CRITIQUE: STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION
https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2026.2651334

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Fictions of Recognition: Myth and Alternative Epistemologies in Contemporary Eco-Fiction

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ABSTRACT
This article addresses the ways in which contemporary eco-fiction draws on myth as a source of alternative, more ecological epistemologies that unsettle the dominant worldview of Western modernity. It shows how Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) and Janice Pariat's *Everything the Light Touches* (2022) foreground indigenous myth as a repository of alternative modes of cognition. Myth in these novels affords different kinds of knowledge and perception that transgress the boundaries of instrumental reason, unsettle the modern narrative of progress, and forego modernity's drive for separation and division. In both *Gun Island* and *Everything the Light Touches*, myth gestures toward alternative temporalities connected to more ecological ways of seeing and engaging with the human and more-than-human world that transcend the binaries of Enlightenment thought. These epistemologies can be framed in terms of the concept of "re-cognition," an intuitive mode of perception and reflection which both novels associate with the qualities of myth. The article sets Ghosh's ideas about recognition in *Gun Island* and his essay *The Great Derangement* (2016) in relation to the reflections in *Everything the Light Touches* on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's concept of "*Anschauung*" from his botanical treatise *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790).

> "All is leaf."
> Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790)/
> Janice Pariat, *Everything the Light Touches*
> (2022)

Introduction

Shapeshifting tigers, talking roosters, and scheming snakes: across the world, folklore and myth have always transcended anthropocentric ontologies to gesture toward a more comprehensive acknowledgment of more-than-human agencies. As Patsy Callaghan puts it in her essay on myth as "a site of ecocritical enquiry," "by giving the natural world itself agency and identity and complexity," myths "can provide an antidote to the anthropocentrism that might be said to motivate, perpetuate, and aggravate the ecological crises of our time" (80). According to Callaghan, myth facilitates "a reconceptualizing of our human presence in dialectical relation to, rather than as separate from and superior to, the rest of the natural world" (Callaghan 86). From this point of view, myth encapsulates Donna Haraway's assertion that "[n]o species [. . .] acts alone; assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors make history" ("Making Kin," 159). People, animals, plants, and other biotic and abiotic agents feature as "sym-poietic collaborators, co-laborers" (ibid., 161).

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Such "sym-poiesis" also informs, albeit in different ways, 21st-century eco-fiction, such as Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* and Janice Pariat's *Everything the Light Touches*. While both novels comprise a variety of settings across the globe, they each attach special significance to a particular region of India, the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans and the hills of Meghalaya, respectively. Following a trend in current writing from Northeast India (see Moral), both associate these regions with entangled human and non-human agencies, pointing out alternatives to the anthropocentrism of Western modernity. As this essay will show, *Gun Island* as well as *Everything the Light Touches* foreground indigenous myth as a repository of alternative modes of cognition that unsettle the dominant epistemology of Western modernity. Myth here functions by no means just, as Khan contends concerning *Gun Island*, "to broaden the horizon of the novel's planetary environmentalism to accommodate the strangeness of the climate crisis" or "to highlight the issue of multispecies justice" (4), nor does it merely serve as "an allegory for our current age of environmental turbulence" (Gilson 272). The functions of myth in these novels can be conceptualized drawing on Andrew Shamel's concept of "mythic sensibility," which he defines as the "capacity to shape a reader's vision and encounter with the world" (18). As Shamel maintains in *Theology and the Mythic Sensibility: Human Myth-Making and Divine Creativity*, myth characteristically provides "an imaginative structure to think and feel with" (18). In Ghosh's and Pariat's novels, myth thus affords different kinds of knowledge and perception that transgress the boundaries of instrumental reason, unsettle the modern narrative of progress, and forego modernity's drive for separation and division. Like other old forms of prose narrative, such as folk epic, myth projects "universes of boundless time and space" (Ghosh, *Derangement*, 61); it is therefore especially suited to opening up temporal horizons that disrupt conventional patterns of perception.[1] Moreover, like folk narrative or classical epic, myth is distinguished by its "completely matter-of-fact acceptance of the agency of non-human beings of many kinds" (ibid., 64). By integrating myth into their narratives, *Gun Island* and *Everything the Light Touches* foreground the inextricable entanglement of the human and more-than-human.

Following the two novels' insistence on acknowledging entangled agencies, I will read them as reciprocally illuminating, and closely in dialogue with *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh's influential essay on climate change. Rather than strictly sticking to the chronology of their publication, my argument will shift between *Gun Island* and *Everything the Light Touches* to highlight their intersections and make the most of their capacity for mutual comment. To begin with, I will show how both are deeply invested in criticizing an instrumental reason and a modern narrative of progress which each of the texts, in its different ways, identifies with colonial oppression, exploitation, and the degradation of the environment. I will then illustrate how *Gun Island* and *Everything the Light Touches* simultaneously gesture toward alternative temporalities connected to new ways of seeing and engaging with the human and more-than-human world that transcend the binaries integral to Enlightenment thought. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, I will explore how both novels suggest a similar notion of "re-cognition," an intuitive mode of perception and reflection which both associate with the qualities of myth. In this regard, I will set the reflections in *Everything the Light Touches* on Goethe's epistemological concept of "*Anschauung*" from his essay *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790) in relation to Ghosh's ideas concerning "recognition" in *The Great Derangement*, which he puts into practice in *Gun Island* in his use of myth.

The Absolute of Reason, Progress, and the "Time-God of Modernity"

In line with the tenets of postcolonial ecocriticism, *Gun Island* as well as *Everything the Light Touches* critique a modernity grounded in human exceptionalism, denouncing the devastating social and ecological effects of its uncompromising narrative of progress. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh traces the widespread misapprehension of the climate crisis not simply back to "the European Enlightenment's predatory hubris in relation to the earth and its resources" (56). More specifically, Ghosh argues, the failure to appreciate the agency of the more-than-human emerges from a particular mental disposition,

> a habit of mind that proceeded by creating discontinuities; that is to say, [. . .] to break problems into smaller and smaller puzzles until a solution presented itself. This is a way of thinking that deliberately excludes things and forces ("externalities") that lie beyond the horizon at hand: it is a perspective that renders the interconnectedness of Gaia unthinkable. (*Derangement*, 56)

Significantly, his phrasing here does not preclude the idea of rational reflection; on the contrary, the notion that a certain habit of mind should render the interconnectedness of the human and more-than-human "unthinkable" affirms the necessity of rational thought. In line with Val Plumwood's *Environmental Culture*, Ghosh critiques a habit of mental partitioning integral to the Enlightenment's separation of Nature and Culture.[2] He does not challenge reason as such, but chimes in with Plumwood to target a "hubristic and sado-dispassionate form of economic and scientific reason [. . .] that is exclusionary in focus and acts for a narrow range of interests" (2). Not unlike Plumwood, Ghosh cautions readers not to "mistake rationalism for reason – rather it is a cult of reason that elevates to extreme supremacy a particular narrow form of reason and correspondingly devalues the contrasted and reduced sphere of nature and embodiment" (Plumwood 4).

Such mental partitioning is also crucial to Pariat's critique of modernity in *Everything the Light Touches*, where it determines the thinking of Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus. In this regard, the novel takes its cue from an epigraph from Linnaeus' pathbreaking *Systema Naturae* (1735), and the narrative of his six-month expedition to Lapland in 1732 forms the structural center of the novel's seven chapters. In the form of a diary in short sections, the expedition narrative charts Linnaeus' reflections during his journey, which inspired his influential system of nomenclature. According to the fictionalized Linnaeus, "objects are distinguished and known by classifying them methodically and giving them appropriate names. Therefore, classification and name-giving will be the foundation of our science." (epigraph) *Everything the Light Touches* critiques this concept of taxonomy as an "artificial and mechanical" (321) way of conceptualizing the world engendering division and separation. The beginning of Linnaeus' travelogue abounds in numbers highlighting an obsession with order and quantification, and last but not least, money:

> Be sure to leave, as I did, on the day when you turn twenty-five. But first be appointed by the Royal Academy of Sciences for the purpose of investigating, in this country, the three kingdoms of Nature. Seize the four hundred daler. Promise to report faithfully on your travels, and to be useful. Leave at eleven o'clock, on the twenty-third of May, in the year 1732. (211)

Constructing a world where "everything [is] in its rightful place" (232), Linnaeus' taxonomy champions fixity, hierarchy, and domination – qualities confirmed by the many imperatives in this passage. The chapter's rhetoric supports the sense of division integral to this worldview: the loose sequence of prose poems of sometimes only a few lines each, written in the mode of an instruction, denies a coherent narrative. This mode moreover creates a hierarchy of speaker and addressee, subject and object fundamental to Linnaeus' ontology. These strict dichotomies go hand in hand with the dualism between body and mind, matter and spirit, nature and culture at the core of the rationalist and empiricist traditions. *Everything the Light Touches* thus clearly associates Linnaeus' taxonomy with the anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism championed by the Enlightenment, which sees the human dominate the more-than-human.

The same position of rational superiority toward the human and more-than-human worlds initially determines the outlook of Ghosh's narrator in *Gun Island*. Keen to emphasize his own "reasonable, practical, cautious parts" (21), Deen casts himself as a rational Westernized Indian contemptuous of anything that "goes against reason" (36). Representative of an allegedly superior enlightened worldview, he champions a clear dichotomy of science and superstition: "'I pride myself on being a rational, secular, scientifically minded person. [. . .] I am not religious and don't believe in the supernatural. [. . .]'" (36) This stance emerges clearly in his attitude to folk culture, particularly toward the myth of the snake goddess Manasa Devi, around which the plot revolves. For Deen, any suggestion of a deeper spiritual relevance of this myth is just "a whole lot of superstitious mumbo-jumbo" (36); Bengali folk poetry holds no interest for him apart from the "valuable historical insights" (22) it offers for academic analysis. A rare book dealer by profession, Deen first acknowledges only the myth's scientific, empirical value, at the cost of its deeper emotional and spiritual value.[3] *Gun Island* charts Deen's reluctant journey from hamartia to anagnorisis, his incremental acknowledgment that the contemporary moment of crisis demands "alternative, richer epistemologies" (Subramaniam 2).

Both novels link human exceptionalism to a relationship between the human and more-than-human inflected by pervasive patterns of colonial domination and economic exploitation. In reflecting on Goethe from an Edwardian point of view, Pariat's characters encounter "a world stricken by separation" (134):

> Everything in the natural world had its place—with humans, naturally, placed on top, scrutinizing, demystifying, and harnessing the power of all aspects of the natural world. To do this most effectively, all kingdoms—plants, animals, minerals—were named, systematically categorized, and fixed. "By Linnaeus, mainly [. . .]" [. . .]. (134)

This hierarchical human/more-than-human relationship undergirds all episodes of the novel, which taps into the discourse of travel writing and exploration narratives. 19th-century travel writing usually involves "the appropriation of the landscape, if only by measuring and naming" (Seed 4). Linnaeus appropriates Lapland through the act of naming in the early 18th century; in the early 20th-century subplot, the young Edwardian Englishwoman Evie, a botanist, encounters a ruthless British explorer hunting for rare orchids. The novel's critique of imperial botany echoes the revisionism of scholars like Banu Subramanian in *Botany of Empire*, who highlights how "[b]otany's foundational theories and practices," including those of categorizing and naming, "were shaped, built, and fortified during and in the aid of colonial rule and its extractive ambitions" (1).[4] This tradition of colonial exploitation culminates in the novel's 21st-century subplot in the practice of Uranium mining. Quite literally, uranium is a case in point of "harnessing the power of all aspects of the natural world" (143), this time by the Government of India, which perpetuates imperialist exploitation. By mobilizing Linnaeus' taxonomy for her critique of colonial exploitation, Pariat emphasizes how "colonial and environmental histories" are "mutually constitutive" (10), as Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley put it.[5]

The repercussions of these colonial histories emerge in *Everything the Light Touches* and *Gun Island* in the "slow violence" of environmental degradation. According to Rob Nixon's observations in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, this is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Perhaps most strikingly, the environmental impact of uranium mining in present-day North-East India depicted in *Everything the Light Touches* highlights the slow but persisting violence engendered by imperialism. As the novel's 21st-century protagonist, the young Khasi Shai, passes through bucolic scenery on her way to her nanny's village, she spots damaged cement tanks and manhole covers, unobtrusive reminders of the slow violence of radioactive waste. Strange afflictions, malformations, and premature deaths of animals and humans alike illustrate how this violence "is driven inward, somatized into cellular dramas of mutation that [. . .] remain largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated" (Nixon 6). The pollution by toxic waste in *Gun Island* is equally hidden and devastating, as chemical effluents from a refinery and disorientating man-made underwater sounds harm underwater wildlife in fatal ways (see 104–108).[6] In revealing the slow violence entailed by colonial histories, *Gun Island* and *Everything the Light Touches* expose the damage wrought by a modern chronopolitics that has lost none of its momentum in the present.[7]

From this point of view, the shifting landscape of the Sundarbans in *Gun Island* does not just serve, as critics have maintained so far, to subvert the notion of (national) borders (see Samkaria 35–38); the cyclical history of the tidal landscape powerfully undermines the modern narrative of progress, which justifies colonialism "through the vocabulary of civilization and modernization, progress, backwardness and catching up" (Trüper/Chakrabarty/Subrahmanyam 15).[8] Modernity espouses a teleological concept of history as "a narrative of progress, evolving towards certain transcendent ends" (Ghosh, *Smoke and Ashes*, 47) – a notion which *Gun Island* and *Everything the Light Touches* debunk in different ways. Pariat unmasks the exploitation legitimized by the progress narrative by deploying an imagery of enlightenment to ironic effect. In the Edwardian timeline, a Khasi outlines his optimistic vision for his people's future: "Christianity had come to them now; and they could finally make progress. His people were in the light" (144). This prediction recalls an earlier section in the 21st-century plot, where a village headman reveals to Shai the mining corporation's false promise that "[t]he digging would bring us hope, and wealth, and light" (63). By associating the progress narrative with the slow violence of uranium mining, the novel reveals the dark underbelly of a concept usually symbolized by the light of enlightenment. While *Everything the Light Touches* thus undermines the progress narrative through dramatic irony, *Gun Island* explores its flipside by showcasing the imperialist practice of "temporal distancing," "the locating of the political or colonial (and national) Other outside of the present" (Esposito/Becker 19). A firm believer in rationality, Deen considers the Sundarbans a primeval swamp and their inhabitants uncivilized and backward.[9] In associating the Sundarbans with "stagnation, underdevelopment, tradition" (Fabian 144), he displays the "denial of coevalness" which Johannes Fabian described in *Time and the Other* (1983) (see Esposito/Becker 7): he relegates the other to a sphere cast as temporally and socially backward.[10] By mobilizing the concept of a denial of coevalness, Ghosh as well as Pariat second Esposito and Becker's assertion that "[c]ontrary to modernist-historicist beliefs, there is no progression from a 'primitive' state characterized by a nature-bound cyclical time to a 'modern' state defined by linear time. Cyclical time and linear time are not a diachronic sequence but a synchronic pair." (12–13)

Alternative Forms of Cognition, Myth, and the More-Than-Human

In their explorations into a more ecological worldview, *Everything the Light Touches* and *Gun Island* foreground alternative temporalities grounded in myth and notions of circularity. Both novels promote new ways of seeing which acknowledge circularity, connection, and complex human/more-than-human entanglements. For this purpose, *Everything the Light Touches* and *Gun Island* feature interconnected journeys on different time levels. In *Everything the Light Touches*, Linnaeus' journey is preceded and followed by the narratives of three other characters traveling at different points of time and place. Told in an alternating, circular fashion, the stories move back from the present to Linnaeus' age and again to the present. The outer layer, set in 21st-century India, centers on Shai, who travels from Delhi to her birthplace Shillong and from there to Mawmalang. The next layer of chapters is set in the Edwardian age, when Evie travels from England to British India and within; finally, Linnaeus' chapter is flanked by the story of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe on his journey to Italy from 1786 to 1788. In disrupting the idea of linear progress, this recursive structure creates entangled narratives evoking a sense of connection across time and space. In *Gun Island*, the narrator's privileged cosmopolitan trajectory from New York to Kolkata and hence to the Sundarbans, to Los Angeles, and finally, to Venice[11] is juxtaposed with the highly precarious struggle of two young Bengali migrants, Rafi and Tipu, to reach Venice via Iran and Turkey. By associating all journeys through uncanny correspondences with the Gun Merchant's myth, Ghosh unsettles the notion of historical progress. In thus privileging circular and recursive over linear structures of time, both novels prepare the ground for proposing alternative modes of cognition that disrupt binary and teleological structures of thinking.

The myth of the Gun Merchant in *Gun Island* evokes a cyclical concept of history in which the boundaries between reality and legend as well as between the human and more-than-human are blurred. The legend goes through its own metamorphoses and "cycles of life" (7), as Deen ascribes it a vibrant, agentic existence: "some stories, like certain life forms, possess a special streak of vitality that allow [sic] them to outlive others of their kind" (6). Revived periodically in "times of upheaval and destruction" (7) by a potent collusion of human and more-than-human forces, the legend challenges different ontological boundaries, just as its central characters defy categorization and undergo various metamorphoses: "Such figures are not quite gods and nor are they merely saintly mortals: like the shifting mudflats of the Bengal delta, they arise at the conjuncture of many currents" (6). The Gun Merchant is but a version of another merchant, Chand; he turns out to be another Merchant of Venice and is revived in Tipu and Deen.[12] Like the Gun Merchant, Deen encounters different representatives of Manasa Devi and her creatures, such as a yellow-bellied sea-snake washing up in southern California (see 144–47) and a brown recluse spider in Venice (see 215, 223). As both animals are utterly out of place there, the encounters not only showcase the environmental effects of climate change; they prove uncanny in demanding “renewed recognition” (Ghosh, *Derangement*, 65) of the deeply entangled human and more-than-human agencies involved in climate change. As Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement* regarding climate change:

> No other word comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us. For these changes are not merely strange in the sense of being unknown or alien; their uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters [with the effects of climate change, C.L.] we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors. (30)

The legend in *Gun Island* activates precisely this sense of the uncanny, and its impact on Deen mirrors Ghosh’s experiences with climate events recounted in *The Great Derangement*. Like Deen, Ghosh recalls becoming “aware of the urgent proximity of nonhuman presences, through instances of recognition that were forced upon me by my surroundings” (*Derangement*, 5). The legend’s revival in the present thus creates “one of the uncanniest effects of the Anthropocene,” the “renewed awareness of the elements of agency and consciousness that humans share with many other beings, and even perhaps the planet itself” (ibid. 63). It is this renewed awareness of the agency of the more-than-human which is at stake in Ghosh’s use of myth in *Gun Island*, and which is encapsulated in the concept of recognition.[13]

The notion of recognition is crucial to *Gun Island* in the normative and epistemic sense, and it is inextricably linked to a cyclical concept of time. The awareness which successively dawns on Deen in *Gun Island* is the same Ghosh describes in his remarks on climate change. In *The Great Derangement*, the experience of recognition provides an insight into life where the concept’s subtly different shades of meaning merge:

> [T]he uncanny and improbable events that are beating at our doors seem to have stirred a sense of recognition, an awareness that humans were never alone, that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be most distinctly our own: the capacities of will, thought, and consciousness. (30f.)

The concept of the uncanny is especially suited to conceptualizing this experience. Since the uncanny refers, in Sigmund Freud’s words, to “that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (220), the epistemic meaning of recognition involves recognizing something which is already known *again* or *anew* (see Meyer & Neuhann 3). According to Ghosh,

> [t]he most important element of the word *recognition* thus lies in its first syllable, which harks back to something prior, an already existing awareness that makes possible the passage from ignorance to knowledge: a moment of recognition occurs when a prior awareness flashes before us, effecting an instant change in our understanding of that which is beheld. (*Derangement*, 4–5)

In other words, Ghosh’s recognition involves “two separate, though interconnected phenomena: the experience of being struck by a realization through an act of observation and the cognitive shift that may occur as a result” (Poray-Wybranowska and Ball 545). In general, recognition may entail an insight in the sense of empathically grasping a truth or the real nature of something (see Meyer & Neuhann 4), such as the shared “capacities of will, thought, and consciousness” (31) addressed in *The Great Derangement*. This empathic-epistemic realization is inextricably linked in Ghosh’s example to recognition’s normative aspect, which involves acknowledgment, acceptance, appraisal, or a recognition of a person’s or entity’s status (see Meyer & Neuhann 5–7). Hence, recognition always has a mutual, relational character (Ghosh, *Derangement*, 29); it is a meeting eye to eye which transcends the categories of the human and more-than-human.[14]

The functions of recognition in *Gun Island* are akin to the epistemology associated in *Everything the Light Touches* with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s concept of “*Anschauung*,” as both ideas champion a more intuitive (rather than purely rational) form of understanding in an epistemic as well as ethical sense. Goethe's Italian journey depicted in the novel was crucial to his scientific career in inspiring or confirming many thoughts that fed into *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790), as the diversity of plants he encountered there encouraged him to look for an underlying shared form, an archetypal version he called the "*Urpflanze*." The twin existence of *The Metamorphosis of Plants* as a scientific botanical treatise and a poetic elegy (first published in 1798) encapsulates Goethe's desire to combine literature and science in productive ways (see Miller xxviii), as he aimed at "a fuller integration of poetic and scientific sensibilities that would provide a way of experiencing nature both symbolically and scientifically, simultaneously" (ibid. xi).[15] In line with this project, he developed an alternative mode of cognition transcending the limits of rational, discursive thinking toward intuition and imagination. As opposed to purely rational reflection, Goethe's *Anschauung* involves an "intuitive power of judgment" ("*anschauende Urteilskraft*");[16] it is "a specifically creative and productive" mode of cognition functioning as "both a creative faculty in his poetry and a precise scientific or philosophical instrument of cognition" (Hennigfeld n.p.). *Anschauung* features in Pariat's novel as a more ecological alternative to Linnaeus' method. Linnaeus' approach of labeling and quantification, in the words of Pariat's Goethe, "is to take away life" (183), whereas *Anschauung* allows for a dynamic view of nature and life foregrounding process and change. As a friend of Evie argues:

> "Seeing the plant intuitively is to experience it 'coming into being' instead of analysing the plant as it appears in its supposed finished state. [. . .] Where Linnaeus imposed an organization on the plant [. . .], Goethe allowed the plant to speak for itself." (325)

This intuitive approach based on empathetic imagination opens up a relationship between the human and more-than-human respecting the plant's own agency and vibrant being.

In the context of *Everything the Light Touches*, Goethe's ideas on the metamorphosis of plants encapsulate a comprehensive model of *Weltbeziehungen* – a term translated, if somewhat inadequately, as "world relations" – whose hallmark is meaningful connection. As defined by Bettina Hollstein, Hartmut Rosa, and Jörg Rüpke, the term pinpoints "the connectedness of self and world and the concept of self resulting from such relationships" (9). It is imbued with a strong relational aspect comprising the human and the more-than-human, taking into account "the agency of all that constitutes world and the mutuality of the relationships established" (Hollstein, Rosa, Rüpke, 9). In the words of Gordon L. Miller, practicing *Anschauung* may have the following effect on the subject's world relations:

> This mode of inquiry aims to overcome subject/object dualism by endowing detailed sense experience of the outward forms of nature with the enlivening inward power of imagination, while also grounding subjective imagination in objective forms and facts. So, in place of the alienation from the natural world at the centre of the conventional Cartesian approach, Goethe proposed a way of identification as the path to a deeper and unifying knowledge of nature. (xxiii)

In approaching nature through *Anschauung*, the boundaries between the observing subject and the object observed, and hence between the human and more-than-human, are dissolved in an imaginative act of empathetic identification.[17] This becomes especially evident in Goethe's elegy on the metamorphosis of plants, which emphasizes the role of intersubjectivity much more than the preceding essay. In the elegy, the affectionate relationship between speaker and beloved addressee forms the precondition for the initiation of the beloved into the insights afforded by the epistemological process of *Anschauung*, as the speaker describes the budding of plants by analogy to the unfolding love of himself and the addressee (see Bies 252). In this manner, Goethe's elegy shows "the doctrine of plant metamorphosis as a doctrine of love that connects all living creatures" (Bies 259).

Among Goethe's insights into the metamorphosis of plants, the epigraph "All is leaf" preceding the narrative of *Everything the Light Touches* gestures toward the principle of an underlying unity of a life continually unfolding, which becomes the basis of an alternative, truly ecological *Weltbeziehung* and worldview. The pivotal phrase refers to the vibrant potentiality of change contained in a single leaf which, according to Goethe, simultaneously contains all other parts of the plant. In Pariat's novel, Evie perceives the essence of Goethe's idea as follows:

> For him, unity. Alles eins aus [sic!]. Not a mechanistic reduction of living, breathing beings. Each part, even in its minuteness, contained the whole. The leaf is stem which is flower which is seed which is the entire plant, and on and on it goes in an unending cycle of life. In this way, the parts and the whole are equal. Calling for connection at the deepest level-one denied by the other, more conventional Linnaean view. There is diversity, yet a unity in this multiplicity. *The many in the One.* (135)

"All is leaf" hence suggests a unity to life that accounts for sameness as well as difference in an entangled network of perpetual change. As Pariat's Goethe points out, "*[l]eaf* is not something still and static and clearly circumscribed … it is dynamic, alive, it is always changing" (200). The capacity of plants to adapt and change in response to a changing environment becomes a model for human life in general and the human mind in particular, as Goethe suggests:

> "If we wish to behold nature in a living way, we must follow her example and make ourselves as mobile and flexible as nature herself. [. . .] We must aspire [. . .] to think like a plant [. . .], to learn to drop fixed ideas, to enter into an open ended dialogue with the world." (190–191)

The phrase "all is leaf" thus provides the conceptual scaffolding in *Everything the Light Touches* for a worldview and a *Weltbeziehung* characterized by vibrant interaction. If the plant represents "a dynamically sensitive being, forming and changing itself through dialogue with whatever conditions it met in the world … air, moisture, light … " (190), the novel's genre as a travel narrative provides a framework in which the characters are in turn deeply molded and changed by the experiences on their respective journeys.

The *Weltbeziehung* unfolding in *Everything the Light Touches* comes across as a deeply dialogic relationship to the world reminiscent of Hartmut Rosa's concept of "resonance," which is "defined by a two-way 'loaded' connection where the subject feels touched, moved, or thrilled by some internal contact to an outer source" (Hollstein/Rosa/Rüpke 9). According to Hollstein, Rosa, and Rüpke, this connection "is not just causal or instrumental, but imbued with a deeper 'meaning'" (ibid.). This resonant connection is most conspicuous toward the end of the novel in Shai's narrative, where she depicts her worldview altered by life in Mawmalang:

> I still head to the hillock every afternoon, though on occasion I don't even bother taking my phone—screen still neatly cracked. Yet this hasn't felt a retreat from life so much as an immersion, with all that I've been learning. How it begins with mud and seed and leaf, and how even if you think you need more, this is enough for you to begin to see widely, deeply. For eyes to open not just in your head but in your hands, and skin, and feet. And from here to know, little by little, how to read the signs of the world. When ants carry their food and eggs up a slope or into a gap in a rock, or fish leap in the pools of a river, or the sun is ringed by a brilliant rainbow circle—all these mean heavy rain will soon fall. [. . .] What does all this mean? That the world is story after story, living, breathing, coming to birth, to life, to death, to retreat—and great joy lies only in knowing deeply. (475–476)

Where Shai previously used to climb the hillock in search of a phone signal to connect with the world beyond (see e.g. 51, 72, 431), by the end of the novel she has found new ways of seeing which entail a new, far more resonant connection to the world directly around her.[18] The cracked phone screen signifies how the superficial and fleeting connections of the mediatized world have been substituted with a more immediate and comprehensive connection to her human and more-than-human kin. Like a subject experiencing true resonance, Shai is "not just passively moved or touched, but [. . .] reaches out to respond to the 'call' such that the relationship between subject and world takes on a responsive, proto-dialogical character" (Hollstein/Rosa/Rüpke 9–10).[19] In both novels, it is myth which ultimately encapsulates and facilitates the more resonant *Weltbeziehung* afforded by recognition and *Anschauung*.

On Deen's journey toward recognition in *Gun Island*, the initially mysterious myth of the Gun Merchant turns out a call to engage in a more resonant relationship with the more-than-human. Aided by the knowledge of his historian friend Cinta, who acts as his mentor, Deen gradually arrives at a deeper understanding of the myth. Cued by his own questions, he suddenly experiences a shift of perspective: “I seemed to slip through an opening, or a membrane, so that I wasn’t looking at the Merchant’s predicament from his own point of view but rather from the perspective of his pursuer, the goddess herself.” (166) This empathetic identification with his antagonist is a crucial step in Deen’s process of attaining recognition, which guides him toward a more resonant relationship with the world. It affords him an insight into Manasa Devi’s nature, as he begins to identify her as a mediator rather than a vindictive Goddess:

> Snakes were not so much her subjects as her constituents; to get them to do her bidding she had to plead, cajole, persuade. She was in effect a negotiator, a translator – or better still a *portavoce* – as the Italians say, “a voice-carrier” between two species that had no language in common and no shared means of communication. Without her mediation there could be no relationship between animal and human except hatred and aggression. (167)

In functioning as a mediator making Deen aware of the “presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors” (Ghosh, *Derangement*, 30), Manasa Devi embodies the notion of recognition. The term “interlocutor” signals a dialogic relationship, and due to Manasa Devi’s interventions, Deen comes to increasingly acknowledge the inextricable connections between the human and more-than-human. As Cinta observes, he and the recluse spider apparently so out of place in Venice are inextricably linked through the processes of anthropogenic change wrought on the more-than-human world: “It is here because of *our* history; because of the things human beings have done. It is linked to you already – you have a prior connection with that spider [. . .]” (235). As Manasa Devi cautions the Gun Merchant to exercise more “restraint in relation to other living things” (167), Cinta translates to Deen the real-life referents of the myth by drawing on her historical knowledge.[20] She challenges the fundamental principles of his thinking, such as the distinction between allegedly typically Western reason and Eastern superstition (37–38), continually asking him to question his assumptions and adopt a different perspective (see 141). As mediator figures, Manasa Devi and Cinta encapsulate a worldview acknowledging not only the entanglement of the human and more-than-human, but also mindful of transcultural as well as transtemporal connections.

This integrative, comprehensive worldview is epitomized in *Gun Island* by the Venetian icon of the Black Madonna of La Salute, in the words of Cinta also identified as “‘The Panaghia Mesopanditissa, Madonna the Mediator: it is she who stands between us and the incarnate Earth, with all its blessings and furies.’” (243).[21] In the aftermath of the Mesopanditissa’s miraculous intervention in a Greek rebellion against Venice in 1264, the epithet suggested “that the icon secured a meeting of the communities midway and laid the basis for their peaceful coexistence”; it functioned henceforth as “the symbolic embodiment of this coexistence” (Georgopoulou 488). In *Gun Island*, Cinta identifies the Virgin Mesopanditissa with Manasa Devi, since the icon originally hails from Heraklion, according to Cinta “a city that is famously associated with A-sa-sa-ra-me.,’ the Minoan goddess of snakes” (244).[22] As an amalgamation of Christian Madonna and Minoan snake goddess, the Mesopanditissa flaunts a syncretistic quality blurring the boundaries between categories, just as late antiquity knew no distinction between belief and superstition (see Onasch/Schnieper 17). Like Manasa Devi, the Mesopanditissa is associated with “deliverance from war and natural catastrophes” (Georgopoulou 490); like Manasa Devi, she transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, as she hails from an Empire and an island encapsulating the entanglement of East and West.[23] Particularly in view of Ghosh’s critique of imperialism in his fiction and nonfiction, it is somewhat ironic that the icon’s depiction in *Gun Island* should elide the colonial violence inherent in the Venetian occupation of Crete as well as the political functions fulfilled by the Venetian appropriation of Byzantine cultural objects such as the Mesopanditissa (see Georgopoulou 488).[24] These critical aspects recede in Ghosh’s representation behind her power of mediation between different spheres. As the Mesopanditissa was subject to different legends (see Georgopoulou 487), in *Gun Island* the icon represents an archetype undergoing different metamorphoses, such as Manasa Devi, Cinta, and a mysterious Ethiopian woman guiding Tipu in his tribulations.[25]

A similar amalgamation of different religious and cultural traditions shapes the use of myth in *Everything the Light Touches*, whose central concept of the “tree of life” is grounded in Khasi as well as

Christian narratives. The motif of the tree plays its part in a dynamic legend introduced in the prologue, which creates a situation of vernacular communal storytelling:

> *We tell this story often, and in the telling it is different every time, but that, you see, is the nature of stories. There is always a tree, always a tiger, always a small bird that knows the secrets of the forest and helps humankind. The rest is smoke that never curls the same way twice.* (xi)

The story forms part of a flexible discourse of indigenous orature in which the telling is never quite the same, and hence the opposite of scientific precision. Told in all likelihood by the Khasi nong kñia, "the storyteller, the bearer of the word" (69), the prologue situates the entire novel in the framework of the collective legendary lore of a dynamic oral tradition. Simultaneously part of the Khasi creation myth and akin to a moral fable, the story of "*how the tree, the tallest-in-the-world tree, was felled; how seven tribes were rendered earthbound*" (xi) features in the novel in different variations. Recalling the vague distinction between the biblical tree of life and the tree of knowledge, the trees of Khasi mythology appear interchangeable in Pariat's novel: sohpet bneng, the so-called "navel of heaven," which functioned as a ladder facilitating movement between heaven and earth, until humankind's "terrible greed and selfishness" (71) caused god to sever this connection (see Pde 212); and the Diengiei, the monster tree, a sign of god's wrath taking away all light from the earth (see ibid.). The tree turns into a resonant motif in *Everything the Light Touches* precisely because the novel purposefully withholds a coherent narrative about it. All that remains of the tree's original story, according to the nong kñia, are fragments offering potentially endless possibilities of meaning (see 480). Due to this variable meaning, the story of the tree encapsulates an alternative worldview championing fluidity over fixity. As the storyteller replies to Shai's enquiry after the meaning of the Diengiei:

> What do any of our stories mean? Every time you tell them, they are different, their meanings as multiple as the versions they exist in. Such a tricky thing, don't you think? Hard to grasp. But is this bad? When meaning is direct, like an arrow through the heart, it can kill things. (481)

This preference for an emerging narrative is associated in Pariat's novel with an alternative way of being-in-the world geared toward overcoming the fixed binaries entrenched in the Linnaean worldview. With this sense of continual emergence, *Everything the Light Touches* endorses the assumption of material ecocriticism that the world is "filled [. . .] with intermingling agencies and forces that persist and change over eons, producing new forms, bodies, and natures" (Iovino and Oppermann 1).

In the universal "tussle between fixity and fluidity" (Pariat, "The Diasporic Sensibility," n.p.) shaping the discourse in *Everything the Light Touches*, the myth of the tree epitomizes an alternative ontology marked by a more ecologically aware and sustainable conception of the environment revolving around the principles of shared resources, balance, and reciprocity. The real significance of the story of the tree pertains to a sense of entangled agencies, which shows in its effect on Shai and her nanny's relatives: "We sit and listen carefully. Banri leans against me, I lean against Mem, and for a long while, we do not move, for everything is entangled" (71). This image of entanglement evokes a feeling of strong communal coherence and a sense of connection between the human and more-than-human, which is fundamental to the Khasi relationship to the natural world. This relationship is grounded in an ethics of mutual exchange and kinship between the human and more-than-human: "Reciprocity. Ban leh markylliang – to balance on all sides. When you give something back, what you have been given becomes a gift, and gifts, he says, create continuing relationships. It's not like going to a shop – where you take, pay, leave, forget." (412)[26] The quick exchanges of capitalist consumption make place for a system of long-term reciprocal obligation. As the villagers explain: "'Our nation is this – the hills we see around us, the rivers we know as well as our loved ones, the trees we call by name. [. . .]'" (62) Such an entangled existence transcending the fixity of the nation-state is embodied in its most radical form by the fictitious nomadic tribe of the Nongïaid, which has become extinct by the 21st-century plot. Reminiscent of the Laplanders in Linnaeus' account, the nong kñia's description of the Nongïaid explodes the distinction of human and more-than-human:

> The ones who walk come like April showers and mad March flowers, fleet of foot and light as leaves, tripping tripping with the breeze, the oldest of our tribes, some say, around since the earliest days, when man and animal would praise the young moon and the sun, when the Diengiei, the tree that carries all trees, was no more than a sapling, the walkers our oldest tribe, no hill too high for their grappling. (472)

Such fleeting presence perfectly in tune with the more-than-human embodies the very opposite of the anthropogenic change associated in the novel with the fixity of the Linnean worldview.[27]

The ecological ontology lived by the Nongïaid in *Everything the Light Touches* finds an epistemological counterpart in a conceptual synthesis between the legendary Khasi motif of the Diengiei and Goethe's concept of the *Urpflanze*. Exploiting the slippery ontological status of Goethe's *Urpflanze* as actual original plant and archetypal concept, Pariat's novel adds a further metamorphosis to the legend's dynamic discourse. As Evie comes across a (fictitious) reference to the Diengiei in a British travel account, she embarks on a quest to find the mysterious tree, in which she sees the *Urpflanze*. The novel itself validates this connection through descriptive detail: while the Diengiei is described as "the tree that carries all trees" (479), the *Urpflanze* appears as "[t]he archetypal plant that carried within it all plants of the past, present, and future" (305). If the nong kñia's lore withholds a precise description of the Diengiei (see 481), the signifying power of the Diengiei as *Urpflanze* derives from this very opacity. Seen through the lens of the *Urpflanze*, the Diengiei appears "inherently dynamic and infinitely flexible" (327) as well. Like the *Urpflanze*, the Diengiei is a cognitive tool opening up a view of the world that acknowledges the manifold connections in a universe where everything is entangled. As Evie's Cambridge friend Ollie explains, Goethe realized "that the Urpflanze could not be found in this tangible, physical way, but the idea of it offered him, and us, a certain mode of perception . . . " (326). This mode of perception facilitates understanding nature "as a living organism whose ever-changing, ever-growing dynamic the observer – us, you, me – is a part of, and in this way to train one's mind to be as flexible as nature herself" (123). In conjunction with the imaginative act of *Anschauung*, the Diengiei thus evokes an existence reminiscent of Heidegger's idea of being-in-the-world as an "essential embeddedness in an environing world" (McManus 103), founded in a "dynamic environmental relatedness" shaped by caring attention (Norris 113). This is also why the two young Nongïaids guiding Evie on her quest for the Diengiei remain adamant that for them to show her the Diengiei, which is in the Nongïaids' care, she must renounce her life to join them and hence become a keeper of the Diengiei, too. Transcending abstract thought, the Diengiei represents a deeper, comprehensive knowledge involving responsibility and care:

> To hold knowledge is to hold responsibility, and to know truly is to know deeply, to give of yourself so that the knowing means something more than mere words. True knowing changes you; we believe you cannot go back to how you were in the world before. It has always been this way . . . " (402)

The deeper knowledge encapsulated by the dynamic story of the Diengiei thus comes across as more embodied and embedded, recalling Goethe's distinction between the abstractions of "*object thinking*" (189) and the imaginative interaction of "*living thinking*" (190). It creates, in the words of Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*, "a 'place' in the deepest sense," one that is "linked to its inhabitants through a dense web of mutual sustenance and symbolism." (62)

Ecofiction, Language, and the Mythic Sensibility

In their evocative use of indigenous myth, *Gun Island* and *Everything the Light Touches* follow up on Donna Haraway's call that to meet the complexities of the Anthropocene, "we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections" ("Making Kin," 160). This may be in some measure due to the complexity of the genre, but both authors have endowed their novels with a structure which foregrounds the significance of making connections on different diegetic levels. As *Gun Island* builds on a network of correspondences between actual and mythical characters, events and locations, the reader is implicated in Deen's search for meaning. The novel's dialogic form as well as Deen's interactions with his interlocutors underscore the dialogic character of a worldview highlighting transcultural and -temporal connections. Such connections are perhaps even more insistently inscribed into the structure of *Everything the Light Touches*, whose episodes cover different cultures, periods, and locations, but are closely entangled all the same in terms of topics, character trajectories, and motifs. Last but not least, the structure and content of these novels not only undermine Cartesian dualism as such but counteract "the orientalism of ecological criticism that it has usually considered the West to be hopelessly mired in Cartesian dualism, while other, more exotic or primitive cultures benefit from a more embedded view" (Morton, *Ecology*, 64). The novels themselves function as epistemological tools to some degree, since their structure promotes the more comprehensive way of seeing implied by the myths they incorporate; in this way, they move toward "the idea of environmental form" (3) foregrounded by Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature*.

Beyond the alternative ways of seeing inscribed into these myths in terms of recognition and *Anschauung*, the myths *as* myths constitute, in the words of Andrew Shamel, "a particular sensibility" (15). Myth here comes across not so much as a particular story emerging in the far-away past, but as "a fundamental category of human understanding and the means by which we meaningfully interact with the universe" (23), as Shamel contends in *Theology and the Mythic Sensibility*. This notion of myth as a sensibility is especially interesting in the context of Ghosh's and Pariat's project of challenging the language use associated with enlightenment rationality. Chiming in with Eduardo Kohn's idea in *How Forests Think* (2013) of "decolonising thought," Ghosh asserts in *The Great Derangement* "that to think about the Anthropocene will be to think in images, that it will require a departure from our accustomed logocentrism" to express that which "cannot be 'thought' through words" (83). Myth in both novels provides a step toward this endeavor not only because it highlights "the marvellous simultaneity, and interconnectedness of living phenomenon [sic]" (271) through its evocative imagery, just as Pariat's Goethe desires for his new method. The mythic sensibility moreover restores to words, and hence to the world, the original, numinous resonance of their multivalent meaning, as Shamel illustrates drawing on Owen Barfield's *Poetic Diction*. As Goethe distinguished between "living thinking" and "object thinking," Barfield identifies a "principle of living unity" (87) in the Latin and Proto-Indo-European language. This is a kind of language which "observes the resemblances between things" (ibid.), whereas later sensibilities focus on difference, so that "single meanings tend to split up into a number of separate and often isolated concepts" (ibid.). In providing a cognitive frame, or "an imaginative structure to think and feel with" (Shamel 18), the mythic sensibility conditions a view of the world that recognizes, in the deepest sense of the word, the inextricable connections and shared agency of the human and more-than-human, which are kin in a world shaped by "sym-poiesis."

Notes

1. As Ghosh highlights in *The Great Derangement*, "the earth of the Anthropocene is precisely a world of insistent, inescapable continuities, animated by forces that are nothing if not inconceivably vast" (62).
2. Plumwood holds that the human/nature dualism "is a system of ideas that takes a radically separated reason to be the essential characteristic of humans and situates human life outside and above an inferiorised and manipulable nature" (4).
3. This is in line with the fact that Deen's language in writing about the myth appears to his Italian historian friend Cinta "so clinical, so precise" (35) as to suggest that to Deen, it is but a "lifeless fragment that is of interest only because it can be carbon-dated" (35).
4. In *Smoke and Ashes* (2023), Ghosh also highlights the complicity of science and empire (see e.g. 70).
5. As DeLoughrey and Handley illustrate, "European Enlightenment knowledge, natural history, conservation policy, and the language of nature – the very systems of logic that we draw from today to speak of conservation and sustainability – are derived from a long history of the colonial exploitation of nature" (12).
6. Neither of these examples is fictitious; the Sundarbans suffer the fatal impact of anthropogenic factors such as "oil spillage, heavy metals, and agrochemicals" (Rahman et al. 369), just as uranium mining has raised serious health and environmental concerns in the South West Khasi Hills (see Boga, n.p.), home to the richest uranium deposit found in India so far since the first explorative mining in the 1950s, 70s, and 80s (see Karlsson 44).

7. Esposito's and Becker's observations on chronopolitics underscore how prevailing concepts of time and politics are indelibly connected.
8. For the connection between the Enlightenment, the narrative of progress, and imperialism, see also Satia 3, 11.
9. Deen also proceeds like this with lower-class Indians he comes across in Kolkata (see 36, 73, 93).
10. For the "denial of coevalness" and Ghosh's critique of the Western modernity, see Schwander.
11. This geographical set-up has led critics to ascribe to the novel "a new mode of planetary realism" by "collapsing the divide between Global South (imperilled) and Global North (safe)" (Gilson 283).
12. Tipu's story replicates the tribulations of the rich trader, who has incurred the wrath of Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes and spiders, seeks refuge in Venice, and is ultimately saved by Captain Ilyas (which also turns out to be Rafi's actual name).
13. For the philosophical implications of the concept of recognition in *The Great Derangement*, see Lusczynska.
14. If Ghosh's and Deen's recognitions destabilize the difference between human and more-than-human, the impossibility to pin down the uncanny mirrors this unsettling of categories. As Caroline Emily Rae explains, the uncanny evades exact definition in a perpetual slippage (see 65). It is precisely "[t]he uncanny's affective capacity to destabilize epistemological and ontological certainties" which "makes it a particularly potent literary tool for challenging the nature/culture binary" (Rae 61) – along with the other binaries at stake in Ghosh's writing.
15. Ghosh actually names Goethe in *The Great Derangement* as a positive example of a writer-scholar resisting partitioning thought by reconciling science and literature (see 70).
16. Bies affirms that "*Anschauung*, i.e., through the intuition or visualization of the object – [. . .] directly corresponds to Goethe's later notions of 'intuitive judgment'" (251).
17. As Miller points out, Goethe's "higher goal of an illuminating knowledge from within" is "rooted ultimately in a harmony or identity between the human spirit and the informing spirit of nature" (xviii).
18. Shai's *Weltbeziehung* here clearly corresponds to the imperatives expressed by Pariat's fictionalized Goethe, who urges his friend relate to the world in a more comprehensive rather than just intellectual way: "'We have rich facilities with which to absorb the world – the gift of our eyes and noses and ears – and yet often we sacrifice all these at the altar of our so-called intellectual mind.'" (190).
19. "The world" here involves "other subjects, animals, plants, artifacts, but also 'transcendent relations' with comprehensive entities such as space, time (and the temporalities of past or future), and what has been called 'meta-persons' like gods or abstract concepts credited with enormous agency like cosmos or nature" (Hollstein/Rosa/Rüpke 9).
20. Cinta translates the place names of the myth into actual geographical locations (see e.g. 151, 153, 269).
21. Venetian sources translated "Mesopanditissa" as "*mediatrice*" or "mediator of peace" (see Dermitzaki 189).
22. This association of the actual icon is highly debated among experts (see Bonney).
23. In a similar vein, Newns more generally shows how *Gun Island* undermines a notion of the Mediterranean Sea "as a geophysical metaphor for Europe's sense of itself as a self-contained cultural space of Western humanist ideals founded on the Greek and Roman tradition" (1109).
24. The Black Madonna's interpretation as a peace-maker was an integral part of Venetian colonial rhetoric (see Georgopoulou 488).
25. At the end of the novel, the Ethiopian woman literally mediates between the human and more-than-human when she seems to manipulate the storm and bring about the strange biological phenomenon that contributes toward the refugee boat being saved; highlighting the aspect of mediation, the novel even shows her with a halo, the attribute of a Madonna (see 307).
26. Whenever something is taken from the natural world – be it a tree or a fruit – something must be left behind in return (see 411).
27. If such descriptions of the Nongïaid veer dangerously close to the ideal of the "noble savage," their association with the Diengiei turns the Nongïaid into a figure of thought rather than an actual example of a different life. As Pariat explained in an interview: "They symbolise everything that the nation-building project, or any project that seeks to fix and calcify, cannot control. The inclusion of the Nongïaid speaks very directly to the tussle between fixity and fluidity. They are the unsettled, wayward, wild, unruly and untamed that the Linnaean way of seeing is constantly trying to suppress, isolate, manipulate, tame, and eliminate" ("The Diasporic Sensibility," n.p.).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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