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Reading In-Common: Configurations of the Incalculable and the Planetary Imagination

Abstract: Situated at the historical juncture of increased global violence, retronationalism, neoliberalism, techno-positivism, environmental and humanitarian disaster, the planet and life itself are in crisis and human "reason is on trial" (Mbembe). This post-global planetary emergency also signifies a crisis of the cultural and political imagination (Gosh) and a lack of critical paradigms through which to address this crisis creatively. This essay discusses a number of analytical terms—noise, the immaterial, rupture/event, the "environmental uncanny" (Gosh), "re-existence" (Mignolo)—to read the planetary in (im)material and decolonial terms as configurations of the incalculable.

Keywords: Planetary Imagination; Reading Strategies; In-Common; Incalculability; Immateriality; Noise; Decoloniality; *Gun Island*; *The Story of a Brief Marriage*; Undisciplinarity.

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> The political in our time must start from the imperative to reconstruct the world in common. . . A planetary . . . curriculum is one whose strategic project is to understand the incalculable and the incomputable. . . [and to] bring as equitably as possible . . . every person and every text, every archive and every memory in the *sphere* of care and concern.
> (Achille Mbembe, "Thoughts on the Planetary.")

1. Thinking In-Common

What is the planetary? What are some of the paradigmatic shifts entailed in planetary thinking? How can we discern these shifts critically and creatively? If any act of reading constructs, as it does, its object under scrutiny, then, how, to what end, and for whom do we read the planetary? These questions were raised by two of my interlocutors, Sneja Gunew and Mihaela Ursa, at the *Planetary Spaces / L'espace planétaire* conference at Babes-Bolyai University (Cluj-Napoca) in October 2019. Not only did their interventions trouble my approach towards reading the planetary, but they also demonstrated that any reading strategy of the planetary, at least in my mind, has to take a collective and relational perspective. Mihaela Ursa rightly observed that an antagonistic reading of the planetary, as I initially suggested, namely, through the new antagonisms of global capitalism outlined by Slavoj Žižek[1], maintains a binary and reactive approach towards resistance and planetary transformation. In fact, let me add to her observation, such a reading accepts—rather than rejects—the conditions of resistance offered, accepted and co-opted by global capital. With hindsight, then, an antagonistic reading approach leaves little room for developing ways of knowing and thinking not based on empirical calculability, heteropatriarchal and racialized divides, or normative historical materialism. In contrast, reading in-common, as I will discuss it throughout this essay, is, as Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh argue, an open "pluriversal" and "decolonial" (2) praxis that explores the concepts of the event, the incalculable, movement, and creative embodiment as critical, and methodologically disobedient, modes of epistemological and cultural transformation.

Sneja Gunew's thoughtful interjection called for epistemological vigilance when engaging in planetary thinking. What—if at all—makes the planetary a new paradigm? How does it co-opt and is co-opted by earlier postcolonial and postmodern forms of critique? If, as Gayatri Spivak argues in her pioneering work on planetary thinking, "the planet is in the species of alterity" (*Death* 72), how might we avoid rhetorical and, worse, allegorical configurations of alterity and planetarity in terms of an incommensurable difference more often than not marked as woman? Although planetary thinking aims to "detranscendentalize" alterity (Abraham 79), that is, to remove it from the grip of both radical Otherness and identity politics, we still risk, as Gunew provocatively commented on my reading of Chrystal Hana Kim's Korean American war novel *If You Leave Me* (2018), transvaluing planetary alterity into a transcendental signifié. Thus, we end up with the figure of the dead, sacrificed or self-sacrificing, woman at the end of the story. Both Sneja Gunew and Mihaela Ursa's interventions have been invaluable for my engagement with planetary thinking. They emphasize the need for a differentiated discussion of planetarity as an epistemological concept, a mode of perception, and a political and cultural practice of the social imagination. They draw attention to a perhaps overrated confidence in the critical force of alterity—understood, as it often is, as incommensurable Otherness, and its difficult, if not irreconcilable, relationship with concepts of relationality and decoloniality. It is important to note, however, that Spivak's notion on planetarity is not reducible to a configuration or privileging of alterity. In an earlier text, Spivak suggests that "planetarity" must be seen "as the source of a double bind that will not bind . . . [a] contradiction without synthesis" ("Imperative" 335). As a double-bind, planetarity becomes relational and translational rather than ontological. More so, by loosening the ontological stronghold of the self/other dialectic, Spivak's notion of the planetary as double-bind enables us to "re-imagine . . .

the subject as planetary accident" (339). As such, the subject changes its enunciative position. It no longer speaks from within a computational or economist neoliberal imaginary divided into an outer and inner sphere of global capitalism but from a collective position of responsibility, refusal and recreation derived from "planetary discontinuity" (342)—for instance, between world and planet—and "long and planetary trajectories of discontent" (Mignolo 212). This collective position, of which I will speak more in the last part of this essay, is volatile and risks being hampered, as Gunew invoked and Spivak insists, by "the manipulation of female agency" (*Reason* 270).

Spivak's caveat notwithstanding, I wish to take a slightly different approach to thinking the planetary. Rather than reading the planet in terms of alterity and assuming the planetary as a given, I ask, along with Jennifer Gabrys, how does the planetary "become evident—whether as object, process, or event?" To begin with, the planetary often signifies the intensified use and development of algorithmic intelligence and computational technology. In this context the planetary evokes "total dominion" and "suggests complete interconnectedness, but also forms of imperial control" (3). The Cameroonian philosopher and public intellectual Achille Mbembe, whose work on planetarity, quoted in the epigraph, guides the theoretical inquiries of this essay, notes an increasing faith in "technopositivism and modes of statistical thought" ("Thoughts"). This faith, he argues, affects a "recolonization of various fields of knowledge by all kinds of determinisms" and leads to "regimes of assessment of the natural world . . . that treat *life itself as a computable object.*" From this point of view, the planetary appears as a "product of globality as well as universal science" (Gabrys). What such an attitude forecloses is the fact that the planetary, as, for instance, Timothy Morton[2] and Spivak argue, cannot be fully represented or visualized. Rather, according to its Greek etymological roots, the word planet derives from "asters planetai" and "planasthai," meaning "to wander," or from "plazein," meaning "to bewilder" and to be of "unstable temperature." Thus, the words planet and planetary connote movement, transformation, wandering and wondering, and therefore, the planetary, as I want to show, becomes evident in a myriad of often invisible ways and events that unsettle, contest and decolonize totalizing planetary imaginaries from "the brink" (Omelsky)[3].

This essay, then, heeds Mbembe's exhortation "to reconstruct the world in common." Drawing from multiple literary archives and epistemologies, it seeks to make a case for the planetary as an event and epistemological practice grounded in reading "the incalculable and the incomputable" as a way of discovering and mediating common ground. Reading-in-common tracks the conditions of possibility of "becoming collective" (Gabrys) and, methodologically, recognizes that understanding the planetary as a decolonial praxis draws from multiple forms of knowledge. For, as the Nishnaabeg writer, activist and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues, "Intellectual knowledge is not enough on its own. Neither is spiritual knowledge or emotional knowledge. All kinds of knowledge are important and necessary in a communal and emergent balance" (*As We Have* loc 2618). The rest of this essay is divided into three parts, each using deliberately open terms of analysis that invoke different formations of the incalculable and planetary. The first part draws on astrophysics and Erín Moure's poetry and analyzes the resistant force of noise to flesh out the idea of "reading in-common."[4] The second part reads silence, the immaterial and unexpected in Anuk Arudpragasam's novella *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016). Here, the critical focus on violence and the immaterial makes legible the global trajectory of the "colonial matrix of power" (Mignolo and Walsh 10) and emerging relationships between the human and nonhuman that reorder the ways in which the planetary becomes evident in-common. The final part explores representations of global warming and the incalculable in Amitav Gosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019). Some of them focus on the transformative power of storytelling and translation, migration, and time and imagine the confluence of different knowledge forms and events, to generate a resurgent planetary common. All of these readings consider the incalculable, and its various configurations, as an aesthetic and epistemological *modus operandi* through which to contest normative imaginaries of the planetary and, instead, suggest a relational and decolonial praxis of imagining and, ultimately, inhabiting the planet.

2. Reading In-Common and the Undisciplinarity of *Planetary Noise*

In *An Autobiography of the Autobiography of Reading*, Dionne Brand suggests that reading means to read at once "the world being addressed and the world buried in the address" (loc 290), always attuned to the "unseen, unread . . . the pedagogy of colony"(loc 272). While my notion of reading in-common is indebted to earlier postcolonial and deconstructive projects of reading,[5] it emphasizes an activist and decolonial reading practice. Again, I take my cue from Dionne Brand, who questions what it means to "be indoctrinated into…narrative structures" that negate the subjects that enable these structures (loc 343). She observes that a hegemonic strategy of narrative interpellation is the construction of a plural subject, a "We," a false and exclusionary universal that encompasses the Western subject of colonial modernity. This " 'We'," she insists, "has a certain barbarity to it—a force. It is an administrative category" (loc 359). Against this "We", reading-in-common does not assume a pre-given collective subject but it mediates differences, to *produce* "the common we share." For, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explain in *Multitude*, "our communication, collaboration, and cooperation are not only based on the common, but they in turn produce the common in an expanding spiral relationship" (xv). Reading in-common operates across the dynamics of singularity and relationality. It aims to "gather," as Brand states, another "*we*", one that refuses to "narrativize Black people into multiple forms of incarceration" (loc 471) and invites the reader "to construct the narrative's coherence without requiring the presumption of an abject location" (loc 492). Thus, reading appears as a process of gathering, collecting, and recollecting in-common. Reading in-common, however, also examines different configurations of the negated and discounted, such as noise, dissonance and the imperceptible in order to comprehend the conditions, agendas and limits of legibility.

Methodologically, reading in-common proceeds by way of what Mignolo calls "irreverent scientific thinking" (105). "Epistemic disobedience" ("Epistemic" 44) refers to pluri- and para-disciplinary crossings of the humanities, social and natural sciences, and follows a decolonial trajectory of thinking. Decoloniality performs a persistent critique of coloniality, understood as constitutive of modernity and originating in global and local protest movements against the divisive effects of global capitalism, planetary environmental destruction and the impoverishment and dispossession of vast parts of the global population. Seeking "radically distinct perspectives . . . that displace Western rationality" and instrumental reason as the universal "framework" of "existence" and "thought" (Walsh 17), decolonial thinking practices, as Catherine Walsh argues, a "serpentine movement toward possibilities of other modes of being, thinking, knowing, sensing, and living; that is, an otherwise in plural" (81). Other than decolonization, from which it has to be distinguished, decoloniality is an epistemic and planetary project of resurgence.[6] The rest of this section reads Moure's translational poetics against astrophysics to unsettle the normativizing effects of computational and measuring technologies in dominant formations of planetary thinking.

In 2017, the Nobel Prize for Physics went to the three American physicists Rainer Weiss, Barry C. Barish, and Kip S. Thorne, for "decisive contributions to the LIGO detector and the observation of gravitational waves."[7] The LIGO project strikes one as a faithful project of a large global collective of over 1000 scientists from over 20 countries. The project was faithful not only to computational methodologies but also because for the last 101 years, the search for the evidence of gravitational waves had to rely not on computation but on the imagination. Albert Einstein had predicted the existence of gravitational waves as a result of movements in the spacetime fabric of the universe caused by the collision or proximity of stars or black holes. He believed, however, that gravitational waves would travel for so long that their effects would not be measurable on Earth. In 2015, however, the LIGO detector recorded first short and then longer drawn out signals, "Cosmic chirps," the physicists identified as electrical signals caused by gravitational waves. The gravitational waves that created a physically and materially audible sound emanated from the rapid fusion of two black holes billions of years ago. The effects of this rupture are contractions in the space-time continuum that travel through space in the form of gravitational waves, through geological deep time, and, stunningly, turn from an immaterial phenomenon in space into a historical event that directly links the ruptures of the universe to planet Earth. Moreover, the gravitational waves can no longer be traced back to an origin but it is the after-effect of the rupture that constitutes an origin without an origin, a spectral matrix of planetary history. The universe then has become audible through sound and requires us to retune our senses in order to imagine the materiality of the invisible. These signals evidence the existence of black holes and suggest planet Earth's multiple ontologies and connectivities. The scientific transformation of gravitational waves into sound symbolizes that the planet and humanity's mode of existence have dramatically changed, while our modes of perception and sensing appear to lag behind. Being audible yet defying full representation,[8] the planet appears as an uncanny hyperobject that ruptures our sense of home and care from a macrocosmic perspective.

Yet, the minute measuring and calculating of gravitational waves and their transcription from sound into signal imply that the signal is fully legible, transparent and decodable by an astrophysicist, without interferences or noise, just a signal to confirm what we already knew. In contrast, *Planetary Noise*, the Montréal poet Erín Moure's re-edition of poems dating from 1979 to 2015, engages with the creative and resistant productivity of noise, a project that links the poet's work to indigenous and postcolonial art and scholarship. Her poetry is characterized by a collusion and translation of multiple languages and intertexts, which Canadian poet Phyllis Webb considers as part of a "planetary and interplanetary ecology" and poetics in which "Relativity, probability, chance . . . are their subjects" (in: Maguire Loc 157). The relationship between noise and the signal is explicitly discussed in *O Cidadán* (2002), a collection that coined the phrase "planetary noise" and was written in multiple poetic genres and languages (French, English, Spanish, Galician, and Portuguese). "What if we listen to the noise and not the signal," the speaker asks. Noise is usually an interference that inhibits proper communication. It is marginal and resists the translatability and full comprehensibility of any act of communication. Noise can be experienced as a moment of confusion, of second-guessing and questioning, but, as Shannon Maguire suggests, it also "acts as a threshold of relationality" (Loc 241).

In Moure's work noise directly relates to a planetary understanding of communication and cultural knowledge production that questions borders and divisions and, instead, invokes the at once material and immaterial expanse of a planet's "electromagnetic spectrum" (loc 1333). In fact, planetary sounds appear as noise but are electromagnetic vibrations interacting with the solar wind and other space phenomena. To introduce planetary noise into the field of the sensible requires intricate forms of translation and openness and must reckon with the ineluctable force of interference. The poem's speaker observes:

> When my language fails, only then can we
> detect signals that harken to a porosity of
> borders or lability of zones … (across the en-
> tire electromagnetic spectrum, not just the
> visual. As in *planetary noise*)
>
> But first we have to suspend our need to
> see "identity" itself as saturate signal (ob-
> literating all "noise") (Loc 1333)

And later, the speaker adds that *what* "we face/hear" in "the threshold environment of weak signal communication" (i.e., in the process of reading itself) is

> present only within the noise generated by the
> planet's surface, the solar relation, the system of detection in
> itself. Here noise is temperature and mapping and we are not

> seeking "strong signal"
> We are listening to something much quieter [...]
> "as vocais multiplicadas"
> *To touch ceaselessly on the confines of the world*... (loc 1386-1397).

Here, planetary noise operates underneath the "planet's surface" as a liberating force of interruption that becomes audible and productive once the signal chain of language breaks down. The disrupting and disorienting effects of noise intervene into narratives of sovereignty, fullness, and identity (that tend to "obliterate all noise") to draw attention to "the quieter," silenced things, to that which remains singular, untranslated and resistant yet multiple, inscribed, as it is, in the Spanish words "vocais multiplicadas." What we have to "face/hear," then, is the slightly dissonant rhyme of voice/noise—that is, symbolically, the crack inbetween these two words, associated with the "vocais multiplicadas," the other gathered and gathering "we" (Brand loc 492)—that disturbs the logic of the signal and hegemonically coded communication. The connotations of "face/hear" are pertinent because they suggest that hearing or listening to noise entails a resistant or confrontational reading of the dominant, while calling for the "redistribution of the sensible" (Jacques Rancière), of what is and what isn't visible, for, in translational terms, face/visage derives from *visus* and *videre*, to see. Noise, then, resides between languages and words, in the excess of translations and sounds, and while it defies calculation, it harbors a significant conceptual force through which we might reconfigure how we represent and inhabit the planet in common.

The poetic and conceptual configuration of noise, then, resonates with the tasks Moure assigns to reading and, second, engenders relational and political connectivities, which, in turn, produce the "common we share" (Hardt and Negri xv). "Reading," Moure states, "is where thought risks" (*Wager* 13). It is characterized by a "seizure" that "break[s] apart the organism, the organism's complacency, its complicities with the status quo" (14). Moure's notion of a feminist embodied and materialist reading practice is firmly grounded in both the "weightlessness" of poetry that resists the symbolic order of heteropatriarchal Reason and the "materiality" and relationality of "words, sounds, and signification" (*Wager* 22). In Moure's understanding, "sound *is* sense [and memory], . . . undercutting surface commerce and ideology" (23). Thus the immateriality of sound performs a materialist critique and "push[es] at order," warning of the dangers that reside in "relying too much on the surface meaning of words" (23). Rather, in her poetry noise remains productive, unsettled and unsettling, fugitive. Poetry, Moure explains, "is first a noise, then a resonance of words that alters noise over and over" (17) to ceaselessly "recontext" (18) the relationships between readers, texts, their social and cultural structuring, and, I would add, the planet (14). From this perspective, Moure's poetic and political practice of planetary noise intersects with the ways in which other resurgent indigenous and non-indigenous scholars, such as Fred Moten, Jack Halberstam, and Jarrett Martineau, promote noise as an aesthetic and political practice of refusal and "relational becoming" (Martineau 271). Reading the sound installations of the interdisciplinary indigenous art collective Postcommodity, the Cree and Dene scholar and artist Jarrett Martineau argues that the collective employs noise as immaterial excess and "disruptive tactic of generative resistance that hacks the phonic materiality" of given colonial and global capitalist signal chains. In Martineau's reading, noise signals the refusal to accept the conditions of recognition imposed by the languages, governments, and codes of the colonizer. In fact, noise negates the underlying received grammar of colonial knowledge production and settler order. Reading indigeneity and noise analogically, he states: "Indigeneity as noise is the sound of survival. We occupy the colonial signal chain to claim the indeterminate, where indeterminacy is a generative opening into collective experience. Indigenous peoples recode ourselves through noise" and "refuse to be contained" (274). Thinking through the interruptive and incalculable potentialities of noise, then, gathers together multiple readers and collectivities of the "undercommons"[9] and productively speculates about common decolonial epistemologies and aesthetic practices. The next section orients my discussion of the immaterial, the incalculable and the common in the narrative of globalized violence.

3. The Un-Common, the Unexpected and the Embodiment of the Immaterial

The following examines the ways in which different representations of silence and proximity come to embody and contest the ever accelerating intensity of globalized violence dramatized in Anuk Arudpragasam's Sri Lankan novella *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016). The novella, I suggest, intertwines the brutal practices of contemporary warfare with the global colonial matrix of power while drawing on the transformative potential of the unexpected to think planetary habitation and the viscerality of life itself in-common. Set in the "No-Fire Zone" in Sri Lanka's North–then still occupied by the Tamil army (LTTE)—shortly before the end of the country's three decade long civil war in the spring of 2009, and after the devastations caused by the 2004 tsunami, Arudpragasam's novella pays close attention to the interconnected human and environmental suffering caused by the violence of war and the effects of global warming. Taken together, the numbers of casualties of the war and the tsunami are staggering and emblematic for the continuous planetary increase of "necropolitical" violence (Mbembe). In fact, the last days of the war, whose origins date back to Sri Lanka's colonial modernity and its deeply racialized and ethnicized politics of post-Independent Sinhalese nation formation, produced a previously unprecedented amount of at least 100, 000 civilian deaths and close to one million internally displaced people. During those final months, as *The Story of a Brief Marriage* documents, the Sri Lankan Army, the LTTE, and counter-insurgents indiscriminately bombed civilian refugee camps. The story narrates one day in the life of Dinesh, an orphaned adolescent evacuee who works in the barely operative field hospital, disposing of the dead bodies and amputated limbs of killed evacuees. Together with thousands of other refugees, he lives in the uncertainty of a makeshift refugee camp that is subjected to arbitrary daily shelling. Amidst the carnage and hopelessness, a fellow refugee offers him his daughter, Ganga, in marriage to "keep her safe " (7), as he himself does not expect to survive for long. An entirely unexpected event, the prospective marriage propels Dinesh out of his shell-shocked state of living death and, for a brief moment, reconnects him with his surroundings and makes him "keenly aware of the multitudes of people around him" (9). Despite his hazardous living conditions and looming death, he accepts the proposal and what ensues is the narrative of a brief, albeit ultimately tragic, encounter, of proximity, attachment and loss. The unexpected singularity of Dinesh and Ganga's encounter makes visible the structural violence and planetary destruction that underlie contemporary warfare.

At first glance, Sri Lanka's war appears to be both a conventional civil war fought over Tamil independence claims within one sovereign territory and what Hardt and Negri call a "global civil war" (4). While the term sheds light on the global enmeshment of seemingly localized conflicts, that is, for example, on India and China's investment in Sri Lanka, the US's interest in a naval base and the implication of the Tamil movement into global terrorism, the term more usefully refers to a biopolitical redefinition of war at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Under conditions of "global Empire" (3), "war," Hardt and Negri convincingly argue, "has become a *regime of biopower*, that is, a form of rule aimed not only at controlling the population but producing and reproducing all aspects of social life. This war brings death but also, paradoxically, must produce life" (13). War, then, figures as "a *permanent social relation*" (12). Hardt and Negri's approach certainly illuminates the first two phases of the Sri Lankan war and the social and political repercussions of the US-led war on terror, including the normalization of the state of exception and the building of detention and refugee camps, signaling the militarization of all social relationships. Although the latter is born out in the novella, its engagement with the arbitrary brutalization and killing of the camp inhabitants recasts Hardt and Negri's biopolitical approach into a necropolitical framework, emphasizing the production of death—rather than life—and the logic of what Mbembe calls "attritional wars" (*Necropolitics* 796). At the beginning of the novel, the narrator muses about the ways in which the extreme violence of the war turns citizens into refugees of their own country and profoundly alters their social and communal life, their customs and daily interactions. In ordinary times, the narrator observes, "Thoughts, feelings and conjectures, stories, jokes, and slander were nothing but thinly spun threads that tied the insides of people together long after speaking had ended, so that communities were nothing more than humans held together . . . in imperceptible webs whose function was . . . to connect each individual to every other." But under conditions of severe violence, "the diaphanous threads which in ordinary life had been so easily spun had been dissolved now, leaving nothing left to unspool, and each and every person in the camp had to sit silently alone . . . unable, in any way, to connect" (67). Here, the violence of war annihilates the social altogether and imposes a regime of dissociation, oblivion and silence. It is no coincidence that this kind of war shares its political logic with what Wendy Brown calls "twenty-first century authoritarianism" subtended by global neoliberal reasoning, "de-regulated freedom," policing and securitization regimes (68). Both forms of violent coercion under the guise of protection aim at abolishing the social and employ systemic forms of abandonment to control the population and generate an enormous surplus of "discountable" people (Mbembe, "Thoughts"). Similarly, the aim of the war, as the camp dwellers experience it in the novella, is to make un-common what previously provided the common thread of the community's social fabric.

In contrast to global civil warfare, "wars of attrition" appertain to our present moment of "planetary entanglement" and "disentanglement" (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* 1928, 1994), which includes specific modes of domination that reinscribe the colonial matrix of power (CMP) into emerging and disintegrating global relationships. Although much more complex than I can explain it here, the CMP makes visible the colonial trajectory of "global modernity" and capitalism as the central practice of conquest and domination. Less a historical or anthropological concept, the CMP refers to an epistemological practice originating in postcolonial space, namely the South American Andes, and tracks "the darker sides of modernity" (Mignolo 111), namely, its ideologies of progress, civilization, and development in exchange for promises of "happiness and salvation" that continue to enslave and dispossess the majority of the world population (Mignolo 142). The CMP rests on the reproduction of racist, sexist and necropolitical practices, fictions and imaginaries that structure political and economic designs and dominant ways of "knowing, believing, and sensing" (Mignolo 126). Most importantly, in its present state of transformation, the CMP is "no longer managed and controlled by the so-called West" alone, but "it impinges on and transforms all aspects of life" (10). The struggle over its control reflects the planetary disintegration of received hegemonic structures of global power and its appropriation by emerging economies as well as predatory and new formations of extraction and cognitive capitalism that brutalize, confine, and dispense of large parts of the population. What Arudpragasam's fictional rendering of an attritional war shares with the global CMP is an emphasis on both war as a legally unregulated form of population control, for which colonial wars and the colonial penal colony are the blueprint (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* 532), and the continuous practice of domination that aims at eradicating responsibility, desire, communication and community. The novella addresses the confluence of war and the global CMP in its orchestration of silence.

Silence seeps through all aspects of Dinesh's life; it relates to the silences, gaps and fractures left behind by the dead and disappeared, in the bodies and minds of the survivors. First of all, it frames the arbitrary shelling of the camp and its inhabitants:

> There was, always, before the shelling, for the slenderest moment before the earth began shaking, a faraway whispering . . . which turned indiscernibly, into a whistling. This whistling . . . was a tremulous vibration, the trembling of earth, . . . followed by a blast of hot air against the skin and then finally the deafening explosion. It was a loud, unbearably loud explosion, followed immediately by others, so loud that … the rest could no longer be heard.

> They could be registered only as the pervasive absence of sound . . . The world becomes mute. (14)

After the shelling, the narrator observes that "a deep silence pervaded the camp" and the living "sobbed in silence" (17), lovingly caressing the faces of their dead kinsmen (17) and "nobody in the camp could tell with certainty when the loud silence of the bombing was replaced by the soft silence of the stillness" (18). Here, the immateriality of silence becomes double and visceral. The silent vibration of the earth takes on a materiality of its own and registers the collective traumatization of the refugees, shattering their world and the earth itself. In this scene the muting of the world indicates that this war is fought against life itself[10] in the service of death. The shelling literally silences the inhabitants, bombing them into a catatonic state of non-existence and oblivion. At this point, the war of attrition assumes the modes of domination previously monopolized by modernity and the CMP. As Rolando Vázquez astutely argues, "modernity's monopoly over representation is grounded on the negation of listening, that is, the negation of language as *relationality*" (6). As such, coloniality/modernity "produces the other as silent, non-existent or as 'pure representation'" (7). The task of this negation, or the bombing in the novella, is to dominate by inflicting a state of "oblivion" that denies "living memory" and, thus, enforces "the coloniality of time." (8) This means that the dominated and the camp dwellers are cast in a perpetual present that defines their conditions of presence and enables "power [to] impose itself as destiny" (Mbembe, *Necropolitics* loc 591).

If the silence that surrounds extreme violence undoes what Hannah Arendt sees as the "quintessential" condition of the "human condition," namely the Earth, it also interrupts and rearranges our reading habits and expectations. For, silence, as Chris P. Miller insists, "reconfigures listening as a discontinuous and non-linear act." It is in the silence before the shelling that the vibrating sound of the Earth becomes audible and enables a reading of the planet not as an inert object but, as Jane Bennett argues in *Vibrant Matter*, as an "actant" with its own "thing-power" (3). On the one hand, the tremor registers the violent planetary transformations that mark the era of the anthropocene. On the other, in a less conventional reading, the tremor sensitizes the reader to a rethinking of the Earth, as geologist Nigel Clark argues, as a "system with multiple possible states" (138). Although the planet's temporality is usually measured as deep geological time, it is also marked by "volatility," "fracturing and ex-orbitance" (139), pointing to the planet's self-transformative and asymmetrical powers, entirely independent of human agency. Yet, negotiating the "schisms" generated by the planet's own mobility "is not a matter of skills [or computational knowledge] … but … the very condition of our capacity to be together and to act collectively" (Clark 141). What is at issue in comprehending the planet as an actant is the necessary recognition that nonhuman agents—organic and inorganic—"author," as Mbembe states, "specific relations" and that, thus, "we have . . . passed from the human to the terrestrial condition" (*Necropolitics* 332). The immaterial condition of silence makes legible the planet as actant requiring us to reconstitute our relationship with what we share in common.

Through his unexpected encounter and union with Ganga, Dinesh glimpses the hope of reconnecting himself with the world. It is this encounter, or event, which, as Mbembe maintains, "nobody can foresee, measure, or calculate with accuracy" (656) that allows Dinesh to open himself to the world. Although he is unable to make love to Ganga, their proximity enables him to recollect and grieve the death of his mother, which was previously shrouded in "silent images" (112). For the first time he recognizes his own "vulnerability" and naked exposure to the "world" (151), while realizing that tears for oneself "could only come when one ignored the suffering of everybody else" or imagined that "the pain you faced was unique and . . . different" from that of others. Thus, rather than looking for difference—the fuel of the war—he begins looking for what he has in common with others, humans and nonhumans alike. In a key scene of the narrative, Dinesh leaves his and Ganga's hiding place to follow the sound of a squawking crow that threatens their security. He finds an injured adolescent crow that must have been "hurt by one of the shells that had fallen in the camp that morning" (156). Animals, just like humans, Dinesh observes elsewhere, were frequently bombed out of their habitats and left for dead. Instead of killing the crow to secure his own survival, Dinesh recognizes their shared precarity and sees the bird as a fellow victim of the war against life. He lies down next to the crow and tenderly caresses its beak (155-8). As the crow responds by instantly "softening" (157) its screaming, Dinesh decides "to let the crow go on living, to let it continue existing" (158). This decision rejects the war's legitimizing narrative of sovereignty and re-establishes Dinesh's life in relational and embodied terms. The biopolitical definition of sovereignty, to remember Foucault and Agamben, consists in the right to let live and put to death. Dinesh, however, refuses these foundational terms of warfare and nation-formation inherited from the CMP. In fact, his gesture opposes the Kantian doctrine of just wars and endorses Judith Butler's argument that "self-preservation is never a sufficient condition for the ethical justification of violence" (*Precarious* 136). More so, his refusal to kill underlines the inextricability of and proximity between the human and nonhuman, the inevitability of embodied life and care, which, as Mbembe emphasizes *pace* Fanon, provides a decolonial " practice of resymbolization" (*Necropolitics* 181). For this reason, the physical proximity between Dinesh and the crow, as they rest together on "the tender earth," generates a shared sense of "solace" and "sanctuary" (159) and constitutes both of them as planetary subjects.

The notion of the immaterial as a site of transformation and critique reappears at the end of the novella when Dinesh finds Ganga dead after another attack on the camp. Once again, his world is shattered in silence and he realizes that all he can do is breathing:

> Breathing was a pact between the chest and the atmosphere about which the mind could say nothing, perhaps, though life itself was nothing but an oscillation between these states, between drawing in the atmosphere and having it drawn back out, between attempting unconsciously to encompass the world and then being forced to give it all up. (185)

In this passage organic life is part of the planet's agency, its atmosphere.

Though weightless and invisible, the atmosphere harnesses much symbolic value. For instance, Karl Marx observes the material yet effervescent character of the atmosphere when he asks, "although the atmosphere in which we live weighs upon every one with a 20,000 lb. force, do you feel it?" (Speech 1856). Impalpable, the atmosphere nevertheless constitutes a life force able to gather mass and move objects, to affect social and political relationships while remaining outside of human control and ontologies. Although a hyperobject, in Tim Morton's sense, the atmosphere also embodies and enables a materialist critique of human suffering and dispossession. As Renisa Mawani observes, the atmosphere "signal[s] something always on the brink of emergence" while its "critical value" resides in "its ability to encompass disproportionate and opposing forces" (4). Thus, although the atmosphere—not unlike silence—consists of immaterial matter, it is neither inert nor without creative capacity. Dinesh realizes that, despite the pain, the physical act of living and breathing equals a state of becoming and attunes him to the planet's material agency, its atmosphere and indifference towards human life, but not to life itself. This recognition, while it guarantees neither survival not justice, demands new forms of relational thinking that search for new narratives of planetary entanglement and enchantment told and read in-common.

4. Resurgent Planetary Commons, or Reading Pluriversally

Amitav Gosh's recent novel *Gun Island* (2019) opens with the statement that "the strangest thing about this strange journey was that it was launched by a word" (2), *bundook*, whose actual meaning, variously translated into "gun," turns out to be inapplicable to the context in which the narrator, Dino, first encounters it. This mismatch of signifer and signified points to another word that is central to but never fully visible in the novel: the Anthropocene[11] or, more exactly, the effects of global warming through which the planetary becomes evident in its multiple uncanny, or "strange," and pluriversal formations. One of the guiding questions raised by the novel and what might be considered its companion text, Gosh's *The Great Derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, is: How can climate change be narrated if that cannot be fully grasped by the human mind, resists representation through the conventional genres of modern and realist fiction, and lacks, as Morton argues, "a metalanguage that could account for things while remaining uncontaminated by them" (*Hyperobjects* 125)? This is the rub. As a hyperobject, climate change is immaterial yet real; it "stick[s]" to beings (104), is "*nonlocal*" (113), though its effects are localized, and it has "a significant impact on human social and psychic space" (113). *Gun Island* addresses these issues not through a narrative of apocalyptic disaster and mass extinction, as this is often the case in dystopic climate fiction, but through a utopian narrative of collective nonhuman and human action in the service of borderless migratory mobility. Given that the novel is a highly complex, multi-layered narrative I do not have the space to do justice here, I will focus my discussion on two connected aspects: (1) collective storytelling as a way of imagining the invisible and incalculable and (3) the novel's final gathering of human and nonhuman agents into an act of collective resurgence.

Dino, a diasporic American Bengali trader of antique books, scholar of Bengali verse epics, and a "compulsive note-taker and record-keeper" (12), initially reminiscent of Benjamin's "collector" and reluctant historical materialist Eduard Fuchs, is asked by his aunt Nilima to visit a shrine on an island in the Sundarbans before it is "swallowed up" by the rising sea levels (18). The shrine was built to honor "Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes" (4) and in memory of "'Bonduki Sadagar'('Gun Merchant')" (4), one of many Bengali folk heroes whose stories, "like the shifting mudflats of the Bengal delta, . . . arise at the conjuncture of many currents" (4). Although these legends have no singular origin, they are closely aligned with the land and culture of the region, related to ancient Bengali epics and are told by Bengal's "original autochthonous people" (6). The story of the gun merchant, however, was transmitted orally for generations and has survived only in fragments and partially remembered verse lines Dino must decipher. With the help of Rafi, the last surviving guardian of the shrine who migrates illegally to Europe, and Cinta, a scholar of early modern Venetian history, Dino's mentor and close friend, Dino traces the story from Bengal, to Northern Africa, from the Indian Pacific slave trade to 17th-century and contemporary Venice. In the process, he meets Piya, a marine biologist, dedicated to the protection of the Irrawaddy river dolphins, Tipu, Piya's adopted son and Rafi's lover, and Gisa, Cinta's relative and member of the LGBTQ community, who invites Dino to work as a translator for her documentary film on planetary refugee movements. Unexpectedly but perhaps not by chance, all of their paths cross and their lives are collectively interwoven through the planetary change of migration patterns and their shared care for Tipu who counts among the refugees trapped on a boat in the Mediterranean sea.

The novel narrates and translates the story of the gun merchant multiple times through different perspectives, each time situating it in a new context of climate history, weather events and subsequent social transformation, interweaving the macro-histories of the Anthropocene and massive demographic movements with the micro-histories of personal care and survival. To begin with, Nilima remembers the shrine in the context of her relief work in the aftermath of the 1970 Bhola cylone, the "greatest natural disaster of the twentieth century," and the surprising discovery that the only people who were miraculously spared from the cyclone were the village inhabitants who sought shelter in the shrine. They believed that the goddess, the protectress of the shrine, saved them. Horen Naskar, a survivor of the cyclone, witnessed the destruction of the cyclone and the massive displacement of people it caused. In his narrative, the villagers were warned by the shrine's bell that rang before the storm. Here legend, faith, and rational observation coincide to compose Horen's climate narrative of survival, a strategy explored throughout the novel. In her conversation with an old boatman, Nilima later finds out that the epic poem and the shrine were kept alive, first, by Hindu "ballad singers" and then by a Muslim boatman and his family. The gist of the story, she tells Dino, consists in a conflict between the gun merchant and Manasa Devi. When the merchant refuses to worship the goddess, she pursues him with "snakes . . . droughts, famines, storms" (16). The merchant escapes to Gun Island but soon understands the futility of his escape. So he flees again but is captured by pirates. Before they can sell him as a slave on "The Island of Chains," the goddess intervenes and in exchange for his faith sends "all manner of creatures, of the sea and sky" (16) to rescue him. Eventually, by recognizing the metre and rhythm a couple of verses his aunt remembered from the boatman, Dino realizes that the legend dates back to the beginning of the 17th century, not only a period of increased seafaring and trade but also the very beginning of the rise of today's coal and fossil fuel economies, that inaugurated and accelerated global warming.

In these examples of the gun merchant legend it is striking that in all of them climate constitutes their very condition of possibility while their interpretation requires a collective interpretive effort. Moreover, each version raises questions about competing forms of knowledge production. In *The Great Derangement,* an obvious pun on the Great Acceleration, Gosh observes that "certain literary forms are unable to negotiate these torrents [of climate change] . . . and their failures will have to be counted as an aspect of the broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis" (8). In other words, what the narrative of *Gun Island* contests is threefold. First, it emphasizes rather than conceals the fact that climate change conditions the social, cultural, economic and political structures, settings, and relationships that underlie literary genres and storytelling. Second, the novel critiques normative realist and modern narratives punctuated by "the calculus of probability" (27), the banishment of the (super)natural and the domestication of ruptures and catastrophes in order to cement the ideas that humans hold control over nature and that Reason is the superior mode of government (i.e., the principles of modernity/coloniality I discussed earlier). Third, if, "the earth of the Anthropocene is precisely a world of insistent, inescapable continuities, animated by" both "forces that are nothing if not inconceivably vast" (62) and by "cumulative human actions" (32) and therefore a willy-nilly collective experience, then cultural and political responses must necessarily be collective and devise a "way out of the individualizing imaginary in which we are trapped" (135). The novel's pluriversal approach emanates specifically from Dino and Cinta's speculations and exchanges.

Following a lecture on the "little Ice Age" and climate change in the 17th century in Venice, Dino tells Cinta the unresolved story of the gun merchant and the conundrum of its oral transmission. Cinta, who is both an archivist and intuitive thinker, believes in the agency of the natural and invisible—she frequently has visions of her dead daughter—and constructively challenges Dino's belief in Cartesian "Reason" and his sense of himself as "rational, secular, scientifically-minded" (35). When Dino asks her why the story was not written down, she suggests that it enhances the story's continuity and openendedness, its "ability to reach out in the future" (133). Stories, she explains, can "tap into dimensions that were beyond the ordinary." They allow for the incalculable and the miraculous. "Only through stories," she insists, "can invisible or inarticulate or silent beings speak to us." She surmises that stories may even be "the last remnant of our animal selves." Thus, it is "through stories that the universe speaks to us" (134). Not unlike many indigenous modes of storytelling, storytelling, as Cinta understands it, creates a multispecies pluriverse in which the encounter of the human and the nonhuman takes multiple forms and often induces a sense of what Gosh calls the "environmental uncanny" (*Great* 63), that is, the keen awareness of the "presence and proximity of a nonhuman interlocutor" (30) with whom one shares a mutual awareness, dreaming, thought, and agency. Tipu, for instance, senses the presence of a huge cobra in the shrine and is bitten by it. The bite enables him to access his true capacities of a seer and shaman and provides him with visions that help guide others. Dino's encounter with snakes and spiders in unexpected places due to climate change cause him a sense of being haunted yet enable him to rethink the gun merchant story from the position of the goddess. He realizes that the goddess is "in effect a negotiator, a translator, or . . . 'a voice-carrier' between two species that had no language in common and no shared means of communication. Without her mediation there could be no relationship between animal and human except hatred and aggression" (159). Securing the faith of the merchant or, analogically, the recognition of the agency of the nonhuman ensures the conservation of the force of the invisible and a relational cohabitation of the planet.

Another reading of the immaterial ought to address the psychological impact of the Anthropocene. Cinta argues that people still tend to deny that the transformation of our entire environment is neither "'natural'" nor "'scientific'" but "because of *our* history; because of things human beings have done" (229). While this assessment might reinscribe an anthropocentric force into the notion of the Anthropocene, it also calls for taking a relational and historical stance of collective accountability. Instead, she observes, people seem "beset by a feeling that inexplicable forces are acting upon them in such a way that they are no longer in control of what happens to them" (226). They experience a sense of loss of freedom and physical presence. These, she says, are "all the symptoms of demonic possession" and despite better knowledge, we live "through habit" (228). Against this cultivated inertia, the final chapter of the novel stages, neigh, performs, the confluence of multiple events, stories and movements into an exorbitant event of planetary resurgence.[12] During their collective search for Tipu, who got stuck in Turkey on his migration route, Dino, Cinta, Piya, Rafi, and Gisa board the *Luciana*, an activist vessel chartered to rescue the refugees. Previously, an unexpected tornado that visualy resembled snakes in the sky (263) had freed the refugees from their traffickers and sent them on their way to Italy. The *Luciana* is now waiting for the Blue Boat carrying the refugees. Yet, the Italian and various other European governments sent military ships and the coast guard to prevent the refugees from landing in Europe. The military boats are surrounded by right-wing NGO vessels whose racist slogans voice the rationale of the governments' "war on mobility" (Mbembe, "Thoughts") and population control. When the boat becomes visible on the horizon and moves closer to the other vessels, the miraculous happens. The sea fills with hundreds of dolphins and whales of all species, forming a "forest of dorsal fins" (289) and moving in circles around the refugee boat. Piya considers this event a major cetacean migration but is unable to explain why the whales and dolphins block the passage of the military vessels and allow the refugees to pass. Then the cetaceans are joined by millions of migrating birds in the sky, a "storm of living beings, *bhutas*" (296), acting together, enacting the powers of Masana Devi, the goddess of snakes. At this moment, Cinta comments, "Time itself is in ecstasy," (295), joining the multiple temporalities of the Atlantic slave trade, imperialism, Indian indentured labor, contemporary human trafficking, refugee and climate movements, and thereby exploding the disjunctive and linear time of colonial and postcolonial modernities. This concert of human and nonhuman action creates, in the words of Leanne Simpson, "a space of storied presencing, alternative imaginings, transformation, reclamation—resurgence" (*Dancing* 1498). Finally, the water begins to glow in green colors, a rare instance of "bioluminescence" (296), while the Admiral of the Italian naval vessel refuses to prevent the refugees from landing, both in the name of the "miracle" he just witnessed and in the name of personal and political responsibility (298). This extraordinary event insists that dealing with the Anthropocene will require listening to the unexpected and the incalculable while understanding that global warming also announces the end of white privilege and exceptionalism. Reading in-common, I hope, will provide one trajectory towards exiting dominant technopositivist and individualized imaginaries in favor of generating pluriversal epistemologies and collective planetary imaginaries.

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NOTES

1. In *The Courage of Hopelessness*, Slavoj Žižek identifies four commons that stand in an "antagonistic" relationship to "global capitalism:" 1) "the commons of culture and . . . immaterial capital," including the flow of languages, finance and virtual capital; 2) "the commons of external nature" (including global warming, climate change, the derailment of planetary reproduction systems); 3) "the commons of internal nature" (biogenetics, AI etc); and 4) "the commons of humanity itself, of the shared social and political space" (including the rise of the precariat, massive refugee movements, and global violence). Yet, Zizek's politics, although looking for a way to move beyond planetary catastrophe, are sweeping, impatient, and transparent, with little room for the unexpected, creative, or the incalculable.

2. Hyperobjects, a term coined by Timothy Morton, include, for instance, the planet, climate change, and the atmosphere, and essentially refer to " massive entities" that have now become thinkable—such as the planet under the pressures of global warming-- and fundamentally change the ways in which humans orient themselves in the world. Hyperobjects "are massively distributed" but "we can't directly grasp them empirically" (*Dark* 11*)*. We sense them but must rely on data to reassure us of their existence. For this reason, "one only sees pieces of a hyperobject at any one moment" (*Hyperobjects* loc 143).

3. Thinking the planet collectively, as the literary critic Matthew Omelsky argues, needs to begin from the global "brink" (34), through the perspective of those who disproportionately suffer from the "dual crisis of ecology and capital" (36), while being the least responsible for causing it.

4. Although my notion of reading in-common is indebted to Hardt and Negri's idea of the multitude, which they define as "singularities that act in common" (105), my understanding of reading or acting in common derives from a decolonial thinking practice that maintains a historical perspective and remains suspicious of their rhetoric of a "swarm intelligence" (91) to name new forms of collective political organization without recognizing that these terms are constitutive for the articulation of a dominant planetary imaginary of algorithmic futures.

5. Reading, as it has been theorized numerous times, is never an innocent practice as it forms and forecloses particular subjects and texts in ways too complex to rehearse them here. Indeed, the postcolonial and deconstructive project may be considered as elaborate "allegories of reading," engaged in colonial and patriarchal discourse analysis, contrapuntally brushing history and language against the grain. See, for example, Paul de Man's deconstructive "negative epistemology" of reading "that would reveal [the] hidden meaning" of texts (72); Edward Said's counter-discursive or "contrapuntal reading" (66) practices of imperial narratives; or Spivak's reading of the figure of the "Native Informant" as a catachresis and "foreclosure" (ix) in the pedagogical context of "transnational literacy" (*Reason* 376). In their different ways, these approaches are collectively indebted to Walter Benjamin's imperative "to brush history against the grain" (*Illuminations* 257).

6. Note that decoloniality and decolonization denote different concepts. While the former emerges from both a critique of the epistemological nexus of coloniality/modernity and pluriversal protest movements against global capitalism in a post-Cold War era, decolonization refers to anti-colonial liberation struggles in the service of state- and nation building before and during the Cold War and remained invested in the principles of modernity/coloniality (Mignolo 112) . Thus, decoloniality – rather than decolonization—works through a planetary perspective.

7. See, https://cen.acs.org/articles/95/web/2017/10/Detection-of-gravitational-waves-wins-2017-Nobel-Prize-in-Physics.html and for a detailed discussion of Einstein's view of gravitational waves, see https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/advanced-physicsprize2017.pdf
8. Note that each planet has a particular or, at least, distinguishable sound. See, https://earthsky.org/space/video-for-your-ears-what-do-planets-sound-like/
9. This term was coined by the African American scholar and poet Fred Moten and refers to the contemporary "maroon community" (loc 413) comprising the fugitives of global neoliberalism who oppose the privatization, economization, and militarization, and, ultimately, the abolishment of the social itself. If, in the past, maroon societies were clandestine self-organizing communities of fugitive slaves, today, they are the future "collectivity" of the undercommons. They oppose "conquest denial" (455) and the epidemic "negligence of the outcast mass intellectuality" of oppositional intellectuals, of "black people, indigenous peoples, queers and poor people" (Halberstam loc 15). The undercommons "refuses interpellation" and, instead, allows "dissonance to continue" (Halberstam loc 70). The people inhabiting the undercommons follow a decolonial trajectory, reject recognition, and seek to dismantle the structures that enable social negligence, coercion and confinement.
10. Along with the Zapatistas, Catherine Walsh suggests that the present "Storm" the planet is experiencing is a "war of . . . elimination, . . . is epistemic and existence based, a war that is feminized, racialized and territorialized" (15). Hence, it is patterned on the logic of the global CMP.
11. I am aware of the various critical discourses that surround the problematic terminology of the Anthropocene as the era defined by the geological force wielded by human modes of production. Following Amitav Gosh's use of it in his The Great Derangement, I will refer to it as a synomym for global warming and climate change. For further critical discussion, see, Grusin, Richard, ed. *Anthropocene Feminism,* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017; Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene,* Durham, Duke University Press, 2016; Moore, Jason W., ed. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Oakland, PM Press, 2016.
12. I use "event" in Alain Badiou's sense, as an unexpected occurrence that "brings to pass 'something other' than the situation, opinions, instituted knowledges" (67). It is "hazardous, unpredictable", a momentous rupture. Yet, by exercising "fidelity" to the event, that is, by investigating the break of the event itself, a "truth" emerges that is multiple, heterogeneous, and "punches a 'hole' in knowledge" and is "the source of new knowledges" (70). For Cinta, the death of her daughter counts as an event; for Dino the event occurs when his aunt calls upon him and he remains faithful to the task of uncovering the story of the gun merchant. This investigation transforms him, makes him a planetary subject, as it leads him to the moment of taking an active and activist part in rescuing Tipu, supporting the refugee movement, and recognizing his involvement in the history of climate change. The event ultimately "sets him free" (285).