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Becoming-Mineral: Desert Timescapes and Post-Neoliberal Geontopower in Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*

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ABSTRACT

In the age of the Anthropocene, capitalism's expansion and damage to the planet can ultimately be seen as "becoming extinction" (McBrien). This essay discusses post-neoliberal structurations of space, time, and consciousness by examining the "desert timescapes" featured in Don DeLillo's philosophical novel, *Point Omega* (2010). The desert, placed at the novel's heart, is analyzed as a prominent religious, aesthetic, and philosophical topos of the crisis of human subjectivity. Furthermore, the investigation of the conceptions in the novel of the "Omega Point" (as the ultimate point of consciousness toward which the universe is heading) reveals an interplay of transcendence and immanence about matter and human evolution and offers a geological perspective of "becoming-mineral." Finally, this paper claims that the "desert timescapes" polychronic perspective challenges anthropocentrism and the ontopolitics of the neoliberal state, and paves the way for reflection on "geontopower" (Povinelli), Life and NonLife in a geophilosophical mode of planetary thinking. (PK)

KEYWORDS: Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*, Anthropocene, desert timescape, mineralization, geophilosophy, extinction

The Anthropocene is claimed to be a new geological epoch where Anthropos is a major destructive force, rivaling some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth. Relevant research commonly asserts as a fact that "the world is likely entering its sixth mass extinction event and the first caused by a biological species" (Steffen et al. "The Anthropocene" 850). Nevertheless, this situation does not represent humankind or contemporary human civilization as a whole (Chakrabarty; Hamilton et al.; Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*). The responsibility falls on a fraction of human beings and nations who have adopted the neoliberalist capitalized way of Life, production, and consumption, which downgrades Nature as an endless resource provider. The kind and the degree of violence involved in the accumulation of capital can be understood as leading to a generalized necrosis or "becoming extinction" (McBrien), threatening the advent of a period of mass extinction. Therefore "Capitalocene" is this new geological epoch's most widely used alternative denomination (Moore, *Anthropocene or*

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Capitalocene?). By combining natural history with social history, the geophilosophical approach facilitates reconsidering the human position as a species and a carbon life form. Deleuze and Guattari define geophilosophical thinking as a form of "thinking that takes place in the relationship of territory and the earth" (*What is Philosophy?* 85). This geological turn in philosophy, arts, and humanities is critical of anthropocentrism. It involves a deep time perspective, an understanding of time as an inhuman force that has a "capacity to hide in objects" from microscopic to macroscopic scales, whether living or non-living, past or present (Grosz 132).

Neoliberalism's culture is characterized by a significant acceleration of traditional temporal structures (Rosa) and a shift toward greater flexibility in all aspects of social life. Thus, acceleration and mobility appear to have lost their cultural value as a means of escaping the oppressive social assemblages and boundaries set by global capitalism. Anthropocene discourses have embedded the ecological crisis in the modern regime of temporality based on a future-oriented chronological timeline. Anthropocene's hallmark narrative about "the great acceleration" (Steffen et al. "The trajectory of the Anthropocene")—the fact that the major Earth system changes have become directly linked to changes largely related to the global economic system—points to a clash of tempos. Namely, the clash between the slow pace of the Earth's history and the fast track of human technological achievements along a single universal timeline (Bensaude-Vincent 217). The notion of "Anthropocene" veils the fact that there are as many times as many lifelines of animate and inanimate things. It requires that all times be uniform and commensurable to fit in a global chronology. The current crisis incites us to explore or even adopt a polychronic view. This would involve, for instance, thinking across ecosystems' temporalities. In the latter, multiple timescales are simultaneously functioning as they involve a variety of heterogeneous temporal trajectories of humans, carbon, rocks, microbes, and so forth, beyond the uniform timeline imposed by western metaphysics claiming human supremacy over the Earth. This paper discusses eventual forms of this polychronic view by exploring alternative structuration of space, time, and consciousness through "desert timescapes," as featured in Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* (2010).

The different narrative forms displayed or mentioned in the novel (triptych narrative structure, haiku, visual art) perform a de-chronologization of time, making the effects of Capitalocene's crises more visible. These crises lead to death and extinction through various types, scales, and tempos of seen, unseen, or even unseeable violence and terror. Violence in the plot is

portrayed through America's war machine in the Middle East and the ideological subtext of the War on Terror (Travers 193). It extends to the characters' existential terror and the endless replay of Douglas Gordon's video art installation *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), an extremely slowed-down projection of Alfred Hitchcock's iconic film *Psycho* (1960). This video art, by its enormous dilation of time and theme, is analogically related to the paleontological species disappearance, human extinction and to the death of the universe. As it is noted in the novel, "it was like watching the universe die over a period of about seven billion years" (DeLillo 47). Finally, both films have also been implanted as clues to the mysterious disappearance of Jessie—probably stabbed to death—in the desert.

In their literary and philosophical texts, modern and postmodern European and American authors privilege the desert as it seems to be the spatial correlate of twentieth-century capitalism. If the exhaustion of history and culture for several European writers, including Jean Baudrillard, is displayed in American deserts, American writers have often seen the historical legacies of European colonialism, war, and genocide in deserts (Tynan, *The Desert in Modern Literature* 124). The desert ecosystem offers an exemplary "timescape" constituted by anthropogenic and natural forces in interaction. The concept of timescape extends the landscape perspective to the dimension of time (Adam 9). It highlights the complex web of heterogeneous and interdependent temporalities included in a territory such as the desert timescape: mineral, plant and animal life, nature's "deep" or geological time, and anthropogenic culture's traces. Typified by drought and extremes of temperature, deserts can be harsh and hostile to organic Life. Furthermore, fossils that are abundant in deserts as organic remnants in sedimentary rocks provide glimpses of past species, the gradual loss of biodiversity, and the extinction of planetary Life itself. Fossils organize the material structure of geological time in their substantiation of the geologic record. Fossil fuels, in particular, are a material condition that subtends contemporary geopolitical Life. Capitalism's desertification of the planet as the spread of physical deserts has come to define our contemporary environmental condition. It has been acknowledged as a critical aspect of Life in the Anthropocene (Chakrabarty). The "slow violence" of environmental degradation—a kind of structural violence that operates on much larger timescales than events that we usually code as violent—remains unobserved and regulates the rhythm of extinction (Nixon). As Claire Colebrook notes,

> there will not be complete annihilation but a gradual witnessing of a slow end, and that we are already at that moment of witness, living on after the end. Indeed, this is what an ethics of extinction requires: not an apocalyptic thought of the 'beyond the human' as a radical break or dissolution, but a slow, dim, barely discerned and yet violently effective destruction. (*Death of the PostHuman* 40)

Potential counterpoints to the neoliberal state's violence are posited in the novel via the idea of a needed change in perspective and human perception. This change is suggested by "slow observation" and "polychronic view" through the desert timescape's example.

Desert timescape, polychronic perception, and the Omega Point

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's thoughts about the evolution of the Earth and humans, as expressed in his treatise *Man as a Phenomenon* (1955), is the novel's substratum. Elster, the novel's main character, is an avid reader of the Jesuit Father and distinguished paleontologist's work, to which he directly refers in his discussions about the Omega point, also referred to in DeLillo's novel title. Teilhard posits in his "Foreward" a claim of refining sight as the condition of understanding the living world's evolution: "And that, doubtless, is why the history of the living world can be summarized as the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes" (31). He states that his purpose is "to try to develop a homogeneous and coherent perspective of our general extended experience of man. A whole which unfolds" (35). Besides, Teilhard presents his syllogism about cosmic evolution as a projection of a film: "Neither do I want any misunderstanding about the degree of reality which I accord to the different parts of the film I am projecting" (35).

DeLillo's novel's narrative structure is built as a triptych. The central section, set in the Anza-Borrego desert, revolves around a philosophical discussion about species evolution and extinction between the two main characters, Elster and Finley. It is enfolded in two sections, entitled *Anonymity 1*: *September 3* and *Anonymity 2*: *September 4,* concerning an anonymous man who visits and revisits Gordon's visual artwork *24 Hour Psycho* at the MoMA in the summer of 2006. These two scenes occur chronologically before the book's untitled central section. The screen in MoMA is the site of projection of the light of images alluding to the mirages of the geographic desert. As Baudrillard notes in *America,* "[t]he unfolding of the desert is infinitely close to the timelessness of film" (1). In the novel, there is an interplay between surface and depth and a correlation between the desert's geological time and

MoMA's room exhibiting the extremely slow-paced *24 Hour Psycho*, a conceptual installation that, according to Elster, stages "the heat death of the universe" (De Lillo 47). The machinic perspective—the unnaturally slowed-down frames of Hitchcock's *Psycho*—allows the human eye to experience non-human durations and angles, like those provided by the geologic time (cf. Sammarcelli). Such a change in perspective *encompassing* the submicroscopic moments and the macroscopic scales joins Gilles Deleuze's request from philosophy to open us up to inhuman perception, to "durations which are inferior or superior to our own, to go beyond the human condition" (*Bergsonism* 41). Teilhard also points to the need to get a geologic perspective at the study of the human as a phenomenon and, through this perspective, to reveal "all that is bad in anthropocentrism":

> When studied narrowly in himself by anthropologists or jurists, man is a tiny, even a shrinking, creature. His overpronounced individuality conceals from our eyes the whole to which he belongs; as we look at him our minds incline to break nature up into pieces and to forget both its deep inter-relations and its measureless horizons: we incline to all that is bad in anthropocentrism. (35)

Teilhard's fictional reader, Richard Elster, is a "defense intellectual" involved in the management of America's war machine. He deserted the city and the Pentagon to retreat to the desert, "somewhere south of nowhere" (DeLillo 20), in search of space and geologic time. Western philosophers—notably Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari—have used the desert to deliberate about modern subjectivity's crisis ensuing from the death of God. In the twentieth-century philosophical and literary tradition, the desert has remained a place where humans escape to seek salvation and to overcome themselves. There Elster is joined by a young filmmaker, Jim Finley, determined to make one take's film about Elster's war experience.

Elster's theoretical arsenal was put into "a series of lectures . . . on what he called the dream of extinction" (DeLillo 36). "Extinction was a current theme of his" (20) and is revealed to be one of the main themes of the novel. The "rule of extinction" is folded in deep time, in the Pleistocene desert: "This is deep time, epochal time. Our lives receding into the long past. That's what's out there. The Pleistocene desert, the rule of extinction" (72). Extinction is also enfolded in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Elster thinks in terms of geologic time, war, exhaustion and extinction, evolution and involution. According to Deleuze, "the desert is an 'Idea of humanity'

before it is a geographical feature because every territory presupposes a primal intimation of the Earth as separate and alien from us, a bare surface on which our territories can be formed" (*Desert Islands* 11). The desert functions as the past (pre-human) and the future (post-human) of human species. This non-human agent reveals the future of the Earth beyond the species. For Elster and Finley, it is a "protoworld," and at the same time, an "alien being" and "science fiction," "both saturating and remote" (DeLillo 20). It is an archive that bares the fossilized traces of the "seas and reefs of ten million years ago" (20), but also the desert supplies the imaginative material for a future history without humanity, a place into which Jessie, Elster's daughter, mysteriously vanishes, most likely murdered.

The vanishing point of humanity, the "Omega Point," is the novel's center line. In Baudrillard's *America*, the first chapter dedicated to the American deserts, holds precisely the title "The Vanishing Point." Baudrillard has seen the American desert as "a vanishing point of European cultural, literary and aesthetic traditions" (Tynan 124), "for the desert is simply that: an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance" (Baudrillard 5). As DeLillo himself refers to the "Point Omega" of the title in an interview, it is "the possible idea that human consciousness is reaching a point of exhaustion and that what comes next may be either a paroxysm or something enormously sublime and unenvisionable" (qtd. in Alter). The novel proposes, in effect, that the temporal dilation of Gordon's video and the spatial and temporal dilation of the desert, can bring on that low-level awareness about the Omega Point.

Regarding the universal process in terms of consciousness, Teilhard's Omega point finds expression in the "thinking layer [of the earth] . . . the noosphere" (182). It is teleologically conceived as the apotheosis of a cosmic or collective mind, a leap into some sort of transcendental consciousness, namely, in "God-Omega" (288). Besides, Jesus reveals himself in the *Book of Revelation* as "the Alpha and the Omega" (*Revelation* 22:13). Elster also thinks in terms of collective human conscience and asserts that "[w]e're a crowd, a swarm. We think in groups, travel in armies" (DeLillo 52). He agrees then with Teilhard when he conceives the Omega Point as a "leap out of our biology": "Because now comes the introversion. Father Teilhard knew this, the Omega Point. A leap out of our biology" (52).

However, Elster is skeptical about human evolution and seems to embrace a rather cyclical conception of the Omega Point. According to Harald Kleemann, the Omega Point is "the point of origin and of return in the cosmic cycle, and the ultimate point of reference for every conceivable

frame of mind" (44). Elster posits the question of the return to "inorganic matter": "Ask yourself this question. Do we have to be human forever? Consciousness is exhausted. Back now to inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field" (DeLillo 52–53).

Criticism recognizes in Elster's speculations "the denial or mockery of Teilhard's thinking," already signaled by the inversion of the "Omega Point" in the title of the novel (Cowart 47; see also Fest 568). However, there seems to be a more complex relationship between Ester's and Teilhard's approaches, defined by an interlacement between immanence and transcendence concerning the Omega Point. Teilhard views evolution as a process that leads to increasing complexity. The teleological function of the noosphere and Teilhard's mysterious upward synthesis of centers, which he has called Omega, is "Survival" (Teilhard 269)—as opposed to Elster's "Extinction" and his backward movement to the matter (stone), to the present moment ("here and now") and to the localized affect (the "local grief" about his daughter's alluded murder). At the end, Finley reflects upon the grandiose philosophical conversations he had with Elster about the Omega Point and narrows it down to the "point of a knife," as they are both deeply affected by Jessie's mysterious disappearance:

> I thought of his remarks about matter and being, those long nights on the deck half smashed, he and I, transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness. It seemed so much dead echo now. Point Omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man's grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not. (DeLillo 98)

Nevertheless, if Elster's Omega Point is revealed to be "human, all too human" and deeply personal, so it remains at the end, for Teilhard, the mystic convergence of the Universal and the Personal in the "hyper-personal" (Teilhard 260). In the closing phrase, before the "Epilogue," Teilhard acknowledges that "[t]he only universe capable of containing the human person is an irreversibly 'personalising' universe" (290).

Between transcendence and immanence: petrification

The perception of the desert timescape incites the interplay of the two planes of existence, immanence and transcendence: the desert, with its uninterrupted spans, can suggest pure presence or continuity of animate and inanimate matter, but in its hostility to organic Life, it also indicates a

discontinuous world deserted by a vital presence that has retreated to the heavens (Tynan, "Desert Earth" 76). The religious notion of transcendence, "a specifically European disease," originates in the desert experience of the seminomadic biblical Hebrews (Deleuze and Guattari, A *Thousand Plateaus* 18). Baudrillard's vision of the desert includes vastness, mystery, sacrifice, transcendence, and finally disappearance, preferably the disappearance of a woman, much alike the one of Jessie in DeLillo's novel: "Death Valley is as big and mysterious as ever. Fire, heat, light: all the elements of sacrifice are here. You always have to bring something into the desert to sacrifice, and offer it to the desert as a victim. A woman. If something has to disappear, something matching the desert for beauty, why not a woman?" (66). In DeLillo's novel, the ecstatic experience is not directed toward transcendence but rather toward immanence. Elster claims the exhaustion of human consciousness: "I'm telling you, this will change. Something's coming. But isn't this what we want? Isn't this the burden of consciousness? We're all played out. Matter wants to lose its self-consciousness. We're the mind and heart that matter has become. Time to close it all down. This is what drives us now" (50).

The evolution of humanity, which does not have to "be human forever," is depicted instead as "involution": "Consciousness accumulates. It begins to reflect upon itself . . . where the mind transcends all direction inward. The omega point" (72). This point of view is lining up with the nihilists and the materialists, but also with the Old Testament: "All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return" (*Ecclesiastes* 3:20). Elster envisions human evolution as a return to "dead matter": "We want to be the dead matter we used to be. We're the last billionth of a second in the evolution of matter" (DeLillo 64). More specifically, he champions a return to inorganic matter or stone: "Think of it. We pass completely out of being. Stones. Unless stones have being. Unless there's some profoundly mystical shift that places being in a stone" (73). Remarkably, Elster briefly contemplates the "mystical" possibility that stones have "being." If for him, at the end of evolution, at the Point Omega, is the regression to stone and for Teilhard the union with God, the two approaches are not as divergent as they seem at first glance. Stones have always been objects of mystical, mythological, and aesthetic attributions; they were revealed to be suited to philosophical meditations (Caillois; Wolf). For instance, their mystical nature is exposed by the admonition of Jesus in the Apocryphal Gospels: "Split the tree, and I am in the wood; lift a stone, and I am there." The medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart similarly states: "The stone is God, but it

does not know it, and it is the not knowing that makes it a stone" (Caillois xvi). In this line of thought, the alchemists chose the Philosophers' Stone to symbolize transmutation. According to Kleemann, the two recurrent motives of the Great Quest in the literature of Alchemy are the "Philosopher's Stone," which is supposed to be the mind in its totality and the "Elixir of Life" or Elan Vital, representing consciousness, which permeates and vitalizes all things (288–89).

The vital force is not only a matter of transcendence but also of immanence. Teilhard assumes "the existence in rudimentary form (in a microscopic, that is, an infinitely diffuse, state) of some sort of psyche in every corpuscle" from the genesis of the universe (301). In recent ecocritical studies, vitality is thought to be intrinsic to materiality. The "vibrant matter," according to the political theorist Jane Bennett, is detached from the figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance (Bennett). Deleuze and Guattari use the term "geophilosophy" to reorient philosophy away from transcendental ideas to concepts of immanence. In his last essay, Deleuze maintains that "[a] life is everywhere, in all the moments a certain living subject passes through and that certain lived objects regulate: immanent life carrying along the events or singularities which do nothing more than actualize themselves in subjects and objects" (*Pure Immanence* 29). Interestingly enough, Teilhard in his account of cosmic evolution, considers a "universal will to live" that "actualize" in humans or is "hominised" in them: "In fact I doubt whether there is a more decisive moment for a thinking being than when the scales fall from his eyes and he discovers that he is not an isolated unit lost in the cosmic solitudes, and realizes that a universal will to live converges and is hominised in him" (36).

Elster's speculation about the possibility of humanity turning into stone and that stones have being, enters into dialogue with Spinoza's famous analogy in his theory of conatus between humans and falling stones as conscious of their endeavors. This analogy stems from Baruch Spinoza's claim that all beings, including stones, contain a power of thinking corresponding to their bodies' power to be disposed in different ways, their capacity for activity and responsiveness (286). Besides, the deep time—the geological perspective—does not discriminate between human, animal, plant, and earth history. Teilhard has already noticed that the change of perspective (microscopic or macroscopic) offers the vision of continuity between "the mineral word and the world of Life":

> The mineral world and the world of Life seem two antithetical creations when viewed by a summary glance in their extreme forms and on the intermediary scale of our human organisms; but to a deeper study, when we force our way right down to the microscopic level and beyond to the infinitesimal, or (which comes to the same thing) far back along the scale of time, they seem quite otherwise-a single mass gradually melting in on itself. At such depths all differences seem to become tenuous. (77)

Catherine Gander highlights the persistent fascination in DeLillo's work with the rock's static encoding of time (138). Elster seems to adopt the geological estimation that everything succumbs to a petrification process in time and turns into a mineral (Bakke 62). The geological term of petrification involves the very slow process of minerals saturating an organism. It is a subcategory of fossilization, which describes the conservation of traces of past Life in, or as stone. It is defined as "the process by which organic material becomes a fossil through the replacement of the original material and the filling of the original pore space with minerals" (Hüglin, Gramsch, Seppänen 2). If we can "see our ways of being as geological rather than biological *per se*," as Kathryn Yusoff proposes (781), human experience on Earth could be seen rather as "becoming-earth" (Braidotti 81). Anthropocene fossils are a specter of the human *as fossil to come*. We can envisage that in a post-human future, humans and their artifacts could form a unified stratum that names this geologic epoch defined through its trace or end (Zalasiewicz).

In the novel, there are allusions and allegories of the petrification process, such as the absorption of the self in the desert timescape: "He'd exchanged all that for space and time. These were things he seemed to absorb through his pores," or references concerning the subject's absorption "in the near static rhythm of the image" (DeLillo 19, 115). A recurring motif is the one of a human quasi-enfolded in the wall. The anonymous man in the MoMA exhibition is rendered invisible against the wall; "the man went back to his place at the wall, where he stood motionless now" during "extended periods every day," quasi fossilized. "He wanted complete immersion, whatever that means" (115). The anonymous woman in *Anonymity 2* "was a shadow unfolding from the wall" (111). At the end, the dissolution process of the anonymous man into the screen figure of Norman Bates's psycho personality-type can be seen as alluding to a petrification process performed "pore by pore": "The man separates himself from the wall and waits to be assimilated, pore by pore, to dissolve into the figure of Norman Bates" (116).

This allegorical petrification process is also envisaged for Elster through Finley's film project, summarized as "Man at the wall" (45). After his daughter's disappearance, as Finley observes, the desert "made him feel enclosed . . . hemmed in, pressed tight. We stood outside and felt the desert bearing in" (87). As the "desertification" grows, Elster is dried out as a fossil, "a man drawn down to sparest outline, weightless" (97). The geological perspective inscribes the human as always already pre-human—inorganic, fossilized, and part of a morphogenetic process whose scale far precedes and exceeds the temporary coagulation of the human. "We are walking and talking minerals," as Bennett puts it (11). At the end of the novel, Finley, while driving out of the desert, reaches at that moment a plurichronic perspective, where natural history and human history merge:

> Then I drove into town to fill up the tank and soon we were out again moving through fault zones and between stands of swirled rock, the history that runs past the window, mountains forming, seas receding, Elster's history, time and wind, a shark's tooth marked on desert stone. (DeLillo 94)

That perceiving eye, combining different perspectives in the present, allows for a mode and style of writing that resembles haiku more than the linear narrative of a novel (Vermeulen 79). Peter Boxall in *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* points out contemporary fiction's commitment to outline a new temporal awareness (39) and "new measures of speed and slowness" (207). If, according to Elster, true Life takes place in "the submicroscopic moments" (DeLillo 17), the "haiku moment" introduced as a poetic attempt to capture presence is one of them (cf. Giroux; Louis). It is "human consciousness located in nature"; it bares "transient things" "to plain sight":

> Haiku means nothing beyond what it is. A pond in summer, a leaf in the wind. It's human consciousness located in nature. It's the answer to everything in a set number of lines, a prescribed syllable count . . .. What I wanted was a set of ideas linked to transient things. This is the soul of haiku. Bare everything to plain sight. . . . See what's there and then be prepared to watch it disappear. (DeLillo 29)

The haiku loosens the spatio-temporal boundaries of the present, even while seemingly fixing a single moment through poetic representation. Western interpretations of haiku's origins have often emphasized "that indelible instant in which all boundaries between self and the world collapse" in a zen-like ecstasy (Marshall and Simpson 119). The haiku's performance of presence is found in

"the remains"; it acts as a fossil, the evocative traces of the past are engraved into the present for each future reader (Giannachi et al. 1).

From neoliberal necropolitics to geontopower

The desert timescape offers not only an opening to the geological past and eventually to a non-anthropocentric or mineral future but also a conceptual *topos* that calls our notions of place into question. It embodies, in a sense, the erasure of the territorial differences that allow worlds and states to be formed and unformed (Tynan, *The Desert in Modern Literature* 178). According to Deleuze and Guattari, the desert and steppe are frequently used to exemplify "smooth" or "intensive space," defined through the concept of the *nomos*, which stands in opposition to the law or the polis (*A Thousand Plateaus* 380). Smooth space, the nomos, is a conceptual spatium that allows us to think power beyond the state-form by which law is grounded on the division and measurement of land. Deleuze and Guattari observe that religions have so often taken root in the desert because they need an "encompassing element" to oppose to a "center": "the entire history of the desert concerns the possibility of its becoming the encompassing element, and also of being repelled, rejected by the center, as though in an inversion of movement" (574). This double movement of the desert, offering grounding, and mainly ungrounding, could provide a basis for new values on a global scale.

The anthropologist Elizabeth A. Povinelli in *Geontologies* argues that the desert is crucial for understanding contemporary formations of power. The current conditions of late liberalism ask for a retheorization of power formations beyond Foucault's biopower and its anthropocentric figures. The ground of biopolitics and biopower is the Western metaphysics of Life (bios) as a measure of all forms of existence. For instance, in western ontologies, which are covert biontologies, the colonized do not really have a being. They merely exist the way a rock does. Achille Mbembe defines "necropolitics" as "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and population" (19) by the power of neoliberal State politics, its industrial-scale warfare, and the various forms of violence exerted in the government of the living and even the planet itself. Biopower and necropolitics are two sides of the same coin, as Rosi Braidotti concludes (9). As the fate of carbon-based lifeforms become precariously intertwined with unsustainable capitalist demands for carbon-based fuels, and the line between Life and NonLife becomes uncertain, biopower needs to be revised through "geontopower," the governance of Life in relation to what is not

Life. Geontological power, or "geontopower," according to Povinelli, is intended to highlight Life, whose opposite is not Death but NonLife. NonLife is a geological concept that takes us to a time before and eventually after the Life and death of individuals and species.

The central capitalist aesthetic mode to envisage the "gap" between Life and NonLife is the "carbon imaginary." It promotes the governance of Life by transposing birth, growth-reproduction, death, and finitude to everything we perceive; it opposes Life to the Other of Life, namely, the Barren, the Inert, or the Inanimate. The Desert is one of the three non-anthropocentric figures operating the geontopower. The maintenance of the distinction between Life and NonLife in the figure of the desert revolves around that which had Life but now is deprived of it, and which eventually could be revived through the proper technologies. It also revolves around that which never was alive in the first place, the undead, the geological. Part of these kinds of ontological questions concerns how ontological differences are stretched across forms of Life and modes of mineralization, the mobility of the border between the vital and nonvital in accounts of the matter and what territorialisations become possible as a result. In a geological perspective which encompasses the beginning and the eventual end of Life, Povinelli describes the difficulty of separating Life from NonLife, the vital as opposed to the "inert of rocky substance":

> For if we look at where and how Life began, and how and why it might end, then how can we separate Life from Nonlife? Life is not the miracle—the dynamic opposed to the inert of rocky substance. Nonlife is what holds, or should hold for us, the more radical potential. For Nonlife created what it is radically not, Life, and will in time fold this extension of itself back into itself as it has already done so often and long. It will fold its own extension back into the geological strata and rocky being, whereas Life can only fall into what already is. Life is merely a moment in the greater dynamic unfolding of Nonlife. (176)

If "Life is merely a moment in the greater dynamic unfolding of NonLife," as Povinelli contends, Life needs to be considered beyond organic, and agency can no longer be associated only with human actants or Life (Bakke 59–60). "On close-enough inspection," as Bennett notes,

> the productive power that has engendered an effect will turn out to be a confederacy, and the human actants within it will themselves turn out to

> be confederations of tools, microbes, minerals, sounds, and other "foreign" materialities. Human intentionality can emerge only by way of such a distribution. (36)

In the novel, whereas the desert timescape heightens the drama of the constant peril of Life in relation to NonLife, the philosophical substratum and interplay of transcendental and materialist thoughts about "mineral being" put into question the division between Life and NonLife. In that light, the plot implies a distribution of quasi-agencies and actants across non-human and human actants in ways that disturb the concepts of subject, object, and predicate. Subsequently, given the novel's war-thematic, it is not surprising that it has been harshly criticized for avoiding to attribute agency, for not providing "concrete anti-Iraq war statements," or even, for obfuscating the reader's emotional identification with the characters (Giaimo 177).

Elster believes "that the landscape unravels and reveals" (DeLillo 87); the desert is presented as a non-human agent, a source of action. The theme of agency in the novel is revealed to be mysterious (Beckman 18), and a web of forces, often imperceptible—rather than individuals—leads to events. For instance, Jessie's sudden disappearance in the desert remains unattributed as the unexplained death of one of the individuals she cared for, who "had just died of multiple something-or-other" (DeLillo 41–42). Despite the evidence in the plot that points to the psychotic anonymous watcher in MoMA, critics have been reluctant to identify the "man" as the murderer of Jessie (Wolf 126). A set of possibilities is opened: Jessie might also have committed suicide, virtually merging into the desert, materializing Elster's fantasies of dissolution in the landscape. The concept of extinction pushed beyond the human, the species and the extinction of Life itself, confers to the geontological a more significant part in contemporary thought and displaces the division of Life and NonLife as such.

DeLillo's philosophical novel falls within the category of critical artistic practices that simultaneously strive to "see it whole" and investigate the various ways how such seeing is obscured or left as an open conjecture. The *Point Omega* elaborates on "the depth of things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing" (DeLillo 13). The inhuman lens provided by the novel's desert timescape and its film/video art analogue, demonstrates that acquiring such a polychronic, geologic perspective, being aware of the different rhythms that create assemblages across the Earth might enhance our capacity to reshape self, agency, imagining alternatives to neoliberal state

violence. A geophilosophical approach would appear to situate human existence and philosophical thinking within broader and inhuman forces of the Earth (Colebrook "Geophilosophy"). Considering that things are neither born nor do they die, though they can change states, the desert is not that space in which Life does not exist but where other forms of (human) existence—like bone, soil, dust, rock, or fossil—are encountered. Rather than defining what Life is, it seems more relevant to "ask what formations we are keeping in existence or extinguishing" (Povinelli 28) in order to form a non-annihilative nor transcendental approach to the Omega Point and a new imaginary of our planetary existence.

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