

ENGLISH

James Fitzgibbon

(De)Naturalising the Novel: Deconstructing Anthropocentric Narratives within Contemporary Climate Fiction

REFLECTION STATEMENT

As the thick and acrid smoke settled over Sydney in the early months of 2020, the true scale of anthropogenic climate change was glimpsed by our society - it seeped its way into the very fabric of our lives as we began to contend with our own fallibility as humans and the narratives that we construct in order to defer responsibility for our existential climate woes. Within my critical response titled “(De)Naturalising the Novel: Deconstructing Anthropocentric Narratives within Contemporary Climate Fiction” I sought to confront how the natural world within contemporary Climate Fiction (Cli-fi) is depicted, criticising anthropocentric representations of the non-human world that have revealed themselves as ingrained within the genre. As an ecocritical essay, my major work seeks to explore the “*the relationship between literature and the physical environment*”¹. Moreover, I examine this relationship within the framework of third wave ecocriticism, deconstructing three Cli-fi novels that each occupy their own niche along the spectrum of the genre. Through the lens of Timothy Morton’s notion of the ecological *Hyperobject*² and Object-Oriented Ontology. I suggest that anthropocentric tropes within Cli-fi are mitigated through denaturalising arbitrary dualisms between the human and non-human worlds and representing, rather, the interdependent relationship that exists between the two. The three novels I investigate, *White Noise*, *Flight Behaviour* and *The Overstory* seek to expose the anthropocentric depictions of the natural world and pitted against each, it is clear that *The Overstory* proves to contend with the natural world in an authentic manner.

-
- 1 Cheryl Glofelty, Harold Fromm, *The Ecocritical Reader* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.
 - 2 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects, Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minnesota: Minneapolis, 2013), 12.

CRITICAL RESPONSE

(De)Naturalising the Novel: Deconstructing Anthropocentric Narratives within Contemporary Climate Fiction

*My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*
(Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias*)

One of the world's leading climate change scientists, Professor James Hansen, recently commented on the role of the novel in influencing social thought, that;

“We need to find ways of communicating not just the scale of the problem but its ethical dimensions...the novel should be perfectly suited to this task....Using the mimetic possibilities of fiction to communicate ideas.”³

Depictions of the natural world within contemporary Climate Fiction (Cli-fi) inherently contain attitudes about the relationships that human beings have with their environment. In a post-human world that understands *human and non-human as one*⁴ due to the realities of climate change, it would be presumed that representations in contemporary fiction would reflect this viewpoint. Instead, as articulated by third-wave ecocritics,⁵ Cli-fi continues to contain deeply ingrained anthropocentric, human-centric, perspectives that give rise to a counterproductive assumed position of human privilege. The result? Literary constructions that diminish the voice and agency of these natural entities within the novel, and ironically support the dualisms that consign nature and culture to binary oppositions.

3 Caspar Henderson, “The best Climate Change Novels”, *Five Books*, <https://fivebooks.com/best-books/climate-change-novels/>

4 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), https://ageingcompanions.constantvzw.org/books/The_Posthuman_-_Rosi_Braidotti.pdf

5 Caren Irr, Climate Fiction in English, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (February 2017), 3. 10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.4

Coined in 2013 by journalist Dan Bloom, the Cli-fi genre is defined as “*fictional books that somehow or someway bring real climate change science to the reader*”⁶. More broadly speaking, Cli-fi aims to provide a representation of the relationship between humanity and nature in light of the environmental upheaval of the Anthropocene.

Ecocriticism is defined by Cheryl Glotfelty’s seminal paper *The Ecocritical Reader* as “*the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment*”⁷. Encountering its first wave during the 1980s⁸ ecocriticism developed out of the practices of nature writing and appreciation. It encountered a second wave in the mid 1990s which turned its attention to other literary genres and media, environmental justice, and urban ecology. Recently, *third wave ecocriticism*⁹ has emerged from the ecocritical field in which the essays in Astrid Bracke and Marguerite Corporaal’s 2010 issue of *English Studies* express as “*the ambivalence of the contemporary situation in which nature is either idealized or lamented; present or irretrievably lost*”⁹. In his 2016 essay *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*¹⁰ ecocritic Amitav Ghosh interrogates the capabilities of the novel in depicting climate change, concluding that contemporary fiction fails to capture the complexity of climate change, and the broader failings of the realist and sci-fi novel in presenting the temporal scales of climate change. Moreover, in light of the Anthropocene, third wave ecocriticism lends itself to reveal the manner in which the apocalypse is presented within Cli-fi¹¹. More specifically this is defined by Timothy Morton and his variation on Graham Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO).

Through unequivocally rejecting anthropocentrism, OOO maintains that the natural world exists independently from human awareness, that all objects remain fundamentally withdrawn from each other, their interactions remaining unassumed

-
- 6 Angela Evancie, “So Hot Right Now: Has Climate Change Created a New Genre?”, *NPR*, April 20, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/04/20/176713022/so-hot-right-now-has-climate-change-created-a-new-literary-genre#:~:text=Live%20Sessions-,So%20Hot%20Right%20Now%3A%20Has%20Climate%20Change%20Created%20A%20New,%20Dfi%2C%22%20for%20short>.
 - 7 Cheryl Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, *The Ecocritical Reader* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.
 - 8 “Ecocriticism (1960-Present),” Purdue University, Accessed August 15, 2020, [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/literary_theory_and_schools_of_criticism/ecocriticism.html#:~:text=First%20and%20Second%20Waves,a%20meaningful%20practice%20\(Buell\)](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/literary_theory_and_schools_of_criticism/ecocriticism.html#:~:text=First%20and%20Second%20Waves,a%20meaningful%20practice%20(Buell)).
 - 9 Astrid Bracke, Marguerite Corporaal, “Ecocriticism and English Studies: An Introduction”, *English Studies* Vol.91, no. 7, (October 27): 710
 - 10 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).
 - 11 Erin James and Eric Moel, “Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory: An Introduction, *English Studies*, Vol.99, (July 2018): 356.

and in need of explanation. Morton's notion of the "hyperobject"¹², has emerged from third-wave ecocriticism as an alternative way through which to view Cli-fi as it explores the ethics of the aesthetic representation of the agency of natural objects¹³. Defined as objects that are "massively distributed in time and space that make us redefine what an object is"¹⁴, the *hyperobject* reimagines the literary possibilities of environmental discourse absent of references to human subjects. Thus, climate change, and the natural world at large, can be defined as a hyperobject, interacting with human society in temporal and spatial frames that defy conventional understanding.¹⁵ The interactions that these hyperobjects have with other objects are referred to as "uncanny"¹⁶, which Morton describes as a quality which refers to a state of ecological awareness of interdependent relationships between the human and natural world¹⁷. Moreover, OOO also rejects foregrounding, the privileging of human objects or nonhuman objects- emphasising an ecocentric rhetoric that moves towards denaturalising the dualisms between nature and culture. This denaturalisation pertains to the dismantling of the barriers between the human and nonhuman worlds, which prove to refute the complex and interdependent interactions that occur between these two objects within the Anthropocene. Ergo, through viewing Cli-fi through the lens of OOO a "nascent ecological awareness"¹⁸ occurs, as both text and responder are confronted with the totality of the natural world, radically repositioning the role of the human to capture authentic representations of nature unhindered by anthropocentrism.

Through viewing Cli-fi within the rhetoric provided by the third-wave ecocriticism of OOO, a clearer understanding of the post-natural condition arises. In that, in an era defined by anthropogenic climate change, which "generates a global form of reactive mutual interdependence of all living organisms, including naturals,"¹⁹ presenting an anthropocentric perspective within Cli-fi refutes the true scale of the natural world. Therefore concealing the interdependent relationship that exists between nature and culture. Therefore, when representing nature within the text, Cli-fi should work towards depictions of the environment that capture the realities of our natural world as complex and reliant not on the human subject.

12 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects, Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minnesota: Minneapolis, 2013), 12.

13 Ibid, 16

14 Ibid, 22.

15 Ibid, 15

16 Ibid, 12.

17 Timothy Morton, "Poisoned Ground", *sympløke*, Vol. 21, No. 1-2 (2013): 39.

18 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects, Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minnesota: Minneapolis, 2013), 25.

19 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p50. https://ageingcompanions.constantvzw.org/books/The_Posthuman_-_Rosi_Braidotti.pdf

Henceforth, through Morton's notion of the *hyperobject*, this essay will interrogate the anthropocentric narratives that are engendered along the spectrum of contemporary Cli-fi- seeking to explore what Ghosh describes as "*the place of the non-human within the novel*"²⁰. Moreover, it seeks to evaluate the extent to which these novels have succeeded in denaturalising the dualisms between nature and culture in order to generate aesthetic experiences that allow the natural entities within the novel to express their voice. I will begin by demonstrating the limits of Cli-fi realism through deconstructing Barbara Kingsolver's 2012 novel *Flight Behavior*, suggesting that realist depiction of the natural world produces individual human-centric narratives that foreground the perspective of the human objects- nature itself becoming objectified aesthetically and serving as an extension of human catastrophe. Additionally, I will go on to deconstruct Don DeLillo's 1984 novel *White Noise*, proposing that apocalyptic variants of Cli-fi depict the natural world as inherently separate from the human world, engendering anthropocentric tropes through refuting the intrinsic complex interactions arising between human and natural entities. DeLillo presents nature as an absence within the novel, aesthetically concealed and accessible only through uncanny encounters. However, through a final deconstruction of Richard Powers' 2018 novel *The Overstory* I present an emerging form of Cli-fi, demonstrating the capabilities of the genre to contend with the totality of the nature world whilst maintaining a denaturalised aesthetic practice. Furthermore, *The Overstory* proves to affirm the complex interdependent relationships that exist within the Anthropocene.

Flight Behaviour

*The man, whose eye
Is ever on himself, doth look on one,
The least of nature's work,
(William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*)*

Stylistically, narrative realism within contemporary Cli-fi, such as Barbara Kingsolver's, *Flight Behaviour* (2012), reveals a tendency to present individual narratives that foreground the human-objects within the narrative. Consequently, realistic Cli-fi often produces objectified aesthetic representations of the natural world whereby the perceived value of nature is only seen in their contribution to the lives of humans. As a result, these texts generate aesthetic experiences that are not representative of agency for the voice of the natural world- that is, they become extensions of the

20 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 72.

human catastrophe presented within the novels. This misrepresentation of the environment alienates the natural agency required to denaturalise the dualisms that foster anthropocentric assumptions and values.

This is demonstrated in Kingsolver's novel, *Flight Behaviour* (2012). Through a third-person, limited narration, *Flight Behaviour* centers around the story of Dellaboria Turnbow and the events that transpire as a result of the sudden arrival of Monarch butterflies to the rural town of Feathertown in the American Appalachians. The novel presents this occurring as the result of changing weather patterns that have disrupted the butterflies' usual migration path to Mexico due to global warming. Whilst Kingsolver succeeds at *presenting the science of climate change* to responders, Dellaboria herself undergoes a process of discovery. She learns about global warming through lepidopterist Ovid Byron, *Flight Behaviour* remains firmly foregrounded in representing nature through human narratives, arrogantly asserting the human referent instead of *"that of the natural history of the insects, whose strange behaviour would still remain a harbinger of ecosystem collapse and extinction"*²¹. Through presenting the natural objects within *Flight Behaviour* as they are experienced by the humans the novel tends towards depicting an anthropocentric aesthetic experience of the natural world. This form of representation results in the objectification and fragmentation of representations of the natural world that allow no scope for an authentic natural voice to emerge. Thus, Kingsolver unwittingly presents *"a thin slice of an image, a caricature of a piece of global climate"*²² - affirming the anthropocentric dualisms and subsequently failing to depict the inherent complexity of the natural world's agency.

Objectification of Nature

A further consequence of foregrounding the human-objects within the novel is the objectification of the natural objects. The first descriptions of the butterflies within the novel, portrayed by Dellaboria in Chapter 1 as, *"leaves, golden darts"*²³ and *"the space between trees"*²⁴. These lexically cohesive depictions of the insects serve to reduce the self-determination of the natural objects- condensed into a objectified allusion that refutes nature as being a *"non-unitary subject"*²⁵. Moreover, the human characters within *Flight Behaviour* maintain this objectified aesthetic experience of the butterflies and nature at

21 Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 178.

22 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects, Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minnesota: Minneapolis, 2013), 73.

23 Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behaviour*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2012), 71.

24 Ibid, 72.

25 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p49 https://ageingcompanions.constantvzw.org/books/The_Posthuman_-_Rosi_Braidotti.pdf

large; Dellarobia's religious community, Feathertown, presents a pantheistic aesthetic experience, as "*the beautiful vision of our Lord's abundant garden*"²⁶, and "*The valley of lights, the boughs of orange flame*"²⁷. These allusions to the books of Exodus prove to de-escalate the expression of climate change within the novel- characterising it instead as a manifestation of divine providence. Comparatively the media within the novel reports of the butterflies' arrival for entertainment, as "*The Battle of the Butterflies*"²⁸, which is extended to characterise Dellarobia as "*The Butterfly Venus....standing on the open wings of a huge monarch*"²⁹. Moreover, Ovid Byron and his colleagues, the scientists studying the butterflies, present an empirical aesthetic of "*thermal stability*"³⁰ and "*reading the writing on the wall*"³¹ in regards to his work of studying the effects of climate change. These dramatically shifting perspectives between the human characters (the media representation, the community, Dellaboria, and Ovid) present a foregrounded human perspective of nature. Thus, the natural objects are reduced to tokenistic narrative features as the inherent unknowability and withdrawn nature of the natural world becomes revealed, therefore diminishing the voice of nature within the novel.

Nature as a Synecdoche of the Human

As William Cronon has understood, "[t]he way we describe and understand th[e] world [within literature] is so entangled with our own values and assumptions that the two can never be fully separated"³². Whilst there is merit to acknowledge the interobjectivity of our own interactions with nature, this remains reliant on the objectification of nature; that it is only validated through its human perception, thus engendering anthropocentrism. For example, Dellaboria can only actualise climate change as a personal loss, a "*child's temperature elevated by two degrees*"³³(p.386). By personifying nature as a "child", it infers that sympathy for the environment as an equal counterpart is not sufficient which produces a dualistic aesthetic experience of the natural world. Perhaps more overtly, Ovid declares that "*everything that has brought us here continues without pause*"³⁴ (385) in regards to the mechanisms of climate change, thereby demonstrating that

26 Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behaviour*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2012), 99.

27 *Ibid*, 182.

28 *Ibid*, 293

29 *Ibid*, 294

30 *Ibid*, 300

31 *Ibid* 384

32 William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature", *Environmental History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan, 1996): 22.

33 Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behaviour*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2012), 386.

34 *Ibid*, 385.

environmental catastrophe within the novel is simply an anthropocentric metaphor of human loss and privilege.

Maggie Kainulainen stipulates that climate change is a “*sublime encounter...while not a walk in the park, is marked by an uncanny and unwanted potency, as one finds oneself implanted in the complex web of interactions that will produce some levels of global catastrophe*”³⁵. The realism through which *Flight Behaviour* depicts climate change fails to truly capture the aesthetic experience of nature as a sublime experience. Due to the limited narrative style of the novel, nature can instead only be realised through individual and fragmented narratives that fail to capture the complex web of interactions associated with ecological catastrophe. Emphasised in the final moments of the novel where Dellarobia finds herself facing a terrible flood, she observes that:

“*Here was a dead world learning to speak in dissonant, unbearable sounds. The topsoil, the slim profit margin of this farm, the ground itself, rushed away from her.*” (p593)

Kingsolver is quick to capture the totality of climate change within the novel as a single metaphor for capital loss, to present a synecdoche of the dramatic anthropocentric experiences that arise from these interior gesticulations of Dellarobia. However, in reality climate change in the Anthropocene is not the loss of “*topsoil*”, or a final disaster like the flood experienced by Dellarobia that can be deferred. It is rather what Adam Trexler describes as “*not structured as a final, local disaster: its effects are incremental, widespread, and various*”³⁶. At this scale (the geological scale required to contend with the hyperobject of climate change) the realism of *Flight Behaviour* breaks down- the singular narratives within the novel leave nature to be experienced in an objectified manner within the confines of the human object- lacking true agency for the voices of natural objects to arise. Therefore, the realist variant of Cli-fi adheres to the dualistic view of nature and culture, failing to acknowledge the interdependent nature³⁷ of interactions with the hyper object.

35 Maggie Kainulainen, “Saying Climate Change”, *symploke*, Vol. 21, No. 1-2 (2013): 113.

36 Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The novel in a Time of Climate Change*, (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press 2015), 250.

37 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects, Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minnesota: Minneapolis, 2013), 12.

White Noise

*And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic mills?*

(William Blake, *Jerusalem*)

Apocalyptic variants of Cli-fi depict the natural world as inherently separate from the human world, engendering anthropocentric tropes through refuting the intrinsic complex interactions arising between human and natural entities. Thus, these narratives exude anthropocentric scale framing that strips nature of authentic agency so that the “*daunting scale and elusive agency of the issue is framed by a focus, at the human scale*”³⁸. Instead, nature is presented as an absence within the novel, aesthetically concealed that give rise to momentary awareness of the uncanny experiences that arise from glimpsing interdependence of the human and natural worlds.

The Simulacra

This is exemplified within the apocalyptic novel *White Noise* (1984) by Don DeLillo. Portraying the narrative of Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler studies at a university known as the College-on-the-hill. Additionally, the depictions of the natural landscape within *White Noise* presents elements of Baudrillard’s simulacra, in that the aesthetic representations of nature within the novel do not depict a form of “*origin or reality*”³⁹. Instead, DeLillo depicts nature as a metaphor of hyperreal⁴⁰ hyperconsumerism and commodities- “*made in the laboratory*”⁴¹ and sold on the shelves of the everlasting supermarkets of the novel. Additionally, *White Noise* manifests a jarring sense of *bourgeois regularity*⁴² as it presents the non-local hyperobject of the “*Airborne Toxic Event*”⁴³ as a peripheral aesthetic experience, distinctly separate from the human objects. As a result, there is a near absence of natural voice and agency within the novel, only encountered as an uncanny experience. Thus, *White Noise* upholds the arbitrary dualisms between nature and culture, emphasising instead an anthropocentric depiction of the natural world which foregrounds the human object in its entirety.

38 Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 178.

39 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 5

40 Cornel Bonca, *Don DeLillo’s White Noise: The Natural Language of the Species*, *College Literature*, June 1996, Vol. 23, No. 2- 26-27

41 Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984), 127.

42 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 25.

43 Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984), 127

The simulacra evident within *White Noise* distances the characters from their natural environment, engaging instead with a synthetic version constructed of hegemonic metaphors. This suffocating metaphorisation of the landscape is established in Chapter 1 through the name of one of the faculties within the university, “[t]he popular culture department, known officially as American environments...an Aristotelianism of bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles”⁴⁴, and whereupon Jack and his colleague, Murray, visits “the most photographed barn in America”⁴⁵ and Murray states that “We’re not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one”⁴⁶. In the postmodern landscape proposed by DeLillo, the original referents become irrelevant as the aesthetic experience of nature within the novel occurs in conjunction with a pervasive media culture that overrides any possibility for authentic agency for non-human objects, the environment becoming concealed beneath the artificial “bubble gum wrappers”. This is emphasised further in Chapter 11, where Murray refers to the ever-present television within the Gladney household as “a primal force in the American household. Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring”⁴⁷. In referring to the TV, a synthetic artefact of the simulacra, as “primal”, DeLillo appropriates the aesthetic experience of nature, depicting it as a metaphor with no *origin or reality*. This consequently overpowers authentic depictions of the voice of the natural world as the human objects remain foregrounded as the primary characters. Harold Fromm echoes this critique, arguing that due to the anthropocentric foregrounding arising from these depictions of technology as natural, the novel is “mostly unaware of a connection to Nature”.⁴⁸ These metaphors within *White Noise* leave responders to access the natural world as merely fleeting glimpses in the dazzling sunsets of the final chapter that are “powerful and storied”⁴⁹ resulting from the Airborne Toxic Event, and the “wind”⁵⁰, in Chapter 21, that blows the Nyodene.D over the town, causing the evacuation. Hence, the metaphors that arise from DeLillo’s depiction of a hyperreal simulacra conceal nature from characters, and by extension responders, stripping any form of aesthetic agency from the natural objects within the novel. As a result, an anthropocentric narrative is maintained, that continues to perpetuate the arbitrary dualism of nature and culture.

44 Ibid, 9.

45 Ibid, 12.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid, 52.

48 Harold Fromm, “From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map.” *The Georgia Review* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1978): 550.

49 Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984), 325.

50 Ibid, 127.

The Bourgeois Regularities of the Apocalypse

Ghosh states that Franco Moretti's notion of the "regularity of bourgeois life"⁵¹ exists within the ecological paradigm as the uniform expectations of the natural world held by novels which serve to distance the human objects from their place in the natural world. Consequently, *White Noise*, the novel exudes a human discourse that confines characters to experience the natural environment as a distant dualism, "out there"⁵². This is evident in the character arc of Jack, when he states that "[o]nly a catastrophe gets our attention... [e]very disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping"⁵³. This is evident when Jack and his family consumes media that depicts natural disasters occurring globally. However, upon experiencing the "Airborne Toxic Event", he becomes unable to reckon with the natural hyperobject at hand. Instead, DeLillo appears to present Jack as being totally alienated from any sort of ecological awareness that pertains to glimpsing the interdependence of the human and natural worlds- stating that:

*"these things happen to poor people . . . it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters...these things don't happen in places like Blacksmith."*⁵⁴

In glimpsing these events, the characters within *White Noise* are given the opportunity to experience the uncanny nature of natural hyperobject as an aesthetic event, resulting in an experience which Morton describes as "a radical asymmetry between the urgency and passion and the horror that we feel when confronted with a hyperobject that could profoundly alter life on Earth"⁵⁵. Jack becomes momentarily aware of the uncanny hyperobject in relation to his bourgeois regularities, describing the Airborne Toxic Event as "religious... so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and willful rhythms"⁵⁶, therefore hinting at a decentering of the human subject within the novel. However, DeLillo fails to maintain this centrifugal motion, portraying Jack as returning towards his old life before the Airborne Toxic Event, waiting at the supermarket, "a slow moving line, satisfying, giving us time to glance at the tabloids in the racks."⁵⁷ Through the regressive

51 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 26.

52 Maggie Kainulainen, "Saying Climate Change", *sympløke*, Vol. 21, No. 1-2 (2013): 117.

53 Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984), 64

54 *Ibid*, 114.

55 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects, Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minnesota: Minneapolis, 2013), 184-185.

56 Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984), 127.

57 *Ibid*, 326.

nature of Jack's character arc, DeLillo retains an anthropocentric discourse that refutes authentic representation of a natural voice. Instead, Jack is depicted in the final moments of the novel as comforted by the *White Noise*, the language of "radiation and waves"⁵⁸ of his synthetic environment. Hence, the bourgeois regularities exemplified within *White Noise* perpetuate a dualism between humanity and the natural world, thus engendering an innately anthropocentric perspective, unable to contend with the totality of the natural objects that barely present within the novel.

Through his depiction of the *regularity of bourgeois life* within a hyperreal simulacra-DeLillo demonstrates a anthropocentric single voiced discourse which allows the human objects, within the novel, to refute the totality of the hyperobject- therefore struggling to contend with its vast nonlocality and interdependent nature. Nature appears as an uncanny absence, concealed beneath synthetic metaphors that abstract the natural landscape. Thus, due to the innate anthropocentric tendencies within apocalyptic Cli-fi, as demonstrated through *White Noise*, nature is represented as fallible. This characterised fragility limits the genre from denaturalising "nature", remaining consigned to perpetuate the arbitrary dualism between nature and culture.

The Overstory

*Of Childhood didst Thou intertwine for me
The passions that build up our human Soul,
Not with the mean and vulgar works of Man,
But with high objects, with enduring things*

(William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*)

As our changing climate remains an intergenerational problem, whose effects are felt by environments and societies present and future⁵⁹, in order for Cli-fi to be liberated from anthropocentric representations of nature, it must consider alternative temporal and scale framing. This scale framing should serve to demonstrate the fallibility of the human object within the novel when in contention with a natural hyperobject due to its "undulating temporality....that is radically different from human-scale time"⁶⁰. Through maintaining this aesthetic practice, this radical new mode within Cli-fi works to denaturalise "nature" through emphasising the interdependence of these two objects

58 Ibid.

59 Brady, Emily, "Aesthetic Value, Ethics and Climate" *Environmental Values*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (October 2014): 551-570.

60 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects, Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minnesota: Minneapolis, 2013), 184.

in order to dissolve arbitrary dualisms between nature and culture; thus achieving authentic agency for nature within the novel.

Nature Speaks

This radical alternative to the traditional tropes within Cli-fi is demonstrated in Richard Powers's, 2018, novel *The Overstory*. *The Overstory*'s narrative arc is macroscopic in scale; narrating a multigenerational story from the perspective of trees which "literalises", according to Pia Masiero, "the debunking of human-centeredness and the consequent perceptual shift the novel takes a stance on"⁶¹. Thus, through this natural perspective, Powers portrays the narrative of nine human protagonists who are brought together to fight the destruction of forests. *The Overstory*, therefore, offers the most authentic representation of natural objects within the Cli-fi genre; a wholesale obliteration of the divide between nature and culture that vanquishes any thought of anthropocentric posturing.

Through a third person omniscient narration style, the natural objects within *The Overstory* become a physical presence that interacts with human objects within the novel. This is evident in the opening prologue in which a pine tree states, "listen there is something you need to hear"⁶² and affirmed through the use of the third person to refer to human objects throughout the novel. The scale of this temporal interaction is revealed in the structure of the novel itself; the narrative is divided into four sections "Roots", "Trunk", "Crown", "Seeds", thus directing responders to consider the entirety of *The Overstory* from the natural perspective which allows for an ultimate expression for natural agency.

Additionally, the novel maintains an aesthetic 'unknowability'⁶³ of the natural world, accepting the withdrawn nature of the natural objects- thus, further aiding to decentre the human objects. This is revealed through Adam, a protagonist, whose activism to protect the forests results in his imprisonment for two seventy year terms following the death of another protagonist Olivia- stating:

61 Pia Masiero, "'The tree is saying things in words before words': form as theme in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*", *DEP rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile*, DEP 41-42, (2020), 141.

62 Richard Powers, *The Overstory*, (London: Vintage, 2018), 4.

63 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects, Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minnesota: Minneapolis, 2013), 184.

*“It shocks him to realize, after a lifetime of looking at wood: He’s staring at the seasons, the year’s pendulum, the burst of spring and the enfolding of fall, the beat of a two-four song recorded here, in a medium that the piece itself created. . . . And still he is illiterate.”*⁶⁴.

Moreover, upon hearing the verdict Adam states that *“Seventy plus years is nothing. A black willow plus a wild cherry”*⁶⁵. This temporal reframing by Powers exemplifies the voice of nature within the novel that serves to decentre the humans within the novel to negate anthropocentric tropes.

The Place of the Human

The Overstory’s transient and fallible representations of the human objects when in contention with the natural world, offer a denaturalised perspective of the nature and culture dualism in order to overcome anthropocentric representations of the natural world. This is evident through the art project of the Hoel family, *“which outlasted four generations of its makers”*⁶⁶) and documents the growth of a single chestnut tree through photographs. The macroscopic prose of the novel is revealed here as *“THREE-QUARTERS OF A CENTURY dances by in a five-second flip”*⁶⁷ for Nicholas Hoel, a protagonist within the novel. These ecocentric representations of the human objects within the novel serve to affirm the transcendence of the natural world- the true scale of these depictions thus give rise to a voice of the natural hyperobject.

Moreover, through expressing the human experience of time within a geological time frame of *“concentric circles...the present floating outward along the outermost rim”*⁶⁸ Powers creates what Kanulainen asserts as *“an experience of the sublime, an experience from which ecological thought becomes thinkable”*⁶⁹. Through presenting the ecological hyperobject as an aesthetic experience, the characters within the novel, and by extension the responder, gain an uncanny understanding of their own humanity as decentered and unassuming; their agency almost reliant on the hyperobject itself. This is evident when Nicholas lies on the stump of Mimas, a large tree cut down by foresters, contemplating the death of Olivier:

64 Richard Powers, *The Overstory*, (London: Vintage, 2018), 194.

65 Ibid, 588.

66 Ibid, 21.

67 Ibid, 20.

68 Ibid, 49.

69 Maggie Kainulainen, *“Saying Climate Change”*, *symploke*, Vol. 21, No. 1-2 (2013): 117.

*“He lies on his side as the night comes on, his head...near the ring laid down the year Charlemagne died. Somewhere underneath his coccyx, Columbus. Past ankles, the first Hoel leaves Norway for Brooklyn and the expanses of Iowa.”*⁷⁰

In a sense here, through encompassing these vast swaths of human history within the rings of tree, Powers reaffirms the interconnectedness of human and natural objects; to the extent that the entire aesthetic experience of nature and culture as a dualism begin to undergo the process of denaturalisation, refuting the ideological construction of nature as placid, harmonious and “out there”.⁷¹ Moreover, this interconnectedness plays out throughout the entirety of the novel as evidence the eco-activists in an exchange with foresters attempting to cut down Mimas state “*We’re doing this for people*”⁷², and when Patricia Westerford, a scientist studying trees remarks that “*There are no individuals in the forest, no separable events*”⁷³.

Consequently these authentic representations allow the responder to glimpse the withdrawn hyperobject, enabling sublime aesthetic experiences which Morton describes as “*theories of ethics that are based on scales and scopes that hugely transcend normative self-interest theories*”⁷⁴ and a speculative sublime of a “*vaster world bursting into the human...of disturbing intimacy*”⁷⁵. The Overstory is successful in the fallible and transient representation of the human-objects within the novel through manipulation of temporal scale framing, yet maintains the interdependence of the natural and human objects. Thus, Powers successfully denaturalises these natural objects and destroys arbitrary dualisms between nature and culture, representing a model for future Cli-fi that strives to encapsulate the looming ecological crisis of the Anthropocene.

Conclusion

In his seminal paper “*Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism*” Glen A. Love asserts that

*“the most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world”*⁷⁶

70 Richard Powers, *The Overstory*, (London: Vintage, 2018), 451.

71 Maggie Kainulainen, “Saying Climate Change”, *sympløke*, Vol. 21, No. 1-2 (2013): 117.

72 Richard Powers, *The Overstory*, (London: Vintage, 2018), 367.

73 *Ibid*, 272.

74 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects, Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minnesota: Minneapolis, 2013), 134.

75 *Ibid*, 105

76 Glen Love, “Revaluing Nature: Toward An Ecological Criticism”, *Western American Literature*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Fall 1990): 213

As depictions of the natural world within Cli-fi occur as an aesthetic experience between the responder and the text, authentic representations that capture the “*full consideration*” of nature require a radical decentering of the human narratives within the novel. As Ursula Heise suggests, the complexity of the environment in our post-natural world “*signals how conventional ways of understanding nature fall short on the Anthropocene*”⁷⁷. That is, traditional literary tropes within Cli-fi that reduce nature to an aesthetic anthropocentric experience that does not redirect human consciousness to a place of nascent ecological awareness. This prevents the text from contending with the totality of the ecological hyperobject, which is a necessity in order to denaturalise hegemonic dualisms between nature and culture.

The realism that Kingslover’s *Flight Behaviour* perpetuates reduces nature to an individual and objectified aesthetic experience that relies on the human-objects to perceive it- all within through the gaze of a single protagonist. Additionally, the opposing apocalyptic visions of nature depicted in DeLillo’s *White Noise* affirm similar anthropocentric posturing in *Flight Behaviour*. However, this is achieved through a hegemonic separation of human and natural world that fail to recognise, as Ghosh stipulates “*that natural forces have the ability to intervene directly*”⁷⁸ with humans. This results in the manifestation of the lack of authentic agency for natural objects to be perceived beyond their absence in apocalyptic presentations of nature as “*in the era of global warming, nothing is really far away; there is no place where the orderly expectations of bourgeois life hold unchallenged sway*”⁷⁹

In turn, within such misrepresentation of nature within a genre that relies on it as a rhetorical crux, Powers’, *The Overstory*, serves as a model for authentic aesthetic representations of the natural through its lack of anthropocentric foregrounding. The novel goes further to denaturalise the nature-culture binary through its transparent depiction of the interdependent relationship between the human objects and the natural hyperobject, achieved through the portrayal of the fallible and transient nature of the human object when in contention with the totality of the natural hyperobject. This temporal shift is what drives the novel towards the denaturalisation of dualisms, recognising the human-object’s importance yet maintaining its appropriate place within the complex web of interaction between the human and the natural.

77 Ursula Heise, “Encounters With the Thing Formerly Known as Nature”, *Public Books*, September 9, 2013, <https://www.publicbooks.org/encounters-with-the-thing-formerly-known-as-nature/>

78 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 37.

79 *Ibid*, 32.

As Ghosh asserts, the age of the Anthropocene “will come to be known as the time of the *Great Derangement*”⁸⁰. The natural world in light of climate change poses an elusive challenge to all literary constructions that contend with it, requiring “*an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the natural or ‘earth’ others.*”⁸¹ However, through embodying an ecocentric aesthetic experience, Cli-fi has an opportunity to present the reality of human existence within living environments; that we are ephemeral and fallible by nature. Anthropocentrism holds no place within an emerging ecological awareness that seeks to deconstruct the structures which hold the human and natural in opposition to one another.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

- Baudrillard, *Jean Simulacra and simulation* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981.
- Braidotti, Rosi, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.
- Clark, Timothy, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- DeLillo, Don, *White Noise*, New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1984.
- Ghosh, Amitav, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016
- Glofelty, Cheryl & Fromm, Harold, *The Ecocritical Reader* Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Kingsolver, Barbara, *Flight Behaviour*, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2012.
- Morton, Timothy, *Hyperobjects, Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minnesota: Minneapolis, 2013.
- Powers, Richard, *The Overstory*, London: Vintage, 2018.
- Trexler, Adam, *Anthropocene Fictions: The novel in a Time of Climate Change*, Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press 2015.

JOURNALS

- Bracke, Astrid & Marguerite Corporaal, “Ecocriticism and English Studies: An Introduction”, *English Studies* Vol.91, no. 7, (October 27): 709-712.
- Brady, Emily, “Aesthetic Value, Ethics and Climate” *Environmental Values*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (October 2014): 551-570.
- Erin James and Eric Moel, “Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory: An Introduction”, *English Studies*, Vol.99, (July 2018): 355-365.
- Irr, Carren, Climate Fiction in English, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (February 2017), 3. 10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.4
- Kainulainen, Maggie, “Saying Climate Change”, *symploke* , Vol. 21, No. 1-2 (2013): 109-123.
- Love, Glen, “Revaluing Nature: Toward An Ecological Criticism”, *Western American Literature*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Fall 1990): 201-215.

80 Ibid, 52.

81 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p39 https://ageingcompanions.constantvzw.org/books/The_Posthuman_-_Rosi_Braidotti.pdf

- Masiero, Pia ""The tree is saying things in words before words": form as theme in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*", *DEP rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile*, DEP 41-42, (2020): 153-150.

WEBSITES

- "Ecocriticism (1960-Present)," Purdue University, Accessed August 15, 2020, [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/literary_theory_and_schools_of_criticism/ecocriticism.html#:~:text=First%20and%20Second%20Waves,a%20meaningful%20practice%20\(Buell\)](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/literary_theory_and_schools_of_criticism/ecocriticism.html#:~:text=First%20and%20Second%20Waves,a%20meaningful%20practice%20(Buell)).

ARTICLES

- Evancie, Alice, "So Hot Right Now: Has Climate Change Created a New Genre?", NPR, April 20, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/04/20/176713022/so-hot-right-now-has-climate-change-created-a-new-literary-genre#:~:text=Live%20Sessions-,So%20Hot%20Right%20Now%3A%20Has%20Climate%20Change%20Created%20A%20New,%20Df%2C%22%20for%20short>.
- Heise, Ursula "Encounters With the Thing Formerly Known as Nature", *Public Books*, September 9, 2013, <https://www.publicbooks.org/encounters-with-the-thing-formerly-known-as-nature/>