“A story to match any fiction”

Environmental Sincerity in Contemporary US Fiction

By

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

September 2020

This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision. The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

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Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have happened without the support and guidance of several people. Firstly, I'd like to thank my primary supervisor Jesper Gulddal. While you came on board a year into my PhD journey, your encouragement, advice and ready ear allowed my own research voice to grow and develop in confidence. To my secondary supervisor, Hugh Craig, your calm manner and clarity of voice have always driven me to find my own. Both of you have given me numerous opportunities to develop as a researcher throughout my candidature and been endlessly patient with my commitment to NUPSA and other pursuits, for which I am eternally grateful!

Many thanks go to my friends Georgia, Hugh, Peter, Tanika, Sarah, and the girls from MC148 (the noetics!). To Annika, for taking the time and having patience with me towards the end! I must also single out Barrie, for always being there, especially for the final months in which I dragged you to campus daily to motivate me to keep going! Andy, for believing in me from the beginning, and Matt for helping me through to the end amidst all the stress, tears and times I couldn't make words work anymore!

Finally, I'd like to thank my family for always believing in me, even more than I do. I love you all.

So, in the spirit of what one of my nannas said the first time I explained my thesis to her, "here's to the art of bullshit!"

Abstract

This thesis argues that the rise of "sincerity" as a dominant style in contemporary American (US) fiction is tied to an ecological consciousness that accords literature a transformative role amid environmental crisis. Climate upheaval is a quintessential characteristic of the present moment, and as such, the pursuit of sincerity has fostered a clear environmental voice in fiction as authors seek to engage with the lived human experience in the Anthropocene. As such, I trace a historical arc in US fiction that is driven by the pursuit of sincerity, and the subsequent, inevitable engagement with environmental crisis. American literature, therefore, transitions from the sterile intellectualism and self-reflexivity of postmodernism to an engaged post-postmodernism that is characterised by ecological crisis and its impacts on the social, cultural and political reality of individuals and communities.

For this study, I undertake close readings of five US novels and examine the various narrative techniques and plot devices used to address environmental crisis. Instead of hypothesising a genre of environmental fiction, I argue that environmental consciousness is unavoidable as contemporary US fiction turns towards sincerity and the lived experience for its content; after all, climate crisis is an unavoidable characteristic in understanding our contemporary moment. The first four chapters examine a canonical text taken from a different decade, beginning with Don DeLillo's postmodern classic *White Noise* (1985), David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996),

Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000), and Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014). Through this historical progression, I demonstrate the ways in which sincerity has manifested in canonical fictions over time, and how environmental consciousness is increasingly evident in the American literary voice. The final chapter examines Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018), a recent, explicitly environmental fiction that pushes beyond human perspectives, beyond humanism, in search of a post-human perspective that positions the planet itself at the centre.

Together, these five case studies demonstrate how fiction identifies and begins to deconstruct the traditional, anthropocentric cultural narrative of human dominion over nature. More broadly, they represent a historical arc in contemporary US fiction that spans from postmodernism to an environmentally conscious post-postmodernism, that ultimately pushes literature into the sphere of commentary and activism.

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Introduction

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh "calls out" fiction writers for failing to recognise and respond adequately to climate change. The same year, he writes "It is a striking fact that when novelists do choose to write about climate change it is almost always outside fiction" ("Amitav Ghosh" n.p.). While he recognises a small collection of environmental authors, Ghosh concludes that the literary mainstream "remains just as unaware of the crisis on our doorstep as the population at large" ("Amitav Ghosh" n.p.). This thesis, however, examines literary responses to the climate crisis and argues that fiction is playing a transformative role in challenging longstanding anthropocentric assumptions about life on Earth. I examine five works of American (US) fiction that respond to environmental upheaval both explicitly, through direct statements by the narrator and characters, or implicitly, through milieu, and events tangential to the main plot. As authors of US fiction increasingly seek to examine what it means to be human in this contemporary moment, the "lived human experience" – that is, the social, cultural and political behaviours and experiences of individuals and communities – becomes a core literary concern. The authorial turn to sincerity means that fiction is positioned to reveal human transgressions to the reader, compelling them to examine their own perspectives and prejudices. I argue environmental degradation is a clear influence on the contemporary human experience, and by drawing out the environmental

consciousness in these works, I demonstrate there is a strong awareness of ecological crisis in contemporary US fiction.

While the Anthropocene is still in the process of being recognised officially in the scientific community[1], the possible identification of a new geological epoch is a turning point for far more than scientific discovery. For the first time in human history, we are confronted with the degree in which humans have altered the planet's atmospheric processes, and the depth of our dependence on the stability of the natural world. Anthropocene discourse in the humanities navigates the challenges that arise around human narrativity, as the anthropocentric scale of temporality and the perception of human dominance are fundamentally challenged in a planetary context. In the West, humankind's relationship to the natural world can traditionally be understood as a power narrative, an imagined state in which humankind holds control over the natural environment by claiming it as an object, rather than a functioning Other. With the onset of the Anthropocene, the narrative behind this reality has been revealed. As such, it is only by reconfiguring these narratives that humankind stands a chance of comprehending, and subsequently fighting climate change.

[1] Neither the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) nor the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) have formally approved the "Anthropocene" as a new geological epoch. However, the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) of the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy (SQS) are submitting a formal proposal to ICS in 2021.

Ecocriticism as an area of research examines the representation of the human/nature relationship in literature, film, and art. Cheryll Glotfelty describes the field's emergence, stating

> ecocriticism takes as its *subject* the interconnections between human culture and the material world, between the human and the nonhuman. Ecological *literary* criticism is that subset of ecocriticism that focuses specifically upon the cultural elements language and literature and their relationship to the environment; it is a critical stance that has one foot in literature and the other on land. (xviii)

In this thesis, I use ecocritical theory and methods as a means of uncovering an arc in US literary history that sees an increasing sincerity inform US literary practice. This sincerity takes several forms, but is unanimously characterised by a sense of seriousness towards literature and its ability to impact readers, communities, and cultures. I present a literary transition from postmodernism, where self-reflexivity and irony are key features, to a fiction that engages directly with real world issues and the shared experiences of human communities in the US. Through the frame of environmental criticism, it becomes clear that as US fiction transitions from postmodernism to an active and engaged voice, it reasserts the lived, physical experience of individuals and communities as a key focus of fiction.

The Role of Fiction in Imagining Climate Change

It is important to be cautious in stating the role and impact of fiction in a broader social and cultural context. In the wake of the Anthropocene, however, discussion has increased about the possibility for fiction to inform cultural narratives and both reveal and challenge deep-seeded beliefs and ideas. Throughout this thesis, I present numerous scholars and authors who position fiction as having an active role in responding to climate crisis. For the purpose of this introduction, I will provide a brief overview that situates fiction as an influential and important part of climate activism.

There are two ways environmental fiction enacts its role in realising the reality of climate crisis. The first is in its ability to reconceptualise inaccessible concepts. Fiction addresses the disparity between scientific knowledge and the lived experience. As Summer Harrison says, "climate change denial is not caused primarily by a lack of information or knowledge, but by a lack of identification with the cultural community of climate change believers" (457). This means the "belief gap" is caused by a discrepancy between the provision of scientific evidence, and the "role of emotion and identity in the creation of our beliefs" (S. Harrison 457). Fiction is a powerful tool in addressing this discrepancy, as it is positioned to link "environmental facts to emotion, metaphor, and symbolism" (S. Harrison 458). S. Harrison's idea here is not unique; both Hannes Bergthaller and Ghosh discuss the failure of culture and "failure of the imagination" in recognising the impact of climate change (Bergthaller 8). While

Ghosh claims fiction's response has not been adequate, he and Bergthaller highlight the role of literature and literary criticism in overcoming world views that hinder the progress of environmental thought. Timothy Morton claims "art can help us [because it] deals with reality and unreality, being and seeming. If ecology is about radical coexistence, then we must challenge our sense of what is real and what is unreal, what counts as existent and what counts as non-existent" (19). Morton's premise appeals to both cultural narrative and literal narrative, lending agency to literature by addressing the need for new cultural practice and paradigms that appreciate the changed relationship between humankind and the environment. Collectively, these voices demonstrate that fiction has the power to impact and inform its readers' world views; this is predicated, however, on the author embedding a particular environmental ethic in their work.

Therefore, the second way that fiction plays a role in the realisation of climate emergency is in the deliberate and sincere engagement with imminent environmental crisis on the part of the author. I argue there is a degree of activism evident in the practice of environmental writing. Many of the of poets and authors seen as early environmentalists were activists in their own right. John Muir, for example, helped establish the Sequoia and Yosemite National Parks, while Henry David Thoreau developed a philosophy on nature that perseveres in environmental thought today. Authors of contemporary ecological fiction such as Barbara Kingsolver, Richard Powers, Ian McEwan, and Amitav Ghosh share a common belief in the power of

storytelling, and in fiction as a non-traditional educational platform. The notion that fiction has a role to play in the fight against climate change is embedded in the very concept of environmental scholarship; Andrew Dix claims that publishing literary ecologies in "the nation which remains the most extravagant consumer" is surely "an ecoactivist act" (167). Further, Rob Nixon refers to "environmental writer-activists" (15) when he discusses the ability of fiction to communicate the nuances of climate science and its impacts on the individual. Nixon positions writers as actively engaging in a political, imaginative, and strategic discussion. This thesis, however, situates this activism within a broader movement of American fiction from a disengaged postmodern reverie to an engaged and active exploration of the lived human experience. In this context, ecocriticism becomes a lens to observe a growing sense of intent in the contemporary novel, and the development of a new, sincere, and engaged fiction.

There is a significant body of non-fictional ecological works that have been quintessential in the context of American climate activism for several decades. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) is an example of a seminal texts and is widely considered to be one of the most important environmental texts of the twentieth century. The text had a powerful impact, spurring a reversal of the United States' national pesticide policy, a nationwide ban on DDT in agriculture, and inspired the environmental movement that eventually became the US Environmental Protection Agency. Daniel Philippon's *Conserving Words: How American Nature Writing Shaped the Environmental*

Movement (2004) is a useful, detailed examination of the role of non-fiction nature writing on people's attitudes and behaviours towards nature. Philippon presents a defence of "traditional American nature writing" (222). The text examines five figures he claims to be central to environmentalism in America, with a view to identify authentic encounters with the natural environment, a reconnect environmentalism with politics. Each figure represents a different view of nature and its relationship to contemporary America: the frontier (Roosevelt), garden (Wright), park (Muir), wilderness (Leopold), and utopia (Abbey). This thesis does not seek to undermine or discredit such non-fiction nature writing. Rather, it seeks to identify a similar urgency in fiction, and examine the literary strategies used in American fiction over time to communicate climate crisis.

What is Climate Fiction?

To disagree with Ghosh and make the claim that contemporary fiction has responded to climate crisis is perhaps a more complex argument than it may initially appear. Adam Trexler discusses this with authority in the introduction of his book *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (2015). The study of contemporary fiction, especially in the US, is fraught with difficulties, with "new contenders for the Great American Novelist appear[ing] almost weekly" (Trexler 11). There are therefore several approaches one might take in determining literary innovation in the face of climate change. The first, as Trexler states, is through genre. Science fiction is often associated with climate change due to its scope to invent,

manipulate and predict the conditions of the human experience. Novels such as J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009), and Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2041* (2017) are examples of science fiction that utilise genre tropes with an ecological voice. The closest thing to a genre of environmental fiction, then, is 'cli-fi', a sub-genre of sci-fi coined by Dan Bloom in 2007. In defining the difference between sci-fi and cli-fi, Bloom claims that while science fiction is "concerned with science and amazing stories and adventures created mostly as escape and entertainment", cli-fi is written with a "certain moral sense of what things might be like if we do not stop climate change and global warming" (qtd. in Zoretti n.p.). Therefore, as Jen Zoratti writes, "Cli-fi is not about escapism or entertainment […] cli-fi has a moral imperative. Sci-fi does not" (n.p.). The key characteristic of cli-fi is therefore in the moral imperative of the author. Cli-fi is a purposeful exploration of cultural and social responses, understandings, and impacts of climate change. Climate fiction is less about the tropes within the novel, then, and more about the author's engagement with the reality of ecological crisis. However, while it may seem intuitive to collect environmentally themed texts together and establish a genre that deals with climate change, the matter is rather more complex. For example, dystopian and speculative fiction also tends towards the fatalistic future imaginings that lend themselves to climate fiction, as seen in novels like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Paul McAuley's *The Quiet War* (2008), and Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* (2009). There is also a collection of young adult fiction that deals explicitly

with climate change, including Blake Nelson's *They Came from Below* (2007), Saci Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries* (2015), and Melanie Crowder's *Parched* (2014).

The severity of environmental crisis challenges the boundaries between what is unbelievable and what makes up the fabric of lived reality. As Trexler argues, "the narrative difficulties of the Anthropocene threaten to rupture the defining features of genre: literary novels bleed into science fiction; suspense novels have surprising elements of realism; realist depictions of everyday life involuntarily become biting satire" (14). Ursula Heise claims the "best friend" of the contemporary environmental writer could be speculative fiction; however, there is a sense of realism that permeates ecological fiction that encourages the reader to "believe in the reality of the fictional worlds it constructs, without the stylistic flourishes, ironies and ambiguities, or the metafictional play that so often inform experimental literature" (Heise "Environmental Literature" 31). In this way, the patching together of an environmental fiction genre is perhaps more reductive than it is helpful.

Instead of genre, the critic might examine how climate change phenomena are exhibited in fiction; as Trexler argues, "climate fiction is not the result of a literary 'school' of related authors", it is a movement informed by "a remarkably broad series of phenomena of the nonhuman world, politics, and the media" (Trexler 10-11). Heise outlines three "types" of environmental fiction based on thematic content (to be outlined later in this introduction). Science about climate change has raised awareness of melting polar ice caps, rising temperatures, natural disasters, and pollution. The

degree to which fiction examines these issues can be understood as a defining trait of environmental fiction, and thus drive scholarly enquiry. However, dependence on these phenomena to identify objects of study means that only novels with a preoccupation with climate change are considered. In other words, only novels written with the specific intention of exploring climate change are considered to be environmental novels. This fails to account for the presence of climate change in novels that do not explicitly claim to be environmental. Therefore, while a genre or strong environmental themes may benefit the consumer wandering the bookstore, it does not account for the diverse range of literary engagement with climate change.

It is not only signposted ecological novels that need to be examined to truly appreciate the depth to which climate change has infiltrated contemporary literature. To interpret environmentalism in American fiction, both implicit and explicit dealings with climate change and nature contribute to a more rounded view of both how literature has responded to environmental crisis, and to what degree climate change informs the human experience as it manifests in literature.

The Five Waves of Ecocriticism

Despite the complexity of defining the environmental novel, there are characteristics of environmental exploration that lead critics to determine four waves of ecocriticism. Lawrence Buell defined the first two waves, with Joni Adamson and

Scott Slovic introducing the third, and Slovic defining the fourth. Before I outline the four waves, it is important to note that the characteristics defining each wave are still active in ecocriticism today. Each "wave" is better understood as the emergence of new themes or layers in ecocriticism, as opposed to an ongoing progression that leaves its predecessor in the past. Each new wave recognises diversity in ecocritical research, and warns of the limitations of the "wave" metaphor[2]; Buell posits that "palimpsest" is perhaps more suitable (*The Future* 17), while Slovic is increasingly cautious of his use of the term "wave", only retaining it for its useful visualisation ("The Third Wave" 5). With these caveats in mind, I will proceed using the "wave" metaphor, noting that waves function more like themed layers.

The first wave began in the 1980s, and recognises a surge in nature writing and criticism inspired by the work of writers like Emerson, Muir, Wordsworth and Thoreau. It is seen as being "synchronous with the aims of earthcare" (Buell *The Future* 21) in its approach; it pushes for a stronger alliance with the environmental sciences, and the appreciation and understanding of nature. Significantly, the first wave maintains a distinction between human culture and nature. Anthropocentric perspectives in cultural theory led first wave ecocritics to call for increased scientific literacy as "a corrective to critical subjectivism and cultural relativism" (Buell *The Future* 18). In its appeal to scientific enquiry, a key characteristic of the first wave is

[2] For a full critique of the use of the "wave" to define themes and trends in ecocriticism, see Chapter 1 of *The Future of Ecocriticsm: New Horizons* (2011), by Serpil Oppermann, who claims the descriptor negates the ecofeminist line of argument.

the notion of a "bedrock 'human' condition" (18) that is revealed through science's ascription to natural laws. The second wave began in the late 1990s, and is not clearly delineated from the first. It does, however, hold that the differentiation between "science and culture is less clear-cut" (Buell *The Future* 19). Rather than science informing environmental criticism directly, a cyclical relationship is seen to create a feedback loop, as science is "viewed both as objectified discipline and humanly discrete enterprise, and the terms of scientific discourse have significant implications for environmental criticism but do not serve as an authoritative model" (Buell *The Future* 19). Second wave ecocriticism tends to "question organicist models" and concentrate on "locating vestiges of nature within cities and/or exposing crimes of eco-injustice against society's marginal groups" (Buell 24). In this way, the second wave expands the scope of environmental critique to include social and cultural issues, and the intersection between social inequity and the environment.

The third wave, commencing in the 2000s, expands the field further and reflects the global community implied by the scale of a new geological epoch. As Slovic and Adamson describe, "The impulse to study human experience in relation to the more-than-human world and to compare human experience across cultures, in particular, struck us as an altogether different tendency than we had observed during the first two 'waves' of the field" ("The Third Wave" 4). The third wave is defined by a global perspective that incorporates the diversity of cultures and ethnicities, with an

overarching awareness of the aspects of the human experience that transcend these delineations between people.

The fourth wave is characterised by a trend towards practical application of ecocritical research: material ecocriticism. Slovic pinpoints the fourth wave as beginning in 2008 with Stacy Alaimo's paper "Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature." Broadly, he describes "a proliferation of studies and courses emphasizing the fundamental materiality (the physicality, the consequentiality) of environmental things, places, processes, forces, and experiences" (Slovic "Editor's Note" 619). The fourth wave is characterised by "a growing pragmatism" in ecocritical practice, with applications "encompassing basic human behaviours and lifestyle choices" (Slovic "Editor's Note" 619). The material turn sees Serpil Oppermann's call for a more engaged and cohesive theory of ecocriticism, founded on the notion that

> all discourses of nature and the nature of discourse itself intersect through a mutually coalescent experience of the physical world. This is the way we can collapse the artificial distinctions between nature and culture, experience and representation, knowledge and being, and discourse and the natural world. (Oppermann 166)

Thus, a significant portion of this wave, at least in the case of literary scholarship, examines the way literary texts "confront the world's ecological disturbances" (Slovic "Editor's Note" 620). The issue of *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE) in which Slovic introduces the fourth wave features an interview with poets

and scholars who collectively identify the power of poetic language, and its ability to facilitate "'subtler, more textured, and more nuanced' thinking about our relationships with the world" (Slovic "Editor's Note" 621). In this way, ecocriticism situates both the creative output and the subsequent scholarship as engaging with politics and ethical debate about climate crisis, developing an increasingly activist voice alongside the fiction it examines.

Finally, in the Editor's Note of ISLE's 2019 Summer edition, Slovic identifies a fifth wave. This wave, Slovic argues, focuses on an increasing concern around "information management, the psychology of information processing, and on efficacy of various communication strategies". The fifth wave shares core characteristic with the recent discourse around "public humanities", which emphasises accessibility and relevance of humanities research to the community and public groups. In the context of ecocriticism, this means that research is communicated through public events, blogs, public lectures, social media and arts festivals, rather than primarily existing in the hard-to-reach pages of academic journals. In this way, practitioners of the fifth wave "work in tandem with the efforts of ecocritics to reach out beyond our traditional academic audiences by writing op-eds and blog entries, speaking at public meetings, publishing creative writing in addition to scholarship, and using other creative outlets" (514) to communicate environmental research. There is a natural evolution between the fourth and fifth wave that is found in the continuation of ecocritic's activism. Upon the realisation of the field's engagement with ethical debate and

activist voice, breaking down of the barrier between academic and public discourse is required to validate ethical debate and engage the population on climate awareness and activism.

I argue that this development corresponds to the broader literary turn away from postmodernist solipsism, and back towards the physical, building a case for literature to be seen as a form of activism. As ecocriticism survives "more by virtue of a common political project than on the basis of shared theoretical and methodological assumptions" (Heise qtd. in Oppermann 154), its predisposition towards activist perspectives allows an examination of developing sincerity in contemporary fiction that is framed by environmental crisis. Oppermann claims ecocriticism has failed to achieve a cohesive voice and requires a deeper engagement with theory and materiality; however, as contemporary fiction and criticism has moved to favour an engaged literature and sincere voice, environmental concern has begun to adopt a broader perspective that recognises humankind as being intrinsically part of these planetary shifts. In other words, the shifting perspective of ecocriticism identifies a new lens of human reality that recognises the broader context of the lived experience on a changing planet.

The American Novel from the 1980s

In order to demonstrate the correlation between the sincere voice in contemporary fiction and its relationship to environmental consciousness, I will provide a brief overview of the American novel since 1980. Postmodernism had a significant impact on the way sincerity in fiction unfolded, and as such I begin with a summary of postmodernism before moving to the turn of the millennium, and finally, the contemporary American novel.

Postmodernism

When examining the history of the American novel from 1980, it is inevitable that discussions of postmodernism will arise. Of course, the term itself is notoriously difficult to define, a fact recognised by its own proponents. As Brian McHale writes, "Nothing about this term is unproblematic, nothing about it is entirely satisfactory" (3). There are, however, common characteristics or markers that are agreed upon. Postmodernism displays a scepticism towards what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as "grand narrative" (*The Postmodern Condition* xxiii); that is, the idea that an ideology such as capitalism, the belief in technology, or the progression of knowledge might provide an explanation for the ways of the world. Lyotard pinpoints science as an example that "legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse […] making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (*The Postmodern Condition* xxiii). According to Lyotard, the

computer age transformed the nature of knowledge into quantitative collections of data with concise rules. While he claims "there is a strict interlinkage between the kind of language called science and the kind called ethics and politics" (8), the nature of scientific discourse negates the ethics and politics behind the use of language. This is because science depends on administration and politics for capital, meaning that "the right to decide what is true is not independent of the right to decide what is just, even if the statements consigned to these two authorities differ in nature" (*The Postmodern Condition* 8). According to Lyotard, science plays "the language game" (*The Postmodern Condition* 26), displacing narrative knowledge and the metanarratives of philosophy. It follows that "the 'loss of meaning' in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative" (*The Postmodern Condition* 26). Steven Connor argues the weakening of delineation between classes, religions, and high and low culture evidence the growing scepticism towards grand narratives. He argues "Centrist or absolutist notions of the state, nourished by the idea of the uniform movement of history towards a single outcome, were beginning to weaken […] Given these changes, it seemed to many reasonable to assume that equivalent changes would take place in the spheres of art and culture" (3). Based on the newfound questionable basis for knowledge, questions such as "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (McHale 10) begin to characterise postmodern literature. The decentralisation of knowledge destabilises the human experience not only in relation to the world around the individual, but in relation to other people. As such, the postmodern experience of reality (or "reality") is characterised by isolation,

insularity and detachment from the multi-layered simulation of the world and those within it.

The American novel became, as Patrick O'Donnell describes, "a literature in search of a language to contend with reality, or more accurately, a literature recognising that the infinitely complicated relation between reality and the imagination can only be viewed partially" (34). American literature became an increasingly diverse body of work characterised by stylistic and aesthetic experimentation that grappled with the question of how to represent reality when the human experience of it prevents our ability to perceive it.

The explosion of poststructuralist theory had a further, swift impact on American fiction that fed into the scepticism of grand narrative. The 1966 symposium at Johns Hopkins University that resulted in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato's *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (1970), saw French structuralism presented to the American scholarly community for the first time, leading to the propagation of poststructuralist and deconstructionist theory throughout the United States. What followed was a generation of fiction writers that were highly educated and aware of poststructuralist theory[3]. The subsequent literary generation produced "highly intelligent and focused literary experimentation", and

[3] Kathy Akker is a key literary example, with Katie R. Muth noting Akker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) reveals "the traces of her encounters with continental theory" (88).

the "publication of a rich body of fiction highly deserving of critical scrutiny" (Green 4-5).

The End of History and Postmodernism

The proliferation of the "end of history" has multiple origin points for the post-1980s novel. As Fredric Jameson begins *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: "The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that" (1). Postmodern scepticism about the nature of reality compounded with the "end of history" and the possible "end of time." Lyotard's postmodernist perspective deconstructed the grand narrative of history in favour of "petites histoires" that competed for dominance. The fall of the Berlin Wall saw Francis Fukayama controversially claim that "we have reached the end of history as such … the end point of man's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (qtd. in O'Donnell 125). Bill McKibben additionally posited the "End of Nature" due to the growing environmental crisis, and the "end of literature" was feared due to the increasing dependence on screen technology. Thus, as Jay Prosser claims, "the figure for the 1990s may be trans: transnational, transhistorical, and transitional" (qtd. in Burn "Introduction" 6).

Not surprisingly, the "approach of the millennium exerted a magnetic attraction for American writers long before the last decade of the twentieth century"

(Burn "Introduction" 2). The "millennial infection" saw a spike in post-apocalyptic imaginings and parallel universes that reflected the temporal concerns of the new millennium[4]. At the same time however, "the 1990s saw the initiation of large-scale suspicion toward and innovations away from postmodernism among high literary authors" (Smith 2). That is, despite the concept of the postmodern being so frequently employed to describe the state of American society at large (Connor 2), authors and literary theorists such as David Foster Wallace[5], Jonathan Franzen, and Jeffrey Eugenides expressed scepticism towards the proliferation of the postmodern perspective, fearing it would instigate a large-scale entropic standstill in American culture. Like Wallace, in 1996 Franzen stated his mission was "to reject postmodernist social critique in favor of what he defined as the 'conservative' posture of psychological realism" (qtd. in Smith 2). This was, after postmodernism, a radical announcement that hinted towards the mentality of new American fiction.

The Turn of the Millennium

While the "end of postmodernism" was a mentality that had firmly replaced notions of "the end of history", the delineation between postmodernism and "after" postmodernism is not as clearly evidenced in the American novel. There was as Rachel Greenwald Smith describes it, a kind of collaboration between postmodern stylistic features and the more sincere and realist intentions of American novelists: "What

[4] Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888) and John Updike's *Toward the End of* Time (1997) as key examples.
[5] For an in-depth examination of Wallace's perspective, see Chapter 2.

resulted from this truce between formal experimentalism and formal conservatism was mind-bendingly plural […] Despite this plurality, there was a general acceptance among 2000s authors and critics that the literary landscape had become unanchored from any single descriptive periodizing term" (3).

The first decade of the 20th Century is characterised by destabilisation and a series of cultural crises. As Robin van den Akker et al. summarise,

> the millennial generation came of age; the maturity and availability of digital technologies and renewable technologies reached a critical threshold […] the era of 'facile fossils' and fantasies of nuclear abundance gave way to 'extreme oil' and dreams of fracking-induced independence; the so-called fourth wave of terrorism hit Western shores […] immigration policies and multicultural ideals backlashed in the midst of a revival of nationalist populism; US hegemony declined; the Arab Spring toppled many a dictator that had long served as a puppet for foreign vested interests; bad debts became, finally and inevitably, as much a problem for the Global North as it always had been for the Global South; and the financial crises inaugurated yet another round of neoliberalisation […], exposing and deepening the institutionalised drive towards financial instability, economic inequality, labour precarity and ecological disaster. (*Metamodernism* 11-12)

The concept of "end of history" was replaced with a revisioning of what history might look like in future criticism and literature, with Fukuyama releasing "The Future of

History" in 2012. The September 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre, although over a decade after the turn of the century, signified the final departure of the postmodern irony that characterised the previous years. Novels such as Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) and Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall* (2005) used 9/11 to explore how perspectives shift during crisis, and reflect on the intricacies of human experience when fundamental reality narratives are challenged[6]. The severity of the events throughout the decade spurred on the literary push towards realism, as cultural and social shifts reawakened themes of violence, war, and environmental change. The seriousness of these concerns fostered the imperative to give voice to the human experience. To quote Smith,

> the belief that American literature should again engage in earnest with the realities of human experience quickly became commonplace in the early years of the century, as the political, economic, and ecological realities of the time accelerated and cemented aesthetic changes already in process. (4)

An increased interest in historical fiction (Susan Choi's *American Woman* (2003); Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document* (2006); Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* (2007)); neorealism (Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot* (2011), Ben Marcus's *The Father Costume* (2002)); and memoir (Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000); James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003); Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped* (2013); and Helen

[6] For more on "reality narratives" see Chapter 4.

MacDonald's *H is for Hawk* (2015)) reflects the swing back towards more accessible forms of literature that directly appeal to the lives of readers.

Adam Kelly describes this newfound sincerity in fiction as a return to convention. Referring to the generation of novelists educated at the height of postmodern theory (including Wallace, Eugenides, Franzen and Dana Spiotta), Kelly claims the "self-conscious ethos" of the contemporary American novelist stems from the realisation the experimentation of the postmodern period "had the perverse effect of leaving a vacuum for the neoliberal ethos – where the market serves as the only binding force, and the individual is thrown back upon her own resources – to make its home and thrive" ("Formally Conventional Fiction" 48-49). In this way, contemporary fiction writers can be seen as "second-generation survivors of that trauma, whose instinct is to seek a more stable vision through critical distance and deeper historical understanding" (51). Contrary to Kelly's return of convention, the pursuit of authenticity in novels such as Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* (2010) "see[s] realism as an epistemological aim that might require nonrealist formal strategies" (Smith 7). Smith demonstrates postmodern narrative techniques are sometimes necessary to enact critique of postmodern culture. Using Franzen's *The Corrections* to articulate her argument, she states that "though *The Corrections* satirizes capitalist ideology, it nonetheless relies on narrative patterns that play well with that ideology" (qtd. in Konstantinou "Neorealist Fiction" 112). What is significant is not

narrative technique per se, but the authorial voice: the intention to achieve a sincere form of realism.

Therefore, contemporary fiction does not necessarily reject postmodern narrative techniques. Lee Konstantinou describes the mission of the contemporary novelist, stating "writers defend the artistic merit and power of realist conventions and do not necessarily dispute the claim that our techno-social or political-economic reality has, in some sense, become postmodern" ("Neorealist Fiction" 112). Instead, they hope to "overcome the critical, sceptical, or depressive ethos postmodernist thought and fiction allegedly engender" ("Neorealist Fiction" 112). Jeffery Nealon plays off Jameson with the dubbing of "Post-postmodernism", recognising "the initial 'post' in the word is less a marker of postmodernism's having finally used up its shelf life at the theory store than it is a marker of postmodernism's having mutated, passed beyond a certain tipping point to become something recognisably different" (ix)[7]. Alternatively, when Timotheus Vermeulen and van den Akker proposed "Metamodernism" as the descendent of postmodernism, they describe a "structure of feeling" in between a "new modernism" and postmodern detachment ("Notes on" 2). Metamodernism, they claim, is "characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment" ("Notes on" 2). In literature, this manifests "through a mix of or oscillation between pre-modernist,

[7] Additional alternatives include Eric Gans' "post-millenialism" and Mikhail Epstein's "trans-postmodernism".

modernist, and postmodernist tropes and devices"[8] (van den Akker et al. "Metamodernism" 48). The difference to postmodernism is found in the concern with the temporal moment in which the work is written; "the postmodern subject ultimately lost its capacity to orient itself in time on an existential level and to narrate the relation between past, present, and future on a historical level" ("Metamodernism" 51). In contrast, "the metamodern subject appears to be actively searching for, and cobbling together, this lost sense of temporal and historical orientation, in a mostly haphazard, helter-skelter, and makeshift manner" ("Metamodernism" 51). Authors appear as characters in metamodernist fiction, but unlike postmodern metanarrative, it "is performative", and "applies depth and depthiness and invokes affect and affectedness by foregrounding a contemporary world that the real author and readers share" ("Metamodernism" 51). Thus, the contemporary American novel is not so much a departure from postmodernism, as a reinvigoration of faith, open and critically engaged dialogue, and sincerity.

It should be noted that recent criticism targets the attack on postmodernism by the likes of Wallace, Franzen and Kelly as being reductive of an incredibly complex and diverse literary period. Robert McLaughlin, for example, says:

> Put simply, many of the fiction writers who have come on the scene since the late 1980s seem to be responding to the perceived dead end of postmodernism,

[8] van den Akker et al. discuss Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014) as an example of metafictional autofiction. I examine *10:04* in depth in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

> a dead end that has been reached because of postmodernism's detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of nonreferential language, its tendency, as one writer once put it to me, to disappear up its own asshole ("Post-postmodern" 55)

McLaughlin returns to John Barth's essays, which are often credited with cutting the cord "between text and world" (56). Here, McLaughlin draws out an important distinction that begins to reveal the nuances of postmodern literature that Wallace and his contemporaries overlooked. The "technically up-to-date" artist, Barth claims, "manage nonetheless to speak eloquently and memorably to our still-human hearts and conditions, as the great artists have always done" (qtd. In McLaughlin "Post-postmodern" 56). That is, the detachment and solipsism that heralded the need to return to sincerity is not necessarily a core characteristic of the literature that emerged throughout the postmodern period. It is not that the postmodern author admits defeat in light of the seeming impossibility of sincere representation through language. Rather, McLaughlin argues that "Perhaps the best way to think about postmodern self-referentiality is not as a denial of language and literature's connection to the world but as their self-consciously pointing to themselves trying to point to the world" (59).

Despite the difficulty of clearly differentiating between postmodern and post-postmodern literature that contemporary criticism exposes, this thesis draws upon a specific aspect of contemporary literature that is shared across numerous metamodernist theorists, including Wallace: a conscious and active commitment to

using fiction to represent the present temporal moment, with attention to the lived human experience. In McLaughlin's words, "literature has been and continues to be valuable as a way of critiquing our social world, of finding ways to be human in it, and of truly connecting with others. This is a good way to think about the agenda of post-postmodernism, but only if we understand that all of these things are mediated through language" ("Post-postmodern" 67). While an academic context sees the notion that language manifests and manipulates reality as rather apparent, the lay individual is ignorant of the degree to which language constructs culture. Post-postmodern fiction finds its difference in its sense of social *purpose*; in its authors intention to remind readers that "other realities are possible" (McLaughlin "Post-postmodern" 67).

In the context of this thesis, thinkers such as Jameson, Wallace, Franzen and their contemporaries remain important despite contemporary scholarship challenging their ideas. Fiction throughout the 80's and 90's was inevitably influenced by postmodern thinkers, and as such, theory had an undeniable impact on fiction that must be recognised and engaged with.

From Postmodernism to Post-postmodernism and… Ecocriticism?

Environmental Sincerity

While this has not been sufficiently recognised in the scholarly literature, there are important points of intersection between the development of the field of ecocriticism and the transition from postmodernism to contemporary fiction. In terms of American literary history, my thesis highlights an historical arc that sees environmental thinking as one of the driving forces behind the transition to sincerity. I argue environmental consciousness[9] is one of the key concerns that instigated the shift from postmodern irony and self-referentiality towards a form of fiction that wants to engage actively with contemporary cultural issues and contribute to a critical dialogue.

This thesis draws out the underlying ecological consciousness in a series of texts that are both inside and outside of a clearly ecological cannon. Not only do these texts represent an environmental consciousness in fiction, but they express an ecological urgency that is both characteristic of our contemporary moment in the midst of climate change, and representative of an activist sentiment emerging in fiction over time. Sincerity is a mode of literary interpretation characterised by drawing out a text's concern with the human experience, specifically in terms of the relationship between self and others, meaning and expression, and, in the context of environmentalism, the physical and the metaphysical. In the Anthropocene, these dialectics are mediated by environmental upheaval, as climate change characterises humankind's existence to varying degrees of extremity. Sincere fiction, as such,

[9] I employ the term "environmental consciousness" throughout this thesis to refer to a sense of consideration and understanding towards the physical environment and ecological phenomena. This consideration is, importantly, associated with an awareness of anthropogenic impact on climate change.

should possess an environmental consciousness, a characteristic I argue is seen increasingly from the 1980's to the present. To refer to this pattern of increasing environmental awareness and concern I coin the term "environmental sincerity". Environmental sincerity is a concept that builds upon the pursuit of sincerity identified in metamodern narrative, and in the increasingly activist intention in ecological fiction and scholarship. As discussed above, the concept of sincerity in contemporary fiction takes several forms, from Adam Kelly's 'new sincerity', to Vermeulen and van der Akker's notion of a shared world between the reader and the author. Even excluding Wallace and Franzen's rebellion against the postmodern, a shared "desire to reconnect language and literature to the social world" (McLaughlin "Post-postmodern" 56) can be identified across post-postmodern criticism[10].

In their article "The Futures of American Literature", Danuta Fjellestad and David Watson ask the question, "what is contemporary American literature?". Their analysis is predicated on the fact that postmodernism is the most salient literary movement in America preceding the contemporary novel. They identify one of the prominent understandings of contemporary American literature as fiction that "gives evidence of its contemporality by connecting itself to one or another aspect of contemporary existence" (3). In a way that is quite disparate to postmodern literature, contemporary

[10] The foundational study of sincerity is that of Lionel Trilling, who published *Sincerity and Authenticity* in 1972. The book was published based on a series of lectures Trilling delivered in 1970 and posits that pre-Enlightenment literature sees sincerity as being indicative of a moral good that is central to modern life. Authenticity, he argues, replaces sincerity in the twentieth century as a notion more akin to "staying true to oneself". Trilling does not come to a clear definition of each term, and indeed claims that perhaps a clear definition of each is reductive. Kelly explains Trilling's argument in detail, and how it relates to contemporary notions of sincerity in his article ""David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction" (2010).

US fiction demonstrates its relationship to its contemporary moment through direct engagement with social, historical, and cultural events and practices. Providing a thorough list of contemporary authors from a variety of genres, they draw out the similarities between a collection of texts that provide a "literary response to a social factor" (4). Interestingly, in this turn towards the lived experience (a turn I will expand upon shortly), Fjellestad and Watson note two key themes of the future identified by various literary critics: geopolitical issues and environmentalism. The nature of this environmentalism has various iterations: *The American Novel in Transition 2000-2010* (2017) dedicates a whole section to "the ecological turn"; Boxall suggests a post-apocalyptic environmental novel has "the strongest claim on the future" (Fjellestad et al. 4); Heather Houser finds contemporary literature concerned with "ecosickness"; and Caren Irr views "the contemporary novel as inextricably linked with the world", with a "new green novel" functioning as a critique of liberal individualism and environmental degradation (Irr qtd. in Fjellestad et al. 6). I posit that these iterations of environmental sincerity are inevitable if contemporary fiction is categorised by its concern with the time and place when it is written. Whether it be through the explicit ecological texts Boxall and Irr describe, or the less explicit representation of climate anxiety through Houser's "ecosickness", environmental consciousness is a core descriptor of the present moment, and as such, should be evident in some capacity in contemporary fiction. The multiplicity of reference to an environmental voice in contemporary fiction is indicative of an overarching trend that is underpinned by a contemporary moment in ecological crisis. Environmental sincerity captures this

prerogative, drawing out a convergence between ecocriticism's and eco-fiction's steady progress towards activism and public engagement, and the intention towards sincerity expressed by authors of contemporary fiction.

Ecocriticism Throughout Postmodernism

In contrast to the postmodern rejection of grand narratives, environmental criticism maintained a strong, if critical, connection to ecological science and the physical world as an overarching grand narrative. As Oppermann argues, "ecocriticism confidently styled itself against the poststructuralist strand of contemporary literary theory that had conversely restored significance to the 'word,' resulting in the linguistic turn in the humanities" (154). During the first wave, this was based on the idea that "ecological science might provide the foundations of a new ethic by allowing them to distinguish between right and wrong ways of living in nature" (Heise "Environmental Literature" 23). It was not until the 90s, Heise notes, that environmental scholarship gradually lost faith in ecological science, not least because the highly specialised field was "shot through with cultural and political assumptions" that "unsettled this understanding of the relationship between scientific and environmentalist claims" (23). Despite the perspective of ecological science as a constructed narrative, it was not dismissed entirely in ecocriticism. Rather, second wave scholars simply posited critical questions around funding bodies; the scientific perspective on terms such as "wild", "nature" and "biology"; and whose interests are best served by ecological science.

Therefore, while this cynicism regarding the grand narrative of science had a significant impact on scholarship broadly, it did not lead environmentalism in the same direction as postmodern criticism. The climate change crisis saw a rekindled affinity between ecological science and the environmental humanities. This was primarily due to a drastic increase in climate denial, purported throughout George W. Bush's presidency and repeated efforts to discredit climate science that did not align with the federal government's interests. Subsequently, the same political ambiguities that led environmental scholars to question ecological science now brought the two fields firmly back together, leading to an environmental literature about climate change that "mostly seeks to mount a decisive defense of climate science, and to press home to readers the urgency of rapid action to avert global catastrophe" (Heise "Environmental Literature" 28). As such, though employed with critical attention, the grand narrative established by ecological science persevered throughout postmodern discourse in the environmental humanities, and in literary practice.

Heise outlines three shared core themes of environmental fiction and nonfiction over the past 50 years that reflect cultural environmental concerns and how the physical world remained connected to each wave of environmental criticism. The first "constellation of texts" is defined by its concern with toxicity and its "subtle but destructive impacts on the human body" ("Environmental Literature" 26). Texts such as Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Richard Powers's *Gain* (1998), and Lydia Millet's *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart* (2005) employ science but are "ambivalent in their relation to

[it]" (Heise 26). That is, the limits to human sciences and knowledge are often employed as a technique to escalate fear and demonstrate humanity's lack of awareness regarding the natural world. Buell identifies the increasing concern of toxicity and its impacts as "toxic consciousness" or "toxic discourse" (Buell *Writing for An* 30-31). Originated in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Buell describes toxic consciousness as a "rude awakening from simple pastoral" to a complex pastoral, characterised by a recognition of human dependence on, and corruption of, the environment. Toxicity represents a point of intersection between humankind and the environment that reverses the narrative of human dominance, placing the individual at the mercy of environmental forces. In terms of planetary imagining, toxicity discourse is still largely anthropocentric, and emphasises the human impacts on environmental upheaval.

The second thematic grouping Heise identifies concerns plants and animals endangered by human activities. The 1970s and 80s saw paleobiologists recognise the likelihood of mass extinction of species, leading to a "large-scale transformation of the natural world enter[ing] environmentalist discourse and writing" (Heise "Environmental Literature" 27). Novels such as William S. Burroughs's *Ghost of Chance* (1990), T.C. Boyle's *A friend of the Earth* (2001), and Lydia Millet's *How the Dead Dream* (2010) evoke biodiversity and ecosystems "as a basis for worries about the consequences of species loss" (Heise 27). While these texts appear to demonstrate an appeal to ecological science, Heise argues they fail by continuing to focus on the

individual sense of loss, rather than making an effective argument for the preservation of biodiversity.

The final grouping of environmental texts have been prevalent over the past two decades, and focus on climate change. These novels represent the unification of science and literature, as authors seek to harness and defend environmental science, utilising it to affect their readers and communicate the urgency of climate crisis. They frequently feature scientist characters who explicitly signpost scientific explanations for various phenomena, and endeavour to offer de-anthropocentrised perspectives throughout the text. Michael Crichton goes as far as to cite scientific articles in the footnotes of *State of Fear*. Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012), Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010), and Kin Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capital* trilogy (2004-2007) employ science to bolster their representation of climate change and give credibility to science. Alternatively, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* (2015), Claire Vaye Watkins's *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015) and Omar El Akkad's *American War* (2017) represent near future societies where climate change has ravaged Western civilisation. There is a clear sense that humankind's denial of climate science is responsible for the dystopian worlds that form the new America in these novels.

An Historical Arc

Examining the progression in the themes of environmental fiction that Heise outlines reveals an expansion of perspective. Both environmental scholarship and environmental fiction demonstrate an increasing engagement with science, and an

increasing sense of responsibility to impart knowledge and critically engage the reader in climate imaginings. Activism with an ethical prerogative is embedded in the field of literary ecocriticism, characteristics that can be seen developing more broadly in contemporary fiction. If fiction is positioned to challenge dominant cultural narratives and bridge the divide between science and the lived experience, then climate crisis is certainly the concern of contemporary fiction.

Environmental sincerity recognises the imperative to acknowledge anthropogenic climate change as a characteristic of contemporary culture, and an informing cultural aspect of contemporary literature. Environmental upheaval bears its mark on all aspects of the lived experience in the Anthropocene as rising temperatures, warming oceans, unpredictable weather, and mass extinctions have increasingly apparent effects on human civilisations all over the world. Therefore, writing fiction that engages with the lived experience and embodies the state of being human in the contemporary moment must recognise climate change. An ecologically minded perspective on contemporary fiction reveals a slow but steady increase in climate crisis awareness, an environmental sincerity that documents the ever-present shadow of climate change over contemporary US culture.

Methodology

In this thesis, I use close reading to draw out an environmental sincerity in five important works of North American literary fiction. While there are numerous works of fiction in the 70's, 80's and 90's that explicitly examine ecological themes (Edward

Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang (*1975), Gregory Benford's *Timescape* (1980), Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* (1998)), my intention is to highlight a growing ecological awareness in the US canon. As such, I focus on prestigious texts that are taught in US classrooms and have been nominated for (and in some cases won) literary awards. While there is a significant body of environmental fiction that pre-exists the point at which I begin this study, my intention is to identify an increasing concern with ecological crisis that is not limited explicitly to the genre of ecological fiction. Environmental themes permeate the canon, and the discourse surrounding the Anthropocene invites us to re-examine texts that are less overt in their ecological messaging to dissect the growing environmental voice in American fiction more broadly.

By using close reading as a method of analysis as opposed to the encyclopaedic or thematic approach of environmental anthologies (Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions* and Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* are key examples of this method), I demonstrate the depth of environment concerns and agendas in texts that do not necessarily advertise their environmentalism. As such, each chapter of this thesis will examine various narrative elements to demonstrate a pervading environmental consciousness in each novel, and how sincerity permeates American environmental fiction as activist intentions increase over time. By examining a variety of elements in each text ranging from authorial

voice, character representation, to description, I demonstrate that each canonical novel reveals a fundamental layer of environmental discourse that in some cases has remained obscure in literary scholarship.

The environmental consciousness in these novels positions environmental discourse as a quintessential voice that brings climate crisis into the cultural imagination, and reconfigures the fundamental question of what it means to be human on a changing planet. To demonstrate the depth of environmental influence, I have selected canonical novels that both implicitly and explicitly engage with environmental themes and ideas, representing a broader shift towards sincerity in the contemporary US novel. Therefore, rather than answering the question of how to define climate fiction, I argue that environmental concern is a theme that has grown exponentially, becoming increasingly evident in contemporary fiction as authors turn towards the lived human experience. Each novel examined is part of the literary transition in American fiction from postmodern irony and detachment, to sincere and earnest engagement with critical issues facing humanity through the lens of environmental literature.

1. I need to acknowledge that the sincerity movement is largely built on the work of white US authors. Similarly, the field of ecocriticism has its epicentre in the US. The founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992, and its inhouse journal (ISLE) in 1993, heralded a vast expansion of the field in America, with the later publication of Cheryll

Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) placing the US as a driver of ecocriticism's development. There is a significant branch of contemporary ecocritical scholarship that examines global voices in the midst of ecological crisis; as outlined above, transnationalism is a cornerstone of third and fourth wave ecocriticism. Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) explores the gross inequities that stem from global inaction against climate change, while *Ecocriticism of the Global South: Ecocritical Theory and Practice* (2015), edited by Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Vidya Sarveswaran, examines the relationship between ecology and the politics of survival, and examines the first-world sensibility of ecocritical studies. Another significant collection, *Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies: Conversations from Earth to Cosmos* (2016) edited by Salma Monani and Joni Adamson, examines the diversity of Indigenous perspectives and the ecological underpinnings of First Nations' artistic expression. There are limitations to national perspectives and frameworks that fail to acknowledge both the global reality of climate change and the diversity of voices responding to environmental crisis. While this thesis's focus on environmental sincerity may be seen to reflect white American discourses, further research may look towards both global and indigenous fictions and perspectives.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter 1, I examine Don DeLillo's prize-winning novel *White Noise* (1985). *White Noise* is frequently cited by scholars as an exemplary postmodern novel and is still studied across the US in this context. However, as I argue, it is also key example of Heise's first category of environmental fiction. *White Noise* challenges notions of postmodern simulation by using environmental trauma to reconnect its protagonist with the physical world. While the scepticism of science is evident in DeLillo's representation of toxic infection, a close reading of the novel with an environmental perspective reveals an engaged literature that demonstrates an active and informed voice against postmodern detachment. This is not to say environmental toxicity is used purely to challenge the postmodern perspective; rather, I argue DeLillo establishes the postmodern perspective as a dire and fundamental barrier to addressing climate crisis. This chapter discusses the standard postmodern reading of *White Noise*, before reimagining the novel in light of environmental crisis, and revealing DeLillo's appeal to the physical world and challenge to simulated reality. By positioning *White Noise* as a postmodern novel that in fact challenges postmodern culture, DeLillo's novel is recognised as representative of the beginning of a historical arc in American literary tradition, an arc that sees the development of a text that engages with the lived human experience.

Building on the implicit environmental consciousness in key postmodern fictions, my second chapter examines David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996). The

novel is oft-cited as a turning point in American fiction, as Wallace enacts the philosophy of writing characterised by sincerity, previously outlined in "E Unibus Pluram". *Infinite Jest* is situated in the first of Heise's three groupings, representing a future America re-determining its borders due to toxicity and excessive waste. I argue the well-documented intention behind Wallace's novel signifies a change in the fictional voice that echoes the ethical concern of environmental fiction. In the late 90s, environmental criticism is engaged in a critical feedback loop between science and culture. While the bedrock of science is under scrutiny, the shared experience of living on a planet in crisis remains a communal narrative that informs scholarship and drives the environmental perspective. Wallace's sincerity brings with it the same concern for the shared human experience, aligning the pursuits of environmentalism and literary sincerity. This chapter further establishes a historical arc that sees environmental engagement with the physical world reflected in contemporary literature.

As contemporary literature interacts with environmental themes, the intersection between the physical self and the Cartesian model of selfhood becomes increasingly difficult to navigate. In Chapter 3[11], I examine a key environmental novel by an author who is critically recognised for her ecological perspective. Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000) demonstrates the difficulties of integrating the concept of humankind as a species into the theoretical aspects of selfhood that

[11] It should be noted that Chapter 3 is currently under review for publication in Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment (ISLE). It takes the form of a scholarly article rather than a traditional thesis chapter.

postmodern culture emphasises. For example, when personality and decision-making are regarded as determined by biology, contemporary understandings of gender are challenged. Kingsolver's novel is an example of the second grouping of environmental novels that repositions human characters as being small parts of a diverse ecosystem. Informed by her degree in biology, Kingsolver draws upon human biology to forge connections between her protagonists and the natural environment. This chapter examines the literary strategies Kingsolver employs to overcome the problematic binaries enforced by a biological approach to human identity, signposting some of the conceptual challenges that arise from the delineation between human and planetary perspectives of time.

Chapter 4 examines a climate change novel that can be just as easily read outside of these parameters. Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014) employs metanarrative to explore the diversity of human reality narratives. While metanarrativity is typically deemed a characteristic of postmodern fiction, Lerner contrasts his protagonist's realisation of subjective reality against the constancy of the physical world, bookending the novel with two hurricanes, physical events that forcibly reconnect the subject to the physical. In the context of Heise's three categories, *10:04* is unique as a climate change novel. Lerner does not put science on a pedestal, nor does he engage with environmental science directly in any significant way. Rather, as I argue, *10:04* is a powerful environmental novel in the way it broaches human subjectivity, exploring the points at which this subjectivity conflicts with the physical. By firmly positioning

the human at the mercy of the physical world, Lerner establishes nature and the environment as the metanarrative of the Anthropocene and reconfigures the subjectivity of reality narratives as a tool, rather than a vice.

The final chapter of my thesis examines Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018). Powers's novel is an example of an activist text that engages heavily with scientific discourse and attempts to take on perspectives beyond the human. It also stands as an example of a text that evokes Wallace's sincerity of voice in an explicitly ecocritical context. *The Overstory* pushes environmentalism in fiction to its very limits, and some of the reviews of the novel demonstrate the "sentimentality", "the yawn", and the "eye-rolling" that Wallace prophesised would come with the "new literary rebels" of sincerity ("E Unibus Pluram" 193). This is to be expected when fiction takes on challenging anthropocentric notions of temporality, and attempts to navigate planetary perspectives. *The Overstory* unites the values of fourth wave ecocriticism and Heise's observations of the climate change novel. Like Kingsolver, Powers writes with a clear activist intention of revealing the folly of perceived human dominance over nature. A scientist character acts as a mouthpiece to uphold ecological science, and there is a sense of enlightenment realised by those who realise the power and grandeur of nature.

Trexler claims there are two critical alternatives to reading climate fiction. The first is to read these texts as "more or less factual representations of scientific phenomena of climate change", while the second is reading them as "cultural texts

that represent the collective imagination about global warming" (34). I suggest that both of these iterations have merit in the analysis of climate fiction, collectively demonstrating fiction as an entity that interacts and engages with climate change in a much more complex capacity than simply as an imaginative rendition of climate phenomena.

While *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* are not traditionally seen as climate novels, more recent scholarship illuminates the environmental consciousness in these texts. The perception of these novels has therefore changed in light of the new focus on climate change, and the degree to which humankind have influenced the natural world. This, alongside their longstanding cult status, makes them informative case studies on the development of environmental thought. Together with *10:04*, these novels demonstrate a clear critique of postmodern detachment, both through the impact of media and consumption, and the inherent sense of isolation that occurs in the abolition of grand narratives. I argue the environmental lens demonstrates characteristics of postmodern culture have dangerous consequences for humanity. In deconstructing science and other such grand narratives, the individual is conceptually separated from the physical environment. This negates the environmental consequences of human action by removing responsibility from the individual and human communities. Environmental fear can be recognised as an underlying concern in these novels, permeating various aspects of the lived experience. As time goes on, these novels demonstrate an increasingly sincere voice that dissects reality constructs,

referring the subject back to the physical world and the shared human experience. Rather than mourning the apparent inevitability of simulacral reality, the malleability of human perspectives is reframed as an asset through which a more ecocentric perspective might be integrated into ways of knowing.

Prodigal Summer and *The Overstory* are much more explicit in their environmental messaging, and as such, the leap to an environmentally conscious reading is significantly more direct. Each overtly engage with environmental science and position themselves as activist texts both in their content and authorial commentary outside the texts themselves. Both Kingsolver and Powers publicly situate fiction as a means of education through the communication of scientific principle, and in the attempt to creatively reimagine humankind's relationship with the natural world. These fictions emphasise a broader challenge faced by environmental fiction: how can humankind think beyond itself, and towards a planetary scale of thinking? The sincerity in these texts is extended beyond anthropocentrism; rather than exploring the shared human experience, it grapples with the concept of the shared human experience of being animal, and at the mercy of the natural world. More than writing something readers can personally connect with and learn from, these fictions attempt to expand perspectives and challenge readers connections with the broader world by appealing to much more fundamental aspects of the human experience such as specieshood, survival, and the false perception of human dominion over nature.

In titling this thesis, *"A story to match any fiction": Environmental Sincerity in Contemporary US Fiction*, I hope to highlight several key aspects of my argument. The quote I have taken from Richard Powers's *The Overstory* reflects the fact that it is difficult to write about the role of fiction on a changing planet without sounding slightly naive – the "eye-rolling" cynicism Wallace describes in "E Unibus Pluram" sometimes seems an appropriate description when discussing the lofty ambitions of the climate novel. Yet this seeming naivety captures the spirit of the quote perfectly. "A story to match any fiction" is a broad summary of what environmental fiction seeks to highlight about climate crisis. The scale of human impact on Earth and our subsequent climate learnings challenge the way we, as humans, have conceived of our entire history. The most fundamental story of humankind has shifted and been compressed into a mere moment in the history of the planet. It is truly a story more akin to fiction.

The current environmental crisis recontextualises the sincerity posited by David Foster Wallace and his contemporaries, though not in a way that reduces Wallace's message. In many ways, sincerity in fiction is more important than ever as humankind is forced to face the increasing fragility of our world. Rather than exploring what it means to be human, environmental sincerity examines what it means to be a part of a living ecosystem on a changing planet. With its motivation being sincere examination of the human experience, contemporary US fiction is well-positioned to explore this conceptual problem. While understandings of human

existence are still largely anthropocentric in nature, the imaginative experimentation of fiction is arguably one of the best platforms to break down and reconfigure these perspectives. Environmental consciousness in contemporary fiction is a form of activism: it challenges, informs, and inspires readers to rewrite their notions of history, and think beyond the human.

Chapter 1: Greening Postmodernism in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

Introduction

Fear of nuclear technology is a quintessential characteristic of 1980s America, alluding to a shifting understanding of humankind's relationship with the environment. On 28th March 1979, a partial nuclear meltdown in Reactor 2 of the Nuclear Generating Station on Three Mile Island became one of the most significant accidents in commercial US nuclear power plant history, ranking 5/7[12] on the International Nuclear Event Scale. Despite a lack of casualties, the incident contributed to a sharp increase in environmental awareness and nuclear concern in the US during the 1980s and is reflected in numerous works of popular fiction, television, and film. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) is one such work, a complex literary exploration of fear of death, consumerism, and technology that engages heavily with the cultural fear stemming from numerous contemporary toxic events. Published only days after the Bhopal disaster, the novel carried an unexpected relevance which many early reviewers and critics commented on, perhaps contributing to its commercial success.

[12] The International Nuclear Event Scale was introduced in 1990 as a tool to communicate the severity of nuclear incidents and accidents. Three Mile Island ranked as level 5 out of 7, or "Accident with Wider Consequences", meaning that it was only two levels below a "Major Accident".

This chapter will present an ecocritical reading of *White Noise* that takes into account these early critical responses. It also looks to more recent in-depth studies of DeLillo's references to toxicity and waste in order to demonstrate that the novel captures a latent ecological awareness in postmodern thinking. I suggest that while media representation is a key focus in the novel, *White Noise* does not fully support claims of a media-constructed reality without connection to anything "real". On the contrary, DeLillo's novel appears to reintroduce the referent, highlighting moments when the physical world disrupts media reality of images and simulacra. Thus, *White Noise* reveals the impact of the physical world on the human experience, identifying nature as postmodernism's repressed other, and revealing an underlying desire to reconnect with nature and the physical environment.

White Noise is widely recognised as one of the foundational postmodern novels of the 1980s. Critics such as Tom LeClair, Molly Wallace, Katrina Harack and Frank Lentricchia cite *White Noise* as a postmodern classic and an exemplar of postmodern fiction, alongside novels such as Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965). Jeremy Green further claims that DeLillo's focus on "the information overload of contemporary culture", and the "allure of spectacles of disaster and violence… [and] free-floating anxiety" have spoken with "particular force to writers and critics of the past decade" (4), making DeLillo one of the most significant literary figures in the study of postmodern literature. Annjeanette Weise states that *White Noise* seem to

speak directly to a pivotal time in postmodern theory upon its release, [13] and exemplified the "present sociocultural condition" of the time (1). However, there is a point where the endlessness of the postmodern simulacra comes to appear reductive in relation to DeLillo's concern with the physical world. In her essay, Weise uses *White Noise* as an example of how "fiction provides a distinctly narrative means of countering the loss of individual, meaningful experience so often associated with the ahistorical, simulacral, and absurdly ironic nature of postmodernity" (2). Weise's argument focuses on identity formation in the novel; however, I intend to demonstrate that the environmental aspects of *White Noise* are key to the representation of an underlying desire in postmodern thought to break through to the physical world. An environmental reading of the novel not only provides a new lens to interpret the novel; the ecological perspective reveals a deeper trauma that was always present in *White Noise*, a trauma that is characterised by the postmodern condition and its detachment from the physical world.

This chapter argues that DeLillo's *White Noise* represents postmodern American culture in a state of crisis, characterised by the subject's inability to cope with outbreaks of physical reality. Rather than acknowledging the impacts and influences of the physical world, characters attempt to assert control over their reality via preoccupation with the media and the ever-evolving nature of consumerism. Postmodern culture acts as "an organisational apparatus" (Weise 3) that shapes

[13] Seen in the publication of Baudrillard's *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1988), Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1984), and Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979).

subsequent individual, social and cultural narratives, and perpetuates a harmful disconnection from nature. By exploring DeLillo's engagement with postmodern theory, it becomes clear the novel reveals the individual desire to surpass postmodern theory's limitations, and the psychological struggle that occurs in the continued denial of the impacts of the physical world on the individual. Thus, in understanding the depth to which characters are traumatised by the alienation inherent in postmodern culture, the fear of death and endings can be identified as a psychological lacuna that lies between the lived experience and the physical world. Environmental crisis, specifically the Airborne Toxic Event, is an occurrence that forces the subject to reconsider the role of the environment, illustrating the inevitable impact of the physical world on the individual. The examination of how characters assimilate the experience of the Airborne Toxic event to the detached, postmodern reality they are familiar with, reveals *White Noise*'s strategy in overcoming postmodern ideologies. While the novel establishes a setting that appears to be quintessentially postmodern, especially in Part 1, I argue it is the intrusion of the physical that allows DeLillo to question and challenge aspects of postmodern reality. As awareness of the human impact on nature escalated in popular and scientific debate, DeLillo analysed humankind's relationship with the environment, establishing White Noise as a key text of the Anthropocene. My position expands on more recent criticism of White Noise, arguing DeLillo takes a critical attitude towards the postmodern condition. By highlighting a deeper trauma that stems from the denial of humankind's intrinsic ties to the physical world, DeLillo reaffirms the importance of the physical world. This

chapter will establish *White Noise* as one of the first major postmodern texts to explore the unstable relationship between humankind and the environment. DeLillo reveals a latent anxiety that later authors of US fiction respond to in his exploration of the complexity of humankind's dependence on the natural world.

"Another postmodern sunset": The Postmodern Reading of *White Noise*

In this section I analyse the Baudrillardian reading of *White Noise* as identified by Leonard Wilcox (1991), Harack (2013), and Adina Baya (2014), among others, before extending upon and challenging it later in this chapter. While DeLillo's novel is undeniably a fascinating exploration of postmodern culture, not to mention the idea of a media-constructed reality, I argue that it also brings into focus the physical world that is neglected in a Baudrillardian analysis. The Baudrillardian evocation of the simulacrum contradicts DeLillo's representation of the biological inevitability of death as well as the characters' dependence upon and interaction with their physical environment. Ignored by postmodern readings of the novel, these are in fact key aspects of *White Noise* and inform an ecocritical reading supported by more recent criticism (e.g. Peter Boxall (2008), Annjeanette Weise (2012), Molly Wallace (2016)).

DeLillo's "breakout novel" *White Noise* is a year in the life of Jack Gladney, a college professor pioneering the field of Hitler Studies. Split into three parts, the novel

follows Jack and his family, jig-sawed together from his and wife Babette's previous marriages. The first of three parts, "Waves and Radiation", establishes the cultural environment in which the family live. Consumerism, family life, and Jack and Babette's paralysing fear of death are painted against a backdrop of academic satire. Part 2, "The Airborne Toxic Event", sees the town of Blacksmith hit by the eponymous crisis, a massive black cloud of a toxin known as Nyodene D heading towards the city from a crashed railcar. The impact of this event continues through to the final part of the novel, where Jack discovers that Babette has been medicating herself with an experimental drug, Dylar, that is supposed to cure the fear of death. The novel is a meditation on society's fear of death and dying, fears that are emphasised by the shortcomings of a culture that idolises supermarkets, the media, and consumerism.

DeLillo's representation of the postmodern subject engages heavily with important postmodern theorists[14], and these theoretical ties remain relevant to contemporary readings of DeLillo's work. According to David Grausam, *White Noise* appears to be "tailor-made for readings that follow Baudrillard" (105), a perspective Heise reflects when she characterises *White Noise* as a "narrative showcase of the postmodern culture of the simulacrum, a novel in which simulation systematically takes precedence over whatever may be left of the real" (*Sense of Place* 163). Baudrillard claims that current postmodern society is a full simulation. The first of his four phases

[14] Of course, Baudrillard did not himself identify as a postmodern theorist; however his work, especially *Simulacra and Simulations,* has been applied so frequently in postmodern analysis that it is difficult to separate Baudrillard's simulacrum from its postmodern applications.

of the image see the image as a reflection of reality. The second and third phases find the image beginning to degrade reality, as it becomes akin to a mask, or a perversion of reality. Finally, the fourth phase of the image is the total annihilation of any sense of reality, and the subject is essentially trapped in a full simulation (Baudrillard *Simulacra and Simulations* 6). Using Disneyland as an example of the "entangled orders of simulation" (12), Baudrillard claims that the artifice of a reality outside the park is maintained by the "miniature and comic strip" forms of American idealism within. Despite this, Disneyland merely masks a third order simulation: "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal and of simulation" (12). Symbols and signs remove the subject from any sense of a stable, constant reality by replacing this reality with a "network of endless, unreal circulation" (12) of images, until the mutability of reality renders it meaningless. The experience of reality is thus determined by a procession of simulacra, where media culture, exchange-value, and global capitalism each contribute to eroding the distinction between reality and the simulacrum. The simulacrum is the result of the fourth phase of the image, where reality itself is entirely replaced by networks of signifiers with no point of origin. Thus, for Baudrillard, no "real" exists in the postmodern world. The final phase of the image sees "no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (*Simulacra and Simulations* 6).

The barn sequence early in *White Noise* is perhaps the scene where DeLillo most explicitly draws the reader's attention to Baudrillardian theory. Lentricchia cites both this scene and another from DeLillo's *Americana* (1971) as the primal scenes of DeLillo's America (415), where the act of watching is more quintessentially part of culture than the observed object itself. DeLillo's earlier novel sees protagonist David Bell observe a photographer photographing a photograph commemorating the Vietnam war. This scene is replicated in the early pages of *White Noise* when Jack and Murray visit "The Most Photographed Barn in America". As they approach the barn, there is a striking description of Jack watching Murray watching the crowds watching and photographing the barn. This sequential watching is then reflected back onto the reader who is, in a sense, also watching via the act of reading. The barn itself is left out of the chain of watchers. The passage is a collection of secondary images, dealing with the "organisation of collective attention, specifying neither [the barn's] colour nor its architectural style" (Nye 34). It is, of course, no longer the barn itself that is famous. Rather, the ritualistic watching of the barn, the original object of attention, has made the act of experiencing the barn's presence the sole purpose of visiting the barn. As they stand and observe the structure, Murray says "What was the barn like before it was photographed? […] We can't answer […] because we've read the sign and seen the people snapping the pictures" (13). This scene can be understood as an allegory for the simulacrum, where the barn itself is outside of the realm of comprehension, concealed by infinite layers of representation based on the idea of "The Most Photographed Barn in America".

In the same way that the image of the barn creates the experience of the barn, media and consumer culture are cast in the novel as sources of reality formation, tying media culture to capitalist ideals that characterise postmodern reality in the West. Jameson describes cultural immersion in the simulacrum in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), stating that one of the conditions for late capitalism is the mass reproduction of simulacra, which creates a "world with an unreality and a free-floating absence of 'the referent'" ("Reification and Utopia" 135). The fragmented nature of postmodern reality weakens the subject's grasp on the past, leading to Jameson's use of Lacan to diagnose the "schizophrenic subject" (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic* 27). Postmodern reality de-situates the subject through its temporal manipulation, making it a near-schizophrenic experience that is caught eternally in the present, seeming not to evolve or progress. This reiteration of the present leads to the "breakdown of the signifying chain" so "the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers" or, "a series of pure and unrelated presents in time" (Jameson *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic* 27). Thus, "the logic of the simulacrum [does not] merely replicate the logic of late capitalism; it reinforces and intensifies it" (Jameson *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic* 46) through the temporal manipulation of the present. The act of watching the watchers of the barn becomes an irony highlighting the fact that the watched is only watched due to the attention of collective watchers in the first place. The barn's value lies in the imperative to watch it, and in this sense, the reader is exposed, through Jack, to "the very disease from which he, Murray, barn-watchers and readers all suffer" (Wallace "E Unibus

Pluram" 171). The barn is a symbol of collective popular culture, emphasising the role of representation and the inescapable effect of image creation on the subject. Temporally, the barn no longer exists in any substantial form, as the nature of its presence manifests through its various representations. Even before arriving at the barn, Jack and Murray pass five signs to "THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA" (13). Prior to seeing the barn itself, a preconceived notion of the barn's celebrity and importance is superimposed over the structure, the act of preserving its image more important than the barn itself; as Murray says, "Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn" (14). The reader is forced into the same mediated space as the characters occupy, left without personal observation beyond secondary representations of the barn, but a strong sense of the imperative to watch nonetheless. They are thus conditioned to be aware of the novel's whole reality as a simulation, casting a shadow of doubt over even basic interactions and events throughout the text. Despite the knowledge of the strength of representation, the seeming absence of physical description places the reader within the same loop of representation as the characters, with only enough critical distance to recognise the fraudulent cycle of bearing witness. The physicality and positioning of the subject in the "real world" is contradicted by emphasis on media representation, the symbolic, and the nature of late capitalism, creating an environment where "no present history actively shaped by humans can evolve" (Cavedon 264). By this logic, the very nature of postmodern culture has allowed for wide scale reproduction of simulacra, dissolving the real in favour of the hyperreal simulacrum.

The subject's separation from the real enforces a traumatic divide between the subject's experience of the world and their physical presence in the world. As Baudrillard argues, "the great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that opens onto an age of simulation" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 43). The subject's separation from the real is significant enough to be traumatic, as the lack of authentic connection and experience suspends the subject from any sense of stability. Christina Cavedon provides a useful analysis of the postmodern subject in the context of US trauma discourses, where she explores both Baudrillard and Jameson's theory on the postmodern subject using her own theory of US "cultural melancholia". Cavedon reiterates the ties between this separation from the real and trauma in Jameson's text, noting that although Jameson does not explicitly describe the postmodern condition as traumatic, he does refer to the ways late capitalism has "cut human beings off from more rewarding ways of organising the conditions of life" (Cavedon 266). Here, it is a "pre-capitalist" and more "humanistic system" that has been lost, implying that the physical world and human relationships are overridden by a postmodern culture in favour of the image and representation.

Opposing the view that DeLillo writes to merely *represent* the simulacrum in US culture, some critics position *White Noise* as the beginning of a critique of the postmodern ideal. Several critical readings suggest that by evoking the simulacrum in such an explicit way so early in the novel, DeLillo is deliberately creating a critical

space from which to reflect upon the idea of the inescapable simulacrum. David Foster Wallace describes the novel as DeLillo's "televisual clarion-call" ("E Unibus Pluram" 169) to fledgling fictionists to embrace a new sincerity in their writing, a strong shift away from postmodern cynicism and detachment. Identifying DeLillo as the "true prophet of this shift in U.S. fiction", Wallace claims that DeLillo creates an environment where ideas of "TV and metawatching" become themselves "valid *subjects*" of exploration" (169). Postmodernism was always self-reflexive, but what Wallace identifies is a further shift from the study of images as valid objects, to the act of watching, and metawatching as an object of study in its own right. Joseph Dewey echoes Wallace's interests in sincerity and breaking through the representations that define postmodern society. He argues DeLillo has articulated throughout his body of work, "the loss of the authentic self after a half-century assault of images from film, television, tabloids, and advertising that have produced a shallow culture too enamoured of simulations, unable to respond to authentic emotional moments" (*Beyond Grief and Nothing* 6). Dewey's reading sees DeLillo using fiction to demonstrate a loss of culture through mass media, and a loss of sincerity in the postmodern subject. Finally, Harack states that *White Noise* is "anomalous in DeLillo's body of work," and its criticism of postmodernism "reflects his interest in going beneath the surface of American life and meditating more deeply on the nature of individual and cultural trauma" (304). Harack similarly recognises *White Noise* as a turning point in DeLillo's corpus, where the author's use of irony to explore "the body and its vulnerability" (304) in the simulacrum is critical in the representation of

postmodern media culture. These critical sources imply that while *White Noise* may be widely perceived as the quintessential postmodern novel, DeLillo's novel is doing something quite different from its postmodern predecessors.

I suggest the three parts of the novel can be read as an argument for the significance of physicality and the environment in human experience. Building upon DeLillo as challenging the notion of a fourth phase simulacrum, I suggest that the intrusion of the physical world indicates an underlying environmental consciousness in the novel. While DeLillo certainly appears to manifest the overarching hold of simulation on the subject in his novel in Part 1, he also captures the flaws in such a reading in Parts 2 and 3. As the Airborne Toxic Event takes hold, the subject's existence is contextualised not by media-driven consumer culture, but by the experience of being a biological creature living in a corrupted environment, with the trauma of living so detached from physical reality becoming increasingly apparent. The constant presence of death is illuminated by an event that reconnects the subject with their environment, breaking through the layers of representation and simulation to draw the physical body into the experience of selfhood. Following the order DeLillo establishes in *White Noise*, I will first examine the unstable nature of selfhood in Part 1 as it is mediated by media and consumer practices. In doing so, I demonstrate the various ways the novel re-establishes the traumatised subject as part of a physical world with a comparably stable context of environmental crisis.

"We all have an aura to maintain": How Auras are a Deliberate Engagement with Simulacra

Auras are referred to throughout the novel in reference to both living and non-living things. The way these references occur encourage the reader to infer the disconnect between the real and perceived reality. As Murray dissects the absurd layers of watching in the barn scene, he says, "We can't get outside of the aura. We're part of the aura" (13). I suggest that Murray's description of the aura surrounding the barn alludes to a more complex relationship between the watcher and the object than a simulacrum might imply. As much as is possible, Murray establishes the subject's removal from physical reality, as the world of the image prevents anyone from truly witnessing and engaging with the actual barn; yet the reference to aura implies the continued presence of the physical thing itself. This section will examine the use of auras in *White Noise* with the intention of building upon my argument that *White Noise* establishes a disparity between the fluidity of selfhood in postmodern society and the biological self.

In Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), the aura is seen as something the original object or work of art is imbued with by its unique presence in time and space. Benjamin claims that "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: Its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" ("The Work of Art" 214); that is, its aura. The aura in *White Noise*, however, appears to work in a

different way, representing a transient, cultivated version of an object or selfhood that may bear very little affiliation with the authentic original. The aura as DeLillo employs it serves to maintain a connect between the individual and their consistently evolving postmodern fantasy. In other words, the aura portrays a more idealised self rather than representing the authentic original object or the authentic self. As such, the aura allows the subject to shift and change the way they are perceived, harnessing selfhood not to the physical experience or any concept of innate individuality, but to the requirements of postmodern consumer culture. While DeLillo and Benjamin's iteration of the aura retains a similar lack of authenticity, the difference in DeLillo's use of the concept is the deliberate act of creating the aura to mask the original. As characters seek out the latest brands and stylise their purchases, they seek to separate themselves from their own sense of inadequacy. Benjamin sees the aura reduced through a reproduction's inability to connect to the original in time and space. In *White Noise*, however, auras are a deliberate and protective act, with the intention of hiding the original rather than replicating it.

When auras are evoked in the novel, it is always in reference to representation of the self for the benefit of outward audiences. Jack paces "secure in [his] professional aura of power, madness and death" (86) after challenging Murray during a lecture; he later describes his ex-wife Tweedy as having a "collapsed aura in which her body struggled to survive" (102); and when Jack finally identifies the sleeping man on his lawn as his father-in-law, an "aura of knowingness" washes away his anxiety (281).

In each of these scenarios, the aura is a protective barrier between the physical subject and the outside world. In a sense, the physical body is like the barn, where manifestations of knowledge, strength, or professionalism are visible, masking the physicality of the thing itself. After filling in for part of Murray's lecture, Jack says "We all had an aura to maintain, and in sharing mine with a friend I was risking the very thing that made me untouchable" (87). Sharing his expertise in someone else's classroom and putting his pioneering research on the line places Jack in a vulnerable position where his professional opinion may be challenged. The aura Jack has cultivated as an academic is a protective barrier that shields the vulnerability of his selfhood; a selfhood that is connected to the vulnerability of the physical, biological body. Tweedy's physical unwellness — "strain and complaint that showed around the mouth and the eyes, the pulsing at the temple, the raised veins in hands and neck" — are described as a "collapsed aura" (102), as if the failure of her representation of self has a reciprocal relationship with her physical wellbeing. In the deterioration of her aura, the dilapidation of her physical body is revealed, and she is made weak and vulnerable. While reality in the novel is clearly delineated as characterised by representation and simulation, the physicality of the body and the environment is very much intact as the real beneath layers of representation.

DeLillo's representation of American culture suggests that characters are not helpless in their immersion in simulacra; rather, submitting to some degree of immersion in representation is a choice that feels safe, as it provides a communal

shared experience that is more comfortable than the real. It is therefore the disconnection between the physical and the virtual that describes the cultural reality of America in the novel. Just as it is the *representation* of the barn that is famous to the point that the barn dissolves into its interpretations, it is the outward representation, the aura, of the subject that characterises them, establishing a fundamental division between the self and the body. Murray's joyousness in his immersion in the "aura" becomes important for the novel, as it evidences that characters take comfort in immersing themselves in simulacra. Cavedon describes how DeLillo's characters "treasure this condition" as it "offers an escape from physical reality's threat of injury and death via late capitalism's more pleasurable defining features: consumerism and mass mediatisation" (259). Similarly, Lentricchia describes a sense of "spiritual surrender" (14) in Murray's commentary and Jack's obsessive noting of the camera shutter sounds at the barn. It is not that the subject is helplessly removed from experiencing the barn; rather, the subject takes comfort in the degree of separation from the real, and as a consequence, simply does not experience it. As Lentricchia continues, "We prefer not to know what the barn was like before it was photographed because its aura, its technological transcendence, its soul, our production, it is us", where "collective selfhood is brought to birth in the moment of contact […] in the medium or representation synonymous with the conferring of fame and charisma" (416). The shared experience of creating an artificial representation of the barn creates community, inviting a wholeness that supersedes that of the isolated experience of the shed itself.

News, media, and consumer culture play a significant role in the construction of auras and both the inward and outward sense of identity. DeLillo spends Part 1 of the novel setting the scene, demonstrating how the average white middle class family functions in a postmodern world where television, representation, and shared identity are antidotes for the isolation and fear inherent of physical reality. It is not only that television, media, and consumerism influence characters' sense of self and experience of reality, but that they do so to the point of impacting physical wellbeing. In this way, the disconnection between the subject and their biological self is enhanced, the consistency of biological identity superseded by the changeability of information, representation, and herd mentality.

Television and other media are a source of information, entertainment, and a connection to the outside world; DeLillo upholds his critical gaze, however, by foregrounding the disconnect created between the subject and their physicality through this filtered medium. Adina Baya describes how the TV set holds a constant "passive presence in the home", giving context to examine the novel using media effects theory. She cites Samuels, who suggests that whilst technology gives the illusion of individual control over media consumption, it also "undermine[s] the awareness of social and cultural mediation", thereby offering an illusionary feeling of empowerment (165). This is certainly upheld in the novel, where Jack's family gains information through media channels, and alter their experiences to adapt to the details they receive. Matthew J. Packer labels these as "media moments," when "characters

imitate, consciously or instinctively, models and performances simply furnished by the media" (650). For example, media information about the symptoms of Nyodene D exposure cause Jack's daughters Steffie and Denise to experience symptoms prior to exposure. It is only after symptoms of the toxic by-product are broadcast over the car radio that the girls experience "sweaty palms", "nausea", and "déjà vu" (146). As updates continue to come through, the girls' symptoms progress, until even Jack reaches the point of wondering ''Could a nine-year-old girl suffer a miscarriage due to the power of suggestion? Would she have to be pregnant first?'' (147). The confusion around the nature of the event and its impacts are reflected directly in the way characters react to the occurrence, creating experiential distance between themselves and the event. The mediated version overrides personal physical awareness, and as they await changing information, characters are left with little agency, and less empowerment than might be assumed by the constant stream of information.

While information seems to precede physical experience in the subject's interpretation of reality, products and branding have an almost spiritual presence in the novel. Consumerism filters its way into even the most intimate and personal moments of characters' lives. Advertising slogans and jingles interrupt conversations with no identified speakers, and sleeping children murmur brand names in their sleep. Consumer culture is so embedded in human experience that the human experience itself has become commercialised, a product of its informing signifiers. In

this environment, shopping malls become the culminating "showcases for a consumerism closely tied to modes of production", where the choices are endless and "almost anything, from anywhere, can be simulated" (Martins 95). The shopping mall represents infinite possibilities in a safe, predictable environment, where signifiers can be constructed in a way that gives the subject the illusion of agency over their own representation. When Jack is seen off campus by a colleague, he is described as "a big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" (98). This uninspired description stands in contrast to Jack's carefully cultivated academic persona – recall the importance of his "professional aura" – and he all but flees the scene to frantically restructure himself among the aisles of the shopping mall. Shopping allows him to regain a sense of composure and identity. He describes how he "began to grow in value and self-regard" (99) as he shopped: "I traded money for goods. The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain. These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit" (100). Acquiring products re-establishes a sense of control after Jack is exposed in a way that challenges his cultivated aura. Jack's preferred identity is essentially reconstructed ("I was bigger than these sums") where shopping becomes "a panicked strategy of insulating his suddenly exposed self with the protective bunker of satisfying stacks of material goods" (Dewey 84). Weise describes how the "narrative provides an often fallacious or misconceived sense of control in a world in which its power to explain has been problematized; nevertheless, it also yields models for positioning ourselves as agents of our own construction of identity" (3). Jack gains

"existential credit" in his purchases because they quantify his identity and his sense of self, a self that he manipulates and fashions to invite a desired reception. DeLillo represents this process facetiously, yet there remains a powerful reference to the idolisation of the shopping mall and the supermarket, which again reiterates the intrinsic value placed on consumption, the white noise of consumer culture.

Ultimately (and inevitably), Jack's portrayal of self is a façade, a protective and carefully contrived aura fed by the symbolic intake of products to create an outward impression of his desired self. These defining products are temporary gestures, and the family separates silently upon returning from the mall. The brief relief of indulging in purchases is primarily in the act of re-creation. In this space, the symbolic dictates there are no conceivable originals, only infinite representations, recalling the precedent DeLillo sets earlier with the "Most Photographed Barn in America". The "existential value" Jack refers to as he shops contradicts this idea, however, DeLillo's ironic tone of voice suggests the fruitlessness of Jack's choice of therapy and the inevitability of the cycle of representation. Despite the short-lived sense of wellbeing and security provided by this "fashioning of selfhood", the fear of what lies beneath the façade is a source of anxiety throughout the novel. Part 1 sees this culture functioning effectively (albeit rather tragically), but disruptions to this delicate and fallible system reveal a much deeper existential crisis that is inherent to DeLillo's representation of postmodern culture. DeLillo's emphasis on products and consumerism indicates much more than an obsession with objects – rather, it

highlights a culture that perpetuates simulacra and representation in postmodern society as a necessity. Excessive products and consumables are a comfort to the characters in the novel, as they maintain the illusion of control, and the ability to construct representations. The problem with this illusion is that it is entirely disconnected from the physical reality of the lived human experience: that is, human biology, and the environment.

There is an inherent gap between the concept of reality and experience through representation that is the fundamental basis of the trauma of postmodern human existence. Mark Osteen argues that DeLillo demonstrates this anxiety in the way "millenialist religions", "tabloids", "celebrity worship", and "compulsive consumerism offer charms to counteract the terror of oblivion" (*White Noise: Text and Criticism* 4). The false security found in these "charms" is only made apparent when the fallibility of the structures that allow them is exposed. Jack, for example, describes the supermarket as a safe haven, saying

> Some of the houses in town were showing signs of neglect. The park benches needed repair, the broken streets need resurfacing. Signs of the times. But the supermarket did not change, except for the better. It was well-stocked, musical and bright. This was the key, it seemed to us. (*White Noise* 196-197)

In a world of chaos and waste, Jack finds comfort in the safe, predictable aisles of the supermarket. Indeed, the description calls to mind an almost heavenly scene, white and fresh with music, contrasting against the grey and dirty neglect outside. This

impression is reiterated at the conclusion of the novel when the aisles of the supermarket are rearranged. Jack notices "agitation and panic" (373) in the aisles: "There is a sense of wandering now, an aimless and haunted mood, sweet-tempered people taken to the edge" (374). Without the familiar structure, characters are aimless and afraid, and the symbolism of the consumer culture embodied in the sacred supermarket is thrown into sharp relief. In the Heideggerian sense, it is only when things break, that we discover their materiality. In a town of damaged benches, broken streets and chemical contamination, the pristine nature of the supermarket strengthens the sense of dependability on consumerism. When the supermarket is rearranged, the mechanical action of selecting and purchasing products shifts, revealing how products, media, and representation provide a superficial structure to a world that is otherwise terrifyingly unpredictable.

The title of the novel, then, is a metaphor extending throughout the text and reflecting that which lies beyond representation, the constant hum beneath postmodern consumer culture. There is the obvious media noise, such as the radio fragments and disembodied voices listing brand names in various conversations: "Daracon, Orlon, Lycra Spandex"(62). There is the white noise machine, a popular device used to block out external sounds. Captured metaphorically, "white noise" is seen in the attempts to block out what lies beyond the safety and predictability of consumer culture, with the apex of this security being the supermarket and the shopping mall. The culture revolving around the supermarket acts as a white noise

machine, a safe environment in which to indulge and uphold order, silencing the fears that slip through the gaps of postmodern simulation. In the Baudrillardian sense, white noise is the "realm of the ecstasy of communication, of mass culture's signifying swirl which disperses the subject into links in the signifying chain" (Bonca 32).

More interesting though is the white noise that is less obvious, that which permeates all aspects of DeLillo's America. In between the disembodied voices and radio chatter, human conversation and interaction remain a constant presence, and despite attempts otherwise, biology and the physical environment do inform the lived experience. The inevitability of aging, death, and, more contextually, environmental dependency, are all evident in the novel's exploration of representation and media culture. The importance of physicality paves the way for an ecocritical reading of the novel, where the subject's existential fears are compounded by ecological crisis. The cultivation of personal auras and indulging in consumer culture cannot truly mask the impacts and influences of the physical world.

"What is out there?": Fear of Death and the Outbreak of the Physical

White Noise undermines Baudrillard's simulacrum by incorporating an irreducible physical context that destabilizes and calls into question postmodern hyperreality. DeLillo demonstrates physical inevitabilities like death cannot be

managed and contained in the form of simulations and media representations. Biological realities and the physical environment are outbreaks of physicality in a mediatised world, enabling the possibility of achieving human perspectives unrestricted by simulacra. This section will establish how the anxiety around death reveals the frailty of what many critics identify as the simulacrum in the novel. If consumption and indulgence of media representation are strategies for overcoming biological fears, then the way characters cope with death is a point at which the intersection between the real and simulation occurs. Examining these moments illustrates how DeLillo establishes the reality that exists behind these controlled aspects of self-identity. It is this physicality and connection to the body that reveals an environmental awareness beneath the postmodern examination of individual alienation, paving the way for an ecocritical reading of the novel.

The idea of death is made approachable through popular media, film, and entertainment mediums. The increased presence of violence in these channels perhaps desensitises the subject to death and dying. Elizabeth Rosen, however, interprets this as a demonstration of an anxiety she calls "apocalyptic fear". Cornel Bonca offers a similar interpretation, describing a "personal and culture-wide denial of death fear" (34). The ongoing witnessing of death and violence becomes a paradoxical and indulgent denial of the reality of the individual apocalypse – death. Accordingly, the Gladneys watch the news each night with relish for the "floods, earthquakes, mudslides, erupting volcanoes" (75) they witness. By commodifying death, media

channels become a coping mechanism for the real thing. The television mediates the space between the exceptional and reality until the subject is desensitised to the former. This is not necessarily from overstimulation; it stems from constant and safe exposure to the horrific. As Rosen says, television "puts the viewer outside the event that tangibly represents the eschatological tension and allows a distancing to occur in which the observer no longer feels personally involved" (151). Catastrophe becomes linked to other places, to entertainment forums, and serves to break up the monotony of the "incessant bombardment of information" (Rosen 77). The distance created through representations of violence outside the viewer's individual context forms an illusion of safety in one's own space. Thus, when Jack sees Babette unexpectedly on television he is extremely confronted: "Was she dead, missing, disembodied? Was this her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology, set free to glide through wavebands, through energy levels, pausing to say good-bye to us from the fluorescent screen?" (123). The appearance of Babette on the screen merges two spheres of Jack's experience that were previously separated – Jack's home environment and that of the violence and death on screen. Jack's disquiet stems from the dissolution of the sense-making he usually finds in television. Babette's presence reveals the reality behind the screen, the connection between real world events and the "eerie separation" (165) forged in the act of secondary viewing. Death is consumed as a product, but in a purer sense it is also a suppressed fear that emerges through the anxiety inherent in DeLillo's postmodern condition. DeLillo presents a

society that is so reliant on a postmodern media culture that it ultimately exacerbates a fear of the real human experience, and the inevitability of death.

Therefore, despite the mediatisation of death and violence, both Jack and Babette have an innate fear of death that overrides the many representations of the concept they consume. Ultimately, death cannot be contained by media and simulations, its physical inevitability slicing through any semblance of simulacrum to reconnect the subject with the physical world. The first time Babette appears in the novel, Jack asks "who will die first?" (17). He wonders if this is a natural question stemming from love, or "some inert element in the air we breathe, a rare thing like neon, with a melting point, an atomic weight?" (17). A kind of instinct that speaks to the biological imperative to survive underlies Jack's questioning, while death is a physical weight, an inevitability that lies behind the things that constitute Jack's sense of self and perception of reality. On two further occasions, he explicitly asks himself "who will die first?" (35, 118). Despite the question reflecting a genuine fear, he trivialises its occurrence, describing it as coming up "from time to time, like where are the car keys" (17). The pair compete over their mortality, neither wanting to be the first the person to die, while also fearing being left alone without the other. In wishing that they could "both live forever" (121), Jack shows he is unable to reconcile the life he and Babette lead together with the reality of their mortality. Jack and Babette trivialise their fears to create emotional distance between themselves and the reality of dying: "She says if her death is capable of leaving a large hole in her life, my death

would leave an abyss in hers" (119). Their humour plays a similar role to that of violence on television; a distance is created between the subject and the anxiety around death, a form of denial based on social performance. While a desire to surrender themselves to simulacra can be observed in Jack and Babette's behaviour, the physical reality of mortality prevents them from truly escaping their fears of dying. This underlying awareness of physicality is an element that is developed throughout the novel, providing the foundation for a deeper understanding of environmental ramifications on the body, and an ecological awareness that reveals itself later in the novel.

Death is a bridge between simulation and the real in the novel. It takes on two forms to create a dichotomy that Jack expresses to his son Heinrich. The first is death through the lens of media, where the reality of the event is mediated by its entertainment value and apparent distance from the viewer. The second is the biological reality of life ceasing to continue, the source of anxiety for many of the characters in the novel. Jack introduces the two deaths as he watches a housefire with Heinrich. He describes one death as being almost fascinating and natural, as "fathers and sons" share the experience of observing, "pointing at one or another part of the half-gutted structure" (276). The characteristic of watching evokes the earlier episode at the barn, indicating this is closer to a representation of death rather than an active and affecting death. As with the aura, the harsher reality of death is hidden by the sheer entertainment of bearing witness. As long as the event does not appear to have

direct impact upon the watcher, it can remain in the realm of entertainment. The second death occurs as the smell of various substances burning ("insulation burning-polystyrene sheathing for pipes and wires- or one or more of a dozen other substances" (276)) causes people to leave the scene. It has a physical impact on those watching; Jack describes the acrid smell as "death enter[ing] your mouth and nose", which "could somehow make a difference to your soul" (276). Death is personified and becomes an active agent, entering the subject and corrupting the natural body, distracting the watchers from their viewing with a physical, authentic experience.

Each understanding of death manifests when Jack is exposed to Nyodene D. He describes the toxin as having "planted death" in his body, saying "I've got death inside me. It's just a question of whether or not I can outlive it. It has a life span of its own" (175). Death is again personified as an agent acting against the subject, transformed from its abstracted state into a physical form. Even here, the personification of death maintains an element of entertainment value. Rather than perceiving his body's natural, biological response to a toxin, Jack envisions a villainous agent acting against his body's will. If he can "outlive" the lifespan of the death in his body, there is a chance he might survive. A fundamental separation between the physical body and the self is established here, protecting Jack from the inevitability of death. Instead of recognising the connection between his self and the physical, Jack establishes a battleground where he might defeat the fragility of his body and evict that which threatens it. To further emphasise the absurdity of this

disconnect, a pamphlet awaits Jack after his "infection by death" featuring "Life After Death Guaranteed with Bonus Coupons" (166). The commodification of death is shown in contrast to the assault of its physical presence, blurring the line between experience and representation once again. The two forms of death are like the barn; one, an idea to be commodified, witnessed, and manipulated; and the other, a very real presence that exists within and affects the physical world.

The juxtaposition of two types of death serves as a critique of the simulacrum, as *White Noise* demonstrates how the world of the sign and the world of the real collide. Death consumed as entertainment can be seen to function within the simulacrum, where representations of violence in the media contribute to the creation of numerous interpretations that construct the virtuality of the simulacrum. The effect is the distancing and abstraction of death, and a disconnection between the subject and the biology of their being. The second death, however, is intrinsically tied to the body, and regardless of how the subject consumes it through media, witnessing, or commodification, it represents the temporality of the human body, something that is inevitably tied to the physical world. In this way, the true trauma in the novel comes from outside the virtual postmodern world, a concept DeLillo exemplifies through the inherent fear of the second type of death. The idea of death is deliberately abstracted by Jack and Babette, who "tell each other everything" (34) – everything, that is, except their crippling fear of dying. Jack describes conversations "spoken deep into the night about fathers and mothers, childhood, friendships, awakenings, old loves, old fears

(except fear of death). No detail must be left out, not even a dog with ticks or a neighbour's boy who ate an insect on a dare" (34). Ironically, the one thing that plagues each of them is the single topic left out of their conversations. Language cannot encompass their deepest emotions and as such they each repress it from the other, preventing it from consuming the performative relationship they hold together. When Babette finally reveals her fears to Jack, he attempts to redefine it:

> "How can you be sure it is death you fear? Death is so vague. No one knows what it is, what it feels like or looks like. Maybe you just have a personal problem that surfaces in the form of a great universal subject."
>
> "What problem?"
>
> "Something you're hiding from yourself. Your weight maybe." (225-226)

Jack takes great comfort in Babette's physicality, in contrast to his previous wives, who "had a tendency to feel estranged from the objective world" (7). Babette's fears contradict the safe and predictable figure Jack has clung too, and as he pushes her, he asks himself "Is this why I married Babette? So she would conceal the truth from me, conceal objects from me, join in a sexual conspiracy at my expense?" (226).

DeLillo's emphasis on death fear throughout the novel therefore reinforces a strong link between the characters and their physicality. Cavedon argues "there is an undercurrent in the novel which reflects a postmodern anxiety about the existence of a physical reality which serves to validate the existence of human beings in the real

world" (282). The fact that characters take such comfort in witnessing the first kind of death on television and in the media demonstrates an anxiety about the second kind, that which is an ever-present threat in the real world, and confirms the character's link to the physical. Cavedon also suggests that "media accounts of catastrophe" serve to confirm the "unabated existence of physical reality" while viewers rest safely in the illusion that they are protected "due to their immersion in a world which allows them to be consumers" (282). The awareness of physical reality contradicts the idea of a simulacrum by undermining the security felt through witnessing of the first death. The anxiety that comes from the knowledge of mortality evidences a fear deeper than the superficial, where death is impossible to know and assimilate into the human experience, yet entirely inevitable. For death fear to be captured in Baudrillard's simulacrum, it must be a product of the real world. The way DeLillo represents death, however, is more akin to an unquantifiable threat or abstract fear that threatens to disrupt the logical structure of the postmodern milieu, a forced acknowledgement of the physical world and its impact on the subject.

"Awareness of the environment": The Impact of the Physical Environment

If two kinds of death reveal the perceived dichotomy between the psychological experience and the physical world, then we are now positioned to examine the environment and how its impacts on the body inform characters'

experiences. This section will firmly situate *White Noise* as an ecological novel that extends its concern with the physical world to examine the relationship between humankind and the environment. As the field of literary ecocriticism gains popularity, *White Noise* has come to be seen as a novel that characterises a specific shift in the consciousness of America, where the relationship between humankind and the physical environment is drawn into focus by advances in technology and the build-up of waste. The significance of the novel's postmodern context is in its setup of a critically aware and ironic postmodern stage, a stage upon which DeLillo presents environmental risks that more contemporary criticism has picked up on and discussed at length.

Cynthia Deitering was the first critic to examine DeLillo's exploration of toxicity in *White Noise* and explore its relevance to environmental theory and ecological corruption in her paper "The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s" (1996). Deitering uses DeLillo's *White Noise* and John Updike's *Rabbit at Rest* to argue a "pervasive problem of toxic waste" in American fiction, a concern which she dubs the new "toxic consciousness" (196). She suggests the increase of toxic waste in fiction of the 1980s is used metaphorically to represent "society's most general fears about its collective futures" and as an expression of "ontological rupture in its perception of the Real" (197). In other words, the prevalence of nuclear or toxic events leading up to the 1980s challenged the fundamental perception of a stable environment. The idea of a "stable environment" is so ingrained that a challenge to

the notion is inconceivable, an infiltration of the impossible Real. As fiction responds to this affront, toxic events become culturally specific metaphors to explore these changing perceptions, where toxicity represents a fundamental shift in how the subject perceives the lived environment. More explicitly, Deitering notes this toxic consciousness indicates "insight into a culture's shifting relation to nature and to the environment at a time when the imminence of ecological collapse was, and is, part of the public mind and of individual imaginations" (197). She ultimately concludes these "toxic consciousness" novels "depict a society that has fouled its own nest" which inevitably "transmogrifies one's experience of the primal home" (200). Recalling Lentricchia's dubbing of the barn scene as the new "primal scene of America" (415), Deitering describes humankind as having transformed the original primal home. Here, the Airborne Toxic Event becomes a metaphor for a cultural reawakening, revealing the connection between the health of the natural environment and human wellbeing.

Since Deitering's paper ecocriticism has grown exponentially, partially due to the continued anxiety about ecological destruction, and more recently through the coining of the term Anthropocene in the scientific community. According to Glotfelty, all ecocriticism "shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (xviii). This means that for a novel to be considered from an ecocritical standpoint, it is not necessarily ecological crisis that is important, but the interaction between humankind and their environment. In

this way, the Airborne Toxic Event becomes a powerful indicator of a primal shift in the subject's environmental understanding in *White Noise*. After Jack is exposed to Nyodene D, he is made aware of his dependence on the environment. He is not only powerless to predict when the toxin will take him, but even if it will take him at all. Jack's experience in the Airborne Toxic Event is a physical reminder of the reality of the subject's experience with death as an unknowable, unpredictable inevitability. To consider *White Noise* in an ecocritical context is to ask what role the physical setting plays in the plot of the novel, and to consider another of Glotfelty's ecocritical questions: "In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?" (xix).

DeLillo's own exploration of ecocritical themes initially comes into play through a less than explicit entry point. He describes media itself as a form of pollution that inspired *White Noise*, stating "I began to notice something on television which I hadn't noticed before. This was the daily toxic spill- there was news, the weather and the toxic spill… It was simply a television reality… this was one of the motivating forces of White Noise" (Rothstein "A Novelist Faces" 24). Growing up in the "duck and cover" age of the first atomic bomb (Rosen 144), DeLillo's experience with the growth of nuclear technology reflects the experiences of his generation and clearly inform his fiction. In a 1998 interview the author says:

> I remember when I was 16 and watched a movie, a news cast, which showed the first H-bomb explosion... And there was something terrifying about it, but

> at the same time it was very entertaining... The mushroom cloud was beautiful and for me it became the determining picture for the culture in the second half of the 20th century. (Jensen "The Triumph of Death" n.p.)

DeLillo's experiences reflect the descriptor "television reality" (Rothstein 24) that he puts forward to explain his use of television in *White Noise*. It also speaks to several of the discussed interpretations of the novel, but it reverses the ecological positioning of the text by placing toxic events as metaphors for mediatised reality. I suggest that despite DeLillo's postmodern positioning of the text, the current social and political climate sees *White Noise* becoming representative of a period when the way American culture defined itself changed from "a culture defined by its production to a post-industrial culture defined by its waste" (Glotfelty xxx). The increasing global concern about climate crisis sees novels like *White Noise* recontextualised and viewed as capturing the period of contemporary American culture just prior to the emergence of the Anthropocene. The daily "toxic spill" of news through the media is a new form of toxic event that amplifies the disconnection between the subject and a corrupted environment, pre-empting the explosion of a discourse that exemplifies current ecocritical scholarship. Climate crisis has allowed readings of *White Noise* to be extended beyond postmodernism and the idea of media-constructed reality to an exploration of the trauma inherent in postmodern thinking and the dangers of the perceived separation between humankind and the natural world. Rather than the Airborne Toxic Event representing the toxicity of media,

mediatised reality is itself a metaphor for the alienation in contemporary culture between simulations and the physical world. *White Noise* is a novel that demonstrates the repositioning of the self as a physical and active agent in a shifting environment. The omnipresence of toxicity in DeLillo's America speaks to an overwhelming infiltration of the physical and emphasises the need to reconceptualise humankind as belonging to and being affected by a damaged environment.

Reflecting this ecocritical perspective is a more recent strain of criticism on *White Noise* where the exploration of apocalypse, death and toxicity has likewise been recontextualised. Critics such as Ursula Heise (2008), Grausam (2011), Greg Garrard (2012), and Molly Wallace (2016) examine the novel from an ecocritical perspective, where events in the novel such as the Airborne Toxic Event indicate a feeling of anxiety around the instability of the environment. Heise and M. Wallace both appeal to Ulrich Beck's notion of the risk society to forefront "*White Noise*'s thematic engagement with risk" (Heise *Sense of Place* 165) through "chemical exposure that individuals undergo in their local environments" (M. Wallace 12). This, Heise argues, contributes to "environmentally orientated literary and cultural studies" by establishing the significance of "sense of place" and subsequent exploration of "new possibilities for ecological awareness [that] inhere in cultural forms that are increasingly detached from their anchorings in particular geographies" (*Sense of Place* 13). By recognising DeLillo's systematic engagement with environmental risk through not only the Airborne Toxic Event, but pharmaceuticals (Dylar), toxic fumes (from

burning buildings), SIMUVAC preparations for disaster, and chemical exposure (chemical smells from the river), Heise argues that the Airborne Toxic Event is a further representation of "postmodern inauthenticity" or a "projection of ambient dread" (163). In her analysis (which is then taken up by M. Wallace), *White Noise* is read not only as a postmodern satire, but a text in which "hyperboles and simulations that have typically been read as examples of postmodern inauthenticity" become "manifestations of daily encounters with risks whose reality, scope, and consequences cannot be assessed with certainty" (Heise *Sense of Place* 169). Though satirical, DeLillo explores the existential fear around the environmental threats featured in the novel, with the added terror and anticipation of increasing risk. The anxiety present in the postmodern reading becomes an indication of a deeper fear, where the postmodern symbolic prevents characters from finding effective ways to deal with events that disrupt it, creating further distance between the subject and experience that allows the anticipation of disaster to grow.

The depth of environmental upheaval in the novel is easily overlooked. While the Airborne Toxic Event stands out as an ecological crisis, the diversity of instances discussed in the criticism reflects the changing perceptions of the environment as ecological concerns and awareness increase. Glen Love identifies a "catalogue of potential horrors" that are now familiar to us all: "the threats of nuclear holocaust, or of slower radiation poisoning, of chemical or germ warfare, the alarming growth of the world's population" (243) are concerns that regularly make headlines. Yet, as Love

also notes, "we prefer to think of other things" (243). This avoidance, reflective of the cultural environment DeLillo constructs in Part 1 of the novel, is a mechanism David Ehernfeld calls "the avoidance of unpleasant reality" (qtd. in Love 243). DeLillo's representation of Blacksmith has the "catalogue of potential horrors", yet it is easy to read the novel without noticing the continuous reference to the nuclear, waste, or toxicity. These issues become a part of the background, the white noise of postmodern American culture. DeLillo's emphasis on the postmodern environment speaks to Love's "other things" – products, media, symbolism and "white noise" saturate the lives of individuals and communities. This "television reality" (Rothstein 24) is a symptom of avoidance, where these increasing environmental threats are disguised amongst more comforting representations. Their presence is revealed through Jack's fears of dying, and the subliminal references to toxicity and the nuclear, all culminating in and after the Airborne Toxic Event.

"The Nature of Modern Death": Reconceptualising Postmodern Apocalypse

Before discussing the core ecological disaster in *White Noise*, I will examine the representation of endings in the novel as a whole. As Rosen says, "endings are part of beginnings" (18). Something always remains after the end, and as such, endings can become sense-making occasions that trigger moments of revelation or awakening in those who experience them. Death is the clearest example of an ending, while also

being a connection characters have to the physical in a world of simulation. As such, the representation of death and endings can shed further light on the toxic culture DeLillo presents. From a postmodern perspective, James Berger theorises the "postmodern apocalypse", positing that the endless cycle of representation negates the possibility of a true and definitive ending. Despite this, endings still exist; death is a constant presence in news and media; and the continued decline of the physical environment remains a source of crisis that does not subscribe to the temporal dissonance of the simulacrum. This forms the basis for apocalyptic ecocritical readings of the novel, where the dependence on representation prevents the subject from assimilating the gravity of crisis scenarios. The continued occurrence of anxiety-ridden events and the seamless resolution of such events into the cycle of representation, prevents the subject from reaching an understanding of their own innate fears of death and endings. It also fails to make the subject a responsible agent in inciting change, strengthening the disconnection between the subject and the physical world. Without the resolution of learning and growing from traumatic events, characters are passive receivers with no alleged control over what happens. This implies, however, that they have no impact on the physical world, which is of course untrue. As such, DeLillo presents a string of scenarios without true resolutions that paradoxically contribute to a rising sense of impending crisis. Endings occur continuously and are reiterated through channels of representation which allows for a sense of disassociation from the inevitability of endings through the lack of consequence in bearing witness through news and media. Ultimately, these endings

lack the resolution that comes from authentic, personal experiences, leaving the subject wanting. Through the focus on death and the culmination of potentially horrific scenarios, there is a sense of inevitability that the cycle of representation will be broken, and that this breach will force recognition of the inevitable impact of the physical world.

The most resolute ending one might see in literature is that of apocalypse, and it is from here that the nature of endings in the novel is best understood. As is often seen in popular representations of apocalypse, total annihilation offers a chance for growth and renewal. Rosen argues that apocalyptic literature was traditionally written to comfort people who are overwhelmed in their current situation, where the end represents an ultimate sense of order and purpose for the subject (xii). Similarly, Frank Kermode also says that "apocalypse, even in its less lurid modern forms, still carries with it the notions of decadence and possible renovation, still represents a mood finally inseparable from the condition of life, the contemplation of its necessary ending, the ineradicable desire to make some sense of it" (186-187). Thus, endings represent clarity, in which a sense of purpose and an understanding of the value of the human life can be realised.

Endings, of course, need not be as dire as the apocalypse to embody this sense of renewal alongside tragedy. In the novel, endings take many forms, with the "apocalyptic literature" Rosen refers to taking the form of news broadcasts and media consumption. These frequently consumed "stories" provide perspectives on "the

knowledge of death which in our own lives is denied to us" (Brooks *Reading for the Plot* 22). That is, despite what the postmodern reading says, the endings experienced through watching television are, consciously or subconsciously, linked to the subject's own ending, providing a deeper sense of connection to the biological lifespan of the self; as Jack tells his class, "all plots tend to move deathward." (26) This sentiment reflects Peter Brooks's view that the witnessing of endings and the subject's own ending are connected: "the further we inquire into the problem of ends, the more it seems to compel a further inquiry into its relation to the human end" (95). That is, the witnessing of endings through film, media, literature, or experience bears direct relation to the individual's own awareness and understanding of death.

White Noise reconfigures endings in a way that undermines the sense-making process that reveals meaning after tragedy. Jack's fear of death can be examined in context of these failed endings, revealing a connection between his fear and the lack of follow through when seemingly traumatic events occur in and around Blacksmith. Part 1 alone sees a school evacuation after a teacher suffers a convulsive fit; a man dying during the inspection of the grade school; and Heinrich undertaking regular communication with a five-time convicted murderer in prison. Despite these events, nothing significant changes in the daily lives of the protagonist or his family. The consistent resolution of violence in DeLillo's representation creates a juxtaposition between the desire for endings, the opportunity for ending, and the continuation of

daily life, until characters appear trapped in a recursive loop that sees no finality or impact to traumatic events or actions.

This desire reflects the deeper connection between the subject and the physical world, where endings and resolutions are interpreted as sense-making events. In an attempt to remedy the unsatisfied desire for endings, the Gladneys ritualistically gather each week to witness the world's daily disasters. Jack observes that they would always wish for more, "something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (75). On a deeper level, an element of desire is reflected in traumatic representation, where the subject subconsciously craves traumatic content to disassociate from the possibility of experiencing it themselves. Berger, for example, evokes the Zizekian *jouissance* to describe "the emotional and libidinal connection of traumatized culture to its symbolised symptoms that give culture back its completeness and coherence" (29). The Gladney's family practice of gathering together to witness violence is indicative of a deeper trauma in themselves. Despite the ability to bear witness and assert control over endings, there is a lack of authentic connection that occurs through the over-saturation of violence, and the desire for endings is not truly satisfied. There is a build-up of anxiety when violence is repeatedly witnessed but no satisfactory ending is actually achieved, as the *jouissance* that would otherwise be experienced is not achieved through personal identification with trauma. The subject is entrenched in the signifying of violence, but DeLillo does not allow the subject's trauma to be fully realised.

It appears DeLillo explores endings in an intrinsically postmodern way, as the ritualistic watching of violence places the character in an anticipatory loop, where the trauma is enacted, but then revoked until the subject inevitably returns to a passive state of witnessing. This is reflective of a shift in how endings have been represented in postmodern contexts. Rosen describes how

> postmodernism challenges traditional sense-making structures, which it calls grand, or metanarratives, refusing to impose one point of view or privilege one kind of "culture" over another, and playfully celebrating the kind of fragmentation and lack of coherency in doctrines which has been the source of anxiety of gloom for some. (xx)

In other words, the very nature of the postmodern perspective defies the notion of apocalypse in terms of its rehabilitative and redemptive attributions. Rosen also claims that postmodern narrative versions of apocalypse occur when "the End of Time becomes instead a story about the end of one time," characterised by a "partial destruction, a surgical strike of sorts, with the result that there is often a blurring of beginnings and endings" (xxiv). The temporal disruption in the postmodern environment negates the possibility of a total ending, as the present is theoretically constant.

Berger offers a further explanation, saying the nature of the postmodern (as per Jameson, Lyotard, and Baudrillard) defies apocalypse in the sense that the "ending" has already occurred. If the postmodern is a product of the fourth phase of simulacra

then "the underlying metanarratives breakdown, lose their legitimacy, and are replaced by a proliferation of local narratives or by the unpresentable witnessed in heterogenous form" (Berger 36). From the Baudrillardian perspective, the endless and inescapable cycle of representation is, in itself, an ending. If the simulacrum is beyond the temporality characteristic of "reality", the various representations inherent in postmodern depictions, while a source of anxiety, do not foster an environment where a traditional apocalyptic ending can occur. Berger thus claims that "we live in a post-apocalyptic world" and "the manner in which technology now has informed, and is itself invested with, apocalyptic tendencies" (38). The apocalypse in a postmodern setting is therefore unique as it must navigate the postmodern environment, specifically its emphasis on images and representation, and its challenge to traditional perspectives on temporality. Apocalypse is reflected thematically through confrontations with death and the unknown, technology, and forces outside of the subject's control.

However, while the representation of endings in *White Noise* lends itself to a postmodern reading, the absurdity of repeated positive resolutions becomes an omen for coming crisis, where the physical ultimately overrides the cultural tendency for things to resolve back into their usual state. While the events and headlines that arise throughout the novel appear to resolve without the required sense of impact (the missing are always found, the crash results in no casualties, and the children's productivity is not impacted by the ill-health of their teachers), there remains the fact

that inevitably, life does go on. When examining the culmination of non-eventful endings, it is also important to consider that should traumatic endings occur, life would still have eventually returned to normal. Jack's desire for endings is characteristic of a desire to understand his own ending, to experience a confrontation with the inevitability of his biology, and accept his own eventual death. While the "postmodern apocalypse" appears to deny such realisations, the physical reality of death remains a constant presence beneath media reality, both inside and outside the novel. DeLillo's chain of non-ending events exemplifies the depth of the disassociation with the physical world, where Jack's desire for "something grander" is indicative of the psychological impact of this disconnection. It is not until the Airborne Toxic Event that Jack has an experience to which he can attach his fear of death, as his physical body bears a direct impact on his experience.

Planting "a death in my body": The Airborne Toxic Event

A more explicit rendition of apocalyptic fear occurs in the Airborne Toxic Event. *White Noise* sees its climax in Part II, entitled "The Airborne Toxic Event", where a crashed railcar releases a toxic by-product into the air, leading to large-scale evacuation of Blacksmith and the surrounding areas. As they evacuate, Jack is forced to stop for petrol, exposing himself to the toxin for "a few minutes" (152). These few minutes are the point when Nyodene D "planted a death in [his] body" (173), representing the intrusion of the physical world both in the inhalation of toxic air

particles, and in the sudden awareness of the physical body's infection. This moment becomes a vehicle for the manifestation of Jack's death fear for the remainder of the novel. While the event ultimately has little impact on the town of Blacksmith, it contributes to a building sense of impending crisis as the physical world continues to break through the boundaries of simulation. Although the shortest section of text, some sixty-five pages, the Airborne Toxic Event has its own place in critical works on *White Noise*, and crystallises DeLillo's exploration of death in the novel. The Airborne Toxic Event is a clear example of Jack's personal experience coming into clear contact with the physical world. While most experiences of environmental crisis occur through media and representation, the Airborne Toxic Event is inherently a phenomenon of the physical world, where understanding and action depend on the recognition of the interconnection between humankind and the environment. Therefore, environmental crisis challenges the idea of reality in simulation by its effect on the body and habitat. Jack's inhalation of the toxin temporarily overrides the simulacrum by returning the physical body to the realm of immediate experience. While focus on the Airborne Toxic Event quickly loses its focus on the physical, its occurrence clearly establishes the need to re-consider the relationship between humankind and the environment by acknowledging and integrating the physical into reality narratives.

The significance of the Airborne Toxic event is epitomised in ecocritical approaches to the novel, as it is the personification of the cultural fear that DeLillo sets

out in the first and third parts. As Garrard says, "the radical disproportion between saturation of imagery and paucity of fact marks the toxic event out as the kind of postmodern crisis with which ecocriticism must increasingly engage" (15). The postmodern crisis Garrard refers to correlates with Rosen's theory of the postmodern apocalypse, where the nature of postmodern society negates the notion of an ultimate end. In this environment, the subject is confronted with an event that, on its surface, seems to necessitate endings (here through the corruption of the air supply); yet paradoxically, there are no fatalities from the event and life returns to normal. In this way, the "imagery and paucity of fact" surrounding the Airborne Toxic Event creates a symbolic environment of terror with no resolution. The disjunction between experiencing a crisis and never having access to a resolution is emphasised by the postmodern condition DeLillo established, and works in tandem with the unsatisfactory endings throughout the novel. The Airborne Toxic Event throws it into sharp relief through DeLillo's critical engagement with America's cultural condition.

The death fear portrayed by Jack and Babette speaks to an underlying anxiety inherent to their detached way of living and the increasing acts of violence that occur around them. Jack describes his exposure to the Airborne Toxic Event, saying "ever since I was in my twenties, I've had the fear, the dread. Now it's been realized. I feel enmeshed, I feel deeply involved" (176). The postmodern environment sates this fear temporarily, yet the dread Jack describes is revealed incessantly, from his constant questioning of "who will die first", to the anti-climactic events that litter the pages of

the novel. Most poignant, however, is that Jack never experiences any physical maladies from the exposure that would justify his constant fears. His death fear is personified in his exposure, yet there is no repercussion to the potential reality of death. This is, in the cruellest sense, a personal postmodern apocalypse, where Jack is theoretically exposed to death itself and denied the relief of knowing the outcome, the resolution that comes in endings. Jack's exposure is accompanied by all the hype of a medical issue, yet when Jack asks the medical staff if he is going to die, their responding comment echoes a philosophical cynicism rather than the words of medical professionals: "It's a question of years. We'll know more in fifteen years. In the meantime we definitely have a situation" (164). A literal event has occurred that provides a logical justification for Jack's fear, yet the questions that death encompass for Jack are no closer to being answered. Recalling Love's "catalogue of potential horrors," the Airborne Toxic Event becomes a vehicle for DeLillo to capture the inherent insecurity present in the postmodern subject.

Despite its lack of a sense of an ending, the nature of the Airborne Toxic Event as an ecological crisis is significant. By corrupting the air supply, the Airborne Toxic Event draws attention to the subject's lived environment in a fundamental way, and forces recognition of the presence of environmental factors outside of the subject's control. In a simulation reality, the physical world is an assumed phenomenon that supports life. However, ecological crisis renders this assumption as problematic, and the dependency of humankind on the stability of the environment is realised. Peter

Sloterdijk's *Terror from the Air* (2009) provides useful context for this phenomenon. Using gas warfare as an example, Sloterdijk describes how the instigation of gas attack represents the point in which "terror from the air" made the environment an active agent in human destruction. Although Sloterdijk does not write on fiction, his analysis of air toxicity is enlightening viewed in the context of the Airborne Toxic Event, as it demonstrates the significance a corruption of the air supply has on the subject. Since their inception, chemical attacks, or exterminations, are evidenced throughout history as widespread traumas, such as the Nazis' Zyklon B used in Auschwitz, the use of Agent Orange in the Vietnam War, and the Trinity bomb. This technological terrorism has become the matrix for modern and postmodern warfare, making the initial chlorine gas attack the dawn of a new era that culminates in the changed relationship between humankind and the environment. In *White Noise*, the Airborne Toxic Event captures this realisation, as the very air Jack breathes carries death upon it. In the moment, this experience is fundamentally linked to Jack's physicality, as the body and the environment it operates within are the core facilitators of his experience.

There is a basic understanding of humankind's animal identity that is inherent in the subject. For the Gladneys living in postmodern America, this instinct is overridden by representation and media culture, only manifesting in Jack's fear of death, and the underlying trauma that cyclically perpetuates the need to reinvent one's self, and assert control over false identities. DeLillo speaks to an America obsessed by media and corrupted by consumerism, where the subject is consistently

bombarded with traumatic events in the natural world ("floods, earthquakes, mudslides, erupting volcanoes" (75)) yet remains detached from its pervasive realities; as Grausam writes, DeLillo's "signature interest" is "in the massively mediated structures of everyday life in contemporary America" (105). This placidity is challenged through the Airborne Toxic Event, as it defies the habitual assimilation of violence in DeLillo's postmodern society through its vast environmental implications. In the context of *White Noise*, Sloterdijk's theory demonstrates the shattering of this protective consumer culture, and the realisation that the subject is reliant on an environment that is largely out of their control. The psychological shift here is traumatic, as it contradicts the basis of assumed knowledge and breaks through cultures of representation by confronting the subject with unchangeable elements of the physical world. In this way, the Airborne Toxic Event is not necessarily traumatic in and of itself, but its implications are a source of ongoing anxiety over which the subject has little control. Sloterdijk says that "with the phenomenon of gas warfare, the fact of the living organism's immersion in a breathable milieu arrives at the level of formal representation, bringing the climactic and atmospheric conditions pertaining to human life a new level of explication" (23). The use of chemical weapons is not only traumatic on the basis of being attacked, but on the wider manipulation of the environment that confronts the subject with their own death in a context in which death is almost guaranteed and likely unchangeable. The Airborne Toxic Event replicates this scenario in several ways while recontextualised into postmodern America, creating a deeper sense of trauma characterised by the postmodern milieu.

Despite this "new level of explication," however, representation soon begins to corrupt the revelation of the physical world. As Jack converses with the health technician, the reader observes the event itself entering stages of representation, where the reality of the threat is manipulated into something deliberate and simulated. Jack's fear is only deepened, as his concern is made futile by the organisation running checks on those exposed:

> "That's quite an armband you've got there. What does SIMUVAC mean? Sounds important."
>
> "Short for simulated evacuation. A new state program they're still battling over funds for."
>
> "But this evacuation isn't simulated. It's real."
>
> "We know that. We thought it could be used as a model."
>
> "A form of practice? Are you saying you saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation?" (162)

The conversation with the SIMUVAC representative becomes comic in its increasing degree of absurdity, and the significance of Jack's exposure to a toxic chemical is degraded to a practice scenario for the technician to prepare for a real disaster in the future. Rather than piercing the veil of the symbolic, as traumatic events do, the Airborne Toxic Event is widely treated in a way that perpetuates it as the community uses it to prepare for potential environmental catastrophes. From the very beginning,

the event is condensed to its own shallow representation, until the death that it ultimately signifies becomes a mere product of its occurrence. As Garrard says, "Death and environmental disaster, which surely exemplify the Real, are subordinated to the order of simulation in which every narrative of threat and resolution seems hackneyed and insincere" (192). In this example, the one certainty of death is made unstable in the sense of its random intractability. Heffernan similarly says that "rather than looking to the end to stabilise meaning, to draw the division between absence and presence, the real and the simulated, we might look at the end or death as the impossibility of the stabilisation of either the referent or the sign, as a 'viral agent'" (54). Communally, the Airborne Toxic Event is reduced to the order of simulation, and the possibility of an authentic ending is reduced by the swift action of SIMUVAC and the labelling of the event as a practice for future disaster. On a more personal level, however, the absurdity of the dialogue and Jack's experience with the SIMUVAC team alludes to Jack's own experience as being somewhat more genuine, as the inhalation of toxic air triggers a realisation of his physical vulnerability.

Jack's interaction with the SIMUVAC officer continues to become increasingly obscure:

> "I was only out there two and a half minutes. That's how many seconds?"
>
> "It's not just that you were out there so many seconds. It's your whole data profile. I tapped into your history. I'm getting bracketed numbers with pulsing stars."

"What does that mean?"

"You'd rather not know." (163)

In this conversation, Jack's lived experience is further overshadowed by his digital self, and the simulation of what may or may not be his imminent death. His reliance on media and technology is reflected back on him as the SIMUVAC officer assures him, saying "This doesn't mean anything is going to happen to you as such, at least not today or tomorrow. It just means you are the total sum of your data. No man escapes that" (165). Rather than biological inevitability, it is numbers and technological formula that quantifies the level of Jack's risk. Reference to Jack's "data" speaks to the frustrated claustrophobia of Jack's anxiety that builds throughout the novel. Despite his fear, the nature of American culture is represented as a mediator of this strong emotion, and acts as a suppression of that which contradicts the symbolic. Data is a product of the symbolic, and fundamentally rejects the purer sense of Jack as an individual. It makes him into a product, a processed representation of himself. The SIMUVAC operative's response to Jack's questions speaks from a system imposed to find order in chaos — yet Jack's fear is not from within this system. What defined Jack and grounded him in the past is reversed to represent a much deeper fear, despite its seemingly simulated origins. Jack reflects that "It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying" (165). In a situation corrupted by representation, Jack is briefly exposed to a substance that validates his death fear; yet, his exposure is publicly reduced to nothing more than a part of the expected result of such an event's

simulation, and he is left with nothing concrete to base his own self on. He is informed that in 15 years they will know enough to deduce whether he is in any danger. Until then, the outcome of Jack's exposure is an unknown, something that contradicts what Jack has strived so hard to avoid in his carefully structured identities.

"My Physical Person": Intrusions of the Physical after the Airborne Toxic Event

The representation of contemporary American society in *White Noise* reflects the established consumer-driven culture in DeLillo's corpus (beginning with *Americana* (1971) and *End Zone*) with an emphasis on waste and toxicity, especially after the Airborne Toxic Event. DeLillo's America is defined by its obsessions with mass media and consumption, obsessions that serve as both entertainment and a mediator between the subject and their physical reality. "Postmodern American subjects such as Jack," as Cavedon says, "are torn between the impression of lacking a stable physical reality due to a perceived immersion into a hyperreal world and a fear of death repressed with the help of commodities consumed" (287). I suggest however, that after the Airborne Toxic Event, even the "consumers' alleged safe distance" (287) from the threats of physical reality is debunked by Jack's new awareness of his mortality. Through new emphasis on waste, toxicity and consumption, the physical world is reconceptualised after the event.

While the Airborne Toxic Event itself does not lead to a direct cultural shift, Jack's own experiences comes to be increasingly affected by the physicality of the world around him after his inhalation of Nyodene D. Jack begins to clean out his house, obsessively discarding items that have accumulated over time. His awareness of death escalates to the point that he interprets his father-in-law's figure on the lawn as "Death standing before [him]" (281), demonstrating how his fear has gained a sense of tangibility. He begins to observe basic physical acts in great detail; watching Heinrich's friend eat a meal, he says "I liked to watch Orest eat. He inhaled food according to aerodynamic principles. Pressure differences, intake velocities. He went about it purposefully, loading up, centring himself" (305), casting a fundamental, physical act as placating. Reflecting a similar affinity to fundamental actions, Jack finds comfort in repeating basic words in German to the nuns as they nurse him after he is shot in the wrist: "all four of us were charmingly engaged in a childlike dialogue. We did colours, items of clothing, parts of the body […] is there something so innocent in the recitation of names that God is pleased?" (364). These small moments indicate a deeper sense of presence[15], where simple observations and attention to the physical ground the subject in the present moment. As Jack's fear of death escalates from his exposure, he purchases a gun. Pulling it out of his desk drawer at work, he describes how the weapon "creates a second reality for me to inhabit […] It was a reality I could control, secretly dominate" (341). He observes the weapon, the "bullet-shaped"

[15] For further exploration of presence, see Chapter 3.

bullets, and finds reassurance in the fact that the child-like perception of what a gun might be like is accurate. He finds security in the fact that the representation of a gun he was raised with aligns itself with the physicality of the weapon, demonstrating an awareness of the physical in opposition to representation, and a sense that the physical holds a more authentic connection to notions of reality.

The clearest ongoing example of the influence of the physical world and Jack's changed perception is DeLillo's emphasis on waste, and a postmodern consumer culture that is indebted to waste and excess. After the Airborne Toxic Event challenges the sense-making structures in the novel, Jack begins to panic, growing increasingly fearful and unstable. In the beginning, Jack describes the home as "storage space for furniture, toys, all the unused objects from earlier marriages and different sets of children, the gifts of lost in-laws, the hand-me-downs and rummages. Things, boxes" (8). These items hold only a temporary significance, and aside from furniture and toys, the list consists of forgotten memories and evidence of past identities, objects that, for Jack, "have a darkness attached to them, a foreboding. They make me wary not of personal failure and defeat but of something more general, something large in scope and content" (8). These items are the remains of Jack's past identities and relationships, the things that used to define him; they are physical manifestations of various representations of himself. They represent the death of Jack's past selves, and evidence of his falsified present. Even more so, however, the abundance of tired, old objects is simply waste accumulated from Jack's consumer exploits. After the Airborne

Toxic Event, Jack rampages the house, disposing of old items. He says that "the more things I threw away, the more I found. The house was a sepia maze of old and tired things. There was an immensity of things, an overburden of weight, a connection, a mortality" (301). Garbage and waste are evidence of the instability of the collective subject, and the detachment between the subject and reality. The abundance of tired objects depicts Jack as living in his own desolate waste, evidence of his iterations of selfhood in physical form. Waste, in the novel, is the degradation of the self in both the individual and the collective sense; but more so, it is the degradation of the physical world, as it culminates around preoccupied individuals caught in the cycle of representation.

It is ultimately waste that instigates the primary traumatic event in the novel in the form of the toxic by-product of pesticide production. Rachel Dini describes the way in which consumerism has paradoxically become both a representation of order and control, yet also an indicator of an uncontrollable urge to fill a void that only deepens. She says, "In *White Noise* [consumerism] is presented as both a means of staving off death and the thing that is killing us" (150). Meanwhile, Osteen observes the same motive that made Jack dispose of commodities, "lies behind valence of this psychic economy: both accumulation and attrition are meant to clear his system, aestheticize his pain" (183). The abundance of waste is, in the postmodern sense, the physical accumulation of death, where the subject is constantly exposed to their own lack, yet remains in a cyclical compulsion to continue consumer practice and deepen

the divide between identity and the environment. The production of pesticides is an advancement in farming practice that allows increased and faster consumption of goods. As the by-product of this production, the Airborne Toxic Event itself is the physical manifestation of the cycle of consumption, shattering the cycle by forcing the inhabitants of Blacksmith to vacate the city.

Slower threats such as the build-up of waste, toxicity and even mortality are made less important due to the immediacy of cultural practice, until they reveal themselves as significant threats that undermine the systems of security found in postmodern culture. Thus, the Airborne Toxic Event as the crisis in the novel does not appear to instil deep changes in the psyche of Blacksmith; however, it does stimulate an increased awareness of the physical world for Jack, who begins to notice the culmination of waste around his home and experiences the absurdity of SIMUVAC's reduction of the event to a practice scenario. Although it appears to be in the background, the impact of these environmental shifts are evident throughout the novel through references to the air and character unease. Murray says to Jack that "death is in the air" (176) as they discuss déja vu. Later Jack, Babette and Murray discuss the organisms designed to "eat their way through" the Airborne Toxic Event and describe a "vague foreboding" that speaks back to the "darkness" and "foreboding" Jack's associates with his possessions earlier in the novel:

"You feel a vague foreboding," I said.

> "I feel they're working on the superstitious part of my nature. Every advance is worse than the one before because it makes me more scared."
>
> "Scared of what?"
>
> "The sky, the earth, I don't know."
>
> "The greater the scientific advance, the more primitive the fear." (187)

There is a sense throughout the novel that there is an abstract threat, attaching a primal fear to both mundanities (such as Jack's physical belongings) as well as extreme circumstances (such as the Airborne Toxic Event). The further the subject moves from nature, the more threatening nature and natural process becomes. Even the sunsets become threatening; Jack's colleague says of them "What can you think about in the face of this kind of beauty? I get scared, I know that" (261). This divide demonstrates the rift between the subject as being within the world, and the lived experience that is filtered through simulacra.

It would be easy to read the Airborne Toxic Event as a postmodern apocalypse through its lack of a definite ending. However, it exemplifies the way the relationship between the subject and their environment is a source of significant anxiety. If the notion of endings and apocalypse is considered in this context, then a broader concept emerges with implications for all future environmental engagement: the awareness of the fragility of the subject's place within their environment is awareness that the very basic requirements for human survival can be easily manipulated, as they are

dependent on the body and the physical environment. DeLillo's approach to environmental crisis is unique in disaster fiction, as the event itself is hardly the core focus. Yet, as Tom LeClair says, "the disaster of *White Noise* is, ultimately, the new knowledge that seeps into the future from the imploded toxic event" (389). For the Gladneys, and the town of Blacksmith, the Airborne Toxic Event is the dawn of a new era, encompassed by the realisation of their helplessness at the hand of an environment corrupted by human production. Slowly, awareness of the physical world begins to enter the psyche of individuals, and the dichotomy between humankind and the physical world begins to fade as the reciprocal dependence of each side on the other is revealed.

Conclusion

DeLillo's award-winning novel *White Noise* paints American culture with a critical eye, using satire and cynicism to engage the reader in entering a critical space from which to reflect on dominant cultural narratives that are driven by religious worship of consumer culture and mass media. These same drivers of culture are critiqued by the featured authors of this thesis, with DeLillo acting as a precursor to a much broader movement that seeks to engage readers in critical thought and reflection on American culture, as well as their relationship to the natural world.

DeLillo's satiric representation of the postmodern American family places a critical gaze on the cultural climate that encourages a detachment between the subject and the environment. LeClair writes

> DeLillo presses beyond the ironic, extracting from his initially satirical materials a sense of wonderment or mystery, finding in the seeming rubbish of popular culture a kind of knowledge that would provide a more liveable set of systematic expectations about life and death. The fundamental questions to which the novel moves forward and backwards are: What is natural now? Has the nature of nature changed? If so, has our relation to nature changed? (393-394)

This exploration of humankind and nature culminates in the Airborne Toxic Event, and impacts on how it is experienced, addressed, and understood, ultimately realising human action has led to humankind being reliant on an environment that is irreparably damaged.

As an award-winning author whose works remain prescribed texts across Western universities, DeLillo's cultural imprint and interest in toxicity situates his work within ecofiction discourse. The representation of American culture seen across DeLillo's corpus is illustrative of the cultural climate where environmental awareness truly escalates, capturing the prelude to a time when the implications of the Anthropocene have become a reality beyond its geological beginnings. Texts such as *White Noise* are important to begin to answer Glotfelty's fundamental questions,

providing a cultural snapshot of the relationship between humankind and nature that is made clearer in the escalation of climate crisis. The idea of the Cartesian self, and the subject being separate from the physical body, is a characteristic of postmodern culture that is exacerbated by consumerism and the power of the media. Amid climate crisis, literary explorations of the postmodern self contribute to a broader understanding of Western culture, and the degree of separation between humankind and nature. Reflecting on these texts sees them recontextualised and reinvigorated as ecocritical research reveals new methodologies from which to approach classic texts. In the company of other environmental works, DeLillo establishes the cultural climate from which pretraumatic society launches itself in the wake of the Anthropocene.

Chapter 2: Environmental Sincerity and Weird Landscapes in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

Introduction

As a writer and academic who engaged heavily in criticism of postmodernism, David Foster Wallace is not typically identified as an environmental author. Nevertheless, I argue in this chapter that *Infinite Jest* (1996) is a novel that demonstrates an underlying ecological consciousness, both through Wallace's pursuit of sincerity in his writing practice, and through the novel's representation of environmentally damaged landscapes. Wallace's belief that fiction should represent the shared human experience is recontextualised by the Anthropocene, where the nature of that experience is reconceptualised by climate change. *Infinite Jest* provides a representation of America imminently bound for environmental collapse, and a culture so absorbed by media and commercialisation that those within it appear unable to recognise it.

Wallace's debut novel was promoted heavily and received glowing reviews, with David Streitfeld describing it as "bigger, more ambitious and better than anything else being published in the U.S. right now," (qtd. in Burn *Conversations with* 53) and *New York Magazine*'s Walter Kirn asserting that "with *Infinite Jest* […] the competition has been obliterated" (qtd. in Burn *Conversations with* 173). For the most

part, criticism of the novel has regarded Wallace's 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction" as paramount to understanding the novel, leading to what Bradley Fest calls a "standard" reading of Wallace's fiction" ("Then and out of the Rubble" 284). In this foundational essay Wallace outlines his belief that television and screen media has homogenised American culture, resulting in the large-scale desensitisation and alienation of the individual. A brief outline of the main narrative strands of *Infinite Jest* makes it clear how the topics of media absorption and commercialisation are in fact of key important to this novel. The novel's America is characterised by capitalist hedonism, competition, and an intense sense of detachment from other people and reality. Even the calendar years have commercial endorsement, from the Year of the Whopper as 2001 to the Year of Glad as 2010. One of the novel's two primary settings is a microcosm of this culture. The Incandenza family own and run Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.). Their son Hal Incandenza is a student at E.T.A. whose worth and status are determined by the complex social structure of the academy. Players understand their identities according to their family's wealth and their skill on the court. As Hal's psychological health deteriorates, spurred on by his alienation, drug use, and possibly a piece of mould he ate as a child, Hal loses the ability to communicate effectively, becoming unable to manipulate his facial features or speak. E.T.A. is juxtaposed by Ennet House, a halfway home for recovering substance addicts. The facility offers an antidote to E.T.A.'s existentially troubling environment by emphasising mindfulness and the gradual recognition of smaller characteristics of one's life to avoid the overwhelming scope of reality. Don Gately, a

former thief and addict, is a counsellor at Ennet house and the novel's second protagonist. He is haunted by the ghost of Hal's father, who committed suicide after making a film referred to as "the Entertainment", whose viewers inevitably fall into a catatonic state until they eventually die of natural causes. Meanwhile, the area beyond New England has become a toxic wasteland known as the Great Concavity. The US merged with Mexico and Canada to become the Organisation of North American Nations (O.N.A.N), a political move on the part of US President Gentle to avoid broaching the problem of pollution. Gentle gifts northern New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine to Canada, and evacuates American citizens south of the new border. In response, a radical group of assassins known as Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents (The Wheelchair Assassins, or AFR) are seeking a copy of the Entertainment to undertake a geopolitical coup against the nationhood of O.N.A.N. in protest of Canada's deterioration into an ecological wasteland.

Despite ecological crisis framing the narrative, environmental readings of the novel are surprisingly scarce. In her important ecocritical analysis of *Infinite Jest*, Houser argues that the novel uses disgust as a "conduit to engaging with human and nonhuman others as it counteracts forms of detachment that block environmental and social investment" ("Infinite Jest's Environmental" 120). Houser suggests that medicalised bodies and the consequential impact of environmental degradation on humans can "goad [the reader] to social and environmental investment" (120). Katherine Hayles engages Wallace's critical work alongside the novel to claim that

Infinite Jest shows how virtual environments are "likely to intensify the already existing paradoxes to the point of implosion" rather than simply "offering an escape from contemporary ecological problems" (678). She ultimately concludes that *Infinite Jest* demonstrates how "Authenticity […] is not about escaping from the realm of the social" but is about recognising "interconnections that bind us all together, human actors and nonhuman life forms, intelligent machines and intelligent people" (696). Similarly, Jansen suggests that the disease of modernity Wallace identifies can only be overcome by the rupture of binaries, and the recognition that to be human "is to be aware of our existence in relation to an exterior material world, to be aware of our roles in a large, complex, interconnected system" (57). Each of these readings incorporates the philosophy of writing Wallace outlines in "E Unibus Pluram" in order to bridge the gap between media-driven experience and environmental crisis in the novel. A thorough examination of the Great Concavity, however, is lacking in the ecocritical discourse of *Infinite Jest*.

This chapter has two parts that ultimately seek to position *Infinite Jest* as an important environmental novel from the 1990s. The first is a theoretical engagement with "E Unibus Pluram" alongside Lawrence Buell's concept of the text as testament, aiming to demonstrate the implicit environmental consciousness that can be drawn from Wallace's critical work in the Anthropocene. Wallace's essay responds to postmodern culture in a period when "the concept of the 'postmodern' was ceasing to be used principally in the analysis of particular objects or cultural areas and had

become a general horizon or hypothesis" (Connor 2). Authors and literary theorists began to question the cultural impacts of postmodernism's self-awareness, institutionalised irony, and self-reflectiveness, fearing an inescapable sense of isolation and entropy in art and culture. Wallace's foundational essay is a meditation on the cynicism and alienation inherent in postmodern television culture, and makes a strong claim for fiction's role and relevance in such an environment. Wallace envisions fiction-writers as writing purposefully to elicit critical reflection and engagement from readers. The growing awareness of humanity's impact on the climate means that these reflections on human culture are informed by the context of a changing environment, positioning the author to respond to climate crisis in the exploration of the human experience. I will be undertaking a comparative analysis between "E Unibus Pluram" and Lawrence Buell's idea of the "text as testament", which similarly presents the aim of fiction as one of provoking action, accountability and ethic regarding the environment. Though Wallace and Buell begin from different points, each reaches the conclusion that the author has a form of responsibility for their representation of the human experience. Wallace's pursuit of sincerity and Buell's "text as testament" imply that the author has an imperative to consider the reader's critical engagement with the text and, subsequently, the reader's own social and cultural experience of the world. I argue that a particular form of sincerity is a cornerstone of ecological fiction as environmental authors increasingly utilise and engage with climate science, world-building and the creative representations of humankind's relationship with nature. Environmental fiction becomes a rallying call

to readers, and opens a critical space from which to reflect on human experience and responsibility on a changing planet.

The second part of this chapter analyses the underlying environmental consciousness of *Infinite Jest* through a close reading of Wallace's representation of landscapes, with specific attention to the Great Concavity. In positioning *Infinite Jest* as an Anthropocene fiction, I take a new approach by using the "New Weird" as a literary context for Wallace's representation of the Great Concavity. The New Weird is a literary genre that "subverts the romanticised ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping-off point for creation of settings" (VanderMeer *The New Weird Anthology* n.p.). By combining tropes from various genres such as fantasy and science fiction, the New Weird enables complex explorations of real-world crisis without the limitations of genre convention or realism. The encroaching border of the Great Concavity easily mirrors contemporary notions of impending environmental crisis, a looming threat that is frequently overshadowed by anthropocentric perspectives and the concerns of media-driven consumer culture. The expanse of uninhabitable toxic wasteland becomes a representation of humankind's impact on the environment, where nature is made "weird" by human interference. Sincerity and the New Weird are very different — to some extent opposite – forms of literature that are not typically considered together in the critical literature, or yoked together in fiction. However, Wallace's representation of the exoticised natural landscape is clearly delineated from

human settlement, creating a space *in between* civilisation and the end of the world. By establishing the Great Concavity as a weird landscape, I extract environmental themes within the novel and re-envision Wallace's social and political commentary in the context of the Anthropocene. With so few environmental readings of the novel available, this chapter makes the case that Wallace's sincerity and weird representation of environmental degradation together make *Infinite Jest* an important novel in the exploration of Anthropocene fiction.

"What it means to be a fucking human being": Wallace and Buell's shared sincerity

In order to draw parallels between Wallace's sincerity and the underlying environmental consciousness in *Infinite Jest*, this section outlines Wallace's philosophy of writing as presented in "E Unibus Pluram" and compares it to Lawrence Buell's notion of the text as testament, which sees texts as authorial acts; that is, the author consciously creates the content with a deliberate theme and message in mind. According to Wallace, the fiction author must cultivate an emotive and genuine response from their readers by producing "things that both restructure worlds and make living people feel stuff" (qtd. in Houser *Ecosickness* 122). As Houser points out, the novel for Wallace "is not only an *imaginary* world; it can reconfigure the world beyond its pages by modelling and generating feeling" (122). She claims that "Wallace's project" raises the question of how aesthetic forms might reveal the

"hopelessness" of current social and cultural conditions. Or, more specifically, how a novel can transform these emotive responses into "an affect that serves the restructuring ends Wallace assigns to fiction" (122). Konstantinou similarly refers to this process as the creation of "believers", where fiction makes "ontological demands of us, can try and convert us into believers" (*Cool Characters* 171). Authorial sincerity, then, actively aims to engage readers and incite reflections on their own worldly interpretations and experiences. I will be drawing out Wallace's representation of the environment and human impacts upon it, but before I do so, I will create explicit links between Wallace's belief that fiction can incite change, and the environmental novel that seeks to inspire ecological awareness in its readers.

What "fiction should be about": Wallace's Sincerity

Wallace's ideas about the future of fiction writing are explained in "E Unibus Pluram" where he discusses the overwhelming use of irony in popular television culture, and how this creates a passive viewer experience that enforces detachment between the individual and their lived experience[16]. Wallace claims television culture

[16] It should be noted that contemporary scholarship highlights several issues with Wallace's sincerity. For example, in "White Guys: Questioning *Infinite Jest's* New Sincerity", Joel Robert and Edward Jackson question the theoretical underpinnings of Adam Kelly's term "New Sincerity" (2017) that stems from Wallace's writings, and argue that the New Sincerity of *Infinite Jest* is based on forms of racist and sexist exclusion. That is, in universalizing the shared human experience, individual suffering is over-written in place of ubiquitous human suffering. Robert and Jackson's argument is, perhaps, limited in that it responds specifically to Kelly's interpretation of Wallace's sincerity. Similarly, Stephanie Lambert argues in ""The Real Dark Side, Baby": New Sincerity and Neoliberal Aesthetics in David Foster Wallace and Jennifer Egan" (2020) that Wallace's New Sincerity is closely tied to a neoliberalist aesthetics and perpetuates gendered perspectives. In the context of

creates the illusion of the audience as voyeur, when in fact "we're not voyeurs here at all. We're just viewers. We are the Audience" (153). The difference lies in the nature of the viewer. The voyeur (a title Wallace ultimately gives to the fiction writer) is something like an active reader in the sense that they maintain critical distance. In observing human behaviour, the voyeur subsequently gains insight into the intricacies of the human condition. The fabrication of reality on television means that the perceived voyeurism is merely an illusion – in fact, we are a passive audience witnessing a poor performance of reality, a carefully tailored version of human behaviour that discourages critical distance and engagement. Wallace opens his essay with an example of this phenomenon, noting that the average American household watches six hours of television per day. He says, "I don't know any fiction writers who live in average American households […] Actually I have never seen an average American household. Except on TV" (151). The American nuclear family is held up as the "average American household", yet this is not the reality of the world the author lives in. Televised reality must be understood in context, where individuals behave in a way that reflects their awareness of the cameras, production team, and Audience. Television upholds the impression of an idealised reality, perpetuating tropes such as

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this chapter, however, Wallace's conception of sincerity contributes to an understanding of *Infinite Jest* that is informed by the author's own worldview and intention. The authorial perspective is significant to dissect the relationship between environmental sincerity and the text. This significance is amplified in this case given that Wallace is one of the instigators of the notion of sincerity in fiction in the contemporary sense; to examine the text without this perspective contradicts the notion of environmental sincerity as it negates the vocal and publicized intention of the author to embody sincerity in fiction. While critics such as Roberts and Jackson have identified issues with the "straight white" performants of sincerity and subsequent criticism that perpetuates this, it is relevant to outline Wallace's sincerity and informative to critique the novel with a mind to Wallace's scholarship.

the nuclear family, the perfect relationship, and the picturesque home on screen. In this way, it perpetuates a falsified view of the American norm, yet even the name "reality television" implies a form of sincerity in its representation of human experience. This representation is used to influence culture; it feeds into advertising; it forces viewers to compare themselves against impossible ideals, upholding a shared belief of personal inferiority. As Wallace says, "television's whole *raison* is reflecting what people want to see" (152). Rather than a complex exploration of the American experience, it is a representation that perpetuates a sense of normality. And it is not that critical distance is impossible; it is that the reality conveyed by television appeals to the desire of its audience. Most audiences have no desire to question the reality they see on television, as it aligns with the dominant cultural narrative. Thus, the human experience is mediated by the poor simulacrum of reality witnessed on screen, where entertainment overrides the authenticity of experience.

The relationship between the culture of watching and "the cycle of indulgence, guilt and reassurance" has important consequences, according to Wallace, but the "most interesting intercourse is between television and American lit" (166). Fictionists born and writing in the age of television are the first to write in a culture "that said its most important stuff about itself via mass media" (169). As true voyeurs or watchers, Wallace observes postmodern fiction writers beginning to document this process of watching, until the "watched subject being watched in their watching" becomes a commonly represented figure. Don DeLillo, is, of course, cited as the "true prophet in

this shift in U.S. fiction" (170)[17]. Wallace's thesis ultimately consists of two parts: first, that television has evolved to a point where it can "capture and neutralise any attempt to change or even protest the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism TV requires of Audience", and secondly, that there is a subgenre of fiction that is making an attempt to "transfigure a world of and for appearance, mass appeal and television" (171). Notably, this subgenre of fiction has a purpose: not simply to describe televisual culture, but to incite a sense of responsibility and accountability in those responsible for its perpetuation. Fiction, then, should challenge passivity and create an active dialogue between the author and the reader. There is a deep concern for the lack of meaning in Wallace's essay, when "institutionalised irony" as a cultural norm necessitates disconnection from experience, individualism, and community. Fiction, or the fiction writer, must wield a torch so as to reveal the seductive power of a mass-produced American identity and "snap readers awake to the fact that our TV- culture has become a cynical, narcissistic, essentially empty phenomenon" (185). Ultimately, Wallace's call to fictionists is to undermine the characteristics that have come to define entertainment. The sincerity he calls for is described as being outdated before it has even begun, as inducing "the yawn, the eye-rolling, the cool smile, the nudged ribs" (193); yet it returns a form of validity to unique human experiences and has an imbued sense of purpose in doing so.

[17] See Chapter 1.

The idea of sincerity, however, is a loaded term and warrants careful analysis. Sincerity on the matter of the human condition implies a degree of honesty regarding a highly complex and highly subjective interpretation of shared experience. The representation of what it means to be human is interlinked with authorial intention in fiction, especially if the purpose of such a representation is to incite critical reflection and change in perspectives. For Wallace, then, authorial intention is inevitable, exemplified by the impact of advertising on passive audiences in "E Unibus Pluram" and by a concern that Don Gately expresses in *Infinite Jest*. "[S]incerity with an ulterior motive" is something the people in the halfway house "know and fear, all of them trained to remember the coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications they'd had to construct in order to carry on Out There" (369). Wallace uses advertising and reality television to exemplify ulterior motives disguised as sincerity, a motive also worth examining in the context of fiction.

This means the author, creator or producer's own sincerity is always balanced against a consideration of the effect of the piece of writing. As both Kelly and Martin Paul Eve argue, "sincerity is always *only* about a trade-off between belief and representation and its future self-consistency" (Eve 40). Thus, true sincerity cannot simply be "reduced by appeal to intention, or morality, or context" (Kelly "David Foster Wallace" 140). While advertising may claim to demonstrate the effectiveness and usefulness of a product sincerely to the viewer, this claim to sincerity has an ulterior motive. This means that the challenge lies not in excluding the author, but in

separating genuine messages from that of communication with an ulterior motive. I suggest that this risk is fundamental to what sincerity is in the first place. Given that the notion of a sincere text is abstract and tenuous at best, the *intention* of sincere communication is just as important to its philosophy as the literary strategies that it employs. True sincerity lies between the conditional and the unconditional, and as such, both the writer and the reader ultimately remain in the dark as to whether a text achieves it or not.

Text as an Authorial Act

Text as an authorial act recognises a deliberate composition of prose that, in this case, has the intention of offering an enlightened and authentic perspective on the human experience. The possibility of a sincere work of fiction is intertwined with the authorial act in so far as it aims to reveal something to the reader off the page. As Zadie Smith states, Wallace's texts attempt "to make something happen off the page, outside words, a curious thing for a piece of writing to want to do" (qtd. in Kelly "David Foster Wallace" 145). Of course, it is not controversial to say that an author might intend their fiction to have tangible impact on their readers. The postmodern context from which Wallace writes, however, makes his claims quite radical. Postmodern fiction primarily deals with the notion of conceptual truths, and the breaking down of grand narratives. In the context of postmodernism, Wallace's pursuit of sincerity implies a shared human experience that contradicts the idea of

simulated reality upheld by postmodern fiction. When Wallace challenges fiction writers to unclasp television's "weird pretty hand" that has his "generation by the throat" ("E Unibus Pluram" 171), he gives responsibility to the author and acknowledges a real-world impact of fiction that responds to collective human experience. When asked about the obligation of fiction writers to "not only to depict [humankind's] condition but also to provide *solutions* to these things?", Wallace responds:

> I don't think I'm talking about conventionally political or social-action-type solutions. That's not what fiction's about. Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we *are* human beings, now. Or can be … (Burn *Conversations* 26)

This demonstrates the active and complex role of the author in Wallace's understanding of the literary landscape. Fiction's "job" here is to interpret and reveal the intricacies of the human experience that are hegemonic aspects of daily life. Notably, it should also remind the individual of their human-ness, specifically their human-ness in terms of presence in a particular time and a particular place. Not only should the author write with sincerity, the texts should reveal something to the reader about their condition, therefore having an impact on perspective and worldview.

In our contemporary moment, by this logic, sincerity must encompass the question of what it means to be human in a time of environmental upheaval. In his 1995 book *The Environmental Imagination* Lawrence Buell discusses his concept of the text as testament, an approach with clear parallels to Wallace's sincerity, only with a specific emphasis on the environment. Buell examines Thoreau, claiming that the poet surpassed "ordinary bounds of the literary" and is a writer "the events of whose writings have been so interwoven with the events of actual existence on the one hand and cultural mythography on the other that at this distance the lines between text and life, text and culture, blur irretrievably" (370). A similar argument can very easily be established for Wallace and *Infinite Jest.* A novel written to capture the very sincerity and cultural reflection outlined in "E Unibus Pluram", Wallace's novel was an immediate bestseller. More significantly, the novel is frequently identified as the novel of its generation and has earned a certain cult status. Buell argues that a text of such cultural capital should be considered as more than the sum of its parts; that is, more than "linguistic and ideational properties" (370). A text comprising of such "institutionalised" heroes and heroines, and with such "posterity" has an impact on the world and can be examined based on what it does (370). Of more significance here, however, is Buell's claim that Thoreau's work "shrewdly and self-consciously […] reflects on these issues" seeming to "define itself as aspiring literary classic in the form of self-reflexive personal testament" (370-371). It is here that Buell establishes the notion of text as testament, mirroring a sense of Wallace's own self-awareness and reflexivity in the writing process. The personal testament Buell identifies can be seen

clearly outlined by Wallace in the form of sincerity, and the author's responsibility to reveal to the reader what Wallace calls the disease of modernity.

In an environmental context, to disconnect the author from their textual production is the negation of history. Buell identifies the poststructuralist approach to reading texts as the removal of context, claiming that environmental writing is an exploration of human history in the context of its relationship to nature, drawing from human impact upon the natural world to imagine futures, or re-envision the present or past. Indeed, he uses environmental fiction to make an argument for the importance of history, saying that "to imagine a literary history comprised of textual objects, or discursive practices, without responsible individual agents is as problematic from an environmentalist perspective as imagining a beautiful landscape without the traces of human shaping that have tailored it to the standards of the picturesque" (*The Environmental Imagination* 372). For Buell, it is naïve to imagine the text as not being a purposefully crafted product of an author, and to ignore the context in which a text was produced, just as it is naïve to see a landscape and believe it to be as such without human interference. It would be paradoxical to see environmental fiction separated from the context of its production, as environmental fiction is founded on an exploration of active agents on the environment. This means that each text composed during a period of environmental crisis reflects, to a certain degree, human attitudes and perspectives on the natural world. However, as Buell notes, it would be also be reductionist to say authorial intention or biography is the key, as this reduces "text (or

landscape)" to "nothing more than an act of authorial will" (372). Therefore, authorial intention greatly informs the text and its message. At the same time, it requires critical engagement from the reader, who must navigate the author's intention, and measure this against their own reading of the text. In other words, critical engagement from the reader is required to dissect intention. It is, of course, impossible to access the author's intentions, just as there is no way to truly determine the difference between reality or simulation. The wider activist pursuit challenges the reader beyond the scope of entertainment, and sincerity is manifested through the seriousness of the subject matter and maintained by the earnestness and sincerity of the authorial voice. The critical space created in the act of reading harnesses both the sincere perspective offered by the author and the experience of the reader to reveal the underlying context of ecological crisis, and how it manifests in the reader's lived experience.

At this stage, I have established that intention plays a key role in both Wallace and Buell's conceptions of fiction. Yet, this is not a return to authorial intentionalism. Rather, it signposts an approach to writing fiction that engages directly with the lived experience of the reader, inciting critical engagement not only with the text, but with the real world. Outlining what he calls "image-fiction", Wallace describes responsibility in writing practice: "the fiction of the image is not just a use or mention of televisual culture, but a *response* to it, an effort to impose some sort of accountability on a state of affairs" ("E Unibus Pluram" 172). Fiction does not only exist in the space of entertainment, but as a form of social commentary and discussion. Further, the

nature of this commentary is not only a whim of the author, but a responsibility on the part of the author-voyeur. If the fiction writer creates a *response* to cultural practice with a mind to maintain accountability, they are implied to have both a depth of critical knowledge, and a responsibility to impart it. Thus, while both Buell and Wallace begin from very different starting points (one concerned by television's cultural influence, the other by environmental degradation), both arrive at a place where fiction is a mode through which the personal sincerity and intention of the author provides new perspectives of the world to the reader. The novel becomes a vehicle to engage readers, revealing the systems the reader uses to understand the world around them, representing various reconfigurations of the components of these systems, and encouraging critical engagement with the outcomes. Wallace and Buell share a concept of the fictional text as part of a cultural dialogue and a basis for reflections on culture and the human experience. In the exploration of what it means to be human, the author plays an active role in moulding reader perspectives. Fiction is a platform for communicating different perspectives, and is a powerful tool for environmental activism and expanding the environmental imagination.

Authorial Intention as Rhetoric

If authorial intention represents the opening of a critical dialogue between the reader and their environment based on the commentary of the novel, we may position the author's representation as a form of rhetoric. Rhetoric has a rather negative

connotation, especially by its manipulative use in political discourse, and is commonly thought of as being insincere in popular culture. However, as Bryan Moore argues in the preface of *Ecological Literature and the Critique of Anthropocentrism* (2017), environmental novels are written by rhetoricians. This is not in the sense that climate novels are merely pieces of rhetoric; rather, they are written with a particular ethic in mind to challenge or persuade the reader, and make an argument about the world we live in. Buell argues "environmental rhetoric rightfully rests on moral and especially aesthetic grounds *rather than* scientistic" (*The Future of Environmental* 46). This means that environmental fiction, whilst often drawing on scientific enquiry, is not typically an educational platform in the sense of providing a literal communication of a state of affairs. Rather, it presents aspects of the world with a mind to have the reader critically evaluate their own perspective, with particular attention to humankind's relationship with nature. Ecological fiction can therefore be seen as ethical environmental rhetoric, as the author writes with a view to convince their readership. Moore even goes as far as to say that "ethics – their discovery and expression through argument – is central to rhetoric" (Moore 2).

The matter of ethics and rhetoric is a difficult one. As an approach to presenting an argument, rhetorical principles can be used to convince audiences in both ethical and unethical ways of both ethical and unethical things. To explain the application here, then, I consider the ethical component Moore presents as being more closely aligned with the sincerity of the author than with a particular philosophical ethic.

Kelly regards New Sincerity writers as staging "ethical experiments, in which affective power cannot be separated from […] the appropriation of affect for manipulative ends" (*The New Sincerity* 204). That is, fiction is a platform from which the author stages a perspective to influence the reader. While this complicates the notion of sincerity if the focus is on the motive of the author, it does speak to a clear intent to convince; if this is to be done ethically, it must be done through critical engagement with differing perspectives rather than simply telling readers what to think, or surreptitiously inserting personal perspectives in the text. Buell also identifies a sense of ethical responsibility in environmental writing. He argues both Faulkner and Leopold's works possess an "implied environmental ethical inference": where each author emphasises the value of property, they also use narrative to "provide arenas and incentives for something better than economic self-interest" with an intent to "nudge owners to and the general public toward behaviour more in the interest of biotic and human community" (*Writing for an Endangered World* 192). Both Buell and Wallace position the author as actively engaging readers in a conversation about their condition. It is the nature of this condition, whether it be as an ignorant subject of a media-driven reverie or a denier of climate change and ecological risk, that is revealed to the reader in a way that encourages active reflection and consideration. Whilst the intention of the author, as described by Wallace and Buell, is to reveal something to the reader, this revelation does not take the form of blindly subscribing to a rhetorical argument presented by the author. Rather, a perspective is offered that requires the reader to actively engage with the author's ideas, and critically evaluate their own

worldview as a result. Fiction writers use direct appeals as well as indirect literary devices as a form of rhetoric as a "means to persuasion as well as a means to understand and critique" (Moore 3) the ever-expanding breadth of information, misinformation, media coverage, and data on climate change and environmental science. As ecological upheaval becomes the contextual link between fictional worlds and the lived human experience, rhetoric is a helpful perspective from which to examine manifestations of sincerity in environmental fiction.

The theoretical shift from human history to planetary history has a significant impact on the conceptualisation and representation of the individual self. Where Wallace sees fiction's responsibility as replicating multiple voices to establish a sense of human community and cultural systems, further complications arise from the subsequent dubbing of a new geological epoch that reminds humankind of its collective state of being. To examine what it means to be human amidst environmental upheaval is to examine the ways that humankind's relationship with the environment has come to inform the lived experience, not only in the context of interactions between humans, but between humans and other living things. In the recognition of complex, interconnected, living systems, fiction begins to reveal characteristics of the human experience related to these planetary shifts, making sincerity a cornerstone of environmental writing.

Establishing a "context of objectivity": Insularity and Sense of Place

Insularity on a Collapsing Planet

Wallace's sincerity in *Infinite Jest* is perhaps more apparently connected to media and consumer culture, but these values perpetuate a sense of insularity in individual characters that deepens the disconnection between them and nature. The cultural landscape in which the novel takes place is indicative of not only the dangers Wallace sees in the growing power of corporate entities and media culture, but also the subsequent deterioration of the natural environment as the subject becomes increasingly removed from it. In a fashion similar to Ben Lerner's in *10:04* (see Chapter 4), the novel is littered with references to a collapsing world. Environmental officials deny "vast collections of drums leaking solvents, chlorides, benzenes and oxins" on softball pitches (399), the Charles River has gone from "café with cream" to "robin-egg's blue" (233), and "toxic effluvia" is "choking" the highways (383). Meanwhile, newspaper headlines include ecological horrors such as "TOXIC HORROR ACCIDENTALLY UNCOVERED IN UPSTATE NEW HAMPSHIRE", "SUB ROSA FUSION-IN-POISONOUS-ENVIRONMENT TEST SITE ALLEGED AT MONTPELIER, VT" and "MY BABY HAS SIX EYES AND BASICALLY NO SKULL" (399). The comparative subtlety of Wallace's exploration of environmental degradation is powerful in itself and reflects the all-consuming nature of media and consumer culture in "E Unibus Pluram". As Konstantinou summarises, the nature of

television is that its "viewers become habituated to ignoring a range of mediations and hard truths" (*Cool Characters* 177). Addiction to the imitation of life on screen creates a viewer seduced by artifice and unable to adequately witness and relate to the real world. It is appropriate, then, that the connection between the ecological degradation of the narrative environment and the characters' personal concerns is so detached; Wallace's "fiction of social, ecological, and somatic poisoning entangles the body and the environment casually and conceptually" (Houser, *Ecosickness* 120). As in Chapter 1, insular and self-involving behaviours result in a destructive detachment from the world. In *Infinite Jest,* this self-involvement reveals itself primarily through addiction and a repetition of references to self-conscious insularity.

An effective case study demonstrating this insularity is the character James (Jim) Incandenza, also known as Himself. The filmographer responsible for the Entertainment, Incandenza's film corpus is a collection of abstract works attempting to make sense of objects. In undertaking these explorations, Incandenza's films serve more to emphasise the "schism between subject and object, self and other" (Jansen 67) than garnering any real insight into objectivity. His filmography also becomes increasingly autobiographical over time, as if Incandenza is utilising his medium to explore his selfhood, exhibiting a frustration at his own lack of insight and inability to escape self-reflexivity. Adding emphasis to the divide between subject and object is that Incandenza's extensive filmography, complete with descriptions, appears in an eight-page endnote (985-993). The reader has the choice of digging deep into

Incandenza's filmography and sacrifice narrative flow, or forego what could be a revelation to the inner workings of the storyline which has demonstrated that all of its disjointed plots are either closely linked, or at the very least thematically unified. In other words, the reader must extract their self from the insularity of the novel or risk a lack of insight into important contextual information. Cruelly, Incandenza's ultimate masterpiece results in a catatonic viewership, "literalizing modernity's insistence on a rupture between interior and exterior, and demonstrating the violence of this rupture" (Jansen 68). The film itself is weaponised as Quebecois Separatists seek the original tape to aid in an act of terrorism against the US, intending to air the tape on public television and lobotomise the whole US audience. It is insularity that is weaponised, as the film's victims become entirely ignorant of the world around them, and in the process, of their own selves as well.

As the film is consumed, Wallace's dire image of media-driven America is realised. the Entertainment is an extended metaphor "through which Wallace explores the role of film and television in contemporary US culture" (Sayers 346), using fiction to reinforce his plea in "E Unibus Pluram". The first victim of the film in the novel is the Canadian-Saudi medical attaché. He returns from work, needing "unwinding in the very worst way", and this need to "unwind" becomes a motif in the lead-up to his exposure. The rituals of his indulgence are described in great detail; he must "head home and unwind" after a day of work, must "unwind without chemical aid" of drugs or alcohol, but as he searches for "something to unwind with", he finds his wife has

not obtained new entertainment cartridges, leaving his "unwinding-options […] severely restricted" (34-35). The repetition of unwinding creates a sense of urgency that captures a need to escape the experience of the day and detach from oneself, "unwinding in visible degrees" (34). There is a clear sense of escapism in the act of watching, and as the attaché searches for a cartridge, it is as if he is more invested in unwinding from himself than simply relaxing. Visually, the reader sees the attaché relaxing away from his conscious self, his ritual being to fall asleep in his recliner by the television. In his paper "Representing Entertainment(s) in *Infinite Jest*" (2012), Sayers theorises the Entertainment alongside Roland Barthes' essay on cinema. Barthes compares the movie experience to hypnosis, describing the spectator as "riveted to the representation" (Sayers 346) onscreen. Just like Wallace's attaché, Barthes' viewer "slip[s] into their seat as they slip into a bed" (347), losing themselves in the reverie of watching. Wallace creates a similar image again in his essay "Supposedly Fun Things I'll Never Do Again", saying "a commercial movie doesn't try to wake people up but rather to make their sleep so comfortable and their dreams so pleasant that they will fork over money to experience it" (Sayers 347). The next time Wallace checks in with the attaché (some 50 pages later), he is accompanied by seven others, all "watching the recursive loop the medical attaché had rigged on the TV's viewer the night before, sitting and standing there very still and attentive, looking not one bit distressed or in any way displeased, even though the room smelled very bad indeed" (87). Those present have "unwound" to a point entirely beyond context. They

are removed from the system, rendered entirely incapable of thought, action, and independence.

It is this insularity that Wallace diagnoses as the disease of modernity. With television standing in as the mirror to the subject, it is the self that is seen and manifested in everything, until context is inevitably sacrificed for self-absorption[18]. Wallace's public address "This is Water" (published posthumously 2009) offers a useful allegory here, whose punchline "becomes crucial in ferreting out the novel's thematic crux and indeed the ethical perspective of its author" (Jansen 55). Upon meeting at an Alcoholics Anonymous gathering, Bob Death tells Don Gately an allegorical tale of two fish: "This wise old whiskery fish swims up to three young fish and goes, 'morning, boys, how's the water' and swims away; and the three young fish watch him swim away and look at each other and go, 'What the fuck is water?'" (*Infinite Jest* 445). The reader is never privy to Gately's response to the story after its telling. It is as if the allegory is told for the benefit of the reader than the story's characters. In his original address, Wallace goes on to explain that the most "important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about" (8). In other words, the aspects that determine the subject's place in the world are rarely recognised consciously. Of course, the subject's positioning in a particular environment makes it exceptionally difficult to perceive that which constructs its context. To repeat "this is water", however, is to remind oneself to be "conscious and aware enough to choose

[18] One may also look to the Lacanian Mirror phase, where the subject develops the Id (Sayers "Representing Entertainment(s)" 348-351).

what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience" (54). The intention is not to develop the ability to comprehend in one's context objectively, but rather to "wake up", to "reverse the sleep-inducing effect" of entertainment (Sayers 351). As Wallace states, "if the writer does his job right, what he basically does is remind the reader of how smart the reader is. Is to wake the reader up to stuff the reader's been aware of all the time" (qtd. in Lipsky 41). Wallace's representation of the physical landscape in *Infinite Jest* is not minimised because it is unimportant or inconsequential, but because the individual remains largely oblivious towards it.

In an extensive, existential rant, James Incandenza's father says to him, "We're so present it's ceased to mean. We're environmental. Furniture of the world" (168). The use of the word "environmental" suggests that he forms part of a metaphorical backdrop, or possesses no critical abilities beyond simply being present. Incandenza's drunken monologue indicates a deep dissatisfaction with the insularity he feels. He likens this to a sense of stagnation he sees as being environmental, yet the association between his alienated self and the environment is one that utterly devalues what it means to be environmental in a biocentric sense. If being environmental is existing as "furniture", as having a total lack of agency, then any sense of relationship to a world outside of human environments is degraded in value. In the expression of Incandenza's personal crisis is the underlying assumption that humans are entirely separate and unaffected by the environment. I suggest here that part of the value of

considering *Infinite Jest* in the context of Anthropocene fiction is that the characters' embedded state in their way of life is quite unsettling in the context of the current climate crisis. The media-driven consumer culture Wallace depicts becomes a convenient and self-perpetuating distraction from the pollution of the metaphorical water. Readers bear witness to an America not so remarkably different from the America they know, providing the opportunity to compare and consider the factors that differentiate their own context from that in the novel.

Sense of Place

This sense of detachment is further enforced through the use of spaces to emphasise social hierarchy and status in human communities, and through the use of maps to visually evidence the division between humankind and their environmental impacts. The representation of place in the novel clearly captures aspects of the social standing of characters, and nature is more likely to be an unwelcome intrusion than contribute to a character's understanding of place. This socially oriented representation strengthens the sense of cultural insularity in the novel. Houser, for example, notes the importance of place and geography specifically in relation to the E.T.A. and Ennet House. Ennet House lies in the shadow of Incandenza Hill. Atop the "shav[ed]" hill, the Incandenzas founded E.T.A. with the intention of attracting "boys [who] like great perspectival heights and spectacular views encompassing huge swaths of territory"; E.T.A. is placed "literally on top of everything" (Houser 119). The

class and social status of each building's occupants is reflected in their geographical locations. More broadly, like the dividing lines on a map, there is a strict sense of division between nature and human environments. Rather than an integration of human and natural environs, nature is seen as the sun shining through windows, or experienced in the hills outside the city. Hal recalls a time as a child where he consumed a vile mould he found in the basement. In this moment, the pastoral all-American backyard image is disrupted by the intrusion of nature, a gross thing penetrating the human environment. Further, the proclamation of "Help! My son ate this!" and the feeble lapping of the garden rather than seeking direct help belies the insular nature of suburbia and the powerless, naive position of the young mother (11). Later, Don Gately "reexperiences" his violent childhood, where his mother was frequently beaten "in vicinities between groin and breast so nothing showed" (446). He describes their house, a "decayed beach-cottage" with "Herman the Ceiling That Breathed" (447), the oppressive ceiling reflecting the culture of the abusive household. Nature is incorporated into the human environment in an uncomfortable way that reflects the human systems in place.

Beyond this localised geographical significance is the manipulation of national borders to form the Great Concavity. The Concavity was created by US President Johnny Gentle, who upon discovering the level of pollution in this area, gifted the land to Canada. All American citizens evacuated south of the concavity in the Territorial Reconfiguration, and the land became uninhabitable. The shape of the concavity, from

the US perspective, visually spans from the toxicity zone and northwards to just south of Toronto and Quebec. The shape, a gentle downwards pointing arrow, bears down upon the former US, still mapped-out below the new blank zone. The US government uses "mammoth effectuators" to "force northern MA's combined oxides north" (456) and use giant "transnational catapults" (217) to project waste north to maintain the border. Despite Gentle's solution being accepted by the American public, Canada denies ownership of the wasteland, resulting in, from their perspective, the Great Convexity ("'I think you mean Great Concavity, Alain.' 'I meant Great Convexity. I know what is the thing I meant.'" (233)), a new border that Canadians recognise between the US and Canada, placing the waste-zone on US soil. The Concavity is also used for power, where "annular fusion" (64), a new technology involving powerplants that use toxic waste to produce energy, is used, paradoxically, to allow the continued production of waste. The responsibility for waste creation is removed from individuals through the enforced border and the temporary technological solution. However, the increasing toxicity of the waste zone is another threat to the human population, slowly leaking "highly poisonous radioactive waste" (571) and toxic gas clouds into nearby cities. As a film scholar notes in the novel, "Fans do not begin to keep it all in the Great Convexity. It creeps back in. What goes around, it comes back around. This your nation refuses to learn. It will keep creeping back in. You cannot give away your filth and prevent all creepage, no? Filth by its very nature it is a thing that is always creeping back in" (233). While the Entertainment is a fast-acting threat moving its way across O.N.A.N., the toxicity of the Great Concavity

moves slowly, as people rest in the security of their own "radical kind of self-absorption" (Jansen 70). While their insularity is psychologically protective in the short term against their environmental situation, the Entertainment metaphorically captures the danger of self-absorption as the Concavity expands. The border between the US and the Concavity is a representation of separation from nature, and a visualisation of the psychological distance placed between the US and the Concavity. Thus, the map is simultaneously a metaphorical exploration of blind commitment to a culture that upholds a harmful sense of detachment and insularity, and a cartographic representation of the environmental cost of these practices.

The map itself is an object that provides context, drawing a clear border between the US and the Great Concavity, and the activities in each zone. By their very nature, maps define and quantify spaces that are beyond the subject's ability to comprehend other than in the abstract. They are a physical representation of abstract space, and therefore the map is inherently biased towards certain perceptions of which spaces are important and which are not; an example is the standard Mercator world map, where the effect of distorting the poles privileged the size of dominant European states. This way, the map also has the power to omit the presence, localities and nature of other things, privileging a particular view of the world. In this act of defining spaces, the map becomes a "marker for the collapse of an established epistemological matrix, a paradigmatic turn in the light of a new, fundamentally ontological insight" (Greve and Zappe 2). The shifting of the border between the US and Canada sees the

US removing itself from a cultural narrative that led to the ecological destruction of part of its country. The new border implies a lack of responsibility for the areas of ecological collapse, as well as enforcing a sense of disconnection between the polluted area and the people who caused it. Perpetuating this idea is that the people who venture into the Concavity simply "never return[ed]" (561); waste can simply "disappear" beyond the border to places that are not relevant to human communities, and the activities that led to the degradation of the pre-existing US states can be forgotten alongside old borders. Despite the foreboding implication that environmental impacts are becoming inherently transnational, the insularity of the American public can continue without consequence with the simple manipulation of a line on the map.

The use of maps in *Infinite Jest* runs deeper than the manipulation of borders. Gentle moves to eliminate the original map of the US in favour of one where a "wicked canine-intensive bite" is taken out and gifted to Canada in a move of "ecological gerrymandering" (403). The impact of the changed map ripples throughout the novel in various ways, and the premise of the map becomes a representation of a more complex reality. The phrase "eliminating [your own or another's] map for keeps" (129, 220, 231) comes to act as a euphemism for ending a life. Not only is this a reference to the unknown that lies in death, but it implies the elimination of the subject's impact on the world, the way the individual interacts and influences other "maps". If the human subject is mapped, then suicide becomes the uncharting of their territory, the

reality that exists outside of the bounds of the perspective of the original map. Kate Gompert, a resident of Ennet house, describes her depression as emotional novocaine, where "everything becomes an outline of the thing. Objects become schemata. The world becomes a map of the world" (693). Here, the map is a fantasy, a simplification of the real world that enforces a form of blindness preventing authentic experience. More broadly, the map becomes a metaphorical representation of what "should be", with the impression that true experience or deeper contexts lie beneath.

If the map is the logic by which the subject perceives the world, then the world or territory is an abstract, complex system that requires the map for comprehension. Both the map and the world are interdependent, as regression into one is detrimental to the subject. The role of the physical map and sense of place in the novel takes on new resonances with the consideration of the mind as map, and, as Adam Miller says, this is best navigated thematically during a complicated game played by the students of the Enfield Tennis Academy (10). In the game, disparity between the map and the territory captures the disconnect between the subject and their environment, recalling the allegory of the whiskered old fish and his question of context. The day Canada and Mexico joined with the US to form O.N.A.N. is celebrated as "Interdependence Day". Each year on Interdependence Day the students of E.T.A. come together to play Eschaton, a complex game utilising tennis balls, four tennis courts, and not a small amount of strategy. "The phenomenally accurate lobbing of tennis balls by semi-professional twelve-year-olds" (Miller 10) is motivated by the simulation of global

nuclear conflict and the multiple factors that dictate the outcome of a doomsday scenario, where realism depends on the artifice of a tennis court representing the whole of planet earth. As a "green fuzzy warhead" (*Infinite Jest* 327) lands where the master of ceremonies is unable to see if it hit its target, a shred of doubt over the integrity of the map pauses the game: "It's an uneasy moment: a dispute such as this would never occur in the real God's real world since the truth would be manifest […]. But God here is played by Otis P. Lord" (333). As snow starts to fall, an argument begins on the impact of the snow-on-blast radius, and the fallibility of the perceived world map is revealed:

> Players themselves can't be valid targets. Players aren't inside the goddamn game. Players are part of the *apparatus* of the game. They're part of the map. It's snowing on the players but not on the territory. They're part of the *map*, not the cluster-fucking *territory*. You can only launch against the *territory.* Not against the *map.* It's like the one ground-rule boundary that keeps Eschaton from degenerating into chaos. Eschaton gentlemen is about logic and axiom and mathematical probity and discipline and verity and *order*. You do not get points for hitting anybody real. Only the gear that *maps* what's real. (338)

On the one hand, Eschaton is a game consisting of an oversimplification of geo-political warfare and appears to be simply a number of children pegging tennis balls at each other. However, the game becomes quite serious, with a fight resulting in the destruction of the Yushityu hard-drive chassis that holds the "nervous system of

Eschaton" when Lord goes flying "headfirst down through the monitor's screen, and stays there" (342). As the map and territory become confused the game results in its own "apocalyptic" end, an allegory for the psychological symptom of Wallace's America.

In terms of the novel itself, the temporal inconsistencies, the endnotes, and the complexity of the prose might be seen as a mechanism to prevent the reader becoming absorbed in the "map" of the narrative. If the subject is to endeavour to see things in a different way and critically consider their own worldview against the ideas presented in the narrative, Wallace's style forces the reader outside of the insularity of the novel. Over 100 pages of endnotes (sometimes with their own additional endnotes) consist of everything from letters, filmographies, and newspaper articles to definitions, lexical data, and observations to which the novel's characters are not privy. Temporal skips spanning back and forth across nine years, and characters who may only appear once or twice in the novel's 1079 pages notoriously disrupting the flow of the narrative for readers. Wallace's style eliminates the distance between the author and the reader, firstly "by breaking the cycle of passive consumption of entertainment" and secondly in the way it "allows Wallace to engage an audience and to present grand narratives and themes" (Bartlett 374). If the map is a singular lens through which the subject understands abstract place and their relationship to it, then Wallace offers no conducive map by which to understand his fictional expression.

Indeed, if there is one clear message to be gained from the metaphorical map he presents, it is to disregard the map altogether.

"Strange upon strange": The Great Concavity and the New Weird

The strange nature of the Great Concavity can be seen as a manifestation of the anxiety surrounding the future of human societies, specifically in relation to the potential ecological impacts of consumer culture. Greve and Zappe explore weird and fantastic fiction in the context of place and ecology in their book *Spaces and Fiction of the Weird and Fantastic* (2019). They understand weird and fantastic fiction as "a diagnostic model of storytelling, outlining the latent anxieties and social dynamics that define a culture's "structure of feeling" […] at a given historical moment" (3). Traditionally, one might consider the weird in literature to be linked with Lovecraftian horror or the supernatural; but if the Old Weird "mirrored the fear of modernisation and industrialisation (and its resultant social and cultural contradictions in Western society)", then, Greve and Zappe argue, the New Weird's "manifestations since the 1960's […] can be read as a reflection of the creeping awareness of fundamental *ecological* and *geological* crisis" (3). It needs to be said unambiguously that *Infinite Jest* is not a New Weird novel. However, some of the key characteristics of the New Weird are reflected in Wallace's representation of the Great Concavity. As a landscape it is

undoubtedly unusual and unsettling, and it is through this that it provides unique commentary on humankind's relationship with, and perspective on, nature.

As Wallace recognises, it is not a new literary technique to attempt to make the familiar strange; "it is no surprise that some of today's most ambitious Realist fiction" seek this end ("E Unibus Pluram" 172). Although Wallace deems this to have failed thus far, it is a useful starting point from which to approach *Infinite Jest* in regard to the Great Concavity. Whilst the re-established border serves to negate the US's actions in making cities uninhabitable, strange things do occasionally emerge from the uncharted space. Aside from the creeping toxicity, the toxic dumping ground is home to "whole packs and herds of feral animals operating in locust-like fashion" who evolved from domestic pets abandoned in the apparently swift and sudden relocation to the "O.N.A.N.ite map" (561). Citizens near the border are precautioned on safety measures against "herds of feral hamsters", whose thundering across the plains of Vermont raise "dust that forms a uremic-hued cloud" visible from Boston or Montreal (93). The site has developed a certain mysticism around it; just as researchers have disappeared inside the restricted zone, so too have explorers and cultists in search of "*The Infant*" and other beings over the border. While some flock over the border "donning tie-dyed parkas and cardboard snowshoes" (562) each New Year seeking the oversized and worshipped child, others hypothesise about "oversized insects" who not only take over abandoned homes, but "actually setting up house and keeping them in model repair and impressive equity" (561). Waste is strategically dumped to

keep the border at bay, the government "steadily dumping in toxins to keep the uninhibited ecosystem from spreading and overrunning more ecologically stable areas" (537). The nation's waste feels almost like a sacrifice to the strange mutations living there. In discussion regarding the Great Concavity between Michael Pemulis and Idris Arslanian, the concavity is described in a number of dystopic ways: as a space of "anxiety and myth", as having "unmacheteable regions of forests of the mythic eastern Concavity", and as a surrounding environment "so fertilely lush it's practically unliveable" (573). The Great Concavity is a weird landscape, and harnesses aspects of the fantastic that evokes critical reflection from readers, in keeping with an authorial approach espousing sincerity.

As a literary genre, the New Weird was influenced by the New Wave of the 1960s, a movement that "deliriously mixed genres, high and low art, and engaged in formal experimentation, often typified by a distinctly political point of view" (VanderMeer *The New Weird Anthology* n.p.). The genre's investment in monsters, subjectivity, and a warped sense of reality makes it a useful frame to examine ecological fiction, as authors present perspectives on the abstract and unfathomable impacts of planetary crisis. Citing S.T. Joshi, Miller quotes, "'the weird tale did not (and perhaps does not now) exist as a genre but as the *consequence of a world view*' (1). It is 'an inherently philosophical mode' (11) because it hinges on what Joshi calls '*the sentiment of ontological horror*'" (244). Moritz Ingwersen claims the New Weird has ecological origins, and that its emergence ten years after the naming of the

Anthropocene is "emblematic of ongoing refractions of the current geological crisis" explored through "the registers of the weird and uncanny" (Greve and Zappe 73-74). Gry Ulstein draws on the "weird" nature of the Anthropocene, and although she claims it does not explicitly have an ecological agenda, she writes on the relevance of the New Weird to Anthropocene fiction. Ulstein argues that "many storytellers of the new weird generation […] incorporate ecological themes in their narratives", where "Anthropocene issues like global warming become monsters within this spectral apocalyptic awareness" (50). The new weird thus provides "an aesthetic strategy for expressing Anthropocene anxieties" (52). It is important to note that Ulstein, like Jansen, evokes Latour to exemplify the connection between the horror of the weird and Anthropocene fiction. Where Jansen harnesses Latour to extrapolate the impact of the human tendency to ascribe binaries, Ulstein specifically notes the impact this has on understandings of nature. Quoting Latour, Ulstein argues nature has "unexpectedly taken on [the role] of the active subject! Such is the frightening meaning of 'global warming': through a surprise inversion of background and foreground, it is *human* history that has become frozen and *natural* history that is taking on frenetic pace" (Latour qtd. in Ulstein 48-49). As such, the confusion between these binaries is foregrounded as a source of anxiety, where humankind have "engineered monsters, but ours are industrial, fossil-fuelled […] Anthropocentric crises muddle the preconceived role division between actor and acted upon" (Ulstein 49).

The Great Concavity is a strong representation of this confusion of binaries. While the reconfiguration of the map draws a neat line between tarnished nature and civilisation, the reality of the human action that caused the Concavity (and its lasting "creeping" impact) remains. The Concavity is an ecological monster biding its time, spitting out strange and genetically mutated creatures as it creeps ever closer to civilisation, taking the lives of those that venture within. As addressed previously, the ecological crisis is evident throughout the novel, however characters rarely exhibit much concern. Even the Quebecois Separatists seem more motivated by territory than the risks of inheriting an ecological wasteland. Despite this, references to the Concavity describe it as much more than simply a toxic zone unsafe for humans. Even without the oversized vicious rodents, or the cultists that sacrifice themselves annually for *The Infant*, nature itself takes on a new and bizarre form within the Concavity. The "annularly overfertilized forests of what used to be central Maine" (93) are a pristine area of "verdant forests with periodic oasises of purportaged desert" (561). The water is an unnaturally perfect blue – "the exact same tint of blue as the blue on boxes of Hefty SteelSaks" (561) – and for all intents and purposes it appears to be untouched, primeval nature. Except, it isn't. The area is uninhabitable by humans, their absence leaving behind an environment that is almost too natural, hypothesised to be fertile enough as to be "a rainforest on sterebolic anoids" (573). Assuming Wallace's unique term is a play on "anabolic steroids", the human-made component is removed to describe a wilderness that grows at an unpredictable and seemingly unnatural rate.

As a post-human zone, the Great Concavity perhaps has a mythic quality that develops both from the risks of exposure, and the weird, altered landscape within. Children terrorise each other with tales of the horrors found across the border, "mile-high toddlers, skull-depraved wraiths, carnivorous flora, and marsh-gas that melts your face off and leaves you with exposed gray-and-red facial musculature" (670). Remy Marathe, the leader of the Quebecoise separatists, lists his wife's maladies as a result of her exposure: "Without the containment of the metal hat, the head hung from the shoulders like the half- filled balloon or empty bag, the eyes and oral cavity greatly distended from this hanging, and sounds exiting this cavity which were difficult to listen" (779). However, the cultish groups that form, inspired by the mystery of the area, embody a kind of extremism that is further indicative of the horror within it. Fuelled by social anxiety and cocaine, Randy Lenz shares several personal stories with Bruce Green, including some about the Great Concavity. He reports "teams of pro researchers and amateur explorers and intrepid hearts and cultists have ventured north east" and "never returned, vanishing in toto from the short-wave E.M. bands as in like dropping off the radar" (561). Compounding the unease of so many not returned is his experience of a deformed infant refugee of the Concavity. The subject of his meeting is described in vivid detail. The child is without a skull, with its head perched in a "sort of lidless plastic box" atop a "raised platform":

> its eyes were sunk way down in its face, which was the consistency of like quicksand, the face, and its nose concave and its mouth hanging over either

> side of the boneless face, and the total head had like *conformed* to the inside of the contained box in was contained in, the head, and appeared roughly square in overall outline… (559)

The infant is the embodiment of a human merging with an environment of human-made toxicity. While Houser acknowledges Wallace's ability to entangle the body and the environment ("*Infinite Jest*'s Environmental" 31), this literal entangling is rather grotesque. In a more abstract sense, this entanglement represents the ongoing denial that environmental degradation is an issue. Civilians go about their daily lives, invested more in themselves than other people or their environment. Such a grotesque consequence is barely acknowledged in the context of its broader implications. This more literal entangling is a personification of the anxieties underlying the subject's detachment from nature, the child literally deformed by their exposure to a version of nature corrupted by humans. Despite this, *The Infant* is the subject of worship for "peoples in costumes" who had "ingested hallucinogens and drank mescal and ate the little worms in the mescal" before performing "circled rituals around the box" (559). Lenz's story is a startling one, and when seen against the representation of uninhabitable nature, emphasises the impression of "exposure" to such landscape as dangerous. The landscape is made weird by humans, a lush forest metamorphosised into a contaminated horror-scape.

Certain strange aspects of the Concavity are replicated in Jeff VanderMeer's eerily unnatural nature in the 2014 New Weird *Southern Reach Trilogy.* Area X, an

almost impenetrable area on Florida's coastline, is characterised by its powerful and unique wilderness. The protagonist of Book One reports a feeling she "often had in the wilderness: that things were not quite what they seemed, and [she] had to fight the sensation" (*Annihilation* 30). It is this kind of nature that Wallace describes as populating sections of the Great Concavity. In both instances, the border of the biologically mutated spaces advances ever closer to human civilisation. Without human presence, the space expresses its own form and agency, natural forests becoming something more sinister and other-worldly. And Ulstein notes, there is a shared emphasis on "forbidden zones and threshold spaces where time and space themselves are warped and weirded" and "the perceived agency of the environment changes" (53) in weird fiction. Engineers even joke about "the annularised Great Concavity's No-Time" (183), as if time in the area operates in a different fashion to the rest of the planet. As toxic waste is catapulted over the border, it "eradicates the overgrowth until the toxins are fused and utilised", resulting in a green environment that flourishes yet remains deadly to humans. Rather than witnessing human characters entering the space, the horror of the Great Concavity comes from the fact that it thrives with "rhythmic lushness" (561) off what humans cannot, and the fact that when humans do cross the border, they never return.

The matter of wilderness versus weird landscape is a point of difference that further exacerbates the unusual nature of the Concavity. Greve notes the semantic affinities between weird landscapes and the wild, saying

> with the weird pointing to states of becoming, strangeness, and non-belonging, and the wild referring to the primary and undomesticated disposition of living entities. Such as animals, plants, but also human beings, there is an apparent questioning of established *norms* in a given human society suggested by these concepts. (48-49)

Historically, the wilderness has often manifested in literature as a symbol of a threat against humankind, especially prior to Romanticism[19]. The wilderness as the "primordial old-growth woodland" has taken on "on multitudinous literary forms: desolate islands, rocky peaks, expanses of ocean, and zones of solitude" (Mellor 104) and is seen in opposition to human dwellings, or habitable landscapes. In this context, the Great Concavity could be seen as a return to a state of wilderness, the Concavity possessing new ecological phenomenon that, now humankind has left the place, flourishes with its own unique biology. Without human civilisation, the space possesses a sense of strangeness and lack of domestication. In opposition to a symbolic threat against humanity, the wilderness otherwise manifests as small pockets of priceless treasure to be preserved and revered. However, while the Concavity has its fanatics, it is certainly not a representation of an untouched and diminishing natural landscape. The influence of human presence pollutes the space through the hurled waste, the decrepit remains of civilisation, and the encroaching borders, all of which challenge the interpretation of the Concavity as a return of the wilderness. The

[19] In Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 I discuss how American colonial identity is founded on triumphing over the wilderness in the expansion of the frontier.

Concavity possesses all the unpredictability and threat of the pre-Romantic wilderness, without any of the need for preservation or primordial value. Its expanding border makes it an active threat rather than a regressing or even stagnant risk area.

The positioning of the Great Concavity as a weird geography accounts for what the zone ultimately represents for the states surrounding the area. Weird fiction is concerned with realms outside of the human that challenge human norms and assumptions about what does and does not belong. Unlike post-apocalyptic fiction or science-fiction approaches to environmental crisis that envision a world without human civilisation, the weird is concerned with the parts in between: "the notion of *the inbetween* is crucial to the weird" (Greve and Zappe 96). The Great Concavity appears to be the beginning of the American continent's toxification. All its components can be easily connected to human communities and lifestyles, with the reader experiencing elements they are familiar with, as well as the transfigured, polluted versions of the same inside the toxic zone. The reader is informed, for example, that the animals inside the Concavity evolved from abandoned pets. Wallace provides the specific example of a feral hamster herd "descended from two domestic hamsters set free by a Watertown NY boy [who] now attends college in Champaign IL and has forgotten that his hamsters were named Ward and June" (93). While the boy has a rather materialistic perspective towards the life of other creatures, of more significance is the contrast between his pet hamsters and the now ferocious, oversized

rodents barrelling across the border of the Concavity. The ghost of civilisation remains connected to various spaces within the Concavity, such as "what used to be central Maine" and "what used to be Vermont" (93); but the area is now blank and unmapped. The post-human space is juxtaposed against human civilisation not through historical memory but by mere geographical difference, giving the reader an impression of the time in between human civilisation, and total ecological collapse.

The Great Concavity as a human-made disaster promotes Wallace's political point of view in the novel. Readers learn about Gentle's solution in a puppet show put on by Mario at E.T.A. that is based on *The ONANtide,* a film by Himself. The show doubles as a puppet-à-clef-type allusion to the story of Eric Clipperton, a student at E.T.A. who is so distraught at the thought of losing a game that he would play with a gun to his head if he should "lose, ever, even once" (408). As a result, nobody who played against him had the nerve to win. Gentle's approach to dealing with toxicity is similar, the comparison emphasising Gentle's poor management and temperamental nature. His "emotional instability" (406) is further questioned with the acronym C.U.S.P. (Clean U.S. Party) reflecting the precipice on which Gentle finds himself. As Mario's puppet show proceeds, headlines interject informing the reader of Gentle's intention to "bomb his own nation and toxify neighbours" if Canada continues not to accept the "aesthetically unacceptable terrain" (407). Nonetheless, the delivery of this political backstory is rather absurd, the discussion feeling more like comic relief than reflecting the psychological distress of those involved. Mario has Gentle's "claque of

doo-wopping Motown cabinet-puppets" dressed in "purple dresses and matching lipstick and nail polish" and "bouffants so blindingly Afrosheened that there had been special lighting and film-speed problems in the custodial closet" (400). Gentle himself wears a mask akin to Darth Vader, having resorted to "pure oxygen" (401) to survive the meeting. The humans responsible for the Great Concavity are largely comical figures. The sinister nature of the Great Concavity, therefore, stands in contrast to laughable people who are responsible for its existence, and the weirdness of the Concavity appears normalised against the absurdity of the culture that created it.

As the Great Concavity exists primarily in the background of the novel, it is the culture of acceptance around it that truly accentuates its weirdness. Indeed, VanderMeer makes the point that in several New Weird successes, "the starting point is the acceptance of a monster or a transformation and the story is what comes after" (VanderMeer *The New Weird Anthology* n.p.). Despite a significant portion of the US becoming so toxic as to be uninhabitable, it is the response of simply migrating south and maintaining cultural normalcy that is more strange. The language and horrific scenes used to describe and joke about the Great Concavity are reminiscent of "nuclear horror from the cold war" (Houser 'Ecosickness' 137), yet outside of folkloric tales and the occasional physically mutated refugee, the general population are largely detached from the toxic reality beyond its ability to provide power, and the few individuals who are directly impacted by exposure. As Houser surmises, "We do not need to grasp all the details of this involuted cycle in order to see the impacts of

generating energy from waste. As the U.S. pursues energy interdependence, poisons produce poisons without end" (337). Hayles describes this as a move from "imperialism to experialism"; specifically, she says that interests move from "expropriating valuable natural resources from less powerful nations" to "forcing them to accept the industrial wastes that result when the expropriated natural resources are turned into capitalist commodities" (685). Wallace's tongue-in-cheek acronyms deliver again, and just as "Onan's seed is wasted on the ground, the cycle of imperialism and experialism uses the Other merely as an occasion for a masturbatory engagement with one's own interests" (Hayles 685). This is ultimately carried through with the Entertainment, the literal manifestation of this self-absorption within a film, resulting in an inevitable final act of compliance as viewers watch until their bodies cannot sustain them. The insularity that carries through the novel is manipulated by the circumstances of ecological toxicity, having the paradoxical effect of making the weird expected and the normal weird. The absurdity through which the Great Concavity comes to be also casts in sharp relief the absurdity of the culture that created it, casting critical gaze on consumer culture and television and media that drive it.

What makes *Infinite Jest* unique in capturing the "normal as weird" and the "weird as normal" is Wallace's sincere voice. However, the most important part of Wallace's representation of the Great Concavity is not just that it recognises the strangeness of what appears to be normal. It is also the call to action embedded in that

realisation. Wallace's America is on the brink of ecological collapse. By setting this novel in the near future, the picture of America is less dystopian and more of a direct warning that if we cannot appreciate the weirdness of normalising environmental degradation, its impact will soon have a severe impact on the liveability of the planet. If Wallace's sincerity emphasises the aspects of the novel that align with the lived experience, then the weirdness of the Great Concavity in the context of the Anthropocene becomes a new "clarion call": a call that targets readers and aims to incite action against ecological crisis.

Conclusion

The ending of *Infinite Jest* is characteristically ambiguous. Whilst the novel appears simply to stop without clear resolution, Wallace describes how "Certain kind of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an 'end' can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame" (Silverblatt "Interview with" n.p.); accordingly, it is the reader's responsibility to complete the task of understanding the novel, as the resolution is open to critical interpretation. "If", Wallace continues, "no such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book's failed for you" (Silverblatt "Interview with" n.p.). The language Wallace uses here is important. The book has a purpose, a clear message (or messages) to communicate to its discerning readers, if only they are able to dissect it. But there is

also a sense of losing something in the event the reader is unable to determine their own conclusion. Its success is tied to the reader finding some form of resolution that is not clearly articulated in the plot, and achieving some level of engagement with the didactic relationship Wallace established. In other words, if the reader has not engaged with the rhetoric of the novel, or found correlation between their own lived experience and that which is represented in the novel, then it has failed.

The "new sincerity" that David Foster Wallace brings to fiction, while theoretically situated as a response to the toxicity of postmodern irony, also brings with it a reconfiguration of the author as an active agent in creating texts. Compared to the postmodern author, the sincere author writes texts that illuminate the nature of shared human experience and recognises the possibility of social and cultural impacts of fiction. As Wallace concludes:

> The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk

> disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how banal.' To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. ("E Unibus Pluram" 81)

These new "literary rebels" are imbued with a responsibility to re-instate fiction as a critical, unambiguously sincere reflection of the shared human experience. In a contemporary setting, this pursuit is contextualised by ecological crisis, making the underlying environmental consciousness increasingly evident. The question of what it is to "be a fucking human being" in the Anthropocene is informed by the increasingly pertinent question of humankind's chances at long-term survival.

Wallace's approach is philosophical. It is not for the fiction writer to teach readers, to reveal the world for what it truly is, or even to provide solutions to the social and cultural issues examined in their texts. Rather, the author is in a position to reinterpret, reinvent, and reconfigure the human experience in different ways, casting light upon the stories and fictions that together construct societies. Although *Infinite Jest* is a novel of its time, it has also stood the test of time, and contributes a unique perspective to ecological discourse. The unorthodox use of the weird to examine the representation of The Great Concavity reveals an underlying ecological consciousness in the novel that illuminates the ever-growing infatuation with technology and new

media, and the dangers embedded within postmodern culture. *Infinite Jest* shows American culture on the precipice; from an ecological perspective, the reader must decide whether it will tip towards environmental catastrophe, or whether it is capable of change. Wallace's *Infinite Jest* uniquely situates critique of postmodern solipsism against a backdrop of ecological crisis, expressing the reality of shared human experience is in fact humankind's collective presence on a dying planet. The appeal to the collective state of human existence embodies the call to action in the novel. By weirding the Great Concavity, the paradoxical strangeness of the collective acceptance of environmental degradation challenges the reader to critically evaluate the binary separating nature and civilisation. Wallace returns the concept of shared human experience to collective thought, evidenced not only by his sincerity, but by his ongoing appeal to a shared, planetary problem upon which humankind's survival depends.

Chapter 3: Zoomorphism and Human Biology in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*

Abstract[20]

This article explores the conceptual difficulties that arise when fiction explores humankind's primordial ties to nature, specifically regarding gender representation. I examine how an emphasis on biology demonstrates humankind's innate connection to nature, while simultaneously perpetuating a problematic, essentialist view of gender. Using Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000) as a case study, I present two perspectives from which to interpret her ecofeminist approach. Firstly, I argue that Kingsolver employs zoomorphism is an effective strategy to override essentialist representations of sexuality. Secondly, I use Hans Gumbrecht's theory of presence to contextualise the representation of biology, and claim that *Prodigal Summer* attempts to dilute a much broader conceptual binary between humankind and nature.

KEYWORDS: Barbara Kingsolver, Prodigal Summer, ecofeminism, zoomorphism, American literature, Anthropocene

[20] Chapter 3 is a scholarly article that is currently under review for publication in ISLE. I have chosen to present my thesis in the approved format of a combination of an article alongside thesis chapters. While it appears in a different format than the traditional thesis chapters in this manuscript, it plays an important role in the context of my argument by highlighting some of the issues that arise in the amalgamation of postmodern selfhood and biological selfhood. Kingsolver's overt environmental consciousness, her appeal to biological science and philosophy through fiction, and personal advocacy for the role of literature in broader society, mark *Prodigal Summer* as an important novel that demonstrates the nature of environmental sincerity in explicitly ecological US fiction.

Introduction

The relationship between humankind and the environment is one characterised by human dominance. In today's climate, however, as ecological upheaval manifests itself through mass extinction, extreme weather events, and rising temperatures, humankind needs to reconfigure understandings of their relationship with the natural world. As ecological research continues to recognise the precariousness of human survival, it is imperative that humankind collectively challenge the fundamental assumption of our dominion over nature. For the first time in human history, it is necessary to consider human existence in line with its status as species. There is a challenging paradox in considering the human subject within the Animalia kingdom, however. The consideration of species surpasses human politics, history, and culture – it occurs in deep history, where the complexities of the human experience are a mere moment in the context of the planet. It follows then, as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, that the idea of species "may introduce a powerful degree of essentialism in our understanding of humans" ("The Climate of History" 214). It is not that the development of human cultures and the nuances of human identity are not related to our notion of species; but to see humankind beyond the limits of its own anthropocentric documentation is to unavoidably lose aspects of the individual human experience. A degree of essentialism, it seems, is unavoidable. Thus, the question for representing the relationship between humankind and their environment becomes one of balance: How can we explore our primal connections to nature

without resorting to outmoded or essentialist concepts of social and cultural paradigms?

Ecofeminism is a field straddling this theoretical challenge. In a contemporary setting, ecofeminism sees equity play a key role in driving academic inquiry into perceptions of nature, where the concept of gender informs ideas of the relationship between humankind and the environment. In other words, ecofeminism "analyses the interconnection of the oppression of women and nature" (Bressler 236). In practice however, examples of ecofeminist scholarship vary in focus, ranging from emphasis on "identifying source[s] of oppression" based on the perceived correlation of mutual oppression of women and of nature (Sargisson 69), to representations of "communion with the earth" (Sargisson 57) which assumes a spiritual connection between women and the environment. A dichotomy between male and female is inherent in many of these approaches, perpetuating a problematic gender binary that has been disputed by gender theorists and queer theorists. This characteristic of ecofeminism, especially in 80s and 90s scholarship, has resulted in criticism of the field's "essentialist, biologist" approach, and its "lack of political efficacy" (Sargisson 52).

This article uses Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000) as a case study to evaluate ecofeminist values in practice. Written and published during the tail end of the essentialist ecofeminist movement, Kingsolver's novel retains a gender binary by harnessing human biology as a way to represent the broader dichotomy between humankind and their environment. I will break down the elements of the gender

binary in the novel in the context of its environmental consciousness. *Prodigal Summer* responds to a pivotal issue in the humanities, that "environmental humanists and eco-critics have not found a coherent theoretical ground on which to conduct their work of re-evaluating cultural traditions in light of environmental concerns" (Westling 2). I position Kingsolver's novel as an experiment in environmental fiction (and environmental scholarship more broadly) in the Anthropocene. While potentially problematic on the surface, Kingsolver's approach posits the question: how can humankind learn to conceive of itself as part of a broader system after millennia of human dominance driving the development of human identity?

In this article, I examine Kingsolver's careful communication of "a handful of important ecological principles" against the portrayal of the human individual, critically evaluating the novels' approach to portraying "whole systems" (Kingsolver "Most Frequent Questions" n.p.). I begin by examining how *Prodigal Summer* uses human biology as a defining feature of human identity. Kingsolver achieves this by appealing to human sexuality and biological processes, and a negotiation between zoomorphising human characters and anthropomorphising animals and landscapes. I argue that humankind's mammalian origins are used deliberately to override social constructs and position the human experience through the lens of its fundamental and primal roots. This promotes an understanding of the human experience that is based on animality, rather than perpetuating a narrative of human superiority over animal kind. Secondly, I will examine the gender binary enforced as part of this biological

approach. Although characteristic of essentialist ecofeminism, there are issues that arise from Kingsolver's portrayal of the female body, specifically in the context of current understandings of gender and identity. I use Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's theory of presence to demonstrate how contemporary understandings of gender identity are informed by social constructs rather than physical biology. This contributes to the disparity between the individual's physical, animal-self, and their notion of selfhood. The issues with the gender binary, therefore, highlight a disparity between breaking down the notion of human dominance over the environment, and the social and cultural evolution of human understandings of identity. Finally, I examine how these issues arise from a dichotomy between the self and the physical body, and how the ecofeminist strategies employed by the novel are a by-product of a broader mission to envision humankind in the context of species.

"You're nature, I'm nature": Human as Animal

Prodigal Summer invites readers to consider "whole systems," looking beyond themselves to the biodiversity of Zebulon mountain, where the novel is set. *Prodigal Summer* follows a year in the lives of Deanna, Lusa and Garnett, residents of a small town in Appalachia. More importantly, Kingsolver situates each character as being within a living, changing ecosystem, as active agents in a living landscape. Authors of environmental fiction share a challenge of how to represent the connection between the human subject and the natural environment without appearing "too contrived"

(Van Tassel 91), "heavy-handed", or self-righteous (Leder 228). Richard Powers personifies trees to break down the division between humankind and nature in *The Overstory* (2018); Karen Joy Fowler brings a chimpanzee, Fern, into a small family as the protagonist's sister to break down the perceived barriers between human and animal in *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* (2013); and Kingsolver focuses her readers' attention to human biology to draw out aspects of the connections between humankind and animal. Kingsolver's approach includes the reoccurring zoomorphism of the human subject. That is, rather than superimposing human characteristics onto nature, Kingsolver emphasises the animal characteristics of her human characters. Within the confines of literary fiction, Kingsolver's strategy is quite unique in its commitment to a zoomorphic approach. While zoomorphism is used frequently in literature, Kingsolver's overarching application of the technique exemplifies the theory of Darwinian evolution in a way that differs from other environmentally minded approaches to literary eco fiction.

In theorising *Prodigal Summer,* Kingsolver concludes that "a biological novel will have to be full of sex" ("Frequently Asked Questions" n.p.). The emphasis placed on animal copulation in addition to the sexual relationships between human characters works to draw parallels between the two groups. Deanna hears the "fierce, muffled sounds of bats mating in the shadows under her porch eaves" (8), sees mating red-tailed hawks nearly fall from the sky in "senseless passion" (19), and observes that "in the high season of courting and mating" the sounds of the birds is like "the earth

itself opening its mouth to sing" (53). Correspondingly, organic, earthy language is used to describe Lusa with her late husband Cole, with reference to "damp places" like "fresh earth toward the glory of new growth" (40). It is imagery of the landscape that pervades their union more so than the meeting of bodies, or the fruition of a complex human relationship.

Just as human characters are described using primordial imagery, the mountain itself takes on reciprocal human characteristics. Lusa describes how "the mountain's breath began to bear gently on the back of her neck […] insistent as a lovers sigh" as Zebulon becomes "another man in her life, larger and steadier than any other companion she'd known" (34). The anthropomorphising of the mountain against the zoomorphism of human characters creates a more neutral space from which to examine the biodiversity of the mountain. As the spring turns to summer, "everywhere you looked, something was fighting for time, for light, the kiss of pollen, a connection of sperm and egg and another chance" (10-11). The human characters are included in this fight, and at the conclusion of the novel bear no more significance than any other living being upon the mountain. Concluding through the eyes of a female coyote, Kingsolver finishes on an expanded view of the mountain itself, an ecosystem of which the humans on the mountain are a small part.

Anthropomorphism is a strategy employed in a number of environmental novels to induce empathy with the nonhuman plight. Works such as *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, Margaret Atwood's *Year of the Flood* trilogy (2003-2013),

and Lydia Millet's *How the Dead Dream* (2007) all exemplify various environmentally minded approaches to identify human characteristics in animals, and establish a sense of shared experience between the human and the nonhuman. These representations seek to find human characteristics reflected in the animal, with the intention of establishing connection between each based on shared experience. In the context of environmental writing, Lawrence Buell notes that the more humanised an animal becomes, the more likely it is to garner empathy from the public (*Endangered World* 202), a phenomenon which has resulted in numerous advertising and awareness campaigns, animated films, and personification strategies that utilise face-on photographs of various animals, endangered or otherwise. Buell likens the emotional connection resulting from eye to eye contact to the building of a sense of responsibility towards the other, as explored by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas saw the act of identifying with another as the basis of human ethics and claimed that the "trace" of the human existed in the eyes. For Levinas, engaging in eye to eye contact is the "activator of one's responsibility for another" (213). From this perspective, human ethics and sense of responsibility for the other is based on the observation of a shared human-ness. The effectiveness of the advertising Buell identifies therefore depends on the human viewer being manipulated into seeing human qualities in the photographed animal. Without this sense of kinship, a sense of responsibility cannot be established.

This take on responsibility becomes problematic in the space of human and nonhuman relations, as the implication is that the human subject requires a human-like connection with a nonhuman to warrant a deeper connection. From a sociological standpoint, this means that "only if nature is brought into people's everyday images, into the stories they tell, can its beauty and its suffering be seen and focussed on" (Buell *Endangered World* 1). The dominance of the human subject over nature is necessarily reiterated in each of these instances, as nature must come into the perspective of humans. The effectiveness of anthropomorphic nonhuman figures is predicated on the role of the human as inherently and unquestionably superior. Only when the inferior subject, the nonhuman, gains categorically human characteristics are they then granted the potential recognition associated with hardship or struggle. This disconnection is only deepened by the manner in which nature has been actively incorporated into human civilisations. Cultivated gardens and agricultural farming situate nature as something that serves an aesthetic and functional purpose for the benefit of humankind. As such, the very idea of nature is defined from an early age by the characteristics that give it worth to humankind, rather than on the basis of an innate value. As Buell prefaces, "human transformations of physical nature have made the two realms increasingly indistinguishable" (3). The delineation between human culture and nature itself, even before the anthropomorphising of nonhuman beings, is an anthropocentric construction in which a cultivated version of nature takes the place of the wilderness. These refined versions of natural landscapes replace the

primeval wilderness in a re-conception of what it means to be "of nature", asserting humankind as the cultivator and facilitator of nature.

Historically, the relationship between humankind and nature in the West is one based on dominion and control. In the late 19th Century, Frederick Turner famously emphasised dominance over nature as forming American identity. Turner claimed that it was the expansion and identification of the frontier in the American forests that saw America achieve its independence from the European homeland. In a public address to the American History Association in 1893, Turner said "the peculiarity of American institutions" is that they have had to adapt to "an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning the wilderness, and in developing at each area […] into the complexity of city life" (*The Significance* 199). This historical narrative of American independence not only establishes the continent's autonomy but establishes a fundamental sense of ownership and control over the American forests as being characteristic of white American identity. In a more contemporary context, Robert Harrison explores the relationship between humankind and the forest as one of dominance in his study of forests and civilisation, describing how "agriculture was a means of cultivating and controlling, or better, domesticating, the law of vegetative profusion which marked the new climatic era" (198). This cultivation of the forest is essential to understandings of human civilisation, where enforcing the aforementioned binary has historically contributed to identity formation and remains representative of human progress. In anthropomorphising the

nonhuman, an acknowledgment is made wherein the nonhuman is given value only through its likeness to humankind. Kingsolver's use of zoomorphication does not reflect the dominance established in these historical paradigms. Indeed, Peter Wenz boldly christens *Prodigal Summer* as "Leopold's novel" (2003), for its ascription to "Aldo Leopold's call for 'a land ethic [that] changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen it'" (106). In Kingsolver's novel, the reader is constantly remined of the protagonists' creaturely drives and their place within a complex ecosystem of living beings, subverting a long-established binary between humankind and nature.

The representation of human solitude is a method by which Kingsolver emphasises this conceptual binary. The impossibility of solitude frames the representation of complex ecosystems in the beginning and the end of the novel: "Solitude is a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to a beetle underfoot, a tug of impalpable thread on the web pulling mate to mate and predator to prey, a beginning or an end. Every choice is a world made new for the chosen" (3, 446-7). The very idea of being isolated despite being a part of an active and diverse ecosystem negates the value of the nonhuman. When characters are zoomorphised, the idea of isolation becomes absurd as characters are explicitly represented within a diverse conglomerate of living things. The image of the beetle underfoot, the brazen reference to the thread of a spiderweb connecting "predator to prey" establishes a space in which to examine the human interactions in the novel through the very same lens each

protagonist uses to examine the creatures around them; creatures that each have an impact on the behaviours and lives of others. Suitably then, each character is connected to one other by various degrees of separation, and although the closest interaction between protagonists is by telephone, their relationships and family connections form a web, bringing together all of the people in the valley.

Kingsolver also makes a connection between education and the ability to recognise and incorporate broader ecological systems into worldviews. The titular allusion to the parable of the Prodigal Son positions environmental education as a redeeming feature. Characters who are more "reckless" in their farming practices or ignorant of ecological processes are guided by the novel's protagonists, and subsequently achieve a form of redemption, and a new perception of their place within the broader environment. Deanna holds a degree in wildlife biology and a thesis "on coyote range extension in the 20th century" (61). As an employee of the US Forest Service, she is responsible for the upkeep of trails throughout the mountains and impeding illegal hunting in the area. She is suitably matched with Eddie Bondo, a young coyote hunter. Entomologist Lusa becomes a carer for her sister-in-law's children and is shocked by their ignorance as they express amazement at the way in which honey is made. Lusa despairs for "all the things that people used to grow and make for themselves before they were widowed from their own food chain" (296) and takes on Crys and Lowell's agricultural education. Through their interactions, the reader is informed about the life cycles of small insects and bugs, and the ecosystems

within the forest that contribute to the biodiversity of the mountain, and ultimately, to food production. Nannie Rawley "went to college once upon a time, and it was *after* they discovered the Earth was round" (281), and educates her neighbour, Garnett, on ecologically friendly farming. At times, these characters are more akin to mouthpieces for ecological principles than rounded characters. Their pairings with such prodigal individuals and educational roles facilitate learning about the complexities of biodiversity and the role of different animals in supporting the ecosystem, not only for their respective protegees, but also for readers. This is a strategy Kingsolver also employs in her later novel *Flight Behaviour* (2012), where the protagonist, Dellarobia, meets Ovid, a scientist studying the movements of the endangered monarch butterfly. As a scientist, Ovid is limited in his capacity to educate the community by the limitations of his profession – "scientists who address the public are ridiculed by their colleagues for being imprecise or theatrical" (Trexler 227) – but on a personal level, his personability enables the exchange of knowledge between himself and the novel's protagonist. *Prodigal Summer* similarly crafts its own parable, where the wisdom of select individuals enlightens characters and teaches moral lessons.

Kingsolver contrasts her two strong female protagonists with Garnett, a religious widower who is working to produce a blight resistant strain of the American chestnut. Despite pursuing his own form of ecological repair, Garnett is reflective of the conventional farmer, upholding the traditional farming practices of the community in the valley. In his own words, "sometimes horsepower can do what

horseflesh cannot" (84) and spraying pesticides is "county right-of-way" (87). While Garnett pursues the development of a blight resistant tree, he sprays herbicide along his fence line to prevent weeds (90-93) and orders his trees in neat rows. He represents a perspective wherein nature is mediated through cultivation, and what is acceptable in nature is determined by what nature can offer agricultural activity. Garnett's ecological interest, therefore, indicates a well-intentioned yet misguided approach to sustainability. Unlike the more activist pursuits of Deanna or the academic interest informing Lusa, Garnett's reluctance to consider Nannie Rawley's organic farming methods are clearly represented as a product of ignorance. Fundamentalist religious dialogue and a value for the "old ways" firmly characterise Garnett as the archetypal elderly man driven by the very binary that Kingsolver is subverting. Thus, the trio of educated matriarchal figures is rounded out with Nannie Rawley, "Garnett's nearest neighbour and the bane of his life" (84). Rawley becomes a mouthpiece for the science behind organic farming and land preservation, challenging Garnett's perceptions around the use of herbicides and God-given dominion over nature, ultimately educating him on the benefits of organic farming for both profit and sustainable practice.

The positioning of educated characters as those who quietly inform those around them of ecological diversity highlights an interesting paradox. On the one hand, the novel draws attention to humankind's fundamental, primordial links to other living beings. Yet on the other, it requires engagement with the institutions of

knowledge that have historically separated humans from animals, to become aware of these innate connections. Education is both the key to understanding the human connection to nature, yet is also a product of humankind's move away from their primal roots. Adam Trexler notes that in *Flight Behaviour,* Kingsolver's realism is "underpinned by an account of Anthropocene economics for the poor", and a complication of the "stereotypical certainty of scientists and the ignorance of rural southerners when unpacking cultural nuances of contemporary climate change" (228). A similar narrative exists in *Prodigal Summer*, where characters who have had the privilege of higher education are more deeply connected to and aware of their animal natures. It is not, therefore, through a sense of earthly connection to the land that these characters become educators of biodiversity and natural systems, but through discussion, debate and academic discourse. For example, when Garnett quotes Genesis to Nannie Rawley, she retorts with a recontextualization of the passage alongside the Volterra principle (218, 278). Later, she outlines to him the ongoing debate between intelligent design and evolution. Despite being the more comedic storyline in the novel, the discussions and letter writing between Garnett and Nannie Rawley follow popular lines of debate about the relationship between humankind and nature. Similarly, Deanna attempts to have Eddie Bondo read her Masters thesis to understand the important role of predators. In all of these discussions, scientific and philosophical principles describe the networks existing between different animals and their behaviours, with each individual narrative expanding outwards until its effect on humankind is made apparent. Kingsolver does not do this to demonstrate the ways

humankind is impacting their environment, per se, but to highlight humankind's position within a complex, interdependent ecosystem. Human action is an active part of the processes described, and an inherent part of the broader system. What does it mean, then, if awareness of this complex system in the novel is dependent on a privileged education?

The zoomorphising of humans in the novel is therefore complicated by the explicit methods of sharing its ecological message; while in some settings characters are encouraged to consider humans in the context of their animal nature, their ability to do so depends upon a level of intelligence that is categorically human. The novel seems to suggest a process of unlearning, as higher education serves to override evolutionary lessons that place the human subject in a position of superiority over their environment. Paradoxically, the subject must learn in order to unlearn, must engage more deeply with the higher levels of institutional knowledge in order to escape a culturally established truth. This is further complicated, however, by Kingsolver's emphasis on the biology of the human body.

"Sex […] the greatest invention life ever made": The Female Body

Physicality becomes a key component of the human experience in *Prodigal Summer* through the emphasis on biology alongside the physical impact that

humankind has on nature. The novel's biological focus, however, also draws attention to the way that concepts of selfhood have informed humankind's relationship with the environment. If, as Gumbrecht posits, Western culture is a meaning-culture, then the reality of biology informing identity can be a challenging concept, as the Cartesian notions of selfhood that define Western thinking of identity typically negate the significance of the physical body. Gumbrecht's meaning-culture sees the subject's desire for presence as a reaction to "an everyday environment that has become so overly Cartesian during the past centuries" (116). He posits that "aesthetic experience may help us recuperate the spatial and the bodily dimension of our existence" (116), envisioning a presence-culture will integrate both spiritual and physical existence into its human self-reference. According to Gumbrecht, Western theory has "made the ontology of human existence depend exclusively on the movements of the human mind" (17), with theoretical movements that saw "the loss of any non-Cartesian, any non-experience-based type of world-reference" (43). Thus, the physical body has been better likened to something the transient self operates from within, rather than a physical manifestation of the self that exerts overt influence on thought and behaviour. I perceive this as an idea reminiscent of the modernist revelation of the subjective self, and one that continued to define much of postmodern thought, where "concepts and arguments have to be 'antisubstantialist'" (Gumbrecht 18). In practice, social media, distance communication, and virtual reality see the self becoming omnipresent, embodying "the dream of making lived experience independent of the locations that our bodies occupy in space" (Gumbrecht 139). The anti-hermeneutic

turn sees this theoretical landscape challenged, and the body is recontextualised as the vehicle through which the subject experiences the world around them.

Prodigal Summer is a novel that focuses on the body, specifically its biology, and emphasises how physical presence informs identity. The experience of Being in the world re-establishes the subject's primordial links with the physical world, situating the self as part of a living system. Biological function actively informs the feelings and behaviours of its characters. As relationships develop, emphasis on sex in the context of its biological value suggests that Kingsolver employs sexual practice as a method of re-establishing the conceptual bond between humanity and their nonhuman counterparts, rather than as a mechanism to explore psychological connection between people or to represent enjoyment. By page 5 of the novel we see the staunchly independent Deanna corrupted by the much younger Eddie Bondo. She is zoomorphised, and her cautionary response to him strikes a delicate balance between that of a human and of an animal. Clearly accustomed to being alone on the mountain, Deanna answers his banter in the "way of the mountain people in general – to be quiet when most agitated" (5). He approaches silently, catching her sniffing a stump as she tracks the path of an animal. She remains defensive as she considers his manner, weapons and potential threat before concluding that the term "*predator* was a strong presumption" (6). The interaction is recorded almost as one between two animals, as language alluding to the innate "fight or flight" response is employed to describe their meet-cute. Long silences stand between clipped verbal interactions, as

each considers the other between vocalisations. Verbs such as "bite", "intruding", "tensed", "watched", and "measured" characterise Deanna as a cornered animal judging the potential threat in her territory. It is this instinctual, biological drive that characterises the relationships and behaviours of several characters in the novel, drawing physicality into their characterisation.

Biology is the fundamental link between humankind and their environment, providing space for the zoomorphism of the novel's human characters to occur. At a fundamental level, presence is innate to human development, where awareness of the body and utilisation of the senses has allowed for human survival in the wilderness. Gumbrecht speaks of this evolution, positing that earlier societies upheld presence cultures thorough the vision of the human subject as being "a part of and surrounded by a world" (25) considered to be God's creation. This sense of presence is maintained throughout medieval thought, where "spirit and matter were believed to be inseparable" (25). As the concept of the contemporary self develops, so too does a detachment from the body and the physical, as notions of selfhood are increasingly associated with the psychological self. Indeed, the postmodern self is characteristically fragmented and decentred, with no connection to the body at all. Contextually, white American identity comes to be informed by a fundamental separation from nature, and entry into a cultural environment that is majoritarily meaning based.

I therefore examine the biological approach of ecofeminist literature as demonstrated by *Prodigal Summer* in the context of Gumbrecht's theory of presence,

arguing that the disembodied notion of selfhood comes into conflict with the sensory experience of the physical body. Kingsolver emphasises the sensory experience and innate physical drives of her characters. This challenges the foundations of humankind's intellectual development, specifically the versatility of the self that meaning-culture has allowed individuals to derive. Prominent references to pheromones, scents, and menstruation are used to blur the delineation between the abstract, psychological self, and the physical body. The physical experience is a clear informant of understanding and interpretation, re-establishing connections between the body and world-appropriation. Deanna, for example, "knew some truths about human scents. She'd walk down city streets in Knoxville and turn men's heads […] on the middle day of her cycle" (94), while Lusa and Cole court "with an intensity that caused her to ovulate during his visits" (41). Kingsolver's emphasis on these biological characteristics challenges personal agency where humans are so clearly and powerfully influenced by their bodily responses and physicality. Lusa's ovulation changes to suit the courtship of a male; she attributes men's attraction to her fertility ("No wonder men were fluttering around her like moths: she was fertile" (232)); and Eddie Bondo allegedly finds Deanna on the trail when he "sniffed you out, girl" (94). Kingsolver frames the biology of the female body as the driving force behind sexual attraction, shaping human relationships in the novel as being more effectively defined by their biological components over notions of kinship or social connection. In this way, Kingsolver uses sexual desire as humankind's fundamental, long lasting link to their biological selves, using this perspective to emphasise the shared biological

processes between animals and humans. In the same way that Gumbrecht seeks to re-establish presence as a defining characteristic of human experience and understanding, Kingsolver emphasises how physicality has a significant influence on the individual's behaviour and psyche.

Biological influence is seen and recognised across the animal kingdom as an explanatory agent for animal behaviour. However, social and cultural progress in the West sees sexuality as a personal faculty, and a characteristic of individual identity. This is not to say that sexuality is chosen, but that its expression is inherently personal. To factor biology into this equation contradicts the developed sense of individual agency over sexual expression. For example, the idea that a human female's cycle is impacted by the mere presence of a male contradicts popular perceptions of bodily autonomy. The functions of the body serve the purpose of establishing each character's connection with their biological, animal selves. It is these biological processes that are then used to evidence budding relationships in the novel, instead of the more complex, emotional, and psychological connections typically employed. A key bodily function that Kingsolver leans upon is menstruation. As Lauren Rosewarne discusses in her 2012 book *Periods in Pop Culture*, menstruation has long been considered a social stigma for women. Rosewarne cites numerous sociologists and psychologists who identify menstruation in Western culture as a "private event not to be talked about in public" (14), where "emphasis on secrecy" (11) perpetuates a mentality of shame around menstruation and the body. It follows that reference to

menstruation is "strikingly absent" (11) from popular media, and it would be fair to say that in fiction, the menstrual cycle is rarely mentioned if at all. By drawing attention to biological process, Kingsolver launches an ecofeminist dialogue around the female body and re-establishes the significance of physical presence as an informing part of the human experience. As Sargisson argues, "Ecofeminism speaks in terms of natural bodily functions" where such references "attempt to articulate the politics of exclusion noted by other forms of feminism" (58). In Kingsolver's representation, the body resurfaces as a depoliticised working object, demonstrating how physicality does, in fact, bear impact on selfhood and identity. Simultaneously, however, the logic of this depends on a dualism based on sex, which is regressive in terms of representing the diversity of women. Her approach, therefore, highlights a disparity between biological and social understandings of human identity.

Prodigal Summer, therefore, has two main points from which to examine the relationship between the human subject and the environment. The first examines the way in which human agency has created a division between the subject and their primordial origins. From this perspective, the novel explores the somewhat more familiar use of anthropomorphism by contrasting it with the zoomorphism of the human subject. The second approach to Kingsolver's representation of the human subject is in regard to physical experience, where the novel offers a contrarian interpretation of human existence as if it were essentially defined by biology and animality. This provides a useful point from which to consider human identity, and

to critically evaluate the effectiveness of leaning on humankind's animal nature to re-establish bonds with the natural environment. In a sociological context, there are disadvantages to such a representation that are important to consider. Characters such as Deanna and Nannie Rawley see their worth as intrinsically linked with the body and its ability to reproduce, where species survival takes precedence as the core goal of the individual. Deanna expresses concern about her age, describing menopause leading her to become an "obsolete female biding its time until death" (333). The "flows, cycles, and rhythms" (Sargisson 58) that ecofeminist texts typically connect with the cycles of nature are manipulated here to signify Deanna's biological redundancy. Biology is not strictly related to physicality, but to function. There is a sense of an ending when Deanna is made redundant by her inability to bear children and her failure to find a mate. Similarly, Nannie Rawley claims that in their mature age, she and Garnett are biologically "a useless drain on our kind" (375) without the ability to reproduce. Though clearly the subjective view of each character, these perspectives serve as a reminder to humankind of the individual's value in the context of their specieshood.

When the dominant lens is human as species, the intricacies of interpersonal relationships and individual identities are overridden by the primal imperative to reproduce. Effectively, *Prodigal Summer* becomes a contrarian interpretation of human existence as being defined by biology and animality. Even as Deanna's worst fears are allayed by a pregnancy, her narrative continues to be demonstrated through her body,

the "enthusiastic cycle of fertility and rest" (*Prodigal Summer* 333), and biological determinism is upheld as a biproduct of this bodily emphasis. Copulation is described as "the body's decision, a body with no more choice of its natural history than an orchid has, or the bee it needs" (26-7). There are two notions in play here that, in a contemporary setting, are problematic: firstly, the notion that biological urges are equal to consent, and secondly, the presentation of reproduction as an inherent responsibility. These notions are not overtly upheld in the novel, rather, they are explored in the context of their role as informing an intelligent and self-aware species. Leder recognises sex in the novel as not only being tied in with characters' biology, but also the "conscious human processing of that biology" (230). This is most evident in moments where characters become explicitly aware of their biology and attempt to dissect its influence on their psychological responses, and subsequent actions. Leder offers the example of Lusa dancing with her nephew Rickie. As Lusa dances, she observes that in the animal kingdom, dancing is a "warm-up for the act". Humans, on the other hand, can "distinguish a courtship ritual from the act itself" (418). The social and cultural aspects of human civilisation create "contexts and assign meanings" (Leder 230) to biological behaviours. However, whilst humans in the novel are aware of the role of biology, there is little occasion for more diverse or socially complex urges to be represented, and the essentialist binary remains.

This approach to the representation of the body is indicative of second wave feminism throughout the 80s and 90s, where biological determinism informs

discussion around sex and gender. In a literary context, the examination of female characters and female authors dominates theory, enforcing a determinism that sees male and female as clearly distinct entities. Ecofeminism at this time saw the conflation of human and animal experiences as a way of emphasising humankind's role within the natural world and breaking down the conception of humankind and nature as being in opposition to each other. To do this, biology becomes a key factor wherein the human subject can be theoretically reduced to their animal selves. Thus, biological essentialism was a tool through which the author could draw clear parallels between the human and animal experience. Of benefit to environmental considerations, then, is the ability to reconnect the concept of human with their animal origins. However, just as second wave theory saw protest in its essentialist approach to sex and gender, so too could such an emphasis on biology convey outdated concepts of human identity and selfhood.

Conclusion

While *Prodigal Summer* could be read as a call-back to essentialist ecofeminism, I suggest that a broader perspective reveals Kingsolver's novel as providing a more nuanced representation of the disconnect between humankind and the environment. *Prodigal Summer* highlights a key challenge for environmental fiction and its mission to reconstruct an ecocentric relationship between humans and the natural world. The representation of "whole systems" is achieved by the interrelationship of

anthropomorphised landscapes and animals, and zoomorphised human characters. The final chapter of the novel prominently and finally demonstrates the conflation achieved by this strategy throughout, as the reader follows a coyote along the same tracks Deanna follows at the beginning of the novel. The reader experiences a full anthropomorphisation of the coyote female, as she enjoys the smell of the air after rain, feels restless away from her children, and tracks the trail of another animal. Her biology is referred to subtly, in a way that reveals her species only to the reader paying close attention. The first indication that she is not human is when she "lowers her nose to pick up speed" (444-5), which, in the context of the passage, is a faint indication of her animality against her very human emotions and observations about the surrounding landscape. The coyote mirrors Deanna's movements in the first chapter, coming full circle and rounding out the novel's brief capture of the ecosystem of Zebulon Valley. As the coyote is anthropomorphised through the mirroring of Deanna's actions, Deanna is once again, and perhaps more powerfully, zoomorphised as her actions are contextualised by the movements of a wild animal.

The success of this representation is based on the emphasis of commonality, the biology and behaviour shared by humankind and animals. As Buell says, "if the passage from society to environment is dramatized by the plot of relinquishment, the bond between the human and the nonhuman estates is expressed through the imaginary of relationship" (*The Environmental Imagination* 180). The imagined relationship in *Prodigal Summer* is somewhat more complicated, in that it is based on

shared biological experience. At the level of species, the novel represents not strictly an *imagined* relationship, but a shared experience based on the biological imperative to survive. It is at the individual level that this representation begins to show flaws, where the evolutionary and biological aspects of the human experience clash with individual experiences and perceptions of identity and autonomous selfhood. We can therefore see two different approaches to navigating modern estrangement between humankind and nature. Kingsolver achieves something unique on the level of species by zoomorphising humankind, an approach that challenges human dominance over nature by reducing human agency and the perception of difference between humans and animals.

Recontextualising a relationship that has historically been based on dominance and the perseverance of a binary between human and nonhuman without losing a fundamental sense of human identity is difficult, as it works against fundamental values of contemporary selfhood. As Buell argues, "one motive for the personification of nature [is] to offset what might otherwise seem the bleakness of renouncing anthropomorphism" (180-1). In other words, it seems more coherent for the subject to consider nature in an anthropomorphised context, than to consider the self outside of the bounds of being human. But this implies that the value of the nonhuman is only apparent if some semblance of humanity is recognisable in it. The frequent strategy of anthropomorphising the animal is therefore inherently problematic in that it purports that the only way for something nonhuman to have inherent value is to make it appear

human. We can see in Kingsolver's novel an example of the reverse, where the human subject is somewhat reduced to their biological function and aligned more closely with their animal counterparts. By envisioning the individual as a single entity within a broader living dynamic, Kingsolver promotes an understanding of humans as non-exceptional, integrated parts of an ecological system.

Whilst zoomorphisation has the effect of challenging contemporary convictions around the malleability of gender and individual identities, it is an approach that also challenges some of the cornerstones of the perception of human dominance over the natural world. *Prodigal Summer* is a novel that contributes to a broader conversation around the perceived binary between humankind and the environment, a conversation that faces the challenge of re-envisioning humankind in a changing world. According to Trexler, the "rise of realist fiction in the Anthropocene shows a wider transformation of human culture" (233). Environmental fiction is a particularly focused narrative environment where the way humankind is perceived in and as part of the world can be dissected, explored and reconfigured. Through its evident authorial intent, realist environmental fiction particularly often draws parallels between facts and fiction, where new literary methods offer platforms from which to re-examine the human experience and human purpose. Kingsolver's novel reminds its readers of humankind's origins, representing humans not in the context of their achievements, of progress, or even as part of human societies, but as a species.

Chapter 4: The Planetary Narrative in Ben Lerner's *10:04*

Introduction

10:04 (2014) can be defined as a "metamodernist" novel with "autofictional tendencies" (van den Akker et al. 48). "Metamodernism" here refers to van den Akker and Vermeulen's intervention in discussions of post-postmodernism, and is characterised by the return of modernist characteristics to literature, art and architecture without the loss of postmodern mindsets[21]. The "autofictional tendencies" on the other hand, means that the work is ultimately fictional, but blends "autobiographical and memoiristic writing with fiction proper" (49). Accordingly, *10:04* follows a year in the life of an unnamed narrator, who in the critical literature is often referred to as "Ben". The novel opens with a dinner where Ben is celebrating a "strong six-figure advance" (4) for his second novel based on a short story he had previously submitted to the *New Yorker*. The second of four parts of *10:04* is the republication of the short story Lerner had published in *The New Yorker* entitled "The Golden Vanity". Throughout the novel, various aspects of Lerner and Ben's literary careers merge, conflating the two storylines into an almost inextricable blend of fiction and nonfiction. On this aspect of his novel Lerner says, "the book you're reading now,

[21] For further explanation of metamodernism see Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen's "Notes on Metamodernism" (2010) or *Metamodernism: Period, Structure of Feeling, and Cultural Logic – A Case Study of Contemporary Autofiction* (2019).

[is] a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them […] an actual present alive with multiple futures" (Lerner qtd. in van den Akker et al. 49). What does this mean about the novel's take on time and reality? I argue that through the use of temporal manipulations and metanarrativity, Lerner constructs a metamodernist ecological novel that questions the viability of Western reality narratives in the Anthropocene.

Before progressing further, it is important here to break down what I mean by the phrase "reality narrative". This thesis has shown in various iterations that the individual's interaction with the social and cultural constructs of which they are a part is fluid and changeable. As things like media and globalisation lead to cultural shifts of understanding around language, class, and social structures, perceptions of reality shift alongside them, ultimately demonstrating the fluidity of large-scale reality narratives. These understandings share an emphasis on the role of media and the nature of consumer culture in framing and otherwise driving these systems of reality formation. Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner argues that that there are two approaches to examine how humans understand the world around them. Traditionally, studies have observed how "people come to know the natural or physical world rather that the human or symbolic world" (4). This means studies have focussed on the development of logic, mathematics, and empirical science, despite many domains of knowledge being based within "man's knowledge of himself, his social world, his culture" (4). This leads Bruner to take a different approach that

recognises more fluid notions of reality formation, and argue that humankind "organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative-stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on" (4). In his formative article "The Narrative Construction of Reality" (1991), Bruner explains that narrative as a term for reality formation accounts for the difference between knowledge founded by scientific procedure and logic, and knowledge derived from experience and observed social and cultural norms. The majority of human reality construction, he claims, is based on narrative with a characteristic of verisimilitude. In other words, narratives "are a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and 'narrative necessity' rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness" (4)[22]. In essence, the individual sense of reality is a complex collaboration between the subjective experience and a "constructed and shared social history" (20). Humans are all similar in the sense that we share joint narratives in the form of social and cultural systems. Bruner claims that it is these shared narratives that give credit to and validate "individual autobiographies"(20), as each can be linked back into a continuity that is shared by whole communities. He says, "It is a sense of belonging to this canonical past that permits us to form our own narratives of deviation while maintaining complicity with the canon" (20). Drawing on Bruner's assertions, I employ "reality narrative" in order to capture the symbolic nature of human reality formation, especially in the context of environmental crisis.

[22] Bruner goes on to outline ten features of narrative, noting the difficulty of distinguishing between the "narrative mode of *thought*" and "narrative *discourse*". Each of these, he claims, "enables and gives form to the other, just as the structure of language and the structure of thought eventually become inextricable" (5).

From an ecological standpoint, the collective reality narratives that dominate Western culture are threatened by the Anthropocene, as assumptions around human dominion over nature, mechanisms for survival, and scales of time are weakened.

This chapter establishes the connection between human reality narratives and an anthropocentric scale of time in order to frame the influence of climate and dramatic weather events on the protagonist as infiltrations of a planetary timescale. These two scales of time in the novel capture the fallibility of human reality narratives, and the failure of the cultural imagination to adapt to climate change. I argue that climate change sees the framing of human existence revealed as a sense-making construct by the planetary imposing a broader non-anthropocentric view of time and history. To demonstrate this, I begin with an examination of temporality in the novel, outlining the two timeframes that clash, traumatising the protagonist and calling into question his sense of reality. Lerner has a unique way of broaching this experience, playing on the human subject's proprioception to establish a sense of detachment and disconnection between the protagonist and his reality narrative. The chapter will culminate with an exploration of Lerner's representation of weather, demonstrating how the interplay between human and planetary narratives is applied in the novel. Ultimately, I argue that *10:04* as an environmental novel explores the challenges of incorporating the depth and reality of climate crisis into human narratives, establishing climate change as a psychological and cultural issue that uproots basic notions of reality in the West.

"The biological, the historical, the geological": Scales of Time

Lerner's novel has had a largely positive critical reception since its 2014 release, with a common theme being the author's innovation and his ability to represent contemporary American culture. Shortlisted for the 2015 Folio Prize, the novel is frequently recognised for its prose (although this is sometimes to the author's detriment[23]), and several critics have identified the novel as doing something different from its predecessors: Christian Lorentzen of Bookforum says the novel "signals a new direction in American fiction" (*Back to the Present*) while Christopher Bollen states that "If indeed, as many postmodern critics tell us, there is no longer the prospect of the certified masterpiece or the Great American Novel, Lerner has created a meaningful substitute: a thinking text for our time" (312). Hansen more specifically refers to the novel's focus on the age of media, and says that *10:04* is "a prime example of the self-reflexive and reactive "new novel" in the age of digital media" (12). Lerner has been dubbed as an author of the present moment, a figure who "brushes up against the actual reality of life as it unfolds in New York City" (Baskin 28). I argue Lerner's novel is representative of the contemporary moment through its literary

[23] Baskin writes that Lerner's engagement with the present moment does "little to divert his attention from a series of tiresome reflections on time, the relationship between fact and fiction, and, above all, the operations of his own intellect" (28), while Klein says, "Ben's literal and figurative wankery is generative, not indulgent" (116).

engagement with climate crisis in America. By bookending the novel with Hurricanes Irene and Sandy, Lerner's novel is easily connected with the lived experience of his reader, specifically regarding increasing instances of environmental crisis interweaving with contemporary American culture.

Sara J. Grossman explores the novel through its representation of Hurricane Sandy, examining the interplay between Lerner's depiction of the disaster, her own experience of the same event, and the role of technology in forging images and creating imaginings of the hurricane. Ultimately, she argues that the "visual response to Hurricane Sandy manifests not in a failure at 'imaging' better relations between humanity and nature, but a failure to imagine an affective relation at all" (817). Coupled with his use of intertextuality, Lerner's novel is a platform from which to examine narrativity in a broader sense, examining how the human imagination reacts to and assimilates climate crisis. Further to this, Ben De Bruyn explores Lerner's "representation of our dysfunctional weather and memory" (951). He argues that Lerner's novel is a part of a broader turn in American post-postmodern fiction where

> climate change has forced us to scale up our temporal imagination and to consider the dramatic possibility of memory after the human, but it also urges us to confront our unsustainable 'petromodernity', and to study forms of cultural memory related to regional disasters with a planetary dimension, like Katrina or, as in *10:04*, Hurricane Sandy. (952)

De Bruyn extends Grossman's argument by exploring the trauma inherent in false imaginaries of climate change more broadly, arguing that Lerner acknowledges "the anticipated trauma of climate change" through the "related broadening of the novel's temporal framework" which is juxtaposed with "passages that memorialise specific traumas from the communal past, like Sandy and the 9/11 attacks" (953). In this way, Lerner uses past traumatic events as a basis to reflect on future environmental and cultural crisis. It is these environmentally focused readings of the novel that form the foundation for my analysis. The combination of personal crisis and ecological events form a powerful contrast that demonstrates two very different scales of temporal operation, highlighting the disparity between human reality narratives and planetary activity.

10:04 follows Ben as he builds his writing career; is diagnosed with Marfan syndrome, a genetic disorder where "there was a statistically significant chance that the largest artery in [his] body would rupture at any moment" (5); and is asked by his best friend to father her child. The narrator navigates these events as an artist in New York City in a way that is very much reflective of the present moment. Media and technology remain ever-present influences, the narrator is obsessively aware of the monetary value of goods and services, and the protagonist's writing process raises questions of sincerity, fraudulence, and time in an ever-changing environment. Much like *Infinite Jest,* environmental disaster frames the events of the novel rather than drives them, contributing to a planetary context that lies behind the anthropocentric

framing of human reality narratives. An important event in itself, Hurricane Sandy's aftermath has the most impact on the narrator, his perspective shifting as the weather event infiltrates the interpretation of many subsequent experiences.

This section seeks to establish the thematic importance of temporality in *10:04* and introduce the notion of human and planetary timescales as a frame of understanding for the novel. Understanding the influence of human timescales on reality narratives is key to explaining the traumatic implications of sudden infiltrations of planetary awareness. Lerner's exploration and representation of temporality is a contribution to understanding the broader phenomenon of humankind's first real confrontation with planetary time. As ecological crisis continues to become a defining factor of life on Earth, it becomes increasingly important that humankind learn to restructure reality narratives to account for broader scales of time, as non-anthropocentric factors increasingly threaten humankind's survival.

Temporality is a key concern for Lerner, and one that the author establishes from the first pages. The novel takes its title from a climactic moment in *Back to the Future*, where a bolt of lightning strikes the courthouse clock tower, causing the mechanism to stop at 10:04. The first of five sections of the novel conclude with the protagonist watching a film entitled *The Clock*, a filmic experiment aiming to "obliterate the distance between art and life" (54). The film shows a "twenty-four-hour montage of thousands of scenes from movies and a few from TV edited together so as

to be shown in real time" (52). Each minute in the film is "mathematically indistinguishable" from a minute outside the film, effectively meaning that "time in and outside of the film is synchronised" (52). Despite the synchronicity of time on and off the screen, the narrator fights the temptation to check his watch, as each time he does he is confronted by the similitude between life on the screen and his reality: the fictionality of the film is reflected back onto the narrator's reality, allowing both to be interpreted as works of fiction. The narrator's realisation of "how many different days could be made out of a day" (54) comes to inform the entire novel's dealings with narrative, and by extension, temporality. The notion of "real time" and "real minutes" that he refers to describe time onscreen and offscreen is a point of interest. "Real time", we assume from the context, refers to the time by which he lives his life outside of the film. This "real time" is a frame or medium through which subjective experiences and social and cultural norms collaboratively inform the unique reality narrative of each individual. Throughout the novel, however, "real time" as a measure defined by the experiences of the individual (see Chapter 5) is called into question by environmental characteristics and events. These characteristics and events hint towards a much broader scale of time in which the human subject is decentralised from history by the lifespan and evolution of the planet, revealing the anthropocentric narrative that informs human notions of reality and time.

Exploration of time in ecological theory largely refers to deep time (also referred to as "geological time"), recognising a certain displacement of humankind in

the analysis of non-human history. The concept of the Anthropocene pinpoints a moment where human time and planetary time (or deep time) reach a point of necessary integration. This integration, however, is a theoretical challenge to humankind that involves de-centring humankind from global history, while recognising the disproportionate depth of impact humankind has had on the planet in their short time in existence. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty captures the discrepancies between human historical time and geological time describing the vastly different scales of Earth history and world history. He says that "the tens of millions of years that a geological epoch usually encompasses" is set against "the five hundred years at most that can be said to constitute the history of capitalism," yet, "in most discussions of the Anthropocene, questions of geological time fall out of view and the time of human world history comes to predominate" ("Anthropocene Time" 6). Despite this tendency, the true depth of the crisis that faces humankind cannot be understood without recognition of planetary history. Understanding requires integration of the fact that humans have dominated the planet to such an extent "that their collective impact [is] comparable to those of very large-scale planetary forces" (Chakrabarty 7), and that human action is responsible and culpable for the condition of the planet.

This chapter is not concerned with how to navigate these temporal discrepancies (Chakrabarty goes on to explore some possible solutions in his article); rather, it is concerned with Lerner's representation of the impact the merging of two

concepts of time has on the subject. I argue that *10:04* uses temporality in a way that highlights the subject's displacement, where the breaking down of human narratives become a traumatic trigger for the protagonist. The first step of this argument is to establish human history in the context of its narrativity, and the perception of stability of human narratives.

There are a number of examples in the novel that demonstrate how nature has been adapted to suit human purposes, enforcing a cultural narrative of human dominance over nature. These examples stand in contrast to the planetary perspective as it prioritises the anthropocentric perspective, and places human practices and needs at the centre of each cultural narrative. From an ecological perspective, humankind is central to the conceptualisation of New York City, where, like in Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer,* nature is manipulated to serve a narrative based on humankind's dominion over the environment. Notably, none of the following examples would be out of place in a reader's observations of the city, the realism of Lerner's representation allowing the reader's own context to be incorporated into the novel's environment. The opening line refers to an "abandoned railway spur" that the "city has converted" into an "aerial greenway" (3). Plant-life is changed to suit the urban landscape and the streets are lined with "improved sycamores" (17); later, the narrator smells "the cottonwoods blooming prematurely, confused by a warmth too early in the year even to be described as a false spring" (108). As he walks through the city he notes "the smell of viburnum, which either flowers in winter or had flowered prematurely, mixed with

the smell of car exhaust" (158); and monk parakeets have established a breeding community by a cemetery "since they escaped from a damaged crate at JFK" (222). These references are blended into the text in a way that reinforces the presence of environmental disruption, yet each examples occurs as brief observational note on the part of the narrator, giving the impression that these concerns are constantly present, flickering (to employ Lerner's terminology) in the background of daily life.

Parallel to the narrative of human dominion over nature, is one that has driven human advancement in the West. The representation of capitalist consumer culture grounds the reader in the modern moment, and monetary value of goods and services provides a strong and relatable context. The protagonist has a particular interest in the monetary value of things, and this taints his narrative perspective. He describes the opportunity for a "strong six figure advance" (4) on the expansion of his short story into a novel; a story he wrote for *The New Yorker* is worth "approximately eight thousand dollars" (56); and he buys the child he mentors a "sixty-dollar *T-rex* puzzle" (153). Capitalist cultural narratives pervade the way the narrator understands his experiences, which is then reflected in the narrative voice. At a celebratory dinner, the narrator breaks down the profits from the success of his advance, ultimately concluding that everything, from art to pollution, comes down to money:

> After my agent's percentage and taxes […] I would clear something like two hundred and seventy thousand dollars. Or fifty-four IUIs. Or around four Hummer H2 SUVs. Or the two first editions on the market of *Leaves of Grass*.

> Or about twenty-five years of a Mexican migrant's labour, seven of Alex's in her current job […] Or thirty-six hundred flights of bluefin, assuming the species held. I swallowed and the majesty and murderous stupidity of it was […] coursing through me: the rhythm of artisanal Portuguese octopus' fisheries coordinated with the rhythm of labourer's migration and the rise and fall of art commodities and tradable futures in the dark galleries outside the restaurant and the mercury and radiation levels of the sashimi and the chests of the beautiful people in the restaurant – coordinated, or so it appeared, by money. (155-6)

Lerner's representation of the Western capitalist cultural narrative allows connections to be drawn across seemingly disconnected aspects of the protagonist's experience. Several narrative threads converge by virtue of their monetary values: Alex's attempts to get pregnant, the protagonist's poetic inspiration (Whitman, who similarly fuses fiction with non-fiction), the dying out of natural species (notably disguised in here amongst a group of very human concerns) all converge into what the protagonist momentarily glimpses as the overarching narrative forged by capital. Lerner highlights these "fictional" cultural reality structures, evoking the sense of a consistent, rhythmic force controlling these diverse aspects of his narrator's life.

"Overlapping narratives": Lerner's use of Metanarrative

These cultural narratives manifest into the human timescale in historical discourse, and individual and shared perspectives based on the anthropocentric view of the world. Ecological crisis recontextualises anthropocentric narratives to appreciate geological time and process. The complexity of these structures is reflected in Lerner's metanarrativity, which he uses to establish cultural narratives that are central to human understanding, and then destabilise them by evoking ecological crisis and environmental characteristics. Metanarrative is typically considered to be a postmodern technique, where a narrative about narratives reveals the flaws behind the modernist way of thinking about an all-encompassing grand narrative. Metafiction reflects on the fictionality of itself, while also encouraging further critique of social, historical and cultural phenomena and their contribution to a totalising sense of a singular reality. The way Lerner employs metanarrative, however, has no such claim to reveal the futility of reality narratives; rather, it creates a connection between the reader and the novel by situating the novel's environment alongside the reader's own. *10:04* blends Lerner's own poetry, Whitman's poetry, prose, images, and a novel within the novel to create a complex and multi-layered narrative that consists of fiction and elements from the real world recognisable to the reader. Philip Maughan describes the novel as a "collage" (51) of different mediums, a description that reflects the various interactions between real world material, such as Hurricanes Sandy and Irene, Bronk's poetry, and featured photographs; material Lerner wrote for the novel

that is presented like real world material, such as diary entries that echo Lerner's own life, and Lerner's art criticism; and material whose origins are entirely fictional and written for the novel. Finally, Lerner himself shares characteristics with his narrator, further blurring the line between reality and the novel. In this way, the novel is very much representative of the present historical moment, as Lerner actively questions and plays with the ways the subject perceives reality.

The metafictionality of Lerner's text is about more than the writing process. As Drew Nelles writes, "although *10:04* is undoubtedly 'metafictional,' it is not necessarily (or only) about 'fiction' in the literary sense. Its metafiction is a vessel for explicitly discussing other realities, other ways in which human experience could manifest itself" (n.p.). The flickering of nonreality throughout the novel, which is a key aspect of my analysis, is predicated on the shifting, multi-layered representation of the narrator's experience of reality. In Lerner's own words,

> if you write something that's meta-fictional people assume that it's all a trick, whereas—again—I'm really interested in the way a work can acknowledge its constructedness. Not to show in some post-structuralist way how you can never access reality, but as a way of making contact with the way we construct our own lives. (Smith "Time is" n.p.)

Recalling Wallace's approach to metafiction, Lerner does not seek to comment only on the nature of writing, but on the nature of reality construction. It is not only the collage of various narratives within the novel that make it unique, but Lerner's

obvious *awareness* and deliberate evocation of multiple narratives. Each layer of narrative is deliberately designed to confuse the distinction between reality and nonreality, reinforcing the sense that reality is, ultimately, a form of fiction.

Lerner's metanarrativity creates an environment for the reader to witness the role that various narratives play in forming concepts of reality. In the metafictional space, diverse strands of narrative become more evident and allow the reader to reflect on the role of narrative and story-making outside the fictional space. As the narrator reflects on monetary values, the reader can see how capitalist narratives inform the way the narrator reflects on his relationships as well art, food, and people. As Rosen says, metafiction "seeks to unmask the fictions by which we live by calling attention to the process of storifying itself" (123). By deliberately drawing attention to narratives, Lerner shines light on the way the subject constructs reality from interwoven human narratives, together forming a system of understanding. The way Lerner uses metanarrative, however, also undermines the perseverance of human narratives by replicating the multiple streams of narrative in a space that draws attention to structure, revealing the human understanding of reality as an act of story-making. Lerner uses metanarrative self-consciously; narrative constructs are shattered throughout the text, emphasising both the illusion created by narrative and the fragility of human narrative structures.

This chapter argues that the geological timescale draws attention to the fragility of human narratives. Geological time emphasises the lack of control the human subject

has over nature, reducing the efficacy of many of the sense-making cultural narratives that comprise anthropocentric history and the human experience. There are useful connections to be made between Lerner's use of metanarrative and apocalyptic writing, where metanarrativity is employed in a way that undermines dominant cultural narratives and reveals the underlying chaos behind them. Lerner says on writing the novel that his "concern is how we live fictions, how fictions have real effects, become facts in that sense, and how our experience of the world changes depending on its arrangement into one narrative or another" (Lin "An Interview with Ben Lerner" n.p.). It is these cultural narratives that drive human action and impact. While "Anthropocene" appears to provide an easy narrative by conflating all of humanity – *Anthropos* – as the driving force behind geological upheaval, it is in reality capital, class, imperialism and cultural narratives that have driven the behaviours leading to climate crisis. These human narratives make the Anthropocene a "socio-cultural phenomenon" (Chakrabarty "Anthropocene Time" 12), where lasting social, cultural and political narratives continue past their applicability, and aggravate climate crisis. Lerner's endeavour to demonstrate how the subject lives by these fictional narratives is apparent throughout the novel, and establishes the depth to which human narrativity constructs the human timescale. It is only after recognising the significant impact that human narratives have on the structure of human understanding that the depth of Lerner's ecocritical perspective becomes apparent. By exposing the fictions that reinforce anthropocentric fictions, Lerner draws attention to

the world beyond these structured narratives, alluding to the planetary timescale, and broader geological time.

"Dizzy with fear and confusion": Trauma and Anxiety

The rupturing of human narratives is a clear source of trauma in the novel, where concerns about the natural world, unusual weather patterns, and environmental collapse occupy the mind of the narrator. This section examines apocalyptic fears and the situations in which they arise, demonstrating an ongoing feeling of anxiety as permeating the narrator's existence. Lerner's representation of trauma is based in the anticipation of crisis, in the potential for something to occur and the narrator's inability to act[24]. Aside from the diagnosis of Marfan syndrome, the ticking time bomb of heart failure, the narrator fears a "future [he] increasingly imagined as underwater" (40); he feels fear of "some sort of chemical contamination" as he donates sperm for Alex (88); looking over the water at night he envisions a "future surge crashing over the iron guardrail" (108); and as he takes Roberto on a tour of the museum, he feels "horrified of being horrified, as it indicated [his] manifold inadequacy" (147). He converses about a "fear localised in [his] extremities" (3) over dinner with his agent, which is recalled later when, narcoticized, he describes how

[24] This phenomenon has various names and iterations, such as Timothy Clarke's "Anthropocene disorder," Ann Kaplan's "pretrauma" which she specifically links to climate crisis," and "climate anxiety," a term adopted by the American Psychological Association in 2017. Each descriptor infers an anxiety around the disconnect between daily experience and the knowledge of climate change, and a fear of eventual impact.

"the last vestige of my personality was my terror at my personality's dissolution, so I clung to it desperately, climbing it like a rope ladder back to my body" (186). The frequency in which the narrator feels fear and horror in various situations demonstrate a near constant feeling of anguish with varied triggers, and sometimes, no apparent trigger at all.

Several sources of anxiety stem from his biological experience. Aside from the diagnosis of Marfan syndrome, a friend's admittance to hospital sparks the realisation that they were "succumbing to biological time" (40). The inevitability of death is fundamental to being human, however the narrator's fear is compounded by the component of time. He describes how "temporal orders broke over" him (40), and the sureness of his own mortality stands in contrast to his vision of an apocalyptic future. Two scales of time come together as both biological and planetary fears are merged. The potential death of a friend is outweighed by the imagining of a "future underwater," where planetary implications vastly undermine the significance of the individual human scale of time.

It is his relationship with Roberto, however, where the depth of the narrator's fears become clearest. Roberto is an eight-year old boy that the narrator tutors to help improve the child's focus. While tutoring, the narrator often foresees the child running away from him or becoming seriously injured, which result in unusually vivid imaginings: "I was seized with animal terror; I imagined having to open his windpipe with a pencil" (11). On the one occasion Roberto experiences a mild nut allergy and

does "run away" to be with his friends in another room, the narrator's fears escalate a straightforward scenario to a crisis situation. But when Roberto comes to the narrator with fears of a future ice age, the narrator's true fears are revealed: "'I don't think there will be another ice age,' I lied" (13)[25]. As the pair continue to discuss global warming, the narrator begins to experience physical symptoms of anxiety:

> An increasingly frequent vertiginous sensation like a transient but thorough agnosia in which the object in my hand, this time a green pair of safety scissors, ceases to be a familiar tool and becomes an alien artefact, thereby estranging the hand itself, a condition brought on by the intuition of spatial and temporal collapse or, paradoxically, an overwhelming sense of its sudden integration, as when a Ugandan warlord appears via YouTube in an undocumented Salvadorean child's Brooklyn-based dream of a future wrecked by dramatically changing weather patterns and an imperial juridical system that dooms him to statelessness; Roberto, like me, tended to figure the global apocalyptically. (13–14)

The narrator's agnosia causes a moment in which he feels detached from his body through his climate imaginings. There is an anticipatory fear made apparent through the narrator's physical response to Roberto's questions, which is emphasised further

[25] The dynamic between Roberto and the narrator demonstrates the consistent internalisation of the narrator's fears. A similar conversation with Roberto occurs near the end of the novel when the narrator delivers books he and Roberto had published together. Roberto seems distracted, wanting "to talk about the 'superstorm', how he was worried he'd have to go live with his cousins in Pittsburgh" (222). As he did previously, the narrator omits his own fears, saying, "Almost half of humanity will face water scarcity by 2030, but I assured him he has no reason to worry" (222).

by his need to lie to comfort the child. The narrator's vision of a "future [he] increasingly imagined as underwater" draws attention to his awareness of a broader notion of temporality, one that surpasses the "biological time" constituting the human temporalities throughout the novel. Simultaneously, he describes a paradoxical "overwhelming sense of… sudden integration" as if the self is completely lost in the experience of anticipatory fear. He is both amalgamated into his environment and entirely alone within it, integrated into his surroundings to the point that the self seems to not exist[26]. I suggest that the narrator's experience here is an example of pretraumatic fear triggered by momentary clarity of planetary time.

"A proprioceptive flicker": The 'flickering' of the Real

The experience of agnosia is mirrored throughout the narrative in the form of "proprioceptive flickers", dissociative experiences that have no clear traumatic trigger; rather, they seem to occur at points when the protagonist experiences a conceptual rupture in his reality narrative. This section will argue that these proprioceptive episodes are key to Lerner's environmental approach, as they demonstrate the rupturing of the reality narrative, and reveal the fictionality of basic

[26] There is a similar episode later in the novel when the narrator speaks to a student he is supervising, Calvin. Calvin appears to be having "a stressful time", saying "You deny there's poison coming at us from a million points? Do you want to tell me these storms aren't man-made, even if they're now out of the government's control? You don't think the FBI is fucking with our phones? The language is just becoming marks, drawings of words, not words" (219). These accusations can again be seen reflected in the narrator, who says to himself "all of that was to my mind plainly true" (219).

human understandings of the lived environment. Lacan's register's theory is a useful theoretical lens to examine this, as the narrator's momentary lapses in proprioceptive awareness closely resemble encounters with the *tuche*, or the Real, revealing a deeper, fundamental level of reality that is akin to planetary history and awareness of deep time.

Lerner has an interesting strategy for communicating these experiences of agnosia, employing the physiology of the octopus to demonstrate the subject's dependence on dominant narratives through body awareness. The creature is first evoked as a luxury food item having been "literally massaged to death" (3). The most significant reference, however, comes soon after, when Lerner spends an uncharacteristic amount of time ensuring the reader is aware of the nature of the animal's proprioceptive condition:

> [The octopus] can taste what it touches, but has poor proprioception, the brain unable to determine the position of the body in the current, particularly my arms, and the privileging of flexibility over proprioceptive inputs meaning it lacks stereognosis, the capacity to form a mental image of the over-all shape of what I touch: it can detect local texture variations, but cannot integrate that information into a larger picture, cannot read the realistic fiction the world appears to be. (6-7)

The octopus's lack of proprioception means that it can only comprehend the movement of its own limbs by watching them. Humans are proprioceptive animals,

demonstrated most obviously when performing habitual activity, in human reflexes and in the "fight or flight" response. Without this "sixth sense", octopus-like proprioception in a human subject would indicate an inability to sense the movement of limbs, where tactile receptors function normally, but the information cannot be coordinated to form a cohesive awareness of what the body is doing, or where it is situated in space. Thus, Lerner's description evokes a detached, isolating experience, where even the protagonist's own body becomes independent from his self. A lack of proprioception is a recurring metaphor throughout the text, perpetuating a sense of dislocation that reflects the protagonist's insecurities on a number of levels; while one such event is drug induced, most others occur in moments where the narrator notices the subjectivity of his own experience of the world, and the insignificance of his own existence. The traumatic trigger stems from what I refer to as the disparity in conflating the human timescale with the planetary, or, what Caleb Klaces refers to as the foreground and background of reality breaking down. I argue that we are to understand this proprioceptive sensation as a symptom of trauma, where the symptom dictates that a traumatic experience has occurred rather than a triggering event. This is not to say that the proprioceptive symptom necessarily *feels* traumatic; rather it indicates a belated psychological reaction to a triggering event. These triggering events, some clearer than others, share an indication of broader shifts in the reality narrative.

The break down of reality contributes to the idea of fictionality in reality narratives. This becomes a key component in the source of the subject's traumatic experience. It begins from the introduction with the proprioceptive octopus who cannot "read the realistic fiction the world appears to be" (7). The narrator alludes to the subject creating their own fictions upon seeing *The Clock*, where the simultaneity between himself and the screen demonstrates "how many days could be built out of a day", and he feels "more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction" (54). The implication here is that each individual subject perceives their own version of reality, their own narrative based on their unique perspective. This echoes the Lacanian premise of the symbolic, where the separation between the subject and language makes it "impossible to discount the possibility that the other is dissimulating" (61). Notions of reality are determined through interpretation rather than as a universal constant, and each individual subject lives their own reality. As Lacan writes, "Nature provides […] signifiers, and these signifiers organise human relations in a creative way, providing them with structures and shaping them" (*Four Concepts* 20). Considering Lacan's oft-quoted premise that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (*Fundamental Concepts* 20), this means each subject's reality is based on an individual prescribed system that creates the illusion of truth. These systems are supported and enhanced by collective understandings of natural law, and the social and cultural constructs that define human civilisations. The individual basis of reality formation, then, can be recognised as a form of fiction that is the culmination of individual and communal notions of accepted truth.

In a more specific sense, the Lacanian *automaton* and the *tuche* explain the subject's relationship with the symbolic and what lies beyond it. This relationship delineates the point at which reality narratives are formed and where they fail, revealing the elements of phantasy[27] that contrive notions of reality. Lacan defines the *automaton* as "the network of signifiers" (*Fundamental Concepts* 52), or as "the insistence of signs" (54), while the *tuche* is "the encounter with the real" (52). The *automaton* is the network of signifiers that construct the symbolic register. The real, therefore, "is beyond the *automaton*, the return, the coming-back" (53) and is that which always lies outside of the *automaton.* The *automaton*, as the network of signifiers that constructs the symbolic, constructs the phantasy that pertains to the subject's notion of reality. In contrast, the *tuche* is purely arbitrary and beyond the symbolic, and occurs when the signifying chain fails. Just as I have represented reality in terms of a form of fiction or narrative, Lacan posits that "life is a dream" (*Fundamental Concepts* 55) and functions as phantasy. As the Real lies outside of the *automaton,* it alludes to the phantasy inherent in perceptions of reality. The *tuche* is therefore considered an episode that disrupts the dream, a process that has the potential to incite trauma.

The narrator's flawed proprioceptive episodes can therefore be understood in the context of the *tuche*, where the *automaton* is dictated by the human driven narratives scripted by the security of the city. The human narrative portrayed in *10:04*

[27] I use the original spelling of "phantasy" to ensure that the relationship between fantasy and reality is not one of opposition, but in fact of synonymy.

can be seen to reflect an environment of increased signifiers through the emphasis on the built environment, media culture and consumerism, which reinforces the sense of fictionality Lerner highlights through his metanarrative approach, and deepens the subject's connection with the symbolic. The more signifiers are created, the further the subject is removed from the Real, and, as seen in *White Noise,* the entrenchment in human-made systems and structures becomes problematic for the subject as cracks begin to show and the fictionality of reality is made apparent.

The fact that the narrator's proprioceptive flickers are often triggered by the cityscape is therefore significant, as, contrary to the narrator's belief in the city's sublimity, it references the fractures within the overwhelmingly human-based narrative. He describes a "thrill that only built space produced in me, never the natural world, and only when there was an incommensurability of scale" (108). The city takes on the characteristics of a living being with "arterial networks" (28, 108), where reference to the city becoming "one organism" with its own sense of awareness "entering the architecture" (17) alludes to a living presence. The city is its own character in the novel, becoming a part of, or even replacing, the "natural" world of contemporary white America. The narrator describes how "the human dimension" within the broader scope of the architecture of the city skyline becomes the "expression of a collective person who didn't exist yet, a still-uninhabited second person", and how "only an urban experience of the sublime was available to me because only then was the greatness beyond calculation the intuition of community"

(108). A narrative that is very much informed by human dominance portrays the built environment in the novel as being interchangeable with the natural world. The vibrancy of the city creates an impression of the sublime based on the overwhelming sense of community in the built space. It becomes clear that this sense of community is based in a fiction structured to screen the crumbling of the natural environment, a human constructed experience of faux sublimity.

The security assured by a living, breathing city is found in its predictability — the city is, after all, a human construction. The narrator's description reflects the mentality behind his proprioceptive episodes which describe a feeling of becoming immersed in his surroundings, the dissolving of his individual personhood. He describes at one point his "personality dissolving into a personhood so abstract that every atom belonging to me as good as belonged to" his friend, Noor, "the fiction of the world arranging itself around her" (109). The narrator's experience is one of comfort that assures safety and connectedness. The entrenchment of the human narrative is metaphorically reflected in this emphasis on community, where the city itself comes to define the subject's personhood, human creation defining human creation. For example, the narrator's heart condition is recalled in the city's arterial traffic, as if its own beating heart might sustain the narrator's. There is a connection forged between subject and city that, despite what the narrator conveys, is symbolic and inherently flawed. He describes "bundled debt, trace amounts of antidepressants in the municipal water" (108), alluding to a collective numbing, where the human-

ness of the city provides a cure for whatever lies outside of it. The "urban experience of the sublime" described by the narrator, then, is not the sublime at all. Rather, it is an imitation forged by the grandeur of the city that is based in phantasy, fashioned to create a sense of awe without the risks associated with the unpredictable climate outside of the human sphere. To understand the narrator's sublime experience of the "intuition of community" as phantasy is not to identify it as a negative experience; rather, it draws attention to the falsehood inherent in the subject's interpretation of reality.

A particularly strong example of the narrator's proprioceptive episodes occurs when he is being tested for Marfan syndrome. If diagnosed, the narrator is put in a similar position to DeLillo's Jack Gladney[28]—positive diagnosis is an unpredictable yet damning confirmation of death. As three young doctors measure his limbs, he feels "as if [his] limbs had multiplied", harbouring an impression that his "pathologized corpus" represents to them their own future bodily decline, rather than the "past immaturity" (6) a more aged doctor may have felt. The narrator interprets himself as a physical embodiment of the body in decline, a representation of all humankind's eventual decay. By interchanging "I" with "it" through the passage, the narrator appears to move in and out of himself, echoing the sentiment that his body is pathologized to the young doctors, and enforcing his own sense of detachment from

[28] Another interesting parallel occurs when the narrator receives his Marfan test results. He reports looking at the screen "which had a frozen image of my heart and arteries" and showed "flashing numbers" (206). Gladney is similarly confronted with the "total sum of [his] data" (DeLillo 165), his life and mortality quantified by modern technology.

his physical body. As he is examined, awaiting the "verdict" (6) of the doctors' examination, the threat of a positive diagnosis evokes the octopus's unique spatial characteristics. In his own words, "my parts were coming to possess a terrible neurological autonomy not only spatial but temporal, my future collapsing in upon me as each contraction expanded, however infinitesimally, the overly flexible tubing in my heart" (7). The protagonist's consciousness separates itself from the infected vessel, alienating selfhood from the body, and, momentarily, from the implications of diagnosis. The narrator and the octopus merge in the imaginative space, enforcing the innate animal nature of the human subject and connecting the narrator's mortality with his specieshood.

The narrator is unable to assimilate the activities in the room as he awaits a traumatic diagnosis, which would call into question the way he lives his life. With no previous indication of the disease (the narrator points out his "excess proportion of body fat and conventional arm span" contrasts with the typically "long limbed and flexible" bodies of those diagnosed with Marfan syndrome), the mature diagnosis of a syndrome generally identified in early childhood reveals a fundamental shift in the narrator's understanding of himself. This is a symbolic shift, where Marfan represents a rupture in the narrator's perceived narrative, based on the newfound "awareness that there was statistically significant chance that the largest artery in my body would rupture at any moment" (5). This undoubtedly traumatic realisation leads to a sense of disassociation as the protagonist struggles to assimilate the threat of his diagnosis.

Without a sense of the constraints of the body's physicality, the self is freed from death, the traumatic response severing the protagonist from the source of his fears.

The narrator's proprioception is also evoked as a "flickering", where the automation of action merges the protagonist with his surroundings, and his physical awareness seems to "flicker" in both space and time (15, 21, 28, 67, 108, 136, 194, 201, 238, 239). While he traverses the city with Sharon, he asks how a billboard looks to her with her colour blindness. Even seeing the world is highlighted as a subjective experience, bringing into focus the subjectivity and, in a sense, fictionality of the protagonist's experiences. As she answers, he has a "proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body" (28). The flickering of his proprioception merges the protagonist with his surroundings, no longer an individual, but a part of the collective populace. He describes an awareness of the "water surrounding the city," of the "delicacy of the bridges and tunnels spanning it, and the "traffic through those arteries" (28), his diagnosis tainting his perception of the outer world, and bring his self together as part of it. These experiences highlight the moments where the fictional nature of human narratives become most prominent. Each time the human narrative is undermined, the narrator experiences a similar, traumatised "proprioceptive" feeling, a sensation Lerner evokes explicitly a total of five times throughout the novel[29]. This sensation comes to represent a sense of disassociation and can be seen

[29] See the initial reference as discussed above (6-7 in the novel)where he walks through the city at night and describes the "traffic through those arteries" (28), where the cohesiveness of the city incites a "proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body" (28). This quote is repeated verbatim when the narrator examines

replicated in additional references to "flickering between temporalities" (21), to the flickering of presence (201, 236). These flickering, proprioceptive moments identify points in the text where the perception of reality has shifted, alluding to something that lies beyond or outside of human narratives.

"Still unseasonably warm": Weather and Human Narrativity

As reality narratives begin to rupture, characteristics of the natural world reveal themselves as influential in the breaking down of anthropocentric perspectives. In addition to the "edited" natural elements seen throughout the city, the changing weather consistently informs descriptions of the city. The consistency of changing weather and the bookending of the novel by hurricanes Irene and Sandy indicate a perpetual narrative of environmental upheaval. The planetary, therefore, remains a slow and consistent backdrop to the anthropocentric perspective, remaining steady in contrast to the disrupted and shifting nature of human reality narratives. Importantly, the weather phenomena that Lerner features are not fictional in nature; rather, they remind the reader that the space Lerner employs in his novel is the same space the reader lives within. This allows the reader to forge a stronger connection between the

the skyline, feeling a "fullness indistinguishable from being emptied" (109). It is used in the drug-induced proprioception (185-6), and finally it appears again in reference to a lost "social proprioception" to match the loss of power from the storm (236).

fracturing reality narratives in the novel and the reader's own context, as Lerner opens a critical space from which the reader can reflect on their own lived environment.

Unlike some of the novels examined in this thesis, *10:04* has been critically perceived by several critics such as Grossman (2016), De Bruyn (2017), Andreas Malm (2017), and Klaces (2020) as a climate fiction novel, Malm describing it as "one of the finest cli-fi novels yet written" (129). These analyses take the metanarrative aspects of Lerner's narrative approach and contextualise its characteristics within the current geological epoch, with specific attention to the portrayal of weather. As weather is one of the clearest ways the subject experiences the impacts of climate change, the most obvious signposting Lerner embeds in the novel referring to ecological crisis (excluding the hurricanes) is the repeated references to "unseasonably warm" weather (32, 66, 108, 153, 164, 213, 231). Klaces notes that these references signal the novel's "interest in climate change is a medial gesture that reinforces the illusion that reader and writer inhabit the same dimension" (7). In these references, it is implicit that the reader will have read similar descriptions, the "same news articles, too often, describing the fact that the seasons we take for granted are becoming different from themselves" (Klaces 7). Lerner's bookending of the novel using familiar and real weather events, hurricanes Irene and Sandy, elevates his appeal to the reader to consider the novel's events in their context of their own environment. The frequency of unseasonable weather throughout the year in which the novel is set indicates a

permeated sense that something is unusual, the protagonist's repeated noting of the discrepancy echoing the media of the reader's world.

The stability of the environment in which we live is one of the most entrenched human narratives, its relative consistency spanning the duration of humankind's existence. The protagonist experiences ruptures in his reality narrative in the form of his proprioceptive flickers, episodes that hint at the intrusion of the planetary, a scale of time that renders his reality narrative as much shorter and less dependable than it appears in the human timescale. These episodes pinpoint how Lerner represents the changed relationship between the subject and the natural environment by contextualising human existence explicitly in the space of a changing environment. Reviewer Lee Klein notes that "other than "unseasonably warm" the most commonly repeated phrase involved his [Lerner's] narrator perceiving the rearrangement of the world around himself" ("Warm Core" n.p.). Alluding to his proprioceptive episodes, this indicates a clear connection between a changing environment, and the narrator's sense of safety and security within his own experience. Thus, the novel opens up an important critical space, where "climate change is both overly familiar discourse and frighteningly mysterious in lived experience" (Klaces 7). The culmination of Lerner's exploration of weather and human reality narratives is in the two hurricanes that bookend the novel. These events reflect how events of a planetary scale begin to impact human systems, bringing the physical world back into human narratives and challenging the notion of humankind's control over nature. The novel's

anthropomorphic lens frames the way the novel is read, drawing attention to human narratives through metanarrative techniques, intertextuality, and manipulation of temporalities throughout the text. Despite Irene and Sandy being significant weather events, their presence in the novel is oddly lacklustre, reinforcing the disconnect between the subject and the natural environment. The hurricane has little direct impact on the narrator, and so the significance of the event wanes quite quickly. Hurricane Irene would have been a major intrusion in many ecocritical novels, the breadth of impact, the physical and emotional damage and the implications of such an event making the hurricane the climax of the novel. Yet in *10.04* the hurricane serves the purpose of surreptitiously planting an awareness of the fragility of human perception in the narrator.

The two hurricanes are an infiltration of the planetary, where environmental shifts create ecological events that challenge human narratives. Just as the "unseasonable weather" represents a seemingly minor indication of systemic disruption, Hurricanes Irene and Sandy are more dramatic representations of weather unsettling human narratives, demonstrating a fundamental shift in the relationship between the subject and the environment. Images of the storm come to be associated with the octopus, proprioception, and other disturbing or confronting moments in the narrator's life. Viewing Alex's ultrasound, the narrator describes the "image of the coming storm, its limbs moving in real time […] the chances the creature will never make landfall remain significant" (233), images which recall both the octopus in the

words “limbs” and “creature”, as well as the first storm. Descriptions of the weather event superimpose themselves over the momentous moments in the narrator’s life and begin to infiltrate his reality narrative. As Hurricane Irene approaches, the narrator labels it as “an aerial sea monster with a single centred eye around which tentacular rain bands swirled” (17), while later images of Hurricane Sandy are a “swirling tentacular mass” (232). Just as the narrator experiences a lack of cohesion and control in his proprioceptive moments, the hurricane imagery comes to represent a lack of control, an intrusion of something other. Later, Calvin challenges the protagonist by listing numerous scenarios where humanity attempts to assert its control, over the environment and their own civilisations. Calvin’s exposition is paranoid – he cites the “poisoned seas”, the hormones added to milk, the bugging of telephones – yet as the protagonist sizes him up, it is as if he is being confronted by the manifestation of his own fears. When Calvin asks whether the protagonist thinks the storms are “man-made, even if they are out of the government’s control?” (219) the protagonist finds himself in agreement. Each act of human dominion over the environment has led to an imbalance that is reflected in repercussions of human action. Where human power narratives previously existed, planetary aspects assert themselves over perceptions of a human-built, predictable environment, creating ruptures in the symbolic.

Despite the aforementioned anti-climax that was Hurricane Irene, the storm demonstrates a human narrativity that stands in contrast to the planetary. As the storm moves towards New York, human perspectives contextualise the weather

system as people struggle to assimilate the hurricane into dominant narratives. The Mayor takes "unprecedented steps" (16) to prepare the city, shutting down the subway, and taking parts of Manhattan off the grid. There is speculation that the Mayor is "strategically overreacting" (16) in compensation for the failed preparedness during a snow storm the previous year; however, the narrator detects a "genuine anxiety" in his news broadcasts, "as if he were among those he kept imploring to stay calm" (17). Response to the storm is mitigated by the idea that human action can control the weather. While preparedness is expected in times of crisis, the framing of storm preparation is represented less as a safety measure, and more as a mechanism to control the weather, the mayor's anxiety stemming from the possibility that safety measures may falter. As awareness of the coming storm "seeped into the city" (17), tracking apps manifest to track the storm's path and intensity, people flee to gather supplies, and the "conventional partitions from social space" (17) collapse as the city's populace share a single conversation about the coming storm. The narrator describes how "the city was becoming one organism constituting itself in relation to a threat viewable from space, an aerial sea monster with a single eye" (17). A strong binary is established of human versus nature. Autonomy is given to the storm cell, the villain approaching the anxiety ridden victim that is New York city.

In this moment of anticipation, aspects of the human environment take on new resonances as their context changes. Lerner contextualises his novel with two storms that actually occurred, and this speaks to the broader cultural shifts that occurred

during these events in the US. Aside from the obvious metanarrative and intertextual elements that occur in Lerner's evocation of Irene and Sandy, Ann Kaplan identifies Sandy as a "border event" in the US and surrounding countries, an argument that can be made, albeit on a lesser scale, regarding Irene. She says (speaking of Sandy and Irene) that "each catastrophe offered a sense of things being irreversibly altered after the happening, of changed sensibilities, of changed feelings regarding security, safety, stability, and of being unable to rely on the environment" (xvi). This fundamental shift in human narratives stems from the subject's deepest adherence to advancing fictions. As common items and facilities are taken for granted, they become inherently linked to human narratives. An applied example of this can be seen in Michael Rubenstein's comments on electrification, where he says there was "a nearly instantaneous forgetting" about life before its instigation. "The transformation that occurs, while controversial and profoundly lived through at first, leaves everyday consciousness with astonishing rapidity" (qtd. in Kaplan xvii). In view of the oncoming weather event, fundamental aspects of the lived process suddenly become significant at the same time as their significance becomes trivial.

As the narrator and Alex shop for supplies, the supermarket appears slightly altered in the context of the storm. The narrator describes "an alteration" which was "most likely in my vision, because everything remaining on the shelves also struck me as a little changed, a little charged" (18). He determines that "the approaching storm was estranging the routine of shopping just enough to make me viscerally aware of

both the miracle and insanity of the mundane economy" (19). In other words, awareness of the incoming storm system disrupts the narrator's perception of his surroundings – he is able to witness the mundane in a way that feels like it is from the outside, the situation creating a critical distance between himself and his experience. Holding a container of instant coffee, the narrator describes "the majesty and murderous stupidity of that organisation of time and space and fuel and labour becoming visible in the commodity itself now that planes were grounded and highways were starting to close" (19). The fictionality of human narratives are revealed in the wake of such a vast and threatening event, where increased awareness of the planetary aspects contributes to "a divergence in human consciousness" (22, 23). We are reminded of the novel's mantra, "Everything will be as it is now, just a little different" (19). In the context of the storm, the coffee container is a metaphor for this changed environment, the human at the mercy of the natural world. Yet when the storm is over, this significance is lost, the instant coffee "no longer a little different from itself, no longer an emissary of the world to come" (24). The planetary timescale cannot remain in focus for any length of time, its vast implications remaining unreachable for the human subject trapped within such a limited biologically driven timescale.

Despite the building anxiety around the hurricane, Irene has very little physical impact beyond that of a typical storm. The narrator and Alex wait out the storm in Alex's apartment, sitting by candlelight watching films. There is anticipation of a

coming disaster, and the moments of paranoia noted throughout the text can be seen here in a compressed form. They watch *The Third Man* "maybe because it's set in a ruined city" (22), and the narrator begins "to worry about the Indian Point reactors just upriver" (22).He sleeps restlessly, waking suddenly "convinced [he'd] heard shattering glass" (23). However, the storm eases off and the city remains largely unaffected. After preparing for days without power or supplies, the narrator prepares to leave the apartment, noting the coffee tin "was no longer a little different from itself, no longer an emissary from a world to come" and he registers an air of "disappointment in [his] relief at the failure of the storm" (24). He leaves the apartment early, with the media reports using phrases such as "dodged a bullet" and "better safe than sorry" (23), the sense of anticlimax recalling the postmodern apocalypse of the Airborne Toxic Event in *White Noise*. Despite the anticipation of disaster, the rushed preparation, and the paranoia experienced throughout the night, life continues as before, and the glimpse of something beyond the superficiality of human narratives fades again into the background.

"The intuition of spatial and temporal collapse": The Planetary

The experience of Irene remains present throughout the novel despite the lack of impact in Lerner's representation, contextualising the human narrative (or narratives) into its broader, planetary timeframe. When the narrator fears a future

underwater, his concerns have more gravity after the natural disaster which, in the real world, inflicted over $1.3 billion damage in New York alone ("Hurricane Irene One Year Later" n.p.). His proprioceptive episodes continue, triggered by the very cityscape that was affected by the hurricane, continuing the dichotomy where the city and the subject are blended into a cohesive organism against nature. The divide between the human and the natural sees the animal self of the subject bypassed by the sense of connection to a city. Lerner represents this metaphorically when technology informs the individual of their physical surroundings, forging a living link between the subject and the built environment. Technology mediates the subject's experience of the coming storm, and again, we are reminded of the Gladneys, huddled around the radio awaiting updates of the Airborne Toxic Event. Apps track and record the storms intensity and direction using the same technology used to "measure the velocity of blood flow through [the narrator's] arteries" (17). Like DeLillo, Lerner represents technology as the primary source of information, a mediator between the subject and their experience of reality. The organic human experience is filtered through products of human advancement, merging the subject with their built environment. Lerner effectively demonstrates how the human narrative dictates the subject's relationship to the natural world. The individual's experience of the storm is secondary to the narratives provided via technology and media on how to experience the event, Lerner's description providing a metaphorical account of the human narrative versus the planetary that occurs at several points throughout the text. In this way, even outside of the hurricanes bookending the novel, Lerner ensures the natural

environment in its now inconsistent and changing form is always present. The hurricanes therefore serve as a contextualising agent, ensuring that these slight environmental references remain in focus.

Hurricane Sandy is introduced in exactly the same way as Irene: "An unusually large cyclonic system with a warm core was approaching New York" (16, 213). This not only recalls the sense of anxiety triggered by the first event, but gives the impression of cyclical catastrophe. There is a very real sense that the narrator has come full circle:

> Again we did the things one does: fill every suitable container we could find with water, unplugged various appliances, located some batteries for the radio and flashlights, drew the bath. Then we got into bed and projected *Back to the Future* onto the wall; it could be our tradition for once-in-a-generation weather, I'd suggested to Alex. (230)

Each step taken echoes the actions undertaken for the first hurricane, reinforcing the sense of repetition. Paradoxically, there seems to be a practised sense of calm in their actions despite the incoming storm having devastated Santiago, Cuba (220), and later being reported to have "obliterated" Queens, drowned numerous people, forced hospital evacuations, and wreaked havoc on numerous galleries, buildings and homes (230-231). There is, therefore, a powerful juncture between suspense and outcome that seems to hover over the narrator, where imminent destruction passes over, only to hit those further along. The narrator's quip about a once-in-a-generation tradition seems

absurd considering the incoming Hurricane Sandy, however it perfectly reflects the environmental possibility that the narrative seems to encourage – that a similar storm could hit in another year's time, and the cycle would continue as before.

Despite a similar sense of anticlimax, there is a contrast between the first weather event and the second that finds its basis in the sense of repetition. This difference can be seen more clearly in the two ways that Lerner evokes the idea of a snow day to describe the atmosphere leading up to, and following, each storm. As people gather in the city collecting supplies and sharing theories about Hurricane Irene, the narrator creates a feeling of unearthly suspense, "the air excited by foreboding and something else, something like the feel of a childhood snow day when time was emancipated from institutions" (18). As noted previously, the anticipation here sees mundane supermarket items attain a "certain aura" (19), and a general feeling of hyperawareness subtly reminiscent of the narrator's proprioceptive episodes. In contrast, the snow day is evoked in a different way following Hurricane Sandy. The narrator describes "constantly talking about the urgency of the situation" but being "unable to feel it", how the children off school and parents at home gave the city a "festive atmosphere" like a "snow day" (231). Unlike the excitement inherent in the anticipation of the first hurricane, where the subject seemed uncharacteristically aware of their surroundings, the routine-like occurrence of the second sees a degree of awareness removed from the subject. Here, the excitement stemming from days off from usual responsibilities to deal with the disaster feels like a form of anaesthesia, a

way to isolate the self from the broader trauma inflicted by another hurricane. The narrator notes that "everyone we knew was ok" (231), demonstrating that the personal human narrative ultimately saw very little disruption. I suggest that Lerner's narrator recontextualises Hurricane Sandy as a familiar occurrence, a part of the human narrative. By jokingly referring to preparation for Sandy as a "tradition," the disaster is re-envisioned as something familiar, and therefore something that does not disrupt the structure of the symbolic. In other words, the hurricane has been assimilated into the human narrative. The detachment described by the narrator after the event therefore reinforces the impact human narratives have on the subject's ability to interpret the planetary.

Lerner's approach is an effective commentary on the subject's inability to comprehend the planetary beyond momentary glimpses. Despite representations of two historically tragic storms, Lerner's characters remain detached from the broader planetary aspects of the weather events. The sense of repetition in the second hurricane, rather than acting as a sign of imminent climactic changes, reinforces the overarching role that narrative plays in the subject's understanding of reality. The event is assimilated into the narrator's reality narrative. This is reiterated again in the concluding pages of the novel. Media coverage of the storm and commenting politicians "were speaking openly, if obliquely, about extreme weather's relation to climate change, about the need to storm proof our cities" (232). However, the narrator instead witnesses the "coming storm" in Alex's ultrasound, "its limbs moving in real

time, the brain visible in its translucent skull" (233). Despite the broader context of environmental upheaval that has entered popular discussion, it is, ultimately, the individual human narrative that takes precedence while the planetary functions in the background.

As the narrator later leads Alex back through the city, attempting to hail cabs that refuse to drive to Brooklyn after the storm, he echoes Jane Eyre and begins to address the reader directly: "Reader, we walked on" (234). The power is out in many of the stores, the "bustling uptown neighbourhoods" now nearly empty, and the darkness of "the unregulated night was dangerous" (235). The description is almost akin to a post-apocalyptic wasteland, an abandoned city, and the pair walk through surveying the damage. The narrator says:

> I felt equidistant from all my memories as my sense of time collapsed: blue sparks in Monique's mouth when she bit down on wintergreen candy; hallucinating from a fever in Mexico City; watching the shuttle disaster on live TV. I looked up at the looming buildings whose presence I could now sense more than see and wondered how many people were still inside them. Here and there you could see a beam moving across a window, a flame, the glow of an LED, but the overall effect was of emptiness. I told Alex I felt fine. (236)

The overall feeling here is one of survival, where the narrator's description constructs a dark and ruined city for the reader in stark contrast to the "festive atmosphere" described immediately after the storm. References to various memories feel like

flashes of a distant past, a past long gone. As the pair walk through the city, the narrator constructs an alternative human narrative. Walking towards City Hall, people congregate around emergency services and supplies, and the strange, sensory experience the narrator describes is broken by "people and headlights, police were directing traffic, and there were clusters of city trucks—fire ambulance, sanitation, etc" (238). Despite this human refuge, the pair continue through, preferring to join a stream of people crossing the bridge to Brooklyn. The narrator reconstructs the previously described totalled city, saying that "Each woman I imagined as pregnant, then I imagined all of us were dead, flowing over London Bridge. What I mean is that our faceless presences were flickering, everyone disintegrated, yet part of a scheme" (238). It is here in the forecasting of a seemingly post-apocalyptic world, where individuals merge into an unidentifiable stream of human beings, that the narrator truly encompasses the planetary from a human perspective. In the dissolving of time and the sensory immersion in the narrator's surroundings, the reader gets a sense of humankind as a species. As the narrator's voice transitions to future tense, Lerner is able to portray a strong sense of awareness, where the inevitability of human narrativity is realised and acknowledged, and thus is exposed in its superficiality.

Conclusion

The final pages of the novel use future tense, forecasting a future fiction that details the continuance of the narrator and Alex's narrative addressed to "the school

children of America" (239). They will catch the bus home, have a conversation with a woman who will ask about Alex's pregnancy, get off on Fifth, and continue on. He says, "We will stop and get something to eat at a sushi restaurant in Prospect Heights—just vegetable rolls, as Alex is pregnant and the seas are poisoned and the superstorm has shut down all the ports" (240). In this moment, the human and the planetary are featured together in a way that highlights the sheer impossibility of assimilating the two perspectives. As the narrator predicts the outcome of the evening, he is writing "this book" (239), acting simultaneously as the author, the narrator, and, it seems, Lerner himself. Narrativity is inevitable, and this moment captures the reality that the planetary will always be filtered through the human experience. Yet Lerner's emphasis on the inevitability of narrativity, and the artificial notion of the subject's reality, is not without hope. Lerner's metanarrative voice not only draws attention to fictionality, but the subject's ability to manipulate it. By placing the reader in a critical space, Lerner reveals the superficiality of human narratives, while challenging the reader to become their own critic, acknowledging the agency of the subject in dictating their own perceptions.

Through his use of metanarrative, and the blending of autobiographical information with his prose, Lerner surpasses the postmodern by openly engaging with the world of his reader. If postmodern metanarrativity is premised on the idea of breaking down a grand narrative, then Lerner's approach encourages readers to think outside of their own narratives and consider the role of fiction in the forging of

reality narratives. If there is anything akin to a grand narrative informing *10:04*, it is that of the planet, a geological history that only now is starting to intercept anthropocentric notions of reality.

Chapter 5: Rallying "believers" in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*

Introduction

Richard Powers's novel *The Overstory* (2018) is an exploration of how trees impact the lives of humans. Blending storytelling with science, Powers tackles a narrative so far outside human perspectives that its temporal horizon, taken to its extreme, spans millions of years. The novel follows nine protagonists as they come to realise the scale, grandeur and importance of nature, or more specifically, trees. Powers structures the text to mirror the form of a tree, splitting the novel into four sections: Roots, Trunk, Crown, and Seeds. Each protagonist forms a separate "root" until their paths bring them into contact with other characters, their interconnecting stories then becoming the "trunk" of the narrative. When the characters separate and pursue different paths, their respective narratives form the branches of the tree and sow seeds that will eventually impact communities and the beliefs of others. The structure and form of the tree is iterated in the text in a variety of ways: some trees, such as Minas, are incorporated as characters; in other cases, the reaching branches that characterise the form of a tree metaphorically expand on Powers's explorations of temporality, storytelling, and the evolution of ideas and relationships. The novel attempts to create a bridge between humankind and nature, employing science as a tool to reveal humankind's sense of superiority over nature, and shield against the further development of these perceptions. Powers represents humankind in the

context of our animal selves and explores the connections and disconnections between what is human, science, and nature.

This chapter consists of two parts that together identify *The Overstory* as a novel of the Anthropocene that uses sincerity and storytelling to portray a layered temporality. The first part establishes human dominion over the environment as a quintessential characteristic of American identity. The second part of my argument frames *The Overstory* as presenting a literary response to the perception of human dominion over nature by utilising different timescales to demonstrate ecological planetary awareness, and communicate the severity of environmental crisis in the novel. The personification of nature, the forest, and trees is central to *The Overstory*, where a juxtaposition exists between viewing trees either as objects for consumption or as ancient life forms. Earlier chapters of this thesis have discussed how media and consumer culture perpetuate a sense of detachment from the natural environment by contributing to a dialogue of human dominion and control. I argue that Powers's novel precedes these advancements by recalling the American frontier, and the natural environment as it was before humankind interfered. Powers's representation of trees is illuminated by Robert Harrison's formative study of forests and civilisation, which frames agriculture as "a means of cultivating and controlling, or domesticating, the law of vegetative profusion which marked the new climactic era" (198). This cultivation of the forest is inherent to contemporary understandings of human civilisation, where enforcing the binary between human and nature drives ideas of

national identity and human progress. Claiming that this detachment comes from the initial split that occurred when humankind sought to control the forest, Harrison argues "detachment from the past […] culminates in one way or another with detachment from the earth" until Western civilisation becomes defined in the way it promotes "institutions of dislocation in every dimension of social and cultural existence" (198). Narratives based around the forest can thus be situated as narratives exploring the relationship between humankind and the planet. Harrison argues that "given our increased knowledge of the many interdependencies that constitute such ecosystems, forests have come to assume a powerful symbolic status in the cultural imagination" where forests are "metonymies for the earth as a whole" (199). Through this lens, Powers's novel becomes an exploration of humankind in an environment that is collapsing under human modes of control. The Turner thesis, presented by Frederick Turner in 1893, highlights a sense of dominion over nature as being a cornerstone of American identity. This, therefore, becomes an effective mechanism to examine the degree of separation between the subject and the natural environment. I therefore begin by examining the evolution of Powers's environmental perspective. Throughout his corpus, Powers has employed scientific discourse to explore the evolution of human thought in various contexts. As a whole, the perspective of his work can be seen to have expanded gradually until it reaches the scope of *The Overstory*, firmly situating science and the evolution of human ideas as core themes in Powers's work. This context allows for an exploration of the American Frontier and its influence on the relationship between humankind and nature. Human

advancement is fundamentally represented as a triumph over nature and the progression of the frontier depends on taming the wilderness. For *The Overstory*, an examination of the American Frontier reveals the origins of the binary established between human civilisation and the forest, complicated by science that aims to reveal the complexity and power of nature.

The second part of my argument examines Powers's use of temporal manipulation throughout the novel, and how a different way of employing time recontextualises humankind's sense of difference from nature. Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur, I argue that the Anthropocene presents an unprecedented problem for comprehending history and time, as is necessitates a timeframe that exceeds human experience – a dehumanised or post-human time. To address this, *The Overstory* presents story-making as a mechanism to aid in the breaking down of problematic human narratives, essentially working in opposition to Ricoeur's notion that narrative humanises time. Powers's core characters are activists, who use art, research and the manipulation of the media to create stories with the intention of inviting audiences to consider different perspectives and change the way they think about nature. Through his appeal to storytelling, sincerity and by drawing from ecological science, Powers sets out to transform his readership into "believers", planting seeds targeted to change perspectives about nature.

"Evolutionary Stages": The Growth of Powers's Ecocritical Perspective

The sincerity of Powers's passion for nature is reflected both in *The Overstory* and in the publicity around the novel's release. Powers even states in an interview with Everett Hamner that he "would have tried to write a novel where all the main characters were trees! But such an act of identification was beyond my power as a novelist, and it probably would have been beyond the imaginative power of identification of most readers" (Hamner n.p.). Although shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and winning the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, *The Overstory* has received mixed reviews stemming primarily from its unabashed use of extended metaphor. James Womack says the novel "unashamedly references every tree you might half-remember" (1), Sam Jordison describes an "increasingly absurd melodrama" with endless "hectoring" (n.p.) and Nathaniel Rich notes the "rhapsodic prose" used to describe trees, and the mis-leading experiences of the enlightened protagonists (33). Many reviewers, however, acknowledge the ambitious task Powers has so clearly taken on to convey "the sense of exceptionalism we humans carry around inside us" and "resurrect a very old form of tree consciousness, a religion of attention and accommodation, a pantheism of sorts" (Hamner n.p.). Womack concludes there are two reasons why Powers's novel ultimately succeeds, one being that what Powers communicates is all true and important, each "fact he puts into someone's mouth is demonstrably true, and the scale of the human destruction he

describes is sobering, for all that it comes from implausible characters" (1). It is not the prose and story itself that Womack seems to acknowledge, but the perceived purpose of the novel, and the importance of its overall message. Indeed, Kocku von Stuckrad cites *The Overstory* as an example of a text exploring a sixth sense lying dormant, wherein the subject possesses a skill of perception that is privy to "old, forgotten, and yet still available knowledge" (12). Powers's sensationalism about trees that leads to the core criticisms of the novel also contributes to interpretations of its overall success, a strategy that I suggest is somewhat anticipated in the novel itself. There is a recognised sincerity present in the perceived purpose of the novel, which is to communicate a message to the reader and teach a fundamental truth about the state of the world – that society must recognise the *construction* of a binary between humankind and nature, but that this division is detrimental not only to the environment but humankind as a species too.

Powers's earlier works provide context for *The Overstory* as an evolution of his previous interests in human advancement, where each follows a clear pattern in the context of the broader corpus. Several of the diverse themes from Powers's earlier work culminate in this novel, where science, materialism and human advancement become conjoined with a reality broader than that of humankind's exploits. Grausam, for example, says

> Perhaps [Powers's] most distinctive feature in his thematic and conceptual range: the history of corporate personhood, the history of visual art, the nature

> of consciousness, the possibilities of virtual reality, the history of race in the United States, the discovery and impact of DNA, the impact of epochal change, the world wars, the Cold War, and literary history. (124)

The absence of environmental issues in Grausam's list is perhaps an oversight, but still identifies *The Overstory* as a progression for Powers in its methods of environmental exploration. His 1991 novel *The Golden Bug Variation* follows two couples twenty-five years apart, and a mystery surrounding the early disappearance of a promising young molecular biologist from the world of science. Later, in his pseudo-autobiography *Galatea 2.2* (1995) Powers shares an adaptation of the Pygmalion myth, where a self-named protagonist returns as the humanist-in-residence at the Centre for the Study of Advanced Science after spending several years writing fiction. More recently, *Orfeo* (2014) explores links between music and science (seen also in *The Golden Bug Variation*), following the story of a falsely accused bioterrorist – "bioterrorist Bach" – as he pays final visits to those who shaped his love for music. Powers's award-winning body of work collectively explores the humanity behind science, the point where science and the subject meet, and how the pursuit of science impacts the individual. Of Powers's twelve publications, eight feature scientists as their protagonists, and the remaining four focus on protagonists experiencing medical anomalies or illness, bringing to the fore the interconnection between two schools of thought as a key concern of Powers's literary pursuits, and

staging a narrative scope that leads naturally into larger questions of anthropomorphic significance on a planetary scale.

Heather Houser, for example, examines Powers's corpus as a continuous and evolving exploration of wonder with a growing environmentalist theme developing throughout. Specifically examining *The Gold Bug Variation* and *The Echo Maker* (2006), she describes each as following the pattern of interlacing "multiple plots that synthesise and humanise diverse domains of knowledge" (*Ecosickness* 81). Powers has always drawn links between science and the human experience, observing the way in which different bodies of knowledge are reflected in human understanding. For Houser, wonder is the key factor in identifying the way Powers's fiction is ecocritical. She argues that wonder is aligned with anxiety in eco-fiction, as each has "traditionally shaped environmental and medical enthusiasm" (7). This means that fascination with the natural world, which for Powers often seems to translate as scientific pursuit, is what drives human interest and ultimately, human impact. More specifically, Houser says that in Powers's novels "wonder brings to light how vulnerable bodies are metaphorically and materially imbricated in their at-risk surroundings" (80). In other words, Powers's work navigates the vulnerability of the human subject in light of their fascination with technology and scientific advancement.

Similarly, Grausam describes Powers's literary career as being an attempt to "produce alternatives to our dangerous propensity to accept too easily the world we

live in" (22). Grausam argues that Powers's literary fiction has "continually returned to the intersections of the human and the technological in an era of big science, and to the guilty consciences that these intersections produce" (124). With a slightly different focus to Houser, yet nonetheless ecocritical in its gaze, Grausam explores the way in which "the nuclear age fundamentally shapes Powers's distinctive aesthetic, and explains the extraordinary commitment to the possibilities of the imagination" (125).

Grausam and Houser also discuss Powers's representation of reality formation, where wonder (Houser) and fabulation (Grausam) work against the representation of reality to highlight the author's concern with the role of narrative in reality construction. Grausam is particularly explicit about this, saying that Powers is "sharply aware of the fact that literature makes nothing happen, Powers is equally aware that not telling stories means that we have given up hope in the future" (22). Narrative becomes not only an expression of the state of the world but a way of growing knowledge and broadening perceptions, as Powers explores humanity through the broad and immeasurable lenses of "globalisation and global threat" (124) in his fiction. *The Overstory* provides an interesting opportunity to re-examine Grausam's argument about narrative as a form of persuasion. Powers is adamant that readers learn from the novel, instructing them to "let the beauty of whatever book you've just read teach you to read the world beyond what we human beings call *the real world*" (Morrow 67). The role of narrative takes on new resonances in *The Overstory,* as characters deliberately use storytelling to share environmental messages,

or act so as to inspire storytelling through the media or witness accounts. Story is used to teach lessons, and influence the thoughts and actions of others throughout the novel, and, it seems, this intention is shared by Powers.

Not only has *The Overstory* presented a shift or advancement in some of the ideas presented in Powers's earlier work, its structure is also more complex, which is notable in the corpus of an author who displays such consistent patterns in his works. Several critics note that Powers typically structures his novels as following two lines of narration along two different stories that intersect in some way (Grausam, Byers). As Thomas Byers points out, two parallel story lines, two binaries, do not seem surprising in the context of an author like Powers's whose own interest display "structures of binary opposition are so deeply implicated in so many of his obsessions" (1). Byers discusses the incongruity of Powers's consistent use of this structure given that rarely does each plotline neatly resolve into the other; there is always a "remainder." This remainder is what is left over after "corporate and individual histories" converge; that is, "the human stories that make up the corporate history" (2). What does it mean, then, when the same author adopts eight interwoven lines of narration in a single novel? If Powers's characteristic double plotline is representative of the impact of human systems, and the stories of individuals who are impacted by these systems, then *The Overstory* sees Powers take a step further in the exploration of his signature focus in the novel's concern with the temporal complexity of exploring a world in ecological crisis. Powers's "overstory" explores the

intersection between individuals, humankind, and the Anthropocene, representing the points at which individuals begin to realise humankind's impact on the natural world, and recognise the risk of maintaining human systems that uphold the sense of disconnection between humankind and nature.

With the expansion to nine protagonists, the roots of the narrative demonstrate the difficulty in consolidating the complex relationship between the "corporate and individual histories" that Byers describes. Where the binaries explored in Powers's previous works contrast the group and the individual, and science and the humanities, ecology is only present as a part of science. In the broader context of the Anthropocene, pre-existing binaries are complicated by their planetary context. Science, for example, might commonly be seen in opposition to nature, as it often symbolises progress and the advancement of human interests. However, the framing of a research question, the ethical application of research, and the intention of the researcher behind a project mean that science cannot purely serve a single side of any binary. In *The Overstory*, science is seen in this more traditional and simple context, but it also manifests as an intellectual curiosity about the world, and is used to disrupt notions of human dominance. Powers seeks to complicate binaries in this novel. The binary contrasting the group and the individual, for example, is complicated by the introduction of additional binaries: activists versus authority; gardens versus forests; human versus nature; pursuing passion versus necessity; until the notion of a binary becomes too simplistic to explain the environment Powers is grappling with. Rather

than two storylines that come together, Powers's nine protagonists form a tangled web, and like Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (see Chapter 3), this echoes an ecosystem more than a story with two sides. If one were to insist on considering *The Overstory* through the lens of Powers's characteristic binaries, his exploration has broadened to perhaps to the most fundamental of binaries – the human and the non-human.

"Power and Control": The American Frontier

If, as it was for Frederick Turner, American democracy came from claiming the American forests, then Powers returns ownership to the land by rewriting the American imaginary of the primordial forest. As prefaced in Chapter 3, it was only in forging new borders through the forests that the American identity was formed and distinguished from its European origins. This triumphing over the wilderness characterised the American peoples, meaning that dominating and controlling nature became a core characteristic of American identity. Turner draws comparison between the European frontier, a distinct boundary line running through dense population, and the American frontier, where the frontier becomes increasingly Americanised the further its people's triumph over the wilderness. Through the ethnocentric lens common to the period, Turner describes how "the wilderness masters the colonist" (200), transforming European sensibilities and replacing them with characteristics of Native Americans. This leads to the eventual transformation of the wilderness, resulting in "not simply the Germanic germs" but "a new product that is American"

(200). The movement of the frontier through wilderness fledges the American identity as the people who domesticated and dominated the untameable wilderness. In *The Overstory*, Powers's scientist character Patricia frequently references this popularised image of inhospitable nature. She describes how

> her kind will always dread these close, choked thickets, where the beauty of solo trees gives way to something massed, scary and crazed. When the fable turns dark, when the slasher film builds to primal horror, this is where the doomed children and wayward adolescents must wander. (135)

Independently, this quote speaks to the social isolation of Patricia's character; however, in the context of Harrison's argument and Turner's thesis, Patricia's words reflect the idea that American identity is intrinsically tied to slaying the wilderness.

Reconceptualising yet still perpetuating the idea of slaying the wilderness was the establishment of the world's first National Park in the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act, 1872. The Act set aside over two million acres of natural forest to be "dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people" ("An Act Creating Yellowstone National Park"). The framing of this monumental act of conservation should be noted — conservation serves the purpose of providing enjoyment for the people. Reference to this sense of idealised and crafted ownership of nature are present throughout the novel, perhaps most explicitly in the character of Douggie, who critiques the beauty strips along the highway that conceal acres of logged national forest. He says, "The route looks like

forest, mile after emerald mile" but "the trees are like a few dozen movie extras hired to fill a tight shot" (87). Douggie becomes angered by the purpose of the beauty strips, which create the impression of integration between humankind and nature, where dominion over the forest beyond is actually what characterises the neat rows of trees. Ownership of the American forest is conveyed through the crafting of an aesthetic, a version of the wilderness that can be cultivated and controlled. The idea of the primordial American forest is reconfigured in pursuit of the frontier, a landscape from which independence and control can be garnered. Understanding the forest is intrinsically tied to the people who inhabited and tamed it, and it becomes a symbol of cultivation and human advancement.

The frontier is a hegemonic narrative that characterises humankind's need to dominate nature. Not only does the frontier provide cultural context that demonstrates the ingrained perception of human dominance, it illustrates the act of construction of cultural narratives. Triumphing over the wilderness has been synonymous with progress, framing white American identity, and enforcing a strict binary between humankind and nature. By recognising the story-making elements of cultural realities, it becomes easier to comprehend story-making as a tool through which these hegemonic narratives might also be challenged. This story-making becomes key in *The Overstory*. The cultural perception of human dominion over nature alongside an understanding of history that is anthropocentrically framed becomes a story that characters then seek to edit, manipulate, and re-write. Before this can occur

however, a new understanding of temporality is required to appreciate the true gravity of the anthropocentric perspective and its impacts on the planet.

"Oldest story in the world": Understanding Geological Time

This section will establish Powers's use of geological time as a mechanism that allows parallels to be drawn between human characters and plant life. While this aids in engendering a degree of empathy for the tree characters in the novel, *The Overstory* does not aim to anthropomorphise trees. Rather, it seeks to establish a context from which the reader can consider a temporality far exceeding the human experience, and appreciate the scope of planetary history. Powers's novel opens in "the time of chestnuts" (5), with Thoreau throwing chestnuts at trees along with his contemporaries at Concord. In this image, several key ideas of the novel are captured. Thoreau places the opening of the novel in the mid-nineteenth century, where his views of the natural world were quite revolutionary. Sanders describes one of Thoreau's prime motives as training himself "to *see*" establishing himself "within nature," someone whose work finds "no conflict between the scientist's method of close, reasoned observation and the poet's free play of imagination" (Sanders 188-189). Don Scheese discusses Thoreau's spiritual belief in the wilderness, whilst Slovic explores the phenomenon of psychological "awareness" in Thoreau's body of work. The image of a famed naturalist poet throwing chestnuts at the trunks of trees to open

the novel is an evocation of Thoreau's environmental consciousness, particularly with the added descriptor, "he feels he is casting rocks at a sentient being, with a duller sense than his own, yet still a blood relation" (5). Simultaneously, the image connects the novel to one of the most significant ecological losses of America in the near eradication of the American chestnut. By the 1950s the chestnut was almost extinct, wiped out by fungus brought to America from Asian-exported trees in 1904.

As the first chapter moves towards the present, it does so by tracking the degeneration of the chestnut tree, metaphorically represented by the six chestnuts planted on the Hoel family farm. This is the most significant time shift in the novel, and its speed creates a sense of continued ecological undoing as the reader moves towards the present day. The destruction of the American chestnut is contrasted by the growth of the one surviving chestnut tree planted on the farm during "the time of the chestnuts" (5). The first chapter follows Nick Hoel, or more specifically, Nick's "family tree", which is documented by a flipbook of photographs showing the growth of the chestnut tree on the family's farm. It describes how "everything a human being might call the *story* happens outside his photos' frame," yet here the seasons are documented in the "fissured bark spiralling upward into early middle age, growing at the speed of wood" (16). The first pages of the novel follow generations of the Hoel family taking monthly photographs of the chestnut before Nick is born, until Nick is left with hundreds of photographs as the legacy of the family that came before him. The history of his family is contextualised through a moment in the lifetime of a

chestnut tree planted by his ancestors, two narratives represented alongside each other. Later, in prison for protesting, Nick recalls "the way those arms tested, explored, aligned in the light, writing messages in the air" (329) portraying the tree as an intelligent humanoid creature, merely operating on a different scale of time. In this image, the chestnut tree is humanised, evoking the same response to its ill health, growth, and exploration as might be directed towards a human subject. The early use of extended personification conflates the narratives of two very different lives and establishes a perspective from which to read the text that appreciates not only the disparity between nature and the human, but the resemblances. The representation of two consciousnesses, operating on different timescales, becomes an overarching perspective throughout the novel, where comprehension of this vast scale of difference is a central focus for the leading characters. Nick dreams of the tree, saying "In that dream, the trees laugh at them. *Save us? What a human thing to do*. Even the laugh takes years" (329). The use of active verbs like "laugh" and reference to intent, such as in the description of the chestnut trees' movement, opens up a critical space from which to recognise trees in the novel as conscious, critical beings, capable of witnessing and judging human action. In turn, the perception of time becomes a key concern of the novel, as the human notion of temporality is transfigured from a phenomenon measurable through human experience, to a broader scale of experience outside the limits of what is human.

Ricoeur's work on temporality is useful in exploring the portrayal of time in *The Overstory*. He begins by saying that "the world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world" (*Time and Narrative Vol. 1* 3). Ricoeur advocates for narrative and its ability to represent the human experience of time, where narrative is the only space in which to observe the intersection between cosmological time (linear time) and phenomenological time (notions of past, present and future). Cosmological time refers to the way in which the subject experiences time from birth to death, the knowledge of time passing over days, weeks, and years. Phenomenological time, however, is the experience of time in the context of particular experiences or events that become situated within the subject's sense of past, present and future. The human experience of time is the blending of these two forms, the phenomenological being an "inscription onto cosmological (*Time and Narrative Vol. 3* 156). Narrativity occurs through emplotment, a mediating function that draws together the elements of a situation (such as characters, actions and settings) into a meaningful whole; in Ricoeur's words, emplotment is the "synthesis of the heterogeneous" (*Time and Narrative Vol. 1* 83). Humans use emplotment to create a narrative of the past. Therefore, the endpoint of the story, or the present, is where past events gain clarity as they are retrospectively fitted together. In a similar fashion, emplotment is used to navigate hypothetical futures, where the individual envisions themselves as being part of different possible situations and contextualises these into a future-narratives. This "inchoate narrativity" (*Time and Narrative Vol. 1* 74) establishes a sense of morality as the individual considers cause and effect regarding the involvement of other

people, and the potential outcomes of events and actions. The continuous incorporation of existing narratives, such as dominant historical, cultural, and social ideology, integrates with the advancing personal narrative to continuously inform the act of future emplotment.

The consideration of planetary time, however, complicates temporal understanding and representation. In the Anthropocene, linear time is not limited to the period between the subject's birth and death, or even human historicity, and the phenomenological notion of the past is extended to far before humankind's existence, where the concept of "past" cannot be pinpointed or contextualised by any phenomenological event relatable to the human subject. Increased climate awareness has come to inform a perception of temporality framed by planetary time rather than frames of time based on the human experience. Ricoeur's representation is, naturally, tied to the subjective experience of time based on measurable phenomena and signposted events. The representation of these temporal systems are mimetically presented in narrative through the emplotment of these indicators. But if narrative is the imitation of an action, and the author seeks to represent something whose origins are fundamentally separated from human action, then there is a complication in representation. In order to establish a framework for *The Overstory*, and indeed any fiction concerned with the Anthropocene, we must go beyond Ricoeur. Powers's approach to this issue is twofold; firstly, a concern with temporality is made apparent throughout the novel from multiple character perspectives. These draw from several

understandings and representations of time, culminating in the idea that human time is a blip in the schema of life on Earth. Powers then employs human characteristics and embeds them within the vaster temporal world of plants, creating a world in which human notions of time are manipulated to create a deeper level of association with trees. Temporal understanding traditionally relies on subjective human experience; thus, for *The Overstory*, the challenge becomes to create a sense of relatability between the reader and the natural environment without resorting to simple anthropomorphism.

Mimi's introductory chapter explicitly situates itself as being concerned with the perception of time via three family heirlooms her father possesses. Three jade rings, "the colour of greed, envy, freshness, growth, innocence" (26), are each intricately carved with an image of a different tree species. The past is represented by a Lote tree, the future, a Mulberry tree, and the present is Pine, temporal notions reminiscent of phenomenological time. Evoking the representation of the second ring, Winston Ma and his wife plant a mulberry tree upon moving to America, "the Tree of Renewal" (30), whose silk makes the family's fortune. There is an additional significance to the mulberry tree itself here as a symbol of Mimi's father's Chinese heritage. China is the largest producer of mulberry and silk in the world and would be considered a core part of Winston's cultural identity in the West. The tree of the family's future becomes the centre of the Ma household; the three girls "eat cornflakes underneath their breakfast tree" (31), they climb it and discover the tree sap ("milky

tree blood" (32)), and Mimi gathers her sisters under the mulberry tree to share her own discovery of the three rings and the accompanying scroll. Not only the source of the family income, the mulberry tree becomes the site of the Ma sisters reaching maturity, representing the children's future.

Once the sisters are grown and working elsewhere, the mulberry tree is ravaged by mealybugs, scale insects, and bacteria. Despite financial success and no economic need for the tree's health, Mimi's father can think of nothing else, and he begins to deteriorate alongside the tree. For Winston, as his familial roots die, so too does the future of his family. In their final conversation, Mimi's father refers to a Chinese saying his wife told him upon the planting of the mulberry tree. She had said, "Best time to plant a tree? Twenty years ago […] When is the next best time? Now" (30-31). Winston raises his children with this mentality, however when Mimi offers "now" in response, Winston retaliates: "Wrong. Next best time nineteen years ago" (40). There is a feeling of lost time in Winston's response, and the significance of the mulberry tree as a symbol of futurity is prompted through the temporal reference. Mimi's request to speak to her mother only serves to perpetuate the sense of immanence. She says

> *Salve filia mea*
>
> *Ego Latinam discunt*
>
> *Vita est supplicium.* (40)

Although punctured by Mimi's words of confusion, her mother's words carry weight alone. Roughly translated, she says "Hello my daughter. They learn Latin. Life is punishment". The use of a dead language gives a sense of origin to the image of stasis evoked by the words themselves. The mulberry tree as representative of the future, is dead, and the use of Latin brings the past to the present, uniting the past and the future in a present moment of hopelessness. Mimi's mother and father both reference a sense of ending conflated with the death of the mulberry tree, where ultimately the ended life of the mulberry symbolises a much slower, ongoing death. Mimi's father continues, "my time coming", equating the fading of his life with changes to the natural environment he lived within: "My work all done. My silk farm, finish. Fishing going down, little bit every year. What I do now?" (40). Not long after, Winston sits under the mulberry tree and shoots himself. The death of the mulberry tree comes to represent the death of all nature, and the death of the future. In their final conversation, Mimi is distanced from her parents, removed from the temporal disparity that seems to inform their despair. It is Mimi who ultimately ends up with the mulberry tree jade ring as well as taking the tree-name Mulberry, her actions thereafter driven by a need to alter the future.

Powers's representation of temporality positions the reader as clearly as possible to understand the limitations of human notions of time, and how this impacts our understanding of the broader world. To do this, *The Overstory* (like Lerner's *10:04*) contends with the relationship between human time and geological time. Each

character has an experience with a tree that reveals a deeper connection to nature. This connection takes different forms; for some it creates an affinity between trees and humans, while for others it builds a semblance of understanding of a broader scale of time that surpasses their own history. Mimi's father commits suicide when his mulberry tree dies, while Adam draws a correlation between the personalities of his sisters and the trees his father plants for each of them. When one sister disappears and is presumed dead, Adam's mother accuses his father never liking Leigh, having planted her an elm despite the fact that "they'd been dying everywhere for years" (56). Beyond these affinities, however, trees are seen as timeless beings, Douggie describing how they are "things on a scale and time frame we can't even—" (314). Patricia frequently refers to the age of trees she studies with descriptors such as "one and a half millennia older than Christianity" (454). In a similar fashion to Douggie, she comments that "the world's outlands are everywhere, and trees like to toy with human thought like boys toy with beetles" (131). Frequently the narrative calls attention to the concentric circles that determine the age of trees, later referenced more abstractly through the generations of families that grow up underneath them, until Powers "zooms out to the vast timeline of a tree—sometimes stretching across millennia—leaving behind our own tight, human perspective" (Fabiani 54). There is, therefore, a clearly established divide between the human experience of time and that of the trees they observe. If there was any doubt as to Powers's awareness and exploration of temporality, the subjective nature of the human experience of time is further ratified in Neelay's contemplations towards the end of the novel. Having

dedicated his life to coding and developing a game that replicates life on Earth, Neelay observes his code, "petabytes of airborne messages" as "Aliens on Earth," describing them as operating "on a different scale of time. They zip around so fast that human seconds seem to them as tree years seem to humans" (487). Approaching the conclusion of the novel, the subjective experience of time is explicitly discussed by a character whose life's work was dedicated to simulating the human experience in computer code, enforcing the notion that human conceptions of time are, in fact, nominal. The recognition that the individual experience of time is determined by the nature of their experience, and the process of emplotment opens opportunity for personal narratives to change. Despite temporal understanding being driven by anthropocentric experience, aspects of planetary history can be incorporated into human narratives. It is this act of story-making that Powers employs in *The Overstory* through his characters' own transformations and modes of activism.

"The only thing that can [change minds] is a good story"

It is not only different timescales that are represented in the lives of trees and computer code. The function of narrative in forming these temporal notions is also highlighted by delineating these modes of time, ultimately demonstrating that the coexistence of temporality and narrative is not limited to the fictional space. As seen in previous chapters, selfhood is structured around the words and actions of others and interaction with the material world, contributing to the way in which the subject

perceives reality. This process can be seen as a narrative process, where the subject assimilates various experiences to inform their reality narrative. For example, Patricia's (referred to as "Plant-Patty" by her classmates) childhood making acorn figures and studying botany with her father sees trees become intelligent, conscious creatures. Her fascination with plants and later experience as a researcher sees her develop a way of seeing that is different from others, a different narrative through which to interpret the world. In this way, the experience of reality is intrinsically connected to narrative construction and thus, to temporality. As Ricoeur says, "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence" (*Time and Narrative Vol. 1* 3). This is especially apparent for climate fiction, where the timescale of the planet comes to inform the conception of time in the context of the human experience.

I suggest Powers's novel draws attention to the function of narrative in forming notions of reality by emphasising the shift in understanding of temporality in climate crisis. The portrayal of temporality on a scale that surpasses humankind has several functions within the narrative. Fundamentally, timescales represent different reality narratives in the novel that the human subject struggles to integrate. The scale of time in which trees function, where Powers can attribute them with what appears to be human qualities, differs significantly from the human experience of time, as it is not based on clearly conceivable markers. This means that characters in the novel whose

experiences have led them to conceive of a temporal scale outside of the human, fabricate a sense of history that is not based on human markers. This concept is iterated in the novel from Patricia's descriptor of the "giving tree" as something to "make the miracle a little more vivid, visible" (221) to the public, to Neelay's observation of airborne computer code operating on a timescale faster than human comprehension. The scale of time that typically defines human reality narratives no longer functions when one considers the vaster scale of time using human attributes to highlight the parallels. Therefore, the idea of a shared perception of reality is called into question through the perspective offered in the novel.

This division takes the form of a discrepancy with the word "world". Patricia refers to these two modes of the world, saying: "The problem begins with the word *world.* It means two such opposite things. The real one we cannot see. The invented one we cannot escape" (466). She refers to this split between human perception and "reality" on several occasions that also refer to the force of the dominant prescriptive "world". She describes people "wanting to drag her violently back into what [they] mistakenly call *the world*" (258) when she is asked to speak on a popular radio program about trees. Her description of the offer is reminiscent of Douggie's observation of the beauty strips — a fashionable, accessible representation of ecological sustainability that hides the reality of neglect and feigned ignorance. The function of Patricia's two worlds is reflected again in a discussion between Watchman (previously referred to as Nick) and Adam in the Mimas tree, where Watchman suggests that reality is

objectively stable, and the subject's sense of reality is superimposed over it. Adam says, "People *make* reality. Hydroelectric dams. Undersea tunnels. Supersonic transport. Tough to stand against that" (320). Here, an overarching narrative is established where human control and dominance dictates the way in which the natural world is experienced, an interpretation we see aligning with Turner's representation of the cultivation of the American forest. Adam lists human built structures that intervene with the natural environment as evidence of humankind "making" reality. The "hydroelectric dams, undersea tunnels and supersonic transport" become metaphors for the narrative of dominance that establishes the human subject as central to reality, and therefore to time. If human action defines the reality narrative, then temporality defines the depth to which the subject can comprehend reality. However, Watchman responds in a way that challenges the significance Adam places on the individual subject. He says, "We don't make reality. We just evade it. So far" (320). The characters that have turned to defending nature also challenge the notion that reality is determined by the individual, and thus, the human scale of time. Watchman refers to an objective reality that functions outside of human constructs, that is not dictated by dominance systems imposed by humankind, but the natural world they live within.

The complexities of temporality in the novel therefore come to inform the way that the enlightened protagonists form their reality narratives. The representation of this process challenges defining characteristics of the postmodern protagonist in the

way characters use planetary time to rewrite the lens through which they evaluate the world around them. Fredric Jameson theorises temporality in postmodern fiction as "sinking to a subordinate feature of space", where the subject's experience of time was something like a "mass-cultural experience, not so much of the abolition of time all together, as rather its shrinkage to the present day" (*The Aesthetics* 105). The lack of meaning found in the subjective human experience leaves the postmodern protagonist entrapped in the present moment, where the awareness the modernist protagonist has of their isolated subjectivity is escalated to a place that questions meaning and purpose. The nature of consumer culture determines that any meaning found is attached to the present moment, and thus transient. Jameson summarises by saying

> All of the features I have attributed to some properly postmodern subjectivity were to be understood in terms of that process—the reduction to the present, the body as some last reality to survive the exhaustion of bourgeois culture, the mutability of affect replacing the self-confident stances of an older emotional system. (*The Aesthetics* 128)

Each text studied thus far, I have argued, demonstrates some sense of personal crisis stemming from the postmodern sense of identity. Chapter 1 discussed the ever-shifting sense of identity as a result of consumer culture, highlighting how the fluid nature of postmodern identity is problematised by its disconnection from the physical world. A similar cultural experience was seen in Chapter 2 as characters navigate media, consumption and class structures alongside the growing sense of isolation

from reality, a sensation crystallised by the film in *Infinite Jest*, the Entertainment. Chapter 4 examines a recurring sense of proprioception as a response to the pervasive present-ness Jameson discusses, coupled with the realisation of media's role in perpetuating this environment. Ultimately, Jameson goes on to argue that only a genuine sense of historicity can restore civilisation and lead to "collective action", and that the absence of historicity is "betrayed by apathy and cynicism, paralysis and depression" (*The Aesthetics* 121). In accordance with Jameson's suggestion, I argue Powers's most recent novel contributes something towards the restoration of historicity in fiction through its representation and emphasis on temporality in climate crisis. If the postmodern narrative sought to volatise temporality (Jameson *The Aesthetics* 120), then Powers's ecocritical narrative seeks to reinvent and re-establish temporality to reflect something beyond the human, and beyond the postmodern sense of stasis.

The fictional space provides a platform to explore narrativity, where literary form and technique can be used to paradoxically highlight the fictionality of the subject's reality narrative. Powers's representation of the natural world appears rather fantastical at times in the novel, however this itself becomes part of the significance of his representation. Phrases such as "living, breathing jungle filled with potential only dimly imaginable" (195); the personification of trees imbued with the desires of human beings ("He has been roving around the hills ang gullies in a ten-millennium search for a female" (133)); and the mysterious voices that leads certain characters to

the doomed redwoods, at times seem tokenistic, or even gauche; however this sentimentality stands in opposition to the perception of the natural as an inanimate, unevolved resource for human use. The dendrology of the novel is conveyed primarily through Patricia, who studies the forest and tree communities. Her discoveries are imbued with a sense of wonder that reads more akin to fantasy than science; as Powers's scientist character, Patricia plays the role of contextualising the passions of other characters within human knowledge about tree communities. In an interview with Bradford Morrow, Powers says he was inspired for Patricia's character by Diana Beresford-Kroeger and Suzanne Simard, two prominent researchers in tree behaviour (Morrow 61). Powers also mentions Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees*, the language of which can be seen replicated in the way Patricia thinks and speaks about the forest. For example, Patricia's early research demonstrates that maple trees are "linked together in an airborne network, sharing an immune system across acres of woodland. These brainless, stationary trunks are protecting each other" (126). This finding results in Patricia's complete rejection from the academic community, where the notion of forests as connected communities is deemed "an almost embarrassing misunderstanding of the units of natural selection" (127). This response is surely associated with Patricia's sentimental delivery and anecdotally presented research context, and the response from Patricia's academic peers are even reflected in some of the previously mentioned reviews of Powers's own novel.

There is an argument to be made here that a part of what appears to be so sentimental in Powers's descriptions stems from his imagining being so far removed from the American imaginary of human dominion over nature. Despite criticism of Wohlleben from the scientific community[30], particularly of his allegorical approach to communicating scientific processes, Wohlleben believes that "The distinction between plants and animals is an arbitrary one" and "recognizing the similarities would cause us to pay more attention to trees and other vegetation" (Kingsland 5). The perspective Wohlleben takes on communicating plant science perhaps sits more comfortably in Powers's narrative, allowing Patricia to act as a liaison between humankind and trees. Rather than impartial scientific discourse, Patricia's character echoes Wohlleben's passion behind her communication in a way that more captures an innate belief than solely information. She learns as a child that "real joy consists of knowing that human wisdom counts less than the shimmer of beeches in the breeze" (115). Fundamentally, Patricia's scientific exploration is situated within the knowledge that humankind holds no right to dominion over nature. This same spiritual investment is revealed in Olivia, whose awakening is entirely oppositional to Patricia's educated approach to knowing trees. Upon being electrocuted, Olivia's heart stops. The impact of her body falling to the floor jolts her heart and she survives, though as a very different person.

[30] Erin Zimmerman writes that "Trees are remarkable without human traits" (qtd. in Boon n.p.) while Sara Boon affirms "the excessive anthropomorphizing of trees and forests went against all of my scientific and science writing instincts" (n.p.). Whilst the text is based on scientific research, Wohlleben imbues his book with his own observations and meaning behind scientific discoveries. For further explanation of Wohlloben's approach, see Sharon Elizabeth Kingsland's review, entitled "Facts or Fairytales? Peter Wohlleben and the Hidden Life of Trees." (2018)

Olivia hears "*presences*" that drive her to defer her education, and follow them, ultimately to join the "defenders of the forest" (212). Despite their different origin stories, Patricia and Olivia appear to be driven by a similar spiritual passion for ecological change. Patricia is shunned by the scientific community for her seemingly fantastical research conclusions, while Olivia follows mystical presences towards a destination on a spiritual journey. Each character's experience is almost gauche in its flamboyant description, yet speaks to a sense of purpose reminiscent of a religious or spiritual determination.

Collectively, the introduction of each character contributes to the building of a broader narrative that is not simply a story, but an ecosystem, a metaphorical geological narrative. Dominant human narratives are revealed under different lenses through each character's experience, and as their diverse perspectives begin to take shape, a kind of evolution can be deduced through the comparison of different characters. Each presents a different form of environmental thinking, and a different sense of the connection between humans and nature. Ray and Dorothy, for example, are "two people for whom trees mean almost nothing" (64). Together, they represent the everyman narrative, where human relationships take priority and drive characters forward[31], and broader concerns are but fleeting moments of drowned-out panic, a mild distraction from more immediate human concerns. In contrast, Douggie's narrative begins in a psychological experiment where a group of individuals play

[31] Ironically, Ray becomes bedridden after a stroke. It is only now that he and Dorothy's relationship truly grows, as they forge a connection with the land around their property.

inmates in a rough prison for two weeks. Those who violate the herd mentality are persecuted by their fellow prisoners, creating a sense of forced cohesion: "There's nothing 571 [Douggie] wants more than to get out himself. But he can't do that to the others. His fellow inmates would hate him for ever" (76). Douggie becomes the challenging voice responding to the lives of individuals like Ray and Dorothy. The fact that his stint in prison is contrived pre-empts Douggie's concerns with façade – he performs his own social experiments, and, evidenced by his mission to replace the trees pulled down behind the beauty strips, desires to replenish something genuine and real.

As the scientist character, Patricia is perhaps one of two final links between understanding the relationship between humans and the environment, where the science behind the way trees function as a community is witnessed through human observation of the phenomenon. Neelay too, shares a technical (but quite different) connection to nature in his obsessive development of a game that replicates the real world. Neelay captures an artificial evolution of nature in his confluence between coding and nature imagery, where computer code becomes a new technological answer to the probing, expanding, animal drive he observed in plants as a child. Opposite Patricia and Neelay's technically-minded pursuits, Olivia represents a purely spiritual connection to nature. If each character's introduction captures a different way of thinking about the environment, what is revealed in Olivia is a childlike wonder and fascination with the natural world being quelled by the realities

of living within Western culture. Like Ray and Dorothy, Olivia begins as someone driven by consumerism, materialism, social etiquette and aesthetics, where the natural world is a broader context that only indirectly influences the day to day workings of human society. As Neelay demonstrates a popular progression of nature, to human, to technology, Olivia embodies an alternative next step in a sincere connection to the environment. She becomes a spirit-like figure, transitioning from a girl who does not even see the tree in her front yard (146), to someone who is reborn after hearing the disembodied voice of nature itself.

Olivia embodies a spirituality seen in each protagonist, as they respectively become a part of a community stereotypically seen as being self-righteous and, according to Adam, based on "orthodoxy and sloganeering. Boring" (237). As Jon Doyle writes, meetings of groups like this "often require the characters to commit to rituals and customs, and therefore submit to the idea of believing before actually possessing belief" (Doyle 260). Although Doyle speaks in reference to the AA meetings portrayed in *Infinite Jest,* the portrayal can be seen as a parallel to the task Powers's protagonists respectively assign themselves – to override the values that informed their lives and advocate for something they deem to be more important. Doyle continues, "post-postmodern novelists must explore post-ironic belief with this in mind, wielding a double-edged sword of human connection and undiluted sincere 'values' that, paradoxically, may prove less humanistic than the ironic façade" (260-261). While *Infinite Jest*, the new sincerity's defining novel, uses dense prose, intense

description, and endnotes to remind the reader to remain critically vigilant, *The Overstory* employs a different method of maintaining the reader's critical gaze. If the new sincerity author seeks to create a "new form of secular belief, a religious vocabulary (God, prayer) that is emptied out of any specific content and is engineered to confront the possibly insuperable condition of postmodernity" (Konstantinou *Cool Characters* 86), then *The Overstory*'s one-dimensional characterisation, sentimental descriptions of the natural environment and sudden awakenings of environmentalist ideals speak to a unironic, religious-type awakening with a purpose to evoke a similar awakening in the reader. It is not the characters themselves that drive the underlying message of the novel, but the cultural ideas they represent. The science presented throughout, based on the work of Peter Wohlleben, is anecdotally presented to evoke empathy for trees. Patricia speaks of trees using terminology applied to humans; she notes their relationships, communities, and their support for those who are struggling. Powers's humanisation of trees allows the reader to consider the vast scale of an ecological lifespan in a relatable temporal context. Just as Powers knew trees could not be the protagonists, complex human stories would distract from the clear intent behind the novel. Whilst empathy is necessary to engage the reader, Powers avoids excessively complex characters that would overshadow the ecological call for action that presents itself throughout the text.

"New believers": Activist characters creating activist readers

I argue that the language Powers employs around nature, and his at times spiritual description can be understood as a technique to evoke belief in the reader. Konstantinou describes belief in post-postmodern fiction as "a disposition or attitude" postironic writers seek to "instil in the reader" (*Cool Characters* 166). This is not belief in the religious sense, rather it is a "metaphorical sort of belief" wherein fiction can "make ontological demands of us, can try and convert us into believers" (*Cool Characters* 170-171). The "final seriousness" found lacking in the postmodern novel is re-established in one that calls its readers to action, even if "action" takes the less anarchic form of belief in a cause. It would be easy to assume that Powers is being ironic in his representations of ecological awakening if one focused on sections of his prose – however Powers's homage to the power of story is indicative of a deeper sincerity.

Characters actively use stories to evoke change and raise a new consciousness of ecological tragedy in the community. Media attention is important from early on in the text, where the goals of protesters are not only to prevent immediate action, but to evoke media interest to spread awareness of activist activity. Arriving at an action near the Coast Range, Douggie says,

> "No television trucks. Not one."

> Mimi curses. "Okay, nobody panic. I'm sure the print journalists are here. With photographers."
>
> "No TV, might as well never have happened." (270)

Douggie and others even risk their own safety to persevere until the media arrives on site. As Douggie climbs higher into a tree, loggers cut the trees down around him while police in riot gear attack those on the ground. When asked to come down, he says "'Can't!' He rattles his cuffs, locked in the hug of the trunk. "Have to hold out until TV gets here" (270). The importance of building awareness through story is quite explicit, and the media is a convenient tool for this. More prominently, Patricia commits "unsuicide" at a public lecture by drinking extract of *tachigali versicolor*, a tree more commonly known as "the suicide tree". Her talk tracks human action and the consequential degeneration of the natural world, showing images of flytraps, forest canopies, and woodlands, followed by satellite images of these forests shrinking over time. She notices two people leaving her lecture early; "they have seen this exploding light show too many times before. Everyone in this auditorium has long ago numbed to the fact" (451). Patricia does the only thing she can think of to break through the numbness, to answer the question on which the keynote was based: "what is the single best thing a person can do for tomorrow's world?" (464). She commits suicide on stage, a startling event to jolt the audience out of their reverie and shine new light on the narrative she struggled to communicate. Similarly, Mimi interprets Adam's confession of guilt for the fires as Adam trading his life "for a fable that might light

up the minds of strangers" (488). If the culprit is caught and arrested, his actions and motives are publicised, startling people with a new story that may incite people to critically assess Adam's purpose and motives. Neelay summarises the pervading strength of stories when he asks his employees, "And what do all good stories do?" (412). Meeting with his employees and game designers, Neelay pushes to make his game more and more lifelike, aiming to replicate the natural environment and its processes to create a virtual reality that perfectly mimics the outside world. He answers that good stories "kill you a little. They turn you into something you weren't" (412). Rather than the preconscious reality narrative Patricia refers to as the other "world", human understanding is based on human experience, where dominant narratives inform and perpetuate a particular way of understanding. Stories, however, are constructed representations of the human experience, meaning that the tools employed by the storyteller can provide unique insight into the structure of the reality narrative. If the subject's understanding of the world is a narrative, then the structure of stories can be an investigative tool through which to dissect the form and function of the reality narrative.

The "realisation" each protagonist comes to experience forces a shift in their understanding of the world, one that triggers a revaluation of the role of trees in their own lives and the shaping of dominant narratives. Each protagonist has their lives significantly impacted by trees: through injury in the case of Neelay, and upbringing in the case of Nicholas, Mimi, Adam, and Patricia. A tree saves Douggie's life by

catching his falling plane, while Ray has a long-lasting revelation in a stage production of *Macbeth*, watching the prophecy of the Great Birnam Wood come true for several nights. The only exception is Olivia who is electrocuted, and upon waking, hears "presences" that allowed her to "look *through*" (158), giving her the unique perspective of having seen the limitations of her human perception. For each character, this exposure is triggered by or culminates in a traumatic experience, something that fractures the reality narrative enough to instigate a shift in the way each character experiences the world around them. These experiences are represented as something akin to "awakening", with reference to supernatural, ethereal "voices" (165, 173, 258, 292) and "beings of light" (163, 164,172). Furthermore, reference to vision or sight returning characterises a new form of "awareness": "the vision, religious and dark green, fades back into its Platonic shadow, wood" (111); "Are they blind? Plant-blind" (114); "scales fell from his eyes" (385); "If we could see green, we'd see a thing that keeps getting more interesting the closer we get" (454). The allusion to a new form of awareness furthers the idea of a deeper reality, two different "worlds" that the subject must assimilate to see a kind of truth. These two worlds, or reality narratives, become a vehicle to explore the idea of sincerity in the novel, where the characters' "cleared vision" metaphorically sees through what Jameson calls "the culture of late capitalism" (*Postmodernism, or* xviii).

The degree of separation between the protagonists' worldview and the rest of society is represented in several ways. The most obvious is, of course, the social binary

created by their activism. As Mimi and Douggie develop a habit of joining protest rallies, their experiences provide opportunity to enforce separation between two bodies of people – activists, and the rest of the population. Laborers and law enforcement are represented as two dimensional antagonists, "reapers with scythes" (271). Loggers' machines approach groups of protestors, police pepper spray bystanders, activists are physically pulled from trees, and police go so far as to pepper spray Douggie's groin whilst he is handcuffed to a tree, causing severe chemical burns (274). Protesters are reduced to animals, Powers's representation aligning them more with the subhuman status of the trees they protect than members of the demonstrably superior species they fight against. Law and order are again challenged by Ray and Dorothy, who decide to let their garden flourish on its own, dubbing it "the Brinkman Woodlands Restoration Project" (467). As trees take root, grass grows, and insects and birds return to the acreage, the neighbours complain, while the council calls twice threatening deadlines and fines. There is a contrast between the growing wilderness and the "local ordinances, legal precedent, and municipal code" (468) that Dorothy reads to prepare herself to fight for her plot of land. The "us and them" mentality perseveres, with attitudes towards nature defining a clear boundary between two groups.

On a more fundamental level, even as the eco-activists are forced to disband, their chosen paths continue to reflect their environmental revelations. After the radical collective burn a plot of land leased for a resort site, Maidenhair, formally Olivia, is

killed in the blaze, forcing the team to separate to avoid capture (the image of their dispersal again mirrored in the novel's progression to "Crown"). The impact of each character's activism can be seen in the way they return to the social order. Nicholas continues his art, graffitiing environmentalist propaganda and art installations on city streets; Adam becomes a tenured professor of psychology challenging materialism; Douggie lives off the land and in small towns, documenting the groups story as he goes; and Mimi becomes a therapist of sorts, with a new-wave approach of healing by establishing human connection. Each character pursues a career or venture reminiscent of their years of activism, not directly, but in ways that continue to encourage people to question their values. Nicholas's graffiti asks questions of its audience, Adam's research is in the "materialistic understanding of the human mind" (439), and Douggie rails at unsuspecting strangers with tales associated with his earlier activist efforts and the plights of the natural world. However, it is Mimi's profession that best captures the polarities between the reality they see, and that of those who remain "unawakened". Mimi's unconventional therapy entails a meeting wherein she makes eye contact with her client for several hours until each shed their facades and truly see each other, as if through a two-way mirror. A hypothetical dialogue is developed between two women who do not speak, but share life experiences, things they have hidden, and frontages they have portrayed of themselves to produce the shallow representation of what makes them who they are. Mimi's hypothetical voice diagnoses the woman, saying "*You're mourning a thing you never even knew*" … "*a great, spoked, wild, woven-together place beyond replacing. One you*

didn't even know was yours to lose." The woman feels a grief "for a thing too big to see" (404-405). The identity of the woman resembles Douggie's observations of the beauty strip; a farce which aims to portray an impression of complete naturalness. The implication that the protagonists of the novel have gained a different kind of sight is reinforced here in Mimi's attempt to remove the defensive barriers of the subject and reveal the human concerns and fears that lie underneath. Throughout the novel, blindness comes to encapsulate dominant views of the world. The literal blindness caused by the pepper spray of law enforcement, the illusion created by the beauty strips, and the role of obligation in identity formation all contribute to a metaphorical form of blindness which each protagonist comes to break through. Despite Mimi's therapy seeming to achieve the same effect, as Mimi's client emerges from the office onto the street she finds that "everything she had just won begins to fade again into the irresistible force of other people" (405). The scale of change required to maintain the clarity and vision that seems so idealistic in the novel's protagonists, is too significant to maintain in a culture that sees humankind as an evolutionary dominant. As Patricia argues later, "*No one sees trees. We see fruit, we see nuts, we see wood, we see shade. We see ornaments or pretty fall foliage. Obstacles blocking the road or wrecking the ski slope. Dark threatening places that must be cleared. We see branches about to crush our roof. We see a cash crop. But trees—trees are invisible*" (423). Each protagonist thus becomes a challenge to the primordial American imaginary, a representation of a broader way of thinking.

Conclusion

Inherent in Mimi's therapy sessions, Neelay's attempts to represent nature in his game, and Douggie's disdain for the illusion created by the carefully cultivated beauty strip, is a desire and pursuit of sincerity, a perspective that pierces the façade maintained by the American imaginary. As discussed in Chapter 2, the pursuit of sincerity in literature has come to identify a style in American post-postmodern fiction that moves away from the postmodern characteristic of aloof irony and pastiche in favour of exploring the human condition. That Powers is frequently associated with post-postmodern sincericist authors such as David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen makes for an interesting point from which to reflect upon *The Overstory*, especially in the context of the rhapsodic language, semi-realistic characters, and the characters' passion for what is raw and natural rather than a cultivated representation of what is natural. Powers's approach in *The Overstory* certainly differs from the likes of Wallace and others more commonly associated with the new sincerity, especially when characterisation is in focus. Powers is often seen as a fellow pioneer of sincerity, yet, as this chapter has explored, he has "problems with flat characters" (Daalder n.p.). Whilst Jurrit Daalder attributes this to an overdependence on "the Midwest and its stereotypical associations with all-American goodness" (n.p.) I have argued that, at least in the case of *The Overstory,* the human characters are not the personalities Powers seeks to communicate in a rich and complex way. The sincerity Powers

employs is in breaking down aspects of the American imaginary to reveal a new way of thinking about the natural world. Powers noes not necessarily appeal to Wallace's "what it means to be a fucking human" (Burn *Conversations* 26) that Powers explores, but what it is to be human in a world that humankind is destroying. The "world with incomplete systems of knowledge" (McLaughlin *Post-postmodernism* 221) is a world caught in a moment where temporality becomes split between the lifetime of a human being and the lifetime of a planet. *The Overstory* is written in a way to create "believers", to draw attention to a long-term, contrived perspective that upheld nature as something to be managed and controlled to fulfil a purpose. Each character represents a step towards a new perspective, where the destruction of the environment is a representation of human ignorance, and the construction of a reality that suits the idea of humankind's dominance is a dangerous fabrication. In contrast to novels placing the reader in a position to question reality and their perspectives, *The Overstory* leaves the reader observing a process that has been occurring for thousands of years. Nick and his assistant have completed their art installation, a series of logs laid out to spell the word "still". Already, "the mosses surge over, the beetles and lichen and fungi turning the logs to soil" (502). Nick observes that in a few centuries time, "these five living letters, too, will fade back into the swirling patterns, the changing rain and air and light" (502). The temporal perspective Powers has perpetuated throughout the novel is the final idea left with the reader. The span of humankind is a brief moment, a stillness, in the context of the planet. The responsibility imbued in the human subject is recontextualised a final time to leave

Powers's final question as one that returns from the state of the environment, to the state of humankind. Within this broader context, the American imaginary is no longer a representation of triumph, but the end of a species. *The Overstory* offers a recontextualization of temporality to communicate the depth to which the Anthropocene usurps human notions of time and history. Just as Douggie and Mimi awaited the media, Nick made his art, Neelay created his game, and Patricia used her public platform to plant seeds in the minds of others, Powers's novel becomes a story told to change perspectives.

It is the reconceptualisation of temporality that makes Powers's *The Overstory* such a unique contribution to Anthropocene literature. The subject negotiates time in a way that is expanded from a system based on human experience to one beholden to the lifespan of the planet. This transference not only recognises humankind's youth and disparate influence but returns value and agency to the living environment prior to humankind's interference. From this perspective, history is also taken from its anthropocentric origins and applied to the planetary, reconfiguring human narratives into a much broader story, and allowing for the depth of human impact to be more fully realised. Powers's novel upholds story-making as a key strategy for changing perspectives. In this way, characteristics of postmodern culture, such as popular media, can be repurposed as critical tools for education and critical reflection. The earnestness with which Powers describes the natural world, and the passion he embeds in his protagonists, allows the novel to be seen as a sincere form of activism

in and of itself. By interweaving ecological science and explorations of human character and social constructs, *The Overstory* is reminiscent of its own protagonists' attempts at story-making to incite change. Inspired by fiction's ability to bear influence on its society, Powers writes with the intention of changing perspectives, inciting change, and developing a more biocentric way of thinking about humankind's relationship with nature.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined five works of American fiction to reveal an arcin US literary history over the last four decades. This arc recognises an underlying ecological consciousness inherent in American fiction's turn away from postmodern solipsism towards sincerity, re-establishing a clear connection between literature and the lived experience that had become questionable at the height of postmodernism. In other words, as fiction moves towards sincere engagement with the lived human experience, it re-engages with society and positions itself as a source of critical reflection on the issue of climate change – it develops as an environmental sincerity. Of course, there are several perspectives from which one might demonstrate the progression of American fiction over time. This thesis has concerned itself with contemporary American literature in the context of the Anthropocene. As such, with attention to ecocritical methods, the increasing awareness of environmental upheaval, and the literary and cultural shift away from postmodernism, I have used canonical works of American fiction to evidence an ecological turn that is driven by the authorial pursuit of representing the lived experience in a period of ecological upheaval.

The coining of the Anthropocene, and its implications for humankind's impact on the planet, warrants a re-examination of novels preceding the turn of the century. In the lead up to what is undoubtedly a conceptual turning point in ecological debate, retrospective analysis reveals new ways to interpret environmental themes, and

definitively exposes further layers of ecological consciousness as we collectively re-write our own history to appreciate the lifespan of the planet and human impact upon it. The concept of the Anthropocene is a transformative one, not only in the context of geological science, but also socially and politically. It invites questions about the *future* of humankind. It calls on us to re-examine the past, using retrospect to uncover the origins and impacts of social and cultural practices over time, and more fully reveal humankind's sense of dominion over nature as something learned rather than something innate. As climate science continues to change human perspectives, it re-frames our understanding of the past, and, most importantly in this context, past literary texts.

The Role of Fiction in Climate Crisis

Climate change has resulted in a turn towards narrativity in numerous contexts. It is, in this sense, a multi-disciplinary issue as literature, law, and sociology each seek to achieve narratives by which to understand climate change and deal with its consequences; even science requires narrative to effectively communicate climate models to the general public. There are inherent difficulties in the forming of these narratives, however, as they forecast a future that works against hundreds of years of comparably consistent and unquestioned ways of seeing the world. Bill McKibben points out that "'[w]e lack the vocabulary and the metaphors we need" to imagine the future, while author James Bradley claims that "new imaginative and lexical

vocabularies" are required to deal with climate change (qtd. in Rogers 17). According to several critics, language is limiting and does not have the scope to communicate such a vast and all-encompassing issue like climate change. This also implies that due to our entrenchment in language, climate change is entirely outside of human comprehension. This thesis has argued that fiction is, in fact, positioned to critically examine past and present effects of climate change, and offers hypothetical future imaginings based upon observations of the present. Fiction has the ability to make abstract language concrete in the form of narrative, make the scientific language of modelling and data come alive, and demonstrate the ways climate change reveals itself in the individual experience. It is the author's creative license that enables fiction to address the limitations of language McKibben and Bradley refer to, enjoying a "freedom unknown to scientists" (qtd. in Rogers 23). Nicole Rogers argues that fiction "can play a powerful role in influencing public opinion, inspiring and empowering activists and even shaping government policy" (23). I have established that the imaginary scope of fiction and its representations of environmental futures prepare readers to better accept challenging and confrontational information. Rachel Carson's influential book *Silent Spring* is a key example. Although a work of non-fiction, Carson begins her text with a dystopian piece of speculative fiction, startling the reader into a hypothetical future triggered by the very environmental issues she is about to discuss. Carson thus uses fiction to position the reader favourably to receive challenging information.

This thesis has positioned fiction, and fiction's role, as challenging dominant human narratives – such as humankind's dominion over nature, the timelessness of a habitable planet, and the idea of history as centred around humanity – and given scope to better assimilate climate science and environmental ethic into humankind's relationship with the planet. Environmental fiction is a catalyst that startles readers into the realisation of climate change and the depth of its impact on the planet. The novel is in a privileged position to do so, given that it has the capacity to shock, explain, reveal, encapsulate, and manipulate climate imaginings without the same exacting commitment to data and detailed modelling as non-fictional media. Contemporary climate novels take many forms, draw from many genres, and enact their environmental ethos in various ways. Some act as mirrors that reflect cultural fears about climate change and the complexity of climate change as a social and cultural phenomenon (Roberts 186). Others script the eventual demise of the human species, or, more optimistically, the path out of ecological crisis. Through various literary strategies including temporal manipulation, multiple perspectives, metanarrative, and motifs of storytelling and narrativity, climate fiction conceptualises climate crisis on a scale that the reader relates to their contemporary moment, overcoming the sense of distance created by the "slow violence" (Nixon 2) of climate destruction.

In the introduction of this thesis, I discussed the difficulties that arise when scholars seek to delineate climate fiction as a distinct genre. It is common, for example,

that dystopian futures and apocalyptic scenarios are grouped together to describe climate fiction. This, however, gives the impression that the environmental novel is primarily concerned with the future. As Margaret Atwood describes, these genres "all draw from the same deep well: those imagined other worlds located somewhere apart from our everyday one: in another time, in another dimension" (qtd. in Ghosh *The Great Derangement* 72). This, for Ghosh, is a key reason that "the Anthropocene resists fiction: it is precisely not an imagined 'other' world apart from ours; nor is it located in another 'time' or other 'dimension'" (72-3). To assume that climate fiction is primarily about the future is to defer the issue of climate crisis to future generations. This thesis has purposefully focused on texts that have an innate sense of present-ness. That is, texts that are concerned with their contemporary moments, and portray representations of American culture as it stands. It is these fictions, situated in the present, that make immediate the issue of climate change.

In terms of environmental scholarship, the notion that fiction has an active and transformative role in fighting climate change is embedded in the discipline[32]. In

[32] While this thesis has established that fiction is in a position to critically challenge social and cultural narratives, the degree to which this occurs on the level of the individual reader is a question under-represented in research. Matthew Schneider-Mayerson writes on the measurable impact of climate fiction in his article "The Influence of Climate Fiction: An Empirical Survey of Readers" (2018) using empirical data. Interestingly, he finds that literature can be quite effective at compelling readers to imagine possible futures (495), however a significant limitation lies in the fact that climate sceptics are not likely to pick up a climate novel, and as such, the average reader is predisposed to the text's environmental message. Schneider-Mayerson sees empirical studies of this kind as a "valuable step forwards" for environmental humanities, given the extent to which those involved "hope to contribute to the ongoing struggle to maintain a liveable planet" (496).

Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature (1998), Richard Kerridge describes the ecocritic as someone who

> wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis. (5)

Environmental scholarship is therefore intrinsically connected to the lived experience and the physical world. Kerridge situates ecocriticism as an evaluative field, dissecting and interpreting "usefulness" of texts in response to climate crisis. Climate change is one of the most serious global issue facing humanity, and ecocritical perspectives have aligned with the post-postmodernist pursuits of sincerity. As Serpil Oppermann argues, "the most sustained and influential pronouncements of the 'return of the real' came from ecocriticism when it resolutely styled itself against postmodernism" (5). The idea of returning to sincerity in fiction, and the lived experience, appeals even to the early representations of ecocritical pursuit.

Creating "Believers"

The pursuit of sincerity in contemporary fiction takes responsibility for its content and makes a conscious and deliberate effort to represent the lived experience

of individuals and groups. Wallace and Eggers's original position in the 1990s was to "connect public and private life […] to attempt to generate forms of belief theory held to no longer be possible" (Konstantinou *Cool Characters* 168). A work of fiction thus takes the role of one side of a dialogue, "a drama of unfulfilled conversation" (168) that required the reader's critical engagement to become whole. Konstantinou positions Wallace and Eggers (and thus the subsequent sincericist trend) as writing "against a culture defined by solipsism, anhedonia, cynicism, snark, and toxic irony" by imagining "a characterological countertype to the incredulous ironist" – the "believer" (169). I introduced Konstantinou's "believer" briefly in Chapters 2 and 5, but I return to the concept here with the purpose of explaining how fiction stands to transform perspectives and impact world views, specifically in relation to contemporary fiction.

There are differences between Wallace's sincerity, as outlined in Chapter 2, and that of the authors who follow in his footsteps. Post-irony (Konstantinou), the New Sincerity (Adam Kelly), and the re-engagement with Modernism (through Metamodernism as per Vermeulen et al.) are different theoretical approaches to the sincere turn, yet share that they consistently reconnect literature and the lived experience in a way, as I have argued, that re-establishes fiction as an agent for change. Konstantinou uses literature to explore post-irony, a journey of political understanding from naivety, to cynicism and postmodern irony, and finally to "a state of postironic political commitment" (*Cool Characters* 275). Adam Kelly, whose New

Sincerity is based on Wallace's work, describes the subjects of Wallace's fiction "depicted as what we might call *originally affected*: they enter the world not as the autonomous and free subjects imagined by many traditions of philosophical and political liberalism, but as always already in a highly affective relation to themselves, to others, and to the conditions of their world" ("David Foster Wallace" 6). For Vermeulen and van den Akker, metamodernism is directly associated with the "structure of feeling" informing a "desire for change" and an "*aesth-ethical* notion of reconstruction, myth and metaxis" ("Notes on Metamodernism" 2). The notion that fiction must return to engaging with social, political and cultural experience after the detachment and aesthetic exploration of postmodernism is a significant shift – that is, while fiction is obviously always connected to society in some way, sincerity actively pursues this connection. The manifestation of fictional voices that seek to connect with the lived experience subsequently invigorates this commitment in the reader. Through its engagement with the present human experience, contemporary American fiction creates Konstantinou's "believers".

Konstantinou concludes his discussion of "believers" by recalling a rather controversial question posed in a *LIVE from the NYPL* event. An audience member asks panellists whether David Foster Wallace's suicide was a literary gesture responding to the pervading cynicism and disbelief in postmodern literature and culture. The panellist's reactions were, Konstantinou records, "suitably decorous", and seemed to confirm that "life and literature are qualitatively separate spheres" (*Cool Characters*

213). However, the study of Wallace's corpus, both fiction and non-fiction, demonstrates the seriousness in which he approaches his literary work, and his deep-seeded belief in the "necessary link between life and literature" (Konstantinou *Cool Characters* 213). The problem, Konstantinou claims, "is not that 'reading' a life as literature debases life, but rather that to assume that one merely reads literature without having to take its conceptual commitments seriously – to assume that writing is merely a gesture – debases literature" (*Cool Characters* 214). This perspective awards the author a degree of influence, in the very least regarding the dialogue created between the author and the reader. Wallace does not seek to remake society "along any particular institutional or political economic lines". Rather, his politics "rest squarely within a tradition of symbolic action and culturally orientated activism" (Konstantinou *Cool Characters* 215). Konstantinou compares Wallace to Eggers' subsequent sincerity which recognises the importance of constructing alternate institutions. Speaking of Eggers' philanthropic pursuits, Konstantinou argues that Eggers "created a relatively optimistic ethos of belief that mixes a quirky aesthetic sensibility with an urge towards philanthropy and the active construction of alternative institutional structures" (*Cool Characters* 215). While such quirky projects are "infrequently oppositional" (215), Konstantinou's analysis reveals the point at which the sincere author seeks to intercept social and cultural constructs and create "believers" of their audience.

Ecological Consciousness and An Historical Arc

This thesis has demonstrated an historical arc from the snark, solipsistic, cynical postmodernism Wallace describes, to a socially engaged post-postmodernism characterised by its critical exploration and reflection on issues relevant to its present moment. The way that sincere fiction draws connections between fiction and reality echoes the long-standing engagement between ecocriticism, environmental literature and the physical world. As such, I have demonstrated that environmental crisis is a fundamental and pervading characteristic of contemporary reality and is of chief concern to post-postmodern fiction writers. From an ecocritical perspective, post-postmodernism's sincerity is in a position to pursue literary strategies that not only capture the reality of climate crisis, but seek to deconstruct the narratives that lead to anthropocentric worldviews and implement new ways of seeing.

I have also demonstrated that retrospective analysis of canonical US novels not only reveals an underlying ecological consciousness, but signposts how environmental concerns can be brought together with the rise of sincerity in US fiction. Each of the five novels illustrates the process of coming out of postmodernism's reverie and back into what Gumbrecht might refer to as a "presence-culture". In Chapter 1, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* reintroduced the physical world into the postmodern simulacrum. The Airborne Toxic Event conflicts with postmodern detachment by uniting the community of Blacksmith against a shared, physical phenomena. Whilst the town's inhabitants swiftly reduce the experience to a practice

representation of potential future crisis, DeLillo's satirical humour emphasises the futility of continuing to ignore the physical. He positions the physical world as an underlying metanarrative that, even in a simulacral reality, tethers the subject to their environment. In many ways, David Foster Wallace continues DeLillo's meditation on postmodern solipsism. Many of his characters, especially the Incandenzas, suffer the same sense of isolation and internal instability demonstrated by Jack in Part 1 of *White Noise*. Unlike DeLillo, however, Wallace provides a foil to media-driven consumer culture in the residents of Ennet House, who pursue a more connected experience based on mindfulness and building relationships with other people. Ultimately, the sincerity Wallace cultivates in the Ennet house residents comes too late, as America is in a pre-dystopic state of pollution and degradation.

The fact that environmental degradation in *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* is tangential to the primary concerns of each novels' cast of characters is representative of the same cultural problems each author identifies in their texts. Postmodern life is largely self-contained, perpetuated by the endless cycle of news, media and advertising that is shared universally across a diverse range of media and devices. Beatriz Sarlo describes the shopping mall as a perfect metaphor of the postmodern reality in the city (a perspective shared by *White Noise*); it is unmarked by history, it forecasts the future, but while a real city has been built up over time, "the mall's version of a small-scale service city comes to us sovereignly, independent from tradition of environs. Being a city in miniature, the mall has an air of unreality because

it has been built too quickly […] History is absent" (13). It is to be expected that anything outside of such a construct remains out of the scope of characters who are subject to its domineering presence. The physical world, therefore, intrudes upon such a habitat, and is a reminder of the history left behind by postmodern civilisation. In the denial of history and metanarrative, there is a fundamental conflict between postmodern reality and the recognition of nature.

Chapter 3 examined one such conflict, specifically the dissonance between the biological notion of selfhood and contemporary gender identities. Poststructuralists like Judith Butler sought to challenge the barriers between different identity groups, seeking to progress human understanding of individual identity. While boundaries between identity groups remain, the agency of the individual in determining identity certainly differs from the strict gender roles of the past, and now stands in contrast to the seemingly simple reality that human beings are animals. A simple "return to the physical" is much more complicated than it may appear. Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* demonstrates narrative strategies for approaching this disparity without oversimplifying progressive identity politics in favour of reminding the reader of human specieshood. Rather than regressing to an essentialist perspective, Kingsolver recontextualises both anthropocentric and biological narratives to create an ecologically minded approach to human identity and the individual's role in the broader ecosystem. A key difference between Kingsolver's approach to narrative and the hopelessness imbued in the postmodern simulacral reality is the attitude towards

reality narratives. The subject is given agency in their ways of seeing; the flexibility of these narratives in tandem with Kingsolver's environmental intention encourages the development of an approach that recognises both human individuality, and human animality.

In Chapter 4, Ben Lerner's *10:04* communicates a similar sense of isolation to postmodern narrative; however, the nature of the protagonist's awareness of isolation is quite different. Lerner gives agency to the subject in reality formation, situating the physical world as a grand narrative from which to develop one's own sense of reality. Konstantinou identifies the act of metanarrative in fiction being to change "our relation with language", which "breaks down our confidences in norms, values, and conventions, such that we're thrown into a bottomless well of doubt" (*Cool Characters* 173). There are two components here, one of which describes Lerner's use of metanarrative, and one that is challenged by the earnestness of the sincere literary voice. The premise that metanarrative throws the individual into this "bottomless well of doubt" undermines the possibility of narrative in the first instance. This thesis has argued that one of the most significant barriers to recognising and responding effectively to climate crisis is the misleading and problematic human narratives fostered by the perception of human dominion and importance. Fiction that draws into focus the inevitability of reality narrativity also reveals the potential to restructure ways of understanding to better serve both humankind and the planet.

In Chapter 5, I argued that Richard Powers's *The Overstory* takes human narrativity and expands it outwards in search of a perspective beyond the human, enacting the potential of rewriting narrative understanding in the ways Lerner hints at in *10:04*. Powers looks forward to what fiction can achieve in the way of post-human perspectives. By manipulating the linearity of human time, Powers places the planet at the centre of imagining rather than the human experience. *The Overstory* represents the current moment in a literary arc that sees contemporary fiction and environmental fiction coming together to represent the human experience on a changing planet. The decentralisation of the anthropocentric perspective is not a move away from the human experience; it is, rather, a view of the human experience from a planetary context, where humankind is positioned as part of a much vaster ecosystem. As such, characterisation is over-ridden in so far as the primary emphasis is on the relationship *between* characters, their environment, and the natural world. The human element is not decentred by the hypothetical tree protagonists Powers refers to in interview, but through his emphasis on the broader relationship between humankind and nature as opposed to investment in human character and individuality.

Literary Strategies as Activism

At this point, I return to Rob Nixon's "writer-activist". Nixon's argument is predicated on the concept of "slow violence", which describes the almost imperceptible threat that climate change poses as time moves forward. This is

especially apparent in the West, where resources and financial security are adept as masking the severity of rising temperatures, melting icecaps, and weather anomalies. How then, he asks, can we "bring emotionally to life […] threats that take their time to wreak their havoc, threats that never materialise in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene?" (*Slow Violence* 14). It is a question that positions fiction as a key contributor to the implementation of widescale psychological change. The fiction writer, too, is in a position underpinned by social responsibility; in Nixon's words, the author has a "political, imaginative, and strategic role" in manifesting ecological crisis in the minds of their readers. Nixon describes it as such:

> Writer-activists can help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the senses, either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale, or are played out across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation or even the physiological life of the human observer. In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. Writing can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration. The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen. (15)

To take on this challenge, the writer-activist also requires an intention or writing philosophy that seeks to engage with the world and reconceptualise its issues into imaginative and inspiring ways. Thus, while a work of fiction may exist in absence of additional campaigning, to write a novel exploring ecological crisis has the same effect of public campaigning in the sense of raising awareness and bearing witness. Environmental themes are foundational in each of novels in this thesis. Even in cases where environmental themes or events are tangential to the plot, the impact of these narrative devices on the remainder of the text is undeniable. As authors continue to embed their work in the contemporary moment, climate crisis will continue to reveal itself in fiction.

There are various overt forms of activism demonstrated by the novels in this thesis. The clearest examples are Barbara Kingsolver and Richard Powers, who, with their environmental missions and public commentary on their novels, are identified as the "writer-activists" Nixon describes. Both *Prodigal Summer* and *The Overstory* feature educated characters who are positioned to advise other characters and readers alike on ecological principles and concepts. Through them, scientific principles are made palatable, communicated through narrative, and intermingled with plot points. Characters with consideration towards nature are empathetically portrayed to build comradery between character and reader. Nannie Rawley, the charming, confident organic farmer, is contrasted with the "uneducated", old-fashioned Garnett. Patricia is bullied growing up, and her love of ecological science is the last remaining

connection between her and her father. Mimi and Douggie are viscerally beaten by nameless loggers who take pleasure in their pain. Environmental ethics are aligned with commonly agreed upon premises of right and wrong, positioning readers to side with the protagonists. It is, perhaps, a privileged view on environmentalism and conservation that Kingsolver and Powers offer. There is a strong alignment fostered between education and environmental consciousness. The idea that a high level of education is required to achieve an ecological consciousness undermines the idea that humankind's connection to nature is innate. It also can be read as silencing the Indigenous voices that have environmental preservation ingrained in their respective cultures. However, the perspectives in these texts are clearly situated as trying to convince readers of a particular message: *listen to scientists*. *Prodigal Summer* and *The Overstory* are novels for Western readers and undertake a "decisive defense of climate science […] press[ing] home to readers the urgency of rapid action to avert global catastrophe" (Heise "Environmental Literature" 28). While there is a diversity of ecological perspectives from which to explore environmental consciousness, Kingsolver and Powers's decision to uphold education as a means of ecological understanding is directly tied to the form of activism their texts employ. As opposed to privileging Indigenous voices, or superficially referencing diverse voices, Kingsolver and Powers write from a Western perspective, using Western theory, for a Western audience in order to affect incremental, yet effective change. Appealing to climate science and philosophy, even in a fictional context, suggests that ecological messaging is supported by undeniable evidence. Activism bears the intention to

inform and educate its audience, and as such, environmental fiction's longstanding connection to climate science appeals to the readership of the American novel.

But how does one determine activism in fictions that do not overtly declare their ecological messaging? I have established that the decentralisation of the individual human perspective is activism in contemporary fiction. The effect of fiction that seeks to reconfigure dominant human narratives is one that challenges human dominance and reintroduces the possibility of nonhuman perspectives. As I have outlined in this thesis, human dominion over nature is a fundamental reality narrative in the West. A focus on human individuals and communities enforces the notion the reality revolves around humankind. In destabilising both the permeance of dominant narratives, and the individual at the centre of reality narratives, fiction becomes a platform to explore alternative perspectives and negotiate the limits of human perspective. As a consequence, fiction is able to advocate for new sense-making structures and appeal to the plight of the nonhuman.

There are elements in all five of the novels that reveal not only an environmental consciousness, but a sense of urgency in convincing readers of ecological crisis. These elements centre around the destabilisation of dominant perspectives and the questionability of individual experience as a primary sense-making structure. Therefore, attention to story and narrativity is one example of a common element in each novel. A fundamental characteristic of DeLillo's America, for example, is the narrativity of reality. Through the simulacrum, separation from

any pure sense of "reality" is prevented by layers of simulation, meaning that story-making is an inevitable process of reality formation. While DeLillo draws attention to the physical world as a constant influence on these reality narratives, the novel never denies how narrative informs human sense-making processes. Lerner takes up a similar kind of narrativity in *10:04*, yet when he evokes the constancy of the physical world, it is in the continued exacerbation of traumatic weather events. There is not only a physical reality that impacts the subject's experience, but one that is in crisis, deteriorating over time while people go about their daily lives. The momentary glimpses of the planetary are indicative of a cultural struggle to grasp the urgency of environmental crisis, and in both *White Noise* and *10:04*, it is frustrating to see life simply go on at the conclusion of the novel. Readers bear witness to a representation of cultural denial that they experience in their day to day lives and are thus spurred into action.

The emphasis on story and narrative is intensified by temporal manipulation and shifts in perspective. Wallace, Kingsolver, and Powers use multiple characters' perspectives, emphasising the fluidity of human narrativity, while simultaneously reinforcing the sense of human connection, or "ecosystems" between people. Temporal shifts recognise the dominant narratives that inform reality at particular points in time, and also draw further attention to how the physical world impacts these narratives. *Infinite Jest*, for example, features inconsistent, sporadic temporal skips over a period of years, which, alongside multiple perspectives and a diverse cast

of characters, decentres the narrative by disrupting the linearity of time. In *10:04,* momentary glimpses of broader timescales startle revelation in the protagonist, who begins to recognise the role of narrative and temporal perspective in reality perception. Lerner's novel emphasises an important characteristic of each of the novels. Setting his text between Hurricanes Irene and Sandy firmly situates the plot in a moment of US history that is current to contemporary audiences. As such, the imperative to recognise the fiction of linear time is impressed upon the reader in their own experience. The purpose of Nixon's writer-activist is bolstered by Lerner's temporal manipulation and appeal to contemporary history. *10:04* demonstrates how fiction can be utilised to engage with real world issues, and prompt real world responses to crisis. Alternatively, Powers intersperses *The Overstory* with "tree thoughts", and the comparative youth of humankind provides context for the notion of human dominion over nature. Powers contrasts the temporal experience of trees, humans and computer code to further decentre the human, revealing how shifting concepts of temporality inform experience of reality over time. Powers manipulates temporality in a different way, but the results of his representation are the same. What pushes *The Overstory* beyond the previous novels in terms of activism and environmentalism is the earnest appeal to empathy for the nonhuman plight. As each protagonist experiences their ecological revelation, they become Konstantinou's "believers", fighting for something that is bigger than themselves, and outside of their scale of comprehension.

In the novels examined, a text "of the contemporary moment" is one that recognises how the human experience of time informs humankind's reality narratives and acknowledges alternative scales of experience that differ from that of humans. It is a grand challenge that authors of these contemporary fictions take on in turning their gaze to the lived experience. In a globalised world, the scale of human issues has grown exponentially, and the ecological writer-activist faces opposition from climate denialists, science sceptics, and capitalist entities that refuse to change. I have argued that a problem with the scale of climate change is that it can only be reconciled into collective consciousness with a significant appeal to imagination. Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, Barbara Kingsolver, Ben Lerner, and Richard Powers write novels that grapple with a culture in denial of imminent environmental crisis, and yet they offer hope that ecological consciousness can assimilate itself with human reality narratives. An historical arc of US fiction reveals literature taking on this challenge and developing an increasingly assertive ecological voice over time. As humankind progresses further into the Anthropocene, an opportunity arises for humanity to change the trajectory of history and recognise and establish a symbiotic relationship with nature. Fiction has an epoch-determining role in this transformation as we navigate our way through environmental crisis.

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