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Reconceptualising ecofascism in the Global South: an ecosemiotic approach to problematising marginalised nostalgic narratives

This paper provides an argument for the need to reconceptualise ecocritical concepts that have naively been regarded as central, and thus global, scholarly concepts. Focusing in particular on ecofascism, the paper argues that if forms of ecocriticism are to be explored in a Global South context, certain concepts associated with ecofascism and anti-progress in the Global North, such as nostalgia, need to be revisited. Such an attempt is made in this paper by introducing the concept of solastalgia to explain the intense dis-ease experienced by a loss of place (caused by, for instance, environmental destruction), and the consequent necessity for different kinds of responses and actions. By situating this study within the paradigm of critical ecosemiotics, focus is placed on the significance of locality (rather than globality) in understanding the relationship between nature and culture, and thereby re-addressing Western ecofascist critique.

Keywords: ecosemiotics, ecofascism, nostalgia, solastalgia, Global South

Introduction

Radical environmentalism is a hotly contested subject in contemporary environmental studies, particularly when attempting to grapple with the conceptualisation of 'deep ecology', eco-terrorism, eco-feminism, and the focus of this paper, ecofascism. Much of the published discourse on ecofascism is vague, contradictory, contextualised specifically for first world (or culturally more homogenous) countries, and often condescending towards non-Western theories and narratives of nature-culture relationships.[1] Radical environmentalism is regarded as a universal ethical imperative in the contemporary hyper-industrialised world to ensure ecological and species survival beyond human beings. However, the inability to recognise the significance or characteristics of certain eco-critical theories within the Global South, and South Africa in particular, is surely a cause for concern among those who work within global environmental studies and who aim towards praxis in the field.

It is in light of this background that this article will problematise the concept of ecofascism (particularly as described and understood by certain hegemonic perspectives), not to reject it as an at-times destructive ideological construct that has had immeasurable effects and consequences worldwide, but rather to add to and expand the literature on the conceptualisation of ecofascism itself within a framework of critical social theory. In doing so, the article will consider what aspects of ecofascism are regarded as being universal, which characteristics are applicable to critique and concern, and how some of these concerns have a different interpretation and meaning in the context of areas of the Global South. Furthermore, it will explore how certain elements that seem to be widely accepted as being ecofascist in nature by many Western-centric theorists are in fact necessary for rethinking environmentalism and other ecologically oriented studies in the context of a country such as South Africa (where the authors of this article are situated).[2]

1 The literature on and criticising ecofascism comes from both left and right, from conservative and progressive forms of the political and existentialist philosophies. For example, there is well-documented (some of it valid, some of it misleading) criticism of the 'deep ecologists' (such as Arne Naess) by the social and feminist ecologists such as Murray Bookchin and Ariel Salleh. There is also literature equating radical environmentalism to anti-humanism and thus misanthropy. The relationship between certain romanticised and eco-socialist ideologies has also been criticised as having too close ties to national socialism and the Nazi ideology of '*blut und boden*', while certain elements of deep ecologies' affinity to Martin Heidegger has been called into question. See Bookchin (1999). Guha (1989), Morton (1997), Salleh (1984), Zimmerman (1990; 1993), Ferry (1992), Zubrin (2011), among others.

2 While this discussion could be perceived as leaning towards cultural essentialism, this is not the intention of the paper or the authors.

As such, this study is an introductory, interdisciplinary engagement with the need to reconceptualise ecofascism. It will be argued that the paradigm of ecosemiotics, by embodying elements of critical ecological studies as well as semiotics, provides an important platform from which to address these conceptual concerns. In doing so, it will allow for a reconceptualisation of the human's positioning within and towards the natural environment as part of a contextualised meaning-making whole consisting of both nature and culture, while simultaneously recognising the unique human-specific symbolic representation of nature. Furthermore, by applying the ecosemiotic notion of 'locality' as the starting point to this paper, it will explore elements of nostalgia and more specifically, solastalgia as dependent on a particular time and space for their conceptual relevance. Nostalgia, in this context, refers to a sense of longing for a place or time from which one is displaced, can be both regressive (attempting to restore something from the past) and reflective (drawing from alternative ways of being in order to imagine a different future to that which we face). Solastalgia, as a crucial related term, was coined by philosopher and environmentalist Glenn Albrecht (2006; 2019) to describe the spiritual loss of nostalgia with a sense of desolation and lack of solace, particularly relating to the destruction of one's 'home' due to environmental and ecological devastation. This, it will be argued, creates an awareness of the historical and contemporary consciousness of human positioning in nature, which ultimately, for the praxial environmental theorist, could (and should) be supported in future research by tangible case studies of human/nature relationships in various contexts.

Why ecosemiotics?

An overarching theme in many ecologically framed studies, as is the case here, is the exploration of the relationship between nature and culture (Andersson Cederholm et al. 2014; Linask and Magnus 2016; Cronin 2017), and in particular humans' physical positioning within nature as well as their representation of nature. However, this relationship is so vast that it often requires a dialogue between different disciplines to adequately investigate, since "no so-called pure discipline can completely embrace such a diverse subject" (Maran 2002: 68). Such interdisciplinarity is evident in numerous fields that examine the nature/culture relationship, including ecofeminism (Buckingham 2004), critical ecology (Odum and Barrett 2005), semiotics (Hoffmeyer 2008; Maran 2020), linguistics (Stibbe 2015) and even translation studies (Cronin 2017; Marais 2019). By extension,

then, attempting to re-imagine critical social theoretical[3] approaches to radical forms of eco-awareness such as ecofascism from an interdisciplinary perspective would follow a similar route in opening up the field to comprehensive exploration.

Before continuing, it is necessary to provide a brief background on semiotics. As a contemporary field of study, semiotics is set within two main schools of thought, one firmly set in linguistics, pioneered by Ferdinand de Saussure, and another, framed by philosophy and pioneered by Charles Sanders Peirce (Deely 1990: 3). The purpose of semiotics is to study the action of signs and the process in which meaning-making and meaning-taking takes place (also known as semiosis). More specifically semiotics is the study "not only of what we refer to as 'signs' in everyday speech, but of anything which 'stands for' something else" (Chandler 2007: 2). For Saussure, this study revolved around language, while for Peirce, the study of semiosis extended beyond language, and concerned anything that can be interpreted as a sign by an interpreter of that sign.[4] Semiosis is an ebb and flow of multi-layered systems of meaning within larger systems of meaning such as ecosystems (as is found in the experience of 'solastalgia', as will be discussed in a later section). It is decidedly more than a linguistic process, entailing "a broader and much more fundamental process, [that involves] the physical universe itself in human semiosis, and [makes] semiosis in our species a part of semiosis in nature" (Deely 1990: 6).

Ecosemiotics, which developed in the mid 1990s to explore the semiosis of ecology (Maran 2020), is situated within Peircean semiotics, since the process of meaning-making is made up of multiple sign systems, only one of which is verbal, and is inextricably dependent on the context in which it takes place. By proposing an ecosemiotic approach to this paper, the authors hope to highlight the complexity of radical environmentalist concepts in a particular society, and

3 In this context, critical social theory refers to the inclusion of a critical approach to traditional social theory, in particular emphasising the need for a multi-disciplinary criticism to what Kellner (1990: 11) refers to as "mainstream theory's presuppositions, methodologies, and a lack of critical reflexivity". Furthermore, such an approach acknowledges contradictions and conflicts between different views and attempts to understand the different influences behind them. Together with analysing new political struggles and movements of the time, especially relating to notions of progress and regress in society and civilisation as a whole, critical social theory also draws upon "theoretical analyses of developments within the capitalist economy and of changes in class stratification, the labor process, new technologies, the media, and politics" (Kellner 1990: 31). It is within this framework that this article positions itself – as a multi-disciplinary critique of mainstream assumptions and theories relating especially to the kneejerk rejection of nostalgic conceptions of the human-nature relationship found within much contemporary ecological thought.

4 Interpreter in this case means the actor (human or non-human) that makes sense of a particular sign (verbal or non-verbal).

the consequent need to situate and explore such concepts from within particular environmental and geographical contexts. Ecosemiotics aims to explore the semiotic "relations between human culture and the environment" (Maran 2018: 630). In this regard, human attitudes toward the natural environment are discussed from a semiotic perspective, since "it is connected with cultural codes and practices, symbols and connotative meanings" (Mäekivi and Maran 2016: 209) that often guide the way in which humans try to make sense of their surroundings. Ecosemiotics is furthermore also linked to the study of the human in the Anthropocene[5], and particularly the impact of humans on the natural environment (Clements 2016). While partly focusing on human attitudes to nature, it takes for granted that all living organisms (including humans) engage in meaning-making, not only on an individual level, but at an environmental level as well. In other words ecosystems are regarded as communicative systems (Maran and Kull 2014), in which both human and non-human participants, as well as the environment, communicate as active agents. As with all semiotic studies, ecosemiotics is a discipline of relatedness, in particular between the human (or non-human) and the environment. An understanding of the relatedness creates a substantial underpinning for the study of a particular environment, since exploring the semiotic nature of ecosystems allows us to explore the "vast semiotic realm that surrounds human culture" (Maran 2020: 2), to which humans can relate through cultural processes and everyday activities. In this paper it is argued that by recognising the culturally-created barrier that humans have inadvertently created to separate themselves from the environment, a comprehensive investigation of the relationship between humans and the natural environment, including the role that the natural world has been designated by humans, can take place.

Of further relevance to this paper is the way in which humans represent the natural world. Here, representation is defined as the way in which humans "relate, depict, portray, or reproduce something perceived, sensed, imagined, or felt in some physical form" (Danesi 2004: 16). It is a central theme in the broader field of semiotics, since, simply put, representation refers to something standing in the place of something else. A prevalent example of representation is language, of which words refer to something outside of themselves (such as the concept of 'fascism'). Within an ecosemiotic framework the manner in which language (among many other semiotic systems) is used to not only name animals, plants

5 The term Anthropocene refers to the current geological epoch in which the effects of collective human actions have resulted in humans becoming a geological force, rather than biological entities (Cronin 2017). The term was coined by Crutzen and Stoermer in 2000 to refer to the era post-Holocene in which they wished to "emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology" (2000:17).

or landscapes, but also to talk of, conceptualise or theorise about the natural environment and issues pertaining to it is explored (such as with 'ecofascism'). In doing so, an ecosemiotic understanding of language use can explain "how certain cultural ideas about animals [and the environment, by extension] and their place in the landscape have become problematic in light of recent environmental changes" (Drenthen 2016: 113), since human culture and, by extension, the symbolic/cultural representations of nature by humans, can have a significant impact on a particular physical environment. While the impact of human culture on the natural environment is observable on almost every level, it can also be argued that culture is, in turn, influenced by the environment through this dialogue with that which surrounds it. Panzaru, for instance, argues that it is not possible to understand culture if one does not look at the surrounding environment in which the "culture is rooted by the age-old processes of meaning-making and by all temporal and spatial conceptions" (2008: 421). This links with the view that culture is not completely autonomous, but "relatively autonomous, [and] transcending, but only by incorporating and resting upon, a physical environment shared with all the forms of biological life in a larger network biosemiosis of mutual dependence" (Deely 1990: 7). Accordingly, culture is not only not separate from the ecology that surrounds it, but ultimately forms part of it while often determining it. As Hoffmeyer puts it, culture is "a creation of nature" (Hoffmeyer 2008: 40). Based on this, then, this paper attempts to merge the highly theoretical discipline of critical social theory with that of ecosemiotics in order to highlight humans' contextualised and localised relationship (ultimately based on semiosis) with the natural environment.

Locality as starting point for reconceptualisation

The development of many ecologically-oriented disciplines has largely coincided with the expansion of the "ecological way of thinking" (Maran 2014) within the Anglo-American tradition in the 20th century. However, within this investigation it will be argued that these disciplines require significant reconceptualisation if they are to be explored and applied in a Global South environment, a process which should firstly entail the identification and understanding of the particular time and space in which meaning making occurs. In the study of semiotics, and by extension ecosemiotics, the context consists of preceding and succeeding messages to the message being conveyed, as well as "environmental and semantic noise, all filtered by short- and long-term memory, genetic and cultural" (Sebeok 1991: 17). Ecosemiotically, the context is both the intersection where human culture and the natural environment interact, as well as the particular space and time in which this interaction takes place. This implies, then, that the context should guide representation (which would include theorising and knowledge building)

of the natural environment as well. However, as indicated in the introduction, many theories on the human/nature relationship are misguidedly regarded as universally applicable to any context.

Estonian ecosemiotician Timo Maran (2014), argues that one of the biggest stumbling blocks in connecting global science and local knowledge and culture is the lack of methods for "describing and evaluating the axis of locality-globality". The theoretical foundation of the majority of scientific studies, he argues, is still instituted within the Anglo-American academic context, which leads one to question the suitability of the theories and methods that originated in one tradition for the analysis of the local material in another context. He provides the example of his native country, Estonia (a northern European country), where not all concepts of ecocriticism, for example, are effective due to the fact that Estonia's "historical legacy and experience of nature are rather different when compared with [...] the United States [for instance]" (2014: 79). He uses the terms 'small' and 'large' cultures (and here it is taken for granted that culture is part of the environment) to refer to peripheral and central cultures such as Estonia and the United States respectively. A significant difference, he argues, between the theoretical thinking in such diverse contexts constitutes the degrees of generalisation; the so-called smaller cultures are inherently doubted in academic thinking, since larger cultures can often more effortlessly claim to "represent universal experience and knowledge" (Maran 2014: 7980). The semiotic principle of locality, defined as the "characteristic of semiotic [meaning making] structures by which they merge into their surroundings in such a way that they cannot be separated from their environment without significantly altering their structure or information contained in this structure" (Maran 2014) is proposed as a way to frame and explore ecocritical studies.

In line with Maran's argument, this paper argues that locality should be a defining and pivotal feature in addressing and reconceptualising profound concepts such as ecofascism and radical environmentalism, since constraints and affordances of time and space often determine the way in which meaning is created, and consequently a particular theoretical discipline is established. For instance, if one regards the South African context as peripheral (linking to Maran's idea in the preceding paragraph), it can be argued that the particular time and space of a post-colonial, post-apartheid, Global South country provides locality-specific constraints and affordances in addressing and conceptualising many co-called universal approaches to concepts such as ecofascism. From this it could be argued that every natural environment (as a product of natural and cultural history) contains a unique semiotic potential that is understood within a particular time and space. This should, however, not be regarded as an attempt at creating a Global North/Global South binary, but rather to highlight the unique constraints

and affordances that allow for the investigation and reconceptualisation of concepts such as ecofascism and radical environmentalism. In essence, this paper intends to argue that these concepts were developed under different circumstances, and with different motivations, in the global North and should be explored as such. From here on this paper will explore the relevant concepts as they are regarded globally, after which attempts at reconceptualisation will be made. The final section of the paper will bring ecosemiotics in line with the topics under discussion and provide possibilities for future research.

What is fascism?

In order to grasp how the concept of ecofascism has been defined in popular discourse, and thus attempt to reconceptualise it from within a local context, the notion of fascism itself must first be unpacked. This is especially important as ecofascism is seen as being a sub-form of fascism while usually being rejected from consideration as an acceptable ecological stance.

Formally, the ideology of fascism is just more than 100 years old, and yet academic literature on fascism agrees that the term itself is somewhat difficult to define as a single, coherent concept as it is often conflated with authoritarianism (of which it is a particular form), totalitarianism, and populism. As Satgar (2019: 585) notes: "Fascism is a complex phenomenon; it is sometimes Y and not Y." Furthermore, the nature of fascism has changed from its early 20th century version into a new form that, while it has similarities to its earlier manifestation, has significant variances and arises from different contingencies, inevitably resulting in the necessity for new conceptualisations thereof. In Jason Stanley's broad working definition, fascism is:

> [...] based on an ethnic division between 'us' and 'them', an extreme ethno-nationalism [...] on nostalgia for a mythic past, typically in which members of the chosen ethnic group had an empire – and it represents the present as loss of that great empire, that natural standpoint in which members of this ethnic group dominated their environment militarily, politically, and culturally (in Weisberger 2021).

Furthermore, fascism is generally defined in liberalist discourses as fulfilling a checklist including "ultra-nationalism, charismatic leadership, dictatorship, racism, a single party, violence (actual or threatened), anticapitalism, antiliberalism, anticonstitutionalism" (Satgar 2019: 585). However, from a critical cultural perspective, it is important to expand upon the liberal interpretations of fascism as a conservative political-cultural movement, and as such recognise, as does Paxton (2005), that one of the characteristic aspects of many (if not most)

modern fascist movements and groups is that they do not have official political status, are not represented by a formal party, and do not have explicit state power, and as such "they operate on a social movement framework rather than a political framework" (Burley in Weisberger 2021). These movements are generally framed as being proto-fascist or neo-fascist, in that they contain immanent characteristics of classical 20th-century fascism but have not yet matured into fully-fledged fascist discourse.

Moreover, politically conservative fascist movements[6] tend to draw on terminology popularised by progressive movements from the 60s and 70s, such as decolonisation, anti-imperialism, freedom of the individual, and even Marxian anti-industry / anti-modernisation sentiment. Such terminology is found in the (largely) Western definition of ecofascism (to be defined and discussed below) which rides on environmental and ecological conservationist talking points to push a socio-cultural ideology of ethnic or racial separatism. An even more problematic aspect of attempting to grasp the nature of fascism is that it is often used as a political or social insult towards a position or group with whom one disagrees, rather than an "historically-informed analytical term" (The Lowy Institute, in Weisberger 2021) which inevitably leads to overuse and a reduction in actual value of the term.

With the above in mind, it could be argued that some of the shared characteristics of fascism (whether classical or proto-fascism) may embrace the following[7]: a "cult of tradition" or traditionalism, rejection of modernism, fear of difference, a belief that "pacifism is trafficking with the enemy", selective populism, us vs them, ethno-nationalism in various guises, nostalgia for a mythic past, and the extensive use of propaganda. However, by using such a classificatory system of check points, as Satgar (2019: 587) notes, "[s]uch an approach occludes historical discontinuities, specificity, and contextual conditions ..."

As such, whether these definitions all stand up to the problematisation of their use in the context of discussions on critical eco-awareness, or local meaning-making and meaning-taking in the Global South, is at the heart of what this article is engaging with.

6 The implication of making this political identification clear is that it is possible for neo-fascism to occur on either end of the pollical and social spectrum, such as far-left progressivist movements usually founded on anti-colonial, racial, nationalist emancipatory sentiments. However, a careful distinction needs to be clearly made between neo- or proto-fascism and leftist populism (see the work of Satgar [2019] and his careful deconstruction of the EFF [Economic Freedom Fighters] party and symbolism in South Africa). Reducing the one to the other collapses the opportunity for responsible theoretical and political engagement with such movements.

7 Some are drawn from Umberto Eco's 1995 seminal essay on Ur-Fascism.

What is ecofascism?[8]

A brief history of the term 'ecofascism'

As with fascism, the concept of 'ecofascism' also seems to elude a clear definition that distinguishes it from eco-terrorism or political eco-authoritarianism. For Zimmerman and Toulouse (2020: 64), for example, a literal definition of eco-fascism refers to "[a] collectivist political regime that uses authoritarian measures to achieve its major goal, protecting nature". However, this definition is unclear in terms of a distinction between fascism and authoritarianism, and also places the emphasis on politically-established power in order to reach a certain end.

8 Before attempting to provide a definition of eco-fascism, it must be noted that this article consciously avoids conflating eco-fascism with the white supremacy terror attacks that have taken place in the USA and New Zealand in the last few years (for example, the domestic terror attacks that occurred in Christchurch [2019], El Paso [2019], Halle [2019], Buffalo NY [2022]). It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the differences in beliefs, ideologies, worldview, and so on, relating to these various terrorist attacks. Furthermore, there is an ironic position adopted by certain social progressive groups who label such racially-motivated terrorists as ecofascists, contending that ecofascist ideologies embrace the Third Reich and early settler ideologies in the form of "eco-fascist creep", arguing from a rational universalist position, while espousing a progressive activist stance on behalf of marginalised groups, that ecofascism is "environmentalism that (1) Advocates or accepts violence and (2) Reinforces existing systems of power and inequality" (Anson et al. n.d.). For example, a group of progressive academics from American universities who make up the 'Anti-Creep Climate Initiative', claim that their initiative, which draws inspiration from Alexander Reid Ross's book *Against the Fascist Creep* (2017), "smashes ecofascist mythology, champions liberatory environmental futures, and has fun doing it!". This slogan arguably embraces what it claims to critique, namely adopting an environmental position that advocates violence in order to reinforce existing systems of power / inequality. The irony of these kinds of stances is that they in fact will commit epistemological violence against marginalised narratives in order to maintain an intellectual status quo – that of liberatory environmental futures. Furthermore, referring back to Satgar's (2019: 587) important insight, this reductionist and dismissive approach almost completely disregards "historical discontinuities, specificity, and contextual conditions..." This further weakens genuine critiques of racist actions as being motivated by genuine ecological concern, framing ecological awareness and moral reasoning thereof from the perspective of the same kind of singular, universal truths and rationalities as they accuse others of doing. In itself, this framing of eco-fascism is both condescending in its definition of environmentalism and in framing the term within American race politics, failing to problematise the very use of the terms – and the implications of labelling others without thought as ecofascists – in their own intellectual work. Furthermore, ecofascism, when defined as above, seems to champion a current status quo of inequality and power, whereas other definitions of fascism seem to represent the desire to return to a lost (and possibly mythic) past or place. The failure to problematise such a loaded term beyond its European history and American roots and adoption is what this article is concerned with, and which, by expanding the term to take note of locality, tradition, and nostalgia as a reflective (instead of restorative) critical tool, aims to engage in alternative translation of the contexts in which the term is used.

If ecofascism is considered as a proto-fascist movement, thus socially-driven without necessarily having political influence, then perhaps a broader definition of it as put forward by Kirsty Campion (2021: 2) is preferable, namely that: "Ecofascism is a *reactionary* and *revolutionary* ideology that champions the *regeneration of an imagined community* through a return to a *romanticised, ethnopluralist* vision of the *natural order*." [own emphasis]

Both definitions of the concept have their roots in the National-socialist regime of Germany, and inherently imply both racist and ethnonationalist ontologies, drawing from 19th-century Romanticism an "organic-corporatist authoritarianism that overrides all individual liberties and the second was a nativist racism that justified protecting German blood and land (*Blut und Boden*) from the polluting presences of non-Germans" (Zimmerman and Toulouse 2020: 64). Can such applications of the term then be realistically applied to contemporary manifestations of what seem to be the revival of seemingly nostalgic pre-colonial / pre-modern traditions of ecological holism in the Global South?

Further complicating aspects related to the term ecofascism is found in what ironically may be considered 'corporate fascism', where the corporate interests of large Western corporations have framed environmental and Green movements as being anti-industrial and undermining their [i.e. corporate] efforts to provide material comfort. These accusations extend to claims that these environmental movements favour the rights of nature over the freedoms of individuals to choose their consumptive habits, and subsequently politically-supported campaigns are initiated to have such movements silenced or shut down. Another concern noted by Zimmerman and Toulouse is related to the ideological position popularised by American neo-Malthusian environmentalists Paul Ehrlich and Garrett Hardin who came to the conclusion that "… only authoritarian regimes could prevent human overpopulation – made possible by modern food production, public health measures, and industrialization – from causing a global 'tragedy of the commons'" (2020: 65). Other social ecologists (such as Murray Bookchin) have argued for the examination of the sources, ontologies, and political implications of different ecological beliefs, voicing concern over their (arguable) misreading of 'deep ecology's' alignment of their (i.e. deep ecologists') ideologies with Martin Heidegger (who had a problematic political relationship to National Socialism). The point we wish to highlight is that there are many contradictions and conflicts surrounding the literature of 'ecofascism'.

The patronising sentiment of many anti-ecofascism scholars can also be seen in the example of animal rights philosopher Tom Regan, who, according to Zimmerman and Toulouse (2020: 66), argued that theories and ideologies of 'environmental holism', such as the view that "individual organisms are

less important than species and the biospheric whole", in fact mirrors 'fascist holism', in which "the social collective trumps the rights of individuals". This kind of critique immediately continues to marginalise many (already peripherally-situated) pre-modern, pre-colonial, indigenous, non-Western, and post-humanist interrogations of the Anthropocene. Furthermore, these kinds of critiques of so-called ecofascism derive from different – arguably – Western historical contexts, namely anti-ethnonationalist, anti-National Socialist, pro-capitalist / pro-industrial, pro-humanist, and anti-holism positions.

At the basis of many of these critiques is a hint of the moral imperialism adopted by First World intellectuals against so-called either 'utopic' or 'nostalgic' narratives espoused by academics often from the Global South, especially those who attempt to reframe necessary ecological responses to the imperialist histories of industrialisation and modernisation outsourced to the Global South. As indicated at the start of this paper, often overlooked is the need to historically ground both ecological theories as well as the critique of these theories in context (both time and place), tradition of peoples, and in allowing for different rationalities to be present in a space for engaged argumentation. This is even more imperative if, as Campion notes, "ecofascism [is] seen as a sub-form of fascism, [and] not an equal merger of fascism and ecologism", in that labelling a movement as ecofascism tends to result in intentionally choosing not to responsibly engage with the actual stance of the ecological position(s) of the movement in favour of merely dismissing actions as being 'fascist in nature'. If ecofascism's ontological roots in the Global North are grounded in racial and ethno-nationalist interpretations of German Romanticism, how could a similar interrogation of the various interpretations of ecofascism be conceived of in the Global South? For example, could one equate what Albrecht (2019: 121) refers to as the emerging imperative of 'soliphilia' (i.e. "the love of the totality of our place relationships, and a willingness to accept the political responsibility for protecting and conserving them at all scales") among indigenous peoples in the face of continuing ecological destruction of 'loved places' as containing within it the same emerging xenophobic (and potentially fascist) sentiment as the *Blut und Boden* ideals of National Socialism?

Arguably, in order to undertake this problematisation, two aspects would need to be addressed: first, the notion of nostalgia as a purely destructive, irrational, emotive, and anti-progressive element of the present; and secondly, whether localised environmentalist responses to both nostalgia – and the related concept of solastalgia – could be considered ecofascist in nature. Regarding nostalgia, the two different aspects of 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia, as put forward by Svetlana Boym (2007), will be briefly considered in light of how they relate to the above-mentioned characteristics of ecofascism. Additionally, in terms of solastalgia, what Albrecht (2019: x) refers to as 'psychoterratic'

(or "psyche-earth") emotional responses, must be considered in light of what is conceptualised in the discussion on ecofascism, and whether a simplified universalisation of that loaded concept without considering locality and context (especially of marginalised people or peripheral cultures) is truly sufficient in the literature thereof.

Nostalgia and solastalgia as crises of temporality and place

Svetlana Boym, the Russian scholar of myth and memory (2007: 8), provides an historical reconstruction of the notion of nostalgia from its etymological roots (from the Greek *nostos*, which is 'return home', and *algia*, which is 'longing') to its conception in medical sciences in the 17th century, which referred to the condition experienced by "displaced people" who were working or serving in places far away from 'home'. Nostalgia, in a theoretical sense, then, refers to "longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed", a sentiment of "loss and displacement", as well as "a romance with one's own fantasy" (Boym 2007: 7). Social nostalgia thus indicates a social crisis, what Niemeyer (2014: 2) identifies as a "crisis of temporality".

However, it is important to note a number of crucial factors related to nostalgia. The first is that while nostalgia as a modern concept indicates a crisis in modern society, nostalgia is not an 'anti-modern' (regressive) posture, but is rather a symptom of our historical modern age. In other words, it emerges from within modernity and modernisation in response to a sense of loss and homelessness that has emerged on an unprecedented scale. This loss and homelessness can be attributed to the alienation of the individual and collective from different sources such as community, religion or myth, traditions, physical spaces that have historical significance, a more holistic conception of self as part of the natural world, etc.

Secondly, the type of yearning that is experienced as nostalgic is not necessarily for a different place, but rather for a different time: "… a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress" (Boym 2007: 8). In fact, Edward Casey (1993: 38) distinguishes between nostalgia and what he refers to as 'place pathology', which entails "disorientation, memory loss, homelessness, depression, and various modes of estrangement from self and others". While Boym's historical analysis and Casey's definition of nostalgia frame the term as a 'pathology', the position of this article conceives of both nostalgia and solastalgia as crises of spiritual loss, or crises of existence. As such, both Boym and Cassey's definitions refer to psychical or spiritual reactions to modern ideas that have failed, especially the destruction of place in the name of industrial

progress, the hypersynchronisation[9] of time and space, and the alienation of the human from nature.

In the third place, nostalgia is both retrospective and prospective in nature, where [t]he fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future". Projections or fantasies of our future(s) are directly influenced by our fantasies of the past, and these fantasies of the past have been influenced by our fantasies of the future. Attempting to imagine a future in our present place without reference to the past is near impossible. Importantly, this insight links it closely to the analysis of the role of non-Western tradition and traditional culture (as collective memory) in modern society, where "[n]ostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" (Boym 2007: 7).[10]

Boym (2007: 9) refers to such a relationship between nostalgia and modernity as "off-modern" – meaning not post-modern, or anti-modern, but instead as running off from the major histories of modernity and allowing for different views, interpretations and critiques of them. One such critique could be that continuity along the same destructive (predominantly Western) trajectory without trying to change our attitude to the present leads to the conclusion of the present being devastating, the future as inevitable, the past as unreasonable.

Where nostalgia among many progressive theorists was critiqued as being an expression of anti-progress,[11] today the sentiment has been much more thoroughly investigated and encompasses a much wider understanding of its manifestation and its potential as an expression of imagination and creativity in a world where these crucial processes seem to be lacking.[12] This is echoed by Alasdair Bonnett's analysis of the relationship between nostalgia and radicalism

9 This is the simultaneous interruption of what Stiegler (2011: 70) refers to as calendarity and cardinality, or cultural conceptions of time and space, by bringing them together in a single stream such as television viewing or streaming on the internet.

10 This alludes to a brief discussion that will be undertaken towards the end of the section, especially drawing from Albrecht's work with indigenous Australians and Kwame Gyekye's text *Tradition and Modernity* (1997).

11 The term carries a lot of baggage in the 21st century: Boym (2007: 9) points out that for Charles Maier, "[n]ostalgia is to longing as kitsch is to art"; Bonnet (2010: 2) adds that for Peter Logan, nostalgia is a "problem of memory"; and Susan Bennett's (1996: 5) political objection to nostalgia is that "[i]n all its manifestations nostalgia is, in its praxis, conservative (in at least two senses – its political alignment and its motive to keep things intact and unchanged)" (author's emphasis).

12 One should also take note of William Cronon's work on environmental history, colonialism, and indigenous conceptions of nostalgic understandings of nature, such as in *The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature* (1996)

in his text *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (2010). In this text, he not only discusses the mid-to-late 20th century political leftist critique of nostalgia as being opposed to progress (a position from which nostalgia was attacked as being a tool of the neoconservative right, who desired a return to traditional social structures), but also the potential of nostalgia in a present bereft of political imagination, to provide a creative element when considering the future – in that it could be a useful tool of critique.[13]

In light of the above three characteristics of nostalgia that shows the deeply dialectical nature of the concept, Boym distinguishes between the reflective and the restorative aspects of nostalgia. Where reflective nostalgia interrogates the algia (longing) of nostalgia, restorative nostalgia fixates on the nostos, or the home.[14] It is this latter formulation of nostalgia, namely restorative nostalgia, as an uncritical, unreflective conception of a past which has been romanticised as having an origin or essence of authenticity, which can lead attempts to restore a blind, emotional reconstruction of this lost ideal – or what is importantly referred to the essence of fascism.[15]

For Boym (2007: 15-16) then, reflective nostalgia contains critical potential and interrogates the present through the lens of a multitude of individual narratives which make up collective memory. This is where the creative potential

13 Bonnett (2010: 2) notes: "We should not underestimate how hard it is to rethink a topic that has, for so long … been a 'political offence of the first order' … [where] [a]ny attempt to take nostalgia seriously, to see it as unavoidable, perhaps even an occasionally creative force, is likely to make us appear discontent with modernity. It rips us from some basic assumptions, not just about progress and change, but what it is to be a happy, optimistic and 'well-balanced' citizen … The idea that 'nostalgia can actually be radically critical' has been offered as a daring suggestion, to be hedged in with thickets of provisos."

14 The distinction between the two forms of nostalgia is clarified by Boym (2007:13) as follows: "*Restorative nostalgia* does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as *truth and tradition*. *Reflective* nostalgia dwells on the *ambivalences of human longing and belonging* and does not shy away from the *contradictions of modernity*. *Restorative* nostalgia *protects the absolute truth*, while *reflective* nostalgia *calls it into doubt*. Restorative nostalgia is at the core of recent *national and religious revivals*. It knows two main plots – *the return to origins and the conspiracy*. *Reflective* nostalgia does not follow a single plot but *explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones*. It loves *details*, not *symbols*. At best, *it can present an ethical and creative challenge*, not merely a pretext for midnight melancholias." [own emphasis]

15 It is this notion of restorative nostalgia which can, in fact, even better be understood through the application of Malpas's mythophilia to many of those values which are transplanted from a past to a contemporary era, in the belief that they are in fact the original normative good. Malpas's (2012:175) conception of mythophilia rests upon a sense of nostalgia as a diminished sentiment which already no longer refers to a particular time, place or experience as such; in other words: "… a love of what is known only in terms of the myths and narratives of that which we never ourselves knew".

of interrogating a prevalent zeitgeist of longing lies – in that the responses to the sense of intense yearning for a different time can be imaginatively expressed in language, poetry, music, art, creative work, and so on. As such, reflective nostalgics are

> … aware of the gap between identity and resemblance; the home is in ruins or, on the contrary, has just been renovated and gentrified beyond recognition. It is precisely this defamiliarization and sense of distance that drives them to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present, and future. Through that longing, they discover that the past is not that which no longer exists, but … the past is something that 'might act, and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows the vitality'. The past is not made in the image of the present or seen as foreboding some present disaster; rather, the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, non-teleological possibilities of historic development (Boym 2007: 15-16).

While reflective nostalgia seems to recognise that we face a broken world and find ourselves alienated from a sense of home, the sense of longing to belong to something greater than the self is absolutely legitimate (as will be seen in the following discussion relating to solastalgia).

The notion of nostalgia as a spiritual loss is also picked up by Albrecht (2006; 2019), in the concept of solastalgia, which refers to the combination of nostalgia with desolation (connected to abandonment and loneliness) and solace (connected to consolation from distressing events). Albrecht (2006: 35) thus defines solastalgia as "… the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home or territory". This pain or sickness thus refers to the experience of one's sense of 'place' being under attack, and thus in the erosion of one's sense of identity as belonging to a particular place. This manifests as feelings of distress in the transformation of one's sense of place and of belonging to that place, and is thus a longing for stability or continuity in a place that originally provided a sense of comfort. Solastalgia is related to understanding meaning in that it is the

> … 'lived experience' of the loss of the present as manifest in a feeling of dislocation; of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the present … a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home' (Albrecht 2006: 35).

Importantly then, solastalgia is distinct from nostalgia as it refers to "… a life experience of losing the present which manifests in pain (dislocation) or feeling

of being attacked by a force that eliminates the possibility of peacefulness" (Mills et al. 2014: 88).

The experience of solastalgia can take place in the destruction of that which is familiar, through industrial development (such as mining or urban development), politically-motivated community displacement, natural disasters, or, importantly for this particular article, ecological destruction by (human-induced) climate change or capitalist ventures.[16]

In order to resist the hyper-individualism (or atomisation) and anthropocentrism of our current era, the Anthropocene[17], which has resulted in social and existential solastalgia, Albrecht (2019: 102) points towards the necessity of moving towards what he terms the 'Symbiocene', an epoch which is "... characterized by human intelligence and praxis that replicate the symbiotic and mutually reinforcing life-reproducing forms and processes found in living systems", and which recognises the "vital interconnectedness of life" as being "the material foundation for all subsequent thought, policy, and action". This epoch is existentially 'biophilic', which is a love for and/or a positive affirmation of life (Albrecht 2019: 139), which "offers the possibility of the complete reintegration of the human body, psyche, and culture with the rest of life" (Albrecht 2019: 102).

He thus makes an explicit connection between human health and the health of ecosystems. Furthermore, he draws on studies that show that one's psychic stability is linked to the sense of rootedness one has in the experience of unity between the earth and human beings. Environmental injustice (or powerlessness) and place pathology, as Casey (1993: 38) identified it, thus result in the feeling of solastalgia: "It is the 'lived experience' of the loss of the present as manifest in a feeling of dislocation; of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the present." (Albrecht 2006: 54)

This is of notable importance when considering the experiences of indigenous peoples who are struggling with the legacies of colonialism in its many forms, including displacement from traditional lands, the marginalisation or erasure of their traditional knowledge systems, and the subsequent labelling of calls for radical

16 A number of studies have been done on the experience of solastalgia among peoples and communities in (mostly) rural Australia, from indigenous communities to farmers (see Agho et al. 2007; Albrecht et al. 2004; 2007; 2008; Albrecht 2011), while less than a handful of similar studies have been published in the context of South Africa (see Tschakert and Tutu 2010; Rusch 2016; Barnwell, Stroud and Watson 2019; Barnwell and Wood 2022). As such, the authors of this article plan to undertake similar research in the context of South Africa.

17 The Anthropocene is often also referred in critical academic literature as "... the Holocene, Moore's Capitalocene, Haraway's Chthulucene, Hornborg's Technocene, Parikka's Anthrobscene, to name but a few" (Bradley 2022: 459).

environmental activism on their part as xenophobic fascism. Two such activist responses are what Albrecht refers to as resurgent soliphilia-based political action, namely: "… personal and community involvement in the protection, restoration and rehabilitation of their home/place/bioregion/country and the nurturing of an endemic sense of place in both individuals and communities" (2006: 54), or an emphasis on the need for "… resistance to the power and arrogance of both government and corporate bodies to silence and isolate public participation in the development approval and environmental monitoring processes" (2006: 54). An example of this can be seen in South Africa with the complex situation of the Makuleke people who were forcibly relocated from (in 1969) and then given back (in 1998) their land in the Pafuri region on the border of the Kruger National Park, and who now govern the land under traditional law together in partnership with the KNP (Robins and van der Waal 2008).

To immediately dismiss such beliefs, movements, or actions in light of Campion's (2021: 2) definition of ecofascism (noted earlier), namely "a *reactionary and revolutionary* ideology that champions the *regeneration of an imagined community* through a return to a *romanticised, ethnopluralist* vision of the *natural order*" [own emphasis] is to completely silence and marginalise the narratives of and work done in and with indigenous communities of a former colony (in the case of Australia) or other peripheral culture (in the case of the Global South, such as noted by Jacob Dlamini in *Safari Nation: A Social History of the Kruger National Park* [2020]).

Such responses are certainly (and no doubt have to be) reactionary in the sense that the feeling of solastalgia is a direct reaction to the dis-ease of experience of industrial modernity, and in an attempt to overcome or heal such a malady, action (sometimes social, usually political, at times violent in resistance) needs to be taken. Such action aspires towards overcoming the Anthropocene through a process of what Bernard Stiegler refers to as 'negentropy'[18], or the urgent need to "counter the entropic tendency of planetary capitalism and the mortal danger of climate change" (Bradley 2022: 459).

Furthermore, it is revolutionary in that radical environmentalism, especially as put forward by thinkers from the oft-marginalised indigenous communities in the North and South, as well as critical ecological thinkers such as those who follow the work of Stiegler, theorise about the necessity of forceful action in order to bring about a new epoch of human-human and human-nature relationships,

18 See Stiegler's 2018 book, *The Neganthropocene*.

such as the Symbiocene or the Neganthropocene[19]. Such action in order to bring about a new system of relationships could be social, political, existential, intellectual, or noetic, or ideally all of the aforementioned together.

For many so-called 'traditional cultures', the relationship between past, present, and future is far from linear, such as Deborah Bird Rose notes in her interpretation of the meaning of the concept of "country" to certain groups of indigenous groups in Australia: "country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life" (Albrecht 2019: 34). This can also be seen in insights by African philosophers such as Kwame Gyekye and Magobe Ramose (2015), who are critical of the polarity between the notions of the 'traditional' and 'modern', especially where tradition is viewed by sociologists and anthropologists as being "rural, agrarian, prescientific, resistant to change and innovation, and bound by the perception of its past". Instead, Gyekye (1997: 217-272) argues that so-called 'traditional' societies experience changes in beliefs and practices over time, and that tradition (and by extension, culture) itself can – and often is – rationally examined from within in order to avoid "cultural sterility" (Gyekye 1997: 228). In fact, Gyekye (1997: 233-241) engages in a thorough and thoughtful discussion on the positive and negative aspects of both 'cultural revivalists' as well as 'antirevivalists', with the reflexive conclusion that "the positive, nostalgic attitude of acceptance of the entire cultural past of a people on one hand, and the casual rejection of it in its entirety on the other hand, are both wrong-headed approaches to an objective, normative assessment of a cultural past" (Gyekye 1997: 272). Instead, there are always both fundamental and functional aspects of the past that could be revived (and conversely those that should be avoided), if they have been rationally engaged with from those within the culture itself[20] – as Boym similarly argues in the context of 'reflective nostalgia'.

In light of the above, the argument must be made that simplistic definitions of ecofascism (as described above), if one considers it from the perspective of ecosemiotics, are simply unable to deal with the histories, contexts, localities,

19 The concept of the 'Neganthropocene' is Stiegler's contribution to radical critical environmentalism. It is a difficult concept to define without reading it in context of his greater work, but Ross (in Stiegler 2018: 31), refers to the term as "the challenge to find a performative response adequate to all the systemic challenges arising in the face of contemporary concrescence" in which systems of economy would both be sympathetic with nature, as well as recognising the importance of nature in such human systems. Furthermore, Featherstone (2019: 3) notes that "This shift would in turn require the transformation of the (human) anthropocene into what [Stiegler] calls the (post- / pre-human) neganthropocene in order to re-scale the human animal within planetary limits and sustain environmental conditions suitable for the reproduction of life on earth."

20 See: Burnett and wa Kang'ethe's (1994) article, *Wilderness and the Bantu Mind*.

and different forms of meaning and experience that are inherent to actional and reactional resistances to ecological destruction and devastation (particularly when gauged from the perspective of the Global South). Furthermore, to continue to marginalise the narratives of peoples and communities from peripheral cultures is to enact – in very broad terms – a form of epistemological fascism upon their bodies of knowledge, meaning making, and experience.

This section has attempted to show how, through different translations of the concepts of nostalgia and solastalgia, the concept of ecofascism itself is also radically problematised through localisation. Furthermore, these concepts, in particular that of solastalgia, are able to reframe the "relations between human culture and the environment" (Maran 2018: 630).[21]

Conclusion

The discussion that an ecosemiotic approach to concepts such as ecofascism, nostalgia and solastalgia wants to initiate, is one of relationality. In this paper in particular, the focus in on the relations between humans and the immediate, local natural environment, and their symbolic representation of that environment. By aligning the discussion above with the notion of locality it becomes clear that living entities (including humans and the ecosystem) in a particular space and time are in semiotic relations with one another, resulting in meaning being created and exchanged in accordance with that particular space and time. This paper argues that this awareness of semiotic relationality allows for an exploration not only of the experience of a loss of space, but what that loss means to both the humans and non-humans that need to make sense of the space that remains. Through the changing of (and ultimately, loss of) environmental time and space, humans are forced to create alternative representations of the natural environment and the resultant cultural interaction with this environment, thereby emphasising the ecosystematic groundedness of meaning: how changes to the natural ecology can have deep existential effects upon the human.

This paper attempted to argue that the desire to change the present – either by drawing from marginalised cultures to reimagine the present or to radically attempt to disrupt the present in order to bring about a new future – is a necessary way to deal with such ecological dis-ease.

21 While this section has pointed towards studies done in Australia by a number of eco-activists and intellectuals, similar studies into human attitudes towards culture-environment relations need to be conducted in South Africa in order to understand the effect of ecological devastation upon experiences of desolation of local inhabitants, as well as the necessitated actions taken to relieve such terrapsychic distress.

Furthermore, through the notion of locality (as alternative to globality), this article aims to articulate the need for and importance of local context and history when discussing inherently derogatory concepts such as ecofascism with much greater cross-cultural sensitivity and openness to understanding different cultural and historical relationships between the self and the natural world. As such, this introductory attempt at bringing eco-critical studies into conversation with the study of meaning hopes to have brought to light that the natural world is not removed from human culture, but rather that human culture is an essential part of the natural environment. Thinking about this relationship, and in particular the roles of cultures in the natural world, should not merely be a symbolic representation of nature by a particular culture. Rather, the natural environment, in turn, should be regarded as having a determining role in this relationship (which will ultimately bring about experiences of solastalgia) by affording and constraining processes that enable humans to engage with the environment in a particular time and space (and still be nostalgic towards another particular time and space). In a South African context, people not only live in close contact with the environment, but are also directly dependent on land through practices such as subsistence farming, and as such are often the first to be affected by early effects of climate change. Unlike many Global North contexts (where nature is often "somewhere out there" and subsistence farming is not as prevalent), particular constraints and affordances contribute to the experience and sense-making of the terrapsychic distress experienced through solastalgia in the face of ecological and environmental destruction of place.

The concept of ecofascism, as a subcategory of fascism, blames human beings and human actions rather than seeing them as being part of – and thus representing and consequently responding to – their environment. This article hopes to have argued that the oft-dismissive attitude towards theories from the margins – which would include the Global South as well as many radical movements in the North – that challenge the narrative of progress as merely being linear in nature, that are often silenced as being ecofascist because of their reactionary or protest nature, should be reflected upon in light of the social-historical-economic histories of the Global South which certainly influenced the destruction of a more holistic conception of the human-nature relationship. Furthermore, such a reconceptualisation of the framing of actional and reactional responses to environmental destruction is a possible – and arguably necessary – response to the continued centring of the human at the expense of the environment. Without a response that forces a disruption of sorts (such as the North American First People's resistance to oil mining on reservations or the Amadiba Crisis Committee consisting of indigenous communities that protested against off-shore oil and gas exploration of the Wild Coast of South Africa, or even

the controversial Just Stop Oil protests in the UK), attempting to simply respond to environmental destruction through the sublimation of distress or appeals to juridical reason arguably furthers the technical-rationalist, neo-liberal discussion rather than grounding such reconceptualisation of the problems of the present in terms, narratives, and cultures that are local to the geographical place, in ways that could be translated in communities.

However, from this understanding of time and space one should also be careful not to create new hierarchies in revering direct experience or intuition over reflective forms of reason (including communitarian reason) that allow for the development of empathy and compassion not only for other creatures and ecosystems, but for other humans being as well. Anti-humanism and anti-rationalism themselves can lead to the most horrendous forms of genocide, when other human groups whose ideologies or core beliefs differ radically from our own. This should not be the unwitting end of radical environmentalism: Peter Staudenmaier (Biehl and Staudenmaier 1996: 9) fears that this is "perhaps, the unavoidable trajectory of any movement which acknowledges and opposes social and ecological problems but does not recognise their systemic roots or actively resist the political and economic structures which generate them"..

This is why such a multi-disciplinary approach is so crucial – to keep alight an awareness of all these various contributions (and resistances) to the current crisis. This is also arguably why supplementing critical theory approach – particularly that of critical environmentalism – with a decidedly ecologically-centred semiotic study such as ecosemiotics is of such crucial importance to such a theoretical exploration. A critical study on humans' perception of and interaction with the natural environment should involve the latter not merely as peripheral entity, but as co-constructor of meaning. This allows for the romanticised nostalgic reactionary politics of the restoration of the past to be problematised in terms of the lack of analysis, reflection, and critique, both from the self, the communal and the natural environment.

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