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“All Nature Teems with Life”: Anthropogenic Wastelands in Robert Hass’s Ecopoetics

The Privilege of Being

Drawing on Rosi Braidotti’s thinking on the posthuman (*Posthuman*; “Posthuman, All Too Human”), on Karen Barad’s agential realism and Jane Bennett’s lessons about vibrant matter, as well as on Rob Nixon’s and Saskia Sassen’s insights into the perverse logic of capitalism and the slow violence brought about by environmental degradation, this article examines the representation of anthropogenic wastelands in Robert Hass’s acclaimed *Time and Materials: Poems 1997-2005*. “Everywhere the wasteland grows; woe / To him whose wasteland is within” (4), writes the American poet in a piece titled “A Supple Wreath of Myrtle,” where Nietzsche is portrayed musing on the nature of the world in utter solitude. This article argues that the concept of *wasteland* as an image of decadence, crisis and a state of mind marked by exhaustion is present in powerful poems in Hass’s collection, where at least two distinct kinds of wasteland can be discerned. The first type concerns the devastation of spaces, terraforming, overexploitation and the depletion of natural resources in the Anthropocene,¹ which is particularly palpable in the ten-part “State of the Planet.” An ambitious piece originally commissioned by the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory at Columbia University on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary, and partially published for the first time in 2005 in the “Science” section of *The New York Times*, it encapsulates a sort of treatise condensing the story of the Earth from the Big Bang to the present. Yet Hass is prompt to write other ecopoems, not of denunciation but of exultation, which sing of the beauty and vulnerability of the physical world *Homo sapiens* is a *part of*, not

apart from. The second type of wasteland concerns the massive corporeal waste brought about by the devastating wars punctuating the twentieth century, as evidenced by the pieces “A Poem,” “Bush’s War” and “On Visiting the DMZ at Panmunjom: A Haibun.” Both kinds of wasteland, examples of human-induced destruction, often go hand in hand. Behind them is the perverse logic dominant in highly industrialized, capitalist societies, which values capital over human dignity and conceives of the Earth as a portfolio of resources to be plundered by *Homo sapiens*. Linking the fertility of Mother Earth and economics, Hass writes in “Ezra Pound’s Proposition”: “Beauty is sexual, and sexuality / Is the fertility of the earth and the fertility / Of the earth is economics” (*Time and Materials* 81). As a poet, Hass is called on to bear witness to and give an accurate record of his time, one that seems to be intent on destroying the planet to ensure relentless economic growth, narrowly understood as the accumulation of capital at any cost.

This article seeks to demonstrate that Hass’s ecopoetry is aligned with the postulates of posthuman thought and the new materialisms. Intrinsic to the agenda of posthumanism is “a downsizing of human arrogance coupled with the acknowledgment of solidarity with other humans” (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 13) and nonhumans. Amidst the unprecedented climate crisis humanity is faced with, what is needed is an ethics of attending to the more-than-human world, one that comprises the human alongside the nonhuman. What is urgently needed is not a moral agent as world changer or problem solver, but as witness instead (see Heiti). As Mark Strand observes in an interview with creativity theorist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, it is “such a lucky accident, having been born, that we’re almost obliged to pay attention” (231). Humans are literally *of* the world – we belong in the larger mesh of things or web of life: “we’re made of the same stuff that stars are made of, or that floats around in space,” but “we’re combined in such a way that we can describe what it’s like to be alive, to be witnesses. [...] We see and hear and smell other things. Being alive is responding” (231). To exist amidst thing-power is, therefore, to acknowledge that attending is part of our mission on Earth and that we are literally inscribed in the tissue of earth, air, water, and fire. In this regard, Hass’s poetry is earth-poetry, that is, poetry deeply grounded in the physical world and sensitive to the

impact of human action on the planet. In terms of style, it is marked by clarity, simplicity of diction, precise imagery and a deft combination of prose-like blocks and free verse that owes much to his long apprenticeship as a translator of the Japanese haiku masters and Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Miłosz's poetry. Thematically speaking, he often "inquires into the meaning of history, language and art. Central to his poetics is a romantic-modernist faith in imagination and in the role of art as fundamental to existence and to the self's spiritual redemption" (Patea 195-96). Having been born in San Francisco, his familiar landscapes are those of the northern California coast and the Sierra high country, which he renders vividly in eco-poems that reveal metaphysical depths.

Lucretius on the Dance of Atoms

The ten-part poem titled "State of the Planet" is both a brief history of the Earth and an accomplished tribute to the Roman poet-philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus (ca. 99-ca. 55 BCE), whose thinking was condensed in the philosophical poem *De rerum natura* (ca. 60 BCE). In the face of the awe-inspiring majesty of nature, Lucretius writes his natural philosophy in an accomplished specimen of what could be termed *lyric philosophy*, rich in poetic language and remarkable metaphors.² George Santayana praised Lucretius's poem for "the grandeur and audacity of the intellectual feat" he accomplished: "a naturalistic conception of things," that is, "to cast the eye deliberate round the entire horizon, and to draw mentally the sum of all reality, discovering that reality makes such a sum, and may be called one" (21). Many of "the core arguments" of *De rerum natura* are "among the foundations on which modern life has been constructed" (Greenblatt 338), such as that "[e]verything is made of [eternal] invisible particles" (338) "in motion in an infinite void" (341), that "everything comes into being as a result of a swerve" (343), "that "Nature ceaselessly experiments" (345), that "the universe was not created for or about humans" (346), that "humans are not unique" (348), and that "understanding the nature of things generates deep wonder" (361). Decentering *anthropos* from center

stage, all these arguments are a sobering reminder that humankind is not the measure of all existence.

In Lucretius's mechanistic, non-teleological account of the creation and evolution of life, nature operates according to physical principles and experiments incessantly across eons of time. As a materialist following in the steps of Democritus and his master Epicetus, Lucretius views the world as a dance of atoms, in terms that anticipate modern physics, Barad's agential realism and Bennett's notion of vibrant matter by more than twenty centuries. In Barad's agential realism, firmly grounded in quantum physics, the universe is a "dynamic process of intra-activity" (396), a site of intra-active agencies where what-is emerges in an ongoing process of shared becoming. In other words, the vitality and the dynamic interconnectedness of an undivided universe are expressive of the "mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (33). According to Bennett, who also senses a form of vitality inherent in reality, (non)human bodies or things have the capacity "to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii), for matter is not "raw, brute, or inert" or "passive stuff" (vii). Matter is not simply acted upon, but has the capacity to play a role in the fabric of the universe. In Barad's words,

Eros, desire, life forces run through everything. [...] Matter itself is not a substrate or a medium for the flow of desire. [...] feeling, desiring and experiencing are not singular characteristics or capacities of human consciousness. Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers. (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 59)

Humans' "habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)" is "a partition of the sensible" (Bennett vii) that does not do justice to the nature of reality – a vast semiotic-material entanglement of intra-acting agencies with trajectories of their own. Most importantly, conceiving of the nonhuman world as inert matter, argues Bennett, "feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (ix), which partly accounts for the current unprecedented environmental crisis. Two thousand years ago, Lucretius was also sensitive to the *eros* of matter – to the fact that matter is alive. In Book II, verses 113-140, of *De rerum natura* he offers a vivid description

of dust particles in motion that he deems a proof of the existence of atoms: "you will see many tiny bodies mingle in many ways all through the empty space right in the light of the rays, and as though in some everlasting strife wage war and battle" (Lucretius 68-69). Lucretius's poem constitutes a powerful subtext in Hass's "State of the Planet." Beneath the mind-boggling multiformity of entities on Earth, there appears to exist a common substratum that can be reduced to a constellation of atoms, which Hass characterizes in his poem as being "electricity having sex / In an infinite variety of permutations, Plato's / Yearning halves of a severed being" (*Time and Materials* 53).

Lucretius's thinking on matter and atomism thus provides the philosophical framework for Hass' investigation into the story of the Earth in "State of the Planet," in much the same way as the framing story of a girl carrying a copy of a book titled *Getting to Know Your Planet* in her rucksack triggers Hass's account of the miracle of life on Earth and denunciation of climate crisis. Upon the publication of the poem in *The New York Times* in 2005, Hass explained that, faced with the invitation by Columbia University to compose a poem on the state of the planet, "he was struck mute by the challenge of writing on so broad a subject. But then he found inspiration in a child walking to school as a storm swept the Berkeley Hills" ("The State of the Planet" n. pag.). Like the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, scrutinizing the planet for more than 50 years, Lucretius and Hass turn to poetry as a mode of knowing that sheds light on the nature of the world and human beings' place in the larger scheme of things. From the outset, section 1 of "State of the Planet" directs readers' attention to the current climate crisis and the havoc caused by *Homo sapiens*. Crutzen and Stoermer emphasize "the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term 'Anthropocene' for the current geological epoch" in light of the growing "impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere" (17). The Anthropocene represents thus "a human-dominated geological epoch; [...] a geological *event*: a momentary though possibly momentous blip in the earth's biography" (Bringham 17). What the girl in Hass's work learns from the book she is reading is put in very succinct, at points laconic, terms. She will learn that

... “the troposphere” – has trapped
 Emissions from millions of cars, [...]

... and is making a greenhouse
 Of the atmosphere. The book will say that climate
 Is complicated, that we may be doing this.
 (*Time and Materials* 49)

Hass’s ecopoem is overtly marked by a deep sense of engagement and denunciation of practices that are damaging to the more-than-human world. Environmental degradation is a form of slow violence, that is, “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (Nixon 2), striking mostly “those people lacking resources” (4) in developing countries of the so-called Global South. At a time of alarming deterioration that is compromising the Earth’s carrying capacity, Nixon claims, it is of the essence that writer-activists make visible such slow violence in works of imaginative literature. As for poetry, different labels such as “green poetry” (Gifford), “environmental poetry” (Scigaj), “ecological poetry” (Gilcrest), “ecopoetry” (Scigaj; Bryson *Ecopoetry* and *The West Side*) and “Anthropocene lyric” (Bristow) have been in use over the last three decades, but the term “ecopoetry” is the most widely used nowadays. “Ecopoetry” literally means *poetry of the oikos* – poetry concerned with the biosphere as the home life has patiently built for itself. Like environment-sensitive writing more generally, ecopoetry is a form of imaginative activism and radical commitment to preserving the integrity of the more-than-human world – an agent of (social) transformation, capable of raising awareness and triggering responsibility. In “State of the Planet,” Hass directs readers’ attention to the havoc caused by anthropogenic action, which has taken humanity to the brink of environmental collapse, in the hope that it might instill in them a sense of the enormity of the situation.

In section 2 of “State of the Planet,” Hass declares that he seeks to compose a kind of poetry that emulates the simplicity of Lucretius’s style and serves as an epistemological tool to make sense of our planet. In a journal entry dated April 2, 1852, H. D. Thoreau wrote: “Man is altogether too much insisted on. The poet says the proper study of mankind is man. I say study to forget all that – take wider views of the universe.

That is the egotism of the race" (369). In such illuminating words, the Transcendentalist poet-philosopher prefigures the Anthropocene and ponders upon the destruction that the "gigantic institution" (382) of humankind causes on Earth. Like Lucretius and Thoreau, Hass belongs to a lineage of poets who respond to the awe-inspiring presence of the Earth by making verbal artifacts of lasting value. What poetry ultimately seems to be is the record of humanity's astonishment in the face of what resists verbalization. Self-centered as we tend to be, we spend most of our time thinking about our petty concerns and "human dramas" (Hass, *Time and Materials* 50). The lyrical voice in Hass's "State of the Planet" is after a kind of poetry that reveals itself to be a form of knowledge of what-is – one that registers the protean exuberance of the world's phenomena and "comprehends[s] the earth / [...] in a style as sober / As the Latin of Lucretius" (50).

In Hass's account, the Roman philosopher, addressing Venus, reported on "the state of things two thousand years ago" in these terms: "It's your doing that under the wheeling constellations / Of the sky,' he wrote, 'all nature teems with life'" (50). Significantly, whereas Lucretius reports on "the state of things" in *De rerum natura*, Hass reports on "the state of the planet" in his homonymous poem. Though twenty centuries apart, both poems are concerned with origins and the nature of reality. In the incipit of *De rerum natura*, the philosopher invokes Venus, whom he deems the creative power of nature, the principle of fertility and endless regeneration. In Dryden's translation, the opening lines read thus:

Delight of humankind and gods above,
 Parent of Rome, propitious Queen of Love,
 Whose vital power, air, earth, and sea supplies,
 And breeds whate'er is born beneath the rolling skies;
 For every kind, by thy prolific might,
 Springs and beholds the regions of the light.
 (52)

Then the Roman poet-philosopher intones crystal-clear words of *lyric* philosophy:

I will reveal the first-beginnings of things, from which nature creates all things and increases and fosters them, and into which nature too dissolves them again at their perishing: these in rendering our account it is our wont to call matter or the creative bodies of things, and to name them the seeds of things, and again to term them the first-bodies, since from them first all things have their being. (Lucretius 28-29)

In words marked by concision and elegance, Lucretius gives voice to his atomism. In his natural philosophy, the world is a swirl of atoms attracted by the force of *eros* (hence the allusion to Venus, the Roman goddess of love), coalescing into the myriad forms populating the Earth. Significantly, it is love or *eros* – the very term used in Barad’s insight that “[e]ros, desire, life forces run through everything” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 59) – that animates the entire world. Along similar lines, ecophilosopher David Abram conceives of the world as being populated by agentic, expressive entities that speak languages of their own. All beings and things, he observes, are literally *enworlded* and embodied creatures that have “the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings” (*Becoming Animal* 172). *Homo sapiens* is not the sole possessor of speech or consciousness, which is “a ubiquitous quality of the world” (37). In other words, the Earth is not inanimate stuff, but rather a whole of wholes and a web of interconnected agencies. In “The State of the Planet,” Hass condenses Lucretius’s core insight into what-is with the greatest linguistic economy as he writes “All nature teems with life” (*Time and Materials* 50), highlighting the livingness of the world and the dance of atoms in all things. Six syllables suffice for the American poet to convey the Roman’s natural philosophy, aligned with the insights of quantum physics.

What Hass offers in section 2 of “State of the Planet” is a most eloquent description of anthropogenic wastelands in the form of a litany of the woes accompanying the Anthropocene. Desertification and terraforming, pollution and overfishing, the construction of gigantic dams on all continents, intensive agriculture and deforestation are just instances of the endless havoc caused by our species. In the beating heart of the poem, Hass writes:

Topsoil: going fast. Rivers: damned and fouled.
Cod: about fished out. Haddock: about fished out.

Pacific salmon nosing against dams from Yokohama
To Kamchatka to Seattle and Portland,
[...]
Most of the ancient groves are gone, sacred to Kuan Yin
And Artemis, sacred to the gods and goddesses...
(50)

In *Expulsions* (2014), Sassen has demonstrated that the perverse logic of global capitalism, whose main hallmarks are profit-making, the commodification of the nonhuman world (rendered inert and hence exploitable and expendable) and an utter indifference to human dignity, has resulted in the unfair distribution of the world's wealth and in varied channels of expulsion. Faced with the sheer magnitude of the current environmental degradation, Sassen notes that the damage caused to the biosphere has grown exponentially in the last decades to the extent that it has become "a planetary event that boomerangs back, often hitting sites that had nothing to do with the original destruction" (3-4). Our toxic modes of development have produced unimaginable havoc in the biosphere and led to "the expulsion of bits of the biosphere from their life space" (5), which precarious human communities have suffered the most. Evidence of accelerated environmental degradation is discernible in at least three major areas: land degradation and toxicity, "water scarcities, created by humans, and the increasing number of water bodies that pollution has starved of oxygen" and "the melting of the permafrost, rising temperatures, and massive floods" (151). All the way "from the stratosphere to deep ocean gyres" (209), there is no place on our planet immune to the havoc caused by the myopic conception of progress and material wealth deeply ingrained in the Western mindset. All three areas of environmental degradation are evoked in Hass's poem with astonishing dexterity: land, water and air – the life-sustaining elements central to the biosphere makeup – are compromised by predatory formations and dynamics at work in capitalist societies. Geographically distant places such as Yokohama, Kamchatka, Seattle and Portland are brought together in Hass's poem to emphasize that environmental degradation is simply ubiquitous. As if emulating Lucretius's simplicity, the language deployed by the poet to evoke anthropogenic damage is extremely laconic. It relies on the use of

participles instead of syntactically full sentences – “Topsoil: going fast. Rivers: damned and fouled” – and repetition – “Cod: about fished out. Haddock: about fished out” (*Time and Materials* 50) – to cumulatively build a sense of litany when recording the extinction of specific fish species. Repetition is also discernible in Hass’s concern with deforestation and mourning of the ancient groves “sacred to Kuan Yin / And Artemis, sacred to the gods and goddesses” (*Time and Materials* 50), with references (Kuan Yin and Artemis) denoting cultural syncretism.

Whereas section 3 of “State of the Planet” shows the poetic persona addressing Lucretius to direct the Roman’s and readers’ attention to advances in genetic engineering in words not devoid of humor (“mechanics / In our art of natural philosophy can take the property / Of luminescence from a jellyfish and put it in mice”; 50) section 4 gives a succinct account of the origins of the universe and the formation of the Earth. A rock is not the same as a stone. As Don McKay lucidly notes, “a stone is a rock that’s been put to use” or, to put it differently, “rock is as old as the earth is; stone is as old as humanity” (59). Stone is domesticated rock and betrays human presence, whilst rock gestures towards deep, geological time. In section 4, Hass turns clocks back to muse on the deep past: the Big Bang. Dwelling on how “life came to be” (51), the poet writes on the miracle of life:

Stuff flung off from the sun, the molten core
 Still pouring sometimes rivers of black basalt
 Across the earth from the old fountains of its origin.
 [...]

 The long cooling. There is no silence in the world
 Like the silence of rock from before life was.
 (51)

The alliterative texture of the lines “Stuff flung off from the sun, the molten core / Still pouring sometimes rivers of black basalt” (51) somehow takes readers back to the cradle of life. Notice how the deliberate repetition of such sounds as /s/, /f/ and /b/ creates a mesmerizing effect and evokes the high temperatures and the subsequent cooling of rock in the formation of the cosmos. In the same section, singing of biodiversity and the wonder

of life as it manifests in “a palo verde tree,” in “an insect-eating bird” and in the ancient rock “in a Mexican desert,” Hass juxtaposes human and nonhuman animals, and contrasts “the completely fierce / Alertness of the bird that can't know the amazement / Of its being there” with “a human mind that somewhat does” (51). Nonhuman animals are part and parcel of the larger mesh of things, but, Hass suggests, are not aware of their being so. In contrast, human animals, inquisitive by nature, have the capacity to think about the miracle of their very existence. However, numerous scholars have emphasized that mind is not the sole prerogative of *Homo sapiens*. As early as 1979, Gregory Bateson noted that thinking was not the private possession of human beings but a property of reality and that “the very word ‘animal’ means ‘endowed with mind or spirit (*animus*)’” (5). According to Wendy Wheeler, “‘Mind’ and ‘ideas’ are not properties of humans alone, but are immanent in all living things” (272). For his part, Abram claims that consciousness is not “the special possession of our species,” but “a property of the breathing biosphere”; as a result, human beings are “carnally immersed in an awareness that is not, properly speaking, ours, but is rather the earth’s” (“Afterword” 303).

At any rate, Hass underscores that “It must be a gift of evolution that humans / Can't sustain wonder. We'd never have gotten up / From our knees if we could” (*Time and Materials* 51) – such is the majesty of nature that Lucretius sensed in the more-than-human world centuries ago. What Hass emphasizes in these lines is that wonder cannot be endlessly sustained if our species is to ensure its survival. He suggests that the will of *Homo sapiens* to master and control the nonhuman is deeply wired in the Western *Weltanschauung*. By taking dominion over the Earth and its living creatures, writes Hass, humans soon learned to master the fowl of the air and fashion “little earrings from the feathers,” adorned their faces with “rubblings from the rock,” and “made a spear from the sinewy wood of the tree” (51) – all of which is expressive of humans' capacity for tool-use and mastery over the nonhuman through technology. Hass's poetic agenda embraces some of the main tenets of Braidotti's thinking on the posthuman subject as being “a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole” (*Posthuman* 82). In line with Barad's and Bennett's lessons, Braidotti argues that the fact that “all matter is One, intelligent and self-organizing” is a crucial discovery, as it reinstates

democracy across humans' and nonhumans' existence and substantiates what she terms "ontological pacifism," i.e., "trust in our shared intimacy with and knowledge of the world and in our lived experience of it" (21). What emerges out of this mindset is a deep sense of ontological humility – an acknowledgment that humans are a tiny part of the more-than-human world – which is the perfect antidote to capitalist greed, the commodification of the planet and the over-exploitation of natural resources. It is this ontological pacifism that Hass captures in "State of the Planet."

In section 5 of "State of the Planet," Hass keeps on investigating the origins of our shared *oikos*. He looks into the deep past of the Earth by attending to "[l]imestone fossils of Devonian coral" that "bring back the picture of what life / Looked like four hundred millions years ago: a honeycomb with mouths" (*Time and Materials* 52). Section 6 explores the origins of life on Earth, that is, "[c]ells that divided and reproduced" and "DNA, the curled musical ladder of sugars, acids" (52), and conveys the lyrical voice's wonder in the face of the awe-inspiring creativity intrinsic to the life forms populating the biosphere. Life evolved in myriad ways, producing a wide variety of organisms and all kinds of cultural practices. From the first bacterium that "grew green pigment" came "eyes, ears, wings, hands, tongues. / Armadillos, piano tuners, gnats, sonnets, / Military interrogation, the coho salmon..." (52), writes Hass evoking the protean variety of life forms and cultures as living ecosystems. The closing lines of section 6 lay themselves down as a bridge leading to section 7, which celebrates biodiversity and the generous spaciousness of the Earth to accommodate trees, beetles, reptiles, orchids, butterflies, parrots and innumerable other species. In a passage of consummate artistry, Hass sings of the teeming life inhabiting the complex ecosystem of a forest:

The great trees in that forest house ten thousands of kinds
Of beetle, reptiles no human eyes has [sic] ever seen changing
Color on the hot, green, hardly changing leaves
Whenever a faint breeze stirs them.
(53)

What is particularly moving about this excerpt is that such vegetable and animal exuberance exists irrespective of human beings and that, if left

untouched, it might flourish again. Hass implies that there is still room for *terra incognita* on Earth, despite the impulse of scientific research to categorize all that exists on this planet. What the poet's gaze registers in the forest is a plethora of details that points to a species assemblage and a confederacy of vibrant entities – trees, insects, reptiles, leaves, a faint breeze – intimately bound with each other as part of a vast material-semiotic symposium. They are what Donna Haraway calls “the Chthonic ones,” that is, “they writhe and luxuriate in manifold forms and manifold names in all the airs, waters, and places of earth” (2). With all of them *Homo sapiens* is kin, as Haraway has noted in memorable words: “all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense,” for all earthbound beings “share a common ‘flesh,’ laterally, semiotically, and genealogically” (103). In fact, Haraway prefers to use the term “Chthulucene” (instead of “Anthropocene”), “a compound of two Greek roots (*kēthôn* and *kainos*) that together name a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth” (2). Incidentally, “Chthulucene” also derives from “The Call of Cthulhu,” one of H. P. Lovecraft's most well-known stories of cosmic horror, originally written in 1926 and first published in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in 1928.

Section 9 opens with a eulogy of agriculture in Roman times. Addressing Lucretius once again, Hass reminds us that it was the Romans who “taught the world to love / Vast fields of grain, the power and the order of the green, / Then golden rows of it” (*Time and Materials* 54). The “smiling” fields – the vineyards and olive groves with which the countryside was adorned – were a pleasure to see. But the section closes on a note of pessimism in light of species extinction. Looking at “a flock of buntings in October wind, headed south / Toward winter habitat,” over fields that “[t]heir kind has known and mated in for thirty centuries,” Hass mourns the disappearance of “the long-billed arctic curlews who flew / From Newfoundland to Patagonia in every weather,” last seen “in a Texas marsh in 1964” (55). Once again, anthropogenic action is beneath the alarming decimation and extinction of animal species, including specific bird species like arctic curlews. Finally, section 10 asks “What is to be done with our species?” (55), a species that is part of a civilization that has taken a self-suicidal course. As Bringham puts it, “earth's life is much larger than our own lives, but our lives are part of it. If we take that life, we take our own” (12). Everything that lives is

bound to die, true enough: “We know we’re going to die, to be submitted / To that tingling dance of atoms once again” (Hass, *Time and Materials* 55), the very same atoms amorously scrutinized by Lucretius in *De rerum natura*. Our lives might be a dream, says the poet, “even the long story of the earth” (55) recounted in “State of the Planet.” However, that life might be a dream does not cancel the fact that human action has become the most destructive force on Earth: “Boreal forests, mangrove swamps, Tiberian wheatfields / In the summer heat on hillsides south of Rome – all of it / A dream, and we alive somewhere, somehow outside it” (55). As if it were possible not to be *part* of it, within it, *it* being the Earth. As Abram has lucidly observed, after “three and a half centuries spent charting and measuring material nature as though it were a pure exterior, we’ve at last begun to notice that the world we inhabit [...] is alive” (*Becoming Animal* 158).

Lucretius ended *De rerum natura* with a plague, which Hass succinctly mentions in “State of the Planet”: “The bodies heaped in the temple of the gods” (*Time and Materials* 56). The Roman philosopher depicts a wasteland of unburied bodies avoided by birds and beasts: “bodies piled on bodies lay in numbers unburied on the ground” (Lucretius 276). The plague caused utter destruction: “death had filled all the sacred shrines of the gods with lifeless bodies” (278). Unlike his Roman predecessor, Hass brings his poem to an end by sounding a note of optimism: “the earth needs a dream of restoration – / She dances and the birds just keep arriving. / Thousands of them, immense arctic flocks, her teeming life” (*Time and Materials* 56). It is no coincidence that the poem should come full circle by going back to Lucretius’s words about the Earth “teeming with life” first introduced in section 2 of “State of the Planet,” as if to emphasize the miracle of life, perpetually in the making. Capitalism may be intent on destroying the planet, but the beauty of the world still persists.

A Postscript: Corporeal Waste and War Statistics

Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* ends with a plague which brings about death and an unspeakable wasteland. A constellation of three poems in Hass’s *Time and Materials* – “A Poem,” “Bush’s War” and “On Visiting the DMZ

at Panmunjom: A Haibun" – concerns a similar kind of wasteland, that of corporeal waste brought about by twentieth-century wars. Though a war is very different from a plague, both share deep affinities in that they gesture towards bodies as being the locus of existence and in that they generate corporeal wastelands. Thus, the three Hass's poems form a triptych that harks back to the closing lines of Lucretius's poem. The first piece, titled "A Poem," explores the US policy of saturation bombing in the Vietnam War, "a way to defoliate the tropical forests as a way of locating the enemy and to kill the enemy if he happened to be in the way of the concussion bombs or the napalm or the firebombs" (*Time and Materials* 66).

Environmental degradation – the killing of trees in the tropical forests – is parallel to the taking of human lives, with the boundary between ecocide and homicide on a massive scale being increasingly blurred to the point of indistinction, for "the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (Alaimo 238). From an ecocritical perspective, there is no point in drawing a clear-cut boundary between the human and the nonhuman, as what both realms share is a vibrant material-semiotic substratum. In fact, the border between the *enworlded*, *embodied* mind and the Earth is conceived as being utterly porous. In this regard, Nancy Tuana has emphasized the permeability "between our flesh and the flesh of the world" (188). Such porosity is dramatically palpable in the effects of toxic chemicals released in wars on the victims' bodies. By drawing readers' attention to the sheer amount of bombs dropped on Vietnamese villagers and the resulting "damage to civilian lives" (*Time and Materials* 66), Hass overtly denounces the havoc and horror caused by the Vietnam War. As the poet explains, "there were more bombs dropped on the villages and forests of South Vietnam than were dropped in all of World War II" (66). Statistics gives a clear idea of the magnitude of corporeal waste caused by the wars punctuating the twentieth century: "In the first twenty years of the twentieth century 90 percent of war deaths were the deaths of combatants. In the last twenty years of the twentieth century 90 percent of war deaths were deaths of civilians" (66).

The Vietnam War is not an isolated example, but rather a paradigmatic one. The twentieth century was peppered with an endless litany of wars in different parts of the globe. In "Bush's War," Hass offers a general overview

of twentieth-century wars and statistics with regards to casualties in a sequence of flashbacks and flashforwards that brings to the fore the colossal monstrosity of human violence released by wars in the recent history of humanity:

Flash: Hiroshima.
 Flash: Auschwitz, Dachau, Thersienstadt,
 [...]

The gulags, seven million in Byelorussia
 And Ukraine.
 [...]

Two million Vietnamese, fifty-thousand
 Of the American young, whole races
 Of tropical birds extinct from saturation bombing)
 (*Time and Materials* 69-70)

The root cause behind all of these wars is, according to Hass, “the rage to hurt mixed up / With self-righteousness” (70-71). The crudity of statistics and of corporeal wastelands stands in stark contrast to the lyricism of certain passages where Hass evokes the more-than-human world in spring in a German city: “The northern spring begins before dawn / In a racket of birdsong, when the *amsels*, / Black European thrushes, shiver the sun up” (68). The poem comes to an end with a quote from “Wandrer’s Nachtlied II,” a piece Goethe wrote on September 6, 1780 on the wall of a wooden cabin where he spent the night, “Warte nur, bald ruhest du auch,” which Hass translates as “Just wait. / You will be quiet soon enough” (71), underscoring the silence of death, the absence of motion which is the mark of the living.

In “On Visiting the DMZ at Panmunjom: A Haibun,” the poet turns his attention to the Korean War. DMZ stands for *demilitarized zone* in military jargon, an area, agreed upon between the parties to an armed conflict, which cannot be occupied or used for military purposes. The DMZ mentioned in the poem’s title is one located in a village just north of the *de facto* border between North and South Korea where the armistice agreement that paused the Korean War was signed in 1953. The blue buildings along the Military Demarcation Line are considered one of

the last vestiges of the Cold War. The *baibun* mentioned in the title is a prosimetric literary form originating in Japan, combining prose and haiku, which informs Hass's poem, an autobiographical account of a journey to Korea that triggers his musings on war. Pondering the staggering figures of casualties in the Korean War – “More than two and half million people died during the Korean War” (*Time and Materials* 82), soldiers and civilians alike – the poet progressively advances towards wordlessness: “There is no evidence that human beings have absorbed these facts, which ought, at least, to provoke some communal sense of shame. It may be the sheer number of bodies that is hard to hold in mind” (82). These words recall an essay titled “Study War No More: Violence, Literature, and Immanuel Kant,” where Hass writes: “War and witness. Human beings seem unable to hold in mind the enormity of their violence or the damage it has done” (131). Our species seems to be the only one that steps time again on the same stone, which is to say that history repeats itself. In the new century and millennium, wars are still being waged in different locations across the globe. Hass's poetic triptych on war is an apt reminder that there is a lot to be learnt: a dose of humility, a new way to relate to the *otber*, human and nonhuman alike.

Notes

¹ Proposed in 2000 by Crutzen and Stoermer, the term “Anthropocene” refers to the current geological epoch, when humanity has become the most destructive force on Earth. They date the onset of this new epoch back to the first stages of the Industrial Revolution.

² In a letter addressed to his brother Quintus in early February 54 BCE, Cicero praised Lucretius's poetry: “Lucreti poemata ut scribis ita sunt, multis luminibus ingeni, multae tamen artis” (118). That is: “Lucretius' poetry is as you say – sparkling with natural genius, but plenty of technical skill” (119).

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