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ARTICLE

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The influence of psychedelics and toxicity in J.G. Ballard and Tom Wolfe's representations of petroculture

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ABSTRACT

In my reading of Ballard's short story 'Dream Cargoes', I find a post-growth imaginary that focuses on a profound species-wide change of pace in the context of future nano- and biotech waste. I compare this to Tom Wolfe's heady account of the Merry Pranksters set during the Great Acceleration of the 1960s and 1970s. While Wolfe captured multiple fragmented points of view located in scattered time frames in his account of the Pranksters, Ballard is suggesting that time and its specific contemporary associations with extinction, renewability and futurity has become a central concern for humanity at large. I argue that literary representations of toxicity yield insight by awakening the reader to the ultimate limits of consumer culture. Thus, this essay offers an approach to fictions such as Ballard's and Wolfe's seeing them as essential resources for assessing toxicity in our lives as a source of insight as well as motivation to look for alternatives to petroculture.

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The ecological injuries caused by unsustainable production and extractivist¹ practices remain in the earth even when they fade from our cultural memory. Toxic waste endures in a purgatorial realm where it lives out its afterlife in the soil, air and water. To fully understand the devastating impact of our toxic post-industrial culture, it is necessary to consider another aspect of this afterlife which endures in our cultural consciousness, what Buell calls toxic discourse in support of 'a widely shared paradigm of cultural self-identification' (Buell 1998: 665) in which we ourselves are also the toxins. Most influential of all discourse on toxicity was Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). Its indictment on chemical pesticides changed our view on the use of petrochemicals. My interest in toxicity as a literary focus in this context differs from Carson's environmentalist discourse and, more recently, that of Rob Nixon, among others. My focus is rather on those authors whose fictions stage the delights of the toxins that circulate in the contemporary cultural landscape on the understanding that such pleasure can be a driver of social change. This is not to deny the real suffering of environmental illness or multiple chemical sensitivity that Michael Boyden has carefully documented in his article in this issue. In fact, I see points of convergence between our accounts since, as Boyden notes, a further

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¹The term given to the 'hyper-exploitation of hydrocarbons, water, forests, oil, natural gas, silver and minerals' (Gomez-Barris 2016: 29).

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consequence of exposure to toxins is behavioural change when 'heightened reactivity to chemicals often impels [...] individuals to drastically alter their living situation'. Lifestyle alterations set an example to others and constitute a performative pressure for social change. Thus, alongside studies such as Boyden's, mine is a speculative essay that looks for relief from the symptoms and dependencies of consumer culture via insights that only that culture and its most seductive affordances can deliver. I read J.G. Ballard's 'Dream Cargoes' (1990) in the context of Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) in relation to chemical dependence as the basis of a new world view. Wolfe's representation of Kesey and the Merry Pranksters reveals how pleasurable toxic culture can be while showing how the energies released by that exhilaration can fuel a political activism at odds with that culture. A generation later, Ballard evokes the visionary aspect of the psychedelic experience in 'Dream Cargoes' to offer an even more immersive critique of aspirations for continual growth. As shall be seen, this dynamic has commonalities with Don Mitchell's discovery (in this issue) of the dialectic in which power structures that maintain and occupy 'absolute space' can be challenged and modified by shifts in the internal configuration of objects – including persons and institutions – that exist in 'relational space'.² In Ballard and Wolfe's narratives, abjected or ephemeral features of consumer culture (toxic waste, drugs) serve as wormholes that offer access to alternative subjective perspectives – spatial and temporal affects – that can effect objective change in the toxic culture that produces them.³

When Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters set out on their journey to encourage Americans to 'turn on, tune in, drop out', they did not suffer any shame in their dependence on energy corridors and roads. They needed the infrastructure of mainstream culture and they enjoyed the pleasures of driving under the influence of psychedelics. By arguing that there are important insights to be gained from analysing contemporary culture tanked up on a range of substances, including LSD, marijuana, and petroleum via these countercultural representations of toxins, this essay shifts the discussion from a focus on material objects to the exploration of sensibility as a pathway to activism. The literary imagination can change readers' perceptions of toxicity in nuanced ways. In my reading of Ballard's short story 'Dream Cargoes', I find a post-growth imaginary that focuses on a profound species-wide change of pace in the context of future nano- and biotech waste. This is a scenario that Wolfe, writing during the Great Acceleration of the 1960s and 1970s, could not have anticipated despite the environmental rhetoric of Carson and others at that time. Ballard and Wolfe also evoke sexual reproduction in different ways. Wolfe's descriptions of the masculine virility of the Merry Pranksters are highly sexualised and centres on the love bunk in their bus (that Wolfe christens 'Furthur') as an enhanced sperm delivery system likely to make any woman pregnant. Reproduction in Ballard's story is asexual without producing a genealogy. In Ballard's story, toxicity emerges as a hyperobject in Timothy Morton's terms (2013: 1) that brings the reader

²In fact, Mitchell's account offers a 'trialectic' that, along with absolute and relational space, also includes Harvey's notion of relative space which, in Harvey's words (1973:13), is a 'relationship *between* objects'. For my purpose, relational space also conveys the meaning of relative space.

³On the affective basis for material change, Temko develops a related point. In a powerful summary of the new materialisms of Alaimo and Bennett, Temko (2013: 495) declares that DeLillo's novel and others like it 'appear to suggest that matter *is* affect itself'.

closer to the subject of the ultimate limits of consumer culture, even if that diminishing of distance inevitably brings us face to face with our own mortality.

End times

Ballard is not the first author to make his readers conscious of sewage, waste and toxicity as an index of the human condition. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Victor Hugo meditates on the sewers beneath Paris as a source of untapped wisdom, revealing waste as that 'which was formerly rouged, is washed free' ['Tout ce qui se fardait se barbouille'] (Hugo 2011: 899). For Hugo, the city comes to its rational maturity as a being once it develops a way of handling its waste: 'but in the good, old times, the capital had not much head [...] and could not sweep out filth any better than it could abuses' ['Mais, au bon vieux temps, la capital eavait peu de tête [...] et pas mieux balayer les ordures que les abus'] (900). Throughout Hugo's reflections, the sewer serves as the truth of what and who we are and what we may become. The sewage is cleansed of our egalitarian illusions in Hugo's imagination when '[a]ll the uncleannesses of civilization, once past their use, fall into this trench of truth, where the immense social sliding ends' ['[t]outes les malpropretés de la civilisation, unefois hors de service, tombent dans cette fosse de vérité où aboutit l'immense glissement social'] (898). There are differences between Hugo and Ballard, but in some respects both are dealing with aspects of human waste that is so widespread and enduring it requires imaginative intervention in order to be grasped. Hugo brings to the surface that which lies spread out unseen beneath the streets. For Ballard, the waste is no longer located underneath the city, but is planetary in scope and conscience, although it is acutely focused in the form of a garbage island. When it comes to sewage, there is no 'elsewhere': the oceans are our sewer. Toxic waste and other traces of post-industrial culture is now best understood as a hyperobject, the term coined by Morton (2013: 1) to refer to 'things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans'.

What is unusual about Ballard's vision in 'Dream Cargoes', however, is that he discovers a peculiar fecundity in waste more powerful even than the industriousness that produced the radioactive decay in the first place. The story is about 'the lowest grade of chemical waste carrier' (Ballard 2002: 382) on which the cabin boy Johnson is the sole occupant after the Captain and the remainder of his crew abandoned ship since not being allowed to moor with its load of poisonous organophosphates, among other toxins. Johnson chances upon a deserted World War II garbage island off the coast of Puerto Rico. There he is discovered by a female biologist who takes an interest in both Johnson and the accelerated growth in the flora and fauna of the island when in contact with the leaking chemicals. Before too long he discovers that 'the toxic reagents might equally be affecting himself' (388). The faster the plants and fruits grow on the island, the slower Johnson becomes until he seems to be able to subsist on air alone. In itself, this accelerated growth recalls Don Mitchell's account in this collection of the 'immensely violent, not infrequently life-destroying process' by which capitalism, in the pursuit of constant economic growth, wreaks 'creative destruction' on natural and built environments. Rather than simply demonise economic processes, Mitchell turns to David Nye (2010: 131) who recommends seeing landscape as 'not something outside of human beings that they merely look at' but instead – and this includes built environments – as something formed or affected by human action and at the same time as 'the infrastructure of collective existence'. The fact

that rapid growth on Ballard's island is the result of massive exposure to toxic waste would seem to suggest that it is an 'anti-landscape', Nye's term (2010: 131) for what he calls a 'space that once served as infrastructure for collective existence but has ceased to do so'. However, somehow the island does support human life even if it is that of just one man – Johnson. For this reason, despite having some features of an anti-landscape, I think of the island as an *ante-landscape*, a place in the process of becoming a possibly suitable habitat for a changing human collective. This concurs with one of Mitchell's hopeful conclusions: 'The tyranny of absolute space is never total. Landscapes can, and do, arise out of the ashes of the anti-landscape. New futures are sculpted out of old landscapes'.

If futurity is a key concern in 'Dream Cargoes' it is also something that Ballard explored in other works including *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979), and *Hello America* (1981), a novel that thematically touches on elements also found in 'Dream Cargoes'. In *Hello America*, North America has become uninhabitable and its citizens have fled to Europe and Asia to escape an ecological crisis and nuclear warfare. The impending struggle to secure natural resources resonates throughout Ballard's work, but in 'Dream Cargoes' he is also interested in a petrochemically altered experience of space and time that gives new insight when thinking about future energy transitions. Mitchell points out that his essay title 'Geography Sculpts the Future' summarises an observation made by geographer Trevor Paglen (2009) that stresses the dependence of the future on the material impact of present actions. In a short non-fiction essay entitled 'Time, Memory and Inner Space', Ballard (1963) also refers to a process of temporal sculpture affecting the significance of imagery in his own practice as a writer of 'speculative fiction' touching on 'the internal landscape of tomorrow that is a transmuted image of the past'. A surreal or nightmarish potential in Mitchell and Paglen's point is evoked in Ballard's (1963) own construction of a dream world from past impressions as 'time-sculptures of terrifying ambiguity' capable of registering actual horrors such as Hiroshima. 'Dream Cargoes' produces equally ambiguous 'time-sculptures' in its attempts to represent the lifespan of waste as a byproduct of consumer culture fuelled by petroleum.

Since its beginning, oil was often thermatized through powerful signifiers of extractivist fantasies of wealth and upward mobility, rather than situated within a broader context. Often, oil was associated with masculine power over nature in early twentieth-century literature such as Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1926) and in films such as *Giant* (Dir. George Stevens, 1956). My appeal to the imagination for reading oil's contemporary presence finds echoes in Nicholas Mirzoeff's claim (2014: 213) that 'to visualize the Anthropocene is to invoke the aesthetic' so as to challenge the authority of multinational corporations and the fossil fuel industry through 'the reclaiming of the imagination' (226). By storying oil in its full complexity, this hyperobject becomes grounded in a wider time span, and in an imaginary and a narrative that includes its geological beginnings until the unimaginable future. The 'terrifying strangeness' (Morton 2013: 49) of the hyperobject becomes, if not precisely understood, then at the very least appreciable and negotiable, via the literary imagination. Though we cannot see the hyperobject, nevertheless narrative allows us to grasp that which cannot be seen physically through an 'intentional act of holding them in mind'.

Only the imagination and aesthetics make the hyperobject accessible to us. I would add that not seeing the hyperobject is akin to not seeing one's own mortality. Ballard, and

Hugo before him, show that literature is capable of giving us that glimpse into our mortality via the imagination. One must begin by understanding that oil affords us a real connectivity to the world that then forms the basis for imagining it. We already know that energy from petroleum connects us to the rest of the world, whether through fuel-thirsty jet engines or by keeping an uninterrupted power supply to the World Wide Web. Rather than reproducing this narrative arc of oil, Ballard's 'Dream Cargoes' takes oil as a substance out of the story and instead points to the hazardous waste this 'large finitude' produces. By removing oil as fuel in 'Dream Cargoes', Ballard is able to show the emancipatory inversion of a transactional relationship that ordinarily locks the human subject into consuming oil in order to partake of what Mitchell calls 'the tyranny of absolute space'. Ballard's story provides no clear solutions but instead offers readers the spectacle of Johnson freed from involvement in that tyranny and now poised in a potentially endless moment of equipoise no longer in lockstep with the accelerated growth around him. For me, this scene provokes reflection on what Mitchell has to say about Harvey's notion of 'relational space'. This, in Harvey's (1973: 13) words, is 'contained *in* objects in the sense that an object can be said to exist only insofar as it contains and represents within itself relationships to other objects'. For Mitchell, 'a kind of relational space' can be found in the way 'powerful institutions and individuals [...] dominate or control the organization and production of space such that they [have] increased control over accessibility and appropriation'. In view of this, we might say that 'Dream Cargoes' shows how an apparently useless byproduct of capital expansion actively counters its spatial tyranny by productively damaging Johnson's consumerist 'relationship to other objects'.⁴ He is freed then to contemplate the toxic environment as an outsider on the inside having become a veritable dropout whose energies have ceased to fuel its rampant growth.

Psychedelic missionaries

Before going any further, let us back-track three decades from Ballard's age to when Tom Wolfe wrote about Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. The 1960s, a time in American history now thought to be the start of the Great Acceleration, also gave birth to a greater awareness of the environmental impact of anthropocentric change. It triggered the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, the first formal declaration of national environmental policies and goals. The literature of the time signalled similar concerns regarding environmental impact, notably Carson's seminal *Silent Spring* (1962) about the adverse effects of pesticides and Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile* (1965). In addition to these societal movements, Kesey and the Merry Pranksters wished to bring about a change society mediated by the psychological insights conferred by the effect of LSD in order to create a 'new collective presence' (Farber 2002: 26). A notable publication coming out of these experiments was the 1968 publication of *Whole Earth Catalogue* by Stewart Brand, a particularly entrepreneurial Prankster. The catalogue was an inventory of tools designed to help citizens relocate to

⁴Temko (2013: 495) develops a related point on the unexpected efficacy of waste products referring to 'a re-enchantment of refuse matter as sacred or holy substance by virtue of its being that which escapes the enframing logics of the capitalistic system as it cannot, or can no longer, be commodified'.

rural communities in ways ‘that would turn acid visions into lived environments’ (Brand 1968: 36). Despite these efforts to go green, from our perspective the Merry Pranksters’ bus ride might seem to exalt the thrill of motorised transport in ways that sit oddly with their quest to reject mainstream capitalist values.

Documenting Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters on their journey from California to New York City with their missionary zeal, wishing ‘to do for the nation what LSD had done for them as individuals and as a community’ (Turner 2006: 63), Wolfe writes about their intense desire to communicate beyond the physical limits of their bodies. The Pranksters were above all interested in connecting with the public, thus the end goal of an acid trip was ‘not so much to explore inner space as to re-negotiate social space’ (Farber 2002: 24). The so-called acid tests in 1966 were designed to inspire Pranksters to ‘re-negotiate’ such social spaces as they found as far afield as possible. The Pranksters used motorised transport as well as the freeway system to deliver not just a message but a set of behaviours that ran counter to the capitalist economy even though that system was what made this means of travel possible. Recalling my account of relational space in Mitchell’s essay, their trajectory makes use of and traverses the absolute space of continental North America, using affordances provided by that system, but in doing so they carry an antidote to the relational attachments that bind consumers within that space and its patterns of domination. Thus, the Pranksters went on a bus affectionally named ‘Further’ or sometimes ‘Furthur’ that Wolfe (2009: 13) describes as follows when he first sets eyes on it:

A bigger glow in the center of the garage. I make out a school bus . . . glowing orange, green, magenta, lavender, chlorine blue, every fluorescent pastel imaginable in thousands of designs, both large and small, like a cross between Fernand Léger and Dr. Strange, roaring together and vibrating off each other as if somebody had given Hieronymous Bosch fifty buckets of Day-Glo paint and a 1939 International Harvester school bus and told him to go to it.

This hyperbolic effusion of Day-Glo petrosymbolism is far from Ballard’s restrained and melancholic representation of the effects of toxins on the environment in the garbage island. Despite Ballard’s (2002: 381, 383, 389) evocation of neon colour as an intense evocation of toxicity, including ‘the metallic surface of the lagoon’ of ‘phosphorescent blues and indigos’ where ‘the reflected colors drowned in swaths of phosphorescence that made the lagoon resemble a caldron of electric dyes’, his is not as visionary as Wolfe’s prose. Wolfe uses an intoxicating set of references to colour that tap into cultural memories of schools of painting and art history. He locates the bus ‘Furthur’ within a lineage of experimental art. As such, the lifestyle associated with the Pranksters reifies what Stephanie LeMenager (2014: 39) calls petroculture in ways that suggest that the problem with post-war American society is not that it is toxic, as such, but that this toxicity feels so good:

One’s parents remembered the sloughing, common order, War & Depression—

but Superkids knew only the emotional surge of the great payoff, when nothing was common any longer — The Life! A glorious place, a glorious age, I tell you! A very Neon Renaissance — And the myths that actually touched you at that time — not Hercules, Orpheus, Ulysses, and Aeneas — but Superman, Captain Marvel, Batman, The Human Torch, The Sub-Mariner, Captain America, Plastic Man, The Flash — but of course! (Wolfe 2009: 39)

This account of a lifestyle attests to the ‘emotional power’ of twentieth-century material cultures (LeMenager 2014: 68). It is a challenge to write about the impact of this seductive consumer culture because ‘as a journalist [Wolfe] must ascertain and represent the reality of a subject engrossed in unreality’ (Jacobs 2015: 135). It has been said that the more subjective creative non-fiction of New Journalism came about precisely because conventional reportage was deemed to be inadequate for narrating the tremendous cultural and social changes of the time (Weingarten 2006: 6). Arguably, ours is no less tumultuous and so it too requires different tools of perception and reporting.

Wolfe (2009: 112) describes a world that is thoroughly material, physical objects that sparkle with life. However, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* responds to the toxicity of petroculture that awakens contemporary readers to the addictions of petrocultural toxins:

the billion eyes of America glisten at them [the Pranksters] like electric kernels, and yet the Pranksters are grooving with this whole wide-screen America and going with its flow with American flags flying from the bus and taking energy, as in solar heat, from its horsepower and its neon and there is no limit to the American trip.

Despite or perhaps because of the expressive poetics of the above, from the perspective of the present moment, Wolfe’s description fails to achieve critical distance from what he is reporting. In this regard, Wolfe’s immersion in his subject matter is a feature of the school of New Journalism of which he was a founder. This allied his style – though with significant differences – with that of the so-called ‘gonzo’ journalism of Hunter J. Thompson in which objectivity took second place to a range of other often sensational narrative features. For a start, Wolfe does not comment on the unsustainability of auto-mobility. Wolfe himself puts his finger on the makings of the Great Acceleration when in *The Right Stuff* he notes that 1960s America is the beginnings of a new civilisation founded upon ‘the incalculable power’ of science and technology, rather than nature’s ‘archaic magic’ (Wolfe 1979: 97). Perhaps this is why he notices, albeit falls short of overtly critiquing that the Pranksters are on the way to cranking up the speed of a civilisation whose progress is already hazardous to our and the planet’s health. The Pranksters, Wolfe writes (2009: 39) aspire to go further than their parents who were content with their family car:

There they go, in the family car, a white Pontiac Bonneville sedan — *the family car!* — a huge crazy god-awful-powerful fantasy creature to begin with, 327 horsepower, shaped like twenty-seven nights of lubricious luxury brougham seduction — *you’re already there, in Fantasyland*, so why not move off your smug-harbor guilty-bed dead center and cut loose - go ahead and say it — Shazam! — juice it up to what it’s already aching to be: 327,000 horsepower, a whole superhighway long and *soaring, screaming* on toward ... Edge City, and ultimate fantasies, current and future ... (italics in the original)

Unable to critique it, perpetual growth is instead further fantasised and eroticised in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* through the representation of the bus. Often, Wolfe resorts to giving the reader the shared consciousness of the Pranksters through a polyphonic narrative point of view of ‘an immersed, rapidly shifting, first-person account in which all speakers and thinkers become ‘us’ (Jacobs 2015: 143). As it covers physical distance it also extends into the future providing a ‘love bunk’ where reproduction takes place in a casual way:

[...] the motor roaring, the fabulous love bunk, and everyone—*synch*—can see that sleeping bag veritably filling up with sperm, the little devils swimming like mad in there in the muck, oozing into the cheap hairy shit they quilt the bag with, millions billions trillions of them, darting around, crafty little flagellants, looking to score, which is natural, and if any certified virgin on the face of the earth crawled into that sleeping bag for a nap after lunch she would be a hulking knocked-up miracle inside of three minutes — but won't this goddamn bouncing ever stop —. (Wolfe 2009: 80; italics original)

This account of the love bunk on board the bus might be close to 'petroporn', yet importantly it also features some aspects of new journalism, which include 'prose, journalism, poetry, and a host of avant-garde modernist devices such as parataxis, collage, and bricolage' (Jacobs 2015: 136) that succeed in reporting on the Great Acceleration as sensed by bodies. As such, it is a valuable testament to the emergence of a post-industrial culture that still today holds us in a tantalising grip, leaving a large majority of us yearning for more.

Crisis, what crisis?

The fantasy of perpetual growth in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* was three decades into the future in relation to Ballard's 'Dream Cargoes' which it seems to reprise albeit in mutated form. In Ballard's imaginary, petroculture's neon colours have shifted from the human world to the natural world. Instead of fantasising about 327,000 horsepower and millions billions trillions of sperm, Ballard's narrator taps into a more elegiac steam punk rhetoric when he notes that a 'powerful life engine was driving the island' (Ballard 2002: 389). As we have seen, in my reading of 'Dream Cargoes' a toxic byproduct of petroculture turbo-charges the life cycle of the island's flora and at the same time paradoxically renders Johnson pleasantly vegetative: 'If I look at a falling leaf in a certain way', he muses, 'it seems to stand still' (391). As I suggested at the outset, there are indirect parallels between the hope for social change I see coming from the very chemicals we most decry and Boyden's account of the high motivation of those suffering from environmental illness to effect change in their personal environment. At moments such as this in Ballard's story, I feel that Boyden's reference to 'dense correspondences between bodies and the landscape' rings true. My focus has been on Ballard's accelerated growth as signifier of the stepped-up operation of capital being tripped up (in Johnson) by its own waste products. But the story could be read another way without losing much of that significance. After all, petroleum is none other than the waste product of ancient forests, and in her work on 'dark green', Heather Sullivan (2019: 156) reminds us that the most powerful life engine is still plant power and hence, she says, 'the real energy question is which form or process of vegetative energy will we next utilize or, perhaps, emulate'. Sullivan's final word here is highly suggestive. It prompts a slightly different somewhat allegorical reading of the story in which economic growth, poisoned by toxic waste, becomes rehabilitated to match the pace of vegetative life which only seems fast to Johnson because his 'engine' is running slower still.

It has been noted that 'time and climate are indelibly linked in Ballard's early novels' (Clarke 2013: 15). This link remains throughout his career and becomes a moral force in 'Dream Cargoes'. It is the change of pace, the process of slowing down, either in a meditative sense or else a form of stagnation in 'Dream Cargoes', which constitutes

a real antidote or denouement to petrocapitalism. This element of social critique becomes clear when towards the end of the story a scientist appears to rescue the female biologist: 'Those organic wastes are hazardous. God knows what might happen if human beings were exposed to long-term contact. All sorts of sinister alterations to the nervous system – people might be happy to stare at a stone all day' (Ballard 2002: 394). Johnson's laconic leaf-watching is a far cry from the hyper-masculinity that cemented the twentieth-century icons of gushers mentioned earlier. Nor is it a continuation of the 'turn on, tune in, drop out' mentality of 1960s counterculture since it bears no trace of the joy and enthusiasm seen in Wolfe's account of the Merry Pranksters. Nonetheless, to contemporary readers contemplating the mass destructions in the Anthropocene, perhaps it is this slow-motion vision of the masculine subject running counter to growth and productivity that holds the key to sustainability.

Nevertheless, as the pace of the human subject slows down, the survival mechanisms of the plants kick in. It turns out they benefit from exposure to a 'remarkably potent cocktail' of chemicals Ballard 2002: 389). The plants' anatomical life has drastically changed, their 'cellular clocks seem to have stopped' and the fruit 'contain no seeds' (394), yet they are still reproducing and rapidly so. Without saying as much, Ballard's story contemplates a world without evolution and without sexual reproduction. Time in Ballard's story is compressed and change occurs too rapidly to comprehend its wider consequences. No reproduction means there is no evolution, at least not at the level of species. Instead, each individual life populating the garbage island is now its own species. If there is any lineage to a new 'life engine' in Ballard's story, it is structured along the lines of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome in which each root in a system constitutes a new beginning with each root multiplying (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 8). Ballard leaves it up to the reader to decide whether this unexpected new lease of life is hopeful or not. There is the suggestion that the growth of the forest is as unsustainable as human growth: 'Engorged on the sun, the giant fruits had begun to split under their own weight, and streams of vivid juice ran across the sand, as if the forest was bleeding' (Ballard 2002: 392). On the other hand, there is no doubt that in Johnson's mind, the experience on the garbage island has shown him 'the staid reality that trapped them all was beginning to dissolve' and provided him with a 'glimpse of another, more advanced world' (Ballard 2002: 393; 394–95).

There remains for him only the wish to escape with the help of birds, 'who would take him with them in their escape from time' (395). While Wolfe captured multiple fragmented points of view located in scattered time frames in his account of the Pranksters, Ballard is showing that time is not just a key theme in his authorship, but crucially he is suggesting that time and its specific contemporary associations with extinction, renewability, and futurity have become a central concern for humanity at large. It is not an attempt to represent a world in chaos, or to keep pace with petroculture's accelerated time as did Wolfe in his frantic attempts to capture the experiences of the Pranksters. For Ballard, by contrast, progress in terms of consumer culture is no progress at all. Despite appearances, what is happening on that garbage island is simply a matter of marking time, another version of narcoleptic oblivion.

Although current levels of toxicity are appalling, this is a speculative essay drawing on the potential for hope and insight under current conditions. I sometimes think of my account of potential insights to be gained from exposure to toxicity in homoeopathic

terms. Perhaps a narrative that thematises exposure to toxicity is the right dosage to derive the benefits I refer to. The fictional explorations of such exposure can yield insight into how close contact with toxic culture is inevitable and potentially also fruitful in terms of the shifts in perception required to gain knowledge and a vision of alternative futures.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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