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At Home with the Weird: Dark Eco-Discourse in Tanis and Welcome to Night Vale

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Kent)**

'The future is unthinkable Because it is weird.'

Tim Morton, *Dark Ecology* (2016)

One of the most influential recent additions to critical environmental discourse has been Tim Morton's concept of 'dark ecology' (2016). Morton's anti-Romantic and non-anthropocentric approach to ecological thinking rejects the idea of Nature as something that should or could be preserved; he also rejects the idea of 'sustainability' in the conventional sense of maintaining conditions in which the status quo can continue. Instead, dark ecology foregrounds a fundamental relationality between human and non-human material, where life is always in-process (and thus cannot be preserved) and where the many ecosystems that compose 'the environment' or 'Nature' are not separate from us, but rather 'ooze uncannily around us.' In this view, contemporary ecological narratives are intimate rather than epic: 'What we end up with,' Morton writes, 'is a situation in which it becomes impossible to maintain aesthetic distance' (Morton 2013: 143). Instead we are faced with views of ecology from the inside: we inhabit the ecological as certainly as we inhabit our own environments, and they us. Our relationship with nature becomes as intimate as those with other people: strange, loving, depressing, endearing, ironic. This chapter positions the podcast as an intriguing medium for the exploration of ecological awareness of a 'darker' kind, and explores what dark ecology has in common with the emergent aesthetics of contemporary podcast narrative.

Contemporary podcasts *Tanis* (2015) and *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012) serve as case studies, to highlight what listeners and critics might interpret as dark-ecological modes of discourse: modes that embrace immanence, intimacy, paranoia, and playfulness in representing humans within broader ecological systems. *Night Vale*, created by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor in 2012, is (fictional) community radio with a twist: the town from which it is broadcast is the site of alien invasions, supernatural phenomena and dark, secret infrastructures, where 'all conspiracy theories [are] real' (Lyden 2013). *Tanis*, a younger

podcast, was created in 2015, and is more in line with the style of nonfiction investigative radio (like Sarah Koenig's *Serial*, also created in 2015), with a splash of horror, concerning mainly its host's fictional search for a mysterious entity called Tanis. Both podcasts draw heavily on the conventions of local radio, while also gesturing out to a larger, unknowable, uncanny globality that speaks particularly to the un-groundedness of the podcast medium itself. Relatively speaking, both *Tanis* and *Welcome to Night Vale* are popular and well-received, with a broad media presence and receiving more critical attention than most podcasts; this is possibly because, having notably non-anthropomorphic approaches to storytelling, they are well suited to critical posthumanist discourses, which is also the context in which they will be discussed here. To this end, we will introduce and develop the concept of the dark-ecological podcast, characterized by emergent aesthetics of uncanniness, pervasive anxiety, bodily permeability, and a complex relationship to the 'local,' all explored with dark ecology in mind. In tracing the outlines of the dark-ecological podcast, we identify resonances between contemporary podcast aesthetics and contemporary ecological philosophy, both of which seek to render a continuous dark environment, where darkness comprises the uncanny and the cute, the intimate and the strange, and unseats the human as the central focus of the text.

The Alien Everyday

In the opening monologue of the pilot episode of *Welcome to Night Vale*, listeners are greeted by a friendly local radio host, voiced by Cecil Palmer, to 'a beautiful community where the sun is hot, the moon is beautiful, and mysterious lights pass overhead while we all pretend to sleep' (2012: ep 1). The format of each episode is the same: a welcome, a catalogue of news from around town, a bit of commentary, messages from sponsors, the weather. Episodes vary in length, and arrive in medias res, with a sense that the *Welcome to Night Vale* broadcast is more or less perpetually on; occasionally it is mentioned that Cecil has not left the radio station in days. Despite being released in a numbered format, the episodes are cumulative rather than delivering an obviously sequential narrative, as if adding to a cloud of impressions of the town. In the first episode, happenings around *Night Vale* include the appearance of angels (whose existence is not officially recognized), the opening of a new dog park in which no dogs or people are allowed, and the arrival of a scientist named Carlos, who is studying peculiar seismic activity in the town. The host also provides safety tips for families taking kids to play in the 'scrublands and the sand wastes', including reassurances that the sheriff's secret police 'will keep a good eye on your kids and will hardly ever take one' (2012: ep 1).

Welcome to Night Vale deals in the everydayness of the weird and alien; while happenings in the town are for the most part unremarkable, they also include numerous calm references to the supernatural and to the evil, secret infrastructure of the town. Both of these elements have become, or perhaps always were, entirely normal for this particular town, positing a condition of accustomed weirdness as native to anyone living in Night Vale. Alongside news of bakeoffs and changing management at the radio station, we receive equally calm news of kidnappings, vaporizings, political takeovers, and communications from other dimensions.

The ambience of Night Vale is an interesting combination of ominous and intimate, illustrating an instantiation of the ‘dark-sweet’ quality that Morton uses to describe dark ecology (2016: 4). Borrowing heavily from the genres of community public radio and serial radio drama, Night Vale’s host typically maintains a tone of bureaucratic care best described as ‘public radio speak’. In episode 2, Cecil asks

Have any of our visitors seen the glowing cloud that has been moving in from the west? ... Apparently the cloud glows in a variety of colors, perhaps changing from observer to observer, although all report a low whistling when it draws near. One death has already been attributed to the glow cloud. But listen, it’s probably nothing. If we had to shut down the town for every serious event that at least one death could be attributed to, we would never have time to do anything, right? That’s what the sheriff’s secret police are saying, and I agree. (2012)

The contrast of Cecil’s extremely calm delivery, and the extraordinary content, creates a darkly humorous tension: in other words, there are always interesting adventures between the lines delivered by the most quotidian and pregnantly de-politicised of voices, that of the local newscaster. As such, the format of community radio becomes a compelling threshold device through which to receive communications from what feels like another world, comprising elements of the old and new, the podcast and terrestrial radio. More than simply serving up nostalgia, Night Vale’s community radio aesthetic leaves substantial marks on how we interpret listened-to media: a kind of precarity suffuses the crisis-laden but professional tone of talk radio, which Cecil raises to a comedic level of paranoid calm.

On one hand, there are numerous seen and unseen forces pervading and possibly endangering every aspect of human existence for those living in Night Vale, such as the hovering Glow Cloud and the Sheriff’s secret police. On the other, official institutions—for which Cecil’s community radio programme might function as a stand-in—minimize these conditions as a rule. The sheriff’s secret police, for example, will ‘hardly ever’ take your children, so don’t worry (Night Vale 2012: ep 1). But because, in this town, the alien has

always already been your neighbor, there's no real reason to be alarmed. Through a dark-ecological perspective, the town and the newscast have a flat ontological stance that welcomes nonhuman objects in the shared environment, including supernatural beings, with tenderness: 'Here's something odd,' Cecil remarks brightly in episode 2,

there is a cat hovering in the men's bathroom at the radio station here. He seems perfectly happy and healthy, but it's floating about four feet off the ground next to the sink. It doesn't seem to be able to move from its current hover spot. If you pet him, he purrs, and he'll rub on your body like a normal cat, if you get close enough.

Fortunately, because he's right by the sink, it was pretty easy to leave some water and food where he could get it. And it's nice to have a station pet. I wish it wasn't trapped in a hovering prison in the men's bathroom, but listen, no pet is perfect. It becomes perfect when you learn to accept it for what it is. And now, a message from our sponsors. (2012)

Like Morton, *Night Vale's* Cecil embraces an inclusive social milieu in which the human and nonhuman can coexist affectionately, with a cadence that is both 'dark-uncanny' and 'dark-sweet,' a 'strangeness that does not become less strange through acclimation' (Morton 2016: 5). This intimacy amplifies, as Cecil's compassion for the nonhuman cat momentarily disrupts the professional talk-radio veneer, compelling new intimacy with the listener as well: Cecil's empathy toward the cat invites the listener to feel empathy toward Cecil. Human relationships are also (sometimes awkwardly) intimate, as we find for example that Cecil has a sweet but obsessive infatuation with the visiting scientist Carlos (2012: ep 2). Cecil's infatuation features in a number of episodes; in one instance Carlos leaves a voicemail asking the presenter to use the show as a platform to let residents know that time is moving at a different rate in *Night Vale* than in the rest of the world. 'Listeners,' Cecil breathes upon revealing the content of the message, 'what do you think he's trying to tell me?' (*Night Vale* 2013, ep 16). Eventually Cecil and Carlos do begin a romantic relationship.

Night Vale relies on a dark-ecological void aesthetic, invoking wonder and portentousness, and taking advantage of the many ways in which podcasting, and radio drama before it, afford a degree of ontological looseness (Barnouw 1947: 23). Richard Hand and Mary Traynor have remarked on how 'There is a peculiar dichotomy in audio drama between its constraints and its *limitlessness*', where it has the potential to 'realise anything'; aural cues and language itself can make questionable claims, where things potentially exist, or partly exist (2011:103-5). That is, as an aural medium, the podcast is able to represent almost any

object or space without the budgetary implications of producing effects in film or television, for example, where objects must be visually present. Still, the podcast form demands producers find ways to communicate the environment without constantly describing it, which is a special challenge in itself. *Night Vale* embraces the possibilities of this as it renders a soundscape/narrative based in absence, void, or darkness itself; in other words, *Night Vale* occupies a psychological space which cannot or will not be fully known: hidden forces at work in the town, hooded figures whose faces are absent, angels who don't officially exist, the dog park which cannot be entered. Cecil's style of reportage, marked by withholdings and absences, is designed to indicate a plethora of possibilities for the listener to explore—always, of course, with a beckoning warning that 'one shouldn't'. In announcing reforms to the *Night Vale* school curriculum in episode 5, for example, we find out that 'Astronomy will now be conducting stargazing sessions only with blindfolds on every participant, in order to protect them from the existential terror of the void. Also, Pluto has been declared imaginary' (*Night Vale* 2012: ep 5). We can also read a void aesthetic into *Night Vale*'s slow pacing full of silences, unreliable narration, frequent questions posed without answers, and deletions that make no sense: 'Wednesday has been cancelled due to a scheduling error'; 'Sandro could not be reached for comment. Probably. We didn't try' (*Night Vale* 2012-13: ep 2; 5). Identifying details are vague, blurred or absent, even for public figures; there is, for instance, a frequently recurring character, disturbingly named *The Faceless Old Woman Who Secretly Lives in Your Home*, who runs for Mayor of *Night Vale* in season 2 (2015: ep 27).

Like Morton's 'dark' mode of ecologising, a void aesthetic communicates a verdancy of possibility as opposed to emptiness. Matt Tierney argues that void aesthetics, by keeping 'the future open, uncommunicated, and undetermined,' disruptive elements to flourish in the text; like Morton's dark ecology, this gives formal description to how complexity plays out in artworks, evangelizing the gaps in representation that direct the need-to-know impulse down a path that pursues paradox, and leaves space for the weird to invade. Tierney places writers like Herman Melville and William Faulkner, alongside contemporary visual and filmic art, against a broad frame of philosophy, cultural and critical theory, to show how the aesthetics of 'the void'—representing a break with both modern structure and postmodern fluidity—opens up possibilities for a truer post-politics (Tierney 2014: 10). In this sense, the deletions create a haunting and fertile space to explore uncertainty, an alluvial ontological muck in which imagination is stoked in very particular ways—for instance, when the *Night Vale Daily Journal* announces that, due to 'spiraling printing costs,' they will be replacing the print edition of the paper with a special new 'imagination edition':

Instead of confining our customers to the outdated modes of ink on paper, we are allowing them to choose the news that interests them by imagining whatever news they want. This will not only save costs, but will allow customers to experience the news as a full-color, full-motion experience, taking place in a mental world that is tailored to their needs. Subscription to this edition will be compulsory and automatic, and will cost a mere sixty dollars a month. (Night Vale 2012: ep 6)

Interestingly, the joke is not just about what has been omitted, but also the precarity of the news itself in the imminent era of post-truth and social media echo chambers; this is even more resonant when arriving as a configuration of the community forum of local radio, where the particular vulnerabilities of public radio are signaled by the characteristic, stagey concern-cum-professionalism that edges Cecil's tone when he delivers strange news, as if it is not worrying at all. Cecil becomes a delivery channel for the worrying unknown that is perpetually lurking behind the official story and which sometimes lingers literally behind him in the radio studio: there is always a larger, darker something else of which the presenter is both aware and determinedly ignorant—standing in, perhaps, for the creepiness and weirdness of the Anthropocene itself. The basic mode of ecological awareness, after all, according to Morton, 'is anxiety, the feeling that things have lost their seemingly original significance, the feeling that something creepy is happening, close to home' (2016: 129).

Cecil's public radio tone is extremely well suited to express this weirdness. This is the same strange admixture of authority and collusive empathy that garnered the success of podcast offspring of public radio. Richard Berry and others have explored how podcasters have developed an aesthetics that amplifies the intimacy of radio, playing on the closeness of the medium (listened to on mobile devices, the text often physically reverberating in your body), and using intimate forms of communication (close speech) (Berry 2006: 148). This includes and has been perhaps epitomized by the massively successful podcast *Serial* (2015), which covered the potential wrongful conviction of an American teenager; the post-public radio aesthetic was perhaps most famously exemplified by the intimate, empathetic, and notably stylized voice of *Serial's* Sarah Koenig, 'carefully crafted to convey authority but also a kind of intimacy' (Durrani et al. 2015). Podcasts come with a sense of community inbuilt, as we choose which podcasts to download based on personal interests (Berry 2016: 666). *Welcome to Night Vale* intensifies the trope by initiating the listener into a ready-made fictional community, however strange. The 'welcome' of the title functions as a sort of embedding device that runs through each episode, implicitly inviting listeners to 'join us' (and then addressing them as if they are already a part of the community). In combination

with the tone and style of presentation, this weds the listener to the weirdness of the community in a strangely effective way; Night Vale's oozy and persistent intimacy, perhaps particularly when consumed in the now-typical binge style, systematically draws the listener into the idiosyncrasies and embedded values of this particular text, and this particular town.

The Anxious Anthropocene

This ambivalent tone of intimacy with the strange and unusual is also a feature of Tanis. This is a podcast drama that adopts the investigative aesthetic of popular podcasts such as *Serial*, and applies it to the recognizable subjects of 'weird fiction': ancient conspiracies, monster cults, ambient paranoia, and ecological horror (Luckhurst, 2011). Using the first-person narration of alternately hapless and heroic everyman Nic Silver, the drama follows an ongoing investigation by a fictional radio network, *Pacific Northwest Stories*, into a set of strange phenomena in the region around Puget Sound.¹ The podcast's format and style is modeled on such popular news, educational, and current affairs shows as *WBEZ Chicago* and *NPR's This American Life*, and—like *Welcome to Night Vale*—riffs on the tensions and quirks of radio news media. The aesthetic is distinctive, however, driven by reference to the physical location of the Pacific Northwest—a location that is both real, and also a particularly potent cipher for changing global conditions. In Episode 8 Nic states that 'we're left with another indication that things up here in the Pacific Northwest are...different somehow, that something murky and mysterious could be tied to the seasonal gloom of the landscape' (2016: Ep. 108). In the opening voiceover of the first episode Nic reveals that what drew him to investigate Tanis (a space he first sees referenced in a 1960s sci-fi short story in a magazine called *Strange Worlds*) is that it is largely invisible to modern media. Indeed, the attraction of investigating the subject for Nic is precisely its void aesthetic, the verdancy of its darkness. According to Nic,

Some stories have layers, history, detailed recorded mass sightings, grainy videos, blurry photographs, and countless witnesses. Are these stories, with their multiple first-hand accounts, years, decades, and sometimes even centuries, of so-called evidence, more likely to be true? Sometimes we come across something different: a genuine mystery. Something that appears to have no recorded history, no website, and no public record at all. Something uniquely strange and mysterious. This is one of those stories. (2016: Ep. 101)

The 'darkness' of an environment that has largely escaped the attention of the 'detailed recorded mass sightings, grainy videos, blurry photographs, and countless witnesses' that

define the modern media landscape, makes it a space peculiarly suited both to the aesthetics of sound, and to a dark-ecological vision of paranoia, immanence and playfulness.

Nic is eventually joined on in his investigation by a number of individuals operating for different groups investigating the same location in the Pacific Northwest that appears to be the source of strange flora, fauna and climate events. These characters include the hacker Meerkatnip (whose deep web research, snark to Nic and his delusions, and flirtations provide much of the plot development and comedy), Cameron Ellis (a wealthy CEO of a large multinational research and mining conglomerate), The Cult of Tanis (a New Age Cthulhu cult), and a host of anthropologists, climate scientists, and historians. All of these characters represent different epistemologies and levels of technological dependence, and respond in different ways to the same Tanis-related phenomena. Additionally, the podcast incorporates references to listener mail and playing calls from the audience, which are integrated into the developing plotline, demonstrating in one sense an embeddedness of the story within a wider social and natural world. A running joke of Tanis is that people Nic whom interviews for his podcast either do not really know what a podcast is or have no idea why anyone would be interested, as we see in this exchange between Nic and one of his guests:

NIC: It's an email somebody sent me, a listener.

MILLER: Do you have a lot of listeners?

NIC: Yeah, we do.

MILLER: (incredulous) Really?

NIC: Yes! They're very engaged!

MILLER: Wow! (2016: Ep. 108)

As investigations continue, Nic is eventually led into the woodland camp of a set of rogue climate scientists known as the Grackles, who have come to believe that the phenomena they are investigating are signs of a bleeding (or oozing) between worlds. 'We sat down to eat at a long table,' Nic recounts via voiceover,

The food was fresh and delicious. While we were eating, something remarkable happened. Two deer walked right up to the table. They were fearless. They were quickly followed by two more. The Grackles fed the deer from their hands, and one of them rested its chin on my shoulder, and I fed it a bit of dandelion greens. It took the food as gently as a well-trained dog. There was something else—something that unnerved me a little. When I looked into the huge, black eyes of the deer, I saw, or rather felt like I saw, a deep, clear intelligence. I'm sure it must have been the

atmosphere and the fact that I hadn't been sleeping much lately ... (Tanis 2016: ep. 110, our emphasis)

The Grackles, inhabiting a strange, unsettling contact zone of past/present, animal/man, nature/technology, and homeliness/unheimliche, serve as a reflection on the forms of community that emerge when, rather than choosing to live with the lie of a once-perfect, prehistoric symbiosis between Man, Nature, and Technology, humans choose to embrace a more integrated ecological mode. Morton has called such a state *ecognosis*; this refers to a combination of ecological awareness and praxis, an epistemo-ontological state that rejects dreams of return to the condition of uncomplicated holism that the Western Enlightenment imaginary has frequently located in virtual Paleolithic formations such as Rousseau's 'noble savage'. Instead, Morton's *ecognosis* acknowledges how '[f]irst peoples don't live in smoothly functioning holistic harmony without anxiety; they coexist anxiously in fragile, flawed clusters among other beings such as axes and horses, rain and specters, without a father sky god or god-king. They coexist elementally.' Characterizing pre-civilization as neither simple nor sufficient, Morton argues that to respond aesthetically to the ongoing destruction of the world by human interventions during the Anthropocene, we must not pine for a 'tragically lost Paleolithic', but rather accept how the acceleration of technology has afforded new biogeophysical power over the natural world (Morton 2016: 80). At the same time, advances in technology allow us to visualize and model our ecological situations with more accurate realism, revealing forms of contingency that had always existed; in other words, the 'dark' in dark ecology is not an indication of an unenlightened state, but rather represents a rejection of Enlightenment epistemology, its relationships structured by logics of individuation and perpetual forward progress. For humanity now, as before the Enlightenment, 'home' is a precarious place without easy distinctions between human and non-human, self and other.

Tanis's Grackles illustrate a similar ethos in drawing no line of division between human consciousness, feelings, deer, and satellites. Instead, they choose to live in a climate change-driven state that is like a Mortonian endarkenment, willfully opposing the apotheosis of the human among other objects in a lived and living environment. The Grackles' world is post-apocalyptic, but it might also be a kind of darkened utopia. In describing their living spaces, Nic explains how

[t]here were other electronic devices in the area as well, including a wide variety of ancient scopes, medical equipment, brand new cameras, and high-tech antennae.

Everything appeared to be powered by a generator station The whole place had a

distinctly cobbled together feeling, ... by people who knew exactly what they were doing. It didn't look like much, but everything appeared to work. (Tanis 2016)

The contingent nature of the group's existence, the fact everything appears to function (if precariously) aligns with their approach to ecological study, which also rejects the idea of Enlightenment harmony. Instead, the Grackles coexist anxiously with other life forms 'in fragile, flawed clusters,' elementally rather than harmoniously, taking a ground-level view of both science and the so-called natural world (Morton 2016: 80). Living on the borders of conventional experience, the Grackles operate as an effective vanguard in the investigation of climate change; their ecological methods involves a determined coexistence with the implications of their conclusions: that if human life is essentially unsustainable, then hierarchical relationships between human and non-human material must be reconceptualized.

One effect that dark ecology produces is a kind of anxious attunement to the world that is not definable, in terms of a clearly recognizable and singular emotion with a locatable source. Morton remarks, 'Ecological awareness is dark, insofar as its essence is unspeakable. It is dark, insofar as illumination leads us to a greater sense of entrapment.... But it is also dark because it is weird nonsensical, yet perfectly logical, and that is funny' (Morton, 2016: 110). In dark ecology, cultivating dynamic interplay of interior and exterior, here and there, home and the *unheimlich* is a deliberate practice. As Garner and Grimshaw note in 'A Climate of Fear', there is something primal and hindbrain-driven about anxiety compared to fear; anxiety is an affect, whereas fear is an emotion; where fear has a locus, anxiety is pervasive, a general skill or way of reading the environment (2011: 36-7). Anxiety is the dominant affect of weird fiction podcasts precisely because it replaces the physically locatable sense of fear (which has a definitive object – a monster, or place to be avoided) with something that is more atmospheric and spatially diffuse. In the age of the Anthropocene, where something potentially physically distant from us (such as coral reef bleaching or foreign oil extraction) has local effects that ultimately imperil us, anxiety becomes a pervasive, omnipresent condition of being. In Tanis, such anxiety takes the shape of an entity frequently referred to as Eld Fen: an eldritch, Lovecraftian god of unknown age, shape, location, or intentions worshipped by sinister Cult of Tanis. This 'Old One', or more specifically its attendant anxious affects, exists outside of standard temporality, in parallel to civilization, and always on the edge of consciousness, as an ever-present threat raised again by the peculiarity of modern conditions.

Oozing Sonic Bodies

The format of *Tanis* works by a series of tonal shifts, reconfiguring generic traits of detective, spy or noir fiction, identified by Auerbach as including first person narration, the use of code words, and the appearance of suspicious informants (Morton, 2010). Its narrative is driven by a sense of an anxious and unwieldy interconnectedness of cosmic elements, signified for example by a literal sonic wave that Nic can hear emanating from the Pacific Northwest (the Grackles are also studying this sonic wave). This sound, what is described as a ‘hum’, is dramatized by a sonic loop that plays unnervingly on the throbbing, so-called wet bass tones in the distance of the podcast’s soundscape; these tones loop more frequently as the serial progresses. Wetness of tone is characterized in musicology by heavy distortion and delay in a soundscape, including clicks and sound-decay.² These tones occur in the background of interviews and other sections of *Tanis*, affording the overall aesthetic a distinctly wet quality. This is related in complex ways to the podcast’s dark-ecological themes, its identity as a product of the rainy Pacific North West, and its genre play between ‘weird fiction’ and noir. In the final episode of Season One, Nic enters the woods to locate the source of this hum, which seemingly only he can hear, without the aid of special equipment. Nic’s personal endarkenment (to contrast with ‘enlightenment’) as the plot develops, his sense of being more and more lost in the material cosmos, is tracked sonically by an escalating wetness of tone, signaling an awakening ecological consciousness as he spends more time in the woods of the Pacific Northwest.

Interestingly, several of the key locations of *Tanis* are described as watery. Rain is frequently heard and referenced as well, as is the sea; Nic describes the environment of Raywood, for example—a totally abandoned but ‘perfectly preserved 1980’s community’ that features in *Tanis*—as smelling ‘briny’ (although it is landlocked and surrounded by forest), and he recalls how

I left Raywood feeling like I’d stepped out of the past, but not necessarily our past, exactly. Maybe something like the ancient past of an underwater world, similar to our own, but adjacent somehow. ... I was feeling strange. (2016: Ep, 108)

Here wetness and strangeness are connected, reflecting the Mortonian argument for a pervasive ‘oozing between bodies, spaces and temporalities. Interestingly, noir is also decidedly wet, as Paul Schrader famously noted in ‘Notes on Film Noir’:

[T]here seems to be an almost Freudian attachment to water. The empty noir streets are almost always glistening with fresh evening rain (even in Los Angeles), and the rainfall tends to increase in direct proportion to the drama. Docks and piers are second only to alleyways as the most popular rendezvous points. (2003: 236)

This emphasizes how water is used to express the limits of vision, and the concept of a world so saturated with distortion as to render objectivity impossible. A Freudian quality appears in also in noir style, in the recalling of an fluidity, almost liquid sense of indistinctness between self and other that Freud saw in infants prior to the development of the ego, a feeling associated with being one with the world (Freud 2002). As we see in *Tanis*, water becomes a way of expressing both the materiality and diffusion of the body, now within the rapidly changing environment of the Anthropocene, where increasing rainfall and rising tides are rapidly altering ecosystems worldwide. For Nic, this experience is inescapable and constricting, and the distinctiveness of *Tanis*'s aesthetic hinges on this matrix of anxiety and intimacy with the alien, resulting in an increasingly oozy sense of self.

Sound affects the world of the individual in materially different ways to the sense of vision, the latter having been frequently overdetermined in Western Enlightenment epistemology and ontology. Bull and Black argue that 'the impetuses to objectify and to universalize appear to be rooted in the historical ascendancy of visual epistemologies in Western culture. Of the five senses, vision is the most 'distancing' one. In vision, subject and object 'appear' as transparent' (2003: 4). In that sense, for Bull and Black the very idea of objectivity is rooted in the primacy of vision in the Western world, with its associated elevation of a discourse of 'enlightened' rationalism. Hearing, by contrast, has a reputation for being less distancing and objectifying compared with vision, a feature amplified by the use of personal media players and headphones that deliver soundwaves directly into our heads. We do not feel vision as we feel sound; while sight relies on physical stimuli, it tends to act upon specific structures in the eyes, whereas sound has broader sensual parameters linked with touch (for example, we might feel bass tones on our skin). Nor can we close our ears, for we 'have no ear lids. We are condemned to listen' (Schafer 2009: 32). Sound permeates the body; this is exemplified by how, in the wet-tonal world of the *Tanis* soundscape, environmental, subjective, and digital soundscapes bleed into one another, as objects and subject lose their distinctions. In the concluding episode of Season One, Nic's diary, read by another character, Alex Reagan, recounts how he is unable to differentiate between the 'inside' and 'outside' of his experience when he says 'The blur is everything now. There's no point where it ends and I begin. The humming sound is constant, it never stops' (2016: Ep, 112).

Local Problems

Podcasts like *Tanis* and *Night Vale* answer a need for postmodern art forms that can represent ‘forms of incomprehensible, unspeakable existence,’ what Morton describes as *ambience*; this is art that continually shifts between pillars of stability, welcoming chaotic processes of divergence and convergence (Morton 2010: 103). As a form, the podcast has the capacity to express the permeability of the body by material, planetary forces, as well as to evoke the strangeness of being engaged in systems on every level. The listener, placed in the role of community resident listening to community radio show, or following a reality show host’s quest for information and knowledge about a strange area of the Washington woods, is subject to a deep irony inherent in her relationship to the local: the local becomes alien to itself, as global and even cosmic elements continually permeate and threaten its coherence. *Night Vale* is a podcast pretending to be radio, not an uncommon trope of digital audio drama, but one that emphasises the importance of radio relative to the fabric of community life. Radio is especially important in *Night Vale*’s particular world, where the radio news is full of between-the-lines information, and where the internet takes a noticeable back seat in the narrative. Indeed *Night Vale* is somewhat behind the times when it comes to the internet, its library’s ‘public computers for internet use ... outdated and slow’ (2012: ep 7), and beyond this internet use in *Night Vale* is heavily regulated (for example, doing internet searches concerning the dog park ‘is considered a thought crime’) (2012: ep 10). The focus on terrestrial radio then would seem to amplify the precarity of *Welcome to Night Vale* (the podcast) as dependent upon the culture and infrastructure of the internet, but within the narrative we might feel communally and locally connected to the ways in which the show signals terrestrial radio. Then again, this connection is continually disrupted by extraterrestrial content, reminding us of its non-radio-ness, its virtuality as well as its non-locality. As a *War of the Worlds* for the contemporary era, *Night Vale* is a playground for active listeners who are used to a deterritorialized world, and also with podcast culture, where the involvement of communities—local by interest if not geography—have revived a grassroots participation that (mis)uses global commercial media structures to write over the old commercial culture of things like radio: modifying, amending, expanding and recirculating in what Henry Jenkins describes as ‘convergence culture’ (Jenkins 2006: 257). The podcast performs its own vulnerability in this sense, reflexively marking its own dependence upon media ecologies that are breaking it down even as it is being made, is a source of its continued attractiveness and existence as a form.

Meanwhile, the intensity of fan commitment to these and other weird podcasts partly relies on tensions between local-global politics concerning the soundscape rendered. The

soundscape of a podcast like *Tanis*, along with the strong branding of Pacific Northwest Stories (from the indie rock soundtrack by Ashley Park that plays in the opening credits, to the references to grunge bands and persistent rain) serve to build connection to physical environments that are distant for the majority of listeners, a sort of home away from home. The effects of the high-quality acoustic layering also produces particular temporal and spatial effects, among these the capacity to overdub different subjective and objective sounds: in addition to the throbbing bass tones that are described above in *Tanis*, for example, there are also sounds taken from events that are not specifically depicted in the plot of the podcast, like police sirens that Nic remembers and reports, but which are never actually heard by the listener (*Tanis*, Season 2, 2016). There are also environmental sounds—bird calls, rustling—that are integrated with acoustic signatures that we might describe as ‘electronic’ or ‘digital’ (like synth music that signals the arrival of a returning hacker character), creating a virtual sense of connection to the environment, a mixture of organic and electronic.³

In podcasts like *Night Vale* and *Tanis*, repeated sequential narrative-elements become ritualised and fetishised by fan communities, constituting a temporary oikos- or home-ecology, placed ironically alongside locales and characters that are widely distributed in space and time. Indeed the title *Welcome to Night Vale* references the at-home and the foreign in the same stroke, indicating, by one interpretation, that you the alien are welcome; on another, that even the town’s residents are in some sense alien to it. This disturbs the very idea of what it means to be local, to be accustomed to and understand one’s environment. Instead it endorses a more flexible, always-foreign way of relating to the environment, one that is compatible with epistemologies like Homi Bhabha’s ‘third space’, where locality comprises confrontation between self and other, and asynchronous experiences of the global and national as well as the grounded; here, intimacy with the strange stranger is essential (Bhabha 1994: 312). In the 21st century there is a deepening deterritorialization as media forms become increasingly unearthed; *Tanis* itself (the amorphous thing for which the podcast is named) moves around the world at different times, and takes on different forms, sizes and meanings—standing in, perhaps, for mediated versions of home. Nic conceives *Tanis* as a cabin in the woods, a kind of temporary home that nonetheless signifies powerfully in terms of American and Canadian tropes of national culture, signalling such emotionally resonant American archetypes as *Walden Pond* and images of the frontier. At the same time, however, *Tanis* contains unlimited space and upon discovering *Tanis*, some characters become permanently lost (2016: Ep, 112). It is an object that disrupts the possibility of the local even

as it shapes it—depicting, like *Night Vale*, the illusory nature of the local in the modern era: ‘we no longer have roots,’ says Mackenzie Wark, ‘we have aeriols’ (Wark 1994: x).

The dark-ecological podcast aesthetic drives home the point that the multifarious texture of home, or locality, is itself an abstraction. Morton writes that ‘The wet stuff falling on my head in Northern California in early 2011, could have been an effect of the tsunami churning up La Niña in the Pacific’, and heavy rain ‘simply a local manifestation of some vast entity that I’m unable directly to see’ (2010: 52). This vastly interconnected way of reading the environment intensifies dark ecology’s bid to render landscape and resources as systemic, complex, and in-process, as well as variously connected to human being. It also problematizes views of the environment that make it originary (how one might mischaracterise national parklands as ‘raw nature’ for example, when in fact it has been changing and settling for many thousands of years), pristine (when in fact it includes much that is dirty and violent), or separate (when we are already breathing it, when it exists as much in our gut microbiome as it does in the protected Grand Canyon). The glow cloud which reappears numerous times in *Night Vale* is yet another expression of this local-global environmental tension, its very presence standing in for non-anthropocentrism, otherness, and possibly even climate crisis. Cecil remarks,

New call in from John Peters, the farmer? Seems the glow cloud has doubled in size ... Little League administration has announced that it will be going ahead with the game, despite the increase in size of the animal corpses being dropped [from the cloud].... The sheriff’s secret police have apparently taken to shouting questions at the glow cloud, to find out what exactly it wants Apparently the glow cloud has not answered. The glow cloud does not need to converse with us. It does not feel as we tiny humans feel. It has no need for thoughts or feelings of love. The glow cloud simply is. All hail the mighty glow cloud. All hail. And now, slaves of the cloud, the weather. (*Night Vale* 2012: ep 2)

The format of *Night Vale* forms a sort of metastable structure around which local-global tensions flow and converge; indeed the glow cloud and the town’s infrastructure literally join when the glow cloud becomes the president of *Night Vale*’s school board (2013: ep 22). Likewise Cecil’s feelings for the scientist Carlos—local—abide throughout many of the episodes, though for much of the series Carlos lives in another dimension; the cat in the floating prison of the men’s bathroom—local—is also diffuse, absent, possibly imaginary; the dark figures who haunt the dog park—local—have faces ‘containing the dark void of nonexistence’ (2012: ep 6). Locality and globality, within and much like the dark-ecological

podcast, are ambient and intentionally difficult to imagine. There is no definite background or foreground, and the local and global are constantly immanent, continually exceeding our ability to process their boundaries.

Media You Can Feel

Contemporary podcasts serve as case studies, to highlight what listeners and critics might interpret as dark-ecological modes of discourse: modes that embrace immanence, intimacy, paranoia, and playfulness in representing humans within broader ecological systems. More broadly, dark-ecological podcasts can demonstrate the ways in which sonic media forms are in alignment with other forms of discourse after climate change, and represent a compelling area for future study within what have been broadly termed the climate humanities. The dark-ecological podcast aligns with broader ontological democracies, such as speculative realism, in which a new human relationship to the world is constructed against anthropocentrism: all things are ontologically equal. As denizens of a new generation of media discourses, dark-ecological podcasts can play with tropes of the terrestrial in ways that continuously casts the local against a much vaster space including basically everything: everything that exists, everything that might not, the supernatural, other dimensions, and hyperobjects both fictional and real. The intense locality of *Night Vale*, casting it on one level as Anytown USA, is weird partly because of all these attachments to the emphatically not-local, the *unheimlich*. Similarly, *Tanis* emotionally evokes Seattle and the surrounding regions, yet its space is also, potentially, limitless and un-demarcated. (Even the titles of the respective podcasts each indicate a weird home-in-space.) Such cosmic localism becomes a means rendering of the material facts of much podcast drama itself; this is a form that relies on being born digital, yet in its cultural debt to radio is in some sense fated to play in the ontological spaces between ‘being there’ and ‘listening in’ (Wark 1994: vii).

No longer capable of the ‘man-in-space’ postmodernism of the 1980s, we are aware of ourselves now as deeply enmeshed in the processes we consume (Haraway 1991: 51) resulting art forms attempt to approach flattening ontologies: local with universal, humans with objects, quark with mountain (Morton 2013: loc. 3176). As a still-emergent form, the dark-ecological podcast posits ways of knowing that have organic, rather than administered, shapes. The remit of the dark-ecological podcast seems to include the task of exploring the alien everyday in a way that is predictably peculiar, even absurd; and it illustrates how the podcast is, for many reasons, an excellent medium for doing so. It has the expansive resources of sound with which to disrupt ontological politics and insinuate new

configurations; as a listened-to form, the podcast has a special ability to amplify ontological gaps, to bring these into our heads in as direct a way as we could hope—affectively, vibrationally—and render ‘ooze’ as a traversable sonic terrain. The podcast can enact what Morton describes as a ‘more honest ecological art’ by playing out these configurations mainly ‘in the shadowy world of irony and indifference,’ a land-/soundscape that models nuanced versions of reality contingent upon complexity and uncertainty, irony, humor and the awkwardly intimate (Morton 2010: 16-17). Situated in dark-ecological spaces, these podcasts finally resist the urge to conclude or otherwise rationalize the worlds they introduce, committed instead to uncanny indications of the limitations of form, and its default presumptions of human mastery over a nonhuman world.

¹ The ‘Tanis’ to which the title of Tanis refers is, within the podcast narrative, a real but occasionally lost location, of unstable size and shape. Interestingly, Tanis is also the name of an ancient city in the north-eastern Nile Delta of Egypt, once the parallel religion centre to Thebes, which may have some bearing on how the name is interpreted within the narrative (Tanis 2015).

² ‘Wet/Dry’ are terms derived from electric guitar reverb effects. A ‘dry’ tone is clean, clear and crisp on the ear, a ‘wet’ tone, distorted, echoey, ‘distant’ sounding. To use a Pacific Northwest example, consider the opening guitar line of Nirvana’s ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’ (dry) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTWKbfoikeg> against the opening of ‘Come As You Are’ (wet) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vabnZ9-ex7o>. For a discussion of wet and dry tones, see Jonathan Sterne, ‘Space within space: Artificial reverb and the detachable echo.’ *Grey Room* 60 (2015): 110-131. For more on the concept, see for example Jay Hodgson, *Understanding Records: A Field Guide to Recording Practice* (Bloomsbury, 2010): 95.

³ An especially rich example of this ‘digital’ or synth soundscape comes in Episode 307 of Tanis ‘God in the Machine’, which features Meerkatnip frequently.

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