

## Greening Black Metal: The EcoGothic Aesthetics of Botanist's Lyrics

Alejandro Rivero-Vadillo  
GIECO-Franklin Institute-University of Alcalá, Spain  
alejandro.rivero@uah.es

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### Abstract

Environmental Black Metal has been a liminal subject of academic ecocriticism during the last decade, but it has rarely been addressed from the perspective of ecoGothic studies. Environmental discourses in Black Metal have taken diverse ideological forms based on the time and place in which they were generated. In the United States, many bands have focused on exploring what Hunter Hunt-Hendrix calls “aesthetics,” an affirmative and nihilist sense of transcendentalism carried out through a certain sense of aesthetics, ascetics (spirituality), and ethics. US bands like Botanist have usually been analyzed through the lens of Deep Ecology, that is, as projects depicting a sacralized Nature and a sense of nihilist self-hating humanism. This view, thus, implies an essentialist understandings of Nature/humanity dynamics on their behalf. Botanist's lyrics are characterized by the creation of a demonological/angelical Nature in sempiternal conflict with humanity and its environment-destroying activities. Observing this narrative through an ecoGothic perspective, however, uncovers a different understanding of the romanticized portrayals of Nature depicted by the band, ultimately highlighting humanity and “humanness” as a vital part of its aesthetical construction. This article, therefore, explores the ways in which ecoGothic aesthetics, Val Plumwood's notion of material spirituality and, Donna Haraway's sense of “chthulucenic” ethics connect with each other in Botanist's grim lyricism. The article highlights the importance of Botanist's representation of plant architectures, “Mother Nature's” spirituality, and the environmental ethics involved in the performance of “The Botanist,” the protagonist of the band's narrative. This brings to light how the band's depiction of Nature not only drives audiences to reflect on contemporary environmental anxieties, but also to look for onto-ethical alternatives to addressing human/non-human relationships.

*Keywords:* Botanist, ecogothic, aesthetics, black metal, material spirituality.

### Resumen

El *black metal* ecologista ha sido objeto de análisis liminal en la ecocrítica académica de la última década, aunque rara vez ha sido analizado desde la perspectiva de los estudios ecogóticos. El *black metal* de corte ambientalista ha tomado diversas formas ideológicas dependiendo de la época y lugar donde fue generado. En Estados Unidos, muchas bandas han explorado lo que Hunter Hunt-Hendrix llama “*aesthetics*”, un transcendentalismo afirmativo y nihilista expuesto a través de su estética, ascética y ética. Formaciones americanas como Botanist han sido normalmente analizadas como proyectos con temas con base en la ecología profunda, es decir, como bandas que muestran una Naturaleza sacralizada y un sentido humanístico nihilista que, por tanto, crean un acercamiento esencializado a las dinámicas Naturaleza/humanidad. Las letras de Botanist se caracterizan por la creación de una Naturaleza demoníaca/angelical, la cual está en permanente conflicto con la humanidad y sus actividades ecosistémicas. Observar esta narrativa a través del prisma de los estudios ecogóticos, no obstante, saca a la luz diferentes perspectivas sobre cómo la visión romantizada de la Naturaleza que imagina la banda acaba incluyendo a la humanidad y a “lo humano” como una parte vital en su configuración. Este artículo explora las formas en las que la estética ecogótica, la ética “chthulucénica” de Donna Haraway, y el sentido de espiritualidad material de Val Plumwood se encuentran conectadas en la lírica oscura de Botanist. El artículo subraya la importancia de la representación que Botanist hace de sus arquitecturas vegetales, la

espiritualidad de “el mundo natural,” y las éticas ecologistas en torno a la figura de “El Botanista,” el protagonista de la narrativa de la banda, con el objetivo de desvelar cómo esta representación de lo natural no solo suscita una reflexión en la audiencia en torno a las ansiedades ambientales actuales, sino que también incita a buscar alternativas onto-éticas para entablar relaciones entre humanos y no humanos.

*Palabras clave:* Botanist, Ecogótico, escética, *black metal*, espiritualidad material.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

As humanity is dragged deeper into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the climate crisis overshadows politics, culture, and our very perceptions of the world. There has never been a better time for apocalyptic discourses, and, therefore, a better time for investigating commentaries on environmentalism exploring “Mother Earth’s” revenge against humankind. Black Metal music, although apparently an old-fashioned and ostracized subgenre of extreme metal, has found its way into contemporary ecological discussions with US bands such as Botanist, Wolves in the Throne Room or Skagos engaging in compelling, but nihilistic and bittersweet, depictions of human/non-human relationships. In this sense, Black Metal, usually a subject of anthropological, theological and political exploration, is an interesting subject of ecocritical analysis. This is firstly because, as Başak Ağin Dönmez comments, many metal projects “have spoken out loud to raise environmental awareness” (72) through their lyrics, either explicitly dealing with political issues, or merely emphasizing a representation of environmental objects in their poetics. Secondly, and perhaps more relevantly, the analysis of this kind of pop culture products “highlights the importance of making connections between theory and praxis” (Ağin Dönmez 71). In the next few pages, I delve in the ways in which Botanist musicalizes an ecocritical and Gothic exploration of human conflicts with the “natural” world. Specifically, I emphasize how the ecoGothic<sup>2</sup> components of Botanist’s poetics affect the configuration of what Hunter Hunt-Hendrix calls “aesthetics”, that is, the sense of distinctive aesthetics, ascetics (spirituality) and ethics inherent to Black Metal (64). Thus, after contextualizing what this genre is and what it implies in ecological discourses, I analyze Botanist’s sense of aesthetics, its spiritual proposal and the ethical implications derived from its lyrics. I use this structural understanding of Black Metal (one based on connecting the three different aspects of “aesthetics”) to focus on Botanist’s solo albums<sup>3</sup>, as they provide a homogenous critique to industrialism and allow me to also contextualize and contest previous academic criticism on the project. Contrary to other analyses of the band’s lyricism, I argue that, although apparently misanthropic, Botanist’s poetics do not displace humanity—and humanness—from an idealistic self-regulated

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<sup>2</sup> A definition of this field of study is provided in “Section 3” of this article.

<sup>3</sup> I: *The Suicide Tree*, II (2011): *A Rose from the Dead* (2011), III: *Doom in Bloom* (2012), IV: *Mandragora* (2013), *The Hanging Gardens of Hell* (2013) and VI: *Flora* (2014).

sense of ecology and, rather, generate ecoGothic aesthetical, ascetical, and ethical inclusions of “the human” into more environmentally-sustainable ecological paradigms.

### **(US) Black Metal: History and Academic Approaches**

Black metal music has traditionally been categorized as a subgenre of “extreme metal” (along with others such as death, or doom metal). Although its name comes from Venom’s seminal album *Black Metal* (1982), and it was initially developed by bands such as Celtic Frost, Hellhammer or Bathory, the subgenre was widely popularized by bands such as Mayhem, Burzum, Darkthrone and some others (the so-called Norwegian Second Wave) during the 1990s. Its sound, and the nihilistic, anti-Christian ethos that nurtures its lyrics earned special worldwide attention after some incidents during its genesis in Norway involving the burning of several churches, suicides, and murders.<sup>4</sup> In musical terms, Black Metal vocals tend to employ high-pitched screams and guttural sounds, which are combined with “extremely rapid tempos, ‘tremolo’ riffs, a ‘trebly’ guitar sound, and simple production values” (Kahn Harris 6). Through dissonance, Black Metal materializes its unconformity with the far more palatable melodic forms that characterize the musical establishment. The sonority is meant to conveniently sound grotesque in an attempt to generate a dissenting contrast with commercial music, developing an artistic discourse in absolute opposition to capitalist logics of (musical) consumption. Regarding their lyricism, Black Metal originally explored religious counter-cultural tropes such as satanism, Germanic-Scandinavian paganism and the occult through a misanthropic and apocalyptic view. Lyrics, thus, attack(ed) the dominant Christian background of Western cultures, while also develop(ed) a sense of anti-hegemonic distinctness—as with other countercultural genres like punk music. Playing Black Metal also bears a very specific sense of performativity, particularly in live shows, videoclips and any other visual display of the bands. They, in many cases, “describe their performances as divine worship, communion, or magical rituals, or in other ways connect their artistic activities to ritual magical practices” (Granholm 6). Usually, the musician’s performance in music videos, live concerts and promotion photos involves white-face makeup with black lipstick and eyeshadow, and it commonly includes pagan or satanic symbology—such as inverted crosses or pentagrams. Bands tend to dress in black outfit, sometimes also wearing rudimental clothes to enhance its paganist performance. Movement in stage is characterized by an extreme violence that emphasizes the music’s demonic ethos. The implications of this hyperviolent performativity, which may find its roots in punk culture, are significant for the analysis of Black Metal. Firstly, it visualizes the counter-cultural messages inherent to the genre, and, secondly, it sets the inherently violent and aggressive premises of whatever imaginary the Black Metal band wants to

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<sup>4</sup> Per Yngve Ohlin (“Dead”), vocalist of Mayhem, shot himself in the head after attempting to commit suicide with a knife in a nearby forest. When Øystein Aarseth (“Euronymous”), guitarist of the band, found his body, he took some photos of the corpse that would later conform the cover art of Mayhem’s album *The Dawn of the Black Hearts* (1995). Euronymous was later killed by Burzum’s frontman Varg Vikernes. More details about these events and their cultural resonances can be found in Moynihan and Søderlind’s *Lords of Chaos* (2003).

represent. Regardless of the ideas argued by the band, their defense is not meant to be achieved (or imagined) through peaceful negotiation with the establishment.

Even though the genre's musical performance and depressive themes have not dramatically changed over time, Black Metal's thematic developments and worldwide expansion incorporated elements diverging from the original ideas embedded in the genre. These new tropes explore Western political counter-cultural political movements—from national socialism to anarchy or communism—non-Germanic local or national mythologies, or, as I later explain, also ecology and environmentalism. Regardless of the specific ideological interest, Black Metal has been known to represent extreme political views (from both left and right specters) that protest against the social, cultural and ecological effects of techno-capitalism, globalization and industrialism. In this sense, the US Black Metal scene has generated a diverse amount of Black Metal bands opposing to some of the traditional logics of the genre. The European context, in their origins, was highly influenced by fascist or ethnocentric views that glorified a pagan sense of Aryan/Scandinavian ethnicity (and a supposed natural connection to their national territories derived from that ethnic identity), an aspect that characterizes early Norwegian Black Metal and that has developed a specific school of Black Metal, commonly known as NSBM (National Socialist Black Metal).<sup>5</sup> In the US, nonetheless, many bands digress from this perspective, namely due to the fact that Black Metal is mostly associated with white subjectivities (almost no Black Metal bands include non-white members) and, therefore, the ancestral connection to the local land defended by European Black Metal bands can be difficultly defended in a colonial context.<sup>6</sup>

In this regard, Hunt-Hendrix comments that American Black Metal must differentiate itself from the European variety through the abandonment of the European forms (what he calls "Hyperborean Black Metal") and the adoption of a sense of affirmative transcendentalism ("Transcendental Black Metal"), one that, in her view, would represent a

double nihilism and a final nihilism, a once and for all negation of a series of negations. With this final 'No' we arrive a sort of vertiginous Affirmation, an Affirmation that is white-knuckled, terrified, unsentimental, and courageous. What we affirm is the facticity of time and the undecidability of future. Our affirmation is a refusal to deny. (61-62)

Although the affirmativeness of his nihilism is vaguely articulated, Hunt-Hendrix proposes an interesting embrace of "an apocalyptic humanism to be termed Aesthetics" (55). The notion of Aesthetics refers to the supposed distinctive essence of American Black Metal,<sup>7</sup> one composed of three interrelated elements: the aesthetic, the ascetic and the ethical (64), which, rather than continuing the negative themes of self-annihilation traditional to Black Metal, propose a positive view of nihilism that ultimately fosters "joy,

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<sup>5</sup> A more detailed analysis of this issue can be found in Spracklen (103-117)

<sup>6</sup> There are American Indian Black Metal bands (i.e. Pan-Amerikan Native Front, Necron or Ifernach) that would deserve a different analysis. In this case, the Hyperborean model could potentially be applied, as American Indigenous collectives do assume an ancestral relationship with the land.

<sup>7</sup> According to Hunt-Hendrix, the name "American Black Metal" (rather than US) is a better denomination for this new philosophical interpretation of the genre, since "the US is a declining empire; America [in contrast] is an eternal ideal representing human dignity, hybridization and creative evolution" (54-55).

health, resonance, awakening, transfiguration and courage” (64). In essence, Hunt-Hendrix’s Transcendental Black Metal aims to address self-annihilation (through a pseudo-Nietzschean nihilist perspective) as a positive process of individual transformation. Although Hunt-Hendrix notion has been negatively received by some scholars—Sascha Pöhlmann, for instance, claims that her text (among others in the volume in which it is included) “ended up pretentiously indulging in obtuse academic jargon and dated poststructuralist routines” (5)—I believe that her structurization of the genre’s themes is analytically interesting when discussing the development of US Black Metal, since it highlights the three philosophical fields with which, widely speaking, many US bands seem to attempt to separate their work from the European tradition. Despite the existence of some proto-fascist reactionary bands imitating Hyperborean modes, such as Gran Belial’s Key or Judas Iscariot (Sauermann 88), there are other bands with political aims that clearly dissociate their themes from classic European Black Metal. Bands such as Feminazgul employ a sense of “vigilante feminism” to oppose patriarchal cultural hegemony (Shadrack 39). Others, like one-man-band Panopticon, reflect on socio-economic aspects of the US rural realities (Lucas, “Kentucky”), and others, like Wolves in the Throne Room, explore Black Metal themes through (eco)anarchist perspectives (Morton). These three Black Metal bands, along with many others such as Agalloch, Nechochwen, or the one featuring this essay, Botanist, have a common element that affects the basis of its aesthetics: a gothic and posthumanist eco-thinking.

### **Black Metal and the EcoGothic**

The fact that Black metal’s environmentalism has rarely been explored from an ecoGothic framework contrasts with the suitability of this genre for this type of analyses. Both Black Metal and “the Gothic mode” not only play with dark symbolisms of Western culture but also engage with philosophical commentaries on their epistemological effects over human experiences. A Black Metal depiction of nature under Gothic terms, therefore, should not be read as purely aesthetical but as an attempt to illustrate and politicize human/nonhuman relationships. As Del Principe states, “an EcoGothic approach poses a challenge to a familiar Gothic subject—nature—taking a non-anthropocentric position to reconsider the role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear” (1). With this idea in mind, Elizabeth Parker defines the ecoGothic mode in the following way:

The ecoGothic is a flavoured mode through which we can examine our darker, more complicated cultural representations of the nonhuman world—which are all the more relevant in times of ecological crisis. It is concerned with texts with a pervasive sense of ecocentric ambience independent of human presence. Transhistorical in its approach, it explores our ecophobic anxieties, our fears of Nature which are so often somewhat tinged with desire. The primary and consistent concern of the ecoGothic is with the deliberate interrogation of the Gothic nature of Gothic Nature. (36)

An ecoGothic perspective, hence, addresses the horrific nature of Nature, the depiction of the natural world as a Gothic monster that is, at the same time, feared and desired. This mode does not only observe and reflect on the aesthetics of “our darker, more complicated

cultural representations of the nonhuman world,” but the connections between this narrative or poetic depiction of Nature and the reasons behind “our ecophobic anxieties.”

EcoGothic theorizations connect well to metal’s traditional approach to poetics, particularly because of the “common themes of sublimity such as darkness and fear used in [the genre], as well as a deliberate arousal of ecophobic feelings” (Ağın Dönmez 73). In Black Metal modes, dark representations of the natural world are a fundamental element. According to Eric Butler, Black Metal’s lyrical vocabulary is commonly composed of references to “the arctic tundra, the unyielding night of the northern winter, virgin woods and wastelands, stone, mountains, the moon, and the stars” (28). There is not only a very specific focus on representing Northern, non-anthropogenic landscapes but also on depicting them as bleak, dark and haunted spaces. This depiction transposes the depressive, violent components of Black Metal—along with whatever specific countercultural ideas that each band is interested in—into the ecological aesthetics of the genre, making landscape signify the song’s mood. Already in the songs of some the very first Black Metal projects, poetics on ecophobias and ecophilias were one of the main thematic lines of their music. According to González Alcalá,

in some early lyrics from Emperor and Satyricon, the return to a past when man had a closer communication with Nature is presented as the way to revitalise the individual who is capable of bringing back this creative dark natural force to create a new order after dismantling the modern one. In these works, natural sublimity represents danger only for those untuned with it; on the contrary, those embracing it understand that it can become a response to substitute the artificially manipulated world of humanity. (910)

Early Black Metal embraced the questionable dichotomy of “Civilization vs. Nature,” as if the civilizing process was somehow separated from the non-human world. Nature, understood as a separate entity from civilization and “man,” following the also hypermasculinist logics of the genre, is observed as a horrifying force that is simultaneously the subject of Black Metal’s desire, a nostalgia for a symbiotic communion with the non-human that now terrorizes us. Darkness becomes a captivating aspect and through their embrace, one is meant to adopt a pagan/occult epistemology that makes us heretically (re)construct symbiotic connections with the biosphere. It must be noted that Black Metal is not particularly innovative in this regard, since it is neither the first movement proposing alliances between neo-paganism and ecology-preserving philosophies, nor neo-paganism is a unique form of eco-spirituality, nor all neo-paganisms are inherently ecological (See Rigby 279-283). Rather, Black Metal’s dark green ascetics provide yet another perspective on contemporary debates on ways to (re)arrange connections between theological sensibilities and ecological thought.

When specifically observing some of the already mentioned US bands (Wolves in the Throne Room, Panopticon, or Botanist), scholars have highlighted and vehemently criticized the dark biocentric premises in their narratives (Morton; Lucas, “Shrieking soldiers”; Woodard). Although these academic explorations tend to delve into the different ecocritical considerations represented by these bands, most of them emphasize their problematic essentialization of Nature/human binaries, linking Black Metal’s thematical misanthropy to deep ecology’s anti-anthropocentric position. As Woodard states, bands like Wolves in the Throne Room and Botanist “suggest an [ideal] ecological

model that is alien to dynamics, to energetic modes of existence, as well as to the complexities of feedback loops as they relate to ecological systems" (194). In essence, these bands seem to generate unproductive conceptualizations of ecology and environmentalism. Their nihilist proposals, combined with their deep-ecological sacralization of Nature, see the degradation of humanity's moral value as artificial (since Nature's divine value is given by humans). For Lucas, in the specific case of Botanist, the band's "assessment of plant revolution as justice is a human act of judgment, rather than an ability to 'get beyond' an anthropocentric perspective" (494). However, in the next few pages I intend to illustrate that, contrary to this criticism, an analysis of the ecoGothic aesthetics of Botanist's poetics uncovers a way to observe humans and "Nature" not only in communion but in a rhizomatic configuration, in Deleuzian terms, that decentralizes previous understandings of the band's lyrics as essentialist and romanticized (or, in other words, as anthropocentric).

### The EcoGothic Aesthetics of Botanist

Otrebor is the name of the anonymous musician behind Botanist, and he composes, plays, and records every instrument used in his music (following Black Metal's tradition of one-man bands).<sup>8</sup> Botanist's music preserves the original sound characteristics of the genre (high-pitched shrieks, distorted sounds, and simple production values), but adding a singular component: rather than employing a guitar as the main melodic power—at least in the first albums—Botanist uses a hammered dulcimer that is later treated in post-production "to meet the genre's demands for strident din" (Lucas, "Shrieking soldiers" 486). Consequently, Botanist's sound results in a distinctive, yet traditional way of producing Black Metal, that, although more percussive than classic stylizations of the genre, perpetuates the equally distorted and cacophonous sound that characterizes Black Metal. Regarding the content of the lyrics, one of the main components that differentiates the band from others is that most of the songs explore plants, its agency, and their different symbiotic properties. The band's poetics, nonetheless, are not descriptive, but, rather, an attempt to link plants' ecological function to common Black Metal themes such as humanity's extinction, apocalypticism and dark spirituality.<sup>9</sup>

Most of Botanist's albums tend to follow a similar ecocritical narrative, one that supposedly confronts an undefeatable Nature with Humanity. According to Otrebor:

The songs of Botanist are told from the perspective of The Botanist, a crazed man of science who lives in self-imposed exile, as far away from Humanity and its crimes against Nature as possible. In his sanctuary of fantasy and wonder, which he calls the Verdant Realm, he surrounds himself with plants and flowers, finding solace in the company of the Natural world, and envisioning the destruction of man. There, seated upon his throne of Veltheimia, The Botanist awaits the time of humanity's self-eradication, which will allow plants to make the Earth green once again. (Botanist, "Lore")

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<sup>8</sup> Although in *Collective: The Shape of he to Come* (2017) and later albums, Otrebor incorporates several other musicians as composers.

<sup>9</sup> The links between plant agency and horror narratives have been extensively explored in the past (See i.e. Keetley and Tanga), and plant studies have devoted much of its academic production to the study of vegetal agency in fiction. For more detailed explorations of this topic see Gagliano et al. (2017).

The lyrics of Botanist poeticize a mythical space that seems to sanctify Nature—and specifically, plants. Thus, in Otrebor's vision, a divine and agentic Nature rises again to punish humanity for the industrial-related crimes committed against the non-human world. The satanic apocalypticism that Norwegian Black Metal historically presented is, in this project, transmogrified and de-Christianized, creating a narrative worldbuilding that observes Nature as a monster to be both feared and praised, since, in the end, it embodies a notion of self-regulated ecology.

Botanist's misanthropic Nature resembles traditional illustrations of the sublime, sacred/demonical forest. Contextualizing, ecophobia in the ecoGothic artistic and narrative panorama has usually been catalyzed through the representation of the forest as a non-human monster. The West's historical view of forests is, as Robert Pogue Harrison comments, "full of enigmas and paradoxes [since] in the religions, mythologies, and literatures of the West, the forest appears as a place where the logic of distinction goes astray. Or where our subjective categories are confounded" (x), and thus, it has turned to represent both a space of divine adoration or resistance and a location for human discomfort and dread. In the Gothic imagination, the forests "show it to be a 'strange and monstrous' space—to be a mythic environment that is, in varyingly disturbing ways, very much alive" (Parker 46). There is a clear aspect indicating that Botanist's Verdant Realm is constructed through this ecophobic understanding of Nature. Mainly, the forest is a place apparently incapable of developing symbiotic relationships with humanity. As stated in the ending of the song "A Rose from the Dead:"

One day, the turn will be theirs [plants]  
Downfall of the human filth  
Careless suicide, murder malign  
Their end shall mark a new era  
The age of the Verdant Realm  
Upon the grave of mankind my flowers will grow  
Tear shed only for the loss of the verdurous  
Monolith marking the passing  
Of an age of waste  
And the arrival of a budding dawn<sup>10</sup> ("II"<sup>11</sup>)

In line with Lucas's (2019) and Woodard's (2014) perspective, this human-depleted vision of a Post-Anthropocene seems to observe a clear binary between Nature (the age of the Verdant Realm) and humanity (the age of waste)<sup>12</sup> that sees non-human life as radically opposed to human existence on the planet. At the same time, the sacred representation of the forest takes an active role as an invader (or "re-conqueror") of human-dominated territories. Nature is destined to destroy *the homo sapiens* species to

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<sup>10</sup> This tone is similar in other songs such as "Invoke the Throne of Veltheimia" from *I: The Suicide Tree*, "Quoth Azalea, the Demon" from *III: Doom in Bloom* (2014).

<sup>11</sup> All the lyrics are taken from Botanist's website.

<sup>12</sup> Although songs like "The Reconciliation of Nature and Man" in *Collective: The Shape of He to Come* and many others in ulterior albums illustrate a shift in this binary toward Nature/Industrialism, setting aside the absolute misanthropy of Botanist's solo albums.

prevent further damage to the Earth and, therefore, as humans we can only tremble before it.

Otrebor's ecoGothic interest is also aesthetic. There are many songs in which either specific plants, or the forest, are constructed as greenified Gothic locations. In the song "Tillandsia", from *The Hanging Gardens of Hell* (2013), Otrebor defines the Tillandsias a living ecological structure on which "A Gothic fortress of moss/ From its lichen parapets beat" ("Hanging Gardens"), evoking the traditional Gothic space of the castle. A similar concept surfaces in the lyrics of "In the Hall of Chamaerops", from *II: A Rose from the Dead*:

Hallowed halls of Arecaceae  
Adorned in fanned petioles  
Spiny needles sharp  
Just menacing

In the hall of Chamaerops  
Dioecious megametophytic spores  
Scent the air  
Released by flowers obscure  
Borne in clusters dense

Amongst these corridors I wander  
In misanthropic mirth  
Brooding deep  
Flanked by verdant brethren ("II")

Here, the Gothic castle is metamorphosized into a bleak vegetal-like palace. The elements that would normally be part of the setting (stone walls, old paintings, or armors) are here Arecaceae palms adorned with flowers, spines and spores. The poetical context is "biotized," as traditional anthropogenic components of the Gothic are substituted by aesthetically comparable plant-like elements that, nonetheless, transmit the dark and grim essence characteristic to Black Metal. In this sense, even language is contaminated by a Gothic sense of the arcane. Rather than simply mentioning a more common name for dwarf palm, the song employs Latin species denominations (Chamaerops, Arecaceae) and other technical terms (Dioecious megametophytic spores), to evoke an atmosphere representing an antique past, in line with Black Metal's obsession with a return to pre-Christian societies and also, as Lucas comments, with esotericism ("Shrieking Soldiers" 487).

What makes Botanist's representation of the ecoGothic woods more significant is atomization of the forest-monster. Botanist solo albums are mainly composed of songs detailing how plant species (as individuals) cooperate in dooming humanity—or, in cases, healing the Earth.<sup>13</sup> Plants, thus, are taken as agentic beings subject to human fear. Although this idea is not new in contemporary mythifications of flora—it can already be

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<sup>13</sup> Otrebor has specifically commented on the interest of his project to detach from a more generic representation of the forest. For him: "Making Botanist a concept project about plants felt like the way to do that: 100s of bands were talking about forests, but none were taking it to a specific, scientific level" (Otrebor).

observed it in Tolkien's fictional universe (See Ryan)—this element contrasts with the mainstream imaginary of plants in Western culture. According to Lucas,

As organisms, plants are so extraordinarily different from us that mortal terror of them is incomprehensible. Even plants that house lethally toxic compounds strike no real terror; one can simply distance oneself, while they remain rooted to the spot, unable to follow. [...] In other words, they are so different from us that we cannot conceive of their subjectivity – we cannot identify with plants. As organisms, they are so different from us that we do not normally even think about being afraid of them. (“Shrieking Soldiers” 489)

Botanist's lyrics reverse this idea of passiveness and absolute otherness embedded in our conceptualization of plants by demonizing and “blackening” them. This can specifically be observed in the concept narrative behind *IV: Mandragora*, with lyrics exploring The Botanist's necromantic powers rising a horde of mandrakes “to wipe the earth clean of its enemies” (Botanist, “Lore”).<sup>14</sup> From an ecoGothic perspective, this is representative of an ecophobia that is not simply channeled through the forest setting, as in traditional Gothic representations, but also through the forest's inner individualized agency.

### Eco-Ascetics as a Technology of Posthuman Communion

The dual composition of Botanist's ecoGothic mode, that of a hallowed forest composed of living active plant-like demons machinating against humanity, bears resonances with contemporary spiritual approaches to planetary ontologies. Although it has already been suggested that “Botanist shows the influence of James Lovelock's popular ‘Gaia hypothesis’, which considers the Earth as resembling a single complex organism in which all systems and species are interdependent” (Lucas, “Shrieking Soldiers” 493), the environmental configuration of the band's bio-paradise, *The Verdant Realm*, better resembles Donna Haraway's conceptualization of the Chthulucene. Similar to Lovelock's scientific configuration of Gaia, Haraway elaborates on Lynn Margulis's concept of “the holobiont” as the model unit for a multispecies natural collaboration. She defines this term establishing that:

[Holobionts] interpenetrate one another, loop around and through one another, eat each another, get indigestion, and partially digest and partially assimilate one another, and thereby establish sympoietic arrangements that are otherwise known as cells, organisms, and ecological assemblages. (59)

For Haraway, holobionts, “at whatever scale of space or time,” can be defined by their capacity to influence one another, not always in mutually beneficial or competitive relationships (60). From cells, to organs, to bodies, to ecosystems, living beings operate in symbiotic relationships (58), what she calls “*sympoiesis*.” This understanding of the world is, in essence, what she named “the Chthulucene,” a view of The Earth in which life cycles are based on “collaborative work and play with other terrans, flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages” (101). In this sense, the difference between Lovelock's Gaia and Haraway's sympoietic ecological framework is that the latter works with “multispecies alliances, across the killing divisions of nature, *culture*, and *technology*”

<sup>14</sup> A more detailed analysis of *IV: Mandragora* can be found in Lucas, “Shrieking soldiers”.

(117-18; my emphasis), as opposed to Lovelock's Gaia, which only considers mathematical models of ecological governance (Lapenis 379).

The reasons why I emphasize these words ('culture' and 'technology') are important for the analysis of Botanist's apparent anthropophobic conceptualization of Nature's ascetics—represented, symbolically, in the location of The Verdant Realm. These two concepts, traditionally associated with "the human" part of the binary, are very present in Otrebor's configuration of Nature. One should not understand Botanist's lyrics as a supposed celebration of the triumph of the natural over the human, as Lucas and Woodard suggest ("Shrieking Soldiers" 494; 197) as if it was a biocentric reformulation of Nick Land's inhumanist machine.<sup>15</sup> Rather, they depict a new biotic paradigm that is neither conceptually nor performatively inhuman. In Botanist's lore, the plant demon Azalea acts as a demonically evil entity talking to The Botanist (a human), who operates as end-of-the-world prophet and agent of its dooming power—"You shall be the prophet of my upheaval./You shall be my sword" ("Quoth Azalea," III). Azalea, nonetheless, does not convince The Botanist to carry out its destructive wishes out of pure misanthropic affiliation, but promises him a sense of eternal life and inclusion in the Chthulucene:

For yours shall be the final effacement of mankind  
Not in death shall you end,  
But in transmuted life eternal.  
Incorporated into the Chlorophyllic Continuum  
Shall you live on evermore. ("Quoth Azalea," "III")

Azalea's mention to eternal life—possibly one of the main tropes of Gothic narratives and easily identifiable in vampire and ghost narratives—is highly relevant. It not only shows the influence on "the human" through technology (human language) but also through culture. Salvation in the "Chlorophyllic Continuum", the very Gaian body, is an aspiration that cannot be understood without considering the role of Western culture in generating the desire of eternal life. This aspect, along with the countless references to classical elements of the Gothic such as castles, fortresses, realms, and even crowns (as in "Deathcap" from *III: Doom in Bloom*), uncovers the importance of "the technological" (intelligence driven interactions with unanimated entities, language) and "the cultural" (hierarchical structures of power, culturally-driven desires) in Botanist's environmentally-inspired narrative. Mingling green visuals with human traits, the Gothic world created through the narrative, although apparently assuming an environmentalist inhumanist sense of ethics, equals the distinctive components that differentiate Haraway's Chthulucene from other biocentric understandings of the planet's biotic functioning.

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<sup>15</sup> Nick Land's sense of "inhumanism" has been widely discussed in the accelerationist/neorationalist philosophical field of the last 30 years. Land's machinic inhumanism refers to the "singularized deliverance of the human to the state of dissolution [...] that assigns capitalism an inhuman emancipative role. This model of emancipation is comparable with H.P. Lovecraft's fantastic concept 'holocaust of freedom' which celebrates the consummation of human doom with human emancipation." (Negarestani, *Drafting the Inhuman*, 184). In essence, Land celebrates capitalism as a techno-industrial machine rapidly and inevitably absorbing planetary carbon-based life (humans included) in an attempt to create a fully-machinic singularity.

The ascetic elements of the narrative engage in other more significant ways with the technological aspects of Botanist's ecological imagination. Although, historically, religion, magic, and the spiritual have rarely been addressed as "technology," contemporary attempts to deconstruct this notion (i.e Haraway 2016; Hui 2016; Holmes 2016) may enlighten Botanist's instrumentalization of spirituality. Christina Holmes, commenting on how spirituality operates in Indigenous environmental ethics, states that it "acts as a technology of connection; it is a way to acquire a sense of ourselves as intersubjectively connected to human—and nature—others through affective works—constructing shared stories, shared emotions, shared visions of just futures" (42). In an eco-conscious framework, spirituality works as a non-material technology interconnecting species and helping to maintain the planet's self-regulating metabolism by either instigating an ecological and multispecies empathy on humans or deterring them from damaging ecosystems by means of fear to the (super)natural.

Although references to spirituality are central to Black Metal, the way in which it is articulated differs greatly from band to band. Commenting on this theme and its role in the lyrics of the classical Black Metal band Emperor, Eric Butler states that

*the spirit is not in the flesh, but must arrive from somewhere else.* This immersion in darkness suspends the rules that govern walking life, and it rests upon the fundament of another law: the cosmic cycle of seasons, itself a part of the course of astral bodies. The cold wind blows from beyond the Earth's atmosphere—descending from on high. (29; my emphasis)

Early Black Metal, with its focus on the (Western) occult and Satanism was in many ways affected by the transcendental sense of spirituality that affected Christianity, one that distinguishes the material and the immaterial, the flesh and the spirit, and the Earth and Hell. Exploring the differences between Indigenous and Judeo-Christian spiritualities, Val Plumwood pointed out that "post-Christian forms [of spirituality] have been framed in terms that have opposed it to the earth and to the body, [a model] leading us to a higher, non-earthly place" (219). Christian spirituality, therefore, has historically developed a dualist logic that divides the material reality and the spiritual communion in two diametrically opposed spheres, developing a "higher immaterial world which is the real source of sacredness" (219). These forms of spirituality not only create a distinction between material and immaterial realities but also negotiate other positionalities in Christian metaphysics. Thus, this spiritual binary develops new dualisms between soul and body (but also Human and Nature), whose power relations are constantly evaluated through an anthropocentric point of view. Black metal's satanism, in this sense, tends to appropriate this dualistic spirituality to reverse it, to transform itself in a nihilistic and horrid reflection of humanity, Christianity or capitalism.

These dualistic conceptualizations of spirituality, as Plumwood argues, "are not attractive spiritual guides for an environmental culture" (218). Since non-human bodies are rendered as disposable instruments, Christianity develops a worldview that deprives other material beings from any potential agency and so, from the generation of ethical interconnections with human beings. Taking the work of Indigenous philosopher Carol Lee Sanchez as a point of reference, she defends the potential subversive capabilities of Indigenous cosmologies in which the binary material/immaterial is not present. Thus,

“our spirits and bodies are united in death with the earth from which we came, which grew us and nurtured us, in the same way as those of trees and animals” (227). This sense of “material spirituality,” as she names it, destroys the frontiers between material and immaterial and between human and Nature. It creates a different ontological and epistemological framework which is ultimately translated in a more “eco-conscious” attitude toward the world and our existence in it. In light of this, Botanist presents a transgressive approach that differentiates it from old-school bands.<sup>16</sup> Although the band transcribes the visuals of the historical Satan’s conspiracy against humankind to a fundamentally biocentric and inhumanist representation of spirituality (transforming plants into demons, for instance), the poetical narrative exposes a vision of spirituality in which “the divine” does not come from an outside sphere but from the world itself. Recuperating Azalea’s promise to The Botanist: “Incorporated into the Chlorophyllic Continuum/Shall you live on evermore” (“Quoth Azalea” III).

Botanist’s representation of spirituality is aesthetically tainted by an ecoGothic essence intertwining ecophobias and ecophilias. In songs like “Amanita Virosa,” from III: *Death in Bloom*, Otrebor explores the dangers of the fungus that gives name to the song. Although not part of the plant realm, fungi share many of the ecophobic properties assigned to plants, particularly when acknowledging the poisonous properties of many species, *Amanita Virosa* among them. This specific mushroom is defined as a “destroying angel,” a “vengeful seraph,” and a “White-gilled death” (“III”), incorporating divine, agentic qualities into its biology. The mushroom species is constructed as a defense system against the inherently anti-ecologic humanity showing us that despite its apparent passiveness, The Verdant Realm has paladins that can purge the toxicity of humanity. Many other songs transmit this ecophobic atmosphere through demonic/divine ways, from *Monstera*s (in the song “*Monstera’s Lair*”), which are defined as “Tentacle hordes creep upward/Strangling” (“II”) to *Xanthostemon* plants (also in the song “*Monstera’s Lair*”), described as “a chaos god” (“II”). However, this misanthropic panorama still presents components for humans to feel spiritually attracted to. The non-human realm is sometimes defined in non-destructive ways. In “*Ganoderma Lucidum*,” The Botanist sings to a fungi species that grants him immortality through a ritual spell:

In churning cauldron imbibe  
Pulverized acrid salvation  
To drink immortality  
While the others wither and die  
[...]  
May I live for ever  
And ever more  
My flesh sustained  
By the fungus *Ganoderma*  
*Lucidum* immortal  
While the others wither and die (“III”)

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<sup>16</sup> Botanist is not the first black metal band that includes this ecological understanding. The same approach, although pointing their different nuances, might be applied to most environmentalist black metal bands in the US context (Panopticon, Agalloch or Wolves in the Throne Room).

The immortal powers obtained by The Botanist do not come from a transcendental outside but from the material Nature itself. *Ganoderma Lucidum* is a species known for its healing properties and its depiction as a human-appealing device breaks with the conceptualization of “the human as filth” commonly established by the poetical narrative of the band. Even though there are not many examples of this positive vision of material spirituality, the ambivalence in the representation of this sense of the divine/demonical deeply connects with the ecoGothic ethos that pervades Botanist's lyricism, and eventually clarifies what the band's poetical themes are contesting. Misanthropy does not come from an inherent opposition between human and non-human realities, but from the environment-damaging actions carried out by human systems. There are ways, as shown in “*Ganoderma Lucidum*,” to (re)generate these symbiotic links between human and non-human beings, but, given the aggressive and destructive power of human socio-politics, the narrative presents a reality in which the multispecies Chthulucentic organism is only capable of surviving by “wiping clean the earth” from humans, as in the song “*Mandrake Legion*” (“IV”). Although the human part of the binary can “naturally” coexist with Nature, proving the human/nature dichotomy wrong, the Verdant Realm pessimistic politics regarding the *homo sapiens* see human destruction as the only alternative for Gaian survivability.

### Posthuman Ethics against Humankind

Otrebor's exploration of human/non-human relationships in many ways embodies an environmentalist approach to the idea of Hunt-Hendrix's aesthetics. The ecoGothic visuals, combined with Plumwoodian material spirituality, plant the idea of the necessity of shifting from the current bio-ethical paradigm of the West. In other words, the inhumanist *sympoiesis* of the Verdant Realm, embedded in a material spirituality opened to the *anthropos*—but not to anthropocentrism—suggests a need for radical change in mainstream understandings of how we operate in relation to our ecosystems. A sense of transformative environmental ethics, thus, surrounds Botanist's project, one that provides listeners a model of biotic self-regulation that is desirable for the planet and with which humans, despite their self-destructive actions, can potentially coexist. Botanist's portrayal of ecological ethics has been critiqued Lucas and Woodard for being overly essentialist. The band's depiction of a plant-based utopia apparently depleted of humanity, as already commented, has been usually understood as an example of essentialist deep-ecological politics (Lucas, “*Shrieking soldiers*”; Woodard), an aspect linked to the more general academic tendency to describe environmentalist Black Metal in these terms (Scott 65-66). The ideas intrinsic to Otrebor's production are taken as problematic from different angles. For Lucas, “*Botanist's assessment of plant revolution as justice is a human act of judgment, rather than an ability to ‘get beyond’ an anthropocentric perspective,*” since celebrating Nature's *sympoiesis* and denigrating humanity's essence, as Botanist does, is, in itself, an act dependent on human perception (494). Woodard goes further and states that both Botanist and *Wolves in the Throne Room* “over emphasize the thingness (or material stability) of nature, thereby implying

that the earth is an infinitely regenerative Gaia-like entity and/or that the possibility exists for an unrestricted reversibility of the damage that has already been done to earth (as the privileged representation of nature-for-humans)" (194). This critique could be amplified by also looking at the "human" part of the binary. Contrasting to other Black Metal bands referencing Indigenous ecologies—like Ifernacht or Nechochwen—Botanist's humanity is taken as a homogenous collective, ignoring the existence of non-Western cultural and philosophical understandings of non-human realities that do not engage with the current ecocidal capitalist dynamics. The ethical interrogations of these critiques are pristine: How can we develop an effective notion of environmentalism if we keep differentiating between humanity's geo and bio-transformative actions and Nature? How can we decentralize "human" toxic egotistic interest if the binary Nature/Human is not destabilized?

Lucas and Woodard's claims are compelling. Botanist's attempt to maintain the binary human/earth does not seem to suggest interconnections, alliances, or integrations of the Human into the Natural—or the Natural into the Human. The band acknowledges the possibility of connection but human species annihilation, in the end, seems a better solution for Mother Nature. When observing *The Verdant Realm* as a representation of deep ecology, this binary comes to light and remains as a ghost haunting the analysis of Botanist's music. The plant-based ecological paradigm that Otrebor illustrates seems to lack clear material representations of human-made technologies, or, in fact, of any other element outside the self-regulating system depicted in the band's narrative. As Woodard states: "what is required is an aesthetics of nature which is always open to an incalculable outside that constantly and consistently eats away at any stable ground beneath it" (198). To put it differently, the mainstream idea of Nature needs to integrate, among other external things, intelligent and conscious driven processes (the artificial, the technological) into its core definition. This is an aspect that has become usual in contemporary reflections on posthumanism, which, widely speaking, tends to deconstruct and incorporate different notions of "technology" in their environmental politics. The works of Rossi Braidotti, Francesca Ferrando, Donna Haraway, Andreas Malm—and many others—exemplify this idea. In this sense, Botanist can be observed through the lens of Haraway's posthuman ethics embodied in her depiction of the Chthulucene not only because, as I have shown earlier, "the artificial" is present through aesthetics (Gothic representations of plant's functioning) and "ascetics" (material spirituality of the Verdant Realm observed as a technology of human/non-human connection), but also through its integration of humanity—and, therefore, the artificial—into its depiction of environmental ethics.

In this sense, Botanist's narrative is in fact not unconditionally misanthropic, since, at the very least, it acknowledges the integration of one human individual into Nature: The Botanist himself. He is defined by Otrebor as a "crazed man of science who lives in self-imposed exile, as far away from Humanity and its crimes against Nature as possible." (Botanist "Biography"), and even though the detailed lore on his figure in the band's web site defines him as an agent planning the destruction of Humanity, Botanist lyrics also describe him as a human being in communion with the non-human world. Already in his

first albums, the “evil” plants inhabiting The Botanist’s world are defined as “brethren” (“In the Halls of Chamaerops,” “II”), as if The Botanist was an integral part of a vegetal “family.”<sup>17</sup> He is also a productive holobiont in the Verdant Realm, as he is in charge of extending Nature’s domains through seeding and sowing —“your germination is my task [...] your dominion will I engineer” (“Quoth Azalea, the Demon,” “III”)—and also the catalyzer of pollination processes by liberating lepidoptera (moths and butterflies) over the Verdant Realm. This action, although “ravag[es] denizens with vicious holes” is nonetheless “a necessary evil” for plants to reproduce themselves (“Lepidoptera”, “I”). Thus, The Botanist cooperates with other species to expand and maintain the Verdant Realm’s ecosystem. He is not just an agent of doom but a fundamental part of the sustainability of the Gaian machine, an instrument of Nature that, through rationalization of ecological dynamics (seeding, sowing, pollinizing), participates in the stability of the ecosystem. The anthropogenic is also part of the Verdant Realm.

This model of engaging with Nature is rooted in a sense of ethics widely explored by Haraway in her reflections on life during the Chthulucene. For her, our “mammalian job” is to “make kin symchthonically, sympoetically” with the rest of biotic and abiotic beings in the planet, that is, to collaborate with the non-human spectrum of agencies and understand their different parts as people (103). Haraway encourages the idea of “making kin” with non-humans as a way to stimulate ethical multispecies assemblages that make us capable of surviving the looming ecocide that industrialism/capitalism/imperialism has triggered. As she states: “One way to live and die well as mortal critters in the Chthulucene is to join forces to reconstitute refuges, to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition, which must include mourning irreversible losses” (101). The Botanist incarnates this understanding of environmental ethics. He establishes multispecies assemblages and kin relations with “the Natural” infected by Black Metal’s rage and hate toward human-driven industrialism. The Botanist’s ethical performance is, then, an example of Alder and Bavidge’s claims when exploring Haraway’s thought in relation with the ecoGothic. As they state: “[when framing Haraway’s Chthulucene in the ecoGothic mode, what] we’re getting at is the way that our ecological crises call for new forms of ethical thinking, and writers find resources in gothic language and ontologies” (231). We can read Botanist’s ecoGothic misanthropy as a critique of capitalist environmental ethics, rather than a pure and unconditional hate of the allegedly toxic nature of the human species—as is traditional in Black Metal. Botanist’s grim and green relations with the Earth, in the end, incorporate the human as a possible (but not necessary) part of the new world that will be left after the collapse of human civilization, providing Black Metal fans with a survival alternative based on a multispecies coexistence whose aesthetics and “ascetics” ultimately result in an ecophilic change of ethics.

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<sup>17</sup> An aspect that is emphasized in *Collective: The Shape of He to Come*, in which flora and fauna are described as “his future kin” (“Upon Veltheim's Throne Shall I Wait”, “Collective”).

## Conclusion

Botanist combines the misanthropic, demonological and nature-worship elements that have traditionally defined Black Metal with contemporary theorizations of ecology and environmentalism. The lyrics and the mythical narrative created by the band's music engage with aesthetical, ascetical and ethical components related to Haraway's and Plumwood's ideas on ecological thinking, ultimately denoting a productive attempt at developing human-inclusive (but anti-industrial) environmental ethics. In this sense, Botanist's poetics are "blighted" by a Gothic modality that pervades the configuration of non-human aesthetics—by darkening and "medievalizing" The Verdant Realm's poetical architectures. This "Gothicness" is fundamental when discerning Botanist's eco-ideological interests. Although the band has been accused of essentialist —by distinguishing a clear dualism between Nature and Humanity—the ecoGothic analysis uncovers the ways in which the notions of "the natural" and "the human" are interrogated. The demonical/angelical Verdant Realm represents a Chthulucene in which certain human-like technologies are employed to establish ethical connections between human species and the rest of living agents. Despite the many claims of "pointless" misanthropy that might be thrown at Botanist, when looking at the project's lyricism through Haraway's posthumanist lens, critical and productive ideas come to light. Botanist's poetical enemy is not the *homo sapiens* but the system's extractive and polluting logics. Therefore, the human figure of The Botanist, as a Harawayan holobiont, survives a damaged Earth both through multispecies alliances and the adoption of a material spirituality that fix their role in the self-regulating processes of the ecosystem's life cycle.

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