
“You’re like a vegetarian in leather shoes”: Cognitive Disconnect and Ecogrief in Stacey Gregg’s *Override*

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Abstract. In this article, we analyse how Northern Irish playwright Stacey Gregg’s *Override* (2013) can be read through the lens of the Anthropocene, a term from the geological sciences that has been appropriated by the humanities to question issues of human exceptionalism. Firstly, we examine the ways in which the play, by means of Vi and Mark’s failed attempt to escape technological misuse, challenges the nature/culture dichotomy, which is central to the instrumentalisation of nature for human domination. Secondly, we consider how ecogrief comes with the loss of social and humanistic elements that were once grounding and grounded, but are now unstable and murky, such as the idea of what entails a human being. Ultimately, we contend that that derives from the cognitive disconnect resulting from not being able to understand one’s role in the development of an ongoing catastrophe.

Key Words. Anthropocene, Nature/Culture dichotomy, Ecogrief, Stacey Gregg, *Override*.

Resumen. En ese artículo, analizamos cómo se puede leer *Override* (2013), una obra escrita por la dramaturga norirlandesa Stacey Gregg, a través del concepto del Antropoceno, un término de las ciencias geológicas del que se han apropiado las humanidades para reflexionar sobre el excepcionalismo humano. Al examinar la tentativa frustrada de Vi y Mark de apartarse de los malos usos de la tecnología, primeramente, investigamos la manera como esa obra teatral desafía la dicotomía naturaleza/cultura, central para la instrumentalización de la naturaleza para la dominación humana. En segundo lugar, consideramos como el eco-duelo viene acompañado de la pérdida de elementos sociales y humanísticos que antaño tenían fundamento y base y ahora son inestables y turbios, así como la idea de lo que supone ser humano. En última instancia, sostenemos que eso se deriva de la desconexión cognitiva resultante de no poder comprender el propio papel en el desarrollo de una catástrofe en curso.

Palabras clave. Antropoceno, Dicotomía naturaleza/cultura, Eco-duelo, Stacey Gregg, *Override*.

Reading into Stacey Gregg's *Override* to find the Anthropocene

In the dystopian science fiction play written by Northern Irish playwright Stacey Gregg, *Override* (2013), a pregnant young woman and her partner choose to live off the grid in an overwhelmingly technological world. The play invites spectators/readers to consider what it means to be human. Or even, what are the limits to what one considers to be a human? The play has two acts and two characters, Violet and Mark. Violet, who has been “enhanced” by a type of technology at first developed to “fix” disabilities but later put to other uses in a hyper-consumerist society, reveals to her techno-purist partner that she has undergone a number of techno-fixes and “augmentation” procedures. The first procedure was done to “fix” a lazy eye, but the following ones were done as a bet on social mobility. Mark, himself an administrator and heir to the company that created these “fixes” and augmentations in the first place, overrides Violet’s settings (without her consent, it should be noted), shutting off in her anything that is not human. As a result, Violet transitions from being human to a decaying machine and consequently having a miscarriage in the process. Ultimately, her existence is reduced to virtual reality only. “Vi” becomes a metal box, and Mark, who still loves and misses her, eventually gets used to her new form. Ironically, this new form of love seems to expand the limits of what entails being a human, as we demonstrate below. At the end of the play, with Vi’s mind stored inside a box, Mark resorts to augmentations himself to be able to interact with her in virtual reality. All of this takes place in a somewhat naturalistic setting, “*Somewhere rural. [...] A cottage feel*” (Gregg 2013: 9, italics in the original), according to the play’s opening stage directions.

As learnt in moments of exposition in the play, in their lives prior to their moving to this walled-off community, Vi and Mark had experienced the world in sharply different ways. Mark comes from a wealthy, intellectual family, while Vi comes from a working class family and is referred to by Mark’s relatives as “earthy” (Gregg 2013: 16). Mark, as heir to the tech-empire that first promoted the “fixes” and augmentations before then banning them once these technologies seemingly gave people too much power, believes in occupying a high moral ground when it comes to technologies in people’s bodies. “No hard tech in a soft body” (*ibid*: 28) was the slogan of one of the protests the couple went to before the banning of “fixes” and augmentations. Vi, on the other hand, is from the start conscious of the fragility inherent to any attempt to hold on to a definition of oneself as either/or human/machine, moral/immoral, right/wrong, thus setting the ground for the discussion of the dichotomy that is at the core of the either/or debate: the nature/culture one.

In this paper we aim to explore three possible readings of the play in connection with the current debates on the epoch of the Anthropocene. First, we contend that the technological societal disruption Gregg imagines can be associated with the disruptions of the Anthropocene, with climate change as its more prominent facet, in tandem with the sixth great extinction, air pollution, ocean acidification, and other anthropogenic effects that are equally worrying and terrifying. A second prominent aspect of *Override* is the play with the nature/culture dichotomy, which is at the heart of the instrumentalisation of nature and of bodies (human and nonhuman) that are othered in the relentless path toward progress. The third and final aspect we intend to analyse in this article is grief. Both Mark and Vi experience moments of grief for the people and the past they left behind before walling themselves off in, we will argue, a staged and thus only temporarily workable situation. In a similar way, in the Anthropocene, those who have the means might work out ways to distance themselves from the anthropogenic effects that are disrupting the natural and social realms of existence and experience, but grief is probable or, perhaps, inescapable.

The Anthropocene is the not-yet-official term to define the current geological epoch marked by the visible presence of the actions of humans on the “rock record” (Zalasiewicz

2008: 4), the rock strata that the geological sciences utilise in order to determine the transitions between eras, periods and epochs. In the Anthropocene, the human, this impossible-to-define category, transitions from biological being to geological agent (Chakrabarty 2009). The marks of human actions on this world lay on the chemical stratigraphic records in a way that is comparable to the most remarkable moments of the planet, such as when the meteor that is believed to have led the dinosaurs to extinction hit the Earth around 66 million years ago, or when the greatest volcanic eruptions released their might, and carbon dioxide, into the atmosphere.

Precisely *when* the Holocene¹ transitions into the Anthropocene is still under discussion. The Anthropocene Working Group of the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy has proposed that there are at least three possible “golden spikes” to consider. Each of them represents a moment when there was a significant enough change in the way humans undertook their actions across the globe – significant enough to leave its mark on the rocks, on the strata (Zalasiewicz *et al.* 2014: 5). The first of these moments is marked by the beginning of agricultural activities, when humans started to change the ways in which they used and transformed the land, which might date back to the Late Pleistocene (*ibid.* 3). The second possible boundary lies in the Industrial Revolution period, which brought about a true transformation in the way in which we started to burn fossil fuel to power the relentless industrialisation process that deeply disrupted both the natural world and the social spheres. About these two first possible golden spikes, Zalasiewicz *et al.* highlight that the events that unfolded in these two periods were remarkable enough to be considered, yet the evidence of these events on the strata is unevenly distributed around the globe.

The third and final possible spike is the “Great Acceleration” period, which starts on July 16, 1945, when, in Alamogordo, New Mexico, the first nuclear bomb was detonated. From this date to 1988, we humans detonated one bomb every 9.6 days. The fallout resulting from these explosions can be clearly identified in rock records. It is also from the mid-twentieth century on that we began to release ever more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, extensively use plastic and aluminium, cover the land with cement, and manipulate more resources than ever before to produce the lifestyle that was instituted in the Western world around the mid-twentieth century (Zalasiewicz *et al.* 2014: 4-5).

More than an epoch, the Anthropocene has become a hallmark of how disruptive, in material and subjective terms, our human endeavours can turn out to be. Although Gregg’s play is not about climate change or the sixth mass extinction, it tackles the grief that comes with the profound societal changes that our actions can lead to, changes that are both material and subjective. What has led us to name an epoch after ourselves could be, in a sense, our understanding of the misuses of technology. What justifies the detonation of more than two thousand atomic bombs on the surface and underground over the course of forty years? For the benefit of whom are war technologies developed and deployed? One of the most interesting aspects of Gregg’s play rests in the representation of characters who occupy both sides of this equation – one side being that of those who benefit from pushing war technologies forward, and the other is that of those who are subjected to them; and all in all, both are overtaken with grief. In the disrupted world the couple live in, nature and culture collide in ways that allow for the exploration of how this dichotomy provokes grief and a sense of nostalgia for a natural world that is no longer.

Yet another aspect to consider is the implications of the genre to which we suggest the play belongs, science fiction. As a sci-fi play, *Override* is inserted in a speculative terrain that ponders what is not *yet*, but the somewhat contemporary feel to the play, suggests that that *is*. Joanna Russ, drawing on Samuel R. Delaney’s distinctions between fiction, fantasy, and

¹ The Holocene is marked by stable weather, neither too warm nor an ice age, that allowed us to develop agriculture and to migrate across the globe.

science fiction, proposes that sci-fi is “about *what has not happened*” (1995: 16, italics in the original). Differently from fiction, in which a writer explores what has or could have happened in terms of plausibility; and from fantasy in that a writer contemplates what cannot happen according to the laws of physics, sci-fi belongs to the terrain of possibility, of things that have not happened yet, but whose possibilities are not yet discarded by our limited knowledge of what is indeed possible. A dystopia, which is often a subgenre of sci-fi, Russ puts forth, often involves what an author “hopes to prevent” (17). Bearing in mind Russ’s argument that the sci-fi² reader “judges the science-fictional-ness of what happens by what he himself knows of the actual world” (21), encountering a play like Gregg’s in a context of exponentially increased technological mediation, it sounds only plausible that very soon the technology we currently (and externally) rely on will come to inhabit our bodies. In many ways and for many people, it already does. This is ironically confirmed by the Author’s Note: “When we arrive in the play, the style might feel retro or bricolage, as though we could be in the 1960’s, or 1990’s, or an unplaceable [sic] contemporary space. As long as we do not feel are seeing something ‘futuristic’” (Gregg 2013: 8). Precisely because the play is not supposed to come across as “futuristic”, it becomes yet more disturbing.

A final parallel can be made with sci-fi and the Anthropocene and what the latter implies for the present and the future. In this new epoch, the human is no longer only a biological entity, but a geologic agent, and this new (and collective) understanding of oneself is bound to lead to a cognitive disconnect. As Dipesh Chakrabarty puts forward, “we can become geological agents only historically and collectively, that is, when we have reached numbers and invented technologies that are on a scale large enough to have an impact on the planet itself” (2009: 207). We are the result of the science fictions of the past. And Chakrabarty himself is suspicious of the exceedingly inclusive notion of “humankind” in its failure to explain who is the “human” behind the economic practices that has led us to become the driving geological force of the Anthropocene, or even which humans in which economies have contributed more or less to the predicament we find ourselves in. He advances the argument that the actions of humans that lead to global warming, “the burning of fossil fuel, industrialization of animal stock, the clearing of tropical and other forests, and so on” (216), are not isolated events, but are deeply rooted in what has become of Western capitalism and its “imperial or quasi-imperial domination by the West of the rest of the world” (216). In *Override*, one witnesses (1) a critique of the economic paradigm which drives the consumption of a technology to the point where people lose sight of the effects of their actions, (2) the process of cognitive disconnect (as is the case with Mark who cannot truly understand the impact of his family’s technology business), and (3) the examination of the human as a (far from) universalizing category. Vi, in embodying the cyborg who destabilises Mark’s understanding of what a human is, calls attention to the cognitive disconnect we have long been suffering from, in seeing ourselves, humans, as disconnected from nature, the hallmark of the nature/culture dichotomy.

The Anthropocene and the Cyborg in the Room, or When the Cyborg Disturbs the Stage(d) Life

Given that the context Gregg explores is highly technological, one might presume that the story takes place in the future, as we are somehow always expecting the future to be ever more technological than it is at present. As mentioned, the stage directions, however, instruct theatre practitioners and readers that the setting should be designed to be ambiguous; it could lean into the 1960s or 1990s, but it should not be “futuristic”. Technology-inspired decor in a society that is striving toward technological advancement is not something new, of course. Futurism

² We use this form here instead of SF to set it apart from Donna Haraway’s SF articulations which will be briefly addressed below.

came hand in hand with the space race – or “Star Wars apocalypse”, as Donna Haraway (2016a) puts it – that marked the post-war and Cold War period. The nostalgia in the setting of Gregg’s play is therefore telling of an anxiety over the extreme, almost invisible integration of technology with everyday life, to the point of Vi being able to pass as a tech-free body in a community of purists. Susan Sontag explores this anxiety already in 1965, in the essay “One Culture and the New Sensibility”, where she questions the effects of science and technology in the arts, in fact calling out on the ineffective tendency to see these two realms as in conflict. The essay was actually meant to criticise the excessive distinctions between high and low culture, somewhat attacking the conception of the literary arts as supreme, but the assumption she tackles was that technology moved forward, “progressed,” while the arts remained static. She was also criticising the expectation that technology, in representing the new, the “low,” had to be somehow shunned by the purist realms of the arts. The arts and sciences, of course, bleed into and inform each other. Sontag cites Marshal McLuhan to expose the following:

[McLuhan] has described human history as a succession of acts of technological extension of human capacity, each of which works a radical change upon our environment and our ways of thinking, feeling, and valuing. The tendency, he remarks, is to upgrade the old environment into art form (thus Nature became a vessel of aesthetic and spiritual values in the new industrial environment) “while the new conditions are regarded as corrupt and degrading.” Typically, it is only certain artists in any given era who “have the resources and temerity to live in immediate contact with the environment of their age...” That is why they may seem to be “ahead of their time”... More timid people prefer to accept the...previous environment’s values as the continuing reality of their time. Our natural bias is to accept the new gimmick (automation, say) as a thing that can be accommodated in the old ethical order. (Sontag 2018: 46)

Sontag highlights that, with the “old ethical order” that McLuhan has in mind, technology and the arts appear to be truly at odds. Those who can see the world for what it is and not for what it was or “ought” to be (although there are more than a dozen post-structural arguments as to why the former is as impossible as the latter) can, she reasons, find powerful ways to integrate both high and low, the scientific and the artistic, and thus inhabit the unsettling position of not being either/or.

The stage directions reveal this high/low and either/or impulse, and especially on Mark’s part there is an urge to oversimplify, to preclude complex ideas from co-existing in the first place, and Vi, one could say, is at the receiving end of this epistemic violence. While it reads that the rural, cottage-like house offers “[e]vidence of someone who considers themselves cultured,” since there is a “classic print on the wall, and a small, ornamental collection of serious-looking books,” the music that is playing on the background is described as “bad pop music” (Gregg 2013: 9). Mark considers himself the cultured one and is the said “purist” between them, but, nonetheless, he is precisely the one who does not read the serious-looking books and whose high moral standing is detached from the social implications of the technologies he and his family made their fortune on.

Although we will not be analysing any productions of *Override* here, the ambiguity of the setting as proposed in the stage directions vis-à-vis the contrast between the dialogues and the action in the play adds to the growing sense that nothing that is material on the stage in is a representation of the world as it is – all is fabricated, nostalgia, simulacra. The style of the furniture belongs to a time that cannot be defined, the chirping birds are a recording, the plants are not real, and the tech-free environment is an illusion; at the couple’s command, things are turned on and off. This corresponds to Baudrillard’s first order of simulacra, which entails those “that are natural, naturalist, founded on the image, on imitation and counterfeit, that are harmonious, optimistic and that aim for the restitution or ideal institution of nature made in

God's image" (2004: 121). In fact, the play begins tethered to the first order of simulacra and ends tethered to the third, the "simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game – total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control" (Baudrillard 2004: 121). The second order, on the other hand, are representations that do not aim to point to the real but give an indication of the original sign's lack of capability of representing reality in the first place. That can be seen, for instance, when Vi becomes a metal box – she is obviously not human then, but what is the human in the first place? That is one of the questions Gregg leaves us to dwell on.

Vi and Mark live in an off-the-grid, protected, fabricated space for those who have the financial means to escape an increasingly technology-based society, and one could understand this as the world being a stage for some, but only some, to play on; where the rules of reality do not apply, or are not constricted by one's buying power. The world Vi and Mark live in is tied to an ideal of utopia which quickly reveals its dystopian qualities in that the simulacra that is supposed to mirror nature in God's image steadily turns to paranoia and hyperreality. Second, they live in a world where one can no longer know for sure who is "only" human and not human/machine, which reveals both (1) how fragile and performative our understanding of the notion of human can be, and (2) the theatricality of having the power (social, financial, privilege-based) to manufacture an alternative world when the world itself fails to please. In *Override*, the technology that is imposed on the masses becomes yet another exclusion mechanism, and those with the means stage a life to their liking, but in Vi and Mark's case, it certainly is not redemptive.

Pretending to be as neo-luddite as her husband, Vi somehow eludes the screening process all those who live in this technology-averse getaway must go through before moving in. The truth about her, however, starts to surface when the pregnant woman and her partner's apparently idyllic life is interrupted by Vi's mother's death and the subsequent bureaucratic difficulties that it generates. The play begins with Mark and Vi going through the details about Vi's mother's digital assets, and it is important to note that the Vi we are first introduced to has dirt on her hands because she is potting plants. Slowly she begins to open up about her augmentations, gauging the extent to which Mark can take it. The discussion between the two concerns the extent of their "humanity". Ironically, Mark, who has not been augmented in any way (or so he thinks), is described in the stage directions as almost robotic: "[h]e is particular. He doesn't slouch. He likes his cutlery clean and his underwear folded" (Gregg 2013: 9), and the reader soon gathers that he also lacks sense of humour and spontaneity. Vi, on the other hand, is wild. There is no fidelity to whatever subject they are discussing, she moves freely from subject to subject and is not interested in allowing Mark to pin her down as either heroic or heretic. In the stage directions, she is described as "slapdash. Sensual. She opens things in shops to smell them, even when they aren't testers. She guesstimates ingredients when cooking" (9).

In the play's author's notes, Gregg lists the references that intellectually guided her conceptions for writing the play. Among them is Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," first published in 1985. In the manifesto, Haraway imagines the ways in which technologies and the sciences have already affected us so deeply that we are already cyborgs, or perhaps we should be if we are to engage creatively with the SF world in which we are already living. The SF acronym is one part of Haraway's more recent formulations and stands for "science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far," among other things (2016b: 2). The formulations tethered to the SF acronym are the continuation of her propositions on the cyborg theory, the companion species one, and the more recent articulations on "making kin," or making *oddkin*, which involves recognising and establishing connections across the biotic and abiotic communities with which we are surrounded.

The stories we tell, Haraway proposes, matter (2016b: 118). They matter in the sense that they make a difference and they make matter; they are the raw material of world-building practices. There are many parallels between Sontag's essay (2018, first published in 1965) and Haraway's *Manifesto* (1986), but we will briefly focus here on the figure of the cyborg to explore how it connects with Vi's understanding that we are both "a splat of neurons" (Gregg 2013: 27) and beings that can allow for science and technology, as well as feminism and choice, to form potent subjectivities that one can then use to articulate empowering kinships among humans, nonhumans and the natural world.

Haraway's cyborg articulations were first published in 1985, at a time when science and technology, as well as feminist theory and practice and post-structuralist theory were disturbing the only apparently firm grounds the intellectual world was laid on. Haraway put feminism, feminist subjectivities, science and technology, and storytelling technologies at the forefront of social change. The hybrid subject can utilise their power to displace the binaries on which Western knowledge stands. They are cyborg-like in the sense that they hold different, sometimes contradictory and therefore powerful subjectivities, and establish kinship with those not of their kind. The cyborg that Haraway imagined still holds considerable sway in feminist scholarship and practice and is a concept and articulation that is recurrently invoked to work out ways in which one can subvert the hierarchical narratives that produce and reproduce inequalities based on gender, ability, race, class, and species.

Haraway defines the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (2016a: 5). At the height of post-structuralist theorisations, she laid the foundation for new materialism in claiming that our cyborg identities allow us to be both: discourse and matter. The lure of science and technology, Haraway identifies, is inescapable. With the current sublimation of our minds onto devices, her words, as well as her invitation for us to give in to the confusion of boundaries (physical-quantum, human-animal, human-machine), sound almost prophetic. Gregg, in portraying Vi as a human-machine who is more "humane" than Mark, who only at the very end of the play yields and resorts to augmentations in order to meet Vi in the virtual world, is tapping into at least one of the potentialities of the cyborg, that of the potent subjectivity and political power that comes from, as Haraway herself puts it, engaging in "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (2016a: 14). The Star Wars race, which refers to the nuclear threat of the Cold War, as well as the space race that involved dominating the satellite and war technology that first had to occupy the skies and then our bodies, is one of these subjectivities, and it is also, she ponders, "the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war" (2016a: 15). It is extremely relevant that, in overriding Vi's augmentation settings without her consent, Mark kills precisely the part of Vi he most wanted alive, thus enforcing the masculinist paradigm of mind over body. In the end, ironically, he is left only with the cyborg.

This potent subjectivity is also empowered by embracing the technology that the cyborg also (but not exclusively) stands for, one in which "people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway 2016a: 15). This is very much in keeping with Haraway's current articulation, or invitation, for us to "stay with the trouble" and "inhabit the belly of the monster" (2016a: 15), nodding to the recognition that no way out of the current climate-change, sixth extinction and related issues mess we find ourselves in will be possible within a "purist" political project. In fact, in Haraway's *oeuvre*, she repeatedly underlines the inevitability of human and nonhuman collaborations, putting forth that "[n]o species, not even our own arrogant one pretending to be good individuals in so-called modern Western scripts, acts alone," adding that "assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too" (2015: 159). When Vi finds no fault in her humanity even when

the technology she carries is life-sustaining, she is reaffirming the many varieties in interpretation of what a human consists of, the different engagements one can make with biological and nonbiological entities, and the potent subjectivity that comes with being able to see what others cannot.

Vi is evidently more clear-sighted than Mark when it comes to grasping the complexity of what consists a human. Firstly, she has grown up among those with the disabilities that once were instrumental to advance the technology that is now banned. Secondly, she has witnessed Mark's and his parents' cognitive disconnect to the effects of the technologies they sold and then prohibited. As a person who has undergone fixes and augmentations, she would now be "done for Contempt of Flesh" (Gregg 2013: 26). "You *could* understand," Vi tells Mark, "[b]ut you – but you only ever access things you already think – just a big bloody echo chamber here," she adds (Gregg 2013: 27), and points to the closest objects that could help him work on expanding his view: the books on the shelves; books that are decorative for him and tools of engagement with other worlds for her. Finally, in being also a cyborg and having been able to pass as "purely" human for so long, Violet also makes evident the performative nature of being human, adding yet another element to the meta-theatricality of *Override* itself.

Will You Be My Nature?

In Barbara Kruger's famous *We won't play nature to your culture* (1983) portrait, where a woman lies on the grass, her eyes covered with leaves and the saying "we won't play nature to your culture" written over the photograph, one is introduced to a rebuttal of the notion that women are construed in patriarchal settings as belonging to the realm of nature and body while men belong to the realm of culture and mind. In *Override*, Vi finds herself in a similar position, that of a woman insisting on not allowing a convenient patriarchal construction to inscribe her body with a limited understanding of nature – and of culture, for that matter. Nature as a category has been a site of heated debate in feminism. In Stacy Alaimo's analysis of Kruger's art, she points out that, generally, in the Western tradition, nature has been called upon "to define and denigrate the female half of the human species" (2016: 530), particularly in two ways. In the first, nature is understood as a type of essentialism, a determining quality that explains or is inherent to a people or a group of people and things. Alaimo calls attention to how intentional this has been, as it "segregates the social and economic forces in such a way as to preclude the question of whether the supposed 'nature' of particular social groups has been fashioned precisely in order to justify or fortify the oppression of those groups" (530). As outdated as this notion may seem, the ongoing feminist and critical race struggles demonstrate that this misconception is far from over. The second problematic conception of nature is the one in which humans and culture are removed from it, giving rise to the way Western thinking organises its epistemologies.

Override tackles the idealised relationship we have with nature. That can be perceived, for instance, in Mark and Vi's wanting to live an "authentic" rural experience in an environment that is completely designed to make it look like just that; in the pushing of boundaries in relation to what it means to be human; and in the burdensome economic structure that dictates how the most vulnerable will serve the economic paradigm, consume at its command, and how it will affect them. *Override* addresses the creation and stabilisation of a narrative that decides who are the outcasts, the freaks, the disposable ones when problems arise as a result of decisions made (and sometimes imposed on others) by those in power. The most vulnerable ones are firstly the guinea pigs of tech companies, and subsequently they become targets of the government, which in turn bans what was once sold as a solution. In this war technology, people with disabilities are doubly stigmatised as they are first used by tech companies to test their products, and are later officially persecuted by the government.

At first, the fixes and augmentations are aimed at eradicating certain disabilities, what Vi blatantly defines as eugenics, but soon they are turned into products that are sold as “the *best* cosmetics”, Vi remarks (Gregg 2013: 26, italics in the original). As Mark refuses to see things from her perspective, from the perspective of the less privileged, she asks “[w]ould you stand back while other people’s kids got better chances?” (26). Vi attacks the nature/culture dichotomy by stressing how enhanced, fixed, and augmented we have always been, whether technologically or socially, dismantling the illusion of a supposed original purity or of the deprived quality of culture. “Getting your teeth straightened, glasses, vaccines – we’ve always enhanced,” Vi says, to which Mark responds that these things are done for medical reasons, and not in order to “pimp ourselves up” (28). The line which Mark draws is an internal convention, not a necessity. He is attempting to establish where nature ends and culture (or technology, rather) starts. To Vi, we are already mechanical bits added together to form the illusion of a self-important being (or hierarchically superior to other beings), as when she argues that humans are all but a splat of neurons, “we’re not special. People make mistakes, die. We’re juice and carbon” (27). When Mark projects his ideals onto Vi, she responds with Kruger’s injunction: she will not play nature to Mark’s culture, and goes further by exposing the limitations of Mark’s perspective.

Considering Kruger’s portrait again, it is ironic that Vi ends the play as a bodiless “mind”. She loses her body, but not her mind. Thus, the cyborg Vi embodies challenges the logic of the nature/culture dichotomy in making her inhabit the realm that has traditionally been associated with the masculine. As pointed out, from the start of the play, Vi is portrayed as “earthy”; she literally has hands dirty with earth from working the garden.

Even though Mark attempts to separate her from nature, she insists on this connection, on seeing it in a positive, non-essentialist light. She is not exploring ideas that are not tethered to life on earth, she wants it all – life, life in all its complexity and messiness, life without the promise of clear-cut borders and definitions. She wants to engage with the sensorial and the virtual. She smells things, she moves her body to music, allowing it to penetrate her, she dives into books, she feels and wants to know what others *feel*. She is fearless, feral. Nature at its best, non-essentialist. She is earthy in the sense that her mind does not disconnect from the social and economic issues that are in place, nor from the war technologies and paradigms that produced the world as they see it now, and flee from. She is earthy in the sense that she acknowledges the impact of the stories we tell in the creation of a world as it is. She is connected to the debates that Mark precludes. She is not highbrow or lowbrow; she is no-brow, non-essentialist, non-idealist. She does not elevate the human (“we’re just a splat of neurons”; “juice and carbon”, Gregg 2013: 27), nor does she dismiss it. For Vi, the type of technology one engages with does not disqualify anyone.

Conclusion: Working Through Grief/Ecogrief

Grief is one of the leitmotifs of the Anthropocene. The perspective that some of the changes which humans have produced in the biosphere are already irreversible is part of the problem,³ as well as the reality of feeling powerless before an economic paradigm that does not show signs of slowing down. Haraway (2016b) also addresses the concept of and fact of grief in this epoch. Grief, she suggests, “is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying; human beings must grief *with*, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing” (42) (original emphasis). The “undoing” here, we understand, is part of the work of coming to terms with

³ According to the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report’s “Summary for Policymakers,” which was released to the public on August 7, 2021, “Many changes due to past and future greenhouse gas emissions are irreversible for centuries to millennia, especially changes in the ocean, ice sheets and global sea level” (29).

what is and assessing where and how change might be possible. In the play, Vi and Mark spend most of their time in mourning, in grief. Vi loses her mother, whom she had not seen since they moved to the walled-off community, three years before. Vi and Mark lose, in a sense, the world beyond the boundaries of the community. Both lose a much-desired baby. Mark loses his naiveté in learning about Vi's procedures, and he loses Vi herself, in a sense. In a moment of exposition in the play, we also learn that Mark had already lost a part of his self-narrative when his father nonchalantly reveals his being a "selected" baby, a baby whose genes were curated for quality. And finally, Vi loses her own body.

When the couple begins to disclose what had been secrets until then, there is a growing sense of grief, but there is also a sense of relief in being able to finally speak the truth, each from their own perspective. Up until the moment when Vi starts speaking out about how those she had a close relation with were sold the fixes and augmentations in a way that made them believe they would then have a shot at social mobility, the impression one gets is that Vi had been accommodating to Mark's beliefs. She, in the manner of the staged life they were living in the isolated community that emulates a rural, yet comfortable life, had been staging an act for herself and Mark. She had posed as the protester Mark had wanted her to be, she had fiercely rejected hard tech in soft bodies although she herself had life-sustaining technologies in her body. As Vi peels off the layers of lies by slowly revealing the extent to which she and her family had been worked on, not even the performativity of the repetition of the word happy produces the happiness effect she is working to convey to herself and to Mark. She says, "I'm happy here. I'm happy" (Gregg 2013: 21), and in a few moments she is ranting about how none of what surrounds them is the "real" Mark wishes for so fervently. The plants are not real, Vi remarks, and we learn that not even the birdsongs are real. At Mark's commands in the middle of their discussion, the chirping stops, and as he commands the override of Violet's implants (without her consent, as mentioned previously), he reveals he is the Administrator. At his gesture, the birdsong resumes.

Although Mark is ultimately in charge and in control of Vi's undoing, he dissociates himself from the result of his actions. For Chakrabarty (2009), there is a cognitive disconnect between the human of the Anthropocene, the human as a geological agent, and the singular human who cannot see the larger effects of their actions. This disconnect shows in the play as no one is accounted for the doom of the humans who have been experimented with; the ones responsible do not see themselves as playing a part in the unravelling of the doom in the first place. In this setup, one could read Vi as the Anthropocene, as she is the outcome of the pressures and oppressions of an economic system. Mark cannot see the part he plays/has played in Vi's doom, only seeing himself as the one who overrides her commands; he is not held accountable for actually being the one who created her in the first place. At the end, when Mark resorts to the implant that allows him to interact with Vi in virtual reality, he is committing to what is not yet lost. In the Anthropocene, with irreversible changes already apparent, perhaps we could do the same.

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