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**abstract:**

The article responds to T. J. Demos's recent call in *Radical Futurisms* to render traditions of the oppressed in plural which in no way has to be identified with 'colour blindness.' This means that we must learn to identify not only the billion Black Anthropocenes that Kathryn Yusoff postulated several years ago, but also those extractivist practices and their current black ecologies that have been largely underappreciated in contemporary (eco)critical discourses, particularly with regard to specific variants of Western modernity and its aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe. Mindful of that, this article focuses on a recent trilogy by a young Polish novelist Marta Knopik. In all three novels the action is set in Black City that may be fictional, but it also refers to the actually existing Upper Silesia, a region in Central Europe with a long history of coal mining and heavy industry. As the proposed reading shows, the detrimental impacts of colonial extractivism are best captured locally, in specific entanglements of an ongoing past, present and future.

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## Of an Ongoing Past: Stories of and from Black City

In recent years, (eco)humanist discourses have increasingly acknowledged that the multipronged ecological catastrophe we have to face does not represent an approaching horizon but a distant and ongoing past, in which racial, colonial, class, gender, and other interlocked oppressions unevenly unfold. Developing a critical theory of settler late liberalism and its aftershocks, Elizabeth Povinelli belongs to the first anthropologists to reflect upon these complex historical networks between present-day environmental emergency and the Anthropocene's beginnings in the so-called long sixteenth-century conquest of the Americas. As she succinctly puts it in *Between Gaia and Ground* (2021), "[t]he catastrophe of climate change, toxic exposure, and viral pandemics are not *à venir*—they are not on the horizon coming toward those staring at it. These are the ancestral catastrophes that began with the brutal dispossession of human and more-than-human worlds and a vicious extraction of human and more-than-human labor."<sup>1</sup> For this reason, no passage into the future can happen without that past and its hauntings. Moreover, one must recognize the necessarily open-ended, always-incomplete formation of such past(s) because the growing number of suppressed historical traditions, diverse lifeworlds, and knowing/doing practices have already been reclaimed against the homogeneous or continuous conception of the mainstream, unmarked Anthropocene. This includes the Black radical tradition, Indigenous decolonial praxis, and anti-capitalist socialist opposition. The suppressed traditions and practices also envisage their own alternative temporalities and lived realities, simultaneously demanding more historical, geographical, and socioeconomic specificity in identifying the causes of today's ecological emergency. At the granular local level, the specific

causes risk effective erasure in mainstream homogenizing approaches to the complex issue of anthropogenic environmental disruptions. For instance, the climate emergency may remain narrowly conceived as an excessive amount of carbon in the atmosphere, ignoring the power–knowledge nexus on the ground inherited after toxic capitalism.

Cognizant of the diverse histories of dispossession, socio-environmental violence, and socioeconomic inequalities that have already been reclaimed and still wait to be articulated, I can only agree with T. J. Demos who emphasizes that if in our time of divisive identity politics we hope to generate a nexus of solidarity across historical and cultural differences, we can do so only by rendering traditions of the oppressed in the plural. As he recalls, the category of the human has been historically denied not only to Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples but also to other categories of subalterns. Therefore, a focus on other forms of modern humanism's exclusions and dehumanizing objectifications does not necessarily mean a kind of "color blindness." Taking it into account, in his recent book *Radical Futurisms* (2023), Demos revisits Walter Benjamin's eighth thesis from the essay "On the Concept of History" (1940), which introduces such a non-exclusive and internally diverse definition of the oppressed. Following that, Demos concludes: "Today's traditions of the oppressed can similarly only be rendered in the plural, as theories of intersectionality have it, designating a matrix of oppressions co-constituted by capitalism, racism, heteropatriarchy, and colonialism. ... Neither readymade category nor endless victimology, its traditions are performatively reconstructed within each iteration of futurist imagination that calls forth specific histories to create the multiracial, anti-capitalist movement necessary for emancipation."<sup>2</sup> In other words, neither specific futures nor pasts are as yet fully articulated, but remain partly suspended in the potentiality of performative (re)constructions, the one

inflecting the other, and, conversely, in various modalities of scientific and artistic discourses that creatively map complex networks between those pasts and futures. It is for a reason that Demos identifies the representationally, narratively mediated networks as a kind of weapon and tool to fight back against and intentionally disrupt temporal oppression of what he calls “homochronism.” The latter serves as an imperial linear master narrative which in no way belongs to the colonial past(s). He argues: “This calculated seeding of fixed futures is at work within prehensive modelings of coming worlds, including in technoscientific desires for automation and global environmental control to forestall climate breakdown.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, it matters not only what and how traditions of the oppressed are (re)constructed and what and how futures are envisaged. It matters also what and how spatiotemporal transit zones that connect supposedly distinct times and places are created and creatively rendered in humanities and artistic practices.

Contemporary (eco)critical discourses have largely underappreciated this intersectional issue, particularly with regard to specific variants of Western modernity and its aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe, which I would like to call a “half-life of deindustrialization,” relying on Sheery Lee Linkton’s phrasing.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, I am convinced that narratives, cultural texts, and storytelling affect and may determine our understanding of both the industrial pasts of our cities and their deindustrial futures in the Anthropocene. Hence, this article focuses on a recent trilogy by Marta Knopik, a young Polish novelist. In all three novels—*Czarne Miasto* (Black City)<sup>5</sup>, *Rok Zaćmienia* (The Year of the Eclipse)<sup>6</sup>, and *Burgundowe Wdowy* (Burgundy Widows)<sup>7</sup>—the narrative deliberately straddles the line between fact and fiction. Black City, where the action happens, may be fictional, but it also refers to the actually existing Upper Silesia, a region in Central Europe with a long history of coal mining and heavy industry.

Today, this deindustrializing region has to cope with severe environmental consequences of the past capitalist and communist regimes which exploited the local natural resources in an equally unrestrained way.<sup>8</sup> However, Knopik depicts Black City's transition from an industrial past to an envisioned post-industrial future through a perspective that diverges from typical industrial memory narratives, which show miners and steelworkers as the archetypal proletarians and wonder whether and how to preserve industrial heritage, together with vital aspects of working-class experience. Despite her focus on wives, widows, and daughters of coal miners, she does not inscribe the trilogy within the dominant social-historical narrative concerning women as hard-working housewives. Instead of presenting the reality of such gendered work, the semi-fictional trilogy manifestly sketches heterogeneous temporalities and mythical stories, tightly interweaving them to fabulate suppressed or long-forgotten knowledge traditions, at least partially preserved in women's knowing/doing practices and storytellings. The traditions might still carry meaning in the present and thus may serve as a resource for a different way of imagining a possible yet foreclosed future, which will then come into view.

Current discussions of a future urban life typically revolve around climate stressors.<sup>9</sup> As a result, a host of other issues becomes marginalized or even entirely forgotten: deindustrial pasts of many cities endangered by non-meteorological factors or the unwavering toxicity of the ground under a lush cover of greenery. In other words, the specificity of black ecologies evades our grasp—ecologies as black as the earth, broken and polluted through greedy extractivist practices of ongoing past(s) in non-Western European countries. For the purpose of my close-reading of Knopik's trilogy, I add another Anthropocene to a billion of Black ones counted by Kathryn Yusoff.

In her *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Yusoff, the British expert on the inhuman geography critically assesses the new planetary age of the (White) Anthropocene.<sup>10</sup> Following in her footsteps in my own way, I read the stories of and from Black City as narratives that aim to re-member and re-tell the suppressed or long-forgotten preindustrial and industrial pasts at the granular level of Central Europe. This re-membering and re-telling proves crucial for imagining any deindustrial future in individual and communal perspectives. In so doing, I would like to flag an important omission in the recently proposed global approaches to urban futures, strategically premised on largely essentialized Black, Brown, and Indigenous ecologies. When critically read from the perspective of a denizen of non-Western Europe, those ecologies urgently need to be revisited and rethought to become more granular, more situated, and more inclusive in order to do justice to many modernities and their aftermaths on our continent. As I argue below, those ecologies should embrace not only Yusoff's billion Black Anthropocenes but also at least one more—the black Anthropocene of Central and Eastern Europe in its local specificities. To support my argument and the proposed reading of Knopik's trilogy, I will start with a closer look at a walk-in installation, recently presented at an exhibition to which the title of my article intentionally alludes.



## An Unmarked Anthropocene?

The exhibition *Landscapes of an Ongoing Past*, subtitled *In Search of Past and Future Utopia* by the curatorial team,<sup>11</sup> took place at the UNESCO World Heritage Zeche Zollverein in Essen, where I spent several months in 2024. The city is located in the Ruhr region, the largest urban area in Germany, which came into existence through heavy coal and steel industrialization in the late nineteenth century. In the 1970s, deindustrialization hit the whole region. However, after successful economic restructuring, it has become one of the strongest landscapes of industrial heritage in the world, often presented as a model for other deindustrializing regions. For this reason, the authors of "A Post-Industrial Mindscape?" highlight that "it is hard to think of any other urban region in the world in which industrial heritage has taken such a significant role in public representation of the region during massive processes of de-industrialization."<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the Ruhr constitutes an interesting attempt in Western Europe to link industrial heritage narratives of both environmental destruction and "re-naturalization" of a severely damaged landscape and polluted grounds, which forms the basis for the region's increasing touristification. Therefore, in "Conclusion" to his edited volume *Constructing Industrial Pasts*, Stefan Berger introduces a paradoxical concept of "industrial nature" which, as he argues, tends to be even "more diverse and more colourful than the nature that existed in the Ruhr before industrialization."<sup>13</sup> In this respect, present-day Essen serves as the best example of such cities in which "new" nature of a once industrial landscape



*Landscapes of ongoing past*, exhibition view, 2024, Urbane Künste Ruhr, Essen. Image courtesy of Urbane Künste Ruhr, Photography: Henning Rogge

attracts a growing multitude of tourists.

Until the last decades of the twentieth century, when heavy industries declined, Essen belonged to the most important coal and steel centers in the country, in particular because of Krupp family's iron. Once the epitome of carbon metabolic regime, today it rightly counts among the greenest cities in Europe, proud of its increasing number of larger and smaller parks planted on industrial waste heaps, recreational centers, and cycle paths around artificial lakes, bioswales, and vegetated spillways. The abovementioned Zeche Zollverein, the biggest interwar colliery in the world, permanently shut down in 1993. As Stefan Berger and Jana Golombek point out, the preservation of the site in its original state belongs to "key decisions on the road of making industrial heritage the dominant memory culture of the region."<sup>14</sup> The site has transformed into a lushly overgrown place, making its reddish brick buildings something closer to a movie set rather than remains of the city's industrial past. In 2001, the salt warehouse, once an important part of the coking plant, underwent renovation to permanently house Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's *The Palace of Projects*. It is a walk-in installation in the form of a two-story, snail shell-like structure made of wood and linen. The installation features over sixty showpieces in diverse forms, such as display cases, tables, screens, murals, or objects laid out on the floor, each presented and explained in detail as a project for a better future. Every exhibit corresponds to a fictional person identified by name, with their age, social position, and profession listed as factors that have influenced the Kabakovs' vision of the future. Visitors can carefully study each piece, sitting on a wooden chair at a well-lit table and reading a page-long narrative about how a given exhibit would secure a better quality of life. All projects make up a peculiar museum of dreams and hypotheses, some of them clearly surreal and unrealizable but designed to inspire the imagination of visitors as

those who actually hold our fate in their hands.

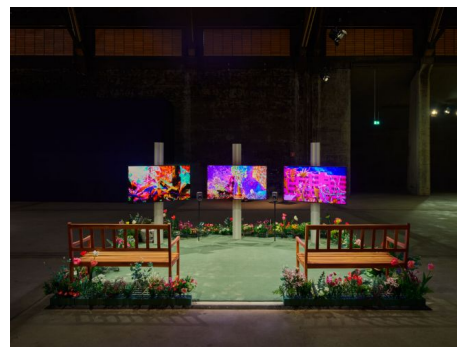
Situated under the same roof as *The Palace of Projects*, the temporary exhibition *Landscapes of an Ongoing Past* comprises several projects by artists from the former Eastern Bloc, mostly Ukraine. The exhibition manifestly enters into a dialogue with the



Kabakovs' artwork and with the once industrial and then "re-naturalized" Ruhr region. This becomes particularly evident in *You Will Survive* (2024), an installation by Yuri Yefanov, a young Ukrainian artist living in the nearby Bochum. Yefanov addresses the subject of Eastern European cities that underwent or are still undergoing manifold processes of deindustrialization—an issue more often than not neglected by today's global reflection on the catastrophic convergence of urbanization and anthropogenic environmental change. *You Will Survive* invites visitors to sit on a wooden bench in a plainly artificial allotment garden made of plastic flowers and plants. Comfortably seated, they watch the artist's sixteen-minute film *We Will Definitely Talk About This After the Last Air Raid Alert Stops*, shown on three screens. Composed of computer-generated, neon-colored images, the film presents three main stages of a generation-long recultivation program that slowly yet radically transforms a city. Once a center of heavy industry, almost entirely denuded of vegetation, Yefanov's city eventually turns into a gigantic forest: an ideal form of a future coexistence of various life forms and ways of living. Here, humans, birds, and animals set free from the city ZOO, and even fungi may peacefully attune to each other. This distinctly utopian world, where all beings are finally able to live in harmony, also becomes a welcoming home to mythical, legendary, and fantastic creatures of every kind. In this respect, one can say that Yefanov's city-forest exemplarily embodies one

of Donna Haraway's naturecultures. However, in the final part of the film, an off-screen voice asks a pertinent yet rhetorical question: Why is the future city doomed to remain in the realm of utopian projects? As the title of Yefanov's film advocates, a convincing reason lies in the current ecopolitical moment in the easternmost part of Europe. Only after the war in Ukraine ends, the time will come to talk about how to manage the impacts of today's increasing ecological crises. Nonetheless, other important factors also prevent the dream of a city-forest from coming true.

Among those factors, I would not count the visible lack of details on sophisticated environmental technologies embedded in the design, which would slowly weave synergetic webs between various life forms and ways of living in the future urban landscape. Neither does the absence of a complex interplay of physical infrastructure, economic and political institutions, and human-influenced environmental change endanger the city-forest's smooth functioning. Something else seems much more significant. Yefanov presents his film in the allotment garden with plastic flowers and plants for a reason. As a matter of fact, as the exhibition catalog points out, both the amazingly green Zollverein and the entire city of Essen are similarly artificial. The successful state-supported and state-funded process of commodifying the industrial heritage to underpin regional identity in the interest of a booming tourism "comes at a price, which is the relative silence about the multiple divisions that have been charactering the society of the Ruhr, or if not silence then the making safe of those divisions in a past that is buried in its pastness."<sup>15</sup> And such silence may endanger "a future of many futures built from a past of many pasts,"<sup>16</sup> to



Yuri Yefanov, *You Will Survive*, installation view, 2024, Urbane Künste Ruhr, Essen. Image courtesy of Urbane Künste Ruhr, Photography: Henning Rogge

quote Demos's *Radical Futurisms* once again. More importantly, for the lush greenery to grow here, the entire ground in this area, still polluted by toxic industrial waste, required coverage with a deep layer of soil, artificially mixed and transported by trucks. However, as many journalistic investigations have demonstrated, this complex operation has not solved the problem of decommissioned mines in the Ruhr region, in particular after the last coal mine shut down in 2018. Almost 60,000 pits, shafts, galleries, and tunnels from inactive extractive sites form a vast network deep underground, filled with water highly contaminated with chloride salt and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), which was regularly used as flame retardants in mining machinery and mostly left in the mines. The water continuously rises up and must be pumped out at a rate of about 9,000 per minute. If the water level rises, it may not only jeopardize the quality of groundwater but also flood the entire Ruhr region. This means that huge pumps must work endlessly, which takes a lot of electricity and money, more and more with each passing year.<sup>17</sup> In this context, by juxtaposing the utopian project of an urban future with a fake paradisiac environment of the allotment garden, *You Will Survive* turns an implicit declaration of its title into a definitive condition of what has to be done to ensure our survival. The ongoing toxic past of the Ruhr may resurface through a great flood or another climate-induced calamity at any time, threatening the livelihood of the inhabitants despite their belief that this engineered and optimized green city guarantees their safety.

In her trilogy—which I read closely below—Marta Knopik employs an alternative strategy to Yefanov's ironic utopia, premised on an illusory reality of a long-forgotten past. Knopik offers her reader a glimpse into the aftermath of a deindustrializing urban fabric, cracked open in a literal sense. All three novels center around what happened one day in the final year of the last century and millennium. During that time,

a massive cave-in at a local coal mine awoke the fictional Black City, which represents the real, health- and life-threatening conditions of Upper Silesia. Indeed, every year in Polish coal mines, stress relief in rock masses after coal extraction causes approximately 1,500 tremors with a magnitude of more than 1.7. Many decommissioned borrow pits, also underneath inhabited areas, have been left without any mitigative technologies. No wonder that sudden sinkholes and massive cracks in the ground constitute everyday occurrences here. Only between 2021 and 2022, the ground heavily shook thirteen times in Trzebinia, where the Siersza mine closed and flooded in 2001, leaving sinkholes 20–30 meters in diameter and 4–5 meters deep in residential areas, a local cemetery, and allotment gardens. Importantly, local authorities and experts say that they have no means to prevent or even localize further ground shakings and cracks.<sup>18</sup> A few years earlier in Bytom, landslides up to ten meters deep led to the post-factum evacuation of many inhabitants. Allegedly, this event directly influenced Knopik's depiction of her Black City. Knopik and her family have been living in Bytom for several decades, and an interested reader may find many autobiographical traces in her trilogy. However, the traces and hints remain carefully hidden because the inspiration for Black City comes from Knopik's lived experiences and her research on Upper Silesia, its history, folklore, and urban legends.<sup>19</sup>

The strong cave-in in Knopik's Black City killed many miners and caused heavy postmining shocks that reoccurred for days and months. The postmining shocks resulted mostly from the previous and unrestrained removal of coal from the sediments not only in the vicinity of but also directly underneath Black City. For this reason, Knopik depicts her city as "hollowed-out below; a city which any minute may sink entirely into the ground, along with all its offices, banks, and stores, all its inhabitants and their dogs."<sup>20</sup> Shortly after the main cave-in, numerous tenement

houses began to crack and crumble, big chunks of plasterwork fell off, and walls collapsed, hurting and killing passers-by. Fearing for their life, the inhabitants hurriedly moved to tunnels and makeshift shelters, trying to start a new life on the ground that was never to become firm again. Significantly, Knopik puts what has happened in Black City in a larger context of both climate change and a millennial atmosphere and solar eclipse of the twentieth century's last year. However, as one of her characters emphasizes, in Black City, the apocalypse that people awaited in horror "began a bit earlier than elsewhere, as if it were a test or a sort of dress rehearsal before the proper end of the global world."<sup>21</sup> Because of this, the trilogy reveals a tight entanglement of socio-environmental, ethnic, migratory, gender, and language oppressions, which materialize as a Black City double—the preindustrial Underground City secretly hidden under today's Black City. After postmining shocks disclosed its presence, Underground City started to infiltrate the everyday life of Black City as a creeping black vegetation with a specific sweetish smell. Notably, the black vegetation may be read as an alternative to Berger's "industrial nature" in the Ruhr region because it does not result from "re-naturalization" but rather signifies the vital presence of an ongoing past. The two cities in Knopik's trilogy become entangled not only in this ongoing past affecting Black City's present and future but also through more-than-human urban intimacies of cultural, bio-social, and geological forces. Importantly, the novels depict a place abandoned and neglected by the political center. Its inhabitants must cope with the situation by reaching out to suppressed historical knowledge traditions to create new subjective temporalities and lived realities that could form the basis for a different way of imagining the future. Though Knopik does not aim to answer my query directly, her trilogy nonetheless provides an opportunity to address the issue of an ongoing

past at the granular local level of the under-researched Central Europe Anthropocene.

## Black City We Became

In his article “Reading and Writing the Weather”<sup>22</sup> written over a decade ago, Bronislaw Szerszynski, a sociologist from Lancaster University, rightly postulates that climate change should be considered not so much a problem to be solved as an opening to which humans—all of whom are future climate refugees in a sense—have to respond. Mindful of this ethical–political challenge, Szerszynski notes that important transformations of any society’s metabolic regime have always involved transformations of the notion of the human. For this reason, he argues, climate-induced change challenges the modern idea of psychic self-closure, which inextricably connects to capitalist modernity. Hence, Szerszynski writes that “[w]e will have to develop new forms of solidarity and security, predicated not on closure and independence but on the recognition of vulnerability and exchange with nature.”<sup>23</sup> In his article, he is particularly interested in locating the desired forms of subjectivity in a much wider context of the relationships between humans, technology, and the environment. He conceives of the latter mainly as weather conditions, which have often been neglected in the controlled “second nature” of human urban settlements. The importance of the weather notwithstanding, its relationship with humans and technology does not constitute the only factor that has recently questioned the modern idea of psychic self-closure. What interests me in the following sections are locally specific modes of urban subjectivity, which I define as a distributed phenomenon that, at various scales, both incorporates and modifies more-than-human elements and inhuman forces. Their complex entanglements undercut the foundations of modern/capitalist subjectivity and power, creating space for new approaches to the necessary de-



mastering and de-centering of the human subject. I have already explored this issue in an earlier article, drawing on Kathryn Yusoff's concept of distributed geologic subjectivity as a new conceptualization of ecological arrangements. There, I analyzed how urban subjects share a sociality with geological and technological forces in a fabulated New York City, as envisioned by N. K. Jemisin in her duology *The Great Cities*.<sup>24</sup> Here, I also engage with Yusoff's stimulating insights, even though Knopik's trilogy, which fabulates entirely different modes of urban subjectivity, requires a different approach from the one I adopted in my reading of Jemisin's novels.

Knopik centers the heterogeneous identity of Black City and its dwellers as the main focus of her trilogy. Moreover, she sees various modes of urban life as defining strata of contemporary subjectivity. A broader ecology of human settlements, which makes itself increasingly visible, challenges the modern concept of urban infrastructure as the epitome of the Enlightenment dream to control nature through science and technology. Accordingly, in Knopik's trilogy, common modes of urban life in Black City have to adapt to this broader ecology, forming an entanglement of urban infrastructure and its geophysical environment. Thus, Knopik depicts Black City as almost entirely isolated from the outer world for a reason. In so doing, she shows that in the aftermath of a local apocalypse, each city will have its own future, depending on its specific entanglements. Similarly, the inhabitants will have an equal status to other biotic and abiotic entities and forces. To demonstrate the specific de-centered subjects of Black City, the trilogy gives them agency as storytellers who voice and fabulate their city and themselves as participants in urban praxis. It seems quite obvious that in the installation *We Will Survive*, with which I started my argument, the utopian city-forest of a future exists only by virtue of cinematic narration and imagery. However, although deeply embedded in the everyday experience of Silesians, who

increasingly often have to cope with the effects of cave-ins in local mines and postmining shocks, Black City does not seem closer to reality than the utopian city-forest. Always chocking with black smoke or smelly moist fog, the city appears as "subjective, most probably completely false, because based on speculations and on memory, which suggests the course of streets in relation to which we are located."<sup>25</sup> As no part of the trilogy has a linear timeline, the maze-like narrative provides a perfect counterpart to the city in which the action is set. Because both the city dweller and the reader have no reliable point of reference, they easily lose their bearings when faced with sudden and unexpected temporal coordinations and discontinuities. At those junctures, they can neither confidently reconstruct what has happened nor anticipate what may come next. This means that the reader never sees the city from a single objectivizing perspective, typical of a realist novel. Here, the cityscape remains subjectivized and manifestly fragmented. It is situated somewhere between recounted dreams and once individually experienced and then recollected reality. This reality sometimes turns out to be part of—or a kind of—a reenactment of somebody else's mythical, legendary, or quite mundane story. In all three novels, an act of telling actively shapes how the fabulated events unfold. Thus, the novels direct the reader's attention not toward the city and its dwellers but toward the circumstances and manner in which their tight entanglements are narrated.

Although the apocalyptic cave-in in a local coal mine constitutes a decisive caesura in the life of Black City, the reader never learns what happened at that very moment and afterwards, during long months when postmining shocks reoccurred and authorities introduced makeshift adaptive measures. It is only after a while that the past events are recalled and recounted in the third person, using individual

viewpoints of several main characters in the first and second installments. The third one presents the events as a coming yet quite phantasmagorical future. The trilogy's last part functions not only as a kind of prologue to the already narrated events. It simultaneously depicts a wider historical context of extractivist practices in Upper Silesia, reaching far beyond to investigate the reasons for the specific relationship between Black City and Underground City. For this reason, I will return to the last novel in the next section. First, however, I will answer an important question of why the author wanted her Black City to be read as an ungraspable entanglement of different perspectives, times, and events, each suspended between memory and hallucination, imagination and reality.

## Speaking in and from the Rift

Particularly in *Czarne Miasto*, the first installment of Knopik's trilogy, the eponymous Black City is not so much remembered as re-membered from a ten-year hindsight. Knopik leaves no doubts as to how the characters' memory works, with its transformative abilities supported by forces and conventions of narration/storytelling. To see how re-membering functions in Knopik's novels, it suffices to look closely at one of these narratives. Before the end of the previous century, a poor, working-class family of a certain Wanda Bóbr who has come to Black City lives there in a tiny room of a workers' hostel for several years. By happenstance, they then move to an outsized bourgeois apartment in an old townhouse, crammed with all the stuff that the previous owner compulsively collected for ages and kindly left under their custody. Feeling particularly confused and insecure under the gaze of unfamiliar ladies and gentlemen in peculiar outfits and hairstyles on portraits hanging all over the place, new lodgers turn those freaks into their family members: they give them familiar names and patronymics, invent degrees of kinship, and make them protagonists of ever new

stories, told and retold on various occasions. Knopik builds her Black City in a similar way, story by story and story upon story. Together, the stories offer a dynamic, ever-shifting image of the city and its people, as unstable as the ground on which the city emerged and into which it started to slowly sink. Thereby, the fabulation of the city perfectly matches its new, postapocalyptic status in a possible future.

Significantly, even though the second installment depicts Black City mostly through the eyes of a foreign visitor, the city's image does not change much. *Rok Zaćmienia* shows several winter days in the year 2000, when John Fox, a representative of a family law firm of Silesian origin, reaches Black City after a long journey from Chicago. As it happens, his grandfather often told him stories about his life in Silesia before the Second World War. However, none of them has prepared John for what he encounters in Black City when wandering through its tunnels and makeshift dwellings, where postmining shocks still occur. Therefore, he can hardly make sense of what he sees and has to rely on local informants and guides. The more so that John's mid-life journey to and through Black City, much like Dante's trek through hell, is superimposed on another journey—that of inner transformation in which his trips to Underground City play a key role, both in dreams and then in reality. Crucially, the former prove more significant than the latter, as they make them possible at all. John's inner journey also demonstrates the agency of Underground City, whose summoning and enchantment he answers when lying comatose in a guest room, having applied a black, sweetish-smelling ointment bought at a shady market stall. A manifest inner and outer transformation of a once prototypical American lawyer in an expensive bespoke outfit and shoes, who has found a core part of himself in and as Underground City, demonstrates the de-centering of his subjectivity, which will forever remain fractured and connected to its primal source. Wherever he goes, he takes this blackness

with him.

The same applies to Wanda Bóbr's two daughters from the first installment. In *Czarne Miasto*, the younger one as a child secretly ventures into Underground City after a series of postmining shocks cracks the wall of the family apartment, revealing hidden steps leading deep down. Although subsequently both sisters, one after another, leave Black City for a foreign and aseptically modern White City, they take a drop of its blackness in their hearts, just like John Fox. However, the novel focuses on their mother, her lonely life in Black City, and the stories she tells about the family and its few acquaintances. Only gradually, as the action unfolds, the reader finds out that, quite surprisingly, the Bóbr sisters leave their native city because their father is killed in the cave-in and soon after, their mother disappears without a trace. Almost a decade later, in the novel's finale, both sisters come back to their old apartment to find black vegetation in a room with a cracked wall. Carrying a torch, they slowly descend the stairs. Deep down, they stumble upon a big pile of rubble. There, they find a well-preserved corpse of Wanda who clearly died a decade earlier, during a series of postmining shocks in the year of solar eclipse. Therefore, whose lonely life have we followed? Whose storytelling have we listened to? Who and from what perspective provided us with glimpses and images of urban life, by means of which we got to know Black City?

Suspended between life and death and intimately bound with the earth, Wanda recalls characters from three fugitive scenes, which allow Kathryn Yusoff to plot the course of black geophysics in the chapter "Insurgent Geology: A Billion Black Anthropocenes Now" in her *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. What seems particularly important here is an 1817 print of a slave woman who jumps out of a window but remains forever suspended in the air as if in a different gravitational field. However, it is not the weight of colonialism but a different kind of

oppression that Knopik's Wanda wanted to escape. As Yusoff states, "[i]n the geophysics of this image of the suspended gravity is both the problem and the solution, rendering her invulnerable, held in the possible, awaiting a different future."<sup>26</sup> Held in a different tense of possibility and relation to the earth in *Czarne Miasto*, Knopik's main character not only lives a kind of ghostly afterlife as a miner's widow but also becomes a storyteller who narrates her own life in the third person, speaking from a special place between both cities and realms, consolidated when the earth's surface broke. In other words, through her voice, Wanda expresses herself as well as the material condition of her subjective placement, becoming a perfect example of a de-mastered and de-centered urban subject.

Hence, in my reading, Wanda embodies a concept, place, and specific perspective that Yusoff calls "the rift" in her recent book *Geologic Life*. Yusoff explains that, indeed, as a topographic zone of the earth's surface, the rift "is a site that is pulled apart by the flex of extensional tectonics in the mantle of the lithosphere exhibiting what is materially buried and what is uplifted to the surface."<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, Yusoff theorizes and deploys the rift as "a geographic concept of broken grounds from which to fracture the surface of white geology and its forms of subjugation."<sup>28</sup> To put it differently, "[t]he rift is a temporal scene and a material experience of shattered grounds."<sup>29</sup> As a site of ontologically and materially unstable grounds and fractures, the rift opens access to those archives of geologic lives that remain unrecorded and unclaimed by the official geology. As Yusoff argues, the latter speaks "from the perspectivism of the plateau, the surveyor as planetary technician and geologic underwriter in cartographies of extraction and sedimentations of valuation."<sup>30</sup> Conceived in such a way, Yusoff's countertheory of the rift primarily aims to consider geology and race together as defining strata of contemporary subjectivity, situating itself in the undergrounds of

colonial scripts of becoming human, that product of white geology. In this regard, the rift in and from which Knopik's de-centered subject speaks opens up to other understandings as well—understandings that define contemporary subjectivity through geologic and epistemic strata, albeit they do so through similar footnotes, fragments, and affects unrecorded and unclaimed by official archives.

In one of her stories about Black City in the aftermath of its miniature apocalypse, the de-centered subject called Wanda highlights a particular aspect of the ongoing transformation in urban infrastructure, reality, and the subjectivity of their dwellers: "The inhabitants of Black City were shaking off their previous reality as tenement houses shook off the cracked plaster off their walls. They were shaking off dust together with memories of their previous lives in the workers' town and heading into a fantasy land."<sup>31</sup> Notably, this fantasy feeds on family and local stories, myths, fairytales, and urban legends. There is also a reason why Knopik situates a huge maze-like Library at the very center of Black City, while Underground City serves as a refuge for all other practices of knowing/doing that question the officially systematized normative knowledge. Materializing as ghostly black vegetation, these dissident practices began intervening in the lives of Black City's inhabitants shortly after the Earth's mantle broke, creating a kind of a rift, as Yusoff would have it. Most stories in Knopik's trilogy unfold from this reopened passage. The third installment puts the rift in a broader context of the Anthropocene as a global and globalized age defined by the Moderns and their episteme, now requiring a more specific and granular approach.

## **A Billion Black Anthropocenes Plus One**

Already in her *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Yusoff, challenging the racial blindness of the Anthropocene, suggests that we should understand geology not so much an "innocent"

science as a regime for producing both subjects and material worlds. As she emphasizes, “[b]oth enslaved land and ecologies became subject to encoding as inhuman property, as a tactic of empire and European world building.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the current age tends to forget its diverse histories of oppression and dispossession. Therefore, this tactic enables “the becoming of the Anthropocene as a material and durational fact in bodies and environments.”<sup>33</sup> Acknowledging the power of stories to designate scenes of agency and accountability, Yusoff offers a material, evolutionary narrative that re-imagines human origins and endings within both a geologic and geosocial context rather than an exclusively biological one. Although from Yusoff’s perspective, geology functions as a racial supplement to the progress narrative, the capitalist extractive praxis has also set up other instrumental relations to land, ecology, and people, which she leaves rather underappreciated. Moreover, it has done so also in Europe, within colonial empires as well as in countries and territories that were economically and politically subservient in historically varied ways, for instance, the Upper Silesia. In these places, nationality, language, gender, cultural upbringing, and economic status proved far more important than race. Knopik focuses precisely on this issue in her last novel. The main action extends here as far back as the late nineteenth century, when a young Prussian mining engineer and his French wife settle down in Black City. He changes a small provincial town into an industrial city—a city of many ethnicities and languages where his second, German wife was paradoxically active as a true Polish patriot. However, at this juncture, something else seems more important than a cursory look at the past of the historical Upper Silesia offered in *Burgundowe Wdowy*.

The eponymous burgundy widows appear cursorily also in previous installments. They all lose their husbands either during the first cave-in or one of the postmining shocks, and dye their hair burgundy as a sign of mourning. Wanda is one of the



widows in *Czarne Miasto*, and in *Rok Zaćmienia*, John Fox participates in one of their meetings in the Library. In the last part of the trilogy, we meet a future librarian and burgundy widow, a young girl named Zilka who has just started to sort out a family archive of Edeltrauda Schwarz, daughter of the already mentioned Prussian mining engineer and his French wife. Schwarz was once a famous journalist, writer, and activist engaged in patriotic and women's emancipation movements of the first half of the last century. Therefore, together with Zilka, the reader has an opportunity to learn the region's histories. However, Knopik's novel begins with a telling fragment of old prophetic visions, written down in *The Life of a Pious Maiden Salvatrix* in 1415. Salvatrix prophesizes the end of the world as we know it when "black saurians with eyes of fire, hidden deep underground since the dawn of time, will be awakened and harassed by humans whose cities have grown deep down the earth."<sup>34</sup> She also sees the main events of all three novels, and even "the one who will envision my story, will see me envisioning her story and prophesizing the Eclipse Year."<sup>35</sup> The same prophetic fragment reappears in the last sequence of the novel—this time, however, as a copy which Zilka finds in Schwarz's archive. The two stories—Salvatrix's and Zilka's—are set six hundred years apart and create each other. Their simultaneous unfolding clearly demonstrates an entanglement of past, present and future temporalities in which a given past influences or even invents a future to the same extent that the future influences or even invents the past. Moreover, the framing story, which connects preindustrial and industrial legacies, marks out a period that more or less corresponds to the variously dated and defined age of the Anthropocene. Regardless of how we name the *longue durée* narrative in Knopik's novels, the striking images and critical events that the narrative depicts across a vast stretch of time show how, due to various processes of modernization and development, the local, mostly female, practices of

knowing/doing become first marginalized and then outlawed as black magic, particularly women's knowledge and praxis of healing with plants. However, already before the cave-in, they slowly start to come back to support official medical procedures, as exemplified by one of Knopik's characters, Genowefa Gwóźdź, an educated psychologist and healer, gaining practical knowledge from an ancient book, written around the time when the legendary Salvatrix lived.

The two storytellers in *Burgundowe Wdowy*—Salvatrix and Zilka—have something more in common. Both suffer from splitting headaches, feeling as if they had a third eye in the middle of their foreheads. We may interpret it as a sign of their creative insightfulness, artistic skills, and their ability to see more and better than others. It also seems to suggest that as de-centered subjects, they work under the influence of a more-than-human force of storytelling, which enables them to look at the world from the perspectives of various living entities. However, Salvatrix and Zilka alike are daughters of the coal mining region, which also invites another reading hypothesis. In her inspiring article "Seeing in the Dark," the Canadian anthropologist Rosalind Morris ingeniously reinterprets the well-known Romantic metaphor of the earth-as-book in the context of gold mining in South Africa: "The word-image of the earth-as-book might ... be understood as a projection of the great book-makers of the extractivist era, bookmaker being, in English, the term for a gambler. Speculative capital is at the origin of this story, and functions as the locus of a gaze—the condition of possibility—of a new order of visibilities."<sup>36</sup> However, like Plato's cave, the mine shaft not only has its forms of visibility but also enjoys a privileged status as a figure for the task of making things visible. Morris draws on Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, in particular his meditation on writing without seeing, when it feels like an additional eye has opened at the tip of one's finger. Importantly,

Derrida also mentions a miner's lamp as a possible prosthesis that a seer employs in such a situation. Nevertheless, Morris recalls the Derridean image of the miner wearing a headlamp only to caution her reader that at the mine, blindness results from the loss of not an eye but rather light. This light "is not the organ of receptivity but the origin and order of visibility. ... Even with a lamp, or a torch, one only sees if one knows how to look."<sup>37</sup> The last sentence seems extremely important here, especially when taking into account the agency of both the seer and the moving source of light.

As the source of light in Plato's allegory remains stable, the figure of the miner wearing a headlamp may refer to quite another order of visibility and, therefore, knowledge about the world. The headlamp not only highlights unconnected fragments of a possible whole that the seer must not so much reconstruct as invent. It also moves together with the seer, which makes the gathered knowledge dependent on the changing perspective and a particular position of the seer's body. Knowledge gained from this position cannot exist as an exclusively human construction but must be conceived of as an emergent property of life systems and environments. In other words, seeing in the dark with the help of a miner's headlamp does not mean universal, systematized knowledge of the Western episteme but rather alternative, local practices of knowing/doing. It is exactly the latter practices that I identify in my reading of Knopik's trilogy and her figure of Black City, reconnected to Underground City after the end of the world as we know it.

Considering the above, I put Knopik's trilogy in the context of Yuri Yefanov's installation *We Will Survive* at the *Landscape of an Ongoing Past* exhibition in Essen, a German city that manifestly keeps forgetting about its ongoing past, selling its skin-deep post-industrial landscapes as a tourist attraction and commodity. In this respect, Essen resembles both Yefanov's utopian city-forest and those contemporary cities where urban

designers and planners try to increase infrastructural resilience to climate instability. However, upon a closer look, a new environmental regime in urban planning and management, premised on global climate modeling, reveals a similar tendency to forget extractivist and industrial histories of oppression and dispossession for the sake of creating a homogenous planetary space. As Yusoff demonstrates, this space, under the name of the Anthropocene, holds the popular imagination and scientific discourses in an ever-tightening grip. Still, recent humanist discourses and artistic practices prove as important as the new environmental regime. For this reason, I started my argument with T. J. Demos's call to render traditions of the oppressed in the plural, which by no means has to be identified with "color blindness."

As my reading of Knopik's trilogy shows, the detrimental impacts of colonial extractivism are best captured locally, in specific entanglements of an ongoing past, present and future, particularly in Central Europe, which remains marginalized in the Anthropocene discourses. In order not to forget about this vital necessity, we must learn to identify the billion Black Anthropocenes postulated by Yusoff and at least one more type of extractivist practices and their current black ecologies—the black Anthropocene of Black City as the epitome of a local black ecology in a region of non-Western Europe that affects much more than just urban infrastructure.



Yuri Yefanov, *We will definitely talk about this after the last air raid alert stops*, 2024. Stills ©Yuri Yefanov

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- 1 Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2021), ix.
- 2 T. J. Demos, *Radical Futurisms: Ecologies of Collapse, Chronopolitics, and Justice-to-Come* (Sternberg Press, 2023), 48–9.
- 3 Demos, *Radical Futurisms*, 32.
- 4 Sheery Lee Linkton, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization: Working Class Writing About Economic Restructuring* (University of Michigan Press, 2018). To emphasize the importance of memory in the present struggle to imagine a better future, Linkton focuses on stories of American industrial workers who lost jobs in factories and mines. Thus, she demonstrates how American working-class literature reveals the impact that the long-term effects of economic restructuring and social transformation exerted on individuals and communities in the late 1970s. Mindful of that, she not only advises against being too positive that we have decisively moved ahead, leaving behind earlier industrial conditions, but also prefers the term “deindustrialization” to “post-industrialism” because the former possesses the eponymous “half-life.”
- 5 Marta Knopik, *Czarne Miasto* (Wydawnictwo Lira, 2020).
- 6 Marta Knopik, *Rok Zaćmienia* (Wydawnictwo Lira, 2021).
- 7 Marta Knopik, *Burgundowe Wdowy* (Wydawnictwo Lira, 2023).
- 8 See, for example, Juliane Tomann, *Geschichtskultur im Strukturwandel: Öffentliche Geschichte in Katowice nach 1989* (De Gruyter, 2017).

- 9 See, for example, Ashley Dawson, *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change* (Verso Books, 2017); Brian Stone, Jr., *Radical Adaptation: Transforming Cities for a Climate Changed World* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).
- 10 Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
- 11 *Landscapes of an Ongoing Past: An Exhibition in Search of Past and Future Utopias*. Curatorial Team: Alisha Raissa Danscher, Tatiana Kochubinska, Yevheniia Moliar, Britta Peters. UNESCO-Welterbe Zollverein, Essen (August 16–September 22, 2024).
- 12 Stefan Berger, Jana Golombek, and Christian Wicke, "A Post-Industrial Mindscape? The Mainstreaming and Touristification of Industrial Heritage in the Ruhr," in *Industrial Heritage and Regional Identities*, eds. Christian Wicke, Stefan Berger, and Jana Golombek (Routledge, 2018), 74.
- 13 Stefan Berger, ed., *Constructing Industrial Pasts: Heritage, Historical Culture and Identity in Regions Undergoing Structural Economic Transformation* (Berghahn Books, 2020), 296.
- 14 Stefan Berger and Jana Golombek, "Memory Culture and Identity Constructions in the Ruhr Valley in Germany," in *Constructing Industrial Pasts: Heritage, Historical Culture and Identity in Regions Undergoing Structural Economic Transformation*, ed. Stefan Berger (Berghahn Books, 2020), 203.
- 15 Berger and Golombek, "Memory Culture and Identity Constructions," 204.
- 16 Demos, *Radical Futurisms*, 76.
- 17 Andreas Fasel, "Das Gift, das aus der Tiefe kommt," *Welt*, June 17, 2024; Moritz Küpper, "Die ewigen Kosten des Steinkohlebergbaus," *Deutschlandfunk*, December 7, 2018.
- 18 See an ARTE.tv documentary titled *Polska: zapadliska w Trzebini* (2024), directed by Tom Fugmann, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyMYEnu-Sik>.
- 19 Marcin Hałaś, "Pisarka z Czarnego Miasta," *Życie Bytomskie*, December 14, 2023; Marta Tomczok, "Ballada o walących się domach," *Nowe Książki*, no. 3 (2022).
- 20 Knopik, *Czarne Miasto*, 32.
- 21 Knopik, *Rok Zaćmienia*, 320.

- 22 Bronislaw Szerszynski, "Reading and Writing the Weather," *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, nos. 2–3 (2010): 9–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409361915>.
- 23 Szerszynski, "Reading and Writing the Weather," 25.
- 24 Małgorzata Sugiera, "Cities and Their People: Dwelling in the Anthropic Time of N. K. Jemisin's New York," *Text Matters*, no. 14 (2024): 136–50, <https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.14.09>. I have also proposed a reading of Knopik's *Czarne Miasto* and *Rok Zaćmienia*, albeit in a different context of speculative cities and their more-than-humans. See Małgorzata Sugiera, "Po końcu świata: spekulatywne miasta i ich więcej niż ludzie," in *Środowiska industrialne/postindustrialne zależności (w literaturze i kulturze polskiej od XIX do XXI wieku)*, eds. Lucyna Sadzikowska, Marta Tomczok, and Paweł Tomczok (Universitas, 2023), 203–17.
- 25 Knopik, *Czarne Miasto*, 290–1.
- 26 Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, 95.
- 27 Kathryn Yusoff, *Geologic Life: Inhuman Intimacies and the Geophysics of Race* (Duke University Press, 2024), 77–8.
- 28 Yusoff, *Geologic Life*, 8.
- 29 Yusoff, *Geologic Life*.
- 30 Yusoff, *Geologic Life*, 77.
- 31 Knopik, *Czarne Miasto*, 107.
- 32 Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, 75.
- 33 Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, 107.
- 34 Knopik, *Burgundowe Wdowy*, 9.
- 35 Knopik, *Burgundowe Wdowy*, 10.
- 36 Rosalind Morris, "Seeing in the Dark," in *For Ever More Images?*, Edited by: Alexander Strecker (Onassis Foundation, 2019), 174.
- 37 Morris, "Seeing in the Dark," 176.

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