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**‘What we talk about when we talk about extinction’: The affective  
(im)possibilities of extinction in contemporary fictions**

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## Introduction: Aftershocks

What are we in shock about when we're in shock about extinction? The word perhaps most vividly conjures apocryphal visions of the end of the world, the 'totalising stranglehold of the future-oriented imagination' that, as Claire Colebrook suggests, is the speculative horizon of so many U.S.-made disaster movies.<sup>1</sup> There is an early example in the asteroidal menace of Mimi Leder's *Deep Impact* (1998), which sees an 'extinction-level event' threatened by a fictional comet (dubbed Wolf-Beiderman) on course for a crash-collision with planet earth. The extreme weatherscapes of apocalyptic touchstones like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) or *2012* (2009), both innovations of director Roland Emmerich, nicknamed 'the master of disaster' for his often-bombastic renderings of climate cataclysm, mostly stylised in CGI depictions of New York deluged by tsunami or the West Coast sliding into the ocean following LA's decimation by a 10.9 earthquake.<sup>2</sup> There is the infertility pandemic of Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), where an 'Agambenesque' state of exception presides amid a sprawling scene of socioeconomic collapse, wherein human survival is newly contingent on reinstating the steadying forces of reproductive futurity. The paranoid millenarianism of Jeff Nichols's *Take Shelter* (2011), in which a Middle American construction worker (played by Michael Shannon) is plagued by ambiguous visions of a 'coming storm' that he (mis)interprets as symptomatic of hereditary schizophrenia rather than a prophesy of approaching environmental crisis. Or the soundless apocalypse of more recent blockbusters, such as John Krasinski's *A Quiet Place* (2018), whose narrative of resilient kinship in the face of humankind's almost total annihilation by creatures of indeterminate origin, hypersensitive to aural stimuli, made it the third-highest grossing horror opening of all time.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Claire Colebrook, 'Anti-Catastrophic Time', *New Formations*, 92 (2017), 102–119 (p. 103).

<sup>2</sup> Hee-Jung S Joo, 'We are the world (but only at the end of the world): Race, disaster, and the Anthropocene', *EPD: Society and Space*, 38 (2020), 72–90 (p. 73).

<sup>3</sup> Despite the persistence of the family unit in these texts, *Take Shelter* and *A Quiet Place* are unusual for their inclusion of disability in the post-apocalyptic landscape, both films featuring a deaf daughter. For further discussion, see Liz Bowen, 'The Cochlear Implant at the End of the World', *The New Inquiry*, 13 August 2018, <<https://thenewinquiry.com/the-cochlear-implant-at-the-end-of-the-world/>> [accessed 6 September 2021]

These cinematic accounts often shunt the prospect of extinction into, as Colebrook has it, ‘a dystopian or imagined future [...] where humans are abandoned to mere survival, where life is on the threshold of annihilation but where corporations are robust’.<sup>4</sup> Which is to say ‘that they depict the end of abundance *for us*’, an us that is loosely held together under the ambiguously inclusive term *Anthropos*.<sup>5</sup> Counterintuitively, in their ontological preoccupation with humanity’s obliteration — a demise that, it is worth noting, is often culturally specific to a Euro-American context — these texts also uphold a dogged fascination with the longevity of humanity’s many institutions, betraying a concomitant commitment to the endurance of these systems, come what may. Take the preservation in *A Quiet Place* of ‘happy’ biopolitical arrangements like ‘the family’, whose heteronormative kinship structures seem unshaken by species eradication; less appealing are the interventions of *Children of Men*, wherein the state is ruled by martial law, and refugees are subject to longstanding detention and incarceration in internment camps; in *Deep Impact*, meanwhile, citizens have the option to ‘luck’ their way into the future through sheer lottery or by taking the meritocratic route, individuals’ entry into underground bunkers guaranteed only if they possess the state-determined verve necessary to qualify as ‘talented’; elsewhere, as in *2012*, the purchasing-power of the elite, billionaire class secures safe passage on a G8-constructed Ark, as it cruises its way towards higher ground. All these suggest that there exist forces whose erasure cannot be tolerated even in the ugliest, most deprived, or most disorienting of imagined circumstances.

The endurance of these narratives would appear to perform a kind of ambivalent mourning-work that is also the work of conservative reassurance, consolation that even if ‘we’ are eradicated entirely then at least something of ‘us’ (usually ‘love’) *will* survive. Accordingly, the force of the aesthetic project’s affective energies is, generally speaking, split between cautionary

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<sup>4</sup> Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, p. 103.



warning and a quiet demand for the viewer's own reinvestment in the centrality of these normative moral tenets. At the same time that they peddle an unquestioning promise of redemption (that if 'we' can simply realise the error of 'our' ways, 'we' can just correct our course, and still have time to turn it around!) they also often fail to imagine new epistemological frontiers beyond fighting for the capitalist lifeworld 'we' already have. Of course, as Colebrook observes, what is encountered as 'dystopian' in these big-budget romps 'is how many already experience (and have experienced) life on this planet at present and in the past', since these 'post-apocalyptic [...] worlds without order, abundance, personhood or leisure' are already the necessary precondition of a First-World existence that relies on 'ongoing extraction and the harnessing of life and energy elsewhere'.<sup>6</sup> In this bizarre, false apocalyptic temporality, what is depicted as an embattled or heroic condition of 'living on after the end of the world' — wherein wandering, elect 'survivors' still valiantly persist even after the wake is over — more often closely resembles something like the expiration of capitalist abundance, and its consumerist pleasures. This aligns with a salient observation already made in 2003 by Fredric Jameson, the pithy claim 'that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.'<sup>7</sup>

Extinction also refers to the real-time crisis of biodiversity: the demise of more-than-human lifeforms, flora, and megafauna, that is understood to characterise the Holocene extinction event, alternatively known as the sixth mass extinction or Anthropocene extinction.<sup>8</sup> Ongoing, and elastic in its timeframe, an estimated 68% have already been lost between 1970 and 2016, many of which remain undocumented and undetected. These disappearances include the Christmas Island pipistrelle (2009), the Smooth handfish (2020), the Japanese earthworm

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<sup>6</sup> Colebrook, 'Anti-Catastrophic Time', p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Future City,' *New Left Review*, 21(2003), pp. 65–79 (p. 76).

<sup>8</sup> The Holocene — the current geological epoch — has become known colloquially known in scholarship and mainstream discourse by the contested name of the Anthropocene, the proposed neologism for describing the era in which human impact on planetary ecosystems first became detectable.

(2018), the Captain Cook's Bean Snail (2016), the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit (2011), the Purple-winged ground dove (2007), among countless others.<sup>9</sup> As Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren and Matthew Chrulew point out, while all mass extinction events are 'marked by three primary characteristics: a radically high number of species being lost; the loss taking place across a diverse range of life-forms; and the compressed time frame within which it is occurring'.<sup>10</sup> The sixth extinction event diverges in that it is directly catalysed by anthropogenic factors, rather than the purported 'indifference' of geological activity that was the previous driver of episodic biodiversity loss — the mass freezings, ice ages, and 'snowball phases' common in both the Proterozoic and Phanerozoic glacial eons.<sup>11</sup> In this instance, species die-off has been almost entirely fuelled by extractive human behaviour; the acceleration of extinctions, now 100 to 100,000 times higher than the 'natural' background rates, is largely attributed to habitat destruction, brought about by anthropogenic climate change, trade, consumption, big agriculture, and sustained exploitation.<sup>12</sup>

As Richard Grusin suggests in *After Extinction* (2018), extinction is thus both a local ('events like the extinction of a species') and global ('massive events like the much anticipated sixth extinction') phenomenon operating beyond any conventional sense of temporality and scale, one that confronts us with a consequent problematic of knowledge production.<sup>13</sup> The piecemeal account of nonhuman extinction is gleaned by the general public through media

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<sup>9</sup> See 'The Recently Extinct Plants and Animals Database', August 2021, <<https://recentlyextinctspecies.com>> [accessed 15 September 2021]. Also see '68% Average Decline in Species Population Sizes Since 1970, Says New WWF Report', WorldWildLife, <<https://www.worldwildlife.org/press-releases/68-average-decline-in-species-population-sizes-since-1970-says-new-wwf-report>> [accessed 18 May 2021]

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, Thom Van Dooren, and Matthew Chrulew, 'Introduction: Telling Extinction Stories', in *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death, and Generations* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 1-18 (p. 1).

<sup>11</sup> George R. McGhee Jr., *Carboniferous Giants and Mass Extinction: The Late Paleozoic Ice Age World, Generations* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> See *Extinction Studies*.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Grusin, 'Introduction', in *After Extinction* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. ix.

reporting, nature programming, statistics and fragmented imagery that seem to do little to actually make these losses intelligible. Indeed, as James Hatley suggests, perhaps ‘the [real] plight of animals in the Anthropocene [is] to be surrounded by human beings for whom the complexity and perplexity of the living world has been reduced to an amorphous set of words and a collection of fleeting images. The very practices by which the living world finds its place in human thought is increasingly dominated by a false familiarity’.<sup>14</sup> This *false familiarity* might put the psychoanalytically-inclined reader in mind of the Freudian ‘familiar’ or *Heimlich*, ‘a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *Unheimlich*’, that which is unhomely or uncanny.<sup>15</sup> As Freud suggests, the ‘*Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *Heimlich*’, a word that can also be utilised in the German language to suggest the amenability of the natural world (that word *species* itself creating an odd parity between the grammatical and biodiverse units): ‘(b) Of animals: tame, companionable to man. As opposed to wild, e.g. “Wild animals [. . .] that are trained to be *Heimlich* and accustomed to men.” “If these young creatures are brought up from early days among men they become quite *Heimlich*, friendly”’.<sup>16</sup>

These flourishing renditions of post-apocalyptic spectacle are now enough of a cultural commonplace to have become both overwhelming and underwhelming at the same time, generating a kind of hybrid effect of excessive stimulation mingled with a feeling of being underwhelmed that is captured by Sianne Ngai’s notion of ‘stuplimity’. This aesthetic experience of bored stupefaction she associates with encountering ‘vast but bounded artificial systems, resulting in repetitive and often mechanical acts of enumeration, permutation and

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<sup>14</sup> James Hatley, ‘Walking with Ōkami, the Large-Mouthed Pure God’, in *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death, and Generations*, ed. by Deborah Bird Rose, Thom Van Dooren, and Matthew Chrulew (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 19–46 (p. 32).

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, ed. by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 134.

<sup>16</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 126.

combination, and taxonomic classification'.<sup>17</sup> 'The loss of animal life, and the loss of 'tame' animal life in particular, is deeply familiar in the sense of being *intimate*, 'relating to the household and close relationships'; an early, figurative sense of the word dating back to 1583, also connotes: 'A spirit, often taking the form of an animal, which obeys and assists a witch or other person.'<sup>18</sup> Such losses are perhaps commonplace enough to be under and overwhelming both at the same time; for many children, the loss of a domestic pet or companion animal might mark their first, often extremely painful, affective encounter with mortality but also an induction into the recognisable rituals associated with mourning, a word that is often figured as grief's social expression. While the totalising emotional sensation of the bereavement is always entirely unique and idiosyncratic, for many it also marks a portal into a world of familiar social conventions that may act as a cultural blueprint for subsequent losses, both human and nonhuman.

The logics of extinction necessarily involve a confrontation with certain 'familiar' or 'traditional' affects. As Freud explains it, 'in economic terms', grief work is psychologically costly and 'extraordinarily painful', due in part to familiarity with the cherished object, whose persistence in the psyche even in the face of its loss requires a lengthy process of uncoupling and 'demands that the libido as a whole sever its bonds with that object'.<sup>19</sup> This task is undertaken with great reluctance 'even if a substitute is already beckoning': 'Each individual memory and expectation in which the libido was connected to the object is adjusted and *hyperinvested*, leading to its detachment from the libido' (emphasis mine).<sup>20</sup> There is the further problem that mourning itself, — 'the normal affect' as Freud terms it, which lies beyond the

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<sup>17</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> 'Familiar', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67957?redirectedFrom=familiar#eid>> [accessed 6 September 2021]

<sup>19</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, ed. by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2005), p. 204.

<sup>20</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 205.

diagnosis of pathology despite producing ‘severe deviations’ from normal cognitive functioning — that most commonplace ‘reaction to the loss of a beloved person’ can also conjure further unfamiliarity, as when ‘an *abstraction* tak[es] the place of the person, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal and so on’ (emphasis mine).<sup>21</sup>

The labour of mourning, or *Trauerarbeit* (in German, literally ‘mourning-work’ meaning either ‘the work that is required to mourn’ or ‘a work of mourning’) relies on a great emotional expenditure that, in the first instance, skews ‘normal’ temporality (‘its task cannot be accomplished immediately’) and requires some vestige of *familiarity* with the object or objects at hand.<sup>22</sup> All of which throws into question whether the labour of mourning, its *task*, can commence without this presupposed hyper-investment that characterises ego attachment, and gives mourning-work its power. How are we to proceed if in fact a ‘normal’ affect such as mourning only serves to test the limits of intelligibility anew, generating still further abstraction? As Judith Butler suggests in their reparative reading of melancholia: ‘Let’s face it: we’re undone by each other and if we’re not, we’re missing something’.<sup>23</sup>

How then to go about grief work without this hyper-investment? Or to begin mourning for unknown or unknowable forms of nonhuman life, flora and fauna that provoke feelings of bewilderment or unfamiliarity? A recent article in the *Scientific American* warns earnestly about the rise of ‘extinction denial’, articulating a ‘need to recognize what we’ve lost, or potentially lost’ in order to adequately mourn them and ‘to prevent as many others as possible from joining their ranks’.<sup>24</sup> There is an increased preoccupation, too, with the figure of animal

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<sup>21</sup> Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, p. 203.

<sup>22</sup> Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, p. 205.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> John R. Platt, ‘What We’ve Lost: The Species Declared Extinct in 2020’, *Scientific American*, 13 January 2021, <<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-weve-lost-the-species-declared-extinct-in-2020/>> [accessed 7 August 2021]

extinctions: public speculation on the as-yet undetermined origins of the Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, have brought much-needed publicity to vulnerable and endangered species like the pangolin, whose keratin-rich scales have led to its widespread illegal trafficking. As Thom van Dooren suggests, the pandemic is thus both a stark metonym for ‘our dysfunctional relationships with animals’, as well as a possibly generative ‘invitation to think more deeply about the consequences of our relationships with other animal species.’<sup>25</sup> And yet, at the same time, such calls for earnestness would seem to be undermined by surges of awkward, excessive, or nonplussed affect that often arise when it comes to metabolising the loss of these relationships. The demise of a species like the smooth handfish, recently declared formally extinct by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), was met with by-lines like ‘RIP, smooth handfish. You were weird and now you’re extinct’, a statement that seems to suggest a sentimental confusion over how to approach such losses, or what they require of us.<sup>26</sup> After all, why should ‘we’ take seriously the demise of the smooth handfish, a marine fish not sighted since 1802, when it was discovered off the coast of Tasmania by French naturalist François Péron? A species that it is hard to say existed for ‘us’ in any real sense, until the IUCN’s belated declaration of its nonexistence.

Entangled with this sentimental demand is another question. Namely what exactly does the *spectacle* of nonhuman extinction provoke or trigger, and can ‘we’ grieve for the disappearance of nonhuman species without also grieving the speculative horizon of ‘our’ own? There is a secondary question about what or who comprises this ‘we’ that is continually losing nonhuman animals. As Audra Mitchell astutely points out in her decolonial work on extinction, the Western tendency to exert selective ownership claims over particular species (usually

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<sup>25</sup> Thom van Dooren, ‘Pangolins And Pandemics: The Real Source Of This Crisis Is Human, Not Animal’, *New Matilda*, 22 March 2020, <<https://newmatilda.com/2020/03/22/pangolins-and-pandemics-the-real-source-of-this-crisis-is-human-not-animal/>> [accessed 6 August 2021]

<sup>26</sup> Laura Geggel, ‘RIP, smooth handfish. You were weird, and now you’re extinct’, *Live Science*, 15 July 2020, <<https://www.livescience.com/handfish-extinct.html>> [accessed 17 August 2021]

awarded to charismatic megafauna and mammals, such as ‘our’ polar bears or ‘our’ tigers) is already a vexed affective practice, one that extends the same colonial logics that first instigated extractive relationships with the nonhuman environment and continue to drive global patterns of extinction.<sup>27</sup>

For the editors of *Extinction Studies*, nonhuman extinction ‘is grounded in [...] no singular phenomenon of extinction; rather, extinction is experienced, resisted, measured, enunciated, performed, and narrated in a variety of ways to which we must attend’, something their book attempts to do through the telling of ‘unique “extinction stor[ies]”’ and a focus on ‘narrative-based engagement that explores what extinction means, why it matters, and to whom.’<sup>28</sup> This narrative ‘mattering’ of extinction is attained through a shared intellectual ‘commitment to the storytelling mode’, which derives from an admirable focus on plurality, and a careful sensitivity to the fact that ‘stories can allow multiple meanings to travel alongside one another’.<sup>29</sup> These conditions they also view as enabling for facilitating ““thick” accounts of other-than-human ways of life’ as well as testimony from myriad disciplinary players: from practitioners in the natural sciences, to ‘hunters and farmers, to artists, indigenous peoples, wildlife carers, and many others’.<sup>30</sup> The commitment to multiplicity stems from an earnest critical endeavour that is paired with a renewed intellectual commitment to the value of storytelling, in which both its *value* — already a foregone conclusion — and that of ‘other knowledgeable peoples’ are assessed, however, in terms of ‘what they teach us’.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Audra Mitchell, ‘Decolonizing against extinction, part III: white tears and mourning’, *Wordly*, 14 December 2017, <<https://worldlyir.wordpress.com/2017/12/14/decolonizing-against-extinction-part-iii-white-tears-and-mourning/>> [accessed 7 September 2021]

<sup>28</sup> Bird Rose et al., *Extinction Studies*, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Bird Rose et al., *Extinction Studies*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Bird Rose et al., *Extinction Studies*, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Bird Rose et al., *Extinction Studies*, p. 4.

In a 2005 essay for *Grist*, ecologist Bill McKibben bemoaned the failure to culturally register what was then called ‘global warming’, making a (dubious) comparison with the AIDS crisis, which ‘produced a staggering outpouring of art that, in turn, has had real political effect’: ‘Where are the books? The poems? The plays? The goddamn operas? [...] We can register what is happening with satellites and scientific instruments, but can we register it in our imaginations, the most sensitive of all our devices?’<sup>32</sup> He continues below:

But what emotions should the playwright play with — fear? guilt? Sure, but not only those. For me, a kind of wistfulness has always been at the core of my reaction to global warming, a sense that as a species we’re finally and irrevocably managing to crowd out everything else, smudge our fingerprints on every frame of the book of life. [...] But there also needs to be hope as well — visions of what it might feel like to live on a planet where somehow we use this moment as an opportunity to confront our consumer society, use it to begin the process of rebuilding community. They don’t have to be romantic visions, though a little romance wouldn’t hurt.<sup>33</sup>

McKibben’s own wistful claims are perhaps hard to take seriously in the present, given the expanding asset bubble of what we might term ‘eco-wistfulness’ among the liberal classes in particular, where the ‘eco-anxious’ subject in possession of a ‘sensitive’ device is increasingly bombarded with a ‘staggering outpouring of art’, as McKibben describes above. Ecological anxiety vibrates at the surface of today’s culture industry, where a proliferation of literary, cinematic, and televisual adaptations appear incrementally obsessed not only with rehearsing humanity’s own speculative extinction, but also tracking *how it feels* in real-time. Musician Grimes, for instance, was much derided for her rather glib claim that, with the release of her 2020 album *Miss Anthropocene* (a joint pun on misanthropy *and* the proposed name for our current stratigraphic era), she ‘wanted to make climate change fun’. Not to mention the bad

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<sup>32</sup> Bill McKibben, ‘What the warming world needs now is art, sweet art’, *Grist*, 22 April 2005, <<https://grist.org/article/mckibben-imagine/>> [accessed 15 September 2021]

<sup>33</sup> McKibben, ‘What the warming world needs’.



phrasing, which seems to contain a sinister structural echo of ‘Make America Great Again’, a review published in *Pitchfork* rightly gestured towards ‘the slimy mouthfeel, standing in the way of [...] genuine catharsis’: namely the contradictions that inhere in a white celebrity — one more likely than most to be insulated from the harms of climate collapse, particularly given her romantic affiliation with aspiring Mars-coloniser Elon Musk — delivering this statement.<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere, in the second season of Reese Witherspoon’s HBO blockbuster series *Big Little Lies* (2019–), Sheryl Sandberg-esque ‘girl boss’ Renata Klein (played by an incandescent Laura Dern) finds her eight-year-old daughter has been hospitalised by a panic attack, following a class in which a left-leaning teacher offered a (perhaps *overly* critically paranoid) reading of *Charlotte’s Web* as a lesson in the long-term unsustainability of sausage production.<sup>35</sup> The

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<sup>34</sup> Anupa Mistry, ‘Grimes: Miss Anthropocene’, *Pitchfork*, 21 February 2020, <<https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/grimes-miss-anthropocene/>> [accessed 15 September 2021]

<sup>35</sup> By ‘critically paranoid’ here I take to mean the critical positionality laid out in Eve Sedgwick’s celebrated essay ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You’, published in *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002). Here, Sedgwick deftly describes paranoid critical practice as follows. For Sedgwick, these ‘very productive critical habits [are] embodied in what Paul Ricoeur memorably called “the hermeneutics of suspicion”’, a category he in turn ‘introduced... to describe the position of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and their intellectual offspring in a context that also included such alternative disciplinary hermeneutics as the philological and theological “hermeneutics of recovery of meaning”’ (p. 124). While for Ricoeur this terminology was ‘descriptive and taxonomic rather than imperative’, as Sedgwick lays out, it has become something of a ‘mandatory injunction’ for critical theory, in particular ‘for the mainstream of New Historicist, deconstructive, feminist, queer, and psychoanalytic criticism’, whose emphasis on oppressive systems as concealed systems in need of demystification owes much of its lineage to critical paradigms established by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, who serve as this school’s ironical ‘founding Fathers’, so to speak (p. 125). The ‘unintentionally stultifying side effect’ of this, Sedgwick suggests, is that it has bred a subspecies of critical rigidity wherein suspicion has itself become a dogmatic ruling, making it difficult — if not impossible — to attend to the ‘local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller’ (p. 124). Critical paranoia is differentiated from paranoia in general (and from political paranoia, more specifically) which, as Melanie Klein suggests, is ‘a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of, and ingests from the world around one’, habitually marked by ‘envy, anxiety and hatred’ (p. 128). Such paranoia is deftly exemplified in Freud’s notorious Dr. Schreber case wherein, following a fleeting thought on waking that it would be pleasant to ‘succumb’ to sexual intercourse as a woman, a patient developed a rapid-onset psychosis that, according to Freud, emerged out of the joint repression of homosexual desire, and a fear of emasculation. Alarmed by this thought, Schreber found himself plagued by persecutory delusions that his nerves were being penetrated by ‘divine rays’ that demanded things of him; as his psychosis intensified, he began to believe that God was actively transforming him into a woman, and sending down ‘little men’ to torture him.

The critical utility of Klein’s modelling lies, by contrast, in its emphasis on oscillation or ‘positions’, as an alternative to the consuming fixity of Freud’s interpretation. The ramifications of this

intrusion of eco-anxiety into the wealthy, predominantly white landscape of Monterey, California — an elite haven for business moguls and women belonging to the 1%, the pinnacle of the ‘good life’, reserved for Americans who have secured the bicoastal dream — suggests the current pervasiveness of climate crisis in public consciousness.<sup>36</sup> This trickle-down is felt even in the abundance of lifestyle trends that cater to those wanting to tread ‘more lightly’ on the planet while maintaining their sporadic indulgences: whether in the prevalence of KeepCups, the corporate turn towards ‘clean’ beauty, or the explosion of more absurd micro-trends like ‘necropolitical fitness’ regimes. The latter finds expression in the new popularity of zombie-apocalypse running apps, as well as something like GymBox’s ‘Extinction Training’ initiative, an exercise class designed to simulate the post-apocalyptic landscape as a ‘tough workout’, raising pulses *and* ‘awareness’ about climate change simultaneously.<sup>37</sup>

These efforts, while seemingly orchestrated to increase extinction’s intelligibility or perhaps simply inject some levity into an otherwise doomy horizon, often have the paradoxical effect of neutralising its power through slotting it into the purview of individuated ‘lifestyle’ adjustments, thus obscuring the extremity of transformational change required of nation states, governments and big corporations in order to halt or reverse its progress. They also follow a generic ‘trend’ occurring across contemporary literature and literary studies more broadly,

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inform my thinking across this thesis more widely, which fluctuates between paranoid and reparative stances. These ideas will be the peculiar focus of my third chapter, where I investigate them in the environmentalist context, using the textual example of Kelly Reichardt’s 2013 film *Night Moves*.

<sup>36</sup> This fictionalised event spilled over into news media, spawning a series of memes, Twitter conversations, and think pieces in which real-life adults resonated with Ammabella’s fear. See Sonia Rao, ‘Climate-change anxiety is now a part of growing up. Pop culture has caught on’, *Washington Post*, 28 June 2019, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/06/28/climate-change-anxiety-is-now-part-growing-up-pop-culture-has-caught/>> [accessed 7 September 2021]. See also Geoff Dembicki, ‘Climate Change Is Everywhere. Just Not on TV’ *VICE*, 15 July 2019, <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/wjv3bq/climate-change-is-everywhere-just-not-on-tv>> [accessed 5 September 2021]

<sup>37</sup> See Katie Rose Hejmanek, ‘Fitness Fanatics: Exercise as Answer to Pending Zombie Apocalypse in Contemporary America’, *American Anthropologist*, 122 (2020), 864–875. See also Samuel Fishwick, ‘Get ready for Armageddon: we put Gymbox’s new Extinction Training class to the test’, *Evening Standard*, 28 October 2019, <<https://www.standard.co.uk/escapist/health/gymbox-extinction-training-class-review-a4272236.html>> [accessed 6 September 2021]

which has seen an upsurge of cultural and scholarly focus on climate change since the consolidation of the environmental humanities and its subset, ecocriticism, in the early 2000s. As Merve Emre has suggested, ranging from the integration of literature programmes into MBAs, to the emphatic drive towards interpersonal ‘flourishing’ that is promulgated by the ‘wellness’ genre, literature is newly (and perhaps insidiously) wielded in the service of the improvement of the professional classes and the promotion of liberal humanist values.<sup>38</sup> This didacticism is felt particularly in ecocriticism and its literary counterpart, the burgeoning field of eco and climate fiction. Contemporary extinction fictions often share in the narrative commitment to dystopian worldbuilding laid out in the film texts above, set mostly in a depleted or postapocalyptic landscape wherein the conditions of life have been drastically altered — whether by global pandemic, or the sudden escalation of ecological degradation. As if to reiterate extinction’s enduring aesthetic *appeal*, this has become an almost-token feature of

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<sup>38</sup> See Merve Emre, *Post-Discipline: Literature, Professionalism, and the Crisis of the Humanities*, forthcoming. < <https://www.wiko-berlin.de/wikothek/multimedia/the-leader-as-reader> > [accessed 4 September 2021]. ‘Liberal’ values are referred to here in the context of an American liberalism which promulgates and prioritizes a moral organization that is often grounded in principles of fairness and empathy. According to linguist George Lakoff, liberal ideology has its roots in five major conceptual systems of morality, among them self-nurturance and the cultivation of well-being, which are perceived as maximising moral good. As Lakoff points out, well-being’s opposites — ‘poverty, illness, sadness, weakness, imprisonment, and so on’ — are frequently viewed as *immoral*, along with any action that jeopardises the security of ‘health, wealth, happiness, strength, freedom, safety, [or] beauty’. See George Lakoff, *Moral Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 89–90. To the extent that this moral framework is conceptualized in terms of wealth, of *having* or not *having*, the pursuit of well-being and its attendant activities (like many of those lifestyle trends detailed above) has come to connote a kind of moral rectitude or ‘goodness’ that is, oftentimes, perceived as lacking in those persons and populations for whom the boons of such experiential forms of well-being are less than readily accessible. Given the economic basis for this system of moral metaphors, the affiliation of morality with beauty, care, strength, and wellness in American culture thus arrives as a kind of *fait accompli*. As Lakoff points out here: ‘Since it is better to be rich than to be poor, morality is conceptualized in terms of wealth. Since it is better to be strong than to be weak, we expect to see morality conceptualized as strength. Because it is better to be healthy than sick, it is no surprise to see morality conceptualized in terms of health and attendant concepts like cleanliness and purity’ (p. 91). The moral charge carried by lifestyle modifications that emerge from — and benefit — an ecologically ‘enlightened’ Eurowestern class thus risks intensifying class schisms, as well as the vilification of already marginalized persons for whom the pursuit of ‘wellness’ often simply isn’t an option.

the genre, affirming Lawrence Buell's insistence that: 'Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal'.<sup>39</sup>

These fictions expend significant affective energies in cultivating the reader's *fear* of environmental collapse, *and* a corollary desire for its avoidance at all costs. Empirical research conducted by social scientist Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, for instance, suggests that "cli-fi" reminds concerned readers of the severity of climate change while impelling them to imagine environmental futures and consider the impact of climate change on human and nonhuman life.<sup>40</sup> He continues: 'While few scholars are so bold as to state in print that a "literary genre" could "save the planet," the ecopolitical value of environmental literature has been a key subtext for the growing interest in climate fiction in (liberal) popular discourse and the academic fields of ecocriticism and environmental humanities.'<sup>41</sup> Though this ecopolitical investment is obviously more or less overt depending on the text, the sustained literary emphasis on dystopian or apocalyptic tropes is not always straightforwardly exploratory; often, it comes infused with the moral imperative to engage with extinction as something to be *prevented*, above all else, resulting in the formation of an emergent ecological 'canon' which, despite its relative newness, already feels affectively overdetermined.

As Greg Garrard suggests, to a certain extent, 'narrative fiction has largely failed to meet the imaginative challenge of climate change', and these 'depictions not only indulge "the fallacy of worst-case thinking," [but] also understate the contingency and reflexivity of the future.'<sup>42</sup> As the editors of *Extinction Studies* rightly acknowledge, following Donna Haraway,

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<sup>39</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 285.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, 'The Influence of Climate Fiction: An Empirical Survey of Readers', *Environmental Humanities*, 10 (2018), 473–500 (p. 473).

<sup>41</sup> Schneider-Mayerson, 'The Influence of Climate Fiction', p. 474.

<sup>42</sup> Greg Garrard, 'Never too soon, always too late: Reflections on climate temporality', *WIREs Climate Change*, 11 (2020), DOI: 10.1002/wcc.605 (p. 3)

‘storytelling is never innocent’.<sup>43</sup> Equally, one might also think here of Joan Didion’s much-used epithet, that ‘we tell ourselves stories in order to live’, which seems at once to emphasise the centrality of narrative sustenance while injecting this ideal with a robust sense of mistrust.<sup>44</sup> What this approach ignores, however, is the potential overdetermination of extinction storytelling, as well as any residual possibility that narrative’s forward-thrust may be formally inept or inadequate in accounting for the entirely ‘novel’ threat of ecological unravelling. Significantly, that same nebulous ‘we’ reappears in an alternative formation in Didion’s grief memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), in which the concept of ‘wildness’ also materialises: ‘We are not idealized wild things. We are imperfect mortal beings, aware of that mortality even as we push it away, failed by our very complication, so wired that when we mourn our losses we also mourn, for better or for worse, ourselves. As we were. As we are no longer. As we will one day not be at all.’<sup>45</sup>

What lies beyond the bombastic, melancholy aesthetics of ‘disaster masters’ like Roland Emmerich and their chronic, phantasmatic rehearsal of the world’s end? Beyond the sentimental, instrumentalising function of eco-fiction as a genre nebulously tasked with ‘saving’ it? What kind of moral or aesthetic response might extinction demand of us? Can we mourn for nonhuman life without a concomitant striving towards ‘mastery’? Are ‘we’ able to lament strange, unfamiliar losses through recourse to familiar affective standards and ‘traditional’ political passions, such as compassion, empathy, anger, and fear? As theorists like Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai have all observed, such passions can be easily weaponised by the extractive capitalist agenda, or in the service of ‘national interests’: whether in the aggressive foreign policy enabled by George W. Bush’s self-professed era of ‘compassionate’

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<sup>43</sup> Bird Rose et al., *Extinction Studies*, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York, NY: FSG Classics, 2009).

<sup>45</sup> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2006).

conservatism, or the historical bolstering of supremacism in the U.S. by a justice system organised around White fears of Blackness.<sup>46</sup>

**'As if there were any other way for us to start or end!'**

Returning to grief, then. Holding in mind Freud's definition of the *Unheimlich/Heimlich*, might there be scope for a more ambivalent, yet still generative, mode of ethical response? One in which the affective familiarity of mourning and the specificity of nonhuman others collide? What began as an attempt at thinking through grief's prospective theoretical function (a still-strange, though perhaps more academically 'familiar', affect) in 'processing' extinction's diversity of meanings, quickly revealed a less definitive, dissonant, group of affects: anxiety, paranoia, loneliness, as well as a kind of disaffection or disinterestedness towards upholding 'our' duties towards nonhuman animals. This thesis emerges at the contact point between these ethical conflicts, at a moment wherein the complex forces of familiarity and unfamiliarity collide. In embarking on this project with grief as one of its primary conceptual architectures, the project sought to reckon with a process that, in temporal terms at least, responds to loss that has already occurred. For Freud certainly, the work of 'serious mourning' would appear to be relatively clear-cut, comprising a reaction to the loss of a (typically deceased) love-object, which consumes and restricts the ego through its entire absorption or devotion to mourning's task.<sup>47</sup> In melancholia, by contrast, which occasions the almost-total 'disorder of self-esteem' in the bereaved subject, the loss is perhaps 'more notional in nature'.<sup>48</sup> '[T]he object may not really have died, for example, but may instead have been lost as a love-object': 'we think that we should cling to the assumption of such a loss, but it is difficult to see what has been lost, so we may rather assume that the patient cannot consciously grasp what he has lost', or that he

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<sup>46</sup> See Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', *Social Text*, 79 (2004), 117–139. Also see Lauren Berlant, ed., *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>47</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 204.

<sup>48</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 204.

‘knows *who* it is, but not *what* it is about that person that he has lost’.<sup>49</sup> The disjuncture between *conscious* (mourning) and *unconscious* knowing (melancholia), speaks to the *absence* of so many species from ‘our’ public consciousness, let alone the sphere of intentional, willed, meaningful, or cultivated *familiarity* that might be termed ‘relational’, in the sense of intimacy or proximity. But also, paradoxically, to the recursive fragmentary effect these notional losses have on the *subject*, represented in the introjection of the loss and a corresponding ‘great impoverishment of the ego’.<sup>50</sup>

Driven by the spectre of the AIDS crisis, critical manoeuvres occurring across affect and queer theory in the past two decades have seen melancholia’s renewed embrace, through reparative attempts to slough off its pathological connotations, such as in David Eng’s book *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (2003) and Butler’s *Precarious Life* (2004). As Butler writes, ‘there [is] something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its unbearability and not endeavoring to seek a resolution’, namely the apprehension of a shared bodily vulnerability and a renewed attention to ‘relational ties’ as a mutually sustaining force.<sup>51</sup> ‘When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, [...] something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are’.<sup>52</sup> This realisation, Butler hopes, acts as ‘a point of departure for a new understanding if the narcissistic preoccupation of melancholia can be moved into a consideration of the vulnerability of others’, in turn denaturing grief’s ‘privatizing’ function and its ‘solitary situation’ through returning it to the political terrain of ‘theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility’.<sup>53</sup> Somewhat optimistically, the centrality of these relations to the subject’s own subsistence, as well as the common physical

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<sup>49</sup> Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, pp. 204-5.

<sup>50</sup> Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, p. 205.

<sup>51</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 23–30.

<sup>52</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 22-30.

<sup>53</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 22–30.

and corporeal vulnerability they unveil, are framed in chiefly reparative terms. Through Butler's robust affirmation of the relational aspects of subjectivity's social formation, there emerges the 'possibility of making different kinds of ties' and 'another way of imagining community', grief and melancholia becoming potent affective forces in a radically utopian political imaginary.<sup>54</sup> Though Butler's essay deftly probes how 'our cultural frames for thinking the human set limits on the kinds of losses we can avow as loss' — taking into consideration the various mechanisms of dehumanization that uphold 'culturally viable notions of the human' and determine how 'grievability is publicly distributed' — their thinking here remains nevertheless oriented around an exclusionary 'common notion' or 'general conception of the human' that fails to move 'us' beyond a limited notion of the 'public' as one that might include nonhuman beings.<sup>55</sup> Nor does it take into account the significant evolutionary role of nonhuman lifeforms in the very process of 'our' social formation. Just as Butler suggests that grief or 'grievability' can be tricked out to serve a supremacist agenda (as in the heavy media coverage of the victims of 9/11, versus the erasure of Arab lives lost during the invasion of Iraq), so too grief *for* nonhuman life, whether animal, plant or vegetal, also risks cultural appropriation.<sup>56</sup> This is exemplified by a Western attention economy wherein the uneven distribution of 'our' melancholy can serve a deeply conservative function, and First World sentiment 'for' nonhuman animals risks exerting a negative emotional or affective claim that perpetuates colonial logics. As Mitchell makes clear, something like the liberal phenomenon of 'white tears' — a microaggression commonly experienced in the context of 'white sensitivity', as an (over)reaction to racial privilege's exposure — shed for lost species can serve an insidious racist function. Their colonisation of emotional space obscures the grief work of communities whose lived relations with nonhuman animals *are* eroded by extinction events, also sapping attention

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<sup>54</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 27–40.

<sup>55</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 31–34.

<sup>56</sup> Mitchell, 'Decolonizing Against Extinction'.



and social resources, which often end up being diverted *away* from Indigenous and other peoples of colour who suffer extinction's direct impacts.<sup>57</sup>

For Butler, the melancholic's 'disorientation' can be read reparatively as 'the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself', an extended form of self-interrogation ("Who have I become?" or, indeed, "What is left of me?" "What is it in the Other than I have lost?") that 'posits the "I" in the mode of unknowingness' and thus becomes 'a resource for politics'.<sup>58</sup> Viewed differently, however, it also carries the risk of refracting grief's affective potential *back* onto the subject, rerouting its force towards the I in a way that risks reinforcing the project of neoliberal sovereignty, rather than dismantling it. Something of this paradox was already made clear by Freud in 1917: 'the loss of object has been transformed into a loss of ego, and the conflict between the ego and the beloved person into a dichotomy between ego-criticism and the ego as modified by identification.'<sup>59</sup> What *appears* in melancholia as 'a great impoverishment of the ego' — the libidinal shock of loss resulting in a tendency towards self-abasement, criticism, and a desire for punishment — might, by inference, lead us to assume that the immense psychic blow of extinction *could* be the precondition for a collective politics that sought to denature an anthropocentric imaginary.<sup>60</sup> As Freud points out, however, despite this apparent impoverishment the resulting 'clinical picture' can also look a lot like regression into narcissism: indeed, the melancholic exhibits 'aggravating' behaviours and traits, including 'an insistent talkativeness, [and] taking satisfaction from self-exposure'; paradoxically then, their expansive self-reproach is often 'merely' an expression of a displaced or introjected *ambivalence* towards the departed love-object that cannot be communicated.<sup>61</sup> Freud, more paranoically, sees this narcissism as stretching back into an

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<sup>57</sup> Mitchell, 'Decolonizing Against Extinction'.

<sup>58</sup> Butler, *Prekarious Life*, p. 30.

<sup>59</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 209.

<sup>60</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 205.

<sup>61</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', pp. 207–209

original, primary ‘narcissistic identification with the object’ that either informed or skewed the ego’s selection to begin with, and whose choosing he attributes to an assimilating impulse occurring in the preliminary stages of object-selection: ‘[The ego] may assimilate this object, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libido development, *may do so by eating it*’ (emphasis mine).<sup>62</sup> This psychoanalytic imagery gains a peculiar freighted charge when thought in terms of animal consumption and the sheer technological scale of agricultural production, an industrial system whose footprint is intimately connected to extinction and biodiversity loss through processes of land clearing and consequent habitat displacement.

This is not to say that Butler’s reparative reading is naïve, nor is it to dismiss it as woolly. Certainly, such self-reflection has both generative and generous effects, as seen in Butler and Eng’s careful attention to the legacies of AIDS activism. Nor is it to endorse Freud’s more outwardly paranoiac reading of melancholia which, though foundational in generating the field of grief studies, has also successfully pathologized melancholia since its inception at the turn of the twentieth century. Rather, my aim is simply to point towards the fundamental ambivalence of these contradictory states which, as Freud has it, confront ‘us with a mystery that is difficult to solve’,<sup>63</sup> a claim that would seem to be honoured by Butler’s insistence on the ineffable, confounding quality of ‘our’ relational ties to the Other, which ‘undo’ the I’s account of itself at the same time as they are integral to it.<sup>64</sup> For Butler, the mechanisms of ‘derealization’ and ‘dehumanization’ operate to dictate what kinds of lives ‘rank’ as grievable in the first place, ensuring the erasure of already-marginalised human lives. But what then of nonhuman Others, those animal lives that are excluded both from Butler’s definition of community — which they delimit as ‘start[ing], and end[ing], with the question of the human

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<sup>62</sup> Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, pp. 209–210.

<sup>63</sup> Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, p. 207.

<sup>64</sup> Butler, *Prekarious Life*, p. 23.

(as if there were any other way for us to start or end!)’ — *and* their account of ‘the social conditions of our very formation’.<sup>65</sup> Even the neurotic, ‘jokey’ formation of this utterance — its containment in a parenthetical aside, coupled with panicky grammatical addition of that exclamation mark! — suggests the extent of Butler’s own species melancholia for *Anthropos*. Indeed, such an omission would seem to demonstrate just how far ‘we’ are from reckoning with the confounding effects of nonhuman loss as well as the extent to which, as Mitchell pithily puts it, ‘Extinction has become an emblem of Western, and white-dominated, fears about ‘the end of the(ir) world’.<sup>66</sup>

### **The Great Dying**

This tension between (over)identification with nonhuman suffering (which Butler proposes as a byroad into productive, political identification) and self-reproach (the disparaging ire directed at one’s own futility, unworthiness or impotence to prevent or resolve climate crisis) forms one of the central paradoxes motivating this project. At the very least, the ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ procedures associated with mourning are, in temporal terms, ill-equipped to respond to extinction, a disparate process that continues to move apace in the present, but cannot be said to be properly ‘completed’ in any sense (particularly given the relative *indistinction* between the loss of individuals of a species, and the loss of its entirety). The world has undergone past mass extinction events, like the End-Permian extinction, also known as the Great Dying, losing some 95 percent of marine and 70 percent of terrestrial life. But as extant species continue to die off at an alarming rate, these losses are also less than clear-cut; many, who remain as-yet undiscovered and formally undocumented, having ‘failed’ to enter formal scientific taxonomy or discourse, and are thus ‘lost’ before they are even ‘found’. Although the chronic futurity of the apocalyptic imaginary, as Jemma Deer observes, seems committed to a kind of ‘proleptic

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<sup>65</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 20-23.

<sup>66</sup> Mitchell, ‘Decolonizing against Extinction’.

nostalgia, in which we find ourselves looking back on the future as if it were the past’, extinction events are at the same time characterized by a peculiar latency, their recognition often so lagging that any attempt to ‘mourn’ at the public level is necessarily inflected with its own belatedness.<sup>67</sup>

Likewise, if melancholia’s extended self-absorption risks a renewed anthropocentrism that becomes about self-flagellation as much as it is *about* the lost object(s), how to go about developing an affective response, or set of responses, that does meet extinction on its plane? What current affective paradigms exist or are available to ‘us’ to navigate this moment of ‘crisis’? In 2019, the *Oxford English Dictionary* selected ‘climate emergency’ as its word of the year, a term it defines as ‘a situation in which urgent action is required to reduce or halt climate change and avoid potentially irreversible environmental damage resulting from it’.<sup>68</sup> A similar discursive acceleration has occurred in liberal media, which has seen a shift towards catastrophising language, with the *Guardian* in 2018 amending their style guide from ‘climate change’ to ‘climate crisis’, to reflect a new diagnostic severity. Dating back to 1543, the etymology of crisis also has its roots in *pathology*, signifying: ‘The point in the progress of a disease when an important development or change takes place which is decisive of recovery or death; the turning-point of a disease for better or worse.’<sup>69</sup> Besides the (valid) question of what or who exactly is the disease in this environmental scenario (the ‘us’ impacting the climate, or the climate threatening the conditions of ‘our’ existence?), there is also the question of who gets to determine this turning-point. Climate change is widely hailed as one of the driving factors of current extinction events, and any prospective ‘event’ that may eventually threaten

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<sup>67</sup> Jemma Deer, ‘Quenched: Five Fires For Thinking Extinction’, *Oxford Literary Review*, 41 (2019), 1–17 (p. 4).

<sup>68</sup> “‘Climate Emergency’ is Oxford Dictionaries’ word of 2019”, 21 November 2019, <<https://www.earthday.org/climate-emergency-is-2019-oxford-word-of-the-year/>> [accessed 6 September 2021]

<sup>69</sup> ‘Crisis’ in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/44539?redirectedFrom=crisis>> [accessed 7 September 2021]

*homo sapiens* with its own obliteration. Given the extent to which both political inaction *and* the sustained difficulty of converting feeling into behavioural change, have defined so much of the cultural response to environmental destruction since its entry into mainstream public consciousness in the 1970s, might there be some critical mileage in exploring a less diagnostic framework? One that doesn't approach it as 'crisis' per se, but rather apprehends its impasses and seeks new modes of intelligibility through which to approach them? As Garrard makes the point, since the founding of the IPCC in 1988, 'climate change has been constructed as a problem awaiting scientifico-political solution, rather than a *predicament* that is effectively permanent regardless of the true value of equilibrium climate sensitivity.'<sup>70</sup>

Although Freud emphasised mourning as a fundamentally 'piecemeal' process that 'cannot be accomplished immediately', only 'carried out at great expenditure of time and energy', his insistence on its eventual completion — and the ego's 'liberation' from its task — has persisted even in contemporary understandings of grief as a time-limited process, with a 'normal' or 'healthy' expiry date.<sup>71</sup> The fifth edition of *The Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, a clinical textbook published in 2013 by the American Psychological Association, contained a clutch of new diagnostic criteria that were seen to overtly 'medicalize' grief, including 'Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder' or 'Prolonged Grief Disorder' (characterised by excessive rumination, feelings of intense sadness, and a reluctance to 'move on') as well as the elimination of an exclusion that prevented a diagnosis of major depression being offered in the first six months following a bereavement.<sup>72</sup> These categories, while ultimately designed to create a more robust framework of biomedical care that will 'catch' depressive symptoms early, and facilitate potentially life-saving interventions, nevertheless

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<sup>70</sup> Garrard, 'Never too soon, always too late: Reflections on climate temporality', p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 205.

<sup>72</sup> Colin Murray Parkes, 'Complicated grief in the DSM-5: Problems and solutions', *Archives of Psychiatry and Mental Health* 4 (2020), 48–51.

contribute to an incremental view of grief (much like climate change) as a ‘problem’ in need of neat and timely ‘(re)solution’. Likewise, and at odds with scholarly and psychoanalytic understandings around the resistance of trauma to the locomotion of linear narrative — as seen in the work Cathy Caruth among others — general consensus still tends to understand grief’s unfurling as a linear process, most famously encapsulated in Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s ‘five stages’, despite this model originally having been developed to aid terminally-ill patients in grappling with anticipatory grief at the prospect of their own imminent death, rather than death’s survivors. In much the same way, the contemporary emphasis on a rhetoric of ecological ‘tipping points’ (timestamps that are themselves, ironically, continually shifting) has ‘recast climate change as abrupt, nonlinear, irreversible, and dangerous to humans and other species in the near term’, as Garrard suggests.<sup>73</sup>

Extinction would thus seem to call upon or demand a different clutch of affects in response to its own ‘piecemeal’ occurrence, its relational complexity, and the affective gaps or illegibilities with which it confronts ‘us’. Ones that are perhaps less robust, less clear-cut in their directives, and perhaps less heavily theorised than emotional paradigms like grief, mourning or melancholia. We might also conjecture that any affectual apparatus also requires attuning to a more indeterminate mode of processing extinction’s temporality, equivalent to the ‘gradual’, ‘often invisibl[e]’ pacing of what Rob Nixon has described as ‘slow violence’, the term he uses to capture ‘the attritional lethality of many environmental crises, in contrast with the sensational, spectacle-driven messaging that impels public activism today.’<sup>74</sup> While doubtless experientially negative, the sociocultural valence of feelings like grief carries the biopolitical weight of normalcy or ‘naturalness’, in the sense of being an *expected* response to loss. But also a

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<sup>73</sup> Garrard, ‘Never too soon, always too late: Reflections on climate temporality’, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

peculiar moral charge, of being somehow venerable, right and proper, and thus subject to being expressed in preordained, distinct, recognisable forms. Might there be some other set of affects that captures the complex mixture of action and inaction that comprise emotional forces, which can be characterized as much by as by a *failure* of action as by its opposite? Especially given that, as Ngai suggests, Baruch Spinoza described ‘emotions as “waverings of the mind” that can either increase or decrease one’s power to act’.<sup>75</sup>

As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth suggest, affect is what ‘arises in the midst of *inbetween-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon’, as well as ‘in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds’.<sup>76</sup> Affect, formed prior to the linguistic *naming* of feeling or emotion, is broadly understood as a precultural force. For Gregg and Seigworth:

Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces — visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion — that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability.<sup>77</sup>

As they suggest, ‘There is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be.’<sup>78</sup> Despite this, nuanced stabs at developing a lengthy account of affect have been made by Gregg and Seigworth, Rei Terada, Brian Massumi and Lawrence Grossberg, among others, all of which differentiate between affect and emotion in a range of fruitful,

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<sup>75</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 2.

<sup>76</sup> Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> Gregg and Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader*, p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> Gregg and Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader*, p. 3.

critically productive ways. Certain of these theorists tend to emphasise emotion as requiring a *subject* where affect does not, a distinction which has its origins in the psychoanalytic need to differentiate between analyst and analysand; other strains of critical thought hold that affect is both prelinguistic and presocial, whereas emotions or ‘feelings are as fundamentally “social” in their construction as are ‘institutions, collective practices, or discursive significations’; elsewhere, affect is taken to be mere formless, unstructured ‘intensity’, where ‘emotion’ signifies the ‘personal’ or possessive form.<sup>79</sup> In their turn, these studies draw on Raymond Williams’s essay ‘Structures of Feeling’, first published in 1977, a term he uses to describe ‘social experiences in solution’: these shifts in presence, which he perceives as ‘emergent or pre-emergent, they do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action.’<sup>80</sup> To Williams, this ‘cultural hypothesis [...] has a special relevance to art and literature, where the true social content is in a significant number of cases of [a] present and affective kind, which cannot without loss be reduced to belief-systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships, though it may include all of these as lived or experienced, with or without tension.’<sup>81</sup>

Such semantic distinctions will be less prominent here and, though it draws in spirit on this rich body of work, the terms affect, emotion and feeling are used relatively interchangeably throughout the thesis. Instead, my inquiry engages with affect theory as a means of tracking how certain emergent affective tendencies expose and intervene in logics that predominate within eco-fictional texts and the wider environmental genre. The corpus of texts that feature in this thesis — the short fictions of Joy Williams and Julie Hecht, as well as Lydia Millet’s novel *How the Dead Dream* (2007) and Kelly Reichardt’s film *Night Moves* (2013) — perhaps deal

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<sup>79</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>80</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘Structures of Feeling’, in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 132–133.

<sup>81</sup> Williams, ‘Structures of Feeling’, p. 133.



less obviously or explicitly with extinction than those that are typically numbered among the generic categories of eco-fiction or cli-fi. As such, the thesis also makes an argument for these texts *as* texts that are both about extinction *and* about climate crisis, even if not brazenly or declaratively so. In doing so, it begins to trace an alternative to the canon of narrative or ‘literary’ eco-fiction as it presently exists, stretching it beyond the temporal period that marked the reification of ecocriticism in the 1990s. In the process, it aims to make an adjacent argument if not about their *utility*, *productivity* or *value* (words of which this project remains duly wary) in resolving environmental problems, then at the very least to adumbrate the contributions their ambivalence make towards reading extinction differently. I suggest that the micro-patterns and micro-logics of extinction may already be present in the dynamics of the everyday, in the ‘relatable’ or the familiar, and thus nearer and perhaps less abstract than we think. This follows Ngai’s emphasis on the diagnostic potentiality of what she determines as ‘ugly’ feelings — those ‘dysphoric’, ‘deeply equivocal’, and ‘ignoble’ emotions which make starkly apparent ‘a general state of obstructed agency’ that can be either ‘individual or collective’.<sup>82</sup> The sentiments that populate this thesis also crop up in scenarios where protagonists find themselves variously floored by inertia, impasse and other ‘situations of passivity’, often in a context specific to being confronted with the prospect of ecological doom. Significantly for our purposes, Ngai argues that the ‘politically ambiguous feelings’ contained within her own book are ‘[c]ertainly less narratively structured, in the sense of being less object- or goal-directed’, and nowhere near ‘as strategic as the emotions classically associated with political action’, and thus ‘less than ideally suited for setting and realizing clearly defined goals.’<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 26.

As already laid out above, this thesis emerges at a moment in time where the ecological *genre*, spanning both the visual, cinematic and literary arts, feels incrementally overburdened with the task of consciousness-raising, the renewed cultural sense of urgency fuelling a renewed sense that environmentally oriented art must also be ecopolitically ‘functional’ in order to be ‘valuable’. As Garrard suggests, in line with the ongoing ‘scientisation’ of climate change, the imperative towards ‘optimising’ behavioural engagement would go some way towards explaining the affective focus on *shame* that dominates much contemporary narrative ‘eco-fiction’, whose ‘view of the future is [often] presumably intended to embarrass the reader into becoming the one who “does one thing differently”’.<sup>84</sup> This transformative demand is also recognised by Nicole Seymour, who associates environmentalism with a specific vision of crusading moral piety that has gained it a ‘general reputation’ as ‘sanctimonious, self-righteous, and sentimental’.<sup>85</sup> The stymying effect of this pledge on environmentalist artworks is aggravated by ecocritics, who ‘have also tended to take an instrumentalist approach to environmental art’, ‘regularly evaluat[ing] cultural texts on their capacity to inculcate “proper” environmentalist feelings — often, reverence, love, and wonder — educate the public, incite quantifiable environmental activism, or even solve environmental problems.’<sup>86</sup> The outcome is an intellectual ecosystem wherein both affect and text are evaluated primarily in terms of their strategic ability to successfully ‘conscript’ noninitiates to the ecological cause or ‘yield results’, thus placing them in the service of a wider environmentalist agenda.<sup>87</sup>

The texts included in this thesis merit critical consideration if only because they encourage us to read ecological decline differently, or perhaps more hesitantly. In their

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<sup>84</sup> Garrard, ‘Never too soon, always too late: Reflections on climate temporality’, pp. 1–2.

<sup>85</sup> Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 16.

<sup>86</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 26.

<sup>87</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 27.

disclosure of passivity, however, they also flout the typical expectations of environmental instrumentalism. Meaning that, as Ngai suggests, they can thus ‘also be thought of as allegories for an autonomous or bourgeois art’s increasingly resigned and pessimistic understanding of its own relationship to political action.’<sup>88</sup> In this sense, they drive at the quasi-comedic futility of attempting to diagnose or shape a cultural moment that is still in the midst of unfurling, a critical impulse which might well be seen as emerging from the same anthropocentric desire for control over one’s objects that is the driving factor behind climate change. As Williams warns us: perhaps ‘[t]he strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is th[e] immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products’, such that ‘relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes.’<sup>89</sup> This tendency towards rapid conversion — of thought, ‘consciousness, experience, feeling’ — into ‘fixed, finite, receding forms’ is especially strong, he suggests, in ‘works of art, which really are, in one sense, explicit and finished forms — actual objects in the visual arts, objectified conventions and notations (semantic figures) in literature.’<sup>90</sup>

What makes or keeps these texts ‘present’, per Williams, is ‘specifically active “readings”’, met with a keen attunement to the fact of making art as a ‘formative process, [occurring] within a specific present’, ‘never itself in the past tense.’<sup>91</sup> The emphasis placed on *active reading* here suggests this practice as one with the potential to be ongoingly generative; a promise that literature is always newly available to us, or that there exist new ways of interpreting fixed signs. Following on the trail of Williams’s resistance to ‘formed wholes’, close reading will form a central part of this thesis, and my analysis deliberately offers ‘jarring’ or

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<sup>88</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> Williams, ‘Structures of Feeling’, p. 128.

<sup>90</sup> Williams, ‘Structures of Feeling’, p. 129.

<sup>91</sup> Williams, ‘Structures of Feeling’, p. 129.

anachronistic conceptual pairings that are intended to bring to life the rich questions about extinction that hover at the surface of these texts. In my exploration of ecological anxiety, for instance, I read Julie Hecht's serially anxious, 1990s protagonist alongside Lauren Berlant's 2017 critical work on humourless sovereignty; Joy Williams's darkly short fiction in tandem with de(con)structive theoretical work by Claire Colebrook; elsewhere, Lydia Millet's capitalist-conversion fable together with a 1959 essay 'On Loneliness' by psychoanalyst Frieda Fromm-Reichmann; and Kelly Reichardt's trio of eco-saboteurs alongside Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's now notorious essay, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; Or You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay is About You'.

Criticism itself is perhaps characterised by a fundamental latency, its response always feeling permanently overdue and continually aiming, in its less generous attempts, towards the kind of fixity or consolidation that Raymond Williams describes above. It is perhaps then risking my own admission of critical paranoia to remark upon the fact that this thesis already smacks of *belatedness*; of being simply too little, too late in a contemporary period that is continually shifting and expanding its own responses to climate change. As Sianne Ngai neatly puts it:

[T]he belatedness is one that exists for the literary critic now — which is one reason it is a belatedness oddly specific to our own contemporaneity with the literary works being produced. For what makes criticism or any other cultural production “contemporary” is not so much its rupture with work of the past, but rather its relation to other cultural developments [...] happening “meanwhile & and / at the same time.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 207.

This project has found its contours over a turbulent four years, during which time the surrounding world, its contexts and rhetoric, have continued evolving, often outpacing my own potential — and perhaps the potentiality of criticism more widely — to grapple with or metabolise its developments. Paradoxically, this emergent sociocultural moment has been indexed by a glut of mainstream broadcasting that has shunted nonhuman relations to the forefront of public consciousness, opening up the possibility for a serious refiguring of human-animal relations. This litany includes David Attenborough’s primetime BBC programme, *Extinction* (2020), Greta Thunberg’s *A Year to Change the World* (2021), Netflix’s *Seaspiracy* (2021), the Oscar Winning *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), and even the ‘viral’ series *Tiger King* 2020, productions which seem to co-exist with a political universe wherein the White House has been a hotbed of neo-Nazism and white supremacy, undergirded by a dangerous strain of climate denialism. The trickle-down of this ethical reckoning is felt in a confluence of moments ranging from novel policy developments (President Joe Biden’s pledge to halve U.S. emissions by 2030) to ‘influencer’ culture (the Kardashians’ recent mass-conversion to a ‘plant-based’ diet). In much the same way that Ngai suggests sentiments *like* anxiety or distraction have been ‘perversely integrated’ into capitalist production, the sentimental underpinnings of concepts like ‘sustainability’ and ‘renewability’ are increasingly harnessed by market forces and subsumed into a certain brand of ethical self-care that offers the boon of moral ‘cleanliness’ — lubricating the function of a green capitalist agenda that prioritises adapting to clean or ‘responsible’ consumption over calls for systemic transformational change.<sup>93</sup>

Amid all these consecutive ‘awakenings’, it perhaps feels conceptually or ethically dubious to insist upon funnelling intellectual attention towards the qualities of inertia and impasse that thematically predominate in the critical work that follows. Likewise, one might see

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<sup>93</sup> See Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

fit to question the worth of thinking asserting the necessity for *more ambivalence* at a moment in time when the threat of climate change ostensibly appears to be amping up, buoyed by the renewed sense of exigency that incrementally characterises the public sphere. The ethical imperative of alleviating climate suffering in its current iteration — incrementally taking the form of natural disasters, such as wildfires, drought, hurricanes, mass heatwaves and flash flooding, with deleterious effects for both human and nonhuman species — is coupled with an expanded sense of indebtedness to a future generation (whose energies are captured in recent waves of youth climate strikes), together with increased calls across politicians, policymakers, and journalism for a greater sense of urgency. All of which would seem to contravene the aims of a critical project that calls for slower, less bombastic attentions. At the same time however, much of the new cultural work mentioned above has done little to intervene in the tried and tested logics of ‘more haste’ or to gearshift the earnest tonal commitments that are now well-hewn enough as to constitute a genre in their own right. As its didactic name hints, something like *My Octopus Teacher* — a documentary feature which traces a man’s pursuit of the same female octopus over the course a year in a South African kelp forest — was roundly praised as a ‘heartwarming’ tale of how even the most ‘alien’ animals are much more like ‘us’ than ‘we’ might think. This anthropomorphic feeling is bolstered by the idea that their relational intimacy in fact unwittingly taught him to be *more human* (!), the manifest ‘strangeness’ of the interspecies encounter somehow leaving the discursive category of the ‘human’ more intact.

As the authors of *Against Value* (2016) demand, ‘If the only answer to the question of the value of the arts is an instrumentalised one, then have we not already abandoned the possibility that the arts can resist the predations of instrumentalised thinking?’<sup>94</sup> Likewise, and as Lucy Burnett points out, while many writers and artists claim to oppose the educational

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<sup>94</sup> See Sam Ladkin, Robert McKay and Emile Bojesen (eds.), *Against value in the arts and education* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 16.

imperatives of didacticism or instrumentality, the temptation towards more or less subliminal ‘messaging’ would seem difficult to resist even if the extent of that messaging is merely the affirmation that climate change is ‘bad’. This thesis is motivated by what I hope is a generative critical ambivalence towards the didacticism and instrumentality of environmental literature and ecocriticism, both of which are increasingly tasked with ‘optimising’ certain kinds of decisive political or personal action. As such, it explores the dubious ways in which environmental fictions are wielded to cultivate ‘good’ ecological sentiments — like empathy, hope, compassion and reverence — in an attempt to develop an alternative set of affective coordinates through which climate crisis might be understood.

What kinds of stories are ‘relatable’ — both in the sense of being able to be told, relayed, and being able to ‘relate to’ — is of course, is a vexed question. Though these artworks, made by four white women hailing from the U.S., are united by their critical relegation, received in the main with a lack of public accolade or deemed to be commercial failures, they are not produced or made by marginalised voices, *per se*. Part of eco-disaster’s unintelligibility, its ‘abstraction’ to so many, is intricately linked to the narrowness or insularity of the Euro-American imaginary of climate ‘crisis’ that has produced these texts, all of which share in their whiteness, class, and geographical location. Indeed, the semantic term ‘crisis’, newly popularised in Western media over the past several years, suggests an acute temporal and affective experience that is perhaps not necessarily reflected in the lived experience of the fictionalised American subjects depicted in these texts, who can hardly be said to be ‘oppressed’, as such, by the threat of imminent environmental change. While certainly no stranger to environmental disaster, the speculative fixation on North America as *the* cultural backdrop for apocalypse *par excellence* — a vision dating back to the foundational ‘millenarian overtones’ implicit in the Puritan ‘desire to make a perfect world’ — is a historical and

sentimental ‘problem’ that it perhaps lies beyond the scope of this thesis to (re)solve.<sup>95</sup> In concentrating on the Euro-American context, however, the thesis homes in on a particularly forceful strain of ecological sentiment that also appears hyper-specific to Western discourse. This elevation of affective threat-level can result in inhabitants of the developed world being blinkered to the uneven distribution of environmental harm that perpetuates systemic injustices like environmental racism — often failing to adequately acknowledge the lived proximity of minority populations in the Global North, as well as the Global South, to air pollution and sustained exposure to toxic substances.

The project is also guided and inspired by Ngai’s innovative work in her 2005 book *Ugly Feelings*, whose index of ‘ugly’ affects numbers among them paranoia and anxiety, two governing features of today’s cultural experience of climate change. For Ngai, ugly feelings (and paranoia especially) are characterised by not only by their temporal belatedness but by their durational capacity to *linger*, their tenacity making them (ironically) more critically *sustainable*, in the long term, for navigating political impasses. This same quality of *belatedness* might also be said to infuse the project’s chosen texts which, taken together, range from to 1980 to 2013. Where themes of ecological crisis or decline *are* made explicit, they are often characterised by a linguistic outmodedness that almost broaches the quaint, as exemplified in the charming adherence of Julie Hecht’s protagonist to a vocabulary of climate panic (‘the hole in the ozone layer’, ‘global warming’, ‘the greenhouse effect’) that has now passed out of contemporary parlance; or in the ‘far-out’ railing of *Night Moves*’s tie-dye wearing eco-warriors against a bloated and unjust corporate ‘system’. Notably, Williams cites the example of language as one of the primary processes that exemplifies the structure of feeling, observing that: ‘no generation speaks quite the same language as its predecessors. The difference can be defined in terms of

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<sup>95</sup> See Martha F. Lee, *Earth First! Environmental Apocalypse* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995).



additions, deletions and modifications, but these do not exhaust it. What really changes is something quite general, over a wide range, and the description that often fits the change best is the literary term “style”.<sup>96</sup> In a stylistic sense then, these texts — most of which predate the advent of more formalised taxonomies, terminologies like ‘climate fiction’ or ‘the’ climate change novel — offer something substantially different to the oversaturated categories as they now exist.<sup>97</sup> Motivated as they are by divergent pressures and less clearly formulated urgencies, the significance of these texts lies in their capacity to document or crystallise a peculiar structure of environmental feeling, one that has already been newly consolidated into a vocabulary that is continually evolving, often exhausting its own terminology at an accelerated rate. In their belatedness, they thus offer a significant, generative opportunity to track climate change’s aesthetic expression at a moment in time when it remained an experience ‘in solution’, one that had yet to be so forcefully circumscribed within the public imaginary. Or, as Williams would have it, a ‘social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating.’<sup>98</sup> The idiosyncratic, isolating experiential dimensions of its unfurling will be the particular focus of the chapters on loneliness and anxiety.

These four quite different textual examples are unified, too, by their own temporality which is (in certain cases) almost suffocatingly rooted in the ‘specificity of present being’, as Williams has it, firmly grounded in the mundanity and the now of *this* world rather than any farfetched, futural dystopia.<sup>99</sup> In choosing to focus on texts that offer a different perspective, and by exploring how certain environmental logics already suffuse the most mundane,

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<sup>96</sup> Williams, ‘Structures of Feeling’, p. 131.

<sup>97</sup> Obviously, this is not to say that they write from a position of *unawareness* or ignorance. Certainly, Millet’s involvement with the Center for Biological Diversity and Joy Williams’s writing on environmental ‘issues’, in the essays collected in her 2002 book *Ill Nature*, would both suggest a high-level of sophisticated engagement sustained over many years.

<sup>98</sup> Williams, ‘Structures of Feeling’, p. 132.

<sup>99</sup> Williams, ‘Structures of Feeling’, p. 132.

quotidian, and ‘domestic’ of scenarios and contexts, I aim to expand the generic parameters of ‘the climate novel’ — imaginative parameters which have become incrementally circumscribed in recent years. In this sense, the thesis marks an attempt to intervene in contemporary aesthetic understandings of what a work that is invested in the figure of ecological loss might look like. It also makes an argument *about* what types of text are properly understood as ‘containing’ or promulgating environmentalist idea(l)s, and thus what literary forms can enable and contribute towards less spectacular modes of environmental thinking. As Seymour suggests, many quietly ‘environmentalist artworks [...] may go unrecognized *as environmentalist*, due to environmentalism’s prevailing reputation for seriousness, sentimentality, and the like.’<sup>100</sup> That is not to diminish the magnitude or the specificity of the problems we collectively face, nor is it to denounce the political centrality of ‘classical’ passions like anger to social justice movements. Rather, in arguing for greater recognition of the fact that environmental feeling can be detected in a cross-section of texts that *aren’t* expressly identifiable as environmentalist, the thesis advances an important generic question regarding the current limitations of extinction’s intelligibility. This limit is often crystallised in the tenacious, punitive moral logic of dystopian fictions, many of which fail to imagine how staying with the present — in all its pedestrian, frustrating temporal realities — might also be a generative creative axis.

All four central texts are also united by certain features of authorial demography; they are works produced by four white women, all American, all belonging to the loose category of the ‘boomer’ generation, if such a term can be readily applied here. Each of the texts is also marked by critical oversight that might be best expressed through the monikers of exclusion: ‘neglected’, ‘overlooked’, and ‘under-read’. Williams, for instance, came up at the Iowa Writers’ workshop alongside contemporaries like Raymond Carver, both of whom shared an editor in

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<sup>100</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 32.

Gordon Lish. Despite this, only a short overview of her work's significance has been published in a 2002 critical compendium of *Contemporary American Women Fiction Writers*; although the *New Yorker* printed ten of Hecht's comic stories between 1989–1998, she remains nonetheless a relative commercial outlaw. Excepting Millet's text, which has been subject to some academic treatment, the literary works especially are notable for their almost-total absence from any contemporary body of literary criticism, an exclusion that (reading paranoically) carries its own vexed gendered implications. Excluding the one cinematic example, the three texts are likewise unified by their generic belonging to 'literary fiction', a niche market that appeals to a particular kind of liberal milieu with a pre-existing investment in social issues like climate change, as Schneider-Mayerson suggests. Certain temporal markers are also shared across the three main narrative fictions, all of which emerged sometime between the late 1980s and mid-2000s, prior to the onset of the 2008 financial crash. In taking such an oblique approach towards climate change, the thesis thus also doubles-up as a means of (finally) recovering these authors from the critical neglect often heaped upon creative outliers who are given the dubious accolade of being a 'writers' writer'.

### **'Being disturbed together'**

This thesis approaches the work of art from a robust stance of curiosity, engaging with texts as fundamentally ambivalent, at a moment when it seems the moral investiture in aesthetic works *about* climate change would appear to have generated an overdetermined (and perhaps overzealous) investment in its transformative powers. Powers which are, at the same time, being proactively diminished by chronic structural underfunding, resulting in the systematic institutional devaluation of literary study. The possibility of art's fundamental weirdness – – weird in the sense of its total *in-utility*, its powerlessness, or its failure to glean particular kinds of tangible, real-world 'results' — feels like an augmented 'threat' when pressed upon by the weight of a seismic, destabilising prospect like global ecological annihilation, a horizon that

menaces the sovereign fantasy of human exceptionalism with the removal of its collective milieu. Often, the totalising threat of this *loss* appears to be met with a reactive critical temptation to control those objects that most directly engage or confront it. This is driven, perhaps, by the slightly paranoid insistence that the text should yield specific outcomes in order to be valuable, which is motivated in turn by a deeply reparative conviction in the power of art, and a desire for its continued legitimacy in the ecopolitical fight. According to Lauren Berlant, however, ‘for criticism not to be delusional’, it requires a humbling recognition of ‘how unbearable it is to be nothing before the text’ that is simultaneously an admission of ‘want[ing] to make something different by reading with it, whether in texts or the world.’<sup>101</sup> This commitment to ‘reading with’ also represents a commitment to ‘be[ing] disturbed together’ as Berlant has it, a fundamental recognition of the text’s utter strangeness and intractability, qualities which demand that criticism ‘reinvent how [it] appears, performs, and engages.’<sup>102</sup>

As I argue, there remains generative work to be done in conceding to stuckness or ambivalence *as* specific kinds of knowledge on their own terms — something which these texts admit in myriad ways, through their documentation of subjects trying and failing to make a dent in eco-normativity. As Jack Halberstam suggests, ‘failure [...] offers different rewards [...] And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a shot of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life’, the ‘flip side’ of this positivity being ‘a harsh insistence on personal responsibility’ and personalised actions, rather than an emphasis on systemic change.<sup>103</sup> Following on the trail of Butler’s analysis, this project is invested in destabilising pre-existing affective paradigms, and ‘acceptable’ responses, as well

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<sup>101</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Genre Flailing’, *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* 1 (2018), 156–162 (p. 161).

<sup>102</sup> Berlant, ‘Genre Flailing’, pp. 160–161.

<sup>103</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 3.

as in the function of grief in the collective psychic processing of a seismic event like ecological collapse. Spurred on by the methodology of close reading, this thesis approaches artworks and the aesthetic, by contrast, as fundamentally ambivalent, attending to the critical ‘utility’ of indeterminate feelings in approaching or thinking through climate crisis, while also staying wary of the premise of *value* as such.

Drawing on a confluence of affect theorists and queer scholars (including Berlant, Ahmed, Sedgwick) and the discipline of aesthetics (Ngai), together with the environmental humanities and ecocriticism, this thesis attempts to productively think the attendant affective ‘threats’ of extinction and climate crisis alongside the queasy feelings of dread and disorientation it triggers. The project, which takes place at the nexus between environmental humanities, extinction studies, and affect theory, and psychoanalysis, also builds on the influence of Seymour’s hugely generative work in *Bad Environmentalism* (2018), a book project which aimed to expand the range of environmental affect’s intellectual exploration beyond simply the ‘negative public emotions stoked by environmentalists’ or the ‘emotional distress’ that is prompted by environmental decline, twin poles which have precipitated an affective canon to match.<sup>104</sup> While Seymour’s textual focus largely homed in on the crass and the ribald through playful readings that embraced camp or ‘trashy’ environmental texts in order to ‘disassemble mainstream environmental logics’, my chosen texts engage with environmentalism in ways that are perhaps more sublimated, or oblique.<sup>105</sup> Though my project shares in Seymour’s aspiration to move environmental criticism beyond moralistic binaries of right/wrong, through exploring ‘weak’ or partial environmental feelings, among them loneliness, paranoia, and anxiety, these sentiments of disenchantment do not consistently

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<sup>104</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, pp. 2–3

<sup>105</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 32.

appear in texts that self-identify as ‘environmental’ works per se, and certainly wouldn’t be hailed as mainstays of a contemporary environmental literary canon.

In much the same spirit, the investigative focus of this thesis alights on a sequence of defamiliarising affects, each of the chapters orbits around a specific affect (disconnection, isolation, low-grade anxiety) that, as I will argue, diagnoses a peculiar aspect of the contemporary environmental sensibility. The project’s four chapters each engage with this concept playfully. Whether through the disaffected nonchalance of Joy Williams’s protagonist, whose refusal to take pleasure in upholding her inherited duty towards a domestic animal draws on the inscrutable, Bartlebyan aesthetics Ngai describes; in the unproductive, noncathartic anxiety of Julie Hecht’s environmentally-preoccupied narrator; Lydia Millet’s satirical depiction of a rapacious property developer’s over-easy empathic conversion to the eco-friendly cause; or the overweening, ‘unproductive’ environmentalism of Reichardt’s *Night Moves*, which is characterised by an excessive commitment to ecological action that ultimately attains nothing.<sup>106</sup> All this, I argue, makes affect a diagnostic criterion that is well-suited to exploring certain of the material and conceptual impasses environmentalism currently faces.

### **A baffling selection:**

The first chapter offers a reading of ‘Substance’, a short story by Joy Williams from her 2015 collection *The Visiting Privilege*, which originally appeared in *The Paris Review* in 1998. The story takes place in the immediate aftermath of a suicide and recounts the death’s fallout for a group of bereaved friends, who have been collectively ‘willed’ a baffling selection of his belongings. Among these is a dog, Broom, whom none of them have ever seen before and didn’t know existed. Through this unexpected comic proposition, Williams’s story attempts to manoeuvre

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<sup>106</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 20.

the reader beyond an affective investment in the animal as the precondition of ethical action. For the dog's unwilling recipient, Louise, her reluctant commitment comes to resemble something *like* the momentum of care despite her chronic ambivalence towards the creature and the story's own failure or refusal to *account* — to provide what Freud terms 'an economical characterization of pain' — for what exactly makes Broom 'valuable'.<sup>107</sup> The creature's unruliness in this scenario, his *unaccountability*, opens onto questions of reluctant duty that speak directly to the unquantifiable nature of human-animal entanglement (which manages to keep Williams's protagonist in its thrall despite her relative indifference). Through this productive defamiliarization, the story puts paid to the notion that *more* affect is always the primary condition of investing in nonhuman others. Instead, it articulates a frame wherein care is made possible through a concession to emotional ambivalence that acknowledges the utter strangeness of the animal. Likewise, in its focus on the figure of *survival*, Williams's story explores the concept of indebtedness towards an amorphous future, deftly capturing the future-oriented mode that (over)defines contemporary modes of relating to extinction. The seeming indifference of Williams's story and the characters that populate it to their own self-maintenance or 'flourishing', coupled with their easy coexistence in a lifeworld governed by arbitrary moments of self-destruction, death and decay, makes a significant intervention in materialist and vitalist debates about 'Life' (as defined in the image of *Anthropos*) as an inherent value. In this sense, the story marks a powerful contribution to the work of de-anthropocentric thought.

The second chapter takes as its thematic departure point E.O. Wilson's notion of the Eremocene, his proposed name for 'our' present geological era. In anticipation of the species 'loneliness' we will feel when biodiversity has been qualitatively diminished, the Eremocene

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<sup>107</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 204.

attempts to muster an affective response adequate to the scale of loss implied by the Holocene extinction event. This concept, however, relies on perhaps falsely utopian relational prospects with nonhuman animals, together with an optimised strain of empathy that risks asserting a neocolonial claim over their 'value'. I demonstrate how this logic works through a sustained analysis of Lydia Millet's 2007 novel *How the Dead Dream*, a loosely satirical depiction of a real-estate developer who undergoes a Damascene conversion after he kills a coyote in a road accident, this event springing on him a newfound compassion for animal life. Whereas the majority of academic treatments of the novel approach T.'s pre-conversion corporate greed as the 'true', 'unequivocal' bona fide object of the novel's satire, I argue that Millet accomplishes something altogether more ambiguous. The novel's satire lands on T.'s conversion, too, demonstrating how the concepts of ecological and economic 'value' imbricate one another. This effect creates an ambivalence that is often eroded by overdetermined critical interpretations which praise the novel for its 'conversion' narrative, foregrounding T.'s acquisitive empathy as a lesson in how ecological precarity can 'redeem' even the most hard-hearted of entrepreneurs. Using Ahmed's notion of the affective economy, I trace the troubling proximity between the fiscal concepts of 'value' that thematically predominate in Millet's novel and the concepts of 'rarity' conferred upon nonhuman animals by their prospective or imminent extinction. In this sense, the novel retains a deep-set ambivalence that can in fact be read as a pastiche of liberal good-intentions and excessive faith in empathy. Through a close reading of the figure of 'loneliness', an ill-theorised psychological concept described in Frieda Fromm-Reichmann's 1959 essay on the subject, I explore the affective and federal reserve of Millet's protagonist alongside the novel's depiction of his eco-vigilantism.

The third chapter begins with an extended close reading of a scene from U.S. director Kelly Reichardt's 2013 independent thriller *Night Moves*, her least commercially successful film to date. Reading it alongside a companion essay, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's now-famous essay



on ‘Paranoid and Reparative Reading’, it asks how it might be possible to derive critical sustenance from a film that so painstakingly documents the failure of ‘radical’ environmentalist ideology, colloquially known as ‘monkeywrenching’, to meaningfully alter the status-quo of capitalist normality. As her protagonists plot to blow up an Oregon dam, Reichardt’s film deploys the conventions of the thriller to explore the paranoid construction of environmental knowledge production, alongside the unfurling plot of criminal subterfuge which largely dictates the ‘paranoid mood’ of its affective landscape. As I will demonstrate, it becomes clear there exists an unsettling proximity between the desire for natural liberation that is the protagonists’ common goal, and the oppressive elements of the male characters’ desire for hermeneutic (con)quest, for mastery over their surroundings. Paranoia’s more pernicious aspects — in particular, the controlling complex of *surveillance* — suffuse the atmosphere of Reichardt’s film, demonstrating how even the best of reparative ecological intentions are incompatible with a non-intersectional activism that doesn’t *also* seek to incorporate the interests of marginalised human others. At the same time, in its affective ambiguity Reichardt’s film resists reparative reading, refusing to present a more eco-holistic approach as ‘the’ readymade solution to ecotage’s failures. As the chapter explores, the activists’ fidelity to an eco-traditionalism which belongs to the ‘radicalism’ of an era long past becomes increasingly problematic for the female protagonists of Reichardt’s film, who get caught up in its indiscriminate snare. In this sense, the film is a powerful indictment of the need for lively self-reflexivity to avoid a green politics that is motivated or underpinned by ‘wholly traditional feelings’, as Stuart Hall puts it.<sup>108</sup>

The fourth and final chapter excavates the aesthetics of humourless comedy, using the short stories of Julie Hecht as its textual example. The chapter begins with a sustained reading

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<sup>108</sup> Wendy Brown, ‘Resisting Left Melancholy’, *Boundary 2*, 26 (1999), 19–27 (p. 24).

of environmental earnestness *par excellence*, undertaking a comparative analysis of two environmentally oriented speeches made by Leonardo DiCaprio. This gloss diagnoses a more widespread aesthetic and tonal ‘problem’ of environmental seriousness that has already been an object of generative ecocritical thought for thinkers like Seymour. From there, I turn towards Lauren Berlant’s work on ‘humorless comedy’, reading this with Hecht’s comedic rendition of a green protagonist, a woman who continually finds herself on the edge of an eco-breakdown, assailed by the many ‘toxic’ aspects of normative living. My reading of Hecht’s stories revels in their ambivalent reproduction of what it means to be excessively (and yet righteously) worried by the ecological state of things. Her text is also remarkably ahead of its time, hailing as it does from a sociopolitical moment, prior to the advent of Al Gore’s environmental bellwether, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2008), in which the threat of climate change had yet to be formally crystallised in public discourse. Writing in her 2010 book *Bodily Natures*, Stacy Alaimo suggested that the ‘environmentalist ethos’ was at that time still marked by a ‘pervasive sense of disconnection that casts “environmental issues” as containable, eccentric, dismissible topics’.<sup>109</sup>

As is the case in each of these texts, the emancipatory horizon of political transformation would seem to glimmer just outside the boundary of Hecht’s fiction, though its conditions remain unfulfilled (and seemingly unfulfillable) for her protagonist within the aesthetic frame. Indeed, the same stuckness that pervades Hecht’s text at the level of plot is replicated in the narrative’s commitment to indecision, a trait which is inimical to its ‘natural’ movement, ‘the hallmark’ of which Gerald Prince suggests is ‘assurance’: ‘Narrative [...] lives in certainty [...] and dies from sustained ignorance and indecision’.<sup>110</sup> The chronic ‘deviations’, delays, and comedic hold-ups that are the motor of Hecht’s prose incur a consequent slowing

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<sup>109</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 16.

<sup>110</sup> Gerald Prince, ‘The Disnarrated’, *Style*, 22 (1988), 1–8 (p. 4).

of story-time, the result being the creation of a zone in which not an awful lot *happens*, no matter how desperately she may want it to. The chronic striving and failing of her protagonist to instigate meaningful change not only reflects her impotence, but is also diagnostic of the earlier stage of eco-political ‘crisis’ at which these stories were written. In this sense, Hecht’s writing — together with all the texts featured in the thesis — serves as a poignant (*and funny*) time-capsule for the politically green roads *not* taken. The proleptic irony and *urgency* of its stuckness lies in the fact that certain aspects of this affective and political impasse still predominate, even today. Hecht’s first-person narrator, a persona (re)occupied again and again across multiple fictional projects, thus allows for an intimate exploration of an ecologically minded subject that is less invested in provoking any one specific affective response in its reader, or in converting them to the protagonist’s cause, than it is in cultivating a strange comedy out of her ecological convictions.



## 1. An Unwelcome Gift: The Future as Burden in Joy Williams's 'Substance'

Louise would have preferred anything to the dog, right down to the barbells. Nothing at all would have pleased her even more.<sup>1</sup>

Joy Williams, 'Substance', *The Visiting Privilege*

Outside the windows, the landscape beckons; it isn't a mirage, it's a *Zwang*, as we used to say in school, a duty.<sup>2</sup>

Fleur Jaeggy, *Sweet Days of Discipline*

On 1st June 2017, in alignment with the myopic nationalism of his 'America First' policy, Donald Trump announced America's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord. As though in perverse fulfilment of Kantian moral philosophy, this repudiation was framed as a "solemn duty to protect America and its citizens", to 'relieve' a nation weighed down by 'the Draconian financial and economic burdens' the agreement imposed on the nation.<sup>3</sup> Trump's rationale was grounded in a deontological appeal to the categorical imperative — an unconditional maxim that, justifiable as an *end in itself*, dictates what one *ought* to or should do, and which binds the subject to obey it. One might trace, in the contours of Trump's jingoistic appeal to the *duty* of national easing, a similar commitment to the preservation of neoliberal capitalism that is, ironically, showcased in the mild concessions and solemn managerialism of the agreement itself. The Paris Accord, brokered with the UNFCCC in 2015 (and which includes, at the time of writing, some 196 nation states as signatories) is characterised by its own brand of 'solemn duty'; comprising a vague and binding global commitment to mitigating the worst effects of anthropogenic climate change, the Accord is organised around a collective, global effort to

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<sup>1</sup> Joy Williams, *The Visiting Privilege* (London: Tuskar Rock, 2015), p. 275. All quotations hereafter will be designated by the initials *VP* and relevant page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Fleur Jaeggy, *Sweet Days of Discipline* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Milman, David Smith, and Damian Carrington, 'Donald Trump confirms US will quit Paris climate agreement', *Guardian*, 1 June 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jun/01/donald-trump-confirms-us-will-quit-paris-climate-deal>> [accessed 2 November 2020]

‘accelerate and intensify the actions and investments needed for a sustainable low carbon future.’<sup>4</sup> The pervasive tone of urgency haunting climate change discourse troubles any possibility of contemplating, or confronting it without resorting to what climatologist Mike Hulme has called a ‘language of disaster, catastrophe and terror’.<sup>5</sup> As Lucy Burnett points out, instrumentality has been one of several culprits in the ongoing political framing of climate change as a quantifiable ‘problem’ in need of ‘solving’; in turn, this political frame has had the effect of consolidating the neoliberal agenda of mitigation, such that *mitigation* is almost what climate change has now come to *mean*.<sup>6</sup>

Trump’s withdrawal was met in some quarters with public outcry; on the environmental Left especially, for whom the mere whiff of *suggestion* of withdrawing from the Accord would seem to be tantamount to an ‘end of the world’ scenario. Trump’s refusal to uphold the agreement was itself viewed as a *dereliction* of moral duty by liberal and ‘progressive’ celebrities such as Leonardo DiCaprio, Bette Midler, John Legend, and Ava DuVernay, who roundly decried the decision as ‘shameful’.<sup>7</sup> Former U.S. Vice President and climate saviour Al Gore claimed the action as both ““reckless and indefensible””, one that seriously ‘undermines America’s standing in the world and threatens to damage humanity’s ability to solve the climate crisis in time’.<sup>8</sup> Responding to the incumbent president’s withdrawal, Barack Obama — issuing a ‘rare statement’ — denounced his successor’s actions, claiming that they marked America as one of “a small handful of nations that *reject the future*” (emphasis mine).<sup>9</sup> The implication being not

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<sup>4</sup> ‘The Paris Agreement’, *United Nations*, <<https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/what-is-the-paris-agreement>> [accessed 5 September 2021]

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Burnett, ‘Firing the climate canon—a literary critique of the genre of climate change’, *Green Letters*, 22 (2018), doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2018.1472027 (p. 3) [accessed 9 December 2020]

<sup>6</sup> Burnett, pp. 1–3.

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Rubin, ‘Celebrities Blast Trump’s “Shameful” Plan to Withdraw From Paris Climate Accord’, *Variety*, 1 June 2017, <<https://variety.com/2017/biz/news/celebrities-react-to-paris-accord-withdraw-1202450934/>> [accessed 12 November 2020]

<sup>8</sup> Rubin.

<sup>9</sup> Milman, Smith and Carrington.

only that any such rejection is an unconscionably “bad” move but, furthermore, that the nation state *ought* to have a duty towards ‘the future’ in the abstract or — more accurately — that futurity is already the nation’s foundational premise. This forward thrust is perhaps best enshrined in the Declaration of Independence’s commitment to *Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness*, an affective horizon whose pursuit is not easily disentangled from futurity, as Sara Ahmed suggests. ‘[T]o pin hopes on the future is to imagine what lies ahead of us’, she writes.<sup>10</sup> And, given the ‘promissory’ nature of the future, it comes as little surprise that the prospect of futurity is also bound up with what Ahmed calls ‘the promise of happiness’, ‘which we glimpse in the unfolding of the present’: ‘[t]he desire for happiness sends happy objects forth, creating lines and pathways in their trail, as if we might find happiness by following these paths’.<sup>11</sup>

As Ahmed argues, to the extent that happiness (and hence the future) serves as a wholesome cultural object, a moral horizon towards which we ought to be *willingly* oriented, happiness itself can appear ‘promissory or nostalgic’ by its very nature, ‘and is, consequently, imagined as being elsewhere than the present’.<sup>12</sup> As Ahmed points out, however, although happiness readily ‘sticks’ to the future, the future cannot always be promissory. When happiness has fallen away, or been lost in transit, the future can feel permanently embittered, haunted by a nostalgia for what is no longer.<sup>13</sup> What about those instances where what the future *has in store* is undesirable, or holds only the promise of distress or alarm? Today’s environmental present is characterised not just by the wide-ranging perturbations of climate change, but by the chronic depletion of the biosphere, acidification of the oceans and a sharp acceleration of extinction events. Increasingly, we find ourselves grappling with the apparent (in)security of life (where ‘life’

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<sup>10</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 160.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 160.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, pp. 160–161.

suggests not only the project of *human* but nonhuman survival) as a biological reality, one that might not just keep chugging along indefinitely. Greeted by such lousy prospects, how can the future remain a ‘happy object’? How to consider a future that holds something unpleasant in store not only for *us* — those generations that will likely evade the worst materialisation of its onslaught — but for those ‘future generations’ that are the putative concern of the political?

As Claire Colebrook observes, notwithstanding the planetary scope of the ‘problem’ that is anthropogenic climate change, imposing a ‘state of exception’ (the phrase utilised by Giorgio Agamben to diagnose scenarios in which basic democratic freedoms, enshrined by the law, are curtailed in the very service of ‘defending’ it) in the name of the environment remains relatively low among state priorities.<sup>14</sup> Agamben was duly critical of the sovereign’s power to suspend all law in what it decreed to be a ‘state of emergency’, since precisely the fungibility of that term (‘emergency’) has historically allowed for some of the most drastic breaches of human rights. On the other hand, Agamben also perceived something revelatory within the state of exception; namely, to the extent that it enacts a suspension of the law, it exposes the very artificiality of law *qua* law, allowing us to see through it as constructed, rather than given.<sup>15</sup> Just what would it take for our collective priorities to be reshuffled such that a concern for the nonhuman, or ecology more broadly, warranted ‘emergency’ status? Is it, as Colebrook asks, ‘possible to see the geological and inhuman forces of climate change as presenting an urgency that both suspends the law *and* exposes the way in which the law has constituted its domain of application [...] if this is so, how does one politicise or legislate times beyond the horizon of man?’<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Claire Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis, Not Now: Why Anthropogenic Change Is Not Really Human’, *Oxford Literary Review*, 34 (2012), 185-209, (p. 186).

<sup>15</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis, Not Now’, p. 187.

<sup>16</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis, Not Now’, p. 186.



What might it look like to have a ‘duty’ towards inhuman forces? Let alone a duty towards ‘future’ others, both human and nonhuman? According to Kantian moral philosophy: ‘If duty is a conception that is to have any import and real legislative authority for our actions, it can only be expressed in categorical imperatives and not at all in hypothetical imperatives’.<sup>17</sup> Whereas ends-based hypothetical imperatives are subject to the changeable heteronomy of an agent’s will, the categorical imperative requires obedience to a ‘supreme principle’ or ‘truth’ that is (as *The X-Files* slogan assures us) detectable ‘out there’, and founded in reason alone.<sup>18</sup> Though it would seem fairly self-evident that one’s *duty* should gravitate towards the planet, or that we *do* have a duty both to biodiversity and to ‘future generations’, determining the categorical *why* of this duty proves difficult without appealing to instrumental rubrics (that climate change is simply a ‘problem’ needing to be ‘solved’, as is Burnett’s concern) *or* stumbling into the logical trap of anthropocentrism, wherein the earth is collapsed into a mere backdrop for the machinations of *Anthropos* — worthy of saving only because it is ‘our’ common dwelling.<sup>19</sup>

Considering an incipient ethical vocabulary with which to approach environmental crisis, Colebrook conjectures whether we might be able to productively extend our current terms to encompass the rather ‘awkward problem’ of climate change.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately she concludes that such a foray would be a relative impossibility since ‘[n]one of the terms of our ethical vocabulary — justice, fairness, respect, forgiveness, hospitality or virtue — is up to the task’.<sup>21</sup> Were we to expand the reach of our current vocabulary — a vocabulary that, she has asserted elsewhere, is fundamentally humanist — to embrace ‘life’ in its most generic sense (be it notions of ‘respecting’ the planet, being ‘indebted’ to the future, or having a ‘duty’ towards generations to

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<sup>17</sup> Roger Scruton, *Kant: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Scruton, *Kant: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Claire Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, *New Formations*, 92 (2017), 102–119.

<sup>20</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis’, p. 185.

<sup>21</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis’, p. 185.

come), the resultant outcome of such generosity would not necessarily generate a ‘successful’ nor effective environmentalist politics.<sup>22</sup> Such terminology typically falls short, in part because of its exceptionalism, which troubles the possibility of easy application outside the jurisdiction of the human, since this rhetoric typically imagines only humans as capable of such ethical imagination. The notion of justice, for instance, immediately becomes problematic when we take into consideration that certain natural agencies — while doubtless entering political space and exerting their force on human beings — do not as-yet possess any moral or legalistic status per se.<sup>23</sup>

This reluctance to stretch our interpersonal vocabulary also, Colebrook suggests, forms part of a broader mistrust that has calcified within theory over the past few decades, towards any approach that seeks to ground itself unabashedly in strategies of ‘calculation, management, [or] instrumental reason’.<sup>24</sup> For Colebrook, this defamation of reason and instrumental thinking has culminated in an almost-total severing of ethics from knowledge, a detachment which, she points out, doesn’t hold in an era where one of the dominant threats to the continuation of life as ‘we’ know it relies on allocating at least a modicum of faith in contemporary science.<sup>25</sup> (As she points out, those who would contest the influence of anthropogenic behaviours on the environment are always quick to deploy a margin of ‘reasonable’ doubt as grounds for de-legitimizing any interventionist approach).<sup>26</sup> To rest ethics upon an appeal to knowledge seems, in the case of climate instability at least, like a partial inevitability given that the strategies we *ought* to implement to avert its worst effects (the reduction of carbon emissions, divestment of fossil

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<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere, in *Sex after Life*, Colebrook ventures a definition of ethics as ‘the problem of forming oneself’, a project she considers to be fundamentally anthropocentric in its scope.

<sup>23</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis’, p. 187.

<sup>24</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis’, p. 185.

<sup>25</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis’, p. 185.

<sup>26</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis’, p. 186.

fuels, ‘sustainable’ investment in ‘green’ energies) are, generally-speaking, predicated on appeals to scientific certainties.

To Colebrook, viewed through the shrewd lens of deconstruction, it may well be self-evident that such ethical language games (hinging around idealistic notions of justice, fairness, respect, forgiveness, hospitality, or virtue) have already perished — that such wordplay is now redundant, or simply isn’t up to scratch. Despite Colebrook’s concern about its potential to exacerbate the problem, and despite the inertia that continues to dog climate change policy, the ethical and sentimental lexicon of duty endures. A 2017 *Guardian* article, for instance, saw Theresa May evince Britain’s neo-colonial ‘duty’ to help ‘developing’ nations hit by climate change, describing it as a ‘clear moral imperative’.<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere, Pope Francis’s 2015 ‘encyclical’ proffered that while ‘each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, [...] it also has the *duty* to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations’ (emphasis mine).<sup>28</sup> The suggestion being that, within contemporary sociopolitical discourse at least, this neo-Kantian posture shows few signs of abating.

Duty’s persistence in the mouths of politicians and cultural thinkers, often arriving under the guise of a duty to ‘protect’ or enshrine a future consecrated to the ‘next generation’, ought to come as no surprise. As Lee Edelman contends in his anti-assimilationist work on queer negativity, what constitutes the political field is precisely the spectre of the future (reproductive

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<sup>27</sup> Theresa May, ‘It’s Britain’s duty to help nations hit by climate change’, *Guardian*, 12 December 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/12/theresa-may-uk-green-economy>> [accessed 10 August 2021]

<sup>28</sup> *Laudato Si’ of the Holy Father Francis, On Care for Our Common Home* (Rome: Vatican Press, 2015), p. 49, <[http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si\\_en.pdf](http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf)> [accessed 1 September 2020]

futurism) and, accordingly, rejecting the future would entail a rejection of the political.<sup>29</sup>

According to Edelman, the political sphere works continually to affirm and authenticate a social order which it intends to transmit to ‘the future’ in the form of its inner Child, such that the child becomes the tacit horizon of every manifestation of politics, as well as the beneficiary of every political intervention.<sup>30</sup> Writing in *Against Life* — their response to ‘contemporary culture’s inability to think ethics and politics outside of [the figure of] life’ — Alastair Hunt and Stephanie Youngblood contend that we are all, to a greater or lesser extent, ‘subjects of a *culture of life*’, a term that has its roots in a pronouncement made in 1993 by Pope John Paul II on the tarmac of a Colorado airport.<sup>31</sup> As they put it: ‘the figure of “life” exerts a pressure on our thinking attention to reality comparable to [bodily] addiction’.<sup>32</sup> More than this, they suggest that to the extent that ‘the endorsement of life is the price of our entry into social intelligibility, we are all fundamentally for life’.<sup>33</sup>

That duty can operate simultaneously in the jingoistic service of national sovereignty *and* the Leftist cause of combatting extinction points, perhaps, towards the authoritarian logic that resides at its etymological root. This is captured in what the Swiss writer Fleur Jaeggy describes in the German as ‘a *Zwang*’; a masculine noun that means at once ‘force, compulsion’ (in the sense of putting pressure, against someone’s will); ‘compulsion, irresistible urge’ (as in an irresistible *inner urge*); and constraint (as in restriction).<sup>34</sup> Like its English counterpart, *Zwang* harbours a semantic confusion that hampers our ability to determine from whence this

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<sup>29</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Alastair Hunt and Stephanie Youngblood, eds., *Against Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Hunt and Youngblood, *Against Life*, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Hunt and Youngblood, *Against Life*, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Zwang’, in *The Cambridge Dictionary* [online], <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/german-english/zwang>> [accessed 5 February 2021]

compulsion might arise: whether its pull emanates from the inside or from without, perhaps exerted by the landscape itself. In the notion of a subject acting in accordance with a compulsion, possibly *against* their own or against someone's else's will, there is the trace of disordered or disorderly willing that is also present in Sara Ahmed's sense of 'willfulness'. As she writes here: 'Willfulness is a diagnosis of the failure to comply with those whose authority is given [...] Willfulness is thus compromising; it compromises the capacity of a subject to survive, let alone flourish.'<sup>35</sup>

In this confusion over who or what exactly stimulates 'our' collective sense of duty towards life's preservation, or our moral sense of its intrinsic 'goodness', there also emerges a corollary confusion over what it might mean to respond ethically to the injunction to survive (and flourish), in the face of unappealing odds. In this chapter, I want to turn towards the figure of reluctant duty, and towards the notion of a 'willful' investment in *life itself*: namely the peculiar duty towards the future, and towards what Colebrook determines as 'the necessary maintenance of oneself'.<sup>36</sup> Through instigating a close reading of 'Substance', a short story by the American writer Joy Williams, which first appeared in *The Paris Review* in 1998 and was reprinted in 2004's *Honored Guest: Stories*, the chapter will explore how Williams's work stages an intervention in ways of talking and thinking about environmental loss.<sup>37</sup> Put more specifically, I am interested in what

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<sup>35</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Sex After Life: Essays on Extinction Vol. 2* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2014), p. 138.

<sup>37</sup> The story is collected in the 2015 collection *The Visiting Privilege* (which saw 13 new stories published, alongside 33 collected), the publication of which may itself have served as a gesture of — or, indeed, perhaps was precipitated by — a critical re-appraisal of Williams's work. This includes the novels *State of Grace* (1973), *The Changeling* (1978), *Breaking and Entering* (1988), *The Quick and the Dead* (2000), a book of essays, *Ill Nature* (2002), together with the short story collections *Taking Care* (1982), *Escapes* (1990), *Honored Guest* (2004) and *99 Stories of God* (2013). Despite coming up alongside Iowa workshop contemporaries like including Richard Yates and Raymond Carver, authors who went on to attain stratospheric ascent in the American cultural firmament; Williams's work (much like her person) remains notoriously hard to track down. Notwithstanding a career spanning some fifty years (and despite being hailed by Neel Mukherjee as 'the greatest living master of the short story'), she remains by all accounts something of a subterranean figure. This anonymity is frequently chalked up to the dubious

her story has to say about what it means to undertake eco-ethical action, or to take seriously a commitment to survival (in particular *nonhuman* survival), while also remaining purposively ambivalent towards it. Briefly, ‘Substance’ documents how its central protagonist, Louise, becomes grudging custodian to a companion animal given — or *willed* — to her following the suicide of her close friend, Elliot. The story opens with the world-shaking event of Elliot’s death, which leaves in its trail a sequence of ‘gifts’ or ‘bequests’ around which the narrative’s minimal action is organised. All the objects are marked by their unfamiliarity (a wristwatch none of them have seen before, a pair of worn silk pajamas, a set of barbells), their lack of symbolic clarity causing a profound sense of disturbance among his friends (‘they could not understand what he had been attempting to say’ [VP, 278]). Most troubling among these is Elliot’s dog, Broom, an animal none of them have ever seen, and cannot recall ever having been mentioned before. The story navigates the fallout of their collective grief, as it unfolds in tandem with the fates of these willed objects, most of which (excepting Broom) will have been discarded, in a mass dereliction of duty, by the story’s close.

It is worth noting at this juncture that ‘Substance’ doesn’t deal explicitly *with* or isn’t explicitly *about* extinction. Nor is it *about* ecological disaster, or even *about* geological epochs per se. That said, one might argue that any story taking place in the geological ‘moment’ of the late twentieth or early twenty-first century — ratified formally by the International Commission on Stratigraphy as the Holocene, but now widely held to be within the purview of ‘the Anthropocene’, depending where you stake your Golden Spike — comprises an epoch in which all life’s *survival* is marked by being under unilateral threat. Notwithstanding the ‘political unconscious’ of ‘Substance’, as Fredric Jameson would term it, the species it depicts — a

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accolade of being a ‘writer’s writer’. See Neel Mukherjee, ‘The Visiting Privilege: New and Selected Stories’, *Guardian*, 26 November 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/26/the-visiting-privilege-new-and-selected-stories-by-joy-williams-review>> [accessed 6 September 2021]

‘medium-sized’ domestic dog — wouldn’t appear to be at immediate risk of extinction within (or extraneous to) Williams’s diegesis, though things admittedly get dicey when someone floats the idea of taking him to a ‘no-kill facility’ which, it transpires, allows unwanted animals only a two-week grace period to attract a new family before eliminating them (*VP*, 280).<sup>38</sup> And yet, in its attention to small moments of decay — the entropy associated with death, ageing, grief, annihilation, and loneliness, that typifies so much of Williams’s fiction — the story contains some of the raw materials required for thinking about extinction; a phenomenon whose thematics Colebrook has described elsewhere as being bound up with a ‘sense of depletion, decay, mutation and exhaustion’.<sup>39</sup>

As Colebrook would have it, the ‘possibility of extinction has always been a latent figure in textual production’.<sup>40</sup> Extinction is arguably a latent figure in Williams’s own textual output; if not fallen out of print altogether, many of her titles have now been relegated by a ‘fulfilment services’ culture to ‘print-on-demand’. In making an argument for the significance of thinking the dynamics of extinction with and through Williams’s work, I am thus also making an adjacent argument about its ecological significance; namely that it constitutes an undervalued contribution to the ‘canons’ of both environmental literature and human-animal studies, one that is worthy of recuperation. Primarily, by thinking Williams’s story alongside Colebrook’s claims about the conceptual impasses in approaching the dynamics of extinction, the chapter aims to demonstrate how Williams’s stories speak to the questions of obligation, value and ‘survival’ that are within the purview of extinction. Whereas Colebrook appears to be hung up on the ‘unthinkability’ of human extinction, gathering around the figure of anthropogenic climate change in particular, her

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<sup>38</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981).

<sup>39</sup> Colebrook, ‘Critical Climate Change’, in *Sex After Life*.

<sup>40</sup> Colebrook, ‘Critical Climate Change’, in *Sex After Life*.

arguments nevertheless open onto broader networks of thought which also allow for a consideration of biodiversity loss — the extinction of *nonhuman* species — an ‘unpleasant’ fallout that is inseparable from the problem of climate catastrophe.

Broadly speaking, Williams’s stories take up a stance of *reluctance* or nonchalant ambivalence towards the upkeep of human life, which is coupled here with the less-than-enthusiastic commitment of her main protagonist, Louise, to sustaining Elliot’s dog. Such hesitancy is perhaps ‘inscribed in the very texture of the gift’ which, according to Derrida, always risks slipping into being a ‘burden’: “The gift is not transparent; it is *ambivalent*, and this ambivalence explodes in a number of lexical forms [...]: we give a gift, but we also give a slap or an order, we *render* a visit, we *render* homage, we *render* service, even if it is the first time, as if each one of us senses an originary debt to the other; gift means offering but also poison.”<sup>41</sup> While Marcel Mauss cynically viewed the practice of the gift as ‘the ruse of a calculating reason’, a self-interested structure organised around anticipating ‘restitution’, or counter-gift, for Derrida the ‘impossibility’ of the gift derives precisely in this paradoxical interplay of willing and unwilling, obligation and volition.<sup>42</sup> “[T]he gift should not create a debt or the obligation [...] the obligation is not to feel obliged, it’s a “dutile duty.”<sup>43</sup> As we see here, the language of duty also infiltrates the language of the ‘gift’. Indeed, to the extent that a gift enjoins us to a cycle of obligations (producing, as is the case with duty, ‘*constraint in the recipient*’) it aligns with the ethical impasses of ‘custody’, ‘intention and volition’, and ‘will’ that inhere in the confusions Colebrook describes; what are, for Derrida, the ‘problems’ of the gift might also be the *problems* of extinction.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, and unlike the Kantian imperative, the gift is defined by its utter *irrationality*, its

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<sup>41</sup> Charles Champetier, ‘Philosophy of the Gift: Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger’, *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 6 (2001), 15–22 (p. 17).

<sup>42</sup> Champetier, ‘Philosophy of the Gift’, p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> Champetier, ‘Philosophy of the Gift’, p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> Champetier, ‘Philosophy of the Gift’, p. 16



incalculability; something which makes it a useful figure through which to unpick what might enjoin someone to care for a gift they didn't ask for (and perhaps didn't want) in the first place.

Given that Williams's story orbits around a *bequest* grudgingly received, and around the action of bequeathing more broadly speaking, there is a sense in which it is already invested in the questions that dominate extinction discourse: questions regarding 'our' collective orientation towards the preservation of 'life' itself (which is often equated solely with the preservation of *Anthropos*) and the preservation of the earth (which is often viewed as 'valuable' inasmuch as it is recognised a resource for *Anthropos*, 'our' common home). What do we owe the future? Or those beings that exceed our own lifetime? What if we were to understand the future as something that might be inherited grudgingly, as opposed to enthusiastically? If we re-oriented ourselves towards it as a direction to be approached with something like caution or ambivalence? Significantly, the given object (and hence the object of *duty*) in 'Substance' is a nonhuman animal. Though Broom is framed as a 'gift', in a marked departure from 'normal' environmental affect and how it operates, he fails to exert any clear-cut affective pull over the narrative's protagonists. His total failure to make himself intelligible to the group, who cannot even remember his having pre-existed Elliot's suicide, also raises radical questions about the kind of charismatic presence or 'likeability' that is an expectation of even fictionalised animals, for whom qualities of 'cuteness', or the ability to induce *eunoia* (an overall feeling of wellbeing or goodwill), often determine or validate their inclusion in narrative lifeworlds. The story thus suggests the possibility of taking an ethical stance towards non-human life that is organised around something *other* than emotive appeals. In so doing, it points towards what kinds of ethical response towards the nonhuman might be possible *outside* the commanding sentimental figure of affection. Through the benevolent grudgingness with which this 'gift' is borne and cared for, Williams's story intervenes in ways of thinking around contemporary logics of duty; importantly, it also allows us to track

these as they relate to an immediately familiar, nonhuman lifeform. Through this grudging custodial transaction — which takes place in a fictional universe wherein care for an animal is shown to be possible *despite* its apparent incalculability — Williams’s story deftly engages with the macro logics of extinction, albeit at the micro-scale.

It has long been observed by scholars that the prospect of the future tends to hamper our attention to the here and now. This problem (namely, our incapacity to adequately body forth the present) is laid out by Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future*: ‘the present in this society, and in the physical and psychic dissociation of the subjects who inhabit it [...] is inaccessible directly, is numb, habituated, empty of affect [...] It is this present moment — unavailable to us for contemplation in its own right because the sheer quantitative immensity of objects and individual lives it comprises is untotalizable and hence unimaginable.’<sup>45</sup> As Jameson suggests, ‘[e]laborate strategies of indirection are therefore necessary if we are somehow to break through our monadic insulation and to “experience”, for some first and real time, this “present”, which is after all all we have’.<sup>46</sup> Such ‘strategies of indirection’ have a bearing on my reading of Williams’s story as an *indirect* way of approaching the problem of extinction. If mankind’s status as a ‘geological force’ has, as Colebrook contests, transformed its environmental milieu from a ‘pure earth’ into a cyborg-like fusion of organic and inorganic matter, such that our habitat now resembles ‘an imbricated man-world complex’, then this realisation means rejigging not just our lived relations to our milieu in a behavioural sense, but also to the conceptual trappings of our own existence, in the sense of how we *read* or interpret its predicaments.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 288.

<sup>46</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 288.

<sup>47</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis, Not Now’, p. 198.

If it is the case, as Colebrook argues, that man is no longer a rational animal existing within a bounded milieu, but rather ‘a geological event’, then any effective confrontation of this fact demands ‘not a shift in extensity (including more, respecting more, furthering our historical imagination) but a shift in *intensity*’, though what form this ‘intensity’ might take goes unspecified.<sup>48</sup> Extinction as it affects biodiversity (the term used to describe the sprawling network of species and habitats that is mined as ‘natural capital’) is often conventionally affiliated with abstraction, owing perhaps to its grounding in the notion of the ecosystem which, as Elizabeth Grosz suggests, already ‘implies a kind of higher-order unity or encompassing totality’ that is connected, in turn, to those processes of ‘exchange and “natural balance” [that are] counterpart to the notion of a global economic and informational exchange system (which emerged with the computerization of the stock exchange in the 1970s).’<sup>49</sup> Perhaps an outcome of this totalizing scale, fiction is often properly considered ‘ecologically-minded’ only to the extent that it deals more or less *explicitly* with environmental representation, where the ‘environmental’ is taken to imply writing about ‘wilderness’ or the ‘natural’ landscape. Writing in 1995, Lawrence Buell enumerates the ‘potentially inclusive *and* exclusive’ criteria that determines what might comprise ‘the broad sweep and cranky hyperfocus of [...] an environmentally oriented work’: ‘1. *The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history [...]* 2. *The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest [...]* 3. *Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation [...]* 4. *Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.*’<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis, Not Now’, p. 189.

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, ‘Bodies–Cities’, in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. by Beatriz Colomina (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), pp. 241–254 (pp. 242–243).

<sup>50</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination. Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 7–8.

At a stretch, Williams's story might fit into the second of these categories in its sustained focus on a nonhuman animal, despite also featuring myriad human entanglements. That said, it takes place mostly in a domestic setting that cannot be easily classified as 'environmental' according to rubric laid out above. And, furthermore, any attempt to extrapolate from the dynamics of the domestic creaturely to a wider human relation to 'biodiversity' risks reducing the complexities of those entanglements to the vicinity of our backyards. For Colebrook however, 'extensity' (a 'reaching' apparatus responsible for the systemic failure of our temporal imaginaries), involves a harmful *dilation* of perspective that is an enabling condition for man's panoramic view of himself ('him', here, being presumably the white, Western subject) as an epochal creature. As she writes here: 'The Anthropocene epoch is possible [only] because man is epochal in his capacity to take all the world as his own, and epochal in his capacity to step back from that ownership and view the world as such'.<sup>51</sup> This myopic self-enclosure emerges out of an abstracted, scaled-up view of the world 'in general' that qualifies man to see both the world entire and the 'complexity of its living systems' as reducible to the environs of his own life.<sup>52</sup> Extrapolating, this demand for intensity might begin with how we perceive the *present* geological moment through which we are currently living — a moment that might be conceived of in terms of Lauren Berlant's 'crisis ordinariness', wherein the horizon of an 'apocalyptic' future no longer feels quite so distant but is already immanent in the world, as it currently exists. If we cannot think culturally or critically about extinction without also descending into the wormhole of extensity, wherein temporal logics of deep time and far-flung futurity — logics that would seem to stymie, rather than invigorate political action — seem to prevail, then perhaps attending to aesthetics that eschew the spectacular imaginary might be generative in loosening that 'totalising stranglehold of the future-oriented imagination', as Colebrook puts it.<sup>53</sup> Might approaching

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<sup>51</sup> Colebrook, 'Not Symbiosis', p. 197.

<sup>52</sup> Colebrook, 'Not Symbiosis', pp. 190–193.

<sup>53</sup> Colebrook, 'Anti-Catastrophic Time', p. 103.

extinction through strategies of indirection, through a non-dystopian literature that has no vested interest in adhering to its ‘extensive’ representational logics, then be a generative terrain?

The shift in *intensity* Colebrook describes is especially pertinent to the scalar project of Williams’s fiction, which couples a simultaneous investment in ‘the volatility of the present’ with the peculiar *intensity* of the short story form.<sup>54</sup> Developing an (eco)critical practice that embraces said intensity (as well as the more deliberative methodological scrutiny of the kind that is involved in close reading) is also vital if we are to embark upon any serious consideration of extinction, and what it might require of us. If this seems like an overstatement, then we should bear in mind the importance Colebrook ascribes to thinking *against* the grain of the catastrophic imaginary, and its micro-managerial handle on the future — she advocates instead for remaining in the ‘volatility, risk-laden, catastrophe-poised and unpredictable nature of the present’.<sup>55</sup> In this sense, Williams’s fiction forms a fertile testing ground for a playful methodological experiment exploring what happens when we try to slot ‘domestic’ encounters (the discovery of a friend’s corpse, say, or the inheritance of a pet you didn’t know he had) into the imaginary of deep loss more commonly associated with the demise of species. Through careful attention to the crisis ordinariness at work in Williams’s story — one of many which stage moments of interspecies encounter between human and nonhuman animals — I hope to open up some of the ways in which the seemingly intangible logics of extinction already permeate the quotidian.

I will begin, firstly, by attending to the ‘irrational’ figure of suicide which marks the opening of ‘Substance’. From there, I will consider the function of the gift in Williams’s story, and in particular the dog, Broom. Finally, I will turn towards the structural aspects of her narrative which, I will argue — in its fidelity to the temporality of the *present*, also manifest

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<sup>54</sup> Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, p. 103.

<sup>55</sup> Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, p. 109.

through the semantic implications of ‘the gift’ — enables the reader to grapple with the ‘volatility’ of the now, rather than capitulating to the seductive totality of ‘the future’. In their unschmaltzy reverence for the nonhuman, Williams’s stories are, arguably, already invested in the project of de-anthropocentrising the cultural imaginary. Like many of her stories, ‘Substance’ poses a challenge to human exceptionalism in its attention to the *experience* of nonhuman subjects; as well, in its apparent undermining of human survival (what Colebrook describes as ‘the necessary maintenance of oneself’) — at the individual level, anyway — as something that is only ever shown to be ambiguously worth pursuing.<sup>56</sup> As Rebecca Bengal writes in a profile of Williams for *Vogue* magazine: ‘With lightning clarity, with dark, delightful wit, [her fictions] upend the notion of an anthropocentric universe. They acknowledge the presence of mystery and grace and our comically disproportionate human concerns’.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, in its focus on shady, dispossessed subjects who have it economically or socially tough, or those who have, if not actively ‘dropped out’ of normative society, would seem always to be just on the cusp of repudiating it entirely, her fiction points towards the possibility of self-destruction as a means of productively thinking about what might emerge from, or after it.<sup>58</sup> As Rosellen Brown puts it, in a rare critical assessment of Williams’s contribution to contemporary fiction, these marginal figures consist of: ‘Derelicts and thieves, mismarried men and their terrified wives — these are rarely people with a place in their towns or neighborhoods who’ve somehow lost their way. They seem to be born spiritually on the lam, living their clammy lives in a watery, vegetation-laden, untended-feeling place [...] in ineffective shade’.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps the closest Williams comes to

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<sup>56</sup> As well as ‘Substance’, other examples of this ambivalence towards survival crop up in ‘Lu-Lu’, ‘Honored Guest’, ‘The Last Generation’ and ‘Rot’. Attention to the experience of nonhuman subjects is also a feature of these stories, as well as ‘Congress’, and many others.

<sup>57</sup> Rebecca Bengal, ‘A Mysterious and Unparalleled Vision: Joy Williams on Her New and Collected Stories’, *Vogue*, 2 December 2015, <<https://www.vogue.com/article/joy-williams-author-interview-the-visiting-privilege-short-story-collection>> [accessed 6 September 2021]

<sup>58</sup> Williams shares this demographic focus with the work of director Kelly Reichardt, whose film *Night Moves* will be the case study for the thesis’s third chapter.

<sup>59</sup> Rosellen Brown, ‘Rosellen Brown Discovers Joy Williams’, *The Women’s Review of Books*, 16, (1999), p. 33.

*accounting* for a core thematic in her fiction comes in the form of an introductory note, published in *The Best American Short Stories of 1995*, which accompanies ‘Honored Guest’ — another story that is also ‘about’ suicide, this time contemplated by an eleventh grader with a dying mother, who goes on to conclude that self-annihilation is altogether *tragic*, not in the *Trauerspiel* sense, but in the sense of its being simply too *corny*: ‘It was seriously not cool’ (*VP*, 227). Here, driving at the dormant heart of her fiction, Williams writes: “‘All art is about nothingness: our apprehension of it, our fear of it, its approach’”.<sup>60</sup>

### **The necessary maintenance of oneself**

That a suicide marks the opening of Williams’s story seems a fitting entry point for thinking about the peculiar self-destructiveness of the Anthropocene epoch, a procedure Colebrook describes in terms of a ‘violent symbiosis (or “sym-thanatosis”)’ whereby the ‘the human [has become] not so much an event within life as a rupturing in the very figure of life’ itself.<sup>61</sup> After all if, as she suggests, ‘[t]he Anthropocene is a threshold at which all ‘our’ concepts of horizon, milieu, ethos and polity are voided’ then ‘our dwelling is no longer inhabitation, nor do we partake in an organic interdependence or ecology.’<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Colebrook formulates a direct correlation between suicide, as the act of ‘a body turning against itself, taking itself as an object within life’ and the logic of extinction as a ‘process of mutation — still necessary for the species, but one that overtakes the species beyond its own sense or perception of species life’.<sup>63</sup>

The neo-Kantian implications of choosing one’s own death are inscribed to the extent that the subject is inevitably ‘structured by normativity’ and by the fact of their participation in a

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<sup>60</sup> Brown, ‘Rosellen Brown Discovers Joy Williams’, p. 33.

<sup>61</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis’, p. 188.

<sup>62</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis’, p. 188.

<sup>63</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis’, p. 206.

social world which means, consequently, that the will to extinguish oneself cannot help but be entangled with ‘a world of others and therefore with an essential respect for the human’.<sup>64</sup> The designation of suicide as an affront against life, as it were, relies too on a Kantian premise that it demonstrates disregard not just for one’s own individual life but also for humanity entire.<sup>65</sup> As Colebrook puts it: ‘I am always already a member of the human community, and therefore cannot choose to end my life without extending that desire for extinction to all other humans’.<sup>66</sup> It worth noting here, of course, that Colebrook is writing as a white, Western woman to whom the category of ‘humanity’ (and hence survival) is, to quote her, ‘always already’ easily accessible. And that while destroying one’s own being may, in the context of Colebrook’s theoretical provocation at least, comprise an essentially anti-normative act, such ‘radical’ self-destruction would hardly hold the same (al)lure nor consolation for those struggling with disordered mental health at an individual, interpersonal level. Likewise, for marginalised others whose survival is ‘always already’ contested — as evidenced by the ongoing and systematic exclusion of racialised, gender non-conforming, and differently-abled people from ‘membership of the *human* community’, a figure which so often (as Colebrook herself observes) takes the guise of the ‘mournful Western man’, particularly when invoking mass appeals to a communal species-being (emphasis mine).<sup>67</sup> In such instances then, self-destruction is unlikely to resemble anything like empowerment, liberation, or a form of radical anti-normativity for disenfranchised people who may have fallen between the cracks of ‘human’ communities, especially given that the cultivation of — and commitment to the work of — self-maintenance forms an integral tenet of so many social justice movements.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Colebrook, *Sex After Life*, p. 138.

<sup>65</sup> Colebrook, *Sex After Life*, p. 138.

<sup>66</sup> Colebrook, *Sex After Life*, p. 138.

<sup>67</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis’, p. 204.

<sup>68</sup> Take, for instance, Audre Lorde’s stance on self-care as a radical form of ‘self-preservation, [which] is an act of political warfare’. See Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light and Other Essays* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2017).



For the purposes of Colebrook's argument *against* anthropocentrism, however, if one belongs to or is 'member' of a species that has marked itself out as exceptional among other lifeforms, one cannot exempt oneself from the duty towards *life* without also entangling one's own destruction with that of the rest of mankind.<sup>69</sup> Not only does suicide extend an act of self-violence towards humanity more broadly but, viewed through the lens of deontology, it constitutes an intrinsically *irrational* act. Nor can it fall readily within the sphere of moral action since, as Colebrook puts it, 'to have no sense of [one]self as a continuous identity' is to balk 'the necessary maintenance of oneself, as human and therefore free to will, but not free to will the end of willing'.<sup>70</sup> This more normative view is parsed (somewhat ineptly) by one of Elliot's friends, Betsy, towards the end of Williams's story: "Elliot wasn't in his right mind [...]. He wasn't thinking clearly. If you're *thinking clearly*, you don't take your own life" (*VP*, 283 emphasis mine). In this way, Betsy becomes a mouthpiece for Kant's insistence that committing suicide can never be reasonable, precisely because 'one reasons to do away with reason', that vaunted humanist value, and thus by proxy *life itself*.<sup>71</sup> That which entails the destruction of the capacity for thinking clearly, along with the abandonment of that necessary 'self-maintenance' Colebrook describes, could never be considered dutiful. In part because it marks the violation of those basic conditions required to occupy one's selfhood. As Colebrook levels the question: 'What possible future could there be for morality given that the fundamental concepts of normativity and recognition require that I maintain some commitment to being the being who I am?'<sup>72</sup> As the moralistic overtones of Betsy's 'not right' (both in the sense of Elliot's being mentally unsound,

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<sup>69</sup> Colebrook, *Sex After Life*, p. 138.

<sup>70</sup> Colebrook, *Sex After Life*, p. 138.

<sup>71</sup> Colebrook, *Sex After Life*, p. 138.

<sup>72</sup> Colebrook, 'Not Symbiosis', p. 189.

but also somehow incorrect or *'unright'* in his decision making) would seem to make evident, choosing suicide is perhaps the very obverse of ethical action.

That 'Substance' takes place in the immediate aftermath of a suicide is *significant* for Williams's characters, too; the text's opening pages locate her reader within the disorienting psychic and temporal terrain of grief. As Colebrook suggests, '[b]efore there is anything like man or being there are lived relations, ways of being in the world',<sup>73</sup> and '[w]hat we understand as "the world" [is] all the relations of sociality, hope, agency, politics and futurity that compose the horizon of sense and purpose that makes life worth living'.<sup>74</sup> Elliot's friends, (Walter, Betsy, Dianne, Tim, Andrew, Lucretia, Jack, Angus, and Louise as well as 'the twins', Daisy and Wilbur), whose interdependence means they are together 'practically constantly', are cast adrift by the story's action, which leaves them to metabolise the painful loss of a longstanding member of their social group. From the get-go, the friends are wrangling with a similar sense of their relational security having been 'voided', along with the disruption of the interpersonal 'ecologies' that sustain them. This disorientation is felt in the interruption of the habitual activities that organise their interpersonal bonds, the cancellation of the parties that are hosted in alternating locations, on alternating weeks ('Every other week, there would be a party at one of their houses. Rent was cheap, so they all lived in these big, ruined houses' [*VP*, 277]). It also infringes on their private ways of being in the world, as they develop coping mechanisms and escalate bad habits that plunge them into further disarray. The narrator confides that one of the protagonists, Dianne, is 'drinking far too much recently', whereas the twins, already hooked on 'junk', 'spend most of their time lovingly shooting each other up' with 'the great Heroisch' (*VP*, 277). This is to say nothing of the state of their respective crumbling habitations which, teetering on the brink

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<sup>73</sup> Colebrook, 'Not Symbiosis', p. 193.

<sup>74</sup> Colebrook, 'Anti-Catastrophic Time', p. 103.

of economic precarity, would seem to be further menaced by the encroaching decay and depletion that also threatens our common dwelling. This eerie sensation, which hovers ever-present at the story's perimeter, comprises one of the dominant thematic concerns for Williams's story.

Our initial encounter with Williams's bereaved characters finds them *in media res*, suspended in the everywhere disorder of affects that characterise any sudden death, but that perhaps distinguish suicide especially. Notably, we never enter the 'space' of Elliot's death, which is withheld from the reader's view. The story instead takes place across a series of scattered locations (the kennel where Louise attempts to board the dog, the florist's shop where she works), Williams's affectively itinerant characters roaming between parties hosted at their 'big, quietly rotting houses' (*VP*, 278), a circuit of which Elliot's abode is clearly no longer a part.<sup>75</sup> As Lauren Berlant suggests, the 'present' is necessarily a process of emergence, perceived as an affective muddle before it can become anything more concrete, or be properly historicised.<sup>76</sup> For Berlant, this unfurling is crystallised in the *situation*, a genre that is defined alternately through the *situation* comedy, and the police procedural:

The police conventionally say: "We have a situation here". A situation is a state of things in which *something* that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life. It is

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<sup>75</sup> The only allusions to geography in the story's setting are the presence of a Columbia University dinner plate, off which the twins can recall Broom eating, and a fleeting reference to swans, 'mating in a marsh beside the highway' (*VP*, 279) which would seem to imply proximity to a non-urban landscape. Coupled with the story's emphasis on the 'bigness' and 'leakyness' of the characters' houses, the reader is left with an impression of a waterlogged suburbia, possibly the same Floridian backdrop that often appears in her novels and stories. In 1987, Williams published a nonfiction guidebook with Penguin Random House called *The Florida Keys: A History & Guide*. For more on Williams's relationship to this landscape, see *Jango McCormick*, 'God, Death, and the Florida Keys', *The College Hill Independent*, 7 March 2020, <<http://www.theindy.org/article/1948>> [accessed 4 February 2022]

<sup>76</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 4.

a state of animated and animating suspension that forces itself on consciousness, that produces a sense of the emergence of something in the present that may become an event'.<sup>77</sup>

Causality often being less than clear-cut, 'the event' of a self-inflicted death would seem to be governed by a differing temporal logic than that of an 'ordinary' or 'natural' incident of death, its circumstances at once indelible and under constant revision, as the bereaved scabble to find meaning in its aftermath. Suicide survivors often unwillingly find themselves engaged in the hermeneutic task of rooting around to demystify the 'truth' not only of the event itself (which often arrives, much like a natural catastrophe, unannounced and with devastating impacts), but also with rehashing the events leading up to it. Read in these terms, we might understand the immediacy of Elliot's suicide as one such *situation*, which Berlant describes as a 'genre of unforclosed experience' that is also 'a genre of social time and practice in which a relation of persons and worlds is sensed to be changing but the rules for habitation and the genres of storytelling about it are unstable, in chaos'.<sup>78</sup> The procedural likewise seems a fitting genre for the 'situation' of suicide; this sense of 'cracking a case', wherein the bereaved become unwilling agents in this amateur detective work, is later made explicit when the narrator remarks: 'None of them could think about Elliot without being thwarted by the *mystery* of the things he had given them. His behaviour had been inexplicable' (*VP* 285, emphasis mine).<sup>79</sup>

Notably, the act itself remains semantically elusive within Williams's text, inaccessible both to the reader and to her protagonists. Referred to alternately as 'the event', 'the enactment'

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<sup>77</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 4.

<sup>78</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 4.

<sup>79</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 4.

or the ‘performance’, its violence is only hinted at. At the same time, this resistance to the naming of ‘the event’ begins to feel like an extraordinary defence mechanism erected by Williams’s characters to dance around their trauma, almost as though they have engaged the strategies of *indirection* or deflection Jameson describes to shore against the ruin of their own grief. It may be that Elliot’s suicide is held at bay strategically, through a performative language that would seem to frame his death as an act that is thus both excessively theatrical or stagey — somehow *overdetermined* or *over-calculated* — at the very same time that it feels (paradoxically) ‘inexplicable’ or poorly thought out. Lacking any sense of the violence exacted by Elliot on his own body contributes to the illegibility surrounding the circumstances of his death, an illegibility that is further aggravated by the confused inheritance he leaves behind. The reader’s sense of his character is determined by this composite of relics with which he seems almost identical, an effect that is compounded by his friends’ total preoccupation with the *mystery* of the objects, whose pursuit enables them to shun the larger, unspeakable ‘mystery’ of their friend’s suicide — often to comic effect.

From its outset, Williams’s text opens onto a ‘rupturing in the very figure of life’, broaching themes of annihilation, grief and ‘living on’ that form an integral part of any attempt to think about extinction.<sup>80</sup> With suicide as its foundational narrative context, ‘Substance’ can also be seen to destabilize the very notion of survival or something like it (‘life’, perhaps, or the *will* to self-preservation), casting into disarray the idea that the necessary maintenance of oneself is always *de facto* a moral good. By Betsy’s rationalist standard, such self-destructiveness is antithetical to *thinking clearly*. Going against the normative grain however, Louise (the narrative’s principal consciousness), privately ‘marvel[s] at her friend’s way of phrasing things. To take your own life was to take control of it, to take possession of it, to give it a shape by occupying it. But

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<sup>80</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 255.

Elliot's life still had no shape, even though it had been completed' (*VP*, 283). Through this dissenting voice suicide momentarily becomes an autonomous act, a decisive moment of self-actualisation or self-possession, phrases that evoke the slang of neoliberal sovereignty and corporate 'wellness' schemes. As Ahmed puts it, 'Even suicide is an expression of the will to happiness.'<sup>81</sup> For Vitalist philosopher Edmund Husserl, self-extermination was 'a sign of possible renewal' — a route towards freeing the subject from the 'unfortunate error' of mistaking itself for an 'already existing object'.<sup>82</sup> Vitalism — what Devyn Remme describes as 'the tendency of Life to move towards greater complexity, that is, to move towards maximizing pure difference — is enabling for a radical politics in the sense that it 'reaches for the future and encompasses potentiality', taking seriously that which will exist beyond the horizon of 'our' own time.<sup>83</sup> Vitalism marks not just a turn towards Life's renewed complexity, but also encourages its uncoupling from 'what is actually, currently living' and from 'bodies in their general recognizable form, [perceived] as this or that ongoing and unified entity', advocating instead that we 'approach the world as the unfolding of events'.<sup>84</sup> This detachment, the shift away from seeing bodies as the private bearers of a personal stock of 'lifeforce' gives onto an alternative and perhaps reparative reading of self-annihilation not as the condition for any *disavowal* of human life or survival, but as the condition of the subject's liberation from that logic. Another great twentieth-century 'philosopher of life', Henri Bergson, imagined that man's annihilation as a rational animal would make room for a future consciousness liberated from the notion of a subject in general. Indeed, for Bergson: '[t]he living [...] counterfeit immobility so well that we treat each of them as a *thing* rather than as a *progress*, forgetting that the very permanence of their form is only the outline of a movement [...] the living being is above all a thoroughfare, and that

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<sup>81</sup> Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 3.

<sup>82</sup> Colebrook, *Sex After Life*, p. 145.

<sup>83</sup> Devyn Remme, 'Vitalism', *New Materialism*, 16 June 2017, <<https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/v/vitalism.html>> [accessed 5 September 2021]

<sup>84</sup> Remme, 'Vitalism'.

the essence of life is in the movement by which life is transmitted'.<sup>85</sup> This holistic image is one of 'Life' as an elusive, viral force, an 'essence' that is 'transmitted' impersonally across all living species, through the joint operations of self-organizing matter and 'substance'. In this sense, the figure of suicide that inaugurates Williams's story can be seen not just as a rich temporal device for thinking through the collective self-destructiveness of 'our' wider historical moment, or for mulling over suicide's impacts on the diegetic community it affects. But, as Louise implies, there is also a redemptive logic at work in the notion that only in the grips of destruction or self-disregard does one finally become capable of taking 'Life' in-hand for the first time, one that is potentially invigorating for thinking life's 'progress' beyond the horizon of (hu)mankind's extinction.

If such thinking seems untenable then we should remind ourselves that, faced with the threshold of mass extinction, Colebrook similarly advocates for de(con)structive thinking as integral to any (eco)critical project that takes seriously the injunction to decentre *Anthropos*. 'If it is the case that "man" is no longer a rational animal whose forms of respect and recognition might be extended to include the rest of life, but is instead something like a geological event, then we might be compelled to think destructively, if not deconstructively.'<sup>86</sup> Louise's non-normative view of what it might *mean* to commit suicide, her suspicion that life doesn't solidify into, or gain its proper shape until 'completed' by death, betrays an ambivalence towards 'survival'— as both a moral value and a set of material conditions that *ought* to be upheld — that is at work in Williams's story more broadly. As well, it would seem to betray Louise's own stance towards human survival as something that is only ambivalently worth pursuing, aligning her with Colebrook's injunction to think deconstructively (which is, noticeably, framed also in the language of *compulsion*).

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<sup>85</sup> Colebrook, *Sex After Life*, p. 146.

<sup>86</sup> Colebrook, 'Not Symbiosis, Not Now', p. 188.

## An Alarming Gift

At the surface level of plot, ‘Substance’ documents what it looks like for a maladjusted group of friends to work through the muddle of affects that follow any sudden death. To the extent, however, that Elliot’s drastic act can be read as putting a dent in human exceptionalism (a commitment to *will the end of willing*, at least within the textual world of Williams’s story) it also ramifies for thinking through extinction in a temporal sense. Like many of Williams’s stories, ‘Substance’ is formally characterised by a certain temporal sluggishness. What little action does take place hangs suspended in a kind of elongated now, whose unfolding is formally matched by the unexplained gifts (or *presents*) whose imposition instigates its plot. As Charles Champetier writes, through the gift and ‘the immanence of the cycle of obligations that it triggers’, ‘a certain investigation of *time* becomes possible, precisely that of time as presence, *Anwesen* (the gift is also said, in our language, as “present”).’<sup>87</sup> Precisely this temporal lag, as I have suggested above, makes Williams’s text ripe for a conceptual investigation into the kind of ‘intensity’ Colebrook advocates. Already survivors of the seismic event of Elliot’s self-destruction, tasked with *living on* in its aftermath, the friends must further contend with the alarm occasioned by his efforts at legislating or ‘governing’ beyond the horizon of his own time, and a new kind of aftershock arises in the ‘inexplicable’ bequests made by Elliot to his friends, which consists of a sequence of ‘alarming gift[s]’ whose unaccountability leaves Williams’s characters feeling ‘thwarted’ (*VP*, 275). Properly, Williams’s narrative begins by recounting a version of Elliot’s *will*, as it is laid out in his suicide note:

Walter got the silk pajamas clearly worn. Dianne got the candlesticks. Tim got the two lilac bushes, one French purple, the other white — *an alarming gift*, lilacs being so evocative of the depth and dumbness of death’s kingdom that they had made Tim cry. They were large and had to be removed with a backhoe, which did not please the

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<sup>87</sup> Champetier, ‘Philosophy of the Gift’, pp. 17–19.



landlord, who didn't get anything, although he didn't have to return the last month's deposit either. Lucretia got the Manhattan glasses. They were delicate, with a scroll of flowers etched just beneath the rim. There were four of them. Andrew got the wristwatch. Betsy got the barbells. Jack got a fairly useless silver bowl. Angus got the photo basket. Louise got the dog. (*VP*, 275, emphasis mine)

That Elliot left a 'will' or note in the first place would seem to intimate some degree of volition or intention at odds with Betsy's insistence that suicide is the outcome of disordered thinking; at the very least, the compilation of such a document (albeit one that is informal and non-binding) suggests that this act of self-destruction wasn't simply undertaken at whim. As if to restate this deliberation, certain items are preceded by a definite article — *the* candlesticks, *the* photo basket, *the* wristwatch — that insinuates they must have occupied a particular function at one point in Elliot's life, one that ought to be immediately recognisable to his legatees. In their freighted specificity, the descriptions would appear to hark back to memories co-constituted between friends, recollections distributed across a shared life in which these objects would have occupied a central role. As Colebrook suggests, 'a common archive [...] grants us all a shared future' and, following such a loss, Elliot's friends are more than likely in need of communal objects through which to stabilise their world's dysfunction.<sup>88</sup> As legacies then, this clutter of objects confronts each recipient — and Williams's reader, as well — with a host of hermeneutic possibilities through which to approach the future. The mishmash of gifts are the bearers of complex temporal, as well as interpersonal, signals. Perhaps Betsy, who gets the barbells, needs to 'toughen up' emotionally as well as physically? Is the gifting of the wristwatch a jibe directed at Andrew, that he needs to brush up on poor timekeeping skills?

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<sup>88</sup> Colebrook, 'Anti-Catastrophic Time', p. 108.

As it turns out, in a gesture typical of Williams's oblique prose, none of these objects hold much affective stock for their recipients. They are instead perplexed by this 'false' archive, which would seem to destabilise the very possibility of the 'common archive', or 'shared future' Colebrook describes: "They talked about the things Elliot had given them. They could not understand what he had been attempting to say. All his other possessions had been trucked away and stored. A brother was supposed to come for them" (*VP*, 278).<sup>89</sup> The friends speculate that the recipient of the story's 'true' archive, consisting of "all the things we actually remembered Elliot having", might be this estranged brother. As the narrative wears on the gifts, along with Elliot's own *goodwill* or generosity, are systematically discarded. Andrew confesses to having 'tossed' the watch into 'an overflowing Goodwill bin' (*VP*, 283). Lucretia, having taken a chipped Manhattan glass to a jeweller for 'repair', admits she has no intention of reclaiming it; Walter bins the silk pajamas 'immediately, without a modicum of ceremony'; Betsy abandons her barbells 'by the softball field' (*VP*, 280–283). Both the posthumous donation of these objects, and Elliot's status as a donor, is enabled only by the self-destructive condition of his death. The unintelligibility of Elliot's suicide is thus *re*-inscribed by the fact we can approach it *not* through

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<sup>89</sup> See Colebrook, 'Anti-Catastrophic Time', pp. 114–115. The 'common archive' is a concept Colebrook borrows from Bruno Latour and, mainly, Bernard Stiegler, for whom the imperative towards a 'common' or 'collective' future is a necessary outcome of a chaotic and nonlinear history. According to Stiegler: 'Politics is the art of securing the unity of the state in its *desire* for a common future, in its individuation, its singularity as becoming-one. Such a desire assumes a common aesthetic ground: being together is feeling together' (See Stiegler, in Colebrook, p. 114). As Colebrook differently puts it, humans 'are archivally dependent: who they *are* is not given in an unfolding of relations among life, but in a dynamic and trans-individual relation to the archive' (p. 114). Owing to the nonlinearity of the past, many deconstructive theoretical models tend to view the future as necessarily 'promissory', attached to an impossible promise of linearity that simply cannot be upheld; indeed, it is *because* of the utter nonlinearity of the past that the future appears in this way. Perhaps counterintuitively, this ideal hinges on a phantasy of a *past* archive through which one's futural present might be configured. As Colebrook observes: "The archival past recreates and is recreated by every present, therefore opening the possibility of an idea of humanity that is common in its desire for a future beyond life [...]. One's present life is composed from a past that had anticipated a future, and had done so by way of relation to an ongoing and dynamic archive" (pp. 114–115). We see this in operation in Williams's story, in the fact that Elliot's friends variously relate to the *ongoing present* (the aftermath) of his death through a clutter of objects which, they assume, are freighted with some obfuscated meaning that he intended to convey or wanted to travel *beyond* the present of his death (which now forms part of their shared, collective past), into a future that no longer contains him. Notably, this shuttling back and forth between temporal meanings is one of their primary modes of relating to Elliot's death.

any rendering of the event itself, but instead through its detritus: the ‘substances’ he leaves behind comprise his legacy which, within Williams’s story world, serve as both ‘traces’ of his intention as well as ‘fossilised’ records of his life.

Among this inventory of inanimate ‘gifts’, however, one is remarkable for being alive: Elliot’s dog, Broom. Notably, the dog falls last in this otherwise exhaustive list; at only four words, it marks the curtest entry, the animal itself arriving as a kind of semantic afterthought. The disruptiveness of its inclusion is the more pronounced because, to their knowledge, Elliot had no pets: ‘They had never seen it before, but now suddenly there was a dog in the picture’ (*VP*, 275). Of all Elliot’s friends, those not *willed* anything — Wilbur and his twin Daisy, who ‘loved throwing up on junk’ — are the only ones able to ‘picture’ Broom. And yet their joint recollection of the dog eating its dinner off a Columbia University plate is added by the fact of their shared addiction; in ‘their far-out nods’ they can ‘picture almost anything’ (*VP*, 276-7).

According to Jacques Derrida the ‘unintelligibility’ of the gift may be said to reflect the historical contexts of the archaic gift, which was marked by a fundamental ‘*alterity*’ and, as such, ‘the frantic will [of the modern subject’s attempts] to make it *accountable*, to trace the non-said, reveals the anxiety of the observer more than the nature of the observed’.<sup>90</sup> He continues:

‘[T]he intention of the gift [...] is exhausted in the act itself, in the moment of its donation and its reception. The gift is without end, in all senses of the word — since the cycle that it initiates never ends: it is here that the incalculability of its essence resides, as

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<sup>90</sup> Champetier, ‘Philosophy of the Gift’, p. 18.

well as the infinite reversibility of its existence — along with the difficulty to grasp it from within the framework of its recreation by means of reasoning subjectivity.<sup>91</sup>

As Champetier elaborates, the ‘given object — the existence of which Derrida regrets, because it carries with it the *trace* — is nothing but the concretization *hic et nunc* of an interpersonal relation whose eternity we presume or whose perennial nature we desire.’<sup>92</sup> Williams’s characters find themselves similarly landlocked by the incalculable cycle of the gift and its ambivalent expression of intention. Unlike these ‘archaic’ agents, however, the ‘agents’ of Williams’s text are thoroughly modern or indeed postmodern *subjects*. ‘Substance’, had its first publication in the Fall 1998 edition of the *Paris Review*, and its reality appears verisimilar with the late twentieth century context in which it was published.<sup>93</sup> This *present*, what Jameson would term the ‘political unconscious’ of Williams’s text, is palpable in the shoddy socioeconomic conditions of her downtrodden protagonists, whose lifestyle is dictated by the ongoing volatility of a rental economy which shapes their precarious living situations, though it is also shown to be advantageous in its own way (‘Rent was cheap, so they all lived in these big, ruined houses’, *VP* 277). Their depleted living conditions are complemented by absurd and non-sustaining employment gigs. Louise, for instance, alternately finds work ‘among the unnatural blooms’ of a florist’s and ‘sometimes at an auto-glass tinting establishment, cutting and ironing on the darkest film allowed by law, which at twenty percent was less than most people wanted but all they were going to get’ (*VP*, 276). Neither form of labour — both by-products of a lifeworld already defined by capitalist abundance, as suggested by the redundant ‘confetti glitter’ glass with which

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<sup>91</sup> Champetier, ‘Philosophy of the Gift’, p. 18.

<sup>92</sup> Champetier, ‘Philosophy of the Gift’, p. 17.

<sup>93</sup> See Joy Williams, ‘Substance’, *The Paris Review*, 148 (1998), <<https://www.theparisreview.org/fiction/1077/substance-joy-williams>> [accessed 5 September 2021]

Louise adorns the rear window of her own car — provides an income that enables Louise to do anything other than scrape by, just about (*VP*, 276).

For her, the ambivalent burden of the gift cycle is felt even in Broom's absence, which carries with it its own set of economic obligations. Strapped for cash and confronted with the responsibility of an animal she doesn't want but is nonetheless reluctant to see put down, Louise chews over how she's going to be able afford to keep Broom *out* of the picture for as long as possible. 'She was sitting alone in a bar one evening after work worrying about the money it was costing to board the dog, who had been at the kennel for a week and a half' (*VP*, 276). Having taken him 'immediately' to a shelter in the interim while she figures out what to do, she finds herself filled with apprehension: 'Louise was racking up expenses at the kennel. The dog weighed under thirty-five pounds but that still meant fourteen dollars a day. If he had weighed between fifty and a hundred, it would have been twenty dollars, and after that it went up again. Louise didn't have all that much money' (*VP*, 276). Her fretful calculations make clear that her meagre finances already render Louise's own subsistence difficult, let alone overseeing the ballooning costs of a nonhuman companion's 'flourishing'.

As well as this, they mark a (fruitless) attempt at assessing the gift's *incalculable* essence, the Derridean sense of which would seem to 'live on' in Williams's story, not just in the strange unintelligibility of Broom himself who, in his curious meekness, struggles to escape the object-status of pure gift: 'The dog was not demanding. It was modest in its requirements. It could square itself off like a package in a chair, it could actually *resemble* a package, but that was about it' (*VP*, 280). His nondescriptness is seemingly foreshadowed by the fact of his being named after a banal household object, whose function is typically the *removal* of other or excess *matter* — that which is also considered detritus. (The twins refrain from mentioning to Louise a Pablo Neruda line they have stumbled across: '*Death also goes through the world dressed as a broom*'.) For Louise, his

recipient, Broom's aliveness makes the bequest that much more unnerving: 'Louise didn't think it was right that she had been given something alive. None of the others had. She made this point frequently but no one had an explanation for it' (*VP*, 278). The unexpectedness of this acquisition introduces into Williams's story one of its central premises; namely what it might mean for *something* like life, or 'the' future, to be entrusted to someone who doesn't particularly want it. In this instance, what it means to be gifted a lifeform that is something to be 'put up with' or merely tolerated. The narrator's initial offhand comment — 'now suddenly there was a dog in the picture' — quickly collapses into an alethic discussion surrounding when and where the animal might have entered Elliott's life:

"He said he was thinking of getting a dog sometime," Jack said.

"But wouldn't he have said 'I got a dog'? He never said that," Dianne said.

"He must have just gotten it. Maybe he got it the day before. Or even that morning, maybe," Angus said.

This alarmed Louise.

"I'm sure he never thought you'd keep it," Lucretia said.

This alarmed her even more (*VP*, 275–6).

This nit-picking over the circumstances of Broom's acquisition produces a thick, clotted language; the semantic repetition mirroring the apparently irresolvable nature of a scenario wherein the giver's intentions have been made irretrievable by his death. Their back-and-forth might be said to evoke what Ngai observes in her work on the debilitating affect of 'stuplimity' — that temporary 'immobilisation' that emerges 'in situations of extreme shock or boredom'.<sup>94</sup> As Ngai observes, following on from a 'stupefying' loss, such 'congested' language has the effect of creating a 'drastic slowdown of language, a rhetorical enactment of its fatigue — in which the duration of relatively simple actions is uncomfortably prolonged through a proliferation of

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<sup>94</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 254.

precise inexactitudes'.<sup>95</sup> Ironically, these same 'inexactitudes' generate a lag within Williams's narrative through Louise and Lucretia's dawdling over the intention expressed by Elliot's gift, which holds up life's actual procession.

The repetition in this passage of the word 'alarm' reiterates Louise's mounting unease; more alarming still is when Lucretia ventures that Elliot may have got Broom mere days before, or on the morning of his suicide itself. The implication being that he acquired the dog in order for it to bear witness to his death or, alternately, to have something to 'gift' Louise in its wake. As Brown puts it: 'Undomesticable, arriving like portents out of nowhere, Joy Williams' creatures are never to be tended, and rarely do they come to announce good tidings.'<sup>96</sup> The effect is almost as if Broom's arrival coincided with, or materialised through the act of Elliot's suicide itself; one begins to get the sensation that he is like a weird offcut generated by the event, a leftover residue of his 'master'. Notably, 'getting', 'got' and 'gotten' all appear in recurrent formation here, their usage in this particular context (as opposed to words like 'buy' or 'bought', which might suggest the transactional elements of adopting an animal or acquiring it through trade) has connotations with childbearing, as well as ramifications for a monotheistic concept of divinity, wherein God 'begat' the world from *nothing*. This religious subtext is something of an inevitability in Williams's stories. The daughter of a Congregational minister, she claims that she was exposed early on to 'all those wonderful stories — about snakes and serpents and mysterious seeds and trees — [that] didn't mean what they seemed. They meant some other thing'.<sup>97</sup> Notably, as one reviewer put it, '[a]ll Williams's work is informed by a learned yet half-feral Christianity',

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<sup>95</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, pp. 255–256.

<sup>96</sup> Brown, 'Rosellen Brown Discovers Joy Williams', p. 33.

<sup>97</sup> Wendy Brenner, 'Love and Death in the Cape Fear Serpentarium', *Oxford American*, 48 (2005), <<https://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/632-love-and-death-in-the-cape-fear-serpentarium>> [accessed 3 April, 2018].

describing her as ‘a vociferous and despairing pantheist, more Spinoza than St. Francis (though she does love dogs)’.<sup>98</sup>

Significantly, this language of ‘begetting’ steers us back towards Broom’s fundamental *liveliness*, this vital quality being the very thing that distinguishes him from the inventory of ‘gifts’ inherited by the friends, which are otherwise *inanimate* matter. In turn, Broom’s *vitality* would seem to point back towards the ambivalent ‘Substance’ of Williams’s title, a word that dates back to 1300, and derives from the Old French *sustance*, meaning ‘goods, possessions; nature, composition’.<sup>99</sup> In turn, *sustance* derives from the Latin *substantia* which translates into the Greek *ousia*: ‘that which is one’s own, one’s substance or property; the being, essence, or nature of anything’.<sup>100</sup> The dominant meaning it holds today — namely, ‘any kind of corporeal matter’ — was first recorded in the mid-fourteenth century.<sup>101</sup> ‘Substance’ also invokes Baruch Spinoza’s system of ethics, one of the most distinctive tenets of which is his substance monism, the claim ‘that one infinite substance — God or Nature — is the only substance that exists’, which is often interpreted as aligning Spinoza with a form of pantheism, the view that God is identical with the cosmos and thus immanent within the natural world and its contents.<sup>102</sup> In rejecting the transcendence of God, pantheism also rejects his ‘separateness’ from the world, together with any anthropomorphic understanding of divinity as in possession of ‘psychological and moral

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<sup>98</sup> Justin Taylor, ‘Joy Williams’s Micro-Fictions Are a Trove of Bafflements’, *New York Times*, 5 August 2016, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/07/books/review/joy-williams-ninety-nine-stories-of-god.html>> [accessed 5 September 2021]

<sup>99</sup> ‘Substance’, *Online Etymology Dictionary*, October 2018, <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/substance>> [accessed 12 November 2020]

<sup>100</sup> ‘Substance’, *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

<sup>101</sup> ‘Substance’, *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

<sup>102</sup> Jason Waller, ‘Benedict de Spinoza: Metaphysics’, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<https://www.iep.utm.edu/spinoz-m/#H3>> [accessed 12 November 2020]



characteristics modelled on human nature'.<sup>103</sup> A reminder, in turn, that the term 'anthropocentric' emerged as a critique of descriptions of God as *man-like*.

In contemporary commentaries on environmental responsibility made by the Catholic church, however, pantheism has been counselled against for its *refusal* to conform to the logic of anthropocentrism. In a Papal encyclical published in 2009, for instance, Pope Benedict XVI emphasised that '[o]ur duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other'.<sup>104</sup> The letter acknowledges that 'the international community has an urgent *duty* to find institutional means of regulating the exploitation of non-renewable resources, involving poor countries in the process, in order to plan together for the *future*'; and that 'we must recognize our grave *duty* to hand the earth on to future generations in such a condition that they too can worthily inhabit it and continue to cultivate it', asserting the Church's responsibility towards creation, towards defending 'earth, water and air as *gifts* of creation that belong to everyone' (emphasis mine).<sup>105</sup> The encyclical's insistence on the 'need for what might be called a human ecology', or its claim that '[t]he deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence' would seem almost to broach the radical, by all accounts, or something resembling an environmental justice perspective that recognises the inequitable distribution of environmental hazards and harms.<sup>106</sup> As Ahmed has suggested elsewhere a 'more ethical ecological relation would recognize the willfulness of nature'; properly expressed, such '[a]n ecological concern would be an invitation not only to think of

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<sup>103</sup> Steven Nadler, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza/>> [accessed 12 November 2020]

<sup>104</sup> 'Chapter Four: THE DEVELOPMENT OF PEOPLE | RIGHTS AND DUTIES | THE ENVIRONMENT', in ENCYCLICAL LETTER: *CARITAS IN VERITATE* OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF BENEDICT XVI, [online] <[https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html)> [accessed 6 September 2021]. See Section 51, especially.

<sup>105</sup> Encyclical Letter, see sections 49–51.

<sup>106</sup> Encyclical Letter, see section 51.

humans as part of a shared world but what follows this thought.<sup>107</sup> Quickly, however, this ‘holism’ collapses into a different kind of conservatorship, one that in its political conservatism and *investment* in human life, would seem altogether at odds with the ‘feral-Christianity’ of Williams’s fictional project: ‘respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology’.<sup>108</sup>

According to Remme, pantheism has long been invigorating for a vitalist ethics that — in its joint emphasis on materiality and contingency — is also compatible with a radical politics that reaches towards ‘the future and encompasses potentiality, that is, [...] more than what is actually, currently living’.<sup>109</sup> Moving us beyond calculated or managerial notions of duty, vital materialism allows ‘for a consideration of justice that accounts for future generations’ at the same time that it eschews calculability which, for Colebrook, makes it ‘therefore essentially queer’: ‘Vitality is what is hidden when life is reduced to ‘biodiversity’; a pool of resources to be managed and exploited.’<sup>110</sup> Certainly, there is little to be ‘exploited’ in Broom, a creature whose intractability is pronounced throughout the story.<sup>111</sup> This vitalist tendency may be read as emerging through the cracks of Williams’s story in incidences like Broom’s ‘begetting’, whose being seems to materialise (quite literally) out of nowhere, and then only at the moment of another’s lifeforce depletion, underscoring his proximity to an ‘unfolding event’ from which he seems inseparable. Something like a queer or neovitalist approach also seems to emerge in Louise’s critically paranoid reading of domestic pet-keeping, though her stance on what it looks like to treat ‘the

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<sup>107</sup> Ahmed, *Wilfull Subjects*, pp. 192-193.

<sup>108</sup> Encyclical Letter, section 51.

<sup>109</sup> Remme, ‘Vitalism’, *New Materialism*.

<sup>110</sup> Remme, ‘Vitalism’, *New Materialism*.

<sup>111</sup> Claire Colebrook, ‘Queer Vitalism’, *New Formations*, 68 (2009), 77–92 (p. 83).

living' as a 'thoroughfare' is perhaps mildly less jubilant than Bergson's. When he does finally arrive, Elliot's 'dreary brother' must contend not only with Louise's mulish distrust of the kinship claim that supposedly motivates his appeal ('looking at Elliot's brother, if that's who he was, although there was little reason to doubt him'). But, as well, with her wariness concerning his credentials as a custodian for Broom:

"Have you ever had a dog before?" Louise was just curious. She didn't mean to lead him on, but as soon as she said this, she feared she'd given him hope.

"Oh yes," he said eagerly. "As boys we always had dogs."

"They'd die and you'd get another?"

"That's a queer way of putting it".

"Look", Louise said, "your brother had this dog for about three minutes." She felt she was exonerating Elliot.

"Three minutes," he said, bewildered.

"I said about three minutes. You should get a dog and pretend it was your brother's and care for it tenderly and that will be that." (*VP*, 282)

Louise has 'a queer way of putting it' indeed, particularly when it comes to the scorn reserved for dynastic petkeeping. Here, what passes for a 'normative' practice of 'substituting' a dead pet with a new, living replacement is transformed into something unsettling, approaching the perverse. What Elliot's brother frames as time-honoured commitment (*we always had dogs!*) that bespeaks a continuity or ongoingness of obligation, Louise reframes as uncanny indictment of human-animal relations. Just as, earlier on, Louise 'queerly put' the ostensibly humane practice of euthanising an animal in perspective: 'Put them to sleep [...] It sounded like something you'd do with a small child in a pretty room while it was still light out' (*VP*, 280). Louise invokes the passingness of Broom's presence in Elliot's home, leveraging their short-lived temporal relationship. The brothers are thus implicated in a chain of dead animals, snaking back to

childhood, and which cumulatively (perhaps) suggest a more negative interpretation of Bergson's insistence on 'life' as a thoroughfare.

That nonhuman life is, shock horror, *already* treated as fungible or disposable is hardly a revelatory or original claim, given that it dictates so much of our cultural orientation. (Such disregard is implied in another animal altercation in Williams's story, where a rat caught in a glue trap under Jack's sink is 'sailed into the street [...] to fall amid the passing traffic. "I usually just take it down to the Dumpster," Jack said.' As if that's any better!) However, in claiming definitively that Williams's story *advocates* for vitalist or pantheist thinking, the critical risk is that her text is simply reduced to a set of theoretical logics that, in its strange ineffability, it consistently exceeds. While, as Colebrook points out elsewhere, vitalism's holistic emphasis on the 'interconnectedness' of everything can be enabling, it also risks trapping us in a binary exemplified elsewhere in the apocalyptic imaginary, wherein the future is 'imagined as either an intensified line of progress (ideally set back on its proper course) *or* a nonlinear temporality, where every aspect of the whole is in ongoing self-transformation in relation to a dynamically self-organising body.'<sup>112</sup> The effect is that a concomitant either/or is reproduced in aesthetic works that are *about* extinction, the attendant 'risk' being that fictionalised, 'nonlinear' worlds (often resembling *actual* worlds that have been destroyed in the historical Western pursuit of 'progress') become the redemptive condition for thinking *beyond* linearity.<sup>113</sup> For this reason, Colebrook suggests that the various reparative turns towards the figure of 'life' occurring over the past two decades of theoretical praxis (affect, material feminism, posthumanism) are in some ways conceptual misnomers, their logics paradoxically enabled by Cartesianism. According to Colebrook, mankind's novel attempt to wrest itself from 'a history of self-regarding humanism'

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<sup>112</sup> Colebrook, 'Anti-Catastrophic Time', p. 104.

<sup>113</sup> Colebrook, 'Anti-Catastrophic Time', p. 104.

and enact a fleshy return to the ‘proper organic whole of life’ is, in fact, ‘revealed’ as being the most calculated and Cartesian of gestures.<sup>114</sup> Precisely such extensity or *elasticity* of perspective enables ‘us’ to perceive ourselves both as historical actors (a species capable of imagining myriad future forms of ‘living on’) and, at the same time, to perceive ‘life’ as reducible to the domestic or microbial entanglements of the posthuman turn.<sup>115</sup> We should note here, of course, that it is rarely forms of life outside or beyond the human that are at stake in this anxiety. Rather, it is the end of the ‘human’ (by which Colebrook likely means the ‘loss’ of that dull spectre, the white ‘mournful Western man’) that is imagined as the very worst kind of horror.<sup>116</sup>

A materialist reading, for instance, might home in on the centrality of *dwelling* in Williams’s text in particular, wherein her characters are shown to exist in happy synchronicity and mutually satisfying arrangements with varying states of microbial decomposition in their ‘big ruined houses’ (*VP*, 277). It is not the *threat* of its ‘quietly rotting’ infrastructure that ultimately forces Louise’s to leave her house, but rather the ‘banal framework of a new house’, a new build being erected behind her own (*VP*, 283). The construction of this looming development involves the razing of the backyard she had mistakenly thought ‘went along’ with her own house: ‘[It] had been bladed and most of the trees taken down [...]. Outside, the wind was blowing hard but there were no trees anymore to indicate this with their tossing branches’ (*VP*, 284). This clearcutting also entails the removal of “[a]ll those little birdhouses” that populated her ‘overgrown yard’, the relics of former occupants. From an earlier detail in the story: ‘Louise had a solarium in [her house] that leaked badly. In the rear was an overgrown yard with a birdhouse nailed to each tree. Some trees had more than one’ (*VP*, 278). If we were primed to read the felling of these treehouses as a fable about the terrors of habitat destruction (even the quaint

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<sup>114</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis, Not Now’, p. 204.

<sup>115</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis, Not Now’, p. 204.

<sup>116</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis, Not Now’, p. 204.

kind), then Williams allows for no such easy conclusion: “The previous tenants must have been demented [...] How could they imagine that birds want to live like that?” (*VP*, 278) There is some suggestion that she might plant something to block it out but, as Betsy despairingly points out, “Nothing will grow in time” (*VP*, 284). Drawing attention to the difficulty of reinstating both Louise’s own dwelling and the dubiously ‘natural’ habitat of the birds, this aphorism also seems to motion towards the burgeoning logic that is quietly at work in Williams’s fiction. Namely, the sneaking sensation that nothingness is always approaching, which seems to cut to the perhaps not-so-secreted entropy that is that is the story’s organising premise. Subsequently, Louise, together with all her possessions (and Broom), is quite literally being ‘transferred’ to ‘another place’, this one ‘bigger’ but also ‘more ordinary’ than the last (*VP*, 284–5). Even at this brief narrative moment, wherein movement is not just possible but actualised, the horizon of annihilation still beckons. Louise must contend with the random obliteration of her own personal ‘archive’, its own dematerialisation, when her worldly possessions are stolen in the process of moving on:

Louise packed her car with what remained, right up to the roof. Even so, she had thrown away a lot of things. She was simplifying and purifying her life, keeping only her nicest, most singular things. Louise swept the old house clean, glad to be leaving. She looked with satisfaction at the empty rooms, the stark windows and their new ugly vistas. She slammed the door and headed for her car but it wasn’t where she’d left it. She stared at the place where the car had been. But it had vanished, been stolen, and everything was gone (*VP*, 284).

Read ironically, in light of her insistent preference for *nothing at all*, we might see this as a particularly cruel brand of wish fulfilment. After all Louise, who cannot ‘imagine why she, of all people, had been given the dog’, has repeatedly stated her preference for nothingness in Williams’s text: ‘Louise would have preferred anything to the dog, right down to the barbells. Nothing at all would have pleased her even more’ (*VP*, 275). What smarts here however is not

just the loss of her belongings; as her friends console her, “‘*Things* are ephemeral’”, after all (*VP*, 275, emphasis mine). But the erasure of process: ‘It was gone, of course, but there was something else, something worse. She had made all these choices. She had discarded this and that and it hadn’t mattered’ (*VP*, 285). This admission would seem to serve as an acknowledgment of Louise’s own vulnerability to the temptations of calculation even in a story-world whose logic seems to refute it entirely. These strategies she has deployed in the assembly of her own ‘common archive’, piecing together a taxonomy of objects and creating an internal system of valuation, only for them to vanish the minute her back is turned. Precisely a fantasy of calculation has been unravelled by this loss. Indeed, Williams’s use of the word matter (as in ‘*it hadn’t mattered*’) is striking here, suggesting not only the redundancy of Louise’s curatorial project, but also menacing Louise’s archive — an index of possessions accumulated lovingly, across an entire lifetime — with the same encroaching threat of *de-mattering* that is perpetually at work in the story.

Nonetheless, and despite these attempts at calculation, there remains something fundamentally *incalculable* in Louise’s quasi-contrarian commitment to Broom, which persists even in the absence of any obvious affective attachment. As Ahmed puts it: ‘Mere persistence can be an act of disobedience.’<sup>117</sup> Indeed, one of the central paradoxes of Williams’s story, its thematic crux — as well as something of its comic grist — derives in this reluctant obligation. What kind of *thing* might it signify that, despite her professed indifference, Louise continues to tolerate Broom? Writing in *Willful Subjects* (2010), Ahmed suggests that ‘disobedience can take the form of an unwilling obedience: subjects might obey a command but do so grudgingly or reluctantly and enact with or through the compartment of their body a withdrawal from the right

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<sup>117</sup> Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 2.

of the command even as they complete it.<sup>118</sup> Notably, Broom remains unnameable in the opening pages of the story, referred to disdainfully either as ‘it’ or ‘dog’; Louise only begins ‘calling *it* Broom with a certain amount of *reluctance*’ (*VP*, 277, emphasis mine). And yet, it is this self-same reluctance that makes Louise’s grudging *acceptance* of Broom and subsequent reluctance to part with the dog so remarkable. As Ahmed points out: “The word “reluctance” has a willful history of its own. Though it now tends to be used to refer to being unwilling or disinclined to do something, it derives from the Latin word *reluctari*, which means to struggle against, to resist, or to oppose.”<sup>119</sup> She continues: ‘Willfulness tends to imply a particular kind of subject, one that has intentions and knows her intentions [...]. We know [however] from our shared collective histories of struggle that many acts of resistance are not intentional acts: to think these histories through willfulness risks making an intentional subject into the subject that matters [...] [W]illfulness can be a gift given, a gift relayed between parts, a gift that allows noncompliant or resistant action to be carried out without intent.’<sup>120</sup>

What are we to make of Louise’s unruly refusal to part with Broom, despite her friends ditching their inanimate, and far less demanding obligations? Is Louise one such intentionally resistant subject? Or is she the inheritor of Elliot’s willfulness, of which Broom (the gift) is a particularly tenacious expression? The group marvels at the fact that Broom still persists within the narrative, something that is manifest in their half-expectation that he ‘would have disappeared by now, run away’ (*VP*, 280). One might think here of Jameson’s ‘vanishing mediator’, a speculative figure ‘of a transitory institution, force, community, or spiritual formation that creates the conditions for a new society and a new civilizational pattern’, a new

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<sup>118</sup> Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 140.

<sup>119</sup> Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 140.

<sup>120</sup> Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, pp. 175–176.



mode of living entirely.<sup>121</sup> The self-conscious expectation that he will somehow de-materialise or fail to survive the story's denouement seems to point towards the imminence of an extinguishing force that is intent on engulfing them all. To Louise, the animal is, at best, tolerable and at worst unpalatable. Her indifference is quickened by the fact that Broom repeatedly fails to properly express or 'occupy' his form with any of the dynamism appropriate to, or expected from, a living thing. As if to confirm Brown's claims regarding the 'undomesticable' tendencies of Williams's creatures, he appears to lack any manifestly 'doggy' attributes: "The dog crouched miserably on the floor in the backseat of Louise's car. It didn't even lie down [...]. The dog was clearly not habituated to riding in cars, and had no sense of the happiness it could bring" (*VP*, 277).

Given Broom's supreme passivity — which might be framed as its own kind of waywardness or reluctance to the expectations of fidelity and friendship classically associated with dogs — one might begin to wonder if the animal is even invested in its own *telos*; or if he could summon the necessary vim to convince 'us' that his survival is worth pursuing. This failure of intelligibility also engulfs Williams's reader, for whom he remains almost entirely nondescript, both his origins and breed withheld; we learn only that he is 'medium-sized', weighs 'under thirty-five pounds' and has 'yellowish wavy fur' (*VP*, 276–277). So much so that when Louise returns to the kennel, she has to query the woman at the facility over whether or not she is collecting the correct animal. "Is that the right one?" [...] "It's really not mine," Louise explained. "It belongs to a friend" (*VP*, 277). Perhaps her insistence that the dog doesn't *belong* (note here the use of present tense) to her represents a refusal of her own grief for her friend; a reluctance to acknowledge the custodial reality of her obligation to Broom, which would also entail her *acceptance* of Elliot's death, the very thing that has made it possible. If it wasn't bad

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<sup>121</sup> Etienne Balibar, 'Europe: Vanishing Mediator', *Constellations*, 10 (2003), 312–338 (p. 334).

enough that he seems to possess a ‘bad personality’, her aversion is aggravated by her speculation that the animal may have borne witness to Elliot’s suicide:

The dog had either seen the enactment or come into the room shortly afterward. He might have been in the kitchen eating his chow or he might have been sitting on the porch, taking in the entire performance. He was a quiet, medium-size dog. He wasn’t the kind who would have run for help. He wasn’t one of those dogs who would have attempted to prevent the removal of the body from the house (*VP*, 275).

Louise’s internal wrangling belongs to what Gerald Prince refers to as the ‘disnarrated’: a category of narrative ‘events that *do not* happen, but, nonetheless are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text’.<sup>122</sup> This category is linked to what Marie-Laure Ryan refers to as ‘virtual embedded narratives’ — those ‘story-like representations produced *in the mind of a character* (and sometimes — but not always having an equivalent in the narrated world external to that mind): these mental constructs include such private domains as wishes, intents, and *obligations*’ (emphasis mine).<sup>123</sup> Given this speculation over the dodgy circumstances surrounding his advent, one might anticipate that Louise would want nothing to do with Broom. Certainly, in her ‘private domain’ Broom displays none of the ‘loyalty’ associated with domesticated dogs. If he continued eating quietly in the kitchen, he neglected his ‘doggy’ role as protector of his human kin; if he was watching from the porch then his passivity begins to assume an almost deviant aspect. The comment that follows this imagined scenario completes Louise’s suspicion that Broom is somehow deficient: ‘He wasn’t one of those dogs who would have attempted to prevent the removal of the body from the house’ (*VP*, 275).<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Gerald Prince, ‘The Disnarrated’, *Style*, 22 (1988), pp. 1–8 (p. 2).

<sup>123</sup> Prince, ‘The Disnarrated’, p. 3.

<sup>124</sup> There is what Derrida calls an *animalséance* at work here: the impropriety of being *seen* by an animal. Derrida invokes this concept in reference to nudity — namely, to the state of his own nakedness as perceived by his cat. It could also, however, stand in for a kind of primal vulnerability — such as the witnessing of a corpse, or the action of one’s life being ended, by an animal. Notably, Williams offers no insight into who discovered Elliot’s body; it feels almost as if Broom ‘found’ him.

This ‘what could’ve happened but didn’t’ movement, Prince suggests, contributes ‘to the development of a theme (illusion and reality, appearance and being, determinism and freedom, imagination and perception, or, of course, the theme of narrative itself).<sup>125</sup> This notion of *alternative directions* is crucial to the sense of contingency that permeates Williams’s story. Conveyed in these small suspensions of narrative time — which conjure the sense that this is simply *one* possible iteration of narrative time, that things turned out this way but might easily have been otherwise — is perhaps some scant recognition of something outside the mastery of ‘political time’, as Colebrook puts it.<sup>126</sup> One temporal strategy for thinking beyond the demise of the ‘self-sustaining “I” [who makes his own history] as catastrophic’ is to think on those ‘multiple, non-overlapping, impossible and divergent lines of life and time [...] of the earth as opening multiple perspectives.’<sup>127</sup> As Colebrook points out: ‘Nothing would seem more self-evident today [...] than the observation that time is not linear and that life is not a predictable mechanism that allows us to manage or know causes and effects.’<sup>128</sup> All the more so, when one considers that the myriad environmental ‘crises’ that have defined the not so recent past, and that *continue* to define the present, look set to guarantee the future, too. These are, for the most part, ‘because (and not in spite of) nonlinear systems’: ‘catastrophic climate change’, ‘the financial crisis’, both ‘are the outcome of complex, multiple, emergent, distributed, overlapping and nonlinear systems.’<sup>129</sup> When it comes, however, to the dreary, pedestrian apocalyptic imaginary that is Colebrook’s concern, the refusal of a conventional linear temporality, and the necessary self-estrangement that accompanies it, remains an important critical recourse.

We see this temporal estrangement yet again when a challenge for Broom’s custody does finally arrive, brought about by the unanticipated arrival of Elliot’s estranged brother: ‘All his

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<sup>125</sup> Prince, ‘The Disnarrated’, p. 4.

<sup>126</sup> Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, p. 112.

<sup>127</sup> Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, p. 108.

<sup>128</sup> Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, p. 108.

<sup>129</sup> Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, p. 108.

other possessions had been trucked away and stored. A brother was supposed to come for them. He was sick or lived in Turkey or some goddamn place, who cared. In any case, he hadn't shown up here yet' (*VP*, 278). When he does eventually show up at Louise's house, looking suspiciously unlike Elliot, her suspicions are piqued. Despite the estrangement, Elliot's brother is keen to take custody of the animal; having consulted with her friends, who assure him not only that Louise would 'appreciate the opportunity, [...] that in fact [she'd] be relieved and delighted'":

"I've been ill and out of the country. I couldn't travel, but I got here as soon as I was able. Elliot and I had quarreled. You can't imagine the pettiness of our quarrel, it was over nothing. We hadn't spoken for two years. I will never forgive myself." He paused.

"I heard that he had a dog and that you have it now and it might be something of a burden to you. I'd like to have the dog. I'd like to buy it"

"I couldn't do that," Louise said simply.

"I insist on paying you something" (*VP*, 281-2).

Louise refuses bluntly: "No, it's impossible. I won't give the dog up," Louise said. He could be a vivisector for all she knew' (*VP*, 281). A refusal which is met with incredulity by Elliot's brother, who cannot help but believe that she has 'utterly misunderstood his situation': 'His guilt was almost holy, he was on a holy quest. He had determined that this was what must be done, the only thing that remained possible now to do' (*VP*, 281). '[H]is mouth trembling', as if to convey at the somatic level 'the seriousness of his request', he claims that possession of the dog "would mean a great deal": "If I could care now for something he had cared for, then I would have something of my brother, of my brother's love" (*VP*, 281-282). Perhaps Louise's wilful refusal marks the cumulative effect of the *ill logic* that begins Williams's story, the primary disordering of reason that makes Louise invulnerable to the managerial orderliness of paterfamilias. Expressed in this tussle over reimbursement is something approaching a logic of calculability, one to which Broom's *value* becomes suddenly vulnerable. It also makes clear the difficulty of legislating Elliot's (or anyone's) *will* as it is expressed in his suicide note, since its execution doesn't take

place within the strictly legalistic framework associated with normative conventions. The note — as it is repeatedly referred to — is not a ‘will’ per se, nor is it a legally binding document. As if revealing herself as something of a paranoiac, Louise is again astonished by the extraordinary (perhaps excessive) *convenience* of Elliot’s brother’s timing: “I don’t mean to sound rude [...] but we’ve all been dealing with this for some time now and you suddenly appear, having been ill and out of the country both at the same time. Both at the same time,” she repeated’ (*VP*, 282). This remark supplies a moment of narrative self-consciousness that again draws wry attention to the fundamentally contingent architecture of Williams’s plotting, which would seem to evade the insistent pressures of linear temporality, that ‘intensified line of progress’ that is Colebrook’s complaint.<sup>130</sup> And that is perhaps Louise’s, too. As she bemoans: “It’s just so unnecessary now, your appearance. It’s possible to come around too late”’ (*VP*, 282).

Too late for what, one might ask? “In time for what?”, as Walter puts it (*VP*, 284). Perhaps these asides have the effect of demarcating the inevitable capitalist temporality of Williams’s diegetic world (and by proxy ‘our’ own), the linear ‘march of progress’ that defines ‘the world as we know it’, and whose cessation would mark that world’s true ‘end’. But, additionally, is his belated arrival ‘too late’ in another sense; in the sense that the seeds of care have newly been sown? What might it *mean* that Louise’s tolerance finally seems to convert into something resembling tenderness or ‘acceptance’ at the very least? Their eventual *progression* towards something resembling interspecies companionship would seem to be confirmed by Louise’s admission: “Oh, I’ve rather gotten used to Broom”’ (*VP*, 285). One might be tempted to jump to a glib temporal conclusion, wherein Louise’s adjustment period, her ‘*getting used to*’ Broom just happens to map neatly onto her having *accepted* or acclimatised to her friend’s suicide — or that, together with the ending of the story’s own horizons, her grief has simply reached its

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<sup>130</sup> Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, p. 104

expiry date. As the narrator self-consciously reminds us, ‘they were getting over the death of their friend Elliot — each in his or her own way’ (*VP*, 278). Certainly, this would chime with Angus’s insistence on grief as a relentlessly linear temporal cycle, which eventually finds a kind of seasonal resolve: “‘It takes four full seasons to get over a death [...] Spring and summer, winter and fall’” (*VP*, 278). Seasons ‘insinuate’ themselves sneakily, into the lives of Williams’s protagonists although, of course, in ‘the’ Anthropocene — our new climate dystopia — the turning of the seasons themselves is no longer a guarantee. This disorder is made apparent by Andrew’s irritable correction, that it’s “‘Fall and [then] winter’”, suggesting his prospective sense of disturbance at the destabilising notion that we may no longer be able to rely upon these ‘encyclical’, ‘eternal natural rhythm[s]’ to govern the world as ‘we’ know it (*VP*, 278).<sup>131</sup>

Nothing is certain in Williams’s story — least of all where exactly Broom’s *value* resides for Louise, which remains unclear until the bitter end. Certainly, whatever it is, it is irreducible to financial remuneration, as her repudiation of the brother’s ‘something’ would seem to suggest. Even in the story’s concluding sentences, which find Louise on the ‘threshold’ of her own end, any rationale for this commitment remains opaque:

Still, she was sure Elliot would not have wanted her to surrender the animal so easily. Of course she would never know Elliot’s thoughts. She herself could only think — and she was sure she was like many others in this regard, it was her connection with others, really — that life would have been far different under other circumstances, and yet here it wasn’t, after all (*VP*, 286).

Note how Louise’s enjoinder to Broom’s care takes place in a militaristic language that intimates his existence might be somehow embattled, subject to an external threat ‘we’ cannot see, one that her guardianship wards against. One might think here, of the earlier allusion to

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<sup>131</sup> Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, p. 104.

Elliot's brother: 'He could be a vivisector for all she knew' (*VP*, 281). Certainly, pets themselves are not exempt from the amorphous 'threat' of extinction; the 'boom' in the 'exotic' pet trade that occurred in the decade spanning 1980–1990 meant that, by the early 1990s, the *value* of legal wildlife products imported globally was around 160 billion; by 2009, the sector had swelled to be 'valued' at over 323 billion.<sup>132</sup> Where the risks of trading in 'high-value' species, already perpetually at risk of extinction, are more obvious, certain dog breeds, too, have been shown to be vulnerable to or endangered by the fickleness of social mores, including the rising cultural popularity of emulating 'celebrity dog' breeds.<sup>133</sup>

Still, Louise's conviction that Elliot would not have wanted her to *surrender* the animal intimates that he is a site of contention in some *other* sense, or that he harbours some *other* value worth defending in Williams's story, beyond the immediate threat of a thriving illegal pet trade. How to go about determining what this *value* is, without resorting to the same logic of calculability that is the mistake of Elliot's brother? Surrender here carries the reflexive sense of "giving oneself up", dating back to 1580; as well as its earlier sense, from the mid-fifteenth century, which meant 'to give (something) up'; earlier still, from the thirteenth century, there is the Old French, *surrendre*, as in to "give up, deliver over" (this from *sur*, "over" and *rendre* "give back").<sup>134</sup> Which returns us to the incalculability of the Derridean gift. Perhaps it is nothing more than the *trace* described here: the 'given object — the existence of which Derrida regrets, because it carries with it the *trace* — is nothing but the concretization *hic et nunc* of an interpersonal

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<sup>132</sup> 'A brief history of the global exotic pet trade', *World Animal Protection*, 31 October 2018, <<https://www.worldanimalprotection.us/news/brief-history-global-exotic-pet-trade>> [accessed 7 September 2021]. See also Alice Catherine Hughes, 'Trading in extinction: how the pet trade is killing off many animal species', *The Conversation*, 7 February 2017, <<https://theconversation.com/trading-in-extinction-how-the-pet-trade-is-killing-off-many-animal-species-71571>> [accessed 7 September 2021]

<sup>133</sup> Paul Rincon, 'UK native dog breeds "at risk of extinction"', *BBC News*, 25 January 2012, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-16665702>> [accessed 6 September 2021]

<sup>134</sup> 'Surrender', *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/surrender>> [accessed 5 September 2021]

relation whose eternity we presume or whose perennial nature we desire.<sup>135</sup> Alternately, one might return here to the archaic notion of the *han*: the ‘spirit of the given object’, which ‘beyond the donee, the donor, and the good that binds them [...] expresses the interpenetration of or the permanent mediation of beings, men, nature, and gods.’<sup>136</sup>

Is there a certain sense in which Louise’s reluctant attachment to Broom has something to say about her own future? Ironically, he is one of the few ‘things’ Louise drags into her newly spartan future, though she does so without what might be described as anything approaching *real* fondness. Nevertheless, of all Elliot’s gifts, Broom is finally what *matters*; surviving both the end of Williams’s story-world and the catastrophic fates that meet Elliot’s other gifts. Despite this, he appears to be always on the brink of dematerialising at any moment: ‘Broom didn’t know which room to disappear into [...] He would try the most unlikely places. Sometimes she would come across him on the fifth step of a narrow back staircase. What an odd place to be! Wherever he was he looked uncomfortable’ (*VP*, 286). As the narrator observes elsewhere in the story: ‘Louise had had the dog for five months now. When she realized how much time had passed, she thought: Seven more months to go. In seven months we’ll know more’ (*VP*, 283). What’s in a year? Does this gnomic prediction signify an allegiance to the unfolding of linear temporality? A faith in the encyclical healing advocated by Angus? Perhaps Louise’s own evaluation here and in the story’s closing sentences simply predicts a different kind of certainty; namely that, as Colebrook concedes, what the future guarantees is still more volatility: ‘one might predict with near certainty *that* crisis will occur, or — at the very least — *that* the future is ungovernable.’<sup>137</sup> In this there would seem to be a recognition of what Colebrook describes; that temporal pockets and wormholes do not always ‘belong’ to a broken future that is striving to retrieve an idealised

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<sup>135</sup> Champetier, ‘Philosophy of the Gift’, p. 17.

<sup>136</sup> Champetier, ‘Philosophy of the Gift’, p. 17.

<sup>137</sup> Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, p. 108.



past where *things* were more interconnected, more integrated, or more fully ‘alive’. Instead, one is left with the realisation that ‘the’ world consists of many small worlds that are already falling apart, and that worlds are ending all the time, not just in the future but *in the now* — in the everyday reckoning with petty and idiosyncratic forms of grief, in the banal image of the rat sailing out the window.

### **Conclusion**

Part of the irony of the end-times narratives peddled to us in the current moment is the fact that, as Colebrook points out, ‘we do *not* foresee our own end’.<sup>138</sup> Rather, we have ‘domesticated the apocalyptic imaginary, by both imagining a post-apocalyptic world of waste as still one of relative continuity, and by imagining that après-Armageddon world as not-yet’.<sup>139</sup> One might think here, again of the merry occupation of Williams’s economically downtrodden characters in their ‘big ruined houses’; later, these same houses are described as ‘quietly rotting’, almost like the rot is acting out of neighbourly consideration for the residents (*VP*, 277–278). If we have, as Colebrook suggests, domesticated the apocalyptic imaginary — at once fast-forwarding the environmental apocalypse into an abysmal future that has, in fact, already arrived, whilst deluding ourselves that humankind will continue to flourish after the apocalypse hits — then perhaps now is an apt moment to confess that we have been guilty of indulging such fantasies. This reckoning might, paradoxically, involve or even necessitate a return to the sphere of the properly domestic; in the sense of thinking along the lines of micro rather than macro, and sticking with slow temporalities, no matter how awkward or circuitous it might feel. Worlds are already falling apart: as Kathryn Yusoff suggests, even the monolithic category of the Anthropocene is erected on the destruction and deconstruction of worlds. One might consider here the peculiar

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<sup>138</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis, Not Now’, p. 206.

<sup>139</sup> Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis, Not Now’, pp. 206–207.

compactness of the short story form which, in its ruthless emphasis on *concision*, a necessary reserve or economy of style that also finds expression in the editorial precision with which it is treated (in the discarding of this and that), might itself be considered an intensely calculated form. ‘Substance’, as we have seen, while *interested* in calculation, also unravels any straightforward investment in its logic and, thereby, the *rationale* that typically undergirds duty. In this sense, it might be seen as posing a significant or sizeable (in the sense of *important*) threat to the project of much extinction literature, which unquestioningly advances ethical values of liberalism as the primary ground for political mobilisation. Williams’s fiction is remarkable for its disinterest in the kind of anxious investments that have become an almost definitive response to the prospective decline of the world, where ‘world’ often signifies simply Western civilisation’s decline. Indeed, in its own odd, circuitous way, it pre-empts Colebrook’s insistence on the myopia of a futural imaginary that is too blinkered to see the end of ‘its’ world as simply the demise of ‘a’ particular world:

[R]ather than say that every living being perceives and unfolds a world that is singular and yet forms one harmonious compossible world, it is possible to think of *the* world of universal freedom and inclusion as ‘a’ world that is coupled with worlds that unfold without any sense of the human, where what has been lived elsewhere as freedom and universality appears as violent and myopic self-enclosure. Any event would be the expression of thousands of distributed, and conflicting forces, some of which would yield one world, while others would unfold an opposite path.<sup>140</sup>

One is reminded by Colebrook’s language of Louise’s own sage observation: ‘She herself could only think — and she was sure she was like many others in this regard, it was her connection with others, really — that life would have been far different under other circumstances, and yet here it wasn’t, after all’ (*VP*, 286). Significantly, both for Louise and for Williams’s reader, this

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<sup>140</sup> Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, pp. 105–106.

plurality is posited as the condition of renewed connection across human and nonhuman others. In its profound mundanity, this 'epiphanic' moment of 'realising' things seems to testify anew to the utter contingency of the present, its wayward possibilities unfurling into the world like so many tendrils.



## 2. To Have and Have Not: The Affective Economies of Lydia Millet's *How the Dead Dream*

I'm talking about your soul, T. I'm afraid you'll always be lonely in your soul.<sup>1</sup>

— Lydia Millet

Extinction adds value.

Value appreciates.<sup>2</sup>

— Karen Solie

When Frieda Fromm-Reichmann's tract 'On Loneliness' was first published in 1959, it declared loneliness to be a psychiatric condition that was 'such a painful, frightening experience that people will do practically anything to avoid it'.<sup>3</sup> The severity of this avoidance is such that even the writer attempting to write about loneliness is likely to run into terminological difficulties; any elaboration on this psychiatric phenomenon is made almost impossible, firstly, by the reluctance of psychiatrists to probe their patients any further and, secondly, by the fact that even its trace arouses 'anxiety and fear of contamination', both in the sufferer, and within the public imaginary at large.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, loneliness, she writes, is 'one of the least satisfactorily conceptualized psychological phenomena, [rarely] even mentioned in most psychiatric textbooks'.<sup>5</sup> The scale of the problem is such that writing about loneliness proves to be a kind of conceptual cul-de-sac; as Fromm-Reichmann puts it, thinking about loneliness forms a chrysalis of isolation that threatens the writer-psychiatrist herself with the possibility of ineffective

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<sup>1</sup> Lydia Millet, *How The Dead Dream* (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 102. Hereafter designated by the abbreviation *HTDD*.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Solie, 'Cave Bear', in *Pigeon* (Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press, 2009), p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 26 (1990), 305–329 (p. 305). It is worth noting here that the paper was left in draft form on Fromm-Reichmann's death, in 1957. It was completed by Mrs. Virginia Gunst and the staff at *Psychiatry*, where it was originally published. That the essay was reprinted in *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* at the beginning of 1990, as part of their 'classics of psychoanalysis' series, suggests not only the foundational nature of Fromm-Reichmann's work but, also, serves to reiterate that loneliness remained — even at the close of the twentieth century — a somewhat neglected site of scholarly interest.

<sup>4</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', p. 313.

<sup>5</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', p. 306.

communication. For her, the act of writing thus becomes an '[attempt] to break through the aloneness of thinking about loneliness by trying to communicate what I believe I have learned'.<sup>6</sup>

This quality of noncommunicability — or, as Fromm-Reichmann puts it, 'completely blocked communication' — is fundamental to the kind of loneliness with which she concerns herself.<sup>7</sup> Any discussion of it is hampered not just by the reluctance of patients to divulge but also by a confusion about the various forms of loneliness, which tend to get lumped into the same 'terminological basket' despite the fact that they are morphologically and descriptively distinct.<sup>8</sup> Fromm-Reichmann begins her essay, in fact, with a sequence of negations. She is not concerned with what she terms 'culturally determined loneliness' (which harbours the potential for verbalisation), nor with the solitude arising upon experiencing, to parse Freud, "oceanic feelings" — of the kind occurring when an individual finds themselves faced with the vastness of the natural world (a desert, a seascape, a mountain range), and their own relative insignificance.<sup>9</sup> She remains unconcerned, too, by the deliberate seclusion of artists which, unlike 'the disintegrative loneliness of the mental patient', can be voluntarily looked for and then abandoned at will.<sup>10</sup>

While grief — that 'sense of loss and of being alone following the death of someone close' — orbits closer to the experience of 'true' loneliness, still it is morphologically discrete.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the passing heartache of a 'broken-off love affair' is semantically distinguished from loneliness as a protracted sense of 'lonesomeness'; it can be easily palliated with conventional

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<sup>6</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', p. 305.

<sup>7</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', p. 305.

<sup>8</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', pp. 305–306.

<sup>9</sup> As she is careful to point out, such apparently 'overwhelming' feelings can be a fruitful route into creative production and thus do not fall into the territory of the 'inexpressible' loneliness with which she is preoccupied.

<sup>10</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', p. 307.

<sup>11</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', p. 308.

strategies that are, for the most part, open to collective access: ‘daydreams, fantasies, and the love songs of others’.<sup>12</sup> Rather, it is with ‘real loneliness’ that Fromm-Reichmann concerns herself, as she clarifies here:

The kind of loneliness I am discussing is nonconstructive if not disintegrative, and it shows in, or leads ultimately to, the development of psychotic states. It renders people who suffer it emotionally paralyzed and helpless. In Sullivan’s words, it is “the exceedingly unpleasant and driving experience connected with an inadequate discharge of the need for human intimacy, for interpersonal intimacy.” The longing for interpersonal intimacy stays with every human being from infancy throughout life; and there is no human being who is not threatened by its loss.<sup>13</sup>

Fromm-Reichmann’s insists that there exists a basic and ‘universal human need for intimacy’; the lonely, she proposes, are those who suffer from ‘their failure to obtain satisfaction’ of this vital requirement, a claim that would appear to be predicated on a relational understanding of subjectivity as co-constitutive, a social formation wherein the subject exists ‘for’ the other as much as they do for themselves. This view of subjectivity still prevails in contemporary dialectics, in particular, in Judith Butler’s reparative reading of melancholia, a pathological or excessive mourning by Freud’s account, as revealing the extent to which the other holds us ‘in thrall’.<sup>14</sup> For Butler, grief becomes the precondition of ‘ethical responsibility’, laying bare the

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<sup>12</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, ‘Loneliness’, p. 309. The gendered dimensions of Reichmann’s tendency to ‘downplay’ heartbreak here should not be overlooked. Fromm-Reichmann, a German contemporary of Freud, was a pioneering figure for women in psychology and science, making particular strides in the treatment of schizophrenia. First published in 1959, this paper was written prior to the mobilisations of second-wave feminism, and it is possible that such denouncements of heartache as mere ‘lonesomeness’, endlessly remediable, may have stemmed from an ambient pressure to be ‘taken seriously’ in her field, and to keep pace with her predominantly male peers.

<sup>13</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, ‘Loneliness’, p. 309. Though the human is Fromm-Reichmann’s primary concern, this relationality is not delimited to a single species. As she is careful to point out elsewhere in her text: ‘An interesting sidelight on this is provided by experiments in isolation with very young animals, in which the effect of isolation can be an almost completely irreversible lack of development of whole systems, such as those necessary for the use of vision in accomplishing tasks put to the animal’ (p. 310). This is likely a reference to Harry Harlow’s experiments, which receive a fictional treatment in Lydia Millet’s collection *Love in Infant Monkeys* (2009).

<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, *Prearious Life* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 24.

extent to which subject formation is relationally constructed: ‘What grief displays [...] is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us’.<sup>15</sup> ‘Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency’.<sup>16</sup>

These ‘milder’ states of loneliness that Fromm-Reichmann excludes are contrasted with its most ‘severe developments [which] appear in the unconstructive, desolate phases of isolation and real loneliness which are beyond the state of feeling sorry for oneself — the states of mind in which the fact that there were people in one’s past life is more or less forgotten, and the possibility that there may be interpersonal relationships in one’s future life is out of the realm of expectation or imagination’.<sup>17</sup> This ‘real loneliness’, an ‘extremely uncanny experience’, ‘defies [all] description’.<sup>18</sup> It shares in common with other emotional phenomena, including psychosis, panic, and anxiety, a quality of intolerability: ‘People cannot endure such states for any length of time without becoming psychotic [...]. [Indeed] experiences in adults usually described as *a loss of reality* or as a sense of *world catastrophe* can also be understood as expressions of profound loneliness’ (emphasis mine).<sup>19</sup>

For Fromm-Reichmann, loneliness is also fundamentally environmental: what distinguishes it from depression and other forms of ‘psychotic withdrawal’ is that, beyond any ‘factual isolation from others’, loneliness skews the subject’s relationship to her ‘interpersonal environment’; the detachment is so total that the subject’s interest in their surrounds, and the

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<sup>15</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, ‘Loneliness’, p. 312.

<sup>18</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, ‘Loneliness’, p. 313.

<sup>19</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, ‘Loneliness’, p. 313.



people that make it up, are all but completely ‘extinguished’.<sup>20</sup> Already then, in 1959, loneliness harboured the semantic threat of the subject’s being extinguished. Indeed, extinction would seem embedded in the various, everyday forms of vanishing loneliness inflicts on the subject. Whether in the failures of communication that mark it, its erosion of ‘normative’ relational possibilities or, bleaker still, in its statistical proximity to self-destruction. As Lars Svendsen remarks: ‘Strong correlations [also] exist between loneliness and suicidal thoughts and behaviours’.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, statistics published by the Campaign to End Loneliness indicate ‘a clear link between loneliness and a wide number of poor health outcomes’ including ‘increased risk of cognitive decline, clinical dementia, high blood pressure and heart disease’.<sup>22</sup> Loneliness, it is said, ‘*leads to poor health*

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<sup>20</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, ‘Loneliness’, p. 313. It serves the purposes of my argument to distinguish here with greater clarity between loneliness and melancholia, another ‘morbid’ state which it can often resemble. Though it is beyond the scope of this note to provide a fulsome account of their differences, I do so briefly below.

As Freud makes clear, melancholia is a ‘pathological [form of] mourning’, characterized both by a ‘reaction to the real loss of the love-object’ but, also, by a ‘narcissistic identification’ with the love object that often manifests in ‘obsessive neurotic depressions’ (See Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, pp. 209–210). According to Freud, a result of this over-identification, melancholia is often characterised by an ‘indubitably pleasurable self-torment’ wherein ‘the conflict of ambivalence’ harboured towards the departed love-object is ‘turned back against the patient’s own person’ (Freud, p. 210). Per Freud, melancholic states also induce ‘an extraordinary reduction in self-esteem, a great impoverishment of the ego’ that fills the patient with ‘self-reproach.... He abases himself before everyone else, he feels sorry for those closest to him for being connected to such an unworthy person’ (Freud, p. 206). While solitariness has yoked itself to melancholy since the period of Galenic medicine, during which time solitude was thought to breed loneliness, the relationship of loneliness to melancholia had shifted palpably by the close of the nineteenth century. Although pre-modern melancholy had a ‘white’ version, which held positive connotations — as ‘a life-enhancing, contemplative state aligned to emotional sensibility and creative genius’, which implies the ‘oceanic feelings’ mentioned above — it was supplanted by ‘melancholia’, or black melancholy, ‘a psychiatric disorder characterised by anxiety, morbid preoccupations, guilt and a ‘love of solitude’. See ‘Solitude, Melancholy and Depression’, *Solitudes Past and Present*, <<https://solitudes.qmul.ac.uk/research/solitude-melancholy-and-depression/>> [28 March 2022].

Here, melancholia is typified by cultivating an often deliberately aversive relationship to social life whereas, for Fromm-Reichmann anyway, ‘true’ loneliness arises from the *inadequate* discharge of interpersonal intimacy which, far from being a *desirable* state for the lonely subject, more closely resembles an infliction brought about by lack of meaningful integration with others. Ironically, Freud suggests that the ego impoverishment of melancholia manifests in a surprising way: ‘the melancholic does not behave just as someone contrite with remorse and self-reproach would normally do.... In the melancholic one might almost stress the opposite trait of an insistent talkativeness, taking satisfaction from self-exposure’ (Freud, p. 207). This incessant communication would appear discrete from the condition of loneliness which — according to Fromm-Reichmann — is characterised by a perilous, vexed relationship to its own communicability, which troubles the possibility of even recounting its experience.

<sup>21</sup> Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Loneliness* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> ‘A million lonely older people spell public health disaster’

<<https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2014/05/FINAL-Age-UK-PR-response-02.05.14.pdf>> [accessed 1 March 2021]

choices', and this *failure to adequately* maintain health is seen to jeopardise not just the sufferer, but the polis more broadly (emphasis mine).<sup>23</sup> As Jonathan Metzl has observed, 'Health is a desired state, but it is also a prescribed state and an ideological position', one that is accordingly 'replete with value judgments, hierarchies, and blind assumptions that speak as much about power and privilege as they do about well-being'.<sup>24</sup> And, much like illness or poor-health, loneliness not only conveys a powerful sense of personal catastrophe, the onus of the failure to engineer meaningful relationships, or to 'connect', often being placed on the individual. But research also suggests that it is biopolitically freighted, in the sense of being unevenly distributed and administered across the population. Indeed, loneliness is most likely to negatively impact already-vulnerable populations: those marginalized by social and economic impoverishment, race, age, gender, as well as pre-existing psychiatric conditions.<sup>25</sup>

Such value judgements are abundant in environmental journalist George Monbiot's sensationalist claim that the 'disease' of social isolation is 'as potent a cause of early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day [and] twice as deadly as obesity'.<sup>26</sup> Despite Svendsen claiming that it may be more proximate to an autoimmune response than a pathology — 'a "normal" part of our emotional defence system', with its roots in evolutionary development — Fromm-Reichmann's charge of contagion ('the fear of contamination') persists in loneliness's affiliation with the language of the epidemic.<sup>27</sup> This existential anxiety around extinction emerges not only in the (inter)personal sphere; but also in the arena of (bio)politics, where loneliness poses an ostensible ontological threat to *Anthropos* itself. As Monbiot suggests: 'We no longer talk about people.

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<sup>23</sup> 'A million lonely older people spell public health disaster'.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Metzl, *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010), pp. 1–2.

<sup>25</sup> Metzl, *Against Health*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>26</sup> George Monbiot, 'The age of loneliness is killing us', *Guardian*, 14 October 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/14/age-of-loneliness-killing-us>> [accessed 20 February 2021]

<sup>27</sup> Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Loneliness*, p. 7.

Now we call them *individuals*. So pervasive has this alienating, atomising term become that even the charities fighting loneliness use it to describe the bipedal entities formerly known as human beings' (emphasis mine).<sup>28</sup>

Though Monbiot reckons with loneliness as an adversary 'out there', awaiting discovery, as Philip Morrison and Rebekah Smith point out, loneliness diverges from other psychiatric health hazards to the extent that it has no concrete biomedical aetiology; there is a subjective dimension to it that cannot be ignored.<sup>29</sup> This tension is parsed by Svendsen when he suggests that just because '[l]oneliness is receiving steadily more attention [...] that does not mean there is more of it out there'.<sup>30</sup> Fromm-Reichmann posed this question herself in 1959, when she suggested that part of what makes the diagnosis of 'psychotogenic loneliness' so nebulous is that, in an "other-directed" culture, it threatens to collapse into mere intolerance of 'aloneness'. 'Why', she asks, 'are some people able to meet aloneness with fearless enjoyment, while others are made anxious even by temporary aloneness — or even by silence, which may or may not connote potential aloneness?'<sup>31</sup>

The question Fromm-Reichmann demands — namely, 'What has gone wrong in the history of the lonely ones?' — reproduces 'the lonely' as an atomized, largely self-contained risk population whose interpersonal detachment can, in certain cases, generate an observational astuteness that often eludes the 'average nonlonely, mentally healthy person': 'some of them are more keen, sensitive, and fearless observers of the people in their environment'.<sup>32</sup> And, like the

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<sup>28</sup> Monbiot, 'The age of loneliness is killing us'.

<sup>29</sup> See Philip S. Morrison and Rebekah Smith, 'Loneliness: an overview', in *Narratives of Loneliness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives from the 21st Century*, ed. by Olivia Sagan and Eric D. Miller (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 11–25.

<sup>30</sup> Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Loneliness*, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', p. 315.

<sup>32</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', p. 314.

court jester (or like Julie Hecht's narrator), '[t]hey may observe and feel free to express themselves about many painful truths which go unobserved or are suppressed by their healthy and gregarious fellow men', although these 'unwelcome truths [...] may be displeasing if not frightening to his hearers'.<sup>33</sup> Beyond this, however, there lies 'psychotogenic loneliness', that "naked horror" — in [Ludwig] Binswanger's term — of real loneliness' which, 'with its specific character of paralyzing hopelessness and unutterable futility' lies 'beyond anxiety and tension; [where] defense and remedy seem out of reach'.<sup>34</sup> Like the erosion of interpersonal relationships, which loneliness places entirely 'out of the realm of expectation or imagination', this inertial horizon is also evocative of the 'end times'; and, in particular, the affective sensation of 'paralyzing hopelessness' with which environmental crisis confronts us. If, according to Fromm-Reichmann, those 'experiences in adults usually described as a loss of reality or as a sense of world catastrophe can also be understood as *expressions of profound loneliness*' then perhaps, by implication, the looming threat of 'world catastrophe' or the imminent loss of *our* shared reality might also be understood as linked to, or as *producing*, an eco-specific condition of loneliness.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', p. 314.

<sup>34</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', p. 316. Ludwig Binswanger was a Swiss psychiatrist, and foremost proponent of existential psychology, an approach to psychological subject matter that has its roots in the phenomenological work of Edmund Husserl. It focuses on attempting to explain the experience from the viewpoint of the subject, through analysis of their speech. Binswanger argued that there were three 'modes' of existence, which differentiated between human and nonhuman animals. Among these were the *Umwelt* (the 'around world'), the *Mitwelt* (the 'with world'), and the *Eigenwelt* (the 'own world'). The *Umwelt*, in the sense of surroundings, applies to both human and nonhuman animals alike, since it refers to the relationship between an organism and its environment. The *Mitwelt* refers to the mode of existence involved in inter-species relations and interactions between human beings; it also refers to the 'shared world' we have with other people, and especially the perception of our lives through our relationships with other humans. The *Eigenwelt* refers to a person's own subjective experience, or 'self-world' — another category that (presumably) excludes nonhuman animals. According to Martin Halliwell, Binswanger argues that 'world-design is peculiar to human beings'; likewise, he 'assert[ed] that animals don't have reciprocal worlds in the same way as humans because they do not possess a notion of selfhood: that is, the inability to say "*I-you-me*". For further elaboration on Binswanger's existential psychology, see Martin Halliwell, *Romantic Science and the Experience of Self Transatlantic Crosscurrents from William James to Oliver Sacks* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, 'Loneliness', p. 313.

Amplifying these environmental undertones, Fromm-Reichmann also suggests that ‘Binswanger has come nearest to a philosophical and psychiatric definition of loneliness when he speaks of it as “naked existence,” “mere existence”, and “naked horror,”” phrases which in their evocation of Giorgio Agamben’s *zōē* or ‘bare life’, returns us not just to the prospect of mankind’s ‘definitive annihilation’, in the sense of man’s *becoming animal*.<sup>36</sup> But, moreover, it returns us to one of the establishing events of Western science, as Agamben has it. Namely, ‘[t]he *isolation* of [Aristotle’s] nutritive life (which the ancient commentators will already call vegetative)’ which ‘marks out the obscure background from which the life of the higher animals gets separated’ (emphasis mine).<sup>37</sup> As Agamben makes clear, the transformation of politics into biopolitics that was inaugurated by the foundation of the modern State in the seventeenth century in fact relied on ‘a progressive generalization and redefinition of the concept of vegetative life (now coinciding with the biological heritage of the nation)’.<sup>38</sup> This still prevails in biomedical contexts to this day: ‘the definition *ex lege* of the criteria for clinical death, it is a further identification of this bare life — detached from any brain activity and, so to speak, from any subject — which decides whether a certain body can be considered alive or must be abandoned to the extreme vicissitude of transplantation.’<sup>39</sup>

If the solidity and integrity of *Homo sapiens* depends on preserving these intimate semantic and symbolic oppositions, then the forcible return to a ‘naked’ or ‘mere’ existence that ‘real loneliness’ implies also carries with it the (possible) threat of *devolution* into animality; the collapse of the boundary between ‘vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human [...] [between] what is human and what is not’.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, if loneliness can be understood as a

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<sup>36</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, ‘Loneliness’, p. 318. See also Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Agamben, *The Open*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>38</sup> Agamben, *The Open*, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Agamben, *The Open*, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> Agamben, *The Open*, p. 15.

kind of extinction, or if extinction events can also be understood as producing profound loneliness, this sense has doubtless been sharpened by the slow arrival of ‘world catastrophe’ in its non-figurative sense.<sup>41</sup> If, for Fromm-Reichmann, *world catastrophe* signified a metaphorical loss of reality for the subject, then in the environmental present — shaped by the prospective loss of ‘our’ shared reality — loneliness has been retooled as an emotional directive, scaled into a global affective structure. In this state of collective political malaise, the prospects of ‘the lonely ones’ collide with the prospect of a ‘lonely future’ brought about by the sixth mass extinction event.

As Alette Willis argues — drawing on Timothy Dumm’s assessment that “loneliness is the experience of the pathos of disappearance” —, there can perhaps be no proper understanding of loneliness in the twenty-first century that does not take into account the vast loss of nonhuman and animal life across the globe.<sup>42</sup> As of 2019, the ICUN Red List estimates that some 26,500 species are already threatened with extinction; meanwhile, a major report published by the WWF in October 2018 found that, since 1970, human consumption has successfully eradicated 60% of animal populations.<sup>43</sup> On 10 December 2018, contemporary nature writer Robert Macfarlane tweeted that his ‘word of the day’ was “Eremocene” — “the Age of Loneliness”; the “miserable future” into which we are accelerating as a species, characterised by the existential & material isolation that comes *from having calamitously extinguished* other forms of life on Earth.<sup>44</sup> This epochal term was first proposed by entomologist Edward O. Wilson in a 2013 article for *The Economist*, entitled ‘the Age of Loneliness’, one characterised

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<sup>41</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, ‘Loneliness’, p. 313.

<sup>42</sup> Alette Willis, ‘Loneliness in an era of mass extinctions’, in *Narratives of Loneliness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives from the 21st Century*, ed. by Olivia Sagan and Eric D. Miller (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 162–172 (p. 163).

<sup>43</sup> Damian Carrington, ‘Humanity has wiped out 60% of animal populations since 1970, report finds’, *Guardian*, 30 October 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/30/humanity-wiped-out-animals-since-1970-major-report-finds>> [accessed 25 February 2021]

<sup>44</sup> Robert Macfarlane, [Twitter post] (@RobGMacfarlane, 11 December 2018), <<https://twitter.com/RobGMacfarlane/status/1072385615612862465>>. Monbiot has also diagnosed a similar crisis of epochal language in his ‘viral’ article, ‘The age of loneliness’.

by mass extinction events, and the rapid loss of biodiversity.<sup>45</sup> For Wilson, this neologism — owing etymologically to the noun ‘eremite’, meaning ‘one who has retired into solitude from religious motives; a recluse, hermit’ — ought to supplant ‘the Anthropocene’ as it is ‘cheerfully called by some’; a term which, in his view, with its jubilant hailing of the now as ‘a time for and all about our one species alone’, instigates a self-congratulatory elevation of *Anthropos*, a term which already carries its fair share of exclusions.<sup>46</sup> This ‘new era of planetary history’ Wilson prefers to call ‘the Eremocene, the Age of Loneliness’.<sup>47</sup>

As Willis points out, species loss — often “enshrined” primarily in the form of statistics — remains, for the most part, ‘unmournable in the public sphere’, as Butler would have it, since nonhuman loss cannot be grieved through the conventional biopolitical devices Butler enumerates (the genre of the obituary, for instance, is highlighted as one such ‘instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed.’)<sup>48</sup> Nonhuman animals remain unmournable, too, even within Butler’s own humanist critical frame, which excludes them in its reliance on dehumanization — the discursive failure to fit the ‘dominant frame of the human’ — as the cultural procedure whereby disenfranchised lives or subjects become ‘derealized’.<sup>49</sup> As they quip to the reader, ‘it should come as no surprise that I propose to start, and to end, with the question of the human (as if there were any other way for us to start or end!).’<sup>50</sup> Ironically then, even in their efforts at recuperating melancholia, or re-organising the task of mourning around an increased regard for corporeal vulnerability, they stumble into the same jubilantly

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<sup>45</sup> E.O. Wilson, ‘Beware the Age of Loneliness’, *The Economist*, 18 November 2013, <<https://www.economist.com/news/2013/11/18/beware-the-age-of-loneliness>> [accessed 20 February 2021]

<sup>46</sup> Wilson, ‘Beware the Age of Loneliness’.

<sup>47</sup> Wilson, ‘Beware the Age of Loneliness’.

<sup>48</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 35

<sup>49</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 34. See also James Stanescu, ‘Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of animals’, *Hypatia*, 27 (2012), 567–582; Chloe Taylor, ‘The Precarious Lives of Animals: Butler, Coetzee, and Animal Ethics’, *Philosophy Today*, 52 (2008), 60–72.

<sup>50</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 20.

anthropocentric terrain that is Wilson’s concern. As Willis suggests: If ‘the question of mournability starts and ends with human lives’ then animals — their ‘derealised’ lives already negated by a process of dehumanization that is always ‘already at work in the culture’ — ‘cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never “were,” and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness.’<sup>51</sup> Thus, Willis concludes, if loneliness is:

about loss and disconnection, [then] on one level, loneliness in the face of species extinction cannot be intelligible since these creatures and our relationships with them were lost hundreds of years ago. Their physical eradication simply brings about what was already done to them discursively.<sup>52</sup>

That there exists a nebulous ‘we’ that is in thrall to a broader matrix of animals and nonhuman organisms should seem fairly obvious; or at least the notion that there exists a ‘we’ that is physically dependent on the exploitation of a world of ‘healthy ecosystems’, comprising more or less vulnerable beings. Certainly, these are the same grounds on which many contemporary conservationist strategies mobilise their appeals. In her insistence that ‘we’ probably wouldn’t last long if these unreal animal lives and their ecosystems were to be suddenly extinguished, Willis appears to offer a ‘solution’ predicated around a woolier version of an ecosystem services logic, which holds that functional ecosystems ensure optimal physical and mental wellbeing.<sup>53</sup> This

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<sup>51</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 33–34.

<sup>52</sup> Willis, ‘Loneliness in an era of mass extinctions’, p. 165.

<sup>53</sup> Willis, ‘Loneliness in an era of mass extinctions’, p. 165. My critique of this notion is made in the context of a Eurocentric ontology, wherein nonhuman life — treated as ‘natural capital’ — is instrumentalised in the ‘greater’ service of optimising human health and wellbeing. There do exist, of course, differential ways of conceptualising and acknowledging the relational connectedness of natural, nonhuman and human lifeforms, most significantly in Indigenous belief systems and lifeways that persist even under advanced capitalism. For instance, Potawatomi author Professor Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her work across books including *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants* (London: Penguin, 2013) and *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses* (London: Penguin, 2003), points towards a more mutual form of biophilia, one grounded in a language of reciprocity and restoration. In an interview with the *Guardian*, she suggests that the lesson of companionship with the natural world should emerge not through a quantifiable language of ‘value’, but rather through ‘the “grammar of animacy”’, which ‘means viewing nature not as a resource but like an elder “relative” — to recognise kinship with plants, mountains and lakes. The idea, rooted in indigenous language and philosophy (where a natural being isn’t regarded as “it” but as kin) holds affinities with the



one-sided, quid pro quo arrangement, wherein nonhuman life is worth preserving only to the extent that it enables human life, emphasises the contingency of market forces on both animal and vegetal capital, as well as their reliance on a corollary understanding of nonhuman lifeforms filtered through the conceptual prisms of value, service and profitability, terms which are themselves inseparable from an economic framework.<sup>54</sup> This problematic will be of central concern for this chapter. As Willis acknowledges, ‘something’ is clearly missing in a Western public’s relational attachment to nonhuman animals, meaning that animals often ‘seem too far removed from the type of sociality that can result in loneliness when it is severed’.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, as Rosi Braidotti has observed, one of the few senses in which the urban subject can be said to be ‘in thrall’ to non and more-than-human others is via the negative net of dependency in which advanced capitalism suspends all lifeforms: ‘The global economy is post-anthropocentric in that it ultimately unifies all species under the imperative of the market and its excesses threaten the sustainability of our planet as a whole. A negative sort of cosmopolitan interconnection is therefore established through a pan-human bond of vulnerability’.<sup>56</sup> (Notably, this interconnection is often starker in urban geographies, the same scene in which loneliness also tends to thrive). The culprit in this drama of atomisation emerges as an insidious brand of neoliberalism, driven by a tenacious, Randian ideology which prizes heroic individualism ahead of humanity’s ‘de facto’ sociality.<sup>57</sup> Humans, as Monbiot has it, ‘the most social of creatures, who cannot prosper without love’, have been hoodwinked by ‘a life-denying ideology, which enforces and celebrates [...] social isolation’ at the same time as it vaunts ‘heroic individualism’.<sup>58</sup> As he

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emerging rights-of-nature movement, which seeks legal personhood as a means of conservation.’ See James Yeh, ‘Robin Wall Kimmerer: “People can’t understand the world as a gift unless someone shows them how”’, *Guardian*, 23 May 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/23/robin-wall-kimmerer-people-cant-understand-the-world-as-a-gift-unless-someone-shows-them-how>> [accessed 4 April 2022]

<sup>54</sup> See Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2009).

<sup>55</sup> Willis, ‘Loneliness in an era of mass extinctions’, p. 165.

<sup>56</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 63.

<sup>57</sup> Monbiot, ‘The age of Loneliness’.

<sup>58</sup> Monbiot, ‘The age of Loneliness’.

threateningly concludes elsewhere, ‘*We* are all neoliberals now’, an affirmation that would seem to be borne out by the language hiccup above — the defining human attribute of ‘love’ itself weakened by the influence of ‘prosperity’ (emphasis mine).<sup>59</sup>

### **Crisis of (un)feeling:**

If Butler’s insistence on relationality rattles when ‘we’ attempt to bring nonhuman life inside its frame, perhaps this is because love itself is dogged by a grammar of prosperity that exudes

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<sup>59</sup> George Monbiot, ‘Neoliberalism — the ideology at the root of all our problems’, *Guardian*, 15 April 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot>> [accessed 18 February 2021].

Monbiot, though writing in the British context, most likely refers to ‘neoliberalism’ in the *laissez-faire* sense of a free-market ideology advanced by right-leaning politicians since the 1980s, which includes economic policies implemented under Thatcherism and Reaganism. Broadly, these reforms prioritised economic deregulation, favoured corporations, and eliminated price controls, ensuring enhanced trade competition. In turn, together with the privatisation of state functions and austerity regimes, neoliberalism facilitates social arrangements whereby the shrinking of the state gives rise to individual freedom and ‘responsibility’ as overriding social values, as the dynamics of market competition seep into all areas of social, political and economic life. In the American context, these tenets are enshrined in the Washington Consensus, which stipulates ten economic ‘prescriptions’ for developing countries, viewed by many critics as a renewed strategy of neo-colonial exploitation that lubricates First World economies by lifting trade barriers, facilitating cheap overseas labour and the free movement of goods. The term neoliberalism itself, as Elizabeth Shermer has argued, first gained discursive traction among left-leaning academics throughout the 1970s, who used it to ‘describe and decry a late twentieth-century effort by policy makers, think-tank experts, and industrialists to condemn social-democratic reforms and unapologetically implement free-market policies.’ See Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, ‘Review’, *Journal of Modern History*, 86 (2014), 884–90.

My own usage of the term throughout the thesis draws on Jodi Dean’s nuanced understanding of the term in *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), of a tenacious, blanket fantasy of free trade that is disbursed across all strata of society. This fantasy, she suggests, ‘tells us [that] everybody wins. If someone loses, this simply indicates that trade was not free’ (Dean, p. 58). Since the majority of my texts emerge out of an American context, this refers broadly to what Dean parses as: ‘the overwhelming neoliberalization of the U.S. economy that culminated during the Clinton administration in the defeat of universal health care, rollback of welfare state provisions (which were already sporadic, poorly delivered, and minimal), “reinvention of government” as a private contractor and market actor, and expansion of the freedoms of financial and banking concerns in the haze of a dot-com euphoria that trampled on the poor.’ See Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (p. 3). Whilst neoliberalisation is generally yoked to the political Right, Dean makes the (important) point that the Left has also ‘assumed and enjoyed [its] values [...], firing its own salvos at the state and celebrating the imaginary freedoms of creativity and transformation offered by *communicative capitalism*’, which she defines as the ‘ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment, and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global capitalism’ (Dean, p. 2, emphasis mine). Likewise, and as Dean argues, the embrace of freedoms traditionally associated with left-leaning liberalism in American life (including freedom of the press and freedom of speech) have been complemented by the sometimes-uncritical embrace of neoliberalism’s economic formations, such that one might say ‘that the left (even the middle!) is what the right says we are, liberal, both in terms of licentiousness and economic liberalism or neoliberalism.’ See Dean, p. 3.

interest in the neoliberal promise of sovereign wealth, even at the moment of its disavowal. As Butler suggests, one cannot ‘have’ grief without first ‘having’ desire. Attempting to speak about the origins of one’s social formation, Butler writes, thus confronts us with:

‘[a] consequential grammatical quandary [...]. In the effort to explain these relations, I might be said to “have” them, but what does “having” imply? I might sit back and try to enumerate them to you. I might explain what this friendship means, what the lover meant or means to me. I would be constituting myself in such an instance as a detached narrator of my relations. Dramatizing my detachment, I might perhaps only be showing that the form of attachment I am demonstrating is trying to minimize its own relationality, is invoking it as an option, as something that does not touch on the question of what sustains me fundamentally’.<sup>60</sup>

Like loneliness, what throws us about desire is the fact that it leaves us inarticulate, challenging not just our narrative autonomy but also our narrative *accountability*.<sup>61</sup> Accounting for *why* loss is so totalizing entails calculating whatever precise value ‘resides’ in the beloved object, something which (as Freud observed) often remains obscure to the mourner: ‘Freud reminded us that when we lose someone, we do not always know what it is *in* that person that has been lost’.<sup>62</sup> What remains is the seeming (im)possibility of beginning to take stock of loneliness or loss *without* having semantic recourse to the quantifying vocabulary of accounting, a language which also haunts Butler’s analysis. Their speculation over what might constitute a ‘successful’ mourning, for instance, takes on its own corporate slant: ‘Freud changed his mind on this subject: he suggested that *successful* mourning meant being able to exchange one object for another; he later claimed that *incorporation*, originally associated with melancholia, was essential to the task of mourning’, yet another word that conjures visions of company mergers (emphasis mine).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 23.

<sup>61</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 21.

<sup>63</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 20–21. Notably T., in his move to southern California will also ‘*incorporate* for the purpose of buying and selling real estate’ (*HTDD*, 28, emphasis mine.)

As Lauren Berlant suggests, it may be that there exists in desire some latent form of aggression: “The value of recognizing the aggression in desire is that people who desire to be good won't inadvertently secure it through a disavowed humorlessness.”<sup>64</sup> This proximity between the ‘sphere of dispossession’ (which for Butler, might ‘lead to a normative reorientation for politics’) and that of possession — between having and not having, desire and aggression — is also a *problem* for interspecies relations, though not one diagnosed by Butler.<sup>65</sup> Despite Willis’s claims to the contrary, the grammar of ‘having’ — which Butler problematises even within the sphere of human relations — is in fact pervasive in public discourse surrounding extinction, yoked to a peculiar liberal strain of maudlin eco-sentiment. For a conservationist like Wilson, the Eremocene blunts some of the more jubilant connotations of the Anthropocene — which, in its very centring of ‘the human’ as an intervening, geologic force falsely reproduces an image of species unity that unevenly positions all populations as equal culprits in ecocidal degradation. This language shift would appear to be motivated by the aforementioned ‘desire to be good’, the unrestricted benevolence of liberal good-intentions. The effort to reframe mass extinction or the diminishing of biodiversity as something *other* than ‘mere’ scientific dilemmas, but rather as crises of (un)feeling, would seem to form part of an ongoing hustle to de-anthropocentrise the Western cultural imaginary, thus stimulating some kind of ethical injunction towards preserving the heterogeneity of species *other* than our own. And yet, such liberal sentiment can quickly ‘convert’ into, or intersect with a kind of neo-colonial logic. Notably, Wilson’s appeal to loneliness is impossible without also resorting to a simultaneous veneration of scientific ‘discovery’ (as the privileged means of encounter and knowledge production) that also mobilises the extractive logics of colonial ‘enterprise’:

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<sup>64</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Genre Flailing’, *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*, 2 (2018), 156–162 (p. 161).

<sup>65</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 28.

Earth's biodiversity is a dilemma wrapped in a paradox. The paradox is that the more species humanity extinguishes, the more new species scientists discover. Like the conquistadors who melted the Inca gold, they recognise that the great treasure must come to an end — and soon. That understanding creates the dilemma: will we stop the destruction for the sake of future generations, or go on changing the planet to our immediate needs? If the latter, planet Earth will enter a new era of its history, cheerfully called by some the Anthropocene, a time for and all about our one species alone. I prefer to call it the Eremocene, the Age of Loneliness.<sup>66</sup>

Notably, loneliness *for* species loss would seem also to require or rely on the semantic conversion of 'Earth's biodiversity' into 'our great treasure'. The mobilisation of such language should come as little surprise given that, as Elizabeth Grosz suggests, the very idea of an ecosystem, with its 'notion of exchange and "natural balance"' is itself a counterpart to the notion of a global economic and informational exchange system (which emerged with the computerization of the stock exchange in the 1970s).<sup>67</sup> However, even in the midst of disavowing biodiversity's evisceration, Wilson also asserts a dangerously proprietary view of the world's biodiversity as a commons and, by proxy, an affective commons: a tendency that often expresses itself in 'bleeding heart' claims about loneliness 'for' nonhuman animals in the wake of their possible (or actual) extinction.<sup>68</sup>

Recollecting her upbringing as a settler child 'in unceded Musqueam and Skwxwú7mesh territory toward the end of the 20th century', scholar Audra Mitchell writes how '[t]he emotions of white and other privileged children (and adults) [were] continually mobilized to generate support for global conservation efforts'.<sup>69</sup> She continues: 'For the most part, the

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<sup>66</sup> Wilson, 'Beware the Age of Loneliness'.

<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, 'Bodies-Cities' in, *Sexuality & Space*, ed. by Beatriz Colomina (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), pp. 241–254 (p. 243).

<sup>68</sup> Audra Mitchell, 'Decolonizing against Extinction, part III: white tears and mourning', *Worldly*, 14 December 2017, <<https://worldlyir.wordpress.com/2017/12/14/decolonizing-against-extinction-part-iii-white-tears-and-mourning/>> [accessed 15 February 2021]

<sup>69</sup> Mitchell, 'Decolonizing against Extinction'.

white and other privileged people who cry “for” “endangered species” in the abstract simply do not have these relations with the beings in question. We are not directly experiencing the destruction of the intimate relationships — with plants, animals, Ancestors, land, water air and more — that have sustained our collective existence for millennia, and that are necessary for its continuation [...]. In short, the beings targeted for extinction are not “ours” to mourn.<sup>70</sup> As Mitchell argues, ‘this kind of crying can be deeply *dispossessive*. It asserts *proprietary* claims over grieved beings. Indeed, this sentiment — worry over losing “our” “biodiversity”, or my childhood anxieties about not “having” rhinos or koalas when I grew up — embodies the colonial impulse in which the global conservation movement has its roots’ (emphasis mine).<sup>71</sup>

For Sara Ahmed, emotion already operates within what she terms an ‘affective economy’: much like capital, affects function to cumulative effect, accreting ‘value’ through their ‘circulation between objects and signs’ across systems of emotional circulation that are ‘social and material, as well as psychic’.<sup>72</sup> Emotions are thus ‘crucial to the delineation of [both] the bodies of individual subjects and the body of the nation’, and ‘work to align some subjects with some others and against other others’.<sup>73</sup> In doing so, Ahmed argues, they ‘play a crucial role in the “surfacing” of individual and collective bodies’ in such a way that ‘clearly challenges any assumption that emotions are a private matter, that they simply belong to individuals, or even that they come from within and then move outward toward others.’<sup>74</sup> Though not identical (Ahmed’s proper concern here is with hatred and fear, and the fascisms they enable), her emphasis on the way in which the affective texture of hate is scattered, ‘distributed across various figures’ (like the ““common” threat’, for instance, of the immigrant or the biracial coupling) is nevertheless enabling for thinking about how other ‘dysphoric’ affects (dysphoric in

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<sup>70</sup> Mitchell, ‘Decolonizing against Extinction’.

<sup>71</sup> Mitchell, ‘Decolonizing against Extinction’.

<sup>72</sup> Sara Ahmed, ‘Affective Economies’, *Social Text*, 79 (2004), 117–139 (pp. 117–120).

<sup>73</sup> Ahmed, ‘Affective Economies’, p. 117.

<sup>74</sup> Ahmed, ‘Affective Economies’, p. 117.

the sense of being experientially *unpleasant to feel*) — might also work to corrosive effect.<sup>75</sup> One might pause here to (re)consider precisely what kinds of bodies are surfaced or outlined through loneliness's circulation, or what forms of community are aligned under the common threat of 'species aloneness'. What types of individual subject comprise the amorphous 'we' that is the site of Wilson and Monbiot's shared moral panic? Is an affectively-charged category like the Eremocene 'the' proper descriptor to encapsulate 'our' environmental times? The paranoid critic might be tempted to wonder whether the surge of species loneliness *isn't* in fact global but is an affective *bubble* specific to the Euro-American context — to the affective economy of 'the liberal blessed', to borrow Claire Colebrook's turn of phrase.<sup>76</sup>

### **Ad(venture) capital:**

If, as Ahmed suggests, such affective circulation 'play[s] a crucial role in the "surfacing" of individual and collective bodies', 'creat[ing] the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds', it follows that this surfacing also extends to the realm of aesthetic production, the 'surfacing' of fictional bodies and worlds.<sup>77</sup> Although the affective economy of loneliness is still gaining traction in the public imaginary, it has been consolidated in a clutch of contemporary literary fictions, among them Lydia Millet's 2007 novel, *How the Dead Dream*. Millet's text is a bellwether for exploring the fluctuations of loneliness, and how this particular species of emotional capital operates. Not least because the protagonist at its centre, T. (the initial short for Thomas, as in *Doubting*) begins the novel as an emissary of Monbiot's least favourite ideology and ends it as an environmental vigilante, a new breed of (ad)venture capitalist in search of increasing proximity to nonhuman animals. In what follows, I want to think with Millet's novel, a text that — given its own investments in the machinations of economics and in

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<sup>75</sup> Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', pp. 117–118.

<sup>76</sup> Colebrook, 'Anti-Catastrophic Time', p. 106.

<sup>77</sup> Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', p. 117.

the device of ‘spectacular’ or Damascene conversion — approaches these questions of affective capital and nonhuman ‘value’. (By conversion here, I mean both in the sense of spiritual or political reformation but also in the sense of currency, money lust being a formative interest for Millet’s protagonist). Emerging in the slipstream of the 2008 financial crash, the text comprises the first instalment in a trilogy that puts its stock in loneliness. Barring their carousel of recurring characters, the novels that followed — *Ghost Lights* (2011) and *Magnificence* (2012) — share little thematic territory with the first. As Millet put it in a 2009 interview with *BOMB* magazine: ‘the thematic similarities it has are pretty embedded and obscure. Except for aloneness and dogs. Those are obvious’.<sup>78</sup> Taken together however, the trilogy is ‘heavy with ecofriendly themes’, around which *How the Dead Dream* in particular is organised.<sup>79</sup> As Millet puts it, ‘I’m kind of interested in this idea of species aloneness and what will our experience be when there aren’t as many others in the world’.<sup>80</sup> Much of the novel’s action takes places within the global asset bubble of the late 1980s and early 1990s, allowing Millet to chart the idiosyncratic expansion of an economic bubble while simultaneously tracking an emergent ecological ‘loneliness’ brought about by the depletion of the world’s biodiversity, which is estimated to have dwindled by roughly a tenth since the onset of the 1990s.<sup>81</sup> (‘Perhaps,’ as Patrick Ness suggests, ‘Millet seems to be arguing, the love of money is in fact the root of all loneliness’.<sup>82</sup>) The novel’s timespan, as well as its West Coast geography, locates it in close proximity to a discursive moment in which the perception of loneliness as a debilitating psychosocial condition was being newly reified

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<sup>78</sup> ‘Jonathan Lethem and Lydia Millet’, *BOMB*, 1 April 2008,

<<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/jonathan-lethem-and-lydia-millet>> [accessed 13 February 2021]

<sup>79</sup> Adelle Waldman, ‘Boy Meets Squirrel’, *New York Times*, 9 March 2008,

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/09/books/review/Waldman-t.html>> [accessed 1 March 2021]

<sup>80</sup> Wolf Humanities Center, *Lydia Millet: Environmental Science and the Post-Apocalyptic Novel*, online video recording, Vimeo, 28 March 2018, <<https://vimeo.com/264300654>> [accessed 15 February 2021]

<sup>81</sup> Brian Mastroianni, ‘Study: One-tenth of Earth’s wilderness lost since the 1990s’, CBS News, 12 September 2016, <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/more-than-a-10th-of-earths-wilderness-lost-since-the-1990s-study/>> [accessed 15 August 2021]

<sup>82</sup> Patrick Ness, ‘How the rich live’, *Guardian*, 11 October 2008,

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/11/lydia-millet>> [accessed 14 February 2021]



across clinical psychology.<sup>83</sup> At the forefront of this were Russell, Peplau and Cutrona, whose creation of the UCLA Loneliness Scale in 1980 did much to legitimise loneliness not just as a form of mental suffering, but also to renew it as a pertinent subject for scholarly consideration. This scale, which consisted of twenty items, was designed to ‘measure one’s subjective feelings of loneliness as well as feelings of social isolation’.<sup>84</sup> Among these were claims such as: ‘I cannot tolerate being so alone’; ‘I lack companionship’; ‘My social relationships are superficial’; ‘There is no one I can turn to’; ‘People are around me but not with me’.<sup>85</sup>

These descriptors are redolent of T.’s own ambient conditions, which become still more isolating as Millet’s novel progresses. The text charts T.’s lonely evolution from his acquisitive boyhood to the college frat-house, through to his (adult) career as a property developer — with the bulk of his capital investments funnelled into the construction of atomised retirement ‘communities’, often in remote desert settlements which shroud the loneliness of ageing populations under the illusion of social cohesion around shared pastimes. Precocious in his real-estate successes, T. might be taken as a cipher for a certain iteration of corporate neoliberal subjectivity, what Foucault termed ‘*Homo economicus* [who] is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself’.<sup>86</sup> By the time he departs home for the perfunctory college education that is *de rigueur* for his particular species of white masculinity, he has ‘amassed sufficient funds for an account with a discount brokerage firm’ (*HTDD*, 15); by the age of twenty-two, the juvenile mogul has his own office in Santa Monica, from which he runs his various operations. Finally, T.’s unravelling

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<sup>83</sup> See Olivia Sagan and Eric D. Miller, *Narratives of Loneliness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives from the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> Daniel Russell, Letitia A. Peplau, and M.L. Ferguson, ‘Developing a measure of loneliness’, *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 42 (1978), 290–294, <[http://fetzer.org/sites/default/files/images/stories/pdf/selfmeasures/Self\\_Measures\\_for\\_Loneliness\\_and\\_Interpersonal\\_Problems\\_UCLA\\_LONELINESS.pdf](http://fetzer.org/sites/default/files/images/stories/pdf/selfmeasures/Self_Measures_for_Loneliness_and_Interpersonal_Problems_UCLA_LONELINESS.pdf)> [accessed 7 February 2021]

<sup>85</sup> Russell, Peplau, and Ferguson, ‘Developing a measure of loneliness’.

<sup>86</sup> Athena Athanasiou, ‘When the Arrivant Presents Itself’, *Internationale Online*, 25 November 2014 <[https://www.internationaleonline.org/research/alter\\_institutionality/12\\_when\\_the\\_arrivant\\_presents\\_itself](https://www.internationaleonline.org/research/alter_institutionality/12_when_the_arrivant_presents_itself)> [accessed 6 September 2021]. Millet states as much in the Wolf Humanities talk, where she also suggests that the character of T. was based loosely around her brother, an entrepreneur.

arrives through his exposure to a sequence of excoriating losses that confirm his ‘spectacular conversion’ to the cause of extinction, inaugurated by a roadside encounter with a coyote (*HTDD*, 87). The first interruption to T.’s smooth pathway through life arrives in the early pages of the novel, when he hits and kills a coyote on the freeway, an event from which he seems unable to fully recover. T.’s own initiation into loss also coincides with his father’s self-actualisation: upon realising he is gay, he skips town, his coming out prompting an abrupt deterioration in the mental health of T.’s mother, Angela. When she shows up in L.A., she hangs around T.’s apartment only to attempt suicide; surviving her near-death experience by some kind of fluke, (or put off by the fact that heaven was in fact a branch of the International House of Pancakes: “I thought it would be more expensive than that” [*HTDD*, 69]). In the midst of all this, T. falls seriously in love for the first time with Beth, a woman whose beauty he believes would ‘confer her elegance on any landscape’ (*HTDD*, 60). Her sudden death from ‘fibrosis of the heart muscle’ (*HTDD*, 91) leaves him distraught, ‘flattened’ by grief, the (telling) symbolic implication of this being that T. is so drastically unlovable or *devoid* of affect, that Beth simply cannot survive him intact. His grief is punctured, albeit briefly, by two significant forms of companionship: firstly, by a rescue dog adopted from the Humane Society; later, by an intense and short-lived friendship with Casey, the paraplegic daughter of his employee, Susan. Finally, his estrangement from Casey — following an ‘extreme’ and drug-fuelled sexual encounter — seals his isolation (*HTDD*, 183).

Their friendship derailed, T. begins his more avid pursuit of close encounters beyond the sphere of a purely domestic animality. This manifests not only in a new attentiveness towards nonhuman others displaced from their habitats by his developments (the desert kangaroo rat, the Devils Hole pupfish), but also in his subsequent attempts to establish intimacy with charismatic

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<sup>87</sup> Wolf Humanities Center, *Lydia Millet: Environmental Science and the Post-Apocalyptic Novel*.

animals in captivity (the Sumatran rhinoceros, the Mexican gray wolf, the Morelet's crocodile), a hobby that becomes for T. an increasingly risky business. Inverting the paradigm of the corporate hunting trip, as he enters zoo enclosures, exhibits, laboratories and wildlife sanctuaries, this proximity is often attained through states of co-sleeping, or mutual boredom: 'He was so bored one night that he lost resistance to falling asleep [...]. After that sleep was part of the routine, and sleeping he surrendered — it was up to the animals what happened [...] Lying down in the exhibits with them', he felt, 'awkward, uncomfortable, and finally overcome' (*HTDD*, 167). T.'s Kurtzian abandonment at the novel's conclusion to 'the wilderness' of a Belizean preserve, where he has retreated in search of the black jaguar, represents an ambivalent final communion with 'the natural' that is necessarily complicated by factors of privilege and access — to capital, mobility and power — that facilitate T.'s (ad)ventures, as well as the prizing of rarity as a metric proportional to *value*.

Aside from being the author of some twelve works of literary fiction, Millet — a self-described 'writer and conservationist' — holds a Masters in Environmental Policy from Duke University, and has been a staff writer at the Center for Biological Diversity since 1999.<sup>88</sup> In a 2009 interview with *BOMB* magazine, Millet confessed to being 'captivated by animals. I find that any literature that isn't populated by them seems dry to me. Animals are like rock stars, they have that charisma'.<sup>89</sup> That Millet should yearn for a literature *populated* with animals is perhaps unsurprising, given the purview of her day job: 'there has to be a practical side to all this. For me, I can't just write books [...] there's no instant gratification in literary fiction, really. And I like instant gratification, I'm American [...] I have to have a job where I can see some kind of immediate impact'.<sup>90</sup> Elsewhere Millet has denounced the more paranoid strategies of

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<sup>88</sup> Bethanne Patrick, 'On Bad B&Bs, Writing As a Single-Parent, and the Presidential Elections', *Lithub*, 2 May 2016, <<https://lithub.com/on-bad-bbs-writing-as-a-single-parent-and-the-presidential-elections/>> [accessed 2 February 2021]

<sup>89</sup> 'Jonathan Lethem and Lydia Millet', *BOMB*.

<sup>90</sup> Wolf Humanities Center, *Lydia Millet: Environmental Science and the Post-Apocalyptic Novel*.

environmental pessimism, describing herself as ‘highly idealistic’ ‘hopeful’ and ‘optimistic’: ‘All their lives [people are] trained to love animals [...]. People really want for extinction not to happen [...]. Extinction is not what people want, and as long as people love animals — and I think that they do, just at their core — there will always be this fight that can sometimes be won against extinction’.<sup>91</sup> As the novel’s paratext would seem to suggest, the influx of animals in Millet’s literary works functions in some degree as artistic compensation for their own dwindling numbers in the world beyond the realm of the purely aesthetic. The book’s acknowledgments index those species extinguished during the period that marked the text’s composition (the West African black rhinoceros), dedicating itself also to the memory of the many precarious lives still on the cusp of being lost: ‘the rarest species in the United States, many of which may vanish in the blink of an eye’ (among these are the Alabama beach mouse, Attawer’s greater prairie chicken, the Florida panther, and Fosberg’s love grass).<sup>92</sup>

The reparative gesture of Millet’s project, with its emphasis on *re-population*, would itself seem to emerge from the same conservationist imperative encouraged by Wilson himself, who has advocated ‘setting aside’ half of the Earth’s land to remediate biodiversity loss.<sup>93</sup> This concept proves integral to the ‘mitigation’ strategy undertaken by ‘the state and federal biologists’ of Millet’s narrative wherein T., ‘the paving for his subdivision’ having ‘displaced’ a population of kangaroo rats — themselves ‘on the brink of disappearing’ — must offer up ‘a parcel of land’ to resettle the small rodents (*HTDD*, 123). There is a sense in which Millet’s text might also be seen as a kind of discursive set-aside, a fictional stronghold or *reserve* wherein animals endangered in ‘real’ life find themselves newly populous or able to thrive within the aesthetic frame. Indeed, according to Willis, one means of retrieving the ‘unmournable’ animal from the territory of

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<sup>91</sup> Wolf Humanities Center, *Lydia Millet: Environmental Science and the Post-Apocalyptic Novel*.

<sup>92</sup> See ‘Acknowledgments’ in Millet’s *How the Dead Dream*.

<sup>93</sup> See E.O. Wilson’s book *Half-Earth* (New York, NY: Liveright, 2016).

derealisation is precisely *through* the aesthetic, in particular the genre of ‘ecological writing’ wherein writers write themselves ‘into relationship with the more-than-human world’, ‘enter[ing] imaginatively into dialogue with [nonhuman] experience’.<sup>94</sup> In the context of this jubilant reading, such dialogue simulates an interspecific encounter that not only renders interspecies loneliness more ‘intelligible’, but also allows for the neat reinsertion of *Anthropos* into the ‘embodied vulnerability’ of a sprawling ecosystem.<sup>95</sup> The reparative power of the gesture is such that Willis compares ecological writers to ‘contemporary shamans [who] descend from the world of common discourse into the realm of the “unreal”, the world of the not quite dead and not quite living, to bring back the ghosts of the members of our wider community and breathe life back into their forms’.<sup>96</sup> One might take issue here with Willis’s reductive alignment of contemporary, corporate publishing culture with the practice of shamanism — which forms part of an Indigenous belief-system dating back millennia — a critical move that in itself seems legible within the context of the appropriative affect Mitchell describes.

Millet’s afterword, however, seems not just to confirm her *proximity* to the reparative strain of ecological writing Willis describes, it also implies a certain degree of liberal conviction or investment in the novel’s formal power as a didactic vehicle that can directly convert ‘feeling’ into ‘action’.<sup>97</sup> The notion that ‘it’s possible to connect with some[one] else even though they’re

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<sup>94</sup> Willis, ‘Loneliness in an era of mass extinctions’, pp. 163–169.

<sup>95</sup> Willis, ‘Loneliness in an era of mass extinctions’, p. 169.

<sup>96</sup> Willis, ‘Loneliness in an era of mass extinctions’, p. 171.

<sup>97</sup> See Frank I. Michelman, ‘The Subject of Liberalism’, *Stanford Law Review*, 46 (1994), pp. 1807–1833. As Michelman suggests there, liberal principles ‘feature strong commitments to basic individual rights and liberties, to limited government, to acceptance of difference and even conflict among people’s conceptions of the good in human life, to securing broad latitude for people’s endeavors to live their lives according to their varying conceptions of the good, to a rule of law and equality before the law, and to entrenchment of these commitments in a political constitution’ (p. 1814). As George Lakoff notes, much of modern theoretical liberalism derives its roots from the work from philosopher John Rawls, who sought to expand ‘classic liberalism to include social issues, such as poverty, health, and education.’ See George Lakoff, *Moral Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 56. Rawls’s social contract theory of a ‘just society’ built on the classical tradition of theoretical liberalism, which holds ‘that individuals are, or should be, free, autonomous rational actors, each pursuing their own self-interest’ (p. 55). (This model has often been critiqued on communitarian grounds, perceived as denying that individual subjects can exist and flourish within community structures, as well as the extent to which

very different from you’ is a shibboleth common to Victorian understandings of fiction, which was neatly parsed in a 2015 conversation between Marilynne Robinson and Barack Obama in the *New York Review of Books*: ‘the most important set of understandings that I bring to that position of citizen, the most important stuff I’ve learned I think I’ve learned from novels. It has to do with empathy’.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, a 2013 write-up in *The Atlantic* proffered up literary (rather than popular) fiction as a serious ‘empathy workout’, and proclaimed ‘bookworms’ as ‘bleeding hearts’, based on a study led by researchers at VU University in the Netherlands which found that ‘readers who emotionally immerse themselves with written fiction for weeklong periods can help boost their empathic skills’.<sup>99</sup> Elsewhere, in 2016, another article printed in the same publication seemed to revoke the unquestioned veracity of such claims, suggesting that scientific attempts to assess whether or not reading actually *causes* augmented empathy may, in fact, be rather brittle.<sup>100</sup> (Its author also goes on to note the general terminological ‘mushy-ness’ between ‘cognitive empathy’ — ‘the capacity to imagine rather than share another person’s feelings’ — and theory of mind — which refers to the capacity to understand others by ascribing mental

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subjectivities are formed in the crucible of the social, as Judith Butler points out). For Lakoff, this is distinct from political liberalism, which he suggests ‘characterizes the cluster of political positions supported by people called “liberals” in our everyday political discourse: support for social programs; environmentalism; public education; equal rights for women, gays, and ethnic minorities; affirmative action; the pro-choice position on abortion; and so on’ (pp. 57–58). The liberal investment in concepts of ‘fairness’ or equitable distribution is, per Lakoff, also yoked to a moral system that tends to prioritise empathy, compassion, and self-development along with other ‘nurturant’ affects, which then become equated with moral ‘solvency’ or goodness, accruing moral ‘credits’ for those who practice them (pp. 103–104). Whereas others (envy, anger, self-destruction, acts of deception or disobedience) get associated with moral ‘bankruptcy’ or frailty, a state Lakoff configures as running up a ‘moral debit’. As such, these so-called ‘liberal’ forms of moral ‘capital’ are often left to circulate unquestioningly, imbued with a positive moral ‘charge’ or ‘value’ that may, in fact, operate to reinforce conservative logics that people in society simply get what they ‘deserve’ (p. 105), obscuring structural injustices in the process.

<sup>98</sup> President Barack Obama and Marilynne Robinson, ‘President Barack Obama & Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation — II’, *The New York Review*, 19 October 2015, <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/19/president-obama-marilynne-robinson-conversation-2/>> [accessed 15 August 2021]

<sup>99</sup> David Wagner, ‘Reading Fiction Can Make You More Empathic’, *The Atlantic*, 22 February 2013, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/02/reading-fiction-can-make-you-more-empathetic/318050/>> [accessed 16 April 2022]

<sup>100</sup> Joseph Frankel, ‘Reading Literature Won’t Give You Superpowers’, *The Atlantic*, 2 December 2016, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/12/should-psychologists-study-fiction/509405/>> [accessed 4 April 2022]

states to them —, terms that are frequently conflated in popular coverage of psychological research though they remain subtly distinct.)<sup>101</sup> The mythos of empathy’s transformative potential is likewise hailed by Ella Soper in her 2013 treatment of Millet’s novel: ‘literature’s ability to revolutionize thought and language has been well understood by sentimental novelists in the tradition of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Anna Sewell, Marshall Saunders [...]. Our empathy is elicited by the plights of identifiable individuals to a far greater extent than it is moved by those of countless and unknown others’.<sup>102</sup> As Suzanne Keen observes, such claims slot into a broader effort among contemporary virtue ethicists to forge a connection between the ‘experience’ of empathy and behavioural ‘outcomes of changed attitudes, improved motives, and better care and justice’.<sup>103</sup>

The issue here is not with empathy per se, which can be a vital tool for establishing intersubjective connection and generating solidarity across divergent lived experiences; certainly, the propensity to ‘feel with’ someone harbours radical potentiality, and has been integral to many social justice efforts, collective activisms, and mutual aid practices.<sup>104</sup> However, the over-easy, sometimes pat, correlation of empathy with literary production frequently finds expression in the vague, imprecise insistence that reading (and the reading of ‘literary’ fiction, in particular, a category whose parameters fluctuate according to shifting political and social mores) is, at the individual level, emotionally enriching in and of itself, without always properly attending to ‘the social uses and ramifications of that [empathy, which] are extremely open to question.’<sup>105</sup> As Joseph Frankel writes in the *Atlantic*, ‘the benefits of empathy are sometimes seen as “too

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<sup>101</sup> Frankel, ‘Reading Literature Won’t Give You Superpowers’.

<sup>102</sup> Ella Soper, ‘Grieving Final Animals and Other Acts of Dissent: Lydia Millet’s *How the Dead Dream*’, *ISLE*, 20:4 (2013), 746–756 (p. 746).

<sup>103</sup> Suzanne Keen, ‘A Theory of Narrative Empathy’, *Narrative*, 14 (2006), 207–236 (p. 208).

<sup>104</sup> See, for instance, scientist Terri E. Givens’s *Radical Empathy: Finding a Path to Bridging Racial Divides* (Bristol: Policy Press and Bristol, 2022). Givens calls for the development of a ‘radical empathy’ that would move us beyond ‘an understanding of others’ lives and pain to understand the origins of our own biases, including internalized oppression.’

<sup>105</sup> Frankel, ‘Reading Literature Won’t Give You Superpowers’.

obvious for justification,” too easily conflated with the ideas of compassion, morality, and kindness’, not to mention the vexed class implications of prescribing ‘literary’ fiction as a tool for cultivating empathy, a process that is itself ‘slow work that depends so much on social circumstance.’<sup>106</sup> Additionally, as George Lakoff suggests, empathy also serves as a multifarious and potent metaphor, yoked to schemes of ‘moral accounting’ that don’t always produce a net good, and sometimes veer dangerously close to the ‘improving’ logic of a prescriptivist approach. He distinguishes ‘*Absolute empathy*’, for instance, ‘simply feeling as someone else feels, with no strings attached’, from *egocentric empathy* wherein we ‘project [not only] our capacity to feel onto someone else, but [...] also project our values’, processes that cannot always be readily disentangled from one another.<sup>107</sup> Lakoff also notes the unsavoury paternalistic dimensions of empathy, as commonly framed in Western practices of charity, whereby a wealthy subject ‘accru[es] moral credit by giving something of positive value—typically money—to people who are less well-off’.<sup>108</sup> This ultimately self-serving strain he terms ‘*affordable empathy*’, or ‘the ability of people who are relatively well-off to empathize with people who are less fortunate than they’, a context in which T.’s sudden *interest* in vulnerability might certainly be legible.<sup>109</sup>

In the case of Millet’s novel, the strategic value of placing one’s faith in the empathic potentiality of fiction is complicated by a textual endnote which, in the very act of dedication, also appears to signal the impotence of her text, ‘exposing’ the aesthetic as ineffectual in mounting a successful challenge to the problem of species loneliness. The commemorative appearance of these ‘rarest species’ (*HTDD*, 245) within the (relatively) rarefied environment of literary fiction has ostensibly had minimal impact in the thirteen years since the novel’s first publication — either in terms of materially intervening in, or discursively redeeming these

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<sup>106</sup> Frankel, ‘Reading Literature Won’t Give You Superpowers’.

<sup>107</sup> George Lakoff, *Moral Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 216.

<sup>108</sup> Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, pp. 217–218.

<sup>109</sup> Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, p. 217.



animals from extinction. In the time it took for Millet to write her book — and in the time elapsed since its publication — their statuses remain nevertheless ‘endangered’, an impasse that suggests empathy alone isn’t a politically robust or *sustainable* as a strategy for recuperating precarious lifeforms. In its simultaneous commitment to documenting T.’s affective conversion, and its oblique engagement with the satirical form that has guided much of Millet’s career, *How the Dead Dream* enables us to track how the logic of eco-loneliness operates, while also calling it into question through Millet’s mobilisation of a doubting (and unlikeable) protagonist. Accepting T.’s eco-radicalisation encourages the reader to take seriously the radical possibilities of conversion at the same time that its satirical undertones suggest the brittleness of his conversion, exposing how easily emotional sovereignty extends into new terrains. Precisely the novel’s ambivalence towards its own protagonist makes it a richly generative textual example through which to track the affective economy of environmental loneliness, which will be this chapter’s central focus. In what follows, I offer a sustained close reading of Millet’s text, firstly exploring her protagonist’s systematic relational ‘reserve’ through the figure of ‘flat affect’. Bearing in mind Ahmed’s concept of the affective economy, I will then turn towards the thematic proximity between the circulation of lonely affect and capital in Millet’s novel, demonstrating the synchronicity between them. Through engaging with reparative academic treatments of *How The Dead Dream*, I aim to demonstrate how critical interpretations of the novel tend to bolster a perception of privileged Western entitlement to ecological affect. Following Sianne Ngai’s approach, which reads ‘emotions as unusually knotted or condensed “interpretations of predicaments”’, I suggest that the cultural *prevalence* of loneliness, and its proximity to anxieties surrounding species ‘loneliness’ in the face of ecological degradation, thus become a prime way of diagnosing the knotty sociopolitical ‘problem’ of environmental ‘crisis’, and the ramifications of our emotional response to it.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 3.

## Roadside Conversions

Fittingly for a novel that deals with T.'s spectacular conversion to the ecological cause (Millet herself has cited this narrative device as a 'Damascus road' intervention), his conversion begins 'on the road', a figure already imbued with apocalyptic undertones through works of fiction by authors ranging from Cormac McCarthy to Octavia Butler. As well marking the first 'mistake' in T.'s charmed existence, T.'s involvement in a highway collision at the opening of Chapter 2 also interrupts the 'traditional' set of meanings affiliated with the road, which is typically conveyed as a site of linear acceleration, mobility, and sovereign autonomy guaranteed by the vehicle. As well as this, it marks a suspension of the road as a uniquely human construct, revealing it to be a site of crossing for nonhuman others, too:

He killed her driving to Las Vegas, after a truck stop and a few bites of a turkey club served by a waitress with lurid curling fingernails; after a dingy restroom whose yellow urinal mints made him turn away in disgust. He was still in a state of repulsion when he emerged from the diner into twilight. Then the feeling fled: there was a dusky earthshadow in the east, a dim violet light that made even the asphalt look soft.

Driving up the freeway on-ramp he turned the radio on and knew the smoothness of his buttery seat leather against the backs of his thighs. He was satisfied; he was easing in. Then a shape, blurred and fast from the right, and he hit it. The car bumped over it and veered off the road onto the shoulder. He jammed the brake pedal to the floor and sat shaking [...]

Dust rose behind and beside him, and his two right wheels were off the shoulder pavement. He looked out the window behind him to see if there were other cars coming. What was that on the road? What was hit? (*HTDD*, 36–37)

Here, the highway ceases to be merely a cipher for masculinity or a smooth chronotope — a tarmacked surface that facilitates T.'s movements from A to B, insulating him from the world on the commute from his air-conditioned office to his air-conditioned home. If, for T., the freeway previously carried a certain sensual thrill — the Ballardian satisfaction of the 'buttery seat leather

against the backs of his thighs’, or the inviting ‘softness’ of the asphalt — the coyote’s death reveals it as a site of violent encounter, as well. Not just in the sense of the highway pile-up, or the angry snarl of the traffic-jam. But also, in the grotesque banality Millet’s narrator observes: ‘Animals died by the road and you saw that all the time, everyone did. You saw them lying there, so obvious in their deadness, sad lumps of dirty meat; you saw their limp furry masses thrown up like flowers along the yellow stripes, the tumbly asphalt edges. You saw the red insides all exposed. You thought: that is the difference between them and me. My insides are firmly contained’ (*HTDD*, 37). This momentary run in punctures the flimsy fantasy of sovereignty that undergirds T.’s aloof persona, the encounter with the coyote throwing his *modus operandi*, his self-conception as a bounded individual, inured to his surroundings, into total disarray. He reneges on this observation later in Millet’s narration, when he recognizes his own ‘aloofness’ in a Mexican gray wolf: ‘Animals were self-contained and people seemed to hold this against them — possibly because most of them had come to believe that animals should be like servants or children [...] But then he was self-contained too: he had a private purpose, a trajectory, and no one had license to block it’ (*HTDD*, 137). Notably, these mammalian corpses ‘thrown up like flowers along the yellow stripes’ are framed in the language of fecundity, pre-emptively matching the ‘blooming’ of T.’s ethical consciousness, his new-born awareness of the ‘wealth’ of lifeforms that surrounds him.

As Benjamin Bateman observes, in one of the few academic treatments of Millet’s text, T. talks a good game about his own agentic potential: ‘[H]e liked to present himself as solitary and free, an argument for potential’, clinging to ‘the lucky movement of forwardness’ (*HTDD*, 21), a direction that is itself a form of contrivance affiliated with the *bildungsroman* form.<sup>111</sup> Forced to a stop on the fringes of the road, the forward momentum T. embodies is deliberately arrested.

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<sup>111</sup> Benjamin Bateman, ‘A Flattened Protagonist: Sleep and Environmental Mitigation in Lydia Millet’s *How the Dead Dream*’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, 13 (2019), 152–168 (p. 156).

Newly alert to the road as something resembling an ‘environment’, he recognises it as a space in which the human cannot always remain fully sovereign, as suggested by the intrusion of ambivalence into the narrator’s syntax. What T. sees on the road is a ‘shape’, a ‘blur’, a ‘mound’ before it comes into view for what it actually is: ‘It was *just* a coyote’ (*HTDD*, 38, emphasis mine). The primary loss T. incurs in this collision is his Mercedes S-Class (Sonderklasse or “special” class), an initial that, like T.’s own, bears the suggestion of an elite symbolism. The vehicle will later be ‘irrational[ly]’ traded in for a ‘modest 190’, in a noirish move intended to palliate T.’s guilt. This downgrade, while threatening to slow T.’s velocity, in effect does little to permanently suspend his ‘great acceleration’ (*HTDD*, 18). If anything, it newly equips it. Cruising through ‘the newly minted neighborhoods’ (*HTDD*, 85) of his retirement resort later in the novel, he reflects: ‘There was no better way to behold this neatly emerging landscape than from behind the clean windshield of the 190, which framed external scenes and kept them at a perfect distance’ (*HTDD*, 86). This ‘perfect distance’ is an apposite metric for the social world of Millet’s novel, wherein the prospect of connecting — including the kind of ‘connecting’ that might be thought necessary to political agitation — would seem to be perennially withheld by a text that is only able to envisage ‘relationality’ and its prospects in terms of Braidotti’s ‘negative net of dependency’. His contact with fellow men is underpinned by his conviction in the ultimate ‘willingness of people to be fleeced — the ease, almost the gratitude with which they surrendered their assets’ (*HTDD*, 11). Even T.’s cynical attempts on his arrival in California to widen his relational ‘net’ primarily take the form of networking, including the joining of an ‘[e]xclusive racquet club’ populated by a ‘dully middle-class clientele’ who either petition him for sex or business (*HTDD*, 31). Post-conversion, this network will likewise be transfigured, marked by T.’s insertion into a new mesh of ‘lively’ empathic relations that embraces not only human but also nonhuman vulnerability. Seemingly, his newfound communion with the ‘natural’ world signals the incontrovertible authenticity of his new attitude towards interpersonal relations. Peering

behind the veil, his entanglement with a fallible and failing environment outwardly prompts a fresh awareness of the frailty in 'us' that supposedly augments his empathic competencies.

For T., this 'accident' marks a moment of disruptive encounter, one that recalibrates his carefully organised perceptions and private empathies. This event, and the animal marks, perhaps, in the Derridean sense of the *l'arrivant*, an 'absolute surprise' — the arrival of 'a singularity, of an alterity that cannot be anticipated'.<sup>112</sup> Perhaps it is the conspicuous non-abundance of animal contact in his childhood, its willed exclusion from T.'s early life, that makes its intrusion at this point so transformative. 'In his house growing up there had never been pets. He had wanted one, of course. But his mother said dogs and cats left their hair on the furniture and smelled, so he tried asking for gerbils, guinea pigs, and then hamsters; his mother said rodents in cages reproduced and smelled' (*HTDD*, 39). Angela's mysophobia aligns with his mother's broader view of animals as entities which ought to stay 'firmly where they belonged — that is, in paintings, stories, even stained-glass windows, but far from her living room' (*HTDD*, 39). Besides its comic verve, this metafictional moment also introduces a wry, self-reflexive commentary on 'where animals belong' that might be read as more widely indicative of the standardised distance that exists between animals and children in a privileged Western world, wherein proprietary sentiment is cultivated for these creatures notwithstanding the fact that the dominant mode of encounter is primarily through the cultural imaginary, whether in the diminutive niceties of picture books, TV shows, or the 'exoticised' wonder of gallery walls. Angela's claim functions as a sort of unwitting acknowledgment of this irony — an admission of the global threat of animals becoming 'real' — at the same time that it offers an insight into T.'s historically dysfunctional relations with the nonhuman, emphasising that he was raised in an environment where they were tolerable only to the extent they were reduced to little-more than

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<sup>112</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 81.

2D shapes. So, animals are ‘flattened’ in more ways than one: firstly, in the grisly sense of being mangled on the road and, secondly, in their reduction to the representational, their neat containment in the aesthetic realm, something in which Millet’s fiction is also knowingly complicit.

Like this roadkill, Millet’s protagonist finds himself differently laid out by a ‘cardiac event’, the ‘arrhythmogenic right ventricular dysplasia’ that results in Beth dying, flooring an unsuspecting T. (*HTDD*, 91). Beth’s entry into T.’s life marks another conversion for Millet’s protagonist (‘in minutes he was converted. Like all conversions his own was sudden’ [*HTDD*, 57]), one that poses yet another threat to his ‘vision of forward motion’ (*HTDD*, 10). ‘This was how he lost his autonomy — he had moved along at a steady pace and then he was flung’ (*HTDD*, 58). The ‘event’ of Beth’s illness, her own loss of health, is so structurally traumatic in part because of T.’s assumption of her invulnerability, which would seem to violate the rules of his attraction (*HTDD*, 91). “‘But she’s healthy,” said T. faintly, without force. [...] “She goes to the gym”’, as if this fact alone might have shored against her ruin by undiagnosed ‘fibrosis of the heart muscle and a susceptibility to fatal cardiac arrhythmias’ (*HTDD*, 91). If T. feels himself to have been *flung* by Beth’s arrival, then her appearance in his life also facilitates a novel fantasy of momentum that he might harness anew. Beth’s radiance is such that her beauty attains, for T., a kind of exaltation equivalent to that of sunlight, its power stretching over new and enlarged domains: ‘it was the shock of how the world glowed with it — how she lent her surroundings the style of her presence, its effortlessness of grace. In the desert subdivisions would spread, life radiate outward from the sand as the tone of her flesh shone on the planes of her face, through buildings and cables and gas mains’ (*HTDD*, 60). In its turn, this effortlessness recalls his mother (that ‘steady glowing fixture’) as well as his childhood fixation on the subtle ‘alchemy of money’ and the infrastructure that suspends his beloved economy, those ‘great thick cables that ran beneath the surging Atlantic, the intricate and freezing satellites that whirred a thousand

miles above the surface of the earth, displaying all the ingenuity and subtlety of humankind’  
(*HTDD*, 15)

To an extent then the coyote’s killing marks the ‘re-wilding’ of T.’s lifeworld, in the sense described by Jack Halberstam in his nuanced work on the functions of ‘wilderness’: ‘the wild is an encounter, it’s random, it’s a hoped-for, longed-for way of bumping into the counterintuitive, the silly, the incomprehensible, and the unknown. The wild requires mistakes.’<sup>113</sup> For Halberstam, the wild is yet ‘another iteration of the queer’, subtended by these ‘mistakes’ which, following José Esteban Muñoz, he links to ‘failed speech acts’ that harbour the promise of a queer utopia: ‘[W]hen a speech act fails, it’s not that communication is lost, it’s that communication points to something else.’<sup>114</sup> One might think here, of T.’s reaction to Beth’s death, which sends him into his own hermetic state of ‘completely blocked communication’, not dissimilar to the disintegrative state Fromm-Reichmann describes.<sup>115</sup> At points, this dissociation appears so total that T., overhearing his mother conversing with his cleaning woman, finds their conversation wholly unintelligible: ‘It was as though the women were speaking in hums, tonal variations with no alphabet’; ‘Anger rose through him and was trapped at his throat, unable to exit’; ‘his tongue would not move in his mouth’ (*HTDD*, 94). Through suffering, T. enters into his own kind of ‘emotional paralysis’, as Fromm-Reichmann would have it, one that seems to ‘point towards’ his own new hermetic state: ‘As a rule no one came to his apartment. Since Beth had died [...] it had welcomed no one: the rooms were a set of monastic cells, unseen by anyone but himself and the cleaning lady’ (*HTDD*, 167).

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<sup>113</sup> Jack Halberstam, ‘Notes on Wilderness (This is Not a Manifesto)’, *Hemispheric Institute*, 22 June 2014, <<https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/enc14-5-minute-manifestos/item/2608-enc14-5min-halberstam.html>> [accessed 16 February 2021]

<sup>114</sup> Halberstam, ‘Notes on Wilderness’.

<sup>115</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, ‘Loneliness’, p. 305.

For Fromm-Reichmann, such a disintegrative condition is a reaction to the removal or ‘inadequate discharge of the need [...] for interpersonal intimacy’, that precondition of every human being from infancy and throughout life. Bearing in mind the difficulty of surfacing any kind of meaningful connection in Millet’s novel, it is notable that T.’s formative experience of intimacy is warped by his own avarice, possibly owing to the parental failure to provide affective security. Of his father, T. recalls mainly absence and ‘the sight of his back’: ‘dense and silent in the house on weekends, rarely seeking out others to speak to them [...] he always seemed to be turning away to what occupied him’ (*HTDD*, 12). His childhood attentions gravitate not towards any plush toy or animal companion but dollar bills which, in all their crinkled physicality, appeal to him. They wield still greater power when they are ‘soft and worn, for when they were freshly pressed they seemed nearly counterfeit’ (*HTDD*, 3). Indeed, if the haptics of money delights or arouses T., this culminates in the orgiastic image of him opening his mouth to ‘rain a wet spew of coins into his cupped hands’ at his mother’s book club meeting (*HTDD*, 5). As T. outgrows his commodity fetishism, ‘learn[ing] to like abstract money better than its physical body’ (*HTDD*, 13), the evolution of his prospects only returns him to the comforts of the market. ‘Money [becomes] the movement of commerce and the movement of broad arms’; ‘his satisfaction’ is relocated ‘in surges of energy, in the stream of contact between machines’ (*HTDD*, 13). These momentary surges reveal the slick functioning of an economy that, for T. anyway, demarcates some form of connection. His cold desire, however, ‘to have a hand in the revolutions of the market itself, in the ebb and flow’, cannot satisfactorily take place without his involvement in the network of relations that make the market tick: ‘But he needed to make connections [...] that other people found a community easily struck him as mysterious; the city was a wide network of generic streets and buildings, among which small figures were suspended in casual segregation’ (*HTDD*, 31).



For Halberstam, T.'s isolation and its attendant failures of communication might be viewed redemptively as pointing towards *something else* for him: like, say, his conversion to ecological sentiment, or to a politics of anti-capitalism. Bateman, for instance, traces the 'bizarre flight from normative conduct' that precipitates T.'s descent into vigilantism, culminating in his eventual 'abandonment to, and embeddedness in a precarious planet'.<sup>116</sup> He makes the argument that, through Millet's novel, 'T. is brought into radical coincidence with vulnerability', this trajectory evolving in tandem with the 'de-development' of the *bildungsroman*, the novel of formation replaced by one of de-formation.<sup>117</sup> This vulnerability, Bateman suggests, originates with T.'s 'interest in *vulnerable creatures*, including an aged coyote with which his car collides, the dead body of a girlfriend killed prematurely, [...] a mother retreating into dementia, a friend confined to a wheelchair, and an array of critically endangered and extinct-in-the-wild animals' (emphasis mine).<sup>118</sup> Somewhat paradoxically then, this 'other thing' would seem to be the same 'wildness' that has already arrived, in the form of the coyote. The progression of T.'s quest for 'the wild' persists in a less fleeting form of animal companionship, an adoption from the Humane Society: 'a thin, middle-aged [bitch], white with tan markings, a homely but intelligent face and a tendency to back away, frightened, whenever he made a sudden movement' (*HTDD*, 40). The dog, while seeming initially 'superfluous, a being without purpose', soon incites a genuine fondness in T., so much so that the wild's intrusion into T.'s life begins to take the form of a surprising new 'avocation', namely eco-vigilantism — a hobby that, much like his early work in day-trading, soon evolves towards more sophisticated and rarefied targets (*HTDD*, 40). Though the coyote inaugurates T.'s ethical transformation he quickly moves on (motivated, perhaps, by its consensus status as 'vermin', 'People said they were pests. They took pets out of

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<sup>116</sup> Bateman, 'A Flattened Protagonist', p. 154.

<sup>117</sup> Bateman, 'A Flattened Protagonist', pp. 154–156.

<sup>118</sup> Bateman, 'A Flattened Protagonist', p. 153.

yards in the suburbs, ran off with children's kittens' [HTDD, 36]), deriving consolation in the wake of Beth's death through encounters with increasingly 'exotic' or 'wild' animals.

According to Halberstam, the wild marks a necessary critical deviation from the 'beaten path': entering the zone of the wild compels us to 'find other tracks', 'break with [...] academic formulae and aesthetic clichés'.<sup>119</sup> Despite its thematic territory, Millet's text ironically produces its fair share of *formulaic* academic readings, ones that typically neglect to critically wrangle with T.'s own affective flatness, and the relative implausibility of his developmental shift from *homo economicus* to fully-fledged eco-empath. While the telos Bateman lays out may be descriptively accurate (certainly, these are the conventional events that take place in Millet's novel, and in roughly that order) the very idea of 'thrown-ness' or *flung*-ness implied by Bateman's argument, with its emphasis on T.'s 'radical coincidence with vulnerability', would appear out of kilter with the deterministic moral system in which Millet's protagonist exists. As the blurb of Millet's text suggests, this re-wilding is one among several 'events' that '*conspire* to leave T. isolated again', a 'conspiring' that seeds a sense of paranoia in her protagonist, to which T. confesses partway through: 'he felt tentative, suspicious — as though someone had slyly robbed him and only now was he suspecting it' (HTDD, 110). Bateman's claims above would also seem to (unhelpfully) establish a false hierarchy that distinguishes between 'types' of vulnerability that 'count' as radical and those that *don't*. Perhaps it is wishful thinking to decipher in the engineering of T.'s radicalisation something *other* than the peculiarly feminised brand of 'vulnerability' Bateman suggests is the only viable catalyst for political 'awakening' or mobilisation in Millet's novel, even if this *something else* is merely T.'s growing disenchantment with 'the motile geniuses of corporate novelty' (HTDD, 25). That these female characters are singled out as proxies for a specific mode of vulnerability that sits in uncomfortable proximity to the 'creaturely' is jarring — not least

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<sup>119</sup> Halberstam, 'Notes on Wilderness'.

because it deprives the women in Millet's novel of any opportunity to serve as something other than the purveyors of T.'s sentimental education, or the arbiters of his 'spectacular conversion'. The suggestion being that they exist solely as mediators of lonely masculinity, and not as victims of loneliness in their own right. This, despite the fact that, according to the ONS, women report feeling lonely more frequently than men, with older women (the age bracket to which T.'s mother, Angela, belongs) in particular affected with greater frequency.<sup>120</sup> Cumulatively these events do little to dent T.'s acquisitive mindset even if they have the effect of denuding its pleasure, making accumulation rote, 'routine', 'almost dutiful — almost as if the accumulation of capital was nothing more than an obligation kept up for the sake of honor' (*HTDD*, 111). The same cannot be said of the women in Millet's novel, who are continually brought close to the brink of an extinction from which the novel permits only certain of them to return. Furthermore, Bateman instigates a sequence of troubling conflations, not just between the conditions of animality and femininity but, also, between this 'animal' vulnerability and (dis)ability, the treatment of which already forms a sizeable problem for Millet's text.<sup>121</sup> There exists, for instance, a discomfiting proximity in Millet's novel between the 'event' of the coyote's death, the gory scene of her injury and the rueful over-attention paid to Casey's paraplegia, which is itself the outcome of a road accident, 'a pileup of cars on the freeway in an ice storm outside Denver' (*HTDD*, 154).

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<sup>120</sup> See 'Gender and Loneliness', *Campaign to End Loneliness* [online], <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/frequently-asked-questions/gender-and-loneliness/> [accessed 15 August 2021]

<sup>121</sup> Millet has, in at least one interview, suggested that her own feminism might extend to the remit or intention of her work ("I hope my work's considered feminist, among other *ists*, but I'd be surprised if that's the first adjective that springs to mind for most readers"). See Matthew Tuberville, 'Lydia Millet Has Stopped by to Talk About Her Career as One of America's Most Important and Diverse (AND INTERESTING) Writers—Here We Go', *Writers Tell All*, 21 September 2018 <<https://www.writerstellall.com/writers-tell-all/lydia-millet-has-stopped-by-to-talk-about-her-career-as-one-of-americas-most-important-and-diverse-and-interesting-writers-here-we-go>> [accessed 5 March 2021]

Nonetheless the transformative potential of this sentimentalism, or T.'s 'heightened awareness' of frailty, remains a crucial affective strategy for Millet's text which — like the morality plays that entertained audiences in the medieval and Jacobean periods — would seem vested with its own didactic interests. These allegorical dramas typically found their everyman protagonist confronted by personifications of moral attributes, who variously tried to prompt them to choose a life of good over a life of evil. That drama is perhaps smuggled through in Millet's own 'battleworthy' pitting of a liberal agenda against a neoliberal one. As Ella Soper observes, 'Lydia Millet's characterization of her books' "agenda of empathy" ("A Conversation" 84), together with her call for a "battleworthy" ("Die, Baby Harp Seal!" n.p.) environmental rhetoric befitting our age of extinction and complacency, suggest that Millet sees her writing as promoting a politics of affect — that is a political stance that acknowledges and mobilises the agentive potential of empathic realization'.<sup>122</sup> An attentiveness to these sentimental leanings, or to the apparent conviction of Millet's text in itself as a *vehicle* for spectacular conversion, is made more prescient because her text thematically trades in *doubting*, an ambivalence that is invited in the apostolic implications of T.'s naming. Reading more paranoically, it begins to seem altogether *too* convenient that T.'s ethical transformation could be so easily attained, or that the preconditions for a rigorously empathic politics *just so happen* to exist in a narrative whose primary momentum has heretofore been driven by the charm of an almost entirely detached and affectless protagonist, a man whose wealth is underpinned by emotional poverty.

Certainly, Soper would appear reasonably prone to this affective politics, as evidenced in her conviction that the novel 'provokes our moral imaginations by foregrounding the figure of the resistant mourner', 'an affective posture' that, for her, 'might be an ethical praxis entirely suited to the grief work authors and ecocritics are increasingly called upon to perform.'<sup>123</sup> This

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<sup>122</sup> Soper, 'Grieving Final Animals', p. 747.

<sup>123</sup> Soper, 'Grieving Final Animals', p. 747.

insistence on the moral provocation of Millet's novel infers a critical receptiveness that is also rehearsed in Bateman's reading, in which he similarly advocates for T.'s discovery of an empathic bounty that has supposedly been lying dormant all along. Following the collision, T. tests drives his own empathic potential, engaging in small flights of fancy: 'He lay with his arms and legs frozen, imagining paralysis: he tried to feel the gradual freezing'; 'As a child [...] he had liked to play for a short time that he was something else [...] a dead man [or] a fallen log' (*HTDD*, 54). As T. cannily acknowledges, the abandonment of such imaginative faculty comes with the onset of adulthood and is seen as the price of entry into neoliberal subjecthood, where loneliness is never very far away: 'What the fraternities offered was a last gasp of boyhood before the assumption of a purely adult identity, one that for most would bring loneliness' (*HTDD*, 24). Bateman, however, alights on this 'imaginative activity' as an instance of 'interspecific identification with the coyote whose legs he paralysed on the drive to Las Vegas'; in practicing this 'numbness', Bateman suggests, in 'becoming a child again, he also becomes the coyote [...] and [thus] part of an animal ecology.'<sup>124</sup> T. conducts a similar empathic 'exercise' in the accident's immediate aftermath, as he falteringly attempts to imagine why the animal might have strayed onto the road in the first place: 'Maybe she had been feeble and exhausted and thought, trotting onto the blacktop for the last time: welcome, friend' (*HTDD*, 39). T., perhaps more ambivalent than Bateman, seems quick to relinquish the success of these attempts however: 'But no. A coyote might want relief from suffering, but to plan for her own end seemed human' (*HTDD*, 38). Whereas Bateman willingly grants the success of T.'s interspecies empathy — an affectual apparatus that would appear to be entirely lacking from T.'s arsenal elsewhere in the narration — with relative ease, Millet's protagonist himself remains decidedly more hesitant towards his own efforts.

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<sup>124</sup> Bateman, 'A Flattened Protagonist', p. 159.

Importantly, the uncritical validation of this empathic premise *within* the frame of the novel fails to confront how Millet's own strategic investments in empathy might be more ambiguous than they seem at face value, or that the truly 'radical' gesture of her fiction might actually emerge in its ironic *distance* from the lonesome figure of the eco-vigilante. Instead, these critiques seem to yearn for their own kind of theoretical solutions to the problematics raised by Millet's novel, wherein species loneliness can be resolved through easy recourse to exemplary humanist values like empathy, or a new materialist insistence on the joyous rediscovery of corporeal entanglement with the nonhuman world. Crucially, what these (mis)interpretations belie is that a more interesting reading of the novel is available to us if we don't simply strain to override its morally jarring elements or jam its ambivalences into a straightforwardly queer or reparative reading. By insisting that Millet's text offers up the neat solution to the problematic of loneliness it raises, these critiques not only limit the heuristic potential of the novel, they also deftly reassert a species of anthropocentric logic in their wholesale buying into T.'s redemptive arc. As Claire Colebrook asks of the various theoretical turns towards ecology, bodies, and matter: 'What if all current counter-Cartesian, post-Cartesian or anti-Cartesian figures of living systems (along with a living order that is one interconnected and complex mesh) were a way of avoiding the extent to which man is a theoretical animal, a myopically and malevolently self-enclosed machine whose world he will always view as present for his own edification?'.<sup>125</sup> Might T.'s convenient retrieval of a vibrant material world that has heretofore been almost entirely excluded from his subject formation simply be a specious *reassertion* of the extractive assumption that everything is his for the taking?<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Claire Colebrook, 'Not Symbiosis, Not Now: Why Anthropogenic Change Is Not Really Human', *Oxford Literary Review*, 34 (2012), 185-209 (p. 193).

<sup>126</sup> Thanks to my supervisor, Bob McKay, for illuminating and providing necessary clarity to this strand of argumentation.

Instead, in the following section, I will suggest that the text's critical potential lies in its ability to diagnose the extractive-capitalist subjectivity that *also* dogs the conservationist instinct to hold onto biodiversity as though it were our possession, enabling 'us' to conceive of the world as somehow 'owing' us its gifts. Through T., Millet satirises the prevalence of lonely affect that is quietly at work in Eurocentric conservation logics, an affective stance that feels that much more seductive to the reader given its ability to convert even a steroidal expression of the capitalist mentality like T. — the implication being that empathic realisation could seize *almost anyone* at any moment. By pushing the reader to identify with T., the text sells us the idea that feeling might somehow radically disrupt or intercept capitalism's accumulative energies, halting its extractive momentum by substituting it with something *less* consuming. At the same time, however, this textual process is rendered entirely ambivalent, since this identification cannot help but reproduce a yearning for the *avoidance* of human loneliness that also reveals readers' complicity as mass consumers of animal-affect, in a way that takes up equivalent existence-consuming energies. But if not empathy, then what?

### **Empathy Exams**

To the extent that the reparative gesture of empathy (much like Willis's advocacy for 'feeling with' the nonhuman world) strives towards a fantasy of approaching greater 'embodied vulnerability', it also risks excessive or over-identification, approaching a new extremity of anthropocentric hubris.<sup>127</sup> As Leslie Jamison reflects, empathy exists on a frail touchline: 'empathy is always perched precariously between gift and invasion [...]. [It] requires inquiry as much as *imagination*' (emphasis mine).<sup>128</sup> Despite empathy's unchallenged status as a pro-social affect, a fledgling cultural suspicion towards empathy has found dystopian expression in the phenomenon of 'VR philanthropy', and technologies pioneered by the softer arm of global

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<sup>127</sup> Willis, 'Loneliness in an era of mass extinctions', p. 167.

<sup>128</sup> Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams: Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2014), p. 5.

corporations, including ‘Oculus’s “VR for Good” and HTC’s “VR for Impact”, which try to use VR to promote empathy and social welfare’.<sup>129</sup> As Ben Tarnoff writes: ‘At black-tie fundraisers in New York, attendees have used VR headsets to travel to destinations as distant as a Lebanese refugee camp and an Ethiopian village. And the United Nations has built its own VR app that teleports users to Syria, Liberia, Gaza and elsewhere, while encouraging them to donate money or time’.<sup>130</sup> As Tarnoff points out, these philanthropic galas — at which Millet’s protagonist himself wouldn’t look out of place — have proved a valuable, redemptive rhetorical tool for Silicon Valley. Such simulated encounters have led to VR being hailed as ‘the ultimate empathy machine’, a technological apparatus that in its turn seems to better grease the wheels of green capitalism.<sup>131</sup> This new iteration of ‘bearing witness’ has already been mined by environmental organisations in an effort to combat ‘Nature Deficit Disorder’; in 2017 Greenpeace launched their own Virtual Explorer experience, intended to bring users closer to the ‘amazing places they’ve helped to defend’.<sup>132</sup> Elsewhere, Stanford University’s Ocean Acidification Experience, developed in 2016, offers users a ‘virtual underwater ecosystem’; by ‘swimming’ in two versions of a coral reef (one healthy, the other degraded), users were able to observe firsthand the projected decimation of marine life by the end of this century, if our carbon emissions continue at the current rate.<sup>133</sup> Perhaps the ultimate gain of such experiences, however — the fleeting proximity of an encounter with another being’s suffering — is in the service of the human: ‘this

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<sup>129</sup> Fernanda Herrera et al., ‘Building long-term empathy: A large-scale comparison of traditional and virtual reality perspective-taking’, *PLoS ONE*, 13 (2018), p. e0204494. *Gale Academic OneFile* [accessed 26 February 2021]

<sup>130</sup> Ben Tarnoff, ‘Empathy – the latest gadget Silicon Valley wants to sell you’, *Guardian*, 25 October 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/25/empathy-virtual-reality-facebook-mark-zuckerberg-puerto-rico>> [accessed 17 February 2021]

<sup>131</sup> Of course, as Rosi Braidotti observes, much of our attitude towards technologies of posthumanism depends on our own stance towards technology more broadly, how technophilic or –phobic one considers oneself.

<sup>132</sup> Lucy Siegle, ‘The eco guide to virtual reality’, *Guardian*, 2 April 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/apr/02/the-eco-guide-to-virtual-reality>> [accessed 6 September 2021]

<sup>133</sup> Jeremy Bailenson, ‘How to create empathy in VR’, *Wired*, 26 February 2018, <<https://www.wired.co.uk/article/empathy-virtual-reality-jeremy-bailenson-stanford>> [accessed 6 September 2021]



high-fidelity simulation, the argument goes, will make us better people by heightening our sensitivity to the suffering of others. It will make us “more compassionate”, “more connected”, and ultimately “more human”, in the words of the VR artist Chris Milk.<sup>134</sup> ‘More human’, however, can also quickly tip over into the neocolonial affect that is Mitchell’s concern, those ‘eruption[s] of emotion’ that ‘involve the appropriation of grief and other emotions from those who are directly experiencing violence and harms to their communities, relations and worlds.’<sup>135</sup> Often arising in the insidious phenomenon of white tears, ‘[t]he emotion generated by white and other privileged people when confronted with images of impending extinction’, although ‘real, and quite powerful’, ‘can also be deeply problematic, and can entrench the forces and structures that drive global patterns of extinction — including racialized patterns of ecological violence.’<sup>136</sup>

Certainly this ‘more connected’ affect would seem to be at least one facet underpinning Millet’s fictional project. Speaking on eco-pessimism in an interview at the Wolf Humanities Center, she confessed to a persistent ‘hope’ for a resolution to extinction, an affective stance that is classically associated with environmental sentiment. ‘I just love the world. I love the animals in it. And I think most people do. I think people love the wild world. And they love animals. All their lives they’re trained to love animals and they really really do [...]. And people really want for extinction not to happen [...] Extinction is not what people want.’<sup>137</sup> As Berlant suggests, the appearance of compassion often coincides with the *displacement* or *dislocation* of suffering for the spectator, for whom it is necessarily located ‘over there’, often belonging to the socially disenfranchised.<sup>138</sup> Perhaps one consequence of this uneven social relation, which affiliates compassion with a moral requirement to discharge some kind of state or personal action, has been the affect’s mobilisation in the service of conservative state agendas, an ambivalence that is

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<sup>134</sup> Tarnoff, ‘Empathy – the latest gadget Silicon Valley wants to sell you’.

<sup>135</sup> Mitchell, ‘Decolonizing against Extinction’.

<sup>136</sup> Mitchell, ‘Decolonizing against Extinction’.

<sup>137</sup> Wolf Humanities Center, *Lydia Millet: Environmental Science and the Post-Apocalyptic Novel*.

<sup>138</sup> Lauren Berlant, ed., *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (London: Routledge, 2004).

deftly captured by Berlant: ‘the word *compassion* carries the weight of ongoing debates about the ethics of privilege [...] and about individual and collective obligations to read a scene of distress not as a judgment against the distressed but as a claim on the spectator to become an ameliorative actor.’<sup>139</sup> Millet seems to drive at something of this First World insulation in narrative asides like the following, which implies the vague intrusion of food insecurity (possibly an allusion to the Ethiopian famine) into T.’s blithe spectatorship of the 1980s sitcom *Cheers*: ‘Around the same time the nightly news was prone to show millions succumbing to famine, far away in a sandy country’ (*HTDD*, 27). This pre-conversion moment marks an ironical jab at T.’s own immunity to the imperatives of amelioration, at the same time that it points towards a critical move that emerges through both Bateman and Soper’s critiques of the novel. As Berlant suggests elsewhere, in their essay ‘Genre Flailing’, the ‘stabilizing’ urge of criticism often speaks to a ‘confusion on the writer’s part about whether [they] are trying to open up the object or close the object, extend a question about it or put it to rest’, such that critical praxis itself mounts an attempt to ‘control the object’.<sup>140</sup> As they continue: ‘We can’t presume our defenses aren’t also aggressions [...]. [Instead] we can ask ourselves, where is the humorlessness in my work, what am I protecting from exposure to change?’<sup>141</sup>

What *thing* might a reparative reading like Bateman’s be protecting from exposure to change? Bateman’s claims in particular seem to betray a peculiar critical *defensiveness* around T.’s character, one that also finds expression in something like Ness’s protest in *The Guardian* that T., while undoubtedly ‘a wealthy man’ isn’t ‘a bad one’: ‘He is not an uncaring child, nor does he grow into an uncaring man’.<sup>142</sup> Clearly, T.’s proximity to vulnerability inculcates a certain readerly

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<sup>139</sup> Berlant, *Compassion*, p. 1.

<sup>140</sup> Berlant, ‘Genre Flailing’, p. 156.

<sup>141</sup> Berlant, ‘Genre Flailing’, pp. 160-161.

<sup>142</sup> Patrick Ness, ‘How the rich live’, *Guardian*, 11 October 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/11/lydia-millet> [accessed 14 February 2021]

simpatico that is corroborated by his conversion, part-way through the book, to the ‘green’ cause. If however, as Bateman insists, ‘a profound sadness inheres in [T.’s] bereft state, [a] development [which] is not narrated as a sinking into a deep affective reserve through which he could be diagnosed as depressed, delusional, or *distinguished* in his anguish’ (emphasis mine), it seems remarkable that, notwithstanding his ‘privatised’ emotional development, which is mostly withheld by the narration, this smooth operator is nevertheless equipped with the requisite emotional depth to feel such a newfound wealth of empathic eco-sentiment.<sup>143</sup> It seems perhaps altogether *too convenient* that, beneath the veneer of heroic individualism T. seems universally to ‘suggest’ to critical readers, there should nonetheless exist an affective repository filled with something *like* the capacity for ecological sensitivity or that, all along, T. was hoarding the secret wealth of ‘humanity’ or upstanding liberal sentiment. This critical stewardship is also on display in Bateman’s insistence that the novel’s trajectory brings about a gradual dissolution of character that renders ‘the preservation of T.’s distinctive identity’ impossible, a claim that seems to betray a critical attachment to the very coherence of this identity, or an allegiance to keeping its distinctness *intact*, at the very same moment that it is preoccupied with its unravelling.<sup>144</sup> Coupled with the simultaneous refusal of T.’s flatness this works, somewhat counterintuitively, to reinforce a sense of T.’s specialness, the creeping feeling that he is simply an ‘elect’ purveyor — only this time for the animals’ cause — of the same ‘heroic individualism’ Bateman so hotly denounces.<sup>145</sup> Paradoxically then, Bateman, even in looking to denounce this individualism and its attendant elevation ‘of the human as something sovereign, special, and set apart[...] — a steward capable of saving the planet’, would appear to exert a corollary stewardship over the transformative potential of Millet’s fiction.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Bateman, ‘A Flattened Protagonist’, p. 162.

<sup>144</sup> Bateman, ‘A Flattened Protagonist’, p. 156.

<sup>145</sup> Bateman, ‘A Flattened Protagonist’, p. 162.

<sup>146</sup> Bateman, ‘A Flattened Protagonist’, p. 161.

From a critical standpoint, the extent of our susceptibility to ‘feeling with’ or ‘feeling for’ T. *matters*, in part because it dictates how defensively we approach the text, determining what the reader lets him (and therefore ourselves) get away with. In taking T.’s conversion seriously, are we enabling him in his efforts at expanding the sphere of his dominion, simply allowing his acquisitive intuitions to colonise new affective terrains? Returning to Ahmed’s phrasing, what kind of world is surfaced through such permissiveness? One might begin to wonder whether T. is in fact worthy of reparative reading in the vein offered by Bateman, whereby T.’s conversion and subsequent pursuit of ‘co-sleeping opportunities with critically endangered animals’ gets read as enabling ‘the novel [to imagine more] sustainable and rehabilitative alternatives to traditional character development.’<sup>147</sup> Rehabilitating T., however, necessarily means acquiescing wholeheartedly to the ‘authenticity’ of his spectacular conversion from rapacious developer to ‘good guy’ — a move that would seem, by proxy, to grant Millet’s novel (a rather uncritical) success in its own conversion mission, the rendering of that ‘politicized aesthetic’ Soper describes. Such critical permissiveness towards T. thus also forms an attempt to exert our own (slightly paranoid) form of control over Millet’s text, in such a way that divests it of its affective ambivalence. Instead, this reading insists that it *does* certain things or *produces* certain effects, whether that’s cultivating *more* ecological sentiment or offering a blueprint for a ‘way out’ of capitalism that can be readily deployed for all the eco-lonely subjects caught in neoliberalism’s thrall. How reparatively we read T.’s conversion also matters because the extent to which we allow the success of T.’s conversion also has ramifications for the satirical dimensions of Millet’s undertaking, and for deciphering precisely what her satire takes as its ‘bad object’. Is the acquisitive mentality T. bodies forth the ‘true’ object of the novel’s censure? Or does the text skewer ‘our’ own proprietary attachments to biodiversity, and the wistful romanticism implicit in saviour logics? Millet’s book may well remain within the realist range of credibility in thematising

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<sup>147</sup> Bateman, ‘A Flattened Protagonist’, p. 152.

the dissolution of T.'s emotional world, or the intrusion of profound loneliness into his personal life. But other, more critically paranoid readings, are also available. As Adelle Waldman puts it in *The New York Times*, "T.'s conversion is not entirely convincing, nor is it inherently as profound as Millet seems to think [...]. As T.'s obsession grows, he starts to seem a bit unhinged, and the rather pat implication is that what society deems insanity is actually a higher level of awareness."<sup>148</sup> Understanding T.'s generic inheritance thus becomes crucial not just in enabling us to determine where the text's own 'value' resides, but also in arguing for the wider *problem* of whether or not we are meant to take his conversion at face value.

Despite the fact that T.'s entire identity could quite easily be read as a private joke Millet is making about stocks or stockiness, Bateman, for instance, *resists* the accusation of the 'stock' character and the flatness this would imply, while celebrating the '*flattening* [of T.'s] body and his affect in order to gradually minimize his impact on a world that cannot handle him in full' (emphasis mine).<sup>149</sup> Bateman reads T.'s 'flatness' reparatively, as the precondition of his 'becom[ing] ecological' — a status which is attained 'not through a specific set of commitments or sentimental attachments to environmental causes but rather through the suspension of the agential mode'.<sup>150</sup> Borrowing from Sarah Ensor, this increasing proneness he determines as a welcome form of 'ecological lessness' that emulates the de-anthropocentric project of Millet's own novel, its sustained effort at "'de-centring our forms of self-regard'".<sup>151</sup> This refusal of the stock character is paired with his critical insistence that while '[t]he young T. found in the opening pages of the novel possesses all the aspiration of a bildungsroman's central character', the text itself eschews the aesthetic constraints of the *bildung's* progression, and is actively

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<sup>148</sup> Adelle Waldman, 'Boy Meets Squirrel', *New York Times*, 9 March 2008.

<sup>149</sup> Bateman, 'A Flattened Protagonist', p. 156.

<sup>150</sup> Bateman, 'A Flattened Protagonist', p. 162.

<sup>151</sup> Bateman, 'A Flattened Protagonist', p. 162.

engaged in its formal ‘de-development’.<sup>152</sup> The very identification of this convention however would seem to undermine Bateman’s claim. Clearly, enough of the *bildung*’s remnants are discoverable in Millet’s text that something resembling its architecture can be discerned, otherwise no such reading would be possible. Likewise, and despite Millet’s own claim that she is ‘loathe to follow the path to enlightenment character arc that is traditionally advocated’, she suggests that such narratives do ‘feel real’ to her and are not incompatible with the ‘spectacular conversions’ undergone by T. or other of her characters.<sup>153</sup>

Bateman’s critical insistence against the linearity of the novel’s form as somehow unviable for dealing with or accommodating its ecological imperatives, seems to advance the notion that such linearity exists in stiff competition with an expressly ‘nonlinear’ form that is somehow more natural, or more attuned to T.’s incremental interest in ‘grooving’ with the nonhuman. In turn, the notion that the thematic presence of financial capital is somehow oppositional to the ‘enmeshed’ systems of ecology seems to assert or guard a queer mode of temporality as somehow uniquely viable for dealing with, or accommodating, ecological imperatives. As Colebrook suggests, however, it no longer behoves a critical ‘we’ to perceive linearity as being impossibly affiliated with something *like* ‘the productive imperatives of capitalist activity and neoliberal self-development’ nor, for that matter, to claim that ‘clear linear causalities’ follow from clear, linear systems: ‘Even the seemingly most certain and determined causal sequences and dire predictions [...] are the outcome of complex, multiple, emergent, distributed, overlapping and nonlinear systems.’<sup>154</sup> In fact, what Millet’s novel perhaps most productively ‘exposes’ or ‘reveals’ is that our treatment of the ecological and the economic are

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<sup>152</sup> Bateman, ‘A Flattened Protagonist’, p. 156.

<sup>153</sup> Wolf Humanities Center, *Lydia Millet: Environmental Science and the Post-Apocalyptic Novel*.

<sup>154</sup> Claire Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, *New Formations*, 92 (2017), 102–119 (p. 108).

more proximate than one might think at first glance. As she suggested in a conversation about the ‘compositional problem’ of the post-apocalyptic novel at Wolf Humanities Center, one challenge thrown up by the fictional confrontation with climate catastrophe and its threatened loss of world is that ‘it’s difficult as a reader of the novel to really believe that the end has come and that you’re into something after the end, because you’re still reading toward the end of the novel and the novel is going on in the usual way. You’re caught in the temporality of narrative’.<sup>155</sup>

T. himself attests to the formalised propulsion that infuses Millet’s project, in his admission that *something*, some strange feeling of contrivance, lies just outside the perimeter of his hollow experience: ‘Some mornings he woke with a nervous premonition of imminence: an *event* lay in wait’ (*HTDD*, 56, emphasis mine). Just as the now-inevitable financial crash that followed the novel’s publication —a formative loss for an entrepreneur like T., though one located just beyond the horizon of the artwork’s present —, a sense of impending crisis (personal *and* ecological) is always already latent in Millet’s text. Even beneath the seeming haphazard-ness of the accident that ‘derails’ T.’s development, the very prospect of that derailment would seem to hover at the margins of his too-charmed existence, almost as though by grace of a kind of *deus ex machina* in reverse. Although Millet seems to accomplish an inversion of Nietzsche’s complaint of the device: ‘Hence an earthly resolution for tragic dissonance was sought; the hero, having been adequately tormented by fate, won his well-earned reward in a stately marriage and tokens of divine honour. The hero had become a gladiator, granted freedom once he had been satisfactorily flayed and scarred.’<sup>156</sup> Here, rather than the ‘problem’ of excessive tragedy finding

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<sup>155</sup> Wolf Humanities Center, *Lydia Millet: Environmental Science and the Post-Apocalyptic Novel*.

<sup>156</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 84.

its resolution or reward in T.'s eventual relief, the 'problem' of neoliberal capitalism or the privileged, 'heroic individual' — themselves diagnosed by T.'s inadequate torment up until now — instead seems to find resolution through the prolonged instigation of T.'s suffering.

That T.'s life has been 'thrown' deliberately into disarray is something he also begins to suspect, emerging with particular prominence in the weeks following Beth's loss: 'Time was foreign for many days, the texture of time and all things alien in their existence, at once strange and dull. He was flattened, pinned on his bed [...]. He had the suspicion that cogs were spinning, the universe beyond his walls was functioning and he was not, but he had no choice' (*HTDD*, 93). If this reads like testament to the profound disorientation of T.'s loneliness, it also functions as a simultaneous indictment of the ambient conditions of the fictional multiverse in which he is enclosed; not just *How the Dead Dream*, but the subsequent novels that form Millet's trilogy. Notably, the moment of T.'s grief coincides with the intrusion of a certain linguistic flatness: 'He was *flattened*; he did not want to do anything' (*HTDD*, 101, emphasis mine). The emergence of flatness at this juncture has a bearing not just in the sense of 'flat affect', a phrase emerging 'from psychiatric discourse' that 'has been used from the 1950s to the present in drawing a subtle, at times artificial, distinction between the symptoms of schizophrenia and depression.'<sup>157</sup> But the appearance of flatness also ramifies for the formal logic of Millet's novel, and in particular its allegiance to the satirical mode, which will be the focus of my discussion in the forthcoming sections.

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<sup>157</sup> Robbie Duschinsky and Ruth Wilson, 'Flat Affect, Joyful Politics and Enthralled Attachments: Engaging with the Work of Lauren Berlant', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28 (2015), 179–190 (p. 185).



## Federal Reserve

As Robbie Duschinsky and Emma Wilson describe, within psychiatric discourse flat affect ‘refers to an expressionless presentation’, ‘a kind of emotional opacity in which affective display [...] has little range, intensity and mobility, and subjectively, it is not clear to the patient what the feelings they experience mean or what bearing they may have for them.’<sup>158</sup> For Berlant, such instances of blunted affect and otherwise ‘understated behaviour’ ramify beyond their capacity for metabolizing or expressing trauma: flat affect also constitutes a ‘recessive style of emotional underperformance’, that is also ‘a genre of symbolic practice’, one that ‘focuses attention on the ways in which events can be sensed, holding at bay or dilating the conventions which would quickly find an established and closed form.’<sup>159</sup> This strategic holding at bay reads like a symptom of T.’s own isolation. Not just from his peers at school, or from the college fraternity, which would seem to be expressed through a sustained refusal of the ‘thrall’ Butler describes. While Berlant argues that this flat affect can often be the outcome of a traumatic incident or ‘other forms’ of emotional dispossession, they suggest that behind this opacity there

might [also] be a degree of *reserve* from situational injunctions, which carves out some affective and relational — indeed, some ethical — room for manoeuvre or apprehension. The withheld or uneven accessibility between self and other which is operated by flat affect stresses the difficulty in tying down gesture to a particular historical moment and a particular meaning within a set of conventions. As such, it has particular appeal *at a historical moment in which subjects and collective movements feel a sustained crisis in their ability to make effective and consistent claims on the world, particularly in relation to politics* but also in terms of intimate relations — this leaves things rather apprehensively suspended. The withheld or uneven accessibility of the subject of flat affect can disturb and reflect disillusionment with contemporary discursive forms — ranging from talk shows to pillow talk — which ask that we seek the truth of a subject and participate in a sense of belonging with them

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<sup>158</sup> Duschinsky and Wilson, p. 185.

<sup>159</sup> Duschinsky and Wilson, pp. 185–186.

through the intensity of the *private feelings and vulnerabilities* that they make available (emphasis mine).<sup>160</sup>

One might think here of T.'s boyhood 'habit of secreting coins on his person, a thick and powerful quarter lodged under his tongue or discreet dimes tucked into the cheek pouches. He never swallowed and he never choked' (*HTDD*, 3). Beyond the obvious psychosexual implications of swallowing and choking, this hoarding also marks one of T.'s earliest realisations that value may be *contained* in the nonhuman, which comes in his recognition of the metaphorical proximity between the animal and the fiscal. Despite being reviled by his mother's early suggestion that he might keep his money somewhere other than his person ("A piggybank? [...] "Talk about sitting ducks"") [*HTDD*, 4]), several pages later, having been inducted by his parents into the incorporeal prospects of the bank and the marvels of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, 'he learn[s] to put the lion's share in the bank' (*HTDD*, 8). As Millet herself suggests, 'we forget that as we grow older sometimes, we forget how dear other animals were to us when we were children [...] Our whole language is defined by animals, we can't even have metaphor, we can't even have it without animals. Everything we are has been shaped by all these other nonhuman people that we evolved around and grew up around, even on an individual level.'<sup>161</sup> And yet, taken together, these details clearly suggest anew T.'s utter *disinterest* in engaging with the substitutive animal logics which underpin capitalism both in its modern-day reliance on sprawling systems of nonhuman exploitation, and its historical rooting in goods and chattel.

As Millet's narrator suggests, the boons of this federal reserve find more conflicted expression in T.'s own emotional withholding. Though he is not immune from occasionally 'having private gluts of feeling', he excels in 'holding his secrets close, and seeming all the while the whitest of white bread; of being perfectly opaque and seeming transparent; of being merely

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<sup>160</sup> Duschinsky and Wilson, p. 185.

<sup>161</sup> Wolf Humanities Center, *Lydia Millet: Environmental Science and the Post-Apocalyptic Novel*.

well-informed and shrewd while seeming like a prodigy' (*HTDD*, 14).<sup>162</sup> Bateman, as if in critical recognition of T.'s early realisation of his universe that '[c]urrency infused all things, from the small to the monolithic' (*HTDD*, 14), quite rightly observes that these 'private gluts' 'echo the hoarding of capital, establishing an affinity between the possession of wealth and the possession of an individualized self.'<sup>163</sup> The novel's expectation of this emotional equity extends even to others, as evidenced in T.'s worrying over the attrition of his mother's love: 'her interest had diminished until it seemed almost to equal her interest in other persons' (*HTDD*, 21). As T. confides, the canny 'first lesson of real estate', is '[n]ever pretend to know better' than the buyer: 'His own preferences were only a private luxury' (*HTDD*, 61). Such 'emotional opacity' is par for the course for T. Indeed, precisely his *reserve from situational injunctions* is shown to be the precondition of his economic success. Although mostly 'well-liked', T. is said to have 'practiced a kindly reserve that invited affection but discouraged any more intimate advance [...] he held himself apart' (*HTDD*, 15); 'he was never too close for comfort' (*HTDD*, 17). This atomisation is reified in the image of him standing 'apart from them, too rigidly controlled to mix his solemn molecules with theirs' (*HTDD*, 18). This fantasy of attaining loneliness at the molecular level is, in turn, framed as something aspirational, approached only through hard graft and 'the stiff discipline of discretion [that forms] part of his training' in entrepreneurship (*HTDD*, 15).

While for Bateman, T.'s ecological 'interest' may emerge out of his sudden encounters with vulnerability, ecological vulnerability would in fact already seem to be imbricated in his business practice (which is, in turn, inextricable from a politics of extraction). Beyond the slick, proto-Trumpian 'mechanics of the deal' (a comparison made by Millet herself) what motivates T., what 'capture[s] his interest' is precisely those glitches in the matrix of business that betray vulnerability (*HTDD*, 30). 'What wings lifted him then, what banks shored him up along the

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<sup>162</sup> Bateman, 'A Flattened Protagonist', p. 156.

<sup>163</sup> Bateman, 'A Flattened Protagonist', p. 157.

river of work?' (*HTDD*, 30) The 'nuance of his approach' lies in 'the small tells that accompanied a lie, the fluster and the cover-up that followed an inadvertent truth': 'the tics and quirks of investors', 'the faces and the words of those he moved through and past' (*HTDD*, 30). Reading the chinks in businesspeople's armour is his foremost competence. Indeed, if T.'s aloofness gives 'the appearance of being caught up in his own velocity when in fact his mind was carefully fixed on the other'; 'always watchful, always wedded to the close observation of detail, [though] he pretended otherwise' (*HTDD*, 31). T.'s niche, his gap in the market is this hypervigilance, his awareness not only that 'Corporations Are People', too. But that the hot pursuit of capital necessarily strips you of your sovereignty at the same time that it contains its promise, that '[t]he market made a fool of you by giving you what you wanted' (*HTDD*, 30-1).

### **Where Value Lies**

Far from vulnerability being a sudden or 'radical' intrusion in T.'s life then, his apparent imperviousness to the sorrows of others would seem to leave him more than *au fait* around the loneliness of others, the suggestion being that his gravitational pull towards nonhuman isolation is less of a Damascene conversion and simply another expression of his canny pursuit of vulnerability. Its exploitation is already shown as being an integral facet of his steely character development. He appears entirely unfazed, for instance, by two early suicide attempts in the novel — the first, a college friend, the other, his neighbour, 'an emaciated model' he is sexually involved with. When she is 'found in her kitchen with open veins', T. regards this event only with an admixture of 'remorse and slight wonder' (*HTDD*, 27). This competence finds a darker expression in T.'s role as resident intermediary for his 'wilder' college comrades, who adhere to the morally dubious 'bromance' of the frat house code, which makes 'brothers' 300% more likely to commit sexual assault: 'it was he who politicked behind the scenes to dissuade frivolous accusations of date rape, negotiated truces with disgruntled neighbors and bored campus police'

(*HTDD*, 16).<sup>164</sup> The image of him enabling sexual violence through consoling ‘sorority girls whose soft, still-shaking hands he had held gently as he persuaded them not to file charges’ (*HTDD*, 18), is seeded in his earliest transactions on the suburban black-market, in particular his nonconsensual circulation of ‘a Polaroid of Adam Scheinhorn’s naked sister. Her eyes were as small as currents in a bleached-white face but the rest of her was so clear that fingers trembled as they held the photo [...]. Oh yes: he knew where value lay (*HTDD*, 7-8). As it becomes increasingly difficult to chalk these events up to the heady innocence of misspent youth, one has to question whether T. is in fact *worthy* of rehabilitation.

Together, these formative events may well leave us less ‘in thrall’ to T.’s ultimate benevolence than either Ness or Bateman, particularly given the latter’s emphasis on the ‘latent feminist sensibilities’ of Millet’s text which — especially given T.’s empathic redemption — would seem at odds with those scenes rendered above. Perhaps more tempting is the critically paranoid stance occupied by the mother of a childhood ‘friend’, from whom T. extorts money in exchange for ‘protection’ from the ‘various jocks who had it in for him’ (*HTDD*, 9). “‘You’re a slick little bastard,” she said finally, picking up the towels and turning her back on him’ (*HTDD*, 10). For T., value (re)lies not just on the circulation of illicit nudes, or the commodification of women’s vulnerability. But it also resides in uncomfortable proximity to extractive environmental logics that mine his knowledge of others’ vulnerability. Prior to the accident that sets his conversion in motion, his interest lies in what frames the road rather than what strays across it. He relishes the ‘drive up the rocky coast from the angels to the Franciscans’, with its vista over the Pacific on one side and ‘the rolling hills of chaparral that cost a thousand dollars per square foot’ on the other (*HTDD*, 28). What really gets him off, however, is the germ of profit the

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<sup>164</sup> See Jessica Valenti, ‘Frat brothers rape 300% more. One in 5 women is sexually assaulted on campus. Should we ban frats?’, *Guardian*, 24 September 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/24/rape-sexual-assault-ban-frats>> [accessed 18 August 2021]

landscape suggests. For him, ‘the wild’ is simply a vast patchwork of vacant, as yet undeveloped lots. ‘He liked the fact that speculators tended to ignore the foreshortened future of the hills, their promise of imminent collapse by mudslide, quake or fire’ (*HTDD*, 28), his own narrative prospecting confirming his indifference to the plight of those unfortunate enough to inhabit such risky environmental settings. That T.’s early career as developer hinges on furnishing retirees — a community seen as particularly vulnerable to social isolation — with an ‘elite’ habitat seems to confirm his status as an inveterate trader in lonely futures. From a young age, T. is especially repulsed by the elderly, including his own grandfather, ‘with his pee-stained corduroys and his chronic inability to count out change’ — for whom T. cannot summon even ‘pretend deference’ (*HTDD*, 7). This we see in the description of T.’s first ‘development’, the ‘Mojave project’:

Then his first golden egg, a swath of empty desert would be converted to subdivisions for retirees, with golf courses and Olympic-size swimming pools and luxury spas and a phalanx of nurses to monitor cardiac rhythms and tend to recovering hip and knee surgeries. Down the road, thanks to economies of scale and various state and federal subsidies, it might become a great citadel — light rail systems, a solar-powered mall (*HTDD*, 55).

Coasting through ‘the newly minted neighborhoods’ (*HTDD*, 85) on their completion, he opportunistically speculates over the longevity of their residents, ‘idly calculating the probability of atrial fibrillation’: ‘he was, in part, a designer of the lives that would wind down and likely end here’ (*HTDD*, 86). Clearly, his business in building these resorts stems not from any ethical investment in remediating the social atomisation of an ageing population, notwithstanding the dubious potential of such newbuilds for remedying the plight of ‘Aging golfers whose children lived far away and avoided contact’ (*HTDD*, 61). This ‘swath of empty desert’ however, it later transpires, is already inhabited by a different community. ‘A garrulous surveyor who worked for him in the desert [...] discovered that a group of small rodents called kangaroo rats had been

displaced by the paving for his subdivision [...]. [T]he rats were the last of their kind, on the brink of disappearing' (*HTDD*, 124). In a subsequent phase of T.'s conversion, he offers federal biologists a parcel of land where the rats might settle, as a gesture of 'mitigation'. The failure of the set-aside ('The rats were gone now, the biologist had told him. They had been extinguished' [*HTDD*, 128]) prompts his growing irritation with the retired denizens of his desert commune: 'Coyotes could live anywhere. They were not like the rats, who lived only on one small patch of land. They could live anywhere and die anywhere too. Like him. They were opportunists' (*HTDD*, 127). Perhaps the morbidity of T.'s guilt over the coyote's death hinges on this idea that animals are *more human* than we think, or that their continued survival deftly embodies certain 'grifter' affects like opportunism — which relies, in turn, on affects like adaptability, flexibility and resilience that grease the wheels of contemporary capitalism.<sup>165</sup> Even as his conversion begins to consolidate, what T. seems to recognise as valuable in the nonhuman is organised not around its irreconcilable strangeness, or the ineffable, global scale that a conceptually abstract network like a planetary ecosystem suggests. Instead, this new relationality is traced according to the familiar contours of an economic system of affects T. already knows and respects. Perhaps then what *feels bad* or worthy of mourning in the coyote's demise is the end to 'opportunism' that it implies.

This 'swath of empty desert' marks the expansion of T.'s portfolio of already-ecologically tenuous sites, including 'the purchase and renovation of an industrial park on a Superfund site' (*HTDD*, 32), Superfund being a common moniker for CERCLA, the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act, which comprises a U.S. federal law passed in 1980 and administered by the Environmental Protection Agency. The program was designed in the wake of 1970s scandals, to investigate and fund the long-term clean-up of sites

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<sup>165</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, pp. 3–4.

contaminated with hazardous substances; though the burden of expense for this process was initially funded by the potentially responsible parties (PRPs), responsibility has latterly been shifted onto taxpayers. T.'s first eco-endeavour thus looks to 'compensate' nature while also furnishing his own business interests, suggesting the ultimately self-serving foundations of his green saviour impulse. Elsewhere, there is 'his first six-figure profit', turned 'by brokering the sale of a derelict apartment building [...] on a beach in South Florida, owned by an ageing heiress whose long-dead father had made his fortune growing sugarcane in the Everglades' (*HTDD*, 32). This deal, brokered through his father's legacy 'connections', is viewed as restitution for T.'s 'careful stewardship of his brothers', 'all the hours of his indentured servitude' (*HTDD*, 32) at the frat house, as it is awkwardly referred to by Millet's narrator. This racialized language opens onto another, more discomfiting proprietary logic, one which Millet's novel repeatedly brushes up against, if fails to adequately grapple with, and which remains unchecked in most critical treatments of the novel (*HTDD*, 26). T.'s incremental disenchantment, for instance, with 'the momentum of empire he had always cherished' begins to be consolidated at the very same moment that he first experiences pangs of grief for the kangaroo rats, an affective upsurge that – yet again — threatens him with the prospect of lost communication (*HTDD*, 125). '[O]ddly he found his own throat closing [...] he could not be choked up over the kangaroo rats [...] under their foundations the crust of the earth seemed to be shifting and loosening, falling away' (*HTDD*, 125). Indeed, if Butler intends 'thrall' to convey the jubilant power of attachment, then its archaic meaning — a slave, a servant, or captive — implies a more authoritarian relational form, one that invokes T.'s insidious fetishizing of the imperial project as well as his own profiteering from extractive business practices. These extended forms of 'thrall', while obviously being a drag for T., once again suggest the negative propensities of relation in Millet's novel, the sharp edge of which is recalled later on at the hospital, where T.'s sullenly obliges to see Beth's body: 'The nurse took his arm and led him out again and he forgot everything as he walked



behind her: as he followed her back it felt dutiful, though at the same time he was *enslaved* (HTDD, 90, emphasis mine).

T.'s own relational reserve is conveniently endorsed by his eventual meeting with Beth; when he does finally 'let love in', as it were, he is 'not surprised' that the gains of his strategic aloofness are also maximised in romantic connection, and the sweet 'perfection of this new sentiment' (HTDD, 62). When the utility or novelty of this affective economising does finally come under T.'s scrutiny however, following Beth's 'sudden cardiac death' (HTDD, 91), he must grapple not only with the realisation of having 'no friends outside business' (HTDD, 114), but also with his own private sense of disillusionment with the amity afforded by his early fixations. Beginning in childhood, this infatuation held as sacrosanct all the 'Great institutions and the tall columns and white soaring domes that stood for them — these seemed to him the crowning achievement of his kind', together with the architects of the 'Authority [that] inspired him' (HTDD, 2). This nascent arousal is complemented by an allegiance to long-dead presidents that skirts the homoerotic: 'At times he found himself ranking the girls in his class on a scale of one to ten in terms of their resemblance to [Hamilton] the former soldier of the Republic. None came close, he lamented' (HTDD, 2). The gradual crumbling of T.'s investment in these authorities will serve to expose his *flatness* in another sense, yet another way in which his own romance with sovereignty is withdrawn long before its inauguration, negated by Millet's longstanding affiliation to the institution of political satire.

As Berlant puts it, 'genre stands as something like a conventionalized symbolic, an *institution* whose modern translation through the commodity form affixes it with both genericness and a uniqueness derived from the particularity of its distinguishing details (emphasis

mine).<sup>166</sup> To an extent, *How the Dead Dream* exceeds these generic conventions through its engagement with a more postmodern mode that lightly flouts aspects of the *bildung* form. However, in its reliance on deadpan as well as comic ironies, T.'s agency is also beholden to satire, a genre with its roots in Greek tradition, which found renewed expression during the long eighteenth century, especially in the formation of the modern prose novel.<sup>167</sup> As Adrian Brunello observes of character in eighteenth century fiction, novelists tended either to follow one of two main directions, alternately set by the example of Henry Fielding's 'characters of manners, as distinguished from the characters of nature, best illustrated by [Samuel] Richardson's novels', the focus of the first being to explore 'character [a]s a certain type of social behaviour', versus 'greater attention to the inner springs of action and to the psychological intricacies of the human personality'.<sup>168</sup> Continuing, Brunello writes that: 'Fielding's picaresque novel of manners was clearly masculine', whereas Richardson's epistolary novel mines an 'essential feminin[ity] in eighteenth century terms'.<sup>169</sup> Millet's creative allegiance to satire often goes unremarked upon in academic treatments of *How the Dead Dream*, despite her consistent return to the form.<sup>170</sup> The resemblance to Millet's previous comic novels is slight enough that Waldman, writing in the *New York Times*, suggests that 'T. turns out not to be an antihero, and *How the Dead Dream* is neither satirical nor absurdist. In contrast, T.'s transformation [...] is presented in a deadpan tone, albeit in lyrical, meditative prose.'<sup>171</sup> Waldman's observation however fails to account for the ways in which this 'deadpan' tone, which gestures towards the *underperformance* suggested by flat or flattened affect, may in fact be formally integral to the wider project of T.'s characterisation. Granted, Millet goes (relatively) gently on her protagonist, something that aligns the novel with

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<sup>166</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 259.

<sup>167</sup> Adrian Brunello and Florina–Elena Borsan, 'Views Of Women In 18th Century British Literature: Richardson Vs. Fielding', *International Journal of Communication Research*, 5 (2015), 323–328 (p. 324).

<sup>168</sup> Brunello, 'Views Of Women In 18th Century British Literature', p. 324.

<sup>169</sup> Brunello, 'Views Of Women In 18th Century British Literature', p. 324.

<sup>170</sup> Millet began her career writing darkly humorous political novels (including *George Bush, Dark Prince of Love* [2000]) a 'Presidential Romance' that follows ex-con, Rosemary, who is inexplicably smitten with 'G.B.' Senior).

<sup>171</sup> Waldman, 'Boy Meets Squirrel', *New York Times*, 9 March 2008.

the playfulness of the Horatian tradition, wherein wit or self-deprecation are directed at human folly, rather than ‘evil’. As Alexander Pope suggested, the Horatian mode is geared ‘to heal with morals what it hurts with wit’.<sup>172</sup>

T. isn’t aggressively lampooned in the way one might expect, at least not for such a paradigmatic example of the extractive capitalist mentality that consensus holds as the driving force behind the ‘birth’ of the Anthropocene. But nor is he sentimentalised. If the clinical image of T. in his boyhood, for instance, his ‘hands in latex gloves [...] counting out rare dollar bills [...] and old coins [...] remove[d] from his safe in ritualized style and la[id] out on a sheet of newspaper’ (*HTDD*, 8) — an activity that clearly supplants the masturbatory urges on whose exploitation his profit margins rely — *is* risible or absurd, then it is notable that this absurdity never approaches the fully ominous. This, despite the ruthless aggression T. demonstrates in his business activities, despite the vaunting ambitions and detachment patterns that, at times, almost resemble the more acrid tones of a Juvenalian example like, say, *American Psycho*’s Patrick Bateman — a mode of satire that wouldn’t have been beyond the pale for a character hailing from T.’s particular demographic. Certainly not for a critic like Willis, who reads ‘the intellectual hollowing out of Western culture’s capacity to empathise with non-humans’ as tantamount to a ‘societal level of psychopathology’.<sup>173</sup> And yet what Millet’s novel skilfully reveals through its reliance on an inflated, hypertrophic example of the capitalist mindset is the discomfiting proximity between the luridness of accumulative capital and the over-easy propensity of Euro-American feeling ‘for’ animals, a sentimental acquisitiveness that, her novel suggests, functions in a not dissimilar way.

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<sup>172</sup> Alexander Pope, ‘Imitations of Horace’, *Poetry Foundation*,

<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44904/imitations-of-horace>> [accessed 13 August 2021]

<sup>173</sup> Willis, ‘Loneliness in an era of mass extinctions’, p. 167.

If T. is simply playing to ‘type’, a cipher for the Foucauldian *homo economicus*, or a peculiarly socially-mobile example of the picaresque (a comic form that has in its sights the exposure of society’s foibles, though its ‘hero’ usually hails from a lower social class than T.), then it may be that the ‘distinctive identity’ Benjamin Bateman identifies never properly existed to begin with. Indeed, his own essential fungibility is something T. teases at in his own apparent contentment with relative anonymity: ‘It wasn’t that he needed to be well-known — he would be happy to be the gray eminence behind a publicly traded logo’ (*HTDD*, 31). Elsewhere, ‘jubilant after drinks at a bar’, having learned that an environmental case against his Mojave development was decided in his favour, he observes ‘a news segment featuring politicians’, reflecting how ‘[t]he faces on the small screen were interchangeable, not only with each other but with his own: quite possibly they were not his representatives but his representations’ (*HTDD*, 56-7). Through Millet’s narrator, who slides in and out of subjective alignment with T., he approaches a proto-Frankensteinian wish that he might be animated by the raw force of authority: ‘If he grasped deeply this language of symbols, grasped it beneath the surface, he would course through the currents of authority as they coursed through him like heat or the tremble of cold [...] shot through with glowing nerves he willed himself on to the rest of what was’ (*HTDD*, 57).

### **Final Animals**

T.’s ‘incursions’, which remain ‘unspoken’ for the novel’s duration, are ‘a clear benefit of being alone’, as well as a social reserve that allows him to ‘[guard] carefully the difference between himself and the self that was available publicly’ (*HTDD*, 163). They are staged in sanctuaries, captive breeding facilities, rescue centres, laboratories, butterfly habitats, as well as in ‘the best zoos’ across California, Arizona, and New Mexico (*HTDD*, 163). These encounters, however, are themselves motivated by an acquisitive affective logic that places them in awkward complicity with an extractive mentality. As Bateman puts it, ‘T. gets the chance to widen his world of co-

sleeping’, as if this widening of worlds were simply the outcome of happenstance or kismet, and not engineered to align with Millet’s ‘macrosocial’ designs for her protagonist (emphasis mine).<sup>174</sup> The critical assumption that T. is a kind of ‘Everyman’ is punctured by narrative asides that briefly foreground the tenacity of his privilege, even amidst his burgeoning ‘radicalism’: ‘He had standards. He only broke into accredited zoos. In the others he knew he would see nothing but misery. They held no appeal for him’ (*HTDD*, 151). The convenient rewinding of T.’s universe is predicated on a privilege that insulates him, to a certain extent, from seeing the grubbier dimensions of contemporary human-animal relations (the more abject scenes of, say, poaching or the ‘exotic’ wildlife trade), which he can choose to reject in favour of more refined, well-preserved emissaries of animality. In this sense, it is worth attending to the conditions that sustain this activity in Millet’s novel. There is always the question of who gets to retreat from the *polis*, who gets the chance to widen, or rewild their world.<sup>175</sup> One might detect in Bateman’s attempted reparation of T.’s ‘encounters’ an attendant failure of queer theory to adequately grapple with the inherent social privilege that is both an enabling condition for his empathic transformation *and* the possible object of Millet’s sardonic efforts, the luxuries of time and money T.’s elite lifestyle affords being decidedly *un-queer*. For Bateman, T.’s encounters are a form of ‘melancholic identification with the dead’, a ‘potent protest against [...] ongoing oppressive conditions’, as well as an attempt to ‘diminish his own agency’, and to take up a more ‘hesitant mode of self-bearing’ that might ‘serve an imperilled planet better’.<sup>176</sup> In turn, he associates this hesitancy with the “ecological lessness” that Ensor affiliates with practices such as gay cruising, as a form of ‘depersonalized “ecological entanglement” [that] cultivates an attentiveness to one’s surroundings’.<sup>177</sup> Though Bateman recognises that T. hardly qualifies as

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<sup>174</sup> Bateman, ‘A Flattened Protagonist’, p. 165.

<sup>175</sup> ‘Care at the Margins: Debra Granik’s “Leave No Trace”’, *Another Gaze*, 19 May 2018, <<https://www.anothergaze.com/care-margins-debra-graniks-leave-no-trace-2018/>> [accessed 17 August 2021]

<sup>176</sup> Bateman, ‘A Flattened Protagonist’, pp. 159–163.

<sup>177</sup> Bateman, ‘A Flattened Protagonist’, pp. 159–163.

‘oppressed’ or that activities like cruising require some degree of social mobility, he nonetheless fails to reckon with the very private reserves of capital that fund T.’s myriad breaches.<sup>178</sup> Not just the airmiles and expensive equipment, but also the conditions of (relative) bodily and financial *invulnerability* that would more than likely cushion against any legal liability. This is not to mention that diminishing or relinquishing one’s own agency arguably requires ‘having’ agency, or being agential in the first place. As Mari Ruti suggests, in her incisive critique of Halberstam’s work on the queer art of failure: ‘those who have been severely marginalized are unlikely to [...] be interested in further failure in the name of radical politics; those who have genuinely failed in relation to our society’s dominant happiness scripts are unlikely to experience their failure as a sexy political stance.’<sup>179</sup> This is to say nothing of what kinds of subject are granted the opportunity of ‘having’ mobility, in the first place. During T.’s first (il)legal infraction — itself precipitated by loneliness on learning he has missed Beth’s funeral — he breaks into the desert cemetery where she has been buried. By the ‘new mound’ of her grave, itself a form of ‘development’, he lights a small funeral pyre that gives rise to a fantasy of an eternal mobility, persisting beyond death: ‘if you were burned then you could go anywhere. On the smoke your particles would be dispersed over foreign countries, the poles and the tropics; who knew where you might end?’ (*HTDD*, 109). As if corroborating that T. doesn’t leave his fiscal conservatism behind him in these encounters, even here, in the motel room he has rented to accommodate his loneliness, T. cannot abandon the consolations of the market: ‘He had been holding the stock far too long and it was grossly overvalued. Her death had diverted his attention from its meteoric rise [...]. If he could not work his current projects while he was here at least he could speculate’ (*HTDD*, 107).

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<sup>178</sup> Bateman, ‘A Flattened Protagonist’, p. 161.

<sup>179</sup> Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory’s Defiant Subjects* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 35–36.

On exiting the locked cemetery after committing this act of petty arson, the noise of ‘sirens [remains] in the distance’ for T., just as he remains ‘unalarmed’ by this sonic warning: ‘he did not hurry, did not change his pace’ (*HTDD*, 109). T.’s ‘lucky moment’ persists even in his pursuit of encounters with the nonhuman, where his movements stay for the most part conveniently undetected. Certainly, the absence of T.’s rumbling, the failure of his activities to be detected by the ‘authorities’ on whom he newly heaps scorn is instrumental to Millet’s text (*HTDD*, 151). T.’s newly developed criticality of these institutions (‘when had he ever made institutions his own enemy? They were his bulwarks, his cathedrals’ [*HTDD*, 55]), along with his suspension of ‘normative’ habits, are tenable only because he is the beneficiary of a political and economic system that looks favourably on him as an agent of this ‘power’. T. himself appears ready enough to acknowledge how his own propinquity to authority has aided his development, both in building his character and his business interests. He makes reference to the ease with which he surmounted the stalling of his ‘ambitious’ Mojave project which, like anything in California, was beset by ‘an array of planning difficulties and lawsuits from the liberal fringe, and soon enough there were cases in district court’ (*HTDD*, 55): ‘in his own case it had not required strength or merit to make the authorities take his side’ (*HTDD*, 140). His subject position enables him to ‘move with [a] lightness’ that is tantamount to ‘leisure’ or ‘freedom’; notwithstanding his symbolic investments in the imagoes of ‘august men of state’ (*HTDD*, 7), he also recognises that he is able to ‘cash out’ this investment as and when he desires: ‘Authority was not all’ (*HTDD*, 109).

Even when T. does come perilously close to discovery, in the San Diego Monkey House, tripped up by an unanticipated silent alarm, what he fears is not ‘the awkwardness of an arrest — victimless trespasses like his tended not to draw much publicity — but more that his experience would be trivial if it revolved around an awareness of risk’ (*HTDD*, 151). And yet, Millet’s text

poses no real such possibility of risk for T., who if not granted immunity from being flattened or 'laid out' by loneliness, remains nevertheless insulated from certain of its wider biopolitical ramifications. T., a rich, white man is insulated from the contours of everyday 'emergency' that increasingly define the American present. Certainly, he has no trouble paying medical bills for his ailing mother, not to mention those incurred for the various minor abrasions sustained during his break-ins. While this complicity alone shouldn't foreclose the horizon of transformative politics in Millet's novel *or* point towards the abject failure of T.'s encounters, the critical reverence towards T.'s spectacular conversion, which continually gets read as fundamentally 'radical' in spite of all this, should at the very least be seriously destabilised by it. Especially since T.'s ease in attaining enlightenment may simply be another mode of him flexing his agential domination. Furthermore, in as straightforwardly accepting of his transformation, these critical readings also negate the possibility of more complex interpretations, in which Millet herself is *in on the joke* of T.'s complicity, and his conversion itself becomes an ironical object. The skewering of these affective logics is, in fact, an integral part of the wary ambivalence Millet's novel generates towards the imperatives of conservation and the entitled, often proprietary attitudes that underpin it.

Even in T.'s newfound prospecting for nonhuman vulnerability, he still gravitates towards the coalitional axes of vulnerability and value, honing his canny instincts about where value, that disembodied vector, might lay. Early in the novel, T. demonstrates a studious inquisitiveness about what 'value' is exactly, and where it might be located: 'What people valued and professed to value were quite different objects, and he made constant note of this, always refining his study', these reflections forged on 'black nights of deaf and solitary thought', where he 'sleeps alone' (*HTDD*, 33-34). T.'s early awareness of the proximity between precarity and value surfaces his realisation that there is money not just in extraction, but in extinction too.



There is ‘the noble trace of money in the half-imagined bodies of the dinosaurs, looming with arched necks in the shadowed halls of natural history museums, the back-lit shapes of toothy deep-sea fish brought up from the dark fathoms below’ (*HTDD*, 13). Notably, he also chooses to ‘lay’ where value resides, sleep eventually becoming a routine part of his incursions into animal enclosures, where he finds himself ‘lying down in the exhibits with them, awkward, uncomfortable, and finally overcome’ (*HTDD*, 167).

Through T.’s incursions, Millet’s own concern with the depletion of species heterogeneity also belatedly begins to emerge, through their shared preoccupation with lastness — more broadly indicative of a cultural milieu that increasingly favours ‘blockbuster’ extinction events. Millet’s novel has a vested interest in thematising ‘species aloneness’, something it does through the ‘endling’, a figure that, as Dolly Jørgensen has observed, exerts a pull over many artists and writers.<sup>180</sup> Suggesting that Millet, not unlike her protagonist, knows where value lies, her novel repeatedly invokes the figure of the ‘final animal’, a linguistic formulation that appears for the first time in Chapter 7, not long after T. begins making his first illicit forays into animal enclosures. Though the neologism doesn’t appear in the novel itself, Millet aligns herself with this cultural trope when she describes the trilogy as being ‘about last creatures and the experiences we have watching last creatures go’:

We never needed to have that word until recently and now we have a word for the last creature of its kind. So they’re endlings. And we meet new endlings in the news fairly often. So it’s a time where we’re seeing this ... we’ve seen this great acceleration and now we’re seeing this great capitulation, this great falling away of that which exists. The

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<sup>180</sup> See Dolly Jørgensen, ‘Endling, the Power of the Last in an Extinction-Prone World’, *Environmental Philosophy*, 14 (2017), 119–138.

diversity of existence. And we have to live with that, and so our experience I think is unprecedented in a way.<sup>181</sup>

The term ‘endling’ was coined by Robert Webster, a physician in Jasper, Georgia, who died in 2004, to denote ‘the last person, animal, or other individual in a lineage’.<sup>182</sup> (Alternative candidates included: ‘terminarch’, “ender,” “lastoline” (a contraction of “last of the line”), and “yatim” (Arabic for “orphan”) [with Webster] eventually settl[ing] on “endling,” which he liked because its suffix recalled both “line” and “lineage”’.<sup>183</sup>) As Soper points out, the final animals whose company T. keeps are not — technically-speaking — themselves dying, nor are they at imminent risk of doing so:

rather, they are “final” in a synecdochical sense — they signify the last of their kinds, their lives representing the fate of their species, which face either extinction or extirpation in the wild. Yet, the individuals themselves (and perhaps the species in total that they represent) live on in postnatural environments as a result of captive breeding programs.<sup>184</sup>

The animals are still ‘in the middle of dying, not only one at a time but in sweeps and categories’ (*HTDD*, 139), a middling that forms a stark contrast with the concreteness of Beth’s absence:

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<sup>181</sup> Wolf Humanities Center, *Lydia Millet: Environmental Science and the Post-Apocalyptic Novel*.

<sup>182</sup> Michelle Nijhuis, ‘What Do You Call the Last of a Species?’, *New Yorker*, 2 March 2017, <<https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/what-do-you-call-the-last-of-a-species>> [accessed 1 March 2021]. Though most commonly applied to the last known individual or a species or subspecies, the neologism is in fact human in origin; it has its roots in the story of a patient Webster was treating at an Atlanta convalescent home in the 1990s, who informed him she was the sole surviving member of her family.

<sup>183</sup> Nijhuis, ‘What Do You Call the Last of a Species?’. After being rejected by Merriam-Webster — on the grounds that a word had to appear — Webster appealed to the journal *Nature* in 1996. In a letter, they wrote: ‘about the “need for a word in taxonomy, and in medical, genealogical, scientific, biological and other literature, that does not occur in the English or any other language”’. Despite ostensible enthusiasm from *Nature*’s readers however, the word fell once again into disuse. It wasn’t until 2001, on the reopening of the National Museum of Australia, in Sydney, that “endling” was cemented within extinction discourse, thanks mainly to its inclusion in a display about the thylacine — the last known individual of which died in captivity in 1936.

<sup>184</sup> Soper, ‘Grieving Final Animals’, p. 752.

[she] was finished being dead, with her departure accomplished and her absence complete. There was the memory of her but that had nothing to do with death, or at least was a wilful opposition to it' (*HTDD*, 139). This moment coincides not just with T.'s realisation that the zoo animals are, like him, 'alone, most of them, not only alone in the cages, often, but alone on the earth' (*HTDD*, 134). Likewise, the Devil's Hole pupfish T. visits in Nevada are 'alone, with only each other for company — not one animal but hundreds of them, alone as a whole kind, in a world without others' (*HTDD*, 161).

This conflation is made more explicit during T.'s first illicit entry, wherein he encounters the zoo's 'rarest' animal: 'a Mexican gray wolf, the one pictured in the tourist brochure' (*HTDD*, 135). The wolf's rarity makes it viable 'marketing' material for T., whose exposure is perhaps hastened by his own susceptibility to the seductions of advertising. His desire to 'meet' the wolf stems from a need to kill time in between business meetings in Scottsdale but, latterly, from a desire to discover what 'wildness [the zoo] contained', an environment he acknowledges simultaneously as 'artificial' (*HTDD*, 131) and yet still far-removed from 'the realm of his competence' (*HTDD*, 134). It is here, outside the zone of T.'s 'competence', that he seems to come into himself, his own self-discovery coinciding with an altercation at the zoo with a family who is harassing a black bear, tossing projectiles in an effort to capture the 'right' angle for the camera. Prior to T.'s intervention, he experiences a surge of lively affect that he experiences as a kind of pleasure and phonyism both at once: 'He was enraged. Or excited. But all here, he thought: and *I will kill them*. Even though he knew it was a posture, he felt the anger and relished it' (*HTDD*, 132). This about-face appears motivated by an ambiguously felt empathy towards the bear itself, but also by the impetus to *act* and be seen to be an actor. 'He had never done this, never. Never anything —. He was thrilled and at the same time he hated the man, hated his wife, and even his children' (*HTDD*, 133). When given expression however, this 'realization' quickly collapses into a proprietary strain of affect, that same language of *having* which proceeds from the

attempt to provide any ‘account’ of his relation to the nonhuman. “It is my *business*,” said T. “just like it would be if you threw garbage at my sister. What don’t you get about that?” (HTDD 133, emphasis mine). The bear is, all of a sudden, T.’s business, who inserts himself into the fray through a speculative appeal to kinship (made doubly ambivalent by the fact T. doesn’t have siblings). This sudden defensiveness T. experiences as a form of ‘rapture’; an elated moment of self-actualisation brought about by the purposive sense of the custodial (HTDD, 134). No longer just a roving signifier for entrepreneurial spirit, T. himself seems to approach the task of the reparative critic: “This was who he was, he thought; he was a person who would defend, who would swear and threaten and feel the heat and the cliff-edge of opinion. He felt good — better than good’ (HTDD, 134).

Notably, this sudden rush of *awareness* or appreciation for nonhuman loneliness is attended by a heightened sense of T.’s own. Outside the compound later that night, he reflects: ‘He knew the zoo animals lived in cages but nothing more about them except that they were alone, most of them, not only alone in cages, often, but alone on the earth, vanishing. Their condition was close to what he was trying to grasp, lay somehow at the base of his growing suspicion that the ground was no longer fixed, was shifting beneath him’ (HTDD, 134). T.’s geological suspicion that the rocks beneath are no longer solid, or that the tectonic is on the move, expands beyond the shattering sense of his own grief; this destabilisation is true of ‘his’ environment, too. Still, his recognition of his own non-sovereignty, his aloneness (‘Alone, he thought — a word that came to him more and more, in singsong like a jeer’), or his self-reflection on the ‘irrational’ bent of his vigilantism (HTDD, 135) cannot take place without a concurrent anxiety about imperial decline: ‘Empire only looked good built against a backdrop of oceans and forests. It needed them. If the oceans were dead and the forests replaced by pavement even empire would be robbed of its consequence’ (HTDD, 135). Though he cannot guess at the ‘individual histories’ of these animals, knowing only ‘their position, as he knew his

own: they were at the forefront of aloneness, like pioneers. They were the ones sent ahead to see what the new world was like' (*HTDD*, 135).

This final infiltration sees the 'final animals' of Millet's novel themselves becoming 'pioneers', test-subjects probing a lonely future. The following passage sees the narrator recount T.'s moment of introspection about his 'experience' of the zoo:

The zoos were not new. What was new about them was the way the animals were valued as possessions more than symbols, the way the animals had become scarcer and scarcer as millennia passed so that they were now tradeable. [...] These days the zoos were full of final animals. Almost all primates were on their way out, almost all the large carnivores, the great cats and wild dogs and the bears, almost all the wide-ranging and large herbivores, giraffes and pachyderms, almost all the vast, intelligent mammals that lived in the oceans. They were all on the clock, in the long moment of going before being gone. The zoos were a holding pen: they had the appearance of gardens, the best of them, but they were mausoleums (*HTDD*, 196–7).

Note here T.'s awareness that even in the moment of their expiry these creatures are continually jobbing, 'on the clock', an idiom that suggests the hypervigilance of the timecard; shunted between the language of the auctioneer and the fidelity of the neoliberal subject. The infiltration of economic 'value' into these spaces is affirmed by T.'s continuing critique: 'In fact whole species were being protected as living relics, given the honor of being almost extinct. This status was posted on their exhibitions sometimes, as though it was a blue ribbon. But even when the animals were relics they were less the last of their kind than a different kind entirely — a hybrid kind, he thought. A zoo kind.' (*HTDD*, 197-198) Beyond just a biopolitical commentary on the dubious (im)moral function of the zoo, this passage is also bookended by T.'s facing his own prospects of 'extinction'; his mother, suffering with memory loss, 'forgets' him when he turns up at her home for their regular dinner appointment, this erasure leading T. to reflect on his own genealogy. He is struck by the fact that he has no family remaining to speak of; when he tries to

‘enumerate family members’ he comes up with ‘almost none’: ‘Part of the growing estrangement from family, in the end, was a simple product of freedom. It was the American way to pick and choose from a range of possibilities, not to be bound and obligated. Cut loose from a certain idea of duty, it turned out, individuals did no great deeds but only drifted apart’ (*HTDD*, 194). Estranged from his father and temporarily unknown to his mother, T. himself brushes up against the category of ending, though he doesn’t yet have the language to make this explicit.

If this collapsing of animal into human affect, the cross-contamination of T.’s own loneliness and self-pity, with pity for the animal, follows from the same proprietary logic Mitchell describes, then it also expresses something of ‘our’ own defensive apparatuses and what they might be protecting from exposure. This ‘something’ T. drives at in his observation of the affective surge he experiences when confronting the kangaroo rats’ demise: ‘But it was not sentiment, not at the base of this — he felt for them, but it was not empathy. It was fear. It was the knowledge of the ants beneath them, the ants pouring away and taking with them the very foundations. Everything.’ (*HTDD*, 129) This attempt at shoring against loneliness through the animal is present, too, in the discursive atomisation suggested by the aptly named Lonesome George, the last known *individual* of the Pinta Island tortoise. Or in the anecdotal death of Sudan, the last male Northern White Rhino, in 2018, whose own ‘loneliness’ was the slow ‘tragedy’ of his failure to find a viable mate, this libidinal failure inseparable from his subsequent demise. The outpouring of grief ‘for’ Sudan in the public sphere, punctuated by the bulbous ‘cuteness’ of broken-heart emojis, forms a pithy demonstration of how ‘our’ own anxiety about ‘our’ lonely futures might overflow into our dispositions towards loneliness. In 2017, the Ol Pejeta Conservancy made a profile for Sudan in collaboration with Tinder, with the aim of raising funds to develop artificial reproductive technologies, intended to circumvent his extinction through in

vitro fertilisation.<sup>185</sup> Sudan's bio read: "I don't mean to be too forward, but the fate of my species literally depends on me. I perform well under pressure [...] 6ft (183cm) tall and 5,000lb (2,268kg) if it matters".<sup>186</sup> The many collapses here — between this impotent rhino, the queer potentialities of artificial reproduction, a mandatory culture of 'coupling' (a pressure that extends across the chasm of homo and heteronormative anxieties) — suggests the proximity between the horror of 'our' own fear of disinclusion or, to put it colloquially, 'dying alone' and the anxious spectacle of 'last' animals. Like the 'bachelor' fate that Beth's dying consigns T. to, much to the chagrin of his chauvinist friend's matchmaking wife, whose meddling is met with his 'quiet repulsion' of the many 'sacrificial virgins' she parades in front of him (*HTDD*, 144). Perpetually swiping right to avoid the deeply anti-normative fate of 'aloneness' thus functions as a defensive strategy in its own right.

T.'s own final sojourn leads him to the Belizean jungle, where his hermeneutic quest for finality, a seminal aloneness, culminates in his pursuit of the jaguar. This acquisition (its perusal interrupted by the event of Beth's death some several pages earlier) also marks the cessation of grief's ordering of his time. 'First among his new tasks was the purchase of the island in Belize. So inexpensive was the pristine land with its surrounding reefs and atolls that he considered himself well-advised to focus his acquisition program in the tropics, assuming he could gain enough expertise in transitional business and tax practices. There in the sunny lands lay the leisure fantasy of all northern people; there despots fell, borders opened, and wealthy tourists streamed (*HTDD*, 111). Flying into the peninsula so that he might supervise construction on his own 'modest island facility' (*HTDD*, 201) from the ground, he observes the 'brown and orange

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<sup>185</sup> 'Last male northern white rhino joins Tinder to raise money', *BBC*, 25 April 2017, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39713327>> [accessed 24 February 2021]. Those who 'swiped right' on Sudan would be led to a donation page for the fund.

<sup>186</sup> This gimmick of the lovelorn rhino who is reassuring us of his sexual prowess despite his 'failure' to sire (which gestures also, perhaps, towards a quietly Eurocentric joke based on western distaste at the use of rhino horn as sexual aid).

of the coral. It was not, he realized, as bright as coral he had seen in photographs: was there something wrong with it? (*HTDD*, 202). His empathy seems to newly fail him in his interactions with the locals, where mostly ‘money talk[s]’ for him (*HTDD*, 209); met with the sudden disappearance of his foreman Marlo’s son in a freak hurricane, T. can offer only financial remuneration to aid their search: ‘T. did not find words; he was inadequate’ (*HTDD*, 211). This capacity for diagnosis approaches its zenith in the Belizean rainforest, where T. finds himself in pursuit of seeing a jaguar, despite odds of 17,000 to 1. Here, in the novel’s final pages, the narrator finds a new way to furnish T.’s own ‘specialness’, as part of a new empathic elite:

When a thing became very scarce, that was when it was finally also seen to be sublime and lovely. It had happened with wild nature in England in the nineteenth century: nature that had been despised and avoided before it was destroyed by cities and farms and pollution became, when there was almost none of it left, the subject of poems and paintings, the highest access to the divine. *Now some few persons, he thought, marginal persons in their marginal groups, knew the value of the animals and their world, and he was one among them.*

He was as farsighted now, he thought with a flush of his old conceit, as he had ever been in his stock predictions, in his speculation for his own profit. He saw what was coming. Whether it was wheat futures or neighborhoods or the Nikkei or this; for the market had failed to see the animals for what they were, the animals in their own places with the ancient networks of their culture and landscape intact. Worth far more than single commodities.

The lapping water was like a lullaby. Uncountable wealth, he thought, not the kind that was superfluous but the kind that but the kind that kept you alive, down through the generations.

But the market would take too long to recognize it; the market already had. The market had failed them. (*HTDD*, 238, emphasis mine)

For Bateman, T.’s ‘abandonment to, and embeddedness in a precarious planet’ at the novel’s close ‘represents a situation of danger, to be sure, but the novel also frames it as a prolonged rest and as a reprieve from the productive imperatives of capitalist activity and neoliberal self-



development'.<sup>187</sup> This final merging, however, and the 'epiphanic' recognition of nonhuman 'worth' it brings about would seem to be almost entirely reliant on T.'s retention of his own 'special skill' as a day trader, even in the depths of a disorienting 'wilderness'; further, far from 'losing' himself, he remains able to view this precarious planet only in terms of market *value*, an overlooked niche. Even in this momentary realisation, Millet's prose suggests the fundamental entanglement of animals with an economic language and logic, an involved metaphoricity that cannot be pulled back from.

### **Conclusion**

In the interview at the Wolf Humanities Center, Millet is challenged by her interviewers on her formal commitment to the novel and 'what she thinks the novel is capable of doing as a political technology these days' given its unspecified 'limitations' — to which we might also add T.'s observation regarding its anthropocentrism ('Those who loved stories also loved the human, to live in cities where there was nothing but men and their actions as far as the eye could see', *HTDD*, 234.). In response, Millet cites Amitav Ghosh's 'complaint that, you know, the novel hasn't sufficiently confronted the matter of climate change', suggesting that while the accusation levelled against the form is doubtless true, the demand for the genre of literary fiction to grapple satisfactorily with a problem that 'all the governments and corporations of the world have failed' to address is 'also a sad joke', a kind of absurdism in its own right. Her answer repeatedly returns to the validity of persisting with writing about crisis, despite the seeming impossibility of getting it right. She alights on the relative impotence of art to metabolise or embody unprecedented threat at the planetary scale required, 'the full horror' and abstraction of which is, as she puts it, 'a tall order'.

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<sup>187</sup> Bateman, 'A Flattened Protagonist', p. 161.

In its self-conscious attempts to redress human loneliness, *How the Dead Dream* asks us to confront our automated affective responses to the issue of extinction, to dial up how it makes us feel, and how this feeling might be reshaped. While the conversion narrative seemingly offers a tempting and readymade cue for ‘resolving’ the age of loneliness, through optimising empathy or investing in affective futures, in truth the novel offers a more complex world wherein the utility of affect is itself made ambivalent or put up for grabs. By posing as an affective balm against the frightening reign of statistics, the Eremocene is in many ways yet another emotional directive, an anthropocentric pathology predicated on demanding that the world offers us its gifts.

Ambiguously, Millet’s own optimism in this scenario — her reparative conviction that, ‘as long as people love animals, [...] there will always be this fight that can be won against extinction’ — seems to infiltrate the jarring sentimental ‘lesson’ or ‘sermon’ that ends her novel, ventriloquised through T.’s own late-stage assessment of a bland, non-biodiverse future: ‘On and on they would live, surrounded by gray. Complexity would be gone, replaced with dull sameness that stretched out unending [...] and when they had killed all their friends and everywhere was empty: only then would they see how terribly they had loved them’ (*HTDD*, 242).<sup>188</sup> Terrible in the sense of exceedingly loved, but also in the sense of love’s *failure*.

Perhaps Millet’s novel does offer the reader the glimmer of a less conventional, more ‘radically’ dissociative alternative? One that returns us to Fromm-Reichmann’s vision of ‘real loneliness’: those ‘states of mind in which the fact that there were people in one’s past life is more or less forgotten, and the possibility that there may be interpersonal relationships in one’s future life is out of the realm of expectation or imagination’.<sup>189</sup> While for Fromm-Reichmann such states are degenerative, plunging the sufferer into psychic darkness, is there a sense in which they might also be conceptually generative? Following T.’s unconvincing submersion in

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<sup>188</sup> Wolf Humanities Center, *Lydia Millet: Environmental Science and the Post-Apocalyptic Novel*.

<sup>189</sup> Fromm-Reichmann, ‘Loneliness’, p. 312.

the ‘wilderness’ at the novel’s end, itself a postmodern pastiche of Joseph Conrad, he enters a similarly dissociative state: ‘He began talking to himself. He wandered, he was bored, but he had no other diversion and after a while he was forced to invent a companion [...] Together they recalled moments from youth — kids he knew, things that happened [...] He recalled all these people as an elegy, since he was removed from them. Not only now, he thought, but forever. He might still seek people out, talk to them — of course he would, they were part of him — but his eyes would be fixed on a point beyond them’ (*HTDD*, 231–232). It is here, in this state of emotional vacancy or *flatness* that he attains the (possibly profound) realisation of the ways in which the meanings of extinction exceed the conceptual frame of the ‘market’, demonstrating how its toolkits of ‘value’ and ‘scarcity’ simply aren’t equipped to reckon with the *qualitative* loneliness it poses. While quantitatively biodiversity may regain its numbers in the future, what lies on that ‘fixed point’ beyond the lonely horizon of visibility is perhaps a generative sense of ignorance or dispossession, not just a relinquishing of self but also of knowledge: ‘there was an animal perched on a branch [...] He watched it jump and climb until it was too far from him to see. He had no idea what it was. This pleased him: maybe there was hope yet. How was it that his own ignorance was a comfort? But it was’ (*HTDD*, 231). The satirical ambivalence of Millet’s text proffers an (over)easy identification with T. as moral ‘hero’, and sympathy with a ‘conversion’ narrative that is energised by his sudden perception of his own loneliness, his urgent need to be reinstated to a ‘more human’ world of feeling (and thus ‘feeling better’ about himself). Which is attained, in its turn, through his re-orientation towards a more-than-human world. And yet, as Millet’s satire consistently suggests, both his heroism and the altruistic gesture of his conversion are *self*-oriented to the extent that their ‘truth’ or ‘authenticity’ simply cannot be verified within the world of her novel, despite our best critical attempts. In this sense, the text problematises the possibility of anything even resembling other-directedness (and especially animal-directedness) in a bloated capitalist market, leaving the reader in a precarious position

where only ‘real’, dissociative loneliness — one without any residual hope of ‘comfort’ — seems to have radical potential.

In outlining an affective stance that exceeds an easy affective economy of species ‘togetherness’, the novel *seems* makes sensible the need for a ‘future life’ for animals which lies outside ‘the [current] realm of human expectation or imagination’, it ultimately fails (like so many formations on the Left) to fully articulate what this generative notion in theoretical principle might look like in praxis. Despite the oneiric promise of its title, Millet’s novel falters in its ability to ‘dream’ beyond a market vision, in such a way that perhaps mirrors the contemporary ‘typing left’s’ own ‘unwillingness to reinvent its modes of dreaming’, as Jodi Dean describes it, as well as its ‘inability to raise particular claims to the level of the universal, to present issues or problems as standing for something beyond themselves’.<sup>190</sup> This vagueness, Dean argues, finds expression in a brittle commitment to individualism that likewise poses a problem for the possibility of politicization, which necessarily entails the elevation of localised complaint, issue, or event to the status of the global.<sup>191</sup> Thought in this way, the specificity of T.’s metaphoric example begins to feel like something of an ouroboros. Not only is the ‘relatability’ of Millet’s political messaging contingent on the use of an individualistic ‘cipher’ to advance her ecological *critique* of neoliberal ideology but, as a whole, the novel has introjected the lexicon of the capitalism to the point that Millet’s satire cannot occur without it, its ironical allegiance to the neoliberal tongue becoming almost indistinguishable from its wider critique of the ideological frame. This imaginative deficit is described differently by Dean when she writes: ‘Right and left share the same rhetoric of democracy, a rhetoric merging ethics and economics, discussion and competition so that each is a version of the other... Our enemy speaks our language. And because our enemy has adopted

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<sup>190</sup> Jodi Dean, *Democracy And Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 16–18.

<sup>191</sup> Dean, *Democracy And Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, p. 18.

our language, our ideals, we lack the ability to say [clearly] what we want.<sup>192</sup> In much the same way, Millet's novel attempts to unfurl a counternarrative to hegemonic, or extractive modes of relating to animal life, only to effectively reproduce it in its final gasp: 'T. goes in hunt of what lies beyond the market, only to find that (hey ho!) neoliberalism inflects nature's own kingdom, too, and that a generic, globalised 'we' already treats animals like commodities.

As Dean suggests, neoliberal ideology — the prizing of privatization, deregulation, corporatization, and competition — 'relies on the [extensive] fantasy of free trade', operating under the delusion that 'everyone will win. To ensure that everyone will win, the market has to be liberated, freed from constraints, unleashed to realize its and our full potential.'<sup>193</sup> Subtending this fantasy, Dean suggests, is a 'series of tensions and anxieties associated with the failure to enjoy', anxieties that get 'displace[d] ... away from the brutalities and uncertainties of the neoliberal market and onto the state as art institution for collective approaches to social, economic, and systemic problems.'<sup>194</sup> The spectre of failed enjoyment, Dean suggests, is often configured through the spectre of excess: "The one who fails to enjoy fails because he has overdone something; [because] there is something excessive in his relation to the market."<sup>195</sup> She continues:

Consider the figure of the entrepreneur or executive who seems to have it all but actually doesn't. What does "it all" actually mean? How much is necessary and for what? The fantasy of a free market defers answering insofar as buying and selling, investing, and even bequeathing never stops. The market continues, ever expanding and intensifying, without end. The entrepreneur can't have it all because there is no limit. His problem thus seems to be that he doesn't know this. He doesn't realize that capitalism necessarily generates a surplus and so he can't realize, make real in his own life, a limit to his desire.

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<sup>192</sup> Dean, *Democracy And Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, p. 18.

<sup>193</sup> Dean, *Democracy And Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, p. 55.

<sup>194</sup> Dean, *Democracy And Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, p. 59.

<sup>195</sup> Dean, *Democracy And Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, p. 59.

Accordingly, the free-marketeer, the phantasmic businessman, corporation, or investment banker, has to be careful and not be *too* absorbed, *too* captivated, by the delights of the free market. The sacrifice is too much when it involves the marketeer's friends, family, and soul.<sup>196</sup>

While Millet's novel seems intent on a hollowing out of this fantasy to reveal its brittle, spiritually impoverished lining, the extremity of its conclusion — and the critically sought-after erosion of T.'s identity — perhaps attests to yet further evidence of T.'s entrepreneurial hybridity, not to mention the seemingly infinite adaptability of an ideology that can embed an injunction for self-regulation even in the midst of a cautionary fable warning against its worst excesses. Even at the pinnacle of his conversion, T. remains in many senses the same canny *homo economicus*, yet '[a]nother version of the overidentified, overinvested free-marketeer [...] who clearly delights in the game, in the risk, the hunt, the thrill of the market', whether the object of that 'hunt' is prospecting a new portfolio investment, or pursuing an affective commodity like his encounter with the black jaguar, just for kicks.<sup>197</sup> This figure, what Dean terms 'the fascinating-repulsive market predator' — most typically a white male, a lineage to which T. firmly belongs and emerges out of — is a 'key motif in market-porn' ranging from Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* franchise (1987–2010) to David Fincher's *The Game* (1997), one whose overidentification with neoliberalism deliberately 'exposes the obscene supplement of the free market fantasy, the violence or violation that underpins the system.'<sup>198</sup>

Even in this final fantasy, as it were, Millet's novel formally animates what Dean describes as the conventions of the business memoir, wherein the 'predator ultimately has to lose [or relinquish] in some domain—his business is taken over or collapses, he loses his family, or he

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<sup>196</sup> Dean, *Democracy And Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, p. 61.

<sup>197</sup> Dean, *Democracy And Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, p. 62.

<sup>198</sup> Dean, *Democracy And Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, p. 61.

loses his sense of self. This loss is thus accompanied by lessons, lessons now made available to everyone so we can avoid his mistakes and be ourselves winners in the free market.<sup>199</sup> Read in such a way, what Millet's conclusion attains is perhaps a kind of *ur*-lesson in how *not* to do human-animal relations, its ending spectacularly showcasing the immoderate and irrational extent of T.'s (over)investment in a new, untrammelled market. Indeed T.'s flattening, the Kurtzian *loss of self* he undergoes in the novel's final throes, might also be read as a symptom of this excessive bearing, which shows up in T.'s faulty, outlandish relation both to the economies of capital and nonhuman 'bounty'. The risk here is that, even as it attempts to obliterate a rapacious, acquisitive mindset, Millet's novel ultimately ends with a renewed and familiar 'message' of (re)assurance — that it is individuals' *ab*-use of or bad relation to the market, 'our' overindulgence or intemperance, and not the configurations of the pristine system itself that are at fault. As Dean suggests, the fantasy of free trade 'promises that everyone wins, uses losses to reconfirm the necessity of strengthening the system so everyone wins, and perpetually displaces the thieves of enjoyment throughout the system as warnings, exceptions, and contingencies.'<sup>200</sup> Here, then, T.'s losses become compulsory losses, sermons in moderation that — taken seriously — will in turn prevent a global 'we' from becoming sore 'losers' of biodiversity.

What are we to make of this? Is it the case that, as Margaret Thatcher's provocation had it, 'There Is No Alternative' to a market system that perpetuates an instrumentalised, economised view of nonhuman life? In the concession to extremity that marks its strangely bombastic ending, Millet's satire seems to (unintentionally) issue a call for re-possession of 'our' ethical senses that will also ensure 'our' swift repossession of biodiversity and the realisation of its 'true' potential, a vision that harks back to E.O. Wilson's 'pioneering' ideal of great treasure.

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<sup>199</sup> Dean, *Democracy And Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, p. 26.

<sup>200</sup> Dean, *Democracy And Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, p. 62.

As Dean suggests, however, fantasy isn't always occulted or secreted behind the 'sinister forces' of government jargon or the bureaucratic imperatives of policymakers, far removed from the terrain of 'ordinary' folk. Instead, 'fantasy is manifest in our actual practices; these practices, what people actually do, are the location of ideological beliefs ... The ordinary exchanges of everyday people — cleaned up and understood as rational decisions made under ideal conditions — are trade ... We might think of small farmers and local businesses or about how great it is to get to choose what we want from abundant, alluring consumer items. We might imagine lemonade stands or buying and selling on eBay.<sup>201</sup> Perhaps the contours of ethical behaviour in Millet's novel reside not in the narrative *bouleversant* of T.'s transformation, but in the reprieve offered by glimmers of non-compliance, those non-exploitative interactions that appear like chinks in his armature, and almost come to resemble something like care. These small feats of accountability the novel does achieve can be traced in the quiet bond he shares with his adoptive dog ('That night he took his dog onto the bed with him, a gesture his mother roundly condemned as unsanitary' *HTTD*, 54); the mundane gestures of care shown towards his mother ('What rose in him was tenderness... He wanted to comfort her... He loaded her suitcases into his car; he bought her a yellow rose, which she pinned to her lapel' *HTTD*, 49–53); the 'awkward intimacy' he feels confronted by his 'new parent' (*HTTD*, 79) as his father recounts to him his "'journey of self-discovery'" (*HTTD*, 53); or the moments when he is brought low by grief for Beth ('This was how he lost his autonomy' *HTTD*, 58). These stumbling infrequencies contain the promise of something *like* the kinship structures that are requisite to visualise a non-extractive horizon beyond the toxic presiding paradigms of human-animal relations, taking a reparative leap towards the necessary *investment* in extended forms of community that might enable new realms of (re)invention and new modes of dreaming.

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<sup>201</sup> Dean, *Democracy And Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, p. 55.





### 3. Fringe Mentalities: Paranoid Masculinities and Environmental Activisms in Kelly Reichardt's *Night Moves*

I mean, end of the world, what's there really to lose?<sup>1</sup>

— Dena, *Night Moves*

That is to say, once again: for someone to have an unmystified view of systemic oppressions does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences. To be other than paranoid (and of course, we'll need to define this term much more carefully), to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression.<sup>2</sup>

— Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*

Roughly five minutes into Kelly Reichardt's environmental thriller *Night Moves* (2013) — the U.S. director's film about a trio of activists who plot to blow up the Green Peter Dam — two of her central protagonists attend a makeshift screening of an environmental documentary. We reel through a familiar montage of images, projected onto a sheet pulled taut enough to erase its creases; coal spews into cars travelling on the rungs of a conveyor belt; gas flares over oil fields against the dusk; plumes of smoke billow into an ashen sky. Cooling towers exhale fumes that melt indistinguishably into the clouds; a biplane appears from the right of the screen, descending low to spray pesticide over a field of crops. Overlaying this visual narrative is an oral one spoken by a plaintive female voice:

The disaster we see is happening everywhere at the same time. The clock is ticking. It has been ticking for one hundred and fifty years now, since the dawn of industrialisation. We

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly Reichardt, dir., *Night Moves* (Cinedigm, 2013). All quotation from the film hereafter will be cited in the body of the text.

<sup>2</sup> Eve Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading And Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123–152 (p. 127).

are a culture hooked on profit, production and perpetual growth. But at *what cost*? The disaster is happening to our farmlands, it is happening to our oceans, our forests, our wildlife, it is happening to our climate. How long will it be until humanity understands that everything is interconnected? How long until multinational corporations understand that they can't make a profit off a dead planet? So let the revolution begin. All around the globe, an army of individual citizens must rise up and take a stand. For the future, for the people, and for the planet.

As this narrative description of 'where the disaster is happening' coagulates and gathers rhetorical force, these images of natural destruction gather speed, accelerating into a time-lapse. Visions of an ailing, blackened coral reef are followed by vast swathes of conifers, engulfed by fire. The voiceover continues, the camera's gaze retreating from a now-familiar spectacle of environmental decline to frame its audience instead. As we watch them watching, this textual screen is withdrawn, replaced by the interplay of light on a row of blank faces, all differently affected. As Reichardt's camera lingers watchfully, panning across the row of indeterminate reactions, one can detect the slightest trace of a smile, a hint of dewiness around the whites of the eyes, a slackened mouth; all nonverbal cues that could alternately be suggestive of a state of environmental *rapture* induced by the film's mesmeric 'message', or *eco-stupefaction*, a sense of bored perplexity experienced on being confronted by the bewildering prospect of the coming apocalypse.

When Reichardt does eventually return her gaze to the scene of the montage, it is to the diegetic filmmaker's hopeful injunction to 'let the revolution to begin'. Crowds of humans are seen peacefully protesting, brandishing placards roughly painted with injunctions to 'THINK ABOUT OUR FUTURE' or insisting on 'DIGNITY, EQUITY, RESPECT'. The corporate implications of the word *equity* evoke the kinds of slogan heard during an infomercial for a legal firm or insurance broker, rather than the egalitarian vocabulary associated with the demand to

meet the ecopolitical goals of environmental justice. Contained in that ‘we’ is a rousing invocation of what Kathryn Yusoff has described as ‘the language of species life — *anthropos*’, whose broad-spectrum appeal to ‘a universalist geologic commons’ also does the insidious work of erasure, affirming a fuzzy, collective ‘humanity’ often at the expense of attending to the violent legacies of colonial and racial subjugation that undergird the category’s coherence.<sup>3</sup> As if to underscore the ambivalent inclusivity of this ‘we’, the documentary’s final cut melts into a slow-motion shot of a white pregnant woman clutching the hand of a small blonde child as she strides peacefully amidst the throng of nonviolent procession. The footage of this march coincides, somewhat discordantly, with the voiceover’s militaristic command for ‘*an army* of individual citizens’ to rise up and mobilise in the fight against climate collapse.

As the credits roll, overlaid by a scattering of applause and the squalling of a baby, filmmaker Jackie Christiansen (played by Clara Mamet) is commended for her ‘tremendous, amazing work’; the voiceover revealed as her own. The lights in the room fade-up and the camera settles on Josh (played by Jesse Eisenberg), who stands locked and motionless at the back of the room, set apart from the crowd. His determined lack of applause, a slight narrowing around the eyes, the downturned set of his mouth — all are suggestive of a peculiarly cynical mien. The sensation that he’s seen and heard it all before is restated by the flattened affect achieved by Eisenberg’s oddly illegible performance style; an under or anti-performativity that might be added to Lauren Berlant’s canon of ‘post-melodramatic anti-method acting’, which they suggest is comprised in ‘the slow burn mien of [certain] actors’, and their ‘flat, casual, or imploded methods’.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*’, *International Journal of Politics Culture and Society*, 28 (2015), 191-213 (p. 197).

Had we not already seen Eisenberg's wearied gaze (not least in the film's establishing shot, wherein he glares inscrutably at a jet of water that surges forth from the hydroelectric dam he will later blow up), we might be forgiven for mistaking him for a non-believer, rather than a proponent of Christiansen's cause. Reading paranoically, Josh's visible suspicion towards the slow stratagems she proposes, coupled with his closed, recessive expression all suggest the bearing of an *anti*-environmentalist; signalling perhaps that a climate sceptic has infiltrated this otherwise 'environmentally-minded gathering'.<sup>5</sup> The camera's fixation on Josh's embittered face marks a not-quite symmetrical return to the shot that immediately preceded Christiansen's voiceover. As Josh's boss Sean (played by Kai Lennox) pulls up in a truck, wondering aloud where he is, his colleague, Surprise, (played by Alia Shawkat) informs us that he has ducked out of labouring duties: 'He took a walk!' Inhabiting the Thoreauvian maxim that 'every walk is a sort of crusade', Reichardt's camera tracks Josh as he moves through a thicket of young trees, carefully reinstating a fallen nest to the boughs of a young sapling.<sup>6</sup> The slight gulp, his tentative glancing from side-to-side, his guarded movements; all signify something open, vulnerable, appreciative that points towards the bearing of a true believer. At the same time, they are also indicators of the watchful or furtive, this illegibility suggestive, perhaps, of inquisitiveness and suspicion in equal measure. Notably, Christiansen's dialogue intervenes in this forest scene, overlaying the ambient noise of chirruping birds and Jeff Grace's mournful piano score.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Christiansen's voiceover intrudes on the diegesis *before* we bear witness to the unfurling environmental disaster she describes, beginning at roughly 05:28 and ending at 06:17. That is to say less than sixty seconds in total; a timespan that, for Reichardt, a filmmaker notorious for her '*refus[al]* of certain traditional forms of pacing', signals less a dismissal of Christiansen's vision

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<sup>5</sup> Katherine Fusco and Nicole Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt: Contemporary Film Directors* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017), p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Henry David Thoreau, 'Walking', *The Atlantic*, June 1862, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/06/walking/304674/>> [accessed 15 March 2021].

<sup>7</sup> Grace also collaborated with Reichardt on *Meek's Cutoff*, another film about a menaced water supply.

than it does a reassurance: that this, a film we already know to be ‘about’ radical environmentalism, will not be ‘about’ the slow environmentalism that preoccupies Christiansen.<sup>8</sup>

As if mimetically reproducing Josh’s doubtfulness, the scene’s framing troubles Christiansen’s canned narrative of a natural world ‘contaminated’ by the enemy of industrial pollution, in urgent need of ‘healing’ through collective mobilisation. By way of offering a counter-visualisation to this aesthetic output, what immediately precedes the screening is a bounty of evidence to the contrary; rows of tall crops and vividly green stalks of kale lining the co-operative farm where Josh works and lives. Even if, as Katherine Fusco and Nicole Seymour suggest, nature is ‘degraded and *being degraded* at a sickeningly slow rate’, ‘we *don’t* actually see [it] happening, at least not in this idyllic setting.’<sup>9</sup> The disastrous ‘everywhere’ of Christiansen’s narrative doesn’t appear identical with the world of Reichardt’s film; in fact, the same sprawling environment that is so acutely threatened in her documentary appears on-screen here in abundance, and thus less straightforwardly at risk. The voiceover’s insistent reminder that ‘the disaster is happening everywhere’ intrudes on Josh’s Thoreauvian ‘*sauntering*’ (a noble pursuit Thoreau playfully associates with an ‘ancient and honorable class’ and the ‘Chivalric and heroic spirit which once belonged to the Rider’, or knights of old) in such a way that *could* give voice to his ambivalence; that it pre-empts the screening instead reinforces the weary affect already at work in the impression that Josh has, in a rather literal sense, seen and heard it all before any of his comrades, *and* before Reichardt’s viewer.<sup>10</sup>

One is reminded of the jadedness exhibited by Seldom Seen Smith, the Jack Mormon protagonist at the heart of Edward Abbey’s eco-saboteur novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975).

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<sup>8</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> Thoreau, ‘Walking’.

When confronted with the artificial monstrosity of Lake Powell, the manmade reservoir whose creation together with the Glen Canyon Dam he holds responsible for the destruction of the Glen Canyon, he finds ‘his heart was full of a healthy hatred. Because Smith remembered something different [...]. All these things now lay beneath the dead water of the reservoir, slowly disappearing under many layers of descending silt. How could he forget? He had seen too much.’<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Abbey’s novel, which marked an ‘influential contribution to grassroots environmentalism [...] is one of a very few texts in U.S. literary history to have exerted a demonstrable “real-world” environmental impact’; it is widely considered as having galvanised the ‘ecotage’ movement.<sup>12</sup> Eco-critic Lawrence Buell cites ‘poet-critic Gary Snyder’s sardonic (and so far accurate) prediction that *Monkey Wrench Gang* would never become a commercial film, despite Abbey’s having been paid a goodly sum for movie rights, because the novel “violates the most sacred American value: industrial private property”’.<sup>13</sup> Ostensibly, Abbey’s hyper-masculine novel (which Buell uncritically frames as a ‘raffishly sympathetic treatment of eco-sabotage by four colourful characters who sortie around the “Four Corners” area of the southwest [...] disrupting hydropower, logging, and construction projects’) served as loose inspiration for Reichardt’s own project.<sup>14</sup> Even if it goes some way towards violating Snyder’s claim, however, *Night Moves* is not a ‘commercial’ film, at least not in the sense Buell intends; as Fusco and Seymour point out, there are few ‘commercial’ directors who would make a film about the construction of a fertiliser bomb, only for that bomb to then explode off-screen.<sup>15</sup> While the eco-thriller may be the most conventionally ‘dramatic’ of Reichardt’s seven feature films, it maintains her characteristic understatedness — what Fusco and Seymour refer to as her

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<sup>11</sup> Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Buell, ‘What Is Called Ecoterrorism’, *Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism*, 16 (2009), 153-166 (p. 154).

<sup>13</sup> Buell, ‘What Is Called Ecoterrorism’, p. 160.

<sup>14</sup> Buell, ‘What Is Called Ecoterrorism’, p. 154.

<sup>15</sup> Dominic Patten, ‘*Night Moves* Director, Producers, UTA Sued By Edward Pressman & Edward Abbey Widow For Copyright Infringement’, *Deadline*, 15 September 2012, <<https://deadline.com/2012/09/uta-director-kelly-reichardt-sued-by-edward-pressman-edward-abbey-widow-for-copyright-infringement-336968/>> [accessed 5 August 2021]

signature ‘unflashy style’ —, eschewing the affectively-charged, apocalyptic imagery that is a mainstay of Christiansen’s documentary, a sentimentality that follows the suit of contemporary environmental filmmaking more broadly speaking.<sup>16</sup>

As in Abbey’s novel, the inert monstrosity of the dam and the expansionist sprawl of ‘the grid’ it metonymically represents, is also the object of a ‘healthy’, righteous environmental loathing in Reichardt’s film.<sup>17</sup> Where her plot marks a significant deviation from Abbey’s ethos, however, is in its attitude towards the ‘sanctity’ of human life: namely, in the unintended killing of a man camping upriver from the site of the explosion. Crucially, this ‘accident’ violates one of the central tenets of ecotage, described elsewhere by Travis Wagner, as ‘a variety of criminal acts (e.g. vandalism, arson, and threats) undertaken in the name of protecting nature while *specifically not harming humans*.’<sup>18</sup> As Fusco and Seymour have it, accident is a defining trope of Reichardt’s filmmaking, which preoccupies itself with all ‘the ways small and random events may nonetheless derail a life’.<sup>19</sup> Such ‘neorealist plotting’, which tends to push ‘audiences to reflect on the thin line between incidents that are causal and those that are merely chronological, [...] what counts as a “then” or a “therefore”’, also entails a denial of ‘the sentimentality often associated with [neorealist] filmmakers’: Reichardt ‘declines to ask audiences to care about or identify with particular characters; instead, she asks that we consider the structural limitations placed on them.’<sup>20</sup>

Given Reichardt’s purported ‘resistance to affective appeals’, one might locate her corpus as belonging to, or emerging from, an exemplary ‘cluster of queer and independent docudramatic

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<sup>16</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Travis Wagner, ‘Reframing Ecotage as Ecoterrorism: News and the Discourse of Fear’, *Environmental Communication*, 2 (2008), 25-39 (p. 25).

<sup>19</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 83.

<sup>20</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 34.



narratives emerging in the mid-1980s and continuing into the present': one which favours, as Berlant describes, 'spaces and episodes of recessive action that appear in styles of underperformed emotion', wherein '[w]orlds and events that would have been expected to be captured by expressive suffering [...] appear with an asterisk of uncertainty'.<sup>21</sup> This 'unspectacular opacity' — shared in common across many of Reichardt's protagonists — is perhaps most keenly *felt* or consolidated in a 'type' like Josh. Precisely the *illegibility* of Reichardt's characters resides in the anti-sentimentality that both produces and constrains them, leaving them critically ripe for (or, put less vindictively, *vulnerable* to) satirical reading.<sup>22</sup> As Henry Fielding put it in his 1742 'comic epic poem in prose', *Joseph Andrews*: 'I describe not men, but manners; not an individual, but a species'; the aim is 'not to expose one pitiful wretch to the small and contemptible circle of his acquaintance; but to hold the glass to thousands in their closets'.<sup>23</sup>

This flatness is remarked upon by Michael Koresky who, reviewing the film for *Reverse Shot* magazine, suggests that 'Reichardt's story [...] comes across as little more than a solemn near-parody of the radical left' and her eco-terrorists as 'ultimately buffoonish'.<sup>24</sup> He continues: 'If more meditative or kind toward its characters, *Night Moves* might have been a trenchant examination of the failure of any sort of ideology — left or right wing — when pushed to its limits, and the importance of incremental social change'.<sup>25</sup> Besides unhelpfully reaffirming the ameliorative imperatives that already haunt environmental filmmaking (the implication being that *Night Moves* might be a 'better' or more artistically 'valuable' film if it were more like Christiansen's or told us how to 'fix' environmental activism), Koresky's reading crucially overlooks what *Night Moves* shares in common with the strategic aims of the comic mode.

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<sup>21</sup> Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling', p. 193.

<sup>22</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, pp. 35-47.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. R. F. Brissenden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 185-6.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Koresky, 'Environmental Deficiency', *Reverse Shot: Museum of the Moving Image*, 28 May 2014, <[http://www.reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/888/night\\_moves](http://www.reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/888/night_moves)> [accessed 16 March 2021]

<sup>25</sup> Koresky, 'Environmental Deficiency'.

Namely, that the operations of genre, precisely those ‘standard thriller elements’ are in fact structurally integral to its deconstruction of radical environmentalism’s failings. The ‘guilt-fueled violence and hushed, noirish cellphone talks’ that Koresky disdains as *obstacles* to an effective cinematic analysis of environmental and ideological catastrophe aren’t simply a narrative deviation from those broader ‘conversations about environmental activism, radical politics, or even the desperate state of contemporary agriculture [that] are ambiguously raised in the first half of the film’.<sup>26</sup> Rather, these paranoid stylings, and in particular the claustrophobic anxiety about the threat of criminal ‘exposure’ that organise its long second half, are vital to the film’s exploration of how so-called ‘radical’ environmentalist ideology — grounded in a blinkered, nostalgic reverence for the radicalism of another era — fails Reichardt’s protagonists.

Behind Koresky’s insistence that Reichardt would have done better to show greater *kindness* to her characters or that *kindness* would have produced a more ‘successful’ artistic portrait of their ideological failure, there seems to lurk a long-disdained critical positionality, one that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests has become almost inadmissible amid a ‘monopolistic [critical] program of paranoid knowing’: namely, the ‘reparative motive of *seeking pleasure*’.<sup>27</sup> As Sedgwick writes:

Like Proust, the reparative reader “helps himself again and again”; it is not only important but possible to find ways of attending to such reparative motives and positionalities. The vocabulary for articulating any reader’s reparative motive toward a text or a culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary that it’s no wonder few critics are willing to describe their acquaintance with such motives. The prohibitive problem, however, has been in the limitations of present theoretical vocabularies rather than in the reparative motive itself. No less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither

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<sup>26</sup> Koresky, *Environmental Deficiency*.

<sup>27</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 144.

less nor more delusional or fantasmatic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks.<sup>28</sup>

That one might be critically motivated by reparative motives in a critical evaluation of a film like Reichardt's makes sense, given that Sedgwick's own advocacy for developing an alternative lens to the pervasive 'hermeneutics of suspicion' would seem to turn on this latent notion of *survival*. After all, as she proposes: 'What we can best learn from [reparative] practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting *sustenance from the objects of a culture* — *even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them*' (emphasis mine).<sup>29</sup> Here, Sedgwick is invested in the project of *queer* survival, and more specifically in the 'problem' of queer theory's own corrosive methodological attachments to 'a hermeneutics of suspicion', a 'critical practice [that] has involved a concomitant privileging of the concept of paranoia' (something Sedgwick finds ironical, given that paranoia, by Freud's account, anyway, is a signifier of homosexual repression *par excellence*).<sup>30</sup> While this attachment to paranoid methodology, she suggests, first emerged out of a necessary response to a culture that has been historically oppositional, if not actively hostile, towards the flourishing of queer selves and communities, the presumptive 'them' whose survival is at stake in Reichardt's film comprises humanity as a 'whole', rather than any one specifically marginalised group. That being said, at the level of plot, the primary target of the activists' investment would appear to be the survival of the 'world' in general rather than *homo sapiens*, their 'vague anger' undergirded by a shared misanthropic view of a parasitic or 'viral' humanity that is the driving cause behind the demise of nonhuman species, and the degradation of natural habitats.<sup>31</sup> For the critic, however, what is symbolically 'threatened' by the viewing subject's failure to 'extract sustenance' from a cultural object such as *Night Moves*, is the prospective annihilation of an entire species: the extinction of the geologic

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<sup>28</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 150.

<sup>29</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 150.

<sup>30</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 125.

<sup>31</sup> Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, p. 17.

commons that is suggested by the looming vision of the ‘Blue Marble’ that rises over the horizon of Jackie Christiansen’s final frame. This chapter’s first section will provide a brief overview of some of the central tenets of Sedgwick’s now-classic essay, alongside the function and meanings of ‘denial’ within contemporary environmentalist discourse. From there, I will engage Sedgwick together with Ngai’s critical work on paranoia, reading these two critical texts alongside Reichardt’s eco-thriller, with a particular focus on the origins of surveillance technologies in the military-carceral complex.

It is important to bear in mind, here, the strangeness of seeing that word ‘extract’ collide with Sedgwick’s demand for a reparative critical language, given its myriad negative environmental implications. After all, as Claire Colebrook reminds us, ‘[t]he world of leisured time, reflective reading, democratic debate, rights and reason’, not to mention critical endeavour itself, ‘would not be possible without the ongoing extraction and harnessing of life and energy from elsewhere.’<sup>32</sup> And, as ‘we’ have already seen in Yusoff’s emphasis on the uneasy universalising ‘appeal’ of a category like *anthropos*, these grammars of geology can work to conceal not just the ongoing unequal distribution of environmental harms in the present. But, furthermore, the legacies of colonial violence, and appropriation of natural resources that have defined the West’s environmental past. Reading along the axis of race, one might be inclined to suggest that the pointed whiteness of *Night Moves* (and of Reichardt’s films more broadly) confronts the reader with the filmmaker’s own imaginative limitations as far as concerns a more inclusive vision of environmental justice, perhaps indicating a wider critical and artistic failure to grapple with the legacy of Abbey’s own insidious anti-immigration stance.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Claire Colebrook, ‘Anti-Catastrophic Time’, *New Formations*, 92 (2017), 102–119 (p. 103).

<sup>33</sup> In a 1988 essay entitled ‘Immigration and Liberal Taboos’, Abbey proposed closing the border with Mexico in order to arrest ‘mass immigration’, in order to shore against the collapse of an overburdened state and prevent the extermination of plant and animal species. The essay deploys specious, fearmongering rhetoric to justify a paranoid, exclusionary conservationism that is tied to Abbey’s own anxious localism as a resident of the American Southwest. The essay was never printed, after being solicited then rejected by the *New York Times*, who also refused to pay Abbey his ‘kill fee’ for the piece.

In environmental terms, a reparative reading of the kind Koresky is vying for represents an attempt to dredge from the abject failure of Reichardt's 'extremists' a more viable alternative for radical environmental politics, one that approaches a marginally less bleak conclusion than the impotent outcome of their fast and furious plot. Especially given that the ending of *Night Moves* seems to offer little or nothing in the way of *sustenance* for the viewer hell bent on obtaining environmental justice, nor for Reichardt's own 'true believers'. Instead, it underscores the redundancy of her protagonists' efforts to meaningfully make a dent in the paranoid architectures of 'the system' or 'the grid' they find themselves embroiled in. These architectures remain firmly intact by the film's close, despite the trio's explosive efforts to draw attention to the plight of Oregon's salmon population (efforts that are, notably, upstaged by the subsequent loss of human life and its moral fallout). Confronted with the rising body count of these activists' environmental angst, deriving *sustenance* from Reichardt's film thus becomes something of an urgent imperative. The more so because, reading at our most paranoid, the logical endpoint of radical ideology's failure both within and beyond the world of Reichardt's film is some iteration of the millenarian 'end of world vision' that structures so much environmental thinking in the U.S.

As in Abbey's novel, this 'healthy hatred' finds its keenest expression in the film's male agents, channelled in the first instance through Eisenberg's insular Josh, whose tamped-down masculinity exists somewhere on the spectrum of 'incel' sensibility, his frustrated sexual energies diverted into his contempt for Christiansen's 'soft' methods *and* the felt ambivalence of his seemingly grudging platonic relationship with Dena (played by Dakota Fanning). The intensity and pitch of the irritability shown towards Fanning's character suggests something beyond the 'healthy' paranoia of a more experienced eco-saboteur tasked with inducting a rookie into the field but is additionally freighted with the injured affect commonly associated with men relegated to the 'friend zone'. This paranoid masculinity finds alternate presentation in the more unhinged

stylings of marine corps veteran, Harmon (played by Peter Sarsgaard), a self-styled anarchist whose misanthropic rage against the machine of ‘progress’ takes vague, almost indiscriminate offence against the generic threat of urban *expansion*, as represented by the onslaught of development and gentrification in Oregon’s high desert — a region colonised by white settlers during the ‘Snake War’ of the 1860s, which also forms the setting for Reichardt’s 2010 film *Meek’s Cutoff*. This peculiarly gendered paranoia and its *coincidence* with environmental zealotry becomes the ‘true’ object of cinematic inquiry in *Night Moves*’s long second half, which tracks the increasingly disordered roving of the activists’ environmental affect. Finally, this comes to alight on its most ‘natural’ object, culminating in a shockingly predictable display of misogyny, as Josh violently strangles Dena — the only female comrade — at the women’s spa where she works, her murder remotely stage-managed by Harmon.

Given that so many competing forms survival are at stake here (not just the camper’s incidental death, or a young woman’s murder, but the possible demise of the entire species), how reparatively we choose to read *Night Moves* matters. At least insofar as Reichardt’s text raises vexed ethical questions about the structural limitations of environmentalism itself, and its discomfiting coincidence with other forms of social conservatism: ranging from the spurious corporate sympathies of greenwashing to the genocidal imperatives of eco-fascism, an ideology that converts contempt for those anthropogenic behaviours associated with detrimental environmental impacts into a broader contempt for an extractive, resource-guzzling ‘humanity’ at large. In its xenophobic focus on scapegoating overpopulation and immigration, together with ‘industrial society’, as the causes of ecological decline, eco-fascism tends to target predominantly marginalised groups including migrants, people of colour, women, and the working poor.<sup>34</sup> This

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<sup>34</sup> Eco-fascism was a tenet of the Christchurch shooter’s ‘manifesto’, who was thought to be a proponent of the ideology, having self-identified as an ‘eco-fascist’ and ‘ethno-nationalist’ in the 74-page document that was circulated minutes prior to the 2019 terrorist attacks, which took place in Al Noor Mosque. See Jason Wilson, ‘Eco-fascism is undergoing a revival in the fetid culture of the extreme right’, *Guardian*, 19

nationalist sentiment also inflects the legacy of Abbey's exclusionary conservationism, epitomised in his novel's rendition of Doc Sarvis's bumper sticker, which reads 'GOD BLESS AMERICA. LET'S SAVE SOME OF IT'.<sup>35</sup> Evoking proto-Trumpian policy in an infamous 1988 essay entitled 'Immigration and Liberal Taboos', Abbey argued that the border with Mexico should be sealed off to prevent an influx of 'uninvited millions [who] bring with them an alien mode of life which — let us be honest about this — is not appealing to the majority of Americans'.<sup>36</sup> Along with the essay's open racism, Abbey also advocates for 'birth control', a biopolitical injunction that seems directed at 'Our Hispanic neighbors', in particular; this further corroborates his infatuation with a contrivedly rugged 'wilderness' or with 'the natural landscape as a commodified feminine figure' that is his to possess and control, as Andrea Ross suggests.<sup>37</sup> This problematic proprietary vision of environmental 'purity' also coincides with reproductive rights in contemporary 'eco' drives towards population management: in the growing BirthStrike community, as well as in older organisations like The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHMET), founded in 1991, which endorses abstinence from procreation, and antinatalist religions like DJ Chris Korda's Church of Euthanasia — founded in 1992 — which holds as its four pillars 'cannibalism (for those who insist on eating flesh), abortion, sodomy and suicide'.<sup>38</sup> (Notably, CoE first gained renown for its affiliation with 'paranoia.com', which formerly hosted controversial websites that skirted illegality).

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March 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2019/mar/20/eco-fascism-is-undergoing-a-revival-in-the-fetid-culture-of-the-extreme-right>> [accessed 6 September]

<sup>35</sup> Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> See: Peter M. Leschak, 'He Liked His Meat Poached', *New York Times*, 28 February 1988, <<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/28/books/he-liked-his-meat-poached.html>> [accessed 3 September 2021]

<sup>37</sup> Andrea Ross, 'A Feminist Look at Edward Abbey's Conservationist Writings', 2 August 2018, <<https://blog.pshares.org/a-feminist-look-at-edward-abbey-conservationist-writings/>> [accessed 6 September 2021]

<sup>38</sup> See Simon Davis, "'Save the Planet, Kill Yourself' The Contentious History of the Church of Euthanasia', *VICE*, 23 October 2015, <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/bnppam/save-the-planet-kill-yourself-the-contentious-history-of-the-church-of-euthanasia-1022>> [accessed 5 September 2021]

Though the majority subscribe to more progressive political values, such trenchant eco-conservative sensibilities would seem to be alive and well beyond the world of Reichardt's film, lurking dormant even in the most so-called 'radical' of world-saving strategies. In each case, the paranoid conviction in the necessity of saving the natural landscape involves a concomitant *denial* of another's claims to flourishing or survival, a complicity that will be a central tenet of this chapter. Indeed, paranoia is intimately connected to the figure of *denial*, an affect with a negative environmental valence due to its conventional affiliation with the political Right. However, as Kari Norgaard's ethnographic study into a rural Norwegian community makes clear, denial also structures much of the Western world's engagement with climate change even on the progressive political Left, as well as among populations living alongside its sharpest, most immediate effects.<sup>39</sup> As Sianne Ngai suggests, paranoia is perhaps uniquely privileged to explore 'the highly specific problem of *complicity*', and thereby uniquely placed to explore the congruent 'problem' such denials can play in left narratives of climate change.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the apparent struggle of (eco)critical responses to embrace a critical holism that *doesn't* default to prioritising some forms of survival above others is reflected even in aspects of and Fusco and Seymour's nuanced gloss which — as if reaffirming the ultimate disposability of Reichardt's cipher-characters — leaves the events of Dena's murder curiously untouched. This critical oversight effectively reproduces Reichardt's own emotional detachment from her characters. Apparently intent on offering their own quasi reparative reading, they insist that *Night Moves* is, put simply, 'about all the small ways in which things cannot be set right once they're in motion', a claim that testifies to their broader conclusions concerning Reichardt's cinematic oeuvre as a whole.<sup>41</sup> As they later go on to suggest: 'Reichardt's films in the 2000s show how easy it is for one accident to knock a person out of society; incidents in her films *may* become life-threatening events, but, just as easily, they may

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<sup>39</sup> See Kari Marie Norgaard's book *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 303.

<sup>41</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 83.



not'.<sup>42</sup> Granted, one might feel a slight tad of critical queasiness considering the violent extremity of the 'accidents' structuring the action of *Night Moves* which, by its conclusion, have ballooned to involve not just one but two 'life-threatening' events. Reading suspiciously, we might detect in this critical inattention to the climactic scene of Dena's murder an abdication of responsibility that mirrors Josh's own semantic insistence at the very moment of his confession ('I went to see her last night and there was kind of like, like an accident ... it was an accident though, I mean. She quit by accident, OK?'), or a joint *infiltration* of their critical faculties by the ignorance-is-bliss attitude taken by Harmon in response to Josh's 'revelation' that Dena is dead ('Don't tell me anything, I don't wanna know').

The redemptive urge to dredge something resembling 'value' from the activists' failed plot — or to separate out the film's rendition of environmentalist affect from its formal paranoia — suggests a peculiar critical defensiveness that is worth exploring for what it seems to corroborate about the willed instrumentalism of so many environmental texts, whose value in the eyes of critical readers is often reducible to their success in mimetically reproducing good or 'kind' environmental affect (a mimesis that itself smacks of paranoia's 'strong' theoretical tendencies). Certainly, it would be easy enough to succumb to the temptations of reading Reichardt's film reparatively, to detect in its 'ugly' mood and grisly depiction of ecotage a readymade formula for how the Left might do a better job of acting up, of doing environmental activism differently or 'better'. To read *Night Moves* reparatively might be to suggest that, through its depiction of the dire consequences of the activists' actions, the text denounces the phantasy of fast radicalism offered by Abbey's age in favour of *some other thing*, preferably a more joyful alternative. Perhaps the 'answer' is harboured in the loosely ecofeminist approach encapsulated by Dena's 'wellness' retreat, or in the communal arrangements at the cooperative farmstead

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<sup>42</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 46.

where Josh is gainfully employed during the film's opening stretch. After all, the seeds of such a reading are planted (suspiciously) early on when a smirking Dena, seemingly on a critical quest of her own, asks of Christiansen: 'Jackie I'm curious what you think it is exactly that we're supposed to do. Do you have some sort of big plan or ...?' She is met with a comparatively muted response: 'I think this one big plan thinking leads to a lot of the problems we're facing, part of the idea for me is not thinking there's just one big thing. I'm not focused on big plans, I'm focused on small plans, a lot of small plans.'

As seen during the terse Q&A that follows the screening of Christiansen's film, her documentary gleans a range of competing responses from the environmental 'converts' present, who exchange gripes over how best to optimise survival strategies. Some (possibly sarcastic) thanks are given for 'that uplifting, hopeful vision there, that was really *awesome*'; another viewer suggests that 'if you bombard people with too many *horrific* images it just feels like it's too late or too much to take on'. These problematics slot neatly into what Ngai has described as a 'paranoid economy', one fuelled by conditions of 'bad or suspicious timing (*too late*); the burdens of fearful epistemology (*too much*); anxieties about 'unintended collusion with the system'; as well as the tension between local and 'transglobal' structures (big versus small plans).<sup>43</sup> Though the curious disavowal of critical responses like Koresky's suggests a peculiar defensiveness, or resistance towards the paranoid mode or mood, these semantic quibbles also point towards a pervasive structural disharmony within contemporary environmentalism that prevails not just at the level of action, but at the level of *feeling*. In turn, they seed the notion that paranoia might *already* have 'infiltrated' Green thought, or (worse still) that some measure of paranoiac investment or 'faith' might be structurally integral to any political commitment, and hence to the movement's own functioning. Such moments also reify a schism within the environmental Left concerning the

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<sup>43</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, pp. 298–317.

blockage around modes of acting ‘on’ or ‘against’ climate crisis, at a moment in time where social inertia still appears to be the prevailing attitude. As Kari Norgaard and Robert J. Brulle remark, ‘despite extreme weather events and urgent warnings from the scientific community, action [...] is stalled’ and ‘[t]he relentless march of carbon emissions continues.’<sup>44</sup> This impasse is literalised for Reichardt’s viewer when, buoyed by Josh’s impatience, we exit the stale atmosphere of the documentary screening only to find her protagonists stuck in gridlocked traffic and (quite literally) going nowhere, themselves contributing to the same unrelenting march of emissions it is their mission to prevent.<sup>45</sup>

One unintended effect of Sedgwick’s essay is that to some extent it installed reparative reading as *the* alternative to paranoid methodology *par excellence*, the one often switched out for the other, ignoring the original nuance of her careful affirmation as regards the fundamental ‘instability and mutual inscription built into the Kleinian notion of positions’ underpinning her argument.<sup>46</sup> This inattention has had the somewhat ironical countereffect of reproducing or precipitating the very same critical *rigidity* Sedgwick warded against, a tendency also observed by Berlant in their reflection on the humourlessness of literary criticism: ‘We cannot presume that there is a thing called reparative affect that trumps self-evidently mechanical or paranoid or anti-relational thought and ideology’.<sup>47</sup> Certainly, there exists the temptation to read Reichardt’s text paranoically, as a cinematic exposé that all-too-conveniently ‘reveals’ certain or maybe *all* of the critical problematics laid out above. Such a reading may appear especially seductive given that the film seemingly ‘plants’ a reparative solution to the paranoid exigencies of its disaffected

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<sup>44</sup> Robert J. Brulle and Kari Marie Norgaard, ‘Avoiding cultural trauma: climate change and social inertia’, *Environmental Politics*, 9 January 2019, DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2018.1562138 (p.1).

<sup>45</sup> This veering between affective extremities (the twee insistence on the uplifting and awesome, versus the apocalyptic) might be seen as folding into a broader tonal problem that is peculiar to the environmental left; the Yeatsian conundrum! (‘the worst are full of passionate intensity’ while ‘the best lack all conviction’.)

<sup>46</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp. 128–129.

<sup>47</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Genre Flailing’, *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* 1 (2018), 156-162 (p. 160).

protagonists right under their noses. Doing so, however, not only risks succumbing to a second-order paranoia in which the text itself becomes suspect, driven by subliminal aims to control, influence, or otherwise manufacture certain environmental affects or (re)actions. But, moreover, it denies the apparent exhaustion of those reparative strategies as they are actually depicted within Reichardt's film, their failure to keep pace with the (ironically) reparative motivations of her activists. One might think, here, of the imperative offered up by CSS farm boss, Sean, on hearing the news of the dam's destruction: 'Look outside: It's a lot slower but it makes a lot more sense to me'. And yet, it seems clear enough that a commitment to these slow, 'powerful reparative practices' hasn't quite delivered for Josh and Dena, falling prey to its own case of 'bad or suspicious timing' in the sense of being simply *too little, too late*.

While Josh, the film's most paranoid emissary, may not be right, nor is he entirely wrong. As Ngai points out, paranoia is remarkable in its tenacity or 'capacity for duration' — something that, in formal terms, makes it an adept companion not only for the congealed pacing of Reichardt's film but for the 'slow violence' of climate change itself, a term utilised by Rob Nixon to describe the 'attritional lethality of many environmental crises, in contrast with the sensational, spectacle-driven messaging that impels public activism today.'<sup>48</sup> The tactical deployment of the paranoid mood in Reichardt's film, also one of its chief thematic concerns, works *against* the grain of paranoid environmental investments as sufficient basis for a contemporary activism by showing them to be unsustainable, *at the same time* that it refutes reparative reading by didactically installing slowness as 'the answer'. By engaging seriously with Left paranoia, Reichardt's film functions not only as a vehicle for thinking through our own complicity in the very systems 'we' (the critical subject) are seeking to dismantle. It also represents an aesthetic intervention in the norms that conventionally govern environmental filmmaking, both in its glacial pacing *and* in

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<sup>48</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of The Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

Reichardt's resistance to bombastic or otherwise 'spectacular' visions of ecological degradation. Significantly, in its commitment to a sustained exploration of eco-paranoia, *Night Moves* also demonstrates how, as Sedgwick affirms, some degree of paranoia infuses even the 'purest' reparative motives, and vice versa. As she puts it: 'I am also, in the present project, interested in doing justice to the powerful reparative practices that, I am convinced, infuse self-avowedly paranoid critical projects, as well as in the paranoid exigencies that are often necessary for nonparanoid knowing and utterance.'<sup>49</sup>

Through instigating a localised, close reading of the paranoid exigencies of Reichardt's film, the following chapter will explore how *Night Moves* stages a significant intervention in the either/or logics of fear and reparation that conventionally structure environmental narratives. Some questions this chapter ventures to ask include: What is the relation between paranoia and denial? Can the imperatives of 'natural liberation' suggested by 'radical' environmentalism collide with the emancipatory aims of the environmental justice movement? In what ways is toxic masculinity ill-equipped to respond to a toxified world? Firstly, I will demonstrate how, through mobilising the genre of the thriller — which thematises paranoia itself *as well as* the limitations of paranoid modes of knowing — Reichardt's film invites its viewer to grapple with the imaginative limitations of 'traditional' environmental Left values, in particular with its peculiar misogyny and its whiteness, as well as its class dynamics. The chapter's third section will explore paranoia's gendered ramifications for her characters, as well as the potential for developing a specifically feminist mode of paranoia in Reichardt's film, one that might counteract ecotage's macho tactics and its proprietary stake in gaining 'mastery' over the environment. Finally, by way of conclusion, it will (re)turn to the reparative possibilities offered by the film which, as I will demonstrate, are undergirded by logics of 'opting out' that are mainly accessible to beneficiaries

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<sup>49</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp. 128–129.

from particular socioeconomic demographics. Following Ngai's understanding, the chapter approaches paranoia 'not as mental illness but as a species of fear based on the dysphoric apprehension of a holistic and all-encompassing system', a diagnosis that aptly describes the paranoid mood of Reichardt's film.<sup>50</sup> As I will argue, paranoia is affectively primed for any consideration of climate change in part because, as Ngai describes, its status as an 'ugly' or 'dysphoric' feeling means that it 'can thus be thought of as a mediation between the aesthetic and the political in a nontrivial way.'<sup>51</sup> As I will demonstrate, in *exposing* her viewer to the narrative exhaustion of these destructive eco-paranoid methods, Reichardt's *Night Moves* thus seems to point away from the hegemonic perception of a damaged or despoiled environment in need of drastic, corrective intervention, towards a more tentative, ambivalent portrait of ecological decline.

### **Paranoid and Reparative Knowing**

Writing in 2003, Sedgwick remarked upon just quite 'how normative paranoid thinking has become at every point in the political spectrum, this cognitive impulse manifest not only in the socio-political sphere but also in the arena of critical theory: "That intellectual baggage that many of us carry around under a label such as "the hermeneutics of suspicion."<sup>52</sup> While the prevalence of paranoia isn't necessarily a problem for Sedgwick per se (she cites Richard Hofstadter's insistence that 'paranoid people or movements can perceive true things'), the problem inheres in the paranoic 'passion' for the total elimination of any 'bad surprise[s]':

While its general tenor of "things are bad and getting worse" is immune to refutation, any more specific predictive value — and as a result, arguably, any value for making oppositional strategy — has been nil. Such accelerating failure to anticipate change is [...] entirely in the nature of the paranoid process, whose sphere of influence [...] only

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<sup>50</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 299.

<sup>51</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp. 124–143.

expands as each unanticipated disaster seems to demonstrate more conclusively that, guess what, you can never be paranoid enough.<sup>53</sup>

This ‘general tenor’ of *things going from bad to worse* is almost spookily redolent of the global environmental state of things as it currently stands; certainly, this narrative of escalating threat plays out on the environmental Left in the recent discursive pivot from a language of climate ‘change’ towards a language of ‘crisis’.<sup>54</sup> As Frank Fischer suggests, climate deniers are already well-acquainted with ‘political paranoia’ which, at its sharpest extremity, views the ‘entire environmental movement simply as a green Trojan horse,’ and ‘a plot to steal American freedom’, culminating in the conspiratorial expectation that ‘IPCC climate scientists are the functionaries of a dangerous and hidden cabal of “deep state” subversives made up of Democrats, intelligence community members, high-level global officials and numerous celebrities, among other nefarious elites.’<sup>55</sup> This affective climate of mistrust is thought of as properly ‘belonging’ to the right of the political spectrum and to climate denial more specifically which, as Norgaard suggests, is viewed by the Left as uniquely obtuse in its refutation of scientific consensus and remains among ‘the most polarizing and irrational phenomenon of our time’.<sup>56</sup> Something of this polarization is consolidated in the battle that has already been waged (and lost) over the term ‘ecoterror’ itself, a neologism that has been bandied across the left and right of the political spectrum. These volleys are described by Lawrence Buell: “The epithet “ecoterrorism” and its cognates form a cluster of related neologisms of quite recent date that, probably two decades at most, coined it would seem almost simultaneously from the right — in

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<sup>53</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 142.

<sup>54</sup> See Sophie Zeldin-O’Neill, “‘It’s a crisis, not a change’”: the six Guardian language changes on climate matters’, *Guardian*, 16 October 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/16/guardian-language-changes-climate-environment>> [accessed 15 March 2021]

<sup>55</sup> Frank Fischer, ‘Knowledge politics and post-truth in climate denial: on the social construction of alternative facts’, *Critical Policy Studies*, 13:2 (2019), 133-152, DOI: 10.1080/19460171.2019.1602067 (p. 143.)

<sup>56</sup> Kari Marie Norgaard, ‘Making sense of the spectrum of climate denial’, *Critical Policy Studies*, 13, 2019, 437–441.

order to stigmatize radical activists — and from the left, in order to stigmatize authoritarian state and corporate mistreatment of environment and/or animals.<sup>57</sup>

One might detect a trace of this paranoid epistemology in Christiansen's own melancholic insistence on the impossible sprawl of environmental degradation. Consider, for example, her insistence on everything being 'interconnected', or the *too-convenient* simultaneity of a disaster that *just so happens* to be unfurling everywhere at the same time, not to mention the description of a specious plot by 'multinational corporations' to wrest profit from a dead planet, loosely reminiscent of the vision put forward in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* of 'a planetary industrialism [...] growing like a cancer'.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps Josh is only so readily able to disdain Christiansen *because* he recognises in her paranoid epistemology the contours of his own. This, after all, is the *modus operandi* of paranoia, as Sedgwick suggests:

Paranoia seems to require being imitated to be understood, and it, in turn, seems to understand only by imitation. Paranoia proposes both Anything you can do (to me) I can do worse, and Anything you can do (to me) I can do first — to myself [...]. [O]ne understands paranoia only by oneself practicing paranoid knowing, and that the way paranoia has of understanding anything is by imitating and embodying it.<sup>59</sup>

The mimetic tendency (not just Anything you can do I can do worse, but I can do *first*) is showcased in Josh's impatience for the slow drag and localised implications of Christiansen's 'small plans'. That her 'message' is intelligible to him in the first place, even in the bristling of a disagreement, relies largely on his *already* inhabiting or 'flexing' the same paranoid epistemology that unites them both against the abstract enemy of 'the system', *at the very same moment* that it betrays a tactical clash. Far from this shared enmity being a site of solidarity however, Josh

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<sup>57</sup> Buell, 'What Is Called Ecoterrorism', p. 157.

<sup>58</sup> Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, p. 64.

<sup>59</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 131.



appears haunted by the epistemic prospect that Christiansen might have more comprehensive, robust, or exhaustive facts than him, that she might possibly possess secret, better, or simply, heaven forbid, *different* knowledge. In this way, *Night Moves* would seem to offer the one-upmanship and overzealous compulsion for knowledge of the ‘mansplainer’ as a paragon of the paranoid *par excellence*.

For Sedgwick, paranoia’s dubiousness as a theoretical praxis and a mode of ‘doing politics’ pertains to its inertial effect on developing oppositional strategy, with ‘how severely [its] mimeticism [...] circumscribes its potential as a medium of political or cultural struggle.’<sup>60</sup> As she points out, the problem of paranoia is chiefly a problem of *inaction*, which would also seem to be one of the defining ‘problems’ of contemporary environmental activism. The paranoid realisation, for instance, that one is simply a small cog in the totalising sprawl of the Anthropocene matrix doesn’t necessarily equate to becoming radicalised *against* environmental degradation and the systemic violence that subtends it. And despite the heft of environmental activism over the past two decades having been thrown into public education and ‘awareness raising’ in an effort to remediate the epistemic threat of climate denialism, this glut of information has nonetheless been shown to induce ‘emotional paralysis’, even in the case of “true believers”.<sup>61</sup> As Seymour points out, ‘in many cases, the *more* one knows about climate change, the *less* likely one is to act.’<sup>62</sup> In this sense then, as Norgaard also observes, there is a greater degree of emotional congruence between the wilful ignorance of the climate sceptic and the responsive inertia of the environmentalist, who receives the ‘traumatogenic’ prospect of climate change in a similarly “unbelieving mood”.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 131.

<sup>61</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> Brulle and Norgaard, ‘Avoiding cultural trauma’, pp. 14–15.

If environmentalists, quite rightly, find themselves feeling increasingly paranoid about the spread of climate disinformation, then the imperative to ‘get your facts straight’ on climate change has become that much more pressing faced with a contemporary ‘post-truth’ landscape, which is broadly ‘seen to denote a political culture in which discussion and debate are shaped by *emotional appeals* disconnected from the empirical details of policy issues’.<sup>64</sup> These questions have gained a renewed political charge in recent years amid the ascendance of ‘alternative facts’, the spewing of disinformation and fake news. The ascent of climate misinformation has been enabled by the election of prominent far-right sceptics like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro to public office, men whose respective disavowals of climate change as a ‘hoax’ betray a political agenda that shares in privileging national sovereignty over empirical realities.<sup>65</sup> Grounded in a renewed faith in equipping itself with more and ‘better’ facts, the Left’s response to the rising tide of climate misinformation has unwittingly incurred an ironic reversal, insofar as many ‘environmentalists may now find themselves in the position of defending science, when in fact modern Western environmentalism emerged from a *critique* of science’.<sup>66</sup> Scientists and liberal media seeking to counter the ascendance of ‘alternative facts’ increasingly do so through recourse to an *overdetermined* investment in ‘getting the facts straight’ — as evidenced in the slew of ‘fact-checking’ during recent election campaigns — an allegiance which, as Fischer makes clear, ultimately proves redundant in combatting disinformation.<sup>67</sup>

All of this calls into question, as Seymour suggests, ‘the idea that we can solve environmental problems simply by swapping out corporate or conservative “untruths” for environmentalist “Truth” — and on the idea that environmental problems arise in the first place

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<sup>64</sup> Fischer, ‘Knowledge politics and post-truth’, p. 134.

<sup>65</sup> Fischer, ‘Knowledge politics and post-truth’, p. 133.

<sup>66</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>67</sup> Fischer, ‘Knowledge politics and post-truth’, pp. 134–135.

because people simply do not *know* any better’ (emphasis mine).<sup>68</sup> Though the paranoid project of ‘demystifying’ climate disinformation, and the aggressive systems of neoliberal interest that subtend it, is doubtless important work, isn’t there a sense in which environmentalist knowing also comprises a peculiarly paranoid structure? Particularly if we grant as true Sedgwick’s insistence that ‘[p]aranoia places its faith in *exposure*’; [that] it is extraordinarily invested in ‘the efficacy of knowledge per se — knowledge in the form of exposure’.<sup>69</sup> As Seymour elaborates, the recent affective drift in the environmental humanities has seen a burgeoning mistrust towards ‘rationalist appeals to knowledge and facts’, embodied in the claims of environmental sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynski that ‘the moral earnestness’ of “environmental politics” has “gone hand in hand with its over-estimation of the epistemic power of science”.<sup>70</sup> Something of this divestment from rationalist models of knowing would seem to be captured in the ‘wellness retreat’ where Dena is employed, the semantic implications of *retreat* pointing towards a moment of political stasis in which the onus is increasingly placed on individuals to ‘live well’ and consume less, or ‘more mindfully’, as shortcuts towards green advocacy. As we shall see, this is also the dilemma faced by Julie Hecht’s protagonist. Namely, that the linking of pro-environmental affect with pro-environmental behaviour often forces subjects back onto their individual *resources*, in turn resulting in environmental behaviour being relegated to the privileged few.

That some modicum of paranoia inheres in any commitment to environmentalist politics, as well as in any denial of it, seems clear enough from the structure of these scientific appeals which, as Szerszynski observes, are similarly organised around *exposure*: “‘reveal[ing]” hidden knowledge and tending as they do to “loo[k] down” — which would seem to confirm

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<sup>68</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 44.

<sup>69</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp. 130–138.

<sup>70</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 43.

skeptics' fears of environmentalist and scientific elitism.<sup>71</sup> Ironically then, the claims made by Joseph Bast — former CEO of the Heartland Institute, the leading think tank of climate deniers — that findings published by scientific experts attached to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are essentially an 'article of faith' would seem, in some perverse way, to cut to the heart of the paranoid 'problem' undergirding climate change epistemology.<sup>72</sup> Namely, the *X-Files* anxiety of whether or not environmental 'truth' is in fact *a priori*, something that hangs objectively 'out there', ripe for discovery, or whether it is socially formed. As Fischer would have it, 'the scientific community is also recognized to be a social group, much like any other social group in society, insofar as it has a status system governed by a hierarchy dedicated to specific beliefs.'<sup>73</sup> This is not to (paranoically) suggest that the IPCC's climate data is false, or unreflective of the empirical realities that increasingly shape our lifeworld and its material processes. But rather to suggest that, like any body of knowledge, climate science can be 'understood to be *constructed* by the community of inquirers who formulate and measure conceptualizations of the world, both natural and social, as opposed to the outcome of purely objective observation and analysis.'<sup>74</sup> As Seymour boldly invites, perhaps environmental scholars and activists alike might benefit from engaging with 'enemy' tactics, or straying however briefly into the same queasy world of 'post-truth' they're attempting to denounce: 'Might we find some value in or affinity with post factual conspiratorialism, or, at least, its contrarian spirit?'<sup>75</sup>

In this sense, paranoia would seem to be (almost suspiciously) well-placed to confront the impasse around ways of 'knowing' and acting against environmental degradation. As Wendy Brown describes in her work on left melancholy, the Left's own imaginative failures might well

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<sup>71</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 44.

<sup>72</sup> Fischer, 'Knowledge politics and post-truth', p. 143.

<sup>73</sup> Fischer, 'Knowledge politics and post-truth', p. 138.

<sup>74</sup> Fischer, 'Knowledge politics and post-truth', p. 135.

<sup>75</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 42.

be read as more widely indicative of a case of bad timing, one of paranoia's hallmarks. Borrowing from Walter Benjamin, Brown diagnoses this melancholy as the plight of 'the revolutionary hack who is, finally, attached more to a particular way of political analysis or ideal — even to the failure of that ideal — than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present.'<sup>76</sup> For Brown, this melancholy signifies a 'refusal to come to terms with the particular character of the present, that is, a failure to understand history in terms other than "empty time" or "progress"', as well as 'a certain narcissism with regard to one's past political attachments and identity that exceeds any contemporary investment in political mobilisation, alliance, or transformation.'<sup>77</sup>

To the extent that *Night Moves* is a film that is both 'about' an act of criminal subterfuge and the failure of radical environmentalist ideology to 'get with the times', it is thus well-placed to probe this problem of environmentalist *complicity* with political stasis, whether through failure of adaptation or self-delusion. This tendency is something Ngai, borrowing from Brian Massumi, describes as "'our unavoidable participation in the capitalist culture of fear [which may be] a complicity with our own and the other's oppression.'" And in situations where there is no purely external or even clearly identifiable nemesis but rather "the enemy is *us*".<sup>78</sup> Reichardt's film is intimately concerned with this complicity, and not just in the obvious sense of the activists' involvement in a roster of nefarious activities (ranging from ecotage and manslaughter to premeditated murder) with criminal ramifications, but also in their own (seemingly helpless) collusion in the very systems they seek to thwart. As Norgaard suggests, 'the complicity or engagement of the American public on climate change has powerful consequences for present and long-term human well-being and the ecology of the planet'.<sup>79</sup> This imbrication will ironically

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<sup>76</sup> Wendy Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholy', *Boundary 2*, 26 (1999), 19–27 (p. 20).

<sup>77</sup> Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholy', p. 20.

<sup>78</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 302.

<sup>79</sup> Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, pp. 178–179.

be invoked later in Reichardt's film, during an extensive sequence wherein Josh (having already packed the boat-bomb with plastic sacks of explosives) drives to dispose of the non-degradable evidence of their activities at a sprawling landfill site, before taking his car to be deep-cleaned by a water-guzzling jet-washer. It's not easy being green!

### **Boys Club: Environmental Thriller and Male Conspiracy**

From the get-go, Reichardt's direction manoeuvres the viewer towards an atmosphere of mounting kinetic tension, not unlike like the ambient hum of the hydroelectric dam itself. The effect is such that Dena's early reminder to her co-conspirator, during a trafficky car-ride, to remember his basic reflexes ('Breathe, Josh!') doubles as a summons for Reichardt's own audience to exhale and puncture the swelling sensation of dread. This mode of 'gathering' mirrors the aggressive structural 'build' of paranoia which, left to its own devices, finds increasingly inventive ways to concretise itself. Precisely this quality of overdetermination is what leads Sedgwick, following Silvan Tomkins, to describe paranoia as a "strong affect theory" — in this case, a strong humiliation or humiliation-fear theory: 'A humiliation theory is strong to the extent to which it enables more and more experiences to be accounted for as instances of humiliation experiences on the one hand, or to the extent to which it enables more and more anticipation of such contingencies before they actually happen.'<sup>80</sup> Counterintuitively, a 'weak' affect theory is one that *fails* in its territorial expansion, whereas strong theory gains in strength proportional to how many experiences it can gather to itself: in magnetising other experiences towards it, 'the mushrooming, self-confirming strength of a monopolistic strategy of anticipating negative affect can have [...] the effect of entirely blocking the potentially operative goal of seeking positive affect.'<sup>81</sup> Above all else: 'An affect theory is, among other things, a mode

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<sup>80</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 134.

<sup>81</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 136.

of *selective* scanning and amplification’, such that ‘[t]he entire cognitive apparatus is in a constant state of alert for possibilities, [however] imminent or remote, ambiguous or clear.’<sup>82</sup>

Shot from inside their stalled car, the viewer’s gaze is directed outwards, through the windshield. It alights on a cow mascot which, brandishing a placard advertising dairy products, grooves manically on the sidewalk. Notably, the strategic bickering that characterises Jackie Christiansen’s ‘open forum’ on the climate crisis is curtailed by an abrupt jump cut to the scene of this flailing mascot, seen from the perspective of Josh and Dena who are on their way to buy the titular ‘Night Moves’ — the boat that will later become an explosive device. As Fusco and Seymour observe, this is ‘a technique that reappears throughout [Reichardt’s] oeuvre’; the directorial ‘choice to shoot from within the vehicle [...] has the effect of immersing viewers in the environment. But in her films such shots additionally signify a view *refused* — one available to her characters, but not taken up by them.’<sup>83</sup> We might read the ‘road not taken’ here as those ‘alternative’ activist strategies to ecotage or ecoterror, ones that have been foreclosed by the collective disenchantment of Reichardt’s protagonists.<sup>84</sup> By contrast with the kind of intentional,

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<sup>82</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 135.

<sup>83</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 26.

<sup>84</sup> A notable example of ecotage was the 1998 arson attack on several buildings and lifts at Vail Ski Resort, which resulted in excess of \$12 million in damages. Responsibility was claimed by the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), one of the foremost radical environmental groups, which was founded in Brighton in 1992. Also known as ‘The Elves’, the leaderless, non-hierarchical organisation consists of autonomous individuals or ‘cells’ who deploy ‘economic sabotage and guerrilla warfare to stop the exploitation and destruction of the environment’. This and other attacks captured the interest of the FBI, who classified ELF as America’s primary domestic terror threat in 2001. Congressional hearings held in February 2002 suggested that ‘special interest extremism, as characterized by the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), has emerged as a serious terrorist threat.’ See James F. Jarboe, ‘Congressional Testimony: The Threat of Eco-Terrorism’, <<https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/news/testimony/the-threat-of-eco-terrorism>>.

The subsequent ‘Green Scare’ that followed these hearings culminated in Operation Backfire, which merged seven independent investigations from its Portland field office, indicting six women and seven men on a total of sixty-five charges between late 2005 and early 2006. It was widely hailed as one of the largest arrests of environmental activists in American history. The trials form the topic of Marshall Curry’s 2011 documentary film, *If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front* (Oscilloscope, 2011). The Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski (with whom Julie Hecht’s narrator claims to share certain ideological leanings, though perhaps in less extremist form, as we shall see in the next chapter) has also been (somewhat reparatively) reframed as an ‘ecobomber’, though his homemade postal bombs directly

nonviolent community depicted on-screen at the cooperative, ecotage (often known colloquially as monkeywrenching) operates explicitly with the intention of interrupting ecocidal ‘business as usual’, motivated in the main by a desire to cause sustained disruption and destabilize the profit-motive of environmental destruction. Traditionally, ecotage encompasses radical ‘interventionist’ actions ranging from acts of petty vandalism to arson (in particular the firebombing of gas-guzzling vehicles such as SUVs and Hummers, habitually targeting car dealerships), fuel contamination (often at unattended construction sites), tree spiking (the driving of metal or ceramic spikes deep into trees with the intent of damaging chain saws or blades at sawmills) and the scuttling of whaling or fishing vessels. The possibility of ‘small plans’ that has been refused in the film’s action, through the activists’ exasperation with the slowness of a reparative sensibility, is restated again in Reichardt’s use of form.

In the car, their caps pre-emptively pulled down low over their faces as though in anticipation of being caught, Josh expresses (though Eisenberg can hardly be said to *express* anything here) consternation that they might be late for their meeting. Dena, suggesting they could give the guy a call, is met with an antagonistic response — ‘I really don’t want to find a payphone right now’ — which interpellates Josh into a sprawling lineage of male paranoiacs that came before him, all of them anxious about the risks of being wiretapped when talking on an unsecure line. Viewed as it is through this mood of hypervigilance, even the mascot begins to look like a prospectively shifty figure; after all, what is a mascot but a man in disguise? The banal sight of its wiggling in a plush bodysuit over the noise of a pneumatic drill functions, perhaps, as an indictment of the deranged corporate strategies that allow cartoonish animals to be used in

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contravened the cardinal rule of endangering human life. For a more thorough account of ecotage’s history, see Bron Taylor, ‘Religion, violence and radical environmentalism: From earth first! to the Unabomber to the earth liberation front’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 10 (1998), 1–42. Martha F. Lee’s book *Earth First!* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995) also provides a thorough overview of Earth First!, the radical advocacy group that formed in the 1980s, and which is seen to have pioneered monkeywrenching as a crucial form of ‘ecodefense’. In 1985 its founder, Dave Foreman, published an instructional tome entitled *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*, which featured a foreword by Edward Abbey.



the service of marketing the same extractive agricultural economy that abuses them. As though to re-signify Josh's suspicion towards the localism advocated by Christiansen, the 'message' the non-cow advertises carries the promise: 'Wilber Milk, Made By Happy, Local Cows', as though distant, anonymous cows might somehow be more gladdened by or more amenable to their own exploitation.<sup>85</sup> As Steve Baker observes of an 'infuriating[ly] memorable' jingle that accompanied a British advertisement for Anchor Butter that was omnipresent circa 1990, in which Anchor's 'lucky cows' engaged in a 'grotesque televisual dance', these 'jerky repetitive "dance" movements' seem to elicit the 'common view that almost anything to do with animals is somehow funny, or at least is likely to be funny'.<sup>86</sup> This funniness, for Baker, 'may range from the endearingly amusing to the surrealistic and bizarre, and it need have nothing whatsoever to do with the idea of an inherently warm-hearted response to the animal'.<sup>87</sup> Within the paranoid economy of Reichardt's film, the appearance of a 'zany', artificial interpretation of the animal at this early juncture is shady enough to generate a second-order critical paranoia that casts doubt on whether the local can, in fact, be trusted — an inkling that will be corroborated later on when this same slogan is repurposed by Dena in the service of Josh's 'think big' environmental ambitions.

Notably, this is the same dairy Dena will later lie that she works at, during a scene wherein she comes under scrutiny as she tries to buy more ammonium nitrate fertiliser at the feed store. Put on the spot by the store's manager (played by James LeGros), who is pressing to see her social security card before selling her a controlled substance, Dena has to think fast, hatching a plan that evolves beyond the script she's been allocated by her male comrades. The manager himself is another such 'man of suspicion', as Sedgwick would have it; even in the

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<sup>85</sup> The 'dairy connection', as it were, is explored more explicitly in Reichardt's latest effort, *First Cow* (2019), a film which focuses on the (warmly) extractive relationship between a cow and a baker-cum-cook in nineteenth century Oregon County.

<sup>86</sup> Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 23.

<sup>87</sup> Baker, *Picturing the Beast*, p. 23.

interior of his small office, a CCTV camera is mounted in the corner, the blank wall behind his head flanked by an isolated aerial photograph of farmland sprawl.<sup>88</sup> Dena, on realising that she is being surveilled, appears to be on the verge of descending to sweet talk in order to ensure her demands get met, this flirting betraying her own suspicion that male desire might just be capable of quashing or neutralising male paranoia. That Dena has been sent as an emissary by Josh and Harmon in the first place suggests their own reliance on feminine ‘wiles’ to trounce male paranoia, likely grounded in their own localised knowledge of male susceptibility. Dena, removing her anonymising baseball cap, risks being captured by the roving gaze of the CCTV. She musses her hair a little, a not-so-coded gesture that draws attention to her femininity but is met with the same refusing response. When two older men coincidentally walk into the front office, she recruits them into her soft sell: ‘You’d sell it to me if I looked like them’, she pleads as if to suggest her own proneness to the vagaries of paranoid critique. This aside is perhaps a textual indicator of Dena’s allegiance to a second-wave feminist line of suspicion regarding the prevalence of gender-based discrimination in the workplace; the automatic assumption that LeGros’s stale white male manager adheres to a worldview wherein Dena’s gender alone would make her ‘implausible’ as a farm labourer, or anything resembling it.

The ‘truth’ of Dena’s allegiance in this scene is complicated or made ambivalent, of course, by the fact she *is* bluffing and in light of her own seduction by the ‘fast and furious’ methods of ecotage, which are more traditionally associated with macho swagger.<sup>89</sup> The

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<sup>88</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 125.

<sup>89</sup> Notably, this inflection plays out in contemporary coverage of the Eugene-based activist group known in the media as ‘The Family’, a ‘domestic terrorism cell’ responsible for some twenty acts of arson carried out on behalf of the Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front between 1996 and 2001. Though the saboteurs have, for the most part, been arrested as part of the FBI’s efforts, ‘Operation Backfire’, one activist Josephine Sunshine Overaker, still remains uncaptured. She is described in an online ‘wanted’ advertisement, expressly wards that ‘Overaker may have a light facial moustache. She was a vegan and may still be’. See: *Most Wanted: Josephine Sunshine Overaker*, fbi.gov [online], <<https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/dt/josephine-sunshine-overaker>> [accessed 5 September 2021] See also: Bill Morlin, ‘Notorious “eco-terrorist” finally arrested’, *Salon*, 1 December 2012,

manager's response ('But I *know* them', he intones) seems to convey that his resistance has little if nothing to do with Dena's gender and everything to do with a privileging of *locality* and localised knowledge, belying that his reluctance might *also* be linked to latent anxieties about the furtive motives of a female subject who's 'not from around here'. Seeming instinctively to recognise that, as Sedgwick puts it, 'there are important phenomenological and theoretical tasks that can be accomplished only through local theories', Dena summons a last-ditch appeal organised around locality.<sup>90</sup> The subliminal message implanted by the advertisement shows up to lend a hand: 'Look sir, if you want to, you can call my uncle. Nature's Harvest is our name, we grow carrots, onions, beets, parsnips, broccoli. And we have one hundred and twenty milk cows that supply for Wilber Dairy. You probably drink our milk'. One of the older men, who has walked in mere moments earlier, provides his own endorsement — 'I do drink the milk, if it's on sale'. In this way, Dena gets her fertiliser. Through a ruse that insists that, even though she may *not be from around here*, 'her' product can substitute for the various (re)assurances of trustworthiness secured upon sight of a familiar face. At the same time, and as if to re-emphasise Josh's scepticism about placing his faith in Christiansen's 'small plans', Reichardt reveals how the local — when wielded, once again, in the hands of a woman — can itself become a locus for suspicion. Indeed, if its willingness as a prop in Dena's little charade manages to shore up her believability for LeGros's manager, for Josh it simply reinforces what he (and his comrades) *already knew*; that they have good reason to mistrust localised environmental strategies.

The clashes mapped out in this encounter — between the big and small, the local and remote, between 'knowing' and 'knowing' of — speak to the wider paranoid atmosphere of Reichardt's film, also flagging the 'problems' that inhere in the critical task of attempting to

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<[https://www.salon.com/2012/12/01/notorious\\_eco\\_terrorist\\_finally\\_arrested/](https://www.salon.com/2012/12/01/notorious_eco_terrorist_finally_arrested/)> [accessed 6 September 2021]

<sup>90</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 145.

visualise the ‘true’ scale of environmental crisis in the first place. Indeed, as Sedgwick points out: ‘the very productive critical habits embodied in what Paul Ricoeur memorably called the “hermeneutics of suspicion” — widespread critical habits indeed, perhaps by now nearly synonymous with criticism itself’ may also ‘have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller’.<sup>91</sup> Given the reliance of the academic world and the ‘lone scholar’ on the language of abstraction (‘capitalism’, for instance, or ‘the Anthropocene’) in order to critique the very ‘systems’ whose demystification it desires, paranoia becomes something of an inevitability, as Ngai suggests.<sup>92</sup>

This coupling, already seen in Sedgwick’s essay, finds peculiar expression for Ngai in the work of Fredric Jameson who, implicating himself in such ‘tactical’ appropriation of ‘conspiracy-theory rhetoric’, detects in the neo-noirs and thrillers that serve as Reichardt’s stylistic inspiration (clear in the fact that *Night Moves* borrows its title from Arthur Penn’s 1975 neo-noir of the same name) a natural analogue for the ‘collapse’ or crisis of theory and the rise of ‘antitheory’: which “rail[s] against what it likes to call grand theory or master narratives at the same time it fosters more comfortable and local positivisms and empiricisms in the various disciplines.”<sup>93</sup> In their efforts to ‘grasp global capitalism’s social totality in formal or representational terms’, the subjects populating the conspiracy film are a willing synecdoche for the ‘coupling’ of paranoia with critical theory: ‘the conspiratorial plot these protagonists attempt to analyze and expose [...] seems to have become an exemplary model for the late twentieth-century theorist in general’.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 124.

<sup>92</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 299.

<sup>93</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 299.

<sup>94</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 299.

As Fusco and Seymour suggest, the thriller — with its ‘emphasis on hidden schemes, convoluted plans, conspiracy, surveillance, and recording, and its moods of paranoia and dread’ is thus peculiarly well-primed for the purposes of Reichardt's film, ‘match[ing] the environmentalists’ machinations and its ensuing fallout.’<sup>95</sup> At the same time that ‘thrillers are characterised by conspiracies and convoluted plans’, ‘they also are about *observational mastery*, often featuring *technological control over sensory fields*’; they observe how ‘surveillance in thrillers and surveying in landscape art are both modes of trying to *uncover the truth* of a particular environment’ (emphasis mine).<sup>96</sup> There is a further sense in which the thriller caters to the paranoid exigencies that inhere in attempting to ‘see’ the sometimes abstract disaster of eco-crisis. The exponential rise of paranoia as “strong theory” is not just the disciplinary prerogative of queer and feminist theorising. This hermeneutic of suspicion also ramifies in the environmental humanities where, notwithstanding the self-avowed reparative motivations of scholar-activists invested in healing the natural world, there also exists a concomitant confusion around what knowledge production *about* environmental crisis might be able to achieve. Discussing the dangers that inhere in overdetermining a ‘primary crisis’, eco-critic Ursula Heise expresses anxiety that a one-dimensional focus on something like climate change (merely one facet of a rhizomatic ecological ‘problem’) carries its own risks: “There are a lot of other crises going on. And some of these are much more concrete; they’re much more *locally* focused, and you can do things about them much more easily than you can about global, systemic issues such as climate change’.<sup>97</sup> The paranoid tension expressed here, between the concrete/local and the global/systemic speaks to the fundamentally paranoid quality of attempting to theorise about environmental crisis. We see a similar ‘infiltration’ of paranoia’s mimetic “Takes One To Know One” logic in Fischer’s critical ‘recuperation’ of climate change denial. Fischer’s empathic reading

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<sup>95</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 73.

<sup>96</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, pp. 78–79.

<sup>97</sup> Max Fox, ‘How to Talk About the Weather’, *The New Inquiry*, 7 January 2013, <<https://thenewinquiry.com/how-to-talk-about-the-weather/>> [accessed 3 September 2021]

is itself generated out of reparative efforts to read climate scepticism's affective positioning as worthy of something other than instantaneous or chiding dismissal.<sup>98</sup> The phenomenon, he argues, has less to do with a resistance towards scientific data or 'facts per se' than with affective structures of '*mistrust and hostility*': 'crucial decisions are made by *distant, anonymous and hierarchical organizations*', and 'citizens want to know [...] whose interests are at stake, if the process reflects a *hidden agenda*, who is responsible, what protection they have' (emphasis mine).<sup>99</sup> From Fischer's summation, it would seem clear that one cannot begin to court the possible utility of conspiratorial thinking for environmental theory *without* resorting to the semantic reproduction of enemy 'codes', or a paranoid fantasy of a nefarious, subterranean cabal of forces at work.

This environmentalist paranoia finds alternate expression in an essay by Nicholas Mirzoeff on the difficulties of attempting to 'visualize' a geological abstraction like the Anthropocene era, an undertaking which begins to sound like an increasingly paranoid critical project.<sup>100</sup> As Mirzoeff points out, the task of 'visualizing' — a practice of 'classification, separation, and aestheticization' that has its roots in the military theory of the eighteenth century and is 'normally carried out by the agent of an action, such as the general visualizing a battlefield' — is made difficult by the all-encompassing holism of the Anthropocene.<sup>101</sup> Framed here as a sprawl 'extending across centuries, through dimensions and across time', 'affect[ing] everything from the lithosphere to the upper atmosphere and all the biota in between', the category itself would seem resistant to any possibility of classification or separation (since it already 'defines the entire planet, whether we like it or not').<sup>102</sup> This claim seems perhaps obtusely totalising, given that the Anthropocene not only remains unrati ed in geological terms, its timelines still hotly debated among ecocritics and scientific communities alike. But, moreover, the Eurocentrism and

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<sup>98</sup> See Fischer, 'Knowledge politics and post-truth', p. 140.

<sup>99</sup> Fischer, 'Knowledge politics and post-truth', pp. 140–142.

<sup>100</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'Visualizing the Anthropocene', *Public Culture*, 26 (2014), 213–232 (p. 213).

<sup>101</sup> Mirzoeff, 'Visualizing the Anthropocene', p. 213.

<sup>102</sup> Mirzoeff, 'Visualizing the Anthropocene', p. 213.

anthropocentrism of its discourses has precipitated a wealth of alternative terms to describe our current geological era, including the Capitalocene (Jason W. Moore), the Cthulucene (Donna Haraway), the Plantationocene (Tsing and Haraway), and the Anthrobscene (Parikka). Mirzoeff's own paranoid description of a world in the grips of 'autoimmune capitalism' — a word whose significance is redoubled given that Sedgwick's study of paranoia arose out of her own conspiratorial musings on the origins of the AIDS crisis — gives onto a similar anxiety about how 'the interactive crisis of climate change and capitalism' might precipitate a similar 'crisis' for theory, one in which:

the periodizing and dividing so beloved of academia no longer holds good. In the Anthropocene, all past human history in the industrial era is the contemporary. No location is outside the Anthropocene, although some are affected far more than others. The modern research university has grafted the capitalist division of labor onto the medieval vision of the individual scholar in his cell. Learning to think anthropocentrically, to coin a term, will mean letting go of both the divisions of time and space that define research and the myth of the solitary intellectual.<sup>103</sup>

Unlike Jameson, Mirzoeff frames this epistemological shift as a welcome sea change rather than cause for alarm, happily envisaging new modes of activism and research grounded in crowd-sourced, collective and horizontal practice.<sup>104</sup> And yet, even in striving to counter-visualise a mode of action consisting of something *other* than the 'scholar in his cell' (what else is Mirzoeff after all?), he also risks reproducing those same paranoid injunctions. The task of describing or theorising climate itself let alone its 'collapse' cannot be accomplished without resorting to the same critical abstraction that is the essay's organising 'problematic'. 'Climate', for instance, that 'volatile context for life' [is] 'knowable only as a set of *abstracted data*' — data that, in the moment of its discovery, ends up simply restating what 'we' already knew: '*revealing* to us that all

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<sup>103</sup> Mirzoeff, 'Visualizing the Anthropocene', pp. 215–216.

<sup>104</sup> Mirzoeff, 'Visualizing the Anthropocene', p. 216.

knowledge rests on such models' (emphasis mine).<sup>105</sup> The circularity of this logic confronts both Mirzoeff and 'us' with the difficulty of really *knowing* environmental degradation or indeed 'knowing' the Anthropocene, its dominant critical category, when the very terms of that category would themselves seem to thwart the possibility of any *less* paranoid mode of knowledge production.<sup>106</sup>

For both Ngai and Sedgwick, paranoia is intimately tied to carceral logics, as made clear in the latter's focus on D.A. Miller's 1988 book *The Novel and the Police*, whose 'main argument or strong theory [...] is entirely circular: everything can be understood as an aspect of the carceral, therefore the carceral is everywhere.'<sup>107</sup> As Mirzoeff clarifies, visualising dates back to 'eighteenth-century military theorists': 'once the battlefield became too extensive and complex for any one person to physically see, the general's task was to visualize it by means of his imagination, supplied with ideas, images, and intuition from his staff and troops.'<sup>108</sup> The task of visualisation — 'a complex' which has its origins in the military, which is perhaps an adjacent form of the carceral and its disciplinary concept of the panopticon — is thus pertinent to *Night Moves*, especially given Harmon's origins in the U.S. Marine Corps *and* the text's depiction of male hermeneutic anxiety (brought on by attempting to 'see' the scale of 'the grid' as well as the extent of the damage done to their American 'wilderness').<sup>109</sup> According to Ngai, the territorial expansion of the hermeneutics of suspicion can be traced to the ascendance of a peculiar species of *male* paranoia that is inherited in the conspiracy theorist of the late-twentieth century, and his manifold fears about the "potentially infinite network" of relations constituting our present

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<sup>105</sup> Mirzoeff, 'Visualizing the Anthropocene', p. 216.

<sup>106</sup> Mirzoeff, 'Visualizing the Anthropocene', p. 215.

<sup>107</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 135.

<sup>108</sup> Mirzoeff, 'Visualizing the Anthropocene', p. 216.

<sup>109</sup> Mirzoeff, 'Visualizing the Anthropocene', p. 213.



social order.<sup>110</sup> Here, she alights specifically on the thriller as paranoia's generic counterpart which, with its legacy of P.I.s and federal agents, tends to 'center on the knowledge-seeking trajectories of male-protagonists who, like the conventional film noir detective, belatedly find that they are small subjects caught in larger systems extending beyond their comprehension and control.'<sup>111</sup> As Ngai points out, while such a 'conventional' realisation (contending, say, with the totality of capitalism or the smallness of one's place in the global matrix) *should* ramify for everyone, the trajectory of the thriller nevertheless remains yoked to a set of genre conventions and to 'a narrative tradition which most powerfully highlights the problem [as] a gendered one — as if "conspiracy theory" itself, an epistemology underpinned by the affective category of fear, becomes safeguarded *through* the genre of the political thriller as a distinctively male form of knowledge production.'<sup>112</sup> Reichardt's film deftly showcases her characters' own commitment to this distinctly 'aggro', male form of knowledge production. As Josh vindictively reassures Harmon, demonstrating his apparently absolute faith in the power of paranoid affect to instantaneously convert the masses to the environmental cause: 'It's gotta be big, people are gonna start thinking anyway. Killing all the salmon just so you can run your fucking iPod every second of your life. And that's what's gonna happen. People are gonna start thinking. They have to.' Ostensibly central to the underlying rationale of the plot to blow up the dam is Josh's urgent desire to 'awaken' ordinary citizens to the plight of nonhuman lifeforms, in the hopes of combatting their ongoing depletion — something which chimes with the film's opening sequences, in which Josh's intuitive 'alertness' to a lively, rustling natural world is foregrounded.

At the same time, in Reichardt's sporadic loyalty to the thriller genre (or her deliberate inversion of its tropes), the authenticity of this masculine epistemology is continually brought

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<sup>110</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 299.

<sup>111</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 299.

<sup>112</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 299.

into question by her male protagonists, whose inconsistent modes of relating to their natural surroundings suggest a counternarrative, one that seems to prioritise making an ‘impact’ over genuine engagement. Alongside drastically overestimating the magnanimity of his audience, Josh’s relation to a more-than-human world is elsewhere marked by an ambivalent disinterest that undermines his own messaging. When Josh and Dena conduct reconnaissance on the dam, it is Dena who is shown to be attentive to surveying her environmental milieu, and receptive to nonhuman experience in a way that the film’s male protagonists aren’t. Shouting over the ambient din of the water, she observes that the structure has no fish ladders (‘I thought they all had to have fish ladders’), speculating over how the powers that be would’ve ‘got away with that’. Her reparative ability to derive something like pleasure or wonderment even from surroundings that are plausibly ‘contaminated’ or endangered by human activity is reinforced when, exiting the dam’s compound, she enthusiastically sights a bird flying overhead: ‘I think that’s an oriole ... I didn’t know we had those’. The presence of the New World Oriole in the Oregonian landscape of Reichardt’s film, a bird which habitually migrates to warmer climes than the Pacific Northwest, is itself perhaps a quiet indicator of warming temperatures. Whereas Josh seems to view the natural world as unilaterally ‘threatened’ (in the sense of being imminently vulnerable to brewing eco-catastrophe) and ‘threatening’ simultaneously (in the sense of it being an unruly, unknowable terrain that eludes the scope of paranoid control), Dena nonetheless seems able to glean some sense of joy from this fleeting experience, despite it being a potential signifier of ‘perversity’.<sup>113</sup> Through this pleasure together with her willingness to admit *unknowing* (something Josh, an eco-paranoiac who prides himself on being prepared for all eventualities, cannot concede), Dena demonstrates a more speculative model of knowing, wherein a willingness to *exposure*, this time in the form of a *good* surprise, doesn’t constitute the end of the world.

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<sup>113</sup> Given their location, the sighting is likely to be a New World Oriole, named for the striking similarity of its plumage to the Old World Oriole, which inhabits Europe.

By contrast, and despite his Thoreauvian self-styling, Josh appears entirely closed-off to the joyful potentiality of such close encounters. As though experiencing a momentary lapse, he fails to 'look up' at the rare sighting of a migratory bird, even though its very presence in these regions could itself serve as a paranoid warning signal indicating drastically warming global temperatures. Compare Dena's sighting of the oriole with his central nonhuman interaction in the film, at the roughly ten-minute mark, the discovery of a wounded, pregnant doe on the roadside during the long drive to reach Harmon's cabin. As Josh pulls over, Dena reacts with palpable annoyance ("You're stopping?") that, reading paranoically, casts doubt over the authenticity of her own nonhuman investments. Directing the investigative beam of his flashlight towards the body (a 'seeking' gesture of police procedurals *par excellence*), Josh unveils the animal's bulk, the surrounding tarmac strewn with a long streak of blood that is reddened by the glare of the car's taillights, perhaps a clunky metaphor on Reichardt's part for the 'deer in headlights' responsivity of the Left. Coupled with the freighted atmosphere of the scene, that he stops in the first place would seem to suggest at least some measure of the 'warm-hearted response' to the (dying) animal that Baker describes, if only the requisite moment of hushed respect for the fragile 'sanctity' of new life. Gulping slightly, a reflex action that betrays a rare moment of emotionality, Reichardt's camera holds the frame tight on a close-up of Josh's face, before shifting to a more withdrawn shot of Dena's own blank expression, her laboured breathing audible. Unlike T.'s collision with the coyote, which appears to open onto a (possibly ironical) affirmation of shared vulnerability, and a 'valuable' moment of empathic conversion for Millet's protagonist, Reichardt's text refuses the reparative scene in favour of something stranger. Instead, Josh silently disposes of the doe's undead body, dragging it towards the steep incline of the verge and pushing it down the bank, leaving the viewer to contend with the discomfiting noise of its shingled descent. (Notably, this sound presages one that will be heard later in the film, pertaining this time to a different kind of labour — as the activists shovel vast quantities of ammonium nitrate into a cement mixer.) Played differently, this might have been a hallowed

moment of eco-tenderness, Josh and Dena operating as roadside doulas presiding over the fawn's 'miraculous' delivery. Whether his actions here are merciful or callous is hard to read, though with the paranoid benefit of hindsight they could foreshadow Josh's latent capacity for violence, which has yet to fully 'reveal' itself. The illegibility of his actions also opens onto the possibility that they may not be determined by positive or negative affect at all, but simply by the condition of *not knowing* how to respond to an unfolding situation.

As Seymour and Fusco point out then, although Reichardt's men may appear hyper-attentive to the 'universality of surveillance, even in supposedly natural environs', elsewhere they are shown to be remarkably *laissez-faire*.<sup>114</sup> Later in the film, the trio share a rushed breakfast of scrambled eggs in a diner before making a last-minute, unplanned run to the feed store to purchase more fertiliser, their unpreparedness itself the outcome of Harmon's sloppy calculations. As if to reinforce that the carceral is everywhere (and that it can even interrupt your breakfast!), Harmon, now masquerading as 'Ed', gets recognised by an old acquaintance who is working as a busboy, and glibly informs his agitated co-conspirators that they 'served time together'. An outraged Dena upbraids him for fudging that he 'didn't have any priors', as Harmon, encouraging her to 'calm down', condescendingly reiterates that his record, predating the advent of digitisation, is gone, 'expunged'. His appeal to the before-your-time logic of the generation gap falls flat with Dena, who recommends he get wise to a surveillance culture of which data-harvesting and retention form a crucial part. 'You think your record is gone? You think anything is ever *gone* anymore? You need to join this century dude and realise that your record is not just sitting in some filing cabinet somewhere. They don't just burn it. Nothing is ever gone anymore.' Strangely, it is Dena who 'reveals' the full extent of the postmodern subject's imbrication in 'the system' here, fulfilling the traditionally *masculine* function of Lacan's

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<sup>114</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 80.

‘paranoid notary’, the ‘figure for the subject of paranoid knowledge, who is [...] “a petty bureaucrat, an impoverished figure through whom the state performs its functions without his or her conscious or willful consent.”<sup>115</sup>

The laboured focus on record-keeping in this scene gestures towards the film’s wider preoccupation with technologies of environmental surveillance, and geological recording in particular; that *nothing is ever really gone anymore* might also be said of geological time, whose measurement is kept according to a stratigraphic record that cannot be erased.<sup>116</sup> While Harmon remains duly alert to the perils of surveillance technologies of yore (when they pull into the campsite where they intend to park their respective ‘rigs’ later on, he is the one who draws attention to the positions of the various CCTV cameras), he is cocksure enough to believe he has truly made it ‘off-grid’, and thus inept to adequately reckon with its strategic adaptations or its new technological vagaries. Such assumptions are also subtended by, as Dena points out, his own failure to ‘get with the times’, which drives at what Ngai describes as ‘a sense of redundancy or belatedness’ that is indicative of ‘the temporality characteristically associated with postmodern aesthetics’.<sup>117</sup> This belatedness is insinuated through Harmon’s upholding of some of the film’s cornier stylistic elements — which, in true circular fashion, also point self-consciously towards *Night Moves*’s own indebtedness to the thriller genre. This influence is felt in his performative use of initials (‘You must be D’) and slang (‘slick’, ‘brother’, his invitation to Josh to park his ‘rig’); in the image of him shovelling fertiliser in a tie-dye t-shirt; and in his insistence on the seemingly futile procurement of fake licences for the trio, despite the fact that the desired object of managerial scrutiny ends up being Dena’s social security card.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 318.

<sup>116</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 80.

<sup>117</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, pp. 305–306.

<sup>118</sup> Even here, the film stages a postmodern ‘in-joke’ between the two men that points towards their own elongated experience operating in the activist ‘field’. The ID Harmon procures for Dena carries the pseudonym ‘Carrie Taylor’, an ambiguous allusion that isn’t addressed elsewhere in the film. This may, however, be a subtle reference to London’s 7/7 bombings: the terrorist attack with the highest number of

Harmon's so-called anarchism, coupled with his loosey-goosey attitude to criminal activity (a haphazardness rarely 'policed' by Josh as vigilantly as Dena's inexperience), seems to signal his allegiance to the activism of a past era, one that perhaps links up more securely with the masculine 'quests' of Abbey's novel than the anxious intellectualism associated with postmodern conspiracy theory. His loyalty to past tropes is in some way redolent of Brown's observation of the contemporary Left, that it 'often clings to the formations and formulations of another epoch, one in which the notion of unified movements, social totalities, and class-based politics appeared to be viable categories.'<sup>119</sup> Notably, this redundancy is communicable to him only through descending to the anachronistic language of his own radicalism. The sarcastic 'dude' that accompanies Dena's diatribe, an utterance delivered with a serrated edge, deliberately suggests its own out-of-stepness with the 'valley-girl' vocabulary that governs her own generation.

Notably, Dena's own rising paranoia, communicated in her insistence that Harmon's record *does* constitute a 'big-deal', is clipped by Josh's irritable injunction for her to 'shut up' (a comment that gains sinister implications given its resemblance to his final warning to 'keep your mouth shut' in the moments before he kills her), a dismissal which seems engineered to diminish

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fatalities on UK soil since the Lockerbie bombing of 1988. One of the victims Carrie Taylor, aged 24, was travelling on the Circle Line at the time of her death, and was one of 52 people killed on July 7 2005, after four suicide bombers coordinated attacks that targeted commuters using the city's transport network during peak rush hour. Like Reichardt's terrorists, the explosive devices used in the attacks were improvised; unlike hers, they used triacetone triperoxide (TATP), a non-nitrogenous explosive that is easily extracted and prepared from non-restricted, over-the-counter retail products such as nail varnish remover, and hair bleach. Its popularity as an explosive in several terrorist attacks since 2001 also relies on its ability to evade detection; it is one of few explosives that doesn't contain nitrogen, a substance which explosive detection scanners had, until 2016, been designed specifically to detect TATP. One might speculate, then, that this wink-wink nudge-nudge allusion thus serves a tripled function: as a 'boys club' joke that further excludes Dena from the 'lore' of grassroots terrorism, her 'unknowing' renewed evidence for Harmon and Josh that she hasn't yet 'earned her stripes'; a derisive (misogynist) jibe at the expense of a dead woman in a similar age bracket to Dena, whose own life will (later on in the film) be treated as infinitely disposable by the film's male protagonists; and a paranoid commentary on bad timing and belatedness, the anxieties of detection, as well as the evolution of terrorist methods.

<sup>119</sup> Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholy', p. 25.

the validity of her concerns about his erratic contributions. Despite looking similarly perturbed by the belatedness of Harmon's admission that he has acquired too little fertiliser too late, Josh outwardly refuses the possibility of annoyance, denouncing any anxiety a little snappily: 'I'm not worried'. While reasserting his own imperviousness, his willingness to metabolise Harmon's flakiness might also be legible as Josh aligning himself with the camaraderie of male paranoia, or perhaps symptomatic of the broader paranoid impulse to beat exposure to the punch. This momentary refusal shows how — as Ngai notes — 'paranoia can be denied the *status* of epistemology when claimed by some subjects, while valorized for precisely that status when claimed by others'.<sup>120</sup> As Ngai suggests, whereas Dena's paranoia comes off as mere harping, guided by 'subjective implications alone (an ignoble "emotionalism")', the 'cognitive dimensions' of Josh's paranoia are 'emphasised as an enabling condition for knowledge'.<sup>121</sup> This is demonstrated in an earlier scene in the trailer, where Harmon exhibits his own show of paranoia, grilling Josh about the necessity of Dena's involvement ('You think she's alright?'). Contradicting his earlier criticality, Josh vouches for her: 'She's good, she's done some shit', though Harmon seems less than convinced. Reinforcing that he always has his ear to the ground, Harmon mentions having 'heard' that Dena bankrolled a previous operation: 'She did that thing in Eugene with you, the SILTARS?', a military cryptonym often used to refer to 'Silent Targets'. Josh, schooled perhaps by the injunction of his paranoid antecedent Fox Mulder to 'Trust No 1', sketches out ('What do you mean that's what you *heard*?'), worrying about informational leaks travelling through the subterranean whisper network. Revealing that not even his own person is exempt from the territorial reach of his suspicions, Harmon reminds his comrade that '*You* told me that you dumbass', a paranoid reaction which is explicitly valorised as proportionate or 'correct': 'That's good you're paranoid, healthier that way in the long run.'

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<sup>120</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 302.

<sup>121</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 302.

Dena's exclusion appears complete when Harmon, expressing a latent class *ressentiment*, contemptuously mutters 'Rich Daddy' in reference to the wealthy father who is unwittingly financing their monkeywrenching. His misogynistic reduction of her sizable contributions — the demonstrable risk she's taking, or the proven steeliness of character involved in a commitment to their shadowy cause — to the status of a 'buy-in' seems to confirm something of Stuart Hall's own (marginally paranoiac) insistence concerning the Left: 'that traditionalist ideas, the ideas of social and moral respectability, have penetrated so deep inside socialist consciousness that it is quite common to find people committed to a radical political programme underpinned by wholly traditional feelings and sentiments.'<sup>122</sup> Lining Harmon's dismissal is an anxiety about his own emasculation; though the camera, staying close on a conspiratorial shot of the two men's faces, withholds the precise object of his gaze, its trajectory follows his sightline out through the window, alighting on the hull of the boat (in which Dena is sleeping) at the exact same moment this line of dialogue is spoken. The implication being that, through such proximity to financial security, Dena is herself a 'Rich Daddy' (an insecurity that gains a newly erotic charge when read in hindsight of the fact that the two will later become lovers).

The scene also betrays a latent class anxiety concerning Dena's own conversion to radicalism, the possibility that her decision to 'opt-out' of normative society is simply the luxury of socioeconomic privilege. As showcased in Harmon's earlier tirade against the proliferation of golf-courses in Bend, Oregon ('It's the high plains desert! Where's the water?') and the plight of corporate expansionism ('the latest outpost of the Portland empire. Taxidermy, Gourmet food, eight-dollar coffee'), he is grudgingly financially dependent on the same bloated 'systems' he rails against ('I have to work, right? Those greens don't mow themselves'), a network of contradictions he (quite literally) can ill-afford to look at too closely. His griping over the

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<sup>122</sup> Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholy', p. 24.



gentrification of a macho ‘wilderness’ is thus also a griping over his own complicity in this corporate ‘taming’, which would seem to be motivated at least in part by rage at the desert’s possible feminisation, an expanse whose ‘purity’ is similarly prized by the character of Hayduke in Abbey’s novel, who appoints himself as its staunchest defender. Notably, when Dena sardonically comments that these recent developments ‘sound pretty cool’, Harmon retorts hotly: ‘Yeah fuck cool, Keep your fucking cool to yourself’. Framed by Harmon’s insistence to Josh on excluding Dena from what’s about to go down (‘We can take her down to the train station tomorrow morning’), the effect begins to look one of profound epistemic *insecurity*, an overdetermined defensiveness emerging in response to the threat that their boys’ club might be infiltrated by the ‘feminine element’. This male insecurity will be obliquely thematised by *Night Moves*’s second half, in which the strong paranoia that had found focus in their shared mission is rerouted onto their female comrade, finding vigorous expression in Josh’s renewed *tracking* of Dena’s movements, both in the literal and affective sense of the word. This atmospheric shift is signalled when Josh covertly visits Dena’s workplace to discuss the fate of the missing camper, and a tense conversation ensues between the two inside his car. Notably this visit, conducted under cover of darkness and using noirish signals like the flashing of headlights, is framed in the language of allyship as ‘checking in’, something that, as Fusco and Seymour remark, assumes more sinister implications considering the increased ‘securitization and militarization of everyday life, from airport body scanners to Facebook *check-ins* after disasters’ (emphasis mine).<sup>123</sup>

### **Feminist Paranoia**

Given the widespread infiltration of postmodernism by a ‘conspiratorial imagination traditionally associated with an intellectually valorized masculine paranoia’, Ngai suggests that, for the feminist critic and reparative readers alike, ‘it remains important simply to recognise the way in

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<sup>123</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 81. This is also, notably, a language that is increasingly attached to conversations around sexual consent.

which conspiracy theory seems intimately tied to the [male] hermeneutic quest.<sup>124</sup> Following Naomi Schor, she argues for ‘the need to define and argue on behalf of a specifically female paranoia’, one that extends beyond the reach of ‘the jealous form that is “par excellence the paranoia of women”’.<sup>125</sup> What a specifically feminist mode of paranoia, or a feminist epistemology of climate breakdown might look like — ‘breakdown’ itself being a newly popular eco-terminology, imbued with clinical resonances that are peculiarly gendered — seems like a slightly inevitable question to ask of Reichardt’s film.<sup>126</sup> Not least because in the wake of the accident that ostensibly cleaves the film into two distinct halves its surveillance technologies, and hence the object of its male hermeneutic (con)quest, visibly shifts towards women’s bodies. If *Night Moves*’s first section is affectively organised around the primary paranoia of the unfurling bomb plot, the second orbits around a compound feeling: a synthesis of anticipatory *fear* of being ‘rumbled’; paranoid-anxiety over who’s going to ‘crack’ first; and extended denial involved in upholding a sustained pretence of ‘normality’ in the face of serious criminal fallout. The latter is best embodied in Harmon’s easy reassurance that ‘Monday morning we’ll all go to work like nothing happened’, a disavowal that could easily serve as an indicator of Left environmental denial even in decidedly less paranoid circumstances. As Norgaard and Brulle argue, the ‘language of denial and apathy’ is as prescient to overt forms of scepticism or ‘literal denial’ as it is to a public that is ‘concerned but has normalized their knowledge’; these find their counterpart in the insidious phenomenon of ‘implicatory denial’, a form of cognitive dissonance or ‘two track

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<sup>124</sup> See Emily Beament, ‘Five years to climate breakdown’, *Ecologist*, 9 July 2020, <<https://theecologist.org/2020/jul/09/five-years-climate-breakdown>> [accessed 7 September 2021]. See also: Laurie Macfarlane, ‘Why 2021 is humanity’s make-or-break moment on climate breakdown’, *OpenDemocracy*, 7 January 2021, <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/why-2021-is-humanitys-make-or-break-moment-on-climate-breakdown/>> [accessed 5 September 2021]

<sup>125</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 301.

<sup>126</sup> See Fiona Harvey, ‘Major climate changes inevitable and irreversible — IPCC’s starkest warning yet’, *Guardian*, 9 August 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/aug/09/humans-have-caused-unprecedented-and-irreversible-change-to-climate-scientists-warn/>> [accessed 17 August 2021]

thinking', wherein 'people see the future as apocalyptic' and "'business as usual' reigns" both at the same time'.<sup>127</sup>

As Ngai and Sedgwick both reveal, the reparative motivations of feminist inquiry are already compromised by an inbuilt structural paranoia that has proved vital to the success of its counter-hegemonic work: 'through what might be called a process of vigilant scanning, feminists and queers have rightly understood that no topic or area of psychoanalytic thought can be declared a priori immune to the influence of such gender reifications.'<sup>128</sup> In the case of *Night Moves*, instigating any redemptive or reparative reading along distinctly 'feminist' lines is further problematised by the always-tempting recourse to an essentialism that perceives an automatic correlation between the feminine and the 'natural', or vice versa. Endeavouring to read *against* the grain of this conspiratorial masculine paranoia, or going in search of a 'softer' vision of hard-and-fast environmentalism, seems difficult to do without resorting to a binary notion of 'healing' or 'caring' for the natural world as 'women's work', or viewing these as the metrics of femininity.

Though we might be forgiven for mistaking the gendered affinities of the conspiratorial imaginary as something that is 'revealed' only partway through Reichardt's film, it remains almost impossible to disentangle the macro desire for environmental 'oversight' from its protagonists' anxious patriarchal investments in obtaining 'mastery' over women's bodies. What feels at first like a noticeable volta in *Night Moves*'s thematic preoccupations is, on closer inspection, subtly encoded from the get-go, the targets of the film's violence quietly designated 'female' from the outset. Not only is there the conventional usage of the pronoun 'she' to refer to the boat (an object which will later serve not only as an agent of eco-sabotage, but will itself be destroyed),

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<sup>127</sup> Robert J. Brulle and Kari Norgaard, 'Avoiding cultural trauma', pp. 14–15.

<sup>128</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 132.

but also the monolithic dam, which is framed as a feminised object the trio must ‘deliver’ from its own form of environmental burden: ‘God knows that dam wants to come down. There is a serious tonnage of water just pushing up against her walls. Everything in the world is telling her to give up and let go. But still, I mean, we should just help her all we can. Right?’ By the time of its arrival, even the fundamental weirdness of Dena’s murder manages to feel somehow anticlimactic, generating for the viewer the same vaguely underwhelming affect that is associated both with Reichardt’s own understatedness *qua* director *and* the paranoiac desire to evade surprise. Although the bizarre sequence of events staged in the lead up to her murder — Josh stalking Dena through the spa, a brief struggle in which she attempts to fight him off with a rain stick before he finally overpowers her in the mist of the steam room — still constitutes a bad ‘surprise’ for the viewer, misogyny’s belated ‘exposure’ at this juncture feels neither ‘shocking’ nor revelatory.

The spa where Dena works perhaps represents a different kind of holism to the suspicious one with which Josh is acquainted. Certainly, the ‘wellness’ retreat, as a space that is organised around taking or seeking *pleasure*, and the conservation of the body known colloquially as ‘self-care’, would seem to be one possible recess from the otherwise paranoid economy of Reichardt’s film, a reparative ‘alternative’ to ecotage that is held open by the text. In one of the film’s establishing shots, following their recce of the dam, the pair ventures inside through a back entrance, Dena sharply instructing Josh to wait by the flimsy wooden gate, the implication being an unspoken paranoiac desire to minimise any sightings of the two of them together. Steam rises over the diegetic sound of panpipes, as Josh finds himself affronted by the sight of women’s bodies in various stages of undress, ageing, and imperfection. Chewing on his lip, Josh averts his gaze, his eyes roving about as if to suggest *not* knowing, or at least not knowing where to look. The camera loiters over a topless woman as she emerges from the steam room, abruptly cutting back to a shot of Josh’s furtive gaze before readjusting its focus. Another woman emerges in

passing from the steam room, the shot holding on the closed door for several seconds, pointedly refusing the viewer voyeuristic entry to the secreted interior that will later be the site of Dena's strangulation — an event to which the viewer *is* exposed and to which, however unwillingly, they are rendered accomplice. The camera's darting, quicksilver gaze along with the spatial arrangement of the pools themselves, resists any easy attempt to 'take in' these female bodies all at once. Tellingly, they cannot be wholly seen by the viewer (whose visibility is, at this moment, coterminous with Josh's own), available to us only in partial or obstructed glimpses. A blonde woman enters a plunge pool, her back turned to the camera, only for her to be subsequently obscured by grass planting; a wooden screen 'reveals' a nude woman but prevents us from successfully 'visualising' the other women with whom she is communing, nor can we surreptitiously 'listen in' on their intimate conversation over the soundscape of rising steam.

Josh's apparent dis-ease in this unsheltered environment (particularly in a 'safe' outdoor space dedicated to the restorative potential of female self-exposure) is underscored when Dena returns, handing over what we infer is cash shadily concealed in a brown paper bag, only to find him inside ('You didn't wait!'), defacing a life-coaching brochure. The leaflet depicts a grinning, newly 'enlightened' male figure on its outer leaf, a halo of 'Oms' floating in the printed white space above his head. One might interpret Josh's embittered scribbling as the marks of his own striving to overwrite a mode of masculinity open to something *other* than mere paranoia. As Sedgwick points out, however, 'enlightenment' can also turn out to be a false friend: in the form of 'popular cynicism', or what Peter Sloterdijk describes as "enlightened false consciousness" — false consciousness that knows itself to be false, "its falseness already reflexively buffered" — already represents "the universally widespread way in which enlightened people see to it that they are not taken for suckers".<sup>129</sup> Josh, in his strong paranoia, likely views his own environmental

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<sup>129</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 141.

fervour as one such (false) iteration of the ‘truly enlightened’ subject, though he has apparently failed to attain the spiritual elevation or contentment associated with the self-actualised masculine ideal advertised here.

Attempting to read into the spa’s reparative potentialities is made difficult given that, later on, it will come to be similarly infiltrated, ‘contaminated’, ‘violated’, and ‘defaced’ by the climactic events of Reichardt’s film, whose closing scenes witness this purportedly safe space transformed into the dramatic locus for his paranoia’s escalation. A trope of the thriller *par excellence*, Josh conducts a stake out of the facility from his car, spying on Dena as she bids farewell to a late-night client who, upon seeing she has developed hives on her face and neck, impels her to indulge in a little self-care: ‘you should really treat yourself, too’. The camera takes us through an elaborate sequence of Dena locking up, the necessary ritual of ‘securitizing’ the facility. As Sedgwick writes, invoking a “popular maxim” of the Cold War era: “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you”.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, the startling necessity of developing a mode of female paranoia proves not only *righteous* here, but integral to Dena’s survival, since what this scene ‘reveals’ is that Dena has both everything and nothing to be paranoid about. After all, this man *is* in fact here to kill her and there is perhaps no clearer ‘local’ or ‘nonce’ theory than discovering an intruder is already in your workplace, with murder on his mind.<sup>131</sup> Concealed inside a closet, a Peeping Josh spies on Dena through a narrow slit, whose form remains only partially visible to him. As an uncloseted(!) Josh (with all the symbolic ramifications that has for his ambiguous, repressed sexuality) springs forth into the room, looking like the very definition of a bad or unwelcome surprise, he mimetically absorbs the vocabulary of his ‘wellness’ setting, the language of self-care made sinister by its stalking context:

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<sup>130</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 127.

<sup>131</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 145.

‘I just wanted to make sure that you’re OK... I just think it’s important we know what we *feel*’ (emphasis mine).

Notably, Josh’s renewed attention to an emotional (il)legibility that threatens his own exposure fixates on Dena, whose guilt over the death of the camper is somatised in the form of an inflamed rash. What begins as a slight itch on the night of the bombing gradually spreads, over the course of the film’s denouement, until it eventually covers most visible portions of her body.<sup>132</sup> Like paranoia, irritation belongs to Ngai’s index of ‘ugly feelings’, a ‘minor and, one might say, inherently “disproportional” feeling’ that implies an ‘aesthetics of affective illegibility’, as well as ‘what we might call the problem of incorrect or “inadequate” anger’.<sup>133</sup> This kind of excessive affectivity is, according to Ngai, suggestive of ‘an overdetermined response to [one’s] environment or hyperactive judgement of taste [that] seems closely related to the “nervousness” that late nineteenth-century physicians associated with the heightened sensitivities of the dandy, the intellectual, and the “overly civilized” person in general.’<sup>134</sup> Not only this, but irritation is distinctly feminised, such that it ‘might be described as negative affect in its weakest, and most politically *effete* form. One is tempted to vote it the dysphoric affect least likely to play a significant role in any oppositional praxis or ideological struggle’.<sup>135</sup> Irritation’s status as a

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<sup>132</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 300.

<sup>133</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 175.

<sup>134</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 175.

<sup>135</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 181. It is important to note here, that Ngai’s analysis is tied to the dynamics of racialisation in the context of Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* (1929), rather than femininity per se, something that bestows her argument’s emphasis on the ‘cutaneous’ with a different and specific set of meanings that cannot be mapped onto the pointed whiteness of Reichardt’s disaffected eco-terrorists. Furthermore, this commentary is not intended to discount irritation and its ‘strong’ form, anger, as redundant or ineffectual in the fight for climate (and other forms of social) justice. As Ngai also points out, ‘thinkers from Aristotle to Audre Lorde have highlighted anger’s centrality to the pursuit of social justice’ (p. 35), and ‘[t]he observation [made by Lorde in her 1981 essay “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism”] that justice conversely requires anger, and cannot be imposed solely by reason, underscores the passion’s centrality to political struggles throughout history’ (p. 182). The point made by Mari Ruti (see Chapter 2) that marginalised communities are unlikely to gleefully embrace Jack Halberstam’s ‘art of failure’ might, inversely, be made about marginalised communities who are rightly unwilling to abandon anger, or to denounce its political utility in organising against oppressive regimes. The purpose of my

‘cutaneous signifier’ also results in it seeming to always threaten ‘to slip out of the realm of emotional experience altogether, into the realm of physical or epidermal sensations’ and ‘life at the level of the body — and particularly to its surfaces or skin.’<sup>136</sup>

Like the exposed flesh of the women at the spa, the hypervisibility of Dena’s rash is paradoxically suggestive of both too much (*overinvestment*) and not enough (*underinvestment*) at the same time. At the physical level, it seems to convey an excessive or over-emotionality that does Dena no favours in the eyes of her co-conspirators and sets her up as the inevitable culprit of any subsequent informational leak. Without even making any verbal confession, Dena manages to admit what they’ve done to a mutual friend (‘she didn’t have to *say* anything, Anne knows her too well’), a slippage that leads to Josh’s own irritability flaring (‘And who else is Dena talking to?’). That Dena’s emotional reaction to the camper’s death is the ‘strongest’ of the three protagonists, or that she is susceptible to caring about something *other* than the cause, would seem to retroactively confirm what Josh already ‘knew’: that she isn’t ‘man enough’ for the hard task of ecotage. The same environmental passion that first generated her involvement, uniting the comrades in a common goal, thus belatedly becomes the focus of male paranoia, sealing the dissolution of their collective bond. Whereas the so-called ‘explosion’ of Dena’s body into hives appears to the viewer perhaps as an allergenic reaction to her guilt, a clumsy metaphor for ‘the popularized concept of repression’, it reads to Josh as a symptom of this anger’s ‘expressive deficiency’.<sup>137</sup> As Ngai suggests, ‘irritation is *both* an excess and a deficiency of anger’: ‘an insistently *inadequate* reaction, one occurring only in conspicuous surplus or deficit in proportion to its occasion’, ‘irritation marks the very opposite of “having the *correct* capacity for anger”’

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discussion here is rather an exploratory analysis of the aesthetic function of irritation, and the peculiarly gendered dynamics of ‘irritability’ as they appear in *Night Moves*, where questions of affective proportionality — of having *too much* or *too little* rage — are especially prevalent, frequently thematised through Dena’s ‘excessive’ or ‘overcommunicative’ body.

<sup>136</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 184.

<sup>137</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 183.



(emphasis mine).<sup>138</sup> As Eric Schlosser observes, such weak affect is antithetical to Abbey's novel, with its 'passion for social justice, the erudition combined with an absence of anything *effete*.'<sup>139</sup>

The anxiety surrounding the manifestation of Dena's guilt would seem to arise not just in the need to stop her talking to the cops, but also to defend against the still more intrusive threat of environmental affect's feminisation (or, worse still, the possibility that environmental care might *already be* feminised). The language of 'worry' is likewise, as Ngai suggests, peculiarly gendered, implying the conscientious or deliberate *aggravation* of a wound or sore, 'with "sore" itself signifying both a condition of the skin or body [...] and, in twentieth-century slang, a state of indignation or resentment' (emphasis mine).<sup>140</sup> This crops up in an interaction between Josh and Dena during his initial visit to her, after the accident: '[Harmon] said that you were worried, that's all ... It's *natural* for you to feel so upset', to which Dena replies, 'there's nothing *natural* about this'. Whereas Josh's emphasis on the 'natural' or inevitable quality of Dena's upset seems to imply something distinctly or specifically feminised about her anxiety (as in it's *only natural*), Dena's renunciation of her feelings as 'nothing natural' (and thereby *unnatural*), would seem to point towards the 'perverse' fallout of their efforts to 'redeem' Mother Nature. One is reminded, here, again of the insidious logic of purity that undergirds the word natural, as seen in the logic of Mirzoeff's claim that: 'Nature, so often used by humans to define perversity as unnatural, has itself become perverse'.<sup>141</sup>

One might consider Josh's own perversity in light of this irritable tendency, as Aristotle's characterised it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "'Those people we call irritable are those who are irritated by the wrong things, more severely and for longer than is right.'"<sup>142</sup> Certainly Josh is

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<sup>138</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 182.

<sup>139</sup> See Eric Schlosser, in Introduction to *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, p. xii.

<sup>140</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 184.

<sup>141</sup> Mirzoeff, 'Visualizing the Anthropocene', p. 215.

<sup>142</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 175.

prone to his own irritable flare-ups, such as when he stumbles back with food for the group and ‘listens in’ on Dena and Harmon having sex in the trailer. In a state of apparent frustration at what he has overheard he attempts to clear his head by replicating his earlier ‘saunter’ through the surrounding brush, his petulant mood signified by the childish action of kicking dried leaves underfoot. Moving in the direction of Josh’s perspective, a close-up lingers over his hands as he impatiently tears a pine fascicle apart at the sheath, splitting its three conjoined needles into two and then one, before letting them fall to the soft ground. As the camera fixates on his upturned palms a slight tremor passes through them, this moment of somatic twitchiness signalling the return of a repressed *something*, despite the always-unphased mien that would appear to mask any possibility of deeper feeling. This shot mirrors one that immediately precedes it when Josh, peering inside the bowels of the boat, scrutinises the sacks of ammonium nitrate, the camera homing in on sticks of dynamite tightly packed between plastic, the tails of the fuses peeking slightly out. Framed in this way, the shot’s composition seems to engineer a visual continuity between the pine needles and the explosives’ fuses, the implication being that Josh’s annoyance at overhearing Dena and Harmon’s mutual pleasure may be simply a projection of his environmental anxieties (that their sexual activity might jeopardise their dedication to the cause, that the mission might be a flop), or vice versa. Whether this irritation stems from his seeming loss of control over Dena’s sexuality, or a breach in his homosocial desire for Harmon however remains less than clear. As Sedgwick claims in *Between Men*, the proximity between the two is often deeply ambivalent. ‘[T]he tableau of legitimation of “modern” class and gender arrangements is something that takes place on firmly male-homosocial terms: it is a transaction between men over the dead, discredited, or disempowered body of a woman’, a transaction that will be neatly reified in Reichardt’s film by the subsequent events of Dena’s murder.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 137.

The sense that Josh's own affective investment may be somehow similarly superficial, disproportionate or misdirected — in the Aristotelian sense of taking 'the wrong things' as its objects — is set-up by the discussion that ensues at the CSS farm in the wake of the explosion, which 'blows up' in a metaphorical sense, becoming a 'big story' in the national media. In Josh's cooperative homestead however, their actions are poorly received by his boss, Sean, who dismisses them as mere 'theatre': 'They're idiots, that's all ... One dam, who cares. That river has ten dams on it. The grid is everywhere. You need to take down like, twelve dams to make a difference, a hundred. It doesn't do anything... It's a statement, right. I'm not interested in statements; I'm interested in results.' In his insistence on the grid's tenacity, Sean seems to betray his own paranoid investments (yet another man of suspicion!) even in the very moment that he unwittingly condemns Josh's as idiotic. Notably, ecotage is presented by Sean as melodramatic, showy or in some way 'histrionic', suggestive of an excessive affective bearing towards the 'wild' that perhaps harbours some fundamentally 'effete' quality. At the same time that the explosion is framed as performative, over-demonstrative and 'too much', it is also 'revealed' as being curiously impotent, simply another case of 'bad timing', as Fusco and Seymour suggest: '*Night Moves* pointedly frames this explosion as being both too late and ineffectual.'<sup>144</sup> What Josh might think is the utterance of a big No! to the system, or a sustained attack on an oppressive state apparatus, is shown to be little more than a limp middle-finger to existing power structures, an environmental affect that is not only misdirected but also inadequately transformative, inept when it comes to playing the long, slow game of attaining social justice.

For Ngai, any reclamation or 'reformulat[ion]' of paranoia for the purposes of 'feminist inquiry' is especially ripe for thinking about 'the highly specific problem of *complicity*' that 'fear of unintended collusion with a system in which one is already inscribed — a fear that might be

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<sup>144</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 83.

described as specific to a [particular] class of intellectuals' (emphasis mine).<sup>145</sup> It would appear that Dena's own environmental knowledge is derived from a more or less institutional source and is, in this sense, allied to scientific 'expertism'. Dena is presented as having undergone her radicalisation through more 'conventional' critical pathways, namely dropping out of college — an experience she summarily describes to Harmon as 'a joke' and 'just a bunch of posers shooting up for four years before they took their media jobs in New York'. On the boat in the moments before the bomb is detonated, it is Dena who comes closest to articulating a rationale for why they are doing what they are about to do. As the boat coasts towards the dam under cover of darkness, her and Harmon make idle conversation about fishing:

H: Someday you'll fish.

D: No, I'm not fishing now. In 2048 the oceans are gonna to be empty.

H: Yeah, who says?

D: Science.

H: Science. Maybe science is wrong.

D: No. Twenty-nine percent of edible fish have gone down by ninety percent. More people are moving to the coastlines. Means more pollution, more waste. The situation's getting geomedically worse. It'll all go fast in the end, once the marine biodiversity goes, everything goes with it.

H: You know a lot.

This brief interlude is perhaps the closest Reichardt's film gets to being didactic, at least in the sense of providing facts and figures as a takeaway for the viewer. Josh remains noticeably silent as the exchange unfurls. The camera volleys between Dena and Harmon, passing over him just as Dena has 'passed' him over sexually. Indeed, this quantity of knowledge — which, to Harmon anyway, is 'a lot' — Dena ascribes to 'one good class [she] took in college', though she is careful to intimate that she 'wasn't there very long'. Here, Dena 'exposes' herself as the jaded college

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<sup>145</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 302.

drop-out, in search of Real Life beyond the institutional frame. At the same time, she also *exposes* herself as belonging to that specific ‘class of intellectuals’ Ngai describes, or at least having wanted at one time to join their ranks.<sup>146</sup> When Harmon expresses consternation that she hasn’t ever fished before (‘No, never? Not once?’), she describes trawling galleries with her family instead: ‘Saw a lot of paintings of fish when I was a kid. Those were our family vacations.’ Dena’s insistence that her childhood was spent ‘looking at paintings of places we’d rather be’ inscribes her within a specific cultural and economic milieu suggestive of the leisure classes. The suggestion *also* being that Dena is on a hermeneutic quest of her own. In an interview with Fusco and Seymour, Reichardt suggests that, together with the thriller, influences for *Night Moves* also included ‘U.S. landscape artists such as painter Charles Burchfield (1893-1967) and photographer Joel Sternfield (b. 1944)’, noting ‘the importance of surveying and surveillance to each genre’ as ‘modes of trying to *uncover the truth* of a particular environment’ (emphasis mine).<sup>147</sup> Harmon, who has already exposed himself as belonging to an older school of conservationism, seems duly wary of science, scoffing slightly at Dena’s invocation of ‘hard facts’. Her allegiance to statistics as well as her emphasis on the use value of trout (‘It’s an oily fish. Good Omega-3 fatty acids in trout. Good for the heart, good for depression’) seems to convey a more calculating, instrumental view of nonhuman life, one that is at odds with her giddy open-mindedness on spotting the Oriole — although perhaps not unsurprising from someone who believes she has ‘seen enough’ to successfully survey the ‘state of nature’ in one term at college. Her mention of ‘geomedical’ worsening meanwhile returns us to Jackie Christiansen’s didactic imagery of *contamination*. In particular, the emphasis on geomedicine, a discipline which studies the effect of geographical environment on human and animal health, bespeaks the same anxious focus on mapping or ‘evaluating’ the scale of environmental toxicity — and, in some cases, *engineering* the environment in order to mitigate its impact. This would seem to implicate Dena in the same male hermeneutic

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<sup>146</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 303.

<sup>147</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, pp. 78–79.

struggle as the ‘visualizing’ agent, or ‘general’, suggesting that she may, in fact, be a true paranoiac after all.

For Fischer, the ascendance of today’s regime of post-truth or ‘truthiness’ can be seen at least as a partial reboot of the ‘sciences wars’ that dominated the 1990s, which saw proponents of social constructivism (cultural theorists) and scientists clash in a series of (often ‘caustic’) exchanges that constituted an epistemic and ‘discursive struggle over whose reality count[ed]’.<sup>148</sup> That Dena is herself an emissary of the academy would seem to count against her with her two comrades, whose own environmental knowledge (ironically) derives in non-institutional, localised modes of knowing suggested by their ‘lived experience’ as it is presented in the film. Though we know little of the boys’ precise economic origins, according to the scant detail furnished by Reichardt’s plot, a certain longevity of political commitment is suggested not just in Josh and Harmon’s mutual past in grassroots activism, but also in their respective ‘off-grid’ lifeways. While the latter, in line with his self-styled rebel status, has conscientiously relegated himself to a solitary existence in a male paranoiac haven out in ‘the middle of nowhere’, the former resides as part of an intentional community, on a cooperative farmstead somewhere in South Oregon. Reichardt’s film appears well-disposed towards the commune’s horizontal organisation, or to somehow endorse its elective affinities, which seems implicit in the fact that this setting provides some brief pockets of warmth in an otherwise affectively chilly cinematic landscape. Though Josh remains something of an affect alien even within this structure, there is nevertheless something reparative at work in the homey scenes of domestic life, its apparent bounty of sustainable produce, and the prevalence of children who appear to be collaboratively raised. The precise nature of the relations between the farm’s inhabitants isn’t an object of thematic interest and is treated unselfconsciously enough as to go unremarked upon. The

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<sup>148</sup> Fischer, ‘Knowledge politics and post-truth’, pp. 135–139.

integrity of the familial ‘unit’ isn’t something in which Reichardt’s film particularly indulges, unlike other recent ‘off-grid’ cinematic efforts such as *Captain Fantastic* (2016) or *A Quiet Place* (2018), both films which seem to loudly revel in the spectacle of self-sufficiency and the resilience of traditional kinship dynamics, whether occasioned through the imposed isolation of global apocalypse or self-ostracization from corporate society.

Indeed, the farm’s operation may be the closest we get in affective terms to a reparative vision of Josh. Several scenes that take place there discover him in a state approaching something like ‘contentment’. This is hinted at the first time we see inside the contrivedly ‘rustic’ yurt where Josh lives, midway through Reichardt’s film. A slow, panning shot lingers over his bookshelves long enough to reveal the library of an autodidact: the worn spines of James Howard Kunstler’s *The Long Emergency* (2006), John Muir’s *Wild America* (1976), Jeff Golden’s *Forest Blood* (1999), and copies of the Eugene-based, anti-civilisation journal *Green Anarchy* (2000–2009) can be glimpsed on the floor among the detritus of everyday life, giving the impression of a time-honoured allegiance to collective resistance. Shot from beneath as he lies on his bed, the camera follows his gaze upwards to a skylight, fixating on a small oval of visible sky, before returning us to a view of his beatific face.<sup>149</sup> Like the spa, the reparative potential of the commune is made ambivalent by the fact of its vulnerability to paranoid investigation by enemy forces. The risk being not only that such ‘authentic’ spaces might be infiltrated by institutional ‘phonies’ like Dena. But, further, that being ‘outwith’ normative society doesn’t mean being beyond the reach of biosurveillance by agencies of the state. In the fallout of the bomb’s detonation, as Josh watchfully anticipates being busted by the cops, another inhabitant, Corser

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<sup>149</sup> Notably in Abbey’s novel, sky serves as a kind of metaphor for the commons, its pollution often used to signify the contamination of an otherwise ‘pure’ sovereign landscape, as in Hayduke’s vision of ‘the filth [...] pumping through stacks into the public sky. A smudge of poisoned air overhung his homeland’ (p. 17). See also: ‘The sky above the mountains was untouched by a single cloud, like the dark blue of infinite desire. Hayduke smiled, flexing his nostrils’ (p. 19).

(Barry Del Sherman), is nervously awaiting his own rumbling by the Food and Drug Agency, for having (somewhat inexplicably) ‘burned his cheese license’. At a hoedown later on, Surprise, in a fruitless attempt at flirtation with Josh (who can only think about Dena, the latest object of his paranoid attention economy) gossips to him that the feds showed up and took Corser’s computers, speculating that it may be about more than just the licence, that the authorities may be ‘onto something... Out of this world, right?’

If this scene ‘reveals’ the persecution of differing lifeways by agencies of the state then it also ‘exposes’ the sad revelation that Josh has already been living a relatively charmed existence, for surveillance to be considered the exception and not the norm. At least in environmental terms, the commune approximates a pocket of time and space that is *out of this world* enough to be at least partially, if not wholly, resistant to paranoid logics. At the same time, the film’s sympathies resist easy determination, and the commune isn’t offered up as a social utopia. A more clear-cut endorsement would broach a dangerous romanticisation of the ‘off-grid’ lifeway which, as Norgaard points out, is already the province of Indigenous peoples and ‘communities who exist inside the US and elsewhere that — despite a concerted effort for their elimination, despite widespread narratives that they are gone, continue to live out practices that are outside the dominant capitalist worldview and are now on the front of the climate mobilisation in their communities, their governments, and in the streets.’<sup>150</sup> In Reichardt’s film, abdication from this dominant worldview is shown to be contingent on forms of agency that are already privileged by capital, thus offering a ‘get-out’ from the urban rat-race. The overwhelming whiteness of the smallholding, and the wider community that envelops Reichardt’s activists (a tendency in the demography of her films more generally) could be seen as a relatively verisimilar reflection of ‘mainstream’ environmentalism that is lightly satirical. Reading reparatively, Fusco and Seymour

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<sup>150</sup> Norgaard, ‘Making Sense’, p. 440.



suggest that ‘the film reminds us of how working-class whites were pitted against poor people of colour [by the Right] in a way that obfuscated their similarities in terms of class.’<sup>151</sup> As Fusco and Seymour also point out, the Pacific Northwest — which serves as the backdrop not just for *Night Moves* but for several of Reichardt’s other films, including *Old Joy* (2006), *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), *Meek’s Cutoff* (2010), and *First Cow* (2019) — has long been a political stage for ‘an environmental culture war, with environmentalist and working-class citizens positioned on either side of a widening chasm.’<sup>152</sup> Despite Reichardt’s own allegiance to exploring the environmental specificities of the region, and the state of Oregon more specifically (which perhaps represents its own form of reparative dedication to locality), *Night Moves* also speaks to a more insidious absence of ‘commune’ that is pervasive in the film. Through exposing the tenacity of both ecological and structural inequalities, it reveals the ‘danger’ that, for many inhabiting ‘the millennial neoliberal moment’, activism risks becoming a leisure pursuit for those who (quite literally) can afford it: simply a case of ‘activism becomes what one does if he “feels like it” and “community” looks like an increasingly fractured set of subcultures — which [...] are incapable of offering real care for the down-and-out.’<sup>153</sup>

### **Care at the Margins**

These questions of environmental community, and of ‘real care’ that are suspended by *Night Moves*, move us towards the ‘alternatives’ the film offers to the bleakness of its ideological failure. I am wary that splitting Reichardt’s film into ‘small plans’ versus ‘big plans’ risks falling prey to the same critical binarism warned against by both Sedgwick and Ngai. But does there exist within the critique of monkeywrenching instigated by Reichardt’s film a more viable mode of environmental knowing, one beyond the narrow vision of paranoia? Any framework of ‘real care’

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<sup>151</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelby Reichardt*, p. 31.

<sup>152</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelby Reichardt*, p. 72.

<sup>153</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelby Reichardt*, p. 29.

would seem incompatible with Reichardt's trio of activists, whose relationships simply give way under the duress of paranoia's vigorous reach, despite those bonds ostensibly having long roots. Likewise, and notwithstanding the outwardly 'harmonious' structure of the farmstead's operation, Josh's excommunication from the clan at the first sign of (albeit very big) trouble suggests some measure of indifference to the individuals that comprise it.

Elsewhere in the film, the activists seem barely capable of summoning the most basic affective tenets that communal living implies, at least in the intended sense of *commune* as the OED describes it: 'a. *intransitive*. To talk together, converse *with* someone; to communicate; to confer, consult'; b. †(a) *transitive*. To talk over together, confer about, discuss, debate, deliberate over; c. *intransitive*. To communicate intimately (*with* someone), esp. at a deep level of mental or spiritual engagement; to attain a state of rapport and spiritual unity *with* something.<sup>154</sup> Their ineptitude to manoeuvre themselves towards this state of rapport is confirmed when, snacking at a deserted picnic table prior to the explosion, the activists encounter a hiker (the obligatory 'mystical hippy-type character' that shows up in Reichardt's films) who, grinning awkwardly, recounts how he 'used to come here back in the eighties [...] man those were wild times. Wild times.'<sup>155</sup> As the man rambles on about nerve damage in his legs and the therapeutic effects *rambling* has on his condition ('gotta keep walking all the time'), their radical disinterest becomes still more pronounced. Moved on by the force of their indifference, he bids them to 'take care', an injunction that is met with open derision and snickering by the trio, who see this interloper as a mere blip in the denouement of their big plan. Shortly before his arrival, poring over maps to compare the divergent routes they will take home, they remind one another to abstain from

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<sup>154</sup> 'Commune', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/37298?rskey=LJhzwv&result=3#eid>> [accessed 6 September 2021]

<sup>155</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, pp. 120–121.

keeping in touch after the detonation takes place. As these words ('No contact', 'No contact', 'No contact') circulate in the round like a chorus or an incantation, their semantic repetition deliberately (over)emphasises the weak spot in an otherwise 'strong' political strategy. As Fusco and Seymour observe, 'Being together [is] a phenomenon of time [...]. Such exploration is, as Reichardt has it, fundamentally temporal: the capacity to spend time, to *invest* time, in others.'<sup>156</sup> Part of this ecological thinking, Reichardt's films suggest, ought to '[remind] us of how ethical responses are shaped, if not *determined*, by available resources, both material and immaterial, natural and manmade. As Reichardt asks, are care and compassion — *and time for others* — in short supply as well?'<sup>157</sup>

As the film progresses, the fragility and disposability of the relationships structuring Reichardt's text is also incrementally *exposed*, as Dena's fling with Harmon and Josh's resentment fuel a conspiracy to murder that results in the untimely dissolution of their homosocial bond as, having coaxed Josh into Dena's murder and chaperoned its completion, Harmon ditches him. In the film's final scenes Josh calls Harmon on an unsecure line, making a cagey attempt to communicate that 'D isn't in the picture anymore'. His confession is met with cold reciprocity by Harmon: 'You gotta get real lost now. You gotta real lost and stay lost.' Josh's desperate proposition ('I don't know, I was thinking maybe like... You and I could go somewhere like kinda quiet. Just out in the middle of nowhere or something') harks back to a fantasy of 're-wilding' that is gestured at earlier in Reichardt's film when the two men are discussing Randy, an old friend with whom they have both lapsed contact. Harmon recalls that Randy 'was squatting in Eagle Creek last I heard', to which Josh remarks: 'Back out into the wild. Lucky man.' One is reminded of Fusco and Seymour's observation that 'Reichardt's films in the 2000s show how

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<sup>156</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelby Reichardt*, p. 68.

<sup>157</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelby Reichardt*, p. 68.

easy it is for one accident to knock a person out of society'.<sup>158</sup> For Josh, the prospect of being 'knocked out' contains the glimmer of wish fulfilment, gleaning a rare smile. The allusion is redolent of Abbey's own feted return to the 'wilderness' upon his death in 1989: he 'asked his two closest friends to help retrieve him and take him away and out, deep into the country that he loved, and let him die there and bury him accordingly. No trace. No totem. No leaving. His wish was successful'.<sup>159</sup> Josh's own desire to go to ground, as it were, is also more or less 'successful'; by the film's close he has realised his ambition of 'opting-out', his compulsion to get off-grid now fulfilled by the fugitive's subterranean need to remain permanently undetected. And yet this cut-off comes at what affective cost? Symbolically, Josh disassembles his cell phone, the device that has served as the one link between him and Harmon, scattering its parts in the trunk of another car. Coming as it does from a stance of total vulnerability, this act of severance seems to originate less from any paranoid motivation than it does from sheer loneliness — a commitment to reifying his newly isolated state, one he hasn't entirely chosen.

To a certain extent, Josh's brief stint at being 'on the run' ticks a stylistic box for Reichardt's films which, as friend and producer Todd Haynes suggests, 'are all sort of failed road movies'.<sup>160</sup> Whereas Reichardt's first feature, *River of Grass* (1994), luxuriates in the trope of the 'fugitive', *Night Moves* offers no such viewing pleasure in the fact of 'getting away' with murder. Here, 'getting lost' simply looks like yet another facet of the paranoid agenda, as Josh finds himself newly imbricated in the very same systems he sought to evade. Reading reparatively, one might observe that Josh is forced back on his own resources and is left, finally, looking at himself, not *outside* but inward; a confrontation that may also generate the conditions for a generative moment of self-exposure, or perhaps a transition towards the kinder or 'more

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<sup>158</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelby Reichardt*, p. 83.

<sup>159</sup> See Preface to *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, p. ix.

<sup>160</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelby Reichardt*, p. 35.

meditative' state advocated by Koresky at the beginning of the chapter. As Ngai writes, while 'paranoid logic always offers "escaping" as one option, it offers "thinking" as the other: "*As in theories of capital, realise this situation and see it as the beginning place for all current thinking or escaping.*"<sup>161</sup> The hope is that, as Ngai suggests, any such reckoning with 'the small subject's inevitable complicity (or perhaps even her "paranoia") might eventually become "the condition of agency rather than its destruction."<sup>162</sup>

Such agency is peculiarly difficult however for Reichardt's character-ciphers to attain, ensnared as they are between the accidental predisposition of Reichardt's filmmaking, and the film's own stylistic investment in the paranoid mode. Josh's criminal abdication, as well as the failure to hold himself accountable for Dena's murder, would seem to refute even the possibility of 'owning' a more negative mode of agency, her death ambiguously disavowed as 'quitting by accident'. This paranoid function is reinscribed in the circularity of the film's final scenes, in which Josh wanders aimlessly around a retail outlet specialising in outward-bound exploits (think camping, hunting, fishing), a sad recapitulation of his freeing 'saunter' through the thicket at the film's opening. At the cash-register, he begins the process of applying for a job, listlessly filling in the store's paperwork, and finds himself confronted with one of the earliest surveillance technologies: a convex mirror. Often known as bankers' eyes, these devices expand the optical field, allowing in-store CCTV cameras to refract their own reach, and store-clerks to heighten their capacity for observation. Their integration into retail spaces serves a dual security function; while monitoring for 'threats' like shoplifters, it also allows shoppers to move uninterrupted through the aisles without crashing into one another, thus lubricating capital's flow. In this one sense, at least, Reichardt's film resembles its cinematic antecedent: Gene Hackman's private

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<sup>161</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 331.

<sup>162</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 331.

investigator ends Arthur Penn's 1975 neo-noir in similarly murky circumstances, bobbing on the eddying waters of the Florida Keys, 'circling the abyss, a no-exit comment on the post-1968, post-Watergate times'.<sup>163</sup> Like Josh, Harry Moseby is also left gazing into a reflective surface that resists the easy pleasures of catharsis, proffering only further questions, seemingly without any hope of resolution. The film's critical depreciation as a 'flop' — with all its implications of flaccid, disordered and failed ejaculation — was driven in part by its formal failure to deliver on the guarantees and assurances of *exposure* that structure the thriller, a critique that seems to reinforce the phallogocentric requirements of a genre that, as Jameson makes clear, demands epistemology be produced *by* the text itself.<sup>164</sup> Both 'men of suspicion', as Sedgwick would have it, Eisenberg and Hackman are each implicated in the (dubiously) 'accidental' deaths of women, each ending their hermeneutic quests only to discover themselves further adrift in the corrupt, bloated systems whose 'exposure' formed the guiding force of their pursuit.

The cumulative effect of *Night Moves*'s final scenes is an unsettling feeling of renewed circumscription, resulting in agency's total foreclosure. The emphasis on monitoring here generates the heavy conviction that there exists no one true possibility of living 'off-grid', and that the formative condition of life *on the grid* is complicity with the same bureaucratic systems that perpetuate environmental harms. What are we to make of this utterly paranoid conclusion? According to Ngai, not only is it perfectly possible for a text to reproduce paranoia in the very moment of asking questions about it, but there is perhaps something inherently absurd in the critical assumption that a text *ought* to solicit specific responses from the viewing subject, particularly 'when the possibilities for responding have been [already] predetermined by an

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<sup>163</sup> Manhola Dargis, 'Arthur Penn, A Director Attuned to His Country', *New York Times*, 10 October 2010.

<sup>164</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 331.

existing generic grid' — in this case, the thriller.<sup>165</sup> But how to go about 'escaping' or 'thinking' beyond capital's limitations when there is seemingly nowhere to run within the imaginary of Reichardt's film? Josh's fresh imbrication in a world of corporate retail — a chain store that feels geared towards a peculiarly rugged mode of macho hobbyism — feels like a peculiarly stark example of eco-deradicalisation that is also a fitting diagnosis for the 'problem' of Left politics, as described by Stuart Hall:

Traditionalism is hardly new in left politics, but it has become pronounced and pernicious in recent years [...]. [W]hen this traditionalism is conjoined *with a loss of faith* in the egalitarian vision so fundamental to the socialist challenge to the capitalist mode of distribution, and a loss of faith in the emancipatory vision fundamental to the socialist challenge to the capitalist mode of production, the problem of left traditionalism becomes very serious indeed. What emerges is a Left that operates without either a deep and radical critique of the status quo or a compelling alternative to the existing order of things (emphasis mine).<sup>166</sup>

Josh's own left traditionalism, the failure of his environmental 'radicalism' to slot into a broader matrix of intersectional critique, constitutes a 'serious problem' for Reichardt's film. The emancipatory vision of the fertiliser bomb delivering the river from an oppressive dam or exploding the status quo doesn't quite 'deliver' on its promise, either for Reichardt's activists (bringing in its wake a total loss of faith), or for her viewer (who is left to grapple with the seeming lack of any compelling alternative). As Sedgwick suggests, mustering an affective investment in any political cause arguably demands some aspect of paranoid sentiment, which can be an *enabling* condition for critical thinking, allowing the seeker to peer behind the veil of capitalist normalcy. The ineptitude of paranoia as an affect for acting or organising against environmental degradation would seem to demand the temperance of reparative affect in order to look beyond a purely destructive or deconstructive critique towards a 'better' horizon.

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<sup>165</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 328.

<sup>166</sup> Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholy', p. 26.

Certainly, any ‘faithful’ interpretation of Abbey’s novel would have represented a failure of imagination on the part of Reichardt herself, a nostalgic capitulation to the ‘dynamic activism’ of yore and a concession to the kind of left melancholy Brown describes. Instead, in pointing towards the exhaustion of destructive or paranoid methods while also refuting the glib salve of a straightforward, paint-by-numbers ‘solution’, the film produces a messier, more ambivalent mode of environmental knowing.

### **Conclusion**

Does *Night Moves* contain any glimmer of a ‘compelling alternative’ for environmentalism? Other than proving confirmation that failure is, as Ngai suggests, ‘the unavoidable consequence of imagining political transformation’?<sup>167</sup> Despite the manifest unsuccess of their big plan, it still seems clear enough that the environmental status quo as it is depicted in Reichardt’s neorealist world *isn’t working*. And yet, nor does the ‘localised’ vision of ‘small plans’ at the film’s outset seem to hold much redemptive appeal for Reichardt’s agitated, impatient eco-saboteurs, for whom the local reads as both parochial and trite. How then to manoeuvre beyond the push-pull of blithe hoping or abject despair suggested by these respectively paranoid and reparative eco-stances? Reichardt’s elongated, reflective exploration of paranoia’s failings, together with her refusal to encrypt either fast or slow environmentalism as ‘the answer’ perhaps constitutes *something like* a reparative intervention in the seductive binarism of ecocritical discourse that incrementally frames the epistemologically unruly threat of planetary extinction as a ‘problem’ in need of ‘solving’. Indeed, in its resistance to a totalising vision of climate crisis, what *Night Moves* ‘reveals’ is the (very real) difficulty of locating oneself within the fray, as is deftly captured in Seymour and Fusco’s observation that ‘[t]here are too many players; too many victims who are also perpetrators; underlying causes that are too big and too abstract to swing at, or perhaps even

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<sup>167</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 331.



to comprehend, [ranging] from capitalism to the surveillance state.<sup>168</sup> Reichardt's text also *exposes* the parity between the more fervent strains of climate paranoia and climate denial which, if not identical, are at least shown to be interrelated. Denial would seem to be abroad in both the paranoid mindset of the climate denier *and* that of the zealous environmental convert, allowing individual actors to hotly pursue the trail of 'the truth' while (often) remaining often wilfully unalert to the presence of the 'T' in the system. At least in this sense, Reichardt's film recognises that, as Sedgwick encouraged, some confluence of paranoia and reparation inflects all the best critical projects. This ambivalence is felt even in the awkward, exhaustive pacing of her film, which might be said to fall prey to its own case of 'bad timing' in the sense of its durational overplay. As Ngai suggests:

it has been noted that cinema in general "has trouble with summary," often resorting to devices ranging from montage sequences to "cruder solutions [. . .] like peeling calendars," the preference for the narrative stretch over a compression that "forces us to take in the entire story almost instantaneously" might also be said to reflect the difference between the paranoia that suffuses the postwar film noir and the fear that drives classical tragedy; as a feeling without a clearly defined object, paranoia would logically promote a more ambient aesthetic, one founded on a temporality very different from the "suddenness" central to Aristotle's aesthetics of fear. The anticathartic device of dilating the time in which any particular incident takes place thus accentuates the manner in which these uneventful moments mirror the general situation of obstructed agency.<sup>169</sup>

Reichardt's own formal resistance to these devices bespeaks her artistic refusal to commit to a vision of sudden onset or accelerated crisis which, in its turn, might be said to constitute if not an *explicitly* reparative move, then at least an intervention in the hegemony of paranoid environmental aesthetics. Indeed, despite its thematic preoccupations, *Night Moves* itself marks a

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<sup>168</sup> Fusco and Seymour, *Kelly Reichardt*, p. 73.

<sup>169</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, pp. 13–14.

reparative intervention in the overprocessed, bombastic, and panicky aesthetics that currently saturate contemporary filmmaking about environmental degradation, a genre whose optics (as we saw in the introduction) have been steadily infiltrated by paranoid affect since it first gained mainstream cinematic popularity. Finally, there is Reichardt's repeat exposure to Oregon, a locality her oeuvre has tracked over the course of five meditative, glacially-paced films, and some thirteen years of direction.<sup>170</sup> Reichardt's own 'stuckness', her slow and rigorous dedication to constructing an 'uneventful' cinematic portrait of this region, offers a counternarrative to the optics of eco-decimation, one that foregrounds the value of patience in environmental thinking at the same time that it shows *not all is yet lost* in the natural world. While the film accentuates the obstructive ('the grid' or the 'generative blockage' of the dam) and obstructed agencies ('the ideologue') that keep environmental 'progress' at a standstill, the film's ultimate suggestion is that obstruction, far from being a hinderance, might also give rise to its own compelling investigative models — offering its own astute forms of environmental meaning.

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<sup>170</sup> *First Cow* is set in 1820, whereas *Night Moves*'s action would appear to be verisimilar with the time of its release, 2013. The five films Reichardt has made about the Pacific Northwest (mentioned above) thus span some two-hundred years of Oregon-based storytelling, their narratives ranging from the early nineteenth century to the present day, more or less. The first of Reichardt's Oregon films, *Old Joy* was released in 2006; the latest, *First Cow*, in 2019.



#### 4. On the importance of being earnest: serialising eco-anxiety in the short fictions of Julie Hecht

I have no experience with the well-adjusted.<sup>1</sup>

— Julie Hecht

Behind the “straight” public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private, zany experience of the thing.<sup>2</sup>

— Susan Sontag

On Thursday 23 September 2014, actor Leonardo DiCaprio stood before an assembled audience at the United Nations’ climate summit. Donning a black tux, his beard full, his hair slicked into a low man bun, the newly appointed ‘Messenger of Peace’ addressed the room. ‘[N]ot as an expert but as a concerned citizen, one of the 400,000 people who marched in the streets of New York [...] and the billions of others around the world who want to solve our climate crisis.’<sup>3</sup> From behind a black marble podium, he enumerates the threats that menace our world:

Every week we’re seeing new and undeniable climate events, evidence that accelerated climate change is here right now. Droughts are intensifying, our oceans are acidifying [...], we are seeing extreme weather events, and the west Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets melting at unprecedented rates’.<sup>4</sup>

DiCaprio’s activist clout is well known; he has been a tireless advocate for environmentalism since 1998 when, at the tender age of 24, he ‘established his foundation with the mission of

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Writer Julie Hecht on Living in the World as a Normal Person’, *Fresh Air with Terry Gross*, 25 February 1997, <<https://freshairarchive.org/segments/writer-julie-hecht-living-world-normal-person>> [accessed 5 March 2021]

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Leonardo DiCaprio, ‘Leonardo DiCaprio at the UN: “Climate change is not hysteria — it’s a fact”’, 23 September 2014, *Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/23/leonardo-dicaprio-un-climate-change-speech-new-york>> [accessed 2 March 2021]

<sup>4</sup> ‘Leonardo delivers landmark speech at the United Nations climate summit’, 27 April 2017, <<https://www.leonardodicaprio.org/leonardo-delivers-landmark-speech-at-the-united-nations-climate-summit>> [accessed 7 February 2021]

protecting the world's last wild places.<sup>5</sup> As if his celebrity were something readily forgotten, or his presence behind this podium could be somehow severed from it, DiCaprio reminds the assembled delegates: 'Leaders of the world, I pretend for a living, but you do not. The people [have] made their voices heard [...]. Now it is your turn [...] to answer humankind's greatest challenge'.<sup>6</sup>

DiCaprio wields his 'confession' — that he is guilty of 'faking it' for a living, of 'play[ing] fictitious characters solving fictitious problems' — in full awareness of its rhetorical weight. As David Foster Wallace suggests, this is part of the ruse of the televisual. The demand of viewership entails that we collectively 'acquiesce to the delusion that the people on the TV don't know they're being watched, to the fantasy that we're somehow transcending privacy and feeding on unself-conscious human activity [...]. [T]he performers behind the glass are — varying degrees of thespian talent notwithstanding — absolute *geniuses* at seeming unwatched.'<sup>7</sup> This self-conscious moment of reassurance seems intended as a foil to the suspicions of anyone watching that we can trust he now speaks completely in earnest, that *this* marks a peculiar suspension of his own actorly talent for *insincerity*, the skill of his craft. In the very act however of affirming that, on this rare occasion, he *hasn't* prepared what Foster Wallace terms, 'a special watchable self', DiCaprio opens a tiny fissure, into which doubt begins to flood, creating the uneasy sensation that what 'we' are viewing is in fact a kind of grand simulation.<sup>8</sup> What reads like a bald statement of fact also comes off as weirdly aphoristic, reading like a frank diagnosis of what Claire Colebrook has described as 'the huge problem of postmodernity' — namely that 'our very

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<sup>5</sup> See *Leonardo DiCaprio*, United Nations [online], 2014, <<https://www.un.org/en/messengers-peace/leonardo-dicaprio>> [accessed 16 August 2021]

<sup>6</sup> DiCaprio, *Guardian*.

<sup>7</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (London: Abacus, 2012), pp. 24–25.

<sup>8</sup> Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram', p. 23.

historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation, and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony.<sup>9</sup>

The irony is redoubled when DiCaprio's earlier speech is watched alongside his acceptance for Best Actor at the 2016 Oscars, snagged for his turn as a frontiersman, in Alejandro G. Iñárritu's *The Revenant* (2015). This win, which finally put paid to the 'Poor Leo' meme, also has the effect of making the U.N. look like mere dress rehearsal. Here, a clean-cut DiCaprio appears before a shimmering curtain of Swarovski crystals, their glint refracting the twinkle in his blue eyes. Eliding almost entirely the materiality of movie-making, DiCaprio describes the making of *The Revenant* as a 'transcendent cinematic experience [...] about man's relationship to the natural world' — a world that DiCaprio and the rest of the film's crew 'collectively felt, in 2015, as the hottest year in recorded history' when production was forced to move 9000 miles from Canada to Argentina, in search of new snow.<sup>10</sup> A plight it becomes harder to sympathise with when we consider that it cost \$135 million to make *The Revenant*, or that one of the 'bodies' he thanks — 20th Century Fox — is the same production studio behind another DiCaprio vehicle — the notoriously environmentally 'dirty' film, *The Beach*.<sup>11</sup> 'Climate change is real', DiCaprio reiterates: 'it is happening right now. It is the most urgent threat facing our entire species, and we need to work collectively together and stop procrastinating'.<sup>12</sup> The affective sucker-punch here is that catch-all 'we' — the nimble rhetorical appeal to a joint species-being. With this assertion, the camera pans away from his face, alighting with belaboured intensity on his *Titanic* co-star Kate Winslet, who watches, dewy-eyed, her hands clutching her face. This clunky evocation of *Titanic* (another film that is, in its own way, about 'man's' fractious

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<sup>9</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Irony: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Leonardo DiCaprio winning Best Actor / 88th Oscars (2016)*, online video recording, YouTube, 23 March 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpyrefzvTpI>> [accessed 4 February 2021]

<sup>11</sup> Peter Flanigan, 'The Environmental Cost of Filmmaking', *UCLA Entertainment Law Review*, 10 (2002), 69-96 (p. 72).

<sup>12</sup> *Leonardo DiCaprio winning Best Actor*.

relationship with nature) is imbued with a freighted double ‘meaning’. Indeed, its sentiment seems almost deliberately engineered to sate fans of the franchise, promising the couple’s survival beyond the hostile, icy lifeworld of the film, at the same time that it premonishes the collective peril climate catastrophe casts over ‘our’ own, the sinister image of the sinking ship invoking real-world visions of melting ice floes and glacier calving that casts a long shadow of doubt over the prospect of our own species’ chances of making it out alive.

Little need be made here of the ironies inherent in DiCaprio ‘speaking truth to power’ (all those ‘big’ corporations, and ‘big’ polluters) in a room full of well-intentioned ‘gliterati’, nor of his *selective* environmentalism, which remains a favourite topic of tabloid media.<sup>13</sup> Such hypocrisy was already glossed elsewhere by Foster Wallace, in an essay where he skewers ‘the grotesquerie of watching an industry congratulate itself on its pretense that it’s still an art form, of hearing people in \$5,000 gowns invoke lush clichés of surprise and humility scripted by publicists, etc. — the whole cynical postmodern deal [...]. Underneath it all, though, we know the whole thing sucks’.<sup>14</sup> As Peter Flanigan observes, although ‘[t]he process of filmmaking is often thought of as a “generally benign, clean industry”’ and ‘the medium of film is regularly used as a tool to further environmental ideals’, cinema’s carbon footprint doesn’t lag so far behind those ghoulish ‘big polluters’ or ‘big corporations’ DiCaprio lambasts.<sup>15</sup> Certainly DiCaprio’s sense of ‘belonging’ is differently leveraged here; clearly, the elite ‘we’ in which he brackets himself within *this* room is not identical with the earlier ‘we’ of the UN assembly, where he appealed to world leaders *qua* citizen, emphasising his membership of the polis.

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<sup>13</sup> For two glowing examples of the ‘debate’ on celebrity climate hypocrisy, see David Roberts, ‘Rich climate activist Leonardo DiCaprio lives a carbon-intensive lifestyle, and that’s (mostly) fine’, *Vox*, 2 March 2016, <<https://www.vox.com/2016/3/2/11143310/leo-dicaprios-carbon-lifestyle>> [accessed 15 July 2021]. See also Robert Rapier, ‘Leonardo DiCaprio’s Carbon Footprint Is Much Higher Than He Thinks’, *Forbes*, 1 March 2016, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2016/03/01/leonardo-dicaprios-carbon-footprint-is-much-higher-than-he-thinks/>> [accessed 18 July 2021]

<sup>14</sup> David Foster Wallace, ‘Big Red Son’, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2005), p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Flanigan, ‘The Environmental Cost’, p. 69.

Unsurprisingly, DiCaprio approaches both speeches with the same earnestness of endeavour he brings to every role, reproducing the same *rousing* affect summoned by his myriad performances on the ‘big’ screen. And yet, notwithstanding his impeccable showmanship (or the two decades of activism bolstering his ‘message’), this doesn’t prevent both speeches from feeling in some way inflected by something of the Actor’s corny, hammy, or hokey stylings: performative hallmarks that are antithetical to the Method approach that has won DiCaprio such acclaim in his day-job, in particular as Inárritu’s Hugh Glass.<sup>16</sup> In the very *fact* of the message’s redoubling (and the suspicious fungibility of the contexts in which DiCaprio repeats it), the possibility of determination — of figuring out whether he *actually* means what he says — would seem to be thrown into utter disarray.

Reading comparatively, these two speeches open onto questions of truth and sincerity, facticity, and fiction, that cut to the heart of the aesthetic problems around climate change, and the prospect of eco-catastrophe. They link up, too, with the wider conditions of postmodernity and what ‘authentic’ political participation or commitment might look like in a prevailing era of half-truths and ‘fake news’. As Nicole Seymour has observed, the ludic sticks to environmental problems just as readily as it does any other global ‘issue’: climate change discourse is itself ‘defined by ironies and riddled with absurdities’.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Donald Trump’s own views on climate change have often, in their very incoherence, been unintentionally comedic, lurching from assertions that it’s all an ‘expensive hoax’ to claims that ‘it’s a very *serious* subject’ (emphasis mine).<sup>18</sup> Such inchoate pronouncements seem neatly to encapsulate the problem of *eironeia*, defined quite simply by the first-century orator Quintilian as ‘saying what is contrary to what is

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<sup>16</sup> Dan Jackson, ‘11 Crazy Things Actors Have Done to Prepare for Roles’, *Thrillist*, 28 February 2018, <<https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/method-acting-stories>> [accessed 16 July 2021]. As part of DiCaprio’s process for *The Revenant* he ostensibly took a ‘furry nap’, sleeping inside an animal carcass in order to more fully inhabit his character.

<sup>17</sup> Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Helier Cheung, ‘What does Trump actually believe on climate change?’, *BBC*, 23 January 2020, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-51213003>> [accessed 8 February 2021]



meant'.<sup>19</sup> That is, as Claire Colebrook puts it: 'The problem of irony is at one with the problem of politics: how do we know what others really mean, and on what basis can we secure the sincerity and authenticity of speech?'<sup>20</sup>

Given the wholesale insecurity of 'authentic' speech under the conditions of postmodernity, not to mention the geological 'instability' signified by 'the' Anthropocene, it perhaps goes without saying that DiCaprio's activism cannot be severed from the taint of theatrics, or performance. After all, as Susan Sontag insists: 'To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.'<sup>21</sup> Let me be clear: there is nothing outwardly 'campy' about DiCaprio's speech, per se, nor about DiCaprio himself. His ascent from epicene boyhood into 'straight' manhood was confirmed long ago, and he retains little of the seraphic beauty — veering towards Camp, at once 'totally androgynous' — that led French filmmaker Céline Sciamma to refer to Titanic's sex scenes as 'totally queer'.<sup>22</sup> As Sontag points out, however, the 'pure[st] examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious [...] In naïve, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails.'<sup>23</sup> Inherent in both speeches is a tension between the self-styled earnestness of political commitment and a certain stylistic absurdity that makes DiCaprio's speech an example of humourlessness *par excellence*. In turn, the almost-total absence of jocularitas in DiCaprio's speeches has, in many ways, become something of a baseline expectation for environmental activists and advocates, whose rhetorical stylings often give rise to an elusive generality of seriousness in their *tone* as much as their content.<sup>24</sup> This

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<sup>19</sup> Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 2

<sup>20</sup> Colebrook, *Irony*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>21</sup> Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Emily VanDerWerff, 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire director Céline Sciamma on her ravishing romantic masterpiece', *Vox*, 19 February 2020, <<https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/2/19/21137213/portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire-celine-sciamma-interview>> [accessed 15 January 2021]

<sup>23</sup> Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, pp. 7–15.

<sup>24</sup> By tone, here, I take to mean what Sianne Ngai has described as 'the promiscuously used yet curiously underexamined concept of literary "tone" ... [an] affective-aesthetic idea [...] which is reducible neither

stoking of ‘high seriousness’ also runs rife in the sphere of cultural production where, as Lucy Burnett has observed, the urgency of manufacturing engagement with environmental problems, coupled with the drive towards action, has wound up asserting itself over aesthetic imperatives, despite creative practitioners often vehemently denouncing such didacticism.<sup>25</sup>

How then do we go about squaring the (necessary) investment in serious environmental rhetoric or endeavour, a symptom of political commitment, with the fact of its (occasional) stylistic absurdity? To what extent do these speeches extend into a wider problem or *excess* of sincerity already existing in environmentalism? And is DiCaprio’s own serial earnestness diagnostic of a broader tonal ‘problem’ in environmental discourse? Such purported humourlessness has been long been a site of derision for anti-environmentalists, often leading to the vilification of environmentalism as a movement and transforming the environmentally minded into the butt of cultural jokes.<sup>26</sup> Recall, for instance, Donald Trump’s sarcastic tweets following activist Greta Thunberg’s excoriating speech at the U.N. in September 2019: “‘She seems like a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future. So nice to see!’”<sup>27</sup> As the collapse of ‘high’ office into ironical cyber-sniping suggests, this pernicious

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to the emotional response a text solicits from its reader nor to representations of feelings within the world of its story... the slippery zone between fake and real feelings’. As Ngai makes clear, the function of tone cannot be entirely contained by claims of New Critics such as I. A. Richards and T. S. Eliot, for whom it held ‘connotations of “stance”, or ‘dramatic “attitude”’ (‘namely, a speaker’s “attitude to his listener”), all of which actively sought to ‘de-emotionaliz[e]’ tone and strip back the affective component that accompanies its more everyday usage (I don’t like the *tone* of your voice). Rather in Ngai’s definition, tone indicates ‘a global and hyper-relational concept of *feeling* that encompasses attitude: a literary text’s affective bearing, orientation, or “set toward” its audience and world.’ See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 24 and pp. 41–43.

<sup>25</sup> Lucy Burnett, ‘Firing the climate canon — a literary critique of the genre of climate change’, *Green Letters* (2018), DOI: 10.1080/14688417.2018.1472027.

<sup>26</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Trump’s Twitter account has since been deactivated but for details of the altercation see Aaron Rupar, ‘Trump’s tweet about Greta Thunberg is one of his ugliest yet’, *Vox*, 24 September 2019, <<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/9/24/20881541/trump-greta-thunberg-tweet-un>> [accessed 17 July 2021]. Trump’s derision forms part of a lamentable ableist commentary spanning the political Right, one that takes aim at Thunberg’s autism, while also attempting to denature the youth climate strikes she has spearheaded as mere ‘alarmist’ response.

hostility runs rampant especially in denialist corners of the public sphere and in the U.S., where the political support for denialism has continued to operate largely unchecked, often in cahoots with the specious lobbying of fossil fuel interests.

Such lampooning also signals the extent to which the comedic increasingly figures as an expectation spanning social life and interactions, a pressure that is felt across ‘all zones of modern life — politics, education, journalism, even religion’, to such an extent that funny-ness has become almost a precondition of social membership both online and off.<sup>28</sup> As Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai argue: ‘These operations of comedy as judgment about aesthetic and social form have also morphed into an overarching tone of late capitalist sociability, affecting how people self-consciously play as well as work together and the spaces where they do so (including Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube).’<sup>29</sup> Such pronouncements have thus become symptomatic of the incremental tendency for humour to erupt into humourlessness, or the enmeshment of comedy and its opposites. As they put it, in this collision: ‘the funny is always tripping over the not funny, sometimes appearing identical to it.’<sup>30</sup>

For some, however, this infiltration marks a more sinister development. Árpád Szakolczai, for instance, has lamented the ongoing “‘commodification” of the public sphere’, viewing ‘comedy as a maleficent virus, “infecting” Western Europe [...] transforming politics into farce and the public sphere into a place of “permanent liminality.”’<sup>31</sup> The irony here being, of course, that Szakolczai’s own anxiety about the rapid ‘theatricalization of social life’ produces a critical gloss that hoists itself by its own startling humourlessness; doing far more to reveal him as a purveyor of critical mirthlessness than it does to convince the reader of the permanent

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<sup>28</sup> Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, ‘Comedy Has Issues’, *Critical Inquiry* 43 (2017), 233-249 (p. 237).

<sup>29</sup> Berlant and Ngai, ‘Comedy Has Issues’, p. 237.

<sup>30</sup> Berlant and Ngai, ‘Comedy Has Issues’, p. 234.

<sup>31</sup> Berlant and Ngai, ‘Comedy Has Issues’, p. 236.

absurdity of the social world.<sup>32</sup> While Berlant and Ngai emphasise the *originality* of Szokolczai's locating comedy at the centre of the public sphere, they also disagree with his claim; indeed they are careful to point out that, despite what may seem like a mandate for playfulness within social life, or a directive for people 'to be funny all the time' (a light-heartedness that trails workplace culture, in particular), many corners of public life (the culture industry included) are still dominated by a tendency towards 'high seriousness':

So many recent events testify to an intensification of humorlessness that seems to run counter to, but may be actually compatible with, the becoming permanent of comedy [...]. [I]n particular, humorlessness and humor are as inextricably linked as, well, inextricably and linked. The mirthless are an especial object of ridicule, even intolerable — but as such, essential for comedy to happen — and perhaps because, as Friedrich Nietzsche suggests, mirthlessness threatens to consume the world.<sup>33</sup>

The mandatory seriousness observed by celebrities and activists like DiCaprio or Thunberg leaves these figures personally vulnerable to pillory by anti-progressives on the political Right, almost as if the very effort to stamp out the ontological threat of climate denialism and reassert the 'truth' of anthropogenic climate change creates the self-same insistence that environmentalism *is* a very serious subject. And yet, in many ways, the maintenance of tonal mirthlessness here and elsewhere in the environmental mainstream is an outcrop or trickle-down of the discursive tenor already set by purveyors of environmental science and environmental humanities alike. The affective bearing of mainstream environmentalism is corroborated not just by the sphere of cultural production but, additionally, by tendencies already enshrined within the academy and criticism itself; as scholars like Seymour have suggested, it draws on stylistic and moral cues already formulated by eco-critics themselves.

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<sup>32</sup> Berlant and Ngai, 'Comedy Has Issues', p. 236.

<sup>33</sup> Berlant and Ngai, 'Comedy Has Issues', pp. 237–240.

Indeed, the connection between humourlessness and environmentalism has become more pronounced in recent critical turns occurring in the environmental humanities. Emerging in response to the prominence of this aesthetic hegemony, Seymour's 2018 book *Bad Environmentalism* marked an attempt to carve out works that 'reject the affects and sensibilities typically associated with environmentalism which include guilt, shame, didacticism, prescriptiveness, sentimentality, reverence, seriousness, sincerity, earnestness, sanctimony, self-righteousness, and wonder — as well as the heteronormativity and whiteness of the movement.'<sup>34</sup> Precisely this normative set of affects (themselves bound to 'respectable' values that uphold normativity at all expenses) allow mainstream environmentalism to uphold its credentials as 'authentic and straightforward', often blinkering its supporters to the potential for more heterogenous modes of engagement, or to the possibility for variances within the 'green' script.<sup>35</sup> This aversion has often secured the reproduction of certain aesthetics (like, say, the beatific or the sincere) at the expense of others. In turn, and as Seymour notes, this affective canon has precipitated a reactive tendency in ecocriticism, and across the environmental humanities more widely, whose practitioners are complicit in 'reproduc[ing] the same dominant affects and sensibilities found in mainstream environmentalism', 'judg[ing] artworks primarily by their functionality: their capacity to educate the public or spark measurable change'.<sup>36</sup> Seymour's own attempts to formulate an alternative and neglected tradition of 'bad environmentalism' has at its centre the rejection of this tonal homogeneity, and 'our narrow understandings of what environmentalism looks, sounds, and most importantly, *feels like*' (emphasis mine).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 7. Speculating on why this moment of critical reckoning may not have arrived for the Environmental Humanities, Ursula Heise has attributed this faltering progress to slowness on the part of the foundational environmental movement to the uptake of the 'study of narrative and the study of metaphor [...] two things that are really important for understanding what environmentalists talk about, how they talk about it, and how people [...] advocate against certain environmental measures or against the environmental movement more broadly.' See Max Fox, 'How to Talk About the Weather', *The New Inquiry*, 7 January 2013, <<https://thenewinquiry.com/how-to-talk-about-the-weather/>> [accessed 14 July 2021]

These impediments to public engagement don't have exclusively to do with an aesthetics of humourlessness. The difficulty of consciousness-raising has been compounded by extant sociological factors, including the fact that older models of pro-environmental behaviour which may have assumed an easy linkage between increased environmental knowledge and increased environmental *concern* have crumpled under the weight of an evermore urgent and expanding slew of environmental threats.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, behavioural research over the last two decades indicates that, far from a *lack* of awareness impeding ecologically minded behaviour, having 'too much information' is likely to lead to 'emotional paralysis', rather than 'enlightened' action.<sup>39</sup> As noted by Seymour, the grand affective binaries that tend to predominate in mainstream environmentalism also tend to pitch despair against hope, and doom against optimism, often speaking to a very human 'desire for certainty and neat narratives about the future'.<sup>40</sup> As eco-anxiety — a term defined by the American Psychological Association in 2017 as a mode of severe or chronic anxiety typified by 'a chronic fear of environmental doom' — increasingly begins to inflect the dominant public mode of relating to environmental threat, becoming its elective affective bearing, there also looms the anxious question of what literature might actually *do* about climate change.<sup>41</sup> In its turn, the aesthetic question over whether or not literature is in fact capable of galvanising a politics of resistance to ecological degradation relies squarely on the (perhaps still more) pressing question of whether literature can in fact *do* anything. Precisely this twofold anxiety — the collision of fears about eco-doom with a self-reflexive fretfulness about art's own function, its apparent inertia to combat climate crisis — will comprise one of the central problematics of this chapter.

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<sup>38</sup> Anja Kollmuss & Julian Agyeman, 'Mind the Gap: Why do people act environmentally and what are the barriers to pro-environmental behavior?', *Environmental Education Research*, 8 (2002), 239-260 (p. 241).

<sup>39</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> 'Climate Change's Toll On Mental Health', *American Psychological Association*, 29 March 2017, <<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/climate-mental-health>> [accessed 8 February 2021]

Anxiety belongs to Ngai's index of 'ugly feelings', those negative affects that are marked not just by their ambivalent and 'deeply equivocal status', but also by their depletion or suspension of the faculty for political action.<sup>42</sup> While 'relatively unambiguous emotions' like hope and fear have been read, traditionally speaking, within the framework of classical political passions, those that 'link up [...] securely [...] with models of social action and transformation theorized by Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, and others', the appearance of 'ignoble' feelings like anxiety tends to constitute a less conspicuously 'powerful' response, in some cases galvanising no response at all.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Seymour cites José Esteban Muñoz's claim 'that "hope along with its other, fear, are affective structures that can be described as *anticipatory*"' (emphasis mine).<sup>44</sup> This 'special temporality', or future-orientedness, they also share with *anxiety*, a dysphoric affect belonging 'to Ernst Bloch's category of "expectation emotions"', characterised by drives that "aim less at some specific object as the fetish of their desire than at the configuration of the world in general, or (what amounts to the same thing) at the future disposition of the self."<sup>45</sup> The textual presence of such emotions tends to coincide with 'situations of passivity' that are uniquely poised to 'disclose' sites of impasse; in turn, these 'can also be thought of as allegories for an autonomous or bourgeois art's increasingly resigned and pessimistic understanding of its *own* relationship to political action'.<sup>46</sup> In a sense then, these 'predicaments posed by general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social as such' belong to the wider predicament of art's own *relevance*, a dilemma Ngai takes as 'charged with political meaning regardless of whether the obstruction is actual or fantasized, or whether the agency obstructed is individual or collective'.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, pp. 3–5.

<sup>44</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, pp. 209–210.

<sup>46</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 3.

This chapter shares with Seymour's work in its desire to expand the range of affects currently used to think through the various threats posed by climate change. Many of Seymour's textual objects are marked not just by a flat affect that countermands the schmaltzy reverence that has become a commonplace in cultural works about 'nature' but, further, by their embrace of the comic genre, thus advancing a compelling argument for the untapped potentialities of laughter or irreverence in pursuing critical environmental inquiry. Where Seymour's interest lies, however, in recuperating the latent environmental potential in 'trashy' texts that have often been derided as openly shlocky or kitsch (the Australian sitcom *Kath and Kim*, for instance, or the *Jackass* spin-off, *WildBoyz*) and with a strain of humour that is overtly funny or even crass, at times, this chapter looks instead to explore these connections between comedy and 'eco-anxiety', through the literary fiction of American writer Julie Hecht. Though frequently hilarious, Hecht's own shtick operates by contrast in a comic mode that is altogether more subtle or ambiguous, also existing within a different formal genre to those texts that are the subject of Seymour's inquiry, and thus carrying the contexts of that readership. What little critical coverage of Hecht's work has appeared in mainstream media outlets seems largely to interpret the project as a proto iteration of autofiction, a novelised form of autobiography overseen by a first-person narrator that allows the authorial 'I' to more fully inhabit her protagonist's neuroses.<sup>48</sup> Proving or disproving any contiguity between Hecht and her protagonist, however, will not be the chief concern of this chapter, which is primarily preoccupied with how the disruptive, sometimes unbearable level of the narrator's neurosis, acquires new textual meanings in the context of the chronic state of environmental anxiety that characterises the present day.

Looking beyond the immediate function of 'light relief', my interest here lies in tracing an emergent strain of comedy that probes the humourless tone that sticks to climate change

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<sup>48</sup> See Gross's *Fresh Air* segment.



discourse, through making light of the curiously humourless subjectivity that often coincides with the appearance of environmentalism and its advocates. Humourlessness, as Berlant describes it, is a convention that gets ‘associated both with political correctness *and* with the privilege that reproduces inequality as a casual, natural order of things’.<sup>49</sup> Such humourlessness is brilliantly exemplified in Hecht’s short fiction, in particular her collections *Do The Windows Open?* (1997) and *Happy Trails to You* (2008), which will be the focus of this chapter’s textual analysis. Between 1989 and 1999, at least ten of Hecht’s interlacing stories were printed in the *New Yorker*, where they met with a cultish, ‘laugh-out-loud’ reception.<sup>50</sup> This familiarity was encouraged by the recurrent appearance of the nameless, serially neurotic narrative persona that unites all her fiction, spanning both her short stories and her 2003 novel, *The Unprofessionals*.<sup>51</sup> Despite this, her work has been almost entirely overlooked within contemporary literary scholarship, an oversight made the more significant given the centrality of environmental anxiety to her work, at a moment in time before the concept had infiltrated ‘public’ discourse with the same prevalence it currently boasts in media outlets on both the left and right of the political spectrum (of course my allusion to ‘public’ discourse, here, is in turn infiltrated by the specific demographic of the cosmopolitan, summering elites that make up the social milieu of Hecht’s protagonist).<sup>52</sup> That

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<sup>49</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)’, *Critical Inquiry*, 43 (2017), 305–340 (p. 308).

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Nellins, ‘An Interview with Julie Hecht’, *The Believer*, 1 May 2008, <<https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-julie-hecht/>> [accessed 6 January 2021]. This includes the stories published in *Do the Windows Open?*, all of which first appeared in the *The New Yorker*.

<sup>51</sup> See Sara Nelson, ‘What the Hecht? The Case of the Missing Marketing Blitz’, *Observer*, 27 October 2003, <<https://observer.com/2003/10/what-the-hecht-the-case-of-the-missing-marketing-blitz/>> [accessed 12 July 2021]

<sup>52</sup> It is, of course, worth noting here that such an ‘ignorance-as-liberal-bliss’ attitude was not equally available to everyone in the 1990s, a decade that began with the IPCC’s First Assessment Report (FAR) which, in turn, laid the groundwork for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The latter report warned that global temperatures may rise by as much 2°F in 35 years. Elsewhere, a Gallup poll taken in 1991 — one year after Earth Day was enshrined as a global event — indicated that 78% of Americans identified as ‘environmentalists’, a historical high that suggests at least some measure of broad-spectrum ecological concern or ‘awareness’ among a general public. This figure has steadily declined in the intervening years, falling to 63% in 1995, 47% in 2000 and 41% in 2021. For an expanded account of these figures, see <<https://news.gallup.com/poll/348227/one-four-americans-say-environmentalists.aspx>> [accessed 6 March 2022]. Relatedly, the decade also saw an upsurge in ecoterrorist, nonviolent and grassroots environmentalist actions — too numerous to account

her stories should have been neglected in this way — as compared with the more obvious eco-affinities of literary fictions emerging around the same time, like Margaret Atwood's *Year of the Flood* (2009) or Cormac McCarthy's blockbuster *The Road* (2008), texts whose maudlin dystopian setting typically locates them in the emergent category of 'cli-fi' — can be read as further indication of the preference among eco-critics for texts that are outwardly *functional*, or serve some higher didactic purpose, as Seymour suggests. The extent to which the conservatism of this affective canon has shaped the expectations of readers (and indeed writers) around what an environmental text *should* look like cannot be underestimated, and only further proves the necessity of thinking Hecht's work alongside an emergent strain of environmental humour.

### **Bad Objects**

While any consideration of the relationship between eco-anxiety and comedy (or of the relationship of anxiety to the comic mode more broadly speaking) ought to be informed by efforts to understand how comedy can inform education about environmental issues, this instrumental capacity has already been the focus of several recent studies which, as I will elaborate below, have tended to focus on the potentiality of the comic mode as a *salve* for, or a

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for here — ranging from Julia Butterfly Hill's two-year occupation of a California Redwood (1997) to Greenpeace's occupation of a Shell company North Sea offshore oil rig called the Brent Spar (1995). In January 1993, some 300,000 Indigenous Nigerian men, women and children mobilised in protest against the destruction of their homeland by Shell Oil. This action formed part of Nigeria's Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, founded by Ken Saro-Wiwa in reaction to Shell Oil's drilling and extensive pollution in Niger River delta. In response to these protests, Nigerian military forces attacked Ogoni villages, killing and displacing people in their thousands. In 1995, after years of threats and intimidation, the country's military dictators executed Saro-Wiwa along with eight other environmentalists. Elsewhere, in June 1997, Pehuenche groups occupied Chile's Indigenous Affairs Bureau and Environmental Protection Board to protest governmental licensing of the Ralco Dam on Chile's Bío-Bío River. As demonstrated by this exceedingly brief account of environmental actions across the globe, the narrativization of past states of 'environmental ignorance' or non-awareness that often sticks to contemporary Western accounts of environmental 'awakening' isn't necessarily a linear one, nor was environmental ignorance a holistic, globalised condition in the twentieth century. Instead, it was (arguably) a luxury of privilege, reserved for those populations whose lives were less embedded in 'natural' environments, and hence found themselves insulated from the sharpest and most detrimental impacts of ecological change.

means of, alleviating eco-anxiety. This critical narrowing not only risks prematurely circumscribing comedy's sphere of influence before it has been fully elaborated, but it also further denies its status as an expansive formal mode that can accommodate the very *indistinction* or ambivalence that, as Berlant and Ngai suggest, make it ripe for 'figuring out' the social and its problems in the first place. Crucially, it also ignores the problem of humour or humourlessness that already inheres in both environmentalism and ecocriticism, thereby negating comedy's potential as a means of dialectical inquiry, one that might newly authorise environmentalism to take itself as its own 'bad' object.

In what follows, I suggest that ecological anxiety and comedy can be productively thought together. As I will argue, the comedic is a fitting mode through which to explore eco-anxiety, in part because its operation relies on qualities of indistinction and ambivalence, which *produce* 'the funny'. Elsewhere Ngai has argued, together with Berlant, that comedy is not just an aesthetic mode, or a device for pleasure, but also a necessary release valve for anxiety, something evidenced in the rich tradition of political satire.<sup>53</sup> As they note, though anxiety is formally understood as the province of the tragic, it also opens out onto the comedic. 'Comedy's pleasure comes in part from its ability to *dispel* anxiety' but, then again, 'its action just as likely produces anxiety: risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure.'<sup>54</sup> They continue below:

One worry comedy engages is formal or technical in a way that leads to the social: the problem of figuring out distinctions between things, including people, whose relation is mutually disruptive of definition. Classic comedy theory points to rapid frame breaking, including scalar shifts, as central to comedic pleasure. Scenes, bodies, and words dissolve

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<sup>53</sup> Berlant and Ngai, 'Comedy has Issues', p. 233.

<sup>54</sup> Berlant and Ngai, 'Comedy has Issues', p. 233.

into surprising component parts; objects violate physics or, worse, insist on its laws against all obstacles.<sup>55</sup>

Though *scale* here suggests some of the zanier aspects of the comedic, it also implies some of the structural tensions that might make comedy a richly pertinent mode for exploring the ‘scene’ of ecological decline. Indeed, scale consistently hampers contemporary understandings of (and aesthetic output *about*) climate change, a threat whose very magnitude would seem to produce abstractedness. Hecht’s short stories also confront us with a similar scalar conundrum; themselves existing as compressed, micro-units of fiction that, at the same time, can be tessellated into a longstanding creative project expanding over three decades, formal features that make them ideally placed to navigate the warped temporal logics of the Anthropocene. Moreover, in their relentless commitment to worrying about the ecological *now* rather than a post-apocalyptic future, they also mark a significant refusal of the dystopian aesthetic that has come to predominate in so much contemporary environmental fiction, offering a narrative alternative to an increasingly oversaturated, and overdetermined genre.

If there does exist an aesthetic or tonal ‘problem’ of seriousness in contemporary environmental fiction, then the strategic value of Hecht’s satire resides precisely in its ability both to diagnose *and* generate humour from it. Take, for instance, the gallows humour at work in her vegan disgust at a friend’s meat-saturated diet, a practice that confirms her dedication to the eco-friendly cause as well as her implicit awareness that overconsumption is a one-way ticket to planetary annihilation: ‘A friend had told me that the Danish people she saw everywhere on her visit to Scandinavia all had rosy cheeks and high blood pressure from their conventional diet of butter, cheese, and meat [...]. I knew that the Swedes liked to commit suicide, and if this was

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<sup>55</sup> Berlant and Ngai, ‘Comedy has Issues’, pp. 233–4.

their diet, maybe it was the reason'.<sup>56</sup> My readings of Hecht's texts home in on their ambivalent reproduction of what it means to be excessively and yet at once *righteously* concerned by the ecological state of things. Hecht's comedic rendition of an 'OTT' green protagonist, a woman who continually finds herself on the edge of an eco-breakdown, assailed by the many 'toxic' aspects of normative living, feels remarkably prescient, hailing as it does from the late 1990s — a sociopolitical moment in which the 'threat' of climate change had yet to be formally crystallised (or popularised) in public or, for that matter, artistic discourse. Furthermore, my readings will demonstrate how her humour derives its grist precisely from the proximity between the kind of over-earnestness that suffuses DiCaprio's speech, as well as Hecht's writing, *and* a seriousness that is the precondition of an authentic investment in any kind of political organisation or counter-hegemonic thinking. I will therefore begin my discussion of Hecht by mapping something of the landscape of contemporary environmental comedy, focusing on recent scholarship that demonstrates the complexity and productivity of thinking the two things together. The next segment will turn towards Berlant's work on 'humourless humour' and the idea of the 'humourless sovereign' as a means of considering some of the tensions between humourlessness and political investment, with a particular focus on the pertinence of these tensions to questions of environmental committedness. The third section will turn towards a more thorough exploration of humourlessness in Hecht's fiction, exploring how Hecht's stories encourage a kind of *laughing at* environmental humourlessness that, ultimately, demonstrates how comedy and ecological anxiety just might be more compatible than we think.

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<sup>56</sup> Julie Hecht, *Do The Windows Open?* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 82. Hereafter designated by the abbreviation *DTWO*.

## No Laughing Matter: Comedy and Environmentalism

As scholars Beth Osnes and Maxwell Boykoff have remarked: ‘Why fuse climate change and comedy?’<sup>57</sup> Perhaps understandably, given the grimness of eco-catastrophe’s contexts — the slow violence it threatens against millions, environmental racism, the mass extinction events of countless nonhuman species, not to mention the prospective demise of *homo sapiens* — humour may well seem an inappropriate response, one that not only risks undermining the severity of the attendant threats, but also violates the codes of pleasure itself. Past attempts to marry the two — or to deploy comedy as a strategy that might help to alleviate or *allay* ecological anxiety — have been either non-existent or slow to evolve, often meeting with sustained resistance. Certainly, the prospect of deriving aesthetic pleasure from one’s own (or someone else’s) eco-anxiety may feel inimical both to the formal pressures of the comic itself, with its gruff demand for laughter at all costs, *and* to the self-determining seriousness of environmental threat.

Accordingly, there currently exists very little scholarly work that *takes seriously* the relationship between comedy and eco-anxiety, a silence that is broken only by a handful of recent critical studies which have begun to draw connections between laughter and the potentiality for increased environmental understanding. These recent considerations have tended to emphasise the potentiality of comedy and satire to engage *disengaged* audiences, or those actively resistant to the scientific realities of global ecological crisis. For instance a 2014 article, co-authored by Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore and Grace Reid, advocates the potentiality of satire as a device for facilitating audiences’ engagement, appealing to its ‘long tradition in elite and popular culture [of] provid[ing] an important means of offering social and political commentary while entertaining’.<sup>58</sup> Far less attention has been paid, however, to the ways in which comedy

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<sup>57</sup> Maxwell Boykoff and Beth Osnes, ‘A Laughing matter? Confronting climate change through humour’, *Political Geography*, 68 (2019), 154-163 (p. 154).

<sup>58</sup> Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore and Grace Reid, ‘Laughing in the Face of Climate Change? Satire as a Device for Engaging Audiences in Public Debate’ *Science Communication*, 36 (2014), 1–25 (p. 2).

might be used to shift the discursive frames that have come to dominate *how* we talk about this crisis, and what types of cultural output these discursive frames might generate. Elsewhere, a 2019 study undertaken by Boykoff and Osnes affirms that: ‘Everyday people and elected officials typically do not engage with or learn about dimensions of climate change by reading peer-reviewed literature, whether in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report or through new scientific research.’<sup>59</sup> Instead, these connections are forged through ‘complex sub-political spaces’ which form ‘a politics of everyday life’ organised around ‘a range of relevant media and person-to-person communications and experiences’ together with other ‘complementary ways of knowing’, humour among them.<sup>60</sup> As they suggest, comedy is a dynamic and destabilising force with the power to ‘exploit cracks in arguments, wiggle in, poke, prod, and make nuisance to draw attention to that which is incongruous, hypocritical, false, or pretentious’.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, it also enables people to shuttle between dominant or ‘authorized’ understandings of the world and alternative meanings, narratives or bodies of knowledge, and can thus ‘seed fertile locations for subversion, resistance, [and] liberation’.<sup>62</sup>

In a 2019 study, also undertaken by Boykoff and Osnes, they further emphasise the potential of ‘good-natured comedy to enrich climate communication’ and ‘actively communicate top climate solutions’.<sup>63</sup> By ‘good’ the authors take to mean ‘a mode of comedy that is good for nature, and also good-natured, meaning kind in intent — not seeking to shame or expose in a cruel or demeaning manner’; they further suggest that ““Good” as an adjective also implies that

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<sup>59</sup> Boykoff and Osnes, ‘A Laughing matter?’, p. 154.

<sup>60</sup> Boykoff and Osnes, ‘A Laughing matter?’, p. 154.

<sup>61</sup> Boykoff and Osnes, ‘A Laughing matter?’, p. 154.

<sup>62</sup> Boykoff and Osnes, ‘A Laughing matter?’, p. 154.

<sup>63</sup> See Lakshmi Magon, ‘A little humor may help with climate change gloom’, *The Conversation*, 10 November 2019, <<https://theconversation.com/a-little-humour-may-help-with-climate-change-gloom-125860>> [accessed 12 May 2021]

environmental comedy needs to be *of superior quality in order to be effective*' (emphasis mine).<sup>64</sup> The suggestion being, then, that any comedy which fails to be adequately instructive is not just morally but also formally 'bad'; but that it also fails as art since, by implication, comedy cannot be properly 'environmental' unless it is properly 'effective' or capable of producing tangible *effects*, a claim which veers dangerously close to an insistence on its *needing* to demonstrate some measure of didactic merit. Responding to the ostensible 'glut' of scholarship already existing on environmental satire (which, 'by definition has a target and often a pivotal element of cruelty'), they look to move scholarly conversations around environmental comedy beyond the 'mean-spiritedness' and 'biting' stylings of satire which, they suggest, often relies on shame or debasement to achieve its aesthetic effects.<sup>65</sup> Notably, their arguments *for* a more 'good-humoured' species of environmentalism arrives at satire's expense, which serves here as the villainous 'other' against which a vaguely benevolent species of humour can be valiantly pitted. Despite promising a tonal shake-up, the study thus ends in recapitulating many of the same 'beatific' affects Seymour identifies. Indeed, all Osnes and Boykoff's talk of 'good nature' further entrenches certain reverential critical attitudes to do with 'nature' or the 'natural' itself, categories that already prioritise and uphold conventional Eurowestern norms. As Seymour makes clear, such critical attachments often safeguard a vision of 'the supposed serenity of the natural world and, in turn, a faith in the restorative powers of natural landscapes; this nature is somewhere we go to, rather than something within which we live, hopelessly imbricated, each day'.<sup>66</sup>

While Osnes and Boykoff's contribution certainly foregrounds the tonal merits of comedy in diversifying climate communication, their own humourless insistence on nature's 'goodness' deftly reproduces many of the same conservative tendencies that already prevail

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<sup>64</sup> Beth Osnes, Maxwell Boykoff and Patrick Chandler, 'Good-natured comedy to enrich climate communication', *Comedy Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2019.1623513> (p. 2).

<sup>65</sup> Osnes, Boykoff and Chandler, 'Good-natured comedy', p. 2.

<sup>66</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 25.



among so many ecocritics. This self-fulfilling humourlessness mirrors a disruptive strain of moralism that is also ongoing elsewhere in critical theories of comedy which, as Berlant and Ngai recognise, tend ‘to maintain and amplify distinctions between true and false comedy’, thus ‘protect[ing] the desire for aesthetic experience of any kind to be elevating, self-developing, or worthy of idealization’.<sup>67</sup> This critical move, which formulates the distinction between ‘bad’ and ‘good-natured’ humour as a distinction between ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’ environmental artworks, often smacks of the intervention of *taste*, wherein authorial preference simply gets smuggled through as ontological certainty — something that, as Seymour points out, risks ‘detract[ing] from the real job of criticism: to see how cultural works present us with problems and make things messy rather than neatly resolving them.’<sup>68</sup>

The moralising force of these aesthetic judgments that pitch ‘good’ against ‘bad’ or ‘naughty’ comic forms is not only unhelpful but also a less interesting outcome of critical consideration than thinking about the aesthetics of comedy itself, or *why* the comic mode might be well-suited to the affective experience of climate change in the first place. In their emphasis on how comedy might optimise climate communication or deliver ‘better’ environmental messaging, Osnes and Boykoff pay little or no attention to how comedy might be differently organised around eco-anxiety; how it might do something *other* than simply mitigate its sharpest effects or, perhaps more significantly, how it might be directed *towards* that anxiety itself, something that will form one of this chapter’s central lines of inquiry. In the very rigidity of their argument, their critique also, ironically, falls prey to its own species of camp, fulfilling Berlant and Ngai’s observation that comedy ‘creates critical rigidity in a way specific to comedy’, and that in turn this ‘very critical rigidity is great material for comedy’.<sup>69</sup> This claim also bears out one of

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<sup>67</sup> Berlant and Ngai, ‘Comedy has Issues’, pp. 240–241.

<sup>68</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 28.

<sup>69</sup> Berlant and Ngai, ‘Comedy has Issues’, p. 242.

the central paradoxes that lies at the heart of this chapter — namely, how affective *investment* can itself become legible as ridiculous. If Osnes and Boykoff deduce that humour lies in the spectacle of someone ‘fully committing’, of trying or perhaps trying *too hard*, then the question remains how are we to know, all the more so in this era of ‘post-truth’ and ‘fake news’, what is authentic and what isn’t? Does comedy have to do with authenticity or with its absence? As Berlant and Ngai point out, to certain people ‘inauthenticity is precisely what makes humor humor and what makes it aesthetically and philosophically attractive in the first place’.<sup>70</sup>

For Berlant and Ngai, by contrast, comedy’s generosity lies in its generative ‘capacity to hold together a greater variety of manifestly clashing or ambiguous affects’: a clash that can accommodate moral ambiguities *like* deriving pleasure in the cruel or the tragic as readily as it can the high jinks of slapstick or farce, which often rely already on ‘mean-spirited’ devices of miscommunication and humiliation.<sup>71</sup> Surely, this ambivalence is what makes comedy such an environmentally rich vein, and peculiarly well-fitted to the problem of ecological crisis. As Berlant and Ngai further suggest, comedy’s jumbled pleasures and pains have ‘the power to disturb *without* moralizing for or against it’; it is through the comedic that ‘[p]eople can enjoy [...] disturbance’, an enjoyment that is (almost always) mixed (emphasis mine).<sup>72</sup> Precisely this formal indeterminacy — the fact that it can be hard to figure out just what is or isn’t comedy, let alone quite *how* it works — makes it ripe for thinking about environmental aesthetics.<sup>73</sup> In this sense, the comedic genre offers a freewheeling space to explore the contradictions that inhere in trying to live an environmentally ‘friendly’ life, or the difficulties of upholding environmental practice amidst the compromising mire of contaminations that characterises our present iteration of late-stage industrial capitalism.

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<sup>70</sup> Berlant and Ngai, ‘Comedy has Issues’, p. 241.

<sup>71</sup> Berlant and Ngai, ‘Comedy has Issues’, p. 239.

<sup>72</sup> Berlant and Ngai, ‘Comedy has Issues’, p. 248.

<sup>73</sup> Berlant and Ngai, ‘Comedy has Issues’, p. 239.

Instead of approaching the environment as a site that is, by turns, complex and multifarious, capable of contaminating ‘us’ in the same ways we contaminate it, Boykoff and Osnes engage a polarising critical humourlessness that allows them to implement arbitrary (and false) distinctions between what can and can’t ‘count’ as environmental comedy in the first place — a binarism that, as we shall see in the following section, Hecht’s comedy continually resists and exceeds, by compulsively ensnaring the reader in the dragnet of their own eco-complicities and absurdities. Through reading Hecht’s short stories together with Berlant’s work on humourless sovereignty (embodied by the laughable figure of ‘the combover’), I aim to illustrate how a different model of humour — one whose interests are perhaps less vested in moralising or directive outcomes than those encountered so far — might be better suited to a thoroughgoing consideration of the ‘problem’ of environmental seriousness. Rather than contriving to counter this lack of levity by drowning it out, or supplanting it with *more* abundant humour in the hope of cultivating more positive, inspiring, or ‘hopeful’ eco-sentiment, her fiction proposes a way in which environmental seriousness might take *itself* as pleasure’s ‘bad object’, becoming good grist for comedy in the process.

### **Three Toupee Mistakes; Or What Does a Balding Pate have to do with Climate Change?**

‘The world meltdown has begun’ (*DTWO*, 16)

— Julie Hecht

In the title story of Julie Hecht’s debut fiction collection *Do The Windows Open?* (an entreaty that forms an anxious refrain for Hecht’s neurotic white, liberal protagonist), her unnamed narrator boards the South Fork Bus for the first time, conquering a prospect of which she has been terrified for several years. The bus shuttles back and forth between East Hampton (where she lives, most of the year) and SoHo (where her husband works, and they keep an apartment) along ‘the Long Island Expressway and the deadly approach to the Midtown Tunnel’,

a route the narrator had formerly driven herself prior to the onset of ‘attack[s] of no breathing’ and ‘the more serious attacks of paralysis of the lungs’ that began to plague her on the commute to and from the city (*DTWO*, 26). After many years of evading public transport, its eventual negotiation, steeled by ‘half a Xanax’, appears relatively simple: ‘Then one day I rode it’ (*DTWO*, 26–29). Among the many things she observes that appal her about the bus ride are: its lack of seatbelts; ‘wildly fluctuating temperature conditions’ (*DTWO*, 35) the delivery of ‘cheap club soda in a plastic bottle and served in plastic cups’, in place of the promised Perrier (*DTWO*, 34); her paranoid suspicion that the bus’s hostess might be an ‘est’ graduate, an allusion to the (controversial) Erhard Seminars Training organisation, popular throughout the 1970s, which offered a two-weekend workshop that promised to ‘transform one’s ability to experience living so that the situations one had been trying to change or had been putting up with clear up just in the process of life itself’ (*DTWO*, 28); and the ‘poor peanut-eating styles’ of her fellow passengers: ‘Why hadn’t these people heard that peanuts are contaminated by the carcinogenic mold aflatoxin?’ (*DTWO*, 35).<sup>74</sup> The bus ride, itself an environmentally fraught undertaking in which the narrator is beset by ‘fluctuating temperature conditions’ (*DTWO*, 35) and anxieties about air quality on the Long Island Expressway, seems to invoke a predecessor: that of Elizabeth Bishop’s canonical road-trip poem ‘The Moose’, whose observational litany finally ‘stops with a jolt’, its momentum halted by a ‘Towering, antlerless’ moose that ‘looms [...] in the middle of the road’.<sup>75</sup> The observations of Bishop’s bus driver (“Curious creatures”) and her passengers (“Sure are big creatures”) are recapitulated in the hawkish scrutiny of Hecht’s narrator, whose attentions finally alight on a different kind of ‘six-foot-six creature’, who sits down across from her:

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<sup>74</sup> Adelaide Bry, *EST: 60 Hours that Transform Your Life* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1976).

<sup>75</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, ‘The Moose’, *Poetry Foundation*

<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48288/the-moose-56d22967e5820>> [accessed 6 July 2021]

He sat down in the seat across from mine. He wore a reddish-brown box-plaid suit and a lopsided Frankenstein-style toupee, the same color brown as his suit. The toupee was tilted too far forward and, underneath it, in back, his own hair was visible — darker brown with gray. I'd seen this kind of toupee mistake on other men, including something I thought I saw on Dennis Hopper.' (*DTWO*, 38-39)

Where does the comedy 'land' here? Arguably, it's in the archly suspicious phrasing of that 'something I *thought* I saw on Dennis Hopper', whose very equivocality seems to intimate an excess or depth of consideration entirely disproportionate to the issue at hand. This is not to mention the implication that the narrator may or may not have a historical habit of logging particularly poorly executed or offensive toupees. This passage, as well as illustrating the narrator's distaste for tonsorial dissimulation, also deftly renders her caustic (often-withering) eye for detail. To an extent, Hecht's prose derives its momentum from the aggregate effect of these little observational moments, a comedy that also undergirded much contemporary stand-up in the mid-1990s, with Jerry Seinfeld often hailed as its 'master'. Significantly, the narrator's distaste for the man's lopsided coiffure coincides with a sudden spike in her own eco-anxiety, as seen in the passage immediately preceding him boarding the South Fork bus: 'I could see out the window that the sky looked as if it might snow, but I knew that in the new greenhouse weather this wasn't likely' (*DTWO*, 38-39). Adding to the horror show of the bad comb-over is the fresh betrayal of this 'new greenhouse weather' which *appears* to promise snow only for the very suggestion to be withdrawn, its possibility relegated to the territory of nostalgia ('it was still cold out, almost like a *real* winter day from the past [*DTWO*, 38]).

This 'bad' comb-over finds its virtuous counterpoint in the collection's opening story, 'Perfect Vision', which takes the form of a letter to the narrator's estranged friend, wherein she warns her of her suspicions that their (presumably shared) optician, 'Mr. Kropstadt, the

German’, is ‘definitely a Nazi [...] a neo-Nazi, or is at least a Nazi sympathizer’ (*DTWO*, 4). She looks more favourably, however, on his employee, ‘the small fearful Belgian, Mr. Frey’:

I took to him immediately because he was getting bald but had the good sense to brush what hair he had all straight back — Here it is, the forehead, the receding line, the scalp, so what? —rather than parting it lower down on the side of the head and trickily brushing over to conceal the recession, the way Gary Hart did. This was never mentioned — that *this* was why you couldn’t trust Gary Hart, a presidential candidate who thinks people are fooled by covering the baldness with hair from another part of the head. He dared to mention John F. Kennedy as his hero and mentor, but just compare the two heads of hair. (*DTWO*, 18-19)

Unlike the ‘good’ combover sported by Mr. Frey, which plainly announces the fact of his baldness, almost proudly (‘so what?’), the shiftiness of Hart’s combover is corroborated by his efforts at *sneaking* his baldness past the entire nation. As if to underscore his duplicity, there is the semantic slippage of that word *recession*; suggested in the imagined action of Hart *brushing over to conceal the recession* is the also-imagined action of him sweeping any number of economic failures under the rug. This becomes, in turn, a telling indictment of Hart’s entire political career, one whose failure is generally chalked up to purported extramarital conduct. Perhaps funnier than the narrator’s investment in her own outrage, the passage also ‘reveals’ the obsessional quality of her own humourlessness, which would seem to be lodged in that scandalised phrasing *he dared to mention*. Worse still than the allegations of womanising that derailed Hart’s presidential nomination in 1988 is the ‘betrayal’ of his having ceded the 1984 nomination to Walter Mondale, a candidate whose subsequent landslide loss in the 1984 election ushered in the second of two consecutive terms of Reaganism. (Ironically, Mondale famously used the Wendy’s slogan ‘Where’s the beef?’ to describe Hart’s policies as ‘lacking depth’, a quip that likely wouldn’t have gone over well with Hecht’s ardently vegan protagonist). Indeed Reagan’s own environmental credentials were most notable by their absence; his administration included the cabinet

appointment of anti-environmentalist James G. Watt as Secretary of the Interior, under whose oversight environmental spending was eviscerated, and Anne Gorsuch as Administrator of the EPA — under whose twenty-two month tenure budgets were cut by 22 percent, the Clean Air Act was relaxed, and the agency itself infiltrated by representatives of the same industries it was tasked with regulating.<sup>76</sup> This forms a stark contrast with the legacy of Kennedy's more 'progressive' environmental commitments — which included the divestment of DDT (encouraged by the narrator's personal heroine, Rachel Carson).

Exulting Kennedy and berating Hart in the same breath thus exposes a legacy chain of green liberalism and eco-betrayals dating back to the early 1960s. What Hart's comb-over privately 'reveals' to Hecht's narrator, however, is not just the foreclosure of his political career or his lacking moral-fibre. But, moreover, the self-hoisting nature of Hecht's comedy, the full extent of which surfaces in her own absurd and thoroughgoing conviction that the measure of a man's ethical self-styling might be taken by his coiffure. This scene clearly announces a certain *committedness* to, or overdetermined investment in, the 'integrity' of the Democratic party that neatly aligns with the narrator's own anxious environmentalism. Detectable in her implication that JFK's obviously 'natural' head of hair seems to body forth all the voluminous integrity that Hart's lacks is also a (ridiculous) intimation that there might, just possibly, exist some affinity between the trustworthiness of a man's environmentalist credentials and the 'authenticity' of his hairdo.

But what does a balding pate have to do with climate change? The connection between ecological decline and a bad hairdo becomes legible yet again in Hecht's 2003 novel *The Unprofessionals* wherein the narrator, 'at the brink of being seriously over forty-nine' and

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<sup>76</sup> In 1986, Reagan famously removed the solar panels Jimmy Carter had installed from the roof of the White House.

confronted with the encroaching ‘winter’ of her life, finds her eco-anxieties are triggered by her own bad dye-job (*TU*, 4).<sup>77</sup> This precipice brings with it a nagging sensation of ‘obliteration of the self’; a feeling of ‘living without a soul’ (*TU*, 3); ‘this newest episode of emptiness and nothingness’ (*TU*, 3) occasioning a renewed and more aggressive scrutiny of ‘the flaws in [her] character’ (*TU*, 3). Compounding this is the additional pressure of self-maintenance, a task in which the protagonist feels herself to be floundering:

My hair, I was horrified to notice as I passed the sunglasses-display drugstore mirror, was almost platinum blond, with pieces sticking out from having more and more highlights added in an attempt to lighten and cheer up the area around the pancake face. My skin was pale and white, and the tiny bit of makeup I had on it served only to even out the whiteness instead of enlivening it. The cheek-color makeup had faded away and the no-flake mascara had flaked off during a long hike to the ocean from the snow-covered conservation land, which was rated one of the five most beautiful conservation areas in America. (*TU*, 10–11)

Perhaps what so mortifies Hecht’s narrator about the toupee mistake is its resonances with her own feelings of subjective incoherence. As this passage suggests, her own identity appears to be hanging by a thread (‘I didn’t realize the person was myself, or my former self, or the physical form in which the former self had once resided’ [*TU*, 10]); a fact confirmed not just by the apparent erosion of her ‘inner self’ to the status of free-floating ‘fragment’, but also by the brittleness of the carapace holding it all together (that ‘feeble attempt at organizing the shell of the self’ [*TU*, 11]). The narrator’s own physiognomic desiccation (the flaky mascara, the overprocessed hair, the degraded blush) implies a loss of self that also collides with the wider imperatives of land conservation (the pristine, snow-bound landscape), suggesting some immanent connection between an exterior peril *out there* that threatens the American landscape

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<sup>77</sup> Julie Hecht, *The Unprofessionals* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2003). Hereafter designated by the abbreviation *TU*.



and the dislocation of the interior, affective world within. This is redoubled anew in her private struggle to retrieve the ‘geographical place where I’d once fit into the landscape’, which had once appeared steady, reliable and unchanging, precipitating an identity crisis of the first order: ‘I could see that [...] my inner self was gone, and this fragment floated in nothingness’ (*TU*, 11).

As Hecht makes clear, her protagonist is engaged in her own sustained ‘act’ of dissimulation, namely the manufacturing of a ‘normal’ personality, or ‘[t]he feeble attempt at organizing the shell of the self’ (*TU*, 11). Much like Leonardo DiCaprio, this preparation of a special ‘watchable’ self is tracked in small and recurrent moments of contrivance, such as when she recounts making a conscious effort in *Do The Windows Open?* to reproduce conversation with the commandant of a bus company ‘as if I had normal casual thoughts on my mind’ (*DTWO*, 39), or panics during a ‘hot little car journey’ with a gynaecological surgeon that a sudden glitch might jeopardise ‘the semblance of the normal personality’ she has cobbled together (*DTWO*, 66). This cultivation of normalcy appears to revolve at least in part around the suppression of her peculiar susceptibility to a toxic normality that, for her, almost approaches the unbearable, the Thoreauvian struggle to ‘keep pace with [her] companions’ suggesting that she is attuned to the beat of a ‘different drummer’. As she confides at the outset of *Happy Trails*, ‘I am never prepared for the people in our society’, an unpreparedness that extends not just to the inhabitants of the social world, but also to the seemingly unstoppable juggernaut of ‘progress’ (*HT*, 10).<sup>78</sup> Her distress shapeshifts, responding with quickfire alarm to the changing of sexual mores (‘The other clothing on the shelves and hangers was prostitution-style — open midriffs with large metal rings holding top and bottom barely together [...]. A panic attack was starting, caused by what I’d seen [...] I fled the tawdry atmosphere and shocking price range’ [*HT*, 146–147]); or her technophobia (‘That horrible thing, the computer, was in the room with us. It was

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<sup>78</sup> Julie Hecht, *Happy Trails to You* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2008). Hereafter designated by the abbreviation *HT*.

the bad kind — big, and wired into the wall with a cable' [*HT*, 91]). This *proneness* indexes a broader comic tendency in Hecht's writing; namely its reliance on carving humour out of a peculiar affective *sensibility*, a kind of 'over-the-topness' that is also on display in the protagonist's hyperactive worrying about the toupee. This proneness sticks to environmental offenses, in particular. As she offhandedly announces on the first page of *Happy Trails*, this 'hatred of technology' secures her affinity with the Unabomber, with whom she also shares in 'a love of Thoreau', signalling her allegiance to a certain strain of American environmentalism that is borne out in her photographic projects, which document the slow degradation of the same American landscape that seems her only small 'respite' from a 'toxic' everyday (*HT*, 1). 'My photographs of flowers in every stage of decline were "not what most people want to see," a gallery owner had told me the week before' (*DTWO*, 54). Indeed, one of the most immediate ways that the seriousness of the narrator's green investments is conveyed in *Do The Windows Open?* is through her ardent veganism, something which — at the time of the book's writing, anyway — was anomalous enough to establish her environmentalist credentials from the get-go.

As Elizabeth Frank suggests in the *New York Times*: 'Ms. Hecht is a brilliant comic writer. The stories are breathtakingly funny, and over and over again I found myself laughing until I cried. Yet the laughs are unforced and unmanufactured; Ms. Hecht's narrator isn't a comedienne and she doesn't do shtick [...] Moreover, the humour in the stories is so organic to the narrator's rambling and digressive sensibility that it's hard to tell when it becomes fused with sadness or stained with desolation.'<sup>79</sup> Notably, Frank's own liberal use of 'naturalistic' metaphors to describe the indeterminacy of Hecht's comedy (it is *unforced, unmanufactured, organic*) is itself inflected with the vocabulary of the 1990s 'panic' about GMO crops, a controversy that

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<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Frank, 'Meltdown Has Begun', *New York Times*, 26 January 1997, <<https://www.nytimes.com/1997/01/26/books/meltdown-has-begun.html>> [accessed 4 September 2021]

would have almost certainly preoccupied Hecht's narrator. In the aptly titled 'That's No Fun', in attendance at a dinner party, she recounts the litany of foods her stringent macrobiotic diet forbids, showcasing how her strenuous hypervigilance to 'clean' consumption is maintained even in an ostensibly 'progressive' setting:

If our friends, this couple, ever prepared a vegetable, it would be a nightshade vegetable on a macrobiotic list of "Never Eat"; for example, eggplant, peppers, potatoes, or tomatoes [...] They were all screwed up in this way and so was their refrigerator. Almost everything in there was in a plastic bottle. Everything else was in a plastic wrapper — chicken, meat, and cheese would come tumbling forth from every shelf (*DTWO*, 81–3).

### **The Humourless Sovereign**

Hecht's own wrangling with these competing 'toupee mistakes' finds an ironic corollary in Lauren Berlant's 2017 essay on 'Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)', which begins with the figure of the combover, as exemplified in the inaugural shot of David O. Russell's 2013 film caper *American Hustle*. Set in 1979 in an Atlantic City lubricated by gambling and 'white crony capitalism', the film's opening scenes intrude on a very private tableau, namely the figure of Irving Rosefield (played by Christian Bale), 'a pasty, big-bellied white man' in the careful process of assembling his toupee, '[a]ll the while the white man's face is pure gravitas, utterly serious and focused'.<sup>80</sup> For Berlant, comedy arises not in the fact of the poorly-executed toupee, nor in the spectacle of 'male vanity' of which it has become culturally emblematic (and whose appearance Hecht's narrator also struggles to metabolise in her vegetarian hero, Paul McCartney, another white man whose 'problems with dark brown' hair dye would seem to suggest his own susceptibility to male preening and everything it shores against — a fear of

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<sup>80</sup> Berlant, 'Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)', p. 307.

ageing, decay, or the possibility of emasculation [*HT*, 90]). Instead, the comedy that interests Berlant exists in the subject's rigid and decidedly *unfunny* commitment to the *fantasy* which the device of the hairpiece props up. 'What abjects this combed-over subject', they contend, 'is his refusal to adapt to anything but his own style of adapting to his own fantasy; what makes his appearance comic, when it is, is his insistence on form and, in particular, on inhabiting the form of comedy that, in his view, will allow his imperfect life to appear as a victory over existing.'<sup>81</sup>

This form Berlant distinguishes from other, more 'straightforward' types of comedy insofar as it has at its root not just the physical *glitch* of the bad hairdo, but the very delusion of 'intactness' the combover attempts to sustain; namely, the 'hustle' towards sovereignty that is emblematic of a commitment to taking oneself seriously. The effort Irving sinks into nailing the combover arrangement is so funny because the effort poured into 'repairing' his baldness demonstrates his complete investment in what Berlant determines as a 'fantasy of self-ratifying *control* over a situation or space', one that characterises the wider project of neoliberal sovereignty.<sup>82</sup> Precisely this striving invests the scene with a specific type of comedy Berlant identifies as 'humourless humour' which, '[i]n its conventional appearance', 'involves the encounter with a fundamental intractability in oneself or in others', often arising out of 'someone's insistence that *their* version of a situation should rule the relational dynamic'.<sup>83</sup>

While Berlant's discussion revolves (primarily) around how this interpersonal awkwardness plays out between human actors, such comic intractability is, they suggest, likewise 'motivated by the pressure of humorlessness, with its radical cramping of mobility at the heart of the encounter, whether the encounter is with oneself or with another person, *object*, or *world*, a

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<sup>81</sup> Berlant, 'Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)', p. 307.

<sup>82</sup> Berlant, 'Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)', p. 308.

<sup>83</sup> Berlant, 'Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)', p. 308.

claim which returns us to our own ‘threatened’ milieu (emphasis mine).<sup>84</sup> As they point out, ‘every encounter with *any* object provides evidence of one’s lack of omnipotence in the world, such that one experiences one’s very receptivity as a threat *because* one needs the world’.<sup>85</sup> If the humourless scene emerges at the contact point where the individual fantasy of ‘sovereignty’ rubs up against a noncompliant world, then this world-neediness comes to the fore with particular prominence in a cultural moment where eco-disaster predominates within the cultural imaginary, confronting us not just with the so-called ‘intractability’ or apparent indifference of geological forces to the scale of mankind’s vaunting ambitions. Furthermore, if the comover represents a dogged attempt to make ‘the world [line] up’, or to force everything to ‘come together’, what could better exemplify humourlessness than the neoliberal subject’s confrontation with the very decline of the world *as he knows it*, or with that world’s failure to properly ‘line up’ for him?<sup>86</sup>

As we have seen, the logic of humourlessness is already at work in those strains of environmental sensibility described by Lawrence Buell as “‘save-the-world moral earnestness’”.<sup>87</sup> As an aesthetic style then, humourlessness can thus be productively thought alongside the difficulties of genre and tone that hamper much of the work made about environmental catastrophe, at least in part *because* of the peculiar po-facedness that already sticks to cultural works about climate change. If it is true, as Berlant makes out, that ‘the scene of unyielding self-commitment is humorless’ or pre-eminently ‘serious’ then ‘humorlessness [also] involves a commitment to principles, after all, to a world and to being reliable’, which is to say that ‘it is central to any kind of fidelity or obedience in love, politics, and religion’.<sup>88</sup> If humourlessness ‘can cathect us to habit’ then it becomes necessary to maintaining any form of earnest endeavour

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<sup>84</sup> Berlant, ‘Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)’, p. 308.

<sup>85</sup> Berlant, ‘Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)’, p. 311.

<sup>86</sup> Berlant, ‘Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)’, p. 306.

<sup>87</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 25.

<sup>88</sup> Berlant, ‘Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)’, pp. 311–314.

or striving; the flip-side of a commitment to humourlessness is, quite simply, commitment itself: whether to a hobby, a lover, or to activist practice.<sup>89</sup> For this reason, it carries a potent moral charge, one that shouldn't be readily abdicated in favour of the compulsory 'good vibes' that Berlant and Ngai argue have increasingly come to define our relations within the contemporary encounter. As Berlant and Ngai point out: 'the demand for play and fun as good and necessary for social membership is everywhere inflecting what was once called alienation'.<sup>90</sup>

In a 2019 *New Inquiry* interview Berlant describes how all 'these questions about comedy and anxiety are all bound up in the contemporary (Western, cosmopolitan) moral test that the pleasures of comedy are being exposed to: whether it's possible for spontaneous pleasure to be governed by ethics.'<sup>91</sup> Hecht's work is imbued not just with concern for the seriousness of the environmental problem but, further with what it means to live a life that is dominated by a tyrannical awareness of, and anxiety about ecological collapse. It is worth noting that, while the connection between mental health and climate change is now relatively well-established, Hecht's writing predates a time when 'a chronic fear of environmental doom' had passed into any kind of daily vernacular. Eco-anxiety itself is a relatively new phenomenon, a neologism first defined by the APA in a 2017 report as 'a chronic fear of environmental doom'.<sup>92</sup> Other recent terms coined to describe this fear include: climate distress, climate grief, eco-fear, eco-paralysis (David Pollack), and eco-trauma (coined by Eco-Psychologist, Zhiwa Woodbury). This emergent vocabulary forms an extension of psychoterratic illness, a concept first advanced by philosopher

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<sup>89</sup> Berlant, 'Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)', pp. 313–314.

<sup>90</sup> Berlant and Ngai, 'Comedy has Issues', p. 237.

<sup>91</sup> Charlie Markbreiter, 'Can't Take a Joke: An interview with Lauren Berlant', 22 March 2019, *The New Inquiry*, <<https://thenewinquiry.com/cant-take-a-joke/>> [accessed 24 February 2021]

<sup>92</sup> Ciara Nugent, 'Terrified of Climate Change? You Might Have Eco-Anxiety', *TIME*, 21 November 2019, <<https://time.com/5735388/climate-change-eco-anxiety/>> [accessed 12 July 2021]

Glenn Albrecht in 2006 to describe ‘earth-related mental illness where people’s mental wellbeing (psyche) is threatened by the severing of “healthy” links between themselves and their home’.<sup>93</sup>

While the humourless aesthetic commonly finds expression in ‘satirical dark amplification’ or in ‘gallows humor’, it also emerges in what Berlant calls “‘situation tragedy,” where the very compulsion of a protagonist or a world to appear to be on an arc of a comic triumph over life reveals them to be a thin membrane away from suffering life as a complete disaster of ordinariness’.<sup>94</sup> To them, [h]umourless comedy is’, after all, ‘a comedy of compulsive sovereignty’, a ‘spectacle of a *radical willfulness* that generates disaster after disaster, like a Road Runner cartoon’ and, much like a Loony Tune, the humourless protagonist is characteristically motivated by a ‘barely comedic [...] insist[ence] on bringing down any person or world who threatens their ambition’ — something that, Berlant suggests, ‘links humorless comedy to Trump and many [other] phantasmatic sovereigns’ (emphasis mine).<sup>95</sup> We can perhaps eliminate Hecht’s protagonist from the status of phantasmatic sovereign or anything so straightforwardly Trumpian; certainly, she isn’t in the business of toppling others. Although the narrator’s humourless style — what she calls ‘blurting out the truth’ (*TU*, 40) — is arguably in the business of *bringing people down* affectively, something which allies her to Sara Ahmed’s notorious figure of the ‘killjoy’. As Berlant points out, however, ‘humorless comedy protagonists are not all alike, because they have different relations to the truth of the costs of their ambition. They also want to maintain the comedian’s historical obligation to be the fool who *tells the truth about the ordinary injuries, anomalies, absurdities, and impediments of life* (emphasis mine).<sup>96</sup> In her idiosyncratic ‘blurting’ style, Hecht’s protagonist perhaps more closely resembles the latter definition but, unlike an

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<sup>93</sup> Glenn Albrecht, Gina-Maree Sartore, Linda Connor, et al., ‘Solastalgia: the distress caused by environmental change’, *Australasian Psychiatry*, 15 (2007), 95–98 (p. 95).

<sup>94</sup> Berlant, ‘Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)’, p. 314.

<sup>95</sup> Markbreiter, ‘Can’t Take a Joke’.

<sup>96</sup> Markbreiter, ‘Can’t Take a Joke’.

observational comedian (or perhaps like a bad one), the narrator's inventory of quirks isn't necessarily optimised or played for laughs. Without the gelling unison of the on-screen laughter-track, which implies a consistency of broad-spectrum appeal that is absent here, this perspicacity is undergirded instead by social awkwardness. Inside the world of Hecht's text, the narrator's commitment to exposing what strikes *her* as life's ordinary injuries and impediments tends to fall flat or rub people the wrong way. Her social *disease* thus plays out in various interpersonal clashes and relational mishaps in a way that often proves obstructive to her everyday social relations, an affliction that is perhaps an occupational hazard for any observational comedian.

While this awkwardness may be where the comedy is located *for* Hecht's reader, this compulsive sovereignty often 'reveals' itself as a source of chronic distress to Hecht's protagonist; for her, such perspicacity can provoke feelings of affective alienation from a cast of surrounding characters, many of whom are left 'aghast' by her renditions of life's anomalies (*DTWO*, 18). As she laments of Hart's combover: 'Am I the only one to have noticed this?' (*DTWO*, 19). The self-same moral crusading on display in her judgements about Hart ('Only I spoke about it, only *I* said I never trusted him, because of the hair cover-up, and a suspected nose job, plus a pinky ring. All those who trusted him got what they deserved in disappointment' [*DTWO*, 19]) likewise enables Hecht's protagonist to sustain her conviction in the surety of eco-catastrophe, which is forecast in her habitual, confidential narrative asides: 'Even in March I knew the sun was starting to interfere with everyone's plans, because one muggy warm day I found I needed the car air conditioner' (*DTWO*, 53); 'the heat and humidity started, as they do now, in April, due to the greenhouse effect and the hole in the ozone layer, which are both happening this minute and not, as was first predicted, in a hundred years. The world meltdown has begun' (*DTWO*, 16).



As Seymour suggests, ‘environmentalists [often] feel good about themselves while disdaining others’ and precisely such moments of ‘insight’, much like the narrator’s prophetic observations about the weather in midtown Manhattan, often characterise a specific type of eco-piety, whereby the environmentally ‘anointed’ are able to exert their own exceptionalism.<sup>97</sup> Her epistemological commitment to this *world meltdown* begins to manifest everywhere, registering even in the slightest of atmospheric disturbances. The derangement caused by a heat wave in a domestic setting, for instance, transforms the sight of children playing into a sinister prognostication of approaching eco-catastrophe: ‘Five boys melded into one; the heat and the sticky conditions blurred the lines of distinction among them [...] These boys had melted into something like pancake batter and poured in and out through the doorways into the kitchen from time to time. This had to be the greenhouse effect getting under way’ (*DTWO*, 70). Though edging the realm of the absurd or the exorbitant, such claims also approach a specific form of paranoid knowing or environmental intuition, this latter refrain bringing the narrator perilously close to a moment of dazzling and righteous perspicacity. Although the collection’s publication preceded the coining of the now commonplace moniker ‘the Anthropocene’ by Paul J. Crutzen in 2000 — a term which has still yet to attain geological ratification despite its discursive popularity — climactic changes *were* still happening, even in the ostensibly ‘non-urgent’, Holocene moment of Hecht’s writing.

The *funny*ness of Hecht’s protagonist stems, then, in part (as Osnes and Boykoff rightly observed) from her own full-throttle commitment to ‘fully committing’; but it also originates in the proximity of this environmental *sincerity* to a kind of environmental absurdity. Though sometimes inflated, the narrator’s (over)reactions appear to contain the kernel of a justifiable conviction that is vital to sustaining any political movement, often manifest through the

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<sup>97</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 16.

contemporary logics of ‘calling out’ (habitually done in a public forum, say, over social media) or ‘calling in’ (habitually done privately, in the context of interpersonal conversation) harmful actions or behaviours. These are terms utilised in a host of activist circles to refer to practices of exposing or confronting social injustice, and directly communicating the need for remediation.<sup>98</sup> In this sense, her responses to the various environmental affronts she endures *may* be legible in the context of ‘microaggressions’, a term used to describe ‘daily verbal, behavioural or *environmental* slights, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward stigmatized or culturally marginalized groups’ (emphasis mine).<sup>99</sup> That said, even if this term captures certain aspects of the chronicity of these interactions, and her routine experience of a toxic environmental norm as a source of interpersonal threat, it is nevertheless hard for the reader to take seriously Hecht’s white, middle-class narrator as occupying a marginalised or otherwise stigmatised subject position. Moreover, the uneven distribution of her judgments, coupled with the exaggerated, sometimes misplaced sense of personal harm they convey, also threatens to diminish their efficacy, casting doubt over their political utility in formulating or developing ‘effective’ modes of resistance. As Ngai notes, Baruch Spinoza broadly understood ‘emotions as “waverings of the mind” that can either increase or decrease one’s power to act’, poles of action and *inaction* between which Hecht’s protagonist seems to be almost continually caught.<sup>100</sup> So, while an anecdotal mention of men ‘cooking some ducks [they’ve] shot’ (*HT*, 19), certainly can’t be an easy image to stomach for a vegan, and provokes in the narrator a rightful consternation that *also* represents a sizeable

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<sup>98</sup> For more see: Jessica Bennett, ‘What if Instead of Calling People Out, We Called Them In?’, *New York Times*, 19 November 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19/style/loretta-ross-smith-college-cancel-culture.html>> [accessed 6 April 2022]. See also Adrienne Matei, ‘Call-out culture: how to get it right (and wrong)’, *Guardian*, 1 November 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/nov/01/call-out-culture-obama-social-media>> [accessed 6 April 2022]

<sup>99</sup> See Derald Wing Sue, Christina M Capodilupo, Gina C Torino et. al, ‘Racial microaggressions in everyday life: implications for clinical practice’, *American Psychological Association*, 62 (2007), 271–286 (p. 271).

<sup>100</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 2.

challenge to meat culture's hegemony, elsewhere in Hecht's oeuvre this susceptibility begins to feel somewhat disproportionate to the ethical stakes at hand. In *Do The Windows Open?*, this anxiety becomes grist for comedic play, when an equivalent dose of suspicion is levelled at a friend's cat. Her dislike of the creature, which seems motivated firstly by her allergenic suffering with 'cat asthma, a condition not taken seriously by most people' (*DTWO*, 84), is aggravated by the animal's own malevolent carnivorous leanings: "The cat jumped up onto a chair next to mine and looked right into my eyes. I picked up a spoon and touched the fur with it [...] "I like his company," I said. "Even though he wants to kill and eat birds"" (*DTWO*, 97). If everything is cause for alarm, then perhaps nothing is.

### **Trying Out My New Fake Smile**

As Richard Twine suggests, vegans (much like environmentalists) often risk 'occupying a killjoy position', in Ahmed's sense of the term — in volunteering an ethical qualm with meat consumption and destabilising what is assumed to be a mutual happiness, the killjoy opens herself up to becoming the object of all sorts of 'bad feeling'.<sup>101</sup> There are a multitude of scripts through which this marginalisation is achieved, including jibes and interrogation ('well what *do* you eat then?').<sup>102</sup> Another such conflict crops up in 'Over There', where the narrator's social *disease* is mapped out through a series of fraught interactions with her neighbour's conservative relatives on Christmas Day. The scene sees her converted into what Ahmed terms an 'affect alien', a stranger within a dominant affective community: '[F]rom the Republican looks on their faces I dreaded being introduced to them [...] With this inner screaming going on, I walked into my neighbour's kitchen. Right away I smelled bacon. I kept this to my vegan self, though. Or, I should say, to myself and from that self at the same time' (*HT*, 5-6). The narrator's ecological

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<sup>101</sup> Richard Twine, 'Vegan Killjoys at the Table — Contesting Happiness and Negotiating Relationships with Food Practices', *Societies*, 4 (2014) 623–639, (pp. 624–625).

<sup>102</sup> Twine, 'Vegan Killjoys', p. 626.

correctness also becomes grist for (bad) comedy, when a ‘red-faced man’ spontaneously conjures “a joke for vegetarians”, this joke also serving as an early indication of what style of humour Hecht *isn't* interested in:

“If God didn’t want us to eat animals, why did he make them out of meat?” he said proudly.

I pictured a cow. Then I pictured a deer, a duck, a rabbit. There was nothing I could say. I wanted to try out a new version of my fake smile, a special version that would show how fake it is, but I couldn’t.

“Oh,” I said. They all went back to their merrymaking. (*HT*, 10)

Except the narrator doesn’t quite pan out as the butt of the joke, in part because it’s so desperately *unfunny*; both for the reader, for whom it lands with the thud of a bad pun, and for Hecht’s protagonist, who finds herself newly unable to participate in this merrymaking or even mildly dispossessed by it (as is suggested by the semantic pointedness of that ‘their’). His goading in the presence of someone who refuses the pleasures of ‘omnivorous happiness’ not only reinforces the dominance of meat culture (and at Christmas especially!), the wisecrack also ‘reveals’ the extent of his own insecurity in the face of the ‘threat’ posed by the narrator’s refusal to accept animal consumption as the *natural order of things*. As Berlant points out, humourlessness often gets ‘associated with a tone drained of whatever passes for warmth or openness’, which goes some way towards explaining why it is also ‘associated both with political correctness *and* with the privilege that reproduces inequality as a casual, natural order of things.’<sup>103</sup>

Humourlessness then, in this scene would seem to properly belong with the red-faced man; the ‘privileged’ subject who works to stoke *anti*-environmentalism, thus reproducing the privilege that reproduces nonhuman inequality as ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ *and* something worthy of casual

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<sup>103</sup> Berlant, ‘Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)’, p. 308.

derision.<sup>104</sup> Rather than flout ‘politeness’ Hecht’s protagonist (perhaps a partial capitulation to the social pressure to ‘be a good sport’) considers cracking an extreme version of the ‘new fake smile’ she has prepared specifically ‘for occasions like these’, but finds she can’t quite get there (*HT*, 8). The accusation of humourlessness is commonly levelled at vegans and other eco-disruptors; indeed, humour operating at the expense of ‘green’ killjoys often hinges on the idea that any subject who has made any kind of commitment to counter-hegemonic practice simply ‘can’t take a joke’. The pressure to ‘lighten up’ often arrives in the form of a countermand to relax the strictures of whatever subject position one occupies. Thus, when the protagonist’s neighbour later insists that she breaks her veganism in order to try a forkful of hot, buttery potato, (framing having ‘a bit of butter now and then’ as an inalienable national right, “‘You’re American!’”, my neighbor shouted’ [*HT*, 20]), the gateway opens onto a demand for her to ‘lighten up’ further still, the neighbour then coaxing her to eat ‘just a little bit’ of leftover baked ham (*HT*, 21). The irony here being that, while the narrator privately grapples with her own clandestine desire to taste the butter (‘It was the best potato I’d ever tasted. I had to resist the urge to grab it and gobble it down, butter and all’ [*HT*, 20]), instead reaching for her ‘Pellegrino bottle’ to suppress it, the encounter nevertheless results in her being (mis)read as ‘overly dour and serious’, as Twine would have it.<sup>105</sup>

If the audience’s defence mechanisms are triggered by this (over)identification, if ‘we’ feel even vaguely *defensively* towards Hecht’s protagonist, this is perhaps because, in so many instances, she is simply trying or trying too hard to do the *right* thing, striving to fulfil the difficult promise of what it means — as she admits in *The Unprofessionals* — ‘to be ecologically correct’ in an ethically wayward present that is defined by hyper-consumption (*TU*, 9). Part of the plight of the eco-kook is, as Osnes and Boykoff affirm, the ‘[r]ecognition of a truth’ — a recognition that,

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<sup>104</sup> Twine, ‘Vegan Killjoys’, p. 626.

<sup>105</sup> Twine, ‘Vegan Killjoys’, p. 626.

while serving as the springboard for important counter-hegemonic work, can ‘be funny even when the actual content of that truth is sad’.<sup>106</sup> As Berlant reinforces, ‘Sincerity is often funny, it if comes from a desire to self-idealize or get things *right* [...]. [B]ut once you’re relating to others and worlds, you aren’t in control of the frame’ (emphasis mine).<sup>107</sup> Some of the intractability Hecht’s protagonist encounters, and the rigidity of her commitment to environmental doomsaying, thus makes her the ideal candidate for thinking through how we might better be able to laugh at — or perhaps along with — environmental seriousness. To claim that the narrator’s *own* humourlessness is instigated by this one snub, however, would be kidding ourselves. As Berlant observes, ‘it would be wishful to think that humorlessness is always contained *over there*, in the other person’s intractability’; the linguistic overlap with the ‘over there’ of Hecht’s title here insinuating that the relational dynamics of the story might be legible in terms of a Berlantian aesthetics of intractability (emphasis mine).<sup>108</sup> Berlant offers humourlessness as a site of relational impasse between persons, citing ‘the sense of relational rigor mortis’ that often accompanies its appearance, a retraction that visibly plays out in the protagonist’s reaction to the red-faced man.<sup>109</sup> Although the narrator does the necessarily humourless interior work of denouncing the rendering of animals into ‘products’, conjuring the image of these dead animals before her in an attempt to ‘restore’ their absence to the narrative frame, she nonetheless finds herself unable to ‘speak up’ in retaliation (only an inert ““Oh”” escaping), the futility of her efforts to summon an effective response suggesting the strategic redundancy of affective outrage in this scenario.<sup>110</sup> This non-responsiveness seems, however, to have less to do with what Twine identifies as a self-clamping desire ‘to avoid being outed, not to be difficult, or to cause a fuss’, than it does with the sense of resignation captured in her

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<sup>106</sup> Osnes and Boykoff, ‘A Laughing matter?’, p. 5.

<sup>107</sup> Markbreiter, ‘Can’t Take a Joke’.

<sup>108</sup> Berlant, ‘Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)’, p. 308.

<sup>109</sup> Berlant, ‘Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)’, p. 308.

<sup>110</sup> Twine, ‘Vegan Killjoys’, p. 626.

admission that '[t]here was nothing I could say', which would seem to mark her own recognition that even a pastiche of politeness is not an effective strategy against toxic normativity, which would seem to keep on chugging along, regardless of any prospective intervention by the narrator.<sup>111</sup>

While Twine's critique *positively* conflates the figure of the killjoy and the activist, viewing 'vegan practice as part of a broader politics of resistance against routinized norms of commodification and violence', it doesn't necessarily follow that this 'practical and affective awkwardness' is always counter-hegemonic, or always tantamount to a form of political fulfilment, as is evidenced by the abundance of 'lifestyle' veganism shopped around under the rubric of 'wellness' discourse.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, is Hecht's narrator the marginalised, 'radically wilful subject' or feminist killjoy that Ahmed and Berlant describe? She is 'difficult', certainly, but is she the 'troublemaker', or 'activist' that Twine affiliates with the vegan subject position? Crucially, a critique like his misses the point that, as one reviewer deftly points out, Hecht's narrator is 'a complicated persona: equal parts naturalist and cable news junkie, a misanthrope who dreads social interaction, yet relies on it to reinforce her hermit-like ways'.<sup>113</sup> Though the protagonist doesn't publicly antagonise the red-faced man, her misanthropic, private narration of the gathering betrays not just the strength of *her* alienation from a social world that fails to recognise the same level of eco-peril in the mundanity of everyday life; but it also exposes her *own* incapacity to relate to those of an unlike mind. As Berlant makes clear, 'What constitutes humorlessness is someone's insistence that their version of a situation should rule the relational dynamic; *but no particular way of being and sounding confirms its social presence*' (emphasis mine).<sup>114</sup> Likewise, the protagonist's demand for the other to meet her on the plain of *her* environmental

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<sup>111</sup> Twine, 'Vegan Killjoys', p. 626.

<sup>112</sup> Twine, 'Vegan Killjoys', p. 624.

<sup>113</sup> Nathaniel Bellows, 'A fictional photographer, back in focus', *Boston Globe*, 22 June 2008, <archive.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2008/06/22/a\_fictional\_photographer\_back\_in\_focus/> [accessed 6 August 2021]

<sup>114</sup> Berlant, 'Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)', p. 308.

fervour functions as an equal-yet-different assertion that *her* reality ought to ‘rule’ the relational dynamic, an insistence that humorously stages an aesthetic intervention in the bipartisan stalemates that have come to characterise how environmental ‘issues’ play out in the political sphere. In this situation, the ‘sense of relational rigor mortis’ translates into a linguistic blockage whereby the narrator, utterly disoriented by the *lack* of environmental engagement, cannot seem to gain any kind of foothold: ‘I tried to get the gist of their conversation, but it wasn’t exactly a conversation. There were *no topics that I recognized*. Global warming, asteroids crashing to earth — these subjects didn’t come up’ (*HT*, 11, emphasis mine). This absurdity of this polarisation is differently rendered later on in the story, when confirmation of her olfactory suspicion that ‘a ham had been baking in [her] presence’ leads to an elaborate narrative digression about ‘purifying’ her neighbour’s oven: ‘I’d been told that a stove could be sandblasted to be made for use by Orthodox Jews. The same must go for stoves for vegans. But I could never find a sandblaster to come and take our old stove apart’ (*HT*, 14).

In her quasi-religious zeal, the narrator equates eco-friendliness with godliness, this fantasy of spiritual ‘purification’ deftly capturing a wider problem of liberal elitism that has elsewhere earned environmentalism a reputation for a kind of unrelentingly ‘preachy’ tone. As well as WASPs or emissaries of Republicanism however, such relational failures *also* pose a serious problem for mainstream environmentalism when it comes to those people occupying marginalised subject positions or identities. As Seymour suggests, ‘[c]ompounding its reputation for sanctimony and self-righteousness, environmentalism is known for being out of touch and unrelatable’, citing writer Adrienne Maree Brown’s claims that ““for a lot of young people right now, the environment is an issue for the privileged or the issueless””.<sup>115</sup> This perception of exclusivity is differently expressed in something like African-American musician Al Young’s

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<sup>115</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 17.



assertion that, prior to his own involvement in environmental justice movements, he thought environmentalism was just “white yuppie stuff”.<sup>116</sup> For Berlant, irony is primarily figured as a mode of *distance* — a helicoptering movement in which the viewer circles the protagonist conspiratorially.<sup>117</sup> This ‘aerial’ viewpoint is often deployed in the service of what Seymour, via Bronislaw Szerszynski, has described as ‘corrective irony’, a strain that he suggests is prevalent in much environmental protest, as well as in the spheres of cultural production and criticism. This corrective irony finds its opposition, Seymour suggests, in the model of ‘thoroughgoing irony’ proposed by Szerszynski, which “would involve a reflexive awareness of *the limited and provisional nature of human understanding*, while at the same time not lapsing into cynicism or quietism”.<sup>118</sup> The ‘affective scenario’ Seymour envisions is one in which ‘the ‘thoroughgoing ironic environmentalist laughs at herself, not just at others [...] admit[ting] to some ignorance or culpability on [her] own side’, and thus closely resembles the scene of humourless comedy.<sup>119</sup> Such irony also moves comedy towards what Kenneth Burke describes as “true irony” — closely aligned with the thoroughgoing — as “humble, not superior to the enemy, but based upon a *fundamental kinship*’ (emphasis mine).<sup>120</sup>

This inimical kinship appears a fitting match for the demand of humourless humour, a comic style that also hoists the reader by their own petard, since they cannot keep themselves definitively out of the joke. That we are *in on it*, implicated ourselves, also explains the variety of responses to humourlessness which, Berlant suggests, can include the following: ‘distancing, snickering, reluctant feelings of superiority, disgust at physical incongruity, rage at being taken affective hostage (and by a fool), the self-threatening, melting overcloseness of pity or

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<sup>116</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 43.

<sup>117</sup> Berlant, ‘Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)’, p. 309.

<sup>118</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 45.

<sup>119</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 45.

<sup>120</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, pp. 57–58.

identification, and the tragicomic burden of being forced to lie, whether out of aggression, defense, or care, reluctant or genuine'.<sup>121</sup> If the pathos felt by the reader in witnessing the narrator's attempts to fashion an environmentally-conscious life for herself in a world that simply doesn't value her contributions reveals something of the affective slog involved in upholding a meaningful ethical commitment, then her not-infrequent anhedonia hardly makes for a prescriptive environmentalism. What Hecht's protagonist *does* and *says* may well be legible as 'killjoy discursive practices', ripe for deployment by the eco-rebellious masses. And yet, I'm pretty certain this isn't what Hecht sets out to achieve, especially not in rendering a character whose unpleasure in seeing and moving through the world often has the effect of making environmentalism's daily practice and its transformational requirements look desperately unappealing.

Those few reviews of Hecht's book that do exist, mostly written during a less politically correct critical era, and pre-dating the coinage of 'eco-anxiety', often deploy casual idioms like ('compulsive', 'crazy', 'an endearing crank' and, elsewhere, 'a freak' and 'a nutjob', to describe her narrator.<sup>122</sup> Such commentary already contains the echo of lamentable right-wing propagandist efforts to dismiss activists like Thunberg as 'mentally ill', jibes that gesture towards the historical proximity between ecological investment and being laughed *at*, by way of derision or dismissal.<sup>123</sup> This 'crackpot' language is, essentially, constitutive of mental illness, something Hecht's narrator already identifies herself with in *The Unprofessionals*, in a weirdly prescient

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<sup>121</sup> Berlant, 'Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)', p. 310.

<sup>122</sup> See Elizabeth Frank's review for the *New York Times*. See also Laura Collins-Hughes, 'Decline and Fall: Julie Hecht's "Happy Trails to You"', *New York Sun*, 16 June 2008, <<https://www.nysun.com/arts/decline-and-fall-julie-hechts-happy-trails-to-you/80014/>> [accessed 9 August 2021]

<sup>123</sup> C.W.H., 'Who are you calling a climate crank nut job?', *The Economist*, 17 February 2011, <<https://www.economist.com/johnson/2011/02/17/who-are-you-calling-a-climate-crank-nut-job>> [accessed 6 August 2021]

admission that she needs pharmaceutical-grade medication to ‘manage’ her own eco-anxieties (“The Xanax — when I saw how nice and full the bottles was — I’d gone from thirty tablets at a clip, to sixty, to ninety, and was now hitting the jackpot with one hundred and twenty’ [TU, 5]).

Writing in 2010, Stacy Alaimo suggests that the contemporary ‘environmentalist ethos’ was marked by a ‘pervasive sense of disconnection that casts “environmental issues” as *containable, eccentric, dismissible* topics’: a dismissal that perhaps held water at the moment of Hecht’s writing but is no longer tenable in the present day (emphasis mine).<sup>124</sup> Though eco-anxiety still remains outside the bounds of any formal medical pathology, it has nevertheless spawned a series of subsidiary terms, an emergent affective vocabulary that taps into a certain ‘structure of feeling’ having specifically to do with environmental change. In turn, the phenomenon of eco-anxiety can be traced back to *solastalgia*, which Albrecht defines as ‘the distress that is produced by environmental change’, which tends predominantly to impact those communities suffering the most immediate or strenuous impacts of climate change.<sup>125</sup> In a Euro-American context, the rising tide of eco-anxiety is reflected in a clutch of (deeply humourless) headlines that warn alternately that ‘Eco-anxiety is overwhelming kids’ (*The Washington Post*) or that ‘Eco-Anxiety Is On The Rise’ (*Huffington Post*).<sup>126</sup> An article published in *TIME* documents ‘How Eco-Anxiety Exploded Across the Western World’, explaining that for those in richer northern hemisphere countries it stems, more nebulously, ‘not from the immediate impact of climate change but from uncertainty over what is yet to come’.<sup>127</sup> As Aimee Lewis-Reau, co-

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<sup>124</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 16.

<sup>125</sup> Nugent, ‘Terrified of Climate Change?’

<sup>126</sup> See Natasha Hinde, ‘Eco-Anxiety Is On The Rise. Here’s What You Need To Know’, *Huffpost*, 3 January 2020, <[https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/what-is-eco-anxiety-climate-change\\_uk\\_5d7f7c1ce4b03b5fc886cc16](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/what-is-eco-anxiety-climate-change_uk_5d7f7c1ce4b03b5fc886cc16)> [accessed 7 August 2021]. See also Jason Plautz, ‘The Environmental Burden of Generation Z’, *Washington Post*, 3 February 2020, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2020/02/03/eco-anxiety-is-overwhelming-kids-wheres-line-between-education-alarmism/?arc404=true>> [accessed 17 September 2021]

<sup>127</sup> Nugent, ‘Terrified of Climate Change?’

founder of the ‘Good Grief’ project, writes: “People in the U.S. don’t know what to do with th[e] feeling of uncertainty”, despite the fact that climate scientists suggest Western Europe and America are unlikely to suffer its sharpest effects.<sup>128</sup> While acknowledging the irony that eco-anxiety continues to gain traction in the Global North ‘even as developing countries have suffered most from climate change so far’, the strategies the article offers for coping with fears occasioned by ‘the climate predicament’ are nevertheless framed in a solutions-led language that is tied to neoliberal logics, detailing how best to ‘manage’, or even ‘beat’ eco-anxiety, advocating techniques for ‘build[ing] personal resilience while strengthening community ties’.<sup>129</sup> These logics semantically configure the spectre of planetary extinction, and the existential insecurity that implies, as something to be surmounted or ‘conquered’. Indeed, environmental dread is tethered quite explicitly here to a loss of *control* that seems to return us to the underlying tension in Berlant’s fantasy of the sovereign versus the world, what they term ‘the bruxism of the neoliberal soul’.<sup>130</sup> That anxiety should have become one the defining affects for an age of ecological decline is hardly surprising given that, as Ngai argues, anxiety can be seen as a ‘modern variant’ of melancholia, or ‘pathological’ mourning.<sup>131</sup> Not only does its ‘non-cathartic’ engagement ‘with the drab realities of impasse or stuckness, rather than the grand political passions that index earlier genres of “sentimental” literature’ perfectly *tailor* a feeling like anxiety to the present day ‘nature of the sociopolitical’ which, according to Ngai, ‘has changed in a manner that both calls forth and calls upon a new [and less powerful] set of feelings’ than those classical passions that preceded it.<sup>132</sup> But anxiety has also, as Ngai observes, historically-speaking been ‘the province of male intellectuals’, for whom existential quandaries have formed a ‘natural’ evolution from the gender-specific castration complex which, in its turn, finds expression in

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<sup>128</sup> Nugent, ‘Terrified of Climate Change?’

<sup>129</sup> Nugent, ‘Terrified of Climate Change?’

<sup>130</sup> Berlant, ‘Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)’, p. 334.

<sup>131</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 214.

<sup>132</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 3.

bourgeois art's introspection, its 'reflexive preoccupation with its own "powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world"', a feature that (ironically) makes it uniquely poised to 'theoriz[e] social powerlessness in a manner unrivaled by other forms of cultural praxis.'<sup>133</sup>

Anxiety's 'epistemological cachet' in 'Western intellectual history' also points 'to the general prominence of phobia as a signifying economy in modern culture, expressions such as "anxiety of influence," "middle-class anxiety," and "millennial anxiety" us[ing] the negative affect they invoke as a handy way of immediately establishing a skeptical or critical stance toward the phenomena described.'<sup>134</sup>

Governed by its 'own special temporality', anxiety belongs to Bloch's category of "expectation emotions" as opposed to "filled" ones, whose drive-objects, even if unattainable, are generally located in the 'available world'.<sup>135</sup> Anxiety, however, shoots "less at some specific object [that has been marked as] the fetish of [a subject's] desire" than it does at "*the configuration of the world in general*, or (what amounts to the same thing) at the future disposition of *the self*" (emphasis mine).<sup>136</sup> While the vagueness of anxiety's objects resonates with the uncertainty or abstraction threatened by climate crisis, this doesn't necessarily recommend its suitability as an organising affect for political action. In the opposition between 'the self' and 'the world in general' Bloch envisages, there emerges a corollary tension between eco-anxiety as a response to a loss of sovereign control, with possibly individualising effects (instigating a retreat from the world), and its potential for mobilising collective action (a turning towards it) that is deftly captured by Hecht's text.

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<sup>133</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, see p. 2 and also p. 213.

<sup>134</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 213.

<sup>135</sup> Ernst Bloch, cited in Ngai, p. 210

<sup>136</sup> Bloch, cited in Ngai, p. 210.

## Yuppies in Peril

To an extent, Hecht's narrator fits the prototypical mould of Al Young's 'white yuppie', a subject too-readily seduced by green consumerism, and the notion that (over)consumption's effects can be mitigated by making the 'right' or 'sustainable' choices in one's personal domain. If we take seriously, however, Hannah Arendt's metric of 'political being', that "what makes man a political being is his faculty of action", then not only does the logic of consumer refusal reroute the sphere of political participation *away* from a commons, and towards individual participation in the market.<sup>137</sup> It risks privatising eco-affect, deflecting *away* from people getting their bodies out onto the streets as the 'traditional' site of political protest, meeting and community, something Hecht's protagonist notably struggles to attain despite the imminent eco-doom that so dominates her interior consciousness.

This feeling of running aground in the search for political kinship becomes starkly apparent in 'Were the Ornaments Lovely?', a story which focuses on the narrator's recurrent run-in with twin brothers, who (like her and her husband) split their time between quaint Nantucket (summers) and luxurious East Hampton (the rest of the year), a timeshare that is an absurdity in itself. Significantly, the story takes place amidst Anita Hill's testimony against Clarence Thomas, a political backdrop that is recurrently referenced throughout the story. Consider this moment, for instance, wherein the possibility of bona-fide political action seems finally to crop up:

I saw the Schoenfeld brothers walking along a tree-shaded street on a warm, humid evening last November in East Hampton. It was the time of gloom that came after the Supreme Court confirmation hearings [...]. I didn't expect anything about current events to come up, so the next question was a surprise. "What did you think of the confirmation hearings?" the talkative brother asked.

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<sup>137</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 2.

“Sickening,” I said. I really began to feel sick. [...]

“What do you think of our senators?” the other brother asked. “Aren’t they deplorable?”

“We have to get rid of them,” I said. “And the President, too.”

“We must organise and defeat them,” he said with feverish energy. (*DTWO*, 109,122)

As these passages convey, the narrator is *concerned* with politics, certainly; prospectively, this moment might mark her conversion to a politics of radicalism. Instead, just as the very token of ‘real’ political participation comes into view, it is simultaneously derailed: “Will you be here Thanksgiving? Do you come here for Christmas?” the talkative one asked. For a second I thought they knew of an upcoming political event to help defeat the senators and the President. “Yes,” I said. I decided right then that if I was ever going to be there for Thanksgiving, the brothers would be invited to a Thanksgiving vegetarian dinner (*DTWO*, 122-123). Even in the moment of its invocation, the promise of political uprising or of overturning a ‘deplorable’ Republican senate is reduced to a diluted form of political participation, the subversion of a culinary tradition (as if the colonial violence underpinning a ‘tradition’ like Thanksgiving could be somehow purged through its alimentary conversion to veganism/vegetarianism). The conversation further devolves into an elongated discussion of the menu offerings of inns in Stockbridge, MA, where they serve ‘Normal American food [...] But healthier, because of the hippie influx of the seventies’”, an addition that seems to hark back to a nostalgic radicalism, suggesting a peculiar moment in time when the narrator’s worry might actually have ‘stood for something’ (*DTWO*, 123). This horizon of political possibility would seem to glimmer just outside the boundary of Hecht’s text, a possibility whose conditions also remain frustrated and unfulfilled for her protagonist within the aesthetic frame. Indeed, the stasis that pervades Hecht’s text at the level of plot also imposes itself at the level of narrative, which is fraught with an indecision that is inimical to the movement and function of narrative, ‘the hallmark’ of which

Gerald Prince suggests is ‘assurance’: ‘Narrative [...] lives in certainty [...] and dies from sustained ignorance and indecision’.<sup>138</sup>

The peculiar narrative temporality of her prose is often experienced as an ongoing sequence of diversions or postponements, emerging through the jarring dislocation between feeling and action. This is, in many ways, the motor of Hecht’s text, its effects amplified by the chronicity of the narrator’s own sense of private frustration. Though fuelled by the protagonist’s often overweening sense of ecological despair, Hecht’s stories also appear to dramatise a broader kind of impasse or blockage around the possibility of ‘taking action’ against climate change, doing so through foregrounding the limitations of performing authentically ‘green’ behaviour under capitalism. Many of them are set during the early onset of the health-food ‘craze’, a particular moment of the late 1990s in which organic foodstuffs and sustainable produce were still niche enough to be conspicuous, and sales were delimited mainly to natural food stores, cooperatives, and direct-to-consumer outlets like farmers markets.<sup>139</sup> The health-food store looms large over the consumer landscape of Hecht’s text, showing ecological agency to be problematically bound up with consumerist logics of opting-in and out in a way that *also* mirrors the bind with which the environmentally-conscious reader might themselves be faced. Take, for instance, this passage from ‘The Thrill is Gone’, a story that focuses on the narrator’s newly acquired anhedonia, her almost total ‘loss of enthusiasm for everything’:

My cruelty-free cosmetics were in the upstairs bathroom [...] I wet my face and quickly put on some *Vegetatum* — a non petroleum jelly. I'd read in a fashion magazine a list of commandments which included “Never wash your face without moisturizing

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<sup>138</sup> Gerald Prince, ‘The Disnarrated’, *Style*, 22 (1988), 1–9 (p. 4).

<sup>139</sup> Take the rapid expansion of a chain like Whole Foods, for instance—which started with one store in Austin, Texas, in 1980—began in 1991, with the company’s acquisition of various other natural food stores and chains across the countries. By 2000, it was operating 120 stores nationwide. Today, the figure stands at more than 500, spanning North America and the UK. The consequent ‘mainstreaming’ of organic and alternative produce. See *Food Review: The Magazine of Food Economics*, 24 (2001), p. 34.



immediately.” If only there were a way to put on a little makeup without having to see your face, I was thinking as I tried to gear up for the task. My eyelids were still puffy, even though I’d given up taking Xanax for insomnia and switched over to valerian-root tincture. Maybe it was because I took twice the recommended dose after reading, “ten or twenty drops, or as needed”. This must have been what Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley’s lives were like: “Downers to sleep and uppers to wake,” I’d read. (*DTWO*, 131–133).

All this *before* she has even managed to leave the house! This internal babble precedes her quest to obtain coffee beans, something she has purged from her home having ‘given up coffee fifteen years before’ (*DTWO*, 128): Even such a relatively simple task, however, proves fraught with ethical difficulty. At the store, the narrator discovers they are ‘out of organically grown beans’, a shortage that drives her ‘to the health-food store downtown’, then again to the ‘gourmet store down the block’ (*DWTO*, 139), since ‘[m]ost people don’t know that coffee beans are one of the most heavily sprayed crops, just as the makers of Pepperidge Farm cookies and Cape Cod Potato Chips don’t know that cottonseed oil had the most pesticide residue of any cooking oil, since the cotton bolls aren’t subject to food-crop rules and are sprayed heavily for the cotton crop’ (*DWTO*, 130-1). This diatribe confronts us with yet another manifestation of the protagonist’s humourless intractability, the blunt ‘corrective’ force of which, to use Szerszynski’s term, would appear to be directed at an uninformed reader, who is upbraided for not having bothered to do their research. This ventriloquised transmission points towards satire’s more traditional function, towards: ‘humor as corrective, a view that informs satire more obviously than certain other comedic forms such as “farce and ribaldry”’.<sup>140</sup> As the authors of ‘Laughing in the Face of Climate Change’ observe, satire has proved a viable route into ‘promot[ing] active and positive engagement with climate change debates’, facilitating ‘audience reflection, investigation, and action’ as well as aiding ‘audiences [in] manag[ing] feelings of fear, helplessness, and guilt, *which*

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<sup>140</sup> Kalviknes Bore and Reid, ‘Laughing in the Face of Climate Change?’, pp. 3–4.

*may otherwise prevent them from taking action*' (emphasis mine).<sup>141</sup> And yet, as well as her own laughable rigidity, what these passages also foreground is the bad joke of eco-anxiety's noncatharsis for Hecht's narrator, its failure to provide something resembling a therapeutic release, or to galvanise her into something resembling political action. Here, Hecht puts to use what Ngai describes as 'the anticathartic device of dilating the time in which any particular incident takes place thus accentuat[ing] the manner in which these uneventful moments mirror the general situation of obstructed agency'.<sup>142</sup>

One such 'situation' is invoked by the second story in *Happy Trails*, 'Being and Nothingness', which sees the narrator slumped on her couch, mired in the throes of a political depression induced by binge-watching coverage of the Monica Lewinsky hearings, a name so hateful that the narrator cannot 'bear [even] to have [it] pass through my mind' (*HT*, 29) or through the text itself (notably, later mentions are redacted to 'M\_\_\_\_ L\_\_\_\_' [*HT*, 31]). While the worrying 'commodification' of the public sphere that is Árpád Szokolczai's mournful concern refers most obviously to the Trumpian political era, the 1990s — the decade that forms the predominant setting for many of Hecht's stories — was likewise marked by a not dissimilar theatricalisation of political life, something the narrator finds similarly repugnant to behold. 'Sexgate', a scandal which plunged the United States into a constitutional and moral 'crisis', also stoked a similar collapse of the performative into the political that, as Richard Posner reflects, 'at first seemed a political crisis of the first magnitude, but [...] now seems better described as a political drama or even a comedy (for other than the participants)'.<sup>143</sup> As Berlant and Lisa Duggan put it, 'Had politics and prurience become identical, and whose fault was that?'<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Kalviknes Bore and Reid, 'Laughing in the Face of Climate Change?', pp. 1–3.

<sup>142</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 14.

<sup>143</sup> Richard A. Posner, *An Affair of State: The Investigation, Impeachment, and Trial of President Clinton* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>144</sup> Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan (eds.), *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001), p. 1.

In stark contrast to the bustle of ‘Over There’, in which the narrator must navigate a series of thorny encounters with Republicans on alien terrain, this subsequent narrative finds her within the confines of her own home, a location that seems to provide little respite from her mental agitation. Her inertia here forms a stark contrast with the preceding story, evoking Ann Cvetkovich’s framework of ‘political depression’ — a phrase coined to describe ‘the sense that customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better’.<sup>145</sup> Following Ngai’s trajectory, the narrator’s anxiety is without clear political outlet, her desire for inclusion in the melee of the *polis* obstructed or perhaps significantly weakened by a sociocultural moment in which politics itself appears to have been remade in the image of sensationalism. Floored by the sensation of having been *denied* the possibility of meaningful participation, she finds herself incapable of adequately metabolising her political investments. This struggle seems to present itself over and over again for Hecht’s protagonist, who is likewise slighted by her own repeated failures to ‘convert’ her eco-anxieties into decisive action. The clash these failures stage between catharsis and its opposites — between emotion and action, but also between the collective and the self — smacks of a character for whom, as one reviewer puts it, normal life feels at once ‘fraught and frustrating, hilarious and hopeless’, a reminder that Hecht’s narrator is ‘ultimately, *just an individual trying to survive in the world*’, often to devastating comic effect (emphasis mine).<sup>146</sup>

### **Whose Rigidity is it Anyway?**

Not dissimilar to Sontag’s *Camp*, satire is also figured as a lens, ‘a mixture of laughter and indignation’, through which to approach or view the world, and possibly even a means of trying to survive it.<sup>147</sup> Like irony, satire is often figured as “a mode” or a “procedure” that eludes easy

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<sup>145</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>146</sup> Bellows, ‘A fictional photographer, back in focus’.

<sup>147</sup> Kalviknes Bore and Reid, ‘Laughing in the Face of Climate Change?’, p. 4.

categorisation, although Kalviknes Bore and Reid emphasise ‘incongruity’ as a key tenet of satirical texts, citing Henri Bergson’s claim that one of laughter’s central functions is ‘mocking the failure to adapt to social change’: ‘society demands “the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability,” and rigidity therefore appears comical’.<sup>148</sup> But just whose rigidity are we talking about? Who exactly is the butt of Hecht’s joke? Who does her humour put ‘at risk’? Hecht has, in the past, been adamant that her narrator is not a comedic figure (or at least not deliberately so), flatly stating in a 2008 interview that critics who read her stories as such ‘don’t get it’: ‘It’s not a satire of anything. *It’s not a satire*’ (emphasis mine).<sup>149</sup> Significantly, in her apparent anxiousness to distance herself from the satirical mode, not only does Hecht disavow the mode itself but, assuming her text *was* or *is* satirical, she further muddles our sense of who or what precisely its object might be. As she affirms: ‘It’s not a satire of *anything*’. This commitment to disavowing any such ‘false’ interpretation of her work conveys its own prickly kind of humourlessness, as if these critics have hit a sore spot — a decidedly non-funny bone. At the same time, her resistance to easy categorisation also captures something essential about her comedy, which doesn’t *feel* constructed; nor does its humour *feel* corrective. Whereas satire — an ostensibly democratic form, with roots in both ‘elite and popular culture’ — typically deploys humour ‘as a weapon’ with which to ‘[attack] ideas, behaviors, institutions, or individuals by encouraging us to laugh at them’, this attacking stance isn’t what Hecht’s work achieves. Satire’s use of humour tends to have as its origin ‘a state of mind which is *critical and aggressive*, usually one of irritation at the latest examples of human absurdity, inefficiency or wickedness’ (emphasis mine).<sup>150</sup> Being hung up on human absurdity certainly smacks of Hecht’s narrator; with her inventory of gripes and her continual unpreparedness for the world and its inhabitants; the stories can often read as little acts of condemnation against those who *are* able to survive without

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<sup>148</sup> Kalviknes Bore and Reid, ‘Laughing in the Face of Climate Change?’, p. 3.

<sup>149</sup> Nellins, ‘An Interview with Julie Hecht’.

<sup>150</sup> Kalviknes Bore and Reid, ‘Laughing in the Face of Climate Change?’, p. 4.

the ‘inner screaming’ that defines her psychic landscape, people with the temerity to remain ‘calm as they [go] about their daily rounds of wrong choices and futile pursuits’ (*DTWO*, 58-9).

Of course, satire can be tonally varied, wide-ranging both in its subtlety, and in its stance towards an audience: it ‘may be [more or less] gentle or hostile, clear-cut or ambiguous, aimed at “us” or “them” — or it may oscillate between different approaches, remaining flexible and surprising.’<sup>151</sup> In those few environmental comedies that do exist, satire’s overbite is typically directed at the various misdeeds of *anti*-environmentalists. Indeed, the ‘corrective’ motion described above would appear to point environmental satire’s finger at ‘us’, the unconverted reading public, as the ‘problem’ and source of the narrator’s countless eco-disappointments. And yet, the narrator isn’t exempt from the force of her own weapon, which frequently takes her own person as its object. Take, for instance, these momentary lapses in ‘The Thrill is Gone’, which appear to generate an incredible wealth of self-loathing: ‘All the normal healthy people of this Nantucket neighbourhood had done their early-morning errands and were off doing something worthwhile’; ‘Anything could happen on the road to the coffee store. And whatever happened to me would be what I deserved for driving to a place I should have biked to’; ‘I felt myself to be a wastrel and my life to have been wasted. [...] I tried to think of my contribution to society, family, or community. I compared myself with Hillary Clinton. Even though she was not as admired as Jacqueline Kennedy — I always compared myself unfavourably with her’ (*DTWO*, 134, 135, 129). ‘[T]hese thoughts’, she confides, are ‘never far from [her] mind’, suggesting a state of existential exhaustion that is gestured at in an earlier story, ‘A Lovely Day’: ‘I’d noticed this before — that those who were not going insane just kept moving’ (*DTWO*, 58-9).

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<sup>151</sup> Kalviknes Bore and Reid, ‘Laughing in the Face of Climate Change?’, p. 2.

Such movement often painfully eludes Hecht's protagonist. As Berlant insists, any encounter with 'the aesthetics of the intractable' also confronts us with the problematic of how to go about distinguishing between 'satirical deflation' and 'the melodrama of stuckness', of feeling out the difference between 'principled commitment' and 'foolish righteousness':

The moral question is also an aesthetic question about the genre that communicates rigidified relationality and *what proceeds from it*. When we encounter the aesthetics of the intractable, how do we know how to distinguish satirical deflation from the melodrama of stuckness and the comedy of it? How do we, how can we, distinguish foolish righteousness from principled commitment? Context is everything. Perspectives vary. So much depends on the style of the subject's or the artwork's *investment* in humorlessness. So much depends on the resources spectators have to process certain styles of defense, their costs and their failures.<sup>152</sup>

It is worth noting here that although Hecht began writing her protagonist character over twenty years ago, prior to the explosion of autofiction, the repeated conflation of her character with the authorial 'I' — or the idea that the author's 'way of responding to the world' is the corollary of her character's — has infiltrated both critical and readerly responses to her body of texts. During a rare 1997 interview on the (ironically titled) radio talk show *Fresh Air*, Hecht is at pains to explain to host Terry Gross that her narrator's 'catalogue of phobias' are not necessarily commensurate with her own.<sup>153</sup> Pressed by Gross on whether it's 'fair to assume' a certain verisimilitude between Hecht's own fears and her protagonist's, Hecht responds after an excruciatingly long silence that she'd 'rather not get into that', only to equivocate: 'Other than to say that when I came here today I asked if the windows open in this building [...] they said they can be open but they're not open, so that was good enough for me'.<sup>154</sup> She goes on to claim that

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<sup>152</sup> Berlant, 'Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)', p. 314.

<sup>153</sup> Nellins, 'An Interview with Julie Hecht'.

<sup>154</sup> Gross, *Fresh Air*.

this is the first question she asks on entering any building, and that she has never been to the offices of Random House, her then-publisher, in part because ‘it’s a sealed building [...]you can’t get any air, you’re separated from the air [...]’. What kind of air is being filtered through all these sealed buildings?’<sup>155</sup> Hecht’s own anxieties about the ‘dangers’ of huffing conditioned air or being hermetically ‘sealed’ off from ‘nature’ would seem also to be embedded in the titular refrain of ‘Do the Windows Open?’ with its implication that, for her narrator, even the tainted oxygen of the Long Island Expressway is preferable to the filtered air of the South Fork Bus (*DTWO*, 29).

Elsewhere, in *The Unprofessionals*, the narrator fixates on attaining her ‘fresh-air allowance’ during a visit to the electrologist in the ‘beauty procedure chamber’ (*TU*, 21); in the discount drugstore, meanwhile, she is triggered by the reformulation of Electrasol Dual-action dish washing powder. ‘The odor of the blue powder almost knocked me out when I opened the little metal spout on the box. I remember gasping for breath as I staggered out of the cleanser aisle’ (*TU*, 7). Clearly then, Hecht’s narrator perceives not just the world’s inhabitants but also its new-fangled products as sources of latent aggression, revealing a degree of co-morbidity between her ecological and health anxieties. There is the creeping feeling that she is constantly assailed by the ‘threat’ of toxins: ‘the plastic molecules’ (BPAs), leaching from ‘soft plastic bottles into the water’ (*HT*, 9); ice purportedly contaminated by bacteria (*HT*, 9); accidentally huffed ‘Easy-Off fumes’ (a product that now markets itself as miraculously ‘Fume Free!’). This obsessive-compulsive anxiety, as she determines it, locates her within a broader continuum of characters pre-disposed not just towards a heightened ecological sensibility but, moreover, a peculiar *proneness* or reactivity to environmental triggers — a lineage that also includes Carol White, the milky, chemically-sensitive protagonist of Todd Haynes’s 1995 body-horror film, *Safe*. The film’s plot sees Carol, played by a remarkably insipid Julianne Moore, newly afflicted by seizures, nosebleeds

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<sup>155</sup> Gross, *Fresh Air*.

and severe rashes, 'sealed off' from the world; first, her removal from the Californian suburbs to Wrenwood, an isolated desert retreat where she lives among a community consisting of similarly vulnerable individuals; finally, she ends the film secreted in a porcelain-lined igloo, alienated even from the idiosyncratic band of fringe subjects that have become her community.

Like Haynes's film, our affective bearing towards Hecht's protagonist depends in some measure on our own investment in the yuppie lifestyle that finds itself newly imperilled by the insipid heroine's sudden sensitivity to the imperceptible and relentless infiltration of pollutants that jeopardises the tasteful suburban ambience she inhabits. Despite her sickness, and despite the palpable suffocations of her life as a woman and a homemaker, Carol also forms part of a privileged community that is already insulated against some of the sharpest forms of violence, as demonstrated in a brief aside in the film: her stepson's mention of a paper he is writing on gang-violence in 'the black ghettos of Los Angeles'. As Berlant and Ngai remark of Haynes's 'affectively ambiguous film', 'one can have an interesting debate about whether or not the film is a tragedy or a satire, especially if one has, say, no empathy for the white, upper middle-class female protagonist's failure to thrive'.<sup>156</sup> The same ambiguous, tragicomic empathy is invoked when Hecht's protagonist, deliberating in the drugstore aisle over innersoles, a new candidate for her environmental scrutiny ('I was studying a new light-pink rubbery kind with a miniature waffle pattern' [TU, 6]), allows herself to succumb to fantasy of consumerist excess:

The case of Dr. Scholl's in regard to the topic of recycling was as yet unknown to CNN's *Pinnacle* viewers. I pictured the mounds of worn-out and discarded foam shoe pads in a landfill in New Jersey filled with all kinds of garbage, or at the town dump in Nantucket, where a special dome had to be built to keep the ever-expanding waste and accompanying fumes away from the homes of the many new million- and billionaires and their moors-encroaching real estate development. Since almost all of Nantucket was

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<sup>156</sup> Berlant and Ngai, 'Comedy has Issues', p. 242.



for sale, the land near the dump had some of the best views of the once-beautiful island (TU, 9).

The indistinction here between ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’ (the imagined mounds of discarded shoe pads aren’t yet a textual reality, though they might as well be) offers a wry directive against corporate disregard, sending up at the same time the elite class that can afford to limit its own exposure to toxicity. The image of the ‘special dome’ that segregates this billionaire class from an ever-encroaching expanse of waste is captured in Alexis Shotwell’s notion of ‘defensive individualism’, ‘the sense in which the self is imagined as a fortress, separable from the world and requiring defense against [it]’.<sup>157</sup> Quoting Eula Biss, Shotwell writes that: ‘Our version of this shuttering now is achieved through the purchase of purified water, air purifiers, and food produced with the promise of purity’.<sup>158</sup> As Shotwell clarifies, however, the pursuit of personal purity is always already about redistributing toxicity *away* from certain bodies and towards others; a quest that becomes vexed when one considers that the brunt of environmental harm is invariably borne by marginalised communities.

Such defensiveness nonetheless shares a common connection with the humourless scene which, for Berlant, can prompt in the audience a similar *defensiveness*, a reactive desire ‘to protect from shared revelation the tableau of another person’s nonsovereignty’.<sup>159</sup> Part of this defensiveness involves a defensiveness that rebounds on the viewer, who brushes up against the attendant ‘threat’ of their own ridiculousness, hypocrisy, or vulnerability. Resistance to the prospect of environmental *nonsovereignty*, that is the threatened permeation or pollution of the body by ‘the climate’ or ‘the environment’, would thus *also* seem to be the prerogative of an eco-

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<sup>157</sup> Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 11.

<sup>158</sup> Shotwell, *Against Purity*, p. 85.

<sup>159</sup> Berlant, ‘Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)’, p. 310.

anxiety or eco-paranoia that fuses care for a natural milieu with fears over its potential for contaminating, or overwhelming corporeal boundaries. This is antithetical to the theoretical embrace of such contiguity by material feminism, as in Alaimo's concept of 'transcorporeality', which views the human as *de facto* coterminous with its surroundings, 'the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world.'<sup>160</sup> While Alaimo's insistence that 'the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world' functions as a stark reminder of our imbrication in a changing climate, this recognition is *also* an intensely earnest site of critical affirmation characteristic of material feminism or new materialism, wherein these interchanges and 'contact zones' are viewed as a gateway onto 'potent ethical and political possibilities'.<sup>161</sup> In Hecht's work, meanwhile, this recognition serves as a launchpad for a comic grappling with complicity *as well as* the possible redundancy of this recognition as a standalone strategy. Likewise, this draws comic attention to the *inutility* of excessive displays of ecological affect in staging 'productive' or 'meaningful' interventions in these unavoidably messy networks.

Hecht's protagonist reveals herself as a subscriber to this purism or holism in her choice of 'strategies for surviving civilization's decline', which are, as the blurb text of *Happy Trails* suggests, 'herbal remedies, macrobiotics, a bit of Xanax'. Her chosen strategies, more robust in their eco-consciousness, are also framed as morally uncontaminated, as in the story 'Cramp Bark', when she piously opts for just 'some Panna water' at her local diner since 'water was the one thing I could count on not having touched any animal product in preparation or on the grill' (*HT*, 140). Here, however, the joke rebounds on the narrator who, despite her smug refusal, nevertheless unwittingly partakes in resource extraction. First bottled in the 1880s, Acqua Panna is a 'limpid and luminous' branded mineral water with 'organoleptic' properties, ostensibly with

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<sup>160</sup> Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, p. 2.

<sup>161</sup> Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, p. 2.

its roots in a sixteenth-century source owned by the Medici family, the ruling Florentine dynasty.<sup>162</sup> Following its discovery, the springs and their bordering land were ringfenced as ‘private property’, coinciding with the Duke’s expanding game reserve, its isolation effectively ensuring the noble family’s access to freshwater (many other unclaimed springs were contaminated with animal waste) and restricting the local community’s access. Together with San Pellegrino and Perrier, another of the narrator’s favourites, Acqua Panna was bought out by Nestlé in the mid-1990s, the same corporation that (controversially) persuaded the World Water Council in 2000 to downgrade access to drinking water from a human ‘right’ to a human ‘need’, a semantic shift that facilitated the aggressive privatisation of water by their seventy-two brands, together with the (poorly-regulated) leeching of ground water for bottling, often from aquifers and springs located in already water-deprived communities and on Indigenous lands.<sup>163</sup> In a sense then, the same joke also rebounds on ‘us’, the reader: such collusions are, after all, scenarios into which ‘we’, in the privileged West, are all ongoingly flung by a pervasively extractive economy, all to varying degrees of willed or blissful ignorance. A similar kind of environmental comedy, operating at the expense of the ‘liberal blessed’, is at work when Hecht’s protagonist is confronted by depleted stocks of a cherished herbal supplement in the health-food store:

I had a panicky feeling. Too panicky to do the breathing exercises recommended for anxiety by Dr. Andrew Weil in his recent newsletter, and every health-food store was sold out of kava in vegetarian capsules. I’d read in the newsletter that should be reserved for severe anxiety. It was the summer of 1998, and I thought the situation was right for kava (*HT*, 23).

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<sup>162</sup> S. Pellegrino and Acqua Panna, *The Water Codex: The Art of Tasting Mineral Water and Its Perfect Harmonization* (2005).

<sup>163</sup> See Lakota People’s Law Project, ‘The Case Against Nestlé’, 14 June 2018, <<https://lakotalaw.org/news/2018-06-13/the-case-against-nestle>> [accessed 15 September 2021]. See also Alexandra Shimo, ‘While Nestlé extracts millions of litres from their land, residents have no drinking water’, *Guardian*, 4 October 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/oct/04/ontario-six-nations-nestle-running-water>> [accessed 14 September 2021]

Aside from the aural pun at work here (kava is an ironic homophone for the dry sparkling wine, Cava, with all its jubilant implications), which might be enough to elicit a laugh, there is also the slight tone of environmental haughtiness or derision, which seems pointedly to imply that, somewhere, droves of people are purchasing and utilising kava *incorrectly*, and for cases of anxiety far milder than her own. (What could be more absurd than a panic attack brought on by being simply *too* ecologically correct to survive in the world?) Beyond showcasing the moral and intellectual superiority that has led to people deriding environmentalism as ‘didactic, prescriptive, and demanding’, there are also subterranean colonial ramifications at work in the fact of the narrator’s confrontation with a herbal remedy ‘shortage’, which function as a send-up of environmental whiteness.<sup>164</sup> Though scarcity is, traditionally speaking, narrowly understood as an economic framework (as a lack, or the threatened lack of a particular resource), it is above all else, a social relation — there exists an intricate connection between extractive histories of colonialism and logics of scarcity, since resource scarcity drove both industrial expansion and the project of empire further, into new terrains.<sup>165</sup> A species native to Oceania, specifically Pacific Island including Fiji, Vanatu, and the Samoas, kava is ‘a prominent and pervasive force in daily life [...] including as a link to the gods, maintaining of a hierarchy in Pacific societies, as a mind-altering drug, or as a symbol of national identity.’<sup>166</sup> These ‘quasi-traditional’ functions have been interrupted, however, by legacies of colonial violence which have led to periodic slumps in the plant’s flourishing, including its own near-extinction.<sup>167</sup> On their arrival in the South Pacific, Christian missionaries and medical personnel, disturbed by kava’s connection to the supernatural world of Indigenous peoples, sought to smear its consumption and preparation methods as

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<sup>164</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 27.

<sup>165</sup> Out of the Woods, ‘The Uses of Disaster’, *Commune*, 22 October 2018, <<https://communemag.com/the-uses-of-disaster/>> [accessed 7 September 2021]

<sup>166</sup> Yadhu N. Singh, ‘Kava: An Old Drug in a New World’, *Cultural Critique*, 71 (2009), pp. 107–128 (pp. 108–113).

<sup>167</sup> Singh, ‘Kava: An Old Drug’, p. 109.

‘unhygienic’; in certain cases, even buying out ‘plantations and [having] all kava plants dug up and destroyed’.<sup>168</sup>

While the root is ‘traditionally’ prepared as a beverage, its consumption has transformed with its increasing popularity outside an Oceanic context, most notably the explosion in ‘the manufacture of kava-containing pills and tinctures, which are [...] marketed for treating anxiety in Western countries’.<sup>169</sup> According to Jonathan D Baker, kava’s success, as a ‘plant, beverage, medicine, and dietary supplement’, and as a ‘pharmaceutical analogue’ for treating depression, anxiety, and panic attacks ‘is what drove the boom in kava sales in the mid to late 1990s’ though subsequent ‘[c]oncern over potential liver damage from these supplements resulted in a crash in the export market in 2001’.<sup>170</sup> Given the narrator’s anxiety about the effects of Tylenol, it’s perhaps safe to assume this purported toxicity would have led to her abandoning kava. While Hecht’s narrator doesn’t necessarily *know* what she’s buying into, her attempts to buy her way into a ‘greener’ economy *and* greater emotional tranquillity nevertheless implicates her in a legacy of (neo)colonial appropriation enabled by the same extractive, capitalist economy that has made a ‘pristine’, natural world unsustainable, creating in its turn the various eco-stresses whose alleviation she hopes to secure through this remedy. Furthermore, kava’s product’s marketing in the West relies on an illusion of ‘authenticity’ that belongs to a racist imaginary, as Singh points out. Part of kava’s appeal as an alternative remedy to Xanax or other prescription pharmaceuticals is ‘its status as a naturally occurring product linked with Pacific Island cultures [and the] idyllic scenes of island life in which kava is prepared or consumed.’<sup>171</sup> In reality, though, such ‘representations at once propagate and reinforce popular Western notions of native

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<sup>168</sup> Singh, ‘Kava: An Old Drug’, p. 113.

<sup>169</sup> Jonathan D Baker, ‘Pills, Potions, Products: Kava’s Transformations in New and Nontraditional Contexts’, *The Contemporary Pacific*, 24 (2012), 233–265 (p. 233).

<sup>170</sup> Baker, ‘Pills, Potions’, pp. 233–240.

<sup>171</sup> Singh, ‘Kava: An Old Drug’, p. 111.

wisdom, abundance, ecological harmony, and cultural authenticity which [...] are out of kilter not only with the contemporary tenor of Oceanic life but also with the environmental reality of precontact island societies.<sup>172</sup>

The narrator's own (anxious) desire for palliation, for a curative to offset her own slackened sense of control, thus implies its own species of defensive individualism, albeit unintentionally. In its commitment to attaining a miniature fantasy of environmental control, or emotional self-regulation, it also reasserts the dominance of Western neoliberal culture. Which returns us, in a sense, to the connection between comedy and anxiety that initiated this chapter's inquiry, the various ways in which the comic mode may serve a strategic function in the quest for something resembling serenity or 'self-possession', in the face of feeling totally engulfed by eco-jitters. One might even be tempted to wonder whether such an affective strategy *is* indeed infiltrated by authorial anxieties, whether in fact Hecht's eco-fears *are* coeval with her protagonist's. Something of this defensiveness would seem to be detectable in Hecht's own spiky interview stance. In a rare exchange published in *The Believer*, she was pushed on whether or not she sets out to "write funny": 'My editor at the *New Yorker* once said to me, "It's hard to be funny," and I said, "What do you mean?" He read me a sentence from one of my stories and said, "Are you telling me you didn't try to make that funny?" And I said, "No. That's just how it occurred to me. I just write things the way I think of them."<sup>173</sup>

Might this admission — *I just write things the way I think of them* — be legible in terms beyond satire's cruel intentions? Or might the satirical lens itself be better understood here less as a crafty or conniving strategy, and as something more closely resembling a revelatory mode of

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<sup>172</sup> Singh, 'Kava: An Old Drug', p. 111.

<sup>173</sup> Nellins, 'An Interview with Julie Hecht'.

encounter, as Matthew Hodgart suggests, a way of simply ‘respond[ing] to the world?’<sup>174</sup> Perhaps these internal wranglings, and Hecht’s painstaking documentation of her protagonist’s private suffering isn’t the outcome of any exulted formal strategy. If, by her own concession, she merely *writes things the way she thinks of them*, then literature may be the only forum that can absorb or contain the peculiar admixture of absurdity and sorrow that informs her worldview, the space where its pain-pleasure can assume its ‘true’ significance. The authorial devotion signified by the ongoing project of excavating her unnamed character’s neuroses *is* a project some might view as tantamount to a form of therapeutic exoneration or exorcism, rather than takedown or sendup, a possibility that is often overlooked in the scant review coverage *Happy Trails* received. One critic suggests that: ‘Ms. Hecht never mocks her photographer, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t ridiculous’, a critical *misreading* that rests on the false notion of Hecht showing excessive leniency towards a protagonist that is deserving of mockery, as if the protagonist could somehow gain enough distance to mock herself within a first-person narration.<sup>175</sup>

And yet this slippage isn’t delimited to clumsy critics or probing interviewers, suggesting that there *is* something intrinsic in the artwork itself, or in Hecht’s project, that betrays her own *investment* in the figure of the humourless sovereign. As one *Goodreads* reviewer remarks of the ‘liberal freak of nature’ Hecht has created: ‘If it was satirical, that would be one thing. But author [sic.] does such a good job in her narrative that I’m afraid that this isn’t a work of fiction and that Hect [sic.] really feels the way her unnamed character does’.<sup>176</sup> The notion that Hecht never knowingly *tries* to ‘write funny’ begins to unravel, however, when she is asked by Terry Gross in

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<sup>174</sup> Kalviknes Bore and Reid, ‘Laughing in the Face of Climate Change?’, p. 4.

<sup>175</sup> Laura Collins-Hughes, ‘Decline and Fall: Julie Hecht’s “Happy Trails to You”’, *New York Sun*, 16 June 2008, <<https://www.nysun.com/arts/decline-and-fall-julie-hechts-happy-trails-to-you/80014/>> [accessed 9 August 2021]

<sup>176</sup> See review by user ‘Becky’, dated 4 February 2009. ‘Happy Trails to You’, Goodreads, <[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1818138.Happy\\_Trails\\_to\\_You](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1818138.Happy_Trails_to_You)> [accessed 6 September 2021]

her *Fresh Air* segment, where the ‘pleasure is’ in writing (this, after Hecht has described the process of ‘re-writing and editing as being locked alone in a prison with your work’). She retorts: ‘Well who said anything about pleasure. Let’s see [...] it starts out as, um, [...] you know you might make people laugh, that’s what it is. When you see you make people laugh then you feel that it’s not just [...] completely narcissistic, it’s not just obsessive and selfish [...] of course it *is* narcissistic and obsessive and selfish. But you feel when you can make people laugh and you can see that and you see them laughing and smiling, I suppose that’s [...]rewarding’.<sup>177</sup> Here, the suggestion is of something more artful: indeed Hecht frames her own ‘suffering’ as redeemed by her writerly capacity to engage and entertain her readers; but, more expressly, to elicit laughter.

This convergence may simply be the result of what appears to be deliberate obscurity on the part of Hecht as author, evident in the dearth of interviews and the almost total lack of marketing that has accompanied the publication of her books. I labour these (scant) biographical details not out of prurience, nor because I endorse the view that Hecht is necessarily a corollary for her protagonist. As she puts it, I’d ‘rather not get into that’. But the various interpretive snafus surrounding Hecht’s text, the seeming *regularity* with which author and protagonist are ensnared in a switcheroo, would seem to signify its own form of critical identity crisis, which generates its own comic timings and anxieties. As Berlant and Ngai suggest, one worry which comedy formally engages is ‘the problem of figuring out distinctions between things, including people, whose relation is mutually disruptive of definition’.<sup>178</sup> At the same time, the very questions of sincerity and authenticity that Hecht’s writing takes as its thematic objects would seem to hamper the interpretive possibilities of criticism more widely, generating all kinds of anxious *dis-* or *over*identifications. One is reminded, perhaps, of Flaubert’s definition of the author as ‘necessarily other than any described position’: ‘An author in his book must be like

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<sup>177</sup> Gross, *Fresh Air*.

<sup>178</sup> Berlant and Ngai, ‘Comedy has Issues’, p. 233.



God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere. Art being a second nature, the creator of that Nature must behave similarly. In all its atoms, in all its aspects, let there be sense a hidden, infinite impassivity'.<sup>179</sup> Indeed, in the critical gesture of attempting to 'crack' precisely *how* Hecht's humour operates, or in thinking oneself capable of disentangling her authorial presence from her text, one stumbles into the same humourless limbo her protagonist so generously occupies for our entertainment. This reproduction is perhaps one of Hecht's greatest gags, in that it confronts us *yet again* with our own fundamental status as 'combover subjects'. Likewise, we're fooling ourselves in the very action of yearning or hustling for an aesthetic *wholeness* or coherence between Hecht's commitments and those of her protagonist; if it did exist to begin with, such coherence, would be necessarily elusive, since this is its creator's will. As Colebrook makes clear, the very process of close reading enacts a fundamental kind of irony, relying as it does on our 'recognition of our capacity as readers to question whether a literary text is at one with what it says'.<sup>180</sup> To mistrust whether a literary text is actually *at one with what it says*, is to acknowledge a capacity for disingenuity that, in some way, inevitably locates the critic as a paranoid, Doubting Thomas. The impetus as a reader is perhaps to counter this paranoia through attempts at *controlling* the object, insisting on the resolution of its kinks and ambiguities.<sup>181</sup> Perhaps one of Hecht's formal feats in the selection of a proto autofictional mode, is her embrace of this awkward proximity; something approaching Szerszynski's 'thoroughgoing irony', which "'involve[s] a reflexive awareness of the limited and provisional nature of human understanding'".<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Claire Colebrook, 'The meaning of irony', *Textual Practice*, 14 (2000), 5–30 (p. 16).

<sup>180</sup> Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 5.

<sup>181</sup> See Lauren Berlant, 'Genre Flailing', *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*, 1 (2018), 156–162.

<sup>182</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, p. 45.

### Conclusion: Bad Nostalgia

In the closing pages of the title story in ‘Happy Trails to You’, Hecht’s protagonist is engaged in a long, meandering telephone interview with a character named ‘Interview Boy’, an avid fan of her photographic work. During their conversation the unnamed narrator recalls how, during her baby-boomer childhood, her parents ‘were always going to Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals’, commuting into Manhattan from the suburbs for the occasion (*HT*, 206). ‘The next day [...] my father, at some point during the day, would start singing one of the songs [...] Just like that, out of nowhere, I’d hear the song [...] “Oklahoma!” and “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” [or] [...] a few lines from “Some Enchanted Evening” (*HT*, 206). The narrator never joined her parents on these Broadway trips, finding ‘the stories, dialogue, and acting to be fake and idiotic’ and ‘musicals [to be] a waste of time’ (*HT*, 206). Still, as she recounts this history she finds herself overcome with nostalgia for ‘the memory of the beautiful mornings and days and songs of my family’ — a wistfulness that is quickly ‘besmirched’ when Interview Boy begins to drum up increasingly sexually explicit puns on the song titles, reimagining them as porn films (*HT*, 207–8). We see her enjoy a fleeting moment of genuine mirth that still fails to puncture her anxiety: ‘Laughing is supposed to be good for the health, but it felt as if some valve might burst and I might die. I had to get up to do Dr. Weil’s breathing exercises’ (*HT*, 207).<sup>183</sup> That mirth can be so rapidly converted into a potential for danger (these exercises are the very same that the narrator undertakes earlier in the book, when she feels a panic attack coming on) self-consciously announces the proximity between comedy and anxiety that perennially hovers at the surface of Hecht’s writing. Her wistful recollection of *That beautiful morning in childhood* — a reference to the *Oklahoma!* song ‘Oh What A Beautiful Morning’ — trades on a nostalgic strain of affect in which Hecht’s entire project indulges. The structure of her recollection is itself ironical, relying on an investment in what Colebrook describes as ‘a lost sense of the *truly* valuable or original’

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<sup>183</sup> Dr. Andrew Weil, an American celebrity doctor who advocates alternative and holistic medicine, features heavily as a touchstone in Hecht’s work.

(emphasis mine).<sup>184</sup> In this sense, nostalgia itself might be said to be a structurally ironic as well as anxious mode, one that grapples with a desire for return to a lost temporality that never ‘truly’ existed: an investment that is itself synthetic, much like the ‘bright golden haze on the meadow’, the ‘corn as high as a elephant’s eye’ [sic.], and the fat, powder-puffed clouds populating the set of *Oklahoma!*. The narrator’s desire for a return to this era, too, is ironical, at least in Colebrook’s sense of the word:

It is a peculiarly modern gesture to think of differing epochs, each with their own standard of truth. In order to think of the relative truth and difference of historical contexts or epochs we have to imagine that certain contexts may be meaningful and coherent and yet no longer be held as true [...]. [T]he idea of past contexts that are meaningful in themselves but which are no longer ‘ours’ requires the ironic viewpoint of detachment.<sup>185</sup>

This troubling purist sensibility marks the narrator’s broader relationship to nature which, with its mournful harking back to a ‘nature’ of yore, also elicits the American pastoralism that is abundant in a film like Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* where a similar canned nostalgia is at work, hard facts and datasets interspersed with meandering reveries about his own idyllic upbringing on the family tobacco farm in Carthage, Tennessee. As Raymond Williams has observed of the pastoral convention and the illusion of bounty that often flanks it, it is a mode that also conceals vast structural oppressions, primarily ‘the simple extraction of the existence of labourers’, whose management of natural ‘resources’ sustains the necessary conditions for the landowner’s pleasure in the rural landscape.<sup>186</sup> The pastoral also veers dangerously close to a reverence for purity that is by no means expunged in Hecht’s fiction, where the narrator’s ‘gripes’ sometimes give way to a more generalised resistance to ‘progress’. This resolves here into

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<sup>184</sup> Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 3.

<sup>185</sup> Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 3.

<sup>186</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘Pastoral and Counter-Pastoral’, *Critical Quarterly*, 10 (1968), 277–290 (p. 288).

a problematical form of ‘bad nostalgia’, manifested in an ugly display of exclusionary, anti-immigrant sentiment: ‘I wanted to hear English spoken by cashiers and customers. At least I wanted the cashiers to stop speaking Spanish to each other and help the customers [...] The more Spanish I heard the more enraged I became. I knew this was another new, bad thing about myself’ (TU, 6). Here, her own *proneness* to an intractable world clatters into her overwhelming desire to be sealed-off or insulated from it, spilling once again into a fixation on environmental whiteness and racial purity that carries risky supremacist overtones.

This moment, convened through the wholesome fantasy of an ‘untainted’ morning in childhood, is also, in this context, an expression of a desire for a moment of fixity or temporal arrest in a world of incrementally accelerating contaminations. In dramatising, or rather in *failing* to dramatise ecological anxiety, Hecht’s prose exceeds the normative catastrophic register of contemporary eco-fiction, instead documenting the progress of a kind of flat, elongated experience of doom. In doing so, Hecht’s work enables ‘us’ both to grapple with a range of gawky, still-unformed, feelings about climate change *and* to discover the ridicule in such an undertaking. The text holds open a generative space for the reader to explore the self-loathing, inertia, unlikability, disappointment, resolve and joy, that may come with trying or perhaps trying *too hard* to be better, and the possible skidding-on-the-banana-peel awkwardness of your efforts being fruitless. In a certain sense, it also *opens a window* onto an emergent time zone, now past, in which eco-anxiety and its objects were containable or ‘fringe’ topics, rather than a collective state of mind forcibly pushed to the forefront of the Western mind. Before it had crystallised into a formalised discourse or pathology, eco-anxiety perhaps more closely resembled a structure of environmental feeling, a faintly millenarian disposition towards the world, rather than a diagnostic criteria requiring therapeutic intervention, whether through self-help or medical

frameworks.<sup>187</sup> In this way, Hecht's writing serves as a poignant *and* funny time-capsule for the politically green roads *not* taken, as well as the consecutive failures of consecutive terms of liberal and conservative governments to 'marshal' the crisis: a reminder of all the ways in which things could have been (and could still!) be different. The ironic prescience of Hecht's writing being that this condition of affective and political ho-humming still predominates, even in the present day. Weirdly, the text thus operates *both* in the service of now conventional eco-affects (like seriousness or anxiety) at the same time that it also profoundly destabilises them, the protagonist's ongoing commitment to her self-exposure both communicating its preposterousness while affirming its necessity. There is a certain productive resignation in her humourless humour that is perhaps reminiscent of the gallows; a charming determination to keep plugging away at the rituals and habits of environmentalism, while also feeling dispirited by the knowledge that it may yield nothing. But there is devotion and a robust vitality in humour too, and in the political promise of an eco-anxiety that recognises what it needs is to be routed *away* from the inertial force of human sovereignty and individuated neoliberal logics, and to look beyond the threat of what the world might do to hamper the 'I' and its conditions. To turn instead outwards, towards the imaginative horizons of what we *might* do to better sustain the world, and each other. A reminder to always keep the windows open.

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<sup>187</sup> Therapeutic interventions for ecological anxiety are an increasingly common feature on counselling and therapy directories. Self-help 'guides' to eco-anxiety also form part of a growing publishing market, some of these written by psychotherapists, like Anouchka Grose's *A Guide to Eco-Anxiety: How to Protect the Planet and Your Mental Health* (London: Watkins, 2020).



## ‘After all’: (Dis)engagements

On 28 September 2019, a video was uploaded to the YouTube channel of teenage singer-songwriter and ‘dark-pop’ artist Billie Eilish, featuring Eilish together with actor Woody Harrelson — renowned for his long-running stint on *Cheers*, ‘a sit-com about an arrogant bartender and a frigid waitress’ that T., the protagonist of Millet’s *How The Dead Dream*, disaffectedly watches ‘every week with a female neighbour’ (*HTTD*, 27). The video shares its title with Greta Thunberg’s viral nonfiction book *Our House is on Fire* (2018). At the time of writing, Eilish’s YouTube channel subscriber base stands at some 42.8 million, and the video currently has 5,481,591 views. It was posted to Twitter on the same date as it was posted to YouTube. There, it has gained some 20.9 million views. In the video, the odd couple of Eilish and Harrelson — hot off the heels of co-hosting Saturday Night Live together — sit stiffly, side-by-side in what is presumably the backroom of a record label, its cream walls lined with out-of-focus images of musical artists, among them Ed Sheeran. The two celebrities — both long-time vegans, Harrelson for over 30 years — woodenly recite alternating lines of dialogue over a montage of catastrophic imagery as, in the background, Eilish’s debut single ‘Ocean Eyes’ (2015) plays:

Our Earth is warming up and our oceans are rising. Extreme weather is wrecking millions of lives [...] We are in a climate emergency [...] Up to one million species are becoming extinct because of mankind’s actions, and time is running out [...] We must take back power [...] If like us, you love our Planet Earth, follow organizations like Greenpeace and Fridays for Future and be part of protecting it. After all, it’s the only home we will ever have.

The celebrities wear the same clothing as during their SNL appearance — Harrelson in a low-key grey t-shirt, Eilish in a green puffer jacket, her neon green roots peeking out from dyed-black

locks — the implication being that the pitch was filmed either before or after it.<sup>1</sup> The peel-away imagery that is spliced in between footage of the two performers performing is familiar enough to be almost rote — cascades of sheeting ice, forests razed by fire, sad-looking polar bears, scenes of sprawling protests, an uncanny recycling of Jackie Christiansen’s documentary montage in *Night Moves* — but the affect is ‘off’, somehow. In place of earnestness or conviction, empathic care or rousing anger, there is a flattened tone, a vague aura of irritable boredom and a faint sensation of *checked-outness* communicated in the deadpan, almost robotic style of its delivery. All of which makes it difficult for the viewer to decipher whether the video is a sardonic sketch *about* the dreariness of climate emergency aesthetics or, in fact, ‘the real deal’. Like an extension of their SNL appearance, the performers appear to read from an autocue, with their dialogue managing to feel both over-baked and under-rehearsed at the same time, devoid of the cultivated levity and pristine timing that characterises SNL’s polished opening monologues.

The overall impression is one of *duty* inflected by exhaustion, of two environmental ‘straight men’ whose wearied miens have been engineered to match the grimness of their subject matter. The slightly uncanny sensation aroused by seeing two such well-known faces relay this message — as though dosed, or perhaps ‘under the influence’ of some artificial intelligence — puts one in mind of Michael Hardt’s notion of affective labour, a term he utilises to describe ‘one face’ of the ‘immaterial labour’ that has become incrementally ‘exalted’ by the transition towards an ‘informational economy’ and the rapid evolution of communication technologies, of ‘interactive and cybernetic machines’, but also the work of ‘human contact and interaction’ which is more typically affiliated with ‘women’s work’, in particular the health services and the labour of care.<sup>2</sup> As Hardt has it, both ‘the entertainment industry and the various culture

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Our House Is On Fire’, online video recording, YouTube, 28 September 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvIiZc6uAXA&t=12s>> [accessed 20 September 2021]

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hardt, ‘Affective Labor’, *boundary 2*, 26 (1999), 89–100 (pp. 90–95).



industries are likewise focused on the creation and manipulation of affects' whose 'products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion — even a sense of connectedness or community', feelings whose 'realness' is not diminished by these exchanges taking place in a virtual, rather than actual, realm.<sup>3</sup> According to Hardt, 'affective labor is itself and directly the constitution of communities and collective subjectivities' that formerly operated autonomously from capitalist valorization, thus serving as 'as a useful ground for anticapitalist projects', an autonomy that has not been entirely diminished or 'contaminated' by its integration into 'value-producing forms of labor'.<sup>4</sup>

Harrelson and Eilish's affective *disengagement* is markedly different to the impassioned animatedness of other celebrity appearances, the urgent idea that *our very lives depend on it* is filtered through a fusion of bland showmanship and tonal resignation that feels jarring when set against the conventional roster of catastrophic imagery.<sup>5</sup> Unlike DiCaprio's performance (discussed in Chapter Four), theirs seems inflected by a doubtfulness of which the performers seem jointly conscious; the video doesn't attain anything approaching the feeling of 'well-being' that Hardt describes, which is supplanted instead by an ambient sense of *dis-ease*. Their detachment provokes the sensation that the revolutionary potentiality of rallying or chirpy ecological affect has been somehow compromised, blunted or dulled through overuse. The comments posted underneath the YouTube video predictably swerve from excessive praise ('fangirling' over Eilish) to brazen hostility and 'calling out' the disingenuity of celebrity activism — speculating that they probably hotfooted it from filming this video back onto their private jets, or skewering the

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<sup>3</sup> Hardt, 'Affective Labor', pp. 95–96.

<sup>4</sup> Hardt, 'Affective Labor', p. 89.

<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, in more casual videos, Eilish has spoken animatedly and with open irritation about the apparent disconnect between affect, knowledge, and imagery, as seen in her dissection of the 'viral' picture of the Amazon burning, where she accuses people of 'fake caring' about the rainforest's destruction. See: *Billie Eilish talking about the amazon being burned*, online video recording, YouTube, 25 September 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0oYZUgwKYY>> [accessed 20 September 2021]

hypocrisy of Eilish having the audacity to use her platform to tell people to go vegan while *also* profiting off having her songs featured in an advert for Dodge Muscle cars. The video's final emphasis lands on a renewed demand for 'engagement', this tailored appeal to Zoomers blurring the lines between cyber-activism and non-profit sector marketing in an attention economy where competition for the 'youth audience' makes them particularly hard to secure. A screengrab of Greenpeace's Instagram page appears briefly, a ghostly cursor hovering over the 'Follow' button, as if to suggest the inseparability between political investment in the cause and capital investment in the organisations that promulgate awareness of it. In a sense, the video would seem to *expose* its own jadedness in the very action of transmitting its message, a lively critique also emerging through 'the continual interactivity' of a platform that allows viewers to react to and cohere around the broadcast in real-time.<sup>6</sup>

In this awkward rendition of a stock environmentalist script an impalpable discursive shift seems to be unfurling — marked by the intrusion of a low-level fatigue that would appear to be intimately connected to the renewed media scrutiny of environmental crisis, which is no longer a fringe or 'eccentric' topic but a garden-variety feature of the rapid-turnover news cycle. This chronic exposure to the dismal scene of ecological decline — reminiscent of the drone of 'green noise', a term used by Alex Williams in 2008 to describe the affective 'static caused by urgent, sometimes vexing or even contradictory [environmental] information played at too high a volume for too long' — triggers a hybrid sensation of environmental alarm *and* simultaneous frustration at the vast discrepancy between what sometimes feels like excessive media coverage and the inertial response of government and agencies of the state.<sup>7</sup> 'Stuckness', then, would seem not only to have become part of the contemporary eco-message, but to be structurally integral to

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<sup>6</sup> Hardt, 'Affective Labor', p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> Alex Williams, 'That Buzz in Your Ear May Be Green Noise', *New York Times*, 15 June 2008, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/15/fashion/15green.html>> [accessed 7 September 2021]

any attempt to talk about it. As I have shown, the texts that appear in this thesis attend to the peculiar dynamics of eco-impasse as they appeared at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, capturing the curious intractability of the environmental ‘problem’. What emerges across my four chapters — in my arguments about the work of Joy Williams, Lydia Millet, Kelly Reichardt, and Julie Hecht — is a particular mode of aesthetic response towards climate disaster and extinction that is intimately tied to the ongoing stasis of the sociopolitical, and the woefully lacklustre response of the political to a state of protracted nonhuman crisis. To varying degrees, each of these cultural sites index states of impasse through focusing their attentions on individuals and agencies failing to act, or trying to act and ‘*flailing*’, a term used by Lauren Berlant to describe ‘a mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world becomes disturbed’.<sup>8</sup> In making sense of this complex series of linked affective responses, this thesis has practised a mode of reading extinction and environmental disturbance differently, sideways, or perhaps indirectly. In turning away from the more obvious aesthetic rubrics of the spectacular and the disastrous, it has explored a quieter form of ‘crisis ordinariness’, one that crops up in the everyday struggle of people trying to conjure strategies that might enable them to adjust to, or cope with, the prospect of a diminished or diminishing world.

For Fredric Jameson, such ‘strategies of indirection are [...] necessary if we are somehow to break through our monadic insulation and to “experience”, for the first and real time, this “present,” which is after all all we have’, a summation that (eerily) mirrors Harrelson’s woolly, anthropocentric affirmation that Planet Earth is ‘the only home we’ll ever have’.<sup>9</sup> In their daily struggles to uphold their commitments to a dysfunctional ecological present, these fictional protagonists (Louise, Josh, Dena, T., Hecht’s unnamed narrator) showcase the difficulty of

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<sup>8</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Genre Flailing’, *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*, 2 (2018), 156–162 (p. 157).

<sup>9</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 288.

moving through an unsteady, depleted world. In their various (dis)engagements with both nonhuman and human others, however, we also see the importance of taking the environment seriously both aesthetically and politically — as other than simply a *problem* to be (re)solved. Doing so, however, is a demanding, complex and often faltering process, one that necessarily involves contending with many failures in order for anything resembling ‘grief work’ to take place: whether the inefficacy of political leadership in divesting from fossil fuels; of policy in curbing corporate emissions; or the waning power of cultural praxis to catalyse meaningful shifts in public consciousness. These failures have conventionally found fictional expression in dystopian or apocalyptic imaginings of a post-catastrophe future, something which the texts that have interested me here — in their diffusion of climactic moments, and in their fidelity to documenting instances of impasse that are *also* features of the ecological — tend to shy away from. This thesis instead has tracked and sought to explain a clutch of dysphoric affects (paranoia, anxiety, loneliness, detachment) that are also diagnostic of an accelerated period of cultural production, one that is (yet again) hyperspecific to the moment of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century wherein ecological degradation was first ramping up in the public consciousness.

As Matthew Schneider-Mayerson suggests, ‘Starting in the 1990s, authors began featuring climate change as a major element of their fictional worlds — first in science and speculative fiction and then, by the 2010s, in nearly every genre of literature’.<sup>10</sup> This quickening goes some way towards explaining the resulting hard-and-fast pace of literary production, which has tended broadly speaking to foreground future-oriented imaginaries dominated by apocalyptic scenarios. The integration of climate change into these fictional lifeworlds, wherein it serves the function of

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, “‘Just as in the Book’? The Influence of Literature on Readers’ Awareness of Climate Injustice and Perception of Climate Migrants’, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 27 (2020), 337–364 (p. 337).

an ‘emergent threat’, is in many ways a geo-temporal falsehood, a signifier not of the moment at which environmental crisis actually became threatening — a threat which has already long been a reality for populations in the Global South, for whom co-existence with the decimation of natural disaster and extractive colonialism are nothing new. Rather it is perhaps more accurately described as the moment at which a Eurocentric imaginary seized upon it as ‘urgent’, ‘prescient’, valuable, or otherwise worthy of artistic ‘elevation’, in turn generating an affective economy that has devoted its resources to the production and circulation of ecological feeling. Much of the climate fiction to which Matthew Schneider-Meyerson refers originated from ‘an activist bent’, and geared itself towards putting audiences on high alert to both the gravity and urgency of the threat, the organising assumption being that ‘climate fiction can play a critical role in helping us recognize, understand, and feel the catastrophic trajectory on which we find ourselves and chart a different path forward’, with most critics assuming ‘that climate fiction has a positive influence on its readers.’<sup>11</sup> Its persuasive powers are seen by many ecocritics and environmentalists to be such that fiction may ‘convert conservative climate deniers’, ‘function[ing] as Trojan horses for message smuggling.’<sup>12</sup> This quasi-missionary demand of the artwork — the idea that eco-fiction ought to be ‘improving’, to garner positive net effects or affects — risks subordinating or relegating art’s fundamental strangeness or an ambivalence that might, rather than cause for alarm, be a necessary part of grappling with the seismic existential, theoretical and material quandaries posed by a global event like the Holocene extinction. Besides these expectations that place an untenable burden of responsibility on the artwork, the current imagining of climate fiction, and of what extinction might look like, also seems drastically self-limiting for creative and critical praxis, because it reproduces the gruff pressure on the comic that ‘good humour’ should be maintained at all costs, even when faced with the ultimate ‘bad joke’ of the world ending: this

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<sup>11</sup> Schneider-Mayerson, “‘Just as in the Book’?”, p. 337.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, ‘The Influence of Climate Fiction: An Empirical Survey of Readers’, *Environmental Humanities*, 10 (2018), 473–500 (p. 479).

is a mandate described by Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai as ‘the demand for play and fun as good and necessary for social membership [which] is everywhere inflecting what was once called alienation’.<sup>13</sup>

The notion that even in the cumulative movement of feeling bad, we ought to still feel good, is given the lie by the texts explored here, which — by contrast — often showcase the practice of environmental behaviour as experientially *unpleasant*, slow, unengaging, disappointing, dull, underappreciated, oftentimes impotent, and certainly not always transformative. Joy Williams’s ‘Substance’, for instance, offers a blueprint for care or ethical relation between human and nonhuman animals that is centred around an ambivalent configuration of duty that is apparently bereft of any clear affective or rational motive, arbitrated not by logic but by the sheer, immaterial force of compulsion. In the example of Julie Hecht, meanwhile, eco-anxiety is played for laughs; and yet *this* compulsiveness is also shown to be unsustainable in the lack of any cohesive political community where it might find an outlet. Whereas such strategies ironically emerge from the practice of day-to-day life, they do not easily allow for pragmatic replication or rapid implementation; in this sense, the texts in this thesis seem, if not entirely *uninterested* in remediation tactics, then at least un(der)motivated by them. Certainly, it seems doubtful that anyone could encounter a film like *Night Moves* and emerge with a renewed determination or gumption to quit eating meat or reduce their plastic straw usage — which is to say that these texts aren’t *effectual* in any mainstream environmental sense of the word, certainly that *effectiveness* isn’t their primary mission. That, I have argued, is their crucial value.

It is conceivable that these texts would be considered as representational failures by those keen to see fiction ‘tackle’ the climate crisis, too, at least in the sense that they only

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<sup>13</sup> Berlant and Ngai, ‘Comedy has Issues’, p. 237.

infrequently depict extinction or ecological depletion, which often seem to take place ‘elsewhere’, as it were, at the fringes of narrative action. Invoked in brief asides or quiet, indeterminate ‘mentions’, the focus instead alights on noncathartic scenes of impasse, often dedicated to sticking it out with protagonists who are hung up on the present, depicting fictional agents who are also caught up in the continual failure to act. And yet, this unspectacular occurrence is perhaps *more* accurate or *more* verisimilar with how biodiversity loss is actually experienced by an urban, Euro-American public for whom it is often an indirect affective encounter, occurring in a psychic, nonconcrete landscape rather than a localised one. (One might pause here to question whether it can ever be the primary task of ‘ecological’ fiction to simulate for a Western reader the empathic experience of extinction in its absence, or to push ‘us’ towards a deeper interrogation of how we might collectively respond to the pang of its threat, and the disorder that suggests.) What is significant about these texts as I have read them, however, is that in their tonal ambivalence, they indicate the need for some other thing, some alternative cultural register for thinking about the environment and environmental decline beyond simply the conciliatory function of the didactic or the instrumental notion of promulgating ‘awareness’.

This thesis also develops an important argument about modes of *reading*. As Octavia E. Butler writes in *Parable of the Sower* (1993) ‘There is no end / To what a living world / Will demand of you.’<sup>14</sup> What does the living world demand of us? What does a text *about* that living world demand of us? Though these texts don’t float free of the original contexts of their writing — their ‘political unconscious’, to use Fredric Jameson’s turn of phrase — nor are these conditions themselves static; they are continually evolving, as the political shapeshifts around us. As Berlant suggests, ‘The violence of the world makes us flail about for things to read with, people to talk to, and material for inducing transformations, that can make it possible not to

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<sup>14</sup> Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Oakland, CA: Seven Stories Press, 2016), p. 145.

aspire to, feel at war, or to be right; but to be disturbed together, thrashing with, and creating value through a shift in the object [...] Our critical ambivalence toward opening our objects to a transformation whose effects are not foreclosed might make us better at holding the objects that are also changing.<sup>15</sup> This is to say that generative things can arise when we stay critically inquisitive and engage in the productive, sometimes discomfiting, tussle with sometimes noncompliant objects, allowing their uncertainties to wash over us. As my discussion makes clear, before it became a pressing or major element consolidated in contemporary fiction, and before any structure of environmental feeling was corroborated by the formalities of eco-friendly genres, the affective logics of extinction are already present in the artworks that are the thesis's guiding examples. Through engaging in localised strategies of close reading and methods of slow thinking or 'reading with' these texts, the thesis has proffered a more expansive view of what might 'count' as eco-fiction, beyond the remit of 'panicky', dystopian, didactic, or otherwise politically and affectively engaged aesthetics. By probing what can be thought of as an 'ecological' text, per se, it hopes to demonstrate that the ecological is not a set of affects that awaits us in a remote or far-flung future. Indeed, as my analysis of Williams's, Millet's, Reichardt's and Hecht's works across all four chapters shows, it is present as a dynamic, lively set of attachments and micro-logics that are palpable even in the banal rhythms of the everyday.

The work of the thesis has been to trace the affective investments and disinvestments that are at issue when we talk or think about the environment and its possible unravelling, work that is significant because any robust politics of ecological care — an ecological sensibility that *includes* care for the nonhuman as well as human most impacted by ecological — is shaped by these affective (dis)engagements, and by the clash or competition of affective positions that cannot always be easily reconciled. The salience of these affective (dis)investments is traced

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<sup>15</sup> Berlant, 'Genre Flailing', p. 161.



through an innovative synthesis which fuses critical readings of pop-cultural moments with ‘high’ or ‘literary’ fiction texts, placing independent ‘arthouse’ cinema features helmed by auteur-directors like Reichardt on an equal footing with YouTube clips. At the risk of practising my own mode of critical paranoia, the thesis contends that these cultural spheres are *all interconnected* — in the democratic sense of being able to powerfully diagnose different kinds of eco-dynamics — despite the seeming disparity between a fleeting moment of eco-anxiety as portrayed among the bourgeois elites of *Big Little Lies* and the indifference to the biopolitical project of staying alive suggested in the pages of Joy Williams’s ‘Substance’. The deliberate proximity of these readings and the unlikely analytical alliances they form is motivated by a deliberate critical embrace of indistinction, a term that is central to Berlant and Ngai’s understanding of comedy (‘the problem of figuring out distinctions between things’).<sup>16</sup> But is also related (ironically) to philosopher Matthew Calarco’s notion of *indistinction*, which argues that we should abandon the notion that humans are unique in order to explore new ways of conceiving human-animal relations.<sup>17</sup>

In exposing these different positions or logics and working through them sequentially, the thesis argues for the latent value in attending to ambivalent, dysphoric or hybrid environmental affects for what they ‘reveal’ about the knotty, complex relation to ‘our Planet Earth’. One may (quite rightly) see fit to question the utility of dedicating so much intellectual energy to advocating for ambivalence, given the stark escalation of global crisis implied by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has thrust many of us into a world that feels increasingly unfixed and, at times, unfixable. During the period of its writing, the landscape and discourse of environmentalism has also shifted, to varying degrees of (un)subtlety. The issuance of the 2021

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<sup>16</sup> Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, ‘Comedy Has Issues’, *Critical Inquiry*, 43 (2017), 233-249 (p. 233).

<sup>17</sup> See Matthew Calarco, *Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

IPCC report which signalled ‘code red for humanity’ appears to have resulted in a doubling-down of loyalty to the aesthetics of climactic extremity, precipitating a renewed cycle of journalistic handwringing that does little to intervene in the polarising affective standards of ‘doom and gloom’, on the one hand and chipper optimism, on the other.<sup>18</sup> The risk is that this will energise a renewed commitment to instrumentalism through a new generation of cultural works, or that — with the escalation of climate crisis and the panicky acceleration of scientific discourse — the aesthetic follows suit, failing to ‘adapt to the challenge’ by doubling-down on its own didacticism and sincerity in order to better transmit a sense of urgency that has already failed us. The task of this thesis, then has *not* been to track social progress out of a collectively ‘bad’ historical period for climate change, as it morphs and lurches towards a horizon wherein we all become ‘optimal’ climate communicators. Nor, at the same time, is there an intent to disparage or indict as ‘redundant’ those mainstream environmental texts, which are doubtless inflected with the best of reparative intentions, as Sedgwick suggests. Instead, I have looked to deconstruct the homogeneity of contemporary extinction aesthetics, and to underscore the importance of maintaining the wayward, unruly weirdness of artistic expression, even in the heat of widespread global disaster. This aim it has in common with Nicole Seymour’s observation that contemporary environmentalism, in capitulating to the impulse ‘to be straight, white, clean, and neat’ often ends up overlooking ‘the queer, diverse, messy grossness of the world’.<sup>19</sup>

As Hardt observes, it can often seem as though ‘instrumental action and communicative action have become intimately interwoven in informationalized industrial processes’, such that ‘the instrumental action of economic production has merged with the communicative action of human relations’.<sup>20</sup> And yet, for Hardt anyway, this needn’t be cause for automatic despair:

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<sup>18</sup> Matt McGrath, ‘Climate change: IPCC report is “code red for humanity”’, *BBC News*, 9 August 2021, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-58130705>> [accessed 20 September 2021]

<sup>19</sup> Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Hardt, ‘Affective Labor’, pp. 94–96.

whereas ‘one might say that communicative action, human relations, and culture have been instrumentalized, reified, and “degraded” to the level of economic interactions’, in ‘the production and reproduction of affects, in those networks of culture and communication, collective subjectivities are [nevertheless] produced and sociality is produced — even if those subjectivities and that sociality are directly exploitable by capital.’<sup>21</sup> If affective labour and the work of cultural production still retains the power to generate new forms of collectivity and new structures of feeling *in spite of* capital’s thrall, what we might ask, could these look like? What new networks or collectivities might emerge through working to foreground different tonalities and perspectives, as well as new modes of writing and reading about climate crisis? What does the aesthetic have to offer the ecological in the present, beyond the blithe instrumentality of consolation or consciousness-raising? When it comes to speculating on what forms of cultural production about extinction or climate change might emerge in a near future, the temptation is to ‘genre flail’, as Berlant has it, to grope about for ‘relief in established clarity’, in whatever form that may take.<sup>22</sup> Such flailing is, as they suggest, motivated by a defensive response to a sensation of ‘uncontrollable disturbance in [an] object’s stability’, a disturbance that perhaps accurately describes the feeling of losing ‘the’ world, ‘the only home’ that putatively ‘stabilises’ all our objects.<sup>23</sup> Rather than reading defensively, buoyed by the established desire for *foreclosure* that we bring towards ecological fictions — the anticipation that a text about extinction should prove its value through the derivation of affirmation, solace or knowledge production — the texts explored in this thesis suggest that it would behove us to relinquish the fearful impulse to control and retain a speculative openness towards ecological objects, engaging a generosity of approach that is familiar to the *encounter*. The thesis is, overarchingly, organised by a shuttling between the paranoid and reparative positions of reading and, stacked in the order that they are, the chapters

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<sup>21</sup> Hardt, ‘Affective Labor’, pp. 96–97.

<sup>22</sup> Berlant, ‘Genre Flailing’, p. 157.

<sup>23</sup> Berlant, ‘Genre Flailing’, p. 157.

aim to move from a place of relative bleakness (the destructiveness implied by grief or by loneliness) towards a more self-reflexive levity, in the model of a protagonist who has the temerity to keep persisting in trying to *do the right thing*, in forging connections amid disturbance, in flailing and laughing.



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