

1 Exergue

At my godmother Olga's, in the late 1980s, there was fresh limeade and clinking ice served in the shade of a trumpet tree.¹ At my grandmother Deidamia's nearby, I shelled peas on weekend and summer mornings while Grandma swung a chicken by its neck till dead, to be de-feathered and marinated in sour orange and cilantro. Both women handled citrus and poultry with bejeweled and manicured fingers. Their shared high femininity offset the class and race differences of my godmother's white elite status and my grandmother's educated black and rural background. Their gardens, one elevated on a second-floor terrace and the other on the ground itself, overflowed with bougainvillea, hibiscus, rose bushes, cordyline, ferns, and all kinds of striped crotons. Lime, mango, and plantain trees provided beauty and nourishment. My grandmother, like many women and men of her generation, could look at almost any plant and list its curative uses. During her visits to our new home in the South Bronx in the early 1990s, she would interrupt her stride, point to something green growing from the cracked sidewalk, and tell me what medicinal Caribbean plant it conjured. Her voice always had a tinge of reverence and what I can only describe as love – love for this replica plant that reminded her of something back home, love for the plant back home, and love of this knowledge. These replica plants then helped soothe a homesickness so profound that few memories remain of my first years in the United States. Like the swelling sea of auto shops that surrounded them, Deidamia's and Olga's Santo Domingo gardens sprouted in the crevices between the tropical Caribbean wilderness, what I have written about elsewhere as *el monte*, and the growing capital city (Ramírez-D'Oleo 2019, 2021a, 2021b, and 2022). The wilderness always threatened to reclaim its territory; we, the new arrivants, were reminded that we were interlopers by the frequent appearance of “critters” like tarantulas, frogs, and giant red centipedes. Olga's garden has since been replaced by a dermatology clinic and its parking lot, and a cramped stack of small apartments sits atop the memory of my grandmother's garden.

I would caution against misreading this exergue as a sedimentation of my “identity,” “culture,” and “otherness,” or misreading it as a symptom of O, who, as described by Rey Chow, is a figure from the “third world” in the North American academy who brandishes her identity in exchange for popularity, and as unmoored from intellectual expertise (Chow 1998: 26–30).

¹ The *grayumbo* tree or the *Cecropia schreberiana*.

2 Introduction

“My multispecies storytelling is about recuperation in complex histories that are full of dying as living, as full of endings, even genocides, as beginnings.”

Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*²

“ . . . turbulent but generative . . . ”

Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*³

Organized by my readerly journey from seduction to recoil, *This Will Not Be Generative* focuses on various works by Donna Haraway to demonstrate how the ludic language of tendrils and tentacles costumes a violent relationship to “the black(ened) position.”⁴ I also analyze Monique Allewaert’s study of anglophone colonial texts, *Ariel’s Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (2013), and Lisa Wells’s *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller, *Believers: Making Life at the End of the World* (2021). I read these texts closely and with methods inspired by Caribbean literary studies, black critical theory, and the theoretical innovations of various procedures of negative criticism and deconstruction.⁵ The Caribbean studies that influence my writing are centered on the long history of refusals of European temporalities on the island that now encompasses the Dominican Republic and Haiti.⁶ The black critical theory to which I refer is similarly specific, loosely defined by its focus on how anti-blackness shapes the world. I contend that Haraway’s, Allewaert’s, and Wells’s “urgent” ecological discourses attempt to disguise within them a grammar in which whiteness can survive as white *indigène* (a kind of North American *mestizaje*) through the expectation of non-African Indigenous tutelage. In these discourses, blackness, which is never also Indigenous in these writings, continues performing the function it has had in Western epistemes as that which must be

² Haraway 2016b: 10. ³ Haraway 2016b: 145.

⁴ I define the black or black(ened) position after Jared Sexton paraphrasing Frank B. Wilderson III to include “those marked by racial blackness, including most especially African-derived people” (Sexton 2016). Blackness as discussed here is not an identity; rather, it is a structural position that signals usability for others’ desires (material, libidinal, emotional, and beyond). People of African descent are marked by blackness due to the historical fact of *inherited* slave status that only befell people of African descent for centuries and structured the world in which we continue to live. There are circumstances in which people not of African descent experience the grammar of structural anti-blackness, but this is not the same as being fixed and marked by it perpetually.

⁵ The discourse of generativity in ecological writings also has ramifications in fields and methods such as animal studies, new materialism, queer studies, geography, black ecology, science and technology studies, and biopolitics.

⁶ I discuss some of these refusals in Ramírez-D’Oleo 2018 and 2022.

destroyed so that it can give life to other life-forms.⁷ I contrast the disguising and obfuscating procedures of the speculative mode that these eco-critics embrace with the semiotics of horror in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019).

Writings, lectures, and symposia inspired by ecological collapse have become so pervasive in the US academy – not to mention in other institutions, such as the art world – that it would be impossible to scrutinize all the works that follow similar procedures. I have focused on limiting myself mostly to writings by Haraway, Allewaert, and Wells for several reasons. Within the established fields of the humanities and the social sciences that delve into ecological and biological matters, Haraway and Allewaert stand out as scholars who consider the histories of chattel slavery and colonialism in relation to climate change. My research focus on Caribbean literature, which delves into the histories of slavery and colonialism, helps explain my initial encounter with these two scholars. I additionally analyze Wells's writing because her position outside of academia renders her work a suitable case study of the pervasiveness and popularity of the rhetoric I discuss here. Haraway, as one of the most well-known scholars in the world – full stop – can be considered both an important progenitor and promoter of some of the rhetoric analyzed here, as well as exemplary of the kind of scholarship that seeks to straddle the sciences and nonsciences in the academy. Allewaert's book is also a case study of a literary studies attentive to the long history of vitalism as intertwined with more recent discussions of the environmental crisis.

While these works directly engage with the history of colonialism and, to a much lesser extent in the case of Haraway and Wells, slavery, they share the same blind spot of not considering how the position of white womanhood has historically abetted these same histories.⁸ They contain assumptive or explicit critiques of white, phallogocentric Eurocentrism, but they also seek ways to reject complicity in the consequences of this white, phallogocentric Eurocentrism that we all continue to live. This phallogocentrism can take the form of “woman.” In this sense, these texts are far from unique, but emerge, once again, as case studies to demonstrate a set of procedures that apply to many other works. I will focus on Haraway's work briefly to preview some of what I mean. Despite the moments in her work in which she explicitly criticizes white feminism, as she does in her famed “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology,

⁷ The definition of the black(ened) position I follow here precludes it from “indigeneity.” This is not to be confused with specific African cultures and people that can be considered Indigenous.

⁸ There is a long history of critique of white femininity or womanhood, if not outright feminism, in black women's writing, including Harriet Jacobs's and Mary Prince's narratives, as well as Ida B. Wells's journalism. For recent, scholarly critiques, see Spivak 1999, Wexler 2000, Wilderson 2010, and Schuller 2018.

and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” some of the grammar buttressing white feminism also structures Haraway’s writings. For instance, several chapters in *Primate Visions*, which I analyze in Section 4, explain how white feminism improved primatology and how, in turn, these primatologists influenced Haraway’s methods. Yet, *Primate Visions* does not also consider how all white women primatologists working in Africa remain *structurally* bound to repeat the same extractive systems of thought of the male hunter taxidermists whom she argues had preceded them. *Primate Vision*’s blind spot grows from an inability to imagine that the most liberal or even “radical” left ideological positions – including various strands of feminism – may remain bound to the structures of anti-blackness and white supremacy.⁹

Another common feature of the writings under discussion is their positivist or additive propensity. The “more” is just as likely to be rhetorical as physical or biological. In Haraway, “more” is also bound with pathos. “Caring,” she writes, “means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning” (Haraway 2008: 36). These writings encrust generativity with seemingly positive descriptors (e.g., “caring,” “loving,” “thick,” and so on), disguising the destruction also taking place. Even in their rush to generate newfangled language that often distances a signifier from relevant historical and/or etymological context (replacements such as “seminal” to “generative” or “cthulhu” to “chthulu”), these writings all admit that some entity must be destroyed or absorbed for the hybrid (symbiotic) life-form to be realized. However, of the texts discussed here, only Wells’s *Believers* dwells on this loss, which manifests as a cycle of guilt, shame, and desire for absolution. Another broad tendency in these writings is their being grounded in a secularized Protestant episteme, even as they also criticize the forms of colonialism undergirded by Protestantism and Christianity writ large. This tendency emerges in the underlying assumption that productivity (i.e., generativity) is an ethical, moral, biological, and semiotic *good*.

If humans are running out of time on the planet, any time and energy spent on matters not inspired by climate change are time and energy wasted. Does this rhetoric of urgency buttress arguments against scholarship that cannot account for how it has productive, if not always materialist, utility? Scholarship whose function is to analyze, critique, de-sediment, and question without necessarily being equally concerned with the work of *creating* –

⁹ For an analysis of how the basis of radical politics in the Western world rely on racism and anti-blackness, see Rei Terada’s “Hegel’s Racism Is for Radicals” (Terada 2019).

beyond the critique itself – remains crucial in a world barreling into increasingly obvious fascisms. Susan Sontag’s “Fascinating Fascisms” (1974) and Rey Chow’s “The Fascist Longings in Our Midst” expose the grammars of subtle fascisms (Sontag 2002; Chow 1998). If one agrees with Sontag’s and Chow’s analyses, one may discover that the grammar and syntax of fascism has been lurking not only within the expected political right, but also within the most “radical” left corners of academia. I attribute a deep-seated suspicion of some language games both to my orientation toward symptomatic reading and to my upbringing in a (post-) authoritarian society.¹⁰ For many Dominicans from the 1930s into the 1980s, survival often relied on public enunciations of a set of preapproved phrases, as well as the ability to discern hidden meanings behind florid language of love of nation and community. Fascism, as Sontag contends, is not a friend to critique. For instance, Sontag cites Joseph Goebbels’s prohibition of art criticism due to its having “typically Jewish traits of character,” such as “putting the head over the heart, the individual over the community, intellect over feeling” (Sontag 2002: 88). Goebbels ascribed critique (as analysis, at times negative) to “Jewish intellectualism,” which had to be destroyed to allow for the rise of the “German spirit” (Sontag 2002: 88). In other words, rhetorics of pathos, community, vitality, and spirit have long been entwined with each other and against critique. I would argue that the US academy is amidst an anti-critical moment. This Element focuses on ecological writings to partly illuminate the tendencies of this moment.

Given the demand for, sometimes gimmicky, attempts at interdisciplinarity, on one end, and assurances that one’s scholarship will provide healing and solace, on the other, writing critique-as-such is not a fashionable move for a scholar interested in the various manifestations of racial injustice, especially anti-blackness. The US academy’s current (quite literal) investment in interdisciplinarity, while we also hear, ad nauseam, about the “crisis in the humanities,” warrants further discussion beyond the confines of this Element. But it bears asking for whom is interdisciplinarity a gain and for whom is it a loss?

The rhetoric of urgency evident in ecological writings prompts the question of why grapple with the enduring and constitutive anti-blackness of the world considering “we already know” and “we all” will be extinct soon enough? As Patricia Stuelke asserts, the fallacy that “we already know” enough about the gross injustices of our world emerges in two field-shifting essays: Eve

¹⁰ As recently as 2015, a Dominican rapper was indicted and punished for seeming to criticize the country’s Founding Fathers (Ramírez-D’Oleo 2018: 111–113).

Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You" (Sedgwick 2003) and Stephen Best's and Sharon Marcus's "Surface Reading: An Introduction" (Best and Marcus 2009).¹¹ Both essays critique the then-predominance of "paranoid" or symptomatic reading methods that suspiciously search for absences. From this perspective, paranoid and symptomatic readings are not only "arrogant" and "mean" but also "passé" and "futile."¹² In spite of the differences in what the essays call for – "reparative" reading methods in Sedgwick's and "surface" reading methods in Best's and Marcus's – it is worthwhile to note that they share the following element. The exorbitant policing, incarceration, and suffering of black people emerge in both essays as examples par excellence of: (1) just how awful things really are, and, therefore, (2) the need to do something else besides "exposing the [apparently obvious] ruses of power" (Stuelke 2021: 5).¹³ In her critique of the turn to "repair" as a method in the humanities, Stuelke demonstrates that rebuttals of critique-as-such greatly overstate "the assumption that the mechanisms of state, imperialist, and racial capitalist violence are already known and understood" (Stuelke 2021: 9). Even more concerning is "how discourses of [an assumed] transparency themselves work to enforce ongoing forms of state violence and racial capitalist dispossession" (Stuelke 2021: 9). Writers moved by the similar signs of "care" or "repair" elevate specific kinds of pathos – benevolent, optimistic, or sympathetic – at the expense of methods that either avoid pathos or evoke affects such as "reticent," "uncooperative," or "withholding."¹⁴ The demand that intellectual engagement conform to specific affective scripts through a gluttonous desire for generativity ironically silences a wide array of intellectual inquiry.

Many of these writings reinstate the violence of "good" intentions, sympathy, absolution, and redemption found in nineteenth-century abolitionist and sentimentalist narratives. The difference between the end of slavery in white-authored nineteenth-century abolitionist discourses and the struggle for emancipation

¹¹ Rey Chow also notes the "broad" influence of Sedgwick's essay against critique-as-such (Chow 2021: 12).

¹² The terms in quotation marks are from Stuelke's description of Sedgwick's take on paranoid critique (Stuelke 2021: 5). Haraway describes a specific moment in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's writing as "smart" and "mean," which is folded into her broader critique of their perspective on the wolf (Haraway 2008: 28).

¹³ Sedgwick uses the example of "40 percent of young black men enmeshed in the penal system" (Sedgwick 2003: 140). Best and Marcus use the example of "the state's abandonment of its African American citizens" during Hurricane Katrina (Best and Marcus 2009: 2).

¹⁴ For Haraway on "caring" and "care," see Haraway 2008: 82–85 and 332n8. For research on the violence of "care" and "love" in a slaveholding society, see Dayan 1998 and Johnson 2018.

evident in violent slave rebellions lies in the differences between an imaginary that assumes white survival and enduring control and one that destroys it. Similarly, many ecological writings presume that, even “at the end of the world” and after the “apocalypse,” white survival and control – even in rhetorical symbiosis with local ecologies and as abetted by fantasies of communion with (non-African) Indigenous groups – will endure. Patricia Yaeger’s concept of the “unthought known” is useful to consider here. After Christopher Bollas, Yaeger defines this concept as “the omnipresence of ideas that are known but not acknowledged” (Yaeger 2000: 101). Writing about US Southern women’s literature, Yaeger also calls this an “everyday world of white unseeing” in which many literary works feature “white citizens’ ‘genuine shock’ at encountering a world that they see every day – suggesting . . . a deliberate sequestration of knowledge” (Yaeger 2000: 103). In her analysis, motifs of soil and burials make evident (or, more appropriately, submerge) the sublimation taking place. “In southern literature,” she writes, “extraordinary numbers of [black] women, men, and children fall into the landscape and disappear. It is as if the foundation or basis for this world is made out of repudiated, throwaway bodies that mire the earth: a landscape built over and upon the melancholic detritus, the disposable bodies denied by white culture” (Yaeger 2000: 15). These bodies are “cast away without funerals, left unmourned” (Yaeger 2000: 18). In this Element, I read closely for “the unthought known” that sustains the grammar of these ecological writings. I show how a semiotics that seems to be liberatory and generative for an inclusive “we” remains reliant on a grammar of suffering and destruction for those in the black(ened) position. Finally, I argue that avoiding negative critique and semiotic destruction of texts seeming to operate with “good” (i.e., liberal or “radical”) intentions relies on accepting the black(ened) position’s perpetual destruction.

3 The Seduction

“If you see such a semiotic barnacle, scrape it off.”
 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*¹⁵

I read *Staying with the Trouble* and other ecological writings or eco-criticism while conducting research for another book, *Blackness and the Photographic Negative*, in which I explore black Caribbean aesthetic and historical forms of anti-relation and refusals of European epistemic paradigms of capture.¹⁶ In my focus on black Caribbean anti-relationality, at times reliant on entanglements

¹⁵ Haraway 2016b: 169. ¹⁶ Forthcoming from Duke University Press.