

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reconsidering the Ecological Sublime: Kantian Aesthetics and Ecosystems

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Abstract

In environmental political theory, the sublime has been invoked to portray nature as an awe-inspiring site of spiritual elevation and restful contemplation. While the sublime has shaped conservation efforts, it also has perpetuated a grandiose yet static vision of nature that obscures the flourishing and vibrant ecosystemic webs of life. Drawing on Immanuel Kant's aesthetic considerations of nature and his teleological concept of purposiveness, I recover and reconceptualize an *ecological sublime*, which challenges anthropocentric myth by evoking a sense of uncanniness, revealing displays of agency and creativity that undermine the dichotomous barrier between humans and non-humans. Most importantly, the ecological sublime demonstrates that the web of life will rebuild and continue past this ecological crisis, regardless of whether or not humanity remains.

Keywords: aesthetics; agency; ecology; environment; Kant; sublime; uncanniness

Introduction

This project, building on existing legacies in environmental philosophy, works to expand the aesthetic notion of the *sublime* as a means of cultivating our environmental imaginations. The affective, sensorial intensity of the sublime *interrupts* or *shocks* the cognitive processes of the viewing subject, which provides a moment of rupture in judgment formation. This rupture forces the viewing subject to call into question preconceived judgments and assumptions, and thus creates space for the potential development of new affective political and social attachments. Philosophical treatments of the environmental sublime, primarily Kantian, render Earthly landscapes as idealized abstractions devoid of non-human life, silencing narratives of life's beauty, diversity, internal moments of interspecies cooperation and contestation, and end-driven pursuit of continued flourishing. Yet this is counter to Kant's own rich appreciation for non-human nature in his aesthetic theory, despite his overtly anthropocentric conclusions. However, Kant offers us mechanisms to subversively engage with his philosophy of nature and aesthetic judgment, and cultivate an environmental consciousness that can think imaginatively about the wonders of Earthly nature.

This paper argues that drawing upon and sharply expanding the *ecological sublime*, originally proposed by Christopher Hitt, not only allows us to better apprehend the vibrant lives of non-human organisms but also to understand how our non-human partners challenge assumptions of human mastery through their displays of creativity and agency.

Hitt draws his conception of the ecological sublime from Thoreau's "Ktaadn," which tells the story of Thoreau's failed attempt to summit Mt. Katahdin in Maine. As Thoreau descends, he becomes overwhelmed by the presence of "actual" nature surrounding him, the "rocks, trees, the wind on our cheeks" (Hitt 1999: 615). Hitt continues to draw on Thoreau's language to illustrate the affective intensity of the sublime, from the wild alterity of the rocky cliffs and seemingly hostile cloud formations, and most importantly, the *otherness* or *inhuman* characteristics of nature, which transcend the barriers of language that otherwise classify nature as inert. For Hitt, the "ecological" sublime "seems to have the power to jolt us momentarily out of a perspective constructed by reason and language, a perspective that, in modern Western culture, has rendered nature mute." Hitt concludes that there is a necessity for the sublime to recover a sense of "awe, wonder, and transcendence" to apprehend a living nature that is imperiled by the age of modernity and the continued degradation of non-human nature (Hitt 1999: 616–619). This is a vital project, but Hitt unfortunately fails to move his ecological sublime beyond treating nature as a static, if overwhelming and awe-inspiring backdrop rather than a web of ecosystemic connections that *include and sustain* our own human lives. Indeed, despite the use of "ecological" in Hitt's iteration of the sublime, ecology is only referenced in his article to briefly refer to deep ecology, with no reference to living, non-human nature or the ecosystemic connections that make up the sublime wilderness that so captures Thoreau's imagination. An expanded ecological sublime requires setting ourselves beyond seeing nature as a collective of agentic material forces (as we see in new materialism), but one that explicitly connects human animality to our non-human partners with whom we share the planet. Without grappling with the lives and deaths of non-human organisms and the relational webs that bind us together, we blind ourselves to the consequences of annihilating the ecosystems that maintain the stability of the planet's climate (Kirby et al. 2009; Nowicki et al. 2021).

My definition of the ecological sublime, which I argue for in this paper, is an aesthetic experience that goes beyond seeing nature as a transformative yet static backdrop to the inner process of judgment. Rather, it purposefully calls attention to life's seemingly limitless variation of beautiful forms and the connections of cooperation between them, as well as their occasionally violent, tragic struggles to survive amidst a rapidly destabilizing climate system. These life and death struggles, pursuits of joy, and surprising displays of recognition, ritual, and sacrifice demonstrate that non-human life's organization and agency challenge our own appeals to human exceptionalism due to our supposedly unique capacities of reason and rationality. This is an important expansion of the sublime in environmental thought, for as Helga Varden compellingly argues, scholarly work on Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* primarily grounds the sublime in discussions of human freedom while ignoring Kant's own interest in earthly life and (non-human and human) animality (Varden 2022: 27–30).

To develop this concept of the ecological sublime, I draw on the psychoanalytic notion of the *uncanny* to cast light on how non-human organisms demonstrate through

their own social lives and behaviors that *they* are not so different from *us*. Critically engaging with the intricacies of ecosystems' networks of cooperation and competition reveals complexities in social behavior and structure that seem, for lack of a better word, human. More importantly, I seek to emphasize that attuning ourselves to the vitality of Earthly nature brings into focus the reality that the end of life (as it is currently known) does not mean the end of life on this planet, for this world does not merely exist for humanity. It is important to decenter the human (as a "special" entity imbued with reason and rationality) as a necessary element in the sustainable flourishing of Earthly nature, and to recognize the possibility of a living Earth upon which humans no longer walk, as was the case in the billions of years prior to our emergence. Our own actions as a species likely will not render the planet inhospitable to all life and will set the stage on which life becomes reconstituted through processes of adaptation and destruction. Catastrophic though the climate crisis will be, life will continue to flourish in whatever footholds it can find in a changed world. The core question is simply: will we, as members of collective humanity, be present to witness it?

In the next section, I offer an overview of how the sublime encounter has historically been taken up in environmental political thought. I note that while this foundational work has been deeply influential in shaping conservation movements and illustrates a strong romantic attachment toward non-human nature, it at times inadvertently maintains a dualistic separation of humanity from nature. Furthermore, the sublime, as it has been taken up in environmental history, operates on a much wider conceptual premise than the philosophical traditions from which it emerges. I then turn to an expanded conception of the ecological sublime from Kantian philosophy, as a means of integrating narratives of non-human experience in environmental applications of sublimity, while simultaneously maintaining a physical and theoretical distance that prevents us from anthropomorphizing the purposiveness of life. I draw attention to animal and plant networks of cooperation, kinship, creativity, and recognition that reveal the uncanny "personhood" of non-human life (or conversely, dehumanizing traits associated with human exceptionalism) amidst a climate crisis. I conclude the chapter with an optimistic account of rewilding that de-emphasizes the role of humanity and instead focuses on the purposiveness of life and its tendency to take root in the aftermath of catastrophe.

The sublime in historical environmental thought

Western philosophical perspectives on the relationship between humanity and nature have largely framed it as an impassable binary, with humanity hierarchically placed above nature due to divine will, or through the virtue of humanity's supposedly unique capacities for reason and rationality. This anthropocentric exceptionalism has justified the commodification of nature to advance the development of civilization and extractive modes of economic growth, which has only intensified in the last century, with "wild" habitats being continually razed for agricultural or industrial development, severely threatening the planet's biodiversity (Acyrigg et al. 2022; Williams et al. 2021). This contemporary alienation of humanity from nature, while arguably at its peak in the midst of the ongoing climate crisis, is not a new phenomenon. Early environmentalists and conservationists, contesting the loss of nature to ever-encroaching

forces of land development, invoked the sublime to portray a romantic, idyllic nature in which man could pursue restful contemplation and harmonize with the natural world (Leopold [1949] 2020; Muir [1911] 2018). As I will demonstrate, contemporary commentators on the romantic sublime have done well to identify its romanticization and utilitarian management of nature, while recognizing its positive capacity to inspire a greater environmental consciousness. My purpose with this historical review is not to sharply contest this body of work, but rather to illustrate some limitations and to illustrate where the ecological sublime can offer a productive means of expanding our imaginations.

The sublime in nature can overwhelm our imagination “mathematically” via its seemingly infinite magnitude, or “dynamically” spark anxiety and terror through its awesome power. The aesthetic encounter initially inspires a sense of powerlessness in response to the grandiosity of the external world, however, the subject realizes the sublime in themselves as the mind strives to overcome the sublime: to measure it, define it, and master it through reason. As Kant outlines in the *Critique of Judgment*, the sublime encounter in nature challenges the supposed mastery of humanity, “and it is only under presupposition of this ideal within us, and in relation to it, that we are capable of attaining to the ideal of the sublimity of that being which inspires deep respect in us, not by the mere display of its might in nature, but more by the faculty which is harbored in us of judging that might without fear, and of regarding our vocation as sublimely exalted above it” (Kant [1790] 2007: 94). In essence, the sublime provokes the viewing subject’s faculties to pursue progress and understanding, and by *mastering* the sublime, finding liberty in one’s own self through the strengthening of one’s critical faculties. It is important to note that the sublime is part of a long and rich aesthetic tradition that goes beyond any one philosopher, and much of the work in environmental history that engages with the sublime does not adhere to one specific account of it. I engage directly with Kant’s account of the sublime, his deeply anthropocentric conclusions, and my justification for recovering his philosophy in the next section.

The sublime evolved from a linguistic and artistic tradition to an environmental one most prominently during the early years of American colonization and westward expansion. In contrast to the oppressive, ever-present development of civilization in Europe, the seemingly endless frontier of the “New World” was seen as an alternative site for the development of humanity’s social and political character. In Chandos Michael Brown’s account, Puritanical philosopher Jonathan Edwards framed external nature as a lens through which the human could recognize a deliberate, created order that was part of natural law, and designed to be replicated in political constitutions. In essence, the sublime encounter in external nature was thought to reveal the order and design of a creator God, from which the “image and shadow” of divine truths could be grasped, and a “commonwealth of saints” created. William Bartram also observed a natural community of coherence and cooperation in non-human nature, a characterization of nature “not as a simulacrum of divine form by a version of a regulated policy that is connected by degree to similar, human organizations” (Brown 2012: 148–153). There is a strong affinity here between the ecosystemic undertones of the early American sublime and Kant’s own philosophy of nature, which finds an aesthetic pleasure in the sensation of manifold diversity becoming united under specific concepts (Brady 2012a; Guyer 1993: 232).

Edwards and Bartram depict the sublime wilderness as tranquil and calming, while others saw external nature as an antithesis to civilization: wild, untamable, and a source of terror. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his travelogue *Fortnight in the Wilderness*, is attuned to the rhythms of life and death that comprise the “forest primeval,” and is brought to a sense of “religious terror” by the chaotic struggles of non-human life. He writes that “the forest trees seem to form but one whole, an immense and indestructible edifice under whose vaults eternal darkness reigns...a field of violence and destruction. Broken trees and torn trunks, everything testifies that the elements are here perpetually at war” (de Tocqueville [1860] 1959: 356–358). While Tocqueville is pessimistic that the advancement of civilization is altogether positive, and he recognizes an ecosystemic unity in nature, he does not include humanity as part of that ecosystemic web. In contrast with a Kantian sublime, which extols an appreciation for the material independence of non-human nature and the transformative effect it can elicit in the subject, Tocqueville adopts a more Burkean view of the environmental sublime. The sublimity of “wild” nature for Edmund Burke was charged with negative affect (“eternal darkness...a field of violence and destruction”), with the untamed and aesthetically discordant nature presenting as almost hostile to the spectator, in contrast with the calming, uplifting beauty of landscapes carefully maintained by human effort (Wilson 2014).

With America’s colonial expansion westward, the wilderness came to represent a divine mandate to master God’s creation, while erasing Indigenous and community-based relations to landscapes and non-human nature in the process (Bordo 1993). The sublime, under Chandos Brown’s account, “revealed the signature of God in his creation...a special sign of his providential resettling of a people and of his high expectations for them” (Brown 2012: 162). Henry David Thoreau richly details the moral and spiritual benefits of walking through the American wilderness in his essay *Walking*, but also notes that America was uniquely devoid of the predatory animals of Africa and Asia, making the American wilderness particularly fit for settlement and recreation (Thoreau 1862). The sublime wilderness was transformed into a symbol of nationalist expansion, in which seemingly infinite and dynamic landscapes were seen as a mere aggregation of resources, the accumulation of which would shape the moral character of the people.

During the early conservationist movements of the 19th century, the sublime galvanized a new environmental consciousness that attempted to respond to this appropriation of the wilderness, and attempted to preserve some of external nature as a source of spiritual elevation. Jedediah Purdy perhaps gives us the best genealogical exegesis of environmental aesthetics in the wilderness and their role in galvanizing new modes of political engagement during this time period. According to his account, the wilderness as it was *ideally theorized* by romantic writers and conservationists (including Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Muir), was an almost divine space where the sublime encounter could be experienced, and transform the disposition of the viewing subject through its beauty and splendor. In these isolated (or perhaps designated) spaces, nature was left in a “pristine” form, and so could actively resist the subject’s attempt at mastery while instead overwhelming and enrapturing their consciousness (Purdy 2010). The wilderness, as a sacred space for reflective judgment, can take numerous forms: mountainous expanses, the vastness of the

ocean, a rolling thunderstorm over the plains, or the vibrancy of an autumn forest. In the face of such natural wonder, we are forced to adopt an attitude of humility in the face of, to use Ronald Hepburn's terminology, the "nightmare infinite" of the sublime landscape (Hepburn 1996: 192). Critical here, is the role of romantic attachment to landscapes that overwhelm the individual and drive the creation of political and moral attachments to the environment—essentially appreciating nature as "at once deeply intelligible and basically mysterious...familiar and alien, subject to our mastery but also, past a certain threshold, able to overwhelm us" (Purdy 2010: 1198–1201).

However, this romanticized vision of the sublime has been accused of further problematizing and reinforcing the divide between humanity and nature. As William Cronon argues in his essay *The Trouble with Wilderness*, the idea of the wilderness has a romanticized attachment that facilitates the sublime encounter, where individuals can see "God" reflected in the mountains, streams, and valleys—and we draw on this spiritual, religious language in order to ascribe a human characteristic to spaces that are preserved as non-human sanctuaries. Seeking to return to this ideal only serves to repeat the patterns of exploitation and consumption that defenders of the wilderness seek to reject (Cronon 1996). Indeed, in the late 19th century, while many members of Congress drew upon the romanticized sublime to defend wilderness areas, others drew on that same language to invoke the *value* of Yellowstone and Yosemite as national projects that were set aside as isolated, novel public curiosities in contrast to the resource-use ideology that relegated the majority of U.S. land to the whims of the free market. For example, Jedediah Purdy calls attention to the testimony of Senator Vest of Missouri, who lauds Yellowstone as "the great wonder-land of the world" and "a great breathing-place for the national lungs" before later decrying the park as "useless leather and prunella" with the exception of the falls and geysers (Purdy 2010: 1142–1144).

Cronon's critique of the sublime as inadvertently maintaining relations of mastery and commodification between humanity and the rest of Earthly nature is certainly well-reasoned. However, Cronon's vision of the sublime wilderness treats nature as a still, scenic painting, or a cathedral specifically built for the restful contemplation of humanity. In these instances, nature may overwhelm the viewing subject, but it is still treated as a majestic backdrop. Murray Bookchin adopts a similar static view of non-human nature, arguing its independent relational networks have no intrinsic worth without "humanity's ability to appreciate it, to give it the splendor of meaning" (Bookchin [1982] 2005: 39–40). Bookchin further argues that recognizing the reality that non-human nature can thrive without humanity's presence is a misanthropic form of self-hatred that devalues humanity in favor of a romanticized animality, despite his own recognition of nature's diversity and natural spontaneity as essential components for life's *independent* flourishing and potential independent subjectivity (88–99; 364–365). The immensity of snowcapped mountains or the seemingly infinite expanse of the ocean might invoke the power of natural forces, but misses a critical element that allows us to maintain the separation between humanity and nature: the directed organization (or purposiveness) of life and death cycles, and the manifold diversity and beauty of non-humans in interdependent relational networks that maintain the health of ecosystems (Leopold [1949] 2020: 68–72).

As demonstrated, the depictions of the sublime and the moral dispositions associated with it are wide-ranging in environmental history. I posit that this is due in no small part to the broad conceptualization of the sublime that is tied to, but distinct from, the philosophical traditions from which it emerged. Tocqueville's narrative of the wilderness is marred by the Burkean sublime, with wild nature ascribed as dark, violent, and evoking religious horror that is absent from civilization. In contrast, the sublime espoused by Edwards and Brown is rooted in ecosystemic connections, a sense of divine order, and a charitable moral disposition that is more deeply rooted in the Kantian sublime. The affective and psychological effects of nature on the viewing subject vary considerably and are not equally productive in thinking about environmental sustainability and conservation. Yet there is a shared unintentional maintaining of the human/nature divide, in my view. While I do not share the depths of Cronon's critiques of the sublime, little recognition is given to humanity's own ecosystemic connections to nature beyond our presence as observers, even when the vibrant lives of non-humans play a role in the aesthetic experience. Furthermore, there is even less recognition of human animality, or the ways that non-human life challenges assumptions of human exceptionalism through their own displays of creativity and agency.

Although Purdy frames the two as incompatible, there is a clear affinity between the "extreme spiritual elevation of the sublime" and ecological awareness, or "knowledge of one's place in schemes of interconnection and interdependence" (Purdy 2010: 1161). Rather than endorsing Cronon's turn away from the romantic sublime, I argue that the spiritual or religious components of the sublime encounter are incredibly valuable, if not necessary, to galvanize an environmental imagination that takes the dynamic vitality of life into account. Recovering the ecological sublime does not need to come with the unfairly saddled baggage of what Christopher Hitt interprets as inherent maleficence that Cronon attributes to discourse surrounding the sublime (Hitt 1999: 605–606). The emphasis needs to be on what comes *after* the moment of affective intensity invoked by the sublime: reflective judgment and the communication of shared experience from which common values and principles are developed. That sense of awe and reverence is necessary to recognize the agency and power of more-than-human nature, and to recognize our inalienable connections (as fellow organisms enmeshed in relational networks) to Earth's ecosystems. In the next section, I turn to finding the sublime in the purposiveness of life, or the ecological sublime, in the beauty, diversity, and uncanny lives of non-human organisms that are otherwise obscured from political view.

The ecological sublime: endless forms most beautiful

In contrast with the romantic sublime of conservationist movements, non-human life has rarely been considered as a source of awe, anxiety, or wonder in environmental applications of the philosophical sublime beyond their depiction in works of art or as symbols of national identity. Existing work on environmental applications of the Kantian sublime, namely from Christopher Hitt and Emily Brady, has laid a remarkably excellent foundation for further theorizing. However, both Hitt and Brady limit the applications of the sublime by recognizing its transformative potential, but struggle to take it beyond the limitations of Kant's own thought. As discussed in the

introduction, Hitt's notion of the ecological sublime does not adequately differentiate between ecological and environmental, nor does it fully integrate Kant's philosophy of nature with his theory of aesthetic judgment. Brady attempts to make the case for the creation of an imperfect duty to preserve nature based on an appreciative environmental imagination realized in the subject as a result of the sublime encounter, but admits that such an extension of the sublime fails to bridge the teleological gap between humanity and nature that Kant imposes (Brady 2012b: 179). As I argue in this section, Kant unwittingly provides us with the mechanisms to expand our notion of the ecological sublime to include ecosystemic webs of non-human life, to reveal our own presence in and dependency on the health of those ecosystems, and to force us to grapple with the uncanniness of non-human life.

While Kant is far from the only theorist of the sublime, I focus on him in this project because of his unique aesthetic appreciation of living organisms, the special role he accords non-human nature in shaping our own process of judgment formation, and the degree of independent, unknowable agency that he accords to biological life. Despite this, Kant's own conclusions are deeply anthropocentric, and this is revealed in several ways. Firstly, while he ascribes an unknowable, intrinsic beauty to non-human organisms, he deliberately characterizes them by their individual existence, separate from any other forms of life (Kant [1790] 2007: 204–205). Beyond his lack of systemic thinking, Kant also explicitly notes that the practice of aesthetic judgment has the goal of realizing human freedom through the cognitive mastery of nature external to the viewing subject. This mastery is concurrent with cultivating an aesthetic attachment to nature, and this does generate an imperfect duty to care for the natural world. However, for Kant, this is only done in order to further the development of humanity's moral character. As an example, Kant preaches compassion toward animals, but not for the sake of animals themselves. Rather, it is done in order to expand our own moral feeling and cultivate a predisposition to treat others with compassion (Guyer 1993: 304–334; Kant [1790] 2007: 60–61, 178–182; Zuckert 2007: 48, 125).

Despite his own anthropocentric conclusions, Kant unwittingly offers us a mechanism to subvert anthropocentrism in the process of aesthetic judgment. He encourages us to practice judgment contemplatively and to engage with the world external to the subject, so we can realize the *purposiveness* of nature. Purposiveness is a performative assumption in that we cannot understand the nature of life, but given our observations of non-human nature, we must assume it operates according to self-driven ends in order to make sense of the external world. As observers who are limited by our own subjective experience, we can only ascribe order to the natural world by adopting transcendental principles—which Kant asserts is the only way we can “represent *a priori* the universal condition under which alone things can become objects of our cognition generally” (Kant [1790] 2007: 16). To Kant, purposiveness of nature is such a transcendental principle of judgment, and is characterized by multiplicity and variations of form, unified according to specific ends that are wholly independent of the viewing subject. He examines the formative, or self-propagating, power of non-human organisms and the deviations they take in order to pursue the fulfillment of internal and unknowable ends, and describes this “unfathomable property” as the “analogue of life” (203). One example of Kantian purposiveness, drawn from Paul Guyer and Donna Haraway, is the relationship between honeybees and orchids, the latter of which evolve

in order to appear like the reproductive organs of specific, local bee species (Guyer 1993: 150; Haraway 2016: 68–69).

While I am integrating purposiveness and sublimity, it is important to note that this is not a conceptual move that Kant makes, and I am deliberately reading Kant against himself. Purposiveness, as a formal transcendental principle that is ends-focused, is distinct from the purely aesthetic judgment of the sublime encounter in Kant's philosophy. While the sublime is purely a matter of aesthetic judgment for Kant and associated with taste and beauty, he identifies the purposiveness of non-human life as derived from the cognitive domain of reason and rationality (Varden 2022: 32). Yet one does not need to be a specialist in affect theory to know that our cognitive domains are not so neatly compartmentalized from one another, and that "reason" is limited in its capability to master our senses and emotional responses. Kant himself struggles to maintain this divide, as there is a clear appreciation for nature and organic life that reverberates through his writing. In his observations of non-human life, he states that "forms of this kind are those which by their combination of unity and heterogeneity serve as it were to strengthen and entertain the mental powers that enter into play in the exercise of the faculty of judgment, and to them the name of *beautiful forms* is accordingly given" (Kant [1790] 2007: 187). He describes the manifold diversity and organization of life as "intrinsic natural beauty" and characterizes it as an analogue to human art (203). Indeed, this purposiveness in nature is foundational in Kant's own religious philosophy, for it is the observance of nature that leads him to believe that there is an organizational force driving life's evolution, but that such a force is simultaneously unknowable beyond recognition of its mere existence, despite the power of human reason. Helga Varden argues that, while Kant offers little value to nature beyond what is revealed to our cognition via aesthetic judgment and the sublime, the moral attachments that the sublime fosters in the subject lay the groundwork for conceiving of humanity and Earthly nature as part of a unified, ecosystemic whole (Varden 2022: 33–34).

Charles Darwin uses similar language to describe the evolution of life and identifies the *beautiful* as the flourishing of non-human life as it pursues its own survival over the course of generations. He asserts that, despite our limited ability to directly experience the ends of non-human life, that "there is grandeur in this view of life...and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning *endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful* have been, and are being, evolved" (Darwin [1859] 2009: 360). Aldo Leopold, also drawing on Darwin's work a century before, writes, "We know now what was unknown to all the preceding caravan of generations: that men are only fellow voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution" (Leopold [1949] 2020: 102). Leopold notes that the knowledge should have imparted a kinship and a sense of wonder over the purposiveness of life, but over 70 years of ecological findings later, this ecological consciousness has yet to emerge in our institutional environmental politics.

Incorporating the beauty, wonder, and uncanny traits of "personhood" in non-human life adds a new level of awe and shock to the ecological sublime, as our Earthly neighbors challenge the anthropocentric assumptions by which we privilege our existence over their own.

Furthermore, it is only by reckoning with the vitality of non-human life that we can fully internalize the disastrous consequences of our exploitation of nature. A mass

extinction brought about by the unsympathetic and exploitative forces of capital would result in an inconceivable loss of beauty, excitement, and intellectual curiosity. Dipesh Chakrabarty rightly argues that climate justice requires a level of environmental imagination and a willingness to cross ontological boundaries and sympathetically imagine the crises facing both humans and non-humans (Chakrabarty 2016). The purpose here is not to argue for the extension of political rights to non-humans (although that is certainly an area of fruitful academic debate) or to otherwise draw the non-human into the realm of human political institutions (Cochrane 2012; Donaldson 2020; Massumi 2014). Rather, a necessary precondition for bringing non-human nature into the arena of democratic politics is to take on the perspective of a wholly impartial observer, and establish an ecological consciousness that respects the purposiveness of non-human life when divorced from our immediate appropriation of resources or direct engagement in predominantly non-human ecosystems.

The challenge then is to develop opportunities for a “post-anthropocentric” orientation to nature to take root while overcoming barriers of accessibility to facilitating and democratizing the ecological sublime. One avenue to facilitate public engagement lies with technology and science communication, which can play a pivotal role in presenting visions of non-human life with an accompanying narrative format. As Emily Brady points out in her treatment of the environmental sublime, we need not only encounter sublimity in extreme or remote conditions. With advances in technology, we have new lenses through which we can view the sublime in nature and engage in the process of reflective judgment (Brady 2012b: 174). Bruno Latour and Levi Tenen both assert that, while the aesthetic dimension is valuable in changing subjects’ dispositions, engaging with the history and vitality of Earthly nature through collective practice and study of the sciences can also be foundational in developing affective, non-hierarchical relations with our non-human neighbors (Latour 2004; Tenen 2020). Aldo Leopold notes as well, that in comparison with the trophy hunters and tourists of natural parks, a cameraman is one of the “*few innocuous parasites*” in wild spaces (Leopold [1949] 2020: 161). Furthermore, Leopold argues that amateur wildlife research (bird-watching, engaging with local flora and fauna) can reveal wonders of the world without the weight of scientific process and jargon (174–175).

This mode of historical and scientific inquiry and communication is a form of storytelling that can bring into being a reality that we, as humans, are incapable of fully grasping in our state of alienation from external nature. Although Hannah Arendt’s value in storytelling is restricted solely to the human realm, she rightly notes that storytelling plays a vital political role in intensifying and reshaping our “subjective emotions and private feelings,” in a manner similar to how the sublime encounter challenges our imaginative faculties in the process of aesthetic judgment (Arendt [1958] 1998: 50). Furthermore, storytelling allows an other to be recognized as an agent, with their own goals, relationships, and purposive lives (182–184). Stories of non-human nature, then, can make apparent the purposiveness of life as a network of agents and actors, and this strategy has been used in the historical work of Aldo Leopold and John Muir, and the contemporary work of Samantha Vice as a means of calling attention to non-human nature and making moral claims on its behalf (Vice 2023). Storytelling is also critically a radical democratic ritual that encourages coalition-building across lines of difference and the formulation of myth. The creation of *non-anthrocentric* myth is, perhaps, the

most generative product of the ecological sublime as it draws our attention to lifeworlds and ways of being that appear disconnected from our own, but in reality are deeply entwined through ecological webs (Aslam et al. 2024: 113–160; Battistoni 2025).

We then must face the dual challenge of identifying stories that can be made accessible to all, while minimizing barriers between the viewing subject and non-human ecosystems, for those of us who cannot regularly immerse ourselves in nature. Film is a particularly helpful medium here, such as the documentary works of David Attenborough, famed for a lifetime of conservation work, as well as the famed “Blue Planet” and “Planet Earth” series. Although these documentaries maintain a boundary of experience that the typical sublime encounter in nature lacks, they preserve a certain level of non-interference that allows us to engage with animal life as it operates. The narrated life and death struggles of the non-human still prove capable of capturing the public interest, and stoking feelings of wonder and curiosity without the artificiality and exploitative model adopted by “Sea World” and other sites of “direct” interaction with the non-human (Davis 1996). Attenborough’s documentaries have sparked a number of viral moments for an awestruck audience: lionesses forced to pursue dangerous prey by worsening drought conditions; golden eagles in the high Himalayan peaks fighting for the remains of a yak carcass; a bold sloth risking his life to swim across a river to heed a potential mate’s call; and (of particular viral fame) hatchling marine iguanas fighting to escape a veritable army of racer snakes in the Galapagos. Yet, it isn’t all heartwarming or awe-inspiring displays of creativity and agency. The narrative moments that Attenborough shares with his audience are often accompanied with a series of dire warnings on the state of life on our planet: chimpanzees struggling to make homes in razed jungles as they wander through immaculate rows of invasively planted palms; elephants migrating to the watering holes of their previous generations only to find dust and sand in the long-drained riverbed; the suffering and physical deformities of seabirds and turtles forced to live with permanent plastic accessories; and the mass death of walruses forced to nest on sheer cliffs due to the lack of sea ice.

These encounters, presented with a narrative format and accompanying audio cues to intensify the drama of life’s purposiveness, draw in the viewing audience to confront them with spectacles of non-human life that are rarely seen or experienced. Presenting the vitality of life in such a way can cue an experience similar to the sublime, awe, and wonder at the ingenuity and agency of life, coupled with the anxiety and horror of its struggles to survive amidst a climate disaster. Unfortunately, displays of nature’s purposiveness and the tragic losses rendered visible by the climate crisis are not guaranteed to invoke the disposition-shifting nature of the sublime, even with the awe and anxiety they might temporarily invoke. Furthermore, these visions alone may be insufficient to develop a post-anthropocentric environmental consciousness. We must then look deeper at the storied lives of non-human life, and the uncanny ways they challenge human exceptionalism through their ways of living and being.

In recent years, psychoanalysis has become a subject of considerable interest in environmental political theory, in order to grapple with our own psychological responses to the climate crisis. These can range from ecological anxieties brought by intense material and existential loss, to radical reclamations of joy in the face of despair (de Vries et al. 2025; Dodds 2012, 2022; Lurtzman 2015; Schinaia 2022). My particular focus is on the notion of *uncanniness*, which refers to an inability to distinguish between

the animate and inanimate—or to encounter something that is disquietingly, eerily familiar to the degree that our psychological states are challenged. Within psychoanalysis, notably the work of Sigmund Freud, this term is used primarily to address the challenges in distinguishing reality from falsehood faced by adolescents (Freud [1919] 2003). However, the term has also been taken up within environmental political thought, albeit sparingly. Purdy draws on uncanniness as a pause in the viewing subject's process of judgment formation, brought on by a disquieting sense of familiarity and uncertainty. In accord with Kant's assumption of purposiveness, Purdy writes that uncanniness "expresses recognition that, in interpreting nonhuman species and other parts of nature, no judgment can be entirely confident and stable" (Purdy 2015: 243).

The disquieting uncertainty in that process of judgment formation, to which we question the conclusions we draw from aesthetic experience, is similar to the manner in which the sublime challenges our faculties of reason and imagination. More importantly, uncanniness serves as a check against hastily formed, anthropocentric judgments we derive from interactions with non-human life by forcing us to reckon with the reality of the external world, rather than to project our own assumptions and adopt them as fact. Emily Brady similarly deploys the language of mystery and otherness in the sublime encounter as a check against anthropocentric projections, as nature forces us to reckon with "natural phenomena not completely within our grasp...where nature cannot be fully known or appropriated, which supports an attitude of humility" (Brady 2012b: 180).

My point here is to identify the link between the language of uncanniness (familiarity and uncertainty, humility in the face of what cannot be known) and that of the sublime (awe, anxiety, psychologically arrested by the intensity of the experience), and to draw upon examples in non-human life that can invoke these emotions in us through their ways of being. We might, as an example, observe the life of an octopus—a seemingly alien solitary creature with a unique distributed nervous system and problem-solving capabilities, and evident emotional attachments (Edelmen and Seth 2009). In captivity, individuals will form bonds with their keepers (occasionally these bonds are antagonistic as they spray keepers with water and ink), and some engage in veritable Hollywood heists of deception and sabotage to escape from their tanks, in what can be seen as a rebellion against constraints and a desire for freedom. Cetacean species, including dolphins, orcas, and humpback whales, have been found to maintain vibrant social networks with unique dialects that vary based on locality and a pod's social history; furthermore, pods have unique cultural practices of child-rearing and group hunting that are taught across generations (Garland and Rendell 2020; Rendell and Whitehead 2001). We can observe elephants in Africa forming multigenerational matriarchal societies, engaging in ritual behavior under the light of the full moon, or carrying out violent revenge against predators (including humans) who kill one of their young. We might observe examples of chimpanzees (with whom we share 99.6% of our genetic material) in captivity rolling their own cigarettes, mixing their own cocktails, solving complex recognition puzzles, and identifying themselves as "human" when organizing pictures of humans and animals. As resources for chimpanzee studies (rightfully) became scarce in the late 90's, captive chimpanzees in dying laboratory settings began desperately communicating a desire for liberation in sign language by

repeatedly signing the word “key” to their increasingly absent handlers (Bekoff and Pierce 2009; Sagan and Druyan 1992). Recent work in biochemistry has even found that plants and fungi develop vibrant communication networks, and demonstrate adaptive behavior in interacting with their environments, and form symbiotic relations and practices with animals in order to maximize their chances of survival and propagating offspring (Coccia 2018; Hall 2011).

Invoking the sublime in such moments forces us to pause, provoked by the eerie sensation that “we” are not so different from “them.” Our assumptions of human exceptionalism, rooted in the capacity for reason, rationality, and self-recognition, are challenged by non-humans both disquietingly similar to us in appearance as well as those of wildly different species (Panksepp 2005; Pena-Guzman 2022). As Arianne Conty notes in her own exploration of environmental practices in Indigenous animisms, if we extend a sense of “personhood” to individual organisms, the differences between the human and non-human are largely determined by our embodiment. She writes, “different shapes, sizes, limbs and sensory organs embody consciousness or soulhood in different ways...all entities, not just humans, have purposive agency and express themselves, through enunciating, assembling and disassembling subjectivities and collectivities” (Conty 2022: 134). We can see similar turns in new materialism, with Karen Barad reminding us that even a brainless creature like a brittlestar acts with purposiveness through its remarkable, reflexive morphology comprised almost entirely of photosensitive optic nerves, and is capable of dividing itself in response to external stimuli (Barad 2007: 369–384). A sense of agency or purposiveness can even be found in organisms that challenge our preconceived notions of embodiment and sentience. Uncanniness or mystery in the sublime encounter, in essence, forces us to question our ingrained notions of human exceptionalism and sovereignty over nature. Furthermore, by forcing us to reckon with our entangled relationships with nature, the sublime calls into question how we can entertain the idea of long-term human survivability on a planet that is rapidly losing its biodiversity.

These narratives of non-human life have the potential to capture the attention of an audience, and for a moment, bring them into a world that they would most likely never be able to experience directly. They do not move us closer to the non-human, for we cannot directly share in the experiences of animal life or definitively project our own emotional or behavioral characteristics onto them. We can only cultivate an environmental imagination that recognizes an unknowable agency to organisms in more-than-human nature, and a willingness to see how they might challenge our own assumptions of human and non-human existence. These displays of cooperation and contestation are part of the purposiveness of life, and they do not require our acknowledgment or presence for their lived experiences to be validated. Most importantly, we must remember that we are not witnessing a cinematic portrayal of some distant form of life in an untouched wilderness, but of life struggling to survive among dying ecosystems and the ever-expanding reach of human appropriation and exploitation of the natural world. Tim Luke, in his reading and defense of Karl Marx as a contributor to green political thought, perhaps states this parasitic, exploitative relationship between humanity and nature in the clearest terms: “The commodification of Nature, embodying the corrupted energies of unchecked accumulation without end, crystallizes human sapience and sentience as environment within works of labor, whether it is gold ore,

skyscrapers, unrefined oil, computers, harvested wheat, steel, or suburban housing” (Luke 2015: 210).

What, then, does the ecological sublime raise for our environmental politics? Can we engage in half-hearted efforts at ending our economic dependence on fossil fuels and moving toward a green economy without considering our interdependence with non-human life? Alyssa Battistoni argues, correctly in my view, that while it is vital to learn more about the non-human world in addressing climate justice, “we cannot simply return to ‘natural cycles’ or patterns, or reproduce the old; rather, we must ourselves take responsibility for composing them, while never imagining we can make them entirely as we please” (Battistoni 2025: 117–118). In the concluding section of this paper, I offer purposive rewilding as one mechanism by which we can begin to restore a semblance of balance to our planet’s ecosystems, with the hopeful reminder that life will continue regardless of whether or not humanity remains a part of life’s web.

Purposive rewilding: the endurance of life

I do not want to minimize the challenges in generating long-lasting, collective political change from the sublime. Given the ingrained routines we adopt as subjects of extractive socio-economic structures, it is all too easy for many of us to find restful, spiritually elevating experiences in non-human nature and then return to our everyday lives, fraught with environmentally-harmful habits. As Merit Hammond argues, the public lacks opportunities to cultivate an environmental imagination, which leaves us struggling to envision alternatives to institutional reforms that only serve to temporarily mediate the devastation facing life on Earth (Hammond 2021). But generating long-lasting shifts in our ways of thinking and being is far from impossible, and it is a necessary political challenge we must meet. For example, consider environmental justice work that puts willing participants into direct relation with vulnerable non-human species. Heather Alberro’s work with radical environmental activists reveals that, although there are variations in value systems, environmental activists who *repeatedly* interact with vulnerable non-human species in their activist work develop attitudes that are distinctly “post-anthropocentric” over time. Namely, there is a shared rejection of human exceptionalism in favor of a flat ontology of equality, a recognition of agentic forces in nature, and a call for relations of harmony and non-domination between human and non-human life (Alberro 2020: 671). These shifts in thinking are not born through a singular transformative experience, but through a willingness to return to those experiences, even though they might elicit some discomfort as well as awe. The sublime does not generate political change in and of itself, but rather creates opportunities for us to transform our dispositions and do the self-work necessary to ritualize or habitualize those new ways of thinking. A vital first step however, is to ensure that opportunities for the ecological sublime to manifest remain available, and landscape conservation and restoration are an immediately pressing challenge that must be addressed. I suggest that purposive rewilding is one mechanism that might let us avoid fantasies of mastery over nature, while taking responsibility to create conditions for life to flourish sustainably.

Rewilding is, put simply, the ecological restoration of “wild” spaces and landscapes that were damaged by human activity, in order to allow non-human life to recover

and flourish sustainably on its own (Foreman 2004; Gammon 2018; Monbiot 2014; Prior and Brady 2017). We can look to the American Midwest, where Indigenous non-profit organizations in the plains and Great Lakes regions pursue rewilding to help endangered species recover with minimal human intervention (Hartman and Wooley 2020). In a move that has notable common ground with Kantian environmental ethics, Jonathan Yi draws on the Confucian philosophy of Xunzi to argue for an ethic of reciprocal, harmonious relations with non-human nature as a moral duty, grounded in the reality that humanity owes its own flourishing to the continued sustainability of heaven and earth (Yi 2022). A more ethically dubious example, from the realm of realized science fiction, is the revival of extinct species in order to restore vital predator and herbivore species to destabilize ecosystems (Lindquist 2020). There is a convincing moral framework that underlies practices of ecological restoration, especially in rare cases where ecosystems are unable to return to equilibrium without direct human intervention or deliberate absence of intervention, such as in the aftermath of the devastating bushfires in Australia in 2020 (Sebo 2022).

One notable element of purposive rewilding, and one which may discomfort readers at first, is recognition of life's remarkable resilience and the likelihood that it will continue to survive amidst the climate crisis and whatever future might follow. I do not suggest this to promote a misanthropic view that our own futures do not matter, but rather to remind us that there is a glimmer of hope for the world that we care for. Let us take an example from one of the most famous urban environments destroyed through human action. David Attenborough's *A Life on Our Planet* opens with a sequence of aerial footage over a seemingly urban landscape, but one that has been reclaimed by non-human life. In the ruins of concrete and metal, trees flourish and wind their way around and through abandoned structures, their roots circumventing all human-crafted obstacles left in their path. Herds of deer walk along moss-covered highways, and birds sing while nesting on long-dormant traffic lights. While this recovery may not have led to a perfectly flourishing ecosystem, we can and should take some measure of hope that, in an environment first leveled for the development of urban infrastructure and later ravaged by the devastation of nuclear disaster, life was able to reclaim a remarkable foothold in the absence of humanity.

Emily Brady similarly finds opportunities for the sublime encounter in moments of catastrophe and annihilation, asserting that even predictive models of a changing climate present an atypical and abstract "great and sublime event on a huge temporal and spatial scale" (Brady 2012b: 174). Yet even catastrophe has its limits in shaping the public consciousness if we do not have a clear vantage point to fully apprehend the scale of the devastation. Even if we are aware of the catastrophe and are exhausting ourselves bracing ourselves for it, its slow but constant immanence runs the risk of numbing us to consequences that don't immediately affect us. But, as the ruins of Chernobyl remind us, life can still emerge amidst the devastation in some form, and we can see this in the language of catastrophe itself. Brian Massumi characterizes "catastrophe" as a cascading of domino effects—a "unstable, quasi-chaotic situation" (Massumi 2015: 114). Yet, in an interesting irony, this language of instability, uncertainty and cascading effects is frequently used to describe the vitality and wonder of the evolution of organic life (and inevitable death)—described by Fritjof Capra as a series of "oscillations that almost repeat themselves, but not quite, seemingly random and yet forming a complex, highly organized pattern" (Capra 1996: 17).

Finding the sublime in non-human life helps illustrate the true costs of a dynamic dying world, in which each catastrophic backdrop resonates with the death of entire ecosystems. We have an unfortunate tendency to, even when we do recognize the interconnectedness of life, privilege ourselves above it as exalted creatures of reason and dignity, but as Capra makes clear, “in nature there is no “above” or “below,” and there are no hierarchies. There are only networks nesting within other networks” (35). As we strive to save what we can of our planet’s ecosystems, we are also fighting to preserve a future for humanity, for we are inextricably bound to the non-human and must recognize our shared ties of kinship to one another if we are to create a livable future. Without us, it is likely that the Earth will continue to support life in some way, shape, or form that we cannot know. It is with humility that we must reckon with that future, and with a world unconvinced by our anthropocentric projections of self-importance. We can only hope to be privileged enough to bear witness to the future that unfolds.

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