



Gnomes, Gnature, and the “Gnifty Gnomobile”: Elemental Spirits, Deforestation and Energy Systems in Transition in Upton Sinclair’s *The Gnomobile*

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Abstract

Upton Sinclair’s only children’s book, *The Gnomobile: A Gnice Gnew Gnarrative with Gnonsense, but Gnothing Gnaughty* (1936), follows the adventures of a 12-year-old girl, Elizabeth, her young uncle Rodney, and their encounter with the last two Gnomes (Bobo, and his grandfather Glogo) of the Californian redwoods. The Gnomes and their kin are victims of the lumber business and deforestation which, ironically, is the source of the wealth of Rodney and Elizabeth’s family. The four set off in Rodney’s car, now dubbed the “Gnomobile”, in a quest to locate any other surviving Gnome communities in remaining forests across the entire country. This fast-paced novel brings together elements of “little people” folklore, children’s environmental writing, and Sinclair’s signature critique of capitalism and celebrity culture. But at the same time, the story revels in the pleasures of technological progress, relies on the affordances of speed and efficiency of the automobile, and seems to portray the desirability (as well as inevitability) of the exuberance of technological “progress”, not only in human culture, but in Gnomish social evolution too. This article approaches *The Gnomobile* from the perspectives of energy humanities and environmental studies, while also suggesting thematic parallels between *The Gnomobile* and Sinclair’s much better-known realist novel *Oil!* (1927).

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Shortly after losing the 1934 California gubernatorial election, Upton Sinclair embarked on a road trip around the USA, giving lectures in an effort to recoup his election campaign expenses. A combination of factors (seeing the imposing Californian redwood trees for the first time, having a young granddaughter, and having just purchased a new Ford automobile) led to the writing of his only children's book in 1934, a fantasy titled: *The Gnomobile: A Gnice Gnew Gnarrative with Gnonsense, but Gnothing Gnaughty* (Arthur, 2006, p. 281). The story is perhaps best-known today via the 1967 Disney adaptation *The Gnome-Mobile*, which radically changed a number of the book's characters and themes. The book follows the adventures of a 12-year-old girl, Elizabeth, and her young uncle, Rodney, and their encounter with the last two gnomes of the Californian redwoods: Bobo, and his grandfather Glogo. The gnomes and their kin are victims of the lumber business and deforestation which, ironically, is the source of the wealth of Rodney and Elizabeth's family'. The four set off in Rodney's car, now dubbed the "Gnomobile", in a quest to locate any other surviving gnome communities in remaining forests across the country.

In contrast to Sinclair's social protest novels, such as *The Jungle* (1906) and *Oil!* (1927), *The Gnomobile* has attracted very little attention from either students of Sinclair's oeuvre or children's literature scholars. Yet I think that Lauren Coodley's note in passing that the book "may well have been the first children's adventure story with an ecological message" (2013, p. 130) is correct. Long before Dr Seuss's *The Lorax* (1971), which is often hailed as a "foundational ecopolitical text" (Beeck, 2005, p. 281), *The Gnomobile* engages with the discourse of deforestation, conservation, and the effects of the Anthropocene in the natural environment. It does so by giving a "voice" to the natural world through the gnomes, especially Glogo, who himself "speaks up for the trees" throughout the novel. However, as I hope to demonstrate, the book is poised ambiguously between environmental concerns and advocacy on the one hand, and the "exuberance", to use Catton's terminology (1982), of capitalist progress, on the other. This "exuberance", in which *Oil!* also partakes (see Buell, 2012), chimes with the transition from 19th-century coal capitalism to 20th-century oil-electric-coal capitalism, by focusing on the automobile as a figurehead.

The Gnomobile sits historically in the context of this very transition from the coal to the oil-electric-coal capitalist system. I am following here Buell's definition of energy systems as "systems that are constituted by sociocultural, economic, environmental and technological relationships" (2012, p. 273), each one dominated by a particular source of energy, such as coal, or petroleum. Thus we can conceptualize recent energy history as a transition from the medieval energy system of "wind, water, animal, and people power" (Buell, 2017, p. 140) to the unlocking of the energy potential of coal from the mid-eighteenth century (a coal energy system, with the steam engine at its centre), to the appearance of oil in the late nineteenth-century, followed by the subsequent emergence of the

oil-electric-coal system, which was dominant until WWII (Buell, 2012, 2017). Buell highlights how the transition from the coal to the oil-electric-coal system at the turn of the 20th century distanced both upper and middle-classes from the uglier sides of coal capitalism (pollution and the horrible working conditions it imposed on the working classes) by its emphasis on cleanliness, mobility, and speed (2012, pp. 283–284). The motor car became an important agent and symbol of this transition, leading to a perception of the new oil-electric-coal system as cleaner and more efficient. As we shall see below, *The Gnomobile* is a novel very much entangled with the oil-electric-coal energy system, not just via its portrayal of the motorcar, but also its conceptualisation of electricity as magical, and its treatment of the gnomes and their fate.

The gnomes in *The Gnomobile*, clearly, are inspired by folklore about “little people”; they are an invisible “lost” species somewhere in-between humans and plants/animals; and elemental spirits of nature, living on fern seeds and honeydew from flowers, in touch with the “spirits” of the natural world. As young Elizabeth enters the redwood forest for the first time, her experience has something of the numinous:

Suddenly the sunlight was gone, there was twilight and a solemn hush, and a forest made of the largest of living things... Over it all lay a hush as of twilight, of Sunday, the inside of a cathedral—every kind of solemn thing of which you could think. (Sinclair, 1936, pp. 11, 14)

Elizabeth’s reaction evokes beauty and wonder. She walks into the forest “softly, reverently” as if she is immersed into a “new world” (ibid., p. 14) that is primordial and almost lost to modern sensibilities. When the gnomes first appear, and in spite of their comical names, the narrator’s voice explains their existence as outgrowths of natural energies. Just as the giant redwoods are “the biggest of all living things” why shouldn’t this forest be also home to the smallest, with both ends of the size scale being the result of “forces of nature free from restraint” (ibid., p. 14)?

Although the gnomes are never quite equated to creatures such as classical nymphs and dryads (whose very life is tied to a tree/natural feature), they appear to be connected to trees in a symbiotic relationship. In a recognizable trope of the last-of-their-tribe, Glogo’s belief is that he and Bobo are the last of their species because “men have cut down the forests” (ibid., p. 17). Whether deforestation causes the decline of the gnomes because their way of life depends on trees as a natural habitat, or whether there is a more mystical connection between gnomes and trees, the novel never quite elucidates.

The gnomes, clearly, can commune with trees and plants, all of which—as Glogo asserts—have “spirits” and sentience. Asked for a specific example, Glogo points to a particularly gendered view of nature, which is linked with Elizabeth’s girlhood:

The spirit of the fern is like that of a woman... It is gentle, modest, and humble, but also very strong—nothing discourages it. You have thoughtlessly bent and hurt one. It will suffer in silence but when you are gone it will bravely go on with its task of making beauty. The little girl will understand the spirit of the fern, which hangs curtains all over the forest and cannot rest until it has made the place pretty and homelike. (ibid., p. 39)

Here we have both an established imagery of nature as woman, subjugated by (patriarchal) culture, but also a subtle connection with the combination of the current powerlessness *and* potential future agency of a young girl (somewhat marred by the old-fashioned domesticity expectations for her future). These ambiguous moments where seemingly progressive ideas about the intrinsic value of nature/the wild and the power of child agency are twinned with more traditional conservative values such as gender stereotypes and profit-driven agendas, become a telling hallmark of this book, as we shall see below.

Though the gnomes are initially poised as the voice of nature (literally!) and advocates for the spirited-ness and sentience of the natural world which deserves the same respect as humans, the discourse of elemental spirits of nature is quickly appropriated by Rodney to explain how man-made technology works. Adopting the gnomes' own terms of reference, Rodney explains that the coffee in his thermos is hot because "it was the spirit of the sun that the big people had learned to pen up in a bottle and take into their stomachs" (*ibid.*, p. 42). The electric lights of cities they drive through are also dependent on "spirits". Bobo admires how "big men had brought the very stars out of the sky and set them in their houses and along their highways" (*ibid.*, p. 52). Elizabeth also explains cabling as dependant on "a wonderful spirit, so swift that it could travel many times around the earth in a second,¹ and men had made a path across the bed of the ocean upon which it would travel" (*ibid.*, p. 60).

This equation of the oil-electric-coal energy system with "spirits" is epitomized powerfully in the description of Rodney's car, the automobile that gives its title to the story:

"Is it a spirit that makes it go?" inquired the old gnome.

"I suppose you might call it that," replied Rodney. "It is again the spirit of the sun which we use. Men have learned to imprison the sun and the lightning."

"Nothing should be imprisoned," said Glogo.

"It isn't really imprisoned," said Rodney hastily. "It is allowed to change itself into something else. It is what the trees do—turning one form of life into another."

"What do you call the thing?" asked Glogo.

"We call it an automobile. That means something which moves itself. When it moves gnomes, I suppose it should be called a gnomobile." (*ibid.*, p. 45)

This sustained discourse throughout the book of "spirits" powering electricity- and oil-based technology, makes technology sound natural and comparative to "what trees do". Even so, there is a tension here related to the exploitation of natural resources: Rodney talks about the sunlight and lightning being "penned up", or "imprisoned" by humans, and when Glogo objects, he quickly softens his language.

¹ This specific reference to a spirit who can "travel many times around the earth in a second" brings to mind another sprite, Shakespeare's Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Puck famously says: "I'll put a girdle round about the Earth/In forty minutes" (Act 2, Scene 1, 160–1). The electricity "spirit" in *The Gnomobile* seems to be able to take this ability to extremes.

The “spirit” of the gnomobile is described as “obedient” (ibid., p. 49), taking them wherever they need to go, again pointing to a relationship of subjugation, or perhaps parental control, though human control over it is not absolute. During their travels, Glogo claims to have been communing with the “spirit” of the gnomobile, which has told him that “it’s not altogether happy” (ibid., p. 120). Rodney stops at a garage, where an issue with a transmission bolt is identified and fixed, and he then exclaims that “a gnome in the back seat would very soon be standard equipment in all motorcars” (ibid., p. 120). The “spirit” discourse is, then, both validated and tied up more securely to human exploitation.

The substantive part of the novel’s plotline revolves around a long road trip, the purpose of which is for Rodney and Elizabeth to take Glogo and Bobo in the “gnomobile” on a quest to find surviving gnome communities. The companions meander around natural spots in California, before moving on to increasingly desperate searches through Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Nebraska and Missouri, eventually ending up in Johnston, Pennsylvania. Without counting backs and forths, dead ends, and roundabouts (of which there are many), the total journey represents a distance of some 2731 miles and at least 42 hours of driving²! That’s a lot of driving! What is particularly significant here, is that it is the automobile that gives the little group access to the natural world, and eventually leads to the discovery of another gnome community. Its capabilities literally drive the plot forward. This chimes with the relatively exclusive and romantic car culture of the inter-war period, and also with elements of Upton Sinclair’s earlier, and much better-known novel, *Oil!* (1927). In fact, parts of chapters 2 and 4 of *The Gnomobile* could be interpreted as a re-write of the opening scenes in *Oil!*, albeit for children. Rodney is in many ways a version of Bunny, a student and a poet, ambivalent about his ironic relationship to his father’s lumber business (see especially his sardonic comments in Sinclair, 1936, pp. 24–5), both naïve and money-wise. Conversely, “Old man Sinsabow”, Rodney’s father, shares many characteristics with “Dad”: a “tough” self-made industrialist, but also a loving father, who has enough sons looking after his business to be able to “afford” one son who’s different and “queer”, and who writes poetry. In fact, Old man Sinsabow has previously bought a newspaper business for his son in order that Rodney may publish his poems and, furthermore, doesn’t raise objections when Rodney uses his wealth to help part-fund the creation of the Redwood National Park. There is the same paradoxical mix of attitudes in both *Oil!* and *The Gnomobile*: a socialist, anti-capitalist critique on the one hand (in *The Gnomobile* especially against celebrity culture, and the privileges of wealth—the narrator’s voice seemingly rolls their eyes at times, accusing Rodney of “the magnificent recklessness of the rich”, p. 79); and at the same time an “exuberant” celebration of the then

² I calculated this by tracing our characters’ route on Google maps (as closely as possible, based on the information given in the novel): https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?hl=en&mid=1xA5TifEKEin1mUDpa_oDrfrYHLP2qlFm&ll=40.39463304898731%2C-118.49448994036379&z=4. However, this calculation is based on an average modern vehicle and modern road systems and infrastructure. The total of hours of driving in a contemporary mid-1930s vehicle and road infrastructures is likely to be much higher.

exclusive car culture, deemed a “cleaner” technology compared to the old coal energy system (e.g. of public trains), that allows access to the great outdoors.

Oil! famously begins in a motorcar, with Bunny driving with Dad and experiencing the exhilaration of “the power of ninety horses” (Sinclair, 1927, p. 5) while admiring the way in which the road runs “smooth and flawless”, “a magic ribbon” of grey concrete, “rolled out over the valley by a giant hand”, and enjoying “the cold wind of morning whistl[ing] by” and tossing his hair about:

And this magic ribbon of concrete laid out for you, winding here and there, feeling its way upward with hardly a variation of grade, taking off the shoulder of a mountain, cutting straight through the apex of another, diving into the black belly of a third; twisting, turning, tilting inward on the outside curves, tilting outward on the inside curves, so that you were always balanced, always safe—and with a white-painted line marking the centre, so that you always knew exactly where you had a right to be—what magic had done all this? Dad had explained it—money had done it. (ibid., p. 5)

Similarly, Rodney enjoys driving fast and “took it for granted that the highways, like everything else, were made for the Sinsabow family” (Sinclair, 1936, p. 26). There are multiple examples of revelling in the automobile’s ability to move across the landscape, and imagery of the highway as a “ribbon” is also used here romantically:

The wonderful gnomobile could travel just as well by night as by day. It shot out sunshine before it so that one could see the highway in front like a great ribbon of light. It was a pretty thing when one was traveling in the mountains, winding this way and that, with the light playing among the trees. (ibid., pp. 55–56)

Even Glogo, who at first is upset to see that the gnomobile is partially made of murdered trees, cannot help but marvel at the “magic” it conjures:

But what was happening outside? The forest went flying past and Bobo and Glogo ran from the window on one side to the window on the other side. What was happening to the trees? The trees were running swiftly! They had never seen the trees behave this way before. Glogo held on to the wooden trip of the window, forgetting the dead trees in his amazement at the way the live ones were acting. (ibid., p. 49)

Stephanie LeMenager has argued that “What the car suggests in *Oil!* is not the speed/power complex associated with modernity but rather a series of encounters with rich ecologies supported by the automobile’s prosthetic body and a rhizomatic network of fourteen-foot-wide roads that figure as openings rather than disciplinary paths” (2014, p. 81). As the quotations above show, this very much applies to *The Gnomobile* too. LeMenager aptly links the opening scene of *Oil!* with contemporary developments in natural conservation, especially the 1930s Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region, in which “they argued that road-building would be a primary means of conservationism for southern

California” proposing “the car and road system as potentially positive ecological actors” which would provide “democratic access to California’s natural amenities” (ibid., pp. 80–81), leading to the flourishing of “auto-tourism” (ibid., p. 82). *The Gnomobile* partakes in this argument (“The highway had been built to spare the trees”, the narrator asserts, Sinclair, 1936, p. 84), and also offers multiple examples of roadside tourism, including sites still famous and much-visited today or until recently, such as the ‘World Famous Tree House’ (“a tree with a great hole cut in it in which you could sit at a table and drink a glass of ginger ale or of soda—‘Believe it or not’”, ibid., pp. 11–12), and the ‘Pioneer Cabin Tree’ (“Elizabeth came upon a tree with a great fire-blackened hole straight through it, a hole so big that Mama’s limousine could have been driven through without being scratched”, ibid., p. 14).³

If the gnomes, particularly Glogo, represent nature untouched by human intervention, while Rodney represents something more ambiguous, straddling the need for conservation whilst admiring the “exuberance” and freedom of car culture, then paying attention to their (often heated) exchanges reveals once more the paradox in the heart of the book, and in the heart of the oil-electric-coal energy system. Dialogue between Glogo and Rodney increasingly reads as a dialogue between nature and a (sometimes penitent, sometimes cocky) mankind, and seems to represent a balancing act between two recurrent motifs of oil-electric-coal capitalism: exuberance and catastrophe. Indeed, in Buell’s analysis, exuberance is constantly “haunted by” or “fused with” catastrophe (2012, pp. 176, 187): they are two sides of the same coin. Glogo’s voice consistently highlights catastrophe as the dark underbelly of exuberance. He particularly laments deforestation as the beginning of a chain reaction of adverse effects:

All the time the thousand-year-old one was working himself into a frenzy, almost crying with pain because of what the big people had done—chopping down all the trees and letting the land be destroyed! They had dust storms and the precious topsoil was blown away by the wind. They had floods and it was born off by the water. All summer long they had heat waves, and could only keep themselves alive with electric fans and air conditioners and ice-cream cones and racing about the country at a mile a minute to make a breeze! (Sinclair, 1936, p. 132)

The effects Glogo is describing are clearly visible during the little company’s journey. As they travel through Nebraska’s “corn belt”, where the landscape becomes “a series of farms”, they witness one of the “duster clouds” caused by deforestation, “a vast black cloud that seemed to cover the whole horizon” (p. 126). This is a reference to severe periods of drought in the 1930s, causing dust storms in

³ The ‘World Famous Tree House’ is still a popular attraction today, as evidenced by TripAdvisor (https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction_Review-g32882-d1857170-Reviews-World_Famous_Tree_House-Piercy_Mendocino_County_California.html). The ‘Pioneer Cabin Tree’ unfortunately fell during a storm in 2017 (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/pioneer-cabin-tree-famous-tunnel-toppled-storm-n704616>).

what became known as “the Dust Bowl”, the Southern and High Plains region of the United States from Texas to Nebraska, and leading to mass migration (see Worster, 1979).⁴ Similarly, as the group later on traverse Iowa, they come across a flooded river and bridge, and have to retrace several miles and take a new road (Sinclair, 1936, pp. 131–132).

Rodney's responses, on the other hand, are increasingly desperate attempts to justify the unjustifiable and disperse his sense of embarrassment when he is taught the effects of the Anthropocene by Glogo's authoritative voice. We are told that “Rodney was used to finding fault with the world in which he lived but somehow he did not like to have the gnomes do it” (ibid., p. 71). Indeed, when the little group witness the flooded river and bridge “Rodney was much ashamed to have the old gnome see such sights and had to admit that the big people were handling their affairs very badly indeed” (ibid., p. 132). He ripostes either by deflection, or by attempting to explain how the big people try to mitigate environmental catastrophe through conservation efforts. So, when Glogo is saddened to see that the gnomobile's body is made of dead trees, Rodney retorts that the gnomobile is not to blame, it is the lumber business (ibid., p. 48). (The fact that his wealth and ownership of the car is due to said lumber business is left unchallenged.) When Glogo explains that people should plant crops only on flat land, while making sure that slopes have enough trees to “bind the soil”, Rodney expresses surprise that Glogo “had worked out the principles of ‘conservation’ all by himself” (ibid., p. 124)! Rodney quotes John Muir, a “wise old man” who said that “God had protected the redwoods against everything but fools” (p. 39),⁵ adding that government-led conservation has stepped in to offer that protection (ibid., p. 40). Later on in the novel, as a culmination of a complicated sub-plot, he donates to the Green Cross, “a society devoted to forest preservation” (ibid., pp. 102–105). These instances also provide a number of “teachable moments”, for example when Rodney explains the main principles of conservation (only trees of a certain size can be cut down and, in turn, should be replaced by saplings, ibid., p. 123), but this is countered by Glogo who retorts that it is too late—too much damage has already been done.

Besides “conservation” and “preservation”, Rodney also uses another rhyming word, which comes with heavier ideological baggage: “reservation”. When Glogo mourns the fact that the big people “have mastered the whole earth and made everything different”, leaving no place for gnomes, Rodney swiftly proposes: “I would ask my father to set aside a reservation for gnomes. You could have visitors' day once a

⁴ Even the mass migration caused by this phenomenon is subtly alluded in the text, when—among young men on joy rides and a lady sunbathing her legs out of a car window—our travellers see “old cars, loaded with family belongings and babies and chickens, following the star of the empire” and “young men holding up their thumbs at them”, apparently hitchhiking (ibid., p. 125). The “star of the empire” is a reference to Andrew Melrose's 1867 painting “Westward the Star of Empire takes its way”, depicting a shining locomotive disturbing scattering deer. The painting captures the expansion of America's railways eastwards and westwards and has been discussed as a symbol of progress (see Hills, 1991), but here, of course, it becomes an ironic reference.

⁵ This is a brief paraphrase of John Muir's much-quoted: “God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools,—only Uncle Sam can do that” (1897, p. 157).

week or something like that, and the rest of the time you would be let entirely alone” (ibid., pp. 85–85). On the one hand, Rodney’s solution here offers nature tourism (almost voyeurism), contributing to the roadside tourism/auto-tourism theme already prevalent in the text. But, on the other hand, the term “reservation” cannot but bring to mind the removal of Native Americans from their lands and into reservations, and the racialised history of the conservation and environmental movements in North America, especially in relation to changing ideas about national parks.

The removal of Native Americans from their own land from the mid-nineteenth century and on, often to less desirable locations, and aiming to turn them into farmers and keep them under control, is well-documented. But the overlap between this process and the formation of national parks is equally disturbing. Originally, national parks in the US had been envisioned as a space for Native Americans to circulate freely and maintain their way of life. For important early American environmental voices, such as Henry David Thoreau and George Catlin, Native Americans would be part of the “wilderness” of these locations (Spence, 1999, pp. 9–23; Merchant, 2003, p. 381). But by the end of the nineteenth century, perceptions of national parks had shifted: they were now thought of as “living Edens”, “virgin” places of pure wilderness, but also, ironically:

managed places in which the wilderness encounter was predictable within given parameters... Unpredictable elements such as Indians were removed or carefully managed for tourists so that they became part of the total ‘wilderness experience.’ The parks were vast managed gardens in which the wild was contained for viewing. People could have a wilderness experience in a protected environment. (Merchant, 2003, p. 382)

John Muir himself, whose views are evoked in *The Gnomobile*, envisioned national parks as a representation of pristine wilderness, undisturbed by Indians, whom he repeatedly described as dirty (ibid.; see also Fleck, 1985). National parks, therefore, soon became a contested space, and also a space ideologically distinct from Indian reservations. Given this context, Rodney’s solution for the gnomes is both suspect and sobering: like Native Americans, the gnomes are portrayed as an indigenous people, living a pre-modern life, and their removal to a “reservation” within a national park, with carefully managed tourist access, sounds very much like the beginning of a process that contributed to displacing many Native Americans from the lands of their ancestors.

The Glogo vs. Rodney opposition is interwoven throughout the text by another: Glogo vs. Bobo. While it is true that from the very beginning Glogo is depressed about the negative impact of the Anthropocene upon the state of nature, and his mood and wellbeing increasingly worsen, conversely, Bobo moves in a different trajectory. Perhaps in an even more radical way than Rodney’s philosophical journey accepting and espousing environmentalism, Bobo is increasingly fascinated, even besotted, by the wonders of human technology. While his grandfather listens with “quiet dignity” about the food the humans eat, which has been processed and transported by machinery, Bobo is “wildly curious and interested” (ibid., p. 43). As the story continues, each new invention of the big people Bobo encounters seems to him “more delightful than the last” (ibid., p. 74), not least a pleasure that the child

readership will appreciate: “the oldest of living Americans was invited to make the acquaintance of one of the newest of his country’s inventions—the ice-cream cone.” (ibid., p. 73). By Chapter 8, narrator’s voice tackles this head-on:

A curious situation had arisen. Glogo was mourning for the future of his grandson, and the grandson, good and dutiful, tried his best to mourn about himself, but wasn’t able to. Bobo, once a loyal and patriotic gnome, had fallen bit by bit under the spell of the big people. He tried to keep it from his grandfather, but the fact was that Bobo liked to eat ripe olives and celery and ice-cream cones. He liked to look out the window and see the cars go by, even at risk of being discovered. He liked to be told he was in the papers. ... Rodney began to wonder - even if they did find the little people, would Bobo want to live with them? (ibid., p. 112)

Bobo seems to have been “wrapped within” the many infrastructures of the oil-electric-coal energy system (roads, telephone lines, power cables), which, as Buell has shown, was soon “reaching into and restructuring people’s private worlds, identities, bodies, thoughts, sense of geography, emotions”, with modern consumerism as its most important product” (2012, p. 284). Indeed, Bobo “was learning to recognise the different kinds of gas stations and the different makes of cars—in short, Bobo was becoming a young American, up to the minute in manners, ideas and language” (Sinclair, 1936, p. 114).⁶ The Bobo and Glogo dichotomy can be read as one more representation of Buell’s exuberance and catastrophe, each gnome representing one of the two flip sides of oil-electric-coal capitalism.

The story reaches its climax when the two gnomes are kidnapped (or rather “gnapped” by “gnome-gnappers”). Rodney and Elizabeth eventually find them in a local fair in Johnston, Pennsylvania, where, for a hefty ticket price, Bobo is exhibited as the “smallest ever human being”. However, Bobo is completely in control and has “found out his power” (ibid., p. 167). He has laid out terms to his human captors and is splitting the ticket income (some \$1000 a day!) 50–50! He is very aware that he is “no longer a wild thing” (ibid., p. 171) and revels in the luxuries capitalism can offer him. The “exuberance” afforded by the increasing wide-spread adoption of the oil-electric-coal energy system is here taken to extremes: nature can be in control of its own finances when accessed/displayed for pleasure! From being the “perfect tourist” (ibid., p. 119) in the gnomobile, Bobo ends up being a roadside tourist attraction himself, part of the capitalist status-quo he’s seen the “exuberant” side of—he is not sure he wants to go back to being a Gnome any more.

Meanwhile, Glogo’s trajectory also comes to its natural (though melancholy and rather drastic) end, the extreme result of catastrophe—he dies! From the book’s opening, we understand Glogo has a severe case of “neurasthenia” (ibid., p. 18), depressed about the state of the natural world and the impending extinction of his

⁶ Given my earlier discussion of the gnomes as a native people and Rodney’s mention of a “reservation” for them, Bobo’s willing re-education into a “young American” may also bring to mind the forced re-education of Native Americans during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially through boarding schools (see Wallace, 1995) though in their case, often brutally imposed upon reluctant, almost enslaved, pupils.

species. His journey, literally, continues in this vain as he succumbs to “the blues” (ibid., p. 88) whilst their road-trip quest to find other Gnome communities remains fruitless. Increasingly, Glogo is perceived as “depressing company” (p. 112) as his constant mourning envelops him. Eventually, we see Glogo “working himself into a frenzy” (ibid., p. 132) delivering a last damning diatribe on the effects of the Anthropocene, before letting the neurasthenia “win completely”, at which point he “just shut his eyes and let it do anything it pleased with him” (ibid., p. 173). He dies quietly a page later, with Rodney and Elizabeth at his bedside—Bobo is not even present, but still running the show at the fair!

At this latter moment in the text, while we may sense that the conclusion of the story points towards a gloomy ending, one that symbolises nature’s death and the triumph of capitalism and the prevailing of the oil-electric-coal energy system, the tale has one more twist. As Glogo’s funeral ends, Bobo “smells gnomes” in the nearby forest. He discovers an underground community of thousands of gnomes, who have “the most marvellous civilization” and live “in a city quite as fine as Johnstown” (ibid., p. 184). These gnomes had evidently migrated from the Californian redwood forests millions of years earlier, and since their new habitat is rich in iron ore and coal they make steel and have developed a hierarchical industrial society led by Mr Morgo (who is both their steel plant owner and banker), though right now they are “in the midst of a spell of hard times and there’s unemployment and much suffering”—Rodney calls this “the business cycle” (ibid., p. 186).⁷ These subterranean gnomes are “up-to-date” in every way, having evolved from their hunter-gatherer ancestors to making “synthetic foods... out of coal and tar” (p. 187). Furthermore, Bobo meets his love-interest, Mr Morgo’s daughter Queenly, “the loveliest creature”, who wears a dress of “bright blue synthetic material which they make out of coal tar” and “drives in the dearest little sports car you ever did see” (ibid., p. 187). These gnomes seem to be somewhere in-between the earlier coal energy system and the oil-electricity-coal phase: on the one hand they rely on mining, but on the other they partake in the “exuberance” and catastrophe of the oil-electricity-coal phase, with sports cars, synthetic clothes and consumerist values, but also the boom and bust of economic cycles. Indeed, Sinclair had used the imagery of the gnome when writing about miners before. In his 1917 novel *King Coal*, which protested the poor working conditions of the contemporary coal mining industry, the miners are described as “a separate race of creatures, subterranean gnomes, pent up by society for purposes of its own” (p. 22). They are devoid of sunlight and are working for an affluent class they will never see. This imagery echoes the nature of Gnomes in the work of Renaissance alchemist Paracelsus (1941), elemental creatures that belong to the earth and can move through rock and soil as if it is air. Nevertheless, while the imagery of gnomes in *King Coal* helps develop a socialist critique of the plight of miners’ working conditions, in *The Gnomobile* their subterranean depiction

⁷ This is a reference to the Great Depression (1929–1941), in the midst of which the novel is set. The term “business cycle” comes from economic theory and refers to cycles of economic growth followed by crises.

and existence appears to be altogether more positive, a fantasy of a compromise, in-between energy system.

In fact, it seems that in *The Gnomobile*, Bobo can have his cake and eat it: he completes the quest he started with his grandfather by finding a community in which he can fit in naturally, live a normal gnomish life, and contribute to the preservation of his species. At the same time he does not have to go back to the “wild” ways of his more primitive lifestyle in the Californian redwood forests, and may continue to enjoy the taste of luxuries modern technology and capitalism bring. Meanwhile, Mr Morgo is already planning the marriage of Bobo to his daughter, to teach him the steel business, and make him heir to his estates. In turn, Bobo is hopeful that he can help solve the “business cycle” problem. This is an halfway-house solution that gives us hope for the survival of the gnomes’ species (by the end of the story we know Bobo is not the last of his kind anymore) but it presupposes a level of adaptation that necessitates abandoning living an outdoor life in the forest, and rather, living an industrialized, modern life. As Bobo says, “times change and we are to adjust ourselves” (Sinclair, 1936, p. 188). The parallels between this conclusion for the gnomes, and what happened to Native Americans and their ways of life, are once more striking.

The coda of the story offers us Rodney and Elizabeth’s rather anticlimactic journey back to California, covered briefly in less than a page, but—interestingly—the book gives the last word to Elizabeth. As she sees the redwood forest again, and remembers Glogo, she exclaims: “When I grow up, I’m going to help to save the forests and have them all full of lovely little gnomes again!” (ibid., p. 191). Elizabeth is, clearly, not that satisfied with the way the gnomes’ adventure ended. For her the end of Bobo’s journey is not ideal, and though she does not feel she has much power in the adult world right now, she does dream ahead of the time she will be able to effect change. In many ways, for her, as for the child reader, perhaps, this adventure has been an education. Her final words undermine the ambiguous line the story navigates throughout, in-between advocating against the destruction of the natural world, while enjoying the “exuberance” of the oil-electricity energy system in contemporary capitalism. Elizabeth, the story’s youngest character, clearly sides with Glogo, the oldest. Here we have, perhaps, a glimmer of hope that the “exuberant” trappings of the oil-electric-coal system can be resisted and that the catastrophic consequences for the natural world can be seen for what they are. Rodney’s poem at Glogo’s funeral may also be a sign of this tonal shift in the novel, especially when contrasted with his first poem about the gnomobile. The latter, begins with “I am the gnyftu gnomobile,/Before my gname all gnations gneel;” (ibid., p. 47), and is a paean to the automobile and the exuberances it affords. The former is a lyrical elegy of Glogo’s return to the earth, whence his broken body becomes part of the trees, birds, and flowers, with the potential to “make the fallen forest whole” (ibid., p. 178) in a more mystical convergence.

The *Gnomobile* is a complex book with layers of ideological strands. The few lines afforded to it, scattered among biographical and critical work on Sinclair, tend to stress its progressive nature. As we saw above, Coodley praises the book’s

“ecological message” (2013, p. 130), while Anthony Arthur at worst misreads the novel, or at best reads it only superficially, claiming that the story is:

about a little girl who helps a race of woodland elves, or gnomes, frustrate the evil designs of greedy timber pirates. Whimsical and often charming, the tale harks back to Sinclair’s early juvenile novels, though with the knowledge gained of hard experience—as reflected in his reference to Jack London’s Valley of the Moon ranch being “cut up into tracts,” so that the public could “buy romance at so much per front foot.” (2006, p. 281)

Sinclair does refer to Jack London briefly in *The Gnomobile*, in one of those ironic narratorial asides (quoted by Arthur), which keep you guessing about the novel’s ideological allegiances (Rodney claims that Jack London would have loved to have met the gnomes, Sinclair, 1936, p. 68). But as this article has attempted to show, the book’s contradictory political viewpoints, and the different models of ecology and energy systems it engages with (from “wild” nature, untouched by human intervention, to conservation, and to the “exuberance” and catastrophe of the oil-electric-coal capitalism) present the child reader with a complex narrative and different political choices.

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