Between Despair and Denial: Coming to Terms with the Climate Crisis and Environmental Injustice in the Ecopoetry of Craig Santos Perez

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Abstract: Images of the dire consequences of anthropogenic climate change and environmental pollution are featured on the news with increasing regularity. While the coverage of those apocalyptic scenarios has become more straightforward, they can be perceived as traumatic, and are, thus, met with denial. This paper investigates how the ecopoetry of Craig Santos Perez proposes an alternative to conventional environmental discourses by highlighting the difficulty of appropriately communicating issues of social and ecological degradation, and effectively calling people to action in the fight against them. By portraying fear, frustration, and a desire for escapism in "Halloween in the Anthropocene (*a necropastoral*)" (2020) and "New Year's Eve and Day in the Chthulucene" (2020), Santos Perez illustrates the emotional and psychological implications of looming ecological collapse while simultaneously adhering to an environmental justice agenda. The close reading of his ecopoetry is guided by the observation of the poems' different evoked TimeSpaces and their relation to the portrayal of slow violence. In doing so, he practices a radical form of environmental justice writer-activism that renders the depicted circumstances, however, more easily digestible and comprehensible.

For several reasons, we live in an unprecedented age. Globalization and technological progress have changed the way we humans perceive, and live on, our planet—in an assemblage of numerous seemingly immediately accessible spaces, in which mutual trade, communication, and assistance in times of need can occur. The operative word is *can* because an estimated half of the world's population lives in poverty within this vast socioeconomic network (Blunt 1-3). Simultaneously, climate change and pollution levels, which have reached an all-

time high, pose a looming existential threat to a multitude of species, including humans (McNeill and Engelke 86-98). The deterioration of global ecosystems, most prominently in the form of climate change, arguably constitutes the most pressing issue humanity must face in the twenty-first century. Yet, despite the increasing frequency with which extreme weather conditions now also occur in the Global North (Bergamaschi et al. 8-10, Mann et al. 1-2), it is a phenomenon that many US citizens still "do not understand, do not take seriously or do not consider to be a major public-policy concern" (Dimento and Doughman 1). Although climate change denial as a behavior can be observed all around the world, this paper attempts to explore this coping mechanism in a US-American context. Whereas images of the consequences of climate change in the form of wildfires, floods, and storms prominently feature on the news, their coverage is often merely superficial and their effect fleeting, failing to address the causes behind the depicted events. While these pictures certainly leave an emotional impression on audiences, understanding the complex science behind them is a wholly different issue. If the causes are elaborated on, they are frequently either downplayed or exaggerated, making a reasonable engagement with them difficult, if not impossible (4-6). This may, however, also be owing to the fact that the models and terminology used by experts to communicate the impact of climate change are not easily comprehensible for large parts of the population in the first place (8-9). For several reasons, conventional news coverage, hence, seems to be an insufficient medium for raising awareness for climate change and facilitating the public's understanding of it as part of a larger ongoing process of ecological deterioration.

One circumstance that further exacerbates widespread unknowingness is the fact that the impact of climate change is disproportionately distributed across the planet and often occurs without its biggest contributors taking notice (Dimento and Doughman 10). As a matter of fact, most environmental pollution and the steady progress of climate change are anthropogenic, in other words, caused by humans. This condition is one of the central concerns of the environmental justice movement, which seeks to protect and raise awareness for communities that are "most negatively impacted by economic and ecological degradation" (Di Chiro 100). These are often 'developing countries,' whose environmental and social problems are, to a large extent, caused by the commercial enterprises of industrial states (Blunt 1, Nixon 10-14, 40-44).

Anthropogenic climate change and global-scale, capitalist economic activity fall under what Rob Nixon termed "slow violence." He defines this as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). While certain climate-change-induced catastrophes—such as the previously mentioned natural disasters—have the "eye-catching and page-turning

power" that could garner people's attention, the phenomena gradually causing them are underrepresented (3). Nixon claims that mass media has a "bias toward spectacular violence" (4) and voices the need to increase the visibility of slowly advancing, yet equally fatal disasters (2-6). This inadequate representation of gradual ecological degradation and structures that perpetuate environmental injustice has resulted in an increase of writer-activism. Its advocates intend to capture instances of slow violence and make them fully apprehensible by breaking down the spatial and temporal boundaries that make these phenomena difficult to observe (14-15). By spreading awareness for underrepresented place-specific environmental and social concerns, writer-activists act as influential voices who render "sights unseen" visible (15).

This paper aims to show how Craig Santos Perez contributes to this environmental justice writer-activism by drawing attention to the difficulty of appropriately communicating issues of social and ecological degradation and effectively calling people to action in the fight against them. He achieves this by evoking multiple spatiotemporal settings—referred to as TimeSpaces in the following pages—in his poetry, which allows him to depict concrete instances of slow violence. However, these are obscured through his multifaceted experimentation with different registers, literary styles, and voices. Moreover, by portraying feelings of frustration, fear, and despair in "Halloween in the Anthropocene (*a necropastoral*)" and "New Year's Eve and Day in the Chthulucene,"[1] Santos Perez goes beyond a mere environmental justice agenda, illustrating the emotional and psychological implications of looming ecological collapse.

Facing the Global Trauma of the Anthropocene

Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer's conceptualization of the Anthropocene—a geological age in which humans have become the dominant force shaping the planet on which they live—has become central to environmental studies and has been taken up repeatedly by different scholars (McNeill and Engelke 1). John McNeill and Peter Engelke date its origins back to "the Great Acceleration," a phenomenon that refers to the rapid growth of global population numbers in the mid-nineteenth century, and with it, a spike in CO_2 emissions and the production of plastic waste, which further worsened human impact on Earth (4). Since large segments of the population in 'developed countries' are in many cases unaware of the drastic consequences of their standard of living, McNeill and Engelke propose that the human-induced strain on the planet's biosphere will unabatedly continue (5). While they describe humanity's tendency to ignore anthropogenic climate

1 The poems' titles are hereafter abbreviated as "Halloween" and "New Year's," respectively.

change and the slow violence it exerts, complementary scholarship proposes the opposite.

Lynn Keller, for example, suggests that awareness of human complicity in ecological destruction has, by now, indeed become pervasive in Western cultures due to their continuous exposure to environmentalist discourses (1). She conceptualizes the so-called "self-conscious Anthropocene," a term that is meant to foreground the cultural implications of Crutzen and Stoermer's declaration of the Anthropocene at the beginning of the millennium (1). Keller argues that it has sparked a "reflexive, critical, and often anxious awareness of the scale and severity of human effects on the planet," which has acted as a source of inspiration for recent ecocritical writing, with ecopoetry leading the way (2). The emotional and psychological dimension of contemporary discourse on the Anthropocene ought not to be underestimated, the feelings of anxiety being a common reaction according to Keller (2).

Lee Zimmerman even goes so far as to speak of climate change as trauma, in that the previously addressed culture of denial and ignorance, thus, potentially constitutes a coping mechanism for coming to terms with the self-conscious Anthropocene (1). He argues that the radical way in which climate change and its consequences are—and, in his opinion, must be—communicated as an existential threat can leave the public in a paralyzed state, unable to apprehend the information they are receiving (12-13). More importantly, Zimmerman emphasizes that public political discourses on ecological deterioration tend to obscure its traumatic meaning by normalizing it as an outgrowth of a prosperous economy (35). Nixon pinpoints such capitalist propaganda strategies as the nexus between climate change denial and slow violence, as they perpetuate the latter's invisibility (39-40). He emphasizes that writer-activists face the challenge of mitigating these dominant discourses of capitalism which publicly cast doubt on scientific facts about climate change and eschew the representation of disasters that result from capitalist practices (40-42). Nixon suggests that writer-activism works towards establishing a "planetary consciousness" in the reader's mind, which involves not only apprehending distant distressing situations but also the forces at play in obfuscating them (15). Zimmerman, moreover, addresses the problem that exposing such or other obstacles to tackling the climate crisis often conveys a problematic degree of cynicism by invoking irrevocable apocalyptic scenarios for the future, which can make the impact of current endeavors seem futile (2-3).

This discussion has been taken further by Donna Haraway, who claims in her seminal work *Staying with the Trouble* that humankind must enter a new post-Anthropocene age, the so-called "Chthulucene," which she describes as "a timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (2). She voices two major points of criticism regarding

humankind's handling of the Anthropocene. On the one hand, she criticizes naïve notions of hope, such as clinging on to the idea of a deus-ex-machina fix to the current ecological crisis, for example, through technology or religion. On the other hand, she dismisses defeatist attitudes that view the doomed fate of our planet as inevitable (3). Haraway emphasizes that "staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures," urging people to face the trauma that the global environmental crisis poses (1). Her conceptualization of the Chthulucene is a proposal to overcome unsustainable habits that impel the Anthropocene or occur as a response to it.

The concepts and the behavioral patterns, detrimental as well as hypothetically beneficial, outlined above serve as a backdrop to the reading of "Halloween" and "New Year's." Since they either facilitate or counteract slow violence, Santos Perez evokes them in his poetry to make this phenomenon apprehensible for the reader.

Depicting Trauma and Slow Violence in Santos Perez's Translocal Ecopoetry

Both poems selected for the ensuing analysis are written in prose, a suitable choice for portraying the issues of climate change and slow violence at hand. Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton suggest that we live in a "prosaic age," indicating the ubiquitous presence of written prose in the material and digital landscapes with which humans interact daily in the twenty-first century (9). While this may be no groundbreaking observation, they highlight that verse, as its opposite, and its frequently concomitant features of lineation and lyricality are still perceived as typical of ritualistic practices as well as purposes of emotive self-expression (9). However, Hetherington and Atherton propose that, due to its idiosyncrasies, lyric poetry has come to strike large parts of the reading public as foreign and outmoded and "does not serve all contemporary poetic needs" (9). Accordingly, an increasing number of writers have discovered that the prose poem as a form may suit their purposes equally well—if not better—than traditional verse. Hetherington and Atherton define its form as a "condensed and highly suggestive paragraph, or a [...] series of paragraphs, [which] typically contains no line breaks of the kind one finds in [lyrical] poetry" (128). They emphasize the prose poem's "capacity to change, and even distort, the reader's sense of time and space," which they argue is often "compressed and intensified" (128).

In line with the work of Hetherington and Atherton, Immanuel Wallerstein's concept of TimeSpace, a term that encompasses time and space as an inextricable and interdependent unit, will be used in this paper to study the progression of time and movement between different spaces evoked in Santos Perez's poetry. It provides a revised version of Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal theoretical approach to the "literary

chronotope" (Hetherington and Atherton 128-29). Since the chronotope is primarily associated with his study of novelistic writing and the flow of time in specific locales, Wallerstein's TimeSpace might be more adequate for analyzing prose poetry (Hetherington and Atherton 129). Hetherington and Atherton emphasize that prose poems tend to evoke multiple "suggestive, truncated, fragmentary, or elusive" chronotopes, which are, however, not sufficiently developed to meet Bakhtin's original definition (130). Thus, they have selected TimeSpace to investigate the speed and dynamism resulting from the compression of space and time that is characteristic of many prose poems (130).

Hetherington and Atherton, moreover, point out that TimeSpace is not only conveyed through a poem's content but also through its layout. For example, the use of white space or breaks will need to be investigated as formal properties of "Halloween" and "New Year's." The strikingly similar titles, a template Santos Perez uses multiple times in his collection *Habitat Threshold* (2020), evoke concrete occasions in the form of celebrations, which are simultaneously embedded within a wider specifically termed era. They effectively allude to the different scales at play in both poems and to their twofold nature, as they juxtapose mundane domestic festivities and pressing large-scale environmental and social concerns. Due to the similar titles, the two poems also invite a comparative reading, which yields particularly fruitful results regarding Santos Perez's use of rhetorical figures and poetic devices. The varying extent and effect to which he uses them foreground the inherent epistemological divide between the two poems.

"Halloween in the Anthropocene (*a necropastoral*)" – The Comfort of Unknowingness

While the celebration of Halloween historically has a ritual background of commemorating the dead, its significance in contemporary Western culture has considerably shifted (Rogers 6-12). In the twenty-first century, Halloween has come to denominate a global event popular with all age groups, for which people disguise themselves in supposedly eerie or terrifying costumes and children roam through neighborhoods going trick-or-treating (Santino 16-17). Santos Perez captures both aspects of the celebration, religious as well as worldly, by interweaving the solemn voice of a speaker who "praise[s] the sacrificed" as part of a seemingly religious oration with those of "kids" (12) within a cohesive paragraph of prose text. He clearly delineates the utterances of the latter from his primary speaker by using direct speech, strictly adhering to the typographical conventions in the process (12). The children's voices merely intertextually replicate a Halloween nursery rhyme that refers to the practice of trick-or-treating (Santino 18).

Hetherington and Atherton remark that the use of different voices in prose poetry is often employed to create the impression of "an unsettled whole" (10), which also applies to "Halloween." As will be shown in the following, Santos Perez's choice of a religious oration as the macrostructure for his prose poem contrasts with the worldly issues addressed in it. The two distinct voices employed in the poem clash thematically as well as stylistically and, by these means, subvert its coherence. However, the single-stanza arrangement, which avoids the hyphenation of words at the end of lines, establishes a superficial unity that gives the poem a patchwork character, both in style and content.

The serious address of the poem's primary speaker is continuously and, thus, disquietingly disrupted by rhythmic exclamations of children. To begin with, the prevalent voice in "Halloween" belongs to a speaker who appears to be holding a nocturnal religious service. The time of day can be clearly inferred from the striking repetition of the line "Tonight, let us praise" ("Halloween" 12). The "us," additionally, suggests a congregation to their address, who, nevertheless, remains unidentified for large parts of the poem. The first two lines set the tone for the speaker's speech stylistically and thematically, as they liken nightfall to "an oil plume" and the color of the moon to the one of "bleached coral" (12). These images are emblematic of pollution and environmental destruction, since they can be linked to the occasion of Halloween in the sense that they haunt environmentalist discourses. This innovative use of disquieting imagery is maintained throughout the poem and constitutes the speaker's loftily reverent style. The various periods and commas in different places throughout the first five lines complement this by creating pauses, which establish a slow pace well suited for their serious address.

This is, however, abruptly interrupted by the first appearance of a child's voice in the fifth line, beginning with a conspicuously rhymed trick-or-treat song mid-line (12). The succession of short end-rhymed exclamations results in a staccato rhythm that markedly contrasts with the previously established pace. The prominent switch from prose to verse in the lines "'[t]rick or treat, smell my feet, give me something good to eat'" (12) breaks the poem's consistency and undermines its coherence, as it remains unclear how the different voices are spatially and temporally related. The impression of an 'unsettled whole' is further exacerbated through the insistent use of enjambment, which chips away at the poem's structure on the right and disregards the use of different voices, whose exclamations seem haphazardly distributed across lines as a result. The children's obtrusively catchy demand for "something good to eat" repeatedly eclipses the speaker's thoughtful calls to "praise the souls" (12) of people in various distant locales.

The speaker, however, holds their ground and initiates a back and forth between the different voices, during which the nursery rhyme is gradually shortened, depicting the children's behavior in a critical light. While the children's call for

candy is still apparent from the first full-length occurrence, the repetition and gradual clipping of the chant to "'[t]rick or treat, smell my feet, give me something good'" and eventually "'[t]rick or treat, smell my feet, give me'" (12) coincide with a growth of the demands voiced in it. During the second repetition, the children vaguely press for "something good" (12) rather than candy, which is eventually further exaggerated into the indiscriminate order "give me," which is preceded by the remark "smell my feet" (12). This deliberate play with the intertextual reference of the chant, thus, portrays them as greedy and impudent, which Santos Perez subtly integrates into a criticism of global capitalist practices that is voiced in "Halloween" through the creation of contrasts. Despite the seemingly content-related incoherence, the children's voices are neatly interwoven into the religious oration through reporting clauses, which reestablish the pace and prose style of the primary speaker.

Santos Perez ambivalently employs the isotopy of children to draw attention to the unreflective actions of the trick-or-treaters, which appear insignificant to them but may have an impact elsewhere. The information that the children 'sing,' 'whisper,' and 'chant' (12) adds an air of innocence to their demands, supported by their costumes, which are similarly innocent on the surface. Yet, they provide stereotypical representations of people from different cultures as the kids are "disguised as ninjas" or "masquerading as cowboys and Indians" (12). Santos Perez remarkably juxtaposes these disguises with the real-life "black boys," "brown girls," "Asian teens," and "native youth" (12) mentioned by the poem's speaker to point to the socioeconomic divide between those going trick-or-treating and the ones working under dire conditions elsewhere. The "Disney princess" outfit, for example, is metonymically related to the work of the "brown girls who sew our clothes" (12).

Similarly, the "kids masquerading as cowboys and Indians" (12) is followed by a metaphor addressing the desecration and exploitation of Native American lands: The speaker "praise[s] the souls of native youth, whose eyes are open-pit uranium mines, veins are poisoned rivers, [and] hearts are tar sands tailings ponds" (12). The children's costumes presumably portray a historic, stereotypical version rather than this dire reality, their unawareness being also indicted by using the offensive term "Indians." Whereas the "open-pit uranium mines" (12) point to the exploitation of the Navajo Nation as a labor force for US nuclear armament in the previous century (Stepp 2-11), the "tar sands tailings ponds" ("Halloween" 12) refer to the artificial waste basins built for the contemporary practice of bitumen mining in Alberta, Canada, whose contents raise "concerns regarding its composition and toxicity" (Mahaffey and Dubé 98). Given that both acts have contributed to the pollution of groundwater, Santos Perez evokes an extended environmental history of "poisoned rivers" ("Halloween" 12) within a single sentence. The applied metaphor, hence, foregrounds the far-reaching extent of these unsustainable practices, which

similarly impacts the land as well as the health of the people living on it. Thus, Santos Perez's writer-activism becomes apparent by effectively alluding to the slow violence that industrial states exert on 'developing countries' and indigenous communities as an outgrowth of their global trade networks. The image of the disguised children underlines how innocently and unknowingly people happen to participate in institutionalized exploitative systems (Finn 1-2).

Additionally, the back and forth between the speaker's and the children's voices results in an evocation of different TimeSpaces, from and into which the poem fluently transitions, creating a feeling of planetary interconnectedness, though only an ephemeral one. Its title and the intertextual reference to the nursery rhyme initially seem to determine the poem's setting as a Halloween night, most likely in the US or another Western Anglophone environment where the intertextually replicated trick-or-treat song is common. The primary speaker's address, however, evokes a more global and anachronistic TimeSpace. The reader is first provided with a distant locale when the speaker commemorates "black boys, enslaved by supply chains, who haul bags of cacao under West African heat" ("Halloween" 12). The speaker not only envisions the working conditions on a different continent but also at an unspecified point in time, evoking a TimeSpace that is ambivalently disconnected from the setting of their oration.

Following the interruptions of the children's voices, a new geographic location is evoked with each new laudatory exclamation, which appear to eventually close in on the TimeSpace occupied by the congregation and the children. Taking the cacao plantations in West Africa as a starting point, it gradually shifts from the textile and "toys and tech" industries in Asia to North America, commemorating the "native youth" (12). Interestingly, the use of distinct styles also seems to evoke a different passing of time in the different spatiotemporal settings. Whereas the end-rhymed chant by the children establishes a fast pace, the poetical language in the speaker's exclamations causes a slowness, which might allude to the protracted character of the acts of exploitation depicted in these places. "[B]lack boys, enslaved by supply chains" and "fire unthreads sweatshops into charred flesh" (12) are two examples that illustrate Santos Perez's use of assonance, alliteration, and metonymy to abstractly yet visually portray the instances of exploitation addressed by the speaker. By referencing distant locales with a distinct dynamic, Santos Perez evokes several small-scale TimeSpaces that strikingly differ from the initially established domestic Halloween setting. However, they are not entirely disconnected. Since the speaker's evocation of distant locations in their oration accomplishes a zooming out from their immediate environment, Santos Perez simultaneously depicts a large-scale planetary TimeSpace, which is, however, of ephemeral nature. Though the form of "Halloween" as well as its neat intermingling of voices convey a notion of unity, the

recurring replication of the Halloween chant abruptly relocates the poem to the small-scale domestic setting.

Despite the distinct voices that are ambiguously related in time and space, Santos Perez aligns the speaker's and their listeners' living conditions and vices with those of the unaware children. The interruptions by the children's voices ultimately stop in the final six lines of the poem when the speaker praises the sacrifices in their own country referring to them as "our mothers" (12), who seem to have suffered from "fallout," "cancer clusters," and "slow violence" (12). The enumerative style, moreover, emphasizes that there are multiple problematic developments occurring around the religious congregation as well, which they, however, similarly fail to recognize—slow violence serving as an umbrella term for the phenomena mentioned. Remarkably, while the speaker and their audience honor the dead, they voice concerns for those who are present with a brief "*pray for us*" (12). The assonance of "praise" and "*pray*" (12) suggests a similarity between the fates of the sacrificed and those commemorating them. This is confirmed through the two reasons that are provided for the prayer, namely that "our costumes won't hide the true cost of our greed" and that "even tomorrow will be haunted" (12). By using "our costumes" (12), the speaker establishes an intrinsic connection between the congregation and the voices of the children that have interrupted their address throughout. They mention "our greed" (12), indicating that the congregation likely evinces the same behavior as the children. Furthermore, the role of the listeners as children themselves is highlighted by the commemoration of their mothers throughout the final lines. The repeated obtrusive interruption of the primary speaker through the children might, additionally, hint at the congregation members' truant thoughts, who cannot help thinking about the pleasurable part of the occasion during the oration. The pun juxtaposing "cost" and "costumes" (12) insinuates that the implied audience to their speech might have a price to pay for their wish to distract themselves from the serious issues they ought to face.

In addition, these observations reveal that the ephemeral, large-scale TimeSpace is not merely planetary but also time-transcending by hinting at different temporalities and simultaneously creating a notion of continuity. By foregrounding the similarity of the primary speaker's listeners and the children, the Halloween chant can also be read as a voice calling from the past, expressive of a desire to maintain old childhood habits. Generally, Santos Perez's intermingling of different locales and voices results in a brilliant toying with notions of time, which is in large part a result of the primary speaker's consistent use of present tense in their sermon-like oration. The lines mentioning "black boys [...] who haul bags of cacao" and "brown girls who sew our clothes" (12) likely refer to an ongoing exploitative economic system, not to actions that are necessarily performed simultaneously to the trick-or-treating far across the globe. Santos Perez, thereby, evokes the

impression that "the sacrificed" (12) who are praised by the speaker are still living, leaving the reader wondering what this denotation precisely means. Since the people in question seem to attain this status by merely functioning in the position that they have been allocated within the global economic network, he subtly points out the exploitative structures at its core. It is, thus, unclear whether the commemorated "black boys," "Asian teens," and "mothers" (12) are already deceased or continuously exploited for the congregation's wealth and high standard of living.

Eventually, these global problems seem secondary to local and more immediate concerns, as the poem's planetary TimeSpace fades into the background and the sense of convergence increases on several levels. Like the clipping of the nursery rhyme, the global setting evoked by the primary speaker gradually shrinks. As described above, the planetary TimeSpace of the poem initially reaches out to Africa and Asia and is only spared interruption once it centers on imminent problems in a North American context. The fact that the Halloween chant does not resound again once the speaker has arrived there may indicate that distraction from these issues is harder to attain than from those concerns which are spatially and temporally distant. Santos Perez, thus, uses interruption in "Halloween" to allude to the invisibility of the slow violence exerted by capitalism and the consumer behavior that it generates. By portraying continuity, he manages to capture how global ecological deterioration and social injustice are tied to seemingly innocent habits. The line "our costumes won't hide the true cost of our greed" (12) addresses the futility of ignoring or denying issues of environmental injustice and ultimately emphasizes that people's unchanging behaviors are the real reason to be afraid.

The speaker serves as a moral authority, who seems to shoulder the burden of acknowledging these problems all by themself. Despite referring to a congregation in the previous pages, it is not revealed if any listeners are present at the speech at all. Although the speaker virtually preaches about ecological deterioration and exploitation of the poor, the impact of their speech remains unconfirmed. The interruptions of the poetic descriptions of remote misery by the nursery rhyme throughout the first half of "Halloween" can be read as instances of denying or ignoring anthropogenic climate change and social injustice. Santos Perez effectively points out the challenge to make such issues heard, since they only seem to become of concern once they affect one's immediate surroundings and are delivered in an unadorned, radical manner.

"New Year's Eve and Day in the Chthulucene" – The Discomfort of Knowing

The turn of the year marks an event that is celebrated worldwide and is explicitly taken up in the second poem's title, which, thus, previews the portrayed conflict of

enjoying domestic festivities while living according to the philosophy of the Chthulucene. To many people, it poses an occasion to wipe the slate clean, optimistically head into the future, and outgrow old vices. The latter also resonates with Haraway's principles of 'staying with the trouble' in the Chthulucene referenced in the title of "New Year's." She suggests that humans ought to reconsider their ways of living by "making generative oddkin," which means thinking and acting as part of a multispecies network within which they currently fail to take on responsibility (Haraway 3). Haraway's mindset works towards an inclusive concept of kin that also encompasses 'other-than-human beings,' which should guide humanity as they face and try to curb the impact of incessantly advancing ecological degradation (4-20, 99-103).

Against this backdrop, Santos Perez authentically conjures up the occasion of New Year's Eve by alluding to end-of-year reviews in the form of "celebrity death," "posts for good luck," and "the ball dropping" (59). The poem prominently features two italicized subheadings in the form of dates which explicitly provide the reader with a temporal setting. Moreover, it makes "New Year's" reminiscent of a diary entry or blog that is subdivided into two separate yet subsequent sections that give a detailed account of the speaker's holiday experience. The consistent use of present tense evokes the paradoxical impression that the documentation of their actions occurs continuously throughout the day as they perform them, a circumstance that is emphasized through the stanzaic structure. The blank space between the individual stanzas evokes intervals between the single plot elements depicted in them, subdividing the poem into several short chronological episodes. "New Year's," thus, exhibits a linear progression of time, which is facilitated by designations like "[t]hen," "[a]s midnight nears" (59), and "[w]hen I wake" (60). The domestic setting in a family home is similarly created through mundane rituals such as "tak[ing] a bubble bath," "get[ing] dressed" (59), or "sleep[ing] in" (60). Santos Perez uses the form of a personal entry to embed his poem within a framework of ordinary life which contributes to the evocation of a specific small-scale TimeSpace that encompasses the two holidays within the speaker's own four walls.

"New Year's" remarkably portrays modern technology's ability to create a vast digital media landscape that enables global interconnectedness and exchange. It seems to pull the speaker away from the narrow TimeSpace of their home. Their absorption into this digital space as well as its significance for them become apparent through statements such as "I weep at the crossroads of celebrity death, social media, and late-late-capitalism" or "I open the Facebook app to like something in this world" (59). The former quote evokes an impression of a virtual space, in which various domains seem to blur together, with its expansiveness being complemented by the frequent use of enumerations throughout the poem. In combination with the style that mostly consists of strung together main clauses,

this, moreover, establishes an artificially mechanic pace that undermines the sincerity of the speaker's claim that they "weep" (59) while browsing the internet. Such ironic remarks contribute to an impression of indifference, which is also echoed in their nondescript intention to "like something in this world" (59).

This cynical inaccuracy is further maintained during the speaker's subsequent active engagement within the virtual space, when they "share a meme that juxtaposes a picture of a feast somewhere with a picture of impoverished children eating bread crumbs somewhere else" (59). The speaker does this in response to the postings of lavish New Year's Eve banquets by their friends (59), presenting a subsidiary form of writer-activism itself. It renders the unequal distribution of global food supplies, an instance of slow violence, apprehensible to the internet community on a day when this injustice is particularly visible. The act's ordinariness is emphasized through the repetition of a similar sequence in the poem's second entry, juxtaposing "a picture of fireworks somewhere with a picture of war somewhere else" (60). Thereby, showing that, despite the holiday, the speaker seems to 'stay with the trouble' by raising awareness for distress in other places.

The speaker's absent elaboration on the exact locations may, on the one hand, allude to the distorted sense of time and space in a digital media environment, which offers a compressed and hazy version of the real world. On the other hand, it seems that they may not sincerely care about these details, let alone believe in their importance. At the end of the respective stanzas, the speaker plainly remarks that "[n]o one likes [their post]" (59, 60). By this, they establish the modern media landscape as a vast virtual space that—despite serving as "crossroads" (59, 61) to different subject areas—predominantly disseminates trivial or commercial contents which easily find an echo online. In this sense, it exerts a form of slow violence itself, as it sustains a politics of concealing damage inflicted on vulnerable communities and environments as well as drowning out instances of minor activism, such as those of the speaker. The speaker, however, proves no exception, as they themself are caught liking "posts for good luck and universal basic income" (59). Their attempt at drawing attention to global social injustice within the virtual space is submerged by a flood of seemingly more important contents that constitute an isotopy of money—"late-late-capitalism" (59), "universal basic income" (59), "sharing economy" (61)—and entertainment—"Pandora app" (59), "cheap champagne" (59), "Netflix" (61). By providing these underlying themes in his poem, Santos Perez might also point to capitalism as a ubiquitous manifestation of slow violence that not only serves as an engine for global social injustice and environmental degradation but also governs the practices of representation in the digital space.

The speaker's engagement with the media landscape showcases that it, nonetheless, lends itself to the communication of environmental issues and the

proliferation of ecological considerations. The title's allusion to the Chthulucene and the associated mantra of 'staying with the trouble' and acknowledging our responsibility to salvage a damaged planet is conveyed through their compulsive everyday dealing with ecocritical media contents and questions of sustainability. This is portrayed most noticeably when the speaker extensively quotes from Timothy Morton's *The Ecological Thought*, a gesture that heavily undermines the poem's guise as a personal entry through its use of a technique common in academic writing. When elaborating on the expansive extent of ecology, Morton repeatedly uses the phrase "It has to do" (60) at the beginning of sentences. Santos Perez foregrounds the work's drastic influence on the speaker by letting them adopt a style throughout the poem that seemingly imitates the quotation's excessive use of sentence anaphora and enumeration through "At no point" (60). The previously addressed mechanic pace, thus, may be a result of their frantic attempt at pursuing Morton's myriad claims. Moreover, the use of enumeration and sentence parallelisms in the first stanza—"I take," "I weep," "I open" (59)—juxtapose these demands with the flood of popular content that the speaker is faced with online, a pervasive tension that dictates their everyday life.

In this poem, as in "Halloween," Santos Perez emphasizes a global setting by evoking an expansive TimeSpace. The speaker's interaction with the internet seems to occasionally allow them to find like-minded allies, as in the case of the Dakota Access pipeline (DAPL) activists that they witness invading a football game on live television (60, see Rowell). Their presence is evoked by means of an intertextual reference to their banner "'US Bank: DIVEST #NoDAPL'" (60, see Rowell). However, their intervention becomes a major source of frustration for the speaker, as the lack of response in the stadium strikingly parallels their vain efforts on social media. That "[a]t no point is the game interrupted" (60) is a concisely sobering observation similar to the "[n]o one likes it" (59, 60) mentioned twice before. In the following lines, Santos Perez appropriates the style of Morton's quotation to outline the speaker's increasing feeling of despair regarding the manageability of the global challenges that they as an individual and humanity on a larger scale are facing. The anaphora using "At no point" (60), a clause that implies an extended temporality, has a climactic function, as they turn from the local failure in the stadium to their own personal vices and eventually to the global malpractice of ignoring climate change. By beginning the sentences with this anaphora, Santos Perez further highlights the role of time and constructs a vast and highly mobile TimeSpace that transcends the confines of the speaker's home and the New Year's celebrations. With the speaker's laments, Santos Perez links several small-scale concerns like the absent reaction in the stadium or their own bad habits—"At no point is my life detoxed or plastic free" (60)—to a global environmentalist agenda—"At no point is climate change combatted" (60). They seem to be beset and overwhelmed by concerns of

different scales, which evoke a TimeSpace that extends itself toward the past as well as the future and places special emphasis on a global setting.

The speaker's apprehension gives way to a defeatist attitude in their everyday life, once more expressed through anaphora. The crude repetition of "Fuck" (60) in the seventh stanza conveys their increasing frustration. By continuing the use of anaphora with the single word "Fuck" instead of the longer "At no point," Santos Perez boosts the thus far sluggish pace of "New Year's." This break is also mirrored in the speaker's language: Their plain speech is unexpectedly adorned with literary tropes and rhyme, suiting their upset state of emotion. Their use of oxymora and pleonasms, lamenting "the new year's known knowns," "known unknowns," and "unknown unknowns" (60), further contributes to a notion of futility which demonstrates their gnawing doubt regarding the feasibility of living ecologically according to the myriad criteria outlined by Morton. The sheer magnitude of the enterprise is portrayed as intimidating and leads the speaker to surrender, exclaiming that they "resolve to eat countless chicken wings, write chicken-less recipes for the kitchens of the future, and binge watch climate change documentaries and zombie movies [...] until [they] fall asleep" (60-61). Compared to the remaining lines of the poem, these verses constitute a virtual emotional outburst through the eclectic use of internal consonance and assonance as well as alliteration, which gradually cedes toward the end of the stanza.

Amid the speaker's frantic engagement with different media and their meditations of global-scale concerns, references to a daily routine serve as reminders of the poem's small-scale domestic setting, although their familial involvement remains secondary. Despite portraying a family home on a holiday, the speaker seems disproportionately cynical toward and emotionally detached from their surroundings. While "New Year's" undeniably evokes a notion of interconnectedness by creating a planetary TimeSpace through the speaker's stray thoughts about global concerns and their interaction within a vast online space, it paradoxically fails to exhibit a sense of togetherness. Although the poem, like "Halloween," features different voices in quotation marks, they are mostly a result of the speaker's engagement with different media and take on the form of intertextual references, such as the previously mentioned quotation from Morton ("New Year's" 60) or the DAPL activists' unfurled banner (60). Remarkably, the speaker's daughter, who prominently features in two stanzas, remains circumstantial, apart from the information that she is "crying in the other room" (59). Even more importantly, this sentence beginning with "I'm interrupted" (59) clearly shows that the speaker subordinates their family life to their engagement with the virtual media space. The full extent of their conflicted relationship with their daughter becomes apparent from their first association with her, which is "thousands of her dirty diapers that will take 450 years to decompose—outliving us

all" (59). These lines clearly emphasize the speaker's inability to separate their private life from global-scale concerns, as they even associate their parenthood as contributing to structures of slow violence.

Not solely Morton's but also Donna Haraway's work seems to have a haunting impact on the speaker, as they describe meeting the Haraway-inspired figure 'Cthulhu Oddkin' in their dream. By alluding to the pointlessness of the holiday and its supposed new beginnings, the cynicism of the speaker falls in line with what Donna Haraway criticizes in *Staying with the Trouble*. In their dream, Cthulhu "picks [them] up at the crossroads of technophilia, precarity, and the sharing economy" (61)—a line taking up the crossroads metaphor from the first stanza (59). By this means, Santos Perez indicates that the speaker's previously self-diagnosed "internet addiction" (60) is also prominently at play in the final dream sequence. Cthulhu takes them past countless sites representing industrial and economic productivity—from the "neoliberal megacity," "GMO plantations," and "oil refineries," to a "native reserve" promisingly called "'Utopia'" (61). The dream sequence shines a peculiar light on the speaker, as they are portrayed in a flight movement "away from" and "past" (61) uncomfortable sites related to environmental injustice. While their chat with Cthulhu initially concerns "scientific, social, and philosophical reforms," they gradually stray to more trivial subjects, eventually arriving at "sovereign crypto-currencies," thematically linking the end of the stanza back to the "sharing economy" (61) at the beginning. The circular movement of topics makes the meeting seem inconsequential, as the speaker's interests seem to remain the same. Although the speaker is familiar with environmentalist discourse, these sections insinuate that the speaker themself is not resistant to capitalist ideas either and might involuntarily contribute to perpetuating slow violence.

It becomes apparent through certain inaccuracies and exaggerations in the last two stanzas that the speaker's sustainable lifestyle is only pretense. The misspelling of Cthulhu, which might cause confusion with H.P. Lovecraft's iconic fictional creation undermines the thoroughness of their engagement with Haraway's theory and, thus, their intentions to live sustainably and 'stay with the trouble.' The last part of the dream sequence ("New Year's" 61) in fact comes across as a satirical demonstration of Haraway's plea to make kin with other-than-human species by letting the speaker ask a poisoned river: "'Is the apocalypse coming?'" (61) The desperate nature of their attempt is emphasized through the blatant response of a one-eyed salmon, who informs them that "'[humanity's] apocalypse began centuries ago. And it's accelerating'" (61). The fish's remark emphasizes the fact that humans have failed to recognize the impact of the already ongoing ecological deterioration. The dream sequence concludes with Cthulhu's sudden disappearance and subsequent replacement through an unlocatable "AI voice" proclaiming that: "'We all have

unequal, uncertain futures'" (61). This seemingly abrupt thematic break shifts the attention from ecological issues back to the omniscience of modern technology, which is portrayed as the real dominating force in the speaker's life, not Morton's or Haraways's ecological doctrines.

In conclusion, "New Year's" introduces the reader to a speaker who is worn out by their consistent exposure to radical environmental discourse and their frantic pursuit of a sustainable lifestyle, for which they, however, appear to lack conviction. They even seem tired of and irritated by their endeavors, as becomes evident from the sudden temper tantrums discussed above. Moreover, their absent drive manifests itself through observations that "[they] resolve to sleep in" or are "[b]ored" (60) following the stanza that extensively quotes Morton (see Morton 2). The passage is notably from the second page of his work, which casts the speaker's intention to thoroughly deal with the material further into doubt. The continuous appropriation of Morton's style similarly undermines the helpfulness of his writing for the speaker, as it accentuates the sensory overload that they suffer from media consumption. Their misinterpretation of Haraway's writing similarly emphasizes that they may not grasp the full extent of living ecologically. Their social media posts, independent reading of texts, and viewing of documentaries do not significantly benefit anyone but their own conscience. The speaker's efforts to combat climate change are predominantly hypothetical, which is best exemplified in the line "I [...] argue with myself about drinking milk" (60). Their environmentalism is merely conceptual, and the final dream sequence exposes their hypocrisy by revealing their hopes for a miraculous external fix. The speaker in "New Year's" seems entirely incapable of, in Haraway's words, "be[ing] truly present" (1), as indicated through the predominance of a vast digital TimeSpace over the initially outlined domestic holiday setting. Their inability to act or take pleasure out of interactions with their family, moreover, is an alarming indicator of trauma, as has been previously outlined by Zimmerman (12-14).

Santos Perez, hence, contends that some current practices of writer-activism might be counterproductive, as the speaker's frantic reading up on environmental issues has them oscillate between cynical frustration and stifling despair, an unfavorable position from which to accomplish change. Their detached ways portray them as a primary example of someone who is crushed by the seeming magnitude of facing the climate crisis, pointing out a common challenge of the Chthulucene. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway warns that "[t]here is a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of [...] indifference" (4). The quote neatly sums up the speaker's mental and emotional journey throughout the single stanzas. Whereas the reason for denial of global problems in "Halloween" has been portrayed to be unknowingness, "New Year's"

elaborates on the strain of knowing too much, which can similarly trigger an avoidance reaction.

Conclusion

In summary, both poems respectively capture the difficulty of appropriately communicating global environmental and social concerns through their unique prose style. "Halloween" initially uses poetic language to distort and mitigate the impact of the slow violence revealed by the speaker, while the excessive repetitions and enumerations in "New Year's" evoke the impression that tackling the current ecological crisis by adapting one's lifestyle is an insurmountable challenge. At the same time, the latter addresses the problem of a saturated digital media environment within which sustainable discourses, that might make slow violence apprehensible, are eclipsed by popular ones. The ongoing celebrations depicted in the two poems' domestic settings prove a similar distraction that people happily engage in, instead of dealing with the global-scale concerns that they are confronted with. Santos Perez, thus, subtly indicates how such festivities sustain structures of slow violence. In "New Year's," Santos Perez effectively illustrates the psychological challenge of coming to terms with the current socio-environmental crisis by representing a speaker at the receiving end of environmental justice discourse, who is unable to act as they negotiate anger and despair. Similarly, the bleak prospect of tomorrow in "Halloween" evokes an impression of paralyzing climate change trauma. In doing so, Santos Perez illustrates the delicate balancing act of conveying a necessary sense of urgency while avoiding needless traumatizing of the public.

While navigating these complex issues, Santos Perez remarkably addresses the notion of global interconnectedness which is inherent to life in the twenty-first century. He depicts this through his experimentation with different TimeSpaces, which blur the boundary between the local and the global. "Halloween" portrays a planetary and time-transcending large-scale setting by zooming in on the developments in different locales at different, sometimes unspecified points in time. Although the primary speaker voices the need for a planetary consciousness, the fragmentation of the single-stanza poem foregrounds the current inability or unwillingness of the West to acknowledge slow violence and consider remote instances of environmental injustice. "New Year's," by contrast, points out that there is an existing globally interconnected space readily accessible, albeit heavily undermining its usefulness for raising awareness for environmental justice issues in its present form. The expansive TimeSpace provided through the media landscape, with which the speaker continuously engages, overshadows and spoils the small-scale one of their family home. "Halloween" poses the contrary extreme as the

domestic spatiotemporal setting in the US gradually prevails over the evocation of a planetary and time-transcending unit. The transitions from global to local and vice versa are executed at different speeds with seamless passages reinforcing a sense of interconnectedness, whereas abrupt changes of locales coincide with truant thoughts in both poems. Santos Perez's continuous use of present tense grounds "Halloween" as well as "New Year's" in the here and now, even though the causes of the grievances that the speakers evoke may lie in the past and their consequences still ahead. He, thus, successfully executes Nixon's plea to deconstruct temporal and spatial boundaries, which can make persistent slow violence visible (14-15).

On a more general note, the discussion of Santos Perez's work in this paper also raises implications for the form that he employs in his poetry. He effectively uses prose to concisely—more so in the case of "Halloween," less so in the case of "New Year's"—and at the same time imaginatively reflect on pressing global concerns. The previous analysis and discussion of "Halloween" and "New Year's" has shown that they effectively compress a variety of voices and different TimeSpaces within a coherent whole, thereby, demonstrating that the combination of prose and poetry might provide a suitable aesthetic form for making complex systems of oppression apprehensible. The relative brevity poses a promising characteristic as far as the proliferation of the knowledge conveyed in the poems is concerned. A detailed account of the combination of prose and poetry in writer-activism and its significance for contemporary ecocritical writer-activism has so far not been attempted and, thus, poses a promising future area of inquiry.

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