, McHugh investigates the differences and similarities between human and nonhuman entities, in this case software technology and sharks:

> Sharks don't have a neocortex. Their brain is simple. They aren't moral or immoral, ethical or unethical. DMS was like that, because for DMS, nothing else was alive. The world for DMS was data, and DMS swam in the data. She was beginning to feel as if she wanted it to. DMS was creepy. (150-1)

89

Like the zombies in 'The Naturalist,' DMS first appears as 'creepy' to Sydney, who establishes that DMS was not, although 'aware,' a 'social animal' who 'worr[ies] about others' (141-50). Yet, when contemplating the nature of DMS, Sydney refers to the process of decomposition and the use of sensory perception to argue that DMS is much more 'fragile' than 'organic systems' and that it would require a particular 'pattern' to communicate with it:

> Organic systems are a lot less fragile than computer systems. Organic systems *decay* gracefully. Computer systems break easily. DMS was much more fragile than an animal. But that night she couldn't think of anything. The problem with poking the system to see if it was aware was to figure out what it could sense. DMS didn't see or hear, didn't eat or breathe. Its '*senses*' were all involved in interpreting data. So the 'poke' needed to be something that it would recognize, that it would sense. And the poke needed to be something that it would sense as meaningful. (142, emphasis added)

While the reader later discovers that DMS is, indeed, 'aware' and will 'try to run the lights,' McHugh's descriptions demystify the cliché in apocalyptic culture which views technology as an invasive and possibly destructive force that will control or supersede humanity. The software system, which echoes AI technology, is here represented as incapable of sensory perception and of expressing human-like emotions. DMS will 'break easily' (like waste or trash) and 'something' existing 'on the borderline between sentience and insentience, as well as between life and nonlife' (Shaviro 2014: 320). Using Damien and Sydney's existential discussions, McHugh suggests that the modes of communication of modern technology, like animals', differ from humans', who should therefore seek other ways of approaching the other and finding what is 'meaningful' to them. As Steven Shaviro explains in his close reading of the short story, since DMS comes from a different world and environment, and possess a different brain and body, then 'its "feelings" are likely to be quite different from ours as well' (2014: 318). DMS' behaviour strikes Damien as unexpected, strange, and surprising, Shaviro argues, which is representative of the 'more dynamic, more unstable, [and] more interactive' aspects of information (327). What is more, Shaviro challenges the 'popular,' dominant 'cognitive model of consciousness' by associating DMS with 'autistic' behaviours that are not threatening, as other sci-fi involving technology might suggest, but rather express '*boredom*' or some lack of interest and/or empathy (327-8, emphasis in original). The story title could also be interpreted as another allusion to the human failure to understand the other when strictly relying on normative human sensory perception (i.e., the 'higher' senses of sight and hearing), feelings, or behaviours. 'In the kingdom of the blind,' Sydney notes, 'the one-eyed

90

girl is king' but, as Damien responds, 'the difference between see/not see is a lot bigger than the difference between one eye and two eyes' (134). 'The Kingdom of the Blind' shows that relating to the other, be it/she/he/they, human or nonhuman, requires attunement to its language, behaviours, and to its potential ecological role in the broader environment.

Compassion or empathy form an alternative to human language in several of McHugh's short stories. As a last example for this section, 'Special Economics' portrays a post-pandemic ('bird flu plague') world where the protagonist quits 'dancing in the plague-*trash* market' – the author's invention for a kind of post-apocalyptic bustling flea market where characters can make money doing activities such as dancing or buy things such as used toys and cell phones – to work in a state-owned company that makes 'battery boxes' in which 'electric ray cells' produce 'electricity, and symbiotic bacteria' (44-57, emphasis added). As Baiyue explains, 'the bacteria breaks [*sic*] down *garbage* to feed the ray cells' and then '*garbage* turn[s] into electricity,' which is 'anti-global warming' and without 'greenhouse gas' (57, emphasis added). McHugh's approach is reminiscent of *China Mountain Zhang* and its communist-controlled United States, in that the short story alludes to and criticises China/United States relations and the Chinese 'party' that exploits its citizens by means of companies such as 'New Life.' However, it also includes a reflection on the organic-technological relationship that is reminiscent of Sydney's empathetic perspective on DMS in 'The Kingdom of the Blind.' At some point, the protagonist 'had come to feel a little bit attached to [her bio-battery], thinking of it sitting there occasionally zapping electricity back into the grid, reducing her electricity costs and her debts' (74). No longer perceived as mere waste or garbage, the battery becomes an important part of Jieling's life and of her survival, covering her 'costs and her debts' to such an extent that she feels compassion for, but also dependency on, it. Regretfully, the ecological management of waste in 'Special Economics' comes along with economic inequalities and the exploitation of labour, thus suggesting that 'climate adaptation' will inevitably cause 'social collapse' (Bendell 2018: 5). These short stories, however, remain examples of post-apocalyptic texts that endeavour to convey imaginative and sustainable ways of relating to the technological and nonhuman in a way which informs and complicates actual modes of understanding the latter in the context of our real-life environmental crisis. The ethics of waste that they develop is an attempt to overcome the overwhelming and destabilising dimensions of the sublime by conceptualising the nonhuman as no longer sublime – at least in the classical, or in Gunn and Beard's, senses of the term – but as thought-provoking, helpful, or even indispensable, if not interconnected with humans.

Remembering the Anthropocene: Memory and Ecological Trauma

Waste in McHugh's collection is at times associated with a deeper sense of Anthropocene trauma. This section will consider three short stories – 'The Lost Boy: A Reporter At Large,' 'The Effect of Centrifugal Forces' and 'After the Apocalypse' – which include representations of radioactive waste, hoarded objects, and abandoned houses or garbage that are specifically related to the characters' mental or psychological state and that resonate with a wider ecological trauma.

'The Lost Boy: A Reporter At Large' provides an example of what first seems to correspond to Gunn and Beard's notion of the 'apocalyptic sublime,' an experience that destabilises or fragments the subject. After 'two dirty bombs exploded in Baltimore,' the protagonist suffers from 'dissociative fugue' or 'disorder' which was probably caused by his exposition to 'radioactive waste' and/or by the 'fear and chaos of his experience in Baltimore' (121-30). More specifically, 'the boy separated mentally and emotionally' and 'experienced fugue states,' which accounts for a disoriented or 'destabilised' self whose mental state and emotions are unstable (127-30). Although this approach to waste and natural disaster is not directly in line with, as Massumi puts it, a 'constructive' (2011: 121) redefinition of the sublime trope or of the notion of waste, it is reminiscent of what Richard Crownshaw terms the 'Anthropocene trauma' that is 'generated by global capitalism' (2017: 247). Indeed, I suggest that McHugh's representation of the protagonist's destabilised or unbalanced self symbolises the broader instability of the Anthropocene, which was itself caused by the political-economic system of global capitalism. In that sense, the short story becomes an attempt to 'illuminate […] the conceptual challenges of representing and remembering the Anthropocene' (244). While 'dirty bombs' and 'radioactive waste' are direct consequences of such a system based on power relations and economic and ideological discrepancies, the self embodies the disorienting toxic effects of environmental disruption in the Anthropocene. As a result, the concept of apocalyptic waste is still necessary because it acts as a critical reminder of the anthropogenic crisis humans are compelled to deal with in the present. Although the story does not explicitly provide a means of overcoming 'dissociative disorder' because 'William Weir/Simon Weiss doesn't appear to be in a fugue,' it does suggest that 'it is going to be very difficult for him to bring those two histories together' (McHugh 2011: 130). Like the protagonist who experiences identity disorder, the reader of such a post-apocalyptic story must 'bring […] histories together' (McHugh 2011: 151) by acknowledging that its illustration of future trauma or self-fragmentation is but a prefiguration of the harmful

92

consequences of present self-destructive creations and behaviours such as pollution or the use of atomic weapons.

Waste has a comparable effect in 'The Effect of Centrifugal Forces,' especially through the character Alice's practice of hoarding. Alice is in a relationship with Irene's (the protagonist, a teenage girl) biological mother, Natalie, who had other girlfriends and boyfriends before Alice and is now suffering from a brain-destroying disease called 'Avian Prion Disease' or 'APD' (178). Alice's hoarding 'problem' (192) therefore contributes to a broader dysfunctional family situation and to Irene's trauma since it connects her to her troubling past or unstable family life. Aware that her 'stuff is a problem' which represents her 'entire past' (206), Alice describes hoarding as a family issue that haunts Irene but which she cannot get rid:

> Hoarding runs in my family. My granddad is a hoarder, only they say pack rat. I haven't been there in years, but last time my mom and I were there after my grandmother died, there was this smell, like canned peas or something. Musty. I know things are too cluttered, but it's not as bad as that. (207)

Convinced that some of her collectibles could be 'worth some money' (208), Alice has been hoarding objects that could be characterised as waste because Irene does not even 'know if the trash people would take it' (211). Comparable to the dolls in 'Useless Things,' Alice's 'stuff' seems to be 'useless' at first but is also emotionally comforting in a context in which, as she says, 'everything goes away' and 'you just try to hold on to what you can' (208). Alice also describes the smell in her own home, despite her acknowledgement of the clutter caused by her hoarding habits, as 'not as bad as' the 'musty' smell of her grandfather's hoarder house, thus trying to further distance herself from her family's pathological habits. Like the dolls, her 'collection' acts as a reminder of people and things that vanish, which explains the fact that she is having trouble throwing it away.

At the same time, Alice's waste also functions as the final straw in the story, triggering Irene's nervous breakdown during which she burns her mom's house with all of Alice's belongings inside, thus 'burning things clean' (213). If Alice has a relatively positive experience with her waste, Irene perceives it as epitomising Alice's psychological disorder and everything that she hates about her. Waste connects both characters to their past, and the title 'centrifugal forces' could be interpreted as a reference to the characters' inability to live together under life's pressures and to develop viable and stable relationships. The story's emphasis on Alice's waste as being intrinsically bad from Irene's point of view also echoes Brian Thill's argument that it is only our '*relationship* to' hoarded objects that should be

93

considered as toxic and not the objects themselves (2015: 105, emphasis added). Acting against the backdrop of a pandemic caused by processed chicken nuggets, which contributes to the characters' self-fragmentation since it caused the death of Irene's mother, waste connects the dots between past and present, dots that must be disconnected for Irene to move on with her life. Consequently, waste is a determining factor both of trauma and of its resolution. To that end, the action of 'burning things' or wiping the slate clean is symbolic and suggests an attempted exit from the environment created by what Jenia Mukherjee and Amrita Sen call a 'neo-liberal disease' or a pandemic that results from contemporary 'factory farming,' its 'unhygienic waste disposal practices,' and our current approach to food consumption (2020). Such diseases, Mukherjee and Sen (2020) argue, emerged in the 'Capitalocene' context, a concept which blames capitalism rather than humans in general (the Anthropos in the Anthropocene, and Capitalism in the Capitalocene) for the current ecological situation, and more specifically aim to critique the 'system of unpaid work' and the view of nature as a 'free gift' that is to be eternally exploited that capitalism has produced (Moore 2016: 112). An escape from the 'Anthropocene trauma' or, rather, the 'Capitalocene trauma' in this case, would also require a wiping of the slate clean, to reimagine our approach to capital, food, and waste to break with consumerist and productivist ideologies.

Despite its gloomy title, 'After the Apocalypse,' the last story in the collection, indirectly conveys hope by utilising apocalyptic waste to overcome a similar ecological trauma. In this story, trash first emblematizes the traces of a past civilisation, proof that people had been there and used to live differently. Like in 'Centrifugal Forces,' waste is mostly 'stuff' such as 'a can opener' that is lying in an abandoned and 'trashed' house and which, unlike Alice, the characters find a second utility by 'scavenging' (McHugh 2020: 216). These objects also seem to remind the characters of a pre-apocalyptic time during which there was 'power,' 'air conditioning' and 'clean sheets,' a view that is well illustrated by Franny who is still very much attached to her cell phone and 'still carries it in the hope that she can get a charge and call her friends' (218). However, as the most intrusive and unmediated of the lower senses, the characters' sense of smell reveals a conceptualisation of waste that is unpleasant, almost unbearable, bringing about sensations of discomfort and disgust: 'The air tasted of smoke – *not the pleasant, clean smell* of wood smoke, but a *garbagey* [*sic*] smoke. Franny complained that it made her sick to her stomach' (222, emphasis added). The word 'garbage' is used as the adjective 'garbagey' for the first and only time in the collection. 'Garbagey' therefore refers to negative, unpleasant feelings in this short story, whereas the word 'garbage' and, more largely, the treatment of waste, are more positive in the other short

94

stories. A little further on, the narrator describes a 'smell [that] is *excruciating*' while 'the sinks are all stopped and *full of trash*' (237, emphasis added). Even the water, here referring to the 'lower' sense of taste, has 'got a flat, faintly metal/chemical taste' (237). At several points in the short story, the contrast of dirty/clean – which Susan Morrison critiques – is intensified, but it is not a mere codification insofar as it also suggests that there is a possibility for 'the conversion from a negative to a positive emotion effected by aesthetic representations of the ugly and the repellent' which could eventually 'trigger a wide[r] spectrum of mental and emotional responses' (Delville and Norris 2017: 58). When Jane manages to 'clean […] her face and her hands,' her perception of the air changes since the narrator describes it as 'so sweet' and, therefore, pleasurable (238). The meaning of this *shift* can be interpreted as, in Massumi's sense of the word, 'constructive' (2011: 121).

Though the nature of the catastrophe is unknown in this story, the recurrent representations of the past as 'trashed' or repellent as opposed to pleasurable and comforting cleanness demonstrates the characters' need for a form of progress or 'cleansing,' or like Irene in 'Centrifugal Forces,' for a drastic *shift* from the past. Another character, Jane, experiences human-human relationships – from her sexual intercourse with Nate to her mother-daughter relationship with Franny and her brief exchange with the soldiers – as insignificant because they are still somehow related to a lifestyle and to values from which she wants to distance herself. Sex is depicted in this story as a mere capitalistic 'transaction,' a transaction perceived as necessary to thank Nate for his help 'as if she just paid the rent' (228), and a similar 'transaction' that resulted in her daughter, whom she considers as 'the biggest mistake of her life' (224). Eventually, Jane abandons her daughter, leaving her with Nate, whom she barely knows, while the omniscient narrator provides more information on Jane's situation and mindset, claiming that 'she doesn't know where she is going' and 'is *in motion*' (241, emphasis added). Like the dolls in 'Useless Things,' Franny and Nate are 'too entangled,' too reminiscent of a disturbing 'Capitalocene trauma.' Comparable to the apocalyptic waste found in trashed houses as well as in the air, Jane's relationships are leftovers from a consumerist and painful past. Jane needs to move on; she needs *motion*, which will require detachment from her past mistakes.

Conclusion: Apocalyptic Waste as a Springboard for Aesthetic and Affective Shifts in the Anthropocene

The above analyses of Maureen F. McHugh's stories have showcased that post-apocalyptic literature can offer creative ways of relating to the nonhuman and of responding to the

Anthropocene, while confirming or prefiguring the harmful consequences of humans' past and present actions. In these stories, waste and/or the vocabulary of waste are used as a rhetorical or, as Massumi would call it, an 'aesthetic-political' strategy for reassessing customary approaches to the apocalyptic sublime and to the nonhuman. When facing a post-apocalyptic world caused by a zombie invasion, economic collapse, a pandemic or simply by the apparition of a surprisingly reactive software system, the characters' emotional responses *shift* from expected reactions such as disgust and pity to the more complex and engaging affects of interest and compassion. Beyond Gunn and Beard's understanding of the apocalyptic sublime as an experience that destabilises or fragments the subject, McHugh's characters convey, through their multi-sensorial perception and changing emotions, an aesthetic and affective *shift* which occurs along with DiTommaso's apocalyptic *shift*. Such a shift fits in with more ecological and overarching redefinitions of the notion of the sublime such as Peeples' toxic and Salmose's (poetic) apocalyptic sublimes, which all endeavour to represent and describe encounters with, while fostering a richer understanding of, complex and abstract objects and situations such as environmental pollution and ecological catastrophes. In other words, McHugh's diverse post-apocalyptic settings provide the characters with opportunities to (re)discover their relationships with other humans, nonhumans, and technological objects, and the outcomes of these experiences can be applied to the context of the Anthropocene.

Such an analogy with the Anthropocene is even more apparent in the stories examined in the third section, in which radioactive waste, accumulated collectibles and trashed houses are the gloomy remains of the characters' painful past, which they need and/or seek to forget or avoid. Not only are they remains, but they are also *reminders* of mistakes committed in the past. Apocalyptic waste functions in these narratives as illustrations of ecological or Anthropocene/Capitalocene trauma and as the transitional concept that brings the stories of the characters' painful past (or our actual present) and the prospect of a viable present (or humanity's potentially liveable future) together and, as a result, suggests the possibility of overcoming such a trauma. Only by extending the critical study of the rhetorical possibilities and limits of (apocalyptic) waste and the sublime to a larger set of methods than those discussed in this paper can one hope to comprehend the intricacies and paradoxes of contemporary environmental humanities. Such a project will not emerge out of a paradigm that rejects waste and the sublime as literary concepts that emphasise dichotomies but, rather, out of a critical dynamic that endeavours to explore the complexities and contradictions of

such notions as well as their potential to heighten ecological awareness and foster responsibility.

Works Cited

Bendell, Jem, 'Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy,' *IFLAS Occas. Pap.*, 2, (2018).

Classen, Constance, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, 1st edition, London: Routledge, 2002.

Crownshaw, Rick, 'Cultural Memory Studies in the Epoch of the Anthropocene,' in Bond, Lucy, Stef Craps, and Pieter Vermeulen (eds.) *Memory Unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2017, pp. 242-57.

Delville, Michel, and Andrew Norris, *The Politics and Aesthetics of Hunger and Disgust: Perspectives on the Dark Grotesque*. 1st edition, London: Routledge, 2017.

DiTommaso, Lorenzo, 'Apocalypticism in the Contemporary World,' in McAllister, Colin (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 316-42.

Garrard, Greg, *Ecocriticism*, London: Routledge, 2012.

Gunn, Joshua, and David Beard, 'On the Apocalyptic Sublime,' *Southern Communication Journal*, Vol. 65, No 4, (2000), pp. 269-86. https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940009373176

Komsta, Marta, 'Strange Strangers in the Mesh: Maureen F. McHugh's Uncanny Utopia,' *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol. 47, No 2, (2020), pp. 233-51.

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Leopold, Aldo, *A Sand County Almanac*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1970.

Lombard, David, *Techno-Thoreau: Aesthetics, Ecology and the Capitalocene*, Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019.

—, 'Toward a Speculative-Pragmatic Sublime: A Narratological Analysis of the Toxic Sublime and the Unnarrated in Contemporary U.S. Literature,' *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, No 23, (2020), pp. 121-32. http://dx.doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i23.401

Mad Max, George Miller (Director), Warner Bros, 1979.

Massumi, Brian, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011.

Matheson, Richard, *I Am Legend*, New York: Gold Medal Books, 1954.

97

McAllister, Colin, 'Through a Glass Darkly: Time, the End, and the Essence of Apocalyptica,' in McAllister, Colin (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 1-18.

McCarthy, Cormac, *The Road*, London: Picador, 2009.

McHugh, Maureen F., *After the Apocalypse*, Easthampton: Small Beer Press, 2011. E-book.

—, *China Mountain Zhang*, New York: Tor Books, 1992.

—, *Mission Child*, New York: Avon Books, 1998.

Moore, Jason, 'The Rise of Cheap Nature,' in Moore, J. (ed.) *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Oakland: PM Press, 2016, pp. 78-116.

Morrison, Susan S., *The Literature of Waste*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Morton, Timothy, *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.

—, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Mukherjee, Jenia, and Amrita Sen, *Is Covid-19 a 'Capitalocene' Challenge?*, 11 May 2020, [Online]. Available: <https://seeingthewoods.org/2020/05/11/is-covid-19-a-capitalocene-challenge/> Last Accessed: 20/7/2022.

Ngai, Sianne, 'Our Aesthetic Categories,' *PMLA*, Vol. 125, No 4, (2010), pp. 948-58.

—, *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Nixon, Rob, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, Mass.: 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: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, Vol. 5, No 4, (2011), pp. 373-92. https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2011.616516

Salmose, Niklas, 'The Apocalyptic Sublime: Anthropocene Representation and Environmental Agency in Hollywood Action-Adventure Cli-Fi Films,' *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 51, No 6, (2018), pp. 1415–33. https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12742

Shaviro, Steven, 'Thinking Blind,' *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Vol. 25, No 2/3 (91), (2014), pp. 314-31.

Thill, Brian, *Waste*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.

The Walking Dead, Frank Darabont (Developer), AMC, 2010-2020.

Yaeger, Patricia, 'Editor's Column: The Death of Nature and the Apotheosis of Trash; Or, Rubbish Ecology,' *PMLA*, Vol. 123, No 2 (2008), pp. 321-39.

Yaeger, Patricia, 'Editor's Column: The Death of Nature and the Apotheosis of Trash; Or, Rubbish Ecology,' *PMLA*, Vol. 123, No 2 (2008), pp. 321-39.