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Are Ashes All That Is Left? Grace Jantzen's Aesthetics and the Beauty of Biodiversity

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Abstract: As the climate crisis continues to worsen and it becomes apparent that the earth faces its sixth mass extinction event, it is more important than ever to find an alternative to the disordered thinking that prevents meaningful environmental reform in nations of the Global North with large carbon footprints such as the United States. Informed by affect theory, I revisit Grace Jantzen's late work on death and beauty in the context of biodiversity to develop the beginnings of a theological affect of responsiveness to ecological beauty. Juxtaposing Jantzen's theory of the displacement of beauty with Kevin O'Brien's theological ethics of biodiversity, I suggest that biodiversity can be key to an ecotheology that combats human exceptionalism and prioritizes responsiveness to beauty. I contend that an aesthetics of natality requires responsiveness to the beauty of biodiversity in order to combat both human exceptionalism and the culture of necrophilia that Jantzen critiqued. Ultimately, I conclude that beauty, natality, and biodiversity may be able to inform an ecological theology centered on nonexceptional theological affects.

Keywords: ecotheology; biodiversity; Christianity; philosophy of religion; climate change; affect theory; death; aesthetics

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1. "Beauty for Ashes"

> We will need to pray and think and work that we may be given beauty for ashes. Otherwise, ashes will be all that is left.
>
> (Jantzen 2002, p. 447)

You can find the pictures easily enough on the internet: hundred-year-old photos of men standing, tired and proud, next to the massive trunks of the ancient trees they brought down. The famous collection of photographs by A. W. Ericson documents the logging of the California redwoods in the early 1900s. In one picture, the tree, not even the biggest one brought down during the era, was wider than the height of two of the men who felled it. For the corporations that rushed to profit off of the lumber of these giant trees, their living beauty was immaterial in the face of their economic value once dead. Twenty years ago, prominent feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen claimed that if we do not return our attention to beauty instead of death, and reverse beauty's displacement in the western hierarchy of values, then "ashes will be all that is left" (Jantzen 2002, p. 447).[1] In this quote, Jantzen is referring to the KJV translation of Isaiah 61:3, which promises that God will "give unto them [those who mourn] beauty for ashes". Western christendom, Jantzen observes, appears to have selected ashes instead.[2]

Although ecological renewal was only part of the problem of violence that Jantzen was beginning to identify in her unfinished project, *Death and the Displacement of Beauty*, I contend that her work is particularly apposite now in discussing the violence being done to the earth. In spite of exponentially escalating evidence of a global ecological catastrophe, there are still many dominant voices in American society that scoff at those who want to save the mountains or forests because they are "beautiful"—the implication

being that the desire for beauty is something trivial and worthy of derision compared to the eternal growth of the economy. This trivialization of natural beauty cuts us off from a crucial part of our own humanity; it denies our *capacity for responding to beauty*. In this paper, I apply affect theory to Jantzen's work on beauty and death to argue that this has consequences for ecological activism. We are *moved* by these feelings in response to beauty. In discrediting sub-verbal responsiveness to beauty, we also disallow our own and others' intrinsic attitude of "care"—the response of awe and humility at walking in an old-growth forest, and the horror at seeing a clear-cut landscape. Therefore, denying the importance of beauty effectively hobbles a significant part of our ability to take action.

According to Jantzen, the remedy for what ails us is the cultivation of a "responsiveness" to beauty (Jantzen 2002); this quality of responsiveness can be a resource for peace and justice. I argue that such responsiveness should be considered a theological affect that can encourage theologians to take beauty seriously, and that it thus provides resources for valuing the beauty of biodiversity. In so doing, it also restores some of our humanity—giving us permission, as it were, to honor our own capacities for seeing beauty and feeling beauty, thereby cultivating a theological ethic in which it is only natural to protect the nonhuman world.

I first explore Jantzen's work on beauty to shed light on some of the ongoing struggles to enact meaningful environmental reforms in the United States. Beauty has been overlooked and profit has been the only thing worthy of attention and care. Juxtaposing Jantzen's theory of the displacement of beauty with Kevin O'Brien's theological ethics of biodiversity, I suggest that biodiversity can be key to an ecotheology that combats human exceptionalism and prioritizes responsiveness to beauty. I further contend that an aesthetics of natality (the alternative to mortality) requires responsiveness to the beauty of biodiversity. If beauty is to inform truth, it should be done by finding a theological way to talk about the affect of this responsiveness. This paper ultimately blends relational and apophatic theologies to develop the beginnings of a theological affect of responsiveness to ecological beauty in order to combat the culture of necrophilia that Jantzen critiqued.

2. "Beauty That'll Rot": How Death Displaced Beauty

Although Grace Jantzen's work on death and beauty is twenty years old, the deliberate obstruction of environmental regulations and the willful disregard for the evidence of climate change that has characterized the past two decades of American politics suggest that her observations about the primacy of death in the value systems that hold sway in much of the modern world may be more relevant than ever.

"Rot", a popular song by Christian hard rocker Lacey Sturm, contains the following lyrics:

> Beneath her glowing eyes/They call like fire to a moth
>
> The most disgusting lies/Are dressed in beauty that'll rot.
>
> Oh my God you've won/The coldest battle we fought
>
> Deliverance is mine/From all this beauty that'll rot
>
> Rot/(Don't wanna rot). (Lacey Sturm 2016)

Beauty will lure you to your death, Sturm implies; you must resist its pull; you must be saved from beauty (which is identified with death) by God. This song exhibits well known Christian themes that Jantzen critiques in her work: the fear of being material, of biological death and the natural decay that is essential to the web of life, as well as an embrace of death in the form of longing for existence outside the web of life. One way or another, death is the central concern of what Jantzen has labeled "the western symbolic".

By *western symbolic*, Jantzen means "the system of discourses of which religion is one, which are constructed by and in turn are formative of western consciousness" (Jantzen 1999, p. 21). The concept of "the western symbolic" is a slippery one. "Western", especially when capitalized as a proper noun, carries a whiff of ethnocentrism and colonialism. Moreover, what is "the west" anymore, and where is it? Who gets to decide? How does one account for

the multiplicity of ideological strands that collide and intermingle in the making of cultures and identities? Despite the difficulty in pinning down an exact meaning of Jantzen's term, it does seem necessary to have a marker, vague though it may be, for the hegemonies primarily identified with North America and Western Europe that have exerted significant power in the modern era. Although it is, as Jantzen herself admits, "a hotchpotch of myths, symbols, assumptions, taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs which form the contours of what is readily thinkable, structured into what Lyotard has called 'grand narratives'", at its core, the western symbolic contains certain basic assumptions: progress, rationality, freedom (p. 128). Why, Jantzen asks, did christendom and the ostensibly secular capitalism that followed it expend so much energy on death (either causing it or denying it) rather than on life? The answer to that question is connected to the rejection of beauty in favor of profit.

Jantzen's genealogy of death in the western symbolic shows that the iconoclasm that rocked the early church left a legacy of privileging word over matter in its wake. Jantzen is not alone in making such a suggestion, of course, but her unique contribution is that *beauty* in particular was demoted in the process. "To the extent that the idea was rejected that *the beauty of material things participated in the beauty of God,* and (in that sense) that to be is to be beautiful, to that extent beauty—*divine beauty—was banished from the world*" (Jantzen 2002, p. 446, emphases added). If God was to be found, it would not be in the beauty of the earth. At best, beauty was suspect—more a distraction from the word of God than a mode of divine revelation. The word and the idea have thus been viewed as "more able to bear the revelation of the divine" than physical things.[3] In this symbolic system, the act of felling a thousand-year-old redwood is imbued with more theological significance than the existence of the tree itself.

In the first volume of her unfinished series on death and beauty, Jantzen argues that in the western symbolic (or what might more accurately be described, with bell hooks, as the symbolic of the "imperialist white supremacist heteropatriarchy"), beauty has been deprioritized in favor of an obsession with death (Jantzen 2004). The obsession involves a compulsive avoidance of and paradoxical focus on death, which Jantzen identifies as necrophobia and necrophilia, respectively, two sides of the same coin. Necrophobia is evident in capitalism's encouragement of frenetic consumption to distract from mortality. Meanwhile, this obsession with death, in its necro*philic* form, can be seen in the hundreds of years of death and destruction caused by the "Plantationocene", a term first published by philosopher Donna Haraway in 2015. The Plantationocene is an alternate word for the Anthropocene, specifying the role of global capitalism rather than humanity in general in creating this environmental crisis.

> Scholars have long understood that the slave plantation system was the model and motor for the carbon-greedy machine-based factory system that is often cited as an inflection point for the Anthropocene. [. . .] Moving material semiotic generativity around the world for capital accumulation and profit [. . .] is one defining operation of the Plantationocene, Capitalocene, and Anthropocene taken together. The Plantationocene continues with ever-greater ferocity in globalized factory meat production, monocrop agribusiness, and immense substitutions of crops like oil palm for multispecies forests and their products that sustain human and nonhuman critters alike. (Haraway 2015, p. 162n5)

I prefer the term "Plantationocene" to "Anthropocene" because causing total environmental collapse is not necessarily an essential quality of *Homo sapiens* as a species.

The very definition of humans as "mortals"—those who die—is problematic for Jantzen, who borrows the alternative concept of being "natal" from Hannah Arendt (Jantzen 2004). In prioritizing natality, Jantzen attempts to redirect the western symbolic's focus away from death and toward birth, novelty, and the beauty that accompanies the arrival of something new in the world. In the context of biodiversity, this would mean acknowledging that death is a vital part of the web of existence, but is not the pivot around which the world turns. We are not simply "mortals"—we are also "natals" (p. 6). The focus on being-towards-death rather than becoming-from-birth has encouraged an attitude of ignoring ecological beauty

while striving to amass as much wealth as possible. By contrast, attunement to the beauty of biodiversity and our shared fact of having-been-born could bolster a sense of slowing down and allowing ourselves to be *affected* by the beauty of what it is to be alive. Revaluing ecosystems and nonhuman nature in this way would mean undoing the displacement of beauty in the western symbolic, and finally allowing the material world to be equally capable of "bearing the revelation of the divine" (Jantzen 2002, p. 446).

I contend that beauty and biodiversity are natural partners, but "beauty" is, of course, in the eye of the beholder. However, it must be remembered that the beholder's sense of beauty is informed by the surrounding system of values. To me, it seems obvious that the wild prairie of Nebraska, for example, teeming with innumerable birds, insects, wildflowers and grasses, is more beautiful than endless rows of corn. I appreciate the way life thrives in a way that decenters the human. Moreover, biodiversity is arguably aesthetically pleasing because it taps into human "biophilia", a term introduced by psychoanalyst Erich Fromm and popularized by biologist E. O. Wilson (who is, incidentally, also the popularizer of the concept of biodiversity itself). Biophilia has been proposed as an innate human orientation to life; it is the desire to seek out and be close to living things. Given that biodiverse environments are maximally filled with life, and are networks of a vast range of species living beside, within, or by way of each other, a biophilic human would presumably experience these life-giving environments as pleasing, and, hence, as beautiful.

In spite of the biophilia hypothesis, it remains the case that, for a large number of people, the order, regularity, and clear human influence on what used to be prairie—and the promise of the wealth such agriculture brings—evoke a greater sense of beauty. Perhaps it was this latter aesthetic that helped to normalize industrial agriculture's practice of monocropping. A common attitude among Europeans entering North America for the first time was that the wilderness was something to be brought under control; its biodiversity and apparent disorderliness seemed monstrous. This is the horror of miscegenation, admixture, asymmetry, and existence that exceeds predictability or human control. It is not a logical position, but rather an *affect of abjection*. Philosopher of religion Mary-Jane Rubenstein has identified certain affects of disgust and rejection as common reactions against the mixing of disparate elements. In the condemnation of pantheist ideas, which would mix God and world, Rubenstein detects within Christian traditions "a fear of crossed boundaries, queer mixtures, and miscellaneous miscegenations" (Rubenstein 2018, p. xxi).[4] Yet this mixing is precisely what biodiversity is, and this is one reason why it is important to consider biodiversity specifically—not just "the environment"—when talking about ecotheology.

Interpreting the existence of these different aesthetics through Jantzen's lens, I argue that the idea of order as beautiful is evidence of a value system that prefers death over life. Indeed, an aesthetic that chooses monocropping over biodiversity is literal death; it is the destruction of all other forms of life besides the one cash crop, and the resultant disruption to the ecosystem. In this era of climate catastrophe, by contrast, what is needed is a "natal" aesthetic—an aesthetic of *life* that speaks to whatever biophilic impulses we may have. That aesthetic is an aesthetic of biodiversity.

3. Biodiversity as Inspiration for Theological Ethics

E. O. Wilson, known as the father of the concept of biodiversity, defines biodiversity as "all hereditarily based variation at all levels of organization, from the genes within a single local population or species, to the species composing all or part of a local community, and finally to the communities themselves that compose the living parts of the multifarious ecosystems of the world" (Wilson 1997, p. 1). For those who have been engaged with ecotheology for a long time, it may at first seem odd to identify biodiversity specifically as an interlocutor for theological ethics. What does biodiversity as a concept have to offer the conversation that terms such as nature, ecology, or "the nonhuman world" do not already provide? Above, I mentioned the role of the term "biodiversity" in highlighting the intrinsic multiplicity of healthy ecosystems. Besides this, there are two main reasons to use

that specific term: to emphasize multiplicity and to directly address human exceptionalism in conversation with the biblical testament of dominion.

Theologian Kevin O'Brien develops what he calls an *ethics of biodiversity* and describes biodiversity as "a way of talking about the world as a whole—in theological terms, the sum of living creation—while emphasizing the vast multiplicity of its expressions and patterns" (O'Brien 2007, p. 178). By contemplating biodiversity specifically rather than just "nature" or "the environment" in general, themes of complexity, diversity, and multiplicity become explicit (p. 195). This multiplicity directly confronts what feminist theologian Laurel Schneider has named the logic of the One, which "denies its own constitutive multiplicity [and] also denies and suppresses hybridity or contradiction" (Schneider 2008, p. 89). Yet biodiversity is, almost by definition, that "constitutive multiplicity" that has been denied. Under Jantzen's rubric, the logic of "the One", then, is a logic of death, at odds with the messy and unpredictable diversity of flourishing life. Talking about *biodiversity* rather than *nature* brings this conflict to the fore.

Biodiversity as a concept is also useful for ecotheology because it highlights the problem of human exceptionalism and emphasizes just how much the western imaginary has put humans outside of the web of life. O'Brien discusses the classic biblical formulation about filling the earth, subduing it, and having dominion over it, and, in a move distinct from most ecotheological approaches, rejects the stewardship interpretation. The *dominion* model, O'Brien contends, is more relevant because it is *descriptive* and not *prescriptive*. The goal is, ultimately, to find a way to reintegrate ourselves into biodiversity, rather than attempting to stand outside of it. Over time, perhaps "those of us in positions of privilege and power who have done most to create this condition of dominance and degradation [. . .] [will learn] to become participants in biodiversity, seeking to act like one species among a vast variety" (p. 189). Another term for this reformed self-concept is "human nonexceptionalism" (Dean 2020).

4. Human Exceptionalism and the Culture of "Uncare"

Human exceptionalism is the idea that human beings are exempt in some way from the laws or destiny of the material world—that we are not part of a biodiverse ecosystem, but rather above it. A concept that has been decried with increasing frequency by ecological thinkers (see, for example, Toadvine 2007; Bauman 2014; Keller 2018), it is a mindset that has justified animal exploitation and environmental degradation. It has generally allowed humans to act as though profit is the ultimate concern and Earth is disposable. We become the only species of consequence, and the rest are condensed into categories of what serves us—meat, companionship, entertainment, and profit—rather than existing on their own terms. Given the ideologies of human supremacy that led to the current ecological crisis, the future of this planet may well depend upon being able to understand human beings as explicitly "nonexceptional"—neither uniquely unique nor ontologically divided from other forms of life or matter (Dean 2020).

According to psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe, who focuses on the neoliberal manifestation of exceptionalism, exceptionalism means "ridding the self of experiencing unwanted feelings by disavowing reality, the shallowness of experience that results from this . . . the growing sense of entitlement not to have to tolerate any difficult experiences, and the general corruption of truth and language" (Weintrobe 2020, p. 354). Weintrobe identifies "the Exception" as a standard element of human personalities; most of us have an inner sense of being the exception, which we are usually able to keep under control. Our Exception believes, "'I am entitled...to have whatever I want...to use omnipotent thinking to *avoid any inner discomfort and conflict*, especially guilt, that might ensue from holding this position'" (p. 354, emphasis added). When this way of thinking dominates a society, as it has in America, for example, the result is widespread human exceptionalism. The particular neoliberal flavor of human exceptionalism involves heightening everyone's inner Exception and silencing our natural propensity to care.

Weintrobe argues that *care* is the default state of human beings. We are intrinsically predisposed to care for each other and our world. But neoliberal exceptionalism imposes "a culture of uncare" upon us, disconnecting us from our obligations to both human and nonhuman others (Weintrobe 2020, p. 355). In this culture, we are to value only that which can be controlled and measured with regard to profit. This is the culture of death that, according to Jantzen, undergirds the western symbolic. Embracing natality and honoring biodiversity, by contrast, means giving up a certain level of knowing and control.

Weintrobe outlines a range of strategies for emerging from this culture of uncare, including thinking truly rationally (not with "reason" as defined by neoliberal capitalism). Real rational thinking is "thinking that contains and works through our *feelings* and *bodily reactions*" (p. 358, emphasis added). Attention to affective states is therefore key to addressing this problem because denial of unpleasant feelings about the environment is the modus operandi of neoliberalism, which aims to obscure the damage caused by the present state of affairs and to "nip any grief about it in the bud" (p. 358). Attunement to affect is part of the process of nourishing our ability to care.

Similarly, O'Brien advocates for an affective alternative to the three most common tactics ecologists use when making the case for preserving biodiversity: economics, survival, and even the intrinsic value of creation (O'Brien 2007). The problem with these strategies is that they have been focused on those things that are seen as most politically expedient: human self-interest, especially economic self-interest. Maintaining biodiversity is about maintaining a "resource" that we want to use. Instead, O'Brien suggests that, if we want to preserve the nonhuman world and its biodiversity, we would do better to look for *internal inspiration* rather than *extrinsic motivation*—to see something in biodiversity that moves us to act, rather than feeling obliged to preserve biodiversity for the sake of maintaining resources for our use or even a habitable environment in which we can live (O'Brien 2007). Implicit in his proposal is an acknowledgment that affect is more potent than reason. As a theological ethicist, O'Brien understands the power of appealing to the whole person—which implicitly includes affect—rather than merely the economist's rational self-interest. He writes, "we must also be inspired to appreciate biodiversity and trained to rethink our lives in light of that appreciation" (p. 194).

In O'Brien's appreciation of biodiversity and Weintrobe's return to uncomfortable feelings, I see an opening for Jantzen's "responsiveness to beauty". Our innate tendency to care is driven by a responsiveness to the natural world, which propels an organism to act for the benefit of another. I propose that both appreciation of the beauty of biodiversity and grief at continuing ecological losses are significant affects for those concerned with biodiversity, as they are forces that can move people to act.

5. Responsiveness to Beauty as a Theological Affect

Theology (that is, speech about God, who is identified with truth) has been largely separate from the embodied affect of responsiveness to beauty. According to Jantzen, beauty was "displaced" by capitalism as word trumped image and truth became more important than beauty (Jantzen 2002, p. 447). As an alternative, Jantzen asks, "what if beauty and truth were to mutually destabilize and enrich one another?" (Jantzen 2002, p. 429). She is not saying that we should disregard the word or idea and simply immerse ourselves in non-verbal beauty; the question, rather is: What if there is truth *in* beauty? What if the value of beauty were something that could inform our understanding of truth? Theology needs to give more consideration to beauty, rather than sidelining it in favor of verbal and cognizable "truth".[5] I agree with Jantzen that "the relegation of beauty to a minor status in theology is a *betrayal of theology itself*". (Jantzen 2002, p. 430, emphasis added). Theology is arguably an aesthetic pursuit, and as such, theology is already meant to be affective, though this element has often been overlooked or neglected. God-talk in the theopoetic mode in particular is something that is *felt*, with the aim of engendering salubrious theological affects in readers. To develop responsiveness to the beauty of biodiversity as a theological

affect, I combine relational theology and apophatic thought with an understanding of the human as materially interconnected.

5.1. Theological Affect

The definition of affect theory varies, depending on the theorist. It has been used to describe everything from feelings to near-mystical currents that sweep in, through, and around all living things, to being simply a synonym for "emotion". In this essay, I take the middle ground that Donovan Schaefer outlined in his *Evolution of Affect Theory*. Following cultural theorist Sianne Ngai, Schaefer argues that affect is everywhere, and that everything has an affective charge, whereas emotions, as typically understood, are more organized, fixed, and structured than affects (Schaefer 2019). In spite of this, emotions are still an element of Schaefer's understanding of affect. Like Schaefer, I tend to steer away from the Deleuzian sense of affect and veer more toward the idea that "the concept of *affect* remains entangled with terms such as *feeling* and *emotion* rather than rigidly chambered in a nonlinguistic, noncognitive, nonpersonal field" (Schaefer 2019, p. 2, emphasis in original). While not synonymous with emotion, affect does exist at one end of a continuum, of which emotion is the other pole.

Broadly speaking, affect theory analyzes power relations, cultural phenomena, and other realms of human life with an emphasis on the feelings, emotions, and sensations experienced by bodies, in contrast to the traditional academic approach of privileging verbal discourse. Affect theory sees bodies as inherently significant to (and inextricable from) the power relations that were once believed to be exclusively products of verbal discourse. Schaefer observes that affect theory thus "proposes that we ask questions about religion as something that affects bodies first and foremost" and argues that a focus on affect connects bodies on a material level by highlighting "the wormlike processes flowing through bodies, rather than the intact agents resolutely moving through their worlds" (Schaefer 2015, p. 211).

I therefore suggest that responsiveness to natural beauty ought to be classified as a *theological affect*—that is, an affect with theological significance, which engages in the chiasmatic dialogue between words about ultimate concern that move us and the forces moving through us that inspire new words about the divine. This is not to say that Christian theology has never taken up the topic of aesthetics! Presbyterian Ed Farley and Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar, among others, wrote entire monographs on theological aesthetics. The issue at hand in this paper is not Christian theological treatments of aesthetics, but the embodied human—and other-than-human—nature of responsiveness to natural beauty, with the latter being, arguably, synonymous with biodiversity.) Responsiveness to the beauty of biodiversity, I argue, possesses apophatic theological valences. Moreover, the theological affect of responsiveness to beauty is one of the processes that flow through and move bodies in ways that are powerful and profound.[6] It can be formulated apophatically as an expression of human participation in the relational, material world.

5.2. Biodiversity as Apophatic Relationality

At first glance, it may seem odd to combine the relationality of biodiversity with apophasis. After all, as theologian Catherine Keller points out in *Cloud of the Impossible*, "relationality and apophasis ... do not simply jibe" (Keller 2015, p. 6). They even seem mutually contradictory, because relational theologies are "tempted toward a conveniently transparent subject—and . . . [an] all too knowable God" (ibid.). Yet Keller demonstrates that there may be something in relationality that lends itself to the apophatic, and something in the apophatic that funds relationality. The affect of responsiveness to the beauty of biodiversity may be that point of juncture.

A theology that is informed by responsiveness to natural beauty is necessarily material and relational, and the matter that enables relationality is apophatically apprehended by the theologically primed mind. Based in matter rather than language, theological discourse informed by responses to biodiversity necessarily tends toward the apophatic. The expe-

riencing self that expresses this theology is both defined by and dissolved into countless quotidian encounters with both human and nonhuman materiality. The realization of our relational place within natal biodiversity resonates with the unknowable mystery of the divine.

Feminist relational theologian Sharon Welch observes that being attuned to human and nonhuman relationality produces positive states of being. Welch writes that "attentiveness to the web of life, to the exuberance of children, to the *beauty of nature*, provides a sense of peace, of belonging, of exultation and ecstasy" (Welch 2000, p. 179, emphasis added). Although Welch does not use this terminology, what she is describing is the theological affect of responsiveness to the beauty of biodiversity. Relational theology, with its emphasis on interconnectedness and affect, is an excellent resource for theologizing the beauty of biodiversity and for combating human exceptionalism and the culture of uncare. By focusing on human beings as embodied and en-mattered, relational theology demands a departure from verbal discourse as the primary mode for talking about God. By de-emphasizing thinking about propositions and re-emphasizing being affected by beauty, I suggest that theology can instead tap into the implications of living into biodiverse interconnectedness and escape the necrophobia of the western symbolic.

Our bodies respond to beauty and are moved by these affects because our bodies are material. Reflecting on the theological applications of Gloria Anzaldúa's relational epistemology, activist theologian Robyn Henderson-Espinoza affirms "the materiality of the body as an epistemic site for the production of material knowledge and as a critical and *creative opening for the material production of theology*—allowing for embodied and experiential ways of knowing, or a relational epistemology". Additionally, "a relational feminist theology of interconnectedness should begin with the material self . . . [which] is always in relation with the materiality that animates this world, a particular spiritual entanglement that ushers in new forms of connecting with all things" (Henderson-Espinoza 2013, p. 113). This entanglement and connection is a function of biodiversity.

An apophatic aesthetics, born from the beauty of biodiverse inter-relationality, contributes to positioning theology itself as an affective product of human encounters with the world. Language, far from being the primary locus of theologizing, becomes one of a variety of possible expressions of human affect. Thus, the preverbal affect of responsiveness to beauty may be the first component of an emerging nonexceptional ecotheology for us "natals".

6. Conclusions

It may very well be too late. It certainly is too late to undo the damage that has already been caused by the anthropogenic warming of our planet. Meanwhile, the renewed threat of nuclear confrontation and the increasingly alarming intergovernmental reports provide no comfort. In the words of Leonardo DiCaprio's character, from a disaster comedy movie that was a thinly veiled allegory for climate change: "We really did have everything, didn't we?" (McKay 2021, 2:06:02). He utters this line right before most life on earth is obliterated by an asteroid that humans had a chance to stop, but failed to because of greed and hubris.

In this essay, I have suggested that beauty, natality, and biodiversity may inform an ecological theology centered on nonexceptional theological affects. This is not an optimistic proposal. Environmentalists, activists, and scholars have been sounding alarms about climate change, deforestation, and the loss of biodiversity for decades, yet greed and short-term profit, fueled by the necrophilia identified by Jantzen, appear to have won out.

Be that as it may, we are not dead yet.

To give in to hopelessness is to give in to the very necrophilia that natality attempts to confront. While death at some point is inevitable, the impending mortality of the human individual cannot match the radical possibilities of birth, life, creation, and biodiversity. The thing about natality is that it cannot be predicted; it breaks into the world with a breathtaking newness. So, in preparation for the new, it is imperative to cultivate an appreciation for beauty and biodiversity, which is an appreciation for life itself. Ironically,

the natal affect of responsiveness to beauty is not itself something new or foreign to *Homo sapiens*. Those of us living within the dominant western symbolic have had to be taught that it is acceptable, even beneficial, to kill, clear cut, and destroy for profit. All that is required is a new way of thinking that does not reflexively crush the innate empathy and unprompted responsiveness to beauty that is the birthright of human beings.

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Notes

1 I am indebted to the Theology and Continental Philosophy Unit at the American Academy of Religion for putting out a call for papers for the 2022 Annual Meeting that invited proposals revisiting Jantzen's late work, and thereby drawing my attention to how germane her later works are for the present situation.

2 In this paper, I will use "christendom" and "western", in keeping with Jantzen's conspicuous non-capitalization of those terms.

3 This also has a range of gendered implications, Jantzen argues: women, more associated with the material, have a limited beauty that pales in comparison to the sublime masculine beauty of the divine, e.g., Kant (Jantzen 2002, p. 430).

4 While Rubenstein is here describing pantheism, these words apply to the reception of nonexceptionalism, as well. Nonexceptionalism and pantheism arguably go hand-in-hand—one implying the other—and both unsettle rigid dualisms that uphold the established order.

5 The issue, Jantzen writes, is not that there is no theological aesthetics, but that, at the time of her writing, no one had developed an explicitly *feminist* theological aesthetics that grappled with the social and ethical implications of the beauty/ashes dichotomy. In the intervening years, an edited volume on feminist theological aesthetics has been published (Cassidy and O'Connell 2012), with emphasis on the diversity of beauty embodied by women and women's contributions to the arts. Thus, while there has been some attention to beauty in the theological tradition, the real-world ethical implications of emphasizing destruction over and against natural beauty remain an under-developed topic.

6 Note that I did not specify exclusively human bodies; in keeping with the push toward human nonexceptionalism, this responsiveness to beauty is not solely the property of humans, and may be shared with many other species.

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