

The Environmental Activist in Contemporary U.S. and Canadian Novels

Submitted by Kirby Allison Archer to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, October 2023

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Abstract

This thesis examines the representation of environmental activists in U.S. and Canadian novels from 1998-2020, surveying works written by authors including Margaret Atwood, T.C. Boyle, Octavia Butler, Michael Christie, Louise Erdrich, Jonathan Franzen, Barbara Kingsolver, Lydia Millet, Tommy Orange, Ruth Ozeki, Richard Powers, Kim Stanley Robinson, Tanya Tagaq, and Jeff VanderMeer. Despite a growing body of environmental literary criticism, also known as ecocriticism, portrayals of activists in the novel have received scant critical attention. Examining the portrayal of environmental activists in narrative fiction is crucial for a fuller understanding of how novelists address climate change and other environmental issues. Drawing on empirical, affective, and feminist ecocriticism, the thesis analyses depictions of fictional activists amid the increasing incidence of writers self-identifying their work as activism and asks which approaches to character support or undermine writers' interest in motivating reader action on climate issues. One of the key representational challenges facing writers is the prevalence with which fictional activists are commonly depicted as fanatical, ineffective, or motivated by suspect causes, underscoring the anxiety and denial surrounding climate change in the Canadian and U.S. societies. The thesis traces the evolution of the archetypal literary environmental activist, descended from Edward Abbey, from something that can bluntly be described as negative to positive, simplistic to complex, impulsive to strategic. I read activists in several different contexts, with chapters devoted to gender and environmental justice, religion, biocentrism, Indigenous activism, and optimistic climate fiction. Throughout, the thesis considers the novel's possibilities for effectively representing responses to climate change. Ultimately, I will argue that much in the way that activist representations in novels are influenced by the social and political climates in which they are created, these characterisations may in turn influence perceptions of and responses to the environment, climate change, and environmentalism beyond the page.

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Introduction

Like the environmental threats they depict, literature with environmental themes has proliferated greatly in recent decades. Alongside the growing body of environmental literature, environmental literary criticism, or ecocriticism, has developed from a newly established field in the mid-1990s into a global pursuit that facilitates multidisciplinary explorations of environmental themes in literature and the humanities. Despite much discussion of ecocriticism's "strong ethical and/or political commitment" (Buell, *Writing* ix), direct associations with activism, and assertions that addressing the "planetary tragedy" of our age is ecocriticism's most critical priority (Rangarajan 1), representations of environmental activists in fiction have not received significant critical attention to date. The core aim of this thesis is to give due attention to portrayals of environmental activism in contemporary U.S. and Canadian novels with environmental themes to better understand activists as literary figures whose creation and characterisation are influenced by social, historical, and political issues. This thesis is grounded in a guiding principle shared by many ecocritics: that understanding stories with environmental themes may help us communicate "environmental values that would encourage cultural shifts from destructive consumption to sustainable living" (Murphy, "Challenges" 167). I will make the case that, much in the way that activist representations in novels are influenced by the social and political climates in which they are created, these characterisations may in turn influence perceptions of the environment, climate change, and environmentalism beyond the page.

This thesis can be understood both as a contribution to the field of ecocriticism and to studies in the novel. My motivation for undertaking this research arose from the dissonance I observed between ecocritical overtures of impact and activist engagement and the relative lack of ecocritical attention that activism in eco-fiction has received. For this thesis, I have identified and analysed narrative tropes and trends including portrayals of activists as ineffective and fanatical, a range of representations from the simplistic to the complex, and how fictional activists may be seen to manifest difficulties in portraying the urgency and impact of climate change. Even in eco-novels, which are written by authors who are expressly concerned with environmental themes, the urgency, logic, and evidence

base supporting efforts to mitigate climate change is often obscured, undermined, or complicated by fictional activists who resort to crime and mayhem, supposedly in defence of the environment. These characters' flaws lead them into dramatic and engaging scenarios, but through them, environmental activism is typically characterised as exclusive, chaotic, ineffective, non-altruistic, or pointless.

Rob Nixon has articulated climate change as “slow violence”: the nature of the problem is difficult to depict in clear, immediate, dramatic fashion. This poses a representational challenge for eco-novelists and others engaged in communicating about climate change. Nixon asks,

In an age when the media venerate the spectacular, when public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need, a central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time? (*Slow Violence* 3)

Many eco-novelists are engaged in a multi-faceted project in which they attempt to craft a compelling story that addresses our real-world climate crisis. I contend that the portrayal of activists in contemporary fiction is significant because of how it is both influenced by and influences real-world attitudes towards climate issues. Extending this notion of real-world impact, I draw on ecocritical scholarship that deploys a diverse range of disciplinary perspectives (literary studies, sociology, communication studies, and methodologies from the empirical to the theoretical) to argue that common representations of environmental activists may illuminate anxieties about the environment and climate change in the U.S. and Canada. This thesis will ask how novelists engage with environmental themes and address climate change when many eco-narrative tropes, such as dystopia and/or apocalypse have, in studies by Lowe et al. (2006), Norgaard (2011), and Schneider-Mayerson (2018), been shown to be self-defeating in the way that they provoke negative reader responses to environmental topics.

My definition of *environmental activist* is intentionally capacious: someone who acts to protect or preserve the environment, broadly conceived, whether this is

a stated aim or not. The thesis begins with the delineation of a fictional environmental activist archetype: one who is easily recognisable and identifiable as an activist based on observable traits or activities associated with environmental activism, such as people who participate in eco-protests, advocacy, or sabotage. As the thesis develops, I identify and attend to different forms of environmental activism and a more diverse variety of participants. In addition to theorising, understanding, and contextualising the contemporary environmental activist in English-language U.S. and Canadian novels, I am also interested in how the texts I draw from define and characterise activism. Some authors depict activism in familiar or even stereotypical ways, while others have an expansive understanding of activism.

My inclusive definition of environmental activism draws upon existing scholarship on overlapping terms such as activism, protest, and social movements. I theorise that some activities may be more widely interpreted as activism than others due to the overlap or conflation of activism, protest, and social movements. Social movements partly consist of acts of protest, which are carried out by activists, but there is more to being an activist than staging or attending a protest. The historian T.V. Reed notes that both social movements and their discrete constituent components of acts of protest are defined largely in terms of their visibility or “publicness”, observing that most scholars “know a movement when they see one ... And seeing one may be precisely the point” (xiii). Reed draws on Charles Tilly’s definition of social movements as comprising “repeated public displays” (Tilly 257) to distinguish protest and social movements from their “tamer, more institutionalized cousins” like political parties and interest groups (Reed xiii). Indeed, environmental activists seem to counter climate change’s lack of legibility and interest to our “sensation-driven ... image world”, in Nixon’s words, by staging what Kevin Michael DeLuca calls “image events”, highly visual protest tactics that welcome dissemination via mass media (DeLuca 165). Social movements are, Reed writes, “unauthorized”, “unofficial”, composed of “ordinary citizens” (xii), and require a certain “strategic artfulness” to be successful (xi). The intersection of “artfulness,” performance, and activism is evident in the tactics of environmentalist

groups like Greenpeace and Earth First!. Scholars from a variety of disciplines define activism as necessarily “collective”.¹

In my definition, the figure of an environmental activist may encompass the aforementioned activities and roles or a range of different activities and roles. A very powerful individual or established, “authorized” group of individuals could certainly be seen as environmental activists, and many activists in the novels I survey undertake solitary projects. Activists may or may not be formally involved in an environmentalist movement, campaign, or public protests, and activities constituting environmental activism can go far beyond “unofficial” direct action and “repeated public displays”.

Many definitions of activism in a post-1945 North American context derive from specific examples which are both instructive and limiting for the purposes of developing a definition of environmental activism. Examples of paradigmatic activism in North America include the 1960s-era Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War protests, the ACT UP campaign to fight AIDS in the 1980s, and the Occupy movement that began in 2011. While environmentalism in the U.S. and Canada shares some qualities with these other movements, it faces different challenges and diverges from them in numerous ways. Firstly, as I will discuss in Chapter Two, the environmentalist movement has not been as obviously successful as other causes that gained traction in the 1960s, such as civil rights. As Reed’s and Tilly’s focus on publicity and visibility indicate, many protest movements rely on raising awareness – making clear a problem that was heretofore unnoticed or not immediately experienced by most citizens, such as publicising imagery or stories from Vietnam or other wars fought in lands distant from the place of protest. But many scholars have pointed out that raising awareness appears insufficient to rouse support for climate action (see, for example, Norgaard 144). There are several possible reasons for this discussed in the thesis. Among them are, as Nixon and Ghosh discuss, the difficulties of climate change’s legibility; although many individuals have likely experienced the effects of climate change, they may not believe they have, a phenomenon Patrick Murphy

¹ For example, the social scientists Caroline Mackay et al. define environmental activism as “a form of collective action aimed at creating social change for the benefit of the natural environment” (2021).

names as PAN (“present as always normal”) and DIN (“discrete incident mentality”). These cognitive frames, in which an individual perceives constantly shifting weather patterns and events either as one-time incidents or as normal, no matter how much “normal” has changed over their own lifetime, convincingly explicate the shifting mindsets that enable climate change denial and inaction (“Challenges” 168). Conversely, Stephanie LeMenager suggests we often overlook the small or large successes attributable to environmentalist action, such as the proliferation of recycling or banning of harmful chemicals such as DDT. “Forgetting,” she writes, “comes about in part because a new consciousness succeeds in popularizing its goals” (22). “Forgetting” the innovations and progress that do exist in combination with a sense of futility and hopelessness about the goals yet to be achieved lead to what Glenn Albrecht calls “psychoterratic diseases”, pessimistic or anxious states of mind about the environmental crisis that discourage action and a sense of personal agency.

Second, climate change and environmental harm differ from anti-war, pro-democracy, and civil rights causes, which are human-focused and rely on the empathy generated by witnessing the suffering of another human. Environmental activists may also rely on empathy to generate action, but many of the scholars whose work is discussed in this thesis problematise empathy and point out its limitations (see, for example, LeMenager 23). Although humans are negatively impacted by climate change and pollution, the environmentalist movement’s historical association with non-human animals or more nebulous non-human “nature” may make it more difficult for people to connect in the way they might when faced with examples of highly visible, currently occurring injustice towards humans.

Third, whereas some earlier social movements have, for example, pushed for the fair enforcement of existing laws, the cessation of hostilities, or medical research, it is not always clear what the next “steps” of environmentalism will be, and who will bear the brunt of making changes. Private citizens, for example, may not be convinced to change their personal habits when they feel that others, such as corporations, make far more of a negative impact (and strongly resist changing their own ways). The issue of culpability is discussed by such ecocritics as Ursula Heise and Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, while issues of scale, which I discuss

throughout the thesis, and the challenges the enormity of the problem create for engagement, are theorised by such critics as Heise, Timothy Clark, and Adeline Johns-Putra.

Finally, unlike movements which tackle injustices that are indisputably occurring in real time, environmentalism has for more than a half-century been largely predictive. Sometimes, environmental activists focus on issues currently harming humans and non-human animals and nature, such as oil spills or chemical dumps, but climate activists in particular have mostly warned of greater cataclysms that have not yet come to pass. Although many scientific predictions regarding climate change have by now occurred, and scientific consensus on the threat posed by climate change is clearer than ever, this thesis will discuss a number of cognitive frames and structural impediments that continue to inhibit climate action.

I do not strictly distinguish between *environmentalist* and *environmental activist*. The distinction between the two terms, when there is one, is reminiscent of the social movement/protest/activist connection: environmentalism more often refers to the larger environmental *movement*, while environmental activism more often refers to acts of protest, such as marches, sit-ins, or sabotage of environmentally harmful equipment or materials. Even if there is some difference in who is colloquially referred to as environmentalist versus an environmental activist – the former is sometimes used to signify a more privileged or disconnected proponent of wildlife conservation² – environmentalists are environmental activists too, and vice versa. I use both terms, but more often use environmental activist to underscore the wide variety of *actions* a person can undertake to encourage ecological flourishing.

Historical examples of environmental activism include the 1970s working-class resident-led campaign to acknowledge and clean up carcinogenic chemicals that had been illegally dumped in the neighbourhood of Love Canal, NY, and protests targeting Exxon corporate offices following the catastrophic Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989, which killed hundreds of thousands of animals and caused long-

² T.C. Boyle's and Jonathan Franzen's novels exemplify how, for example, upper-class white men who donate to (and frequently talk about) environmental causes are more likely to be referred to as environmentalists, while working-class grassroots protestors are more likely to be referred to as environmental activists. I discuss why this might be the case in Chapter 1.

lasting coastal pollution. More recent high-profile environmentalist campaigns include the Dakota Access Pipeline protests led by the Standing Rock Sioux; Greta Thunberg's spearheading of the international School Strike for Climate movement, in which children and adolescents skip school to protest climate change; and widespread marches organised by Climate Strike Canada to demand government action to reduce emissions. These protest campaigns employ traditional activist tactics, such as large gatherings of peaceful protestors at the location of disasters or the offices of corporations or politicians who may bear some responsibility for climate change or climate policy. Consistent with the history of protest and civil disobedience, some tactics are deployed controversially. Protest is disruptive by design, and the tactics used in historical protests that are now almost universally viewed positively were often contemporaneously criticised; as no activist cause is exactly like another, it can still be difficult for environmental activists to predict which strategies will be successful, what level of disruption or confrontation can be justified, and where that confrontation should be directed. Groups including Extinction Rebellion have long employed the tactic of blocking roadways to draw attention to climate change, incurring outrage in the process; Just Stop Oil protestors throw canned food on famous artworks, symbolically threatening precious, irreplaceable things of beauty to draw attention to human damage to arguably the most precious and irreplaceable thing of all – the environment.

The right to protest is enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. American and Canadian protestors are less likely to face physical endangerment than those in, for example, Brazil or Colombia, where dozens of environmental activists are murdered each year (Greenfield). Nonetheless, much high-profile environmental activism is recognisable in the way that it relies on people putting their bodies on the line in some way to create visibility for the cause and demand action. This can range from the inevitable and expected outcome of Extinction Rebellion protestors being physically removed from the roadway to more serious uses of force that recall the sacrifices made by, for example, Civil Rights or American Indian Movement protestors in the 1960s and 70s. Nick Estes documents the violence used against water protectors at the Dakota Access Pipeline protests: the elements they stood to protect used against them, water cannons blasting through freezing November air (42). Tactics that

guarantee confrontation with potentially violent authorities (or, sometimes, other citizens) will always be controversial, but the visual documentation of such abuses has undoubtedly brought attention to past protest movements and has sometimes been credited with influencing public opinion. Putting one's body on the line for a cause is a recognisably activist choice that indicates belief in the urgency and necessity of addressing the issue at hand.

My definition of environmental activism goes beyond the traditional tactics outlined above to include what might be more often referred to as advocacy, or more simply, *work*. I consider many varieties of labour, vocation, and use of free time as falling under the umbrella of environmental activism. My understanding of the term includes, for example, scientists who research climate change; diplomats, government employees, and policy makers who attempt to negotiate agreements and implement environmentally friendly policies and legislation; inventors who create and scale sustainable alternatives to common materials or energy sources; entrepreneurs who fund the development of new technologies and show a genuine interest in positively impacting the environment; teachers who make environmental issues a cornerstone of their pedagogy; lawyers and paralegals who pursue legal strategies to protect the environment; farmers and chefs who focus on locally grown, organic food; journalists who write about climate change and the environment, such as Elizabeth Kolbert and Benjamin Wallace-Wells; or faith leaders who prioritise environmental stewardship, a practice referred to as "watershed discipleship" (Bock). As I argue in chapters three and four, acts of parenting, caregiving, and friendship are also portrayed as potentially mobilising and supportive of the development of environmental ethics in texts like Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* (2020) and Diane Wilson's *The Seed Keeper* (2021). These diverse forms of activism, while often portrayed positively, are not always uncritically embraced or endorsed, as the authors consider efficacy and the impact of different actions and behaviours. Literary examples of figures that I would consider environmental activists whose approach falls somewhat outside the classically understood parameters of activism include the many scientists, diplomats, and non-governmental organisation workers in Kim Stanley Robinson's eco-fictional oeuvre, including Frank VanderWahl in the *Science in the Capital* trilogy (2004-2007) and Mary Murphy, the director of *The Ministry for the*

Future (2020); the physicist Tom Aldous in Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2005), who invents a process to scale up solar power; an unusually altruistic hedge fund manager in Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017); Gaby Makespeace, a pro bono lawyer and clean water advocate in *The Seed Keeper*; a communist chef in Karen Tei Yamashita's *I-Hotel* (2010); and Lauren Olamina, the creator and spiritual leader of the eco-friendly religion Earthseed in Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* series (1993-1998). Although these characters differ from the protest- and spectacle-oriented activists in novels like *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), *A Friend of the Earth* (2000), *The Overstory* (2018), and *Greenwood* (2020), their activities are just as essential to the goal of forward progress.

My focus on activist character tropes contributes to a broader inquiry into several big-picture questions relevant to literature with environmental themes, including how authors of eco-novels respond to the climate crisis through narrative. Each chapter will analyse two or more novels with related environmental themes, organised by topics progressing from archetypal/pessimistic to subversive/optimistic representations of activism. In each chapter, I delineate the perceived role and efficacy of environmental activists as portrayed in U.S. and Canadian novels from 1998 to 2020, exploring what fictional portrayals of activists show us about approaches to climate change and environmental issues in those countries. One recurrent observation is that even authors who are deeply concerned about climate change and other environmental issues advance depictions of activists that are underwritten by suspicion and anxiety about certain aspects of environmental advocacy, suggesting that fear and discomfort about the scale and implications of environmental problems commonly manifest in denial or mistrust of activists, who may be almost wishfully depicted as hysterical or unreasonably pessimistic. As the sociologist Kari Norgaard puts it, "The fact that nobody wants information about climate change to be true is a critical piece of the puzzle that also happens to fit perfectly with the agenda of those who generate skepticism" (181). The thesis is situated most obviously within the domain of ecocriticism, but I draw from interdisciplinary sources. I will refer to the work of Norgaard and other researchers to contextualise the frequency with which even authors who are demonstrably worried about climate change reduce cognitive dissonance and "psychoterratic dis-eases" – Albrecht's term for feelings of mental

distress that arise from humans' fraught relationship with the wider living world – by portraying those who warn about climate change as excessive, misinformed, or governed by non-altruistic motivations.

It is true that many activists, fictional or otherwise, are represented as excessive, misinformed, or engaged in activism primarily for clout, to release anger, or for other less vaunted reasons than deep-seated care for nature – or, at least, they might be viewed this way from some perspectives. As recent reviews of the film *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (2022), which portrays ecoterrorism sympathetically, indicate, it is not known which approaches to better environmental stewardship will be effective and which will be viewed positively in the future.³ Who will be seen as a hero, who will be seen as complacent or a villain or someone who hurt their own cause via questionable tactics? The authors foregrounded in the first chapter of the thesis unveil many disagreements regarding strategy, tactics, and goals amongst real-life and fictional activists, and it is not always clear who is “right” – whose approach will make a positive difference and where morality and ethics enter the conversation. That the novel's narrative form invites productive ambiguity is arguably one of its strengths. There is a hint of crusading in the tone of many ecocritical essays that is particularly relevant to chapters two and five, which explore the religious analogies and conflicts present in many narratives that portray environmental activism.

In the first and second chapters, I discuss how contemporary eco-novels are marked by an extraordinary if understandable degree of pessimism, if not outright nihilism.⁴ Climate fiction (“cli-fi”) is often associated with dystopia and/or post-apocalypticism, as the direst impacts are anticipated and depicted via catastrophe

³ See, for example, “Is eco-terrorism now self-defence?” by Simran Hans, 17 Apr 2023, *The Guardian* and “Will we call them terrorists?” by Peter C. Baker, Apr 5, 2023, *The New York Times*. These questions have been in circulation since at least the publication of Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975).

⁴ Authors including Richard Powers, Jonathan Franzen, and T.C. Boyle often express pessimism about the possibility for change, with Boyle stating in an interview that “It's quite clear to me that our species is on the way out” (Nazaryan). Franzen attracted attention for his 2019 essay “What If We Stopped Pretending?” in which he urged readers to “accept that disaster is coming” and “rethink what it means to have hope”, because “the radical destabilization of life on earth” is no longer preventable. But even the doomsayers of eco-fiction continue to share their convictions with a wide audience. Although Franzen was criticised for the pessimistic tone of his article, he concluded that there is “still a strong practical and ethical case for reducing carbon emissions”, even though he does not believe it is possible to reverse the two-degree rise in global temperatures.

in novels such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013), Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* (2020), Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* series (1993-1998), T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* (2000), and Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014) and *Borne* (2017). Considering the findings of Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and his empirical ecocritical colleagues – whose first empirical study of reader responses to cli-fi found that “well-intentioned authors who vividly depict the catastrophic consequences of climate change may actually be hindering their goal of heightening environmental consciousness” (“The Influence of Climate Fiction” 490) – I investigate the ethics and efficacy of post-apocalyptic cli-fi, which may not affect readers in the way that its environmentally engaged authors hope. The very nature of the post-apocalyptic genre precludes imagined futures in which climate activism leads to positive outcomes, presenting a conundrum for the goal of engaging readers in a way that motivates or inspires real-world action.

The tension between promoting climate activism and succumbing to despair is present in several dystopian works in this thesis. Lydia Millet's protagonists in *A Children's Bible* try to see the positives of a world without humans, in which “new kinds of animals evolve”, but lament that “we won't be there to see them. We won't be here” (223). Richard Powers' activists (and sentient trees) in *The Overstory* (2018) similarly grieve in their conviction that humans are “doomed” (304), that they cannot “stop the [human] race from killing itself” (345), and that humans “need to remember how to die” (465) for the sake of “tomorrow's world” (456). Post-apocalyptic eco-fiction like Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) begins with the premise that (nearly) all humans have died and suggests that this may be to the benefit of other species. These texts pose questions about speciesism and the possibility of developing a more biocentric or ecocentric perspective. They prompt readers to consider that humans are not innately more important or better than other animals, and that from a utilitarian perspective, our demise as a species might be conceived as a win for the greater good. However, Pieter Vermeulen argues that “the univocal declaration of species insignificance” inherent to many would-be biocentric narratives “masks a sinister decision between valued lives and lives not worth living” (162). Greg Garrard is critical of the “calculated callousness” required to design “disanthropic worlds” (“Worlds” 45), noting that such storyworlds

represent the extreme outcome of misanthropic attitudes. Even as the popularity of the apocalyptic genre speaks to its strange appeal, the idea of embracing human extinction is obviously not very palatable for most readers.⁵ Accordingly, most apocalyptic narratives are not truly apocalyptic in the sense that there are human survivors left to continue recording human experience. Millet's repetition of the phrase "We won't *be* here" underscores the horror that humans feel when faced with the thought of a discontinued existence; the idea, as Vermeulen puts it, that there really could be no one left in the future to "interpret" our recordings (147). This is why it is important for some human characters to survive the fictional apocalypse, which often turns into a not-quite-apocalypse as the narrative unfolds and reveals that more humans have survived the cataclysmic event than initially presumed.

What these narratives instead rely on is a horrific culling of the human population. As Nixon points out, little thought is spared for the "dispensable, anonymous, invisible" victims of such scenarios (*Slow Violence* 239), whether in fictional representations or in real-world climate catastrophes, particularly those that afflict the global poor. The ethical implications of these fantasies, in which ecological balance is somehow restored via the cutting down of the human species, are obvious. There is another problem with the frequent intersection of climate change and apocalypse in contemporary narratives: incidents that may result from climate change are generally neither large nor immediate enough in scale to be accurately represented in stories of apocalypse. As Nixon writes, it is challenging to accurately and effectively depict the most insidious harms of environmental ill-treatment, which are slow-moving and not easily attributable to singular causes. As Amitav Ghosh points out, even high-drama weather events like unprecedented cyclones (which he has personally experienced) may pose a challenge to readers' suspension of disbelief. Even as "wildly improbable" scenes become less so in our rapidly changing epoch, they may still feel that way to many readers (24).

⁵ Vermeulen writes that apocalyptic stories are only "pleasurable" because they are "faced from a safe distance" (152).

Lawrence Buell has written that the spectre of apocalypse gives freighted power to warnings about climate catastrophe, calling it “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (*Future* 285). My thesis poses these questions: What are the ethics of relying on apocalyptic or dystopian tropes in environmental fiction? How do readers respond to narratives that “warn” about dystopian environmental futures yet also insist it is “too late” to change these futures, and how does the idea of apocalyptic literature as a “warning” with the potential to wring action from alarm co-exist with nihilistic despair? I survey social studies and experimental ecocriticism that suggest that overt pessimism may unintentionally dissuade readers from developing pro-environmental behaviours (Schneider-Mayerson, Malecki) and may impede creative visions of alternative futures. While the first three chapters primarily survey dystopian or pessimistic eco-novels, the fourth and fifth chapters explore how some authors build alternatives to these dominant narrative modes, taking climate change seriously while urging constructive action that is often tied to the promise of more just and liberatory social models.

The question of the novel’s role in the climate crisis is of great import to ecocritical scholars such as Nixon, Ghosh, and Johns-Putra, who have all assessed the difficulties of representing climate change in narrative fiction and the novelist’s role in addressing the crisis. I believe this is a critical line of inquiry for scholars of the novel, and although these questions have received more attention from other critics than my focus on the environmental activist, I wish also to foreground this angle throughout my thesis. Ultimately, I work towards the conclusion that some of the qualities associated with the novel from its origins – such as its elevation of everyday, quotidian experiences – suggest its potential as an essential mode through which to tell the increasingly everyday story of climate change, which already affects every living being and every place in the world to a greater or lesser extent. Although many eco-novelists have relied (sometimes problematically) on unprecedented catastrophe and spectacle in their depictions of climate change, I contend that the quotidian effects on individual lives and climate change’s impact on social relations – the traditional purview of the novel – have much to offer in making sense of the experience of this phenomenon. The fact that so many novelists view their work as a means through which to effect change

emphasises the need to comprehend and interpret eco-fiction through the lens of external impact, as well as through more established formal, aesthetic, and thematic considerations.⁶

What opportunities and challenges does the novel form present for writers concerned with the environment? I will discuss, for example, challenges surrounding scale, perspective, and representation; some authors' Sisyphean attempts to evade narrative anthropocentrism and craft novels from a "biocentric" perspective; and strategies to derive drama and excitement from crucial but dry realms of climate change mitigation like science, diplomacy, and policy. Eco-novelists face limitations and challenges along the way, but many are reimagining or simply harnessing some of the foundational features of the novel form to imagine alternative realities, explore solutions, and foster improved relationships with the living world of which we are part. Crucially, many of these authors continue to extol the innate value, beauty, diversity, and wonder of nature and the environment, however broadly this might be defined. Even as many active scholars (including, sometimes, the aforementioned ecocritics) dismiss the potential that "nature writing" has to affect perceptions and treatment of non-human nature (Voie), the ability of novelists to help readers form stronger connections with and appreciation for their environments remains a crucial part of their power not just to tell a good story, but to movingly portray and respond to the challenges of our times, and possibly to inspire some of the commitments and changes they wish to see in the world.

Methodology

The thesis surveys novels written between 1998 and 2020 by U.S. and Canadian writers, including Margaret Atwood, T.C. Boyle, Octavia Butler, Michael Christie, Louise Erdrich, Jonathan Franzen, Barbara Kingsolver, Lydia Millet, Tommy

⁶ The activist drive of many environmental novelists is evident from their interviews and the fact that so many of them write non-fiction about environmental issues that explicitly addresses their fears, political commitments, and hopes for change. Some of these texts are written with the stated intention of persuading readers to adopt lifestyle changes, or to bring awareness to a problem the author believes is critical but has been overlooked, with the assumption that increased awareness will lead to positive change. See, for example, *Eating Animals*, by Jonathan Safran Foer (2009); "What If We Stopped Pretending?" by Jonathan Franzen (2019), and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* by Barbara Kingsolver (2007).

Orange, Ruth Ozeki, Richard Powers, Kim Stanley Robinson, Tanya Tagaq, and Jeff VanderMeer. This section maps out the historical parameters of the thesis and the rationale for its focus on the U.S. and Canada despite the fact that political and social differences between the two countries are often emphasised. First, a foundational moment for the thesis is the signing of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. The Protocol was the first legally binding international agreement to set emission reduction targets, following the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which acted on a global acknowledgement of what was then called global warming. The climate response frameworks of the 90s heralded a new era of climate awareness and action – or, more often, inaction. Canada and the U.S.’s failure to uphold their promises in the Kyoto Protocol and subsequent climate agreements, such as the 2015 Paris Climate Accords, looms over the last several decades of the countries’ eco-fiction. More and more novels with environmental themes are published each year, and for reasons of space, I limited novels in this thesis to those published in or before 2020, the year I began this project. Although I considered including even more recent novels, the selected texts effectively illuminate the trends and trajectory of eco-novels over the past quarter-century.

Understanding the way that environmental attitudes are reflected and impacted through eco-fiction is certainly of global importance and interest, and ecocriticism has become a global mode of inquiry. I find that study of contemporary U.S. and Canadian novels continues to be rewarding, fruitful, and urgent, especially as authors consider the purpose and range of the novel as a form in response to changing climatic conditions and increased awareness of numerous environmental issues. The actions the U.S. and Canada take or do not take on climate change have significant global impact; for years, they have been among the countries with the highest per capita greenhouse gas emissions. The just perception of responsibility on the part of wealthy, developed countries to enact meaningful change means that Canada and the U.S. will have to work together with other G7 countries in the coming years to implement impactful climate change mitigation plans – a task that has become harder year by year.⁷

⁷ Although the U.S. and Canada both signed the Kyoto Protocol, the U.S. Congress never ratified it, and Canada officially left the agreement in 2012. This abdication of an international agreement is just one example of the complications and false starts the two countries have experienced when it

Second, nature and wilderness play an outsized role in cultural myths and literary depictions of both the U.S. and Canada, as they do in many settler-colonial nations. In attempting to generate a coherent sense of national identity, settlers have emphasised the distinctiveness of the landscape they come to inhabit; nature as a subject becomes an integral part of cultural identity and creative output. Whether the impact of nature is framed through the unfamiliar fear, bordering on ecophobia, of early Puritan settlers like William Bradford who longed for the orderly hedgerows and cultivation of their native England; the rapacious deforesters who looked at the leafy northeastern wilderness and saw gold; Indigenous traditions of reciprocity, seasonality, and stewardship that endured assimilationist assaults; or the awe-inspired accounts of conservationists and naturalists like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold, nature has been an extraordinarily powerful factor in the formation of U.S. and Canadian national consciousnesses – and, as many ecocritics have observed since the discipline’s earliest days, an enduring theme in the countries’ respective literary traditions.

Accordingly, human perceptions about and interactions with the environment loom large in the U.S. and Canadian literary imaginations. Although such perceptions and interactions obviously pre-date the arrival of European settlers, the often violent and dominant impressions about nature that accompanied settlement and westward expansion have attracted critical attention. Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 “frontier thesis” presented westward expansion as a crucial component of the “American character” (7), going so far as to suggest that “frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy” (30). Turner’s exaltation of frontier spirit as a particularly American endeavour is indicative of attitudes of the time regarding suspicion of undeveloped nature and the imperative to tame wild spaces and replace them with urbanity. Turner viewed settlers who struck out for the frontier as brave people who were “winning a wilderness”, expressing the attitude that nature exists as something to be captured and conquered by humans (6). Ecofeminists such as Louise Westling have interrogated the association between “masculine” settler notions about dominion

comes to large-scale efforts to mitigate climate change. The failure of signatory countries to achieve climate pact goals is a key plot point in Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* (2020).

over nature and territory. In early settler narratives, nature was coded as female, and the New World as virgin land awaiting “conquest” (52). There was a troubling and enduring perception that the great natural “resources” of the U.S. and Canada were endlessly replenishable. Annie Proulx documents the legacy of this fallacious thinking in her 2016 novel *Barkskins*.

For Native Americans and First Nations people, much of daily life and culture revolved around the seasons and species in one’s area; meanwhile, white settlers were struck not only by the majesty and beauty of North American landscapes, but by its harshness and unfamiliarity as well. Historians have observed that many European settlers expected to be able to cultivate North American land in the same way they had in their homelands and were often stymied by climatic and ecosystem differences to the point of starvation or other catastrophe. In his novel *Greenwood* (2020), Michael Christie depicts the dry horror of the great Dust Bowl in the U.S. and Canada, concurrent with the Great Depression, as partly caused by ill-suited agricultural methods.⁸ This historical incident exemplifies the dangerous intersection of climate catastrophe and economic inequality. Agricultural practices that cause lasting damage to the land persist to this day.

Canada has its own environmental mythologies. As with the U.S., Canada’s relative inhospitality to humans has long been documented and mythologised. Home of ice and blackflies, suitable for only the most rugged adventurers, early attempts to establish a national narrative about Canada’s wilderness bear similarities to the frontier thesis and other narratives of U.S. westward expansion, survival, and domination. Notably, Margaret Atwood published *Survival* in 1972, a “guide” to Canadian literature that highlighted Canadian nature as a distinctive, powerful force with a unique effect on the nation’s literary output. Atwood theorised that survival was “the persistent cultural obsession of Canadian literature”, and that the survivors of Canadian literature generally must contend with the forces of nature, “as when the ice storm cuts off the electrical power” (52). Simon Estok describes “the contempt and fear we feel for the agency of the natural

⁸ Robert A. McLeman et al. analyse decades of research concluding that the Dust Bowl arose from a combination of natural drought and man-made conditions, such as poor management of dryland topsoil.

environment” as *ecophobia* (131) and suggests that this frame of mind is one of the causes of the “environmental degeneration” Atwood has identified as accelerating since she wrote *Survival* more than fifty years ago (53). In some cultural narratives and attendant novelistic renderings, we have always been fighting nature, either attempting to survive it or bring it under our control or both. In many recent works of eco-fiction, the tables are turned: nature is (conceived of as) fighting back.⁹ Somewhat more positively, recent novels, such as those surveyed in chapters four and five, advance a more symbiotic and cooperative understanding of how humans can live in, with, and as nature. This re-framing relies on an understanding of humans as a part of nature, not separate from it – a theme I will return to.

Focusing mostly on twenty-first century novels (both “popular” and “literary,” a distinction that ecocritics as well as other literary scholars are widely interested in critiquing) allows me to consider long-form fictional depictions of activists in the context of current and evolving attitudes and anxieties about climate change and the environment. Adam Trexler writes that the novel has a “capacity to interrogate the emotional, aesthetic, and living experience of the Anthropocene” that documentaries and nonfiction writing lack, but the latter forms have until recently received more attention as sites of climate change discourse (6). Timothy Clark writes:

The novel has long seemed especially suited to the way environmental issues are always and immediately also issues of politics and culture. A novel in particular has the power to be comprehensive in the way that, say, a paper in a scientific or social science journal never could be: for it is free to trace all imaginable scenarios and to survey how prejudice, personal background, cultural assumptions, scientific research and the complacencies of day-to-day life all form part of how people engage or evade environmental questions. (*Value* 78)

The novels I have chosen for my thesis were written during a period in which awareness of climate change was growing year by year, to the point now where

⁹ For example, this is one way to interpret Area X in VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014). The limitations or inability of humans to control or reconfigure their environments and other living beings, attempts at which often lead to unexpected mayhem and destruction, facilitate major plot points in Atwood’s *MaddAddam*, VanderMeer’s *Borne*, Boyle’s *When the Killing’s Done*, and Ozeki’s *All Over Creation*. Climate change in general can somewhat easily, if facily, be characterised as nature “fighting back” against humans – a narrative with obvious legible, allegorical appeal for authors of eco-fiction.

most individuals are familiar with the concept and with attendant environmental issues, whether or not they accept them as fact. That progress has not been commensurate with awareness is important background information for these novels, as we must not assume that “raising awareness” is their primary contribution to climate discourse. As Norgaard has observed, we are past the point where raising awareness can be considered the primary task of environmental advocates and critics. More people than ever are aware of climate change as a phenomenon, but such knowledge psychologically manifests as “a threat to people’s sense of security”, and numerous complex, subconscious processes occur that help people ignore, resist, or fail to assimilate climate information to preserve their sense of security and well-being and to reduce feelings of powerlessness, which have counter-intuitively been shown to increase in tandem with the individual’s knowledge of climate issues (144).

Confining the geographic and chronological reach of the surveyed fiction is limiting but necessary for reasons of space and focus. Although U.S. literature has received more ecocritical attention than that of most other nations, there is still something to be gained from exploring recent eco-novels from countries that contribute more to climate change than others (just as it is worthwhile to study literature from countries that are disproportionately impacted by climate change while contributing less to the problem, such as island and/or South Asian nations). As ecocriticism has endeavoured to engage with real-world consequences, attempting to understand activist characters in environmental fiction goes a long way towards the “commitment of environmentality from whatever critical vantage point” (Buell, *Future* 11).

I read more than seventy novels for this thesis, which are listed in the Appendix. As noted, my text selection was partly based on geographic and temporal considerations, as I wanted to understand how environmental activists are presented in contemporary U.S. and Canadian novels as awareness of climate change and environmental issues becomes more detailed and widespread. Often, my decision to include a particular text turned on the identifiability of activist characters; many novels with clear environmental themes do not feature characters who might be seen as activists even from the broadest definition. Authors who I surveyed but did not have space to include at length include Ann

Pancake, Annie Proulx, Jesmyn Ward, and Diane Wilson. I have chosen to combine close reading of individual texts with a broader survey approach, because I find that both analytical methods contribute to an understanding of narrative trends and tropes relating to the environmental activist figure and to my broader exploration of how the novel addresses the climate crisis.

In some cases, I consider series or sequences of books by the same authors who can be read as developing something of an environmentalist oeuvre. The cli-fi sequel is particularly interesting in the opportunity it affords the author to extend their climate future world-building, and for its open-endedness, which parallels the unknown trajectory of the unfolding climate crisis. Although empirical ecocritics have raised important points about assessing the extratextual impact of novels on the reading public, I align with many environmental humanities scholars in viewing the novel as a potentially influential medium for contributing to improved relations with non-human species.

Literature Review

This thesis is situated as a contribution to the field of ecocriticism and as an investigation of how the novel evolves and develops in response to global crisis. Climate change presents a true representational challenge to novelists in its temporal and geographic scale and in its open-endedness, as no one knows how climate change will “end”. Its effect on every living being on Earth, while unevenly distributed, can be difficult to capture in a form traditionally known for focusing on the (human) individual, psychological or interior experience, and quotidian, everyday affairs. I will begin this section with a brief history of the novel and how early theories might inform an analysis of the novel in an environmental context today. I will then outline the history of ecocriticism and introduce some current ecocritical debates that inform my textual analysis.

The Novel

The origin of the novel’s emergence as a distinct literary form is contested. It is often seen as a momentous development in literary history; Franco Moretti has called the novel “the first truly planetary form” (ix). Mikhail Bakhtin theorised the novel as containing unique qualities and opportunities, describing it as a highly

adaptive form that highlights the subjectivity of the individual, and is free from the mostly rigid conventions of other literary forms such as poetry (“Epic and Novel”). Bakhtin locates the origins of the novel in the Renaissance and suggests that while the novel grew out of the literary forms popular at that time, the novel in its growing predominance has since gone on to influence the structure of other forms. Ian Watt’s mid-twentieth century assessment of the novel’s “ingenious invention” in eighteenth-century England focused on publications by Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding (2). Other attempts to pinpoint the “first” novel, such as Murasaki Shikibu’s eleventh-century epic *The Tale of Genji*, reveal disagreements about genre categorisation that remain relevant to literary criticism today, as well as persistent concerns about Anglocentrism and other socio-political considerations that are pertinent to contemporary ecocritical debates.¹⁰ Some scholars claim that realism differentiates the novel from older forms of prose, even as realist qualities exist in older narratives (Watt 18). In arguing for *Genji* to be understood as a novel, Brian Phillips describes it as a work of “astonishing naturalness” that “abounds in the texture and detail of lived reality” (373). Novelists often focus on one or a few individuals, giving the reader detailed access to the characters’ inner lives, and try to craft a narrative that a reader might find believable in the context of their own life and experiences, in contrast with earlier adventures, romances, and epics that, by design, recounted fantastical or extreme stories.

The novel’s popularity in the U.S. and Europe accompanied a gradual rise in literacy rates in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Printing had become less expensive, and books became more widely available. In its early days, the novel was criticised for diverting attention from pedagogical and religious texts. The novel’s appeal to female readers was greeted with suspicion, unless they read so-called “polite novels”, which restated the moral lessons of “conduct books” in a vaguely fictional manner (Armstrong 105). Interestingly, one could argue that the eco-novel of today is more obviously pedagogical than some of its

¹⁰ Although first-wave ecocriticism is often dismissed for its focus on eighteenth and nineteenth century English and American writers, ecocritics have been notably self-aware from the discipline’s earliest days of its potential to be a global, multicultural field of inquiry. In the first ecocritical anthology, Cheryll Glotfelty anticipated future “international” volumes, “for environmental problems are now global in scale and their solutions will require worldwide collaboration” (xxv).

relatives. It is written not merely to entertain or tell a diverting story, but sometimes also to educate and even persuade readers. Eco-novelists often write with a specific extratextual goal in mind, such as raising awareness about climate issues and influencing readers to do more to protect the environment.¹¹ Aspects of the eco-novel may coalesce to form a “lesson” in which the reader is educated about environmental issues and implicitly instructed in how to live a more moral life. As I will discuss in chapters four and five, some degree of didacticism and the apparent presence of an “agenda” does not always preclude serious engagement with literary tradition, formal experimentation and mastery, or complex aesthetics.¹² The novel as a site for pro-environmental pedagogy that also functions as a historical record of climate change’s effects on society and culture, and the by-now highly politicised dimensions of environmentalism in the U.S. and Canada, recalls György Lukács’s theorisation of the novel as advancing consciousness of history as a constantly evolving process in *The Historical Novel* (1937) as well as his understanding of the novel as a potential site for radical anti-capitalist critique. As Lukács and others have noted, the novel is in some ways an historical document, as it reflects aspects of its time that become clearer in retrospect (23). While many eco-novels have a future-oriented, predictive quality now, they will serve as part of the historical record of climate change in the future.

Scholars ascribe a seeming paradox to the novel in that it simultaneously contributed to the formation of a modern concept of national identity while increasing a sense of global interchange and connectivity. Timothy Brennan

¹¹ See interviews with Franzen (Brodesser-Akner), Kingsolver (Walsh), Ozeki (Meeks), and Powers (Alter).

¹² Many of the authors in this thesis have expressed worries about coming across as didactic or prescriptive, pre-empting a common criticism of scholars and critics of the eco-novel that I will consider throughout the thesis. Barbara Kingsolver has insisted that *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* is not an “instruction manual”, even though it is filled with information, practical advice, and musings about the potential collective effects of a variety of individual choices that prioritise sustainability (10). Ruth Ozeki draws a distinction between using the novel to “persuade” or “teach” readers and conceiving of the novel as a forum through which to explore one’s ideas and questions and “interrogate the world” (Meeks). But for all their wariness of didacticism, they acknowledge that they care deeply about the environment, and their interviews and non-fiction reveal a clear intention to positively influence environmental discourse. Ozeki has said, “I’m terribly concerned ... and I think everyone ought to be, too” (Meeks). Ultimately, most authors of eco-novels, even pessimistic ones, express tentative hope that fiction is powerful, and that their work has the potential to make a positive difference. Kingsolver has said “the only responsibility artists have is to understand the power of our craft and use it carefully ... all fiction has the power to create empathy for the theoretical stranger” (Walsh). This thesis understands the category of “stranger” as including non-human life forms, much as Kingsolver does in novels such as *Prodigal Summer* (2000).

observes that the rise of the novel historically coincides with the rise of the modern nation-state. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's connection between the rise of the novel and the emergence of the nation-state in *Imagined Communities* (1983), Brennan writes that the novel helped to "standardise language, encourage literacy, and remove mutual incomprehensibility", but it also "allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation", building on and perpetuating national myths and a sense of national identity (8). Regarding "the creative side of nation-forming", Brennan describes nations as "imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role" (8). At the same time, as Brennan draws on Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, the novel created something like a global language. With the novel's rise, "the world becomes polyglot, once and for all and irreversibly. The period of national languages, co-existing but closed and deaf to each other, comes to an end" (Bakhtin 12). Brennan's study of the novel's role in the construction of national myths and identity hints at how authors are often arranged geographically.¹³ Simultaneously, the novel has contributed to the idea of a global village: "It was in the novel that previously foreign languages met each other on the same terrain, forming an unsettled mixture of ideas and styles, themselves representing previously distinct peoples now forced to create the rationale for a common life" (9).

When contemporary novels consider climate change, they are addressing a global phenomenon. Does the climate crisis then change or challenge the novel's purview? Ghosh, while defending the novel's capacity to address climate change,¹⁴ argues that contemporary literature has mostly failed to substantially engage with the climate crisis. Ghosh suggests that the novel as it is usually conceived and written is less able to convincingly represent "universes of boundless time and space that are conjured up by other forms of prose narrative" (61), such as the

¹³ This thesis admittedly does nothing to disrupt this common organisational frame, for reasons I outline in the methodology section.

¹⁴ For example, Ghosh rebuts the assertion of authors such as Richard Powers that anthropocentrism prevents novelists from discerning the agency of other species (Alter). Per Ghosh, "Nowhere is the awareness of nonhuman agency more evident than in traditions of narrative" (64).

epic, posing a problem for novelists who wish to confront the confoundingly mammoth subject of climate change. Novels, Ghosh writes,

[C]onjure up worlds that become real precisely because of their finitude and distinctiveness. Within the mansion of serious fiction, no one will speak of how the continents were created; nor will they refer to the passage of thousands of years: connections and events on this scale appear not just unlikely but also absurd within the delimited horizon of a novel. (61)

Ghosh acknowledges that the everyday, small-scale, psychological purview of the novel is complicated by climactic events, which have in some ways evolved from “unprecedented” and unlikely events to everyday realities, yet often appear fantastical or unbelievable to the reader (24). Ghosh offers as an example his personal experience of surviving an unforeseen tornado in Delhi in 1978. Fictionalising this “unheard-of” but true event in a novel is “to court eviction from the mansion in which serious fiction has long been in residence”; “such happenings” are perceived to be the domain of supposedly lesser genres of fiction, such as melodrama, fantasy, horror, or science fiction (7). The subjective distinction between “literary” and “genre” fiction is relevant to discussions of environmental literature. Ghosh asserts that “fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals” (7). This is changing, as ecocritics attend to an ever-widening array of genres and forms, but critical preference for “literary” fiction endures, even as more ecocritics have begun to take “popular” fiction seriously.¹⁵ As Brent Ryan Bellamy points out, science fiction authors have been substantively engaging with environmental issues since the 1950s but have largely been overlooked by critics in favour of works by acclaimed, prize-winning, “serious” novelists who have only recently turned their attention to the environment.

Many of the questions addressed in studies of the novel – about the local, national, and global; pedagogy versus entertainment; realism; individual focus,

¹⁵ Special environmental issues of literary journals are increasingly common, and many recent issues have moved beyond canonical or prestige literature for a more capacious reach. There are many ecocritical anthologies devoted to genres such as science fiction: see, for one, *Dystopias and Utopias on Earth and Beyond* (2021), edited by Douglas Vakoch. *ISLE*, a leading ecocritical journal, has published articles on children’s books like *Ender’s Game* (Olsen 2023), picture books (Smulders 2022), and popular television series such as *Stranger Things* (McMain and Torres 2022).

genre; and engagement with history – retain their relevance and potential to illuminate aspects of the eco-novel. Bakhtin's description of the novel's heterogeneity, for example, relates to discussions of the numerous styles and narrative strategies of contemporary eco-novelists by ecocritics including Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach, who make a case for the capacity of literature to impactfully confront climate change. Novels emerging from all over the world depict multifarious experiences of climate change, work "through problems of privilege, suffering, and inequity", and revisit history through an ecocritical lens (9).

Undaunted by climate change's "global scope", the widely varying approaches taken by eco-novelists and other writers yield diverse insights. "[H]ighly localized" cli-fi, for one, can "draw attention to particular phenological shifts" or "construct sentient, non-human characters"; other works of sci-fi and beyond may depict "plots and characters" that "sprawl across generations or continents ... planets and galaxies" (9). Regardless of the size and timescale of the fictional world constructed, contemporary novelists are actively responding to climate change and environmental issues in creative, often moving, and potentially mobilising ways.

The novel's perhaps inevitably limited focus sometimes troubles authors. Per Margaret Atwood, "A novel is always the story of an individual, or a group of individuals; never the story of a generalized mass" (*Writing* 100). This feature of novels has been the subject of experimentation by eco-novelists who try to extend a sense of "realism" beyond the human realm and imagine the consciousness of non-human animals or plants, as Richard Powers does in *The Overstory*, although they face creative limitations. Powers originally wanted to write a book "where all the main characters were trees" but felt the ability to craft a narrative without an individual and specifically human centre was "beyond my power as a novelist, and it probably would have been beyond the imaginative power of identification of most readers" (Hamner). Even as narrative anthropocentrism and the limitations of scope and realism trouble eco-novelists, they also present opportunities for creatively addressing the climate crisis. That the novel lends itself to presenting both "the individual life in its larger perspective as a historical process, and in its closer view which shows the process being acted out against the background of the most ephemeral thoughts and actions" (23), as Watt (drawing on Lukács) says

of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), makes it arguably well-suited as an avenue for the documentation of climate change as a historical process.

Although scholars make much of the novel as a realist mode, it is also a form given to escapist entertainment, and has always walked a fine line between realism and fantasy. Defoe's adventurous account of Robinson Crusoe's shipwreck, for example, and Crusoe's improbable but textually justified survival and thriving in his new environment are indicative of the escapist appeal of the novel's fictional form when compared with religious instruction manuals, history books, and other nonfiction works commonly in circulation at the time. Crusoe's unlikely and largely idyllic survival experience is echoed in many eco-novels, particularly dystopian or post-apocalyptic novels that depict one or several individuals surviving a catastrophic climate event who often attempt to rebuild a human society. This plot structure is one way for eco-novelists to approach the *planetary* scope of climate change via a *localised* setting that centres on a manageable cast of characters or focal points while the larger context of planetary disaster looms over the proceedings. It also reveals some of the contradictions and limitations of the concept of realism as well as the categorical fuzziness of "serious" literary fiction versus what is sometimes called "popular" or "genre" fiction. Trexler writes that climate disasters, which in the latter half of the twentieth century were most often depicted in "science fiction, thrillers, dystopias, and apocalyptic narratives", obstruct "literary authors" (223) because they "disassemble the illusion of realism, rupturing quotidian experience" (224). Eco-novels unearth "uncomfortable gaps between recognizable realism and global warming's forceful reconfiguration of late-twentieth-century ways of life" (224). Trexler suggests that the evolving perception of climate change from a "distant, hypothetical future" to a "contemporary reality" has affected the trajectory of the eco-novel (223). What was once the purview of "genre" fiction has begun to receive a realist treatment from such novelists as Franzen and Kingsolver: "Realism's 'here and now' ha[s] strayed into the Anthropocene" (224).

Brennan's analysis of the novel's contribution to the idea of the "global village" and Moretti's characterisation of the rapid adoption of the novel as a "planetary form" suggest the plethora of creative opportunities it affords that may make it a surprisingly apt form through which to confront the planetary problem of

the climate crisis. An individual novel need not achieve an all-encompassing, scarcely imaginary planetary “perspective” to do so effectively, although authors continue to test the limits of imagination and craft as climate change intensifies and new technologies and political strategies arise to address it. Ursula Heise, observing the tensions and “conceptual contradictions in many current discourses about place”, finds that the environmentalist movement (within which she includes ecocritics) has found a “practically productive” balance between “issues of global citizenship and activism” and “a return to the local and a celebration of a ‘sense of place’” (*Sense* 8). Heise interrogates the seeming opposition between the local and the planetary, positing that the texts she reads demonstrate “ways of imagining the global that frame localism from a globalist environmental perspective” (9). Heise’s development of “eco-cosmopolitanism” recalls Bakhtin’s and Brennan’s observations about the novel, which may simultaneously contribute to national identity and promote the idea of an interconnected “global village”, even if these conceptual frames seem at odds with one another. Heise writes that environmentalists must grapple with “deterritorialization”, an effect of globalisation that signifies the “the emergence of new forms of culture that are no longer anchored in place” (10). “The challenge that deterritorialization poses for the environmental imagination”, she writes, “is to envision how ecologically based advocacy on behalf of the nonhuman world as well as on behalf of greater socioenvironmental justice might be formulated in terms that are premised no longer primarily on ties to local places but on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole” (10).

These kinds of academic exhortations, while cogent and defensible, seem to implicate some environmental writing as insufficient for the times we live in. But other scholars, including Trexler, recuperate the localism and “sense of place” encouraged by most nature writing, suggesting that the immersive detail of more localised stories helps to shift the perception of climate change “from something that ought not to exist to something that already does” (233). Localised climate fiction may be written and read within national and global contexts; distinctions between the spaces or places that serves as the settings for novels are not always straightforward. Trexler writes that there are different “branch[es]” of eco-fiction that offer different insights; ecocritics and readers should not expect one work to

provide a purely comprehensive realisation of the “environment” and the planetary phenomenon of climate change. Realist fiction, for example, can disclose the current reality of climate change in our own lives, while speculative fiction may imagine “novel technical, organizational, and political approaches to climate change” (233). The specific genre and scope of an eco-novel, to the extent that this can even be neatly categorised, does not indicate anything about the profundity of its engagement with environmental themes.

Even so, the scalar boundaries of the novel can nearly overwhelm eco-novelists, as Timothy Clark writes. Global phenomena like climate change present authors with a real challenge: how does one conceptualise, make legible, and dramatise something so big? Many ecocritics have adopted the term Anthropocene – literally, the “new epoch of humans” – to describe a new geologic era, one in which “human beings are now operating as a major geological agent at the planetary scale”, leaving “an indelible mark on the planet” (Clark, *Value* 59). This view has not been formally adopted by the International Union of Geological Sciences, according to which we remain in the Holocene epoch which began eleven thousand years ago. The Union recently rejected a proposal to adopt the Anthropocene as an official geological epoch (Witze). I find the concept of the Anthropocene presentist and perhaps unintentionally anthropocentric in the way that it stresses human singularity and power, but it gives some sense of the planetary scale of the problem as it is conceived by concerned parties and has been widely adopted by ecocritics to describe our current era. Dipesh Chakrabarty summarises the significance of acknowledging the likely geological impacts of anthropogenic climate change, which he describes as collapsing the long-standing distinction between natural and human history. “To call human beings geological agents is to scale up our imagination of the human,” he writes, “To call ourselves geological agents is to attribute to us a force on the same scale as that released at other times when there has been a mass extinction of species. We seem to be currently going through that kind of a period” (206-207). Johns-Putra and Sultzbach’s discussion of the widely differing scopes of contemporary eco-novels suggests that the complexity of the issue of scale in climate change fiction invites diverse approaches; the massive timescale and impact may act as a creative catalyst more so than an irretrievable limit. This thesis will demonstrate the variety

and depth of eco-novelists' answers to difficult questions of scope and representation. "Scale effects", as Clark writes, "make us reconceive of human life within far less predictable and even capricious contexts of social and material change" and "may open a vertiginous sense that almost anything might happen" (*Value* 55).

Many scholars, especially material ecocritics, have problematised the humanist remit of the novel in relation to developing an environmental ethics that recognises nonhuman agency. As I contend in the essay "The Hero of This Novel Is a Tree: Biocentric Narrative Strategies in Contemporary Eco-Fiction", novels are unavoidably anthropocentric, which has proved vexing to authors and critics who wish to evade or outthink narrative anthropocentrism, as they believe it is at the root of our ecological crisis (see, for one, Callaghan 80). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, for example, argues that only by recognising and elevating nonhuman agency "can we apprehend the environment disanthropocentrically, in a teetering mode than renders human centrality a problem rather than a starting point" (xxiv). Material ecocritics encourage interventions and reframings that, in Johns-Putra's words, "disrupt" the centring of human perspectives. Material ecocritics tend to challenge or collapse distinctions between humans and nonhumans, as when Jane Bennett writes that "human being and thinghood overlap ... we are also nonhuman and ... things, too, are vital players in the world" (4), or when Timothy Morton suggests that we radically expand the species and things we consider to be "people" (*Ecological* 8). Even as material ecocritics insist that humans are "ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (Alaimo 2), and roundly criticise anthropocentrism wherever it might be found, I concur with Clark's analysis that the discipline projects quite human interests (and, I would add, the very specific interests of literary scholars) onto non-human and non-animal matter. As Clark writes, material ecocritics tend to over-ascribe agency to flattened "matter", whilst simultaneously (and contradictorily) understanding matter as "storied" and able to be "read" (*Value* 127). As will become clear over the thesis, I diverge from some other critics in that I view the novel's inherently humanist and, admittedly, anthropocentric qualities positively in the context of ecological crisis, as a potential means for mobilising environmental care and ethics or galvanising action, rather than as a problem that must be outmanoeuvred to creatively depict nonhuman

creatures and priorities. Although material ecocritics rightly recognise dynamism in non-human subjects, this quality is not in contention as much as they might suggest. As Ghosh writes, “Nowhere is the awareness of nonhuman agency more evident than in traditions of narrative” (64). This remains the case in the novel; even as novels are written by humans and traditionally or inevitably represent human characters, interests, and perspectives, eco-novelists are highly interested in the other species and matter with which we share existence, whether the emphasis is on humans’ role in the living world and relationships with other beings, or the human character is marginalised insofar as is possible in literature generated and read by humans.

The creative, imaginative avenues available to an author become complicated when the author endeavours to educate the reader on real-world issues, as is often the case in cli-fi. As Nixon writes, spectacular narrative events that grip the reader and create drama may not accurately represent the slow-moving or invisible nature of climate change and other environmental problems, presenting a dilemma for the author who wishes both to tell an exciting story and to faithfully depict the risks of environmental degradation (14-15). The role of the novel in the twenty-first century, in the face of world-wide challenges like climate change, has seemingly evolved into a more pedagogical realm than the novels of the eighteenth century. Authors of eco-fiction continually push up against the limits of the form and attempt new narrative interventions, such as biocentric perspectives.

Ecocriticism

The term *ecocriticism* was coined in the 1970s by William Rueckert, who set himself an “experiment” to apply “ecological concepts to the study of literature” (115). Rueckert’s definition of the term was more specific and science-focused than its descendant: he wanted to understand “the ecology of literature”, (somewhat fancifully) likening reading to an energy transfer where human-stored information is released into the biosphere (110). But ecocriticism did not come into being as a distinct field until the establishment of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) in the early 1990s. The most significant commonality

between Rueckert's original essay and the establishment of ecocriticism as a field was Rueckert's early recognition of impending environmental catastrophe:

[W]e will soon lose the environment in which we write and teach ... All the creative processes of the biosphere, including the human ones, may well come to an end if we cannot find a way to determine the limits of human destruction and intrusion which the biosphere can tolerate, and learn how to creatively manage the biosphere. (112)

In the first ecocriticism anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Cheryll Glotfelty writes that while the field of literary studies constantly adapts and responds to current events, it had thus far "ignored the most pressing contemporary issue of all, namely, the global climate crisis" (xv). The new field of ecocriticism, as Glotfelty described it, would undertake "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Although Glotfelty foresees the multi-directional potential of the field, she writes that all ecocritics will "share the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (xix).

Glotfelty and her colleagues show prescience about the trajectory and interdisciplinary promise of ecocriticism as well as its nascent shortcomings, such as the limits of its early focus on mainly U.S. and British authors, especially Romantic poets and nature writers. They also predicted some of the definitional and conceptual debates that would come to dominate future iterations of the discipline, such as the boundaries of terms like nature, environment, wilderness, or planet. I use most of these terms broadly and understand humans to be animals who are part of the environments we dwell in, and environments to be complex interconnected systems of living beings and matter. Although I recognise the association of terms such as "nature" and "wilderness" with things or areas that are nominally unpolluted or unmediated by human intervention, there is arguably no place on the planet that is untouched by our presence,¹⁶ and the use of such terms does not necessarily comment on the extent to which an area is impacted by humans. Glotfelty's ostensibly reasonable comment that "Ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii) hints at an enduring conceptual

¹⁶ This is evidenced, for example, by recent studies on the ubiquity of microplastics (see Lang).

challenge for ecocritics, many of whom advocate against anthropocentrism and for a more complex view of ecosystems and interconnectivity yet persist in constructing the human as separate from or outside the natural environment. Adeline Johns-Putra points out that Glotfelty's choice of the term "earth-centered" establishes a "stated preference for (rather than simple interest in) the non-human over the human" ("Ecocriticism" 744). (This questionable distinction was already present in Rueckert's 1978 essay, as he differentiated the "human community" from the "natural community" [107].) Many ecocritics have since interrogated nature/culture and human/non-human dualisms; Glotfelty herself critiques "Western dualisms" that "wrench humanity from nature" (xxiv). Perhaps ecocritics perceived the sequestration of "earth" from the previous interests of literary studies as a necessary reframing or corrective following critical neglect of the connections between environment and literature, as they perceived (perhaps erroneously given the focus on landscape and nature in, for example, Romantic poetry) humans had always been a subject of literary studies, but non-human animals and nature had been overlooked. ASLE, its affiliate journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE), and *The Ecocriticism Reader* ushered in countless such discussions and debates, and the field rapidly expanded.

Terry Eagleton famously asserted in *Literary Theory* (1983) that all literary criticism is political (169-170). Ecocriticism's political dimensions are perhaps even more obvious and routinely referenced than some other branches of literary criticism. Many ecocritics view their work as explicitly political or even activist in nature. Eagleton's Marxist perspective is echoed in ecocritical analyses that emphasise capitalism's facilitation or hastening of climate change (for example, Jason Moore's 2016 *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*). The relative lack of ecocritical attention to the figure of the fictional activist is especially interesting because so many ecocritics view their own work as a form of activism. Garrard writes that "ecocriticism is an avowedly political mode of analysis ... Ecocritics generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a 'green' moral and political agenda" (*Ecocriticism* 3). Clark notes that while the discipline extends in many directions, ecocritics "almost universally" share a "progressive commitment" (*Value* 3). Ecocritics, Clark continues, understand "human abuse of the natural world" as "the corollary of unjust or oppressive systems of government and

economics, and forms of social organisation (hierarchy, plutocracy, patriarchy) that both abuse other human beings and which have no hesitation taking a similar stance towards anything else.”

The scholarly disciplines that pre-date (and build into) ecocriticism, such as ecofeminism, often foreground this understanding. Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen describe ecofeminism as “a robust philosophical practice with engaged, activist roots” (1). Karen Warren defines ecofeminism as taking the position that “important connections exist between the treatment of women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and the treatment of nonhuman nature on the other”; the task of ecofeminists, as Warren conceives it, is to establish these connections and “determin[e] which are potentially liberating for both women and nonhuman nature” (3). Ecofeminism is grounded in far more activist praxis than some other critical disciplines, which may adopt radical rhetoric but have little basis in real-life organising. As Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva point out, ecofeminism “became popular only in the context of numerous protests and activities against environmental destruction”, as when the Three Mile Island meltdown prompted the organisation of the first ecofeminist conference in 1980 (13). There is a variance between ecocritics who organise, protest, and advocate beyond the essay and seminar, as Shiva does, and ecocritics who see their intellectual output as itself a kind of activism. I will return to the conceptualisation of writing and scholarship as activism throughout the thesis.

Despite Clark’s observation that “the majority of ecocritics see their intellectual work as a kind of worthwhile activism” (4), ecocritics have not focused attention on the representation of activism and activists in the literature they study, instead tending to focus on more abstract concepts and definitions surrounding nature/environment, forms of oppression, and the impact of capitalism, as well as aesthetics and recurring themes, or the surveying of environmental literature grouped by location or time period. Ecocritics such as Buell have certainly shown interest in matters of environmental justice, noting that impoverished and otherwise marginalised groups are disproportionately impacted by climate change, and Debra Rosenthal has encouraged professors of environmental literature to teach the intersection of poverty and climate issues. Ecocritics’ lack of engagement with specifically activist characters may have something to do with the simple fact of

their absence from numerous works that are identifiably interested in the environment. Early in this project, I was surprised to see the relative infrequency of environmentalist characters in U.S. and Canadian eco-fiction in general. Novels that did feature environmentalist characters rarely wrote them as originating from poor or otherwise marginalised backgrounds, despite Giovanna di Chiro's observation that most activists with intersectional environmental and social justice interests are "low-income women and predominantly women of color" (300). The protests organised by local, grassroots activists, whether real-life campaigns like Love Canal or #NoDAPL or fictionalisations of similar events, would seem to make for compelling narratives, but representations of easily recognisable activists (protestors, "tree-huggers", etc.) often focus on middle- or upper-class white men looking for adventure or valour. Some conscious efforts to restore literary focus and agency to those most affected by environmentally damaging practices, such as those who live in areas where economic output is centred around mining, logging, or corporatised agriculture, can be found in novels by Ash Davidson, Ruth Ozeki, Ann Pancake, and Diane Wilson. Authors who write less obviously "activist" characters – who I will nonetheless make the case should be understood as effective environmental advocates – include Louise Erdrich and Barbara Kingsolver.

One simple if disputed way to understand the progression of ecocritical studies comes from Buell's widely cited "waves" metaphor, borrowed from feminism (*Future* 17).¹⁷ The first wave of ecocriticism conceived of its function as "the high-brow cultural arm of the environmental movement" (Garrard, "Introduction" 1), taking direct inspiration from environmentalists and grounding critical work in an appreciation for nature and the aesthetics of wilderness. Early ecocritics devoted attention to pastoralism, British Romanticism, and nature writing, including work by American transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau and poets like Walt Whitman and John Clare. Garrard writes that the first wave was "inclined to celebrate nature rather than querying "nature" as a concept; keen to derive inspiration as directly as possible from environmental activism; and willing to

¹⁷ Buell notes that the wave metaphor has limited utility – he prefers the more apt but less historicised "palimpsest" (17) – but it has been widely adopted.

defer in matters of truth to the natural sciences, especially ecology” (2). Ecocritics at this time often echoed the reverence and wonder for nature shown by their subjects and presented nature as a threatened thing worthy of protection and care.

However, it did not take long for a new “wave” to emerge, one that questioned many of the assumptions and operating principles of the first. Despite the prescience of first-wave ecocritics, who were strikingly self-conscious about the field’s early white American/British focus but also its extensive potential, some second-wavers evinced a sense that they were correcting the first-wavers’ thoughtless oversights. Second-wave ecocritics were noticeably sceptical of the reverence for what they perceived as an erroneously pure representation of nature expressed in the writing of transcendentalists and Romantics, and even “sharply critical of environmentalism”, as Garrard observes (2). Queer, deconstructionist, and postcolonial varieties of ecocriticism branched out and took issue with environmentalism’s “metaphysics, its gender and racial politics, and its troubling relationship with colonial and neocolonial histories” (2). Buell’s and Garrard’s analyses of ecocriticism’s evolution goes some way to explaining ecocritics’ reluctance to engage with the character of the environmental activist, as the second wave showed far more scepticism and ambivalence towards political activism and ecology than the first wave. The somewhat narrow geographic, temporal, and cultural focus of early ecocriticism was redressed by such emerging subdisciplines as postcolonial ecocriticism, advanced by Sharae Deckard, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, George Handley, Graham Huggan, Rob Nixon, and Helen Tiffin, among others. Huggan and Tiffin dispute the idea that postcolonialism is “inherently anthropocentric”, noting the field’s long-held interest in “ecological concern” (3) and asserting the centrality of place in the formation of culture. DeLoughrey and Handley draw inspiration from Donna Haraway’s definition of nature as “something we cannot do without, but can never ‘have’” (“Promises” 296). Haraway wrote that humans must “find another relationship to nature besides reification and possession” (296). The plundering of colonised lands and fear or domination over unfamiliar landscapes are just some of the points of interest in postcolonial ecocriticism. In Chapter Four, I will explore the ecologically devastating efforts of white U.S. and Canadian settlers to force “New World”

landscapes to conform to their homelands' agricultural methods and expectations for resource extraction.

If the second wave was invested in diversifying – deepening and complicating what we understand as “nature” and showing a greater interest in a range of world literatures and media – the numerous developments and sub-disciplines of ecocriticism in the putative third wave have probably happily exceeded the expectations and imagination of early ecocriticism's proponents. Today, ecocriticism is a highly interdisciplinary field that extends in almost every conceivable direction. Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic (ASLE's founding president and the editor of the *ISLE* journal for twenty-five years) first described third-wave ecocriticism in 2009, which purportedly “recognizes ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries; this third wave explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint” (6-7). Examples of third-wave ecocriticism might include Adamson's own work on environmental justice and Ursula Heise's transnational “ecocosmopolitanism”, which explores globalisation through an ecological lens. Heise asks “how ecologically based advocacy on behalf of the nonhuman world as well as on behalf of greater socioenvironmental justice might be formulated in terms that are premised no longer primarily on ties to local places but on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole” (*Sense of Place* 10). Whether there has been a fourth or even fifth wave of ecocriticism is the subject of some debate; Slovic has described the material turn as ushering in a fourth wave, although some scholars locate this within the third. More recent third- or fourth-wave efforts include empirical ecocriticism, which essays to bring together empirical and analytical methods to better understand the effect of environmental literature on readers. In an environmental communication anthology, Slovic et al. share the external focus of some ecocritics but call for a wider sourcing of scholarship to help people understand how to positively impact climate policy and other pressing issues: “A fascination with the intricacies of human discourse and an intrinsic belief that improving communication practices might help to sway society toward more positive humanitarian and ecological practices are at the heart of both environmental communication studies and ecocriticism” (3-4). Empirical ecocriticism shares many of the same study- and data-driven interests of

environmental communication studies, not taking for granted that pro-environmental literature necessarily leads to a shift in attitudes and behaviour: “does literature – do words – really have any impact upon audiences? In a sense this is the ultimate question of pragmatic ecocriticism/environmental communication studies” (8). Whether or not contemporary ecocritics think of themselves as contributing to a new, distinct phase of the discipline, more literary scholars than ever are writing about the intersections of environment, literature, and other subjects.

Alongside empirical ecocriticism, which seeks to combine traditional approaches to literary analysis with empirical studies of reader responses to better understand the impact of environmental literature, this thesis draws on much-discussed subjects in affective ecocriticism and animal studies. A theme that recurs in all five chapters is the role of empathy as it relates to care for the environment. Some critics worry about the limitations of empathy as a strategy for improved interspecies relationships and stewardship. Lori Gruen developed “entangled empathy” as an alternative to animal rights campaigns centred on exposing animal suffering, which seems to have a limited effect on human treatment of non-human animals. Entangled empathy is a “type of caring perception focused on attending to another’s experience of wellbeing” (3). Gruen urges readers to recognise the extent of our relationships with other animal species and “attend” to their “needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities” (3). Gruen herself has acknowledged some limitations with this ethical model. Danielle Sands describes entangled empathy as problematically predicated on characteristics we share with others; Sands instead makes a case for the development of empathy that is not “limited by sentience” (20). Anat Pick’s concept of “creaturely ethics” depends not on personhood but on perceiving the innate vulnerability and materiality of all living things, including plants. Some attempts to theorise or develop interspecies empathy are labelled as anthropocentric or anthropomorphic, but such charges foreclose the mobilising opportunities of these likely unavoidable frames, as I argue in “The Hero of This Novel Is a Tree”. Chengcheng You endorses the positive potentialities of some forms of anthropomorphism, suggesting it may be “ethically necessary” for developing “constructive interspecies bonds” (184). Anthropomorphic stories, You writes,

“contest species boundaries, revisit the animal in us humans, and encourage a nature-friendly perspective worthy of attention” (188).

Novels may be a productive site for the development of pro-environmental ethics predicated on empathy. Suzanne Keen has posited an innate connection between storytelling and empathy in *Empathy and the Novel*, to the point of suggesting that the development of empathy through reading novels can lead to altruistic behaviours – something the ecocritics Wojciech Malecki and Matthew Schneider-Mayerson are interested in assessing through empirical studies. Intriguingly, Keen argues that “readers’ perception of a text’s fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathetic responses, by releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through skepticism and suspicion” (xiii). With this hypothesis, Keen assesses fictiveness as an asset for the development of empathy. I concur with Keen’s depiction of narrative empathy as both a strategy and a subject of contemporary novelists, which can be deployed for extratextual purposes – as when an author wishes to influence reader responses to environmental issues.

Other recurring themes or strategies that an author of eco-fiction may use in their portrayal of climate change and that surface in the chapters that follow include humour. Humour helps to alleviate the psychological strain of reading about the more serious subjects explored in novels by such authors as Atwood, Boyle, Franzen, and Ozeki. It can also provide a counterpoint to the sometimes unrelenting pessimism of eco-fiction. Experiments with temporality are also common in eco-novels, as novelists engage “the challenge of speaking for an ecosystem that may operate on scales of time and space that often elude normal human perception or judgment” (Clark, *Value* 9). Many of the novels in this thesis employ a dual-timeline structure, or what Marco Caracciolo has called “dyadic” narratives, which show how a place has changed over time because of climate change. Dyadic narratives lend gravity and authority to the depiction of climate change: the phenomenon cannot be denied or minimised within the context of the story, because the reader is forced to confront a future setting whose altered state is already determined and clearly described. Although many eco-novels are set in a future that is often dystopian or post-apocalyptic, some of the novels in this thesis, particularly in Chapter Four, are set wholly or partly in the past, where they

examine an activist history that may usefully inform environmentalist responses and strategies in the present.

As with any sphere of literary criticism in which participants seek to create something “new”, there have inevitably been what might be called overcorrections, or unfair assertions of oversight.¹⁸ The turn against pragmatic involvement in environmentalism and the strong sense of pessimism expressed by some ecocritics can be perplexing in terms of what it says about the field’s greater purpose. My thesis pushes back against some efforts to deconstruct or dismiss first-wave ecocritical ideas and subjects of interest. For example, I am sceptical of the highly expressive ecocritical turn against nature writing documented by Christian Voie. Voie compellingly defends the emotional power and mobilising capacity of the genre, which already embodies critics’ post-nature writing calls to “address the public more effectively” (Emmett and Nye 8). The idea, as Clark writes, that nature writing portrays “a purist notion of environment” that “just can’t work in today’s world” (*Value* 88) is, Voie argues, “informed by stereotypes that are themselves outdated” (201). Analyses disputing the nature/culture, wilderness/urban dualisms raise valid points, but ecocritical efforts to “connect nature writing to the ‘limited focus’” of first-wave ecocriticism denies the genre’s complexity, flexibility, range, and communicative capacities (200). As Voie writes, no critic can observe the legacy of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) and dispute its affective, informative, literary, and communicative qualities. I believe that reconnecting with the land ethics and philosophies of North American “nature writers” such as Thoreau, Carson, Leopold,¹⁹ and Barry Lopez – who extol connecting with and feeling a sense of affinity with nature and one’s environment – is an illuminating pursuit in our era, and my thesis highlights several novelists who write fiction that is deeply engaged with the influential non-fiction of these earlier writers.

Although empirical ecocritics rightly point out the difficulty of quantifying the effect of exposure to nature or to reading accounts of experiences in nature, it is

¹⁸ Garrard calls attacks regarding what is left out of scholarship, rather than what is included, the “Argument from Absence” (“Ecocriticism” 220-221).

¹⁹ Leopold’s articulation of a “land ethic” and his encouragement to “think like a mountain” in *A Sand County Almanac* resonate through many of the texts included in this thesis.

clear from surveying eco-fiction that many authors who are dedicated to addressing climate change evince real awe and respect for the non-human environment that has substantially contributed to their advocacy or writing work. The historical and cultural impact of U.S. and Canadian environmentalist figures springs from the pages of eco-fiction written as recently as 2020. For example, Thoreau and Walden Pond lurk, in one way or another, behind almost every work discussed in this thesis. Whether it is T.C. Boyle satirising the self-sufficient eco-man; Tommy Orange questioning whether the city is also a part of nature (Thoreau's cabin in the woods was just a short distance from town, and he was far from a hermit); Richard Powers' awe of "miraculous" trees (Thoreau often wrote about trees' proximity to heaven, and like Powers he attributed the most positive of human traits to trees and other living things: "Nature is full of genius – full of the divinity" [*Journal* 5 Jan 1856]); Louise Erdrich's probing of whether the land white men such as Thoreau claimed "belonged" to anyone; or Barbara Kingsolver's breathless appreciation of the natural world and its wonders, Thoreau looms large in the imagination of U.S. writers of eco-fiction. Buell contends that "his stature as a representative of American green thinking" is unmatched (*Future* 2). Thoreau's work as a proto-environmentalist writer continues to inspire ecocritical responses to this day. As Buell sees it, "no writer in the literary history of America's dominant subculture comes closer than he to standing for nature in both the scholarly and the popular mind" (2).

Edward Abbey's non-fiction accounts of his solitary appreciation of wilderness as a park ranger and later as an anarchist paired with his explosive, activist-driven adventure novels make him a precursor to many authors of eco-fiction today. Abbey was himself inspired by Thoreau: he wrote that "Thoreau's mind has been haunting mine for most of my life" ("Down the River" 272). Abbey's biting, politically incorrect dialogue and diatribes live on in Boyle and Franzen's accounts of frustrated, misanthropic activists in Chapter One. Like Abbey, many authors of eco-fiction also write non-fiction that explores their recurring themes and topics from a different angle. Other recurring figures in the U.S. and Canadian environmental imaginations include what Shepard Krech named and problematised as the "ecological Indian" (1999). Interdependent, connected relations between Native Americans and the land, which are often contrasted with settler attitudes,

are apparent in novels by Leslie Marmon Silko, Gerald Vizenor, and N. Scott Momaday and poems by Joy Harjo and Linda Hogan. Despite these alternative visions of what Donna Haraway calls “naturecultures” (which conceives of “nature” and culture as fundamentally entangled [“Companion Species” 100-101]), a certain “frontier spirit” has continued to dominate depictions of environmental activism, in which eco-loving protagonists strive to get “back to nature” – a concept critiqued by Robert Watson, among others, for romanticising a pristine, untouched space that denies “the indispensable complexity of nature” (45).

This thesis draws on the work of many scholars and authors, not all of whom are still living or working in the U.S. or Canada. Many of the novelists I analyse reference or appear to be influenced by important North American environmental figures who wrote about their experiences for a wide audience. These include the conservationist John Muir, the environmentalist Bill McKibben, and the poets Mary Austin, Gary Snyder, Robinson Jeffers, and Wendell Berry, whose “writing project[s]” are “indistinguishable from their living project[s]” (Quigley 249) and who made lifelong commitments to come to know and appreciate the place in the world where they live. Influential authors who predate my time frame include Abbey, Silko, Annie Dillard, Farley Mowat, and Wallace Stegner. I have found graphic novels by Paul Chadwick to contain fascinating visual media representations of environmentalist debates occurring contemporaneously in the real world and in novels and non-fiction of the time.

As will be clear from the introduction, I often reference the foundational work of Buell, Garrard, and Clark, as well as ecofeminist or feminist ecocritics such as Greta Gaard, Lori Gruen, Carol J. Adams, and Laura Wright. Many ecocritics, especially new materialists such as Jane Bennett and Stacy Alaimo, are influenced by the proto-posthumanist theories of Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, and Karen Barad. Latour’s claim that “we have never been modern” pervades ecocritical discussions of humans, environment, and technology (31); similarly, Haraway’s cyborg thesis predates material ecocritical interest in dissolving the presumed lines between human, machine, and non-human other. Material ecocritics are also influenced by Barad’s theory of agential realism, which describes matter as “produced and productive, generated and generative ... agentive, not a fixed essence or property of things” (137).

In my discussions of the prevalence of post-apocalyptic cli-fi, I am indebted to Claire Colebrook and Pieter Vermeulen. My analyses of literature and environmental justice owe credit to Kyle Powys Whyte especially, and my reliance on scholars outside of or adjacent to literary criticism, such as Norgaard and Albrecht, indicates the interdisciplinary leanings of ecocriticism. I have found the pragmatism and true desire for change undergirding the work of founding empirical ecocritics Malecki, Schneider-Mayerson, and Alexa Weik von Mossner to be reliably illuminating. Patrick Murphy, the founder of *ISLE* journal, has also contributed enormously to the environmental humanities through his literary criticism, instigation of new ecocritical themes and directions, and incisive explanation of psychological frames that perpetuate climate inaction.

In mentioning figures like Carson, Muir, and Thoreau, I want to foreground their contribution as something like writer-activists. These great conservationists have, through their nature writing, inspired millions of readers to consider their own place in the world and connect with nature, whatever that might look like; their impact on appreciation for and protection of wild spaces is immeasurable. Empirical ecocritics are right to ask how readers are affected by literature, but there are some impacts that can never be quantified. This thesis will keep in mind whether the novels surveyed within can be seen as their own contribution to environmental progress. Although writing looks very different than public protest, sabotage, diplomacy, and science, it can perhaps be viewed as approaching environmental challenges in a different, creative, imaginative way – one chapter in the environmentalist playbook.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter identifies some overarching trends in the depiction of environmental activists, both in their personal attributes and in the sense of who is represented as engaging in activism. Many qualities associated with fictional activists – action-oriented, anti-authoritarian, reckless, and specifically male – derive from Abbey's famous monkey wrenchers in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1979), which inspired the formation of the real-life environmentalist group Earth First!. In a case of art imitating life imitating art, Earth First! itself inspired fictional activist groups in Michael Christie's *Greenwood* (2020) and T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of*

the Earth (2000). I will consider Boyle's satirical depictions of enraged male activists in *A Friend of the Earth* and *When the Killing's Done* (2011), who exemplify some of the negative stereotypes associated with environmental activists at the same time as they mock an environmental outlook that is overly fatalistic. Boyle's activists are alienated, angry, and driven by anarchic impulses, lacking self-awareness even as the narrative underlines how these motives harm their efficacy. Boyle also utilises a framing that we will see is common in narratives concerned with environmental decline, in which a character from the near future looks back on their experiences in the past, which are shown in a dual narrative. This framing device lends authority to the author's warnings about climate change, because in their future, climate disaster has already come to pass, and it allows the future character to comment on the ostensible mistakes of the past with the already-known outcome as a guidepost. By including two of Boyle's novels, I also consider how novelists build on their existing oeuvre, as many of the themes and plot points of Boyle's earlier novel are sharpened and intensified in the next. I pair Boyle's work with a reading of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), which satirises a presumptuous, oblivious strain of upper-class, white, male-dominated environmentalism. Like Boyle's anti-heroes, Franzen's Walter Berglund is plagued by anger and resentment towards the women in his life, highlighting the problematic role of gender in many environmental narratives.

I am also interested in the possibilities for and representation of environmental justice in eco-novels. Schneider-Mayerson has observed that this issue is often overlooked in climate fiction, particularly among U.S. authors, who "depict climate change in specific, limited, and surprisingly problematic ways" ("Whose Odds?" 945). Environmental justice activists have made significant contributions to environmental advocacy and policy change throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, so their lack of representation in fiction relative to other types of activism is conspicuous. This raises the question of who is associated with environmentalism and perceived and defined as an activist. Franzen's *Freedom* recognises the tensions between a type of for-profit, corporate environmentalism and local grassroots activism, critiquing notions of environmentalism as belonging to a rarefied class and underlining the disproportionate power of corporate environmentalism, the aims of which are often

at odds with those of local activists. At the same time, *Freedom's* framing privileges a white, male, upper-class environmentalist perspective while the less powerful local activists, whose perspectives are not focalised, are barely sketched. I want to think about how this bears on the wider perception of environmentalism as an upper-class concern. I will ask if texts like *Freedom* work mainly to perpetuate or dismantle the identification of environmentalism with positions of privilege.

In Chapter Two, I draw on scholarship concerning religious and environmental movements to analyse the intriguing association of fictional activists with (often fundamentalist) religion. Parallels between religion and environmentalism are common in U.S. and Canadian eco-novels, reflecting the countries' unique religious histories. In this chapter's novels, religious conviction is portrayed as the motivation or explanation for "radical" environmentalism, and the rhetorical blurring of religious observance with zealotry and dogmatism in the narratives included here exposes an interesting conflation. I will examine the dogmatic level of conviction initially used to contextualise or justify the activism of the God's Gardeners in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013), who form an Earth-loving, vegetarian, religious cult in response to a corrupt and broken-down society, but whose origins and motives are revealed to be more complicated over the course of the novels. I also examine the second novel in Octavia Butler's *Parable* series (1993-1998) about a young woman in a near-post-apocalyptic U.S. who invents her own eco-religion, Earthseed, and founds a sustainable commune called Acorn. The multi-novel structure of these series allows the authors space to build out their worlds and religions, including hymns and sermons that largely draw from and reinterpret Christian or Catholic doctrine to promote eco-friendly behaviour. As with *A Friend of the Earth*, Atwood and Butler employ dual timelines and framing strategies that foreground the impacts of various choices and tactics. I contend that the anxieties and mistrust underlying perceptions of religious sectarianism and fundamentalism are somewhat paralleled in attitudes towards climate change, and that insinuating a link between religion and environmental activism reveals an impulse to disregard the objectivity or validity of deep concern for the environment.

Religion, which impacts so much of our cultural understanding about the environment, becomes a thesis throughline. See, for example, the difference

between Christian theology and Native American origin stories, as they are related in chapters two and four. We also see reconsiderations of Christian approaches to nature in Chapter Three, and pragmatic discussion of how to reconcile religion with environmentalism in Chapter Five. Even the myth of the nature-conquering white man haunting the texts in Chapter One is inflected by early-U.S. religious settler ideas: the Puritan William Bradford's conception of the land as "desolate" and "wild", a place God has provided humans with that must be tamed and reorganised to our own liking, with resources endlessly replenishable (Gatta 19).

In Chapter Three, I turn to representations of unlikely or untraditional environmental defenders, including human children and non-human animals and matter. Present and future children are often invoked as a reason to adopt more pro-environmental practices; their lack of legal autonomy, rapid development, and perceived passion and naivete combine to make them unique points of focus in novels with environmental themes. The presence of child activists in Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* (2020) and Michael Christie's *Greenwood* (2020) address how "we expect our children to be the ones to halt the deforestation and species extinction and to rescue our planet tomorrow, when we are the ones overseeing its destruction today" (Christie 420). Positioning children as activists interrogates the practical implications of this idea and offers new opportunities for understanding our environmental plight and the psychological mechanisms that facilitate it. The other protagonists featured in this chapter offer a window into recent efforts to "de-centre" the human from environmental literature. I will return to Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy to analyse the genetically engineered Crakers and pigoons and touch on Richard Powers' experiments with positioning trees as protagonists in *The Overstory* (2018), a "biocentric" effort that poses thorny narrative challenges. The uncategorisable creature at the centre of Jeff VanderMeer's *Borne* (2017), and a humanoid AI character in the same novel, work to fortify the novel's post-apocalyptic wasteland and make it a more liveable place for all things that grow. Agentic things grow even stranger and less legible in VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014), which sees the world start to be overrun by a new, mysterious biospheric entity. The inherent unknowability of things outside the self creates narrative challenges that VanderMeer and others meet with imaginative and complex strategies.

I also want to bring environmental justice into critical arguments that push for “de-centring” the human in environmental literature. I will address how this effort is advanced narratively in Chapter Three. Some texts exhibit a reverence for “more-than-human” nature²⁰ and uphold a dichotomy between humans and nature that may be problematic; others work to dismantle that dichotomy and reimagine interconnectedness and agency among all life and matter. The concept of a “more-than-human” activist can subvert ideas of the human as the primary stakeholder in environmental preservation while illuminating how human traits and social customs contribute to climate change – and how these traits and norms might be countered with less destructive modes of thinking and relating to others. The texts in Chapter Three also demonstrate how authors of “genre” fiction, such as sci-fi and horror, often approach environmental issues in complex and illuminating ways.

Widening the perspective in this way – attempting to take us beyond the gaze of the human – holds possibilities for new ways of understanding and acting. However, many of the surveyed narratives suggest that Earth is better off either with far fewer humans or none. I want to suggest that while popular and possibly more narratively exciting, a fatalistic outlook on the future of the human species – one in which the “environment” can only continue without us – may be fundamentally incompatible with a stated interest in environmental justice.

Chapter Four continues the thesis’s movement towards more generally positive depictions of activism, particularly environmental justice activism. The novels in this chapter centre on Native American and First Nations experiences in what are now called the U.S. and Canada. The authors weave their stories from historical fact to counteract revisionism and forgetting. The use of fact and recounting history through the continuously adaptive Indigenous tradition of storytelling reclaims that history and offers an interesting analogue to the persuasive deployment of fact as a counter against climate change denial. The environmental significance of ancestral land threads through Louise Erdrich’s 2020 novel *The Night Watchman*, in which Ojibwe activists attempt to maintain their land and fight further displacement during the era of the U.S. government’s Indian

²⁰ This term, coined by ecologist David Abram to describe the natural world, has gained traction among some ecocritics.

termination policy. Drawing on Whyte's scholarship, I argue that this is an inherently environmental fight. Tommy Orange's 2018 novel *There There* recounts the 1969-1971 occupation of Alcatraz Island, in which Native American activists demanded the return of out-of-use federal lands. By remembering history, these texts offer a productive counterpoint to climate fiction's tendency to look forward (often with fear or pessimism), raising hope for present and future mitigation efforts and exploring the conditions under which activists successfully press for change. I then read Tanya Tagaq's *Split Tooth* (2018), which has been described as an Indigenous "wonderwork", to consider that neo-genre's possibilities for representing environmental themes.²¹ Tagaq's formal experiments in *Split Tooth* reflect perspectives on life and nature that foreground the interdependence and shifting intra-actions of all living matter. Tagaq blends myth, memoir-style prose, and poetry while simultaneously maintaining a sense of historical record for the recent inhabitants of Nunavut as well as a sense of "universe time" that is non-linear and that contextualises human life within a much larger and ultimately unknowable universe.

Chapter Five turns to optimistic, solution-oriented texts: Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000) and *Flight Behavior* (2012), Ruth Ozeki's *All Over Creation* (2003), and Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020). For Kingsolver and Ozeki, who share an interest in agricultural issues, key drivers of change include community relations, patience, and communication. Unlike the texts discussed in Chapter Two, which liken dedicated environmentalist groups to religious cults, Ozeki and Kingsolver approach religion with a grounded realism, acknowledging the need to reconcile rural Christian attitudes with the science behind sustainable agriculture. Additionally, Buddhist influences are observable in Ozeki and Robinson's writing. Robinson presents a comprehensively science- and policy-positive vision of climate change mitigation in *The Ministry for the Future*. The characters in this novel exemplify Robinson's emphasis on competence, expertise, and dedication, which are critical for problem-solving but

²¹ Daniel Heath Justice's term "wonderwork" refers to Indigenous literature that transcends the categories of Western literary genre. A wonderwork "gestures, imperfectly, to other ways of being in the world, and it reminds us that the way things are is not how they have always been, nor is it how they must be" (2017).

challenging to make narratively exciting. A key formal quality uniting the texts in this chapter is polyvocality. The inclusion of multiple perspectives and voices foundationally supports the authors' linking of equitable social relations with environmental causes. Although the novels are concerned with thoroughly modern issues, they engage with literary tradition. References to *Frankenstein* (1818), Ovid, Byron, and *Utopia* (1516) suggest the novelists' continuation in a long-standing literary engagement with environmental themes and subtly disputes characterisations of factually accurate, politically engaged eco-novels as irredeemably didactic or agenda-driven.

Throughout the thesis, I emphasise how some authors see their writing as activism in itself: raising awareness, inspiring engagement, and offering new perspectives to galvanise effective climate action. Citing interviews and non-fiction to better understand how writing itself can be understood as a form of activism, I also draw on empirical ecocriticism to consider the limits as well as the benefits of this approach. I investigate what the divergent approaches seen in the chapters indicate about writers' hopes for change and beliefs around efficacy and what they may signal for future efforts. I consider how some writers' interest in activism impacts the construction of their narratives and whether there is inherent tension between the authors' activist intentions and their creative drive. Ultimately, I find that critical attention to portrayals of environmental activism in the novel suggests the evolving nature of that literary form and its potential to be harnessed to impact real-world attitudes and behaviours that lead to climate action.

Chapter 1: “To be a friend of the Earth, you have to be an enemy of the people”: Environmental activist tropes in the novels of T.C. Boyle and Jonathan Franzen

This chapter will establish the presence of core environmental activist character tropes in contemporary U.S. and Canadian eco-novels by reading three novels with indicative depictions of environmental activists: T.C. Boyle’s *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) and *When the Killing’s Done* (2011) and Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* (2010). Commercially successful and critically acclaimed novelists, they have distinct stylistic differences but explore many similar themes, including nature and climate change, environmental activism, masculinity, family, and the pressures and contradictions of modern life, particularly as experienced by white middle- to upper-class Americans. I will show how characters in their novels exemplify an environmental activist archetype that is commonly found in contemporary environmental literature – that is, an activist who is frequently hypocritical, unreasonable, and impulsive; motivated by non-altruistic reasons such as anger, revenge, or the desire to prove one’s intelligence, worthiness, masculinity, or general superiority; and less concerned with efficacy and impact than with getting attention or feeling correct, virtuous, or righteous. I will consider that while the characters in these novels embody many common, generally negative activist stereotypes, Boyle and Franzen apply a humorous, critical eye to such tropes that evince an engaged contribution to environmentalist discourse and the consideration of effective strategies and messaging as the climate crisis deepens. This chapter will also touch on how gender, race, and class are treated in literature that depicts environmental activism, and how this intersects with perceptions about who belongs in the environmentalist sphere. The purpose of this chapter is to begin to establish the prevalence of these tropes in environmental novels to better understand the attitudes and challenges shaping contemporary U.S. and Canadian eco-novels.

T.C. Boyle is a popular and prolific author of eco-fiction. I have chosen to analyse his 2000 novel *A Friend of the Earth* alongside the 2011 novel *When the Killing’s Done* to see how his approach to environmental fiction and to the real-

world debates and protests from which he draws inspiration has evolved over time. *A Friend of the Earth* is a dual timeline novel (which, as we shall see, is a common eco-narrative framework) in which Ty Tierwater, a former radical environmentalist, looks back on his adventures during the 1980s and 1990s from his future vantage point in 2025, in which he attempts to survive climate disaster and preserve highly endangered mammals. Boyle sharpens the foibles of Tierwater, a flawed but sympathetic protagonist, in the character of Dave LaJoy in *When the Killing's Done*. LaJoy is also a radical activist but is much more explicitly positioned as an antagonist than his predecessor. *When the Killing's Done* depicts the militant animal rights activist LaJoy's battles with the National Parks Service scientist Dr. Alma Takesue, who is leading an ecological restoration project that involves exterminating invasive species in the Channel Islands.⁴² Both books are set in and around Santa Barbara, California; critics such as Alexa Weik von Mossner have credited Boyle's prescience in accurately imagining climatic changes that have occurred in the region (*Affective Ecologies* 151). Both Tierwater and LaJoy engage in illegal acts of ecotage. Boyle's shifts are evident not only in the more dramatically negative characterisation of the radical activist, but in the subversively more neutral narrative perspective; where Tierwater was the only point-of-view character in *A Friend of the Earth*, who told his own story from two different points in time, *When the Killing's Done* alternates between LaJoy and Alma, whose perspectives are conveyed via a third person narrator. This structure affords a slightly more balanced distance than Tierwater's first-person narration, yet the equal time devoted to LaJoy and Alma's differing ideas and perspectives nonetheless favours Alma in terms of which environmental advocate is portrayed as more just, effective, and rational.

I will also read Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, a family saga centred on an unhappily married couple named Patty and Walter Berglund who face infidelity, parenting struggles, post-9/11 malaise, depression, and the tension between political ideals and personal fulfilment. In *Freedom*, Franzen addresses similar

⁴² Some ecocritics have problematised "invasive species", which are non-native plant or animal species that crowd out native species and threaten biodiversity and ecological health. I argue against drawing a rhetorical parallel between invasive species and human immigration in Chapter Five.

aspects of environmentalist discourse as Boyle, particularly the reputation of environmentalism as an upper-class pursuit or hobby, where grassroots activists are often marginalised in favour of the interests of powerful and wealthy individuals. The novel also depicts some forms of environmentalism as an outlet for male rage. As characters, Walter Berglund, Ty Tierwater, and Dave LaJoy all express facets of destructive masculinity and entitlement that impact their ability to be fair and effective champions of nature. I will begin the chapter by discussing how the novels critique a form of environmentalism inflected with masculine anger; although the male characters claim to love animals, their actions reveal a patronising and often hostile attitude to both women and non-human animals. I will then discuss time and narrative structure, making the case that time jumps in eco-novels help authors establish the likely impact of anthropogenic climate change and show how spaces are ecologically harmed over time. I then discuss how the authors critique a form of upper-class environmentalism, even as their character focus does not leave room for working-class activists and/or the perspectives of people who are more affected by climate change. I conclude with a consideration of didacticism in the eco-novel, which I will revisit in Chapter Five. Throughout, I foreground how the authors portray misanthropy (and related issues, such as a focus on overpopulation) as an obstacle to environmental progress.

Animal rights, sexism, and misanthropy

The hyper-masculine environmentalist has a long history in representations and public perceptions of activism. The hands-on activists of Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), whose explosive direct actions are interspersed with sexual conquests, make environmentalist commitment look like an exciting (if male-oriented) Wild West adventure. Ursula McTaggart, explaining how the highly influential novel uses emotion and drama to inspire action, finds that Abbey "models a set of feelings and behaviors for his readers"; his characters leverage their "awe and anger" by "claiming political power" (317). McTaggart describes Abbey's view of activism as "optimistic," one that insists his characters and readers "have agency to bring about change" (318). Abbey's activists are seemingly unstoppable, and the narrative does not prompt readers to seriously consider the

morality and efficacy of tactics that seem designed for emulation. McTaggart shows how *The Monkey Wrench Gang* has effectively functioned as a handbook for ecotage since its publication, influencing activist strategy, philosophy, and numerous direct actions by groups and individuals.

Boyle and Franzen's treatments of the intersection between environmentalism and gender issues are relevant to ecocritical debates about gender and sexuality. Ecofeminists explored the connections between the exploitation of the earth and the oppression of women long before ecocriticism was an established field. A newer sub-discipline, ecomasculinities studies, concerns itself with how to change male-associated behaviours and attitudes as they relate to exploitative environmental practices. Ecomasculinists propose concepts and archetypes that challenge the man/nature dichotomy, such as Allister's eco-man (2004), a figure who resists the purported tendency of man to be entranced by a romantic vision of the wildness of nature, while also attempting to dominate or "master" that nature. Some ecomasculinist scholars align their work with ecofeminism, while others critique ecofeminism as "essentialist" (Gaard, "Ecofeminism" 26). While the subjects embraced by ecomasculinists are relevant to wider ecocritical inquiry – one recent anthology contains entries on imperial masculinity and climate fragility, ecomasculinity and resilience in the face of climate disaster, and the tensions between eco-anxieties and behavioural expectations related to breadwinning (Pulé and Hultman) – it is hard to find one that has not already been taken up by ecofeminists. I would argue that recent interest in ecomasculinities indicates the enduring relevance of ecofeminist theory, which has been enormously influential to ecocriticism, and does not prove the need for a separate field of inquiry.

The long association between ecofeminism and animal studies is particularly relevant for the novels in this chapter because of the male protagonists' oft-stated affinity with the animal kingdom.⁴³ The men in these novels view themselves as protectors of animal interests – defenders of the non-human world – which gives the authors an opportunity to delineate the complicated and lopsided

⁴³ See, for example, *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, edited by Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen.

dynamics between (hu)man and non-human animals. Franzen's Walter Berglund feels more affinity with animals than humans, but the narrator explains that his feelings derive from misanthropy: "The love he felt for the creatures whose habitat he was protecting was founded on projection: on identification with their own wish to be left alone by noisy human beings" (486). The "love" Walter feels for animals is predicated on an assumption: that his own feelings about "noisy human beings" are shared by non-humans. Franzen's use of the word "projection" highlights the affective and psychological factors in Walter's perception of non-human animals: his understanding of animals is inevitably constructed and mediated through the lens of his personal problems. The passage reveals the supremacy that even a misanthropic animal lover like Walter will grant to humans over animals when the narrator says that Walter loves nature "only abstractly", as much as "good novels" and "foreign movies" but less than his family (486). The equivalence drawn between loving animals in the same way as books or films supports Matthew Schneider-Mayerson's contention that humans "comprehend" climate change (and, in this case, non-human nature more generally) "as a narrative via frames that are employed in everyday discourse", rather than the "physical fact" that it is ("Whose Odds?" 944). Here, Walter's "love" for animals is compared to somewhat edifying forms of entertainment ("good novels" and "foreign movies"). Franzen seems to suggest that even "nature lovers" like Walter maintain a significant degree of distance from non-human nature and understand it through a personal and anthropocentric lens – something that the eco-novel might have a role in challenging, or reframing. That Walter's own family is not included in the despised category of "noisy human beings", although they do noisily irritate him, is a recurrent theme in Boyle's novels too, where his misanthropic activists yearn for a reduction in the human population that never includes their own loved ones.

In *When the Killing's Done*, the animal rights activist LaJoy also entertains ideas about animals that rely on misanthropic and anthropocentric assumptions. He conceives of animals as helpless, innocent, and worthy of greater consideration than humans: his "sympathies lie with the animals that *can't* help themselves" (69). Although LaJoy might not realise it, his presumption of animal helplessness indicates that he views humans as superior in some way, possessing a malevolent

agency that animals do not. Already, we see that Walter and LaJoy's "love" of animals is only relative to their greater dislike for humans. Boyle also explores relations between the species in *A Friend of the Earth*, as Tierwater risks life and limb to manage his wealthy employer's exotic mammal sanctuary. Boyle skewers the employer's humorously transparent self-regard: "I want to save the animals nobody else wants ... The ones nobody but a mother could love. Isn't that cool? Isn't that selfless and cool and brave?" (11) In such interactions, Boyle suggests that many apparently altruistic environmentalist interventions are spurred by impure motivations. Boyle is no moralist, however much pleasure he may take in pointing out hypocrisy: the goodness of the employer's motivation would matter less if his arrogance did not make him so ineffective.

In an ecofeminist reading, declarations of animal friendship do nothing to alleviate the men's role as dominators of the non-human world. Carol J. Adams writes that it is in fact women who have common cause with animals, as both women and animals have been historically exploited by men.⁴⁴ Not incidentally, Walter, LaJoy, and Tierwater are plagued by problems with the women in their lives, which the novelists connect to their treatment and perception of animals. The men display sexist attitudes almost as frequently as they undermine their own insistence that they are friends or protectors of animals. LaJoy's rivalry with Alma Takesue is far from professional: he aggressively condemns her "manipulations" against nature, organises protests and illegal counteractions, and calls her a "condescending little bitch" and worse (82). Since becoming a vegetarian, LaJoy is disgusted by meat-eating, and laments the way his mother-in-law "sucked at her filet mignon as if she were draining it of blood drop by drop" (223). Yet LaJoy consumes fish and factory-farmed eggs and dairy and is irritated by his girlfriend's unshowy but committed veganism. Apart from his characterisation of LaJoy as hostile and unpleasant, Boyle most obviously condemns his brand of activism through its outcomes. LaJoy's own "manipulations" on the Channel Islands, which unlike Alma's have no basis in science, result in much animal suffering, both directly (the animals he captures to release on the islands injure themselves trying

⁴⁴ See *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (first published 1990) or *Neither Man nor Beast* (first published 1994).

to escape their cages) and indirectly (the effect of his release of non-native species on the islands' native populations is impossible to estimate). The injury to these animals is mirrored when LaJoy's reckless actions result in the death of a young woman. His callous, self-preserving reaction leave no doubt about his true regard for life, whether the victim is a human female or a non-human animal. The young woman and the island's animals are merely tools for LaJoy to express his outrage at the world and his refusal to be contained by laws and social norms.

Tierwater similarly misrepresents his relationships with the non-human world; his words are undermined by his actions. He is a wealthy carnivore who rails against the environmentally harmful choices of others. His worst environmental sin occurs when he burns down thirty-five thousand acres of forest in an effort to sabotage a logging company. Tierwater claims that he acts "out of frustration and an overriding love of the earth" (158), but his actions have more to do with his emotions ("frustration") than selfless care for nature. When he says, "to be a friend of the earth, you have to be an enemy of the people" (43), he evinces a worldview that sharply separates humans from the non-human world. This exposes the lie at the heart of his supposed adherence to the philosophy of deep ecology – "that all elements of a given environment are equal and that morally speaking no one of them has the right to dominate" (151). In setting the fire, Tierwater grants himself the right to dominate. Tierwater's belief that what is good for people and what is good for "the earth" are mutually exclusive is disputed by authors like Wendell Berry, who writes, "There is in fact no distinction between the fate of the land and the fate of the people. When one is abused, the other suffers" (18).

In their characters' expression of conflicted, inconsistent views on man versus animal, Boyle and Franzen reflect and engage with philosophical debates about animal rights and environmental restoration methods. In *Freedom*, Walter Berglund is so fixated on the welfare of birds that he traps a neighbour's cat – "the sociopath of the pet world" (582) – and takes it to a far-away shelter "that would either kill it or fob it off on an urban family who would keep it indoors" (584). Walter,

like his creator Franzen, is anguished by the plight of birds.⁴⁵ He has a habit of ruminating on terrible environmental statistics, calculating what has happened since he woke up that morning: “New acres of American sprawl: 1,000. Birds killed by domestic and feral cats in the United States: 500,000” (363). Recalling statistics fills him with rage, which he channels into his advocacy work, but his fixation on listing environmental horrors also serves as part of Franzen’s narrative experiment to include accurate information about real-world environmental issues in a way that is internally consistent and justified as part of plot and characterisation. At the same time as the reader is learning something about Walter’s obsessive tendencies and data-driven anger, they are also learning something about the environment that may spur them to act, as it does Walter. Even though Franzen makes Walter’s outrage more understandable vis-à-vis the concerning information he imparts, Franzen also critiques Walter’s response to this knowledge and the conclusions he draws. Walter laments the decline of birds but does not spare a thought for the cat who will be killed and the family left guessing its pet’s fate, thanks to his intervention.

Tierwater and LaJoy are likewise oblivious to the extent to which they interfere with a nature whose independence they extol. It becomes clear that their overtures to protecting “animals” and “nature” obscure their preference or revulsion for specific species. When LaJoy protests Alma’s plan to reduce the non-native rat population on the Channel Islands, he claims that the “loss of a single animal – a single rat – is intolerable, inhumane and just plain wrong” (62). But when his lawn is dug up by raccoons, the intolerability of one lost life becomes a distant concern. Once the offending animals are “captured, under his control”, LaJoy’s outrage is replaced by “satisfaction. Vindication. And a strange sort of power, of species superiority – they’d assaulted him ... and now he has them and it’s up to him to dispose of them as he chooses” (230). He releases them on the islands to create a new invasive species problem.

⁴⁵ Franzen is an avid birdwatcher (Brodesser-Akner). Walter’s primary job in the novel involves the preservation of one endangered species, the cerulean warbler, a favourite of Walter’s billionaire boss.

Boyle describes each character's antipathy for the other in alternating third-person limited narration. LaJoy's thoughts are steeped in unprovoked hostility, and most of his actions are taken to bother someone else; Alma only reacts to blatant provocations and tries not to let emotion guide her professional choices. Because of the close third-person perspective, we see that Alma, unlike LaJoy, often considers whether her approach may be weak or logically inconsistent. Via the narrative flow from LaJoy's inner thoughts and experiences to Alma's, Boyle strongly implies that LaJoy is defacing Alma's car with slurs like "Pig Killer" (236), because LaJoy has had thoughts similar or identical to the content of the vandalism. Instead of reacting with unexamined defensiveness, as LaJoy would, Alma considers that this assessment of her is "incontestable":

For a long moment, she stands there, feeling the sting of it. She *is* a killer, of pigs, of rats, of fennel and star thistle and of the introduced turkeys that will have to be removed in good time, a killer in the service of something higher, of restoration, redemption, salvation, but a killer all the same. Sadness, with its rotten edges, fills her – and weariness ... (236)

Alma's assessment of herself as a "killer" – and of what constitutes nature and life – is much more complex and expansive than LaJoy's, who regards species in a simple hierarchy that ascribes greater agency and moral culpability to humans. Alma thinks not only of animals, but of fennel and star thistle, other "invasive" species that are living things, too. Although her work-mandated killing "wear[es]" her, her belief that she kills "in the service of something higher ... redemption, salvation" evinces a conviction that echoes the language of religious faith, except she has faith in science instead of religion. The disdain LaJoy feels for women like Alma – who is arguably the greater "defender" of animals – underscores the connections between men's oppression of women, animals, and earth.

Environmental activist traits: masculinity and anger

Activism motivated by anger or other negative emotions is common in eco-fiction, regardless of the activists' gender. Well-known real-life activists like Greta Thunberg often appeal to anger in an effort to spur action (see, for one, her 2019 U.N. Climate Action Summit speech), and the environmentalist Bill McKibben has

written that his “solution” to climate change is to “get outraged” (2012). The masculinity of Boyle and Franzen’s activists – and the fact that they are paired with female characters who are more calm, strategic, rational, and altruistic – is not incidental, and is relevant to the way their activism is developed and enacted. Both authors are clearly aware of and interested in addressing gender and class issues in environmentalist spaces, but by placing white, upper-class male characters at the centre of the narratives, non-white, female, and working-class activists are inevitably side-lined. Ecocritics like Schneider-Mayerson have critiqued the lack of “climate justice” in U.S. fiction, as the populations most likely to be adversely affected by climate change are often the least likely to appear as eco-fictional protagonists (“Whose Odds?”). This is observable in *Freedom*, where local, grassroots activists appear briefly as an apparent plot device to provide an annoying but easily dispatched obstacle to Walter’s competing interests. As with Boyle, there is an uncomfortable tension between Franzen’s portrayal of this dynamic, wherein he critiques the male character’s perspective but might also be said to centre that perspective in a way that crowds out others.

Boyle attempts something of a corrective to the gender imbalance in *A Friend of the Earth*, which is dominated by Tierwater’s rage and regret, with his later novel *When the Killing’s Done*. Boyle cannily employs structural devices that invite comparison between Alma and LaJoy’s personalities, actions, and ideas, which support his exploration of real-world environmentalist projects and tactics. Despite the evenly divided narrative, in which both Alma and LaJoy’s weaknesses are probed, Boyle positions Alma as the hero of her story. Yet, Alma feels flat and uncharismatic, and the female characters in both novels feel sketchily drawn, paling in comparison to the rich, visceral portrayals of the male characters, who (despite their proximity to cartoonish emotions and expression) feel real.

Alma’s lack of charisma is possibly intentional – something along the lines of the “rational scientist” that so often appears in Kim Stanley Robinson’s novels, which I will discuss in Chapter Five. Where LaJoy’s passages are made colourful with his frenetic emotions and wild behaviour, feeding the reader outrage and drama, Alma’s perspective foregrounds neutral scientific observations. Feeling nervous before a speech, she tries to make herself smile: “she can feel the tug of it

in the muscles at the corners of her mouth, and what are they called? Zygomaticus major. Or minor. Or both...it's been a long time since she took anatomy, and if she remembers correctly something like seventeen different muscles are required to achieve a full smile" (94). Perhaps it is because of grounding techniques like this that Alma is more controlled than LaJoy in stressful situations, but she is a more remote and less colourful character, depriving her sections of the momentum and drama generated by LaJoy's. Ironically, the reader's desire for Alma to "win" may derive less from sympathy with her character than from antipathy to LaJoy, whom Boyle has made so thoroughly repugnant; it appears that Boyle has craftily steered the reader to choose sides in a manner reminiscent of LaJoy, who is motivated by spite, hatred, and us/them thinking instead of science and ethical principles. That Boyle simultaneously critiques binary thinking while offering the reader an effectively binary choice of whose "side" to take suggests an approach to environmental preservation that is always to some degree predicated on confrontation or opposition. William Major, writing about the purpose of empathy in environmental literature, notes that "the farther we reside from the object of our empathy ... the more difficult it is to imagine" (126). Although LaJoy is ridiculous, he is easier in many ways to "imagine" than Alma is because Boyle makes him larger than life. Perhaps this means that the reader can also imagine the problems with the worldview LaJoy represents in a way that would encourage the reader not to emulate him. The qualities that would make someone like Alma good in life – intelligence, honesty, enthusiasm for science and education – pose the challenge of making her slightly dull as a character. The shortcomings of LaJoy's style of communication are made obvious, but having the very different character of Alma allows Boyle to expose some of the shortcomings of *her* style as well, and how they might be overcome. Specifically, Alma's scientific, low-drama demeanour and communication style, and other characters' responses to that, are representative of the sort of environmental communication challenges Slovic et al. tease through in their recent anthology, which seeks to understand "the intricacies of human discourse" and "improve ... communication practices" to "help to sway society toward more positive humanitarian and ecological practices" (4). Translating hard

scientific information into actionable, persuasive communication is a challenge for Alma and for real-life environmental communicators.

Boyle's positioning of Alma and LaJoy as both foils and perspectival equals creates a narrative structure that facilitates serious examination of the conflicts and tensions in environmentalist spaces. Alma and LaJoy represent very different approaches to activism. Alma's is government-sanctioned, informed by science, and prioritises efficacy over emotion and appearance. Even though LaJoy's personality overshadows and undermines his platform, he espouses a real animal ethics that is difficult to reconcile with the approach taken by scientists. Boyle invites the reader to consider the tensions between the two approaches and how this impacts progress on environmental issues. While Alma and LaJoy's views are oppositional, their goals are similar, and the way their chapters are written – in a present-tense, third-person narrative focused on one character's perspective – emphasises the ways in which they are similar as well as different. They both like to spend time outdoors and feel passionately about animals and nature. They both struggle to express themselves and understand alternative viewpoints. Their shared musical preferences privilege political messaging over artistry and sound. Alma only listens to music that has "fire, real fire and commitment" (135) and is frequently disappointed when others do not share her taste; when she first meets LaJoy, she is pleased to see he is wearing a shirt featuring her favourite musician. Later, attending that musician's concert, Alma fantasises that the musician agrees with her on "the issues", and that if he "only knew" about her work and the challenges she faces he "would rise up in all his power and influence to back her" (139). This amusingly chaste fantasy is punctured when LaJoy's girlfriend Anise, a member of LaJoy's activist group and a professional musician, joins the stage. Alma's fantasy and its undoing suggest that it can be hard to realise what other people think about the ideals we hold dear, and that Alma and LaJoy, with their clashing ideologies, can easily imagine that the same individual – someone they both admire – would take their side.

Franzen and Boyle connect their heterosexual male characters' feelings about animals with their questionable attitudes towards women and romantic relationships. In *Freedom*, Walter is humiliated by his wife's affair with his best

friend Richard Katz, which seriously injures his already fragile sense of masculinity. Jerry Varsava humorously but convincingly notes the homonymic nature of “cats” and “Katz,” suggesting Walter’s vendetta against felines is a proxy for his anger at Richard and denotes his wounded ego (785). Walter’s war on cats is also emblematic of the tunnel vision with which he approaches environmental advocacy – he tends to focus narrowly on one or two pet causes that compromise his ability to see the bigger picture. While Walter privileges birds over cats, LaJoy mocks the “precious little birds” (62) that the National Parks Service tries to save from extinction. His privileging of rats over birds is largely contrarian and reactionary, but in both cases the preference for one animal over another has to do with the man’s personal issues and does not stem from moral and ecological considerations.⁴⁶ As with Walter, sex, jealousy, and other relationship dynamics play a role in determining LaJoy’s and Tierwater’s environmental priorities. LaJoy’s evolution as an animal rights activist is not organic: his animal rights group, For the Protection of Animals (FPA), was founded “in direct response to” the National Parks Service’s projects on the Channel Islands (72). The main activity of FPA is to oppose Alma Takesue and the institutions she works with. When we learn that LaJoy and Alma briefly dated, the hostility and inconsistency of his platform begin to make sense; he is driven by his emotional reaction to rejection. Even though LaJoy claims to be protecting animals, his desire to control Alma – to punish her for rejecting his sexual and romantic advances – is enacted in the way he uses animals to thwart her agenda.

Tierwater is also governed by emotions relating to sex and companionship. He first starts attending environmentalist events because he wants to meet women, although he is initially put off by “the perfume of forty women who want to give the impression that they’re wearing nothing at all but the scent they were born with. Natural is the word here. Earnest. Committed. And quick now, what’s an environmentalist? Somebody who already has their mountain cabin” (63). The narrator of the novel, even in these sections set in the past, is Tierwater himself; he

⁴⁶ Walter’s antipathy to cats at least has more of a basis in science. His feelings are shared by Alma Takesue: “privately she’d like to see all free-ranging cats exterminated in fact and by law” because of the threat they pose to biodiversity (58). Alma, however, does not take matters into her own hands on this issue.

looks back on his history with painful honesty, adopting a self-satirising prose style that mercilessly exposes his personal weaknesses. Old Tierwater does not sanitise his lifelong objectification of women, but he does not condemn his desire for companionship. (In fact, declining to conceal his casual sexism indicates to the reader that many of Tierwater's problems in his life, including his struggles with anger and inadequacy, are rooted in his failure to respect other people.) Although Tierwater at first mocks activists he perceives as more "committed" than he is, he meets his wife Andrea at one of these events, and she spurs him into direct action. Boyle continues to critique traditional relations between the sexes as Tierwater and Andrea frequently argue about tactics: Andrea prefers a planned and strategic approach while Tierwater is more impulsive. Even though Andrea is the more experienced activist, Tierwater tries to convince her that he is right. Boyle is unsparing in his portrayal of the ugliness of Tierwater's sexism and connects it to the deterioration of his relationships. But the pervasiveness of sexist tropes in Boyle's oeuvre, which are put to humorous uses, highlights the murkiness of critiquing sexism without upholding it.

While some aspects of Boyle's and Franzen's novels may be interpreted as reinforcing stereotypes relating to gender and class in environmentalist spaces, others challenge them. Tierwater relates how Andrea "can talk him out of anything, because she's more rational than he, more aggressive, because she has a better command of the language and eyes that bark after weakness like hounds – but then she doesn't have half his capacity for paranoia, neurotic display, pessimism or despair. Things can go wrong. They do. They will. He tried to tell her that, but she wouldn't listen" (19-20). Andrea subverts gender stereotypes by being stronger in some ways than Tierwater, more "rational" and "aggressive," not "neurotic" and paranoid like he is. Less subversive perhaps is that Tierwater's perception that he is less traditionally masculine than Andrea motivates his desire to prove her wrong – even as he recognises that she is more strategic and experienced than he is. Tierwater's self-awareness that he is pessimistic, neurotic, paranoid, and despairing, without seeking to correct these shortcomings, is partly a function of the narrative structure in which he looks back on his life with the clarity that comes with time. As he later explains, many of his negative qualities arise from his

expectation that bad things will happen based on previous experience. His paranoia functions as armour that he uses to prepare for the worst. But old Tierwater holds himself to account. When young Tierwater says, “Things can go wrong. They do. They will,” he is describing things happening in a passive sense, but old Tierwater shows how he himself created many of the conditions that led to bad outcomes. Tierwater’s self-examination in a climate-catastrophe setting invites the reader to try to understand their own role and the role of their culture and society in the current crisis.

Several decades after the publication of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Boyle and Franzen are more willing to dig into the problems with their activists’ methods and motivations as well as the inherent contradictions of an activist lifestyle. *A Friend of the Earth* is, like several recent environmental novels including Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* (2018) and Michael Christie’s *Greenwood* (2020), highly conversant with Edward Abbey’s work.⁴⁷ As McTaggart notes, the environmentalist group Earth First! was directly inspired to form by *The Monkey Wrench Gang*; Earth First! itself then inspired fictional analogues like Boyle’s Earth Forever!, to which Tierwater belongs. Much like Abbey’s monkeywrenchers, Boyle’s activists wish to be perceived as “environmental crusaders ... heroes in an action or Western movie,” facing off against “villains” who are “cartoonish, bumbling fools” (McTaggart 318). Instead, Boyle emphasises their folly. Abbey’s heroes “are superhuman—they winch cars over cliffs, push boulders onto oncoming cars, survive in the desert as they are hunted by government helicopters, fake their own deaths, and survive felony charges with minor consequences” (319). By contrast, and in contravention of Abbey’s vision of the activist who always outsmarts physics and the law, LaJoy is arrested for numerous infractions, spends years in court and thousands on lawyers, clumsily falls off a cliff and nearly dies while trespassing, and correctly perceives that other people think he is weird and alienating. Where LaJoy imagines himself to be an anti-authoritarian hero à la Abbey’s George

⁴⁷ Some lines in *The Overstory* echo *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Abbey’s Hayduke enjoys the “total independence” of time in nature but recognises a downside: “Somewhere in the depths of solitude, beyond wildness and freedom, lay the trap of madness” (114). Powers’ Adam similarly contemplates how immersion in nature challenges human ideas about sanity and reality: “Consciousness itself is a flavor of madness, set against the thoughts of the green world” (322).

Hayduke (who is generally amoral, but represented sympathetically), he is instead a hapless villain.⁴⁸ He is less concerned with safety and ethics than with looking foolish:

He can't help wondering how much more of an idiot he would have felt if he'd had to have been rescued. Or worse: a posthumous idiot, splayed on the rocks with a crushed skull and his hips reverted, forever a totem of the Park Service, just like the pygmy mammoth. *Remember that clown? What was his name? The one that splattered himself all over the rocks trying to spread vitamin K?* (85-86)

Similarly, he is overcome by fear that his foe Alma may be vindicated. Fear of embarrassment and emasculation drive LaJoy's rage.⁴⁹

LaJoy's problems are again a more heightened version of those experienced by Tierwater, who is similarly reckless but less villainous, suggesting that Boyle has sharpened his critique of ineffective tactics as the climate crisis has worsened. The consequences of Tierwater's actions range from humorously embarrassing to tragic. In one typical escapade he foolishly brings his underage daughter to a dangerous protest, gets himself arrested and knocked out, then escapes from hospital before he can be transferred to jail, only to find himself barefoot in the forest with no clothes and no plan. Where LaJoy blames others for his predicaments, Tierwater does not try to convince himself he has done the right thing; he regrets "the sheer unreconstructed foolishness, the howling idiocy – of what he'd done that morning" (57). When he is promptly recaptured, Tierwater is delighted, if only briefly, to finally get what he desires: attention. As always, Tierwater is motivated by what attractive women will think of him: he "couldn't help trying to smooth his hair down and maybe even work up a smile for" the female reporter who records his capture (57). "*Publicity, that's what we came here for*, Tierwater kept telling himself, trying to transmute defeat into victory, humiliation into triumph, but he was half naked, his hair was a mess and he felt less like a crusader than a figure out of the Opera Bouffe" (58).

⁴⁸ Tierwater and LaJoy carry on Hayduke's cultural insensitivity and hostility. Although neither man is a Vietnam veteran like Hayduke, Boyle has imbued them with a tendency to think of others as the "enemy".

⁴⁹ LaJoy embodies Margaret Atwood's apocryphal observation: "Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them."

The aforementioned buffoonery exemplifies Boyle's sardonic humour, which serves a critical purpose for the reader. Writing about *A Friend of the Earth*, Alexa Weik von Mossner notes that while the climate catastrophe in the novel is "all very serious and sad" – more so because it is realistic and less hard to imagine than many other examples in eco-fiction – "the ironical tone saves the tale from becoming depressing" (*Affective Ecologies* 45). This is important because some ecocritics, environmental communicators, social scientists, and even climate scientists are convinced that despondent or strongly pessimistic tales of environmental collapse – common in contemporary eco-fiction – are less likely to inspire readers to commit to environmental causes. The affective ecocritics Jennifer Ladino and Kyle Bladow address the communication problems of "environmental killjoys" by considering how to "recuperate" negative emotions "for environmentalist purposes in our new geologic epoch" (11). Figuring out how to effectively and appropriately harness negative emotions, they suggest, is just as important as utilising positive emotions in environmental literature. Boyle must walk a fine line between spurring readers to action and sinking readers into despair, painting a realistic and moving portrait of climate change while entertaining the audience, and his ability to do so is arguably supported by his satirical, humorous approach. The novel's satire reaches its peak during an extreme publicity stunt where Tierwater and Andrea spend thirty days, naked and without supplies, in a forest. The couple are principally interested in publicity for their "cause" – they are tortured by the nearby presence of a well-fed and -equipped journalist who has been assigned to document them – but their desire for publicity, above all other strategies, results in unintentional damage to the forest ecosystem and pointless immiseration. In their attempt to survive,

They herded fish into shallow pools ... the protected golden trout, *Salmo aguabonita*, mostly, but chub and roach too ... they extinguished a whole colony of freshwater mussels that tasted of mud ... they dreamed of food. "Reese's Pieces," Andrea would murmur in her sleep. "Cheeseburger. Doritos. Make mine medium rare." (181)

All this ecosystem meddling may be for naught: although Andrea and Tierwater are somewhat gratified by media attention at the end of their experiment, a growing

body of evidence suggests that “raising awareness” about climate change, species extinction, and decreasing biodiversity does little to effect change. Kellstedt et al. find that “in sharp contrast with the knowledge deficit hypothesis, respondents with higher levels of information about global warming show less concern” (120). Kari Norgaard theorises that denial in the face of increased awareness results from feeling helpless. She writes, “respondents who are better informed about climate change express less rather than more responsibility for the problem ... unless they feel able to do something about the problem” (68). Increased knowledge paired with low self-efficacy (one’s sense of their ability to achieve goals) results in cognitive dissonance that is ameliorated by denial.

The novel in a time of climate crisis: temporality, space, and narrative structure

A Friend of the Earth is one of the most productive texts for delineating the archetypal environmental activist in contemporary literature, because Boyle has drawn from so many literary and extratextual sources. In it, Boyle cannily summarises the characteristics and challenges of a popular, “tree-hugging” brand of American environmental activism (for example, that inspired by activist groups like Earth First! or environmental organisations like the Sierra Club) while presciently anticipating realistic impacts of climate change in a near-future California. Boyle employs a particularly effective strategy for narrativising climate change that I will return to with other novels in this thesis, something similar to the “dyadic” narrative described by Marco Caracciolo that is often present in post-apocalyptic fiction. Building on Lubomir Doležel’s “dyadic storyworlds” (narratives composed of two strikingly different spatial domains), Caracciolo observes that “postapocalyptic fiction is dyadic in its temporal extension: its setting is rich in traces of the world before the catastrophe, which may only be implied or may be shown directly” (78). The narrative structure of two temporally distant but spatially overlapping storylines may appeal to authors of eco-novels because of its capacity for imagining climate change. Often, these narratives show how a world much like our own has been decisively altered or lost in the future setting. The consequences of denial and inaction in the past are laid bare in the present or future setting. The older Tierwater, who narrates the present-day passages in first person, also

narrates alternating chapters in the third person where he reflects on his younger self's environmentalist exploits back when there was greater hope for the future of the planet. Structuring the novel so that the older Tierwater alternates between a first-person account of his present-day experiences and a third-person reflection on his younger self's environmentalist exploits (in which the older Tierwater is just barely out of frame, describing his younger self in the third person but occasionally drawing attention to his narration) in this manner allows the older Tierwater enough distance to productively reflect on younger Tierwater's mistakes. Tierwater's narration suggests that with age and experience, a young activist's beliefs may become more nuanced, realistic, and impactful. However – painfully – Tierwater is still the same person and will always be affected by the consequences of his actions. There are moments of raw honesty that lend pathos and illuminate the consequences of Tierwater's actions. The reader is led to ponder if the old Tierwater has become a better friend of the earth – and whether, as Tierwater himself believes, it is “too late” to effect change (219).

The chronological distance between the older and younger Tierwater recalls Alexa Weik von Mossner's analysis of the ironic and satirical distance between Boyle and the subject matter, which, she argues, makes the difficult subjects of climate change and extinction easier for the reader to access and contemplate. Von Mossner writes that the present-tense narration of old Tierwater's passages lends an “immediacy” to “narrated worlds and actions” that “do not yet exist in the historical reality of the reader” (*Affective Ecologies* 162). The narration gives the reader “a vivid sense of what it feels like to live in a climate-changed world” and “invites” the reader to share Tierwater's sadness about the loss of animals and the other ways in which his world has changed – which, in turn, encourages the reader to consider how *our* world has changed and will continue to change (162). Tierwater's perspective is ever-present – the crude, self-deprecating tone characterising both narratives simultaneously shows that he faithfully attempts to remember his old feelings, while expressing how he feels in retrospect, and that he is in many ways still the same frustrated, ridiculous, critical, but deeply wounded man. In this way Tierwater can take responsibility for his personal role in what is often conceived of as “collective guilt” (*A Friend of the Earth* 238) – a global, not

individual, problem. Glenn Albrecht has written that the enormity of climate change's scale can result in "eco-paralysis", where people are too overwhelmed or find it pointless to make any positive changes (83). The older Tierwater's reckoning with both personal and collective history is accompanied by some concrete actions and behavioural changes, such as his care for endangered animals – including the humans in his midst. Tierwater has developed more of a sense of responsibility towards others, regardless of their species.

A Friend of the Earth's clearly signposted time shifts, in which the chapters are headed with a date and location and alternate between first and third person, help to orient the reader in a narrative that addresses difficult themes. Boyle's spatial and temporal specificity reveals a confidence that is not shared by most other authors of eco-novels, who are vague about where and when their stories take place (see Margaret Atwood, Cormac McCarthy, or Lydia Millet). The strategy of a non-specific setting staves off threats to the reader's suspension of disbelief once the story's future date is reached in real time. Non-specificity allows some obvious imaginative leeway but is also a way to hedge that the specifics of the author's imagined catastrophe may not come to pass. Boyle's specificity accentuates his remarkable prescience: as I write in California two years before the future-set chapters of *A Friend of the Earth*, the state endures a seemingly unending barrage of destructive weather events. When one reads about Tierwater's apartment building blowing apart in high winds and rain and coalescing into a mudslide, there is no disbelief to be suspended, because odds are something equally catastrophic is taking place in California at this very moment.⁵⁰ The novel's geographical settings – coastal Santa Barbara, golden Santa Ynez Valley, the picturesque Siskiyou mountains, the green ranges and forests of Oregon – serve an additional purpose: with the novel's back-and-forth time jumps, Boyle clearly depicts the contrast between the beauty and relative health of these

⁵⁰ In 2018, eighteen years after the publication of *A Friend of the Earth*, Boyle avoided the worst of a mudslide (an after-effect of wildfire) that killed many of his neighbours in Montecito. As Boyle writes in an article for *The New Yorker*, the climax of his 1995 novel *The Tortilla Curtain* centred on "just such a sequence of events" of "autumn wildfires and the debris flows that inevitably follow once the winter rains begin" that he then personally experienced in 2017 and 2018 ("The Absence in Montecito"). While Boyle is justly commended for the prescience of his climate change narratives, he points out that many climate disasters are predictable, yet preparations and mitigation measures are insufficient or not undertaken at all.

areas in the 1990s, and the stormy, inhospitable climate of the novel's present in 2025.

Franzen also uses story structure to facilitate thematic exploration. *Freedom* is lengthy, grand, emotionally intense, and structurally intimidating, a Victorian-esque novel that is modernised by finely plotted time jumps, perspectival shifts, flashbacks, and flash forwards. Franzen's time periods melt into one another, capturing how emotion and memory work in real life. *A Friend of the Earth* has moments where old Tierwater breaks the fourth wall, as it were, when narrating passages about his younger self, at points when he is overcome with regret or emotion about the events he is relating, breaking with the façade of the supposedly neutral narrator. These moments are less frequent and fluid than Franzen's digressions into memory; *Freedom* moves seamlessly from one year to another and back in one chapter. The experience is so immersive that the reader easily forgets the "present" time of any given chapter.

When the Killing's Done is somewhat more fluid than *A Friend of the Earth*, especially when the narrative is focused on Alma. Boyle takes the reader along as Alma flashes back to formative events in her mother's and grandmother's lives. Though Alma was not present for the events, they deeply inform her sense of self. The chronological fluidity and frequently changing perspectives of all three novels underscore the resonant impacts of actions and inaction relating to environment and climate change. Just as the characters cannot escape from their past actions, none of us can fully escape from environmental damage. A malleable narrative and temporal structure prompts the reader to think about the consequences of our current trajectory without lapsing into despair. The novels draw on real climate science to inform their exploration of a better way to do things, and the reader sees the results of different approaches. The message is not that nothing matters, but that we must think ahead and plan accordingly – for ourselves and for the planet. That the fate of the environment is, in these novels, so closely tied to the thing most of us love the most in the world – our families – is another tool the authors use to inspire care for nature.

“There’s too many people in the world”⁵¹: the population bomb and misanthropic fantasy

One issue makes an appearance in virtually all novels with environmental activists: that of overpopulation, and specifically environmental activist characters’ dark wish that the human population of the world be reduced as a means of “saving” the planet. This idea gained traction in the 1960s with the work of biologist Paul R. Ehrlich, who issued dire warnings about the threats associated with population growth in polemics like *The Population Bomb* (1968). The same year, the Club of Rome, which Walter Berglund repeatedly references in *Freedom*, was founded by Aurelio Peccei and Alexander King to address the challenges of overpopulation. Walter’s description of the population problem echoes Ehrlich’s intensity and alarm: “I mean, everybody is so obsessed with growth, but when you think about it, for a mature organism, a growth is basically a cancer, right?” he says at his one and only dinner with his wife Patty’s parents (129). Acknowledging that discussion of this idea is “political poison” (129), he nonetheless argues that “*somebody* has to talk about it, and try to influence policy, because otherwise we’re going to kill the planet. We’re going to choke on our own multiplication” (130). The negativity of the word choices – “cancer,” “kill,” “choke” – underscores the topic’s unapproachability as well as Walter’s disinclination or inability to soften the messaging. Franzen addresses the commonplaceness of hypocrisy among overpopulation critics through Walter’s process of reconciling his personal desires with his recognition of the growth problem. His conviction that population growth is a “cancer” is no match for his desire to have children with his partner Lalitha, even though he already has two from his marriage to Patty. And his relationship with Lalitha is inextricable from his recovery of his masculinity or virility – the sexual and gender dynamics in his desire to have children with her are also in play. He sees his admittedly problematic desire to impregnate her as “the meaning encoded in how beautiful he found her body” (523).⁵²

⁵¹ *A Friend of the Earth*, p. 87.

⁵² Walter follows a somewhat old-fashioned arc: that of the family man and committed idealist who loses his way via corruption and temptation, but eventually finds his way back home. There is a parallel between the novel’s consideration of “sustainability” and what it takes to sustain a marriage. Lalitha’s narrative exit is convenient for the eventual renewal of Walter and Patty’s love and marriage, but Walter’s arc of return calls into question many of his commitments and principles.

Environmental activists in eco-novels frequently opine about the necessity of population reduction, without the in-depth exploration Franzen grants the topic in *Freedom*. Almost invariably, this serves to accentuate the activists' hypocrisy. Boyle succinctly captures a frequent occurrence in the depiction of anti-growth activists: that those who wish for population decline typically imagine a scenario in which others lose their lives or reproductive rights – often in a rapid, dramatic, apocalyptic event – while the person wishing for this miraculously survives and thrives in a future that is blissfully cleared of other humans. This idea is repeatedly and somewhat eagerly expressed by the radical activists in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018): a dendrologist suggests that "*the single best thing a person can do for tomorrow's world*" is to die (456), going so far as to suggest "suicide" (465). Most characters who envision the extinction of humankind find a way to exempt themselves from that same fate. (Powers' dendrologist does not, after all, go through with a planned public suicide.) Tierwater imagines such a scenario in *A Friend of the Earth*:

Sometimes, hiking the trails, dreaming, the breeze in his face and the chaparral burnished with the sun, he wished some avenger would come down and wipe them all out, all those seething masses out there with their Hondas and their kitchen sets and throw rugs and doilies and VCRs. A comet would hit. The plague, mutated beyond all recognition, would come back to scour the land. Fire and ice. The final solution. And in all these scenarios, Ty Tierwater would miraculously survive – and his wife and daughter and a few others who respected the earth – and they would build the new uncivilized civilization on the ashes of the old. No more progress. No more products. Just life. (240)

For all its fascistic overtones – Tierwater is here imagining a "final solution," after all – this vision is more transparent than many others in environmental fiction, which express a similarly apocalyptic wish but gloss over the speaker's implicit removal of themselves from the fate that must befall other, less conscientious humans. For example, the narrator notes during Walter's earlier diatribe against "noisy human beings", whom he considers inferior and diametrically opposed to the "nature" he supposedly loves, that Walter does not consider his family to be part of the abhorred human contingent; he loves them more than animals (486). Even though Walter is a member of the group Zero Population Growth, he "embraced" his wife Patty's desire for children "without reservation, because she really was exactly

what he wanted in a woman" (126). That is, Walter adapts his political beliefs to make someone he loves happy – and because he himself wants children – but continues to describe population growth as "a cancer" (129). Boyle's violent imagery – a "comet," a "plague", "fire and ice" – lays bare the contempt in Tierwater's construction of environmentalism, and the mention of "kitchen sets" and "doilies" his disdain for a consumerism he himself practiced only months before. The ones who survive his imagined disaster will magically be people who "respected the earth". There is something of a religious faith in this formulation – that somehow, the good (environmentally conscious people) will be rewarded and spared, while the bad (the ignorant owners of doilies and VCRs) will be punished by death. Tierwater's desire for a new "uncivilized civilization" – and an end to "progress" – is anarchic, with no guarantee that what comes next will be better – or what "just life" means. "Just life" recalls the ecocritical deconstruction of simplistic isolation of the human and "civilization" from nature – are not humans "just life", too? The word "just" suggests how Tierwater thinks about fairness; he correlates his imagined reduction of the offending human population with justice for other species. But this version of justice reinforces an essentialised image of nature separate from humans, one that can be restored to an older, purer state through radical conservation efforts. In Timothy Clark's words, Tierwater makes the mistake of conceiving of "environmental activism as advocating the return of places and ecosystems to some supposed 'pristine' or 'natural' state by means of simply removing human interference" (*Value* 29). When Tierwater burns down the forest, he feels like an "avenger, like a god, sweeping away the refuse of the corrupted world to watch a new and purer one arise from the ashes" (163). He becomes the violent, God-like avenger he wished for.

The identification of population growth as a pressing environmental threat can be critiqued as a way to further marginalise low-income people in environmentalist discourse. Anti-population growth crusaders like Walter Berglund inevitably lay responsibility for climate change and resource depletion at the feet of the poorest humans, who are more likely to have more children. Clark has called overpopulation a "morally obnoxious" theme (*Ecocriticism on the Edge* 9); Greg Garrard notes that "disanthropic" worlds – "worlds without humans" – devolve into

“ordinary apocalypticism and ethical misanthropy” (“Worlds” 49). That the anti-growth activist envisions, whether explicitly or implicitly, their own deserved survival, while others must make the ultimate sacrifice so that Earth may be saved, underscores the reality that people with material, social, and geographic privilege are typically more insulated and protected from the effects of climate change. While Walter does not fantasise about a catastrophic event, his “imperfectly hidden” desire for more children necessitates more freedom for him and less for others: he wishes “that everybody else in the world would reproduce a little less, so that he might reproduce a little more, *once* more”, with Lalitha (523). Those who identify population as a cause of climate issues tend to overlook the disproportionate impact wealthy people like Tierwater have on the environment. While the equation of more children with more resources seems logical, Tierwater and his only daughter almost certainly use more resources than a larger family in a developing country. That they are the survivors in Tierwater’s fantasy of “fire and ice”, and not others, reinforces the unexamined privilege behind Tierwater’s wish. Boyle critically highlights Tierwater’s lack of sympathy or ability to fully imagine others who are less different than he supposes. Tierwater does not mention specific populations in his fantasy of destruction – just faceless masses who own “Hondas” and “kitchen sets”. People without such resources do not even enter the equation. The inhabitants of poorer countries are elided as, in Rob Nixon’s words, “expendable shadow beings, weighing almost nothing in the grand scheme of things” (“Indigenous Forest Defenders”). Nixon points out how those with power have determined resources to be more valuable than the life of an individual human. An analogue to this is apparent in Tierwater’s vision, which is masked as eco-friendly: he has determined that the value of Earth – in an unspecified but apparently unblemished form – is greater than the value of the lives of other humans. Boyle thus arrives at a supremely thorny issue in environmentalism and environmental justice: although we may call for the preservation of Earth in the name of human protection, there is a persistent strain of thought among activists that privileges (a likely imaginary) environmental purity over human life and functionality. The idea that there is a true, pristine wilderness that will recover if only humans would go away persists despite ecocritical deconstruction.

Tierwater's idea resurfaces in *When the Killing's Done*, both through LaJoy's crude fantasies of human extinction and, in one of Boyle's subversions, through Alma. Alma's misanthropic construction is softer, but it points to the prevalence of the idea in environmental discourse:

Alma can't help thinking ... about a world in which the population was less than a third of what it is now, all these surplus people absent, blown away like pollen to the far ends of the earth to let the rivers recover, the forests, the animals. (136)

This is gentler than Tierwater's formulation – people would be “blown away like pollen”, implying an unrealistic painlessness, not “cleansed” by “fire and ice” – and at least expresses a specific intention behind the loss of human life: it would give rivers, forests, and animals a chance to “recover”. (As Alma is a scientist, the reader wonders if “a third” of the population is chosen intentionally or at random.) It is nonetheless a fantasy, and a violent one at that; there is little rhetorical difference between Alma's “surplus people” and Nixon's “expendable shadow beings”. Would Alma conceive of her daughter as a “surplus” person, an acceptable sacrifice for the purported recovery of non-human entities that cannot be guaranteed?

Population discourse has obvious implications for narrative eco-fiction. For one, characters' stated desire for a reduced population bolsters the dramatic effect promised by apocalyptic climate events, which many eco-authors use as an inciting incident, world-builder, or to provide dramatic action. Deaths of numerous nameless characters make the action darkly exciting, while the (controlled, limited) demise of named characters provokes emotion and surprise. Even when authors avoid depicting the human toll of eco-disasters – resisting the writerly impulse to use violence and mayhem to create momentum and impact – they perhaps unwittingly portray the implicit promise of the idea: that the people the protagonist and/or the reader care about will survive. This is evident in Margaret Atwood's dyadic post-apocalyptic trilogy *MaddAddam*, in which virtually all the people who are presumed dead in the post-pandemic storyline turn out to have improbably survived. Boyle builds empathy through the character of Sierra, Tierwater's daughter. Sierra is the novel's tragic figure, the sadness lingering beneath Tierwater's cynical, humorous, self-critical narration. In his flawed efforts to protect

the earth, Tierwater fails to protect his daughter. His vision of a happy ending for them, in a recovering world with a smaller human population, is exposed as a pure fantasy. He must learn from his mistakes, to learn compassion for other people and greater compassion for animals, if he wants to make the most of the time he has left. While disasters make for narrative excitement – and a convenient clearing of the population deck – they create an empathy problem. The unlikely survival of main characters undercuts the true toll of environmental disaster; the scale of climate change becomes a nearly insurmountable representative obstacle, as the reader is still immersed only in one or two unrepresentative viewpoints. Who will speak for the nameless masses?

Environmentalism and class: activist stereotypes and literary representation

Boyle encodes the social and economic class origins of his characters to interrogate perceptions of environmentalism as an upper-class game. Tierwater's surname evokes hierarchy ("tier") as well as that most precious of western U.S. resources ("water"). Those familiar with Tierwater's hometown in New York will realise he was born in the one of the wealthiest counties in the world. When he says, "for the better part of my life, I was a criminal. Just like you", he elides some of the advantages that differentiate him from other citizens and, presumably, from many of Boyle's readers (41). Tierwater regarding himself as a "criminal" *before* he became an activist ironically challenges systems of laws and incarceration that do not contain large-scale injustices, like corporate plundering of natural resources. Tierwater regards his formerly consumerist lifestyle as "criminal", but he only becomes a criminal in the legal sense when his environmental protests cross legal lines. Tierwater's fortunes fall with his criminal convictions, and class remains a chief concern of the future-set chapters: older Tierwater survives a catastrophic storm by taking shelter in his wealthy employer's superlatively equipped mansion, while the lower-income neighbours are not so lucky.

LaJoy, who views himself as socially and politically marginalised, lives in Montecito, a wealthy enclave near Santa Barbara, which is contrasted with Alma's

modest apartment in the city.⁵³ Boyle distinguishes between why and where Alma and LaJoy live in the area. Alma is there for marine biology, educational institutes, and access to ocean and islands for research purposes; LaJoy is there because of inherited wealth and for status signalling and access to the marina for his private boat. Alma's work is shared with the community, subject to accountability and input from local, scientific, and government communities; LaJoy's activism is self-directed, beholden to none. Boyle seems to link LaJoy's misanthropic, attention-seeking, counterproductive activism with more privileged spheres, while Alma's work – science-driven, unglamorous, but more egalitarian and potentially more effective – is shaped and undertaken by people without significant economic and social privileges. Despite Alma's obviously more marginal status in gendered, racial, and economic terms, the fact that Alma works for the government feeds the libertarian LaJoy's absurd sense that he is oppressed by the powers that be.

Boyle addresses the Hollywoodisation of environmentalism by moving Tierwater and Earth Forever!, the environmental organisation he joins, to Los Angeles.⁵⁴ Tierwater, who is energised by direct actions, has less patience for the group's fundraising and merchandising efforts and is harshly critical of other activists. At first, he sees Andrea as “a full-time proselytizer and rabble rouser” (125) and believes E.F.! will make no difference, “not in any way that mattered to anybody except ... a bunch of disaffected lunatics and bush-beaters” (74).⁵⁵ Tierwater is alert to how photogenic Hollywood activism is mostly preaching to the choir, but he is also vulnerable to self-congratulation and overstating the value of his activist contributions, just like the others. All E.F.! members crave publicity. Even on the run from the law, Tierwater wishes for himself and Andrea to “become a *cause célèbre* ... heroes of the environmental movement” (123). Yet Tierwater is

⁵³ Boyle lives in Montecito, too. His most withering critiques are directed at people in his own demographic, adding a layer of knowing self-deprecation to his fiction.

⁵⁴ Hollywood celebrities are some of the most high-profile, vociferous environmental defenders, yet many demonstrate their enormous carbon footprints by, say, attending environmental fundraisers via private jet.

⁵⁵ Boyle's description of Andrea as a “proselytizer” hints at the close association of environmentalism with religion, the subject of Chapter Two. The following quote exemplifies how often Boyle's characters describe other activists as “lunatics” or “woo-woo” (46, 69). Questions about the connections between activism, religion, and mental health are also prevalent in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*.

cognisant of how the E.F.! milieu is out of touch and how the pursuit of “raising awareness” has limited potential. When he thinks to himself, “And quick now, what’s an environmentalist? Somebody who already has their mountain cabin” (63), he is acknowledging that most of the people in his environmentalist circle have unique privileges. With this line, Boyle is also satirising one of the oldest U.S. environmentalist traditions – a Thoreauvian “I went to the woods”, picturesque, to-each-man-his-own-cabin philosophy, an approach to communing with nature that cannot possibly be available to most of the modern world’s population (*Walden* 71). Tierwater’s privileged peers have access to an experience of nature that most people do not, and they are invested in preserving a “pristine” version of wilderness that by definition cannot be experienced by the masses.

Franzen is also interested in the role of class in environmentalism and specifically the *perception* of class as it relates to who is considered an activist/who is doing activism. The narrator establishes that early in their marriage, Patty and Walter comprise a financially precarious, single-family unit with virtually no support system of family or friends, yet they are perceived to be privileged by their neighbours. One neighbour views the young couple’s enthusiasm and neighbourliness as evidence that they are the “super-guilty sort of liberals who needed to forgive everybody so their own good fortune could be forgiven; who lacked the courage of their privilege” (7). When the neighbour’s husband argues the Berglunds are not actually “all that privileged; their only known asset was their house, which they’d rebuilt with their own hands”, his wife pivots to accuse the Berglunds of being insufficiently “progressive” and criticises Patty for appearing to be “allergic to politics” (7). Walter is anything but allergic to politics, but his degree of enthusiasm and passion for politics is received by his neighbours as excessive. When it comes to political expression, the Berglunds cannot win. Patty’s polite aversion to politics, which Franzen later contextualises through a self-narrated history of her unhappy upbringing, is seen as insufficiently “progressive” for a person whose generosity makes her *appear* privileged, even though she has less material and social capital than many of her neighbours. Walter, on the opposite side of the political engagement spectrum, is seen as a “crank” (582). Even Patty’s politically active parents disapprove of Walter’s polemics, particularly his focus on

overpopulation. Patty's father mocks him, and her mother, a Democratic politician, "quaveringly" tells Patty she thinks Walter might be more "conservative" than herself (130), and that his ideas are "provocative" (129) and "*autocratic*" (131). If only both Berglunds had the *right* kind of politics – not eco-politics, nothing too confronting – and the right level of engagement, whatever that might be. Because Franzen connects Patty's lack of political expression with her unhappy childhood in a political family, the reader is prompted to be pained by how she is judged and criticised for it, while the reaction to Walter's passionately expressed politics indicates a deep-seated social discomfort with topics relating to environmental decline. Although Franzen's excavational style highlights his protagonists' flaws, in such instances he is clearly sympathetic to them, and his narrative reveals the many social pressures and mechanisms of denial that might prevent Patty from engaging politically and entrench some of Walter's less persuasive instincts.

The Berglunds gain a degree of economic privilege due to Walter's career, during the course of which his youthful beliefs mutate into less coherent but more lucrative concessions to industry that are disguised as a realistic or coalition-building brand of activism.⁵⁶ Franzen shows that Walter has always had tunnel vision: his old friend Richard Katz thinks the intense, counterintuitive convictions Walter holds in his middle age are "inevitable" given his personality (231). But the introduction of money, prestige, and power influence the solutions he champions. Because the first in-depth look at Walter's work with the Cerulean Mountain Trust comes in Richard's point-of-view chapter, and Franzen writes Richard's perspective as cynically attuned and insightful, the reader gets a less sanitised picture of the Trust than we might if it was related in a chapter written from Walter's perspective. Unlike some other characters, Richard "loves" hearing Walter's ideas and enjoys pushing him "to explain his unusual political convictions" (142). Richard's interested questions, juxtaposed with his impolitic inner thoughts about how Walter has become "one of those people who carried around laminated literature" (231-232), make the passage entertaining as well as revealing. Richard is perceptive enough

⁵⁶ This is not to imply that compromise is not an important factor in efficacy: compromise is a key component of the utopian or optimistic eco-fiction I survey in Chapter Five. But the foundation of Walter's ideological shift is betrayed by his employer's painfully obvious self-dealing and greenwashing.

to grasp the nature of Walter and his assistant Lalitha's nascent relationship and how this might affect Walter's perspective. Walter gets so much unconditional approval from Lalitha that he need not pause to wonder if he is doing the right thing.

We learn in this chapter that Walter works for the Cerulean Mountain Trust, which was founded by a billionaire gas and oilman with a fondness for birdwatching, the aptly named Vin Haven. Haven plans to create a "very large, permanent private reserve" in the Appalachians for his favourite bird, the cerulean warbler, "and other threatened hardwood species" – but only after mountaintop removal mining (MTR), which will require at least one hundred years of habitat recovery (223). Haven has a preponderance of ulterior motives: cerulean warblers are close to being declared endangered, which would halt coal mining in their habitats. The plan, as Walter relates it to Richard, is transparently self-interested, despite Walter and Lalitha's enthusiasm. Lalitha describes detractors of this "whole new approach to conservation" as "close-minded and afraid of being criticized" and praises Walter for taking a chance that no one else would (223-224). Richard observes that Walter is "clearly pleased" by her depiction of his bravery; Walter's wife Patty has always been somewhat embarrassed by Walter's willingness to be "criticized" (224). As an obsessive bird lover himself, it makes some sense that Walter accepts Vin Haven's singular focus without much thought and adopts the vision as his own, which allows him to easily overlook or minimise obstacles and objections. The worldview that Walter espouses in this passage helps contextualise why many people react negatively to him. Anticipating criticism of the project, he says, "it's a lot easier to turn a few billionaires than to educate American voters who are perfectly happy with their cable and their Xboxes and their broadband" (226-227), a statement that echoes and updates Tierwater's contempt for people with "Hondas", "doilies" and "VCRs". Richard astutely observes that Walter would not "actually want three hundred million Americans running around [his] wilderness areas anyway" (226). Walter claims that "local grassroots groups" who oppose the Trust have "demonized the coal industry and especially MTR," but does not explain why their concerns are invalid (227). To minimise their worry, he says "the total number of families directly impacted by our plan is less than two hundred. But the

whole thing gets turned into evil corporations versus the helpless common man”, an interpretation that Lalitha concurs is “stupid and unreasonable” (227). Walter understates the true impact of MTR on humans and every other species in the area by limiting it only to families who will be forcibly moved off the land.

Hearing this, Richard feels “sad and remote” (238). He believes Walter has “snapped” from “thinking in too much detail” about environmental problems and has been “seized by a notion” that he and Lalitha have convinced each other to believe in (238). They “had blown a bubble that had then broken free of reality and carried them away. They didn’t seem to realize they were dwelling in a world with a population of two” (238). The passage underlines the difficulty of outside-the-box thinking on climate issues. Walter, bedevilled by the challenge of changing individual behaviours or enacting public policy, is left to believe that “turn[ing] a few billionaires”, with their outsize influence, will be “easier” than any other approach to wide-scale conservation. His “world ... of two” with Lalitha does not include space to really think about the “less than two hundred” families who must be evicted from the land before it is mined, or all the species that will be destroyed. This attitude is perceived by the families, who put up more of a fight than Walter expects.

This plotline addresses another troubling issue with activism: the conflict between real or perceived elites – well-funded groups and individuals like Walter – and grassroots activists, who often have more of a local stake in the issues. Walter is particularly irritated by Jocelyn Zorn, a “scarily motivated activist” who makes it harder to solve the Trust’s “most difficult problem”, which is convincing holdouts like the Mathis family to move off the land (312). Walter’s attitude to the holdouts, whose families have lived on the land for hundreds of years, affects his ability to “solve” the problem. He views patriarch Coyle Mathis as a “two-bit sociopath” (314) and calls him “stupid” to his face, ignoring Lalitha’s instruction to “flatter [Coyle’s] sense of importance. He needs to be the savior, not the sellout” (315).⁵⁷ (Lalitha might as well be describing Walter.) Even though Walter comes from a background not unlike the Mathises’, he has distanced himself so much from it that no one can tell. He lacks “the common touch; his entire personality had been formed in

⁵⁷ Franzen’s use of the word “savior” here is indicative of the prevalence of religious metaphors in eco-novels, which I discuss in Chapter Two.

opposition to the backcountry he'd come from" (316). Mathis's "poor white unreason and resentments" "offend" Walter and make him too angry to negotiate in good faith (316). His anger hurts his cause in other places, too. When Jocelyn and her group block the first day of mining work, his angry outbursts are quoted in a negative story in the *New York Times*. Walter laments the article's lack of interest in cerulean warblers, which he feels should be at the centre of the story; instead, the article is "all about the human interest" (503). This is an interesting metatextual comment: in many ways, *Freedom* is "all about the human interest", even though Franzen has talked openly about how concerned he is for the non-human world, and these concerns are strewn throughout the narrative.⁵⁸ I am reminded of Timothy Clark's claim that many eco-novels risk becoming "another human-interest story" because readers' attention can rarely be sustained on exclusively non-human or non-anthropomorphised subjects (*Value* 110).⁵⁹ While Walter hopes his plan can be a "model" for others (320), his belief in its efficacy is too connected with his need for approval (from Lalitha) and anger at the "poor white unreason and resentments" of his childhood to stand up to honest scrutiny.

Didacticism and the climate novel

The way that Walter expresses himself is a factor in how he is perceived – by Lalitha, who is attracted to passion, ideas, and eloquence; by the Mathises, repelled by the very same qualities, which to them represent pretension, condescension, and social control; by Patty and Richard, who think they will never be as good, as ideologically and morally pure, as Walter. Many critics have commented negatively on Walter's communication style – the thing the other characters find both lovable and maddening about him – arguing that it detracts from an otherwise masterfully constructed narrative. Martha Hunt Gram writes, "There exists a certain formal incongruity between the parts of *Freedom* that touch upon overpopulation and the parts that touch upon other totalizing political

⁵⁸ Franzen has written non-fiction about his views on climate change and species extinction, such as *The Discomfort Zone* (2006), "Why Birds Matter" (2018), and "What If We Stopped Pretending?" (2019).

⁵⁹ I will discuss whether "human interest" in eco-novels should be seen as limiting or mobilising in Chapters Three and Five.

problems, from sexual violence to the nightmare of imperial war” (295). Gram argues that the “incongruous” passages take the form of “monologue or dialogue or thought” instead of being “part of the story” and are “characterized by a kind of discursive excess or overflow” (296).

I wish to complicate critiques of what Gram describes as Walter’s “didactic” speaking style, which are predicated on two central assumptions (302). The first is that Franzen uses Walter as a mouthpiece for his personal environmentalist agenda, which leads to the assertion that Walter’s monologues about overpopulation and other environmental issues are not “part of the story” in the same way as other dialogue; since they are “incongruous” with the rest of the narrative, they must be part of an extratextual agenda. In his review of *Freedom*, Sam Anderson characterises Franzen as a “crank” – a term that is used repeatedly in the novel to describe Walter by characters who are made uncomfortable by his eco-politics. The second assumption has to do with how eco-politics are received as a legitimate concern of the novel. Anderson, for example, feels the reader is subjected to environmental lectures in the course of reading *Freedom* that do not align with the literary excellence of the rest of the novel. I contest the claim that environmental issues, and Walter’s speeches about them, are not “part of the story”, and I think critical suspicion of extratextual agendas that, apparently, diminish the quality of a story must be re-evaluated, particularly as the novel evolves during our era where climate crisis looms over numerous other pressing political concerns. Margaret Atwood has written that although novels are often political, they “are not political tracts”, and that readers dislike being manipulated, led, or lectured to: “if the author’s main design on us is to convert us to something ... we are likely to sniff it out, and to rebel” (*Writing with Intent* 128). Authors of eco-fiction must manoeuvre around the reader’s detection of overt political slants, even as novels like *Freedom* have many different interests beyond environmentalism. Although Franzen is, like anyone, not without his political objectives, I would argue that “crankiness” is an important consideration for Walter’s character that also happens to function as a vehicle for transmission of climate science and information. This does not necessarily detract from the novel’s quality or realism. Crucially, I interpret the very notion of Walter as a crank as a comment on the

social difficulty of substantively addressing environmental issues. Walter's neighbours and in-laws may be demonstrating Eviatar Zerubavel's concept of "socially organized denial" (2002), which, as Norgaard writes, is "the process by which individuals collectively distance themselves from information because of norms of emotion, conversation, and attention" (9). Reading the parts of the text in which Walter's neighbours favourably compare themselves to him, one is reminded of how social norms "reinforce residents' sense of themselves as good people" (27). Walter's introduction of pressing environmental concerns in "polite" conversation is unwelcome because, as Norgaard has written, the powerlessness that many people feel regarding the subject invites a denial response. Instead of feeling reasonably culpable for unsustainable lifestyles, the neighbours take "the political trembling" in Walter's voice and his "fanatic gray stubble" as an indication of their superior sense and politeness, allowing them to ignore the validity of his concerns and dispel any cognitive dissonance it may provoke (576). The neighbours will concede only that Walter is a "good Minnesotan" (576). Their overall distaste for him suggests a racialised connotation to why Walter might be seen as a "good Minnesotan", as in all other aspects – particularly his environmental consciousness – they view him as alien. More charitably, the narrator writes that Walter's "most salient quality" is his "niceness", a term with social significance for Minnesotans (22). (Walter's integrity and passion violate some of the tenets of "Minnesota Nice", though, which purports to describe common Minnesotan social traits. In addition to pure "niceness", Minnesota Nice entails "aversion to conflict", "understatement", "emotional restraint", and "a confounding resistance to change" [Veldof and Bonnema 2014].) That the narrator impresses on the reader how *nice* Walter is, yet also how much he irritates other people, suggests how much the average person dislikes being reminded both of serious existential threats and their own potential shortcomings.

I would argue that critics of Franzen's didacticism underestimate the relevance of Walter's dialogue and expression to the way he is perceived in the novel, and what he represents to other characters. The many comments that other characters make about his long, discursive forays into what he believes are pressing environmental issues show that this is an intentional and significant

feature of his characterisation. His conviction and passion demand faithfully long-winded speeches in which he usually does not grasp the lack of interest or impending mockery radiating from his audience. By sharing the perspectives of other point-of-view characters, Franzen emphasises Walter's honesty, enthusiasm, and willingness (or need) to speak his mind about what he believes to be important. Richard tells Patty that Walter has always earnestly, un-self-consciously tried to do good and help others do good. At university, he petitioned for better-insulated dorm windows; working in the cafeteria, he "grappled philosophically with his fellow students' habit of putting three times too much milk on their cold cereal ... did they somehow think milk was a free and infinite commodity ... with no environmental strings attached?" (116) Richard tells of Walter's popularity-reducing but heartfelt interactions with other students in a "protective tone ... a tone of strangely tender regret on Walter's behalf, as if he were wincing at the pain Walter brought upon himself in butting up against harsh realities" (116). Through Richard's pained admiration of Walter, Franzen suggests that environmental nagging of any kind will never be popular but may nonetheless be a moral obligation. At the same time, the narrator describes Walter's communication as "bureaucratese" (580), indicating its inefficacy and opacity; accordingly, Franzen might be said to critique or lament the challenges of effective environmental communication.

What appear to be digressions or, to critics like Anderson and Gram, a thinly veiled soapbox for Franzen's personal beliefs are essential expressions of Walter's character, not deviations from Franzen's long, rambling, internal, emotional mode, in both dialogue and thought, that characterise the novel's style. Taking Anderson and Gram's critiques as substantive, I would argue that Walter's didactic, fact-filled speeches are a sign of Franzen's tinkering with the form of the novel in the era of climate crisis. Walter's monologues pose a challenge to what critics may think of as "literariness", or what has traditionally been thought of as the content and style of a "serious" novel. Franzen will not be the only author in this thesis to attempt to balance creative narrative, the traditional purview of the novel, and ecological fact in a way that remains engaging and immersive to the reader (see also Michael Christie, Barbara Kingsolver, and Ruth Ozeki). Franzen may be necessarily

adjusting and playing with novelistic conventions in an era where climate change puts pressure on what has conventionally been regarded as “literary”.

Walter's overly verbose digressions function not just as a character device but as an investigation of how uncomfortable people are with the subject of climate change – because talking about it challenges denial, which is dependent on not talking about it. It is much easier for Walter's neighbours and in-laws to think of him as a "crank" than to take him seriously and engage with him on the issues. And it has been equally difficult for some readers and reviewers to read Walter's dialogue without ascribing his beliefs to Franzen. This leads to the second aspect that many critics struggle with in assessing *Freedom's* literary qualities: the role of environmental politics in literary fiction, in this case a narrative with many other thematic concerns. The critical reaction to Walter's eco-politics replicates Franzen's narrative representation of antipathy to eco-politics. And political antipathy is relative: Walter shows some of the same antipathy to grassroots activists who stand in his way as his neighbours show towards him. The idea that environmental discussions are boring, long-winded, lack literary value, that Franzen-as-Walter needs to tire himself out and get the research out of the way, diminishes both the importance of Walter's politics to his characterisation and the validity of Franzen's literary portrayal of these issues.

The conception of Walter as a Franzen proxy – that Franzen uses Walter's character to shoehorn environmental diatribes into a narrative otherwise untainted by such inconvenient concerns – reveals a discomfort with environmental evangelising that mirrors that of the characters in the book.⁶⁰ Any detectable ardour for environmental causes that exceeds that of the observer is deemed suspicious, unseemly, and ultimately uncomfortable, and the observer automatically feeds that discomfort into something else that they can feel comfortable criticising, with minimal cognitive dissonance. It is easier to look down on poor social manners – the neighbours think that Walter's discussion of topics that make them uncomfortable is in itself inappropriate – whereas well-researched commitment to a critical issue of our times is harder to openly criticise. The impact must be

⁶⁰ Other fraught political themes in *Freedom*, like Joey Berglund's military-industrial complex misadventures, have not been critically assessed as out-of-place.

minimised; Walter's speeches must seem like excesses; the threat he describes must be exaggerated. That the discomfort various minor characters feel when listening to Walter is so faithfully replicated by reviewers is an extraordinary expression of the distrust and resistance that environmental advocates must navigate.

A good deal of what might be regarded as didacticism appears in Boyle's narratives as well. Tierwater's and LaJoy's enraged rants smuggle real, concrete information like statistics on species extinction to the reader, just like Walter's scientifically accurate digressions. Alma, who must communicate frequently with the public, is cognisant of the problem with didacticism, but still struggles to effectively make her case. Confronting a dissident NPS employee who suggests the organisation's invasive species control projects go against "God," Alma knows she should respond "gently" in "tutorial mode," but she cannot stop herself launching into an aggressive rebuttal, and "that was the end of the conversation" (103). The power of emotion and affect is a double-edged sword – it may be required to make an impact, but striking the right balance requires skill.

Conclusion: the absent perspective

I will end by noting some potentially overlooked characters in *Freedom*: the grassroots West Virginian activists and Jessica Berglund. Jessica is the only member of the Berglund family who is not a point-of-view character. She is described as intelligent, mature, and self-sufficient, and is not seen until late in the novel when she tries to help her father plan a series of environmentalist events. Jessica grasps the importance of communication for environmental causes. When Walter learns about his wife Patty's infidelity just before an important Trust event, he has a public breakdown in which he sardonically "welcomes" the Mathises "to the middle class", detailing all the earth-destroying habits this entails and concluding that humans are a "CANCER ON THE PLANET" (515). His daughter Jessica confronts him about the counterproductivity of this messaging. "I don't think you picked the right enemy", she says, referring to the Mathises and the local activists. "You're sending a really unhelpful message when you pit the environment against uneducated people who are trying to improve their lives" (521).

When Boyle and Franzen's activists focus on the wrong "enemy", they suffer and their agendas suffer. Walter's disastrous speech is interrupted by Coyle Mathis's fists. LaJoy's cliffside fall occurs when he is distractedly and hyperbolically thinking about the "unimaginable degree of evil it must take to" carry out invasive species control (84). Tierwater tries to remember that individual loggers are not evil – "Their bosses are" (31) – but in the moment, the "evil insectoid look, no mercy, no appeal" of "born angry" loggers make him "outraged, ready to kill" (33). Even Alma struggles to think charitably about her opponents: "these PETA nuts that come out to shout you down because they've got nothing better to do ... they're ignorant, baseline stupid, that's all. They don't have the faintest idea of what they're talking about" (50).

In a moment of clarity, Walter recognises that in "another, not too dissimilar world" he "might have been friends with Jocelyn Zorn" (359). Jocelyn and her fellow activists represent a localised form of activism that is free from the corporate interests Walter represents. Jocelyn "had a fine, unsettling cool, an unflappability suggestive of irony, and was the sort of bitter salad green for which Walter ordinarily had a fondness" (359-360). But her resistance forces him to confront the inconsistencies of his plan. Much like discussion of uncomfortable topics turns Walter's neighbours against him, Jocelyn's scrutiny makes him resent her.

The brief arcs of Jessica, Jocelyn, and the grassroots activists have the feeling of a missed opportunity. They have the potential to be compelling characters, and authors such as Ann Pancake (2007's *Strange as This Weather Has Been*) and Ash Davidson (2021's *Damnation Spring*) have written what might be viewed as correctives to representational deficits in earlier eco-fiction: environmental justice novels that centre those who have the most to lose from climate change, and for whom impossible choices are embedded in their everyday experiences. Even while they get at important issues in environmentalism today, Boyle and Franzen risk eliding those with the most at stake by centring the characters they choose to. But they make one thing clear: environmentalism that is informed by misanthropy and anger will have limited success. Activists must find another way.

Chapter 2: “God is Change”: Environmentalism as religion in *MaddAddam* and *Parable of the Talents*

In this chapter, I identify a striking trope in contemporary environmental novels: the depiction of environmentalism as a form of dogmatic religious belief. I will survey four novels that depict characters who have turned their environmental activism into a formal religious framework: Margaret Atwood’s 2003-2013 *MaddAddam* trilogy and Octavia E. Butler’s 1998 *Parable of the Talents*, the sequel to 1993’s *Parable of the Sower*. In this chapter, I document the prevalence of comparisons between environmentalism and religion in eco-novels and observe how both certain religious adherents and environmentalists may be dismissed as crazed and fanatical. I believe this kind of rhetorical offensive often serves to discredit environmental advocates and foreclose discussion of valid concerns about challenging topics such as climate change. I will argue that literary comparisons between environmental activism and religion, as seen in the texts discussed, risks characterising concerns grounded in science as a matter of unproveable faith, divesting calls to climate action of urgency and legitimacy.

This chapter will reveal that the conflation or entanglement of religion and environmentalism is of great relevance to environmental literature today, as associations with religion or spirituality are commonly summoned alongside environmentalist characters. We also see that criminality is associated with environmental activism, although depictions of sabotage and violence vary from reluctant last resorts to brazenly destructive acts in which environmentalism is invoked as a cover for the protestor’s rage, zealotry, or instability. There is also the enduring question of what constitutes crime and what justifies protest, which by its very nature tends to inconvenience or inflame non-activists. This line is frequently blurry in eco-novels as it is in life. The cultist protagonists of Atwood's trilogy live in a society where law is unjustly and inconsistently applied – much more so than in contemporary U.S. and Canadian societies – so their subterfuge is difficult but not impossible to evaluate by contemporary standards. Inevitably, the implication that environmental activists are fanatical in their beliefs and, in one way or another, delusional diminishes the chances that their environmentalist causes will be seen as rational and necessary. If one goal of contemporary eco-fiction is to inspire

readers towards greater commitment to environmental causes, the narrative choice to make activist characters religious cultists challenges and complicates the idea that action for the environment is vitally important and arises from logical and informed motivations. I contend that the conflation of religious zealotry with environmentalism runs the risk of undermining the authors' extra-textual goals, even as it provides an opportunity for thoughtful critique.⁶¹

I had originally planned to analyse the American novelist Richard Powers' 2018 novel *The Overstory* in this chapter. (I will consider that novel, along with another religion-inflected eco-novel, Lydia Millet's 2020 *A Children's Bible*, in Chapter Three, for the subject of non-traditional literary activists.) In interviews, Powers has repeatedly expressed hope that his work will challenge readers' anthropocentrism, claiming that humans think "we're the only interesting game in town, and the only species worthy of extending a sense of the sacred to" (Alter), and that his depictions of non-human nature will inspire awe – sometimes of a religious or spiritual nature – and motivate environmental stewardship.⁶² In *The Overstory*, a group of radical environmental activists profess "born-again" faith in their cultish leader, who claims to hear voices urging her to protect trees (317). But the humourless, ideological rigidity of Powers' dogmatic and didactic activists obstructs the author's opportunities to critically examine his activists' strategies and motives, as well as consider the possibility of approaches to activism other than his characters' escalating ecotage and supposed biocentrism. Overly dogmatic approaches to environmentalism-as-religion risk undermining the pro-environmental message of many works of eco-fiction. For reasons of space, I chose to focus on Atwood's and Butler's novels, in which the multi-book format and science fiction genre enable the authors' open-ended, technologically imaginative stories to unfold in a gradual, inconclusive, epistemologically curious manner suitable for the subject of climate change. Like Powers, Atwood and Butler have

⁶¹ Atwood's and Butler's concern for the environment is well-established. Laura Wright describes Atwood as a longtime "outspoken environmental advocate" who donates to numerous environmental organisations, including the Sierra Club and the World Wildlife Fund (83). In interviews, Butler discussed her concern about environmental degradation and its connection to human rights issues. Her *Parable* series depicts "[a]ll the things that I can see going wrong now" (Gross).

⁶² Early in the novel, Powers describes chestnut trees as "gods" (14).

expressed hope that their writing will be politically and socially impactful, but they are interested in a multitude of issues that intersect with environmentalism in various ways, rather than making environmentalism their core theme. For example, Butler is well-known for featuring women and racial minorities as the heroes in her science fiction, commenting in an interview with Terri Gross that the genre gives her the “freedom” to generate more equitable visions of society (1993). Atwood’s playful book tour for *MaddAddam* saw her undertake a pescatarian diet and host “carbon-neutral” readings featuring performances of hymns written for *The Year of the Flood* (2009), donating the proceeds to environmental organisations. Although Atwood and Butler face the same conceptual hazards as other authors interpreting environmentalism through a religious lens, I will argue that Atwood uses her characters’ eco-religion to humorously critique tactical weaknesses and excesses common in activism, while Butler employs a mother/daughter narrative split to trouble her primary protagonist’s unshakeable conviction. Atwood’s and Butler’s imaginings of religion as a vessel for an environmentalist agenda are notably complex and not straightforwardly pro- or anti-, as each assesses the mobilising possibilities of such a framework as well as the problems with conceiving of environmentalism through religious belief.

Historical connections between environmentalism and religion in the U.S. and Canada

The analogous treatment of religious and environmentalist beliefs in contemporary U.S. and Canadian eco-novels can be contextualised with reference to the enduring influence of religion in U.S. and Canadian politics and society as well as the historical conflation of religion and radicalism. Richard King writes that “over its entire history, America has been saturated with religious ideas and institutions” (8). The historian Sydney Ahlstrom has described the U.S.’s religious history as “one of the grandest epics in the history of mankind” (3-4). Indeed, there is far too much to say here about the impact of religion on U.S. politics, social norms, laws, and – to the extent that there is one – national identity. Though religious and spiritual traditions abound in U.S. life and history, the singular effect of Puritanism on U.S. literature can be traced from the arrival of white English settlers until the present

day. The Puritans, according to the historian John Gatta, evinced somewhat complex reactions to their new environment: “untamed nature was at once a challenge, a force to be mastered by human industry, and a revelatory field of divine Creation” (8). Historian William Cronon observes that the conception of New England and Eastern Canadian wilderness as “untamed” indicates a flawed perception of Native American presence and practices at the time of early colonial settlement as well as the prevalence of ideas about mastering nature (90). Gatta notes that early “Puritan hostility” to the environment carried on to future generations; Puritan and non-Puritan settlers alike “were more eager to possess than to be possessed by the land” (17). The concept of land possession was justified by “active cultivation” – in other words, by the idea of “improving ... the existing environment” (21). Gatta notes the enduring salience of Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 “frontier thesis” as it impacts U.S. and Canadian life and the state of the environment today. In keeping with the century’s widespread belief in Manifest Destiny, which promoted the idea that white settlers were destined to expand across the entire continent, bringing with them superior values and practices, Turner argued that the frontier contributed to the formation of American identity. “The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people – to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness”, Turner wrote (6). Turner linked American success and democracy with dominating nature via westward expansion. All the while, settlers developed the areas they expanded into until the “primitive society” of these spaces was replaced by “the complexity of city life” (6). As Gatta notes, religious colonialists, whether persecuted in their home countries or otherwise, were often inspired by their theology to interpret nature in this domineering way – as a space to be conquered, with the help of an approving God.

I have a few hypotheses for why religion, particularly Christianity, has come to be associated with environmentalism in U.S. and Canadian culture and media, including eco-novels. Although the association is usually a disparaging one – typically, as we will see, environmentalists are compared to radical or fundamentalist believers, rather than the more prosaic majority of Americans and Canadians who describe themselves as religious but are not noticeably

observant⁶³ – the environmentalist movement does have historical Christian roots. Mark Stoll has noted that a curious number of historically significant environmentalist figures, such as John Muir, come from Protestant (specifically Presbyterian) backgrounds. Although Presbyterian leadership in the environmental movement began to decline after the 1960s, Stoll credits the Presbyterians for giving “the movement a moral and political centre that no one has replaced” (5). Braunstein et al. insist that religiously motivated progressive activists are vital actors in the contemporary political landscape, despite being “overshadowed” by “the well-organized forces of the religious Right” (3). The religious critic Cherice Bock has advocated the concept of “watershed discipleship,” which argues that faith leaders should use their influence and expertise in community relations to advocate “caring for one’s region as an expression of Christian faith” (306). Others, like Bron Taylor et al, have attempted to empirically assess the “greening of religion hypothesis” that posits that some religious groups have become effective advocates for the environment. The greening hypothesis contradicts what many historians and political scientists have observed, which is a much more negative relationship between highly visible U.S. religious groups (for example, Christian evangelicals) and progressive causes such as environmentalism (King 11). Taylor et al. ultimately find little evidence to support the idea that a significant number of religious groups in the U.S. are actively engaged in pro-environmental agendas.

Organised religion in the U.S. and Canada, and the political constituencies with which they are affiliated, continue to be largely unconcerned with the environment. Many of the aforementioned researchers engage with an influential 1967 essay by Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, which suggested that prevailing Judeo-Christian theology regarding nature is responsible for destructive attitudes towards the environment. (Taylor et al., for example, found that White’s thesis was largely supported by multiple subsequent studies examining religious beliefs and environmental attitudes [318-320].) In a comment that presages a recurring theme in North American eco-novels, White

⁶³ Gallup polls show a decline in church membership and attendance in the U.S. over the past twenty years (Jones); Canadians are even less likely to attend religious services (Cornelissen). Although the majority of Americans and Canadians describe themselves as Christian, most do not belong to a church or regularly attend religious services.

writes, “What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one” (1206). White continues, “Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny” (1207). This idea is taken up in more recent scholarship by Thomas Dunlap, who approaches environmentalism as semi-religious – much like its portrayal in *MaddAddam* and *Parable*. Despite researchers’ hopes for religion to become more “environmentally friendly” (Taylor et al. 309), the power of conservative religious groups in the U.S. and Canada (despite the latter country’s arguably overstated reputation for eco-friendliness) appears to be associated more with the countries’ failure to adequately mitigate harmful environmental practices than with pro-environmental advocacy. Interestingly, as King has noted, the burgeoning environmentalist consciousness of the 1960s did not produce the kind of success enjoyed by the coeval civil rights and anti-war movements. A concurrent surge in the power of the conservative religious movement proved oppositional to White’s calls for a religiously motivated environmentalism, as conservative religious activists, whose power “was considerably enhanced by a deep revulsion against the 1960s on almost all fronts”, became known for opposing environmental progress, rather than advancing it (King 11).

Another historical detail lurking behind associations between environmentalism and religious fanaticism is the rise of religious cults in the U.S., which received much media attention in the second half of the twentieth century. Fear and distrust of the cult has persisted into present times. The existence of such new and secretive religious organisations as the Church of Scientology, which acquired its tax-exempt religious status in the U.S. through what Hugh Urban describes as an “audacious program of espionage” and “illegal activities” (135), demonstrate the blurry distinction between a *religion* and a *cult*, one that is often determined by corruptible bureaucracy. Aside from the tendency to ascribe environmentalist motivation to a vaguely religious devotion, which the rest of the chapter will explore, the specific association of environmentalism with cults arises

also because cults were associated with hippies, and hippies were associated with what the general public of Atwood's *MaddAddam* would call "ecofreaks" or "greenies" (*Year 40*, 266) – in other words, people who care too much about nature. Charles Manson and his "family" comprise one of the most infamous American cults. Setting aside Manson's murderousness, his lifestyle and that of his followers was emblematic of much hippie culture – communal living, hallucinogenic drug use, "free love". Whether or not the association was fair, Manson's notoriety put the worst possible face on hippie culture. The horrific mass murder-suicide of Jim Jones' Peoples Temple cult in 1978 – like Manson, Jones maintained an alarming degree of control over his followers – further encouraged fear and loathing of hippie-adjacent religious cults. Even without the link between hippie lifestyles and dangerous cultdom, which was promulgated by the media, these cults tended to lead visibly sustainable lifestyles by default. Most followers had little money and few possessions, ceding what they had to the cult leader and sharing their spaces and any remaining resources with other followers under simple living conditions. There were also regrettable associations between cults and certain diets, with Jones at one point advocating vegetarianism. Urban's detailing of the Peoples Temple movement reveals its resemblance to the eco-cults in Atwood's and Butler's post-apocalyptic novels: the vegetarian or flexitarian diet, racial and social justice advocacy, the indoctrination of children, rejection of materialism, communal living arrangements, and "a powerful streak of Christian millenarianism, or the expectation of the imminent end of the world" (242). These similarities are uncomfortable considering the movement's shocking end.

The concurrent rise of environmental and religious extremism in North America goes some way to explaining their entanglement in contemporary eco-novels. Following the failure of the environmentalist movement of the 1960s and 70s to secure the victories of contemporaries like the Civil Rights Movement, radical groups known for monkeywrenching and other acts of ecotage started to attract attention. These included the British-born Earth Liberation Front and their Canadian and American affiliates, whose dangerous tactics, such as arson, led the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation to designate them as a domestic terror threat in 2001. At the same time, militant displays of Christian conservatism, such as the

bombing of abortion clinics, also received media attention, and occurred against the backdrop of ever more aggressive campaigns by the religious right in government to resist the separation of church and state. King argues that part of historians' and critics' failure to understand the growing power of the religious right during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is a result of wishful thinking about the apparent decline of religion in North American life: in the 1980s and 1990s, cultural critics "seemed to assume that religion was a cultural and social atavism, doomed eventually – and hopefully – to extinction" (13-14). This assumption failed to account for the organisation and focus of conservative religious groups, which have been arguably more successful in achieving their goals over the last half-century than left-wing environmentalist groups. The widely publicised displays of radical activism from both environmentalists and evangelicals in the past forty years, carried out by individuals who appeared fanatically devoted to their personal beliefs, may partly explain the link between radical environmentalism and religion commonly deployed in eco-novels today. After all, analogy is an important tool for any writer, and similarities between radical activism, whatever the cause, are likely to be of interest, particularly for the cultural and historical associations they evoke in a narrative.

Communes, space travel, and the invention of religion in *Parable of the Talents*

Parable of the Talents, Octavia Butler's 1998 sequel to *Parable of the Sower* (1993), continues the story of Lauren Olamina, a young African American woman living in an environmentally ravaged dystopia who has developed her own religion, Earthseed, and established a small self-sustaining community of survivors called Acorn. *Parable of the Talents* is a dyadic narrative, employing a dual timeline framing device to reveal different perspectives and insights into Lauren's story. One part of the story, as with the entirety of *Parable of the Sower*, comes from her diary, describing her attempts to recruit new Earthseed believers; when Acorn is destroyed by hostile Christian fundamentalists, Lauren begins anew and eventually builds an even larger following. Lauren's diary documents her unshakeable faith in her belief system despite many setbacks, including the murder of many of her followers and challenges to her faith mounted by the people closest to her. Butler

expands on the limited perspective of *Sower* by adding the secondary perspective of Lauren's estranged daughter Larkin, who reads and comments on her mother's diary in the late twenty-first century, sceptically and bitterly reflecting on the unintended consequences of Lauren's faith-driven choices. The framing device, common in post-apocalyptic eco-fiction, is reminiscent of *A Friend of the Earth* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, but instead of an older person reflecting on their youth, Lauren's legacy is assessed by her daughter. The popularity of dual narrative framing in eco-novels emphasises the benefit of hindsight; convincing the masses of the dangers of climate change is now unnecessary because the expected catastrophe has come to pass. Atwood, noting she would be unlikely to write any of her past essays today, writes that "Everything we do is embedded in time, and time changes not only us, but our point of view as well. Also, you find out *what happened*. One year's prophecy becomes the next year's certainty, and the year after that, it's history" (*Writing* xiii-xiv). The future-set narrator functions as an authoritative warning to readers, describing the events and failures that invited catastrophe. If future-set narrators are not themselves trying to persuade anyone of the risks associated with climate change – Atwood's Toby feels "there would be no point" to eco-religious observance and conversion in the post-pandemic world (*MaddAddam* 209) – the authors use these narrators to persuade the reader of the dangers we face in our own world. The certainty of the future characters' outcomes is their attempt at persuasion. They insist that if we do not make significant changes, these severe consequences will result, and by looking back at the past the reader sees exactly how "it" unfolded.

The *Parable* series exemplifies science fiction's long-standing engagement with environmental themes. Brent Ryan Bellamy dates the genre's environmental turn to the 1950s, long before climate change and the environment had entered mainstream consciousness. Amitav Ghosh has argued that the marginalisation of science fiction as a supposedly non-literary genre freed it to pursue ideas – such as the role of the nonhuman – that were considered too lowbrow for prestige-oriented novels (66). Consequently, science fiction from the second half of the twentieth century by authors like Ursula K. LeGuin abound with environmental themes. Where Atwood has often rejected "sci-fi" as a label for her own work,

preferring the term “speculative fiction” (*Writing* 92-93), Butler is considered both a giant of the science fiction genre and an artist who has transcended the limitations of literary genre. The question of what counts as “literary” versus “genre” or “popular” fiction is one that many ecocritics find vexing and limiting, as novels and other literary works thought to be “popular” – not as aesthetically or literarily “serious” as, say, the Pulitzer-prize winning *The Overstory* – have engaged substantively with environmental issues for more than a half-century. Although there are some exceptions, multi-book series are less likely to be seen as “literary” fiction than standalone novels. Series featuring recurring characters and detailed fictional worlds are more common in sci-fi and other “genre” fiction. The multi-novel format allows Atwood and Butler to add detail as they go. It also allows for substantial, continuous engagement with climatic themes. The open-endedness of the series format – Butler, for example, planned further instalments of *Parable* but was unable to complete them – complements the way that we cannot know exactly how climate change will “end” for our species, other species, and the planet more broadly.

Many critics have discussed how Lauren’s race is significant to her development of *Earthseed*, in which diversity and tolerance are important values and race and gender do not stand in the way of personal opportunities. Butler’s interest in Afrofuturism and her exploration of racial injustice and its connection to environmental exploitation adds a thematic layer that is absent from *MaddAddam* and *The Overstory*. Atwood does not specify her protagonists’ races, and in the transhumanist pre-pandemic society, people can change their appearance and skin colour via surgery easily and often. I have written elsewhere that Powers seems to elide environmentally relevant topics including race and gender, possibly because they are identifiably human interests and his ambition is to craft a biocentric narrative that is more concerned with trees than people (“Biocentric Narrative Strategies”). Hatice Öygü Tüzün writes that Butler skilfully “illustrates how the major problems (of our time) ... environmental degradation, climate change, economic disparities, racial and gender discrimination – cannot be understood in isolation” (15). The framing device of Lauren’s diary encourages Clara Escoda Agustí’s reading of how the character brings an “empowered subjectivity” to her

development of a utopian “community of equals” in which “difference can only make the community stronger” (352). Butler diverges from many other eco-novelists with her locational and temporal specificity, which risks suspending future readers’ disbelief (her 2020 California is not, of course, identical to the real thing), yet gives readers a starting point and shows confidence that other post-apocalyptic and/or future-oriented authors, who avoid settings and time periods with an inevitable expiration date, lack. Northern California’s reputation as a progressive, environmentalist would-be-utopia make it a suitable site for Lauren’s utopian project.

If the “slow violence” of climate change is challenging to depict, Butler makes a point of dwelling on long-standing forms of violence that result from climate change’s destabilising forces. Like Atwood, she emphasises the link between sex-based oppression and environmental degradation, among other post-apocalyptic brutalities. In this environment, many aspects of Lauren’s faith appear as positive correctives. Lauren describes some of Earthseed’s doctrine: “It’s about learning to live in partnership with one another in small communities, and at the same time, working out a sustainable partnership with our environment. It’s about treating education and adaptability as the absolute essentials that they are” (*Talents* 358-359). The emphasis on “adaptability” distinguishes Earthseed from many other religions, including the fictional Christian fundamentalists that dominate the novel’s version of the U.S. and serve as Earthseed’s main adversaries. Their leader, a presciently Trump-like figure named Jarret whose motto is “Make America Great Again” (89), is characteristically fundamentalist in his positioning as an “unassailable ... authority over contemporary belief and praxis” (Almond et al. 18). The doctrinal rigidity, “uniformity of belief and practice,” and “purity” (Almond et al. 17) of Jarret’s religious community are contrasted with Earthseed’s openness to malleability, as Lauren tells a potential convert, “God is Change” (*Talents* 74). She characterises Earthseed not as a belief but as a “collection of truths” that “isn’t the whole truth” or “the only truth” (126). Although Lauren’s ambitions extend far beyond the national, such language engages with the country’s founding documents, perhaps speaking to Lauren’s desire to foster equality and tolerance – to actually enact the promises of the Declaration of Independence’s pro-human

rights rhetoric: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights”. The shadow of “the Creator” also speaks to Lauren’s belief that her religion can be a tool for justice and the preservation of “self-evident” rights.

However, Lauren’s overtures to adaptation and doubt mask her almost fanatical adherence to the beliefs she has invented and obscure her grander ambitions. Earthseed is not merely a community: it is a faith-based religion, and Lauren unveils her main interest when she says Earthseed “is about preparing to fulfill the Destiny”, which is to “take root among the stars” (325). Space, to Lauren, “offers the only true immortality. It enables the seeds of the Earth to become the seeds of new life, new communities on new earths” (325). In space, Earthseed followers will go “to grow, to learn, and to fly” (325). Since Lauren never wavers from this view, and her diary entries show only her first-person perspective, Butler needs Larkin to complicate the story of Lauren as a brave visionary. Contrasting her mother’s religion with her Christian uncle’s, Larkin concedes that they are both “zealots” (111). Nonetheless, Larkin believes her uncle is a “realist” who wants “to make the Earth a better place. Uncle Marc knew that the stars could take care of themselves” (111). Butler subtly interrogates the science fiction trope of space travel and colonisation; through Larkin’s critical eye, the reader sees that Lauren never satisfactorily explains why space travel will “break the cycle” of humanity’s abusive and destructive tendencies (358). When Lauren claims, “our new worlds will remake us as we remake them”, she elides the extent to which humans have negatively “remade” Earth without reforming ourselves and overlooks the possibility that Earthseed space travellers will similarly damage the planets they colonise (358). Butler subtly draws a parallel between Lauren’s (unintentional) parental abandonment of Larkin and her naïve belief that humanity can leave Earth’s manmade problems behind and thus miraculously improve as a species.

Even though Earthseed is a new religion, Lauren perpetuates the traditional Judeo-Christian interpretation of nature that Lynn White Jr. critiqued for contributing to the environmental crisis: she uses the Destiny to differentiate humans from animals, as animals are not capable of such lofty ambitions and achievements as space travel. Humans, unlike other animals, have the ability to “make something

more of ourselves ... We can leave the nest" (358). Although this passage indicates Lauren's openness to hybridity – there is more humility in her belief that "our new worlds we will remake us as we remake them" than in many other religious doctrines – Lauren's dreams of space travel are inflected with imperialism and are reminiscent of centuries of religious missionising. The notion that there is a binary choice between "destroy[ing] the ability of our world to sustain us" or moving to different planets reads as an avoidance of responsibility to mitigate environmental damage (358). *Earthseed's Destiny* contains far more of an echo of Manifest Destiny than Lauren presumably intended. Despite this rhetorical parallel, the *Destiny's* inherent escapism may be interpreted more positively in the context of Butler's investment in Afrofuturism and racial justice than it would be in a broader ecocritical inquiry. Building on Ytasha Womack's definition of Afrofuturism as a blend of genres that enact "a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques" (9), Chriss Sneed picks up on Lauren's "repeated ruminations on slavery and its supposed collapse" (189); the resurgence of slavery and race-based oppression in *Parable's* ruinous landscape give some understandable urgency to Lauren's interest in abandoning the planet. Nonetheless, I would argue that the *Destiny* is irresponsibly avoidant whether read in the context of Afrofuturism or ecocriticism. I suspect that the lack of critical commentary on Larkin's role in *Talents* likely stems from how she negatively reframes what Tüzün describes as Lauren's "positive obsession" (16); Larkin's criticism of her mother in *Talents* complicates critical reception of Lauren as an uncomplicatedly brave, resilient, persevering figure. The doggedness shown in Lauren's diary entries sometimes masks the unrealistic simplicity of her solutions: running away to a new planet is not a solution to the climate crisis, and it is also unlikely to end racism and inequality. This is typically glossed over in literary criticism of *Talents* that regards Lauren as a revolutionary hero and ignores Larkin's role in the narrative entirely.

Persuasion is an important tool for religious conversion as well as environmentalism. The way that Lauren tailors her message is reminiscent of various communication strategies employed to promote environmental causes. Lauren views the *Destiny* as what *Earthseed* is really "about" (359), but her

introductory sermons emphasise community-building and “partnership” – with God, with other people, with “any world that is your home” (135) – rather than space flight and colonisation. Many of the potential converts she meets are alone in the world, having suffered enormous hardship and the loss of their communities; finding a new one holds obvious appeal beyond mere survival. Lauren does not expect her followers to “like every aspect of Earthseed,” but hopes

they’ll like enough of it to recognize that they’re better off with us than without us. I want them as allies and as members, not just as “friends.” And as we absorb them, I also intend to either absorb some of the storekeeper, restaurant, or hotel clients that we’ll have ... I want us to grow into the cities and towns in this natural, self-supporting way. (71-72)

Although the language here (“allies”, “members”, and “friends” rather than “converts” or “disciples”) is somewhat secular and thus less threatening, it is nonetheless unsettling. “Allies” implies warfare looming on the horizon. Lauren’s desire to “absorb” more followers metaphorically characterises Earthseed as a bioform that will inevitably make its followers one with itself, erasing individuality and free will. Lauren describes the growth that her recruitment plan will engender as “natural” even though it is strategic and manufactured. Even though Lauren’s conversion speeches are gently crafted (see her formulation of Earthseed as a “collection of truths” [126]), she rhetorically positions Earthseed as a do-or-die proposition. “We can grow or we can wither”, she says, implying that if Earthseed does not amass new converts, the result will be a kind of death (72). While Jarret’s threat to Earthseed is depicted as terrifyingly oppressive, its leader’s pronouncement that “We are God’s people, or we are nothing!” (88) bears more than a passing similarity to Lauren’s own rhetoric, complicating the idea that even new religions can be free from hierarchy, extremism, or conformity. By drawing such parallels, even very subtly, Butler acknowledges some of the shortcomings in Lauren’s logic in *Sower* and seems to consider the trade-offs attending what she otherwise depicts as a unique, transformative vision uniting religion with social progressivism. Lauren is not a tyrant like Jarret, but her religiously inflected ideological rigidity on the subject of the Destiny forecloses on other possibilities for better stewardship of Earth and its creatures. Lauren’s following grows significantly

after new followers help her publish her own holy book. The success of this endeavour speaks to the power of written testaments, something that worries the activists of *MaddAddam*: the power of the written word, particularly in the service of religious ideas, is a double-edged sword (Year 6).

The creation of Earthseed is inextricably tied to Lauren's status as a "sharer" – a person who is afflicted with a fictional condition called hyperempathy. In the *Parable* series, hyperempathy is not a metaphor but a real psychological disability. It is medically classified as an "organic delusional syndrome" (Sower 12) afflicting the offspring of women who took a medication during pregnancy with unknown side effects. Hyperempaths are not merely sensitive – when they see other people in pain, they feel the pain as though it is happening to their own body. The fact of hyperempathy as a real condition is accepted in Lauren's world, but its categorisation as a "delusional" syndrome emphasises its psychological, not physical characteristics, suggesting that the sufferer's responses are not fully "real". Butler invites comparisons to the real-life treatment of patients with mysterious or undiagnosed pain disorders, or with people whose illnesses are seen to have resulted from personal choices: Rebecca Evans notes that the connection of hyperempathy to "maternal drug use" increases its stigma (112). Evans is right that hyperempathy is not "foregrounded" as central to Earthseed, but it still bears relevance to Butler's "ecological projects" (113), and inevitably influences Lauren's impression of the world and her responses to injustice. The great inconvenience of being hyper-empathetic in a crumbling world can be extrapolated to the wider eco-fictional canon and connects to Glenn Albrecht's idea of psychoterratic dis-eases, which are "psychic or emotional state[s] tied to the particular condition of a person's biophysical environment" (63). These include "global dread", "extreme anxiety about the future ... that anticipates a hugely negative future state of the world" (81), and "mermerosity", "a form of anticipatory mourning or grieving" for changes to one's environment (78).

The complexities of "sharing" are relevant to discussions of the role of empathy in climate justice. Sharing, in the literal sense, is central to the Acorn community, but sharing in the context of hyperempathy presents Lauren with unusual ethical considerations. As Evans puts it, "Does being empathic necessarily

make one averse to causing pain, or, problematically, can it make one merely averse to witnessing it?" (113) This connects to debates in ecocriticism and related fields about the limits of empathy, as empathetic feelings do not necessarily lead to a change in behaviour and may not even be experienced in response to non-human nature and animals. Larkin writes that her mother "was always a woman of obsessive purpose and great physical courage" who imposed her courage on others: "She had always been willing to sacrifice others to what she believed was right" (309). Lauren does not always take steps to avoid pain, and because she is willing to experience pain to stand for what she believes in, she sometimes makes that consequential decision on behalf of others without considering that they are not willing to be subjected to the same suffering. Larkin, by contrast, criticises the idea of sacrifice, with its religious overtones: imagining how things might have been different had Lauren compromised more with Larkin's father, Larkin concludes, "She sacrificed us for an idea" (138).

Larkin struggles as a child who has been left behind – sacrificed, in her own words, when her mother put her religious ideas before Larkin and her father. Larkin is critical of the ideas invented by her mother and believes they require interrogation, as the version in Lauren's diary and the eventual success of her movement present a mostly uncomplicated picture of the "truth" of Earthseed's core ideas. Larkin pushes past the inspirational aspects of her mother's story to confront the more dubious aspects of her belief system. Lauren did not look out for Larkin, and in the end, she did not look out for her own planet, believing it was humans' destiny to journey to another one. Larkin's struggle reminds me of Ken Saro-Wiwa Jr.'s reckoning with his writer-activist father's legacy, as told by Rob Nixon, although, unlike Saro-Wiwa Jr., Larkin will not "embrace the commitments that [her mother] had chosen for [her], but on [her] own terms" (*Slow Violence* 124). As Nixon writes, Saro-Wiwa Jr. experiences "the strange struggle to reconcile a parent's ethical stature as the hallowed face of justice with the absences, the aloofness, the familial dysfunction, and to find in all of that some measure of resistant loyalty" (125). If Larkin experiences residual feelings of loyalty, it is in respecting her mother enough to hold her to account for what she gave up in the pursuit of what she believed was true. Larkin is bitter, cynical, and experiencing

unresolved trauma, and yet in her critique she advances an alternate vision of Acorn, separate from Earthseed, that prizes family and community and rejects the rigid hierarchy of religion – a world in which Lauren learns from her “friends” as much as they learn from her, and the ending is a happier one for more people and possibly for Earth. “Sharing,” in this context – sharing decision-making, responsibilities, and life – is a more expansive concept than Lauren “sharing” her followers’ pain, where she assumes not just the pain but the right to make decisions, as is expected for a religious leader.

Vegetarian cults and “ecofreaks” in the *MaddAddam* trilogy

Margaret Atwood’s post-apocalyptic *MaddAddam* trilogy consists of *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013).⁶⁴ *Oryx and Crake* follows Snowman, who believes he is the last living human, and moves between his miserable present-day existence and his memories of a dystopian society before its human inhabitants were apparently exterminated by a mysterious disaster. Although Atwood does not specify the time or setting, familiar place names and cultural references establish the location as a recognisable but altered U.S. The lack of locational detail in the early pages helps to immerse the reader in a changed world that narratively reconstructs Snowman’s dislocation, isolation, and confusion. Snowman’s real name is Jimmy, but the pseudonym (from “the Abominable Snowman”) emphasises his sense of no longer being quite human: “existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards” (*Oryx* 7-8). His only company are the Crakers, genetically engineered humanoids created by his erstwhile friend Crake, who is later revealed to be the engineer of a virus designed to annihilate the human species. Crake plans to replace humans, whom he views as irredeemable, with the beatific Crakers and their by-design low carbon footprint. Crake, who professes to believe in neither “Nature” nor God, appoints himself as a God-like figure (206), although many of his attempts to remove “destructive features” such as religious orientation from the Crakers fail (305).⁶⁵ Crake proves a

⁶⁴ Patrick Murphy views Butler’s development of an “ecocentric religious movement” as a “precursor” to Atwood’s *Gardeners* (“Introduction” 3).

⁶⁵ I will discuss the Crakers and other bio-engineered creatures in Chapter Three.

ruthless God. He is memorialised by the Crakers (who know nothing of his crimes) as an idol of sorts, but his grand experiments do not turn out the way he arrogantly expects. Snowman recalls Crake “Sitting in judgment on the world ... but why had that been his right?” (341) The guileless Crakers’ religious observance of Crake, deceased in the post-pandemic timeline, pointedly shows how his attempts to make a perfected creature, free from religion and other corrupting traits, were never entirely under his control. Crake’s criticism of religion appears hypocritical as he perceives of himself as God-like – or superior to God. When a character asks him if he would make the world “better than God”, he replies, “Yes ... As a matter of fact, I would” (*Year* 147).

Atwood’s pre-pandemic storyworld resembles an exaggerated version of the reader’s. The less fortunate masses dwell in dangerous cities, or “pleeblands”. There are middle-class “Modules” and upper-class “Compounds”, the latter of which are self-contained bubbles that house wealthy corporations and their employees. The system is tightly controlled by a private security corporation, the aptly named CorpSeCorps, that functions as a de facto government, curtailing what citizen freedoms remain as the pre-pandemic timeline unfolds. Snowman’s role as a dual-timeline storyteller is effective for the purposes of exploring the apathy and complacency behind the failures of his dystopian society. Snowman is Atwood’s only male protagonist to date. From an ecofeminist perspective, this is not incidental; Snowman functions as a literal “everyman” in the pre-pandemic world, whose apathetic disregard for human and animal welfare and the environment is linked with his participation in a brutally misogynistic social structure and sexually exploitative economy. Even as Snowman expresses sympathy for women and animals who are mistreated by men, he maintains his position as either complicit bystander or active participant.

In *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood shifts the narrative perspective from Snowman to Toby and Ren, two female members of the God’s Gardeners, a vegetarian eco-cult, who have also survived the pandemic. Gardener theology has long anticipated a “Waterless Flood”, their biblical-sounding term for an apocalyptic event that will punish those humans who have destroyed the environment and “broken trust with the Animals” (*Year* 91). Neither woman is devout, suggesting that

most Gardeners are not as pious as they at first appear. Toby is literally and metaphorically saved by Gardener leader Adam One, and views conversion as repayment for his protection. Toby initially regards the Gardeners as “wild-eyed,” delusional, and probably taking drugs (3); she only joins them because her life is in danger and thus feels undeserving of the group’s “hospitality,” as “she wasn’t really a convert” (45). She hides her doubts by appearing stony and severe, performing a staid piety. Meanwhile, Ren is brought to the Gardeners as a child; like many child cult members before her, she has no say in the matter.⁶⁶ Toby and Ren provide a contrast to Snowman, particularly in the way that they allow Atwood to explore gender issues that are beyond Snowman’s comprehension.

Before turning to Atwood’s representation of environmentalism as a religion, it is worth noting how Atwood engages more broadly with activist stereotypes and positions her post-apocalyptic writing as a commentary on real-world apathy. Snowman is a flawed protagonist, but his articulate cynicism and self-loathing enable Atwood’s critique of pre-pandemic behaviours and attitudes. The narrative framing of *Oryx and Crake* resembles T.C. Boyle’s *A Friend of the Earth*: both are constructed to facilitate self-reflection and reckoning in a way that reveals the consequences of actions and inaction, including on climate issues. Like Boyle’s Tierwater, Snowman is sharply critical of his younger self, but occasionally unearths self-compassion when he recognises the circumstances that made it hard for him to be a better person. Unlike Tierwater, whose long-lost lover reappears to steer him in a new, more hopeful direction, Snowman has lost everyone he loves. He often “sees” and speaks to his departed lover Oryx in his underfed, hallucinogenic state, dwelling painfully in his memories of her. Instead of the ameliorating, redeeming possibilities Andrea represents for Tierwater in *A Friend of the Earth*, visions of Oryx serve to remind Snowman of his “guilt” (*Oryx* 91). Throughout the first novel, Snowman finds Oryx’s gaze “contemptuous”; he feels “burned” and “eaten into” by her expression, although she speaks to him kindly (91). Snowman’s interpretation of Oryx’s “contemptuous” gaze is a self-indictment; he knows he is cowardly and insufficient, and in the dire, post-apocalyptic present, he has more reason than most to feel it is too late to make a meaningful change.

⁶⁶ I will discuss the problematic involvement of children in environmental activism in Chapter Three.

The shame that Snowman associates with Oryx, a former sex trafficking victim whose true feelings for Snowman are ambiguous, stems from his complicity in a rapaciously destructive system that eventually results in the end of life as he knows it. Snowman's chief source of anguish is his failure to stop Crake, but Atwood suggests the real sin is his unexamined participation in a sexist, authoritarian, environmentally disastrous system. His general obtuseness is magnified by his failure to observe and stop Crake's murderous plan. "How could I have been so stupid?" he wonders.

No, not stupid. He can't describe himself, the way he'd been. Not unmarked – events had marked him, he'd had his own scars, his dark emotions. Ignorant, perhaps. Unformed, inchoate.

There had been something willed about it though, his ignorance. Or not willed, exactly: structured. He'd grown up in walled spaces, and then he had become one. He had shut things out. (184)

Just as ecocritics characterise post-apocalyptic fiction as "cautionary tales" – or, in Tüzün's more positive framing, as "opportunity" or "possibility" tales (6) – Snowman's character functions as a warning to resist complacency; the consequences of his inaction are dire.

Although Toby and Ren are the primary protagonists of *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam*, they and their environmentalist ilk do not appear until late in *Oryx and Crake* and are suitably peripheral characters in that instalment, which centres on complacency and inaction. Jimmy alludes to climate change and social unrest, but, in his comfortable Compound existence, is conditioned to ignore such concerns. The first activists the reader meets are typical of fictional activist representation in that they are hysterical, irritating, and ineffective. They appear when Jimmy and Crake view news footage of widespread protests against the "Happicuppa" coffee chain, which grows genetically modified coffee beans, throwing "small growers out of business and reduc[ing] both them and their laborers to starvation-level poverty" (179).⁶⁷ The chain's ruthlessness results in a

⁶⁷ Happicuppa is, probably not intentionally, one of many linguistic reminders of Atwood's Canadian provenance, as "cuppa" is not a U.S. English term. Such linguistic slips (e.g., "get stuffed" [*Year 40*, 227]) raise the question of why Atwood chose to set the story (and source of the global disaster) in the U.S., when Canada faces many of the same ethical dilemmas and responsibilities, including its disproportionate impact on carbon emissions. I would suggest that the U.S.-centrism of Atwood's

global “resistance movement” characterised by extreme retaliatory tactics, such as the abduction and murder of Happicuppa employees; meanwhile, “on the other side, peasants were massacred by the army” (179). Crake believes armies and the corporations directing them should be “whacked ... Not because of the dead peasants, there’s always been dead peasants. But they’re nuking the cloud forests to plant this stuff” (179). This is an early indication of Crake’s belief that violent extermination of the human species is justified to protect the “natural” world. Jimmy argues that “the peasants” would be similarly authoritarian if they had the opportunity, cynically suggesting that those without power are not morally superior to their oppressors, merely circumstantially disadvantaged. One “staged media event” shows protestors, with signs reading “Don’t Drink Death!”, attempting to recreate the Boston Tea Party by throwing Happicuppa products into the sea (180). They forget to weigh down the boxes: “[T]here was the Happicuppa logo, lots of copies of it, bobbing around on the screen. It could have been a commercial” (180). Instead of promoting sympathy for the cause, the image makes Jimmy crave Happicuppa, while Crake is disgusted by the apparent stupidity of the protestors. Thus, Atwood highlights the protest’s inefficacy. The power and symbolism summoned by reference to the Boston Tea Party, the famous protest associated with America’s founding, independence, and resistance to tyranny, is distorted by the peak capitalist image of the Happicuppa logo, receiving free advertising and changing no hearts and minds.

This passage, which introduces the critical activity of environmental and social protest, surfaces several important points. Crake’s ethics – so consequential for the rest of the story – are baldly expressed here, one of many warning signs that Jimmy misses. Crake is not disturbed by the slaughter of “peasants”. Where he draws the line is the irreversible destruction of non-human nature, for which he holds law enforcement and corporations accountable. This is an indication of how Crake would reorder the world if he had the power to do so. Also significant is Atwood’s linking of capitalistic pressures, inequality, and climate catastrophe, a convergence that is foregrounded throughout the trilogy. Corporations like

dystopian critique elides Canada’s significant culpability in a range of issues that Atwood is concerned about.

Happicuppa conduct unethical experiments, damage the environment, and violate human rights, all while generating immense profits; those who benefit, even marginally (from CEOs and shareholders down to those who simply enjoy the taste of Happicuppa) are unmotivated to resist, and those who do protest are easily overcome by more powerful forces, discouraging further resistance. Also in this passage, we see Atwood's first examination of perceptions about activists.

Although Jimmy understands that Happicuppa's violent suppression of protests is objectively wrong, his reaction to the protestors is unsympathetic, partly because of their homeliness. The protestors comprise:

balding guys with retro tattoos or white patches where they'd been taken off, and severe-looking baggy-boobed women, and quite a few overweight or spindly members of marginal, earnest religious groups, in T-shirts with smiley-faced angels flying with birds or Jesus holding hands with a peasant or God Is Green on the front. (180)

Jimmy's focus on physical appearance often comes across as insensitive and sexist and is not incidental to his status as an unexamined participant in a cruel and oppressive system. (Atwood first highlights the plight of women in this dying world through Jimmy's gruesome online activities; through seemingly passive means, Jimmy participates in an exploitative sexual economy.) Jimmy, with his Compound upbringing and job, is one of relatively few beneficiaries of the status quo, even though he is at the bottom of his sector's heap. Despite his material comfort in relation to residents of the pleeblands, he never *feels* particularly free, which is part of the system's power. Even though Jimmy should have some common cause with the Happicuppa protestors, Atwood frames the protest through Jimmy's eyes to attune readers to common reactions to disruptive activists: the inconvenience of their presence means they are almost immediately perceived as annoying. The viewer judges them next by appearance, which may be stereotypically "activist"-like ("retro tattoos", shirts with political slogans) and, importantly, unattractive ("balding", "severe-looking"), adding to the inconvenienced bystander's prejudicial impulse to dismiss the validity of their message. (Although Jimmy may not ascribe much importance to it in the moment, he mockingly observes how the protestors' dress identifies them as members of "marginal,

earnest religious groups”, which will become significant later in the trilogy when Jimmy connects with one of these groups.) Anything that goes poorly in the protest can be viewed as resulting from the protestors’ naivete, stupidity, or lack of planning (and, given their religious dress, misplaced “faith”). These perceptions, often formed within seconds, allow the bystander to proceed without considering whether they should take any of the protestors’ ideas to heart.

In this context of a society governed by, effectively, state-mandated consumerism, Atwood introduces the concept of a “green” religion that eschews materialism and the mistreatment of living beings. The first time the reader meets a God’s Gardener is also told from Jimmy’s perspective, through whom Atwood expresses the prevailing impression of “greenies”. He is assigned to share a university suite with Bernice, a “fundamentalist vegan” (188), who we later learn was a child Gardener alongside Ren. Unlike Ren, Bernice is a true believer. To show her disapproval of Jimmy’s “carnivorous ways,” Bernice “incinerat[es]” his sandals, even though they are mere imitation leather (189). She also burns his underpants to register her opposition to his sex life. Jimmy views her as a “pyromaniac,” “reality-challenged in a major way,” and worries she will murder him in his sleep (189-190). Jimmy remembers Bernice throughout his life as a “nut and a nuisance” (257).

Jimmy’s impression of Bernice is a concise summation of common reactions to environmental protest: Bernice and other “animal-welfare freaks” (203) are “fundamentalist”, “reality-challenged”, and prone to irrational and sometimes illegal performances of their ideological commitments. Before providing an insider view of the God’s Gardeners in *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood shows how they are portrayed in the media and by private individuals like Jimmy – at best they are stupid rabble-rousers, at worst they are terrorists – and treats her readers to an array of colourful descriptors (“greenies”, “ecofreaks”, “crazies” [244]). Though activism and resistance circles are not Jimmy’s milieu, Bernice is not the only objectionable activist he comes across. His girlfriend’s artist roommates are prone to aggressive didacticism. They “drone on ... delivering themselves of harangues and oblique sermons that were in fact – Jimmy felt – aimed at himself” (242). Jimmy thus repeatedly connects environmental activism to religion: when he

describes Bernice's vegan activism as "fundamentalist", he is comparing her to a religious extremist, and the roommates' unwelcome diatribes, which might be called lectures, are more specifically perceived as "sermons". Jimmy is not persuaded (nor converted). Instead, he is struck by the sermonisers' ineffectual doomsaying. They argue that "Human society ... was some sort of monster ... It never learned, it made the same cretinous mistakes over and over, trading short-term gain for long-term pain" (243). The roommates could be explicating Crake's philosophy here, without realising Crake's solution to the problems they discuss is to kill them.

Atwood's choice to make the environmentalist, progressive heroes of the second and third parts of the trilogy part of a reviled religious cult is an interesting one, particularly as their back stories are only slowly revealed as the trilogy progresses. This structure allows Atwood to engage with some common, negative public perceptions of activists in *Oryx and Crake* and to consider why people do not act against unjust and immiserating conditions. The shift in perspective beginning in *The Year of the Flood* then gives way to two developments. First, it humanises the God's Gardeners and helps the reader understand them as complex human beings, many of whom truly aspire to more peaceful, symbiotic, and respectful relations with other human and non-human animals and nature. Second, it allows Atwood a different angle of critique, as some of the Gardeners' ostensible beliefs and actions are no more sympathetic up close than they are from Jimmy's distance. As such, the trilogy is underwritten by ambivalence about environmentalist efforts that resemble religious belief. Alexander Menrisky notes that Atwood delineates Gardener theology in detail, articulating the religion's embrace of death, as Adam One, the Gardeners' founder and spiritual leader, extols the process of sharing one's "protein" with other species that occurs following our corporeal dissolution (*Year* 347). Menrisky argues that Atwood critiques the Gardeners' tendency to "flatten" distinctions between humans, non-human animals, and other "matter" to the point where "dying in general is politically unobjectionable" (32); the Gardeners' anticipation of the "Waterless Flood" at times approaches eagerness, making it hard to distinguish between the Gardeners and Crake, as they both anticipate the culling of humankind.

Atwood literalises the didactic, sermonising environmentalist in the guise of Adam One.⁶⁸ Beginning in *The Year of the Flood*, Toby and Ren's perspectives are intercut with chapters in which Adam delivers a sermon during the God's Gardeners Saints' Days. There is at least one saint, typically a well-known friend of the earth such as Rachel Carson, Dian Fossey, or Vandana Shiva, for each date on the calendar, and the sermons pick up on a particular theme exemplified by the saint's life and work. All sermons reflect in some way on the importance of respect for non-human life and end with a selection of hymns from "*The God's Gardeners Oral Hymnbook*" (14). The hymns and sermons give Atwood a space to have fun with poetry, satirise religious language, and honour real-life figures deserving of admiration; they also indicate the extent to which the Gardeners are modelled on Catholicism, as opposed to Protestantism. Given Protestantism's association with conservative resistance to environmental stewardship in recent U.S. and Canadian history, and Adam's rebellion against his fundamentalist preacher father, it is unsurprising that Adam draws more from Catholicism when developing his religious rites. The historical othering of Catholicism as a sinister counterpart to Protestantism is also appropriate, given that the God's Gardeners are a persecuted group.

It is not until the last novel, *MaddAddam*, that we learn about Adam One's subversive motivations. Some aspects of his faith and cultish demeanour may be genuine; his brother Zeb (another last man) never learns if Adam really "believed" his own ideas (*MaddAddam* 228). But his apparently extreme religious movement often functions as a cover for resistance to the regime while genuinely enacting a restorative lifestyle to counteract human excesses that are destroying the biosphere. This suggests that Adam One "believes" in resisting the state and taking concrete steps to enact better environmental stewardship more so than he believes in the importance of observing details of Gardener doctrine such as Saints' Days. He maintains the Gardeners' theological dimensions possibly because, as Atwood suggests via the Crakers' development of religion, humans are often responsive to

⁶⁸ Where Snowman, at the outset of *Oryx and Crake*, believes he is the last man, Adam One is symbolically the first man. Adam's development of his own theology, of which he is the faith leader, invites comparisons to Crake, even though they work against one another.

attempts to make sense of the world through a religious framework, and also because he surmises that the regime is wary of targeting a group with “God in its name” (*Year 48*). There is a through-line from the sins of the father to Adam’s own movement, as Adam’s father is a powerful and corrupt reverend for the Church of PetrOleum, which literalises worship of fossil fuels. This “cult”, which exists to make money, is contrasted with the God’s Gardeners, who disdain material possessions and do not solicit donations. The Church of PetrOleum has much in common with U.S. megachurches, with its “golden-tongued whip-’em-up preaching” and excessive glitz (*MaddAddam* 111). The introduction of the church in *MaddAddam* gives Atwood an opportunity for unbridled critique of the megachurch brand of organised religion, as she has thus far been even-handed in assessing the good and bad in the Gardener cult. An easy formula for financial success, as Zeb sees it, is to “tell people what they want to hear, call yourself a religion, put the squeeze on for contributions ... evade taxes” (111). It helps to be willing to use threats and intimidation and to run one’s own media outlets. (Zeb’s description of the Church of PetrOleum’s tactics accords with Hugh Urban’s description of Scientology.) With the Church of PetrOleum, whose members “thank the Almighty for blessing the world with fumes and toxins”, Atwood implicates environmental exploitation as its own strain of cultish ideology (111). The threat posed to the fossil fuel industry by climate activism is clear from the Church of PetrOleum’s enmity towards “ecofreaks”. PetrOleum’s fictional advertisements are reminiscent of either/or arguments resisting climate action, featuring “stuff like a cute little blond girl next to some particularly repellent threatened species” – great white sharks, ugly amphibians – “with a slogan saying: *This? Or This?* Implying that all cute little blond girls were in danger of having their throats slit so the Surinam toads might prosper” (182). The advertisements (which also humorously demonise activists: “Solar Panels Are Satan’s Work”, “Serial Killers Believe in Global Warming” [117]) set up a false dichotomy between humans and other species, who are only opposed insofar as humans have created the conditions under which the animals are threatened.

Adam One despises his father, whose status as a wife-killer complements his remorseless environmental plundering (recall the ecofeminist connection

between mistreatment of women and nature). If Adam's continuation in the tradition of religious leadership suggests the cognitive impact of religious indoctrination from earliest childhood – it is an express purpose of the Gardeners, Adam says, to “mould young minds” (*Year 78*) – he uses religion to package and sell messages that are objectively better for the world than his father's self-enriching schemes. Flashbacks to Adam and Zeb's childhood show how Adam “used good things as a front for his bad things” (*MaddAddam* 114), which he carries into his Gardener strategy to mask subversive actions. Adam insightfully deduces that the distinction between fanaticism and terrorism is determined by whoever is in power: the regime sees the Gardeners as “twisted fanatics who combine food extremism with bad fashion sense and a puritanical attitude toward shopping. But we own nothing they want, so we don't qualify as terrorists” (*Year 43*). His understanding of the purpose of religion is pragmatic: “We've evolved to believe in gods, so this belief bias of ours must confer an evolutionary advantage ... we need to push popular sentiment in a biosphere-friendly direction by pointing out the hazards of annoying God by a violation of His trust in our stewardship” (241). He is wary of nihilism, believing a “strictly materialist view” is “too harsh and lonely for most” (241). Such considerations show that Adam is cognisant of the need to appeal to and maintain followers if he wants his agenda to succeed, and he accepts that some followers, like Toby, will struggle to accept Gardener doctrine. “In some religions, faith precedes action,” he tells her. “In ours, action precedes faith” (168).

Jimmy's negative impression of the Gardeners and Adam One's deceptive, pragmatic, carefully crafted construction of an earth-friendly faith underscore Atwood's ambivalent comparison of religion and environmentalism, particularly that which might be seen as extreme (or “fundamentalist”). The scepticism Atwood has shown towards organised religion in previous novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (1988) remains intact but complicated. The trilogy's faith leaders and pseudo-idols are not true believers; they merely use faith to garner attention, attract followers, and promote adherence to their precepts, which are designed to facilitate pre-existing secular goals. If Atwood's portrayal seems to reveal how faith can be cynically exploited as a vehicle for secular aims, it nonetheless explicates some of the overlap between religious thinking and other deeply held commitments and

beliefs. Harnessing humans' orientation towards religion, Atwood suggests, might be useful for reframing our approach to and treatment of non-human nature. Yet an aura of deception and extremity associated with fundamentalist religion colours Atwood's treatment of environmental themes. This portrayal suggests that a religious approach to solving our climate crisis, as advocated by thinkers like Lynn White Jr., would necessarily require unorthodox strategies and compromise.

Apocalypse now: culling the human as a solution to environmental decline

To close the chapter, I want to return to the prevalence of apocalyptic eco-fiction in the context of religion. As Greg Garrard notes, apocalypse is commonly represented in world religions, with holy books foretelling the end of (human) life on Earth as humans merge with the divine (*Ecocriticism* 93). Kyle Powys Whyte has written that for some groups of people, a "dystopian future" has already occurred, in which whole groups of people and other species have been destroyed or "irreversibly damaged" by genocide and/or environmental degradation ("Dystopia Now" 207). Claire Colebrook writes that contemporary understanding of "apocalypse" differs from traditional religious representation: now, "We imagine the end of human existence as the end of the world rather than ... a moment on its way to a transcendent and inhuman age of wonder" (264). For the God's Gardeners, apocalyptic prophecy takes the form of the Waterless Flood. Earthseed followers believe that space travel must occur or the human species will "wither", which, in the context of the violent dystopia the characters occupy, implies the potential for extinction (*Talents* 325).

For both fictional religions, dystopia presages an anticipated, widespread extinction event, although in *Parable*, the "apocalypse" is more like a continuation of the pre-existing dystopian society. Theodore Martin has written that post-apocalyptic stories are "desperate for the mere continuation of the present" (161). Although Lauren vocally disputes mere continuation as insufficient and extols "Change" as a central tenet of her religion, Acorn's back-to-the-land ethos, which emphasises traditional homesteading skills, is a characteristic example of the genre's emphasis on continuity, or, as Pieter Vermeulen puts it, the genre's "conspicuous denial of extinction, as these texts' reluctance to imagine an

alternative to current forms of life tends to turn them into exercises in continuity rather than into confrontations with rupture” (150). Indeed, one imagines that human life will go on much as before on the other planets Lauren seeks to colonise; other planets are conceptually a “new frontier” for American settlers.

The dual-timeline construction of Atwood’s and Butler’s novels present some degree of decline as a foregone conclusion, as the outcome of the past setting’s problems is known to the reader. Much as Ty Tierwater wishes the world rid of ecophobic humans in *A Friend of the Earth*, some characters in *MaddAddam* and *Parable of the Talents* express a problematic desire for the “end of the world” to be hastened, a not uncommon idea in more pessimistic wings of the environmental movement. Some engagement with human mortality may be unavoidable in climate discourse, although I would argue that protecting ourselves (and, realistically, corporate financial interests) may be one of the more persuasive arguments for widespread climate action, given that all species are self-interested. (Regarding financial interests: some of the biggest climate offender corporations like British Petroleum have begun to pivot to “clean” energy, both for green-washing purposes and to get in at the ground floor of alternative energy profits.) Louise Squire suggests that human “death denial” drives environmentally destructive behaviours, and that accepting “our ultimate corporality” is necessary if we want to mitigate ecological damage, as we must recognise that “natural resources” and our own experiences of consciousness are finite (27). Death denial is, certainly, a challenge to be overcome in climate advocacy, but overly pessimistic messaging is no asset to the cause, and the notion that “the planet” will “recover” in the absence of humans curiously separates our species from other living things. “Despair is unproductive,” writes the climate reporter Elizabeth Kolbert. “It’s also a sin” (36). The willingness to die (and to encourage others to do so) for an imagined but not guaranteed benefit to the non-human world is irretrievably shaded with associations of blind faith or delusion or both, a Jonestown massacre perpetrated for the supposed benefit of “the environment” – an environment that is, as usual, imagined as disconnected and free from troublesome humans.

Atwood’s trilogy is notably ambivalent towards these questions. Although Crake, destroyer of (human) worlds, appears unambiguously villainous, Atwood

draws parallels between his lack of faith in the ability of humankind to improve as a species and Adam One's sermons about humans' mistreatment of non-human animals, which are accompanied with encouragements to accept one's mortality. A significant decline in the human population, if not outright extinction, is expected by all the "real" Gardeners, according to Zeb: a "population crash ... would happen anyway, and maybe sooner was better" (*MaddAddam* 330). The trilogy's bucolic ending, in which a very small group of surviving humans (all Gardeners) live harmoniously with Crakers and other creatures as "nature" rebounds and thrives, uncomfortably suggests some benefit to the brutal culling of humankind, as well as a value to Gardener praxis – even if, by trilogy's end, it must no longer be couched in theological terms to be effectively deployed.

Butler's metaphor of "adulthood" is thematically important to her protagonist Lauren. Lauren characterises Earthseed as "the dawning adulthood of the human species. It offers the only true immortality. It enables the seeds of the Earth to become the seeds of new life, new communities on new earths" (325). Like the God's Gardeners' reconfiguration of death as a sacred sharing of "protein", Lauren takes the human fear of death and the unknown and uses this to fashion a new understanding of life and mortality, in which one is connected to things outside of oneself and thus in some sense never dies. Lauren never suggests that humans should die to make way for non-human life (although, pragmatically for her dangerous world, "Thou shalt not kill" is not one of her commandments); her solution is instead to flee to other planets, leaving behind a mess that is apparently too challenging to untangle. This fantastical and unlikely solution may evade our responsibility to care for the planet that gives us life, but it at least respects human life enough not to openly call for sacrifice. Lauren learns from bitter experience not to sacrifice others to the causes she believes in, and instead to try to stop people and their "self-destructive way[s]" by asking "what [we] can do instead of dying – what [we] should be doing" (347). Lauren's story of growth and potential – literally reaching for the stars – is, unsurprisingly, more attractive to people than an invitation to species suicide, and Lauren gains far more followers by the conclusion of the *Parable* series who help make her dreams of space travel a reality.

Conclusion

I must concede that religious belief is a somewhat apt metaphor for environmentalism. Just as prophecies, commitment, and certainty – faith – are hallmarks of religion, so too are climate activists certain of impending catastrophe, committed to their vision of the world, and desperate to spread the word. Climate activists must also tailor their message to “convert” as many people as possible. So why take issue with the prevalence of religious metaphors in environmental writing? Beyond the ease of the metaphor and the historical drama it bestows, my concern lies with how the comparison diminishes the weight and authority of climate science. In these narratives, belief in environmentalism becomes a matter of faith, one which divides rather than unifies in the long shadow of religious conflict. It calls into question the validity of environmentalism. If we can set aside troublesome conflation of delusion and religious faith, these comparisons can be productive for how they interrogate the concepts of reason and rationality, persuasion and social dynamics, as well as what constitutes radicalism and fanaticism, but they risk collapsing distinctions and undermining attempts to position climate change as a critical challenge of our times.

Chapter 3: Children, animals, and genetic engineering: De-centring the human adult in literature of the Anthropocene

Considering the perspectives of non-human figures in eco-fiction is important for addressing environmental problems because lack of concern for non-human life is seen as a significant factor in environmental exploitation.⁶⁹ Many environmentalists, ecocritics, and eco-novelists are concerned by humans' insufficient care and respect for non-human animals and "natural resources" like trees. (The very formulation of "natural *resources*" indicates a proprietorial attitude towards flora and fauna). Humans raise animals for food at an industrial scale, and breed or genetically engineer them to suit our purposes.⁷⁰ Agricultural mega-corporations like Bayer-Monsanto have genetically altered crops to increase output and consistency, resulting in the decline of heirloom species, decreased biodiversity and nutritional value, and irreversible changes to vast swathes of ecosystem. Such blatant interventions in what we think of as nature, alongside rapid technological progress, often take form in future-oriented eco-novels through artificial intelligence (AI), bioengineered, and other not-quite-human characters who explore the consequences of such developments. When it comes to marginalised, almost-human characters, eco-novelists explore a limitation: since the humans of Earth are not motivated enough to leave a liveable world behind for their own children, they are unlikely to consider the ethical implications for non-human life much at all.⁷¹ But some authors and environmentalists believe that the depiction of non-human perspectives, which comes with many creative challenges, is an important tool for changing perspectives.

In this chapter, I will examine portrayals of unlikely or untraditional defenders of the environment, beginning with would-be biocentric portraits of non-human

⁶⁹ I use the term "non-human" to distinguish humans from other life forms. Although this framing is admittedly anthropocentric, I prefer it to "more-than-human", an ecocritical alternative that I find imprecise and sentimental.

⁷⁰ A memorable example from Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007): nearly all U.S.-grown turkeys must be slaughtered before they reach their first year, because they have been bred to provide such copious breast meat that their legs cannot support their adult weight (90).

⁷¹ Adeline Johns-Putra problematised the trope of posterity in *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel* (2019). Although I find overtures to the future of our children less problematic than Johns-Putra, she is right to consider that this rhetorical strategy appears less effective than its ubiquity would suggest.

characters in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* (2013). I then turn to human children in Michael Christie's *Greenwood* (2020) and Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* (2020). I conclude the chapter with an analysis of more radical imaginings of agentic, "activist" nature in Jeff VanderMeer's "weird" novels *Annihilation* (2014) and *Borne* (2017). Among the novels' shared concerns is the question of "difference" and "likeness" between humans and other species, and what sort of politics can or should be generated on the basis of similarity. The act of writing is insistently foregrounded in these novels: the diary entries and increasingly rare paper books in *Greenwood*; the narration and "A Child's Bible" in *A Children's Bible*; trees "recording" their thoughts and activists using deadwood to form words that can be seen from the sky in *The Overstory*; and the sinister messages created by a living entity in *Annihilation* all point to a preoccupation with textuality. Although the various creatures in these novels fear extinction, their continued recording of their experiences portrays the persistence of hope as well as an innate need to communicate, a trait the authors do not attribute solely to humans.

Although these texts are heterogenous, I interpret them as portraying untraditional or unexpected activists, who range from human children to non-human animals to agentic nature that "defends" itself from exploitation. These figures are typically granted fewer rights and are perceived as less autonomous and powerful than human adults, but the authors make a case that they should not be underestimated. By extending focus to underrepresented entities, the authors imagine alternative perspectives that challenge attitudes towards nature and environment that deny agency and biocentric value.

"A forest grows aware"⁷²: trees as heroes in *The Overstory*

Richard Powers set himself a difficult task in his attempt to de-centre the human in *The Overstory* (2018). James Hurt has written that the "implicit project" of Powers' work "is an exploration of the possibilities of narrative, a recuperation of this currently much-maligned way of ordering the world" (24). With *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment* (2021), Powers also participates in the project identified in *The Great*

⁷² *The Overstory*, p. 453.

Derangement (2016), in which Amitav Ghosh detailed the challenges of depicting climate change in creative written form. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Powers said that he wanted to write a book “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). Powers describes his nine human protagonists, who take trees “seriously”, as a “compromise” to his grand but ultimately “impossible” goals of narrative biocentrism. Even with this compromise, Powers hopes *The Overstory* “challenge[s]” “the sense of exceptionalism we humans carry around inside us”, noting that trees are not “simple automatons” but “long-lived creatures” who communicate with one another and help make the world a liveable place. Although Powers problematises comparison in *The Overstory*, he cannot resist measuring trees in terms of their likeness, kinship, or utility to humans: “we share a considerable amount of our genes with them”, they show “flexibility in the face of change and challenge” just like humans and animals, and without them, humans would not exist. He notes in the same interview that he was inspired by Ents, the anthropomorphic, talking trees in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, who are legible through their commonalities with humanoid heroes.

Though Powers settled on trees as “heroes” but not protagonists, he still attempts an innovative portrait of trees as agentic characters, which comes up against the very limitations he identified in the interview. Most of his human characters – Olivia, Adam, Nick, and Mimi, among others – are radical environmental activists, but Powers tests out narrative strategies that impress on the reader a sense of trees themselves as “activists” who are powerful, strategic in their own way, and push back against human intervention – and who will likely outlast the human species. Although Powers endeavours to portray trees non-anthropocentrically, human perspective inevitably shapes the textual representation of their qualities and, of course, his human characters’ reaction to them. Even the most knowledgeable of his characters anthropomorphise the objects of their reverence. Patricia, a ground-breaking dendrologist, thinks of “a tree embarrassed for people, embarrassed by efficiency, injunctions” (304-5). According to Patricia, “Trees want things from us”, “Trees are doing science”,

"Trees are the earth's endless effort to speak to the listening heaven" (454). When she describes trees as "want[ing] things" or "doing science", Patricia is trying to encourage feelings of kinship or empathy with trees, but she does so in a way that projects human concepts and emotions onto trees. Although Powers is clearly interested in how to convey tree "feelings" via a biocentric perspective, Patricia is not convinced that anthropomorphism is problematic, and in fact feels that objective distance hinders scientific discovery: "We scientists are taught never to look for ourselves in other species. So we make sure nothing looks like us!" (453) Patricia thinks that viewing humans as very different from other living beings has prevented scientists from realising the extent of trees' complexity.

Patricia believes "man" is causing "The Tree of Life" to "collapse" (304) and considers public suicide as a protest: she darkly refers to suicide as *"the single best thing a person can do for tomorrow's world"* (456). Powers' characters alternate between concern that trees are at the mercy of humans, and assurance that trees are powerful creatures who may even be possessed of human traits like vengeance (Adam speculates that trees will eventually dominate humans), or, alternatively, protectiveness (Nick is saved from a mudslide by tall trees that only a few days later will be felled by loggers). Problematically, whether the trees are vengeful or protective seems to rest on the goodness (environmentalist commitment) of the people in question: when Adam speculates that those humans who have abused nature will be abused in turn, he does not mention that this fate will also befall those with less responsibility for catastrophe (339).

To cultivate the reader's ability to connect with trees, Powers self-consciously resorts to analogy and symbolism, a strategy which comes with anthropocentric trappings that are hard to shake off. The affinity Powers' activists feel for trees is often based on recognition of kinship or likeness. Mimi's connection to trees begins early in life with a mulberry tree revered by her father, who writes a poem about three trees that represent Mimi and her sisters. Adam's parents mark each of their children's births by planting a different species of tree. Adam takes this tradition and its symbolic meaning seriously: "Leigh is droopy, like her elm. Jean is straight and good. Emmett's ironwood – look at him! And my maple turns red, like me" (49). Adam's father chooses the next baby's tree because it is on sale,

and plants it still in the burlap sack it arrived in: Adam fears that the “choking” tree indicates the baby will die (50). While Adam admires trees on their own merits, his belief that the fate of each tree aligns with the child it represents adds a higher stake to his care for the tree’s well-being. If this belief seems childish, it is narratively reinforced by the ways in which Adam, Mimi, Nick, and Neelay’s lives are shaped in accordance with trees with which they have a strong association.

Powers writes a scene in which Nick consciously tries to resist anthropomorphising the trees he reveres. Here, Powers comes up against the limits of the novel and, more broadly, the written word:

What are those treetops like? They’re like that cog-toothed drawing toy, spinning out surprise patterns from the simplest nested cycles. They’re like the tip of a Ouija planchette, taking dictation from beyond. *They are, in fact, like nothing but themselves. They are the crowns of five white spruces laden with cones, bending in the wind as they do every day of their existence. Likeness is the sole problem of men.* (355)

Where Nick takes man-made objects as a starting point, comparing trees to “cog-toothed” toys and not the other way around, the omniscient, italicised voice that Powers use to represent a biocentric (or specifically dendrocentric) perspective corrects the inversion. Nick’s impulse to compare the trees to something – to find their “likeness” – is expressed as a human “*problem*”, as the trees should be viewed only as what they are: if anything, toys and Ouija boards are “like” these treetops, not the other way around.

Despite its efforts to upend Nick’s thought process, the tree “voice” necessarily reveals the human perspective writing it, as well as a preoccupation with writing and communication: “*the spruces pour out messages in media of their own invention ... they record in their own bodies the history of every crisis they’ve lived through ... The five white spruces sign in the blue air. They write ...*” (355) Like their human author, the trees “*record*”, “*sign*”, “*write*”; Powers’ imagining of the trees as expressive communicators depends on metaphor. I read Nick’s struggle to resist analogy as self-reflexive, as analogy is a powerful tool for writers. Powers implicates his own impulse to analogise as a “*problem of men*”, yet his self-conscious attempt to avoid doing so (or to at least signpost his awareness of it) represents a not entirely successful complication of linguistic convention.

Problematizing comparison creates a dilemma, because analogy is an important tool for any writer. Forgács and Pléh assert that metaphors “play a central role in formulating and spreading novel ideas”; they suggest that effective climate change communication cannot occur without creative analogy, even while analogy is effectively harnessed by those who forestall climate action too (447). Analogy and metaphor can indeed be risky. Powers plausibly wishes to avoid an anthropocentric version of the problems Elizabeth Butler Cullingford identified in comparing the plight of one marginalised population or conflict with another: although such analogies can be illustrative, they are “slippery things” that risk conflation and insensitivity to detail and individual experience (133). Powers is evidently sensitive to how anthropocentrism might be detected in language that evaluates “strange strangers”, as Timothy Morton terms living others (*Ecological Thought* 40). But his compulsion to signpost if not entirely evade analogy – this “*problem of men*” – as an anthropocentric construction limits his ability to freely use compelling imaginative mechanisms. As Cullingford puts it, analogies “operate ... though the power of empathy” and “can be a potent mobilizing force” (133). While trying to find a way around – perhaps to transcend – comparison may appear subversive and innovative, it is a self-imposed creative limitation that necessarily interferes with the deployment of complex and illuminating metaphors.

Powers suggests that trees communicate amongst themselves but also to humans like Nick: “*The man in the tent lies bathed in signals hundreds of millions of years older than his crude senses. And still he can read them*” (355). Visually, the scene emphasises how Powers has felt compelled to centre humans and how he nonetheless tries to get around them to his real interests. Nick is the centre of this scene in that he lies in the centre of the cluster of trees and is also the main subject. He is the intended recipient of the trees’ communication efforts. Powers writes Nick and other humans as capable of communing with trees, if only they can “listen” (4); the material ecocritical idea that trees are trying to inscribe their own stories in the world is taken seriously here.⁷³ Nick tries to imagine a different perspective: “I wouldn’t need to be so very different for sun to be about sun, for

⁷³ The material ecocritics Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann describe “matter itself” as “a text where dynamics of ‘diffuse’ agency and nonlinear causality are inscribed and produced” (79-80).

green to be about green ... and then this ... would take up all of me, and be all the words I need" (356). The way in which Nick strives to let trees be "all the words I need" turns out to be literal, as he uses dead trees for a type of performance art. Nick's art expresses his need to communicate in human language even as he feels estranged from his species. He uses deadwood to write messages that can be seen from the sky – much as writers and publishers use dead trees to make books, only in Nick's case, he collects from already-dead sources, rather than intentionally felling trees to make paper. Much like his author, Nick is compelled by the majesty and mystery of nature, the "voices" of other-than-human beings, but he is also in thrall to the power of human words. That Powers concludes his long, sweeping novel with a scene depicting Nick's artistry indicates Powers' focus on what art, including his own art as a novelist, can or should do when it comes to addressing crisis on a planetary scale. The deadwood that Nick has shaped into the word "STILL" takes on new life, "beetles and lichen and fungi", supporting Powers' partly hopeful suggestion that non-human life will find a way: "already, this word is greening ... *This. What we have been given. What we must earn. This will never end*" (502).

Animals and genetic engineering in *MaddAddam*

The importance of biotech in the world of the *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013) provides a foundation for Margaret Atwood to examine animal rights (especially meat-eating), ethics, and ontology. Like many novelists, Atwood is fascinated by language: the cult leader Adam One, pondering the question of how God speaks to animals, concludes that each species must have its own language, all of which are understood by God. Animals are central to the God's Gardeners theology and to the themes of *MaddAddam*. Much of Adam One's religious project is a reconfiguration of animal-human relations as understood by Christianity. God's Gardeners music adopts a familiar hymnal structure, which makes Adam One's child-like appeals to call animals "Friend once more" appear harmless and easily assimilated (*Year 14*). Over time, the children and adults listening to these hymns and sermons absorb a worldview concerned with rehabilitating human relationships with animals and the earth.

Atwood addresses animal ethics and posthumanism through two invented species, the pigoons and the Crakers, both of which are bioengineered species that share DNA with humans. The pigoons are mostly pig, with the addition of human neocortex tissue, which appears to increase their natural intelligence; they have been engineered for the purpose of growing replacement organs for humans. The Crakers are a humanoid species, an attempted improvement on humans: they are better-looking, more benevolent, less resource-intensive, and seem to lack such negative traits as jealousy and anger.

With so many creatures blurring the presumed human/non-human boundary, ignoring the “humanity” of protein sources becomes more challenging. Even the less fanatical God’s Gardeners come to feel guilt for past meat-eating, although their religion grants the right to eat meat (even human meat, should the situation arise) in the direst scenarios. Laura Wright characterises this proviso as “hypocritical”, but the idea that the Gardeners would preserve any sort of moral-ethical approach to food in a post-apocalyptic starvation scenario sets them apart from others who do not have dietary restrictions in the first place (87). (It should be noted that the pre-apocalypse setting of *Oryx and Crake* is hardly a place of abundance; soy is the most common protein source, meat is lab-grown for reasons of scarcity and control, and only the ultra-rich can afford “real” meat that is commonly consumed in our modern times.) Wright compares the “dogma” of the Gardeners and their peers to the religion-like features of modern fad diets, such as strict adherence to a rigid set of rules and guilt and self-punishment following lapses (86). While she calls certain diets “extreme” (for example, post-apocalyptic cannibalism), she does not treat strict veganism as extreme, even if it will kill a pandemic survivor whose food choices are limited (87). Wright views Atwood’s engagement with the “hypocrisy” of the Gardeners’ flexible diet and belief system as fostering “a new mythology upon which to rebuild society after the apocalypse” (86) – one in which respect for other life is paramount. Wright notes that the Gardeners’ cultivation of a self-sustaining lifestyle helps them survive the apocalyptic event and will help them continue the arc of humanity with a refreshed vision of human/non-human relations, but to Wright these relations depend on strict

adherence to veganism, rather than the adaptive approach the Gardeners more often advocate.

Atwood's biotech oddities are barely fictional and directly confront bio- and dietary ethics in our own world. Atwood forces the reader to confront philosophical dilemmas, such as if/when lab-grown meat is really *meat*, by introducing ChickieNobs, which *Oryx and Crake* hero Jimmy sees on a trip to visit Crake at university. ChickieNobs are lab-grown chicken parts, but their uncanny presentation and possible sentience are alarming. "Just the breasts, on this one", says a lab worker about one specimen (*Oryx* 202), which amounts to a grotesque visual representation of Carol J. Adams' feminised protein theory.⁷⁴ As the lab worker explains, this method of growing chicken is "efficient" and profitable, and "the animal-welfare freaks won't be able to say a word, because this thing feels no pain" (203). Despite these thin assurances, Jimmy finds ChickieNobs nightmarish: "At least the pigeons of his childhood hadn't lacked heads" (202). Something essential (a head!) has been removed from this creature, which is, after all, alive. The worker responds to this criticism by noting that the creatures do have "a mouth opening" into which "nutrients" can be poured (202). When Jimmy asks what the creature is "thinking", the worker laughs (202). The elimination of suffering from the factory farm process that is supposedly exemplified by these lab-created monstrosities does not assuage Jimmy's sense that something fundamentally exploitative and disturbing accompanies this solution.

Atwood shows that the outwardly callous Jimmy is emotionally repressed through his reactions to how animals and biotech are treated. When compromised pigeons are burned at his father's workplace, young Jimmy worries this will hurt them, but his father says they are already dead, and furthermore that they are the same as meat:

They were like steaks and sausages, only they still had their heads on ...
Steaks didn't have heads. The heads made a difference: he thought he could see the animals looking at him reproachfully out of their burning eyes. In some way all of this – the bonfire, the charred smell, but most of all the lit-up,

⁷⁴ In her analysis of the parallels between exploitation of women and non-human animals, Adams compares the process of extracting animal milk and eggs for food with outdated perceptions of women as reproductive vessels.

suffering animals – was his fault, because he'd done nothing to rescue them.
(18)

The passage foreshadows Jimmy's inability to "do something" as an adult. There is a feedback loop in which his inaction causes guilt and stress, which immobilises him when action is required, which causes further guilt and stress. Jimmy's sympathy in the bonfire scene is not misplaced: even if the dead pigeons are beyond the experience of pain in the moment of their burning, they have been confined, exploited, and discarded. The adults around Jimmy tell him not to worry, which causes him to suppress his instinctual emotions, a learned behaviour that will persist into adulthood. Jimmy is also becoming conscious of the meaning of animals as food. As Adams puts it:

Behind every meal of meat is an absence: the death of the animal whose place the meat takes. The "absent referent" is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product. The function of the absent referent is to keep our "meat" separated from any idea that she or he was once an animal ... to keep *something* from being seen as having been someone. (xxiv)

Jimmy instinctually grasps that there may be no actual distinction between a steak and a cow, only that a steak does not have a head; the steak thus becomes a "free-floating image", as Adams puts it, "unanchored by its original referent (the animal)" (xxiv). The heads of the barbecued pigeons resist Jimmy's social conditioning to accept meat as something separate from animals. Jimmy acknowledges the "beauty and spectacle" (18) of the bonfire despite its queasy horror, disclosing a tension between what he instinctively understands about meat and animals – that meat comes from animals who have been slaughtered and butchered, and is not a discrete thing – and the appeal of a barbecue, complete with sparking fire and the promise of satiation.

Alongside the Crakers, Atwood's pigeons are a refreshing departure from the hostile biotech of other well-known dystopian stories (for example, bad robots from science fiction films such as *Alien* [1979] or, as we shall see, some of Jeff VanderMeer's fictional creatures). Jimmy spends much of *Oryx and Crake* evading pigeons who escaped during the apocalyptic chaos, fearing they will kill and eat him. Even though he is afraid of them, the language Jimmy uses to describe the

pigeons reveals how human-like he perceives them to be: they are “sly” and “tactic[al]” (*MaddAddam* 267), possibly “malevolent” (206), and “might have plans for him later” (*Oryx* 26). The line between human and non-human is blurred not just by the pigeons’ evident intelligence and culture but also by Jimmy’s decline into animality; as the pigeons become more like Jimmy, he becomes more like a pig.

Atwood conveys the will of the pigeons in italics and ellipses, as though pigeon thoughts are floating in the atmosphere and can be gleaned by a human who is really paying attention. Toby, the hero of *The Year of the Flood* (2009), comes to an understanding with a pigeon during a hallucinogenic ceremony. The elliptical deployment of pigeon thoughts and feelings is stylistically similar to how Powers and VanderMeer portray the agency of flora. Through this narrative device, Atwood conveys a pigeon moral outlook on food and eating that is reminiscent of the Gardeners: they will eat any already-dead meat they come across – including the flesh of other fallen pigeons – but avoid unnecessary bloodshed and enjoy a mostly vegetarian diet. The exception to their pragmatic cannibalism is baby pigeons, who are commemorated with the same mournful funeral rites as their dead elders but are then buried in weeds and flowers instead of eaten. Instead of turning the tables on their erstwhile eaters, the pigeons forge an alliance through risky overtures of good will and compromise that are at first hard for the wary humans to understand. The pigeons’ personality traits and opportunistic cannibalism are true to life, as pigs are intelligent, sensitive creatures who are also notoriously omnivorous. Atwood risks anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism with the pigeons, as their human neocortex tissue makes them *more* intelligent and sensitive, even ethical, than other pigs. The pigeons show themselves to be more trusting and noble allies than the humans, willing to do what must be done for the greater good – the well-being of their neo-species and other life.

The fact that the humans gain respect for and find kinship with the pigeons, who stand in for other sentient creatures along with the Crakers, cannot be separated from how human-like the pigs appear. This new species of pig has its own human-like culture, complete with funeral rites and dietary ethics, which may make the species more appealing and legible to humans than species with which we share fewer obvious commonalities. But I do not find this as problematic as

scholars who insist on the harm of anthropomorphism. It may be less important to respect animals and other life for the “right” reasons (for example, not identifying with them just because they remind us of ourselves) and more important that they are respected at all, and emphasising the similarity of animals and humans goes some way to shifting attitudes and perceptions of our responsibility to non-human life (Malecki et al.). Authors like Powers and VanderMeer, alongside ecocritics and animal studies scholars, propose that we must try to understand plants and animals on their own terms, however difficult this may be, in order to prompt a shift in perspective and treatment, but if revealing the commonalities between humans and other animal species improves our treatment of them, anthropomorphism may be a useful response, instead of an irretrievable limit.

Many eco-novelists try to stretch the novel’s capacities in the era of climate crisis, including by attempting to innovate a biocentric narrative perspective, but this is inevitably difficult, or even, as Powers puts it, “impossible” (Hamner). I would argue that continuing to anthropomorphise animals and centre humans in literature is justified and even positive if it helps readers build empathy for the non-human world and thus change our perspectives and treatment of it. The relationship between the pigeons, humans, and Crakers in *MaddAddam* highlights the need to transform human relations with the non-human world. Some critics view the development of feelings of kinship with other life forms as a critical component of environmental stewardship, which should be seen more as symbiotic and reciprocal than domineering. Empathy developed through the recognition of shared characteristics can be powerful, but the philosopher Val Plumwood argues it is not required: “We may identify in solidarity with an animal ... but we do not thereby acquire identical specific interests” (199-200). We may intuitively identify with a sensitive, fictional pig who defends humans and shares our DNA; it is less instinctive to extend the same feeling of kinship and responsibility to invertebrates, rivers, grass, and soil. Plumwood concludes, “We must attain solidarity with the other *in their difference*” (200).

“And how do you give birth to a radical? I could write the manual”⁷⁵: troubling the participation of children in environmental protests

In Chapters One and Four, I discuss how T.C. Boyle (*A Friend of the Earth*) and Tommy Orange (*There There*) address the risks of including children in direct-action protests. The involvement of children in environmental activism is extended by Canadian novelist Michael Christie and American author Lydia Millet, who address a frequently asked but usually rhetorical question – what kind of world are we leaving for our children? – in their novels of ecological crisis. Considering the prevalence of this trope in environmental discourse, including nihilistic, anti-natalist versions of it,⁷⁶ it is curious that children are rarely discussed in ecocritical scholarship.

Why include children in a chapter about animals, plants, and almost-human activists? The answer rests partly on legal rights and autonomy and partly on scholarship that complicates what we understand to be “human”. Posthumanists like Rosi Braidotti take the view that how we organise our idea of “human” is fundamentally flawed, and that historical social norms and oppression reveal that some people are considered less human than others (1). I find this critique imprecise – there is a difference between being perceived as literally, biologically human and being afforded rights and dignity – but posthumanists are engaged in a larger project of delineating what many implicitly understand is meant by “human”. Posthumanism builds on work by Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour suggesting that we were never fully “human”. Haraway’s “cyborg” theory is especially influential to posthumanists who complicate the distinctions between humans and machines. In an era in which “late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed” (*Simians* 152), Haraway asserts that “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism” (150). Although this work is relevant, I fear that some critical treatments of humans as machines risk compromising social justice goals. Attempts to reconceptualise our

⁷⁵ Boyle, *A Friend of the Earth* (96).

⁷⁶ Consider a podcast and article published on the same day, 14 June 2022: “Is Climate Change a Reason to Avoid Having Children?” (*The Ezra Klein Show*) and “Having Kids is Bad for the Planet” (Jill Filipovic).

relation to other matter and our status as humans or machines usually come from good intentions – for example, to challenge a sense of humans as separate from and superior to non-humans – but run the risk of merely dehumanising individuals, reinforcing poor treatment of humans without positively affecting our treatment of non-human others. I have similar reservations about transhumanism, whose proponents traverse related conceptual concerns but are more explicitly positive about direct modifications to the human body and mind, typically with the goal of significantly or even indefinitely extending the human lifespan and facilitating the development of non-human abilities. Transhumanists refer to these modifications – many of which are not currently scientifically possible – as “enhancement”, a term that I find inescapably sinister in its relation to eugenics (Tumilty 2). Because so many eco-novelists are preoccupied with the future, transhumanist concepts often appear in novels with environmental themes, such as Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*.

I think children are particularly interesting figures in environmentalist history for several reasons. First, children generally do not have the same rights as adults. Although this is arguably in their own best interests (and the interests of adults who wish to see young children well-stewarded and cared for, much in the way environmentalists view stewardship of the earth as an adult human responsibility), it means they are subject to different norms and laws than adults and have less autonomy. Second, children grow, change, and develop their ideas, values, and personal characteristics at a faster rate than adults, even if legal adulthood arrives at a somewhat arbitrary date. Sari Edelstein argues that “age is a political instrument” through which social norms are enforced, and that adulthood itself is a “fiction” (1). Indigenous scholars like Tyson Yunkaporta have critiqued the relatively new concept of adolescence, as some individuals we currently think of as children would have already gone through traditional rites of passage into “adulthood” not long ago in the span of human history (90-92). Third – perhaps most controversially, and, I believe, most relevant to the subject of activism – children cannot be said to be consenting (to make decisions for themselves) in quite the same way as adults, who have more freedom, more or at least longer life experience, and a different degree of direct interference from authoritative influences that might mould their reactions, beliefs, and decisions. In general,

children are expected to be less mature and capable of sustained rational thought than adults – a common expectation addressed in Christie’s and Millet’s narratives. By their diminished rights and autonomy, children have more in common with the other unexpected protagonists of this chapter than the archetypal environmentalist adult that I have outlined in the previous two chapters.

Greta Thunberg, one of the most famous environmentalists in the world, first garnered widespread recognition for her climate activism as a young adolescent. Thunberg started Sweden’s *Skolstrejk för klimatet* (school strike for climate) movement, which has seen millions of young protestors from around the world skip school to protest climate change. Thunberg is a polarising figure, which is possibly inevitable for any famous environmentalist: she is both praised as the committed face of youth activism and scorned as a scolding, angry brat (Mkono et al. 2020). Thunberg’s brand of activism has been discussed in terms of neurodiversity and manners (Emily C. Taylor et al. 2021, Andersson 2021), eco-celebrity (Murphy 2021), and social media, affect, and emotion (Molder et al. 2022). But of interest above all is her youth, and the youth of the movement she is perceived as spearheading. The affective nature of many of Thunberg’s deliveries, in which she displays emotions like anger, fear, and sadness, and the emotionally charged and unhindered blame-apportioning of her “confrontational” eco-politics (Murphy, “Speaking” 194), are typically received either as righteous reactions to a grave threat or the overwrought tantrum of a youth who has not learned to control her emotions. Instead of rejecting one or the other framing, I think both righteousness of cause and certain qualities associated with youth (passion, impetuosity, disdain for elders) can simultaneously be understood as contributing to Thunberg’s fame. It is difficult to measure the impact of figures like Thunberg, but many critics believe she has brought an unprecedented level of attention to the cause of climate change. There is also a perception (or hope) that Thunberg has built a “youth-centered” movement that will resist the apathy and destruction of earlier generations (Murphy 193). But there are problems with cleanly apportioning responsibility by generation: many young people show little interest in forgoing the kinds of lifestyles blamed for environmental decline, lifestyles that figures like Thunberg explicitly associate with older generations but that are enjoyed by many

youths as well. I would argue that a rose-coloured approach to youth attitudes about environmental issues underestimates enduring human foibles and defers responsibility to the young, who, since they are supposedly awake to this problem as well as morally superior to the old, are somehow expected to fix it. These are the assumptions upon which Christie and Millet build their narrative foundations.

Christie picks up the major questions pertaining to children and activism posed by Boyle and Orange and weaves them across *Greenwood* (2020), his inter-generational family saga. Christie suggests that overbearing parental insistence on specific values will push the child in the opposite direction. Harris Greenwood, a ruthless timber baron, has a daughter, Willow, who becomes a radical environmentalist; Willow's son, Liam, resents the itinerance and lectures of his childhood and wants nothing to do with environmentalism; Liam's daughter Jake becomes a passionate guide at one of the few remaining old-growth forests in an environmentally ravaged future. *Greenwood* begins in 2038, going back in time to 2008, 1974, 1934, and 1908, at which point the direction reverses and the years are revisited in chronological order. This is visually likened to the rings of a tree, with a drawing that shows the novel's tree-ringed timeline following the table of contents.⁷⁷ This structure (and its visual representation) may seem gimmicky, but it serves a narrative purpose, allowing *Greenwood* to unfold in a way that foregrounds the significance of choices, how the past affects the present, and which environmental realities are within and beyond human control. It also aligns with Christie's metatextual consideration of the use of trees in the production of books; by 2038, paper books are a rare and expensive commodity.

Liam Greenwood's arc is more like the experience of Opal Bear Shield and the other children present during the 1969-1971 occupation of Alcatraz in Tommy Orange's *There There*, which I will discuss in Chapter Four, than Sierra Tierwater's radicalisation in T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth*, although all three texts are critical of the physical and psychological risks taken by adults involving children in their activism. Liam's mother tediously expounds on her environmentalist beliefs, but she also involves Liam in praxis. Liam finds Willow's direct actions terrifying,

⁷⁷ Although there is no such image in the pages of *The Overstory*, that novel's book jacket describes a plot that "unfolds in concentric rings of interlocking fables".

fearing that her destructive protests will “invite a great disaster down upon them both” (48). Willow’s convictions are undermined by constant self-contradiction: Liam observes that “She changes her mind with a swiftness and conviction that terrifies him. A trusted brand commits some ecological sin and she’ll swear off their products forever” (48). Liam’s reference to “ecological sin” highlights the religiosity with which his mother approaches environmentalism, and his concern that her monkeywrenching will “invite a great disaster down upon them” also has biblical echoes.

Willow’s commitment to direct action environmentalism outweighs her commitment to raising Liam, who endures an unstable childhood. Christie reveals how harsh some factions of modern environmentalism can sound through Willow’s anti-natalist language regarding her only son: she describes Liam as a “resource-sucking human” whose accidental, unwanted existence will further “ruin” the world (102). Liam, who longs for love and stability, begins to enact small “betrayals” against his mother and her belief system at age ten, when he allows himself to feel disappointment at his homemade birthday gift, which is accompanied by a “familiar tirade on modern toys and comic books ... which were invented by media corporations and plastic death merchants” (52). Like the youngest God’s Gardeners in Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood* (2009), Liam resists Willow’s anti-materialism, longing for a “normal” childhood that involves some level of wasteful consumption. But unlike the God’s Gardeners, who live in an overtly dystopic future version of the U.S., the largely functional – if slowly approaching climate catastrophe – Canada that Christie portrays in Liam’s lifetime accentuates the abnormality, dysfunction, and deprivation of his upbringing. Liam astutely critiques Willow for assuming a “working-class identity” even though her father is one of the richest men in the world, and when she describes her activism as “work” he instead characterises it as “ruining other people’s livelihoods” (58). This is reminiscent of the clashes between loggers and activists in *The Overstory* and *A Friend of the Earth*, in which the activists briefly consider that the loggers are just doing their jobs. Conflicting priorities of this nature have also been explored from a working-class perspective in Ann Pancake’s *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (2007) and

Ash Davidson's *Damnation Spring* (2021), which enumerate the difficulties facing West Virginia coal miners and California loggers, respectively.⁷⁸

Although Liam is critical of Willow's activism, he develops his own affinity for nature, especially trees, along with a nuanced philosophical perspective. Building furnishings from "reclaimed wood" – a clever marketing term that attracts wealthy clients – Liam's partner Meena prompts him to wonder:

reclaimed from what? Or, more specifically, from whom? The answer is from people who are using it wrong. Poor people. People with no taste. People who don't deserve it ... Why is it that the rich always want to buy back the few things they've allowed the poor to have? Is it to remind them that nothing is theirs, not truly? (64)

This comment is predicated on the perception of wood as a natural resource, the primary purpose of which is to serve people; among those people are the deserving and the undeserving, correlated with wealth and taste. What goes unsaid is that the wood is "reclaimed" not just from old uses, but from nature, where unused wood would naturally dissolve into the landscape, ready to be repurposed by numerous life forms instead of refashioned by an enterprising human into a coffee table. Liam's passion for woodworking and carpentry largely remains in the realm of appreciating wood as a tool, although he experiences small epiphanies over time. Building a violin for Meena, he considers that he has "never before made something so alive ... perhaps his mother had been right: maybe trees *do* have souls" (69). It is interesting to think a manmade instrument could be perceived as *more* alive than a rough plank of wood, or perhaps even a living tree itself. Liam's focus on trees and wood as tools which can be manipulated and reshaped may be a reaction against Willow's purist outlook on nature, which strikes Liam as simplistic. When Willow tells Liam she tried to teach him to "look upon Nature with reverence", Liam interrogates her assumptions: "*What is Nature, exactly, Willow? ... Is one of my reclaimed wood tables Nature? How about me, am I Nature? How come you never looked upon me with any reverence? How come*

⁷⁸ These texts can be described as environmental justice literature. They catalogue the disproportionate impact of environmental disease and degradation on the poor, especially infants and children, highlighting the unique marginalisation and vulnerability of youth.

trees are the only part of Nature that you ever cared about?” (447) Here, Liam expresses something like Karen Barad’s assertion that “*we are a part of that nature that we seek to understand*” (26).

In some ways, Christie positions Liam as a cautionary tale about the challenges of adopting a biocentric perspective. Liam is psychologically harmed by Willow’s attempts to evade anthropocentrism. As a child, Liam asks Willow if she loves trees more than she loves him: “He needs her answer more than he needs anything else” (66). His mother’s reply is honest and crushing: “You’re a good person, Liam. One of the best. But you’re just one person ... Nature is greater than us all” (66). If this sounds like the sort of sage and proportional perspective, endorsed by the dendrophiles of *The Overstory*, that may be just the thing to teach our children if we want to do anything substantial to change our relationship with the planet, it is nonetheless devastating for a child to hear. Unlike the parents in Millet’s *A Children’s Bible*, Willow really is trying to do something about environmental collapse, but always at the expense of her son. Her human selfishness has found another target; the extremity of her conviction at times seems like revenge against her mercenary father instead of a well-considered commitment, and Liam continues the cycle of turning away from the parent’s obsession. Christie is unafraid to inject complexity into characters whose environmental attitudes could be uncomplicatedly bad or good; Willow’s name is evidence of her timber baron father’s unexpected and contradictory reverence for trees and nature, which he expresses by spending time in the outdoors listening for birds – his only hobby – even as he destroys forests to build his fortune.

Christie picks up on a contradiction present in *The Overstory*, in which Powers portrays trees as awe-inspiring, powerful, and certain to outlast humans, but also “weakened” (11), “dying” (14), and “defenseless” (447). Powers’ characters hover anxiously between their belief in trees’ astonishing “longevity” (8) and their certainty that the end of the world – worst of all, the end of trees – is “imminent” (94). Like Powers, Christie is interested in biocentrism, but Christie’s decision to centre a family of human beings is an asset to his engagement of environmental themes, not a resigned demonstration of the novel’s formal and creative limits. By avoiding depictions of arboreal consciousness, he evades the risks attending

anthropomorphism. Christie also reaches different conclusions than Powers by analysing human history, something that is minimised in *The Overstory* and purposefully superseded by the grander temporality of trees.

The tragedy of the Greenwoods' fluctuating environmental commitments is that all Greenwoods are greatly moved by nature, and wish in their own ways to protect it, but the mistakes of the parents engender an equal and opposite reaction by their children that compromises what could have been an intergenerational ecological project. The humans of *Greenwood* are imperfect, and their collective effect on the environment is starkly drawn, but Christie does not condemn them, nor does he submit to nihilism. Instead, Christie finds that humans have always feared the imminent end. One of the simplest but most environmentally salient messages in the novel is that parents – even those who believe population growth intensifies or expedites climate change – wish for a better world for the ones who come after them. This desire makes fear of declining quality of life – which Christie suggests is shared throughout history, by nearly all generations – an even more paralysing terror, but one that is countered by the natural occurrences of birth and death, and with them, hope and continuation. In the 1930s, amid the catastrophic Dust Bowl and Great Depression, Willow's birth mother Euphemia writes in her journal that "*Everything is fraying & falling apart ... I worry that the green & growing things have abandoned us for good & that the dust is all that we deserve*" (500). Even though she fears for the world, her baby has given her hope: "*a world with you in it feels fundamentally richer. Though it's you who will face the bleakness of the future, not me. A future that's no longer better than the past*" (500). Euphemia might have been surprised to learn that the post-Depression future awaiting her descendants is in many ways better than the past. Euphemia writes this in a paper diary, which despite its fragility, physically endures for generations. The paper she writes on has, in effect, a second life, or a continuation of life of the tree from which it was made.

Every generation of the Greenwood family expresses a variation of Euphemia's fear of an imminent collapse. Willow, confronted with an unplanned pregnancy, wonders, "why is it ... that we expect our children to be the ones to halt deforestation and species extinction and to rescue our planet tomorrow, when we

are the ones overseeing its destruction today?” (420) Jake, contemplating family in the frightening era she lives in, thinks, “If history were itself a book, this era would surely be the last chapter, wouldn’t it? Or have all ages believed this? That life can’t possibly go on and that these are the end times?” (497) She remembers Euphemia’s diary entry, “about a society that couldn’t possibly continue. Still, things did go on. And on. And on” (497). Describing this era as potentially the “last chapter”, “that these are the end times”, has something in common with Powers’ “seconds before midnight” framing: Powers writes that if “the planet is born at midnight and it runs for one day”, humans developed only “four seconds before midnight”, and the “giant trunk” of the “tree of life” is about to topple (475). But Christie’s conclusion is different. Stacking up the fears of the present with the fears of the past suggests the universality of these fears and emphasises the continuation of life even when things feel bleak. That lack of context – of human history – in *The Overstory* gives Powers’ premonitions of disaster a feeling of finality, with little hope for alternative outcomes.

In *A Children’s Bible* (2020), Lydia Millet interrogates the logical conclusions of the bromide “our children are the future” and seeks a plain answer to the question of what kind of world adults are leaving to children. The novel centres on a group of vacationing children, ranging from very young to almost adult, who are separated from their parents during a storm and must endure changes to their environment. Millet’s preternaturally mature protagonists are, like Thunberg, preoccupied with an older generation’s inaction and apparent apathy. The children are plainly depicted as superior to their parents: their most important distinction is their response to climate change, but Millet extends their superiority to a more general ethic of care. Nonetheless, for all the children’s resourcefulness, it is too late to effect change in the world of *Bible*; the environment is already too hostile for human life.

As the title implies, *A Children’s Bible* could have had a home in the preceding chapter on religion in eco-novels, but its unusual focus on children as environmental activist heroes is apropos for this chapter. The novel’s allegorical form paints adherence to climate inaction as almost religious in nature, with the children’s opposition to the older generation representing the necessary change to

Judeo-Christian attitudes towards nature and environment advocated by Lynn White Jr. in the 1960s. The parents are introduced as “those so-called figures of authority” who “roam” the house in “vague circuits ... their objectives murky. And of no general interest” (3). They are heavy drinkers; one child calls it a “hobby” (3), another a “form of worship” (4), but in either sense the activity allows the parents to disengage from their responsibilities as the end times near. The narrator Eve’s little brother Jack is enchanted by a book called *A Child’s Bible*; Jack’s takeaway from the story of the Garden of Eden is that “if you have a nice garden to live in, then you should never leave it” (44). This hints at Millet’s interest in how social and economic class impacts one’s experience of climate change. But Jack is unconvinced by the Bible’s depiction of animals: it is an unfair world that paints the snake, not to mention Eve, as the “bad guy” (44). The naming of Eve and Jack is surely intentional. Even though the majority of the children’s story is hopeful, as they acknowledge problems and are willing to change their lifestyles to fix them, the conclusion is pervaded with climate pessimism. Like a rewinding of human history, Eve is left alone, until humans are gone and the Garden of Eden is restored.

Millet portrays inadequate responses to climate change scathingly:

The parents insisted on denial as a tactic. Not science denial exactly – they were liberals. It was more a denial of reality. A few had sent us to survival camps, where the fortunate learned to tie knots. Troubleshoot engines, even sterilize stagnant water without chemical filters.

But most of them had a simple attitude: business as usual. (28)

The parents enjoy their “liberal” politics and bare-minimum gestures as a defence against accusations of inadequacy. Such gestures are accompanied by vague or euphemistic descriptions of alarming threats: ahead of a catastrophic storm, they tell the children, “some weather’s on the way” (47). The children later realise this is not so much a “pretext” for getting them to return from self-imposed exile as a dramatic underselling of climate disaster (47). The “survival camps” may not have prepared the children for the most extreme incidents that occur in the novel, but they seem to have augmented the children’s apparently natural resourcefulness,

as they are able to successfully build shelters, acquire food, and defend and care for one another. These outcomes are merely positive side effects of the true purpose of sending the kids to camp, which is to assure the parents that they are *doing something*. It is also an example of Millet's class criticism: "the fortunate" can afford to send their children to such camps, receiving a temporary amelioration of feelings of guilt in exchange for money while they carry on with their disproportionately eco-harmful middle-to-upper-class lifestyles.

A passage on the beach, where the children "practice" "self-sufficiency" (17), demonstrates the co-existence and dramatic tension between childish adventures and recognition that climate change is a serious threat to the children, both immediately and in the future. Upon reaching the beach, the children feel "a weight lift from our shoulders, the bliss of liberty" (21). This is both an adolescent response to separation from the reviled, embarrassing parent figure and a richer relief that the children can now truly immerse themselves in nature, which they prefer to the kitschy interiors of their holiday house and the adult assumptions such fabrications represent. (Later, the children realise their beach outing occurred on July Fourth, a day with complicated significance for American independence that hints at the challenges attending their liberation.) Millet advances a consideration of climate justice (disparity in outcome based on economic status) by the group's encounter with the "yacht kids", a friendly group of offspring of the uber-rich who help to contextualise the role and likely future of the relatively privileged but apparently middle-class protagonists (31). The yacht kids reveal the different situation and machinations of the uber-rich vis-à-vis other economic strata, as well as a variety of foolhardy, performative, or overly pessimistic responses to climate change. While a pessimistic view is often expressed by the main protagonists – Eve is "coming to grips with the end of the world" (27), and Terry opines that humankind has "hung out way past its expiration date" and has turned into something grotesque, "a blight, a scab" (23) – the yacht kids express this more glamorously; with bravado, they claim they are unconcerned about skin cancer, as they expect they will not live long enough to experience it (31).

The yacht kids are nicer to their parents than the protagonists, as they view their parents as their "insurance policy" and pragmatically believe in the importance

of cultivating “diplomatic relations” to assure their future survival (32). Much like the protagonists’ parents, the parents of the yacht kids have made overtures to preparing for climate disaster, but their efforts at home hardening (or, as the yacht kids specify, “compound” hardening [30]) are not an option for less wealthy families. There is some tension between the yacht kids and the protagonists, one of whom, David, demonstrates his familiarity with environmentalist protest by “monkey-wrench[ing]” the yacht (53). When the other children question his intervention, he insists it is a righteous act of revenge: “Those yacht parents are the worst. *Those* are the people who ate the planet” (54). The disproportionate blame for climate catastrophe carried by the wealthy is a common refrain amongst environmentalist critics, but David’s action does a group of people harm without providing a solution; these words in a child’s mouth suggest how infantile and reductive this mindset can be if not applied strategically. The children are later relieved to find that, befitting the sense of allegorical unreality pervading much of the narrative, the yacht families are spared from harm.

Millet delineates a moral hierarchy that is inversely proportional to age, with the very youngest children, including Eve’s little brother Jack, the most compassionate. This is established early, as the young boys prevent older children from throwing rocks at squirrels, citing “animal cruelty” (13); one of the more dramatic events in the novel sees Jack and a young friend stage a Noah’s Ark-like rescue of animals in the vicinity of the storm. Overall, the children embody many of the qualities that climate advocates like to ascribe to youth, such as hope, passion, and idealism, but Millet imbues them with other exceptional qualities, like intelligence, cooperation, and decisiveness. They are frustrated by their parents’ lack of ability or drive but still pity and try to care for them, in an inversion of the traditional parent-child relationship. Many of Millet’s inversions are humorous, as, for example, with matters of discipline:

We were strict with the parents: punitive measures were taken ... They didn't notice. And we believed the punishments fit the crimes.

Although the worst of those crimes was hard to pin down and therefore hard to punish correctly – the very quality of their being. The essence of their personalities. (11)

The children are Thunberg-like in their persistent fixation on apportioning blame to the older generation, but they are unlike Thunberg in their emotional expression: they are less angry, more disappointed and resigned, and they feel pity for their ineffectual elders. Where Thunberg angrily asked, “How dare you?” at the 2019 U.N. Climate Action Summit, these children bemusedly speculate about their parents’ path to apathy: “Had they had goals once? A simple sense of self-respect? They shamed us. They were a cautionary tale” (13). (Biblical stories are, in a fundamental sense, cautionary tales, making the form of *A Children’s Bible* appropriate for its subject matter.) The protagonists exhibit youthful resistance to association with one’s parental figures (“they shamed us” merely by being related to “us”). The children’s disdain for their parents speaks to questions of “purity” in environmentalist circles and disagreements over strategy and tactics. The children express belief in guilt by association: “our association with them diminished us and compromised our personal integrity” (16-17).

There are other ways in which the children represent a Thunbergian and somewhat fantastical version of child activist politics. The cooperation, dedication, and innovation of the children is inspiring and probably unrecognisable to those engaged in environmental activism; their disagreements are minor, they work well together, and they effectively adapt to new and challenging circumstances. That the group demonstrates a clear and consistent collective ethics befits the biblical, allegorical form of the novel, but where do these ethics come from? Are they born and not made? The broad strokes of these character traits – children good and scrappy, parents useless and pitiable – also suit the allegorical dimensions of the novel. The parents are static characters who do not change or grow, unlike the children, who, *because* they are children, literally, physically grow as well as develop as characters. The parents’ inertia is reminiscent of the failure to act to mitigate climate change.

As the title suggests, *A Children’s Bible* is a work of religious allegory, but one in which the non-human world takes a different, more prominent role, and the anticipated apocalypse is wrought by climate change. Allegorical form may be particularly apropos for climate change literature. Elizabeth DeLoughrey describes “allegory’s pedagogical incentives and its incitement to action” as assets for

remediating a “perceived disjunction between humans and the planet” that is “spatial” as well as “temporal” (4). DeLoughrey argues that there has been an “uptick” in allegorical representation “[c]oncurrent with the recent Anthropocene turn”, which, citing Walter Benjamin, she attributes to “the fact that allegory appears in moments of acute historical crisis” (5). When Terry says the human species is like an “atrophied limb”, something that has hung around this planet for too long, the intensity of his expression evinces deep discomfort, disgust, and fear of coming catastrophe (23). The children appear to have learned this language from the darker corners of environmentalist discourse.⁷⁹ But they retain enough (potentially youth-related) hope to glean positive lessons from biblical stories and classic allegorical myths. David corrects Terry’s encouragement to “summon our courage” and “fly up, up, up toward the sun” like Icarus, clarifying that it was Icarus’ “own fault” that his wings melted because he “ignored the specs” (23). There is a sense that the children pay attention to the moral of these stories more than their parents, who have continued to metaphorically fly too close to the sun.

In early chapters, the children function as a chorus: rather than specific attributions, “one of us” says something, another of “us” does something, “we” think something about our parents and the world “we” live in. (For example: “We respected the lake and stream and most of all the ocean” [12].) The early suggestion of a Greek chorus initially obscures Eve’s first-person narration, but her foregrounding of the group’s shared experiences and perspectives emphasises the collective, cooperative nature of the group, who are independent but not individualistic. This narrative technique, which is also used by Christie in the middle chapter of *Greenwood*, gives an impression of the children as a united front. Formally, it also helps to establish the children’s collective opposition to their parents:

⁷⁹ In *The Overstory*, young Adam has a similar thought upon recognising his father’s abuse: “Humankind is deeply ill. The species won’t last long. It was an aberrant experiment. Soon the world will be returned to the healthy intelligences, the collective ones. Colonies and hives” (56). Adam is also a child when he comes to this realisation; there is an aspect of black-and-white thinking inherent to childhood passions that perhaps encourages ecologically aware children to come to such a stark conclusion.

Didn't they know there were urgent subjects? Questions that needed to be asked?

If one of us said something serious, they dismissed it. (4)

The children's rejection of and retreat from their parents facilitates a child-centric plot that benefits from the metaphorical and plotting potential of literary orphanhood. The figure of the orphan has "pervaded the American imagination ever since the colonial period", Diana Pazicky writes, noting that "whatever shape the orphan assumes, the figure signals identity formation, not only individual but cultural" (xi). Orphanhood is a helpful scenario for facilitating reader sympathy and dramatic events: the literary orphan is always somewhere between abject peril and extraordinary adventures that cannot be accessed by a parented child. Millet's version is this: her youthful characters have parents, but they do no parenting, and are either physically or emotionally absent for the duration of the novel. This allows the children the same level of autonomy and adventure as the typical orphaned hero of children's stories, but by leaving the parents intact Millet can unfavourably compare them with their children. Instead of being bereft, the children are disappointed; they use their parents as a model of what not to do and form their own customs accordingly. Maria Holmgren Troy et al. argue that "the positive characteristics of the orphan child ... are personality traits that resonate with nationalist myths of individualism and self-creation" (14). Millet complicates the trajectory of the displaced child with her capable children, who exhibit the self-sufficiency of American nationalist myths but with a distinctive strain of socialist cooperation, as well as a resigned sense that it is too late to thrive in an irretrievably damaged biosphere. Interestingly, Pazicky notes that orphanhood tropes in literature "tended to erupt at times of challenge and crisis" (xiii), much as DeLoughrey claims about allegory; for Millet, the unparented or inadequately parented child offers a unique lens through which to view the climate crisis.

In these novels, Christie and Millet take seriously the bromide that children are the future, and in so doing interrogate the consequences of deferring responsibility for existential threats to the next generation. Even in moments of self-awareness, as when Willow Greenwood wonders why parents expect their children to fix the parents' mistakes, adults often continue to ascribe qualities like

motivation, passion, and efficacy to younger generations while simultaneously denying their autonomy and maturity. These novels suggest that the time for action is now, and if adults with authority and power could harness some of the ethics and resourcefulness of the protagonists of *A Children's Bible* without expecting the next generation to save the world, they could start to make a real impact today.

"Weird" activists and hostile nature in *Borne* and *Annihilation*

In Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014), the first novel in the *Southern Reach* trilogy, the narrator is a former "radical environmentalist" (79) turned field biologist who joins an expedition to investigate mysterious Area X, a land of "pristine wilderness" that is uniquely hostile to humans (94). The narrator and her colleagues are not allowed to use their names on the expedition – they are instead described by their roles in the mission – which foreshadows their experience of literal dehumanisation as they are absorbed and transformed by their new environment. Area X is surrounded by a mysterious border, something that does not exist in nature but helps the area to keep out humans. As the trilogy progresses, it seems as though the border is expanding, bringing more places and species into its fold.

VanderMeer's descriptions of Area X and its mysteries are in some ways more successfully biocentric than Powers' efforts in *The Overstory*. The narrator notes that she "despised anthropomorphizing animals" (78). Whenever she notices human-like qualities in the entities of Area X, it is a cause for unease and alarm, not something that makes her identify with or more highly value the entities: some of her encounters with Area X's life forms reveal seeming splices of human and non-human features, which strike the reader as uncanny and frightening. In one scene the narrator is chased by the culprit of a "moaning" sound that occurs at dusk, but cannot decipher what she sees and hears:

From out of the darkness there came an impression of a great weight, aimed at me from my left. A suggestion of the side of a tortured, pale visage and a great, ponderous bulk behind it ... The crucial moment came. I thought I felt its hot breath on my side, flinched and cried out even as I ran. But then the way was clear ... the air suddenly *filled*, and the sound of something massive trying to brake ... An almost plaintive keening, a lonely sound in that place, called out to

me. And kept calling, pleading with me to return, to see it entire, to acknowledge its existence.

I did not look back. I kept running. (142-143)

VanderMeer is attempting here to describe something that cannot be wholly comprehended by human senses, using uncanny and unsettlingly vague descriptions as an effective, subversive tool. Nothing is solid in the passage; the narrator feels more than she sees an “impression” of something, a “suggestion”; there is “weight” and even a flash of a “tortured, pale visage”, but not one that the narrator can fully see. Even the sounds of the creature are abnormal; they “fill” the air. The narrator senses that the entity wishes her to “see it entire” but is neither willing nor able to do so, recalling Pieter Vermeulen’s analysis of post-apocalyptic fiction’s “obsess[ion]” with “how human residues will be read and interpreted” when there are no more humans to “make sense of them” (147). The creature is an example of the extreme hybridity and unknowability of Area X’s mutations. It is far less legible than Atwood’s animal mashups, extending the work required by the reader to imagine or empathise with a being that is just familiar enough to be uncanny but otherwise incomprehensible. Attaining “solidarity with the other *in their difference*” is much more challenging in *Annihilation* (Plumwood 200), but the lengths the characters must go to in reconfiguring their understanding of the world convincingly fictionalises the many things we do not know about life and nature and that we may have to reckon with or accept if we wish to change course on the climate.⁸⁰

VanderMeer uses the uncanny to great effect in both *Annihilation* and *Borne* (2017). The first page of *Borne* subverts associations with “the city” by mentioning the “escaped, altered creatures of unknown origin or intent” (3) who roam it; their intent proves to be mostly malevolent while their origins remain somewhat mysterious. *Annihilation* is set in an entirely altered landscape. Although VanderMeer uses words like “pristine” to describe Area X, and the narrator more than once comments on its beauty, this appears to be relative to the environmentally damaged areas beyond its border (12). The prevalence of

⁸⁰ The final novel in VanderMeer’s trilogy is, not incidentally, titled *Acceptance* (2014).

uncanny encounters with altered nature in VanderMeer's work sharply contrasts with Atwood's portrayal of sympathetic biotech in *MaddAddam* and the parenthetical characterisation of trees as wise and serene in *The Overstory*. The protagonists of the latter novels reflexively interpret animal and non-human actions as either good or bad, but the narrator of *Annihilation* rarely regards species in emotional terms. When she tries to describe an entity she calls the "Crawler", she is aware that it is an intelligent organism, no more and no less sympathetic than other organisms, including humans.

The narrator's struggle to convey her experience to the reader is a metatextual comment on the challenge of pursuing a biocentric perspective in narrative. Ellipses and half-finished thoughts convey the inadequacy of human language and thought to grasp Area X: "*No words can...no photograph could...*" (176) overwrite what the narrator experiences inside the living, breathing "Tower" that is home to the Crawler, "busy and incomprehensible in its task" (185). The narrator critiques her learned impulse to name and taxonomise: "what an inadequate name I had chosen for [the Crawler]" (178). The narrative is seeded with questions, which, as the story unfolds, start to focus on the narrator's ability to communicate her destabilising experience – "What can you do when your five senses are not enough?" (178); "Why couldn't I see it?" (178); "If I don't have real answers, it is because we still don't know what questions to ask" (192).

It often seems as though the life of Area X is taking action to protect itself against incursive humans: effectively, the area's mutant species become fighters, or for my purposes, activists, dedicated to protecting their ecosystem from further human damage. But this interpretation is less interesting than the efforts VanderMeer makes towards understanding other forms of consciousness and probing the "mesh", as Timothy Morton would put it, of environment (*Ecological Thought* 28). In the context of ecocritical work to disrupt nature/culture and human/non-human dualisms, some aspects of the text are problematic: humans are, after all, not the only invasive or dominating species in existence, not the only beings who push out others, although we do so at a prodigious pace; we are, to quote Karen Barad again, "*a part of that nature that we seek to understand*" (26). The narrator's experiences, and the structure of Area X – set apart, beyond some

sort of border, and what is that border made from? – call into question the constructed separation of nature and culture. The narrator wonders if she was chosen for this expedition for the same reasons that got her fired from previous jobs: “I melted into my surroundings, could not remain *separate from, apart from*, objectivity a foreign land to me” (173). The narrator literally “melt[s] into my surroundings” when she passes through Area X; her lack of “objectivity”, inability to remain “*separate from*” is possibly an asset. The narrator retains some fear of losing herself, as her husband’s personality seemed “drained out” (189) in a previous expedition, but her practice at seeing herself as part of the “mesh” prepares her for a whole new level of losing oneself, which, while terrifying, cannot be understood or recounted within the confines of human language and known experience. The narrator is almost overwhelmed by the limits of human knowledge. She recounts an earlier discovery of a rare starfish, which, like the entity that infects her in Area X, glows “as if it were on fire”:

the longer I stared at it, the less comprehensible it became. The more it became something alien to me, the more I had a sense that I knew nothing at all – about nature, about ecosystems. There was something about my mood and its dark glow that eclipsed sense, that made me see this creature, which had indeed been assigned a place in the taxonomy – catalogued, studied, and described – irreducible down to any of that. (175)

These long sentences are characteristic of a scientist, mid-study, looking for answers and explanations, even as she realises she has none. This passage is also demonstrative of how VanderMeer combines descriptions of the wonder and beauty of “natural” places like Area X with a strong sense of foreboding, unease, and fear of the unknown. The glow of the starfish is “dark”, the glow of the narrator’s changed body strange and unfamiliar. It imbues her with inhuman power, protecting her against injury, but she also does not know where it will take her, what it will make her become.

One aspect of the “Crawler” that is visible to the narrator, if not quite understandable, is that it writes in a language she can understand on the walls of the living Tower. The narrator is struck by the “ominous” tone of the messages (47), but she never ascertains a clear meaning. The message has disturbing implications for the nature of the Crawler’s “task” (185). The words are not only

written in a language discernible by the narrator: they are also familiar in the sense of appearing religious or specifically biblical, but with traditional biblical themes subverted. “*That which dies shall still know life in death for all that decays is not forgotten and reanimated shall walk the world in a bliss of not-knowing...*” and “*Give back to that which gave to you*” (172) appear to be variations on an old environmental theme – we all came from the earth and will return to it, we are all comprised of atoms – and a description of what will happen or has already happened to the narrator and her colleagues.⁸¹ Why does the “Crawler” write this, why impose some small amount of knowing on the “*not-knowing*”? For the same reason that these authors attempt to write from a biocentric perspective, even though they are aware of the limits of their ability to do so? Communication is a fact of life, not just for humans and other animals. Though the true purpose of the Crawler may be inscrutable, this one sign of its life is legible to the narrator, reinforcing an almost fantastical belief in the power of words.

Where *Annihilation* takes place in an almost incomprehensibly wild setting, *Borne* is set in an unspecified city that portrays a near worst-case scenario of environmental degradation and corporate plundering. The denizens of this polluted and dangerous environment are terrorised by a giant, flying, bioengineered bear named Mord, a failed experiment by “the Company”, who kills dozens of city dwellers per day. VanderMeer portrays the Company as an invasive, imperialist force that has leached the former city’s resources and made it all but unliveable in the process. Mord is, as his name suggests, a murderer, but the responsibility for his destruction lies with the Company, and he is but one bringer of death in an environment that is crumbling as a result of unregulated experimentation.⁸² Early descriptions of the city – “ruined” (3), “broken” (5), “toxic” (8) – reveal a slow, profound dying off wrought by corporate greed, a form of Rob Nixon’s “slow violence” which is overshadowed by Mord’s spectacular daily violence but is no less destructive and life-threatening.

⁸¹ Although VanderMeer’s “weird” worlds appear mostly secular, the Crawler’s messages are overtly biblical, and Borne’s sacrifice to help restore the environment is suggestive of dying for our sins.

⁸² In another tie-in to Chapter Two and the theme of making sense of a disordered world through religion, Mord is ironically referred to as a “god”, albeit a malevolent one (198). The instability wrought by the Company’s unnatural, manmade disasters give rise to cults that attempt to explain Mord and the damaged environment via religion.

Out scavenging, the protagonist Rachel finds an unidentifiable but appealing object that turns out to be a sentient, intelligent shapeshifter. VanderMeer characterises Borne from the start in complex and seemingly contradictory ways that reflect the limits of Rachel's ability to understand him. Rachel's ways of understanding Borne include assigning him human and animal characteristics; for example, she refers to Borne with male pronouns throughout the novel, even though Borne's true nature remains mysterious, and he may be genderless. This, along with Rachel's impulse to name Borne, assists her conception of the creature as a relatable, human- or at least animal-like individual who can be understood in terms Rachel is familiar with. She explains that she chose the name Borne because she has "borne" this creature home and feels responsible for his well-being, but the name also suggests that this possibly non-human object – which may be man-made or created under even more mysterious circumstances – has been "born" into the world, like any "normal" animal.

Rachel's feelings about Borne demonstrate her opposition to the Company and its amoral wreckage. Rachel feels responsible for Borne; she does not wish to use him for his special abilities and then abandon him when he is no longer useful. Like a child, Borne has endless questions for Rachel, forcing her to reflect on the causes of the city's decline:

I don't know, it just happened. Everything everywhere collapsed. We didn't try hard enough. We were preyed upon. We had no discipline. We didn't try the right things at the right time. We cared but we didn't do. Too many people, too little space. Weighted down, unable to see the way Borne saw. (166-167)

Rachel's musings are an uncomfortable mix of regret, guilt, sadness, and anger, with blame alternately directed at herself, other people, powerful corporations, and no one in particular. Opatow and Weiss describe "denial of self-involvement" as a common psychological response to climate change (481). This includes "deindividuation" (minimising one's contribution), "diffusing" and "displacing" responsibility (seeing climate change as a collective rather than individual responsibility and holding "higher authorities" responsible), and "self-righteous comparisons", in which one thinks of themselves as "environmentally 'clean' and blameless in comparison to 'dirty', irresponsible, or reprehensible others" (481).

Although Rachel fairly apportions blame to the Company ("We were preyed upon"), her wide-ranging explanation for the current situation avoids self-righteous comparisons and implicates denial and deindividuation ("We didn't try hard enough", "We had no discipline") as contributors to the current crisis.

Borne is not recognisably human, animal, plant, or machine. In the cover art on my copy of the novel, Borne looks vaguely bird-like, so I spent the duration of the novel picturing him as a bird – which suggests the limits of my own ability to imagine a unique, invented entity that is unlike anything living. Rachel struggles to make sense of Borne; she wonders if he is truly able to feel empathy and morality as he seems to, or if he is just mimicking her. Despite his aura of mystery, Borne introduces a hopeful perspective to Rachel's difficult life. When Rachel feels resigned and despondent, Borne insists, "it doesn't need to be this way" (167). VanderMeer seems to suggest that it is *because* of Borne's difference that he can envision and fight for an alternative way of life. In a cruel world, Rachel imparts kindness and an ethic of care to Borne; he then uses his unusual abilities to extend this care to the wider world, at great personal cost. There are ways in which Borne might be conceived as an activist. He does not accept the status quo; where Rachel admits to wishing there was someone in the Company who could "pull a lever or push a button to fix our situation, reset it, and bring forth everything afresh" (296), Borne knows this is a fantasy, and he takes it upon himself to defeat Mord. With Rachel's help, he leaves behind a safer and possibly recovering city in which the residents no longer daily fear for their lives, and absent the corrupting force of remnants of the Company the environment slowly begins to heal. "Life is still hard," Rachel says, "but it is fair, and there is more joy in it that doesn't feast on heartbreak" (320).

Narrative perspective is an important tool for VanderMeer. *Borne* is narrated by Rachel, who acts as a proxy for the reader as she discovers novel concepts and the mysteries of Borne. Borne is always filtered through Rachel's human, moral perspective. He is an interesting environmentalist hero; despite his unknowable difference, he inherits the same mantle of responsibility that Willow Greenwood places on her son Liam, that the hapless parents of *A Children's Bible* recklessly leave to their children, that adults in our own world burden their children and

grandchildren with. Everyone in the world of *Borne* has suffered, but Borne must be willing to suffer the most because no one else before him has made a meaningful attempt to halt the unfolding disaster. Borne's child-like wonder, the intensity of his feelings for Rachel, his occasionally uncomplicated grasp of what is right and wrong, what is bearable and unbearable, lead him to make decisions that a self-preserving, cynical human adult – accustomed to a status quo that seems insurmountable – does not. Apathy does not always indicate a lack of care: as Stanley Cohen writes, "Passivity and silence may look the same as obliviousness, apathy and indifference, but may not be the same at all. We can feel and care intensely, yet remain silent" (9). And yet caring is insufficient if it does not lead to action. The reset button that Rachel admits to hoping for does not exist. We do not have a Borne in our world to act as our saviour, and we cannot expect our children to fix what we have not. Rachel's regret, a common refrain in post-apocalyptic eco-fiction – "We did this to ourselves" – is a warning. Borrowing her words for our own world, perhaps it is not too late to "try hard[er]", have "discipline", and "try the right things at the right time" (166-167). Michael Christie and Richard Powers quote variations of an old proverb: "The best time to plant a tree is always twenty years ago. And the second-best time is always now" (*Greenwood* 421).

Borne is not the only non-human character VanderMeer uses to question the nature of humanity. Rachel eventually learns that her seemingly human partner, Wick, is another creation of the Company. Since Wick's non-human status is not revealed until late in the novel, he is particularly representative of posthumanist questions about what it means to be human. Rachel's characterisation of the Company as "dehumanizing" Wick as one of their many sins is interesting in its formulation and exemplifies Rachel's rejection of the idea that Wick is not human in any meaningful sense: "Wick had never been a person. But he had always been a person to me" (299). Whether or not Wick can be said to be truly sentient, he started his "life" not knowing that he was not human; he cryptically tells Rachel that "*Mord showed me what I was*" (299). As with Borne, it is difficult for the reader, both by inclination and VanderMeer's design, not to read Wick as sentient and also sensitive; like Wick himself, we start our acquaintance with him under the impression that he is unambiguously human. VanderMeer writes Wick as

possessing some of the best of what we recognise as human, or humane, qualities, such as nobility, loyalty, courage, and wisdom, so the revelation of his provenance underscores the question – originally posed by Borne – of what makes humans “human.” Although Wick is AI, he professes to wish for a healthy, safe environment where people and things can flourish and his actions support this intention, as he is willing to risk his existence in this pursuit. The courage, self-sacrifice, adaptability, and resilience of Rachel, Wick and Borne are equivalent, despite one being human and the exact origins of the others remaining mysterious.

The authors in this chapter experiment with narrative strategies to give voice to underrepresented stakeholders in environmental issues, such as children and animals. Although the desire to avoid anthropocentrism in the novel reaches inevitable limits, the authors’ attempts to creatively imagine the experiences and perspectives of characters beyond the eco-novel’s usual adult human protagonist shows their willingness to stretch the form’s creative capacity, deepening our sense of the world and creatures around us.

Chapter 4: “Why should anything be impossible?”: Native American novels and the reclamation of environmental history

This chapter examines recent novels by Native American and First Nations authors: *There There* (2018) by Tommy Orange, *Split Tooth* (2018) by Tanya Tagaq, and *The Night Watchman* (2020) by Louise Erdrich. *There There* is told from the perspective of modern-day “urban Indians” living in Oakland, California, who offer diverse perspectives on history, cultural identity, and identification with place. *Split Tooth* combines prose, poetry, and myth to relate the formative years of a young woman living in Nunavut, Canada, who is strikingly attuned to the tundra environment and non-human entities. *The Night Watchman* tells a fictionalised version of Erdrich’s tribe’s legal campaign to maintain their land and treaty rights in 1950s North Dakota. Erdrich and Tagaq depict environmental activism in broad, complex, and reflective ways, drawing from Indigenous storytelling traditions and foregrounding interspecies relations that are ecologically beneficial as well as culturally significant and mythologised. The environmental outlooks informing their works offer a conceptual and practical alternative to exploitative, uninformed, and unethical environmental practices common in settler-colonialist cultures. Erdrich and Orange’s retellings of historical Indigenous protests provide illuminating counterpoints to eco-fiction’s preoccupation with the future, defying dystopic and pessimistic trends in eco-fiction. Understanding historic Native rights campaigns, based on true events, is not merely a contribution to the historical record, but also offers lessons for current efforts to address climate injustice, while emphasising storytelling as a uniquely effective means of communication and change-making. In this chapter, I explore themes of community activism, education, symbiosis and interconnectivity, and food sovereignty within an overarching framework extolling the activating potentialities of storytelling.

My principal claim in this chapter is that efforts to maintain or reclaim tribal sovereignty and land rights are inherent acts of environmental justice. My analysis of the texts in this chapter will reveal that the status of Indigenous rights in North America and elsewhere has inescapable implications for the environment. My claim about the connections between tribal sovereignty and the environment owes much to the work of Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte, who has detailed the

relationship between Native oppression and environmental impacts. Whyte foregrounds environmental implications in his definition of settler colonialism, which constitutes

complex social processes in which at least one society seeks to move permanently onto the terrestrial, aquatic, and aerial places lived in by at least one or more other societies who derive economic vitality, cultural flourishing, and political self-determination from the relationships they have established with the plants, animals, physical entities, and ecosystems of those places. ("Dakota" 323-324)

Simone Birgitt Hartmann, writing about environmental justice in a Canadian context, lends credence to this perspective: "From a contemporary point of view, the survival of Native communities and issues of (political and cultural) sovereignty and control over natural resources are still closely intertwined" (104). I do not wish to assert that Native Americans are universally better stewards of the land than other groups in all contexts. Assumptions about Native predisposition to environmentalism – in Erdrich's words, that Native Americans have an in-built "hotline to nature" (*Future Home* 5) – have rightfully been interrogated (Harkin and Lewis 2007). But there is abundant documentation of how many Indigenous groups live with and perceive their environments that reveals a deep awareness and attachment of personal and cultural significance to the specifics of their local environments. The importance of place and landscape is a recurring theme in Indigenous narratives. David McNab connects place with Indigenous cultural identity and stories: "Place and the stories that come from them are an integral and inseparable part of nature. Nature is landscape and mindscape conjoined" (205). Much Indigenous literature represents culture and self-determination as inseparable from environment, following what happens when forced relocation and environmental degradation affect the places and plants and animals that are traditionally connected with and significant to tribes.

A core aim of this chapter is to highlight the role and importance of storytelling and, relatedly, history as tools for combatting climate change and transforming human relations with the non-human world. In previous chapters, I have shown how many authors of eco-novels approach their work with a belief in the mobilising power of stories. Words and language, written and oral literature,

receive special attention in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy and Michael Christie's *Greenwood*, but storytelling themes appear in many other eco-novels, often through narrative devices like journal-keeping, or meta-references to the novel's fictional becoming where the narrator seems to leave a record for posterity, even if the narrator fears there will be no one left to read it (*Parable of the Sower* and *Talents* [1993-1998], *Annihilation* [2014], *A Children's Bible* [2020]). According to Pieter Vermeulen, the prominence of these narrative devices in post-apocalyptic eco-fiction speaks to our anxiety about mortality and species loss, but also reflects "the paradoxical temporality of apocalypse: the fact, that is, that the end can only be narrated if it is survived" (152). Inevitably, apocalyptic narratives must contend with the messy and less spectacular reality that the human species will not be rapidly extinguished in one or two seismic environmental catastrophes; indeed, the challenge of narratively conveying the complexity of the climate crisis lies in its scale, "slowness", and unevenly distributed effects. In this chapter, I will delineate how Erdrich, Orange, and Tagaq's narratives diverge from fearful and pessimistic attitudes towards nature and our role in it – what Simon Estok has termed ecophobia. These novels represent a recalibration from fear and distrust of wild, agentic nature to a reciprocal outlook that recognises and respects that agency, described by the botanist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer: "Our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories" (9).

The reciprocal, hopeful turn evident in this chapter's novels may seem surprising considering Whyte's argument that Native Americans have already experienced a kind of existential collapse that is anxiously anticipated in much contemporary eco-fiction. Although Native Americans "consider the future from what we believe is already a dystopia", Whyte writes, many are deeply invested in activism and conservation projects to protect what remains of "plants and animals that matter to our societies" ("Dystopia Now" 207). Whyte points to Indigenous-led restoration projects that interlink environmental stewardship with the preservation of culture and tradition. Many Native Americans' sense of connection to their local environments has undergone continuous adaptation as "quite a few indigenous peoples in North America are no longer able to relate locally to many of the plants and animals that are significant to them" (207), due to forced relocations,

environmental decline, and species extinction. Nonetheless, “local stories and relationships” help Indigenous groups to “survive and flourish” (213). Rather than deriving motivation from “dread of certain futures” (213), Indigenous responses to climate change are informed by shared stories that derive from historical experience and traditional knowledge, characterised by a spirit of what Gerald Vizenor calls survivance, “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent” (1).

Vizenor’s explanation of survivance identifies stories, humour, irony, and “moral courage” as forms of Native resistance (1). Karl Kroeber writes that survivance stories renounce “dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry” and complicate “the commonest word in all discourse on the history of American native peoples – *survival*” (25). The literary legacy of survivance is evident in *There There*. Despite enumerating a litany of injustices, past and present, the narrator bristles at what Kroeber describes as “a peculiarly vicious consequence of genocidal attacks on natives of the Americas: an inducing in them of their destroyers’ view that they are mere survivors ... the white definition of themselves as victims” (25). Orange writes, “don’t make the mistake of calling us resilient. To not have been destroyed, to not have given up, to have survived, is no badge of honor. Would you call an attempted murder victim resilient?” (137) This perspective challenges what Kroeber characterises as a white coloniser view of victimhood, but Orange’s own contradictions reveal the complexity of rejecting narratives that conceive of Native Americans largely in the context of their historical victimisation. Orange’s dismissal of “resilience” is immediately preceded by an assertion that “what we need to heal” are Indigenous stories: “All these stories that we haven’t been telling all this time, that we haven’t been listening to” because of centuries of cultural suppression (137). Indigenous stories, Orange asserts, must be rediscovered and continually transmitted as part of a collective healing process, a view shared by many other Native writers, including Kimmerer and Vizenor. However, it is difficult to read the stories of Native Americans in *There There* and other novels who maintain some sense of cultural identity in the face of centuries of assimilation and oppression and

reject resilience as an apt descriptor. The resilience required to continuously invest in one's local environment, for example, and to support species that are culturally important to one's tribe as well as ecologically significant is quite moving to anyone who might be interested in conservation and stewardship. Those who are engaged in the intertwined preservation of Native stories and culturally significant plants and animals, like the groups described by Whyte in the essay above or characters in *There There* who find a way to maintain Native traditions despite the limitations of their modern urban environment, can be seen as enacting a comprehensive environmental activism. Keeping stories and traditions alive, which attach profound significance to places and other species, contributes to a sense of responsibility for and protection of the activists' current and historical environments and vice versa.

The connection between storytelling and the survival of humans and their fellow living beings is of urgent interest to Erdrich, Orange, and Tagaq. Native American and First Nations groups are known for rich traditions of oral storytelling, and as many tribes have faced extinction and culture loss in the last five centuries, the transmission of language and traditional stories has become a priority. Kimmerer, learning Potawatomi from the world's few remaining fluent speakers, finds that it teaches her "the grammar of animacy", which "could well be a restraint on our mindless exploitation of the land" (58). In the twentieth century, popular novels by Native authors including D'Arcy McNickle, N. Scott Momaday, and Leslie Marmon Silko evinced a process of adaptation as oral traditions made their way into written forms and new stories grew from the old. Contemporary Native authors including Diane Wilson describe the potential of stories to foster cultural identity and an understanding of one's place in a world full of life, a world that is in a continuous state of flux, but in which some fundamental truths endure. As Silko puts it, "through the stories we hear who we are" (267).

Another key point in this chapter is the use of historical fact to challenge continued threats to tribal sovereignty and survival, which is strongly paralleled by the strategic use of facts to combat climate change denial. In a text not discussed in detail here, *The Seed Keeper* (2021), Diane Wilson draws a parallel between the obfuscation of Native American history and the climate crisis, as her protagonist faces up to her personal and tribal history while also encountering denial of

obviously harmful environmental degradation. In recounting historical events with accuracy, authors like Erdrich and Wilson thwart attempts to hide or deny observable outcomes. Similarly, their representations of settler-colonial environmental destruction are constructed in ways that resist denial: the truth of the damage is laid bare and must be reckoned with.

This thesis is concerned with the relationship between the figure of the environmental activist as represented in novels and the larger question of the formal and narrative opportunities posed by the climate crisis. Wonderworks, Daniel Heath Justice's term for specifically Indigenous forms of literature that engage with the world beyond humans and offer "hopeful alternatives" to the status quo, are appealing for their inventive possibilities: the merging of oral storytelling with the written word, myth with documented history and "realist" fiction, the breaking of conventions regarding novelistic structure and plot, and elasticity and adaptation. For these reasons, I understand Justice's proposal to name Tagaq's shape-shifting *Split Tooth* as a wonderwork, but not all Indigenous-authored texts are wonderworks. Erdrich's and Orange's engagement of the novel to address issues of pressing historical and contemporary interest indicate to me that the novel as a creative form still holds great potential for addressing the climate crisis. While Justice's conception of "wonderworks" is useful for exploring some of the formal and thematic experiments in *Split Tooth*, his emphasis on the unknowability of "truth" and "reality" diverges from Erdrich's and Orange's reliance on historical fact as a tool for education, progress, and justice, as well as for a narrative framework. In the "misinformation" era, the authors insist that there is such a thing as historical accuracy and that the past must be properly accounted for if, in Orange's words, Native Americans are to "heal" and if progress on any number of fronts is to be meaningfully achieved. A certain factual murkiness – similar to Jeff VanderMeer's probing of the limits of our knowledge in the *Southern Reach* trilogy – surfaces when the authors contemplate the experiences and interactions of non-human life forms, particularly in the myth-adjacent *Split Tooth*. But impressing a shared sense of reality regarding recent human history is a key aspect of how these authors confront existential issues like Native survivance and climate change.

In this chapter, I aim to delineate how the activist characters in some contemporary Indigenous novels contribute constructive perspectives on the climate crisis that posit environmental health as inseparable from tribal rights and sovereignty. This chapter will focus on how ecological awareness informs the activism and worldview of characters in these novels and strengthens their resolve, strategy, and ability to succeed.

Tribal sovereignty and the fight against termination

In her long writing career, Louise Erdrich has crafted a detailed portrait of Ojibwe life and history that depicts the significance of non-human species in Ojibwe culture and tradition and the struggles resulting from ancestral land loss, relocation, and resource extraction. The linked novels *Tracks* (1988), *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), and *Four Souls* (2004) as well as her non-fiction *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003) explicate the ties between land and culture loss, native plant and animal species extinction, and the genocidal extermination of Native tribes. Christian Knoeller writes, “For Erdrich, environmental preservation is ultimately grounded in her regard for the relationship between natural and *cultural* resources ... language and tradition are linked to this specific landscape” (645). *The Night Watchman* (2020) references historically accurate accounts of the environmental effects of settler colonialism, such as overhunting, overfishing, habitat loss, and encroachment, all of which have led to Ojibwe food insecurity and starvation.

The Night Watchman tells a fictionalised version of Erdrich’s tribe’s struggle during the era of Indian termination policy in the U.S. in the 1950s. Termination refers to a chapter in the country’s campaign to, at best, assimilate Native American tribes and, at worst, exterminate them. (Erdrich’s protagonist visualises the prefix “ex-” when he reads the word “termination”). In the case of termination, the government’s anti-Indigenous goals were advanced by revoking federal recognition and support for tribes. David Martínez references Hannah Arendt (the banality of evil) and Max Weber (state-managed power) to explain the legislative/bureaucratic mechanism of termination, by which government agencies “could inflict harm on Indians without acknowledging any wrongdoing” (109).

Erdrich shows how the government tried to advertise termination, despite its sinister name, as a positive development, as the first tribes targeted by congressional legislation were supposedly successful and independent enough to thrive without federal support. But Erdrich's tribal chairman sees through this gloss, recognising that the policy is another euphemistic cover for the government's plan to "solve" the "Indian problem" (80). He and his tribe resolve "to remain a problem. To not be solved" (80). I will refer to termination policy several times in this chapter, interpreting it in Erdrich's formulation as connoting (ex)termination while maintaining cover as a specific, legal reference to a historical chapter in the U.S. campaign against tribal sovereignty and survival.

Erdrich based *The Night Watchman* on the true story of her grandfather Patrick Gourneau's fight against House concurrent resolution 108 (HCR-108), legislation that called for the cessation of federal recognition and supervision of reservations and tribes and put an end to tribal sovereignty. Passed by Congress in 1953, HCR-108 signified an escalation of the U.S. government's Indian termination policy and was a precursor to further legislative efforts to break up reservations and rescind federally recognised tribal status, which would revoke government responsibility to tribes and nullify terms of earlier treaties. Gourneau's tribe, the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, were among the first five tribes targeted for termination. The government claimed that tribes with a high likelihood of surviving independently were chosen first, but as Erdrich notes in *The Night Watchman*'s afterword, their selection was more likely based on the perceived value of their reservation land. The government's communication with the Turtle Mountain Chippewas problematically compares termination to the end of slavery: the word "emancipate ... bang[s] around" in the protagonist Thomas Wazhashk's head as he reads the notice (80). (Wazhashk is based on Gourneau. The secondary protagonist, a young Chippewa woman named Patrice who travels from the reservation to the city to look for her missing sister, facilitates Erdrich's exploration of another government assimilation method: the Bureau of Indian Affairs' misleading relocation programme, designed to lure Natives away from their reservations with the promise of better jobs in the city. Erdrich portrays this programme as cutting off Natives from their homes and support systems and

subjecting them to the caprices and dangers of city life, some of which are environmental.) The inapt analogy is unsettling: “But they were not enslaved. Freed from being Indians was the idea. Freed from their land. Freed from the treaties that Thomas’s father and grandfather had signed and that were promises to last forever. So, as usual, by getting rid of us, the Indian problem would be *solved*” (80). Martínez notes that comparisons between Native American genocide and other historical atrocities like the Holocaust or slavery are often viewed as overwrought or offensive but suggests that there may be some value to the comparison in how it highlights both the brutal violence against marginalised groups and the seemingly mundane bureaucratic activities that uphold the oppressive regime’s more obvious injustices (108). But in this instance, the inaptitude of the comparison alarms Thomas, as it signals that the resolution will be a disaster for his tribe. Erdrich’s description of Thomas’s reaction to HCR-108 subtly evokes a different historical analogy, as Thomas recognises the resolution is sinisterly designed to finally “*solve*” the “Indian problem” (80).

Remarkably, the Turtle Mountain Chippewas’ campaign to maintain their federal status was successful, culminating in a delegation that testified before Congress about the expected impact of termination. Their challenge to HCR-108 had wide-ranging implications. It was a critical assertion of Native rights and resistance to broken treaty promises. More immediately, it was perceived to be crucial to their survival as individuals and as a people. Less obviously, there was a vital environmental dimension to the campaign that becomes clear in a close reading of Erdrich’s novel. For many years, colonised lands in what is now the U.S. and Canada had suffered and degraded along with the tribes who had once occupied them. Native species dwindled, logging obliterated old-growth forests, lakes dried up, rivers were polluted and their fish stock depleted. Staying on the land held vital import not only for the Indigenous people fighting for it, but also for the ecosystems contained within that land.

Erdrich reveals the stakes of termination policy through dialogue between Thomas, the titular night watchman and tribal chairman, and his father, Biboon, who laments that the Turtle Mountain Chippewas have only “just started getting on our feet” after earlier forced relocations (119). Biboon bemoans the government’s

brazen turn away from treaty obligations: “It was their promise to exchange [federal support] for our land. Long as the grass grows and the rivers flow” (120). Thomas agrees that the grass still grows, the rivers flow, and the government is “using the hell out of the land” while “trying to pretend they didn’t sign a contract to pay the rent” (120). The rhythms and quirks of the characters’ speech, in this and in all Erdrich novels, represents their Ojibwemowin-inflected English as a unique language that would be tragic to lose. Encapsulated in the novel’s dialogue is the tribe’s propensity for humour, teasing, and a particular kind of playful lyricism.

Biboon references the perpetuity invoked in the treaties – “as long as the grass grows and the rivers flow” – that the government is now trying to renege on. This phrase, which Michael Dorris notes was commonly referred to as a “perpetuity clause”, invokes environmental health in a troubling way (49). As Thomas says, the settlers are “using the hell out of” the land (*Night Watchman* 120). They have used up much of the natural water sources in the area, diverting water from tribal neighbourhoods to white communities nearby. In the language of the treaties, if the settlers were to “use” up the natural resources in an area, to the point that the “grass [no longer] grows” and the “rivers [no longer] flow”, the right of the Indigenous groups settled there would be semantically in question. Dorris points out that the perpetuity clause was commonly included in treaties between white settlers and Native Americans but was not “ordinarily” featured in “compacts [Europeans] made with each other” (49). Its inclusion may reflect the European expectations that Indians were indeed ““vanishing” and would not survive to reap the long-term benefits of an easily made promise” (49). The unexpected survival of Native Americans following centuries of oppression meant the U.S. government had to find another way to “solve” their problem – in this case, by passing legislation that voided earlier treaties.

The hidden loophole of the perpetuity clause is not in itself the tribes’ downfall. Although in many places, non-locally-specific settler practices have caused the rivers to cease flowing and the grasses to stop growing, the government does not require environmental destruction as an excuse to renege on the agreements; it is within their power to pass contradictory legislation as they see fit. As Patrice’s mother Zhanaat puts it, “once these people talked of taking the land

it was as good as gone” (345). This has a double meaning – the land is “as good as gone” in the sense of it being taken from the Indigenous group in question, as well as in the sense that the land will inevitably be degraded by settlers who do not respect or understand the local ecosystem like the tribes who once lived there. Contradictions are apparent in the government’s assertion that the tribes chosen first for termination are “advanced” enough for supervision to cease (199), even though it is clear that no one believes this: Martínez describes the language of HCR-108 as “nothing if not condescending” (112).

Succeeding in the infamous residential school system is portrayed as a critical factor in the tribe’s fight against termination. Thomas’s ability to learn his opponent’s game – to use “the education they had given him to advance his people” – sets him apart from T.C. Boyle’s environmental activists, whose dominant position in society allows them to indulge in anarchic fantasies even as they benefit from the status quo (275). Thomas knows that he must operate *within* the system, “to use their logic”, if he wants to secure his tribe’s future (275). Erdrich emphasises the need for activists to communicate effectively with their opponents. Thomas has learned the language and customs, the “courtesies” of bureaucrats and politicians, which he deploys to his advantage (399). He and his tribal cohort are strategic and pragmatic about the content of their congressional testimony: rather than “arguing the premise of termination itself”, they describe their reservation in ways that promote empathy and include “a ladle of corn syrup – appreciation for the efforts and time of the government” (399). The wounded pride this “corn syrup” would provoke in Boyle’s reckless activists does not stop Erdrich’s, because they are more concerned with achieving their goals than momentarily protecting their pride. In the long term, their dignity and self-determination will be ensured only by successfully disputing termination, not by refusing to make momentary rhetorical concessions.

Through her depiction of Turtle Mountain food systems, ceremonies, and daily life, which is juxtaposed with her negative portrayal of the city as an assimilationist space, Erdrich implies that the people who are threatened with having their land taken away are better stewards of the land than those trying to take it away. The Turtle Mountain Chippewas are intimately familiar with the local

wildlife, live largely self-sustained lifestyles,⁸³ and will not overdevelop the land they live with or degrade it with unsustainable, non-native agricultural practices. Most produce their own food from gardening and small-scale farming. Where possible, they hunt for food, although this is impeded by governmental restrictions and boundaries – a serious food insecurity issue that Native Americans have been actively organising against for decades.

Whyte writes about the destructive impacts of settler colonialism on North American landscapes, which “have already depleted, degraded, or irreversibly damaged the ecosystems, plants, and animals that our ancestors had local living relationships with for hundreds of years and that are the material anchors of our contemporary customs, stories, and ceremonies” (“Dystopia Now” 207). These effects are experienced by Erdrich’s characters, who believe white settler attitudes towards non-human life have “caused a rift in the life of places” (345). Animals stay away from places “stained by the names of humans”, plants cease to grow or “d[ie] out altogether”, and once the new-named places are “half-ruined” they are “taken”, in more than one sense (345). The Turtle Mountain Chippewa are facing another forced relocation, but the “half-ruined” places are already “taken” in the sense of being degraded and depleted, with some species likely to go extinct; the places have irrevocably changed. Here Erdrich unfavourably contrasts settler naming practices with Ojibwe customs in a similar manner to Leslie Marmon Silko, who has written that traditional Indigenous place naming promotes a sense of identification with nature. As Silko puts it, place names that are based on the existing traits and character of the place are more fit for this purpose than places called after human surnames. The traditional stories of Silko’s Laguna Pueblo tribe foreground specific landscape details: “it is impossible to determine which came first: the incident or the geographical feature which begs to be brought alive in a story that features some unusual aspect of this location” (270).

The Turtle Mountain Chippewas’ stories, jokes, food, and even funeral rites reveal close connections to the other living beings in their area. In one of several

⁸³ The characters’ poverty makes wastefulness unthinkable. This point is emphasised in the novels in Chapter Five, especially Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior* (2012).

spiritual scenes in the novel, Patrice sleeps alongside a hibernating bear, and awakes renewed, inspired to action: “She kept the strength she’d fathered in the minutes she’d slept. Bigger ideas were called for. Why should anything be impossible?” (314) Although Patrice is inspired by the bear’s energy, she acknowledges the traditional Ojibwe understanding that a bear is “a walking medicine cabinet” (325). Thus, while the bear is recognised as agentic, powerful, and worthy of living its own life, Patrice’s family guiltlessly hunts the bear and uses parts of it in a traditional ceremony following the death of her father. Rather than being a purely sad experience, Patrice’s family and friends find comfort in the process of building her father’s grave house. Their sense of connection to beings outside of linear time and space is intimately connected to their place on the land. “Sometimes when I’m out and about”, say one, “I feel like they’re with me, those way-back people. I never talk about it. But they’re all around us. I could never leave this place” (323). Such scenes demonstrate deep, place-based, culturally significant relationships with animals, who may still be used by humans for food, warmth, and medicine but are respected and admired in a way that is foreign to most uses of animals in Western diets.

The observance of animal agency in Ojibwe culture is radically different from dominant attitudes in the U.S. and Canada that view animals in relation to their service to humans. Although animal studies scholars and ecocritics critique positive relations with animals that are predicated on our kinship with them – in Laura Wright’s words, “the rights that humans might grant to animals are dependent upon the ability of animals to demonstrate their likeness to us” (11) – the recognition of our commonality with and reliance on animals is essential to Ojibwe thought and mythmaking, in which animals are celebrated for their gifts to humankind in a way that elevates reciprocity and mutual responsibility. The appreciation of reciprocity is evident in Erdrich’s protagonist’s surname, Wazhashk, which means “muskrat” in Ojibwemowin. In the Ojibwe origin story, the muskrat sacrifices his life to give Skywoman, the first human to fall to what will become Earth, the materials she needs to survive and build Turtle Island (a place where she can live that begins on the back of a turtle – another helpful animal).⁸⁴ Without the muskrat’s help,

⁸⁴ Kimmerer relates the story of Skywoman in the opening pages of *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013).

Skywoman and her unborn twins would have died, because there was not enough land for her to live on. Skywoman remembers the muskrat's sacrifice and resolves that her descendants will be respectful and fair to their animal counterparts, who she sees possess admirable qualities like grit, determination, and resilience. I take the position that anthropomorphism, far from being simplistically problematic, can be a powerful literary device for encouraging better environmental stewardship. Indigenous stories that emphasise kinship with animals reveal a mythical foundation for the stewardship demonstrated by Native American groups as compared with settler-associated resource depletion and disconnection from non-human species. Like Erdrich's other works, *The Night Watchman* is deeply informed by Ojibwe myths: Thomas Wazhashk's name signifies his heroism and sacrifice to ensure survival for his people and their environment. Erdrich's fictional recounting of the tribe's successful historical protest offers hope and strategic lessons for activists. Thomas's campaign exemplifies the difficult negotiation and compromise often required to achieve substantive change. His dedication to his cause is matched by his attention to impact and efficacy. For this, his tribe remains on their land. Their position is still precarious, but their destruction is no longer assured. Through this narrative of successful historical protest, Erdrich emphasises the necessarily collaborative nature of efficacious environmental activism.

The occupation of Alcatraz, retold: cities, sovereignty, and environmental control

Tommy Orange's 2018 multi-perspectival novel *There There* follows a group of "urban Indians" in Oakland, California, whose ancestors, whether by choice or force, relocated from their former territories or reservations. Orange depicts the survival of relocation as a form of resistance, even as he bristles at sweeping characterisations of Native resilience. Describing termination policy in the novel's prologue, he writes

Getting us to the cities was supposed to be the final, necessary step in our assimilation, absorption, erasure, the completion of a five-hundred-year-old genocidal campaign ... But the city made us new, and we made it ours. We didn't get lost amid the spiral of tall buildings ... We found one another, started up Indian Centers, brought out our families and powwows, our dances, our songs, our beadwork ... We made art and we made babies ... We did not move to the cities to die. (8-9)

As Orange tells it, urban Indians are not so different from the Turtle Mountain Chippewas in that they have spent several generations adapting to a new environment and have developed a sense of pride and connection to these surroundings. Orange conceives of the city as situated in the larger environment, not separate from it, and suggests that some Native Americans carry cultural memory through major transitions. “We’ve been moving for a long time”, he writes, “but the land moves with you like memory” (11). Urban Indians “belong to the city, and cities belong to the earth” (11). Orange insists on the “natural” origins of urban materials: “Everything here is formed in relation to every other living thing and nonliving thing from the earth ... The process that brings anything to its current form – chemical, synthetic, technological, or otherwise – doesn’t make the product not a product of the living earth. Buildings, freeways, cars – are these not of the earth? ... everything comes from something that came before, which was once nothing” (11). He questions whether urban Indians’ familiarity with the smell of petrol and concrete is less “traditional” or “original” than the smell of sage and cedar; he insists that knowledge of the “sacred mountain range” and “the deep wild forest” should not be privileged over knowledge of “the downtown Oakland skyline” and the “sound of the freeway”, which makes Oakland Indians “feel at home” (11). Orange draws attention to the relationships among matter: “Cities form in the same way as galaxies” (11).

The grandiose style of the passage resists the dismissal of urban settings – which may rightfully be viewed as landscapes, according to Orange – as ugly or unnatural. Orange’s take on cities departs significantly from Erdrich’s decrepit and alienating urban landscapes in *The Night Watchman*. Erdrich contrasts the city, a place of illness, entrapment, and estrangement, with the Turtle Mountain reservation, where she emphasises the sense of connection the residents feel to each other and to their natural surroundings. Patrice’s daily walks are animated by a sense of natural agency: “Rain tapping through the brilliant leaves the only sound ... The sense of something there, with her, all around her, swirling and seething with energy” (51). Patrice feels “how exquisitely she was included ... Her spirit poured into the air like a song” (51). By describing how Patrice’s spirit mingles with

others in her environment, Erdrich expresses a view of nature in which the human is firmly *included*, not separate from it. Orange's argument for the city to be understood as a part of nature counters the early days of ecocritical preference for the pastoral and the concept of pristine wilderness, leaning instead towards a new materialist perspective. He adapts a traditional Native framework for life in the city; while some non-Natives may view humans as separate in some way from nature, and the products of human manufacturing as accordingly separate, Orange does not.

Orange gestures here to an idea made much more explicit in Tagaq's *Split Tooth*: that humans come from "something that came before"; our cells were here before and will stay here after we die, transformed into something else (11). This speaks to Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality – our inseparability from the material that comprises the world around us with which we are always entangled and intermixing. Orange employs this concept to reconfigure conceptions of the city's role in "nature" and in contemporary Native American cultural identity. The material agency represented in this passage hints at new political, economic, and social possibilities associated with viewing matter in this way – a somewhat radical accounting of what we humans have in common not merely with other animals, but with asphalt, stars, concrete, and the components of vehicles that have transformed our landscape. Orange is focused not merely on a proper accounting of history, but also on reconciling the material reality of Native life today (a direct result of that history) with traditional conceptions of nature, one-ness, malleability, and reciprocity. Perhaps because Orange is writing about a particularly urban Indian experience, he challenges ideas that are widely accepted and significant in much other Indigenous writing: "Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere" (11). This contradicts Lawrence Buell's observation that many Indigenous narratives begin with a return of the hero to their ancestral or tribal land, as was true in Wilson's *The Seed Keeper* and several of Erdrich's novels (*Writing* 20). On the other hand, Orange adapts a traditional Native framework for life in the city in his positioning of these humans as a part of "nature", even if their nature comprises skyscrapers and pavement.

The tone of defiance in *There There*'s prologue masks how Orange sometimes strains to present urban Indian life positively, especially in comparison to work by contemporary Indigenous authors who focus on smaller communities and reservation life. His divergence from Erdrich regarding cities arises partly from necessity and partly from the temporal and spatial distance between the 1950s (the period in which *The Night Watchman* takes place) and the late 2010s (the period in which most of *There There* takes place). Orange's protagonists are much more geographically and temporally distant from their ancestors' experiences of land than Erdrich's Turtle Mountain Chippewas, and their relationships with their urban environment are more complex. While there is something like a rebuke to the idea of sovereignty here (perhaps resulting from a realistic appraisal of the situation – urban Indians do not have land or tribal rights, but they are surviving anyways), Orange's prologue is less an uncomplicated reclamation of space and more an expression of environmental awareness, a call to nurture connections to one's space, wherever that may be. Although Orange says Oakland Indians "feel at home walking in the shadow of a downtown building", there is an elegiac quality to his invocation of the "sacred mountain range" and "deep wild forest" that is less familiar to urban Indians than the "Oakland skyline" or the "sound of the freeway" (11). It is easy enough to read the substitution of "cedar or sage or even fry bread" with "gas and freshly wet concrete and burned rubber" not, as he seems to assert, as something to be accepted or even celebrated, but as mourning something that has been lost (11). Does the smell of concrete and petrol have equivalent sensory significance as "natural" scents like sage, or the comforting, familial smell of fry bread? What about their impacts on human health? Orange establishes that he is interrogating the concept of "nature", but the passage is nonetheless pervaded by a sense of loss. When he writes, "Everything new is doomed ... Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere", he may be reaching for defiance, adaptation, and survival, but the tone is one of inevitable resignation (11). It is implied that the fight for sovereignty is either doomed or irrelevant because the land is "everywhere or nowhere".

For all its philosophical differences with *The Night Watchman*, it is interesting to note that *There There* also recounts a historical Native protest

campaign that foregrounds questions of tribal sovereignty and land rights. Orange uses flashbacks to recount the 1969-71 occupation of Alcatraz Island, the site of an infamous U.S. prison that closed in 1963. The occupation of Alcatraz was inspired by the 1868 U.S.-Lakota Treaty of Fort Laramie, which stated that any out-of-use federal lands would be returned to the Indigenous groups that once lived there, but this promise was never fulfilled. As American Indian Movement historians Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Warrior explain, Alcatraz, unoccupied but not restored to Indigenous use, was a savvy protest choice symbolically if not logistically: it was hard to ferry food and supplies to the island, but also harder for law enforcement to access. Although the campaign was unsuccessful in its ostensible goal, it received extensive media attention and is regarded as a landmark event in Native American activism.

As an event that captured the imagination of the national press and Native activists, the Occupation of Alcatraz is relevant to this chapter's explication of the link between environmental health and Native sovereignty. Alcatraz was important not just for Native rights and self-determination, but also for the health of this environment and others like it – out-of-use federal lands that were never restored to Native stewardship. Not only did the lack of fulfilment of these promises further marginalise Native Americans, they also further damaged the ecosystems in these places, which were not sustainably stewarded.

Orange tells the story of Alcatraz through the memories of Opal Bear Shield, who was a young child when her mother joined the occupation. "We're going to be with our relatives, Indians of All Tribes", Opal's mother tells her daughters as they travel to the island (48). Like Smith and Warrior, who describe Alcatraz as an "astonishing metaphor ... a prison that represented the incarcerate spirit of Indian people everywhere" (34), Opal's mother sees Alcatraz as a metaphor for "where we are now" as Native Americans in U.S. society: "the inside of a cell" (48). To her, the protest presents an opportunity to "work our way out from the inside with a spoon" (48).⁸⁵ With this metaphor, Opal's mother acknowledges that a reversal in

⁸⁵ Alcatraz was indeed an appropriate metaphor for the situation of Native Americans in U.S. society. It was popularly considered to be escape-proof, but many prisoners attempted and sometimes completed escape from the island prison before its closure. None of the bids for freedom

fortune will not occur overnight; and indeed, the occupation lasts nineteen months in total, without achieving its initial aims.

Opal's mother is inspired by a quote attributed to the Lakota leader Crazy Horse prophesying that "the Red Nation shall rise again and it shall be a blessing for a sick world ... I see a time of seven generations, when all the colors of mankind will gather under the sacred Tree of Life and the whole Earth will become one circle again" (48). The prophecy carries environmental whispers, alluding to the seventh-generation philosophy, in which any decision-making must consider how seven generations from now will be affected; the need for Indigenous wisdom and resurgence in a "sick" world,⁸⁶ a world that has been environmentally and spiritually degraded; the Earth becoming "whole", "one circle" again; a renewed appreciation and respect for interconnectedness. Orange's invocation of these words indicates the holistic hopes attached to the Alcatraz protest. For Opal's mother, the occupation is not only about recognition, rights, and the fulfilment of promises, but about something greater: the health of the "Red Nation" and the health of "the whole Earth", which are uniquely intertwined; there cannot be one without the other. The restoration of land to Native occupants represents a chance at transformed environmental relationships, where both Native people and the other inhabitants of this land can once again thrive.

Orange's choice to narrate Opal's Alcatraz experience in the first person evinces a sense of immediacy suggestive of the long shadow this experience will cast on her life. Even though the episode is a flashback within the novel's time structure, in these long-ago moments Opal is forever "I", while her present-day passages as a responsible grandaunt are narrated in third person. Throughout the novel, Orange moves constantly from one perspective and narrative mode to another; the same character may be discussed in first, third, or even second or "we" narration at different times. Brian Richardson notes the power of different narrative modes – such as the relatively rare "we" narration, which Orange

were ultimately successful – escapees either died or were captured – but escape was technically possible. This more or less summarises the protestors' feelings about the possibility of success.
⁸⁶ Sick has more than one meaning here: a huge percentage of the Native population was wiped out by European illnesses. Like Patrice's experiences in the city in *The Night Watchman*, a direct parallel is drawn between human well-being and environmental well-being.

employs in the prologue and a consequential “interlude” in which the various characters join together for a powwow – to evoke things like “children’s sensibility” (56). In one chapter, Orange adopts second person narration to convey the experiences of the drummer Thomas Frank. Orange’s use of second person in this passage is “standard”, per Richardson’s narratology, in that “the protagonist/narratee is quite distinct from the actual or implied reader; nevertheless, one of the more unsettling features of this mode of narration is that this distinction can be collapsed whenever the “you” could refer to the reader as well as the protagonist” (20). This is the case for the first sentences of the chapter, when Orange describes what “you” were “before you were born” in universal terms (“a head and a tail in a milky pool – a swimmer”) before disclosing increasingly specific details until it becomes clear that “you” refers to a specific individual – Thomas (208). Orange’s description of “you” conflates the individual’s traits with his family’s history: “Before you were born, you were chased, beaten, broken, trapped on a reservation in Oklahoma”, provocatively suggesting that the experiences of one’s ancestors are part of who one fundamentally *is* (208). Orange notably returns to third person narration in a passage where Thomas is shot. Perhaps the effect of extending second-person narration would be *too* unsettling as the plotting turns violent, even though the passage overtly impresses on the reader the unsettling legacy of violence that shadows Orange’s characters.

Orange’s movements through different narrative perspectives, settings, and time periods lend the nuance borne of experience to his critique of activist goals and tactics. By writing Alcatraz through the eyes of a child, Orange sympathetically explores some of the concerns about child safety, choice, and agency highlighted in Chapter Three. As Smith and Warrior note, the island posed significant dangers to underage occupiers: rowdy activists turned it into a “truly wild place” (34), in more than one sense of the word, and the former caretaker John Hart said that “one would have to search hard to find a more inhospitable location for human habitation” (73), emphasising that Alcatraz was a far more symbolic than practical target for repossession. Through Opal’s recollections of her mother, Orange captures the hopes of the movement’s early participants, and there are signs of considered strategy in the movement’s formal demands: the protest was

predicated in terms the U.S. government could understand – occupying land and refusing to leave. This action follows the government’s playbook exactly, but with the benefit of a sense of restoration and justice on its side, which may be why the occupation initially garnered sympathetic media and public attention. However, the public relations boon of the movement’s early days did not last; Smith and Warrior write that “sheer boredom”, “exuberant anarchism”, hard partying, and ego clashes between different leaders led to fights, accidents, and a “general lack of cohesion and purpose” on Alcatraz, which eventually drained public support and delimited the occupation’s apparent goals (31). Orange’s choice to focalise the events through the perspective of a child activates reader care and sympathy. But the benefit of hindsight provided by Opal’s present-day sections provides a critical lens through which to view the shortcomings of the movement. The protest would have needed to sustain the optimism of Opal’s mother and her wishes for a healthier, more just world and environment to be successful; sustained focus and clear, sympathetic, constructive goals were required for the Turtle Mountain Chippewas to succeed in their campaign. Of course, Alcatraz was a far more disjointed undertaking than Turtle Mountain’s mission, which may be why it lacked a cohesive purpose.⁸⁷

By recounting the complicated legacy of Alcatraz, Orange considers how to make an impact. Choosing to tell the story through the voice of a child injects some youthful confusion, empathy, and pathos while exploring some of the ethical tensions in activism that involves minors. Like Thomas in *The Night Watchman*, Orange’s characters are aware of the importance of education; if working outside the system, as with Alcatraz, does not bring the desired outcome, one has no choice but to learn to work within the system. When they are not at Alcatraz, Opal’s mother encourages her children to succeed in school. As Opal recalls, “the most important thing we could do was to get educated ... people won’t listen to you otherwise” (59). Characters who try to improve Native circumstances and seek

⁸⁷ Smith and Warrior note that the disparate origins of the Alcatraz protestors created conflict. Some California Natives accused the Alcatraz protestors of being “colonizers themselves, since they had not sought permission from the descendants of the people who originally lived in the area” (88). These critics argued that Alcatraz did not belong to Native Americans generally, but Northern California Natives specifically.

justice return to the importance of storytelling – what Karen Tei Yamashita calls “powerful magic” (378). Opal’s mother says, “You have to know that we should never not tell our stories, and that no one is too young to hear” (57). Opal asks her mother what they can do: “what we could do had everything to do with being able to understand where we came from, what happened to our people, and how to honor them by living right, by telling our stories. She told me the world was made of stories, nothing else, just stories” (58).

Orange engages modern media in the flexible process of Indigenous storytelling. Early in the novel, the young Oaklander Dene embarks on a project to interview other urban Indians about their life experiences.⁸⁸ He tries to let “the content direct the vision”, rather than leading with an agenda: “It’s about documentation. For posterity” (240). He asks his interview subjects, “What does being Indian mean to them?”, which yields non-cohesive but authentic responses (240). One interviewee, Calvin, talks about his father’s absenteeism: “I don’t wanna come off like I think that’s what being Native means ... I know there’s a lot of Natives living in Oakland and the Bay Area with similar stories. But it’s like we can’t talk about it because it’s not really a Native story, but then it is at the same time.” (148) Calvin’s discomfort with contributing to a damaging narrative – something he worries could be harmful to perceptions of Native Americans, even if he is truthfully describing his own experience – is what Dene wishes to deconstruct. Dene’s project utilises modern film and sound to help urban Indians share their stories. Much as McNickle, Momaday, and Silko’s twentieth-century novels evinced a process of adaptation affecting Native American storytelling, Dene’s acquisition of government grants to fund a multimedia project for “posterity”, and his desire to help as many urban Indians as possible tell their personal stories, reflects how Native stories may be shared, adapted, and preserved for a modern age.

Dene’s project is partly a reaction to Gertrude Stein’s criticism of development in Oakland, her hometown: “There is no there there” (289). For Native Americans, Dene thinks, the “there there” of their one-time homelands has “been

⁸⁸Dene shares some biographical details with Orange, who previously held a job in digital storytelling in which he encouraged other Native Americans to share stories about their lives (Chang). Through Dene, Orange extols the power of storytelling as a form of activism and as a healing process through which people can “overcome” personal struggles.

developed over, buried ancestral land, glass and concrete and wire and steel, unreturnable covered memory. There is no there there” (39). The colloquial meaning of “there, there” haunts the narrative: a murmured phrase of comfort is no match for generations of intentional harm. Dene seems to be looking for a way to either demonstrate this lack of “there there” for Native Americans, or conversely to find something that will change his mind, to help him believe that there really is something “there there” in the city that is his home (as Orange seems to argue in the prologue when he writes, “the land is everywhere or nowhere”). Over time, the diverse responses to his interviews supplant the pursuit of the meaning of “there there” to become the point of the project. Asked if he feels “Native pride”, Calvin says, “I just don’t feel right trying to say something that doesn’t feel true” (149). Dene reassures him, saying the authenticity of Calvin’s response is “what I’m trying to get out of this whole thing. All put together, all our stories. Because all we got right now are reservation stories, and shitty versions from outdated history textbooks. A lot of us live in cities now. This is just supposed to be like a way to start telling this other story” (148).

There is a metatextual dimension to Dene and Calvin’s conversation. *There There* is itself comprised of short chapters showing a range of characters’ perspectives, some of whom have relatively mundane, uneventful lives, and who have various feelings about their heritage, if they even know the provenance of their ancestors. Dene learns that divining an overall “message” from stories that faithfully document their subjects’ widely varying experiences should arguably not be the goal of his project. Nonetheless, Orange’s emphasis on storytelling as healing is reminiscent of many other Native writers, such as Kimmerer. In an interview describing his work in digital storytelling, he recalls how he came to “revere people’s stories as their own ... You live your story and you earn it” (Chang). His decision to craft what he calls a “polyphonic” novel creates room for a multitude of stories. The diversity of perspectives in Dene’s documentary mirrors the structure of Orange’s novel, which gives space to numerous characters who all have different ideas about what it “means” to be an Indian.

Orange makes a point of the diversity of attendees at the Big Oakland Powwow, the novel’s climactic event. The powwow sees visitors from all over the

country, from innumerable tribes, “full blood”, “half-blood”, “thirty-seconds”, “undoable math” – all welcome and included (136). Many of the characters in *There There* do not know their ancestors’ tribal affiliations, but the powwow is emotionally significant to them. This supports Dene’s conviction that there are many ways to be an Indian, and that individual stories matter. It is also a rebuke to the fractional obsessions of the U.S. authorities throughout the history of their genocidal efforts against Native Americans. In *The Night Watchman*, Erdrich recounts how a census-taker intentionally undercounted the Turtle Mountain population by failing to record anyone who was not immediately reachable and by only counting “full-bloods” (366). As a result, the Turtle Mountain allotment was reduced from twenty townships to two, with catastrophic results from overcrowding and reduced ranging. Thomas Wazhashk sees this obsession with “blood” as a “game” politicians play to “erase” Native Americans (407). This writing metaphor is significant: Native Americans must continue to tell their stories, because government officials use the written language of bureaucracy and legislation to deny their history and existence. No one in Thomas’s delegation to Washington, including himself, knows or cares about “their degree of Indian blood ... Everyone knew they were Indian or not Indian regardless of what the rolls said or what the government said” (407). The diversity of the Big Oakland Powwow in *There There* is both an elegy to the loss or assimilation of so many Native people, tribes, and customs over the years and a celebration of their survival and desire to gather, and all the things it “means” to be an Indian.

In this chapter’s introduction, I noted Orange’s discomfort with the word “resilient”. Yet resilience – tribal, environmental, and personal – is a key theme in Native American eco-novels. The characters in *There There*, without being uniformly admirable or purpose-driven, exemplify Whyte’s concept of collective self-determination – “a society’s overall capacity to adapt to social and environmental changes, or resilience” – and adaptive capacity – “a society’s persistence in the face of environmental variability” (“Food Sovereignty” 350-351). If the city has replaced their original environment, or paved over it, they remember to regard manmade materials as part of the natural world, too. They conduct ceremonies, “pray[ing] for the whole world to get better” (Orange 198); they build

traditional medicine boxes, even if they must drive to the desert and trap badgers with fishing line (183). Powwows and other community events help the characters navigate modern city life by fostering a sense of connection to one another and to the past, and it offers something to look forward to: “We made powwows because we needed a place to be together. Something intertribal, something old, something to make us money, something we could work toward, for our jewelry, our songs, our dances, our drums” (135). The powwows are a place where “we get to all be together”, where “the messy, dangling strands of our lives got pulled into a braid – tied to the back of everything we’d been doing all along to get us here” (135).

The narrative voice of the powwow chapter is another avenue through which Orange harnesses perspective to serve the novel’s thematic ambitions. While most of the story is told from first- or third-person individual perspectives, when the powwow occurs the perspective become “ours”. Richardson notes the prevalence of “we” narration in postcolonial literature, which “valorize[s] collective identity ... ‘we’ is almost always a favored term and a desirable subject position that is to be sought out and inhabited” (50). “We” narration, Richardson writes, demonstrates social cohesion and solidarity, and is often put to “intensely political uses” (43), although he notes that no narrative mode should be inherently identified with a specific political objective. Richardson cites Hertha D. Sweet Wong, who has observed that Native American speech patterns often imply or directly employ first-person plural, and that “‘We’ often invokes a (sometimes *the*) Native community” (Wong 171). Analysing Erdrich’s use of “we” in *Tracks*, Richardson observes how the elder Nanapush’s use of “we” “expands” and “contracts” (51). One minute, “we” might include the spirits of his ancestors; the next, “we” merely refers to the group of people with whom Nanapush is currently traveling. Contrasting this with the younger Pauline’s first-person narration – a more common narrative mode – Richardson delineates how “this pattern of alternation itself depicts the move away from a traditional, collective sensibility rooted in the land to a more isolated, individuated, and mobile existence that interacts with the encroaching world of the white people” (51-52). In this sense, Orange’s use of “we” reclaims traditional Native speech and storytelling patterns and resists an individualistic colonial

subjectivity. In the powwow interlude, he explicitly uses “we” to invoke, as Wong observed, *a* or even *the* Native American community.

The primary effect of Orange’s experiment with narrative modes is to strategically foster empathy with certain characters and then create distance from them that encourages the reader to self-consciously maintain empathy even when any given character is no longer the “I” subject. By the time Orange gets to the “we” narration of the powwow – the political-solidarity angle of which is complicated by the scene’s violence – the unfolding connections between the characters supports his accentuation, upheld by the narrative mode of “we”, of imbrication. “[W]e’ve been coming for years”, he writes of the powwow, “generations, lifetimes, layered in prayer and handwoven regalia, beaded and sewn together, feathered, braided, blessed, and cursed” (135). Orange’s evocation of the participants as “feathered” and “braided” together resembles the new materialist drift of his opening paean to the city landscape. The combination of “natural” and culturally symbolic elements that “sew” the powwow attendees (and, given the inclusive breadth of Orange’s description of their origins, Native Americans writ large) together extends Orange’s dissection of a nature/culture binary that is exploded by the complex lives of his characters.

Split Tooth: a different way of being

Split Tooth, the 2018 literary debut of the Inuit throat singer Tanya Tagaq, alternates between prose, poetry, and occasional illustrations; one poem is written in an Inuktitut dialect, sans translation. Reviewers have struggled to assign *Split Tooth* a genre and describe its content, but it can generally be read as a coming-of-age novel told from the perspective of a young Inuit woman growing up in Nunavut, Canada. The experimental structure, along with Tagaq’s seamless bridging of myth with semi-autobiographical narrative, contributes to the work’s resistance to genre categorisation. The open-endedness of Daniel Heath Justice’s definition of wonderworks – forms of literature by Indigenous authors that “remind us there are other ways of being in the world than those we’ve been trained to accept as normal” (“Indigenous Wonderworks”) – ironically functions to contain works like *Split Tooth* that otherwise resist classification. The shifting form, stylistic

playfulness, and unexpected narrative create a sense of immersion and surprise that encourage the reader to re-envision the living world of which we are part. Both form and substance of *Split Tooth* defy the settler-colonial impulse to conquer and categorise if not understand “the other”, whether that other is human, non-human, or an entity we cannot readily comprehend.

Tagaq is an activist as well as an artist. She dedicates her book to missing and murdered Indigenous women and survivors of residential schools, and the early chapters focus on dangers and abuse suffered by the unnamed narrator and other women and girls in her community. Interspersed with the narrator’s struggle are sensory descriptions of her Arctic environment. The prose sections are mostly written in present tense, fostering a sense of immediacy, in which the reader is placed in the cold alongside the narrator. Describing the scents “unleashed from the spring thaw”, the narrator says,

The freeze traps life and stops time. The thaw releases it. We can smell the footprints of last fall and the new decomposition of all who perished in the grips of winter. Global warming will release the deeper smells and coax stories out of the permafrost. Who knows what memories lie deep in the ice? Who knows what curses? Earth’s whispers released back into the atmosphere can only wreak havoc. (6)

This early invocation of the threats posed by climate change is indicative of Tagaq’s engagement with environmental themes. Like Sheila Watt-Cloutier, who has written of the Inuit “right to be cold” in her anti-climate change campaign, Tagaq sees climate change as fundamentally entangled with the survival of Inuit culture. The effects of climate change on Northern territories and their populations – human, animal, and otherwise – are irrefutable. Watt-Cloutier believes “The projected magnitude of climate change [will] stretch [Inuit] adaptive ability to the breaking point” (10).

Contrary to some environmentally conscious activists and ecocritics who problematise the consumption of meat, Tagaq’s narrator sees no contradiction in enjoying animals both as agentic fellow species and as food. In one scene, she describes the pleasure of letting baby lemmings crawl through her hair: “It’s still the best massage I have ever gotten” (20). In another, she and her cousin eat raw fish while traversing the tundra: “It was delightful. The flesh was so fresh. Something

awoke in me, an old memory; an ancient memory, of eating live flesh. When flesh is eaten live, you glean the spirit with the energy. That is why wild predators are so strong. The farther away you get from the time of death, the less energy the meat carries" (26-27).

The narrator's unapologetic carnivory is provocative in the context of critical perspectives on vegetarianism and veganism. Her experience of eating live fish goes beyond mere sustenance – fishing is a critical part of Inuit survival but is also something the narrator personally enjoys – and is necessary as her journey takes longer than expected: "The treeless expanse" of the tundra "lends itself to illusion" (25). More than simply feeding her, the act of eating fish functions as a connection through time to her ancestors, to "an ancient memory, of eating live flesh".

Throughout *Split Tooth*, the narrator interacts with a "spirit" world that would seem fantastical to many readers accustomed to conventional Western narratives. Here, she believes she "glean[s] the spirit with the energy" by consuming the fish live. Extracting maximum "energy" from the flesh is important for survival, and the narrator believes freshness is correlated with nutritional and spiritual value.

In her early work on the intersection of animal rights and feminism, Carol J. Adams "assumed the normativeness of vegetarianism while understanding why Western culture refused this recognition" (Wright xi). While Adams makes salient points about the ethics of eating animals, the assertion that "Western" cultures specifically refuse to recognise the "normativeness of vegetarianism" overlooks numerous non-Western cultures that use animals for food and other purposes. Vegan scholars are certainly aware of the conceptual challenges facing their field. Laura Wright, a pioneer of vegan studies, concedes that the field she helped create is controversial – not least when Wright compares meat-eaters to vampires and zombies. Adams's and Wright's ethical and political arguments may be apropos when speaking to a Western audience, although many Westerners live in food deserts, have limited access to or knowledge about plant-based diets, and have their own cultural and personal reasons for eating animal products. It is worth noting that the obvious environmental dimensions of veganism are less readily applicable to non-factory farming systems of animal-eating – Tagaq's narrator's consumption of the fish, for example, puts no undue strain on her ecosystem.

Pragmatic, social, and geographic considerations further complicate the ethical and political discussion of diet.

The ideals driving animal welfare campaigns become notably problematic when directed by the dominant cultural group towards less privileged groups, as in the case against seal hunting. Tagaq interrogates some troubling aspects of attempts to intervene in hunting practices and food cultures in the name of animal welfare. (Erdrich has also broached this topic in her work, referencing restrictions on Native ranging, fishing, and hunting imposed by the U.S. government in novels such as *Tracks*.) Passages in *Split Tooth* are aligned with the ethics of Tagaq's real-life opposition to anti-seal hunting campaigns in Canada. When protesting seal hunting became a celebrity cause in 2014, Tagaq pushed back, insisting that seal hunting was a critical component of Inuit tradition and food and supply systems. Her social media commentary on the subject generated controversy amongst animal rights activists, as when she posted a "#sealfie" of herself alongside a deceased baby seal. In her public comments on the matter, she drew attention to missing and murdered Indigenous women, asking why this issue did not provoke the international outrage aroused by seal hunting, and disputed the prioritisation of sea mammals over Inuit lives. "We are expected to perish because you think seals are cute", she wrote on social media (Williams). She also critiqued the notion that First Nations people should only hunt if they "use the whole animal", arguing that non-Indigenous people do not "care what happens to the rest of a pig, or cow, or goose" and should not expect Indigenous hunters to be different. Erdrich has also critiqued tropes of the "noble savage" more broadly or, to use Shepard Krech's term, "ecological Indian" more specifically. These tropes understand Native Americans as more principled, natural friends of the earth than non-Natives, often overlooking debates within Native communities regarding how to reconcile traditional values and responsibilities with modern pressures.⁸⁹ Patrice's experience with the bear in *The Night Watchman* demonstrates how relations with non-human animals – including as food/prey – have important cultural and environmental significance and are inseparable from questions of survival. *Split*

⁸⁹ For example, media stories about Native resistance to oil pipelines typically sideline or omit community members who are pro-pipeline, usually for economic reasons.

Tooth advances compassion for women in Indigenous communities as well as an approach to human-animal relations that emphasises symbiosis. This perspective understands humans as themselves animals who are part of the environment and the food chain.

The poetic passages in *Split Tooth* often restate themes found in the prose. In one poem, Tagaq writes:

a collective shift of consciousness
Is needed so
The sunflowers will all turn

Towards the sun (160)

The poem expresses the importance of pushing back against social constructs if life on Earth is to continue:

We would do anything for acceptance
Water Food Air Love
Approval
What drives a social climate? We just do what the others do
Following (160)

The poem documents failures of human social constructs and the dangers of conformity, asserting a “shift in consciousness” is required “before the sunflowers burn” (161). Frequent spacing and shifts before particular words cultivate an expectation of impending calamity; the discomfiting tone and structure reflect the urgency of addressing environmental damage, even as the scale of the problem cannot be confined within a poem.

Tagaq interrogates conceptions of time and space, often in conjunction with the material interaction of the narrator’s body with the outside world. “I am lying on the ice for an unknown amount of time because Time went for a walk. Ice in lung, fear in spleen, and river of blood flowing through my womb. Can the water be cognizant of my own fleshly currents through the ten feet of ocean ice? Can my blood join the ocean currents in ritual?” (55) The narrator has experiences that seem like visions, though they may be non-literal expressions of interconnectedness. One effect of the novel’s unusual structure and semi-mythical content is to press the reader to

confront their interest in which parts of the narrative are “real”, which implicitly critiques the desire to understand stories – and the world we live in – in literal terms, real and not real. The blurred boundaries Tagaq confronts between human and nature, for example, is echoed in the formal boundaries Tagaq blurs by blending fiction, memoir, poetry, and myth. This subversion of apparent order upends any impression of the human as separate from nature and coaxes the reader to consider ideas or experiences that might seem impossible within the parameters of their existing worldview. Poetically restating a prose section in which the narrator communes with the Northern Lights, Tagaq writes,

I am a pillar, gorging on the dimensions we sense but never see...
the lights begin to blur and I swear they are calling me backwards
forwards in Time, back to a time before I was born and where I will return to after I
die. (56)

This passage, among others in which the narrator has experiences with the Northern Lights that are conveyed more as interactions than observations, exemplifies the uniqueness not merely in *Split Tooth's* structure but also in its content, in the seamless interaction between the narrator and powerful natural phenomena in a form that seems more mythical than literal. In a story that has also portrayed mundane, everyday reality – going to school, spending time with other kids, eating candy – the sudden turn in which the narrator is impregnated by the Northern Lights comes as a surprise. The supernatural abilities of her twin offspring, and their eventual transmutation into sea creatures, sees Tagaq engage with the ecofeminist subject of women and animals in strange and not obviously legible ways.

Justice writes that wonderworks “remind us that other worlds exist; that other realities abide alongside and within our own”. The co-existence of “other realities” is invoked in many Indigenous narratives, with ramifications for environmental consciousness. Kimmerer writes that “there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us” (58). Tagaq writes, “There are other realities that exist besides our own; it is foolish to think otherwise. The universe is conscious” (30). Kimmerer and Tagaq portray these “other realities” and “intelligences” not as things to be frightened of but as expansive sources of

awareness and insight, if only we can access them. Tagaq's formal and thematic experiments extend to the search for different, sometimes non-human, perspectives, much like the novels in Chapter Three, without losing sight of the human history at the heart of the narrative. Imagining different "realities" is a feature of traditional Indigenous stories, and the practice of listening for these stories primes the individual to "listen" to one's environment. The Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan describes "listening to nature" as revealing a connection not only to non-human forces but also to one's lineage: "Walking, I am listening to a deeper way. Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say. Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands" (159). Kimmerer extols the connection between the powerful feeling of the "love" of those who came before you to love between an individual and the other-living world: "Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond" (124-5). That these experiences "activate" the individual indicates the power and potential that any individual can bring to bear as a reciprocal defender of nature – a true friend of the earth.

While Tagaq's narrator may not appear to be an environmental activist in a traditional sense, she advances a clear, often confronting ecological philosophy that underscores our transcorporeality and challenges human behaviours and constructs that negatively impact other species and our shared environment. The novel's extensive exploration of environmental themes accords with the author's real-life activism; in this sense, *Split Tooth* is arguably an example of writing as activism. Tagaq advances her critique of animal rights discourse in describing the annual culling of foxes in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, which is required to balance the ecosystem. "These foxes will die of starvation", the narrator explains, moving seamlessly from everyday preoccupations to philosophical ones: "better to put them out of their misery. These foxes will harm schoolchildren; better to put them out of their misery. These humans will destroy the earth; better to put them out of their misery" (60). This is simultaneously serious, sardonic, and provocative.

In one sense, Tagaq resists Peter Singer's influential concept of "speciesism", which philosophically assigns equivalent value to non-human animal

and human lives (“all animals are equal” [24]). Singer argues that humans should not interfere with other animals for human benefit. Tagaq’s narrator takes a different position, arguing that it is *not* acceptable to allow foxes to attack schoolchildren, when instead the foxes’ own starvation-related “misery” could be ended by culling (killing) them. Simultaneously, she recognises the disproportionate harm inflicted on the Earth by humans, as humans may be partly responsible for the unbalanced ecosystem in which the foxes have insufficient food. This leads her to entertain the possibly absurd conclusion that the same solution for miserable, starved and thus harmful foxes could be used for humans, who also suffer and cause harm to other species.⁹⁰ But she emphasises the ability of humans to make rational decisions, particularly when balance and food chain is taken into mind, and suggests that compassion for animals in certain circumstances is not always an option; furthermore, mercy for the foxes would deny humans’ own animality. “Empathy is for those who can afford it. Empathy is for the privileged”, Tagaq writes. “Empathy is not for Nature” (61). By arguing that “empathy is not for Nature”, Tagaq critiques a popular animal rights ethical framework that is premised on anthropomorphism. Many ecocritics and ecofeminists, including Lori Gruen, have problematised empathy as it relates to animal studies. Even though Gruen calls for empathy towards non-human species, developing such empathy is often premised on how similar we perceive other species to be to ourselves, or to our recognition of how our own well-being is impacted by theirs. Tagaq observes that other animals do not entertain the same conscious, ethical considerations of interspecies relations and compassion of which humans are capable and suggests that valuing non-human lives in precisely the same way we do our human family and neighbours can inhibit responsible reactions to our environment. “The foxes die. I mourn them”, Tagaq writes, “but I understand that there is danger in mourning for those who would not mourn for you in return” (61).

The assertion that a fox would not “mourn for you in return” challenges an ecocritical argument that eating animals is anthropocentric and speciesist. The

⁹⁰ Entertaining the benefits of human extinction is a common feature of apocalyptic eco-fiction, as discussed in other chapters.

scene in which Tagaq's narrator eats live fish, and her ecstatic response to it, recalls Alexa Weik von Mossner's affective ecocritical analysis of the short story "Flyfishing" from Dale Jamieson and Bonnie Nadzam's environmental short fiction collection *Love in the Anthropocene* (2015). The story concerns a man living in a time where most of the outside "environment" is artificial. He has fond memories of the outdoors before anthropogenic climate change and takes his daughter on a trip to a scenic (but mostly constructed) river to "fish". Although the man is disturbed by the inauthenticity of the environment, he experiences happiness – a fulfilment of his "eco-nostalgia" – when, in what Weik von Mossner calls a "morbid twist", his daughter catches a fish ("From Nostalgic Longing" 60). The daughter is disgusted by the wriggling animal, but the father is overjoyed, and promises they will build a fire and eat the fish together. "Think of all the good river days that fish had", the father tells his daughter. Weik von Mossner finds the ending of "Flyfishing" "darkly ironic" due to "speciesism": the father "lack[s] empathy" and holds the "anthropocentric belief that fish are made for killing and eating" (61). Weik von Mossner feels the moment of father-daughter bonding exposes the father's "belief that nonhuman life forms should be used in ways that benefit humans", and she objects to the "ritual killing of the supposedly authentic animal" (61).

Weik von Mossner's primary subject in the essay is the affective dimensions of "Flyfishing" – the father's eco-nostalgia, his "lack of empathy" for animal life, the daughter's lack of "embodied experience" in nature and the "ecoparalysis" her "nature deficit disorder" engenders (60), which Jamieson and Nadzam suggest will be a widespread condition in a world irrevocably altered by climate change. Tagaq's contrasting depiction of eating fish – a fish that is still alive, no less: "its tail tickled all the way down to my tummy" (26) – is equally rich in affective detail, but rather than the morbidity Weik von Mossner sees in "Flyfishing," Tagaq's scene is unambiguously joyful. The narrator stands taller after eating the fish; she and her cousin "pretended to be seagulls" as they "absorbed" the "energy" of the fish and imagine what it would be like to fly (26-27). Tagaq portrays the fish-eating as giving her narrator life and energy in the present moment, as well as connecting her to her ancestors. It also connects her with other animals who consume living flesh. If this seems morbid or anthropocentric to an ecocritic, to Tagaq's narrator it is an

expression of animality and the joy of living, a depiction of the sensory experience shared by all living creatures who acquire food. It is one of many moments where Tagaq evinces affinity with other animals, while still being aware of her present human-ness – a state that, like Tommy Orange, she knows will change after her death, when her own flesh is “unraveled back into energy” (30).

Many of the narrator’s experiences on the tundra portray *sila*, an Inuktitut concept. As Janet Tamalik McGrath explains it, “The word *sila* encompasses experiences of awe or joy while also affirming a fundamental connection with the forces that inspire these feelings. What is outside (environmental) is inside too. We are interconnected” (262). *Sila* encompasses concepts of life force and breath, but also outerness, Earth, air, atmosphere, sky, and spirit. There is a notable emphasis on interconnectedness in the concept of *sila*. Adopting the term *sila* in an ecocritical context, McGrath writes, “offers a connotation of connection that the English words *nature* and *environment* lack” (263).

The interconnection explored by Tagaq is not unique to her Inuktitut upbringing; it is a perspective expressed in one way or another in all the novels in this chapter. Describing Ojibwe philosophy, Larry Nesper writes, “human beings need spiritual power gained from relationships with non-human persons in order to realize *pimadaziwin*, life in a complete and full sense” (34). Erdrich expresses this in the significance of the bear in *The Night Watchman*, just as Tagaq explores the “spiritual power gained from relationships” with foxes, fish, lemmings, newts, and seals; one of Orange’s characters goes to great lengths to acquire badger fur for her grandson’s medicine box, which she hopes will help prevent self-destructive behaviour and teach him “how to stay down there. Way deep down inside yourself, unafraid” (185). Regarding Inuit philosophy, David Anderson writes, “there is a notable absence of the hypothesis that life is to be enjoyed by individual creatures. Instead, it is thought to be something that neighbouring organisms share with each other” (14).

The worldview expressed in *Split Tooth* has commonalities with Glenn Albrecht’s concept of the Symbiocene – a new geological era that Albrecht believes must occur to achieve terrestrial stability. The Symbiocene, he writes, “begins when recognition by humans of the vital interconnectedness of life

becomes the material foundation for all subsequent thought, policy, and action” (104). This imagined era “will be characterized by human intelligence and praxis that replicate the symbiotic and mutually reinforcing life-reproducing forms and processes found in living systems” and “will be a positive affirmation of life, and it offers the possibility of the complete reintegration of the human body, psyche, and culture with the rest of life” (102). In many ways, Tagaq’s narrator is living this life. She is integrated with her environment to an unusual degree – communing physically and spiritually with the Northern Lights, living holistically with other animals, deeply aware of “the vital interconnectedness of life” and all that has come before her and will come after her. Tagaq writes,

The Earth calls us back to her
Just as the Earth is being pulled
Back into her origin
The one giant breath
The universe exhaled
All of us out
Therefore the universe
Will inhale
All back in again
Upon our deaths
The Earth welcomes us into
her bosom
Turns us into plants and oil and wind
Churns us into more life (78)

For all the differences in ritual, philosophy, and everyday life among First Nations and Native American tribes, approaches to interspecies relations and a recognition of ourselves as animals and as part of nature inform many tribal worldviews to a degree that the dominant settler-colonial perspective lacks. The impact of this perspective on care for the environment becomes more evident by the day. In telling stories of historical activism, when survival itself reads like an act of protest, Erdrich, Orange, and Tagaq continue a legacy of environmental stewardship and kinship. As a new era of Indigenous activism unfolds in the Americas, these historical fictions provide blueprints for action and testify to what has come before and is still with us today.

Chapter 5: Writing hope: Communication, cooperation, and the optimistic eco-novel

The previous chapters traced the evolution of the archetypal literary environmental activist, descended from Edward Abbey, from something that can bluntly be described as negative to positive, simplistic to complex, impulsive to strategic. I argued that the activists in the first two chapters exemplified popular conceptions of the environmental activist in the U.S. and Canadian literary imagination – first, the angry, privileged, action-oriented male environmentalist and second, the “greenie” activist as preachy, quasi-religious dogmatist. We started to see a broadening of the activist figure in Chapter Three with non-adult and even non-human characterisations of environmental protectors and advocates. These imaginative characterisations pair productively with the texts’ boundary-pushing depictions of environment, nature, and “us”: the novels’ untraditional activist characters and interrogations of “nature” are inextricably linked. In Chapter Four, we see how the literary potentialities of the novel stretch with the influence of Native American oral traditions, mythmaking, and a treatment of storytelling as the preservation of identity and the human species itself, with the fate of the human always linked to that of other species.

In this chapter, I survey novels including *Prodigal Summer* (2000) and *Flight Behavior* (2012) by American author Barbara Kingsolver, *All Over Creation* (2002) by Canadian-American novelist Ruth Ozeki, and *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) by American sci-fi writer Kim Stanley Robinson. The authors in this chapter depict environmental activism as positively motivated, rewarding work that can yield meaningful results. Although for reasons of space I will focus mostly on one novel per author, I want to think about how these authors develop their environmental themes and narrative strategies over time, and how each has made environmental issues a central part of their creative work.

Although each novelist in this chapter brings something different to their cli-fi oeuvre, I think of them as constituting a less common but important sub-genre of optimistic, community-oriented, and solution-driven eco-novels that evades the overarching trend of pessimism and proposes practical interventions that readers and institutions can work to implement. Although the authors’ emphasis on up-to-

date scientific information and both small- and large-scale practical sustainability solutions invite questions about didacticism and literary quality (the latter always a fraught and nebulous category in any case), closer analysis of the novels shows engagement with literary tradition and what might be seen as the trajectory of eco-fiction from ancient times to the present. This aspect, along with the authors' formal reliance on multi-perspectival narrative structures that express a spirit of cooperative politics, lends aesthetic and literary-historical complexity to their focus on science and efficacy, which they endeavour to weave into a compelling narrative with sufficient drama and momentum to keep the reader engaged. The novels in this chapter offer case studies as to how eco-novelists resolve the tension between scientific accuracy and narrative drama, which critics like Timothy Clark and Amitav Ghosh have identified as a unique challenge for climate change novels. Similarly, the authors' aesthetic and formal engagement with canonical narratives of the past keep their interest in politicised or environmental justice issues (such as the intersection of poverty and environmental studies and food systems and sustainable agriculture) from disrupting the story or appearing overly prescriptive.

This chapter is organised by topic rather than author/novel. Analysing the novels' commonalities reveals some positive trends in activist characterisation and identifies intersecting topics that continue to interest and provoke eco-novelists. First, I discuss how the authors approach the role of religion in ameliorating or hindering environmental progress in Canada and the U.S. Where Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler imagined fictional environmentalist religions that skewed fanatic or fundamentalist, the authors in this chapter explore the real-world influence of Christian and Buddhist ideas in conversation with environmental attitudes and policy. Second, I turn to the authors' engagement with canonical literature, noting how they draw attention to proto-environmental texts, situating their own work as building on an eco-literary canon stretching back to ancient times. The authors' references to Ovid, Lord Byron, Mary Shelley, and Thomas More underscore the longstanding presence of concern for climate and environment in storytelling. Third, I analyse the authors' use of polyvocality as a narrative strategy that emphasises the necessarily collaborative nature of environmental activism. The novelists' formal strategy of polyvocality (multi-perspectival narrative structures)

facilitates the representation of large, diverse constituencies as contributory stakeholders whose cooperative undertakings have the potential to positively impact environmental issues. This section of the chapter is the longest, foregrounding some of the big-picture questions this thesis has asked about the role of the novel in the climate crisis and considering how the authors in this chapter respond to those questions. This chapter continues to highlight the often-productive tension in many eco-novels: between sentiment and information, didacticism and entertainment, and religion as both a help and a hindrance to environmental activism. I conclude by restating the optimism evinced by this chapter's eco-novels and how their solution-oriented representation of environmental issues might contribute to an understanding of the writers themselves as activists.

Religion and environmental stewardship

Unlike Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler, who characterise certain facets of archetypal environmentalism as religious in nature (and therefore epistemologically unstable), Ozeki and Kingsolver present environmental activism as largely secular. Their activists are usually more motivated by science than religious ideologies, even if they sometimes misinterpret or overstate the certainty that the targets of their activism are harmful to plants and humans in specific ways. (The exception is characters in *All Over Creation* who explicitly connect their environmentalism to their personal interpretation of Christian doctrine; these characters read, in the Bible, instructions to be good stewards of non-human nature.) Ozeki's and Kingsolver's "activists", some of whom are more immediately recognisable as such than others, mostly lack the zeal of Butler's *Earthseed* and Atwood's *God's Gardeners*. The authors and their characters frequently quote scripture, often reinterpreted in the service of green goals, but it comes from the Bible, rather than Atwood's and Butler's invented holy books. Instead of fictional "green" religious adherents, Ozeki and Kingsolver's novels follow questioning or former believers of established religions who typically act as a bridge between "rational" science and religiously inflected scepticism of the environmental movement. These characters have ties to both realms – science and religion – and, importantly, learn to "speak

the language” of each, eventually deconstructing the assumed binary between the two and encouraging coalition-building. Ozeki and Kingsolver pragmatically approach the question of how to facilitate dialogue between those with differing viewpoints, and they specifically ponder how religion might be harnessed or rehabilitated in a way that promotes environmentalism instead of resisting it. These are key goals of watershed discipleship – “caring for one’s region as an expression of Christian faith” (Bock 206) – which posits that faith leaders have a unique role to play in environmentalist efforts because of their community ties, influence, and communication skills. There is now a small watershed discipleship movement in North America consisting of pastors, rabbis, and other faith leaders who view environmental justice advocacy as inseparable from their other responsibilities.⁹¹

The prominence of Christianity in Kingsolver’s and Ozeki’s eco-novels speaks to the continued salience of religious influence on U.S. and Canadian social life and politics, which in turn affect environmental laws and discourse. Kari Norgaard has noted the importance of religion in social conditioning. She observes that many people in her study “who are most active politically around both environmental and human rights issues ... connect their social engagement with their religious beliefs” (28) – something that secular activists may not expect. Norgaard’s research lends some credence to Kingsolver and Ozeki’s explorations of whether religion can be a force for environmental good, instead of merely an obstacle.

In Kingsolver’s rural U.S. settings, Christianity is the foremost belief system that drives social behaviour and influences policy. On the surface, Christianity itself is an apparent obstacle to environmental progress. In her non-fiction book about locavorism (a practice of seeking out food that is produced locally), *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (2007), Kingsolver expresses an idea akin to Lynn White Jr.’s argument that something like religion may be required to alleviate our ecological crisis. Kingsolver writes, “Most of us are creatures so

⁹¹ Securing the buy-in of faith leaders has proved consequential for a variety of progressive issues in the U.S. For example, in August 2022, following the Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, voters in the conservative state of Kansas rejected a ballot measure restricting abortion. The campaign against the measure relied on the testimony of Kansas faith leaders, who were well-positioned to frame the issue in a way that resonated with the state’s Christian majority.

comforted by habit, it can take something on the order of religion to invoke new, more conscious behaviors – however glad we may be afterward that we went to the trouble” (38). The concept of watershed discipleship insists that new religions or religiously inflected belief systems may not need to be created when many already exist. The question of the *necessity* of something like religious belief for positive reorientation towards nature may be resolved in Kingsolver and Ozeki’s novels insofar as many of the non-religious characters are positive forces for environmental stewardship who work together with their religious peers. Their care for the environment does not assume the spiritual dimensions shown by Atwood’s Adam One or Butler’s Lauren Olamina, but they still show potential to achieve their goals.

In *Flight Behavior*, Christianity provides context for how many of Kingsolver’s characters interpret signs of climate change. The protagonist Dellarobia, a young mother who is intelligent, under-educated, and dissatisfied, finds purpose after discovering “trees turned to fire, a burning bush” in her family’s forest (14). The initially religious, semi-apocalyptic vision of “forest fire” gives way to the stunning realisation that the “showers of orange sparks” are in fact monarch butterflies, who have mysteriously halted their annual migration to Mexico to winter in Tennessee’s colder climate. Dellarobia’s initial encounter with the butterflies, which interrupts a moment of self-interestedness as she prepares to cheat on her husband, shows some degree of solipsism: “Unearthly beauty had appeared to her, a vision of glory to stop her in the road. For her alone these orange boughs lifted, these long shadows became a brightness rising” (15). Even though Dellarobia is sceptical of organised religion, its influence on her life is obvious in the way she perceives the butterflies as a “burning bush”: “Moses came to mind ... Burning coals of fire went up and down among the living creatures” (14). Kingsolver’s allusion to the burning bush signals how important this event will be for Dellarobia personally as well as its larger significance, as God speaks to Moses through the fire and instructs him to lead the Israelites to the promised land. There is an implication that someone, perhaps Dellarobia, will receive this event as divine intervention and potentially save someone or something (the butterflies, her town, the environment, herself) as a result. When Dellarobia realises the unusual scene

represents not fiery danger but “a valley of lights, an ethereal wind. It had to mean something”, her realisation carries the touch of revelation, and the desire to search possibly mundane events for greater – specifically, religious – significance or meaning (16). She suddenly experiences “the strangest conviction” that “the burning trees were put here to save her” (16). The scene illustrates not only how Dellarobia interprets nature (and “unnatural” events such as an unprecedented interruption to the monarch butterfly migration) through a Christian lens, but also the degree to which she assigns personal significance to occurrences in her environment. It will take Dellarobia the length of the novel to understand the truly significant ways in which her trajectory and well-being, and that of her species at large, are imbricated with this harbinger of climate change; for the moment, she interprets it as a sign from a higher power to change her immediate plans. She views the beauty of the moment, so close on the heels of perceived danger, as a sight for her alone to savour: “For her alone these orange boughs lifted” (14). While Dellarobia’s initial reaction to the butterflies quickly gives way to growing concern about climate change, her family and fellow townspeople interpret the presence of the butterflies as a “miracle”, not a worrying sign of climate change (128).

I discuss later in the chapter how Kingsolver’s polyphonic narratives, such as *Prodigal Summer*, enhance her themes of interconnectedness and mutual care. In *Flight Behavior*, the tighter focus on Dellarobia’s gradual transformation into an environmental advocate gives Kingsolver space to fictionally represent the psychological impediments to assimilating climate change that Norgaard writes about in *Living in Denial* (2011). As Norgaard showed, even citizens of the most ecologically progressive nations cling to familiar social norms and psychological coping mechanisms to reduce internal conflict and stress (30). At times, Kingsolver’s townspeople seem to embody Simon Estok’s concept of ecophobia, which names “the contempt and fear we feel for the agency of the natural environment” (131). Dellarobia’s education is certainly not comfortable: “In such a short time [her study] had relieved her of a lifetime of illusions, and already she missed them” (422). As she dedicates herself to climate science, her increasing awareness comes with pain: “She didn’t know how scientists bore such knowledge. People had to manage terrible truths” (247). In some ways, the knowledge that

Dellarobia gains about the environment parallels her disenchantment with traditional Christianity. Non-believers must manage the “terrible truths” of an incomprehensible universe, while believers are granted comfort in the face of their mortality. Analogously, deniers (or non-believers) of climate change are protected from another frightening reality, while believers experience anxiety from their confrontation with what Al Gore calls the “inconvenient truth”. Dellarobia notes that it is easier to “sleepwalk” than to accept responsibility for a changing climate (231). Members of her community sometimes sound like the planet-fleeing space colonisers of eco-science fiction, but instead of spaceships they think of biblical vessels: “What do you think of this weather? Should we start building an ark?” one jokes (161), while another says, “There’s always some place else to go” (172). The townspeople’s belief in the inexhaustible bounty of the forest is a holdover from centuries of deforestation, a faulty premise that should have been plain to all long ago. That Dellarobia’s relations can still tell themselves that their logged forests will replenish, after centuries of evidence to the contrary, is an example of Norgaard’s denial in action. It is also suggestive of the “orthodox ... arrogance toward nature” that Lynn White Jr. ascribed to Christianity, which he thought could be ameliorated not by science and technology alone but by a new, humbler, “green” religion, “whether we call it that or not” (1207).

Like Kingsolver, Ozeki is cognisant of the link between environmental attitudes and religion. The rural, probably evangelical Christians in *Flight Behavior* mostly greet environmentalism with suspicion, while Ozeki’s *All Over Creation* more prominently features Christian characters who assimilate environmentalist viewpoints into their faith. Ozeki charts the point of connection between Lloyd Fuller, a conservative Idahoan farmer, and the secular activist group, the Seeds of Resistance, as the belief that gene editing goes against nature. Lloyd’s defence of nature derives from it being a creation of God; interference with God’s “wisdom” is an immoral act of hubris (67). The atheistic activists are similarly appalled by human intervention in the “natural” at the level of the gene, but their opposition to gene editing largely arises from distrust of technology. They are guided more by gene editing’s “ick factor” – a reaction to its novel strangeness – than by evidence-based scepticism or reverent appreciation for nature, although both science and

scripture provide arguably more cogent bases for the group's activism than their assertion that genetically modified potatoes are bad because they are "Zapped with DNA" (84). The Seeds emphasise the untested as well as the monstrous aspect of gene editing in their performance-based activism. One member dons the costume of a demented Mr. Potato Head, "with two bolts stuck in its neck and a badly stitched scar on its forehead", portraying genetically modified potatoes as a Frankenfood (84). As part of this anti-GMO protest art, the compromised potato performs "magic tricks" in grocery stores in which potatoes are transformed into cans of insect poison. The group targets rural agricultural areas, where small farmers face pressure from Monsanto-like corporations to adopt patented, genetically engineered seeds, and where a lack of familiarity with abstract food science makes the audience susceptible to confusion about "chemicals" in food, which the Seeds exploit to their advantage.

Both Lloyd's and the Seeds' ideas about genetic engineering are muddled. Lloyd's belief in an uncomplicated and largely static version of nature created by God leads him to recognise some threats to agricultural and environmental health, such as the extreme reduction in biodiversity presaged by the dominance of agribusiness giants, while misunderstanding or overlooking other threats that are not neatly reconciled with scripture. Lloyd and his wife Momoko downplay the danger of "non-native plants": "Our plants are as immigrant as we are!" reads one pamphlet. "... anti-exoticism is Anti-Life: "God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body" ... we believe anti-exoticism to be explicitly racist ... propaganda of the very worst kind" (67). Lloyd correctly identifies plant diversity as a marker of ecological health, then fails to account for how non-native species *reduce* diversity as they compete with and overrun native plants. Ursula Heise points out Lloyd's mistake of imposing a human sociological framework onto ecosystems. Heise critiques the notion that if "restoration ecology does not provide a good model for social engineering ... it must therefore itself be misguided, on the premise that biological conservation should be conducted on the model of intercultural ethics" ("Transnational Turn" 395). Apart from the attention Lloyd and Momoko bring to issues affecting family farming, their greater contribution to the

cause of biodiversity is their carefully kept and shared heirloom seed bank – not their counterproductive association of invasive species control with xenophobia.

While Kingsolver and Ozeki consider how to reconcile Christian beliefs, and their attendant political and cultural cachet in the U.S., with the need for greater environmental stewardship, the influence of Buddhism is also present, particularly in novels by Ozeki and Robinson.⁹² Zen Buddhism has influenced the eco-politics of many high-profile U.S. and Canadian environmentalists, such as the poet Gary Snyder. Snyder, in contrast to proponents of watershed discipleship, has opined that Christian ethics do not “extend concern to non-human beings” in the way that Buddhism does (Elder). Snyder is energised by the aesthetic associations of Zen Buddhism, with “its particular kinds of discipline, its poetry, and its heart”. Greta Gaard has written about promising directions in Zen ecocriticism (or “mindful ecocriticism”). Gaard understands Stacy Alaimo’s transcorporeality and Karen Barad’s intra-action as manifesting “the Buddhist understanding of *not-self*” (“New Ecocriticisms” 227) and discusses how Buddhist precepts and virtues “reflect environmental ethics” (229). Mindful/Zen ecocritics, Gaard writes, are interested in how Buddhist concepts like eudaimonia (living well) and present-moment awareness offer alternatives to common narrative frames that deny or minimise interconnectivity, impermanence, and interest in others outside of the self.

Although *All Over Creation* is minutely engaged with Christian doctrine, Ozeki’s background as a Zen Buddhist priest is evident in the protagonist Yumi’s evolving worldview. Yumi’s takeaway from her interactions with her parents, Lloyd and Momoko, and members of the Seeds of Resistance centres on how cooperation and interpersonal care feed into care for the Earth, and vice versa: “we are responsible. Intimately connected, we’re liable for it all ... I realized I was powerless to forecast or control any of our outcomes. But maybe that was the trick – to accept the responsibility and forgo the control? To love without expectation?” (410) Yumi becomes more aware of the impermanence of life than characters who believe in a more static version of nature and of the afterlife (and with it, the implied

⁹² Robinson occasionally mentions right-wing, Christian, conservative (qualities that are, perhaps justifiably, conflated) factions as obstructive forces, but they do not play a large role in his novels.

continuation of one's consciousness). Her resolution to "love without expectation" calms and centres her, instead of provoking despair or futility.

The scientist heroes of Robinson's *Science in the Capital* (2004-2007) trilogy are not religious, but they draw inspiration from several Buddhist characters who are fleeing environmental catastrophe, and Robinson has discussed the religion's influence on his personal life and writing process for *The Ministry for the Future* (Snibbe). Although much of the trilogy is concerned with hard science, the Buddhist characters in *Science in the Capital* offer many insights into relationships with nature – and possible climate change mitigation strategies – that the protagonists take to heart and apply to their strategy. Robinson's representations of Buddhist philosophy sometimes provide a spiritual foundation for pragmatic approaches to climate change mitigation. When Rudra, a Buddhist climate refugee, describes the National Science Foundation as "very Buddhist!" in its mandate "to make a better world", NSF scientist Frank demurs, describing the foundation as "very pragmatic ... [not] particularly Buddhist. Compassion and right action are not their prime motivation" (*Sixty Days* 3-4). Rudra insists that pragmatism is compatible with Buddhism, and that motivation matters less than results: "Compassion! So what? Does it matter why, if we do good things? ... Maybe not!" (4)

Perhaps the most noteworthy evolution from *Science in the Capital* to *The Ministry for the Future*, both of which centre on climate change mitigation, is Robinson's examination of eco-terrorism, the worst of which is aimed at commercial airline passengers. The apparent efficacy of this brutal tactic – air travel effectively stops in response to mass-casualty bombings, and a new era of slower, more ecologically friendly transport begins – is Robinson's most challenging provocation in a cli-fi oeuvre that more often aims for non-violent and almost improbably optimistic solutions. Robinson does not dwell extensively on the ethics of such measures. In a conversation with her undercover-terrorist aide Badim, Ministry director Mary comes off as the holder of the moral high ground. But Badim's appeal to his strategy's apparent "success" contributes to the formation of an uncomfortably open question, which Robinson further probes with the character of Frank, a traumatised aid worker who kidnaps Mary in an attempt to hasten

climate interventions, and his tortured forays into direct action. Frank's misery seems to suggest that at least on a personal, spiritual level, violence is not the answer. While other characters, like Mary, recover from traumatic incidents, Frank arguably can never heal because his interventions only create more misery and suffering, not less, and not least for himself. Robinson's Zen influence may be partially glimpsed here: the correlation (causation can only be speculated) between terroristic direct actions and positive systemic changes shows Robinson's willingness to confront less rosy ideas about how to affect such a huge, neglected problem, but at the level of the individual, Frank's desire "to kill", "to punish" real and imagined foes "who had worked all their lives to deny climate change" hurts his soul (65-66). Even though Robinson repeatedly suggests that their encounter has a significant influence on the course of events,⁹³ the idea that Mary would be less effective if Frank had not kidnapped her seems a disservice to her temperamentally dogged character, and she maintains her preference for "carrot" over "stick" (291). This metaphor might also be applied to Robinson's general approach to fictionalised climate solutions, which valorises working together towards a positive common goal over divisive, unethical direct actions that harm people, animals, and places in the supposed service of later generations.

Drawing inspiration from environmental texts of the past

The authors' engagement with canonical literature evinces a "literary" quality that some critics, such as Kingsolver's, have found lacking in texts whose environmental themes are so prominent as to appear didactic (Leder 228). A conversation between Dellarobia and Ovid Byron, an entomologist from St. Thomas who temporarily relocates to Tennessee to investigate the butterfly phenomenon, about their respective names⁹⁴ underscores the ways in which Kingsolver pays homage to and builds on prior texts, a subtle rejoinder to critics who view her eco-fiction (or any) as conceived primarily as instruction for real-

⁹³ Because both Mary's and Frank's perspectives are focalised, Robinson shows the reader how often one thinks about the other in the context of their climate action choices.

⁹⁴ Dellarobia believes that she is "named after a wreath made out of nature junk", but Ovid tells her that Della Robbia was a Renaissance sculptor (105). Della Robbia was known for terracotta statuary in which sculpted scenes are encircled by wreath-like leaves and fruits – "nature junk", perhaps, but more beautiful and refined than the version with which Dellarobia is familiar.

world engagement with environmental issues. Much as Louise Erdrich and Tommy Orange retrieved moments of past activism, the novelists in this chapter find in canonical texts a genealogy of ecocriticism they can mobilise in the present. Ovid Byron's name is not merely an indication of his outsider status; it also signals Kingsolver's engagement with longstanding literary traditions. The association with two famous poets should not be presumed coincidental. Hailing from different eras, Ovid and Byron exemplify how writers have engaged with environmental themes from ancient times through the present. Like his contemporary Mary Shelley, Byron has been interpreted as writing eco-apocalypse. Jonathan Bate, reading Byron's 1816 poem "Darkness", argues that the poet "may be reclaimed as a prophet of ecocide" (435). Kate Rigby, evincing the ecocritical preoccupation with striking a balance between literary analysis and external impact, observes that ecocritical study of writers like Byron and Shelley "might assist us to *confront catastrophe*" (213).

Robinson and Ozeki also reference famous texts: Ozeki engages with Shelley's *Frankenstein*⁹⁵ (1818) and Robinson participates in a literary tradition begun by Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). James McKusick writes that approaching Shelley's work as "narratives of environmental apocalypse" elucidates how *Frankenstein* "foreshadows the nightmare potentiality of genetic engineering in our own time" (110). McKusick specifically mentions the "terminator" gene that so concerns Ozeki's *Seeds of Resistance*.⁹⁶ Reading *Frankenstein* as "eco-feminist", McKusick describes how Victor Frankenstein's "transgression of a mad (male) scientist into the traditionally female domain of generation and nurturance leads to the inadvertent creation of a violent, uncontrollable "new species"', which McKusick compares to scientific advancements "whose ultimate effects upon the terrestrial ecosystem are impossible to predict" (110). Ozeki's references to *Frankenstein*, which I discuss below, are apt considering the *Seeds*' fear of "monstrous" gene

⁹⁵ *Frankenstein*, with its "monstrous" central creature and parable of unintended consequences, is widely cited among ecocritics. James McKusick reads Shelley's novels, including *The Last Man* (1826) as "deeply concerned with the possible destruction of the Earth's capacity to sustain human life" (96).

⁹⁶ This technology, advanced by corporations like Bayer-Monsanto, is also known as "suicide seed". The terminator gene blocks propagation to protect the corporation's patent and force farmers to buy new seeds every year.

editing, the results of which (regarding human, agricultural, and ecological health) are not fully known. McKusick's analysis of Victor Frankenstein's "transgressions" into the supposedly female space of generation is reminiscent of the Seeds' discomfort with advancements they view as unnatural, even if they cannot quite explain why.

Apropos to *Flight Behavior*, the title and subject of Ovid's most famous epic poem, *Metamorphoses*, puts one in mind of butterflies, who undergo a process called complete metamorphosis in their four-stage life cycles. The great number of cross-species transformations recounted in *Metamorphoses* are suggestive of Alaimo's transcorporeality and the overlap and "intra-actions" between living matter (Barad 141). In an analysis of Ovid's version of the Erysichthon myth, in which the arrogant human attacks the goddess Demeter's sacred orchard and is punished with eternal hunger, Jill Da Silva asserts the relevance of ancient myth to ecocritical inquiry. Da Silva writes that "Allegory is interpreted myth and therefore can be regarded not merely as fiction but as an example to follow" (105), noting that Ovid's Erysichthon instructs readers or listeners to respect non-human nature and recognise their dependence on it. Da Silva's analysis of myth as partly an instructional tool for more ethical or constructive behaviour leans on the pedagogical aspect of literature – something that authors of eco-fiction are keen to approach with balance, lest, as Ozeki says, readers are turned off by being "told what to believe" (Meeks). By naming her scientist Ovid, Kingsolver evokes ecological myths that have long instructed readers to "avoid transgression" (Hopkinson 63) while signposting her narrative's roots in a long literary tradition that considers the agency and interconnectedness of nature and our (self-interested) obligation as humans to be thoughtful agents in the ecosystem.

Ovid and Byron are also associated with love poetry. Love is the central emotion explored in Dale Jamieson and Bonnie Nadzam's *Love in the Anthropocene* (2015). The authors begin the collection by asserting "how inseparable love is from nature in our actual experience – whether it involves those special places where we have fallen in love, activities we love to engage in, or even the love of nature itself ... where does nature end, and we begin?" (17) This final question implies that love of nature equates with love of self and other people.

Dellarobia's growing love and appreciation for nature are tied to her love for her son, Preston. She feels "panic as she watched her son love nature so expectantly, wondering if he might be racing toward a future like some complicated sand castle that was crumbling under the tide" (247). Dellarobia's awareness of how Preston's future may be negatively impacted by climate change means she must learn to "manage terrible truths" (247). Love can be painful, as Jamieson and Nadzam write, because what we love can be taken away; more reason to take care of the world in which our loved ones live.

Kingsolver explicitly connects love for nature with romantic or carnal love. A chapter in *Flight Behavior* titled "Mating Rituals" plays with the parallels between butterfly and human courtship, a subject the author also explores in *Prodigal Summer*. Kingsolver's characters often develop their "love" for nature in tandem with romantic subplots. In *Flight Behavior*, Dellarobia perceives Ovid both as an aspirational font of knowledge and as physically attractive. This human-centric subplot conjoins love for knowledge with specifically romantic love, both of which affect Dellarobia's sense of satisfaction and growth as a person. Ultimately, a stable romantic love remains inaccessible to Dellarobia (and *Prodigal Summer's* protagonist Deanna), while her connection to nature endures and grows. Even though Kingsolver continues to focus on the "human-interest story" (Clark, *Value* 110), Dellarobia leaves her traditional marriage and family structure behind to pursue education and become a more active carer for her environment. The traditional novel structure calls for something about Dellarobia's life or character to change over the plot's unfolding; that this change takes the form of interest in science and stewardship, rather than a new romance or recommitment to family, suggests, somewhat subversively, that ecological care can provide a worthy foundation of meaning for a person beyond merely human relationship networks.

The novel's traditional purview of human drama – and, specifically, interior psychological experiences – not only provokes reader interest but acts like a gateway to sharing the characters' (and Kingsolver's) other passions for nature, insects, and plants. Romantic passion and passion for knowledge and for the care of our environments intermingle. Returning to Ovid, the poet's myths combine the "wildness" and intra-actions of nature with human lust. Human recklessness –

which comes in various guises but constitutes its own form of “wildness” – in ancient myth facilitates cautionary tales, but such tales also underscore our existence as animals who are governed by biological impulses and responses that we do not fully control. Francesca Martelli analyses Ovid’s myths as depicting a notably complex understanding of nature and environment, one with great relevance to our age of ecological crisis. In some respects, Martelli writes, Ovid’s representation of wilderness accords with many modern narratives in which wilderness “is characterised above all as untouched by human hands”; the landscape as a site of repeat sexual violation and other violence also lends nature a “sinister quality”, even as it “nuances the common environmental position that identifies the human as nature’s perpetual aggressor, for in these stories, the victims are humans” (44). Nonetheless, some of the most obvious and intriguing facets of Ovid’s representation of nature are the entanglement of matter, the complex, deep, and embodied ways in which the transformed subjects of *Metamorphoses* come to identify with animal and plant species different from their own, and the epic poem’s foregrounding of “the consequences of human intervention in the environment, for both good and ill”, which in accordance with mythic interpretation provide “models” for the reader to relate to their own environment and other beings (35).

Attaching human emotions to the non-human world is often seen as anthropocentric, but affective ecocritics recognise the power and role our emotions play in our relations with non-human others (Bladow and Ladino 3), and how certain feelings and experiences make us more or less likely to adopt pro-environmental behaviours.⁹⁷ The suggestion is that we can simultaneously care deeply about human others and the non-human environment; that there are forms of love and stewardship, in both interpersonal and whole-world realms, that are analogous. As one strengthens so does the other. This is a pro-empathy argument – understanding that our care for the wider world can grow from our care for other people.

⁹⁷ Bladow and Ladino quote Heather Houser: “it is emotion that can carry us from the micro-scale of the individual to the macro-scale of institutions, nations, and the planet” (223).

Ozeki positions the strategic employment of ubiquitous literary history and storytelling proficiency as a potentially effective persuasive strategy for activists. This is most obvious through the Seeds of Resistance's protest art and performances, which reference classic literature that has penetrated mainstream consciousness. The performance art is conceived by the group's most strategic member. Pointedly nicknamed Geek, he suffers from the well-established environmentalist tension between action and despair. When Geek opines that it is "too late" to effect meaningful change, he checks himself, because "Despair is not a morally acceptable choice" (268). Still, he often succumbs to pessimism, telling Yumi, who urges patience, "*We don't have time*" to reverse climate change (408). Geek recognises the power of narrative and marketing, which can help him make the impact to which he feels it is only moral to aspire. He thinks the Seeds have found their "guru" in Lloyd, because he is "salt of the earth. The American farmer making a lonely stand, defending his seed against the hubris and rapacious greed of the new multinational life-sciences cartel" (106). Geek accurately recognises the power of tropes like the "salt of the earth" farmer who stands up to forces more powerful than himself.

Geek's narrative fluency and messaging strength is apparent in his literary references, as when he designs his GMO potato costume to invoke Frankenstein. The ubiquity of the Frankenstein motif ensures that, cued by the familiar and uncanny sight of jagged scars and a bolted neck derived from the novel's many visual media adaptations, Geek's captive audience at the supermarket will begin to associate genetically engineered food with horror, grotesquery, unintended consequences, and imminent destruction. Timothy Morton describes myths as "stories that exceed their authors in a profound way", noting that *Frankenstein* is among such stories that are "universal" in their impact and infiltration of the creative imagination (143). "You do not need to quote Ovid to talk about Arachne", Morton writes. "You do not need to cite Frankenstein to refer to "Frankenfoods", which is how many began to talk about genetically modified crops in the 1990s" ("*Frankenstein*" 143-144). Geek's visual and rhetorical references to *Frankenstein* rely on the story's profound popularity, wide dissemination, and penetration of the public consciousness. Transmitting information about GMOs through this storied

lens arguably makes the protest more memorable, legible, and persuasive than a dry recitation of facts.

Geek's use of his facility with storytelling to convey information in a way that prioritises persuasion over factual accuracy reads as a meta-commentary on eco-fiction. Anahita Rouyan is critical of the Seeds' explanations of gene editing, suggesting that through the Seeds and Lloyd, Ozeki critiques "the utopian representation of agriculture" (150). The other activists are influenced by Geek, and they tend to form their beliefs based on the aforementioned "ick factor", as well as general resistance to capitalism and social convention; one group member goes on to protest the World Trade Organization. This suggests, as have previous representations of activism in works ranging from Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) to T.C. Boyle's *When the Killing's Done* (2011) to Karen Tei Yamashita's *I-Hotel* (2010), that some activists are driven by an anti-establishment, anarchic spirit more so than specific ecological concerns or policy goals.

Critics have noted Robinson's participation in the utopian literary tradition, with Andrew Milner observing that his novels have "over time acquired an increasingly utopian character" (389). *The Ministry for the Future* is the latest of his long-form novels, some of which comprise multi-book series, to explore the building of more socially just and, not incidentally, ecologically healthy worlds. Like *Science in the Capital* and *New York 2140* (2017), *Ministry* painstakingly explores political, governmental, and scientific processes relating to environmental policy, showing the immense challenge but also the promise and possibility of climate change mitigation as well as its inextricability with social and economic justice. Where Robinson was praised for centring scientific detail and cooperative politics in *Science*, set in Washington, D.C., and *New York* but critiqued for the novels' U.S.-centrism,⁹⁸ *Ministry* is more global. The ministry is located in Zurich, but its employees and funding originate from countries all over the world. India is a major player in the global fight against climate change, ignoring wealthier countries' reticence to become the first nation to implement geoengineering at scale, because Indian government officials and citizens have been "radicalized" by worsening

⁹⁸ See "Whose Odds? The Absence of Climate Justice in American Climate Fiction Novels" by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson.

weather events so extreme as to constitute a “crime” perpetrated by higher-emission countries that refuse to act (23). The comprehensive, globe-spanning reach of *Ministry* suggests an evolution in Robinson’s narrative scale that addresses the truly global ramifications of the subject matter.

Robinson’s eco-novels demonstrate his consistent dedication to the depiction of real-world solutions, always through an inclusive process of collaboration between numerous stakeholders across a spectrum of power and authority. Such recurring themes are why Robinson’s work is often seen as utopian, and he himself identifies as a utopian science fiction writer, commenting that utopianism has developed from a “somewhat minor literary problem to a necessary survival strategy” (“Remarks on Utopia” 9). Adeline Johns-Putra has written that Robinson’s identification with the genre of sci-fi enhances his utopian vision. In his novels, Robinson sets out a version of what Darko Suvin calls a “novum”, a world of “strange newness” (4). Where the novum was more obviously new and strange in, for example, Robinson’s *Mars* trilogy, in which humans terraform and settle on the red planet, Johns-Putra writes that Robinson’s establishment of a functioning, forward-thinking Washington, D.C. is a closer-to-home version of the novum that “enables the imaginative construction of climate change in a way that is psychologically and ... politically and ideologically relevant” (“Ecocriticism” 754). There is a connection between what Johns-Putra describes as the “world-building impulse” of science fiction as a genre and the narrative strategies specific to cli-fi imaginings of what climate progress might look like (750). Robinson for his part has written that he thinks “of science as another name for the utopian way, or what [Raymond] Williams called the long revolution ... to me the idea of science as a utopian coming-into-being has seemed both true and useful, suggestive of both further stories and action in the world” (“Remarks” 4).

As most eco-fiction is dystopian or at least pessimistic about the future, and with the risks of climate change and environmental degradation well-established throughout this thesis, it might seem counterintuitive to even consider whether climate fiction can be utopian. But the authors in this chapter offer some resistance to the idea that environmental topics are self-evidently depressing, and that we are

inevitably heading to a worse future.⁹⁹ Although writers have always imagined “better” places and worlds, utopian literature formally begins with Thomas More’s 1516 *Utopia*, in which More outlined the putatively ideal society of a fictional island state. More’s choice of the word “utopia” – from the Greek for “no place”, but phonetically near-identical to “eutopia”, or “good place” – admits that while we can imagine a “perfect” world, no such place can truly exist.¹⁰⁰ A specifically environmentalist version of utopian literature might be seen to arrive with Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975), which depicts a society that is almost humorously free from conflict. Like More, Callenbach proffers some contentious ideas about what constitutes an ideal society, recalling Margaret Atwood’s observation that one person’s utopia might be another’s dystopia (*Writing with Intent* 95). But Callenbach’s explorations of the *details* of how a more ecologically sustainable and, not incidentally, harmonious society would function instituted a small sub-genre of utopian literature that centres on issues of the environment, a tradition in which Robinson participates. Callenbach characterised his fictional society not as a true utopia, but as a work-in-progress – a description reminiscent of Johns-Putra’s reading of *Science in the Capital*, in which she writes that Robinson’s readers “experience Utopia in and as progress” (756). Frederic Jameson writes, “utopia as a form is not the representation of radical alternatives; it is rather simply the imperative to imagine them” (416), supporting Johns-Putra’s framing. I find these approaches to literary utopias useful because they evade the categorical desire to explain away the concept’s innate contradictions and impossibilities, highlighting instead the value of imagining positive alternatives. Robinson’s attention to detail in how alternative imaginaries might come to fruition is one of the things that makes his cli-fi unique.

If we take the meaning of “utopia” as a work in progress, Ozeki and Kingsolver might be seen to participate in utopian fiction too, or what Caroline Edwards calls *literary utopianism*. Literary utopianism invites critics to “unearth ...

⁹⁹ In his *New Yorker* article about accepting climate change, Jonathan Franzen wrote that the future will be “undoubtedly worse than the present” (2019).

¹⁰⁰ Setting aside that More hailed from England, an island nation, there are some interesting spatial/environmental dimensions in More conceiving of utopia on an island – symbolically and geographically remote.

utopian potential” even in novels that do not obviously “depict utopian societies” but that “articulat[e] a political engagement capable of redeeming the past and yearning for a better future” (20). Although the world’s ills are not resolved by the end of Kingsolver’s and Ozeki’s stories, people understand more about their environments, relate to each other and to other species better, and often positively modify their behaviours. Robinson’s novels go a step further in detailing mostly bloodless wholesale revolutions – as Andrea Righi puts it, obliquely noting a paradox, “revolutionary change through institutional means” (67) – which result in sweeping societal changes across the globe. Robinson grounds his utopian possibilities in the premise that revolution is a “necessity” but that it must be “reconceptualized” to discourage violence, chaos, and failure, and that utopian thinkers must accept that significant changes are unlikely to occur over a short timeline (“Remarks” 3).

Edwards’ study of contemporary literary utopianism is organised around temporality. The “quiet utopianism” of “decelerated temporality” Edwards identifies (162) is evident in the ascension of hydroship travel in *The Ministry for the Future*, which replaces commercial airlines as the dominant mode of international travel. Robinson locates much of the peacefulness of this travel in its slowness, which the industrial world has hitherto been missing. Passages where Ministry director Mary travels by boat and airship are some of the first scenes to reveal the rewards of her labour, as a long novel filled with obstacles to sound climate policy finally give way to more utopian images of a calmer, less inflamed world. Mary’s voyage to Antarctica includes many views of or stops in beautiful places that are now protected as part of an initiative to conserve half the planet’s land mass. Mary sees the “high expanse of snow and trees, punctuated by clean granite domes” of Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite (489), followed by a “pink alpenglow suffusing the range of light” as she continues her travels (491). Mary is headed to Antarctica for a purpose, but her journey is free from the manufactured urgency of work trips from a bygone era. Occasionally thinking of work, she is “brought back” to the present by watching a group of wolverines eat and play. “They were in no hurry”, Mary thinks; “this was the place to be ... It was a blessing” (491). With his visions of eco-friendly air and ship travel, Robinson rehabilitates “slowness” as a positive thing. If

the “slow violence” of climate change has been difficult to faithfully represent, potentially slowing our response to the phenomenon as a result, Robinson hails a kind of slow recovery, and the slowing of our schedules required to achieve this.

I have noticed that critics – and, often, Robinson himself – conflate Robinson’s political socialism with utopianism. This is likely because the very idea of socialism relies on the belief that a better world is possible. Robinson’s utopian outcomes do not straightforwardly represent the successful implementation of socialism as the prevailing economic system and ideology, something that stymies anti-capitalist critics such as Derrick King. If, as King believes, “the ecological crisis is unresolvable within the capitalist mode of production” (197), and Robinson’s surprisingly happy conclusions do not thoroughly upend capitalism, the only way for King to view Robinson’s work as “utopian imaginary” is in its potential to inspire “the desire for a radical transformation of the social totality” (195). Francis Fukuyama has described Robinson’s novels as “ludicrous[ly]” optimistic (2021); Milner more measuredly notes that *New York 2140*’s plethora of happy endings for its characters and society represent a “specifically eutopian outcome from global climate crisis” (392). Robinson’s apparently excessive optimism may be evident in how often he depicts sweeping changes to the global financial system that pay social and environmental dividends. A summative chapter from the perspective of “the citizen”, one of the not-always-specified voices that make up *New York 2140*’s polyphonic narrative, is almost glib in its account of seemingly sudden, momentous change following the widespread nationalisation of banks and adoption of progressive tax structures: “Capital flight stopped, the law held, and nation-states everywhere felt even more empowered ... The neoliberal global order was thus overturned right in its own wheelhouse” (602). Something similar occurs at the end of *Ministry*, when an assembly of “central bankers” – “as close to the rulers of the world as existed”¹⁰¹ – resolve to “use their power to protect the biosphere and increase equity” (510). Robinson plays bankers-as-saviours as surprising and ironic but also writes that “the whole world was making them do it”, as the previous five hundred pages have depicted how the incentives and rationale have shifted in

¹⁰¹ This is a globalised, finance-centric update to Robinson’s previous description of the U.S. president as “about as close as anyone could get” to “world ruler” (*Sixty Days* 31).

favour of the bankers adopting pro-environmental practices (510). Robinson is also rosy about the power of non-violent civil disobedience: in *Ministry*, Hong Kong gains independence from China after “thirty straight years” of weekly protests (515). Cheery explanations such as “Solidarity – there’s no feeling like it” (515) seem to dramatically underplay the power of the Chinese state as the reader knows it. In these brief concluding pages, one can see how Robinson’s solutions and endings are indeed often characterised by tidy, cohesive, rapid success, but they follow hundreds of pages of painstakingly detailed negotiations and campaigns to effect change.

Even if his conclusions require some suspension of disbelief, Robinson maintains a narrative formula that insists that effective climate change mitigation can be achieved by cooperative means. Robinson’s propensity for dramatised abrupt climate change is analogous with his seemingly swift solutions, yet he is equally interested in practicality and compromise, which simultaneously embody a spirit of socialist cooperation while realistically operating within the parameters of our current world – that is, within capitalism. King notes that many critics have observed how “Robinson refuses the “pragmatism” of the present moment in favor of the open-endedness of utopia”, but I do not view pragmatism as mutually exclusive with utopia, nor do I think Robinson’s mode is better described as critical dystopia, as King suggests (202). The pragmatism of Robinson’s characters is precisely what allows them to make progress. Robinson’s version of utopia is one in which existing systems and institutions – including the oft-reviled financial system – do not disappear or assume an entirely unrecognisable form but are instead redirected and reshaped through non-violent cooperative initiatives to more equitably and sustainably serve far more of the world’s population, human or otherwise. This provides something of a roadmap to readers, as the climate solutions Robinson details can indeed make a difference if they are implemented in some of the ways his novels suggest. What makes Robinson’s novels utopian is their insistence that fantastical circumstances are not required to usher in a better world: that change *is* possible here.

Narrative form, polyvocality, and the politics of cooperation

Another way in which Kingsolver, Ozeki, and Robinson's novels complicate charges of didacticism is their employment of multiple perspectives, which advances a dialogic or multilogic aesthetic that echoes the characters' commitment to cooperation and the strategic transmission of ecological information. In this section, I will first discuss critical conceptions of "literariness", revisit the subject of how eco-novelists portray or generate empathy for living beings, and consider the intersection of environmental literature and poverty studies. The latter topic's relevance to social justice leads into this section's primary focus on polyvocality as a narrative strategy for advancing a progressive, cooperative eco-politics.

Kingsolver is one of the writers in this study whose works transcend any perceived distinction between "popular" and "literary": her books are popular in the sense that they are best-selling and well-liked by readers, and literary in the sense that they are well-crafted, concerned with "serious" themes such as poverty, and receive much critical attention. Although Kingsolver has received many literary prizes, Priscilla Leder notes that literary critics are often sceptical about her work, describing her characters' earnest "lectures" as "heavy-handed" (228). I have found that overt didacticism is a challenge in even the most prestigious and critically lauded eco-fiction, such as Richard Powers' Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Overstory* (2018), in which different characters repeat versions of the same talking points throughout the novel as though they represent only a single perspective. Many of Kingsolver's protagonists are scientists or naturalists who live in rural U.S. communities and regularly communicate with characters who have a low level of science education and are climate sceptics. The protagonists self-referentially expend effort communicating scientific information so that it might be compelling and interesting for their listeners (and, incidentally, Kingsolver's readers).

Regarding the challenges of scale in cli-fi, Timothy Clark has written that Kingsolver's "vivid locally realist" fiction "risks shrinking towards being only another human-interest story", even as it resists the evasion of responsibility posed by fantastical or global-scale treatments of the same issues (*Value* 110). Clark critiques what he views as Kingsolver's intertwining of Dellarobia's fate with that of the monarch butterflies and Kingsolver's "almost exclusive" focus on Dellarobia: "why is the trajectory of one, individual fictional life still felt by a reader to be so

much more powerful as a story than that of the natural history of insects, whose strange behaviour would still remain a harbinger of ecosystem collapse and extinction?" (*Ecocriticism on the Edge* 177-178) Clark observes that "what makes for people a credible or compelling story" may itself be "a problem for representations of the Anthropocene" (178); novel readers "are still so much more easily engaged and drawn in by the human drama ... than by the environmental one" (178).

These considerations, so commonly summoned in current ecocritical discourse, reveal how much my own analysis diverges from others in the environmental humanities space. Clark may be right to point out that Kingsolver "engage[s] a reader's interest in climate change in this individualizing way", but unlike Clark, I do not see this as a "pitfall" (177). I agree with his choice of the word "inevitable" to describe such accessions to narrative psychology but would not deploy the term in a negative or defeatist sense. I have written elsewhere that authors concerned about climate change often resist (futilely, I argue) readers' preference for the individual, as well as issues of anthropocentrism in narrative framing and perspective and anthropomorphism as a tool for relating to and caring about non-human life ("Biocentric Narrative Strategies"). Instead of this resistance, I suggest that acceptance of these inherent representational limitations would serve the authors' goals to inspire reader engagement and change. I would argue that *Flight Behavior* ends more ambiguously than many reviewers have indicated, with another potential climate catastrophe on the horizon that threatens the species in its wake. If Kingsolver does, to some extent, suggest a parallel between Dellarobia's life and that of the butterflies (both of whom face connected threats of climate change and whose stories conclude neither triumphantly nor tragically, but without tidy resolution), this choice underscores our similarities to other species, suggesting we have more in common with butterflies and other animals than we might realise. I would also note that Clark's concern about the "depressingly enclosed" human imagination, which can "be captivated only by immediate images of itself" (178), is challenged by the popularity of nature documentaries, which are often (visually, at least) human-free, even though the subjects are inevitably mediated through a human lens. The novel as a form presents different challenges

for a compelling depiction of non-human species than visual media. The latter still emphasises the human viewer's preference for the individual: we can empathise with the lone penguin attempting to bridge a gap in the ice much as we can a human single mother who is considering going back to school; we also like to see non-sentient creatures like flowers growing in time-lapse images, a strategy that overcomes temporal challenges to sustain interest and promote empathy. Although scholars problematise empathy, they have not often suggested alternatives to the lenses discussed here that hold potential for revitalising interspecies relations and care. Kingsolver has ventured that fiction's great power is its ability to foster empathy, to "bring the reader inside the mind of another person" – or, especially in the case of *Prodigal Summer*, inside the minds of other animals (Walsh). This aligns with Suzanne Keen's thesis that the novel is a unique mode through which to build empathy, which I have argued throughout this thesis remains critical for the development and continuation of environmental responsibility.

Kingsolver's formal choices promote identification with other creatures. To the extent that *Prodigal Summer* is "about humans", Leder writes, "it explores the process through which humans create contexts and assign meanings. Its characters participate in biological systems both within and outside of themselves; every choice makes both a new individual and a new world – for the chooser as well as the chosen – in ways that are not always predictable" (230). This approach emphasises that human choices impact other humans and non-humans in ways that we should take much more care to consider. *Prodigal Summer's* polyvocality accentuates these key themes. As Leder writes, *Prodigal Summer's* multi-perspectival narrative "underscores the ways in which individuals interact within a system, altering and influencing each other in myriad and sometimes unexpected ways ... The characters not only experience and interact with the living species that surround them, they also discuss the nature of that interaction, invoking scientific principles to elucidate it" (230). Kingsolver's recognition of humans as part of a larger system is reflected in the form of *Prodigal Summer*, in which no one perspective or voice is dominant and numerous non-human characters make their presence and influence known in various ways, such as the coyote who assiduously evades poachers and defends her offspring, or the snapping turtle who

has the power to ruin a grumpy old man's day – and prompt a reconsideration of his values.

The close third-person chapter about elderly farmer Garnett's encounter with the snapping turtle exhibits the sort of kinship-seeking that some ecocritics problematise. Kingsolver underscores how Garnett sees nature in human and specifically religious terms: the turtle who bites his foot is "a monster in its dark, humped shell, a slime-green creature that had sprung from some other part of God's mind, certainly, than most" (89). Yet he feels sympathy for it: "it did seem to Garnett that its dark little beady eyes were looking up at him fairly sheepishly. Poor thing ... to have to commit yourself so hard to one moment of poor judgment" (89). Garnett identifies with the turtle presumably because he is also stubborn and feels he must commit himself to "moment[s] of poor judgment", such as antagonistic relationships with neighbours predicated on religious and political differences. When his neighbour suggests killing the turtle to release its grip, Garnett seeks to avoid this outcome without compromising his tough, apparently nature-hating persona. "[T]here isn't any call to take out your grudges on this old fellow", he tells the neighbour (90); Garnett always disagrees with her, so his refusal plausibly looks more like his usual contrarianism than the result of a soft spot for animals. He would rather "transport fifteen pounds of turtle" up to his house than see the creature dead, but he positions this choice as a demonstration of his toughness and obstinacy to save face (90). Although Garnett's empathy for the turtle may be predicated on assessing likeness – he thinks he sees determination and a human (or ovine) "sheepish[ness]" in its gaze – the turtle's fate would not necessarily be more positively affected by Garnett developing a particularly capacious or biocentric empathy. It matters only that he develops empathy in the first place, regardless of the reasons, which affects his treatment of other living beings.

Kingsolver's folksy optimism may be one of the reasons her work is often critiqued, but her emphasis on constructive, respectful dialogue as a key tool for shifting attitudes is one of the things that sets her apart in the genre of eco-fiction. Garnett, for example, is lonely and embittered until he starts to open up to his neighbour's repeated attempts to connect with him regarding both environmental and personal matters. This requires a period of initially uncomfortable back-and-

forth between the two that slowly develops into a respectful and affectionate relationship despite their differences. Especially critical to Kingsolver's vision of environmental stewardship is what Leder calls "mutually educational dialogue, which "leads characters to an understanding of themselves and of their relationship with the natural world" (237). Kingsolver's protagonists are unlike the activists in *The Overstory*, who browbeat and verbally dominate their ideological foes with an apparently unassailable group logic that must be didactically repeated throughout the text but never substantially challenged or complicated by those with alternative viewpoints. Instead of the entomologist Lusa lecturing her Christian relatives for their resistance to science education, or the park ranger Deanna effortlessly convincing the hunter Eddie of the error of his ways, each conversational pairing in *Prodigal Summer* is an opportunity for both parties to share their knowledge and experience and learn from one another. Lusa, for example, a trained scientist, thought she had little to learn from her late husband, a farmer. When he told her they had to "*persuade*" the honeysuckle on the side of their garage to take "*two steps back every day*" lest it "*move in and take you over*", she flippantly replied, "*Take over what? The world will not end if you let the honeysuckle have the side of your barn*" (360). Lusa is taking something of a biocentric position here, but realistically, she does not want her home to be consumed by wildlife, as her husband warned it would without proper stewardship. Lusa reflects that her husband's "instincts" – really, experience – were "right; his eye had known things he'd never been trained to speak of ... She crossed her arms against a shiver of anguish and asked him now to forgive a city person's audacity" (360). The characters' conversations are mutually beneficial for themselves and for the world around them as they grow from learned and shared experiences, which develop into something richer and more complex than one individual alone could construct.

Much of Kingsolver's oeuvre situates humans as firmly enmeshed in the oft-mentioned "web" of life, not separate from other species.¹⁰² In *Prodigal Summer*, the narrator often compares human characters to other animals and shows their movements through the same spaces. The novel opens by following an initially

¹⁰² Lawrence Buell describes the web as a "master metaphor" in environmental literature, going back to Darwin (*Environmental Imagination* 282).

unnamed female as she walks through the forest: “Her body moved with the frankness that comes from solitary habits. But solitude is only a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot; every choice is a world made new for the chosen. All secrets are witnessed” (1). We soon learn that the subject of this passage is Deanna, a (human) park ranger who leads a solitary life in the Appalachian Mountains, who is being watched by a hunter named Eddie who soon makes her acquaintance. This opening paragraph is mirrored by a passage at the end of the book that also describes a female moving through the same woods, “inhaling the faint scent of honeysuckle” and running “in a gait too fast for companionship” (441). But this time, the subject is a mother coyote, whose traces have been mentioned throughout the novel but who has thus far eluded poachers and other predators. Just as the presumed-solitary Deanna was watched in the novel’s beginning, the coyote “might have [been] watched for a long time” by Eddie, but his passivity suggests that Deanna’s defence of animals, especially endangered ones, throughout the novel has affected him (444). The novel concludes with a paragraph nearly identical to the first: “Solitude is a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life 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” (444). Initially obscuring the identity of each passage’s subject allows the reader to develop identification without knowing the subject’s species. Kingsolver’s shifting perspectives cultivate a sense of empathy with or investment in different individuals and systems, and, as Leder writes, shine a light on interactions and interdependence.

One can see the sort of parallelism Clark critiques at work here, as Kingsolver subverts reader expectations by replacing Deanna with the coyote as the final chapter’s subject, treating the coyote as an equally agentic individual. When read through the lens of Clark’s critique, this can have the effect of suggesting that a coyote’s liberty or “rights” are just as important as a human’s, problematically using humans as a benchmark. However, I view this type of narrative anthropocentrism not as irredeemably problematic but as emotionally resonant and mobilising. Amidst the passage’s echoes of earlier human

interactions, we see the outcome of Deanna and Eddie's conversational wrangling about animals and nature throughout the novel. As far as the reader can tell, Eddie does not carry out his long-held goal of killing the coyote, a keystone species, perhaps because he has been moved by Deanna's worldview, which strives to limit anthropocentrism and prioritise biodiversity, for the good of all species. Although Deanna's pro-animal views might be seen to prevail in the end, Kingsolver also hints that Eddie's views have been considered and assimilated in some way, as the closing paragraph mentions "the web pulling mate to mate and predator to prey". Kingsolver does not reject the concept of a human-dominated food chain. Her characters sometimes grapple with the implications of their preference for animals who do not threaten them (Deanna is partial to birds) and revulsion towards animals that do (copperheads, who also threaten the cherished birds). But Kingsolver draws distinctions between "natural" responses to threats from other species, such as pre-emptively killing a venomous snake,¹⁰³ and the killing of endangered species for sport, which impoverishes the world we are a part of for momentary human satisfaction. *Prodigal Summer* and *Flight Behavior* are just two of Kingsolver's works that demonstrate the conviction that respectful, open-minded, two-way communication about environmental issues is critical for changing behaviours that intensify climate change and other problems, showing in the novels' denouements how these conversations affect the participants, their choices, and all those who would be affected by their choices.

Kingsolver, who has lived most of her life in Southern Appalachia, is also cognisant of the socioeconomic dimensions of human suffering from climate change. Her personal connection to the biodiverse and economically depressed region seems to lend her sympathy and insight when writing characters who are perceived as ignorant obstructionists by more "traditional" activists. One of the foundational beliefs underlying *Prodigal Summer* and *Flight Behavior* is that conflicting worldviews must be met with openness and a sincere interest in dialogue if one's goal is environmental preservation. By giving voice to multiple Appalachian characters in one novel, Kingsolver counteracts the erasure or

¹⁰³ Deanna would likely agree with Tanya Tagaq's comment: "there is danger in mourning for those who would not mourn for you in return" (61).

marginalisation of local stakeholders in novels such as Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, without suggesting there is a monolithic Appalachian viewpoint. The narrative prominence of non-human characters, such as coyotes in *Prodigal Summer* and butterflies in *Flight Behavior*, also makes space for considering the interests of and ecological impacts on non-human species.

Kingsolver's choice of point-of-view characters aids her deconstruction of upper-class environmentalism. When the traveling activist Mr. Akins offers Dellarobia tips to reduce her carbon footprint, she forcefully delineates all the ways her poverty ensures her footprint is smaller than his. Dellarobia feels the "condescension of outsiders" even from Ovid, whom she idolises and wishes to emulate (395). She comes to recognise that she herself has not been long informed on many issues that are now important to her, and struggles to summon "the remotest sympathy for any of the different fools she had been. As opposed to the fool she was probably being now. People hang on for dear life to that one, she thought: the fool they are right now" (304). It is typical to think that at any given moment, we are the most informed we have ever been, and thus have the answers *now*. The sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel writes that "society teaches us what to pay attention to and what to ignore" (47). The "social organization of denial" conditions individuals to avoid changing their minds even when faced with contradictory information. As Kari Norgaard notes, challenges to our beliefs create cognitive dissonance, an "uncomfortable" condition that most individuals wish to resolve as quickly as possible, either by ignoring the discomfiting information altogether or denying responsibility for it (68). Dellarobia's realisation that all people learn and change to some degree as life goes on – and that receiving information that conflicts with our current convictions does not usually result in immediate change – underscores Kingsolver's message: that we must be patient, understanding, and open-minded towards those we disagree with if we can ever hope to find common ground on the most important issues of our time. The necessity of being open to different perspectives is formally supported by the polyphonic narrative structures deployed by Kingsolver, Ozeki, and Robinson. Such narratives, if carefully written, alleviate the tendency of activists (and all people) to depersonalise their ideological opponents, because multiple perspectives are represented or considered. The

novels' heavy reliance on dialogue underscores what Kingsolver has described as the possibility "to begin a conversation across some of these divides" (Lichtman).

Political polarisation in the U.S. has seemingly only intensified since *Flight Behavior's* publication. Kingsolver explores polarisation at a local and issue-specific level, which is extrapolated to the national problem of "us" versus "them" thinking (171) and the pressures of social conformity, particularly in small or insulated communities. Dellarobia observes that people she is ostensibly politically affiliated with feel insulted if she "wander[s] out of the box" on only one issue, like the environment (304). Kingsolver employs colloquial dialogue ("flipping the bird") to convey how mere disagreement or scepticism about a single issue can be taken as a personal offense – particularly if one is viewed as stepping out of line with their "home team", even more so than if one is thought to belong to a different "team" altogether. The key to bridging such divides is, to Kingsolver, respectful conversation that accommodates difference. Openness must be mutual; otherwise, "There were two worlds here, behaving as if their own was all that mattered. With such reluctance to converse, one with the other. Practically without a common language" (152). Whatever direction polarising social mistrust comes from, Kingsolver identifies it as a significant obstacle to mitigating issues like climate change. Kingsolver suggests that if we can have respectful conversations with people we apparently disagree with, nature can be transformed from a specifically "greenie" concern to everyone's concern. Enhancing one's ability to identify with other-living nature, Kingsolver suggests, puts one on a path to awe and appreciation, which overcomes fear. Dellarobia's "life was unfolding into something larger by the day ... She was involved in a way, with those scientists" (157). Her immersion in nature and exposure to science education gives Dellarobia the purpose she lacked before. She also unexpectedly becomes more defensive and accepting of the people in her community whom she has heretofore resented; the wider lens of environmentalism helps her see the limitations of focusing just on her "own little life" (157). Kingsolver arguably extends this widening lens through formal strategies in *Prodigal Summer* and her other ecologically concerned novels such as *Unsheltered* (2018), which weave together the stories of multiple interconnected narrators.

Debra Rosenthal has written about the role of poverty in Kingsolver's environmental writing, which affects her portrayal of more visible, privileged forms of activism. While ecocritics emphasise the unequal distribution of climate change effects on the global poor, few authors of environmental literature make poverty a central focus. Rosenthal writes that reading from an "ecopoverty perspective shifts readers' attention from one focused exclusively on the environment to one on eco-social justice" (275) – something that is lacking in texts like Powers' *The Overstory* but is central to the work of Kingsolver and Louise Erdrich. Although many eco-novels with more privileged protagonists implicitly critique the sphere of upper-class, green-washing, or virtue-signalling environmentalism, such as Franzen's *Freedom*, Kingsolver devotes far more space and perspectival prominence to poor and working-class activists, whereas Franzen's local, grass-roots activists are peripheral, sketchily drawn figures who narratively function as obstacles to the grand vision of a billionaire and his minions, who are granted far more narrative prominence. Kingsolver shifts focus from scheming pseudo-environmentalists to the people most directly impacted by climate policy and jobs such as mining and forestry. As Rosenthal notes, this allows her to explore some of the tensions faced by these stakeholders, who "disproportionately bear the impact of environmental degradation" but who simultaneously "cannot sacrifice immediate survival needs for far-off gain" (278). This creates a scenario whereby rural, impoverished people "become complicit in the destruction of their own natural resources" – much as Dellarobia's relations seek short-term gains from the logging of their old-growth woods without considering the long-term environmental and economic consequences (278). Whereas in *Freedom* the reader was shown this conflict from the perspective of comfortably middle-class Walter Berglund, who views the Appalachian locals who will not accede to his plans as "stupid" (314), in *Flight Behavior* and other Kingsolver novels the conflict is told from the perspective of the locals, who enumerate the various contradictory pressures leading them to compromise their own habitats. Christmas shopping at the dollar store, Dellarobia feels "despair" sorting through "tinselly junk" that she fears will "fall apart before you got it home"; she does not want to buy toys made from "cheap plastic", but she cannot afford better and will not disappoint her children (159). The scene hints at

the emotional pain underlying her economic need to make compromises in virtually every area of her life.

Kingsolver's orientation towards multi-perspectival structures, sharing scientific information via fiction, and dramatising collaborative, constructive solutions is shared by Robinson, who has long shown an interest in environmental issues but has increasingly centred the subject in fiction and non-fiction over the last two decades. Like the others, Robinson's thematic and explicitly socialist emphasis on communal perspective is formally reinforced by the polyvocal format of his recent cli-fi novels, including the *Science in the Capital* trilogy, *New York 2140*, and *The Ministry for the Future*.¹⁰⁴ In these works, each chapter is told from the perspective of a different character or collective.

Robinson's novels revolve around different manifestations of what he has called "abrupt climate change": fictional, not-strictly-scientific depictions of sudden, extreme climate events that lend the drama, excitement, and spectacle that Rob Nixon observes is often lacking in more accurate depictions of climate change. These range from sudden deep freezes and catastrophic floods in *Science in the Capital* to permanent flooding in *New York 2140* that turns the city into something like a futuristic Venice. Although Robinson continues to deploy "abrupt climate change" as a narratively useful, if not entirely probable, inciting incident for his cli-fi narratives, the growing severity of these fictional incidents is one of the indications of how his work has evolved over the past twenty years, as he attempts to mirror increasing concerns about climate change's threat level. Although the narration tells us that the abrupt climate change events of *Science* and *New York* are nominally unprecedented and life-threatening, the events noticeably provide his characters more with an opportunity for adventure and play than pure survival or trauma. For example, *Science*'s Frank experiences Washington, D.C.'s deep freeze as an opportunity to snowshoe and ice climb. He appreciates scenes of

¹⁰⁴ The titular ministry derives from an idea similar to the "seventh generation" principle to take the well-being of future generations, "whose rights ... are as valid as our own" (16), into consideration when making decisions today. While the seventh generation principle's applications are typically positive both for current and future generations, the Ministry's ostensible purpose to protect future generations of humans (and other species) generates some controversy, as members of the ministry participating in a shadow organisation endanger or kill people with the goal of reducing greater casualties in the future.

people playing on the frozen Potomac River, “cheerful to the point of euphoria” (*Fifty Degrees* 422) despite the cold; meanwhile, the characters of *New York* enjoy high-speed boating adventures on the aqueous “streets” of the city. By contrast, *Ministry*’s inciting incident, a wet bulb heat wave that kills tens of millions of people in India, is characterised by nothing so much as abject misery.¹⁰⁵ In this opening sequence, Robinson abandons the playful, optimistic attitude that pervades his earlier depictions of climate change, showing how the situation dramatically worsens over hours and days and evincing the scale of the disaster by populating a scene with thousands of ailing bodies, which humanises the accompanying description of scientific processes that is also a hallmark of his style. Those experiencing the heat wave hasten to bodies of water, but the water is hotter than body temperature: “if all the sun’s energy that hit Earth were captured by it rather than some bouncing away, temperatures would rise until the seas boiled” (11). The hypothetical (“if”) scientific language is less moving than Robinson’s subsequent descriptions of how the water actually feels to the people immersed in it: they feel as if they are boiling alive. By contrasting scientific theory that was heretofore mostly untested – scientists speculating what would *theoretically* happen if the sun’s energy was fully captured by Earth – with descriptive experiences of humans suffering in unprecedentedly hot and humid temperatures, Robinson captures the sense of climate change worsening, creating scenarios that had previously only been imagined or speculated about. Because Robinson lays expository groundwork regarding the city population, the tribulations that its inhabitants faced even before this catastrophe, and the knowledge that everyone in the city has fled outdoors following the loss of power, the reader is more easily able to grasp the scale when the narrator observes that “Everyone was dead”, apparently counting the sole survivor among this number, who physically survives as a shell of his former self (12). This shocking passage, illustrating the profoundly violent and potentially wide-scale effects of unusual climate events, is immediately succeeded

¹⁰⁵ The “great Indian heat wave” of the novel is noticeably more realistic than Robinson’s previous depictions of climate disaster, although its death toll is extreme (23). Scientists estimate that severe humid-heat incidents have more than doubled in frequency over the last forty years and will continue to increase over the next half-century, to the point where wet bulb temperatures that cannot be survived by humans will potentially become expected in some tropical regions (Raymond et al).

by a dry chapter discussing the impotence of the Paris Agreement and the United Nations Climate Change Conferences (COP), in which climate goals are agreed between nations and then never achieved. Such abrupt transitions serve as indictments of the failure to mount a global response to catastrophic climate change.

The surviving aid worker Frank's transformation is indicated by his selective mutism: "he never said a thing. His eyes were just slits, and so red. He looked completely mad. Like a different being entirely" (22). Frank's loss of speech in this passage is significant in the context of Robinson's propensity for dialogue and polyphonic narratives. Unlike the other characters in *Ministry*, *New York 2140*, and *Science in the Capital*, who are constantly speaking, interacting, and negotiating with one another, Frank's subsequent passages evince total isolation. His lack of normal everyday contact with other people fosters rage and grievance; he begins to view an increasing number of people as "climate criminals" (86) and finds severe fault with lifelong public servants like Mary, the director of the Ministry for the Future. Instead of finding common ground with other climate crisis survivors, refugees, and activists, his early post-trauma years are spent in his own head, developing ever more detached and destructive ideas and schemes predicated on "vengeance" (66). He is dialogically opposite the Buddhist climate refugees from Robinson's *Science in the Capital* trilogy, who share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences widely with constructive results.

Oddly, and perhaps not incidentally, three protagonists in *Science*, *New York*, and *Ministry* are named Frank or Franklin. They are a National Science Foundation scientist, hedge fund manager, and aid worker-turned-eco-terrorist, respectively. Despite their disparate careers, the coincidence of their names implies that they are iterations of the same hero or anti-hero, whose trajectories are affected by their differing experiences with climate change. For example, the Frank in *Ministry* survives a more traumatising climate catastrophe than the others, with fatalities in the millions, becoming radicalised in the process. The recurrence of activist Franks, and the collective groups or movements they belong to, illustrates how Robinson develops and adapts his engagement with environmental themes, imagining different climate change scenarios and their relationships to social and

political structures, while suggesting that the most effective tactics for approaching all manner of environmental problems rest on collaboration, both at a grassroots and institutional level. (Robinson may also be pushing honest confrontation with reality – “frankness” – as the self-evident antidote to denial.) *Science* Frank and *New York* Franklin are both deeply involved in collaborative networks and contribute their personal skills to strengthen the impact of the group. In his thornier entanglements with activist strategy and efficacy in *Ministry*, Robinson does not resolve the question of Frank’s true impact. But it is noticeable that he is the least collaborative of all the fictional Franks and appears to be the least impactful, as well as the loneliest, unable to regain a sense of himself as a whole person. His violent misanthropy, though understandable in the context of his experiences, forecloses the enriching, results-driven collaborative possibilities enjoyed by the other Frank/lins. Even though Robinson provocatively leaves open the question of the role more confrontational forms of activism play in alleviating our current crisis, *Ministry* ends where the other novels do: with a vindication of the most dogged, collaborative, patient, and constructive movement towards a solution. Because happiness, fairness, and fulfilment are crucial to Robinson’s optimistic political vision, it is worth noting that those characters who take the “legitimate” routes to climate change mitigation are more personally fulfilled and satisfied than those who try to achieve the same aims through illicit measures.

I want to restate the importance of polyvocality as a narrative strategy in this chapter’s texts, which I would argue is imbricated both with Robinson’s oft-discussed socialism and his propensity for depicting cooperative pragmatism. I would suggest that Robinson prefers his oft-used multi-perspectival narrative technique for two reasons. Firstly, the inclusion of multiple perspectives injects drama and human interest to texts that are otherwise dominated by hard science and diplomacy, which risks boring or overwhelming the reader with abstract information. Secondly, and I think more significantly, the use of multiple perspectives functions as a narrative expression of Robinson’s socialist commitments (more narrowly) and to the cause of communal dialogue and solidarity (more broadly). The multi-perspectival narrative strategy, particularly the passages that use a collective, “we” voice, advance his political agenda by

evinced a spirit of collaboration and cooperation, which are necessary for the successful practice of science, climate change mitigation, and societal revolution. Robinson's perspectives do not stop at individuals, whose point-of-view chapters represent a variety of viewpoints and priorities (although they tend to unite on core principles). There are also chapters told from the point of view of nameless collectives, whole city populations – who are often, more specifically, the voice of the disenfranchised masses – or, in *Ministry*, elements, concepts, and scientific theories. For example, one chapter is told from the perspective of a photon (236). Another “what am I?” chapter, reminiscent of childhood games, is about code, which hints at Robinson's hopeful approach to technology: “if you want justice, I will help you find it. I am blockchain. I am encryption. I am code. Now put me to use” (177). Although Robinson expresses some confidence here in decentralised currency, his characters more often use established tools of capitalism and the global banking system to achieve ostensibly socialist goals. The characters in *New York 2140*, for example, invest gold (literally the result of an underwater treasure hunt) to reverse the fortunes of impoverished orphans and acquire collective ownership of their besieged apartment building; they propagate distributed wealth with a side of environmental justice, but through Wall Street mechanisms. This is an example of where Robinson gets his reputation for unrealistic optimism: “the key weakness” of *New York*, Milner writes, “is that all this happiness is far too easily bought, most especially at the political level” (393).

Ministry maintains Robinson's characteristically rosy outcomes – supported by sheer length and plot detail, the granularity and repetition of which reminds readers of the gruelling nature of science and societal progress – and the formal strategies that so neatly encapsulate Robinson's key themes. Polyvocal chapters written from the perspective of a group of Antarctic climate scientists offer a risky hook through which Robinson endeavours to maintain the reader's interest in a volley of hard science. Robinson imbues the Arctic scientists' “voice” with stick-to-itiveness, humour, and *esprit de corps*. These qualities allow them to keep dreaming up and testing new ideas, even as they endure one failure after another – which is itself the nature of scientific work. The passages deploy a repetitious style: “So, we deployed the equipment to our first borehole site and got to work ...

So we circled the wagons and got to work ... So, the ice borers were still as simple as showerheads” (262), which demonstrates the patience and diligence required to achieve progress. The ennui of failure is complemented (or, for the reader’s interest, alleviated) by physical tribulations; the scientists remind each other not to “get to the point where if you flick your cold ear it breaks off”, but they accept that “cold” is “just the way it is” (262). “Humans evolved in ice ages”, they tell themselves. “Just deal” (262).

Through these passages, which turn science into adventure and scientists into heroes, Robinson effectively conveys the interminable nature of scientific experiments – many of which start with promise but ultimately fail in their task – without losing the audience to boredom or frustration, partly through the storytelling device of these chapters, in which the chorus of scientists is characterised by dogged ingenuity and stamina. If the scientific chorus did not present a charming, united front, the in-depth discussions of hypotheses and frustrated experiments could present an overwhelming problem of unsustainable interest for the reader. Switching back to focused main character chapters in between these Arctic excursions and other collective passages, in which one individual’s trials and tribulations are followed as is traditional for the novel form, gives the readers a break both from the collective form and from the details of science.

Conclusion: writing as activism

The commonalities between the texts in chapters four and five are suggestive of a solution-oriented or optimistic subgenre of eco-novels. The authors in Chapter Four draw on real historical events, using fact to combat historical revisionism or erasure as well as climate change denial. For example, Louise Erdrich’s retelling of the Turtle Mountain Chippewas’ successful campaign against termination is a positive, fact-based, historical counterpoint to the future-oriented pessimism infusing many eco-novels. The authors in this chapter also rely on fact, seeding it throughout the narrative in ways that at times risks didacticism, and build on a tradition of formally diverse environmental literature spanning two millennia. The “human-interest” aspect of the texts, while critiqued by authors such as Clark, may be vital to the authors’ extratextual goals of supplying readers with up-to-date information about

environmental issues, because it keeps them invested in the novels' plots.¹⁰⁶ My discussion of socio-religious issues, literary history, and polyvocality in this chapter's novels should provide some indication of their complexity.

Additionally, the authors in this chapter provide perhaps the most obvious examples so far of how writing itself might be construed as an activist undertaking, as all three have publicly discussed their desire to work through concerns about climate change and environment and imagine alternative possibilities through their writing. Allison Carruth discusses Ozeki's work through a lens of writing-as-activism, concluding that in interviews, speeches, and non-fiction writing, Ozeki shows her commitment to promoting sustainable agriculture and locavorism – both of which are espoused by Lloyd and the Seeds of Resistance in *All Over Creation*. Carruth identifies a “politics of form” in *All Over Creation* that vilifies corporate globalisation and promotes grassroots activism in response, as it reveals how even “local food cultures are always hyperconnected – plugged into global networks through neoliberal trade and mass media but equally through alternative markets and oppositional uses of information” (122). Ozeki carries on this theme from her earlier novel *My Year of Meats* (1998), which centres on an international marketing campaign to convince Japanese consumers to buy more imported American meat. Both novels demonstrate Ozeki's concern, shared by Kingsolver, about pesticides and genetically engineered food crops. Characters in both *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation* experience miscarriages, cancer, and fertility problems that they suspect may be connected to pesticide use or exposure, but small family farmers feel financial pressure from multinational corporations such as Ozeki's aptly named “Cynaco” (evoking both cynicism and cyanide), and many consumers have few choices about what to buy and eat. Ozeki enumerates these pressures and incentives in both novels. Using a euphemistic farming term (“inputs”) that contextually refers to pesticides or other agricultural resources designed to increase yield and uniformity, one character observes, “Banks don't lend money to farmers who don't use inputs. Not sound farming practice” (*All Over Creation* 77).

¹⁰⁶ As noted in the introduction, Kingsolver, Ozeki, and Robinson have all spoken and written about how their fiction addresses their personal concern for environmental issues (see interviews with Meeks, Snibbe, and Walsh).

The farmers feel trapped by predatory relationships with agribusiness conglomerates; consumers in one part of the world are bombarded with marketing urging them to buy food products shipped from halfway around the world whose quality is in question; the consumers lack “knowledge and consent” as they are sold products that are not disclosed as containing GMOs, because governments generally do not require GMOs to be labelled (93). Although Robinson touts some (optimistically rendered) forms of global coordination as the type of large-scale solution required for climate and social issues, Ozeki identifies serious problems with globalisation as it relates to the internationalisation of food systems and the pressures of the global financial systems on how people farm and eat.

There is, Carruth writes, “an unresolved tension between sentiment and information” in Ozeki’s novels. *My Year of Meats*, for example, “both provokes readers to feel deeply and arms them with facts in order to demystify the impersonal structures of later capitalism in general and meat capitalism in particular” (128). The tension between “sentiment and information” is present in every book in this chapter, as it is in eco-fiction more broadly, and the authors’ comments on the boundaries between didacticism and creativity reveal a certain porousness characteristic of the genre. Kingsolver writes that *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* “is not a how-to book aimed at getting you cranking out your own food”, yet the book is overflowing with concrete suggestions for how one might do just that, among other pro-environmental endeavours (10). Ozeki has said in interviews that novels “should not be a Trojan horse” for authors’ opinions, warning that readers “are very sensitive to didacticism and pedagogy” (Meeks); this comment is reminiscent of Margaret Atwood’s claim that readers are likely to “sniff out” and then “rebel” against political agendas in novels (*Writing with Intent* 128). Yet an author’s personal beliefs will inevitably make their way into if not wholly shape a narrative. Ozeki claims she does not write fiction to “tell readers what I think about genetic engineering or factory farming or convince them to agree”, but she acknowledges the thin line between an author’s interests or opinions and “screed or propaganda”. Ozeki describes her novel-writing process as “exploring a question” rather than “trying to prove [a conclusion] or “teach” it”. The intermediality of *My Year of Meats*, in which the protagonist films a documentary series intended

to promote American meat to Japanese consumers that evolves into a factory-farming exposé, serves as a strategy to work through some of Ozeki's real-life concerns in a way that feels organic and that adds a layer of complexity to the narrative. With this framing, the narrator learns facts about the farming industry along with the reader; the knowledge she gains drives her character arc while satisfying Ozeki's stated intent to work through "something that worries or frightens me" (Meeks). *My Year of Meats* is also polyphonic, following the concurrent experiences of the American documentary filmmaker and a Japanese housewife, whose lives intersect. The form clearly speaks to Ozeki's interest in how everything is globalised, including food.

The novels in this chapter are grounded in their authors' interest in highlighting and resolving environmental issues, which they approach in notably optimistic, practical, and empowering ways. Kingsolver's and Ozeki's portrayals of religion and environmentalism differ from earlier chapters in the way they attempt to pragmatically bridge or reconcile contemporary Christian attitudes towards climate change with pro-environmental, pro-science goals. Like the authors in Chapter Four, this chapter's authors endeavour to incorporate fact (in this case scientific rather than historical) into a fictional narrative in an accurate but exciting way that challenges climate change denial. The authors' engagements with a proto-environmental literary canon show how nature has long been a serious literary concern with ramifications for reader attitudes and engagement. Most significantly, the authors' depiction of positive, solution-oriented attempts to mitigate environmental damage show that eco-novels can be read as utopian. In these novels, both large entities like governments, via the funding of science and diplomacy, and individuals, via constructive, respectful dialogue and the sharing of different perspectives, can get involved in positively affecting environmental protections. This perspective is formally supported by the texts' polyvocality. The optimism underwriting the novels in this chapter spurs the reader to think that it may not be too late to do something positive for our world, suggesting solutions that not only contribute to a compelling narrative but may also empower the reader beyond the page.

Conclusion

In the U.S. state of California, where I live, climate change has transformed daily life. Although by 2018 it seemed clear enough just how catastrophic and extensive wildfire season had become, no one I know was emotionally prepared for the Camp Fire, which levelled the town of Paradise a few miles from where I grew up in Chico, Northern California. The fire that began that morning following a power transmission malfunction consumed the equivalent of a football field every second. Usually, evacuation procedures and practice enable people to escape the fires that have become an expected occurrence for six months of the year, but there is only one road in and out of Paradise, and the pace of the fire was unprecedented. Eighty-five people burned to death in their cars and beds. Others got out of their vehicles and ran as the soles of their shoes melted. Ninety-five percent of the town's structures burned to the ground; innumerable animals perished. In a matter of hours, tens of thousands of residents became climate refugees. On that November day the sky turned from sunny blue to an apocalyptic black; ash blanketed the ground like snow. Noontime was indistinguishable from night.

This is only the most extreme, high-casualty climate-related event to happen in this area to date. We can now expect multiple major fires each year; tolerating smoke and sharing evacuation plans have become a feature of neighbourly chats about the weather. The creeks of my childhood, which kept us all cool, have dried up, while hundred-plus degree Fahrenheit weather persists well into autumn. The depredations of drought on the area's agriculture worsen each year, with no end in sight. When we are blessed with winter storms, ruined topsoil is transformed into another lethal threat.

This is just one ecosystem among countless others in the wider world, all facing their own climate changes. In the rest of the country, storms increase in severity and number. A south-eastern governor called a recent hurricane the "500-year" storm, which struck me as a laughable obfuscation of just how regular these devastating occurrences have become. Beyond this nation, famous for its rapaciousness, are other places with their own floods, fires, cyclones, hurricanes, erosion, sea rise, and pollution. Many parts of the world face environmental catastrophes they have no history of and for which they are ill-prepared. Wealthier

countries like the U.S. and Canada have the means but seemingly not the motivation to alter their infrastructure.

Perhaps my perception that my experience in life has been increasingly, indisputably affected by climate change explains why I find the topic urgently interesting. My personal belief in the imaginative opportunities and power of literature led to an interest in combining my work in managing California wildlands with a literary research project. I noticed trends in the way environmentalism is depicted in contemporary literature and wondered if delineating these could help me understand what sort of artistic and creative opportunities and obstacles exist in the realm of climate change mitigation. In setting out this project I kept returning to these questions:

- How is the environmental activist portrayed in contemporary U.S. and Canadian literature? What are their common traits? What do these representations say about attitudes towards climate and environment in the geographic, cultural, and intellectual spaces in which these texts are produced?
- What is the role of the novel in addressing the climate crisis? Can novelists effectively employ their mode of artistry for the purposes of eliciting change and impactfully representing issues of environmental import?

I think scholars like Timothy Clark and Rob Nixon are right to locate the challenge of climate change representation in its temporality and scale and to observe that authors of climate fiction are drawn to the “unprecedented” event, the sensation, the spectacle; testifying to the less spectacular, long-running, outcome-unknown aspects of climate change is, for the novelist and for all of us, a taller order. I also find Amitav Ghosh’s delineations of the challenges faced by the novelist regarding climate change compelling and cogent. I must credit Ghosh for leading the way into the claim with which I wish to conclude.

I will concede that there are some ways in which the novel is ill-equipped to facilitate reckoning with our climate crisis, if we understand the novel via literary theory as a mode of the everyday, the quotidian, the internal psychological life, the

manners. Ghosh, like Nixon, is concerned with the pitfalls of spectacle. Recounting his chance encounter in the 1970s with a freak tornado in Delhi, Ghosh wondered how such an unlikely but true event could possibly be received as believable by a reader of fiction. Nowadays, “unbelievable” climate events occur seemingly daily, spurred by anthropogenic climate change. Eco-novelists are understandably focused on the drama of such events; they represent the feared apex that all fictional environmental activists rally against. Terrible events, and worst of all, species extinction, loom behind much environmentalist rhetoric.

But it is the *everyday* experience of climate change and environmental damage that is the obvious purview of the novel. The eco-novel does not meaningfully diverge from the form familiar to its scholars and theorists. If there are limitations to the novel’s representative possibilities, it is equally true that the novel is in some ways uniquely well-positioned to tell a true and comprehensive and complex story of climate change, including and especially the slow bits. The details of climate change have unfortunately become quotidian; even the very richest California residents, who are of course some of the richest people in the world, are unable to access all the water they desire. A novelist could very well write a story framed by one man’s quest to find a spot of shade in Los Angeles. Novelists *do* write about such things, and they fulfil the novel’s other great interests in details of life. Novelists can portray the everyday impacts of climate change without engaging in Patrick Murphy’s “present as always normal” mindset: these things are our reality, but they are not normal or good or acceptable. Climate change is an everyday reality, and the novel is an everyday as well as an extraordinary form. Novelists have always been concerned with affecting social progress. Our climate crisis may be big and scary, but on this count, it is no different.

One of the aims of this project is to broaden conceptions of what it means to be an activist. As the previous chapters have demonstrated, there is an archetypal figure that comes to mind upon hearing the word “activist”. Those who are explicitly represented as environmental activists in eco-novels often fit this image, but some novels depict environmental activism with consideration for the numerous ways to make important contributions to resolving the challenges of our time. Some novelists provide a model for working “outside the system” that is different from

overt protest – communication, dialogue, open-mindedness, community-building. But one does not have to work outside the system to be an effective advocate, and we have seen how some of those most dedicated to the cause are those working diligently in government and institutions.

This project will not solve the climate crisis, but it may suggest some ways forward. Those who read, write, and critique environmental literature are often passionate about the issues, and in considering the strategies and potential effects of novels concerning environmental activists, I hope I have retained sight of the bigger picture. Some ecocritics have lost faith in the power of connecting people to nature, and how this exposure can reshape our relations with non-human nature; they feel that immersion in nature has not slowed our mistreatment of the world around us. But I believe it is more important than ever to keep beauty and awe in our sights as regards the living world and continue to insist on its importance and its power to transform those who encounter it, whether in real life or on the page. Literature that aims to protect the environment cannot give into nihilism. It must further the cause of renewed relations with the world in which we live.

Appendix

A selection of primary texts with environmental themes that I read for this project. Most are novels but there are several short story and essay collections, graphic novels, and non-fiction books. Some of these texts were published earlier than the era I focused on, and some are by authors outside of the U.S. and Canada. This was to provide a sense of global context and to see how eco-fiction has evolved and been influenced by earlier publications.

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