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“Enabling Entanglements”: Rethinking Modernist Difficulty in the Sixth Extinction

Turns out the apocalypse is boring and sensible, a combination of sugars, fats, and trying to come up with a cunning plan

- Bhanu Kapil, “Pinky Agarwalia: Biography of a Child Saint in Ten Parts”

There’s something incredibly unsettling about the dispassionate description captured in these lines, which the reader encounters midway through “Pinky Agarwalia,” a science fiction narrative written by the British-Indian poet Bhanu Kapil. By Kapil’s account, the story revolves around the destruction of what was once Earth by a thermonuclear war, and opens in medias res with the narrative voice of its eponymous protagonist: the orphaned, Punjabi child named Pinky Agarwalia. Indeed, it is the apocalyptic subject matter of Kapil’s story that makes the mutedness of these lines—the affective anaesthesia they capture—all the more striking. There is little mourning or lament here about the catastrophic loss that the protagonist suffers; there is little joy or revelry at surviving a mass extinction event; and there is very little outrage at the annihilation of one’s home by the destructive effects of human influence and power. But there is something quite political about these lines as well. “If home is found on both sides of the globe”, Kapil further writes, “home is of course here, and always a missed land” (21). The lines offer a stark portrayal of the devastation of the planet from the perspective of the racialized subject. If mass extinction represents the monstrous alteration of planet earth by human activities—the becoming-unhomely (unheimlich) of our home—then its recognition also brings with it a certain irony. The irony is no doubt relatable for many people of colour (immigrants, in particular) who already experience home as a growing absence: that which is already unrecognisable; fractured;
unhomely. The story pushes us to reckon with these disturbances, and generates an indispensable vocabulary for thinking through issues of intersectionality that have been squeezed out of current debates on the sixth extinction. Pointedly, it seems to ask: who is the “us” by which collective survival is measured? And along similar lines: who or what is worth saving when the world comes to an end?

These questions aren’t meant to lessen the terror or gravity of the extinction crisis, or minimise the threatening and destructive aspects of the Anthropocene. On the contrary, they are meant to reposition the thought of extinction from below, in order to complicate the somewhat flat, or homogenous, notion of the anthropos that most studies of the Anthropocene have produced. They are also prompted by the desire to see more colour-conscious, race-specific, culturally nuanced arguments in narratives of extinction that do not presume to speak for all of humanity. “Pinky Agarwalia,” I argue, takes up such questions. It admits a conception of the Anthropocene that is more open to the experiences of the other: not just the nonhuman or the nonliving other, but also the racialized other, who is already ensnared in economies of risk, precarity, and vulnerability.

Trauma—instead of being contained within the overarching threat of mass extinction—lapses against the story’s textual surface like a background hum. “On the planet Avaaz”, Kapil writes, “where a city once was, is now a hole. Imagine a house bursting into flames in the rearview mirror of a yellow-and-black taxi” (11). Memories of environmental catastrophe and social violence are radically intertwined in this line. The image of a house on fire—an image that recurs in Kapil’s oeuvre and points to the horrors of the Partition of India in 1947—is conflated with the image of a ruined planet that persists as Planet Avaaz in the year 2121. The dizzying scale effects make its sense difficult to follow, but the story’s textual difficulty also opens it to scales of time and space that are both vast and minute. Scalability, here, seems to mimic the material conditions of the Anthropocene. In Ecocriticism on the Edge, Timothy Clark offers a particularly pre-
scient reading of the “disruption of scalar norms” that have been prompted by the Anthropocene. He writes: “the Anthropocene enacts the demand to think of human life at much broader scales of space and time”. In Kapil’s story, the disorienting effects of the Anthropocene are replicated through difficulties of form. As readers, we are made to reckon with and comprehend both scales at once: a textual strategy that appears to be particularly suited to representing the sixth extinction and the challenges to thinking that it poses.

I open with this text because it touches on so many of the issues that animate my essay. “Pinky Agarwalia” is moved by questions of unliveability and uninhabitability; power and inequality; representation and reading; response and responsibility. However, as much as it is a story about death and extinction, it is also a story about survival: a mode of survival that radically depends on the existence of others. “Can animals save us”, the narrative voice asks, “or will it be the plants who become conscious, adept, empathetic: the functional adults of our universe?” (12) The line marks the limits of human agency: it disrupts the illusory notion that agency is something that might be proper to human beings. It also flattens the vertical structures of power that exist in post-Enlightenment culture between humans—deemed the higher, superior beings of civilisation—and nonhumans. As Jemma Deer reminds us in Radical Animism: Reading for the End of the World, much of Western philosophical discourse has relied on such hierarchical frameworks. According to Deer, such discourse leaves intact the worldview that nonhumans are “poor-in-world”, whose experiences of the world are “somehow less than human ones”. The non-central position that humans occupy in “Pinky Agarwalia” could thus be read as a blow to pathological forms of human narcissism that have emerged as destructive in the contemporary moment. In its stead, Kapil offers us a vision of entangled ways of life within the universe. She offers, in other words, a vision of a radically interrelated world in which human and nonhuman actors are interdependent on each other for their survival. Such notions of entanglement allow for the democratization of relations between all forms of life: a perspective that intensifies to-
ward the end of the story. “There wasn’t a university in our future”, the story concludes, “and there never would be again. Instead, we apprenticed to our elders, then shared in their care” (27). Interdependence—or entanglement—thus lies at the heart of Kapil’s project: a notion that also concerns the transformation of our long-held beliefs about what it means to be human. To borrow Deer’s formulation, it inaugurates “a reading that is for the end of the wœr-œld” where the Old Danish word ‘wœr-œld’ (that etymologically relates to ‘world’) translates to the “the age of man” (1). “The end of the wœrœld”, as Deer beautifully notes, would therefore be “the beginning of a less destructive or pathological relationship between humans and the other forms of life with which we share this planet” (1).

This essay is divided into three sections. In the first section, I circle back to the impetus of this cluster: one that concerns issues of reading and the legibility of the extinction crisis. Indeed, the editors open their introduction by noting the “more challenging aspects” of modernism, and their usefulness in theorising a “hard-to-think-about thing” like extinction. I respond directly to this claim by re-turning to modernism’s favoured yet contentious trope—modernist difficulty—which has driven discussions about modernism since the early twentieth century and now resonates differently in light of the current extinction crisis. I find this process of recovery to be most strikingly at work in Kapil’s prose-poetry, which adapts techniques of difficulty inherited from modernism but makes them relational rather than anthropocentric, and more suited to the experiences of the racialized other. Difficulty in Kapil’s writing, I argue, is recast as entanglement: a term that has acquired a certain currency in postcolonial writing as well as the environmental humanities, and which allows us to bridge the gap between these two intellectual traditions. By tracing a genealogy of the term entanglement, I aim to enable a more lucid dialogue between postcolonial thought and the thought of extinction, and illustrate how Kapil’s intellectually complex and profoundly responsive poetry is a writing that we might need for the Anthropocene. The second section uses this framework to close-read one of Kapil’s earliest prose-poems titled Humanimal (2009): an experimental and formally difficult narrative that takes its readers to out-of-sight sites of suffering and focuses on the figure of the subhuman. The importance
of this stance is emphasized throughout, for it allows us to throw the brake on much of the ecological thinking produced in our contemporary moment, which often turns a blind eye on intra-human hierarchies in its rush to theorize what lies beyond the human. The concluding section ruminates on this strategy of deceleration and highlights its importance for our epistemological practices in the age of anthropogenic mass extinction.

Finally, a brief note on my methodological approach. My reading of Kapil as a modernist figure is broadly informed by the global turn within modernist studies that understands modernism as pluralised and multivalent, rather than a restrictive Eurocentric phenomenon. The core modernist attribute of Kapil’s provocative and little-studied oeuvre is located in its self-conscious engagement with the limits of knowledge and representation: a strategy that undergirds both “Pinky Agarwalia” and, as we shall see, Humanimal. The importance of Kapil’s contribution for a special issue that remains largely dominated by Anglo-American modernist writers is also emphasised by the editors in their introduction. But the limitations of this special issue, I would add, also reflects a more worrying gap in the fields of environmental humanities and extinction studies, which—despite important recent work that has somewhat expanded its geographical contours—can barely hide its white, middle-class complexion in the twenty-first century. Such gaps in scholarship have been admirably pointed out by scholars like Elspeth Probyn, who caution us against the disavowal of “concerns of feminists, queers, and postcolonial people” and the selective privileging of “the big issues of the Anthropocene” over issues of intersectionality. In what follows, I thus share the rationale of this issue to expand our literary imagination, and reposition the thought of extinction from below.

Beginnings: Patchy Stories
As the previous section made clear, it is the act of re-thinking—particularly modernist difficulty and its relationship to the thought of extinction—that this essay gives special emphasis. Yet, it is to the strangeness and the apparent impossibility of this labor that I now turn: the impossibility that underpins thought’s risky attempt to capture an event that structurally resists thinking. As Deer writes: “the thought of extinction as the extinction of thought is a thought that cannot get going, that annihilates itself before it has even begun” (46). The crisis of extinction is thus radically inaccessible to thought—a ruse against thinking—yet it also compels us to think: a dialecticality whose only index is, perhaps, difficulty.

Difficulty is thus essential rather than incidental to the thought of extinction: an idea that is obliquely noted in Sarah Wood’s Without Mastery: Reading and Other Forces, which exhorts its readers to stay with the aporias of thought that one necessarily encounters when one thinks about the crisis of extinction. The ethical question of thinking through difficulty also manifests itself in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s The Mushroom at the End of the World, a multispecies ethnography that addresses the imaginative challenge of living in a human-damaged planet. At the heart of Tsing’s project lies the matsutake mushroom (Tricholoma matsutake)—a species of wild, aromatic mushrooms—whose story is narrated through a “riot of short chapters” that mimic the “patchiness of the world” in the Anthropocene (2). Patchiness, in this context, refers primarily to the “patchy unpredictability” that undergirds our contemporary moment: it is the affective condition associated with living on and through the Anthropocene, and its interrelated crises (5). As Tsing puts it: “the uncontrolled mushrooms are a gift—and a guide—when the controlled world we thought we had fails” (2). Tsing’s patchy scholarship in the book does admit a degree of formal difficulty because of its experimental nature. She prefaces her work by noting its divergence from authoritative analyses that rely on clarity and explanation. Indeed, what follows is a tangle of chapters that interrupt each other and appear more like “the flushes of mushroom that come up after a rain”—unpredictable; unruly; lively—rather than a “logical machine” (viii).
But the rewards of this project are also stated explicitly in the beginning of the book. “If we open ourselves to their fungal attractions”, Tsing writes, “matsutake can catapult us into the curiosity that seems the first requirement of collaborative survival in precarious times” (2). Thinking fungally, or rather thinking mycologically, thus necessarily requires us to think with difficulty. But this version of difficulty should not be conflated with the high modernist valorisation of academic obfuscation for its sake, which is perforated by an instinctive indifference towards the ordinary, ‘unskilled’ reader. Difficulty in Tsing is not privation—the impoverishment of meaning—but plenitude. It is a commitment to curiosity, open-ended attention, and indeterminacy: notions that are significant for thinking in the Anthropocene. Crucially, the difficulty that concerns Tsing also emerges is also different from the difficulty that concerns Deer and Wood. Rather than focusing on the difficulty of imagining extinction, Tsing focuses on the difficulty of imagining multispecies survival or, the difficult task of imagining collaborative survival in precarious times. The life of matsutake mushrooms that grow in the ruins of capitalist modernity—disturbed, open landscapes that have been ravaged by commercial logging and deforestation—thus offer her a guide to imagining “one kind of collaborative survival” that might be possible in the Anthropocene (4).

Survival in Tsing’s work is frequently structured by its relation to the other. It is made possible by entanglements, by which Tsing primarily refers to the alternative politics of multispecies sociality and collaborative survival in the Anthropocene. It is a mode of relationality that she discovers in “disturbance-based ecologies” in which multiple species live together in ways that are intimately related and interdependent (5). The survival of matsutake mushrooms, for instance, is made possible by a species of red pine (Pinus densiflora) that grows only in lands that have undergone human deforestation. The foraging and trade of matsutake mushrooms—at a broader level—further points to yet another kind of entanglement: one that includes the “shifting assemblages of humans and nonhumans” (20). The humans, in this context, refer to matsutake foragers: a group of marginalised people including “disabled white veterans, Asian refugees, Native
Americans, and undocumented Latinos” who are also sustained by these precarious landscapes where they forage for mushrooms (18). To borrow Tsing’s excellent phrase, entanglements thus have to do with the “transformative mutualism” that is possible between species: a cross-species sociality in which both actors are transformed by the encounter (18). However, as much as I am convinced by Tsing’s argument about entanglement and the work of collective survival, there are times when the book advocates a facile democratisation of precarity, and fails to account for the hierarchical processes that have structured the human in the first place. “Precarity”, Tsing writes, “once seemed the fate of the less fortunate. Now it seems that all our lives are precarious” (2).

The argument fails to account for the differential distribution of precarity and embraces it as the universal and inevitable condition of life in the Anthropocene. It invites a problematic universalisation that disregards the fact that the threat of mass extinction does not cast its shadow equally upon all. In other words, we will—depending on where we live and what access we have to resources—be affected differently by the Anthropocene and its crisis of extinction.\(^{11}\)

How, then, might we recover entanglement for the Anthropocene when the very term seems to entail a disconcerting non-differentiation? I suggest an answer can be found in Édouard Glissant’s conceptualisation of entanglement in *Poetics of Relation*: an account that is specifically focused on the Caribbean historical experience, but speaks to Tsing’s work through its insistent focus on relationality. For Glissant, the term entanglement signifies the dynamic process of being-in-relation: a complicated relationality that affirms the irreducible singularity of entities even as they are intertwined. He conceives it as an imaginary in which different bodies are tied together in a way that affirms the multiplicity and diversity of each of its components: “[it allows] each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry”.\(^ {12}\) The motif of entanglement runs through *Poetics of Relation*, for the text remains interspersed with figures such as the weaving frame; mangrove swamps; rhizomes; and seaweed. Much like Tsing, Glissant also uses the concept of en-

\(^{11}\)

\(^{12}\)
tanglement to speak meaningfully about attention and formal difficulty. “This poetics of Relation”, he proclaims famously, “interweaves and no longer projects” (33). Glissant attributes to the figure of entanglement a meaning-making process that is centred on difficulty, which fosters conditions for relations that would otherwise be inconceivable. Ultimately, difficulty—in both Tsing and Glissant’s work—does not signify literature’s implosion into its own materiality as artifice, or its retreat into unintelligibility. “The opaque”, Glissant writes, “is not the obscure … it is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence” (191). Difficulty-as-entanglement thus refers to epistemological dilation rather than the closure of interpretation: it refers to a radical openness to forms of otherness, which is what makes the concept so resonant in the Anthropocene.

*Humanimal*

The more respectful and accommodating notion of difficulty that informs these accounts is central to my argument about entanglement. In this section, I trace the concept of entanglement back to Kapil’s writing, where modernist difficulty is nudged out of its proscriptive western, humanist orbit and brought closer to a critical communitarian imagination. I turn, as promised, to *Humanimal*: an experimental prose-poem that is grounded in historical processes that have structured the human, and the colonial legacy through which racialized and animalised subaltern bodies are cast as in/non/subhuman. The text delves into the true story of two feral children who were ‘recuperated’ from a wolf’s den by an Indian missionary and integrated back into human society through a violent regime of socialisation and extensive physical training. “Despite his efforts”, Kapil writes, “Amala died within a year of capture, of nephritis. Kamala lived to be about sixteen, when she died of TB” (ix). What remains implicit in the text, therefore, is the tight loop between the idea of the subhuman and that of “corrected humanism”: a formulation that has
been politically problematized by scholars such as Maneesha Deckha who remain attentive to the intra-human hierarchies that I have been highlighting throughout this essay. Kapil’s prose-poem brings to the fore the performative construction of the human as a site of exclusion; the human domination (and killing) of subhuman figures; and the conditions under which such killing can be performed with impunity.

Crucially, however, Kapil suggests that the story of the feral children cannot be reduced to a linear sequence of events with fixed, identifiable characters. Rather, it enters the text through fractured perspectives and memories that abjure simple narration and impede readerly efforts at interpretation. In particular, there are two moments where the prose-poem self-consciously admits to its own difficulty. “I want to make a dark mirror out of writing”, Kapil writes, “one child facing the other …” (54). And, similarly: “I’ve exhausted the alphabet. But I’m not writing this for you” (63). The terrible seduction of the mirror lies, arguably, in its promise of perfect visual and self-knowledge. It reflects a knowledge that is fixing—fixating—and offers a sense of mastery and control. Darkening the mirror is thus a resistance to visual prowess, objective knowledge, and easy consumption: an extension of key modernist concerns that are similarly iterated in twentieth century declarations of difficulty. Yet, I would argue that there is more at stake in these declarations than just an admission of deliberately created difficulties. Indeed, the line “I’m not writing this for you” can be read as both constative and performative. Even though it turns away from the reader who wishes to lay claim to absolute knowledge, it still bespeaks a duty, or a responsibility to the other as other: the feral child, in this context, who straddles the human/subhuman binary and abjures taxonomized humanity.

This violence-perpetuating binary—as scholars like Maneesha Deckha have eloquently argued—still survives in current, mainstream instantiations of global, economic, and racialized violence. Species difference, Deckha argues, remains the axis of difference that is “only marginally discussed” in even the most attentive discourses of intersectionality. In this regard, the
achievement of Kapil’s narrative lies in its careful thinking about responsibility in relation to a
limit figure: the subhuman figure who is not protected by discourses of human rights and human
dignity. I argue that this “you” that we find in Kapil’s narrative is precisely the ‘you’ that we need
for the Anthropocene. The experiment of thinking through our responsibility to and for such
forms of life signifies the broadest possible realisation of relationality in the Anthropocene, and
espouses modes of being-in-relation that are particularly salient in the context of the current
planetary catastrophe.

Entanglement with the figure of this other is depicted as the first condition of writing in
*Humanimal*. The image of glass returns in the Preface, where Kapil writes:

> With all my strength, I pushed the glass doors shut, ignoring the screams of the vendors inside, with a click. I clicked the spaces closed and then, because I had to, because the glass broke, I wrote this (1).

The broken glass could be read as an allusion to Virginia Woolf’s rendition of human-animal entanglement in *Moments of Being*. Maud Ellmann describes how Woolf regarded the wolf in particular as a phobic animal because of a childhood vision of a “double-headed monster, half-girl, half-beast”. The tone of dread and horror, when Woolf confronts herself as becoming-feral, is evident in *Moments of Being*:

> I was looking in a glass when a horrible face - the face of an animal - suddenly showed over my shoulder. I cannot be sure if this was a dream, or if it happened … But I have always remembered the other face in the glass (83).

Kapil’s preface similarly takes us to the “other face in the glass”, but unlike Woolf’s narrative, entanglement with the other—the feral child—is depicted as the very condition of writing. In a later passage, Kapil writes: “(T)o write this, the memoir of your body, I slip my arms into the sleeves of your shirt. I slip my arms into yours, to become four-limbed” (15). Entanglement is thus the means by which authorship is shared with the absolute other. In Kapil’s hands, art emerges as that which is collaboratively created, or co-created with the other. What this also achieves is an interrogation of agency: narrative voice emerges from an entanglement of human
and nonhuman actors, such that the human is no longer solely the locus of expression but shares
authorship with forms of otherness. Such a re-thinking of agency is particularly salient in the
current context of the mass extinction: an ongoing crisis that demands a conception of agency
which is decoupled from individuality or mastery. “Human actions on the planet”, as Deer re-

minds us, “may be enough to warrant the designation of a new epoch, but this is hardly a matter
of sovereign control” (9). In the context of Humanimal, entanglement transforms our ideas of
what agency is, and to who or what it might be attributable. Underlying Kapil’s figuration is thus
the acknowledgement of relational forms of agency that push against the misrepresentation of
human agency as the sovereign determinant of events. This decoupling, I argue, holds the poten-
tial to undo the “blowback of the modern” at the cusp of the extinction event and its repercus-
sions for a human-damaged planet.17

Such entangled, relational forms of agency emerge throughout the narrative, with their
appearance signalling the presence of different registers and selves:

A. All the branches stir in their silver. Like a liquid metal—the jungle. For her,

the girl—tentacular

2. Like automata, the trees rise up in rows, mechanically. Because it’s January,

we don’t see scat or paw marks

B. I want to stand up but I can’t do that here. They would know I am a wolf by

my sore hips, the look in my eyes (11).

From the very outset, two different fonts are established that suggest an entanglement of voices:
the numerical sequence loosely denotes the poet’s voice, whereas the alphabetic sequence sug-
gests a blended, partial voice that is more suited to the feral children and their other-than-human

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being. However, instead of attempting to give voice to the feral children, entanglement creates conditions for an embodied utterance that bears witness to the violence of socialisation and medical correction to which they were subjected.

The difficulty that arises, then, isn’t syntactic or lexical. Rather, it inheres in the prose-poem’s excessive reliance on temporal and spatial disjunctions that impede readerly efforts at interpretation. For instance, the second utterance is rooted in the time of composition—the year 2004, when Kapil travelled to the forests of Midnapore—whereas the first and third expand and contract the temporal ambit of the prose-poem by taking us back to the feral child’s scene of capture in 1920. As the narrative progresses, these dislocated images that shuttle between colonial and postcolonial time are further pressed against a consideration of deep time. The prose-poem opens itself to non-human scales of time, which further inscribes the limits of human rationality. Kapil writes: “she moved, through sal. But these new trees are new, too young to be hers” (17). Here, the identity of the other-than-human dilates through the introduction of deep time scales, or scales that inscribe a view of the universe that is much older and vaster than we can comprehend. The scale effects recall the deliberately created difficulties of “Pinky Agarwalia” but they also provide an imaginative perspective from which the contemporary crisis of mass extinction may be understood. If the extinction crisis manifests itself as a temporally and spatially extended event, then contemporary aesthetics must find ways to reproduce these disturbances of scale. These are moments, then, when the difficulty of Kapil’s narrative might be read in conjunction with the intellectual challenges posed by the sixth extinction. Kapil’s writing takes us beyond human apprehensions of scale and asks that we—as readers—reckon with such radically different perceptions of place and time in the dawn of the Anthropocene.

Difficulty, in Humanimal, is therefore not limited to an aesthetics of fragmentation, estrangement, and rupture, but is expanded into a condition of relationality. The telos of such prose-poetry is responsibility: a fidelity, perhaps, to the other who is abandoned by law and violently extirpated as bare life. To borrow a phrase from Tsing, Humanimal inscribes a poetry of
profound attentiveness to the other who has been “ignored because [they] never fit the time line of progress” and the forward march of capitalist modernity (Mushroom, 21). Feral children (Homines feri)—who linger on the edges of humanity, animality, monstrosity—and are far removed from the life of Homo economicus (economic man) are perfect examples of such others who drop out of history. “This is the humanimal project”, Kapil reminds us, “all the fingers are still inside the hands” (15). The excessive focus on the haptic signals a shift from the desiring, imperial eye (that guarantees the quintessence of the human) to that of touch. One is reminded of the hierarchy of senses in Aristotle’s De Anima, where touch is relegated to the lowest category because it tugs at the distinctions between the human and the animal. Kapil’s formulation is thus a blow to human exceptionalism—and the ocularcentrism of our species—that is replaced here by touch. It is also a blow to masterful thinking, and the coercive epistemological practices associated with the voyeuristic gaze. These textual strategies are, I argue, inseparable from what the sixth extinction is about: an event that similarly marks, in an absolute and vertiginous sense, the spiralling eversion of human mastery. As Tsing reminds us, living at a time of planetary catastrophe might crucially depend on such a rethinking of our literary tropes. “How can we”, Tsing asks, “repurpose the tools of modernity against the terror of Progress to make visible the other worlds it has ignored and damaged?” (Arts, 7)

What emerges in Humanimal is such a re-thinking of difficulty for a planet in crisis. It is a version of difficulty that is far removed from its Cartesian and anthropocentric biases, and which marks the beginning of a non-dominative, non-intrusive relationship with the racialized other. In this final move of my argument, I want to pause and note how far we’ve come from the cultural and intellectual concept of modernist difficulty. Famously lauded for its textual difficulty, Joyce’s Ulysses is, as Maud Ellmann reminds us, an “epic of the human body”. The human—that is to say, the white, male, upper-class, rational anthropos—has often been the privileged centre around which modernist difficulty turns, especially given that the cultural work of the trope was to hu-
manise its readers. Adorno’s enthusiasm for literary difficulty in *Aesthetic Theory*—despite his communism and antifascism—might serve as a chilling reminder of such anthropocentric biases. “Art respects the masses”, he writes, “by presenting itself to them as what they could be rather than by adapting itself to them in their degraded condition”.

The statement is also a reminder of the assertions of mastery that were frequently made by modernist writers typically associated with difficult writing. Unlike Kapil’s commitment to complex modes of relationality with the racialized other, modernist difficulty largely came down to discourses about expertise and intellectual mastery. Pound’s hectoring tone in *The Spirit of Romance* makes this quite evident: “the history of art is the history of masterwork, not of failure or mediocrity … the study of literature is hero-worship”.

Besides their failure to situate the other-than-human ethically, these discourses are also deeply entangled in power relations that are turning out to be unsustainable and illusory in the Anthropocene. The challenge of thinking in the Anthropocene is thus to take these limits into account, and reckon with forms of intra- and inter-species relationship necessary for our collective survival.

**Conclusion: A Critical Slowdown**

I opened this essay by gesturing to the importance of out-of-sight sites of suffering for literature produced in the Anthropocene. I use the term to refer to impoverished regions—particularly (though not exclusively) across the global South—that remain at disproportionate risk from the destructive effects of the Anthropocene. As Deer reminds us, these are the places that we “raze and burn, mine and pollute”: places that become “essential sacrifice zones” for the more economically developed parts of the world, or the global North. Against the long emergencies of the sixth extinction and the scale of its epochal activity, these are the areas that remain rela-
tively invisible to most environmental justice movements, which have failed to take into account
the “hushed havoc and injurious invisibility” that trail the destruction of these places. Readers
of Rob Nixon will already have recognised in my argument many of the issues that are eloquent-
ly approached in *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*. Nixon’s book redraws attention to
places that remain “outside our flickering attention spans”, as well as places that remain outside
the “purview of a spectacle-driven corporate media”. These are places that are characterised by
the workings of “slow violence”, by which Nixon refers to violence that occurs “gradually and
out of sight” or an “attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). As the
editors argue in their introduction, the temporalities of the sixth extinction might be viewed as a
form of slow violence, which also flags up the “difficulty of apprehending the threat of extinc-
tion as real and tangible”. *Humanimal*—a text that turns to some of the poorest regions of Eastern India and focuses on out-of-sight zones of suffering—might also be read along such lines.
Unlike the more spectacular and instantaneous form of violence that erupts in “Pinky Agar-
walia” via nuclear warfare, readers find in *Humanimal* a more elusive and pervasive violence that
undergirds the seemingly innocuous term ‘human’. Poignantly, the text prises open a question for
its readers: in our haste to imagine the end of the human, have we somehow conspired to forget
that there are many who still aspire to the status of the human?

Kapil’s efforts in *Humanimal* might then be read in tandem with Nixon’s in *Slow Violence*. Both texts exhort their readers to attune to “disasters that are anonymous and star nobody” and produce stories that are dramatic enough to counter such challenges of invisibility and historical amnesia (3). But Kapil’s deep attention to the story of the feral children in Midnapore also resonates with yet another of Nixon’s claims that remain somewhat obscured: the need to render “isolated site-specific struggles” more urgently visible (4). As modernist studies opens out to a
transnational and global frame, the attention to particularity that we find in Kapil’s text becomes
seemingly indispensable. It reminds us to keep sight of specific struggles and local conflicts.

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that emerge from the differential distribution of precarity: a revisionist position that is more frictional than expansionary, and more firmly grounded in local scales of inquiry. As this essay hopes to have shown, this critical impulse is a function of the imaginative challenges of the contemporary moment, and is shot through with possibilities for literature produced in the Anthropocene. To circle back to Kapil’s literary-ethical question posed in “Pinky Agarwalia”: “(W)as this the moment that our species took a turn?”
Notes


4.


12. Amitav Ghosh writes: “the Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us.” See


