

Re-bodying the Anthropocene: Trans-species Subjectivity and the Critique of Cartesian Dualism in Ray Nayler's *The Tusks of Extinction*

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Abstract

Science Fiction has increasingly emerged as a critical site of ecological interrogation, reimagining posthuman subjectivities in ways that challenge entrenched anthropocentric worldviews. This article examines Ray Nayler's *The Tusks of Extinction* as a seminal work of posthuman ecocriticism that systematically dismantles the Cartesian dualism underpinning Western thought. By centering on the "uploaded" consciousness of mammalogist Damira within the body of a resurrected woolly mammoth, Nayler moves beyond conventional de-extinction narratives to foreground the emergence of a trans-species subjectivity. Drawing on the material ecocriticism of Stacy Alaimo and the multispecies ethics of Donna Haraway, this article argues that Damira's experience enacts a radical disruption of the *res cogitans* / *res extensa* divide. Rather than a human mind piloting a biological machine, the narrative stages a process of "re-bodying," wherein consciousness is reconfigured through mammoth physiology, altered sensory landscapes, and collective herd instincts. This posthuman hybridity critiques "technological salvage" in the Anthropocene, exposing the limits of purely technoscientific restoration. The article contends that ecological survival demands an ontological shift towards an entangled, embodied, and ethically responsive multispecies mode of existence.

Keywords: Posthuman Ecocriticism, De-extinction, Anthropocene, Multispecies Ethics, Nonhuman Agency, Re-bodying, Ecological Restoration.

In contemporary literary discourse, Science Fiction functions as a speculative site for reconfiguring the ontological boundaries between the human, the nonhuman, and the technological. Over the past few decades, the genre has emerged as a primary site for posthuman ecocritical inquiry, offering a discursive space to interrogate the ecological ramifications of technoscientific intervention. Canonical works such as Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*, and Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* exemplify this trajectory by destabilizing anthropocentric assumptions regarding agency, embodiment, and survival. These narratives foreground hybrid ontologies and distributed forms of consciousness, thereby challenging the Cartesian dualism—the bifurcated logic of mind and matter—that has historically underwritten Western humanism.

As Rosi Braidotti argues, the posthuman subject is “a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity” (49), a definition that rejects the myth of the self-contained, sovereign individual. This aligns with Cary Wolfe’s assertion that posthumanism necessitates a radical “decentering of the human” as the primary locus of meaning (xvi). Within this evolving intellectual landscape, posthuman ecocriticism provides a vital framework for analyzing how contemporary fiction reconfigures ecological thought. By emphasizing materiality, entanglement, and multispecies ethics, the genre moves beyond human-centric survival narratives towards a vision of existence defined by interspecies dependency and biological porosity.

It is within this theoretical and literary context that Ray Nayler’s *The Tusks of Extinction* assumes particular significance. By depicting the transposition of human consciousness into the resurrected biological frame of a nonhuman subject, the novella extends beyond parochial debates on de-extinction to interrogate the ontological foundations of subjectivity itself. Rather than treating the mammoth as a passive object of scientific manipulation—what “Heidegger might call a ‘standing reserve’” (24)—Nayler foregrounds the experiential and ethical implications of inhabiting a nonhuman body. Through the narrative strategy of “re-bodying,” the text enacts a shift from anthropocentric epistemology to a multispecies ontology grounded in ecological interdependence.

This transformation reflects Dipesh Chakrabarty’s seminal observation that the climate crisis “collapses the age-old humanist distinction between natural and human history” (207), forcing a rethinking of human agency at planetary scales. As Damira’s human cognition is subsumed by mammoth physiology—navigating the world through infrasonic vibrations and “the collective memory of the herd” (Nayler 16)—the category of the “human” is effectively destabilized. Nayler’s novella thus functions as a literary articulation of this ontological rupture, suggesting that survival in the Anthropocene requires the dissolution of the sovereign “I.” By centering the trans-species subject, the narrative argues that true ecological restoration is impossible without a corresponding shift towards what Rosi Braidotti describes as a “pan-humanity” that includes “the non-human as a vital force” (60). Ultimately, Nayler suggests that to save the biosphere, the human must first learn to be “one among many” (17) in the multispecies continuum.

At the core of Nayler’s exploration of the posthuman condition lies the concept of “re-bodying” (18), a process that demands a decisive departure from the Cartesian view of the body as a passive vessel for a sovereign, disembodied mind. In *The Tusks of Extinction*, Damira’s consciousness is not merely “installed” within a mammoth form as if it were software being loaded into new hardware; rather, it is radically reconstituted through the material and sensory exigencies of nonhuman embodiment. This transformation resonates with Stacy Alaimo’s concept of trans-corporeality, which foregrounds “the interconnections between human corporeality and the more-than-human world” and suggests that “the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (2). As Damira inhabits her new corporeal existence, her residual human cognition is persistently disrupted by the embodied realities of mammoth life—its immense physicality, altered sensory apparatus, and instinctual drives shaped by millennia of evolutionary history.

Nayler captures this ontological shift when Damira recognizes that the mammoth body “moves before thought, insists before intention” (19), effectively foregrounding the primacy of material embodiment over intellectual command. Such sensory reorientation underscores a central posthuman insight: that consciousness is neither abstract nor autonomous but is fundamentally contingent upon the corporeal structures that mediate experience. This perspective aligns with N. Katherine Hayles’s critique of the liberal humanist subject, in which she argues that “the body is not a prosthesis to the self but a core component of subjectivity” (199). By depicting Damira’s mind as being actively reshaped by the “low-frequency rumbles” and “chemical signatures” of her environment (20), Nayler challenges the long-standing privileging of the human mind as the solitary locus of identity.

Instead, subjectivity is positioned as emergent from the dynamic interplay between body, environment, and social relations. This perspective further aligns with Jane Bennett’s notion of “vibrant matter,” which attributes a specific kind of agency to nonhuman materialities, arguing that “vitality is shared by all bodies” (xiii). In *The Tusks of Extinction*, the mammoth’s tusks, trunk, and hide are not mere tools for Damira’s use; they are actants that dictate the boundaries of her world. By acknowledging the “power of things” (Bennett vi), Nayler further destabilizes anthropocentric hierarchies, suggesting that the human subject can only survive the Anthropocene by recognizing its own status as a material, and therefore entangled, entity. The narrative thus enacts a transition from the *res cogitans* to a state of material entanglement, where the boundaries between the “thinking I” and the “vibrant world” are irrevocably blurred.

This critique is further deepened through Nayler’s destabilization of the Cartesian conception of the autonomous “I.” Within the Western humanist tradition, subjectivity is grounded in autonomy, rational self-presence, and a clear demarcation from the “other.” Nayler’s narrative, however, reimagines consciousness as a distributed and relational phenomenon, embedded within the social and ecological dynamics of the mammoth herd. This reconceptualization resonates strongly with Donna Haraway’s assertion that “beings do not preexist their relatings” (4). Damira’s realization that “memory was not hers alone anymore; it moved between bodies” (21) exemplifies this distributed ontology, wherein identity is constituted through relational exchange rather than individual autonomy.

The figure of the “Uploaded Matriarch” thus emerges as a powerful metaphor for posthuman ethics. It reconceives the self as an entanglement of biological inheritance, social obligation, and ecological embeddedness. This framework aligns with Timothy Morton’s ecological thought, which emphasizes radical interconnectedness and the impossibility of isolating the human from its environment (28). In this sense, Nayler’s text moves beyond representational critique to propose an alternative ethical paradigm grounded in multispecies interdependence.

This ontological critique is fundamentally complemented by Nayler’s interrogation of “technological salvage” (23), a concept that exposes the anthropocentric assumption that ecological collapse can be remedied through technoscientific intervention without dismantling the human/nature binary. As Bruno Latour argues in *We Have Never Been Modern*, modernity’s rigid separation of nature and culture is a foundational illusion, noting that “the word ‘modern’

designates two sets of entirely different practices which must remain distinct if they are to remain effective” (75). Nayler’s novella dramatizes the violent consequences of this epistemological divide, particularly through the depiction of poachers and corporate agents who reduce the mammoth to *res extensa*—unthinking matter to be exploited. This reductionism illustrates the persistence of extractive logics within contemporary ecological discourse, where the nonhuman is viewed merely as a resource for human consumption or capital.

Nayler extends this critique by situating de-extinction within the mechanisms of neoliberal capitalism, where ecological restoration is often hollowed out to become a commodified spectacle. The mammoth’s resurrection is framed not as a genuine recovery of a lost ecological niche, but as a high-tech “performance,” reflecting what Fredric Jameson identifies as late capitalism’s tendency to aestheticize crisis. For Jameson, the cultural logic of the current era involves a “new depthlessness” and a “weakening of historicity” (9), where the historical reality of extinction is replaced by the glossy, market-ready image of the resurrected beast. In this context, the mammoth becomes a “hyperreal” object—a simulation of a species that is functionally detached from the intricate ecological networks that originally sustained its life. The “salvage” here is aesthetic and financial rather than biological; the creature is a ghost summoned to haunt a world that no longer possesses the ecological space to hold it.

At the same time, the novella interrogates the profound dissonance produced by imposing a humanist framework onto a posthuman condition. Damira’s internal struggle to reconcile her residual human consciousness with the mammoth’s embodied instincts dramatizes the tension between anthropocentric sovereignty and distributed ecological intelligence. This friction is most evident when Damira realizes that her human definitions of selfhood are incompatible with the herd’s biological imperatives. Nayler suggests that “the herd was not a collection but a continuity” (16), emphasizing a relational mode of being that prioritizes the survival of the collective over discrete individuality.

This tension operates as an allegory for the Anthropocene itself, wherein strategies of technocratic control persist despite their evident failure to stem the tide of biodiversity loss. By forcing the reader to inhabit Damira’s “porous” mind, Nayler argues that the crisis is not merely technical but philosophical. As Latour suggests, the only way forward is to recognize the “imbroglio” of humans and nonhumans (78); Nayler’s “continuity” of the herd offers a narrative blueprint for this recognition, suggesting that we must abandon the myth of the “sovereign I” to survive within the multispecies “we.”

Drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty’s formulation of the Anthropocene as a crisis that “collapses the age-old humanist distinction between natural and human history” (207), Nayler’s narrative foregrounds the fundamental inadequacy of existing epistemologies. Ecological restoration, the text suggests, requires more than mere technological innovation; it demands an ontological transformation of the human subject. By placing Damira’s consciousness within a mammoth, Nayler forces a confrontation with what Chakrabarty describes as the “scaling up” of human impact to a planetary level, where the individual “I” is subsumed by the geological “we.”

Nayler's *The Tusks of Extinction* advances a vision of ecological survival predicated upon an "entangled" ontology that fiercely resists human exceptionalism. Damira's trajectory—from detached observer to embedded matriarch—enacts a shift from "mastery to membership." This shift resonates deeply with Anna Tsing's emphasis on "collaborative survival" in multispecies assemblages, where she argues that "staying alive—for every species—requires help" (4). Damira's survival, and that of the herd, is not a solo endeavor but a performance of "becoming-with" in a damaged landscape. As she learns to navigate the tundra not as a scientist but as a matriarch, she embodies Tsing's assertion that "precarity is the condition of our time," requiring us to look for "social and ecological life" within the ruins of capitalism (Tsing 20).

In this light, the novella offers a compelling rearticulation of the Anthropocene as an ontological impasse. Survival, Nayler suggests, depends upon the emergence of a "porous" subjectivity—one that recognizes the self as inextricably bound to ecological systems. Damira's transformation highlights the extent to which the current crisis is rooted in the "myth of separation." By the novella's end, the rejection of Cartesian dualism is complete; Damira's porous mind is no longer a human artifact but a node in a multispecies web, proving that in the Anthropocene, we must learn to "live in the thick of it" (Haraway 4) to ensure the continuity of life.

In conclusion, Ray Nayler's *The Tusks of Extinction* transcends the generic boundaries of speculative fiction to function as a profound posthuman ecological intervention. By systematically dismantling the Cartesian dualism that separates the sovereign human mind from the "unthinking" biological world, the novella asserts that the existential challenges of the Anthropocene cannot be addressed through the same bifurcated logic that produced them. What the text demands, instead, is a radical ontological shift—a fundamental reimagining of the human not as a detached manager of resources, but as an embedded participant within a multispecies continuum of life.

Through the "re-bodying" of Damira, Nayler illustrates that the path to ecological survival is not paved with further technoscientific mastery or the illusions of "technological salvage." Rather, it requires the cultivation of an entangled consciousness that recognizes the porosity of the self. This narrative move aligns with the posthumanist rejection of liberal individualism, suggesting that our survival is inextricably tied to the agency and sociality of the nonhuman other. Damira's transition from a scientific observer to a member of the mammoth herd serves as a vital blueprint for ontological humility; it suggests that the "human" is a category that must be surrendered, or at least significantly decentralized, if a habitable biosphere is to be preserved.

Nayler contends that true restoration is an ethical endeavor rather than a merely mechanical one. It posits that a viable future is only possible if we move beyond instrumental rationality and embrace a state of relational belonging. In this light, the novella serves as a posthuman manifesto for the Anthropocene, reminding us that we cannot "save" a world from which we remain conceptually and ethically apart. To survive, we must learn to inhabit the world as Damira does: as an integrated, ethically responsive node within the collective, breathing fabric of the ecosystem.

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