Neohelicon (2020) 47:27–39
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-020-00519-0

Corporeality, hyper-consciousness, and the Anthropocene ecoGothic: slime and ecophobia

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Published online: 3 February 2020

Abstract
The centrality of slime to corporeal theory can hardly be overstated, and phobic responses to slime belie both the exceptionalism we claim as our birthright, on the one hand, and the realities of our bodily existence and experiences on the other. Slime threatens and enables our sense of corporeal identity; triggers horror and disgust (as well as playful delight in children and sexual arousal in adults); and sits firmly within an ecophobic understanding of agencies outside of ourselves. Gendered and threatening, slime is oddly ambivalent matter. It is the stuff of which Anthropocene ecoGothic dreams are made, matter well beyond our command that threatens us precisely because of the ineluctability of its agential presence in our lives.

Keywords Corporeal theory · Slime theory · Ecophobia · Ecocriticism

Consciousness of the body is what gives us our senses of particularity and, indeed, exceptionalism. Consciousness of real differences from every other living thing on the planet emboldens our intellect and fuels our spirit. We are (or we think we are) special in every manner, and it is this sense of human exceptionalism, perhaps, that got us to the moon, gave us the European Enlightenment, the Great Wall, the Atom bomb, Campbell's soup, bread, and smart phones. But it is what Kelly Hurley calls "the realities of gross corporeality" (Hurley 2004, p. 3) finally that defines the human, and it is a corporeality that is under constant threat from the ravages of age, disease, predators, environment, and a host of other dangers. We have initiated what can only be understood as an Anthropocene ecoGothic in which the monstrous Nature we have created now threatens our very survival. Without downplaying the stark realities of the material threats we confront, we can see clearly that an

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alarming result of the Anthropocene ecoGothic is that one of the greatest threats we face is both consciousness (a hyper-consciousness, in fact, that we may rightly see as phobic) and the imagined body itself.

British mathematician Marcus du Sautoy, in a remarkable BBC documentary entitled "The Secret You," reminds us of a fact that may seem painfully obvious to most of us—namely, that our sensations let us know that we are alive and that we are who we are. He explains that "without [these sensations], everything would disappear. Without them, I disappear. We don't have an equation that explains consciousness" (du Sautoy 2009). He goes on to explain that "The price you pay for being aware of your own existence is having to confront the inevitability of your own individual demise. Death awareness is the price we pay for self-awareness. It is a sobering experience to dwell on the thought that we know one day our consciousness will disappear forever" (*ibid.*). We therefore protect this life as best we can, shielding it from threats, policing its boundaries, keeping it from infection and rot. Written into those attempts to isolate ourselves from harm is the understanding that there are threatening agencies outside of ourselves and that some (perhaps many) of those threatening agencies belong, in fact, to matter that we have discarded from what Julia Kristeva calls "the horror within" (Kristeva 1982, p. 53). These discards offer the threats of abjection, as Kristeva explains, threats to the "collapse of the border between inside and outside" posed by "urine, blood, sperm, excrement," and slime (*ibid.*). And the reason that they are able to pose such threats is that they are agential.

A solid two decades or so before the New Materialists began theorizing about agency, Pamela K. Gilbert identifies the agency of nonhuman things in a compelling discussion about mid-nineteenth century London: "Bodily wastes were no longer seen as simply by-products of the life process, but as animated and hostile filth that would, given the chance, attack the body itself" (Gilbert 1995, p. 79). It is not just waste and rot and slime, however, that are the threat here; rather, it is the natural agency and natural environment of which they are a part that is really the core of the terror here. In their discussions about the ecoGothic,[1] Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils have noted "the fear, anxiety, and dread that often pervade [the relationship of humans to the nonhuman world]," fears almost invariably about maintaining the integrity of the human body and the human subject. They go on to explain that the ecoGothic "orients us, in short, to the more disturbing and unsettling aspects of our interactions with nonhuman ecologies" (Keetley and Sivils 2018, p. 1). As I have explained elsewhere, the ecoGothic is an important area that has recently opened onto important theoretical and practical questions:

> Theorising about menace, the ecoGothic allows for understandings of how we imagine and persecute social and environmental Otherness; about how monstrosity is central to an environmental imagination that locates the human as

[1] Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland explain in "*Gothic Nature*: An introduction" that uncontrollability and terror characterize the ecoGothic: "we see the 'overwhelmingness' of Nature reflected in the fact that canonical Gothic frequently associated with the sublime, an important precursor to Gothic Nature, which emphasises the awesome, exciting, and terrifying aspects of landscape" (2019, p. 3).

> the center of all things good and safe; about how the control-freak aspects of humanity point toward continued problems; about the entanglement of ontological and existential matters with environmental ethics; and about solutions. One thing is certain: there is no way forward until we come to serious understandings of how ecophobia got us to where we are. EcoGothic theorising helps us toward these understandings (Estok 2019c, p. 34).[2]

For Keetley and Sivils, "the ecogothic turns to the inevitability of humans intertwined with their natural environment—to humans surrounded, interpenetrated, and sometimes stalked by a nonhuman with an agentic force that challenges humans' own vaunted ability to shape their world" (Keetley and Sivils 2018, p. 7). They explain that "at the broadest level, the ecogothic inevitably intersects with ecophobia, not only because ecophobic representations of nature will be infused, like the gothic, with fear and dread but also because ecophobia is born out of the failure of humans to control their lives and their world. And control, or the lack thereof, is central to the gothic" (*ibid.,* p. 3). To lose control of the body to Nature is a frightening prospect, and in the Anthropocene, Nature has agencies that are different than in earlier periods, agencies that are terrifyingly unpredictable. Imagining these reiterates and reinforces ecophobia.

If it is the perceived or imagined threats to the integrity of the body that obtain most, then it seems vital to direct our attention to the kinds of mortal corruption that are known to dis-integrate bodies. Gilbert observes that "wetness and liquidity often ground descriptions of the body disintegrating" (Gilbert 1995, pp. 83–84); but it is more than simply water and wetness: it is slime. Slime, Hurley explains, "constitutes a threat to the integrity of the human subject" (Hurley 2004, p. 35), and it is a great threat. Often evoking disgust, slime is complicated theoretical matter. It is a site of uncertainty and unpredictable change: "what is now slime was once something else that has degenerated. Slime is disgusting because it is uncertain, a phase in the dissolution of existence" (Wilson 2002, p. 64), as the late Robert Wilson explains in *The hydra's tale*. Slime is the promise of corporeal diffraction at best, death at worst. It is the source of horror and disgust, all of those things that, as Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer argue in the introduction to Aurel Kolnai's work *On disgust*, "are decaying and putrefying, that are contaminated and contaminating, and are thus associated with impurity and threat" (Smith and Korsmeyer 2004, pp. 1–2). Yet, slime is also a site of profound ambivalence.

I have argued in "Theorising the ecoGothic," from which some of the remainder of this paragraph is drawn (Estok 2019c, p. 45), that there is surprisingly little talk of slime in ecoGothic discussions, surprising because slime is absolutely central to horror. Jennifer Schell briefly raises the topic of slime in her 2006 article "Fiendish fumaroles and malevolent mudpots: The ecoGothic aspects of Owen Wister's Yellowstone stories" but without any theoretical discussion of slime. Anthony Camara

[2] Since originally penning these words, I have thought it necessary to offer the term "Anthropocene ecoGothic" as a perhaps more precise description of the ecoGothic in the era of climate change (since ecoGothic need not necessarily be in the Anthropocene).

makes several points about slime in his "Abominable transformations: Becoming-fungus in Arthur Machen's *The Hill of Dreams,*" but the discussion is primarily thematic. More recently, I address the ecophobic dimensions of slime in "The environmental imagination in the slime of the ancient mariner" (Estok 2019b). Slime is indeed oozing into the discussions, and there are important connections waiting to be made.

Jean-Paul Sartre offers one of the few serious theoretical investigations of slime, and his meditations get to the heart of slime's ambivalence. Sartre maintains that slime is matter "whose materiality must on principle remain non-meaningful" (Sartre 1996, p. 605). It is this principle that makes slime an utterly ambivalent site, and this ambivalence makes slime both the matter of fascination to children and matter to which they "show repulsion" (*ibid.*). Sartre's theoretical discussions of slime are unique, compelling, and informative[3]: "Sliminess proper, considered in its isolated state," he argues, "will appear to us harmful in practice" (*ibid.,* p. 605). Slime is a threat. It threatens boundaries, and "the slimy appears as already the outline of a fusion of the world with myself" (*ibid.,* p. 606). It is an utterly ambiguous material: "immediately the slimy reveals itself as essentially ambiguous," and "nothing testifies more clearly to its ambiguous character as a 'substance between two states' than the slowness with which the slimy melts into itself" (*ibid.,* p. 607). Slime is a dangerous transcorporeal matter that threatens the very boundaries that it traverses. Hurley has explained that

> Nothing illustrates the Thing-ness of matter so admirably as slime. Nor can anything illustrate the Thing-ness of the human body so well as its sliminess, or propensity to become-slime. Slimy substances—excreta, sexual fluids, saliva, mucus—seep from the borders of the body, calling attention to the body's gross materiality. [T. H.] Huxley's description of protoplasm indicates that sliminess is the very essence of the body, and is not just exiled to its borders. Within an evolutionist narrative, human existence has its remote origins in the "primordial slime" from which all life was said to arise (Hurley 2004, p. 34).

Seeping from the borders but not exiled to the borders, at the core and origin of the body and yet a matter of profound disgust and horror,[4] slime is beyond our command, is not the water we so proudly control in our fountains and dams[5]: indeed,

[3] This sentence and some of the rest of the paragraph that follows appears in slightly different form in my "Ecophobia, the agony of water, and misogyny" (476).

[4] Noël Carroll argues that there is a "tendency in horror novels and stories to describe monsters in terms of and to associate them with filth, decay, deterioration, slime and so on. The monster in horror fiction, that is, is not only lethal but—and this is of utmost significance—also disgusting" (Carroll 1990, p. 22).

[5] I have often thought that the reason people are so fascinated by fountains has to do with control. Fountains offer the possibility of chaos, the threat of disorder in the very moment that they carefully choreograph every splash and movement of water. Like our childhood fascination with heavy snow and leaf-strewn autumnal streets that temporarily obscure human order, fountains remind us of natural agency (particularly of water), and it is a powerful and potentially deadly agency. Our control over water, it seems, is rarely complete and is often fraught with ambivalence. On my first visit to the Three Gorges Dam in 2008, the ambivalence of the visitors (Chinese and foreign) toward the massive structure hailed as a "taming of the Yangtze" was palpable, a taming that cost 200 lives in onsite casualties and displaced more than 1.2 million people.

as Sartre so colorfully puts it, "slime is the agony of water. It presents itself as a phenomenon in the process of becoming; it does not have the permanence within change that water has but on the contrary represents an accomplished break in a change of state. This fixed instability in the slimy discourages possession" (Sartre 1996, p. 607). It can neither be possessed nor controlled, and it should not be surprising that fears about slime are entangled with sexism and misogyny[6]—each, to differing degrees, obsessed with power and control. Indeed, myxophobia (fear of slime) is deeply enmeshed with the fear of women's bodies and sexuality[7] and with fantasies of violence.

In my 2019 "Ecophobia, the agony of water, and misogyny," I suggested that how men imagine the agency of women—sexual, emotional, intellectual, political (and how they fear what they imagine)—is inseparable from the physical workings of women's bodies, and I asked about how men's fears of women's sexual agency and arousal intersect with the fear and contempt of slime.[8] What happens when patriarchies imagine women, women's bodies, and women's sexuality as sites of pollution articulated through slimic discourses? What is the rendering of the agential female body in the patriarchal imagination, and is FGM (female genital mutilation) the result (Estok 2019a, p. 483)? The evidence that slime is gendered and dangerously sexist is overwhelming. I write in considerable detail in "Ecophobia, the agony of water, and misogyny" about the film franchise *Alien* and will briefly summarize here the key points of the argument, since they are also relevant to the position of this paper.[9]

The alien in the film franchise is female—even a "bitch" in one promotional feature—who drools acidic slime from her mouth in a manner that is, at best, unseemly for what is hailed as perhaps the most perfect species in the universe. The film offers no reason why she is drooling like a common mutt, and the fact that dogs *do* drool slime puts this alien into a canine affective register—the viewer associates her with dogs. Even so, while she is clearly better, smarter, stronger, and overall more capable than humans in many ways, the dog image looms. It is a dehumanizing image. The fight between Lieutenant Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver) and the alien is fight between well-matched opponents, and—let's face it—it is not a dogfight! It is a fight between two females, and this is called a "catfight" in speciesist and sexist vernacular. Rachel Reinke argues that catfights "are part of a sexually arousing performance for men" (Reinke 2010, p. 176), a point perhaps reinforced when the

[6] See also Kristeva (1982, pp. 53–55) and Creed (1993, pp. 1–83).

[7] Greta Gaard usefully discusses this fear of sexuality (erotophobia) in relation to sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia (1997) as well as in relation to ecophobia: "erotophobia is […] a component of ecophobia" (2010, p. 650); "ecophobia and erotophobia are intertwined concepts" (2011, p. 1).

[8] Sartre has been accused of sexism in how he addresses slime. I take up this matter elsewhere (see "Ecophobia, the agony of water, and misogyny," pp. 466–467 in particular).

[9] Barbara Creed has written about horror and sexism in *Alien* in *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. While primarily psychoanalytic, Creed's approach deals little with what she calls "the struggle between the subject and the abject" or "the site of this struggle—a struggle which literally takes place within the interior of and across the body." She explains that "slime, bile, pus, vomit, urine, [and] blood" are all part of this struggle (Creed 1993, p. 40), but her discussion is very brief and is of *The Exorcist*, not *Alien.*

Fig. 1 Lt. Ripley in what is surely uncomfortable underwear Photo credit https://www.news.com.au/entertainment/movies/jamescameron-says-sigourney-weaver-strip-in-alien-film-crossed-the-line/news-story/dfc04a5f9a98ad082a5c462760c680a5

exhausted Ripley traipses in around skimpy underwear at one point, thinking that she has vanquished the alien (see Fig. 1). The term "catfight" is itself dehumanizing, picturing women as cats, and, as Reinke explains "the catfight culture problematically implicates real women in a narrative of competition that is dehumanizing" (*ibid.,* p. 183). The catfight is obsessed with the body (the Wikipedia cover image, Fig. 2, shows this well). If the corporeal and sexual agency of Ripley is the object of representation here, then it is a representation that is enmeshed within deeply pornographic and slimic imaginations—and there is fear and loathing written all over this but perhaps no more clearly than in the affect that the slime engenders. "Slime," Hurley reminds us, "is the revenge of matter, which seeks to swallow up the known and bounded world into its own amorphousness" (Hurley 2004, p. 38), and this "somehow malevolent" (Hurley 2004, p. 36) agency has profound theoretical implications. Positioning matter as somehow malevolent is ecophobia writ large—and slime is central here.[10] The slimic is evil just *because* it is slimic, as the Jew to the anti-Semite is vile for no other reason that he or she is a Jew, as the African-American is inferior to the racist for no other reason that he or she is black, and as the natural is threatening for no other reason that it (often gendered "she") is the natural. It is in the potential agency of each that the threat lies—and there are intimate links among these maladaptive phobic responses. When men see women as sites of

[10] This sentence and the four that follow appear in Estok (2019a, p. 481).

Fig. 2 Catfight Photo credit https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catfight#/media/File:Vintage_Catfight_circa_1950.jpg

pollution, effectively they see women as "matter out of place" (Douglas 1984, p. 36) that they can put right and clean up. Slime, a shape-shifter that defies categories, triggers ecophobic disgust precisely because of the threat it poses to human order, and we should understand that it is a *male* order, one that maintains itself by anatomizing the bodies it controls—women's bodies through pornography,[11] geographical bodies through maps, and animal bodies through dismemberment and consumption.

Anatomizing the body dis-integrates it rendering it nonfunctional as a body, but even all together, it is not necessarily a body. The whole body is indeed greater than the sum of its parts, is indeed not simply the sum, as Wallace Stevens poetically explains: "in the sum of the parts, there are only parts" (Stevens 1971, p. 204). Jean-Luc Nancy explains that

> un corps est une collection de pièces, de morceaux, de membres, de zones, d'états, de fonctions. Têtes, mains et cartilages, brûlures, suavités, giclées,

[11] Carol J. Adams argued long ago in *The sexual politics of meat* (1991) about the anatomizing gaze of patriarchy and how dismemberment and fragmentation of the body are fundamental to both pornography and the meat industry. The compelling cover of the book shows a beach towel featuring a naked woman whose body is mapped out like the diagram hanging in butcher shops of animals and their meat cuts—"rib," "rump," "breast," and so on.

> sommeil, digestion, horripilation, excitation, respirer, digérer, se reproduire, se réparer, salive, synovie, torsions, crampes et grains de beauté (Nancy 2004, p. 35).[12]

But this kind of argument takes the body as a given and seems to ignore the fact that it is ultimately only through consciousness that the body becomes the body. My argument here, I suspect, is about as unoriginal as ideas come and seems to be coursing through the same vein as Anne Balsamo's questions about the possibilities of gendered identities in fractured bodies: "When the human body is fractured into organs, fluids and genetic codes," she asks, "what happens to gender identity? When the body is fractured into functional parts and molecular codes, where is gender located" (Balsamo 1996, p. 6)? A collection of parts is not a body for the self until the parts function together to—and only to—the degree to which such functioning produces consciousness. As du Sautoy summarizes neuroscientist Professor Christof Koch's position, "consciousness emerges out of a collection of neurons. Think of it like water. A single H_20 molecule isn't itself wet" (du Sautoy 2009). Lacking consciousness, a cat does not—cannot—recognize its body as body. Remove the nails that hold together the house and we get a collection of wood. Remove the consciousness that produces the body and we get what Nancy describes. Whatever the degree to which "bodies—and life—exceed and resist our definitions" (Fishel 2017, p. 25), it is consciousness that makes me have a body; and for the self that is you, that is all that matters, not whether others recognize your body. The mind/body dualism starts to seem a bit silly. Obviously, I diverge somewhat from the tedious commonplace that bodies take meaning through their interactions with other bodies—a point by no means a novel insight of the New Materialists.[13] This is not to deny that "bodies […] take shape through being oriented toward each other," as Sara Ahmed explains (Ahmed 2010, p. 245), but rather to understand that consciousness is the *precondition* for these relationships and for the plasticities that lead to corporeality.

Understanding consciousness means looking not at the thing itself (if ever there were such a thing) but at the process—and like the wetness of molecules of H_2O, consciousness is a process of interacting components. Rosi Braidotti argues that "the most striking feature of the current scientific redefinition of 'matter' is the dislocation of difference from binaries to rhizomatics" (Braidotti 2013, p. 96), and it is a

[12] A body is a collection of pieces, of bits, of members, of zones, of states, of functions. Heads, hands and cartilage, burnings, smoothnesses, spurts, sleep, digestion, goose-bumps, excitation, breathing, digesting, reproducing, mending, saliva, synovia, twists, cramps, and beauty marks (My translation.).

[13] Indeed, long before the so-called New Materialism appeared on the theoretical map, Baruch Spinoza explained that "bodies are distinguished from one another in terms of motion and rest, quickness and slowness, and not in respect to substance" (Spinoza 1955, p. 93). It is a position later echoed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari:

> A body is not defined by the form that determines it nor as a determinate substance or subject nor by the organs it possesses or the functions it fulfills. On the plane of consistency, a body is defined only by a longitude and a latitude: in other words the sum total of the material elements belonging to it under given relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness (longitude); the sum total of the intensive affects it is capable of at a given power or degree of potential (latitude). Nothing but affects and local movements, differential speeds. The credit goes to Spinoza for calling attention to these two dimensions of the Body, and for having defined the plane of Nature as pure longitude and latitude. Latitude and longitude are the two elements of a cartography (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 260).

transition to "a method that replaces linearity with a more rhizomatic style of thinking [and] allows for multiple connections and lines of interaction" (*ibid.*, p. 165). This represents a shift "from [analyzing] sex/gender or nature/culture to [seeing] processes of sexualization/racialization/naturalization" (*ibid.,* p. 96). It is a move to understand the process of a thing (rather than an imagined static telosic unity) as constitutive of its identity. This being the case, then, it is reasonable to wonder about the generative effects on consciousness when it sees itself under threat of disintegration and dis-articulation. If Elaine Scarry is correct in asserting that "every act of civilization is an act of transcending the body in a way consonant with the body's needs" (Scarry 1985, p. 57), then it stands to reason that every barbaric act is perhaps the opposite, a way of transcending the body in a way opposite to the body's needs—even, perhaps, in a way that is a mortal threat. Scarry is explicit about the nature of the threat to corporeal integrity and how *sensation* is central to this threat. "Intense pain," she argues, "is language destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and subject" (*ibid.,* p. 35). The result of the corporeal experience is, according to famed cultural historian Joseph Amato, spiritual: suffering "deals with spirit rather than body. Suffering is greater and more comprehensive than pain […]. Suffering does not invite specific and immediate remedies […]. Accordingly, as pain seeks its relief almost exclusively in magic and medicine, suffering directs us for help to philosophy and religion and, also, more recently to social work and psychoanalysis" (Amato 1990, p. 15). The sensation of pain (as well as the suffering it causes) is enough to erase the self and thus the conscious and thus the body. Indeed, then, we might ask if suffering alone and what E. Ann Kaplan calls "pre-trauma" is sufficient to erase the self and thus the conscious, and we might reasonably assume that, yes, hyper-consciousness resulting in phobic reactions threaten disarticulation of the coherent self.

The consciousness of slime itself (and subsequent myxophobia) cannot, however, put the phenomenological subjective body under threat in the way that the trauma of pain does, since the two traumas (myxophobia and pain) are clearly different at the subjective experiential level, but it can and does evoke actions that do put such a body under threat through maladaptive responses such as obsessive consumption of anti-biotics that aid in the growth of "superbugs." To a very real degree, myxophobia and the ecophobia with which it intersects may have "pretraumatic" implications.

The term "pretrauma" seems to originate with Kaplan, and she uses it to describe how "people unconsciously suffer from an immobilizing anticipatory anxiety about the future" (Kaplan 2016, p. xix). She is speaking in general about the future and in particular about climate change in her explanation that "future time is a major theme, along with thinking through the meanings and cultural work (including that pertaining to race and gender) that dystopian pretrauma imaginaries perform in our newly terrorized historical era" (*ibid.,* p. 4). The enmeshment of ecophobic assumptions and values certainly complicates the position of the body in the pretrauma imaginary. The enmeshment of gender about which Kaplan speaks is very clearly visible when we begin to address the matter of slime and the threatening agencies that it ambivalently represents. One might even persuasively contend that the plasticity and vulnerability of human corporeality has never been greater than it is now.

The plasticity of the human certainly has never been more apparent than in the Anthropocene, in part because of our growing grasp of the genetics that determine what and who we are, in part because of electronic technologies (varieties of what Donna Haraway calls cyborg politics, what a generation earlier was termed bionics), and in part because of chemical and environmental challenges (pollution, climate change, GMOs, and so on). Experimenting with the plasticity of the body is both a gothic and an Anthropocene compulsion: "the Gothic," Hurley explains, "seizes upon the opportunity [of the] evacuation of human identity accomplished within the sciences[,…] in order to experiment with the 'plasticity' of human and other bodies" (Hurley 2004, p. 156). Her discussion is about the *fin de siècle* gothic body, but I want to fast-forward a hundred years to our own time, to what may rightly understand as the Anthropocene ecoGothic.

Re-workings of the human body (to make it better than Nature made it) fill the imagination behind films such as *Ironman*, *The Fantastic Four*, *The Hulk*, *Justice League*, the *Terminator* franchise, *RoboCop*, *Lucy*, and so on, and escapist fantasies and nightmares in film of travel beyond earth or through time often picture reworked bodies that are not bound by earthly things—*Elysium*, *The Wrath of Khan*, *12 Monkeys*, *Edge of Tomorrow*, *Source Code*, and others. Whether we like it or not, however, we *are* bound to Nature and the earth. As Hannah Arendt has argued in her 1958 philosophical discussion about the debatability of human agency, "The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition, and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice" (Arendt 1998, p. 2). It is a habitat that "for roughly the first 2.5 billion years of life on Earth" was populated only by bacteria and archaea (Yong 2016, p. 9)—slime, in other words. The staggeringly improbable merger "between an archaeon and a bacterium" that "enabled the existence of all plants, animals, and anything visible to the naked eye" (*ibid.,* p. 10)[14] take us to the heart of the ambivalence of slime: slime is clearly not always putrefaction and death. Moreover, the primordial slime that existed for the first two-thirds of the 3.6 billion years[15] of life on earth didn't disappear: microbiomes are absolutely essential to all life on earth, and we can rightly argue that the very term "Anthropocene" makes little sense, since "we are still living in the Microbiocene: a period that started at the dawn of life itself and will continue to its very end" (Yong 2016, p. 8). It is an oft-repeated fact that "there are 10 times more bacterial cells in your body than human cells" (Wenner https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/strange-but-true-humans-carry-more-bacterial-cells-than-human

[14] The merger is as overwhelmingly improbable as would be the conception of a baby from a man having sex with the tailpipe of a pickup truck. The number of failures is nothing short of dizzying, and the successful merger itself is "so breathtakingly improbable that it has never been duplicated" (*ibid.*).

[15] Geology professor Ross Large asks why "evolution remained stuck in primordial slime for a boring billion years" (Moore https://bionews-tx.com/news/2014/02/20/why-was-evolution-stuck-in-primordial-slime-for-a-boring-billion-years/). The length is actually much greater than a billion years, but one billion or two and a half billion are each a long delay. The reason for the long delay is has to do with the improbability of the merger between the bacterium and the archaeon.

-ones/)[16]—our bodies are 10% human and 90% nonhuman, and that 90% nonhuman matter is the stuff slime dreams are made of. Hardly putrefaction and death! We each swim our ways vigorously and energetically through the slime of seminal fluid and vaginal secretions, and yet, though slime is our origins, our necessity, and the very core of our corporeality, it can have (and has had) mortal consequences—hence, the ambivalence. Historically, we have been increasingly careful to get rid of our piss and shit, our used sanitary pads and snot, and so on—and literature generally does not celebrate these discards.

The consciousness of our corporeal discards more often results in literary and filmic condemnations than celebrations indeed, and the ecophobic litany of warnings against the corporeal threats of slime abound—-from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Adam Dickinson's poetic and lyrical *Anatomic* and its examination of the effects of Anthropocene environments on the human body is one of a very small collection of works celebrating the "spectacular and horrifying assemblage" (Dickinson 2018, p. 9) that constitutes "the prosody of [our] metabolism" (*ibid.,* p. 76). The book is an indictment of the 'petroculture' and of how it has disrupted the slimic agencies of our bodies: "the emergence of petrochemical in the Anthropocene has coincided with the proliferation of endocrine-disrupting chemicals" (*ibid.*). Most unusually (at least for poetry), Dickinson celebrates his "blood, urine, sweat, and feces" (*ibid.,* p. 9) for the stories that they narrate about himself and his body and of what the environment is doing to all of our bodies. Part poetry, part autobiography, part scientific tract, part detective story, *Anatomic* is a remarkable book that carefully avoids falling into the trap of demonizing slimic agencies of matter that has left the system.

The body is an open system, obviously, and must let go of (as much as it must incorporate) matter, and the phobic hyper-consciousness of (as well as the actual microbial threats potentially embodied in) such matter indeed threaten corporeal disarticulation. Our consciousness of and capacity to sense ourselves and our worlds are central to our having at least the following: a sense of corporeal identity, an understanding of agencies outside of ourselves, and the need to protect ourselves—and there are few substances that embody these issues more clearly than slime. Gendered and threatening, slime is oddly ambivalent matter that is at times necessary for life and at other times lethal to it, a substance that pervades both the phobic consciousness of the Anthropocene ecoGothic and the mirthful fancies of children. As central to the body as it is to the ecophobic imagination, slime is a topic that requires much more theoretical discussion.

Acknowledgements This work was supported by the double-first class discipline cluster "The Chinese Language and Literature and the Global Dissemination of Chinese Culture," Sichuan University, China.

[16] See also Sparks and Honey (2013), References.

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