Cross Cultural Studies Review

A journal for comparative studies
of culture, literature, and the arts

Reviews

Luis Prádanos.
Postgrowth Imaginaries: New Ecologies and Counterhegemonic Culture in Post-2008 Spain.

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Postgrowth Imaginaries is the first monograph published by dr. Luis Iñaki Prádanos-Garcia, Associate Professor of Spanish and Portuguese Studies at the University of Miami. Prádanos regularly writes in scholarly and media outlets on the subjects of degrowth, postgrowth, and associated posthumanist and decolonial pedagogies in the Anthropocene. This monograph synthesizes and develops on some of the ideas presented in his earlier scholarly pieces.

The book is best placed in green cultural studies' as it is methodologically grounded in environmental cultural studies on the one hand, and in the degrowth theory on the other. These two pillars intertwine in inspecting Spanish contemporary narratives, movements and art practices since the onset of the economic crisis (2008) and austerity measures greatly felt in the Iberian Peninsula. The cultural manifestations discussed in the book encompass fiction and nonfiction writing, films, TV shows, social movements, art collectives and practices, newspaper articles, graffiti, as well as comic books and cartoons.

The layered interrelations of economic paradigm, cultural practices, and ecological degradation are presented clearly at local, national, and global scales, while Prádanos develops his arguments affectively, directly and boldly. Though this writing style is refreshing in the context of the wider academic field, the so-called academic activism is less uncommon in environmental humanities, especially green cultural studies or ecolinguistics.

On the whole, *Postgrowth Imaginaries* is an accomplished and provocative book which traverses the diverse fields of the humanities, political

science, and economics while its writing remains accessible and easy to follow. This advantageous characteristic reminiscent of (good) environmental journalism enables novice readers to fully grasp the premises and arguments that the author makes (despite Prádanos using a wide breath of English and Spanish language bibliography), though some academics might find the book's directness or slight repetitiveness less appealing. However, *Postgrowth Imaginaries* is in for a radical critique of the status quo imaginary, in order to be able to imagine, narrate and manifest a more equitable, ecological worldview. Prádanos both critiques the hegemonic growth-oriented socioecological logic, neoliberal economics and politics, and presents and analyses the emergent and developing postgrowth imaginaries - so as to ultimately aid their further development. Not shying away from explicitly political implications of his work, when speaking about growth ideology, the anthropological machine (Agamben), or the metabolic rift (Marx), for example, he uses conceptual metaphors of dis-ease, cancerous growth and lunacy (To continue to maintain that the pursuit of economic growth is the main objective of societies is not only unethical, but suicidal').

The first part of the book (Spanish Culture and Postgrowth Economics) is data-rich on Spain's biocapacity status and its unsustainable socioeconomic policies, but here the author mostly lays out the basic premises of his argument. First, that degrowth is inevitable since in a finite biosphere there cannot be constant economic growth. Our present and future socio-political context, though, he claims, will shape the kind of post-growth society (or, societies) that will emerge. Second, he argues that the economic crisis is foremost a crisis of imagination, since neoliberal ideology either deletes or co-opts authentically alternative imaginaries. Still, at the margins of the dominant paradigm alternative imaginaries do emerge - such as the *indignados* movement, street art or permaculture design collectives that he analyses.

In using the term imaginary', he follows the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis' notion of imaginary social significations', which Prádanos sees as complimentary to Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Imaginaries have deep material and semiotic consequences as social realities are constructed according to pervasive dominant conceptions and postulates about humans and their relations to each other and the world' (11). The dominant neoliberal social imaginary thus reduces social reality to the sum of competitive, atomised individuals focused on profits, side-lining alternative conceptualizations of people and their relationships to each other and the environment.

Readers novel to ideas of the Anthropocene, humanities' students in general, and in particular those interested in ecocriticism, will benefit from the first and introductory chapter which transverse the ideas of key

humanities' thinkers such as Agamben and Foucault, and earth systems science like Rockström, also providing an introduction to Spanish ecocriticism and the ecological humanities. Prádanos' ecocritical approach is transdisciplinary in theory and practice, and informed by post(neo) colonial theory, the environmental justice movement, new materialism (especially material ecocriticism and ecofeminism) and posthumanism. Such a methodological stance works at breaching the epistemological limitations of the humanities', trying to decolonize the imaginary', and bringing forward new socioecological imaginaries that counter the slow violence' (Nixon) and cruel optimism' (Berlant) of neoliberal ideology.

In discussion of degrowth and slow movements, the author also develops the argument that the Global South and the Mediterranean are regions in which a particular form of ecocriticism is (to be) practised and further developed, based on comparable experiences in a dynamic with the economically more powerful North. This contribution (and call) is an important step towards diversification of ecocritical voices, since those from Southern Europe and global South have yet in larger numbers to join the scene currently dominated by British and North American perspectives (with ecocriticism developing more steadily in Italy, Germany and Scandinavian countries).

In part two, Iberian urban ecologies are examined in relation to ideas of peak oil, petro-modernity, and crucially, to the idea of metabolic rift between ever-intensifying capitalist urbanization and the planet's limited biocapacity. In other words, cities' destructive linear metabolism (Petropolis) is critiqued and a new imaginary is envisioned, based on circular, zero-waste regenerative principles (Ecopolis). The transition is inspected through four (possibly overlapping) categories of narratives and cultural manifestations such as documentary and experimental films, novels, graffiti, cartoons, etc. First, the contemporary crisis of the city as a waste and precarity producing growth machine is discussed in films focusing on the agentive production and erasure of collective spaces and communities (be it by persons or objects such as cars and roads), the quality of spaces and communities they enable/disable (pathological or convivial), and the transgression of hegemonic urban-rural dichotomy. Second, post-petroleum narratives are discussed in SF novels. Montero's *El peso del corazon* (2011) as cybernetic thriller betrays difficulty of the dystopian genre to envision postgrowth imaginary in an politically emancipatory sense, while, argues Prádanos, Moreno's *Por si se va la luz* (2013) more successfully fulfils the role. Further, the author looks at past and present effects of agro-industry and tourism on working-class communities, and on those escaping the city in neo-ruralist narratives. He is however, unconvinced that that such folk politics' has a political force, since it remains isolated, insufficient and timid' against global

challenges and national co-optation, an opinion he somewhat shares with U. Heise, the proponent of eco-cosmopolitanism. Lastly, the fourth category portrays the Ecopolis and the practices towards it, as diverse as Madrid's guerrilla gardening movement, the launch of 15/15/15 journal, and transition stories' featured in *Tapas se un futuro pospetroleo* (2015) collection. In this chapter, Prádanos skilfully combines philosophical and ethical analysis of the narratives' imaginary with analysis of their stylistic and rhetorical features, as well as their media context and audiences. His analyses are exemplary for green cultural studies scholars aiming to inspect postgrowth imaginaries in their own national context.

Part three (Waste, Disaster, Refugees, and Nonhuman Agency) comprises two chapters. Chapter 3 features a material ecocritical approach (following on object oriented ontology by B. Latour, J. Bennett, and T. Morton, among others) on cultural manifestations (such as murals, fiction, cartoons, art collectives, films) that focus on trash and waste. Prádanos argues against the aestheticization and monetization of trash in eco-design or industrial use since this reform environmentalism keeps the dream of constant growth alive by implying that a few technological fixes and changes in management can solve the problem without addressing its structural and epistemological causes' (167). Instead, he argues for a political ecology of waste' which exposes the network of consumerism, socioecological issues and the proliferation of waste. Such an approach ultimately reveals that a waste producing system inevitably treats some humans (the poor, refugees) as disposable too. Chapter 4 inspects the limits of the catastrophe genre for espousing alternative political imaginaries (similar to Chapter 2). Sensationalist apocalyptic narratives which deal with extreme environmental events and feature heroic individuals mask the slow and widespread structural violence, Prádanos shows, especially in his reading of the popular English-language film *The Impossible* and TV series *El Barco*. Analysing emergent postgrowth ideas and their ideational antagonists in chapters 2-4, Prádanos jointly discusses literary/artistic texts and their contemporary scholarly interpretations, which is a valuable critical contribution of this book since the latter often remain inside the hegemonic frame.

As noted, this book works towards transcending the epistemological limitations of the humanities and the division of human and natural history to academically (and practically) engage with the issues we face in the Anthropocene. One of its take-home conclusions is that depicting and creating desirable postgrowth societies is (more, or more successfully) counterhegemonic than only critiquing the socio-political status quo. The films, novels, photographs and other cultural manifestations such as communal, art, and intellectual practices he inspects show that such postgrowth imaginaries are being developed/imagined in Spain. Those

emerging imaginaries are, as ecological and postgrowth, also decolonial, (eco)feminist, and postcapitalist, all paradigms that the author seconds. In general, the term postgrowth imaginaries' and the methodological apparatus applied in this book could prove useful to cultural studies, ecocriticism and environmental humanities scholars interested in the topics examined in this book.

Lastly, Prádanos is not alone calling for a new (socio-political and ecological) imaginary in/for the Anthropocene. Similar ideas have recently been voiced by, among others, the British journalist and author G. Monbiot (a new regenerative story'), the ecolinguist A. Stibbe (*Ecolinguistics. Language, Ecology, and the Stories We Live By*, 2015), and - most recently and mostly in line with Prádanos' work - by the economist K. Raworth. She portrays a new economic story' in *Doughnut Economics. Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist*, (2019), a book that could indeed be read as an accompaniment to *Postgrowth Imaginaries* (or vice versa), since Raworth tackles issues around (de)growth policies that could not be inspected in depth in *Postgrowth Imaginaries*. For example, while Prádanos as a cultural critic unflinchingly starts from the assumption that, paraphrasing Raworth, growth is no longer (ecologically) possible, so that it cannot be necessary, Raworth in comparison with due consideration inspects the other (hegemonic) position: that it is still (socially) necessary, so that it must be possible. Opting for a growth agnostic position herself, Raworth paints a picture of an economy that makes us thrive, whether or not it grows'. Degrowth advocates, she shows, have more difficulty tackling global inequality or possible distributional conflicts, though her optimistic vision is more in line with Prádanos' aspirations. However, exactly where the economist's argument stops is where the work of the cultural critic starts: in discerning and inspecting emergent cultural imaginations of postgrowth societies - as we need to first imagine it to be able to think and work towards it. In that way, *Postgrowth Imaginaries* fills a gap not only in ecocritical Spanish and Iberian Studies, but in ecological cultural studies at large.

Han Kang
The Vegetarian

Trans. Deborah Smith. Portabello Books, 2015.
ISBN 978-1101906118. 208 pages. € 15.00.

Okja. Dir. Bong Joon-ho.

Plan B Entertainment - Lewis Pictures - Kate Street Picture
Company, 2017. Netflix, 2017. 120 minutes.

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Jacques Derrida's concept 'carno-phallogocentrism" deconstructs the function of eating meat in the creation of human subjectivity. Extending his classic reading of 'phallogocentricism," which critiques those structures and stylistics of language that reinforce traditional male dominance, *carno*-phallogocentrism conceptualizes the subject as created in relation to an ongoing differentiation of the human and 'the animal" (the lexeme that compresses the planet's entire non-human creaturely life into an antonym for man).[1] *Carnophallogocentrism* identifies how eating animals is a principle mechanism for sustaining human identity. The tribe gathers around the alterity of the animal, asserting domination and group identity; they consume its otherness in order to affirm social cohesion. Meat functions as a primal cultural object in the creation of the subject.

Eating Animals. Derrida's concept is revisited in two recent South Korean narratives: Han Kang's 2016 International Man Booker winning novel, *The Vegetarian (2007, English translation 2015), and Bong Joon-ho's action-adventure movie Okja (2017). In Han's novel, the eponymous* vegetarianism of *protagonist* Yeong-hye transforms her into an object of fascination in the eyes of the other characters. The novel is organized into three sections that are narrated, successively, by her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister – rendering Yeong-hye a mostly voiceless object of their regard. Like Herman Melville's Bartleby, her character is pivoted on her pithy refusal

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1   Derrida, Jacques. 1991. 'Eating Well'; or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida." *Who Comes After the Subject?* Eds. E. Cadava, P. Connor and J.-L. Nancy. New York and London: Routledge. 112-3.

of social norms. "I won't eat it" she states of a dinner with her husband's business associates, "I don't eat meat" (Han 2015, 22). Though the other characters cannot stop looking at her and thinking about her, and it is their ceaseless regard about which the novel is structured, it is nevertheless her gaze that is felt as unendurable. Mr. Cheong, her husband, rushes to explain his wife's diet with a concocted story of gastroenteritis, which elicits a degree of relief among the guests. It is okay not to eat animals for pragmatic reasons – but her ethical and affective rejection of meat compromises the eating community that affirms its own unity via meat.

The betrayal of the shared communal values of contemporary middle-class Seoul is felt most acutely by the patriarchs of her life, Yeong-hye's father and her husband, Mr. Cheong. At a family meal Yeong-hye's refusal comes to a head. Furious at her intransigency, her father forces meat between her clenched teeth, which provokes her to cut herself with a knife. In this moment of breakdown, Yeong-hye's minimal resistance to food normativity exposes the proximity of human and animal flesh. For her brother-in-law, her fear is animalistic, and her violated body resembles meat. In deceptively casual similes, Han presents the decomposition of Yeong-hye's humanity – which will lead in the later sections of the novel to her fantasies of becoming vegetal, and ultimately to her death. Her vegetarianism unleashes an identity ambiguity that, in the context of her rigid eating community, becomes unsustainable – as well as unendurable to her carnophallogocentric guardians. Of the carnophallogocentric normativity mechanism that she rejects, Mr. Cheong warns his wife: "Stop eating meat, and the world will devour you whole!" (Han 2015, 48).

The capitalization of this mechanism is more directly represented and opposed in Bong Joon-ho's *Okja*, released by Netflix direct to their online streaming platform. Okja is a genetically modified super pig developed by the sinister industrial meat manufacturer Mirando Corporation, headed by Lucy Mirando (Tilda Swinton). As publicity for their new meat, the Mirando Corporation send their super pigs around the world, to be cared for in traditional farming situations. For ten years Okja lives in rural South Korea, cared for by a young girl, Mija (Ahn Seo-hyun), and her grandfather. Despite her size, the computer generated Okja has an amiable lovability, somewhat resembling the hybrid of a hippopotamus and Studio Ghibli's Totoro, from Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988). Likewise, tonally the idyllic first scenes of Mija and Okja's friendship in the rolling hills of South Korea echo the fantasy relation of young Japanese girls Satsuki and Mei with Totoro in Miyazaki's now classic depiction of childhood innocence.

Yet innocence is all-too-brief in *Okja*. From its pastoral opening, the movie undergoes a postmodern series of genre transmutations. The movie centres on the attempts of the Mirando Corporation to recall Okja to the

U.S., opposed by idealistic members of the Animal Liberation Front. This results in series of high-speed action urban pursuit sequences through Seoul transportation networks and underground shopping centres. The return to the U.S. leads to ever-darker turns in the movie's tone, first to a series of sadistic tests performed by creepy, khaki short suit wearing TV zoologist Dr. Johnny (Jake Gyllenhaal), and later to a slaughterhouse sequence seen from Mija's eyes that is perhaps the most detailed and emotive description of industrial meat production thus far rendered in mainstream cinema: the vast scale of the mournful holding yard; the reluctant process of the super pigs coaxed by electroprod up the ramp; Hispanic workers squeegeeing floors pooling with blood; carcasses suspended by chains, hewn by industrial saws, partitioned into cellophane wrappers; the bolt gun and the knocking box. Charting the end of innocence, the film's deceptive family-friendly opening gives way to stark industrial violence, perhaps seeking to jolt its adult audience from complacency – and rendering it unsuitable for children. Coming after Okja's characterization in the mode of pastoral innocence, the jarring shift to horror involves an uncannily aslant depiction of meat production: Totoro in the slaughterhouse.

New Korean vegan aesthetic. What Han and Bong share is the flipped view of carnophallogocentricism that they envision, each focusing on the uncanny flesh that is produced and obscured by the conventional socio-cultural function of meat. Rather than Derrida's top-down vision of social structures directing thought via symbolic imperatives, these works foreground the material fact of bodies processed into meat. This makes the new Korean vegan aesthetic an innovative revisioning of the uncanny. The uncanny, Freud theorizes, involves a flash of recognition that proceeds from the discomfiting familiarity of a strange object or affect, to a more deeply weird awareness of the strangeness of the familiar.[2] Uncanniness uncovers the otherness of the body to the self it incarnates. If Han's and Bong's narratives uncannily erode the repressive cultural structures that manage the interrelation of body, subjectivity and meat, yet their texts might seem to push beyond the closed loop of Freud's self-identifying strangeness. For Freud, the uncanny would evade politics, always circling back to the subject's unacknowledged self-knowing – and as such might be seen to short-circuit questions of the ecological catastrophes in which anthropocentric influence is currently rendering world systems unlike themselves. Unlike Freud, Han and Bong refuse to limits their texts to the human in this way. Developing cross-species kinships,

2   Freud, Sigmund. 1955. "The Uncanny." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth. 217-256.

as Donna Haraway has recently theorized, is a vital task in the era of eco-logical catastrophe.[3] For Laura Wright, the emergent field of Vegan Studies likewise explores how the oppressions suffered by nonhuman animals, subaltern populations, minorities, the poor and the powerless are 'linked, intersectional and codependently reinforcing.'[4] For Aph and Syl Ko, the praxis and theory of Black Veganism targets systematic structural links between racism and animal exploitation, exploring the function of 'the animal" as a 'violence producing category.'[5] Han's and Bong's aesthetics should be considered part of this emergent intersectionality. Politicizing uncanniness, the new South Korean vegan aesthetic reveals the violence of meat, and the otherness of the flesh-most-deeply-known, as an open-ing upon a ground where kinships might be forged with other lifeforms.

3   Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 99-103.

4   Wright, Laura. 2015. *The Vegan Studies Project. Food, Animals and Gender in the Age of Terror.* Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press. 15.

5   Ko, Aph and Syl. 2017. *Aphro-ism. Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters.* New York: Lantern Books. 46.

Clemens Apprich, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Florian Cramer and Hito Steyerl. *Pattern Discrimination.*

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Pattern Discrimination is a collection of four essays centered on the role algorithms play in creating and maintaining prejudice. The book is published by Meson Press in conjunction with the University of Minnesota Press. It is part of the *In Search of Media* series, which focuses on different key words in media practice, and includes other titles such as *Machine* and *Markets.* Each book in the series is co-authored by two to four contemporary thinkers or practitioners. This structure is meant to pair scholars from different continents in order to cross the ˈten-year gap" that is said to exist between the production and reception of work in different languages. Thus their structure locates them within the field of cross-cultural studies. All books are available in print and as open-access PDFs, available on the publisher's website.

    The book develops the scholarly discourse around the roles algorithms have in creating and shaping oppression. This discourse includes Cathy O'Neil's *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016), which examines the ways vital numbers to our lives are calculated such as credit scores, Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018), which uncovers the way racism is programmed into algorithms such as search engines, and Caroline Criado-Perez's *Invisible Women* (2019), which specifically deals with the sexism found in data collection and use in such fields as health, snow removal, and public restroom design. However, *Pattern Discrimination* holds a distinct place in this field for two reasons. First, it is more general, meaning more theoretical, in its approach. Thus it allows much more space for exploring problems leading to the creation of discrimination in algorithms, as well as the damage they cause. On the other hand, it is more specific in how it often leans toward artistic examples of discrimination, as well as using art to develop possible ways forward.

    One key concept running through all the essays in the book is Klaus

Conrad's apophenia, or the way unrelated data is believed to be connected. As artist and theoretician Hito Steyerl puts it in her contribution, apophenia can be found when 'narrative breaks down and causality has to be recognized – or invented – across a cacophony of spam, spin, fake, and gadget chatter." There is too much information, and many of the tools for creating patterns out of it are problematic.

For example, information technology consulting company Booz Allen reports on a case of apophenia found in a luxury hotel chain. Data showed that a group of 17 wealthy teenagers from the Middle East often stayed at the hotels. However, the data was considered 'dirty," or useless, because it did not conform to the worldview of the analysts: 'Brown teenagers, in this worldview, are likely to exist. Dead brown teenagers? Also highly probable. But rich brown teenagers? This is so improbable that they must be dirty data and cleansed from the system!" Steyerl's use of the term 'worldview" here is not accidental. It has a meaning both in cultural studies and in the way algorithms work. As Peli Grietzer shows in his PhD dissertation *Mood, Vibe, System* (2017), worldview is similar to the 'feature function" of autoencoder algorithms (algorithms that 'learn," such as neural networks). The feature function denotes the values that an algorithm can process for *x.* In the example above, when *x* = valued hotel customer, one of the feature values for *x* was brown teenagers, but *rich* brown teachers was not. Thus actual hotel patrons became dirty data that did not fit into the worldview of the analysists. Rich brown teenagers simply could not be customers. They were not an available input. Thus they were invisible, and another explanation was needed. This is an example of apophenia.

Artistic reactions to the growing importance of data discrimination have a fairly deep history. In the *Counting Songs* performance from 1962, Fluxus artist Emmett Williams (and his collaborators) would stand on stage and assign a number to each audience member. Although this piece has been seen as an early example of performance art, Florian Cramer argues that 'As data processing, the piece thus contains the hierarchy of programmer, program, and data while selling the same illusion of participation and interaction with which 'interactive systems,' from computer games to social networking platforms, are being sold today." Participating in social media, file sharing, and smartphone use in general is actually just a game to generate valuable data for the likes of Facebook and Alphabet. The control that data processing has over us has been seen in recent examples of Google image searches labeling black people as gorillas and Nikon cameras misreading Asians as blinking and trying to correct for this (similar to how Jean-Luc Godard boycotted Kodak because their film stock was tuned to pick up white skin). In one way, data collection is pervasive: we participate in it even when we are not aware. This was reflected in the German punk band Abwärt's song

"Computerstaat" (Computer State) from 1980. The song which ends with a sample of Horst Herold, head of the Federal Criminal Police, warning Baader-Meinhof members that they will never escape, saying that *wir kreigen sie alle*" (we'll get them all). On the other hand, the worldview of data collectors and processors almost ensures that subjects will be ignored, manipulated, and oppressed.

Another term than can be coopted to describe the damage of pattern discrimination is "homophily." In her essay "Queerying Homophily," Wendy Hui Kyong Chun looks at the way that network science is often based on the idea that "similarity breeds connection," meaning that users are groups into "neighborhoods" according to their likes and dislikes. For example, "underlying Asian' homophily are tendencies of South Asians to befriend South Asians; Chinese other Chinese, et cetera." This has profound implications for predictive technologies such as COMPAS, a software package widely used in US courts to determine whether a person is likely to become a repeat offender in the future. One problem with such tools is that they are based on the idea of "no neighbors without common cultural traits." Therefore, ethnic differences, for example, do not need to be directly tracked, since such features are already included in "less crude" categories, such as "industriousness, reliability, homicidal tendencies," and so on. Once someone is placed in a neighborhood with others who have shown criminal tendencies, US courts will predict that you will show them too, and it will act on those predictions.

This double-tug between all-encompassing data collection and pattern misrecognition leads to a state of paranoia. On the one hand this state arises from apophenia, meaning that there is too much data to parse, so any connection becomes a good connection. Paranoia, in the words of Clemens Apprich, is the "overproduction of meaning" that has turned into a contemporary form of hermeneutics. On the one hand there is a demand to sift the truth from the fake news. But maybe we are beyond that point. Fake bots, fake tweets, fake likes, and fake porn are no longer the exception, but the rule. Perhaps we should, as Steyerl put elsewhere, let this spam of the earth count for our representation so that we can go along with our daily lives, letting the fake exist as our data, in our place. So we need to learn to live in this world of paranoia, rather than change it back to a mythical set of truths that it never was. Pattern discrimination is here to stay. It should be understood, challenged, and changed. But it also needs to be lived with. For it is demanding new forms of life.