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‘There was a star riding through clouds one night, and I said to the star, “Consume me”’: Post-human extinction in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

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ABSTRACT

Human beings are now in a period of the Earth’s history during which their extinction seems ever more probable due to extreme climate change, global pandemics, international conflicts, and lack of long-term intergovernmental or transnational cooperation to tackle these threats to life. Concern for the future of humanity is not, however, a uniquely contemporary phenomenon. Several of Virginia Woolf’s late novels suggest an awareness of the potential for human extinction. Where this concern can be found in *The Waves* (1931), the text does not express nihilism or panic at the prospect. Instead, the idea of a world without humans is seized as the provocation to continue an experiment which runs throughout Woolf’s writing: to reimagine the relationship between the human and the non-human. By exploring this writerly concern in *The Waves*, this essay argues that Woolf also redefines human death by reconceptualizing the natural world in ways which undo anthropocentric understandings of the potential extinction of the human species. By re-reading Woolf’s seventh novel through ecocritical practices and alongside ideas from contemporary post-humanist critical theory, the analyses proposed herein suggest that *The Waves* encourages a reassessment of our position in and response to a human-made environmental crisis which threatens the future of existence, human and non-human, in the twenty-first century.

On Wednesday 7 January 1931, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary that she had learnt to ‘make prose move – yes I swear – as prose has never moved before: from the chuckle & the babble to the rhapsody’.¹ The work in which this new prose style emerged became her

¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1931-1935*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1982), p. 4.

The quotation in the title of this essay is taken from Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 36.

The future imagined in this passage is one from which the human has vanished, but in which the vital force of non-human life continues to ‘undulate’, ‘thrust’, and thrive. Although some material traces of human presence remain, such as ‘the boundary of an ancient garden’, there is no human present to territorialize these traces; instead, non-human life dominates. The central section of *To the Lighthouse*, ‘Time Passes’, also explores the endurance of material and non-human objects and beings in the absence of human observers, famously posing the challenge to ‘think of a kitchen table [...] when you’re not there’.⁶ These two texts, ‘On Being Ill’ and *To the Lighthouse*, lay the foundations for *The Waves* to continue variations on a common theme – human extinction and non-human immortality. In their explorations of a post-human future, neither the essay nor the novel express nihilistic pessimism in the face of either personal death or impersonal extinction. Instead, Woolf’s repositioning of the human in relation to the non-human allows the inevitable end of human existence to be recast as something akin to relief from the incessant suffering caused by experiencing the world as a human. ‘On Being Ill’ does not describe the knowledge of the eventual death of the human as something to be either feared or embraced. The realization that nature will overcome, that ‘some undulation’ will continue, is simply celebrated for its own sake. Woolf’s writing in the essay thus affirms that life does not vanish after the human, even though it is not “a” life or “my” life. In its extensions of these ideas, *The Waves* challenges the reader to understand their own position in the world as entangled with regenerating non-human forces, continually returning to a state of impersonal vitality rather than inexorably marching towards a termination of life. In this regard, the text can be re-read as a vital resource of inspiration for post-anthropocentric understandings of the eventual extinction of the human species.

In the eighth interlude of *The Waves*, for example, Woolf describes night falling and conjures images of a mass extinction event, such as the death of the sun. The bodiless narrator describes how

[t]he evening sun, whose heat had gone out of it and whose burning spot of intensity had been diffused, made chairs and tables mellow and inlaid them with lozenges of brown and yellow. [...] Here lay knife, fork and glass, but lengthened, swollen, and made portentous.⁷

Such a solar extinction event may have been inspired by Woolf’s experiences of a solar eclipse in 1927 first recorded in a diary entry (later developed into the essay ‘The Sun and the Fish’), or by Byron’s poetic evocations of similar extinction events.⁸ The imagery in the second half of the passage, however, describes a curious transformation of material objects in the absence of humans after an extinction event such as the death of the sun. Cutlery and tableware appear to become fluid and metamorphose, as if no longer limited by human demarcations of matter. The penultimate interlude continues this transfiguration and ties the process more closely to images of an in- or post-human world. Now on the brink of total darkness, Woolf describes how

⁶ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008), p. 22.

⁷ Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 124. Italics in original.

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1925-1928*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (The Hogarth Press, 1984), pp. 519–24. A diary entry dated 16 February 1930 shows Woolf’s intense and prolonged reading of Byron’s early nineteenth-century poetry (*Diary Vol. III*, pp. 287–88). While the entry focuses mainly on ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’, a narrative poem published between 1812 and 1818, it is likely Woolf would also have read Byron’s poem ‘Darkness’ (1816) in the volumes of his poetry that she owned (see *The Library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf: A Short-Title Catalog*, eds by Julia King and Laila Miletic-Vejzovic (Washington State University Press, 2003) <<http://ntserver1.wsulibs.wsu.edu/masc/onlinebooks/woolfibrary/woolfibraryonline.htm>> [accessed 12 January 2024]. ‘Darkness’ foresees the eventual extinction of the human, as Byron describes how ‘[t]he bright sun was extinguish’d, and the stars/Did wander darkling in the eternal space’. (George Gordon Byron, ‘Darkness’, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. by M. H. Abrams, 5th edn (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), pp. 510–12 (p. 510), lines 2–3).

[a]ll the colours in the room had overflowed their banks. The precise brush stroke was swollen and lop-sided; cupboards and chairs melted their brown masses into one huge obscurity. [...] The looking-glass was pale as the mouth of a cave shadowed by hanging creepers.⁹

In the world created in the interludes, material objects can no longer be understood in human terms. Woolf shows that it is only the material presence of the human which gives the impression that our understanding of the world and objects within it is purely descriptive rather than interpretive. The comprehending human mind is presented as an obstacle to the fluidity of forms which can finally be resumed when uninterrupted by the artificial imposition of stable categories of being. The description of colours overflowing their banks here is of course more metaphorical than literal, but in this sense indicates that the meaning of objects can no longer be assumed to be contained within their materiality. It is the *identity* of objects which is now subject to change and structured by interrelationality rather than separation. Even by creating the sense that objects usually considered inert and inanimate have an identity, the novel searches for ways of conceiving the world without the influence of the human mind. If matter has no identity in the human world, in the non-human world it most certainly does. Crucially, however, identity in this realm of being is not a marker of individuation or separation from the rest of the world, but is in fact the means by which one entity relates to another, relates to everything, and is nothing more than these relations. Evidently, as with Woolf's earlier descriptions of a post-human world in 'On Being III', *The Waves* does not present the world after humans as inert or lifeless in the interludes, but as bursting with movement, fluidity, and energy.

In this regard, it becomes possible to draw parallels between Woolf's portrayals of a post-human-extinction world, and Rosi Braidotti's more recent post-humanist theories of life as *zoe*. For Braidotti, Woolf's fiction acts as a cultural touchstone for her feminist theories of the nomadic and post-human subject.¹⁰ The ancient Greek term *zoe* is deployed by the critic to describe 'the mindless vitality of Life carrying on independently of and regardless of rational control', adhering to no such boundaries as those imposed by categories of being or species, but felt by all objects and individuals.¹¹ The furniture and tableware in the above interludes expresses a non-human vitality, which cannot be contained within the limits set by humans upon what constitutes animate or inanimate objects and forms. While the most common uses of Braidotti in Woolf scholarship often revolve around Braidotti's theories of desire, sexual difference, feminism, or depictions of monastic subjectivity in Woolf's writing,¹² Braidottian uses of *zoe* have already been deployed in analysis of *The Waves* by Vicki Tromanhauser, who discusses Braidotti's 'post-individualistic notion of the subject' and of the 'auto-poetic force of living matter' which animates all beings, anthropomorphic or otherwise.¹³ For Tromanhauser, representations in the novel of what can now be termed *zoe* vitality disrupt binaries such as 'masculine/feminine, human/animal, organic/inorganic, flesh/matter', but her analysis does

⁹ Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 141. Italics in original.

¹⁰ Braidotti declares that 'In my academic life, I have gone through a modernist Woolf, a radical feminist Woolf, an anti-racist Woolf, a lesbian Woolf, a postmodernist Woolf, a sexual difference Woolf, a queer Woolf, an affect theory Woolf, a posthuman Woolf, and I am already working on an e-Woolf. My love story with the Woolfgalaxy is forever; she will have been my greatest textual passion'. Rosi Braidotti, 'Virginia Woolf, Immanence and Ontological Pacifism', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 19.2 (2022), 131.

¹¹ Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomad Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006), p. 37.

¹² See, for example, Caitlin E. Stobie, 'The Mirrored Monster and Becoming-Wolf: Reflections on Desire in Woolf and Braidotti'; Peter Adkins, 'The Climate of *Orlando*: Woolf, Braidotti and the Anthropocene'; Ruth Alison Clemens, "'Languages Are so like Their Boots': Linguistic Impossibility in *Flush*'. Incidentally, these papers were all published in a special issue of *Comparative Critical Studies* titled 'Reading Braidotti/Reading Woolf', edited by Adkins, Clemens, and Ryan (*Comparative Critical Studies*, 19.2 (2022)).

¹³ Vicki Tromanhauser, 'Eating Animals and Becoming Meat in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 38.1 (2014), 75.

not extend to a discussion of *zoe* as a force which cuts across the animate/inanimate binary.¹⁴ For Braidotti, however, 'a focus on the vital and self-organizing powers of *Life/zoe* undoes any clear-cut distinctions between living and dying. It composes the notion of *zoe* as a posthuman yet affirmative life-force'.¹⁵ In light of this argument, where the interludes of *The Waves* present a vital force of life which courses through all matter indiscriminately, animate or otherwise, distinctions between living and dying are similarly dissolved as all matter is thrown together into a realm of relationality and movement rather than stasis or separation.

While the mindless vitality of once-human matter is evident in the above interludes, such a conception of life is still more visible in an earlier interlude during which Woolf refers to what is '[d]own there among the roots where the flowers decayed, gusts of dead smells were wafted; drops formed on the bloated sides of swollen things. The skin of rotten fruit broke, and matter oozed too thick to run'.¹⁶ Passages such as this preclude a reading which understands the interludes as nothing more than reflections of the characters' lifespans from childhood to old age and which imply that the novel's conception of the natural world is at most a mirror for human concerns. This interlude instead provides an image of life as a process which makes no distinctions between living and dead matter, but incorporates all matter and energy to form and sustain new vitalities. As Emily M. Hinnov argues, such '[i]magery of natural decay and the survival of the fittest simultaneously intimates the cycle of life' and therefore 'the interludes remind us that we are all of momentary importance in this cosmos of chaos over which we have no control'.¹⁷ Woolf's description of natural composting, of plants and dead animals combining in the earth to generate and sustain new life conjures a cyclical pattern of birth, death, and renewal which necessarily operates on a plane of existence that supersedes and includes mortal individuals such as humans, allowing no room for a hierarchical separation between human and non-human beings, or for a conception of the non-human world in the interludes as merely a backdrop for human narratives. Woolf's representations of what can now be termed life as '*zoe*' in the interludes, therefore, blurs the distinction between living and dying by focusing on the impersonal vitality of non-human ecosystems rather than individual lives.

In the novel's first interlude Woolf's descriptions of the world without human presence also show the author explicitly searching for ways of writing which are not directed by the underlying anthropocentric assumptions of human separation from the non-human world. Woolf writes, for example, '[g]radually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another'.¹⁸ This description of dividing sea from sky at the break of dawn echoes biblical imagery of a prehuman world in which forms and beings were indistinguishable from one another.¹⁹ By describing the transition as gradual, but positioning it in the novel's opening sentences, the shift is presented as apparently caused by the event of its being read, as if the presence of a comprehending human mind causes the separation of forms we take for granted as objective facts. This early suggestion of a prehuman world implies, in the words of Bonnie Kime Scott, that 'nature is a human concept, a construction, and that nature and

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁵ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Polity, 2013), p. 115.

¹⁶ Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 43.

¹⁷ Emily M. Hinnov, "'To Give the Moment Whole": The Nature of Time and Cosmic (Comm)Unity in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*', in *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World*, eds by Kristin Czarnecki and Carrie Rohman (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2011), p. 215.

¹⁸ Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 3.

¹⁹ Marlene Dirschauer notes the imagery of the earth's beginnings and descriptions of a future apocalypse in the novel's interludes in her recent work on waterscapes in Woolf's novels, tracing biblical references from early to later interludes which maintain the indistinguishability of sea and sky. See Marlene Dirschauer, *Waterscapes: Water, Imagination and Materiality in the Works of Virginia Woolf* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), p. 120.

culture are intertwined'.²⁰ Scott is here referring to Woolf's use of 'cultural metaphors in describing natural elements' in other areas of the soliloquy sections which she argues evince the impossibility of representing the non-human through human linguistic structures and devices.²¹ By suggesting that the human mind artificially and arbitrarily creates separation between forms and beings, the novel presents all knowledge of the non-human world as necessarily interpretive rather than purely descriptive, recasting nature and culture as coextensive of each other rather than divided terms. While Scott is right to argue that Woolf's writing exhibits an awareness of the nature/culture intrareationship, she elides a crucial aspect of the novel, and thus misreads Woolf's conceptualization of the natural world as nothing more than 'a frame and a medium for human beings'.²² By acknowledging that human perception creates only human knowledge but continuing to attempt representations of the non-human without the material presence of a human mind, the interludes struggle against the difficulty of representing the non-human on its own terms rather than simply accepting that the natural world can only ever function as a backdrop for human actions.

These interlude descriptions of furniture, tableware, rotting biological matter, and separations between land and sea do not suggest that a world which has been absorbed by the non-human is one to be either feared or seen as in some way lacking vitality and vibrancy. According to Marlene Dirschauer, a later interlude, which describes the sea and darkness of night engulfing 'houses, hills, trees',²³ not only conjures imagery of the earth's beginning but also anticipates an 'apocalyptic deluge' in which the earth will be 'washed down', 'engulfed', and submerged beneath 'waves of darkness'.²⁴ The abandoned forms and objects described in the interludes, however, seem to rejoin the non-human world of vitality and potential when they are no longer held within the narrow parameters of human use. The disappearance of the human is not, therefore, negatively portrayed as an apocalyptic end of life or the dawning of a new era of darkness. Graham Fraser's compelling analysis of 'Time Passes' in *To the Lighthouse* show that while '[t]he passage of time may erode the cliff, collapse the house, [...] this is "destruction" or defeat only from the human perspective that wants to preserve these things'.²⁵ This argument challenges the reader to remain aware of the human biases and preconceptions which direct all experiences of non-human beings and agencies, and encourages the reader to think differently. The 'afterlives of things' Fraser describes in his analyses elsewhere of short stories such as 'Solid Objects' (1920) are not ones of stagnation or a lack of vitality, but rather of constant movement and flux. 'Woolf's decontextualized, ruined objects are nothing if not luminously themselves. They demand a different recognition from the human perceiver', writes Fraser when discussing the abandoned summerhouse of *To the Lighthouse*.²⁶ The metamorphic cutlery and regenerative qualities of decaying plant and animal life in *The Waves*, however, similarly shows the luminosity of all matter, regardless of its former human uses or understandings, when that human user has vanished. Emma Brush finds, in her readings of *To the Lighthouse*, that by '[r]ecentering and, with a sleight of hand, decentering the human, Woolf and Anthropocene scholars alike reveal the horrors of either a world fully defined by human presence or a world fully

²⁰ Bonnie Kime Scott, 'Ecocritical Woolf', in *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jessica Berman (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), p. 325.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Dirschauer, *Waterscapes*, p. 142.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

²⁵ Graham Fraser, 'The Fall of the House of Ramsay: Virginia Woolf's Ahuman Aesthetics of Ruin', *Criticism*, 62.1 (2020), 121.

²⁶ Graham Fraser, 'Solid Objects/Ghosts of Chairs: Virginia Woolf and the Afterlife of Things', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 43.2 (2020), 87.

devoid of it'.²⁷ *The Waves* disrupts this artificial binary between an all-too-human world of environmental destruction, and an apparently 'horrific' world of post-extinction human absence. The human world of *The Waves* is positioned in between and entangled within the Ahuman world of the novel's interludes, while those same interludes describe a post-human world as one full of vitality, energy, and heterogeneous life.

Other ecocritical studies of *The Waves* also focus on the novel's interludes. Derek Ryan's recent work, for example, discusses and emphasizes the anti-anthropocentrism of Woolf's writing methods when 'describing the world seen without a self' in the interludes of the novel.²⁸ Still more recently, Leanna Lostoski-Ho has argued that notions of deep ecological time act as latent but directive structuring devices for the interlude sections, illuminating the novel's presentation of the human as dwarfed by the temporal vastness of the non-human world.²⁹ Studies which attend to the soliloquy sections, however, often sideline the experiments with human/non-human imbrications which run throughout the text. Exploring characters' attitudes towards their own mortality and their position in the wider world shows that the soliloquy sections of the text are as relevant as the interludes for discussions of the non-human world and Woolf's novelistic approaches to the possibility of extinction. Woolf's interest in exploring ideas of non-being, human extinction, and non-human immortality cannot be contained within the interlude sections of the text, and neither should the focus of ecocritical readings of the novel be similarly limited. As Lawrence Buell states in his landmark study of environmental criticism,

*The environmental(ist) subtexts of works whose interests are ostensibly directed elsewhere (e.g., toward social, political, and economic relations) may be no less telling in this regard than cases of the opposite sort where human figures have been evacuated for the sake of stressing environmentality.*³⁰

All speaking characters in *The Waves* at some point explore ideas of non-being and ways of being which are undivided and unrestricted by human presence or identity. In early childhood, Susan declares 'I shall eat grass and die in a ditch in the brown water where dead leaves have rotted', expressing a desire to engage with and be absorbed into the natural world as matter undifferentiated from ditch water and rotting biological substances.³¹ Louis says 'let me be unseen', and imagines himself as roots which 'go down through veins of lead and silver, through damp, marshy places that exhale odours', tying his self-image to what is 'down there among the roots' in the interludes – that world of non-human cyclical decay and regeneration.³² Jinny and Neville are harder to read in these ways, but both express a feeling of intimate entanglement with non-human fluidities and vitalities which merge the human with its apparent outside. Jinny observes 'so fluid has my body become, forming even at the touch of a finger into one full drop', indicating a vision of the self as shifting and uncontainable rather than separated from its environments.³³ Neville resents that 'I am merely "Neville" to you, who see the narrow limits of my life and the line it cannot pass', and then 'to myself I am immeasurable; a net whose fibres pass imperceptibly beneath the

²⁷ Emma Brush, 'Inhuman, All Too Human: Virginia Woolf and the Anthropocene', *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, 8.2 (2021), 73.

²⁸ Derek Ryan, 'Posthuman Interludes: Ecology and Ethology in *The Waves*', in *Virginia Woolf: Twenty-First Century Approaches*, ed. by Jeanne Dubino, Gill Lowe, Vara Neverow, and Kathryn Simpson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

²⁹ Lostoski-Ho, "Against Time and the Sea".

³⁰ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 29.

³¹ Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 7.

³² *Ibid.* pp. 6, 55.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 131–32.

The later of the two extant holograph drafts of the novel helps clarify that Rhoda's musings on the erasure of selfhood and human extinction are not rooted in a desire for personal death, but are instead a positive affirmation of impersonal life, or *zoe*. In this draft, Rhoda imagines exploring 'these things seen in chinks, in flashes, through doors, elongated, ebbing violent sensations, search [in?] murk, [- -] rough edges, oh & tears & astonishing joy, disappearing, slipping even as I come' as she becomes atomized and dispersed throughout the natural world.³⁸ The drafting process for what became *The Waves* involved extensive changes to the content and form of the novel, so much so that tracing the evolution of Woolf's ideas for the novel is often a difficult task. Nevertheless, this passage evokes a sense of energy and motion which is not indicative of an end to life. The overwhelming impression is of being reunited with a vital stream of life in which Rhoda is unconstrained by the pressure to inhabit the body of a human individual, existing instead as pure inhuman energy and interrelationality. It seems that Rhoda's drive towards a state which may now be described 'becoming-imperceptible' remains relatively consistent from draft to published novel.

As Rhoda matures, these early desires to attain a becoming-imperceptible relationality to the world continue and evolve in new directions. In a later section of the novel, it is implied that Jinny and Rhoda attend a social gathering together. While Jinny feels herself 'flutter' and 'ripple' as she revels in her new-found sexual prowess, Rhoda longs for solitude and to escape the penetrating gaze of others which she feels as '[a] million arrows', and '[t]ongues with their whips'. Once alone, she observes

*I also see the railings of the square, and two people without faces, leaning like statues against the sky. There is, then, a world immune from change. When I have passed through this drawing-room flickering with tongues that cut me like knives, making me stammer, making me lie, I find faces rid of features, robed in beauty.*³⁹

The image of faceless people is of particular significance for understanding the novel's representations of human extinction, what happens after the death of the individual, and non-human immortality. Tromanhauser argues that 'Rhoda's vision of defaced being suggests a positive cultural endeavour that works to undo the arrogances of anthropocentric thinking'.⁴⁰ Existence without a face disavows the supposed centrality of the human, dissolving selfhood and instead repositioning the human as nothing more than one part of a mosaic-like world of other beings. Tromanhauser also notes that

*Emmanuel Levinas reminds us of the importance of having a face to receive full ethical consideration [...] Not to have a face is to fall outside the sanctuary of ethical regard and to join the ranks of the abject, the flesh, the edible.*⁴¹

But in the context of Rhoda's vision of faceless people 'robed in beauty', whom she seems to envy, Levinas's understanding of faciality implies too much negativity regarding the possibilities of faceless existence. For Rhoda, while escaping the face might push one beyond the circle of human ethical consideration, this seems to be precisely the outside realm she seeks to inhabit, no longer pressured to act, look, feel, or speak in certain ways by other humans but instead free to inhabit the world as nothing more than vibrant matter and energy, joined in the flow of life which courses through the non-human world.

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*, ed. and trans. by J. W. Graham (London: The Hogarth Press, 1976), p. 427.

³⁹ Woolf, *The Waves*, pp. 61–2.

⁴⁰ Tromanhauser, 'Eating Animals and Becoming Meat in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*', p. 86.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

In desiring faceless existence and a mode of becoming-with the natural world, Rhoda searches for a future in which she is not isolated from others, is not forced to inhabit the world as a single being, but becomes atomized and dispersed throughout the world. Brush argues in her analyses of *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts* (1941) that '[t]he question such novels pose, to scholars and artists of the Anthropocene especially, is the extent to which crisis might motivate misanthropic and isolationist imaginaries, and what possibilities emerge to imagine more equitable, enduring futures in response'.⁴² Although Brush is referring here to parallels between the twentieth-century threat of international war and the twenty-first century threat of climate crisis, and does not discuss *The Waves*, her argument seems apposite to discussions of Rhoda's approach to both suicide and living in the world. The novel responds to Rhoda's crises of identity and suicide in a similar way to the response of Anthropocene studies to climate crisis – by imagining and working towards a future which is less painful, dangerous, and more sustainable both for the individual and the non-human world at large. Far from recommending suicide, Rhoda's eventual demise should not be seen as martyrdom but as a generative rejection of misanthropy and an embrace of a more open-ended, affirmative, and relational mode of being. According to Braidotti, Deleuzian theory 'links the act of suppressing one's failing body, as in suicide or euthanasia, to an ethics of assertion of the joyfulness and positivity of life, which necessarily translates into the refusal to lead a degraded existence'.⁴³ Following this redefinition of self-determined death as an expression and affirmation of life, Rhoda's suicide must be read as an act of making the self adequate to existence in the vibrant world of impersonal life, rather than as a termination of vitality.

The novel does not directly describe Rhoda's suicide, and the reader only learns of her death in Bernard's final and lengthiest soliloquy where he declares '[b]etter burn one's life out like Louis, desiring perfection; or like Rhoda leave us'.⁴⁴ The living Rhoda does, however, continue to envision her eventual death with increasing specificity. In these imaginings, Woolf's inventive use of pronouns contribute to the novel's redefinitions of human death as the dispersal of the subject throughout the world. First, Rhoda sees herself in the plural – 'Beneath us lie the lights of the herring fleet' – suggesting that she already no longer perceives herself as a singular identity. The imagined scene continues, as Rhoda foresees

*Rippling small, rippling grey, innumerable waves spread beneath us. I touch nothing. I see nothing. We may sink and settle on the waves. The sea will drum in my ears. [...] Rolling me over the waves will shoulder me under. Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me.*⁴⁵

Rhoda's oscillation between the multiple pronoun 'we' and the singular 'I' suggests that the living and speaking subject can never fully escape singular human identity: this level of subject-dispersal, it seems, can only be attained after the act of suicide itself has been completed. Again, however, this is not a personal death but is instead a single event in the full span of the existence of a body which may or may not be 'alive' in the usual and human sense. For a second time, Rhoda imagines the shoulders of the ocean cradling her body as she sinks beneath its surface and becomes nothing more than a particle in a 'shower', dissolved throughout the natural world, continuing to exist in ways beyond the boundaries of anthropocentrism. Where a similar passage appears in the second holograph draft, Rhoda

⁴² Brush, 'Inhuman, All Too Human: Virginia Woolf and the Anthropocene', p. 72.

⁴³ Braidotti, 'Virginia Woolf, Immanence and Ontological Pacifism', p. 146.

⁴⁴ Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 159.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

describes the sensation of waves which 'rise over my mouth, ears, eyes'.⁴⁶ By listing individual body parts, Woolf emphasizes the materiality of the body, describing it not as something which is necessarily more than the sum of its parts, but merely as biological matter. As such, Rhoda's body can be absorbed and reintegrated into the non-human world just as the bodies of other deceased creatures eventually decay and become sources of nutrition and sustenance for other beings, new life, and ecosystems. Atomized and recomposed as undifferentiated matter, the future materiality Rhoda seeks to inhabit may still be describable as human, but this is only because we lack the language for a more appropriate description. Her category of being no longer operates on discriminatory terms, the boundaries of her existence become too porous to allow distinction or separation between human and non-human matter.

Bernard's soliloquies provide other means for analysing the proto-post-humanist understandings of extinction latent in *The Waves*. Before his final speech, Bernard states 'I do not cling to life. I shall be brushed like a bee from a sunflower'.⁴⁷ This image shows already that his understanding of life no longer positions the human in opposition to the non-human. He sees himself as one element of a vast ecosystem which encompasses all beings, human and non-human. As an insect forced from its momentary landing place, Bernard foresees a moment at which he will depart the world of artificial human certainties and be dissolved and dispersed instead across the non-human world of life as *zoe*. Similar imagery of differing scales is later used to describe his realization of human insignificance, as Bernard states 'I reflect now that the earth is only a pebble flicked off accidentally from the face of the sun and that there is no life anywhere in the abysses of space'.⁴⁸ Reducing the world to a pebble, Bernard sees the minuteness of human life in comparison to the vastness of the cosmos beyond his small and limited existence. But his is a vision of space devoid wholly of life, human or non-human. For Bernard, there is no possibility that humans and other animals are not the only viable forms of 'life'. Imagining the world after an extinction event, Bernard's pebble, and the planet it represents, seem to become inert and lifeless, having once been the only source of vitality in the 'abysses of space'. For Rhoda, however, the limits of human existence reveal that human extinction is a condition of possibility, the point at which the human is freed from its boundaries, free to join the world after having striven to remain separate from it for so long. This is not the case for Bernard, and thus he sees no point in suicide, but continues to suffer as his desire for imperceptibility and the atomization of subjectivity increases and he searches in vain for methods of living in the world which might allow him the immanent relationality Rhoda has achieved.

In his last soliloquy, Bernard attempts to 'sum up' his life and those of the other characters to an anonymous listener.⁴⁹ Carrie Rohman argues that 'the creative force that Woolf reveals [...] opens the human onto its own participation in the inhuman. Woolf understands that force, intensity, art and movement connect the human, the animal, the earth, and the cosmos'.⁵⁰ While Rohman is referring to Jinny here, Bernard's last creative effort to 'tell you a story' similarly connects him to the non-human and inhuman but in a manner more oriented towards a yearning for the impersonality of existence after death than towards continued vitality and desiring energy, as with Jinny.⁵¹ In this last soliloquy Woolf shows that Bernard

⁴⁶ Woolf, *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*, p. 628.

⁴⁷ Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 130.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁵⁰ Carrie Rohman, "We Make Life": Vibration, Aesthetics and the Inhuman in *The Waves*, in *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World*, pp. 22–3.

⁵¹ Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 143.

While in her diary entry Woolf records being stunned into silence at the moment of the eclipse, Bernard describes in greater detail the vital force of life both author and character seem to intuit – the earth ‘breathing in and out’ as if it were a vast modular organism whose multitudinous components work symbiotically with and for the whole. Imagining his own eventual disappearance within such an ecosystem, Bernard’s understanding of the world and his position within it no longer seems to be divided into terms of living and non-living matter. Peter Adkins argues that allusions to extinction in texts such as ‘A Sketch of the Past’ (1939) and ‘Anon’ (1941) serve as

*a reminder that, as Rosi Braidotti describes, just as life is both personal and impersonal, there is also a “personal and impersonal death”. Death no longer serves as the horizon of life, but as the “opening up of new intensities” beyond individual life.*⁵⁶

Quoting here from Braidotti’s *Transpositions*, Adkins locates in Woolf’s non-fictional writing an understanding of human extinction which anticipates Braidotti’s post-anthropocentric redefinitions of death as not so much an ultimate endpoint from which no new becomings can emerge, but a ‘horizon’ which, when crossed, opens new possibilities for post-anthropomorphic modes of being. Bernard’s soliloquy above, however, shows that similar reconceptualizations of human mortality are explored in *The Waves*. Bernard stares at the sky and foresees his own extinction not as the termination of vitality, but as the moment at which he will rejoin the flow of life he sees going on above and without him. Fraser’s analysis of *To the Lighthouse* seems equally applicable to this moment in *The Waves*, as he describes the closing of the earlier novel as an ‘afterimage of Woolf’s vision of the loveliness of such loss and the beauty of this world made and making itself without us’.⁵⁷ This idea of beauty in loss seems apposite to Bernard’s description of the eclipse and aftermath here, as he envisions a depersonalized post-human world which drinks, absorbs, hangs and settles, pulsing with life and inhuman energy, unmaking and making itself ‘without us’. Such a world may be ‘beneath our feet’, but the scale of the organic and cosmological realms compared to the human shows our species to be fundamentally transient, our ‘feet’ infinitesimally small. Humanity’s supposed struggle against death is undermined here, just as the idea of death as an endpoint is undermined. Human existence is reduced to nothing more than a brief period of consciousness amid a vast flow of movement and energy which continues indefinitely after our perception of it ends.

Bernard’s view of human death is far removed from the faceless, imperceptible, and atomized being that Rhoda seeks with a sense of relief. Unlike her, he does not consistently describe death as an event which brings potential and new possibilities. His reactions to human mortality and apparent non-human immortalities are consequently ambivalent. Sometimes Bernard is enthralled by the intensity and power of non-human forces at work beyond the human remit, but he is ultimately unable to move beyond the embrace Rhoda’s future of impersonal existence. Rather than heroizing Rhoda’s suicide, the novel shows the importance of understanding that, as human beings, we will return to a non-human state of biological matter and that in both life and death we are always already immanently entangled with that from which we have arbitrarily separated ourselves. Rohman, writing on the inhuman aesthetics of *The Waves*, argues that ‘concepts of the post-human open up a reading that need not be trapped by views of nature as either “sympathetic” and sentimentally

⁵⁶ Peter Adkins, *The Modernist Anthropocene: Nonhuman Life and Planetary Change in James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Djuna Barnes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 181.

⁵⁷ Fraser, ‘The Fall of the House of Ramsay’, p. 135.

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