
The Extinction Race: Techniques of the Human in Proust, via Houellebecq

James Dutton

The University of New South Wales

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James Dutton,

"The Extinction Race: Techniques of the Human in Proust, via Houellebecq"

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Abstract: In his article, "The Extinction Race: Techniques of the Human in Proust, via Houellebecq" James Dutton "reads" identity and race from the point of view of technics. Namely, he does so through the work of two nominally "Eurocentric" authors, Marcel Proust and Michel Houellebecq, observing how familial and racial resemblance is a living inscription of "lost time." This inscription comes about through the technical means available to and constitutive of the categories which bind them. Thus, instead of furthering unfinishable racial distinctions which only serve to support discourses of racism, this article follows assertions made in the novels of Proust and Houellebecq which read atavism as narrative—that is, all that could be reconstructed from the marks of any, or all, human history. In doing so, these texts emphasize how inscription—which comprises and "gives" all of culture, identity, and race—is bound to the interpretive futurity of reading, collapsing all sense of racial survival *and* extinction into the writing of remains.

James Dutton

The Extinction Race: Techniques of the Human in Proust, via Houellebecq

In this article, I want to "read" the technical makeup of identity and race. In doing so, I hope to view human subjectivity through a long lens (as long as I can imagine), by interpreting what the "human race" might mean without the human—that is, from the point of view of its remains. In doing so, I want to avoid the trap of post-human logic that, as Tom Cohen rightly acknowledges, "tends to re-secure a 'humanism' that was never there to begin with"—an absence typified by the "humanizing," racially-justified violence of colonialism ("Introduction" 20). My focus will therefore be upon interpreting beliefs on the subject of race through the relationship between inscription and extinction, especially in light of immediate questions regarding the human and its legacies in the so-called Anthropocene era.¹ What effect does the Anthropocene have on race, racism, and identity? What meaning do the racial exceptionalisms that feed into racist and racializing discourses have in the shadow of extinction? As Paul Gilroy notes, fixed conceptions of racialized identity emerged as "a critical element in the distinctive vocabulary used to voice the geopolitical dilemmas of the late modern age," where identity is no longer viewed as "an ongoing process of self-making and social interaction" but "instead a thing to be possessed and displayed," a warrant for exclusionary difference (*Between* 103). As immanent, corporeal reality always refuses or elides these stark, static beliefs, one can note the futility and short-sightedness of identity-based racism. Notably, the inhuman future portended by the Anthropocene hypothesis brings such futility into radical focus. In this respect, I want to argue that late-modern humanity's obsession with narratives of identity and exclusion underwrite its extinctive course: racism and extinction are equivalent, both clinging to vain exceptionalisms that serve only to underwrite their remains.

Numerous scholars have argued that the conception and development of narratives pertaining to identity and race are bound up in modernity's exclusionary logics of nationalism, parochialism, and racist distinction.² Indeed, Ellen Feder's convincing argument that "the deployment of race is primarily a function of . . . 'biopower'" (5), insofar as it is mobilized through biopolitical institutions like the nation-state, social collectives, schools, prisons, hospitals and in particular the family, demonstrates disciplinary power's role in reifying racial narratives and identities. Such biopower operates in a "prosthetic" or technical manner, where institutions entrench belief in identity: I am produced in, and *as*, my immediate racialized milieu (my parents, siblings, colleagues, coevals). This sense of social and political distinction encourages cuts between or against cultivated identities, and how these cuts take place makes up the technical basis, or technics, of race. "If the border is the oldest site of racial antagonism," Grant Farred asks, then it is in all forms of "bordering" (geopolitical, social, metaphysical, and corporeal) "that the complications of the past demand the most assiduous engagement, not at the bureaucratic centre where resolutions, both real and symbolic, are more easily available" (17). Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* famously set a marker for postcolonial discourse as anti-nationalist and resistant to "essentialist" critiques based on identifiably homologous conceptions of identity. Instead, Gilroy emphasizes how diaspora forges connectedness via a "logic of unity and differentiation" (*Black* 120), a continuous process that is always enmeshed within other political logics. In this vein, postcolonial theory has worked to critique race on the basis of always unfinished processes, like Frantz Fanon's idea of "epidermalization" (11), where colonial cultures reduce "others" to presumptions about their skin, neglecting the complex web of identifications this disseminates in every act of interpellation.³ Fanon's insights show how

¹ The extinctive force of "human," technical endeavour consists of almost innumerable relations. Not only has technological development led to unprecedented destruction of animal habitats and biospheres, but we only become aware of these extinctions *because* of technological development, as Joshua Schuster points out. "We know more than ever now about the history of life and death on the planet," he writes, "but we are still witnessing a dramatic loss of species, largely due to human causes that include expansive pesticide use, habitat destruction and over-hunting and fishing. We are becoming terribly knowledgeable about the disappearance of life as it disappears. We are making a science and a culture out of coming to terms with extinction" (97).

² Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer sum up this situation aptly: "Race is not, as the racial nationalists claim, an immediate, natural peculiarity . . . Race today is the self-assertion of the bourgeois individual, integrated into the barbaric collective" (138). On this point, see also Susan Lape's *Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy*, which provides a useful account of the particularities of this interrelation (and its genealogies), identifying the often nebulous package of beliefs and self-identifications that made up Athenian "racial identity"—one of the first of its "political" kind. Aileen Moreton-Robinson charts the indelible link between racialized categorization and colonialist possession, violence and extraction in *The White Possessive*.

³ As Kelly Oliver has shown, Fanon's writings describe how "'white' and 'black' are relative terms that refer more to social standing than to some natural skin color in itself; there is no skin color in itself . . . Whiteness and blackness

epidermalization seeks to collapse the unknowable potential of identity to apparent physical properties, but even these are *technical* beliefs, imposed inconsistently and relative to social and political contexts. In this essay, I want to employ this approach to underline the extinctive project latent in property-based, bordering distinctions of race and identity.

To make this argument, I am going to observe how a particular strand of European literature inherently resists such forms of distinct categorization by breaking down a self-evident idea of human life. Because identity is always a social or technical production, any sense of the (predominantly white, male, occidental) "Enlightenment's" mythical trope "the" human—one which survives on a history of barbarous exclusions—is inscribed in an archive, and lives on because of this inscription. Claire Colebrook saliently outlines this point: "everything that appears as a 'we', as 'techne,' as engineering, as Nature, as past and as future is the outcome of inscriptive processes that select and erase, generating what will survive and be sustained" ("Twilight" 116). And yet, this archive is being rendered increasingly fragile by the centrepiece of Enlightenment—that is, extractivist capitalism. Archival practice is thus wedded to an extinctive trajectory, one bound up in the exclusionary intent of colonialisms that seek to erase any culture's inevitable multiplicity of voices. In this respect, I want to highlight how a self-cancelling irony in the work of two authors with specifically Eurocentric reputations, Marcel Proust and Michel Houellebecq, epitomizes the tenuousness of race in the shadow of extinction. This irony nullifies any kind of racial exceptionalism these authors' "canonization" may seek to impart: their writing is not only centred upon the relationship between writing and extinction but predicated by it. Houellebecq gestures to Proust's work as being exemplary of European "high modernism," but he does so, I argue, in order to highlight this relationship. Proust's *Recherche*, a novel focused on what kind of writing may exceed death, became intermingled with this question to the point that Proust's own death became the novel's only possible conclusion. In turn, much of Houellebecq's work imagines a "post-" or "neo-" human future, and utilizes this motif to frame the inscriptive role of literature's "biodegradability" in giving (or upsetting) human ideological continuity. After the human, technics (especially textuality) dissolve into irony: its apparent meanings, identities and genealogies become mere reiterable marks. In interpreting the human from its inscribed remains—be they actual human remains in the form of tombs and memorials, our writings and languages which mark these, or our most significant *literary* work, the Anthropocene—we can ask what its life might have constituted, but also consider a future in which reading does away with the all-too-human exceptionalism typified by racism.

Proper Human Life

In setting out his convincing reading of nature as that which de-natures (*natura denaturans*), Frédéric Neyrat argues that "the Earth is a wild entity that, over billions of years, has dodged" the "absurd lassos" of human appropriations. In this regard, the Earth as denaturing nature is a metonymy that can never be reduced to "something for humanity," but instead is the becoming that passes through "the" human's various, brief, iterations (173). It is this metonymical becoming that destabilizes human properties as a dispersive, natural process. This "as" is the functional term of metonymy, but also the movement from which nature escapes human conceptions of form and property through time. Natural metonymy thus troubles, or rather interlaces, distinctions between self and other, proper and improper, and neutralizes their attempted immunization and self-closure. As Roberto Esposito outlines, it "could be said that the entire Western tradition has remained held in this antinomic turn: the strange is conceivable only in terms of its preventative dissolution," as the borders put up around the proper (*Immunitas* 172). Thus, Esposito's "immunitary paradigm," which troubles the inside of ontological distinction—the outside of identity must always be taken inside in order to forge a distinguishing background of difference—signals to the inconsistency of any attempt to appropriate nature's becoming "outside." Human technical production, even on the most fundamental level of ontological distinction, is immunized by this movement of nature. As Neyrat makes abundantly clear,

The Earth is first and foremost a *traject*, a long-term trajectory originating from out of the depths of time and destined for extinction. Far from being compact and malleable, the Earth is opaque. Much to the chagrin of the human being, it does not provide a full and clear image of itself: will humans be capable of inhabiting an Earth that withdraws from a project of integral constructability? (134)

I would like to follow this reasoning to observe categories of distinction *between* "natural" human identities as this kind of constructed, technical production—distinguished outsides that are only ever

are part of an ideology created to justify exploitation which becomes a psychological justification for one's own sense of oneself as superior" (183).

given by an immunitary *traject* that resists the distinction of ontological bordering. In this regard, defining individual identity is always a complex metonymical relation between "its" inside and outside: this contention has received significant critical coverage, which takes up the first conception of the human person from the Roman Empire onwards. Esposito describes how the Roman juridical mechanism only attributed the "full sense of the term" person to free, Roman men, initiating a complex tradition of designating personhood only *from out of* what it is not ("The Person and Human Life" 208).⁴ This shows the historical and political relativity of "personal identity": but, one could argue, what about the immanent reality of our own, natural bodily matter? Each "individual" human existence is traceable, as a kind of narrative, along a line of other embodied human histories (like metonymy). Human subjectivity, in this regard, emerges as a living archive, the remains of past lives that have occasioned its existence—and thus, in many respects "are" its existence, but cut off as the formal categories of an embodied subject. This is especially true for the trope of the body, but even if the proper formality of the bodily narrative is believed, what is the absolute origin of this form? Dispersed along family or genealogical timelines, the body itself is an inscription, a text that is endlessly re-translated by the marks of its remains.⁵ Belief in its hermetic singularity as the never-changing "site" of selfhood is exactly that—a belief, a technical production. Giorgio Agamben reads the trope of the absolute sovereign's body to emphasize this belief. "The King is dead; long live the King": this translation of identity must "above all represent the very excess of the emperor's sacred life," but as we read this logic of sovereign identity as the sense of sovereign life *in general*—that is, "the" human body—Agamben argues that this "metaphor of the political body appears no longer as the symbol of the perpetuity of *dignitas*, but rather as the absolute and inhuman character of sovereignty" (101).⁶ Each distinct, sovereign body is given by the inhuman, archival character of these metaphors.

Peter Sloterdijk's theory of "negative gynaecology" also contributes to this approach. It seeks to refigure metaphysical distancing otherwise conceived in the form of objectivity and *Vorhandenheit* through the lived-through experience of an "original inner togetherness." To avoid "bringing false daylight into the night with reifying terminologies," negative gynaecology seeks to stick as closely as possible to the uniqueness of *every Dasein*, prioritising in its approach the non-objective (or "nobjective") experience of sense before it is cut-off into identification and categorisation. All experiences of sense and being are always-already mediated, invaded and complexified by immune forms of "otherness" that constitute identity: this *a priori* intermingling of times and spaces that gives life and identity is what Sloterdijk describes as "the With," an originary state of inextricable togetherness (*Bubbles* 356). Technics are what give "us" the possibility of life before the latter has, or can, be differentiated or objectified. Sloterdijk thus advocates for philosophy to turn towards a "general immunology" of spaces and states, an advanced phenomenology that reads technics and prostheses as already interwoven *with* the production, in every infinitesimal conception, of "human life": every anthropology is already an anthropotechnics. General immunology would allow for a theorization that considers life-production as contingent, fragile, but for that reason ongoing, a *pro*-cess where identity is not bound to historical or nihilistic forms (like racist distinction) that serve only to reduce the possibility for life to develop (*Change* 449–451). Such banally objective states are to be overcome in the protentional forward movement of anthropotechnic life, where negative gynaecology identifies natal life and birth as states of such forward-movement, typified by the inevitable With-integration of immunological "alterity." Each body that adds to the passage of family identity thus remains With-in it, while at the same time destroying it (or what "it" was). Every birth keeps the family identity alive in the very process of rendering it precarious.

In this sense, the "event" of birth is one that cannot, in good faith, be segmented into a single moment. The popularity of various pro-life movements in some countries is testament to the politically difficult distinction of "singular" life.⁷ Equally, natural, genetic predispositions and resemblances

⁴ Esposito's work is exemplary on this point. See also *Categories* 151 and *Third Person* 9.

⁵ Gilroy has described how the "appeal to family" in discourses of racial unity and connectedness "should be understood as both the symptom and the signature of a neo-nationalist outlook that is best understood as a flexible essentialism" (*Black Atlantic* 99). Extending the figure of the family in discourses of race and genealogy collapses the complexity of genealogical identity into simplified, and thus politically malleable, tropes.

⁶ See also Esposito's account of this biopolitical paradigm of sovereignty that, historically, meant that the monarch's mortality "immunizes him through a separation from himself that makes his natural death the vehicle for his institutional survival." This accounts not just for monarchical sovereignty, but inscriptive sovereignty and life. In this way, "it is through death that sovereignty survives itself" (*Immunitas* 70).

⁷ See Gilbert's article "Symbiosis as the Way of Eukaryotic Life" for a biologically rigorous account of organisms as "multi-genomic consortia/teams/ecosystems," rendering "individual" life a co-originating process of symbiosis (201).

challenge the stability of a purely discrete, self-identical subject independent of any With. The immediate similarities we have to our parents and grandparents are often enhanced later in life as genetic characteristics emerge. This is a persistent theme in Proust's *Recherche*, where atavism emerges unexpectedly, unpredictably, and always unintentionally, upsetting confidence in bounded subjective identity and showing the work of time on our technical beliefs. This takes many forms in the novel—countless characters often accidentally reveal hidden links to past family histories, which allow the narrator to point out the living (bodily) inscriptions of once lost time⁸—but perhaps the most interesting example is when its narrator describes how his mother gradually *becomes* her own mother following the latter's death. He describes the uncanny presence of her "transformation": "it was no longer my mother I saw in front of me, but my grandmother" (*Sodom* 170–171). He likens the effect of this immanent atavism to the accession of titles in royal families or the nobility, in which the son comes to literally sign *as*, to take on the name of his father. In this example, one can note the *living* work of irony in writing—we know that the son is not the father, but rather a *different* version of the same. As Mark Turner points out, "kinship relations give . . . our closest metaphors for metaphor itself," producing a kind of "living anaphora: from parents to child we see repetition and variation, similarity and difference" (193). A similar version of the same inscribes its confluences *in* the living being, and in such a way allows the title to "live on," to go on being signed *as* itself.⁹

I want to assess the technicity of this "living anaphora" to draw attention to how this irony (or immunitary paradigm), a "similar difference" that we mark as identity, unconsciously sets out determining characteristics that are only ever contextually dependent. That is, the son's identity derives from his similarity to the father in all situations other than in comparison to the father, in which his identity derives from his *difference* from the father. This is most readily identified in the way Proust describes the strange paradox of familial succession, which continues while altering the precise "idea" of family resemblance or identity. For example, the fabled Guermantes family, perhaps the most prominent in the novel, possesses a profoundly immunological quality. "As an overdetermined elite," Joseph Litvak writes, "minoritized and majoritized at once, the Guermantes represent" the allure of a seemingly appropriable alterity that can never be categorized, namely because of "their status as quasi-mythological divinities, as alluring racial others" (84). The narrator is at pains to emphasize how this status emerges from the technical development (the mythology, the romance and history) of the very name "Guermantes."¹⁰ Their family identity is a mysterious, enticing narrative, one that constantly inverts itself through its epochal inscription and utterance, insofar as it is never "read" the same way. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes the importance this has for Proustian identity and its living inscription of lost time:

Family resemblance—any resemblance, in fact, including those between people and animals or objects— is a ground for invoking some version of transmigration. And while Proust describes different beings as incarnations of the same soul, he also envisions an individual's lifetime as a narrative encompassing many deaths and many unrecognizable rebirths. (*Weather* 7)

"Family resemblance" in this sense is the immanent retention of a kind of disappearance, where we can readily discern how time *preserves* what we might deem "identity" precisely by altering, or even destroying it.

Importantly, this kind of similar difference is analogous to the "writing" of the genome and of the progression of life more generally. The inscriptive, technical nature of reproduction should not be overlooked in any discussion of identity. Erin Obodiac points out that "likening the sequencing of DNA

⁸ The narrator identifies atavistic similarities between family members "with the satisfaction of a zoologist" (*Finding* 250), but he is equally careful to note that, being technical constructs, the signs of identity (be it personal or familial, if such a distinction is possible) either increasing or fading with age always "remained dependent on the spectator . . . like the presence of infusoria in a drop of water," they are "brought about less by the progress of the years than by the place on the scale occupied by the vision of the observer" (*Finding* 252).

⁹ Such "similar difference" is fundamental to Gilles Deleuze's influential reading of the *Recherche*, where identity is always made up of relations of difference that are constantly being internalized and transcended "in the direction of a more profound difference" (60).

¹⁰ The narrator details this once the name loses these qualities at the end of the novel: "This little world, in whose specific nature, defined by certain affinities which attracted to it all the great princely names of Europe and its power to keep its non-aristocratic elements at a distance, in which I thought I had found a tangible refuge for the Guermantes name, one which in the end gave it its reality, this little world, in its inner composition which I had believed was stable, had undergone profound alteration . . . A certain concatenation of aristocratic prejudices and snobberies, which had once kept at a distance anything that was not in harmony with the Guermantes name, had ceased to function" (*Finding* 265).

to a language has become a commonplace of bioinformatics and genomic discourses," and that in "[e]mploying the rhetoric of language itself . . . this biosemiotic paradigm suggests that life is regulated by 'linguistic' principles and that DNA can be understood as a bioarchive or a mnemotechnics of inscription" ("Grammatechnics and the Genome").¹¹ Proust's mirroring of family passage against the death and rebirths within *the same* self illustrates how writing and genetic inscription (like the textuality of DNA "sequences") function. Antoine Compagnon points out how it is through attention to such material manifestations of lost time that Proust directs us to what "life is made up of: letters and sounds, something that is in fact already writing, with the deeply rooted reflex of thought that makes writing ricochet into the novel" (114). Lost time is inscribed; it remains in bodies and DNA sequences, overwritten by their genetic code or family resemblances, just like novels whose writing "ricochets" in and out of them as thought. In his mother's transformative grief, Proust's narrator notes the change that genetic code has already inscribed within it—challenging the singularity of the proper subject amongst the irony of its lineage. Indeed, each genealogy has a particular singularity from which difference can be inscribed. But as is the case with all taxonomical distinction or desires to appropriate difference, the latter is the constituting force, the immunitary paradigm of distinction. Even the human, and the types of life that it categorizes, are derived from what each category is not. If the "Anthropocene" era of theory offers us anything, it may be to reconsider how life is produced by the immunology of technical production, even on the most basic ontological level. Colebrook asks:

If life is understood as that which extends itself through artifice, then we are left privileging a (predominantly) European mode of life that furthers and expands itself by co-opting and harnessing artifice for the sake of extension and self-maintenance. One becomes always other than oneself, always through an ever-renewable technology. This is the self of social life, where to be is to be an ever-flourishing individual for whom making is always self-making. It is worth noting how such a conception must rely upon and elide race. ("All Life" 11)

The immunitary sense of identity, heredity and race are given and withdrawn by artificial extension—the belief of differences, which are always technically produced.

Family Resemblance, Through Life and Death

Proust's narrator identifies this in the embodied expression of his mother's grief, which serves only to "break open the chrysalid a little sooner, to hasten the metamorphosis and the appearance of a being that we bear within us and which, but for this crisis, which misses out on the intermediate stages and covers long periods in a single bound, would only have supervened more slowly" (*Sodom* 171). The metamorphosis of the body is readily accepted, but belief in this logic should then, as the narrator is outlining here, be extended beyond the parameters of vulgar conceptions of time, even and especially when making sense of hereditary narratives. His, and indeed his mother's, perception of the latter is guided by a larger collective narrative that describes their entire family; one would find it difficult, outside of standard causal logic, to determine to whom these "familial traits" in fact *belong*. Do I "have" my mother's smile, or her mother's? Or her mother's mother's? The body, and indeed the entire belief in individuality, is this kind of temporary chrysalid. Instead, immunitary "being" deploys a deeper, natural time that we each "bear within us," one which comes to overwrite any thought of our own, or our *distinct*, existence. It is this overwriting that "in the end produces on our own features similarities that were already latent in us, and that above all arrests our more particularly individual activities" (*Sodom* 171).

If we extrapolate this artificial trope of the chrysalid,¹² we can notice the immunitary extinction of any singular subject that is borne "within us," or more stridently, an extinction we bear as the very constitution of our individuality. If our idea of the individual always comes to be overwritten by a constituting outside that was inside all along, the relative effect of each overwriting extinction is merely a question of scale. The human itself, believed in the present as a racial, atavistic or species narrative *tout court*, is one that comes about because the human must necessarily become, like the narrator's mother, its own mother (nature). The very primacy of narrative-giving "facts" is predicated by ethnic belief—and, as it takes the form of this kind of "self"-cancelling evolutionary development, it is a belief on credit. The factual reality of ethnic existence is a human-written narrative, a technical production.

¹¹ See also Vitale.

¹² Which evidently underlines the above point regarding the absolute inability to totalize an embodied self. Like other bodily "excesses" like hair, skin, teeth and the like, the chrysalid is a *constituting excess*—the body relies on it for life, only to discard it—but the chrysalid is *absolutely constituting*, insofar as the body cannot come about without it. One might think of the embryonic sac or the umbilical cord in a similar vein, which begs the question: where do these chrysalises begin and end?

As Bernard Stiegler argues, "the kernel of the fact is its technical essence; its flesh is an ethnic essence"—their symbiosis comes about because the "envelopment of the universal tendency by the diversity that appropriates it is effected by layers setting up the degrees of the fact" (*Technics* 52). I would like, here, to draw attention to the technico-ethnic corporeality—as evidenced by the metonymic overlapping that Proust's narrator believes changes his mother into her own mother—of belief and narrative tropology more generally. Belief, science, narrative, and dominant metaphysical structures are technical productions, and it is such an immunitary belief, even in the very real atavism of racial generation and the kernel of motherly, racial or *human* essence (depending on the scale) that underwrites anthropological identity.

Stiegler argues that the primary problem for anthropology is to distinguish the "factual origin of evolution." His solution is to note the "techno-logical condition of possibility of the fact" in general, interpreting the concept of a "fact," which works as "a catalyst, the act of an evolving potentiality" (*Technics* 52). I would argue that this catalysing of nature's metonymy as "facts" generates the immune sense of natural extinction as natural identification. It is merely the technical belief in identity (or the technicality of the fact "itself") that gives the entire process of ethnic or individual sensibility. Thus, the layers of appropriation that render the fact into flesh, into living belief, are the racial lineage or development of the "different" or individual properties of the human. The living death of archival overwriting that exists within these technical facts is given by the possibility of extinction as these "facts" are given individual being. It is for this reason that, in this context, Proust's narrator significantly resolves:

That we can say that death is not without its use, that the dead person continues to exercise an influence on us. They influence us more even than the living because, the true reality being set free only by the mind, being the object of a mental process, we truly know only what we are obliged to re-create by thought, what everyday life keeps hidden from us. (*Sodom* 171)

The dead, without whom there would be no "individual" human existence, exist only in the present as belief in a technical fact, given sense and form by the "dead" archive. In a perfectly natural manner, the dead go on living in the living, not simply in the mind as memory or grief, and neither only in the technical belief of the fact of their death (which is irreconcilable, for the dead can only be *believed* to be dead by the living because the living can never be made to live their death), but as the very flesh, the belief of the living that can only take its life from the inscriptive, technical essence of the dead.¹³

This is why death, and the marks that it leaves in life (or the marks that it *lives through life*, one might venture to say) is such an important theme in Proust's work. Because of its insistent revival of the dead, Proust's narrator notes that it is difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of the absence that death apparently avows.¹⁴ Proust's "narrator's mind is death-dealing when it seeks to improve upon the ageing process in humans," Malcolm Bowie suggests (288), where such working-through of what lives on *from* death emerges as technics. It is the ease with which death, and *deaths*, can be imagined or fixed into reproducible tropes that we can notice the inhuman or technical quality of tropology in general. This immunology gives the possibility of life precisely because it interweaves, while constituting, the boundaries that allow us to identify it with ready-to-hand, even unconscious, tropes. Such a "strange contradiction between survival and nothingness is, in Proust's account, a burden that minds bear away," Bowie affirms (290), precisely because the only way we can understand life and its absence is through the technics of belief—tropes, language, and narrative. Neither life, nor the death imagined within it, can never be expelled from thought or belief—this much attending to the technics of both can teach us.

Proust is quick to assert that selfhood is "intimately related to our relationship with the dead" according to Anna Elsner, because the "dead are always present within the self" (8). This "presence," flickering nascently as familial resemblance, takes identifiable form through the technical prostheses of language and narrative. In this respect, Proust's attention to it shows us how family resemblance is a

¹³ While critical of the "biological Calvinism" post-Darwinian hereditary theory can arrive at, Esposito focuses on the theory's dangerous development and misappropriation across Western Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. The determinist bent it employs is Esposito's chief historical concern, but it is interesting to note his citation of French paediatrician Eugène Alpert, author of a treatise on this subject entitled *L'hérédité morbide* (1919). "The living act," argues Alpert, "but the dead speak in them and make them what they are. Our ancestors live in us" (Alpert, cited in Esposito, *Bios* 120). Overweighing this interpretation has significant biopolitical consequences, Esposito argues—but from the perspective of inscription and the immateriality of the human, the immanence of atavism is worth noting, especially as its belief is *written*, and in that sense, directed toward an imagined future that relies on some kind of a contiguity of "similar" life to have any meaning.

¹⁴ See Dutton.

strange, technically identified, living-on of death—as marks, or inscriptions, in bodies. And it can emerge from these inscriptions in unexpected, ironical ways. Sedgwick argues that famous scenes such as the revelatory final party in *Le Temps retrouvé*, where the narrator first perceives the marks of his acquaintances' aging as some kind of grotesque joke, upturn the belief we have in a "dogged, defensive narrative stiffness of a paranoid temporality" that "takes its shape from a generational narrative that's characterized by a distinctly Oedipal regularity and repetitiveness." Proust's interest and insight, for Sedgwick, is that "generational relations don't always proceed in this lockstep" ("Paranoid" 26)—that the very embodied impression of aging is unpredictable. The generational narratives we craft to believe in racial or heritable truths are exactly that, narrative—a technical prostheses that makes belief possible—and can be easily upturned by another. As Anne Simon notes, "Proust's writing promotes an overlap between the internal and the external: the outside world is implied in the body and effaces its opacity like the sun shining on horizons indefectibly interior and exterior" (159–160). The body takes on the outside world's passing time in an immunological conjuncture: one can never be extricated from the other, but shines through precisely when we think we can tie down their separation in technical forms. In this sense, technical extinction, the apparently *total* absence of this shining-through of life from the marks that bring it, is the epitome of Proustian *Temps perdu*. And importantly, his novel's interest in the irrepressible emergence of "identity," especially where and in ways it shouldn't, suggests something more complicated, or technical, about time regained.

Proust's interest in heredity¹⁵ and nobility can be read as a result of this attention to the factual essence of *technē* as life, in all of its metonymic forms. The body does not represent the individual, nor does it appropriate the family: the technical production (the belief, the fact, the narrative) that is given by deaths through the family renders any proper imagination of form feebly inferior, indeed *inappropriate*, to supplement or represent the "family" itself. The often defiant, or arrestingly contingent, immanence of atavism is a familiar trope in the *Recherche*, often employed to demonstrate the natural metonymy of identity as *change*, not form. A typical "chrysalid" Proust uses to demonstrate this dispersive materiality is the inflections of voice that overlap across different histories, of which the *Recherche* produces many examples.¹⁶ Notably, in *La Prisonnière* the narrator is struck by the singularity of his friend Andrée's voice, which causes him to reflect upon all of the voices he has known. "I found them all different, each moulded to a language peculiar to its owner" (89); peculiar, that is, evoking a specific narrative belief in identity that is necessarily ephemeral. And yet, this peculiarity is scalar. When describing the voice of the writer Bergotte, he notes how the "idiosyncrasies of elocution which could be faintly detected in the speech of Bergotte were not peculiar to him"—rather, they were shared by his brothers and sisters. The narrator suggests that, however "personal they may be, all these human sounds are transitory, and do not outlive the beings who emit them. But that was not the case for the Bergotte family" (*Shadow* 129). Their identity disperses across the common technicity of these inflections, just as individuality is communed across language and inscription. The technical essence of voice—but also of style, and therein, the dispersive nature of narrative belief—exceeds its definitive form and is shared by these "individuals" of that same essence. It is similar difference, or a different similarity, inscribed in a literary style that can draw our attention to this prosthetic narrative that makes such a belief identifiable, and thus believable. The Bergottes' belief in "who" they are bleeds across different narratives and transmits these "faintly" detectable "idiosyncrasies" (both to the reader, and amongst themselves) as sensible, but without concrete property.

What is most interesting about using voice to demonstrate this common ancestral currency is that it takes form "in" the separate family members that enunciate it. The essential ephemerality of voice (*phonē*) lends to it a novel immateriality¹⁷ that underscores the "deep-temporal" materiality of the subject that speaks it.¹⁸ The voice, its intention and meaning are subsumed under the technically formed

¹⁵ For more on this subject, see Pauline Moret-Jankus' illustrative *Race et imaginaire biologique chez Proust*, as well as the chapter "Heredity, Homosexuality and Science" in Thody 68–84.

¹⁶ The *Recherche* depicts the unique voices of numerous characters, such as Charlus, Legrandin, Françoise, as well as the narrator's mother and grandmother, and often make them a focus of the narrator's reflections on identity. For instance, he notes that the mere passing sound of the Duchesse de Guermantes' voice evokes for him "much of the natural world around Combray" (*Guermantes* 493), or that little more than the tone of Charlus' voice can reveal his sexual disposition and histories (*Sodom* 362). On this last point, see Antoine Compagnon's reading of what he calls the "Hermant's son" trope, a man "who betrays himself by an inflection of his voice" (116–117).

¹⁷ See Patrick Ffrench's reading of the scene in the *Recherche* in which the narrator takes a telephone call from his grandmother. Ffrench argues that voice "is always in a sense the index of the absence of the other, but of an absence either really or potentially inflected by loss" (61).

¹⁸ This is, of course, a central component of Jacques Derrida's early philosophy: he argues that the "living imprint" relative to articulation is "irreducible," a "passivity [that] is also the relationship to a past, an always-already-there

"peculiarity" of the inflection or style, just as "subjectivity" takes its bodily existence from technical belief in the "fact" of a historical narrative that comes to overwrite it in the long term. The flesh of each of these subjects is transient, but its momentary appearance suggests the possibility of appropriation. It is not only the flesh of voice and subject that are imaginatively appropriated in these brief temporalizations, but also the narrative of ethnic unity that each signify. As Stiegler specifies, "[e]thnic unity is essentially momentary and in perpetual becoming; it is never acquired, since it does not itself proceed from an origin that would be shared by the people comprising the ethnic group: ethnic unity is conventional, without any other origin than a mythical one" (*Technics* 54). Ethnic unity, such as that spread across the voices of the Bergotte family, is fundamentally technical—it is a historical, human production. But, very importantly, it is at the same time the natural metonymy of life's immunology. It overlaps, like a mother's smile, and makes any precise origin impossible to determine. In noting this overlapping process of technical production, Proust perceptively directs attention to the becoming of all imagined unities and essences outside of nature. Nature only gives being in immune materiality—the prospect of matter comes only in concert with its immaterial other as its unified essence. The improper outside of the human is produced even from "its" technical, and ethnic, productions.¹⁹

Stories of Identity, Technics of Life

One of the most interesting readings of Proust's treatment of ethnic unity occurs in a fictional work, Michel Houellebecq's famed early novel *Les Particules Élémentaires*. This "fictional" context is particularly noteworthy because it takes advantage of the power (or impotence) literary inscription has to elude absolute intention and meaning—writing certifies nothing definitive about its author's beliefs. The scene in question here has Houellebecq's narrator, a sometime *lycée* French teacher named Bruno, reflecting on a passage from Proust's *Le côté de Guermantes* given to his students to analyse, right after he has narrated an especially paranoid, racist assessment of his black students. Houellebecq/Bruno directly cites Proust's passage, which refers to Mme de Marsantes, a character from the Guermantes family, the highest echelon of nobility in the *Recherche*. The extract Houellebecq cites thus refers to the "purity of [her] blood-line" (*Atomised* 231). According to Bruno, in his assessment of his students and France more generally, this side of Proust's novel "no longer bears any relationship to the world as we know it," presumably because "Proust was fundamentally European – he and Thomas Mann were the last Europeans" (*Atomised* 232). Such a hermetically "pure" Europe no longer exists in Bruno's eyes. Never mind the *inhuman* colonializing massacres that are quintessentially European, and the effects on cultural unity of globalization it brought about. The European footprint inevitably brings with it the immigration and mixing of races that Bruno here identifies as so tellingly non-"European." In point of fact, there is nothing *more European* than Bruno teaching Proust to a global mixture of French students from different racial backgrounds because Europe itself sought exploration and exploitation of global peoples, whose immunizing migration into European culture is the prostheses that allowed the creation of any kind of "Europe" in the first place. "Europe" itself, and the globe that comes into existence through its mercantilist project,²⁰ can only be made sense of as various technical (that is human, *impure*), narrative beliefs. The "purity" of bloodlines has little to do with the purity of Europe, if ever such a thing can be imagined, and certainly not without a multicultural "blood-line" that is the progressive heartbeat of European (one might more accurately say mercantile, or capitalist) identity.

"Mixed blood, no frontiers—you do not know where one nation, one race, ends and another begins." For Jacqueline Rose, this sentiment describes a way "into the heart of Proust's writing" (56). And if we look more closely at the quote of Proust's that Houellebecq cites, it becomes clear that such immunitary logic, where borders constantly intermingle in order to define them, was indeed central to his thinking. Proust's narrator notes that that Mme de Marsantes was adored, indeed, for "the purity of her blood which for several generations had flowed only with what was the greatest in the history of France." But also, importantly, this is because the nature of the "purity" or nobility of this very blood "divested her manner of anything ordinary people call 'airs and graces' and endowed her with perfect

that no reactivation of the origin could fully muster and awaken to presence" (*Of Grammatology* 71). See also *Speech and Phenomena*, 15.

¹⁹ Which, as Neyrat rightly points out, is the ontological basis of the human or technology as *given by nature*—not as "the hegemonic space of unrestrained technologies" like defined and inaccessible heredity, but from nature's "ecology of separation"—the immunitary outside in. Nature's always excessive resilience maintains "as one of its conditions the possibility of an internal or interior distance, an outside within the inside of the world itself" (127).

²⁰ See Sloterdijk's anthropotechnic theses that colonial and economic expansion in fact *creates* the modernized notion of "the globe" as such, which he develops throughout *In the World Interior of Capital* and in greater detail in *Spheres II: Globes*. This globalizing modernity, and all of the violent distinctions it exported, also is responsible for the generation of the double consciousness phenomena described in Gilroy's work.

simplicity" (*Guermantes* 248). It is *because* of the pure and *European* nature of her blood that one cannot believe her to have "airs and graces," that is, acting as though she is "above" any other person. In elevating her to a state of the highest nobility, her manner dictates that she must, for this very reason (and this is a key trope in Proust's depiction of "the nobility") never *appear* as though she is more elevated than anyone else: this becomes anything other than a calculated choice on her part, but rather the nature which her blood or her race *writes* for her, without her intelligible knowledge. The reified "purity" of European identity cannot be shown to exist. "Being a great lady means playing the great lady" (*Guermantes* 248), notes the narrator. For the *Guermantes*, indeed for all of us who believe in any narrative of identity, no distinction can ever be made between the identity and the performance of the identity; indeed, we only ever have access to the former through the latter. Mme de Marsantes' "play" is a narrative performance, a belief that seizes these noblest of *Guermantes* both from within and without and dictates "their" character, without any influence from the individual upon whom the play is performed—or subject-ed. As Stiegler hypothesizes, "since ethnic memory is external to the individual, it can evolve independently of genetic drift and is thus found to be in a sense temporal" (*Technics* 155). Is the "purity" of a bloodline genetic or ethnic? Surely the former, but it can only be enacted *in* temporal categories, and it is for this reason that the living quality of the race is external, or what Stiegler would determine as both the technical and the temporized, the trope of living belief. Mme de Marsantes *playing* the great lady is a technical production, because this is the only way her ethnic memory can be brought to life—in the mask-like, de-subjectivizing externality of techno-temporal social life. It cannot be lived as the death of archival memory, because the singularity of such an event cannot appropriate the entire multitude of divergent events that make up "the" archive we perceive, one increasingly imperiled by our belief we can master it (the Anthropocene).

Therefore, what are the properties of Europe, of its races and "pure" bloodlines, other than subjections and performances, temporalities incessantly reenacted, great ladies *playing* great ladies? Bruno asks what any of Proust's text would mean to his students, or even to himself. "I was beginning to wonder whether *I* understood what Proust meant exactly," he writes. "Here were a dozen pages about the purity of the bloodline, the nobility of genius in the context of the nobility of race, the rarefied atmosphere of great doctors... it all seemed bullshit to me" (*Atomised* 231). But what Bruno overlooks here (and one can read this as typical of Houellebecq's familiar irony) is that Proust, too, noticed that this entire topic is "bullshit"—if we understand bullshit to "mean" irony itself, the immunological With of identity. Proust, famous for preferring the conversation of maids and footmen to Dukes and Marquises, draws attention throughout his novel to the ironies and inconsistencies of the "airs and graces" of the latter and points out that the most noble characters are possessed more by their breeding and "bloodline" than even they are aware. Even if these "subjects" are like Mme de Marsantes—"always trying to make clear the various degrees of kinship involved" in relation to her interlocutors, "alluding incessantly to all the families of Europe under allegiance to the Holy Roman Empire" (*Guermantes* 248)—the elevated "spirit" of their name or family forces them to *play* at their name, humiliating themselves to the plainest simplicity. The trope of the(ir) family is mobilized in order to believe in it; its narrative reproducibility affords an active kind of irony that always eludes a fixed "truth" in any one moment. Proust purposely depicts even the Duc de *Guermantes*, who has nowhere to go but down from the summit of nobility he resides at, as more vulgar and insensate than his footmen, whose belief in his nobility renders his every behavior—even those more vulgar than they could imagine—sacrosanct. The nobility is immune to vulgarity because, as the fiction of their familial "title" assumes such social importance, they define, or enact, what is noble. Their subject or person, then, is irrelevant. The iterable title is merely transposed onto a different custodian, whose subject-defining *failures*²¹ can never be so (the nobility being immune to anything vulgar), and thus never defined. Extinction, too, enacts this translational immunity, removing the embodied subject and leaving only their inscriptions (titles, writings, remains). The most European character in this conversation then becomes the black students made "subject" of Bruno's racist tirade, who represent the apex of progressive Enlightenment immunity. Their very embodied presence in, as Europe makes possible the immunological purity of Europe's "proper" bloodline. The racist exceptionalism underwriting colonialism collapses into itself, arrogating an extinctive future in which only the possibility of a different future remains.

One might argue that the very narrative motivation for *Particules* itself is based on such an uncertainty as to the "purity" of identity, singularity, and ethnic unity—housed or dramatized within the most intimate or "self"-similar familial site. Like the *Recherche*, it is something of a ficto-autobiography, but Houellebecq differs from Proust by splitting "his" biography across the story of twin brothers—the

²¹ On failure as individuation, see Esposito (*Categories* 152, and *Third Person* 102), as well as Stiegler (*States* 33, 62).

forementioned Bruno, and his "genius" brother Michel Djerzinski, a molecular biologist sensitive to the problematic nature of technics, and whose radical work proves instrumental in developing a future neohuman race. As if to underscore, or draw ironic attention to, this split of his own life's story across two markedly different characters, Houellebecq has Michel reflect on the "purity" of his brother's identity: "Was it possible to think of Bruno as an individual? The decay of his organs was particular to him, and he would suffer his decline and death as an individual. On the other hand, his hedonistic world view and the forces that shaped his consciousness and his desire were common to an entire generation" (*Atomised* 212).

This tension between individual and social identity is typical of Houellebecq's position on the technical basis of "human" life, emphasized by this focus on constructivist individuality in *Particules*. Indeed, the end of the novel slowly reveals that its text was occasioned as an account of Michel's life and research, narrated and ostensibly "written" by a race that has, thanks to this research, superseded human life. *Particules* thus asks, or rather inscribes: would being overcome by a technical race differing, but emerging from humans, make "the human race" extinct? Houellebecq's decision to refer to his posthuman race as "neohumans" (an idea he develops in considerably more detail in a later novel, 2005's *La Possibilité d'une île*) underlines this contingency, inscribing in their name the link to the race they surpass and leave behind. But equally, it plays with the imaginative or tropological potential of such an "extinction": these neohumans are never "given" to us. As products of the literary imagination, Houellebecq's neohuman remains undefined, and the specific qualities that make them *neo*-humans—their ethnic unity or identity—emerge in and as imagination of the technical event of narrative. To do this very imagining is to begin the technical fashioning of such supersession, to open the clearing that would make our extinction possible or thinkable—a prosthetic trope as active, and technically available, as life or death.

Hence, all possibilities we have for "making" and thinking life and death are necessarily inscriptions, technical productions emergent from, but prosthetic to, the natural world. Rose notes some convincing examples as to how Proust's conception of race, nation, and identity is grounded in how he "subjects the frontier to the fluidity of natural life" (56). This fluidity, especially as it pertains to conceiving (types of) human life, typifies the border where technical identification is derived—or rather, inscribed. Making the natural world's opacity into human forms is the technics of life, identity and race that I have been describing above; importantly, this takes on a narrative form that, in its immunological excess, bleeds back over into this "natural" fluidity, precisely because of inscription's outliving "a" human life. Proust's narrator takes consistent interest in the technical, narrative productions of ethnic unity in order to note this inhuman or inscriptive nature of life's progression. In conversation with the Duchesse de Guermantes, he notes how, like the Bergottes', the ethnic unity of the "Guermantes" family is a descriptive style that possesses the Duchesse's speech. This leads him to reflect that "[n]oblemen are almost the only people who can teach you as much as peasants," because their "conversation is adorned" with their ways of life (*Guermantes* 550): like Bruno, the narrative that grafts their ethnic unity is as much constitutive of their "life" as their body, or their race. And in doing so, Proust's text sets up a recursive self-referentiality that breaks apart any sense of united and categorical identity. Its narrator notes that a "literary mind" would be "enchanted by the conversation" he inscribes here with the Duchesse, because for him it would form a "living dictionary of all those expressions that are passing out of the language by the day (Saint-Joseph neckties, children pledged to wear blue, and so on)" (*Guermantes* 551). The "literary mind" he arouses here is of course, and self-reflectively, "Proust's"—he has chosen to inscribe it here. But, as it is inscribed, and escapes from its author's control, it is also the "living" narrative of a history whose ethnic excess cannot be summarised into the simplicity of naming, as *one* inscription or direct appropriation. As André Benhaïm outlines in a consummate article on Proust's attention to race, "[f]or Proust, the greatest insult, ethically and aesthetically, is to be called a single name" (64).

This underlines the important gradation that ends the above phrase: "and so on." This literary ambiguity, inscribing a potentially infinite portal of interpretation (this "and so on" can never be completed), signifies why the narrator notes that the pleasure derived from the company of these "living dictionaries" can be a dangerous one for such literary minds. Importantly, the textual voice we read as the *Recherche* (an equally unfinished placeholder for the nebulous, indefinable transit between "Proust" and "his narrator" that the irony of these sections imposes, and literary inscription creates) here warns the writer against importing these expressions "raw into his work, which, if he does, becomes still-born and smacks of staleness" (*Guermantes* 551). Such a result is inevitable; it is precisely because these expressions *are living*—that is, that their interpretation can never be defined or finished, and that they will always materialise differently as they are read, as an extensive and unpredictable technical

production—that they possess the narrative excess of improper life.²² It is for this reason that the *name* "Saint-Joseph necktie" on its own is stale, technical and unreal, easily passed over as a fad and lost to history, but coupled with the "and so on" of the *Recherche* (that leads out and opens back into the infinity and forgettable excess of its living narrative through its readers' lives, or in "the natural world"), it too becomes part of a "living dictionary." The life that vacillates between this element of the dictionary *within* the living dictionary of the *Recherche* itself (as well as between his ironic and ironizing narrator, Proust "himself," and his readers, each in turn undecideding their way through natural and technical "distinctions"), gestures to the greater inability to distinguish *forms* of life or technics. Instead, this living dictionary *underwrites* the living materiality (that is, a materiality *without matter*²³) of inscription as narrative, and thus the reflexive movement of a nature given by its unknowable death, or extinction.

The narrative nature of this technical facticity is critical to how Proust's narrator senses the entire racial tropology of the *Guermantes* (and, perceivably, racial tropology in general). After noting the curious histories of these "expressions" and their signifying excess, he contrasts the effect of his conversations with the Duchesse to "feelings aroused . . . by the hawthorns or the taste of a *madeleine*," those generally regarded as experiences of *memoire involontaire* typical to the *Recherche*. In contrast, he finds that the "living dictionary" provided by the Duchesse's "aristocratic conversations" now "left [him] cold" (*Guermantes* 551). This is because the Duchesse offers him "stories"—narratives of excessive facticity, which overwhelm the narrator and his appropriative "belief" in the world. Like a work of literature or art, the translational effect of the "life" of these stories influences the greater immunity of his belief in and understanding of the world. They do not have the instantaneous force of an involuntary memory because, like family resemblance, the *narrative* living-on of these living dictionaries are what *provide* (like the immunological extinction which underwrites) the possibility of involuntary memory. These inscriptions are the non-living, prosthetic *whats* that sustain his status as a *who*—and for that reason interact with and over-swarm that *who*-ness, troubling its singularity.²⁴ As he reflects on these "stories," he notes that they only temporarily engage his senses, and pass over him, but not without inscribing within him a disquieting and powerful stimulation. "Entering me for a moment," he reflects, "and possessing me only physically, it was as though, being of a social, not an individual, nature, they were anxious to escape" (*Guermantes* 551). Possessing him, these narratives are themselves only possessions—their double-sided ephemerality loops through the subject and disperses it in the same *self*-cancelling movement. The experience of the excess of these narratives renders them inappropriate, and for that reason the narrator feels as though he must carry and disseminate, inscribe them somewhere else in order to make some appropriable sense of them. Rather than craft into his own totalizing form, *he* is written by the narrative, which forces him to retell it in order to craft it into his own language—even if it makes little or no sense to him. Narrative has a social and ethnic force that passes through "individuals" caught up in telling it—and yet without it, such individuals could never, technically, begin to exist.

Conclusion: Technical Extinction and Living-on

Is this not the nature of belief in general? How much do we understand of catastrophic climate change—and yet, how often do we form opinions about it? How easily read—and repeated—are its tropes? Like death, the other is principally unknowable, and yet the appropriative gesture of the human is to speak of it: expressing oneself in general is to territorialize, or make sense of, a singular language whose depth disappears into "involuntary memory," yet whose surface we exploit and appropriate as though every other language falls under the same singularity. It is for this reason that imagining death, and imagining extinction, are so *literally* consuming. In saying it we are merely interrupting the narrative or metonymy we were just saying: extinction or death cannot begin to be written because it is already, enormously, *being* written. Beliefs, be they in bodies or ethnicities, are inextricable, metonymical "parts" of an extinctive archive that cannot be broken apart into properties. This signifies the impossibility of persisting with the trope of the human race without attending to the excessive sense of its own extinction as its constituting essence.²⁵ And by interpreting the excessive narratives, or histories, which give these

²² Boris Groys notes how the only way to define, or "believe in" life in our contemporary biopolitical epoch (where life can be created or rebuilt) is through verifying narratives (56–57).

²³ See Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon."

²⁴ See Stiegler's conception of the "*who qua* living" (*Technics* 154).

²⁵ That is, extinctive of property—this archive immunizes any sense of ownership, returning "the human" to a greater affinity with nature's improper becoming, similar to the "songlines" Elizabeth Grosz describes. These songlines exemplify Australian First Nations people's relationship to the earth, "marked by possession and stewardship," not "private property." This comes about, Grosz argues, "because the earth is already directly

senses of race, and of *reasons for the human* which can never be known by a single, finite subject in totality, the beliefs which *give* the human as a subject can be shown in their futility. As an example of the impossible *individual* conception of impending extinction, Robert Markley rightly points out that the variant "time scales of climate change cannot be experienced viscerally but only imagined." For this reason, it is only ever the "measure of several generations—of one or two extended lifetimes—[that] becomes the timescale of sustainability" or action (57–58), as opposed to the full epiphylogenetic development that gives "the human" who reads such change. The trace of belief, ironically *as* inscription, I would suggest, offers the only (always excessive) other in this context.

The incompatibility of these timescales, one present in his analysis of Proust's European "bloodlines," is what makes race a constant theme for Houellebecq. It is a favoured subject of his for many reasons, but importantly, I would argue, it is because of his interest in transhumanism. In *Plateforme*, right after his narrator, Michel, sketches out a theory that all "humanity instinctively tends towards miscegenation, a generalised undifferentiated state," and describes how, for this reason, Michael Jackson should be considered the first, and greatest, "star . . . in the history of the world" (235), His radical and *singular* celebrity results from the fact that "he's neither black nor white any more, neither young nor old and, in a sense, neither man nor woman . . . having grasped the categories of everyday humanity, he has done his utmost to go beyond them" (*Plateforme* 234).²⁶ Like every sense of the human, Jackson's (non)humanity can only be described—narrated, tropologized, *believed*—as singular. It is "his," and his only. Transcending the basic "categories" of human being is how Jackson, in his very transcending *and* bodily impropriety, signifies the beyond of the human, and equally its extinction. But in shattering these everyday categories in favour of a more radical being that is perhaps *technically* human, Jackson's celebrity underwrites the imperviousness or resilience of life beyond, or without regard for, proper categories of the human. Of course, this sentiment is also fundamental to Proust's belief (echoed consistently across his novel) that identity, indeed individual deaths, are carried along with us in myriad, often conflicting forms—but it is precisely these technico-hybrid remains that make any form of personality possible. As he writes in the last few pages of the *Recherche*: "I understood that dying was not something new but quite the reverse, that since my childhood I had already died a number of times" (*Finding* 347). Such awareness is indicative of the distinctly mundane process of dying, which is the constant, immunological ground from which life can continue to go on. Proust's interest in the active "remains" of family resemblance—as ephemeral, yet coming to life unpredictably, from where one could only think they were gone forever—is mirrored in Houellebecq's attention to the purity of "human" bloodlines, which themselves resurface or unwind only through the technics we have to measure them.

The miscegenation Houellebecq refers to is one that cannot be contained into properly individual, racial, or human categories. Bruno's reading of the "extinction" of European "nobility" is testament to this. The narrative of any "extinction" can never be fully appropriated; it is excessive, and as such traces, be they genetic or inscriptive, continue to live, grow, and challenge exactly that apparently certain *reading* of an extinction that in *fact* never occurred. The proper and bodily categories imposed by human technical knowledge are transcended by the transversal force of life in itself. As Colebrook argues, we only ever imagine the human race as readable, "signaling *that* there was a species event." But this readability is always-already an outside on an extinctive trajectory: "although it emerges from the proximity of humans, coming into being in order to inscribe, convey and sustain technologies, [it] comes to the fore only if we imagine being read by something other than human" ("Sex" 47). Even as the human race in its entirety *becomes* extinct, of which Michael Jackson, Saint-Joseph neckties, or fictional narratives provide unknowable or inappropriate examples, the inability to formalize or finalize it renders extinction necessarily given by, and *as* the immunitary, technical definition of life itself. Cary Wolfe suggests that our increasing need to acknowledge extinction links all forms of life in mutual finitude—this is "not simply a matter of our shared finitude as mortal beings who live and die, [but] more radically, the *finitude of our finitude*, its non-appropriability" (68). The shared sense of complete environmental extinction disqualifies the distinction of an extinction "proper" to any species. Life cannot be made extinct by the human, only the technical belief in the human can—and the examples, the myths already given to the human, demonstrate that this extinction applies only to its taxonomies, its *technē*,

inscribed contrapuntally in the body" generating territorializing "songlines . . . that cut through and inscribe both the earth and the bodies that abide there" (40). The inscriptive relation between earth and body in these cultures radicalizes an Occidental sense of "writing," but signifies inscription's naturalizing "archive."

²⁶ Sylvia Martin suggests that Jackson's identity was in fact always more complicated than these definitive categories. Jackson's celebrity relied on a fusion of cultural iconographies in his music, and his racial identity, deriving "from the African diaspora's forced migration . . . thus was always already transnational" (284–85).

and its arts—while at the same time being the very groundless ground of their possibility. Such a destiny is difficult to believe in, but it is the only one that, and always has, remains.

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Author's profile: James Dutton is a casual lecturer and tutor at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. His first book, *Proust Between Deleuze and Derrida: The Remains of Literature*, was published by Edinburgh University Press in 2022, and his essays have appeared in journals such as *SubStance*, *Angelaki*, *Paragraph* and *Symplokē*. E-mail: <j.dutton@unsw.edu.au>