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AFTERWORD



Expandability and expendability: reading the sacrifice zone

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ABSTRACT

The ‘sacrifice zone’ as a concept and a form pervades contemporary literature and literary studies. The sacrifice zone is premised on expendability, on the idea that one part can be expended for the good of another, and yet, in the waning days of the Great Acceleration, expendability has proven to be remarkably expandable and the zone of sacrifice seems only to grow. At its heart, the sacrifice zone is a relational concept: it names a relation between the human and non-human world and among different human societies under various colonial regimes, a relation that has been fundamental to capitalist extractivism. The remainders of extractivism pervade our modes of perception, our bodies, and our ways of knowing, and in this sense the sacrifice zone is the medium of modern literature as well as of modern life itself. Undoing habits of simplification, diminishment, objectification, separation, and unidirectionality, and instead building habits for recognizing complexity, interdependency, immersiveness, and reciprocity, contemporary literature and art can be forces for repair in the face of the sacrifice zone.

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Gillian Clarke’s poem ‘Silent’ (2017), discussed in Liliane Campos’s contribution to this issue, presents glass as a material medium of perception in a museum display that the speaker imagines passing through, while Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* (1938), treated in Louis van den Hengel’s article, presents glass as a toxic remainder of capitalist extractivism and environmental racism – the silica that poisoned and killed hundreds of workers in the Hawks Nest Tunnel tragedy in West Virginia. Transparent, crystalline, glass is a figure in both poems for that which we cannot see or do not see but whose materiality nevertheless shapes our bodies, perception, and awareness. Clarke imagines humans passing through the glass of the museum, like Alice through the looking glass, going from spectator to specimen and becoming silent along the way. Rukeyser imagines the glass passing into the miners’ lungs, leading to acute silicosis, and she presents a

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contrast between the glass's imaginary transformation into value and its actual, material transformation of the workers' bodies. Together the poems and these essays' readings of the poems suggest how the concept of the sacrifice zone forces a recognition of the complex interrelationality of human and non-human, living and non-living in our earthly environment. As Stacey Alaimo writes in her own reading of *The Book of the Dead*, 'the glass, which is a medium for seeing and knowing, is itself the material ... that is to be seen. An immersed, rather than transcendent, epistemology materialises.'¹ The idea of an immersed epistemology as opposed to a distanced one appears frequently in the essays that make up this issue, expressing the authors' overriding conviction that there is no way to separate ourselves from the world's waters in which we swim. Extractivism's remainders pervade our modes of perception, our bodies, our ways of knowing, even when we cannot see them and even when they seem transparent. The sacrifice zone is thus the medium of modern literature as well as of modern life itself.

This special issue considers the form of the 'sacrifice zone' and its complex meanings in contemporary literature and literary studies. The sacrifice zone is premised on expendability, on the idea that one part can be expended for the good of another, and yet, in the waning days of the Great Acceleration, expendability has proven to be remarkably expandable and the zone of sacrifice seems only to grow. The relentless expansion of capitalist markets carries the shadow of expendability with it as it goes. At its heart, the sacrifice zone is a relational concept: it names a relation between the human and non-human world and between different human societies under various colonial regimes, a relation that has been fundamental to capitalist extractivism. In the same way that Jason Moore considers capitalism a world ecology, the sacrifice zone, too, is a form of ecological relation that pervades capitalist and colonialist ways of organising nature.² In this relationship, the dynamic lifeworlds of one place are 'sacrificed' for a good that redounds elsewhere. The term 'sacrifice' suggests that by concentrating ruin at one site, other places may be saved; it suggests a one-sided environmental bargain that enables plentitude in one place while impoverishing another. The injustice of this 'spatial violence,' as Ben De Bruyn describes it in the special issue's introduction, is bad enough. But as the following essays show, it is also the case that we *cannot* sacrifice one part for another since all nature's parts hangs together. As Naomi Klein writes, in the era of climate change, 'we are all in the sacrifice zone now.'³

The term 'sacrifice zone' has a complex origin. Most of the critics in this issue rely on Naomi Klein or David Farrier for their definitions of it, and certainly Klein brought the term into prominent usage among environmentalists and environmental humanists with her book *This Changes Everything*. Here she influentially defined sacrifice zones as 'condemned places' and 'ravaged landscapes' where exist 'whole subsets of humanity categorised as

less than fully human, which made their poisoning in the name of progress somehow acceptable.⁴ The term predates Klein, however, and can be found in twentieth-century discussions of mining, ranching, and other extractivist practices and their effects on the land. The oldest use of the term ‘sacrifice zone’ that I have found is in A. K. Valentine’s 1947 article in the *Journal of Forestry*, ‘Distance from Water as a Factor in Grazing Capacity of Rangeland,’ which differentiates between the ‘key zone’ and the ‘sacrifice zone’ on rangeland.⁵ Valentine’s work was cited in another early published instance of the term: a 1974 paper titled ‘Effects of Past Grazing in Determining Range Management Principles in Australia,’ written by J. C. Newman and published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Both Newman and Valentine are invested in identifying management practices that will maximise the yield of pasture land in the social context of meat-based diets; in their analyses, ‘sacrifice zone’ is thus a neutral phrase, not a critical one, referring to ‘the area immediately surrounding a watering point or other point of livestock concentration ... subject to gross overuse by trampling.’⁶

After 1974, however, the term came to be used in academic and journalistic articles to refer to landscapes ruined by mining rather than pasture. A 1975 article in the *Washington Post* about the rise of coal strip-mining in the Western U.S., for example, describes how a National Academy of Sciences report ‘unwittingly touched off a verbal bombshell’ by maintaining that certain sites ‘must be given up as impossible to reclaim or even rehabilitate, and for these hopeless areas ... it coined the term “National Sacrifice Area.”’⁷ From this point on, ‘sacrifice zone’ was most commonly used to describe environments damaged or ruined by destructive mining practices. Julia Fox, for example, published ‘Mountaintop Removal in West Virginia: An Environmental Sacrifice Zone’ in *Organization & Environment* in June 1999, writing that all of ‘West Virginia is thus being turned into an environmental-sacrifice zone’ by destructive coal-mining techniques such as mountaintop removal.⁸ Likewise, a 1998 article by Dan I. Bolef titled ‘Yukon, Pennsylvania: An Environmental Sacrifice Zone’ and published in *Legal Studies Forum* focused on the area around Yukon, which had been ‘extensively strip- and deep-mined for coal’ and whose ‘abandoned coal mines ... have leaked extensively, contaminating the ground water and a nearby stream.’⁹

In recent decades, as De Bruyn writes in his introduction to this issue, a wide range of contemporary literature has focused on responding to both ‘the violent legacies and new articulations of extractive capitalism.’¹⁰ In this special issue, critical engagements with literature and the sacrifice zone resonate with the term’s longer history by extending the domain of the sacrifice zone into multiple locales – mines and mountains, but also labs, oceans, museums, cities, and zoos. As De Bruyn writes in the introduction, these articles ‘draw attention to sites and practices that do not fit the standard definition of the sacrifice zone but nonetheless exhibit parallel

trade-offs.’ In this way the articles’ authors expand the idea of the sacrifice zone and suggest it can be found in every place touched by current environmental crisis or by the Cartesian divide (Moore’s term for the human/nature binary) – which means, in fact, every place. Still, there is productive tension across the essays as to the precise meanings of the ‘sacrifice zone’ and the question of whether it is the best term for what it describes. Brigitte Adriaensen, for example, notes that ‘from the perspective of Latin American studies, the concept of the “sacrifice zone” is hard to dissociate from what has been called “extractivism,”’ and she sometimes opts to use the compound phrase ‘sacrifice/extractivist region.’¹¹ Other critics likewise put the idea of the sacrifice zone in dialogue with Macarena Gómez-Barris’s term ‘the extractive zone,’ peeling apart their differences and asking which phrase is most fruitful.¹² Jilt Jorritsma considers ‘the extractive zone’ to be more overtly decolonial, for example, and Jorritsma also offers ‘deadzone’ as a parallel term to ‘sacrifice zone,’ since both suggest an apparently irrevocable environmental disruption. A sacrifice zone need not actually be ‘dead,’ however, as Adriaensen reminds us in her discussion of the plantation as sacrifice zone; here deforestation and biodiversity loss are the price paid for prolific monocultural growth, and growth itself can be understood as a kind of death.

The question of repair is clearly a central one for this issue, for while ‘sacrifice zone’ suggests a region in many ways beyond restoration – ‘impossible to reclaim or even rehabilitate’ as the National Academy of Sciences put it – ‘extractive zone’ is not necessarily so permanent. As Adriaensen writes, for example, Gómez-Barris’s book ‘proposes to focus not only on destruction and despair within the extractive zone, but also on hope.’ ‘Sacrifice’ implies death, absence, and silence, while ‘extractive’ leaves room for repair or the growth of something new altogether, or even for ‘pockets of utopian energy and resistance’ such as De Bruyn describes in his introduction. Perhaps the distinction between ‘sacrifice zone’ and ‘extractive zone’ is, in some cases, a matter of the timescale of repair, for some landscapes and ecosystems may be regenerable only on timescales that dwarf the human lifespan. These are the kind of vast stretches of time that literature can help us imagine and envision, as van den Hengel suggests of Rukeyser, whose poetry ‘connects the disparate scales of geological time and intimate, bodily experience.’¹³ Or perhaps the distinction between ‘sacrifice zone’ and ‘extractive zone’ can be determined only retrospectively: some critics in this issue, for example, focus on what Campos calls ‘sacrifice zones in the making’ (the ocean, in the case of Campos’s essay). Here the possibility of repair is not yet lost, but destruction is ongoing and worsening.

Consideration of repair leads to consideration of preservation and to the question of what can be salvaged from amidst such destruction. Kári Driscoll, focusing on the proliferation of zoo-break narratives in the context of the Anthropocene, writes that ‘zoos generally conceive of themselves as “arks”

committed to the preservation of species threatened with extinction, often by the very processes of extraction, contamination, and depredation that typify the sacrifice zone.¹⁴ While this may seem to suggest that zoos and sacrifice zones are antithetical, Driscoll finds that the same sacrificial logic governs both spaces, a logic that aims at ‘the production of certain subjects, certain forms of life, whose value and meaning can only be guaranteed at the expense of others.’ In the wake of extinction, in other words, the zoo will be ‘a space in which life is preserved only by virtue of being excluded, or removed, from its natural surroundings.’ Campos’s account of the museum similarly suggests that many preservation-minded projects fail to keep alive what is lost in the sacrifice zone, or at best keep the lost alive in a haunted, undead form. The museum, Campos says, is ‘haunted by the zones it has depleted.’¹⁵ The same might be said of zoos. Jorritsma is also interested in the idea of the haunted sacrifice zone, a space that uncannily preserves the specters and memories of that which has been destroyed. Reading fiction about large urban zones in danger of abandonment under future sea level rise, Jorritsma finds a kind of proleptic haunting, where ‘the abandonment of urban areas in anticipation of climate change constitutes a kind of ghosting, in a Derridean, hauntological sense of the word.’¹⁶ The work of Anthropocene imaginaries in contemporary fiction, Jorritsma says, is to ‘draw our attention to these ghosted worlds.’

Beyond questions of repair and preservation, the essays in this issue also grapple with the one-sidedness of the concept of the ‘sacrifice zone,’ the sense in which the term creates a wholesale binary between environmental agency and environmental victimhood by denying the potential for regeneration or repair in a despoiled place. Some critics choose to use the term ‘contact zone’ to present a somewhat more evenhanded field of exchange – not to deny the destructive force of colonial powers in, for example, an overseas extractive operation, but rather to demonstrate some regard for the agency of colonised peoples subject to extractive schemes or for the independent workings of the natural world. Focusing on animals, for example, Driscoll advocates for a ‘contact perspective’ attentive to human and non-human entanglements and for a reading practice that refuses ‘the instrumentalising, extractivist logic of ... sacrifice zones’ and instead ‘stays with the trouble of the contact zones that surround us.’ In their essay, Shannon Lambert and Marco Caracciolo use ‘contact zone’ as well as ‘sacrifice zone’ to describe the ambiguous space of the scientific lab, while also considering the potential bidirectionality of the word ‘sacrifice’ itself. They note that ‘the semantic layering of the word “sacrifice,”’ when used in the context of the scientific lab, invokes a relation that ‘departs from the unidirectional nature of capitalist depletion.’ With its religious overtones, the word suggests a ‘recognition of emotional entanglement across the human-animal divide.’¹⁷ While the problem with ‘sacrificial discourse’ in the lab context is that it ‘ultimately affirms an allegedly superior, and inherently anthropocentric, value,’ the

authors suggest that contemporary literature set in the lab brings out a recognition of this entanglement in scientifically-driven animal sacrifice and can even recast this relation imaginatively from the animal's point of view. In this way sacrificial discourse 'acknowledge[es] that something valuable (perhaps even a part of ourselves) is lost when a lab animal is "sacrificed,"' contrary to common assumptions about scientific objectivity.

A question at work across the essays is how literature can challenge such entrenched ideas about scientific objectivity, especially the assumption that knowledge is visually-mediated, and, relatedly, how literature can contribute to new ways of thinking that promote environmental flourishing rather than sacrifice. Both Lambert and Caracciolo's essay and Campos's essay, for example, consider the different ways that touch can produce other kinds of knowledge about the world, less distanced than vision, and Campos's essay explores how work by Gillian Clarke, Jane Robinson, and Kathleen Jamie develops 'a poetics of touch' to contrast the visually-dominant experience of the museum display. Such concerns connect to the essays' broader set of interests in an immersive epistemology, for touch, as Lambert and Caracciolo write, is a more reciprocal sense than vision. 'We can see without being seen,' but the same cannot be said for touch.

If touch, and the literature of touch, is one mode or gesture of repair in the time of the sacrifice zone, the essays in this special issue also discuss other ways that literature and art can cultivate an awareness of and respect for the complexity and interdependence of the natural world. For example, van den Hengel describes the 'simultaneously disruptive and worldmaking' power of art, while Shannon Lambert and Marco Caracciolo examine the 'imaginative work' that literature does through its formal devices, stylistic cues, and narrative devices. They argue that 'sacrifice zones become full-fledged contact zones when they are experienced through modes of perception that bring out human-nonhuman interconnectedness.' Campos, too, focuses on the 'work' of literature, which in this case is to 'undo the transparency' of the museum exhibit and 'reveal the slippery entanglements of the Anthropocene.' Driscoll, meanwhile, calls for 'an ethics of reading' that resists the logic and assumptions of the sacrifice zone and its accompanying ideas of the more-than-human world. Whether laying emphasis on the critic's methods of reading or on the 'work' of the texts themselves, all of these essays focus on literature and art's aesthetic capacity to remake the world by remaking the way we perceive and understand the world. 'Poetic and narrative resources,' as De Bruyn writes in the introduction, are resources that do not 'simplify and diminish the world but rather [reveal] its multidimensional vitality.' Undoing habits of simplification, diminishment, objectification, separation, and unidirectionality, and instead building habits for recognising complexity, interdependency, immersiveness, and reciprocity, contemporary literature can be a force for repair in the face of

the sacrifice zone, as the essays in this collection, focused on a variety of genres, texts, and authors, all demonstrate. As Michael Taussig writes of his work, *My Cocaine Museum*, which is quoted in Adriaensen's essay, 'This is my magic and this is why we write ... spells, hundreds and thousands of spells, intended to break the catastrophic spell of things.'

Notes

1. Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Indiana UP, 2010), p. 52.
2. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).
3. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything* (London: Penguin, 2015), p. 315.
4. *Ibid.*, 310.
5. K. A. Valentine, 'Distance from Water as a Factor in Grazing Capacity of Rangeland', *Journal of Forestry* 45.10 (October 1947), p. 752.
6. J. C. Newman, 'Effects of Past Grazing in Determining Range Management Principles in Australia', Paper No. 18 in *Plant Morphogenesis as the Basis for Scientific Management of Range Resources: Proceedings of the Workshop of the United States - Australia Rangelands Panel*, Coordinated by Kermit W. Kreitlow and Richard H. Hart, Agricultural Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974): 203.
7. Helena Huntingdon Smith, 'The Wringing of the West', *Washington Post*, (16 February 1975), p. 36.
8. Julia Fox, 'Mountaintop Removal in West Virginia: An Environmental Sacrifice Zone', *Organization & Environment*, 12.2 (June 1999), p. 165.
9. Dan I. Bolef, 'Yukon, Pennsylvania: An Environmental Sacrifice Zone', *Legal Studies Forum*, 22 (1998), p. 489.
10. Ben De Bruyn, 'Introduction: Beyond the Sacrifice Zone', available in this issue.
11. Brigitte Adriaensen, 'Gold, cocaine, montage: Latin American sacrifice zones in Michael Taussig's *My Cocaine Museum*', available in this issue.
12. Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Duke UP, 2017).
13. Louis van den Hengel, 'Love in the sacrifice zone: queer eco-poetics in the Appalachian Mountains', available in this issue.
14. Kári Driscoll, 'World, War, Zoo: Zoo-break Narratives in a Biopolitical Frame', available in this issue.
15. Liliane Campos, 'Grasping extinction: The natural history museum as haptic space in the work of Clarke, Robinson and Jamie', available in this issue.
16. Jilt Jorritsma, 'Ghosts in the urban sacrifice zone: (De)colonial relationality in Global North imaginaries', available in this issue.
17. Shannon Lambert and Marco Caracciolo, 'The Scientific Lab: Sacrifice Zones as Contact Zones', available in this issue.

Disclosure statement

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