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Activism Ltd – Environmental Activism and Contemporary Literature

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Abstract

This thesis examines representations of environmental activism in contemporary literature. In general terms, this thesis understands activism to be a mode of politics that seeks to transform society, counter to forces of oppression and crisis. Precisely as a transformative or counter-hegemonic mode of politics, the actions, public perceptions, and representations (literary or otherwise) of activism and social movements mark out an extreme – though rarely understood – horizon of political agency and possibility.

The thesis uses and adapts Fredric Jameson's theory of the political unconscious to explore, via literary representation, the prospects, constraints, and capacities which exist in contemporary forms of environmental activism. It begins by considering novelistic representations of climate change that display a tension between 'fast-violent' and gradual or historically-embedded forms of environmental change. The thesis then moves on to consider novelistic fiction that displays evidence of the intertwining of environmental crises and neoliberal governmentalities. A later chapter turns to a more specific site of resistance – food production – examining novelistic fiction that not only thematises the emergence of particular forms of resistance, but also aesthetically and formally registers agroecological theory and practice. The final chapter moves away from fictive writing and investigates the ways in which literary non-fiction presents a new kind of critical problem regarding the accuracy of its representations of activism; namely, the tensions which emerge between realist and speculative registers.

To date, there has been a relative lack of attention paid to representations of activism in environmental literary and cultural criticism. A critical study of the cultural representation of environmental social movements will, I argue, yield valuable insights into how environmental problems are articulated and the forms of activism in use today, along with the contradictions, tensions – and even unintended harmonies – between environmentalism and mainstream political and economic trends.

'For activist projects, neoliberalization limits the conceivable because it limits the arguable, the fundable, the organizable, the scale of effective action, and compels activists to focus on putting out fires'

(Guthman 2008: 1180).

Introduction

On September the 18th 2013, thirty Greenpeace activists were arrested following an attempted occupation of the Prirazlomnaya drilling platform, a Russian-owned oil rig in Arctic waters. The activists were arrested at gunpoint on charges of 'piracy' and held for 100 days by Russian authorities (Stewart 2015). The incident provoked international outcry for what many (in the West, at least) regarded as disproportionate use of force and inappropriate litigation.¹ While it is debatable whether the incident was a success or failure for Greenpeace (or the movement more generally), I mention it here for two reasons: firstly, for the insight it gives into a paradox some feel to be characteristic of the environmental movement. As Andrew Biro (2011: 6) puts it, though increasingly accepted for the claims it makes *about* the environment, the environmental movement has been 'incapable of mobilizing more than anaemic, and often individualized, responses'. For some time now, criticism of this kind has become a commonplace; such a view is epitomised, for example, by Michael Shellenberger's and Ted Nordhaus' (2004: 10) article, 'The Death of Environmentalism', which lamented what it called the movement's 'outdated concepts and exhausted strategies'. Indeed, at a time when activism would clearly benefit from widening identification and participation, the actions of the 'Arctic 30' might have inadvertently extended the gulf between already committed environmentalists and the general population, those who might otherwise be willing to populate the movement.

¹ From *The Independent*: 'Hillary Clinton calls for outcry over jailed Greenpeace activists' (Luhn 2013); from *Reuters*: 'Russia charges 30 with piracy over Greenpeace Arctic protest' (Gutterman 2013); and from *The Guardian*: 'Russia changes piracy charges to hooliganism' (Walker 2013).

Secondly, the 'Arctic 30' event was a peculiarly cultural event. Not only did it further expose the rapidly shifting geopolitical tensions around fossil fuels and the environment – specifically exemplified by the rise since the early 90s of Russian oil company Gazprom, though more generally the unstable regimes which extract and refine fossil fuels (Mitchell 2013) – it also revealed the incendiary and divisive ways in which activism itself is represented and perceived in popular discourse. The event even precipitated a piece of 'narrative non-fiction', *Don't Trust, Don't Fear, Don't Beg* (Stewart 2015) [sadly too recently published to feature more prominently in this thesis], as well as a huge media circus, which repeatedly demonstrated the negative effect of such reporting on public perceptions of what activism is or could be.

In general terms, activism describes a type of 'social movement' or organisational structure oriented towards the transformation of society, counter to forces of oppression and crisis. Environmental social movements (ESMs) are comprised of social actors who 'challenge the normative orientation at the core of modernization, and promote alternative values and practices' (Pleyer 2015: 105). Precisely as a transformative or counter-hegemonic mode of politics, the actions, public perceptions, and representations of activism and social movements mark out an extreme horizon of political agency and possibility. Moreover, how activism is framed in cultural production and cultural artefacts tells us a lot about these political horizons. Following Jameson (1981: 17), this thesis argues for 'the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts [...] not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretative methods [...] but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and of all interpretation'. This thesis positions the literary text as an exemplary site of ideological production, and a means to extend an attempt (already underway in

other disciplines) to better understand contemporary activism. A critical study of the cultural representation of environmental social movements will, I argue, yield valuable insights into how environmental problems are articulated and the forms of activism in use today, along with the contradictions, tensions – and even unintended harmonies – between environmentalism and mainstream political and economic trends.

Chapter 1 begins by outlining how ‘the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts’ can operate within specifically environmental contexts, but also how such an approach is given greater purchase by examining texts which have a conspicuous environmental focus. Following a theoretical adumbration, the chapter concludes with readings of two contemporary novels: Maggie Gee’s *The Flood* (2004) and Ian McEwan’s *Solar* (2010). While undoubtedly *about* climate change, both texts actively downplay the slow and complex dynamics of climate change in favour of more attention-grabbing and simple forms of environmental violence. In the readings that follow, the texts are thus shown to reproduce a dynamic at play – and to equally disquieting effect – in contemporary discourse on climate change.

In Chapter 2 the thesis moves to a consideration of how environmental activists and social movements are represented in contemporary fiction. After a survey of recent examples of activism in fiction, the chapter turns to a consideration of the political contexts for contemporary activism and social movements. In light of these surveys the thesis then offers a reading of another two novels with an environmental focus – T.C. Boyle’s *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) and Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* (2010). The chapter argues that the most salient factor within

and around contemporary activism is neoliberalism, a condition the two novels register in their general form, language and modes of characterisation.

Chapter 3 offers an examination of agroecological sites of resistance which demonstrate the capacity of ESMs to counter a predominant sense of the inevitability of environmental degradation and injustice. That is, representations of activism which move beyond an otherwise normalised 'neoliberal governmentality', which, following Foucault (1991), refers to the social reproduction of political subjects predisposed to act with a market-based rationale. Agroecological sites are chosen as particularly dynamic sites of resistance, representing an area of the environmental movement with increasing global reach and power. Following a consideration of the political contexts for contemporary agroecological activism, the chapter offers a reading of two novels: Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) and Ruth Ozeki's *All Over Creation* (2003). The novels straddle a crucial period for the emergence of the agroecological movement, not only thematising the emergence of particular forms resistance, but also aesthetically and formally registering agroecological theory and practice.

Chapter 4 moves away from fictive writing and asks how the particular features of 'literary non-fiction' register the conditions of contemporary environmental crises and represent the groups mobilising against them. Following a consideration of the opportunities afforded by the politics and aesthetics of literary non-fiction, the chapter turns to a reading of two texts which document particular instances of modern environmental activism – *Days of Destruction and Days of Revolt* (2012) by Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco, and *Oil and Honey* (2013) by Bill McKibben. This chapter investigates the ways in which 'literary non-fiction' presents a 'new kind of

critical problem' regarding the accuracy of its representations of activism; namely, the tensions which emerge between its 'realist' and 'speculative' registers.

1: 'ONE AND INDIVISIBLE, A SEAMLESS WEB' – Historicising Climate Change

Introduction

The two girls stared riveted, for a moment, at a computer simulation of a tidal wave. Tiny people struggled like ants. Something big and important at last. Something marvellous that would sweep them away [...] Something massive, sexual, final.

– Maggie Gee, *The Flood* (57).

In the Arts, the response to climate change has been relatively slow to gather pace.² As late as 2005, the non-fiction writer Robert MacFarlane (2005) asked, incredulously, '[w]here are the novels, the plays, the poems, the songs, the libretti, of this massive contemporary anxiety?' Recent years, however, have undoubtedly seen a change in this trend. In a 2013 article, for example, novelist Rodge Glass notes the new currency of the term 'cli-fi', used to denote the now sizeable corpus of literary and filmic engagements with climate change. For Glass (2013), this newly expanded corpus represents an edifying response to the large and complex

² While scientific evidence for climate change began to appear as early as the 19th century, consensus on the threat it poses to humans did not emerge until as late as the 1970s. A 1979 report by the National Research Council in the US is often cited as a seminal document, though numerous others have also played a pivotal role; for example, James Hansen's address to the US Congress in 1988, as well as the five 'Assessment Reports' (1992-2014) published to date by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The delay in response from the Arts has been duly noted, with commentators pointing to the new conceptual challenges posed by global environmental change (Heise 2008: 205; Nixon 2011). In addition, though the registration of climate change in literary media has tended to lag behind scientific publishing, a number of critics have argued that the sheer violence of ecological shifts at the 'periphery' of the world-system has imprinted on such cultural traditions an early and acute sensitivity to large-scale environmental change, reflecting the human and environmental impacts of capital-intensive colonial and neo-colonial projects and the forms of resistance which have emerged to contest them (Grove 1995; Mukherjee 2010; Niblett 2012: 20-1; Huggan and Tiffin 2015: 80ff).

problems posed by climate change. 'As that threat grows', Glass claims, 'so will the vocabulary designed to make sense of it'.

It remains to be seen in which ways this new corpus might help to 'make sense' of a problem as complex as climate change; nonetheless, this new material does provide an opportunity to ask if the relationship between representation of the environment and environmental cognition is as simple as Glass implies. Do more representations translate straightforwardly into better understanding? Or more robust politics? Environmental literary critics (or 'ecocritics') have long equivocated over questions like these, especially regarding certain forms of writing. Lawrence Buell (1998: 663), for example, suggests that global environmental crisis appears at odds with 'the traditional protocols of protagonist-centred fiction'. Similarly, Dominic Head (2000: 238) suggests that what 'is distinctive about the novel' (i.e. 'its dual stress on being in time and personal growth as structural components') often runs counter to 'contemporary environmental concerns'. Indeed, this circumspection may explain why these (and other) critics have looked to more experimental writing to help us 'make sense' of climate change; i.e. that which, in Richard Kerridge's words, might be 'capable of revealing what conventional forms obscure' (2013: 361).

While some ecocritics have remained guarded about the political and aesthetic value of 'conventional forms' of writing, much of the 'cli-fi' that Glass mentions is authored by mainstream literary novelists – Barbara Kingsolver, Liz Jensen, and Margaret Atwood, to name just three – who routinely use 'conventional' forms of narrative, characterisation, and plot in their fiction. Far from being of negligible interest – as texts whose political intent is vulnerable to being co-opted, buried, or

neutralised in line with prevailing norms – these new contributions warrant close and considered analysis. If the implications of climate change can be ‘obscure[d]’ (Kerridge, 2013: 361) in certain forms of literature, can they also be *un-obscured*?

Numerous theorists outside ecocriticism have already outlined reading strategies which seek to ‘uncover’ counter-hegemonic content in a comprehensive range of literary materials. Fredric Jameson (1981: 49), for example, suggests that

the literary structure, far from being completely realized on any one of its levels tilts powerfully into the underside or *impense* or *non-dit*, in short, into the very political unconscious, of the text, such that the latter's dispersed semes [...] themselves then insistently direct us to the informing power of forces or contradictions which the text seeks in vain wholly to control or master.

While, as Jameson suggests, texts will always struggle ‘in vain’ to contain their contradictions, the actual process of uncovering them is far from straightforward, particularly given the strength of the forces complicit in their concealment. Theodor Adorno (qtd. in Jameson, 2004: 51), writing on the culture industry of the mid-twentieth century, remained doubtful as to the possibility of a ‘positive representation of an emancipated society’ while, as he suggests elsewhere, ‘the triumph of invested capital’ provides ‘the meaningful content of every film, whatever plot the production team may have selected’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1987: 124). Given the inherent difficulty of seeing beyond this ‘triumph’, not only do we require *good* or *better* literature – that which, as Rob Nixon (2011: 2) argues, at least ‘engage[s] the different representational, narrative and strategic challenges’

presented by the 'slow violence' of climate change – but also the most effective hermeneutic with which to explore and better understand existing cultural output, as well as the broader contexts of its production. In this regard, ecocriticism offers a way to 'make sense' of the narratives which shape our various environmental attitudes, and indicate, where possible, which ones to embrace or contest.

This chapter takes up this challenge – to offer, following Jameson, a reading strategy sensitive to fatal contradictions in the ways we think about, and act within, our environments. That said, in somewhat of a modification of Jameson's approach in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), the texts examined in this chapter *consciously* thematise environmental issues, for even directly focalised environmental discourse still exists within what Jameson would call 'a seamless web, a single inconceivable and transindividual process', open to endless critique and reappraisal. While undoubtedly *about* climate change, both texts actively downplay the slow and complex dynamics of climate change and foreground more attention-grabbing forms of environmental trauma or crisis. The texts thus rehearse and exemplify a paradox at play in a large proportion of contemporary discourse on climate change – that is, while awareness of the scope and scale of the problems we face has steadily increased, widespread and effective mobilisation has proved difficult. That said, though they often consciously rehearse this concealment, these texts must still be read in ways which uncover otherwise obscured or inexplicit environmental and political dynamics. Indeed, the chapters that follow take this approach yet further, with an examination of the cultural representation of environmental activists, groups, and social movements. What is true of environmental activism specifically is true of environmental thought more

generally: the ecological cognition underpinning each is often complex and always cultural.

*

The first writer I will discuss, Maggie Gee, has undertaken a number of explicit engagements with environmental issues in her work. In her early novel, *Grace* (1989), Gee explores the difficulty of taking direct action against the environmental dangers of nuclear energy; in *The Ice People* (1999) she depicts the impact and aftermath of abrupt climate change; in *The Flood* (2004) – the novel under examination in this chapter – her focus moves to a near-future, flood-stricken London, shortly before a devastating meteor impact. Despite an apparent appetite for the sensational aspects of environmental problems, *The Flood* – if read according to the representational hermeneutic which I outline below – can help us understand the sort of environmental problems which are slow to manifest and bound up in human activity. By juxtaposing sensational and non-anthropogenic forms of ‘natural disaster’³ (for example, the meteor or the ‘planetary alignment’ scare (180)) with anthropogenic problems like flooding and income inequality, *The Flood* permits a confrontation with ‘fast-violent’ or pop-culture environmental discourse, which often foregrounds the former’s sensationalism at the expense of the latter. As I will demonstrate below, *The Flood* mirrors the problems and contradictions in environmental discourse via its literary form, offering, on the one hand, a climate and society in the process of slow, creeping, and actually-existing change and, on the other, the gripping sensation of an event ‘external’ to the production and influence of social relations. In so doing, *The Flood* allows a

³ For a more in-depth consideration of the controversy of this term see Chapter 4 (pp.231-4)

deconstruction of a nature/society dualism, offering instead an outline of a vast environmental history in ceaseless motion, a history which humankind has helped (and continues in ever more substantial ways) to create. In keeping with the shortfalls in contemporary confrontations with climate change, this vision of climate change is pushed, as Jameson would say, into 'the underside or [...] political unconscious, of the text' – it is here, of course, where literary criticism can be of great value and assistance.

Ian McEwan has also dealt with environmental themes in his writing. *A Child in Time* (1987), set in a dystopian near future, like Gee's *Grace*, deals, in part, with the threat of nuclear war. Though not strictly environmental in focus, McEwan has also dealt with themes of civil unrest and the feelings – epitomised by his central protagonist in *Saturday* (2005) – of helplessness and indifference before issues of global import. In *Solar* (2010), the other novel under examination in this chapter, McEwan deals with climate change more directly. This being widely-known ahead of time, the novel was hotly anticipated, even eliciting an academic paper which (self-consciously) went out-on-a-limb to praise the novel prior to publication (Garrard 2009).

Solar's central protagonist is a deeply flawed individual, through whom we gain comically-inflected insights into climate change as a complex and socially-embedded phenomenon. Though *Solar's* chief focus is its central protagonist, a reading of the structural and social impacts of climate change is still viable. Even so, and despite widespread hostility to the political implications of 'responsibilization' (to use Judith Butler's (2009: 37) phrase), few commentators have yet considered *Solar* as anything other than a conceptual reinforcement of

climate change as a consequence of globally-aggregated individual irresponsibility and excess. Greg Garrard (2013: 181), for example, is troubled by the novel's reliance on the supposedly telegraphed analogy between personal gluttony and inflated carbon emissions as 'failures of self-discipline' – a compelling connection to highlight, but which falls short, I argue, of recognising the subtle ways in which *Solar* can be seen to register the more socially-embedded factors underpinning climate change. The novel's comic procedures, I argue, can be seen to undermine the specious logic of personal responsibility, juxtaposing it (devastatingly and repeatedly) with the moral depravity and wanton excesses of its central character, Peter Beard. Though it is arguably unclear exactly which way McEwan's satire goes – whether specifically towards those indifferent to (or in denial of) climate change, or the environmental movement more generally – this uncertainty is a productive one, demonstrating the need for continued critical investigations into the cultural dimensions of environmental politics, similar to the one offered below. Surprisingly, both novels, despite their 'creatively innovative' and self-consciously 'literary' approach, have not yet been the subject of much eco-criticism. As novels which engage directly with a subject as important as climate change, this amounts to a surprising oversight, though one which I intend to redress over the course of the chapter.

As previously suggested, *The Flood's* presentation of environmental problems as dynamic, historical processes, and *Solar's* deconstruction through comic procedures of a depoliticising discourse of personal responsibility, have implications crucial to the reading offered below. Such characteristics make it much easier to go beyond the text as an 'individual utterance' (Jameson 1981: 85) to a consideration of the historical and social contexts in which both novels were

composed: principally, that of widening social inequalities in the early years of the twenty-first century and increasing environmental instability – not to mention their exacerbating interconnection. Making this move, I argue, is essential not only for understanding climate change as an anthropogenic phenomenon (as part of the environment we produce), but also for literary criticism in general: as a discipline which scrutinises and (in turn) influences the stories we tell about ourselves, not least those concerning our engagements with environmental problems. The aim here is to offer a hermeneutic which has the ability to do two things: to see both texts as registering the political and psychological impact of environmental crises, and also to see such writing as active in recoding and reiterating the ideological consequences of such impacts back into contemporary material conditions.

Before embarking on such a reading of these novels, however, I will first offer an indication as to where my reading sits with regards to contemporary ecocritical thinking.

Marxism and Ecocriticism

The engagement with the kind of ‘representational obstacles’ Nixon identifies has a considerable legacy, one much older than the environmental discourse within which Nixon, Gee and McEwan are often placed. In *Capital Vol. I*, Karl Marx (1990) compares his own methodology of ‘historical materialism’ to the efforts of contemporary biologists (namely, Charles Darwin) to compile a ‘natural history’, a project Marx believed to be far more ambitious than his own. ‘Natural history’, Marx claims, makes definitive recourse to abstraction because it refers to a history

we have not ‘made’. As such, natural history excludes ‘historical process’; that is, one which ‘lays bare [...] the production of [...] social relations’ (Marx, 1990: 493). Marx’s understanding of history – as a process in which humans are dialectally intertwined – is the one at work in this chapter. As Marx (2002: 19) famously wrote, people ‘make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves’. In so arguing, Marx offered a way to collapse the vexing opposition of ‘produced’ human and ‘received’ natural histories into an inclusive, ecological analysis, one capable of accounting for forces acting on us from the past as well as our influence on present and future conditions.⁴

As the physical sciences have developed, and awareness increases as to the extent of our own far-reaching influence (a paradigm commonly labelled the ‘anthropocene’, or described by Bill McKibben (2003) as ‘the end of nature’) the methodological gap between human and natural historiography has narrowed. This development is perhaps most evident in the environmental sciences where a consistently high priority has been to describe the consequences of, in Marx’s words (1990: 493), ‘the active relation of man to nature’. Indeed, there have been robust attempts to bring the disciplines of natural and human historiography together. Jason W. Moore (2012: 227), for example, argues for a ‘[move] from the “environmental history of” modernity, to capitalism “as environmental history”’, where we move from seeing capitalism as *having* ‘an ecological regime’ to seeing it as ‘a world-ecological regime – joining the accumulation of capital and the

⁴ The attempt to collapse the binary distinction of human and natural histories might be said to be the central preoccupation of an emergent environmental humanities. As one of its most important figures, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008: 220), argues, in its place we should apprehend the ‘cross-hatching of species history and the history of capital’. Also of note here is work from Neil Smith, Bill McKibben, and Jason W. Moore, among others.

production of nature as an organic whole'. Timothy Morton, too (along with numerous others⁵), has argued for the pressing need to move beyond a dualistic conception of nature and society – literally, as his book's title suggests, an *Ecology without Nature* (2007) – if we are seriously to address the problems which underpin environmental crises like climate change. Surmounting the 'representational obstacles' of phenomena like climate change, then, requires not only an ability to represent our 'natural' and cultural history as coterminous and co-constitutive but, more urgently, an ability to *read* that history. This is where I believe literary criticism currently finds its most urgent function and necessity.

The 'political unconscious'

In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson (1981: 28) writes that the chief objective for Marxist criticism remains 'the representation of History itself', where history, whether 'natural' or 'cultural,' is understood as 'fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational' (Jameson 1981: 82). It is this description of 'History' that marks a crucial point of intersection between critical environmentalism and historical materialism today: as the environmental historian, Jason W. Moore (2014: 2) suggests, '[p]hilosophically, humanity is recognized as a species within the web of life; but in terms of our methodological frames, analytical strategies, and narrative structures, human activity is treated as separate and independent'. Similar to Moore, Jameson's (1981: 35) vision of how we engage with the world around us is graspable only if we understand that 'history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise' but that, nonetheless, it is 'inaccessible to us except in textual form'. Jameson's aim, like Moore's is to work with this dichotomy,

⁵ See note 3 above.

while still contesting descriptions of the world which objectify (or 'reify') nature and history as discrete sites or elements.

For Jameson (1981: 20) the primary object for literary analysis is that which provides a glimpse of what Marx called 'concrete history', by 'restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality' of class struggle. If climate change, as a phenomenon occurring within history and bound up with class struggle, currently evades representation in the ways Nixon has outlined, one option is to look at how it is already (mis)represented 'in textual form'. Contemporary narratives of all kinds (not just those explicitly about climate change) can thus be read as 'mythic resolutions of issues [like climate change] that [we] are unable to articulate conceptually' (Jameson 1981: 79). An awareness of narrative's capacity to '[invent] imaginary or formal "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions' (Jameson 1981: 79, 102), argues Jameson, pushes one into an encounter with an expansive conception of history (and, I would argue, ecology), which 'refuses' simplification. As far as current environmental conditions requires understanding, as Jameson (1981: 101, 19) puts it, 'why what happened [...] had to happen the way it did', both environmentalists and historical materialists seek to engage in historical enquiry in order to retrieve 'the essential mystery of the cultural [and ecological] past'.

Jameson's theory of the 'political unconscious' is not, it must be stressed, entirely fit for purpose within environmental literary criticism (or 'ecocriticism'). Environmental discourses have developed significantly since the publication of *The Political Unconscious* and many aspects of Marxism and environmentalism

remain at odds.⁶ Chief among these would be the omission from Jameson's (1981: 20) 'single vast unfinished plot' of not only the human-felt consequences of an increasingly unstable and toxic environment, but also the non-human animals, plants, and even non-living ecological phenomena whose long-term survival is under ever-increasing threat. The aim of a Marxist environmentalism, in short, is to argue that instances of environmental injustice result from the same abuses of corporate and capitalist power which underlie class injustices, and to find evidence for this in narrative. Environmental writing has not thus far either adequately demonstrated this type of interconnectivity, or even consistently aspired to promote it as a critical priority. As Joshua Dolezal suggests (2008: 12), many western writers 'have not addressed the story [of the connections between global poor and environmental damage] in their own work', focusing instead on what he calls 'the preservation of roadless areas and wildlife refuges'. Indeed, it has been further suggested that 'pretending to isolate the environment [from social issues ...] has severely limited the appeal of environmentalist thought' (DeLoughrey et al., 2005: 27). This chapter is accordingly an attempt to bring together an ecocritical focus and Jameson's theory of the political unconscious that will not only 'update' Jameson's theory and demonstrate its applicability in ecocritical directions, but also help to address some of the shortcomings and contradictions which have hampered ecocriticism to date.

As writers like Nixon (2011: 5) eloquently demonstrate, environmental and social connections (as well as their aesthetic registrations) are often hard to detect and grasp, presenting 'the writer-activist' with a 'challenge of visibility'. As Jameson

⁶ Recent developments in Ecocriticism have reflected an effort to redress this shortfall beginning with Newman (2002) though more recently with Banerjee (2008), Mukherjee (2010), Nixon (2011), Biro (2011) and Szeman (2012).

(1981: 40, 95) himself sees it, 'social life is in its fundamental reality one and indivisible, a seamless web, a single inconceivable and transindividual process'; one 'crisscrossed and intersected by a variety of impulses from contradictory modes of cultural production all at once'. Jameson's (1981: 91, 71) method for surmounting such a predicament begins by envisaging 'a series of enlarging theoretical horizons' that would guide the analysis 'toward one particular order of textual phenomena'. The analysis that follows reflects Jameson's (1981: 102) approach by rehearsing a general movement from individual text to the 'untranscendable horizon' of the text's historical production. Such an approach achieves the ideal situation, as Jameson (1981: 45) puts it, of 'the idea of textual production' as one which 'helps us break the reifying habit of thinking of a given narrative as an object, or as a unified whole, or as a static structure'. Jameson's political unconscious invites us, therefore, to challenge the habits of cognition that keep us returning to the kind of synchronic analyses which either see climate change as not happening, as an inevitability, or as actively desirable as a means to provide a cleansing moment – much like the '[s]omething massive, sexual, final' (57) that Lola and Gracie anticipate in the computer-simulated image of a tidal wave. Seen through the political unconscious, climate change can be apprehended, in contrast, as *happening everywhere now* and inextricably bound up in social relations. It is to a more in-depth discussion of these issues which I turn to now.

Ecocriticism and the 'political unconscious'

Ecocriticism has been variously defined. Definitions range from the broad – 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xix) – to others which move more pointedly towards highlighting ecocriticism's political valences; for example, Garrard's (2004: 3) claim that ecocritics 'generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a "green" moral and political agenda'. Controversy has arisen – and definitions further proliferated – around the question of quite how to pursue specifically political objectives in literary contexts. In general terms, these definitions fit into two categories. The first is characterised by the attempt to bring to greater prominence writing with admirable environmental sentiments, or, as Trexler and Johns-Putra (2011: 192) put it, to 'recover ideal formulations of nature in past texts'. This approach is perhaps the most prominent and long-standing within ecocriticism. Indeed, one of the first systematic appraisals of ecocriticism came from Jonathan Bate (1991: 9) who suggested that ecocriticism's most valuable aim is 'to make claims for the historical continuity of a tradition of environmental consciousness'.

The second approach has less to do with the ostensible environmental engagement of particular works, and more with the degree to which any given work registers underlying trends in environmental theory and practice. This view is driven by the understanding that environmental problems are 'as culturally as [they are] scientifically complex' (Johns-Putra & Trexler 2011: 185), and that cultural objects exist in a dialectal relationship with the produced environment (Newman 2002). As one ecocritic put it, the current global crisis has occurred 'not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function'

(Slovic qtd. in Johns-Putra & Trexler 2011: 193). As such, writing with any attitudes ('good' or 'bad', or which do not necessarily treat environmental issues directly), can be of great interest to this type of ecocriticism. Richard Kerridge (1998: 5) espouses a similar view, suggesting that ecocriticism should

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

Part of Kerridge's claim, of course, is that it can be just as profitable (from an environmental perspective) to highlight 'texts and ideas' which *lack* direct 'coherence and usefulness', as it can be to 'recover ideal formulations of nature' from the existing corpus. This move opens up a variety of possibilities to the ecocritic, not least in the way it permits a critical *as well as* celebratory mode of analysis.

It is in the idea of a text's 'usefulness' with regard to the politics which lie behind ecocritical activity that we encounter the most controversial dimension of ecocriticism generally; i.e. the relationship between criticism and political action. Many ecocritics, indeed, have articulated a number of rousing (though rarely 'worked out') claims as to the logical connection between ecocriticism and action. William Howarth, for instance, defines the ecocritic as 'a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm

through *political action*' (qtd. in Glotfelty and Fromm 2000: 69). Lawrence Buell (1994: 430), in similarly emphatic terms, defined ecocriticism as the 'study of the relation between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of environmentalist *praxis*'. However, if options for 'action' or 'praxis' are given, they rarely have a self-evident relationship to the critical interventions themselves. This 'non sequitur' of critical intervention and political action, is, as Lance Newman (2002: 3) suggests, one of ecocriticism's many 'contradictions' that 'must be faced and worked out' if any substantial action is to result from its inquiries. Such a contradiction is one which can be mitigated, as many ecocritics already claim, by seeing literary criticism as an intervention itself, but, I argue, even more so by looking directly at forms of environmental practice (in my case environmental activism) and how they are given cultural representation. This is a strategy I take up directly in later chapters.

Looking to 'recover ideal formulations of nature in past texts' has a straightforward appeal, but is one which has less obvious pitfalls, not least the burden of 'getting it right' in terms of, for instance, ecological science, social movement theory, or even the *kind of* 'ideal formulations' given representation. As Adorno (qtd. in Jameson 2004: 51) suggests, the utopian visions of an 'emancipated society' can undo themselves, consciously or otherwise, by throwing us back onto 'reality', forcing us to confront the gulf between their visions of 'emancipation' and the conditions of inequity, deprivation, and despoilment which prevail in the world around us. Indeed, it is in this spirit that proponents of critical theory have consistently operated; that is, exposing the contradictions in contemporary thought and practice, and remaining alert to the ways in which power conceals its internal contradictions. Jameson's writing on the political unconscious is offered as a

means of doing exactly this: to emphasise the social and historical contexts of cultural production, and to search for ideological aspects ‘which have failed to become manifest in the logic of the narrative, and which we can therefore read as what the text represses’ (48). Such a reading allows one to recuperate political insight from almost any source material.

Adrian Ivakhiv (a proponent of Jameson’s theory) draws particular attention to the fact that his own evidentiary materials ‘are not films about global warming, or about anything particularly “environmental”’ (2008: 100). Indeed, Ivakhiv (2008: 99) claims, such texts often work counter to the aims of environmentalists, ‘[tending] to be easily trivialised and rendered impotent toward any project of raising the environmental consciousness of the public at large’. The reading that follows marks a departure from both the example of Ivakhiv’s Jamesonian synthesis and ecocriticism more generally. Whereas I retain an understanding of the text as a ‘socially symbolic and repressive act’, I argue that a combination of *The Flood*’s and *Solar*’s telegraphed environmental focus and their handling of resolution is precisely what makes considering them in light of the ‘political unconscious’ so interesting. So much are the two novel’s handling of climate change reflective of the phenomenon’s spatio-temporal vastness, that (especially in the case of *The Flood*) they rarely even name it as such; like Timothy Morton’s (2010) ‘hyperobject,’ climate change will always resist being grasped as a totality, as something we are always inside. Nonetheless, climate change has a constant presence, made visible in the produced landscapes and social relations of their respective narratives. *The Flood* and *Solar* can thus be read for their rehearsal of deeply contradictory ideological closures, rather than a merely unwitting (or even hubristically ‘all-knowing’) contribution to environmental discourse.

1.1: Maggie Gee - *The Flood* (2004)

The Political Unconscious I: The Political Horizon

The Flood's many characters and convoluted storylines are spun in a slowly accumulating complexity, set against a backdrop of social inequality and looming environmental crises. The flooding, in particular, provides the lens through which we view all these lives, each affected in unique ways. Sometimes the consequences are almost imperceptible, though at others obvious, as whole communities (such as those in 'the Towers' (21)) are left to cope in whatever way they can. As its title suggests, *The Flood's* chief focus is the impact of the flooding as it begins to shape what Adeline Johns-Putra and Adam Trexler (2011: 196) call the 'inner and outer lives' of its protagonists. Though climate change indeed looms large over *The Flood's* storyline, it is never directly referred to, per se. In so doing, *The Flood* gives apposite reflection of the otherwise muted coverage of climate change in the mainstream media – an increasing concern for environmental commentators (Specter 2009; Hulme 2009). As Johns-Putra and Trexler point out (2011: 190), one of the few critical engagements with the novel to date does not take climate change as its primary focus (Dillon 2007: 374), but reads *The Flood* instead 'as a response to the events of September 11'.

The first horizon of analysis within Jameson's (1981: 76) political unconscious positions the 'object of study' as an 'individual literary work or utterance' to be considered purely as a 'symbolic act'. Viewed as just such an individual utterance, *The Flood's* chief motif is to be found in the localised preoccupations of its various characters. Overwhelmingly, these preoccupations concern negative emotions –

particularly feelings of loneliness, alienation, confusion, misunderstanding and loss, repeatedly dramatised in the disharmonious and dysfunctional interactions between its protagonists. The first character to appear in the novel is May; both widowed and retired, her experience is one of acute isolation. Events of recent years have torn May's family apart: her son Dirk is sent to prison for murdering his sister's brother-in-law and her husband dies shortly afterward. The result is an abrupt end to communication between the respective family members. With her husband and son-in-law, Winston, dead, and Dirk in prison, May is left alone, eventually ceasing her visits to see her son altogether because 'Dirk barely talked to her' when there, and 'never replied' to her letters (179–80).

Dirk, too, is resolutely isolated, deeply frustrated by his lifelong inability to find meaning in the world despite long feeling 'that he wanted something, he wanted anything [...] it was like hunger, pressing him on' (24). Immediately after his release from prison, Dirk turns to religion, joining the millennial 'One Way' group, where, we are told, he is 'accepted at last', though only because 'no one actually turned him away' (25). A similar loneliness afflicts Moira, a one-time literary critic, who finally abandons her six-year project on author Angela Lamb to join the same religious group as Dirk. During Angela and Moira's first meeting in years it is clear that author and critic 'hated each other' (62) and the book will never be published. The meeting soon erupts into a full blown confrontation, with Angela detecting 'something new in the scale of hostility', and ends with Moira 'shrieking' scripture in prophesy "that everything on earth shall perish" (67). Her prophesying has no apparent effect on those around her beyond the momentary startled concern of onlookers; the hustle and bustle of early evening London life soon resumes (68). Moira's disquieting behaviour, we are led to believe, is the product of some form of

mental illness, within which she stumbles ever further, 'alone, unaccommodated' (145).

Much like Moira's shrieking, political messages are regularly delivered in *The Flood* through faltering and (sometimes) alienating (i.e. messianic, sensational, or fanatical) ways. Lottie's daughter, Lola, for example, and her friend, Gracie, repeatedly garble their anti-capitalist messages, at one point misspelling a political slogan (238). Ian, a satirical painter, is also rarely understood by those around him. When he asks Lola and Gracie what they think of his satirical lampooning of the guests at a lavish 'Gala' event (itself organised by the city to distract its citizens from a foreign war), they fail to make the connection between 'his picture of a troupe of monkeys, capering across the stage, grinning' and the celebrities gathered for the event (237–8). This difficulty is perhaps more acutely felt by the most desperate and marginalised in society. At the same event, a protester is described holding up a sign saying 'NO HOME. NO MONEY. NO HOPE' (234). While no one (apart from the reader) registers her presence, the demonstrator also struggles to get beyond a superficial understanding of the Gala's guests:

She *thinks* that the people invited to the Gala must all have nice homes, and hope and money, she *believes* they are smiling, not just for the cameras [...] but at themselves, in invisible mirrors that whisper to them what their lives amount to; there are enormous, hers is nothing (234–5, emphasis added).

Though the protestor is not necessarily mistaken regarding the Gala's display of wealth, she is unable to imagine the forms of alienation and isolation which nonetheless afflicts the lives of all *The Flood's* characters.

The Political Unconscious II: The Social Horizon

In the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer (2006: 304), Jameson's theoretical precursor for the concept of 'horizons', '[to] acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion'. In Jameson's second 'horizon', we apprehend this 'larger whole' by re-encountering the disharmony experienced by *The Flood's* characters as part of that same 'single vast unfinished plot' of class antagonisms, revealing what Jameson describes (1981: 42) as 'structural oppositions and contradictions' inherent in any given mode of production. *The Flood's* presentation of social relations are, fittingly, antagonistic; that is, as Jameson understands it, 'two opposing discourses [fighting] it out within the general unity of a shared code' (Jameson 1981: 84). The narrative of *The Flood* repeatedly highlights these antagonisms, moving discursively through its diverse cast to reveal a profoundly unequal community. A key figure in this dynamic is the affluent, middle-aged Lottie, completely oblivious to the relative hardship endured by poorer demographics, let alone poverty's historical and geographical contingency. The degree of Lottie's obliviousness is both ridiculous and ridiculed in Gee's third-person narrative presentation: at one point Lottie muses that '[t]he Tower-dwellers did keep making a fuss, but life had definitely been worse for her' (95).

Crucially, the plot of *The Flood* goes beyond 'class' in the traditional sense of a socio-economic designation. Many Marxists, including Jameson himself, anticipate this need to extend an understanding of 'class antagonism' to various other identifiable oppositions within society. 'Sexism and the patriarchal,' Jameson (1981: 99) suggests:

are to be grasped as the sedimentation and the virulent survival of forms of alienation specific to the oldest mode of production of human history, with its division of labor between men and women, and its division of power between youth and elder. (Jameson 1981: 99)

The Flood, in turn, presents a comprehensive range of adversarial relationships along similar lines. Conflict on the basis of race and sexual orientation is perhaps best represented by Dirk, who has already served time for murdering Winston, whom he describes as 'the pansy fucking brother of [his sister's] black boyfriend', Elroy (24). Dirk's position is framed as a violent and ugly opposition to difference, one we are encouraged to see as a misplaced utopian impulse to resolve antagonisms. Dirk's vision of heaven is a nightmarish purgatory, 'a mount of blood and gold and glory, a place where his enemies will burn like straw' (23).

Each set of antagonisms plays a crucial role in describing a view of social life, as Jameson (1981: 95) sees it, as 'crisscrossed and intersected by a variety of impulses'. Such impulses, it is clear, are not limited to those of 'class' in the narrow sense; rather, they are 'the sedimentation and the virulent survival of forms of

alienation' which afflict almost every sphere of life (Jameson 1981: 99). Despite the proliferation of antagonisms among and between its characters we rarely see any outward confrontation regarding the problems which cause these inequalities, least of all over the novel's most visible symptom of a dysfunctional mode of production; i.e., the rampant degradation of the environment. Instead, the public discourse on flooding is characterised either by straightforward denial, or by an active readiness to accept at face value any sign or claim that the floods are abating. On the day of the Gala, for example, despite significant evidence to the contrary, the city-wide readiness to accept the narrative of 'recovery' is obvious. As Gee's omniscient narrator states: 'probably not much was different today, except the sun and the government statement. But that was all they needed: hope' (198). It is a strong force, matched only by the accompanying effort to conceal the impact of the floods. 'Soldiers had been working for seventy two hours', we are told, 'and the worst of the mud had been jettied off the buildings, scrubbed off the kerbs' (199).

Despite collective denial, disaster lingers. Indeed, the city-wide credulity concerning recovery complements earlier failures to communicate effectively, borne along by the impulses of 'a city recovering from chaos, a city eager to be normal again' (213). However, the assertions that the city 'has been reclaimed from the edge of disaster' (214) are flatly undermined, for, we are told, '[a]t six p.m., the end would begin' (216). Not all characters, it has to be said, are entirely confident of recovery. At a swimming pool a couple worry over rumours that 'they're shutting down the city pools ... There's talk about some virus, too. And people are saying its water-born'" (224). Prompted by this rumour incredulity

resurfaces: “But the floods are over [...] That’s why they’ve gone ahead with the Gala” (224).

The Gala is indeed a fitting focus for *The Flood’s* handling of concealed antagonisms as a set piece of political misdirection, with government representatives, we are told, well aware that ‘a show was what they needed’ (200). For the Gala is not just a downplaying of the need to respond appropriately to the climate-change-catalysed flooding, but also of many other forms of social antagonism. The event is a tour de force of wilful decadence and ignorance – ‘[o]nly the *crème de la crème* have been chosen, the people the city defines itself by, the rich, the celebrities, the people who count’ (235, emphasis in original) – part of a process by which social inequality is mythologised as an outcome of a naturally uneven distribution of ability and wealth. In spite of itself, the event is as much characterised by the people it excludes as by those to whom it actively allows entry. Our attention is drawn, for example, to the significance of the claim that ‘everyone was there’ (242) by, only pages later, the admission by Gee’s narrator that, of course, ‘so many of the city’s people weren’t there. The builders’ labourers, the rat-catchers ...the hospital auxiliaries, the midwives’ (245). Far from achieving a successful glossing over of unevenness and disharmony, the Gala acts as an amplification of the city’s problems. Dysfunctional communication between characters is mirrored by a social discourse incapable of purposively confronting the seriousness of unfolding environmental and social crises. The Gala is, of course, part of *The Flood’s* active and explicit *consciousness* of the relation between class and climate change. It is pertinent here as a *rehearsal* of the political unconscious; applying Jameson’s terms (1981: 79), we can read the Gala

as a 'mythic resolution' to an issue like climate change that we find it very difficult to 'articulate conceptually'.

The Political Unconscious III: The Historical Horizon

While Jameson is interested in 'mythic' (rather than real-world) resolutions, his ultimate aim is to use such formulations to, in Gadamer's (2006: 304) terms, 'look beyond what is close at hand' to the widest possible horizon of interpretation: 'history'. For Jameson, history is 'the ultimate ground as well as the untranscendable limit of our understanding' (Jameson 1981: 100). Insofar as it is an *inclusive* analysis, environmental research provides a fitting accompaniment to a Marxist historical methodology as an approach which understands, as the ecologist Barry Commoner (1972: 33) famously put it that 'everything is connected to everything else'.

In contrast to its broad social sweep, *The Flood's* action is geographically confined to one city: London. Whilst the resolution *The Flood* moves towards is one of localised social harmony, this movement takes place against the backdrop of global environmental crises, which dwarf the concerns of individuals and nations. The physical environment of *The Flood* becomes, as Jameson (1981: 210) would call it, a 'privileged place of the strategy of containment' for highlighting both environmental and geopolitical dynamics less easy to identify at the surface level of the text. *The Flood's* environmental and geopolitical backdrop nonetheless struggles to contain the 'shared codes' (Jameson 1981: 84) of ideological narratives such as nationhood and class. The Gala, for example, projects an

image of an event that ‘everyone’ (242) will attend. Yet, ultimately, as the narrator concedes, ‘[s]o many of the city’s people weren’t there [...] Actually, most of the world isn’t here’ (245–7).

As the work of various Marxist ecologists⁷ have argued, a truly ecological analysis is incompatible with thinking about geographical locales in isolation. As writers such as Neil Smith, Jason W. Moore, and Jameson himself, have pointed out, it is terms of space (as much as – or even more so than – ‘history’) that political interventions can generate their most subversive power. Indeed, some of the most politically charged moments in Gee’s novel are those that gesture towards what Moore describes (2003: 434) as, a ‘geographical division of labor’, through which an oppressed or marginalised global majority begins to affect and disrupt the political realism of the capitalist world-system. For example, the descriptions of the ‘[p]rotests in Varna where a massive new dam was said to be threatening the whole coastline [...] Eco-protesters envisaged tidal waves, global disaster, millions drowned’ (57), echo the manifold and dynamic (though often overlooked) sites of resistance around environmentally ‘destructive hydrological regimes’ (Nixon 2011: 171) from across the globe. In their turn, *The Flood’s* depictions of resistance from the periphery are not easily visible, half-manifesting at the margins of the text in muddled or discontinued conversations. Davey (a television astronomer) tells Lola and Gracie: “‘There are real things to worry about, you know, girls. The war, for example. The floods, for another’” (86). As Davey himself soon discovers, however, successfully identifying the ‘real things to worry about’ remains an elusive prize. Upon learning about the imminent meteor impact, for example, Davey is noticeably troubled by his previous complacency, exclaiming “‘if this

⁷ For example, Harvey (2001), Moore (2003, 2012), and Smith (2010).

object hits [...] there will be massive tsunamis [...] ironically just as our programme predicts. But this time it's real. It's serious. Thousands of people will die on the coasts" (283). Readers sensitive to the geopolitical dynamics considered above will know only too well that the slow unfolding catastrophe of climate change – *unreal* for so long in the West – has long been very real for others, not just 'this time'.

Of course, no character in *The Flood* really knows what is happening. Indeed, the more sensational forms of environmental threat – not least the meteor impact itself or the 'Planetary Pile-up' threat (180) – work against attempts to uncover a history of the destructive aspects of 'the active relation of man to nature' (Marx, 1990: 493), namely, the socially embedded environmental threat of the floods. As Jameson's theory (1981: 217) suggests, an 'ostensible or manifest "theme" of [a] novel is no more to be taken at face value than is the dreamer's immediate waking sense of what the dream was about'. Using the political unconscious, it must be emphasised, is in no way intended pre-emptively to condemn engagements with text or history to failure, rather, it is suggested precisely in order 'to resist [the] thematization or reification [of history]' and its 'transformation back into one optional code among others' (Jameson 1981: 101). Jameson's aim is for readers to grasp history as an ongoing, dynamic and irreducible process, what he describes elsewhere as 'a seamless web', a process that escapes straightforward cognition (Jameson 1981: 40).

As a number of commentators⁸ have observed, the process of history is one that is readable not only in written narrative but, concurrently, in the landscape around us. The distribution of environmental benefits and burdens is, as studies of post-industrial landscapes have consistently uncovered, never equal. 'The real patterns of uneven development', Neil Smith (2010: 50) writes, should be seen to reside in 'the unity of capital, rather than [...] the false ideological dualism of society and nature'. The landscape presented in *The Flood* is accordingly a conspicuously 'produced' (Smith 2010: 66) one (to borrow Smith's suggestive term), which we glimpse as the 'warm coral stain of the human animal', and which characteristically forms 'long grids of light' stretching out '[a]ll over the world' (89). And though this human 'coral stain' may *appear* ubiquitous – '[e]astward, southward, there are no more gardens. Every scrap of land has a building on it' (16) – it is one which manifests in sadly uneven ways. The overdevelopment of alluvial land to which this passage makes reference has relevance not only to the numerous environmental problems which result from such activity (flooding, water contamination, disease transmission, and so on) but also the concentration of the poor (historically confined to the southern and eastern areas of London) within those now environmentally vulnerable areas. Areas of the city 'where people were poor', (22) moreover, are presented repeatedly as ecologically (as well as economically) barren – council estates and tower-blocks rise 'above the earth like a forest of dead trees' (22). *The Flood* reproduces in its background a comprehensive imbrication of environmental degradation and social deprivation.

More affluent people, conversely, are shown in the novel to be comparatively free from these risks, but disproportionately responsible for polluting behaviour. In a

⁸ For example, Lefebvre (1991), Harvey (2001), Smith (2010), and Wallerstein (2011).

rare confrontation, Shirley's cleaner, Faith, complains that "“car drivers”" have "“more money than sense [...] whizzing round polluting everything”" (26). Altercations of this sort are infrequent in *The Flood*; more commonly, Gee's readers are merely shown the uneven distribution of environmental benefits and burdens and left to connect the dots. Like the polluting 'plane engine [that] gnawed like a distant headache' (32), these concerns remain banal and remote, part of antagonisms kept from immediate resolution by the distances that exist between their (often unwitting) antagonists. These distances, moreover, are as much conceptual as spatial: ecological literacy, when revealed, is pointedly arcane and difficult. A notable example of this esotericism comes via the character Harold, Lottie's husband, while he considers the temporal nature of 'simultaneity':

[Events] Going on for ever, now, now, all across the planet [...] and even at this instant, as he lay on the floor [...] great events were breaking, somewhere else, people were burning, people were laughing, soldiers were marching across the desert, little children were learning to swim, lives were being changed for ever – and there were the ants, the bower-birds, the lizards, *the intricate cross hatchings of a thousand other species* (205–6, emphasis added).

The passage is perhaps the most poised and insightful in *The Flood*, certainly the one that moves most consciously and calmly towards a robust ecological understanding. It is not panic which grips Harold here, but rather a measured appreciation of the vastness of ecological interconnection. The passage, too, reflects Jameson's (1981: 95) own lucid vision of history as a spatiotemporally interconnected web, 'crisscrossed and intersected by a variety of impulses'. Just

like Jameson, Harold's vision is presented as the basis from which one can engage with the world, rather than engendering political aporia. While undoubtedly insightful, other encounters with the produced environment in the novel are not always presented in such measured terms as Harold's, reminding us that ecological literacy does not result automatically from *looking* at environmental despoilment. May, for example, staring into the flood waters, has the disturbing impression that things:

moved beneath the surface like sea monsters [...] perhaps they were only rotting car-tyres, but they looked black and slimy and warm and alive.

What had she ever understood? What did she know about the world? [...] Suddenly May felt she knew nothing at all (190)

Shortly after this passage May meets Jehangir, a proponent of the 'One Way' religious group, and fleetingly entertains joining the group. The possibility of heavenly absolution which religion apparently offers May leaves her feeling suddenly that 'life is wonderful' (193). The juxtaposition of these two encounters is demonstrative of the gulf between the kind of cognitive challenge of confronting and positioning oneself within the reality of a 'produced' ecosystem (which elicits an existential panic in May) versus the immediate allure of externally (and divinely) managed resolution. Indeed, *difficulty* becomes the shared quality of all these encounters, in a way that highlights the central challenges of environmental interventions in general. Bill McKibben (2003: 97) describes this feeling as the 'loneliness' of a world without external nature, which, when disaster strikes, is manifested to us as a mere 'subset of human activity'. Like the sea monsters May

thinks she sees, this created aspect of the environment conjures feelings of the uncanny, but also of despair.

The difficulty of ecological cognition, then, has urgent political implications. In a key scene with the Prime Minister, Mr Bliss, the manipulation of environmental ideology for political ends is given direct thematisation. The scene centres around the discussion of Middle Eastern terror threats and provides another example of the entanglement of a difficult-to-assimilate but maddening insistence of environmental and geopolitical problems in *The Flood*. Mr Bliss' cartoonish aspiration to destroy terror threats at their source is sardonically undermined when one advisor observes: "We've been bombing them for years [...] it hasn't made them any nicer" (38). The environmental threat posed by the flooding (the novel's faintly – though relentlessly – articulated emblem of anthropogenic climate change) poses a similar problem for the politicians to that of the terrorists, as threats which those in power know will be difficult to handle if allowed to manifest with any degree of complexity. The confrontation with the lived reality of environmental decline brings with it the threat of civil unrest. "If the rains continue," another advisor warns "we [will] have to do something. The people are restless around the Towers" (38). In its place, therefore, Mr Bliss moves to construct a simple and distracting narrative: the "common enemy" (38) of the terrorist. The political significance of such misdirection is spelled out as Mr Bliss, 'his eyes [...] bright,' gleefully anticipates that '[s]omething enormous was going to happen': a "Historic opportunity" (38). While Mr Bliss may consciously intend only to further tighten his grip on power, his plan amounts (at the social horizon) to the reifying, as Jameson would call it, of environmental and geopolitical problems as objects (respectively, the floods and the 'terrorist'), rather than as structural

problems exacerbated by political myopia and class bias. The scene is key, offering a disturbing reminder of the relative ease by which prevalent attitudes toward the environment (as well as global politics) are manipulated in popular discourse. Indeed, despite direct and chronic experience of environmental degradation, almost all of the texts protagonists seem only too willing to accept a narrative of 'business as usual':

Trapped motorists listened to their radios; more rains predicted; demonstrations in the south and the east, where the populace claimed they were being neglected, their basements left flooded, their drains left blocked. Business as usual. They sighed and switched off (81).

As well as the hints here of a jaded acceptance of environmental injustices visited upon a 'neglected populace', the passage is interesting more for its juxtaposition with the description of 'the end of the world spectacular'; a two-hour special TV show which Lottie's son, Davey (a TV astronomer), will present, covering the unique astronomical event in which the planets 'were due to line up in the heavens' (82). In contrast to the slow violence of the floods described above, the 'Planetary Pile-up' threat is presented in morbidly lurid terms. The 'repercussions,' we hear, 'could be cataclysmic. The footage, [the] producer promised would be stunning. "Hope you're as excited about this as we are"' (82). Through the juxtaposition of the two scenes there emerges a major discrepancy between the experience of environmental burdens and spectacular conceptions of natural disasters. This discrepancy haunts Davey, who 'in some humble, deeply buried part of him, believed in truth, and accuracy [... but] lived in a world that preferred

entertainment' (83). Fittingly, this is a predicament which *The Flood* itself goes on to rehearse in its own resolution.

Resolution and Conclusions

The Flood appears to use what is effectively a tragic composition: the follies of humankind reduced to nought by a cosmic indifference; the many antagonisms which the novel develops are summarily swept away by the motiveless and amoral energy force of a 'natural' disaster in its final chapters. That is, until one notes the framing of the novel as a whole; i.e. the preamble and the coda of semi-paradisiacal reunification in which these antagonisms and frustrations (which abound in the novel proper) dissolve: 'No one is mad here', the narrative voice tells us, 'no one is angry' (323). The tone of the novel's final passage is relentlessly (and ironically, we must assume) utopic: it is the 'place of perpetual summer' (322) where all the principal characters 'are as they wish. All they ever hoped to be' (324). The irony is a delicious one, for what is this resolution but what Jameson would call (1981: 83) an 'intolerable [ideological] closure'? From the perspective of the political unconscious it stands as a conspicuous reminder that, of course, everything is *not* alright – at least in the world which we currently inhabit – a world in which the prevailing trend is one that better fits Rob Nixon's description (2011: 2) of 'slow violence' discussed above: indifference or confusion in the face of incrementally rising intensity of environmental and social crises.

The Flood's opening is perhaps even more significant, though, than its ending. Like the final scene, the 'Before' passage which begins the novel adopts an

apocalyptic perspective, speaking from the point of view of total revelation. 'I am going to tell you how it happened,' (7) declare the opening lines, before going on to describe the setting: a place 'which holds all times and places' (7). Like the end, the novel's opening appears to be the fantastical realisation of a transcendental view of history, where one can see the 'whole of the road, stretching out forever, before, behind' (9). It is, in this sense, reminiscent of Jameson's (1981: 101) straightforward description of historical materialism as an attempt to understand 'why what happened [...] had to happen the way it did.' Like Jameson, *The Flood* (whether by design or not) cannot conceal that the attainment of such an understanding is impossible, with the simple difference that it does this indirectly via its formal resolution. For *The Flood's* apocalypse does not bring a cleansing moment, only death; and its paradisiacal coda is jarring in its saccharine neatness. The only reliable constant is the slow, creeping violence (as the book's title suggests) of the flood, one manifest in both the environmental and social injustices that afflict its characters.

The basis of *The Flood's* political resonance is much like the one identified by Jameson in his analysis of Conrad; that is:

[the] unplanned harmony between this textual dynamic and its specific historical content: the emergence of capitalism as just such an always-already-begun dynamic, as the supreme and privileged mystery of a synchronic system. (Jameson 1981: 280)

Climate change, as I have tried to argue, is often in danger of being perceived as an 'always-already-begun-dynamic,' received by us as an ahistorical and 'reified

force' (Jameson 1981: 102) we could not possibly hope to contest. Climate change, much like capitalism, is – in reality – a contingent phenomenon, a symptom of a *longue-durée* process within, and alongside, which we have sought (with increasing zeal) to extract what Marx calls (1967: 745), the 'free gift of Nature to capital'. As environmentalists have been saying for decades, although compound growth has become unsustainable, it is not (lest we forget) inevitable.

The Flood does a lot to set up a fruitful engagement with anthropogenic and accretive environmental problems, invariably in complex interdependency with a comprehensive range of social antagonisms. The novel's handling of social and environmental contradiction, however, works in stark contrast to its paradisiacal resolution, one which can be read as an enclosure in literary form of the complexity of a historical and anthropogenic climate change. This juxtaposition is spectacular in its rehearsal of the operation of ideology within environmental discourses, offering, on the one hand, a stark tableau of social and environmental problems and, on the other, a sensational embodiment of environmental phenomena as 'reified force[s]' (Jameson 1981: 102).

This reading is, it must be stressed, immanent within, rather than a patent feature of, *The Flood*. As I have argued above, Jameson's political unconscious has functioned here as that 'indispensable instrument for revealing those logical and ideological centers a particular historical text fails to realize' (Jameson 1981: 49). This is not to suggest that *The Flood* is *at fault* for 'failing to realise' the ideological implications of anthropogenic climate change; instead, we might argue that a *symbolic* resolution is all narrative is capable of doing, merely reflecting the ways and degrees to which climate change is routinely ignored, misrepresented, and

misrecognised. The political unconscious is thus invoked here as 'the indispensable instrument' for helping us to comprehend the political import of *The Flood's* particular resolution. Yet even in spite of its resolution, *The Flood's* various formal features – e.g. its multiple perspectives and the geopolitical lens of its plot – comprise an effect commensurate with, if not climate change itself, then our monumental failure to respond appropriately to its challenges. Gee's decision to sweep this all away in *The Flood's* final passages is perplexing, though not at odds with the fast-violent appetites of popular discourse on climate change. The next section will consider a text more obviously 'conventional' (to use Kerridge's term) in its formal strategies, though which yields no less fruitful critical insights.

1.2: Ian McEwan - *Solar* (2010)

Ian McEwan's *Solar* tells the story of Michael Beard, a recipient of the Nobel Prize for physics who finds himself at the forefront of the British attempt to identify renewable technology solutions to the intertwined crises of energy and the environment. Despite his first class education and prestigious profile, Beard's inner world is one of emotional turmoil and moral disarray. The story begins with Beard distracted from his duties as head of the 'National Centre for Renewable Energy' amidst the breakdown of his fifth marriage. As Beard is drawn into a vortex of jealousy, petty revenge, lust and self-loathing generated by this situation, he is shocked to discover that his wife, Patrice, is having an affair with one of his research assistants, Tom Aldous. Following a brief but non-violent confrontation, during which Aldous attempts to confide in Beard that he is on the verge of a solar energy breakthrough, Aldous accidentally slips and falls, hitting his head on a coffee table. He is killed instantly. Realising he will almost certainly be accused of Aldous' murder, Beard decides to flee the scene, though not before planting evidence which would incriminate another of his wife's lovers, Rodney Tarpin. With a sound alibi of his own, Beard is never a serious suspect, and Tarpin goes down for the murder having already aroused police attention through previous violent conduct. Shortly after the episode, Beard discovers papers addressed to him from Aldous detailing the plans for a new type of solar panel. The rest of the novel is split into two time periods (2005 and 2009) which recount the attempts by Beard to develop the plans and prepare them for the international market.

Initial reviews of the novel were largely positive, with many writers welcoming what they saw as the first mainstream literary engagement with climate change. Stefan

Rahmstorf (2010), for example, welcomed not only the novel's comic framing but also praised *Solar* for making accessible some key issues around climate change. Though largely positive, *Solar*'s journalistic reviews often question in what way the novel helps in the fight against climate change, as the subtitle of Julie Steinberg's (2010) article illustrates: 'Does art make people better? The jury's still out'.

Literary-critical responses to *Solar* have been slow to emerge. In their 2011 review of 'literature and climate change', Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra noted a lack of scholarship on the novel, though suggested that *Solar* 'will almost certainly be the focus of much research' over the coming years. At the time of writing, however, there remain only a handful of serious critical engagements with the novel. One such example, by Eva Zemanek (2012), recommends *Solar*'s usefulness in thinking about 'risk', which she outlines in an attempt to draw parallels between 'the risks [Beard] is taking in his private life' and the risks we are taking collectively with climate change (2012: 52). It is exactly this sort of allegorisation which I wish to move beyond in my approach.

Much of the other critical engagements with *Solar* have come from Greg Garrard. His initial reactions were positive. In a bizarre turn, Garrard (2009) wrote what Johns-Putra and Trexler (2011: 192) described as 'a playful engagement with the novel, analyzing it before it was published'. Using the development towards what he saw as 'the notion of human nature' across McEwan's career to date, Garrard (2009: 696) claimed to be able to extrapolate how McEwan would engage with climate change in *Solar*. Such a move, suggested Garrard (2009: 718), might permit 'a way around the formal obstacles to writing a novel about climate change', which had, he said, been bound up in the opposing poles of 'fatalism' or 'idealism'.

As fuel to this hypothesis Garrard referred to statements made by McEwan himself, who, ahead of the novel's publication, suggested that

The thing that would have killed the book for me, I'm sure, is if I'd taken up any sort of moral position [...] I needed a get-out clause. And the get-out clause is, this is an investigation of human nature, with some of the latitude thrown in by comedy [...] I couldn't quite see how a novel would work without falling flat with moral intent (qtd. in Rahmstorf, 2010).

Buoyed by these comments, Garrard (2009: 718) goes on to suggest that

If it is successful as a work of fiction, as McEwan's recent novels undoubtedly have been, it may well provoke a fundamental shift in ecocritical assumptions, from moral idealism to pragmatism, and from the ecofeminist demand for re-enchantment that prevails in some quarters to an anti-essentialist Darwinism that considers the question of what, on the whole, humans are disposed to *want* to do, and critical to influencing what we will in fact do. McEwan's next book will at last innervate a Darwinian environmentalism, which is the only kind that is likely either to prevail or to prove fit to survive.

For Garrard, such a novel would be capable of disabusing us of an essentialist, liberal view of 'human nature', one corroborated and consolidated over the long history of the European novel, especially during its 19th century, bourgeois heyday (though, of course, in conventional fiction to the present day). McEwan's treatment would, Garrard hoped, be able to deconstruct this position and offer up something

more suitable to crisis on a global scale. In his following two publications on *Solar*, however, Garrard has been unable to conceal his disappointment. Garrard's (2013: 178) main grievance, it seems, is with McEwan's choice of genre, which he sees as instrumental in limiting the potential of the novel to 'to give climate projections a moral salience they otherwise lack, and, by extension, encourage us to see carbon emissions as damnable rather than foolish'. On the contrary, argues Garrard (2013: 181-2), *Solar* draws up

a cruelly comic analogy between physical weight and carbon emissions that implies both obesity and global warming are failures of self-discipline – a convenient untruth that exonerates the fast food and fast fuel industries. [...] Yet the analogy of obesity to carbon emissions is inexact, and the representation of both forms of 'excess' as failures of individual resolve is deeply misleading.

Given Garrard's comments here and elsewhere, the response marks a clear about-face on his initial optimism. Firstly, with regards to McEwan's exploration of 'human nature', and, secondly, in terms of what Garrard envisages to be literature's function vis-a-vis a problem like climate change. As I will go on to argue, the morally and physically dysfunctional aspects of Beard's character run counter to ideas of an 'essentialist' human nature, consistent, in fact, with the way Garrard had originally envisaged. In his 2009 article, for example, Garrard (718) adopts a similarly non-prescriptive approach, noting that 'the work of fiction is to wonder at our human variety and commonality, it seems, not to seek to reform it'. Furthermore, in his 2013 article, Garrard (186) reminds us that 'Ecocriticism is not the literary critical department of the IPCC. [...] Climate has deep meanings in

every culture that cannot simply be over-ridden by a mass of climatological data'. Despite these comments, however, Garrard appears to want *Solar* to deliver solutions to climate change in a relatively straightforward manner. This is, as McEwan himself had suggested, not what *Solar* could possibly do, at least not without 'falling flat with moral intent'. Neither is it how we should view literature in this instance. What is offered below is a reading which acknowledges the ideological tensions which cluster around Beard's character, but which goes beyond a view of his behaviour as indicative of something 'essentially' and immovably human. In other words, despite *Solar's* recapitulation of what Buell (1998: 663) calls 'the traditional protocols of protagonist-centred fiction', we can still go 'beyond' Beard – that is, into what Jameson (1981: 49) calls 'the underside or [...] the very political unconscious, of the text'. In doing so it is possible to identify ideas which run counter to 'dominant' modes of thinking about and organising the world, and, moreover, which embody the power and inevitability of social change.

The Political Unconscious I: The Political Horizon

One might very well forgive Garrard. McEwan constructs a story dominated by the exploits of a deeply uncaring, selfish and troubled individual. Against the backdrop of a global concern like climate change these characteristics are thrown into even sharper relief, and in ways which appear to fatally undercut any hope that such individuals might readily adopt more environmentally sound modes of thinking and acting. Indeed, climate change itself is often only a background concern for Beard. Throughout the novel's first section (entitled '2000') – bar some minor incidental

details (such as Beard's appointment at the National Centre for Renewable Energy, and his dealings with Aldous) – Beard is utterly preoccupied with thoughts of himself, or the details of his farcical break-up. That said, in one rare aside Beard intimates that he is not wholly sceptical about climate change:

It was one in a list of issues, of looming sorrows, that comprised the background to the news, and he read about it, vaguely deplored it and expected governments to meet and take action. And of course he knew that a molecule of carbon dioxide absorbed energy in the infrared range, and that humankind was putting these molecules into the atmosphere in significant quantities. But he himself had other things to think about. And he was unimpressed by some of the wild commentary that suggested the world was in 'peril', that humankind was drifting towards calamity, when coastal cities would disappear under the waves, crops fail, and hundreds of millions of refugees surge from one country, one continent, to another, driven by drought, floods, famine, tempests, unceasing wars for diminishing resources (15-16).

If there is chief reason for Beard's indifference, then it is quite simply because 'he himself had other things to think about'. Beard surveys the accumulating inventory of potential calamity without concern, from the coldly scientific perspective of the 'molecule of carbon dioxide'. There is no space in Beard's appraisal for emotion or socialised sensibility to what climate change might mean to others. Up to a certain point, the justification given for Beard's view is an otherwise healthy scepticism, calling out humankind's myopia for believing itself to be 'always living at the end of days, that one's own demise was urgently bound up with the end of the world' (16).

But Beard's call to realism is structured by a stridently narrow individualism; the 'other things to think about' are no more profound than where the next shot of whisky, bout of intercourse, or deep fried snack will come from. Beard is indeed, the paragon of the modern, liberal individual subject, an aspirationally distant and independent exterior concealing an interior in emotional chaos: 'he was self-sufficient, self-absorbed, his mind a cluster of appetites and dreamy thoughts' (169). Despite being a resolute individual, Beard utterly fails to stay in control of himself, or, rather the competing *versions* of himself. In perhaps the best example of this (indeed, in a moment which, for Garrard, undoes the whole novel), awaking after a heavy night's drinking, Beard, we are told, 'began to form the familiar resolution, then dismissed it, for he knew he was no match for that late-morning version of himself, for example, en route from Berlin, reclining in the sunlit cabin, a gin and tonic to hand' (184). Beard is not simply a victim of his own appetites, but rather a schizoid composite of rational calculation and powerful libidinousness; Beard's inner life becomes vicissitudinous in the extreme, vacillating between existential crisis and consumerist coma.

Where Beard is single minded is in the pursuit of profit. The so called 'mission' to get his solar panel project off the ground, for example, is nakedly a get-rich-quick scheme. Beard addresses investors on the subject of climate change for an 'unnaturally inflated fee' but also because if, as a result he manages to sell one or two panels 'even by the smallest of fractions, his own company must benefit' (112). So much is Beard's pursuit of profit a blind compulsion, in fact, that when he encounters difficulties and attempts to play the victim, we are pointedly invited to wonder at the effort it must take to sustain the illusion:

He did not deserve these distractions. They were encircling him, women, an Albuquerque lawyer, a north-London criminal, the unquiet cells of his own body, in a conspiracy to prevent him making his gift to the world. None of this was his fault. People had said of him that he was brilliant, and that was right, he was a brilliant man trying to do good. Self-pity steadied him a little (236-7).

Beard's life becomes a gruelling battle with himself, a gargantuan effort of self-delusion maintained by the stories he tells to himself about himself. These stories regularly fall apart, manifesting physically. In a conversation about his severe and manifold illnesses, Beard's doctor tells him, 'This won't go away just because you don't want it or are not thinking about it' (238). Like his personal and financial problems, Beard's ailments run deep, and we hear in morbid detail as Beard's illnesses are itemised:

Pathogens swam in hordes across the moat of his defences, they swarmed over the castle walls armed with cold sores, mouth ulcers, fatigue, joint pain, watery bowels, nose acne, blepharitis – a new one this, a disfiguring inflammation of the eyelids that erupted into white-peaked Mount Fuji styes that pressured his eyeballs, blurring his vision. Insomnia and monomania also distorted his view (22).

By the end of the novel the chronic nature of Beard's medical conditions is obvious, and the same is true of the accompanying repressive effort. During the breakdown of his marriage in the earliest section of the novel, Beard's behaviour is characterised by a wilful avoidance of the truths he cannot face up to in his life.

Rather than act to otherwise change the situation, Beard, we are told, 'watched television for five hours in his overcoat, drank two bottles of wine and tried not to think. And failed' (5).

The Political Unconscious II: The Social Horizon

Given the combination of Beard's centrality as protagonist and his embodiment of gluttonous and slovenly behaviour, themes of excess and indiscipline easily influence how we encounter many of *Solar*'s social issues. The second horizon of interpretation is, in Jameson's (1981: 76) words, the phase in which we begin to view the text as 'an individual parole or utterance' within 'the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes' – that is, we begin to see the text as participating in a social discourse or 'order'. Seen from this perspective Beard's actions have significance beyond the symbolic drama of the text, as utterances which take part in and influence larger narratives, ideas, and power structures.

Solar exists to propagate allegorical readings. As one commentator suggests (Zemanek, 2012: 56), Beard's story 'in its entirety constitute[s] an allegory' of climate change. This is indeed what most readers of *Solar* (including Garrard) have done, and there is a lot of mileage in it. It is compelling for example to note the structural similarities between Beard's behaviour and general inaction on climate change. At the 'social horizon' allegory works to help us see what is

happening on a much larger scale. Consider, For example, the breakdown of Beard's fifth marriage, which can be read as an exercise in how not to act during a crisis. When Beard discovers a note from his wife informing him with cruel honesty that she is 'staying over' at her lover's house that night, Beard entertains going 'round to the mock-Tudor ex-council semi [...] to mash the man's brains with his own monkey wrench'. Those acquainted with environmental activism in literature might well recall Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), but if so, that is as far as the comparison goes with Abbey's gritty depiction of environmental activism. As we have already heard, Beard's impulse to act is only momentary; instead, he simply 'watched television for five hours' (5), trying and failing to distract himself with alcohol. The experience initiates in Beard an uncharacteristically long period of personal reappraisal, particularly regarding his physical attractiveness. Catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror one day he reflects, 'What engines of self-persuasion had let him think for so many years that looking like this was seductive?' (6). To Beard's physical re-appraisal are quickly added further instances of critical introspection, building towards a spiral self-loathing in which he chastises himself for being a 'disgrace, an idiot, a weakling' (6).

When Beard does act, it is an extremely childish way. In a particularly farcical display, Beard pretends to have an extra-marital lover of his own, creating sounds designed to convince his estranged wife that there is someone in his room with him, using the TV to approximate voices, laughing periodically to non-existent jokes and even using his hands to simulate the sound of two sets of feet on the stairs. 'This was the kind of logical plan', we are told 'only a madman might embrace' (10). When Beard sees a bruise on Patrice's face he again contemplates

action, 'lingering on the detail of his right fist bursting through the cartilage of Tarpin's nose'. The inclination does not, however, develop beyond the realm of fantasy, as 'with minor revisions, he reconsidered the scene through closed eyes, and did not stir until the following morning' (14). The episode acts as a neat lampooning of the politics of climate change, replete with straightforward inaction, fantasy, self-deprecation, and (in the case of Beard's fictitious lover) 'politics as simulation', analogues of which have come to prominence within analyses of climate change policy (Clark 2010: 141).

The episode also sets us up for the rest of the novel within which we encounter numerous other domestic and personal foibles which are difficult to dissociate from the overall horizon of climate change politics. For example, Beard's contradictory slovenliness, 'clean about his person, vain about his clothes' (163); his avoidance of his own accumulating ailments, despite overwhelming evidence; his imperviousness in the face of huge changes in his life, like the birth of his daughter; and his relentless pursuit of guilty pleasures, while in full awareness of their detrimental effect on his physical and emotional wellbeing.

The resemblance of Beard's personal foibles to the problems of climate change is more than merely structural. The language is also the same, as if in some kind of pathetic fallacy the ailments of the planet begin to manifest in spectacular sympathy on Beard's body. This phenomenon is best demonstrated in a passage already quoted, which when viewed in the wider context of an environmental discourse suggests much more than personal discomfort. Beard lists his ailments, including a condition called 'blepharitis', which, as we have already heard, manifests in hideous 'white-peaked Mount Fuji styes' (22). Similarly, just before

Beard gives his speech to investors he undergoes an untimely bout of food poisoning, during which

he felt an oily nausea at something monstrous and rotten from the sea, stranded on the tidal mud flats of a stagnant estuary, decaying gaseously in his gut and welling up, contaminating his breath, his words and, suddenly, his thoughts.

“The planet,” he said, surprising himself, “is sick.” (148)

The echo of environmental despoilment here is striking, concretising the geographical scale and scope of climate change on Beard's body. This juxtaposition of personal and global scales occurs frequently in the descriptions of Beard's disordered and toxic lifestyle. Beard's abandoned flat for example is imagined by him in stomach-churningly foetid terms. 'There would' he tells us

be vigorous, differently hued fungal growths in creamy whites and soft greyish-greens, a blossoming on the abandoned cheese, the carrots, the hardened gravy. Airborne spores, a parallel civilisation, invisible and mute, successful living entities. Yes, they would have long settled to their specialised feasts, and when the fuel ran out, they would dry to a smear of charcoal dust (110).

The descriptions of climate change and personal foibles become intricately and ineluctably intertwined, often sitting side-by-side in mutual reinforcement. In perhaps the most spectacular example, again from a passage already quoted,

Beard's resignation that his good intentions are no match for that 'version of himself, for example, en route from Berlin, reclining in the sunlit cabin, a gin and tonic to hand', is immediately followed by some observations on the reading he had been doing on the plane, part of which comprised of 'an academic paper sifting data on Arctic summer ice, proposing 2045 as the disappearance date'. Beard then asks himself, 'Was he unhappy, reading of this man-made mess?' The answer: 'Not at all' (184). Beard's resignation to his own demise (and the planet's) is shown to be part of the same inability to face up to or be moved by rapidly mounting evidence, and it becomes difficult – even impossible – to unpick one from the other.

Indications appear, in fact, that Beard himself has begun to be affected by the same ambiguity: 'Don't be a denier' Doctor Parks had said, appearing to refer back to their climate-change chats' (238). As Zemanek has noted, the allegories stack up to such an extent as to create a *mis en abyme* or 'hall of mirrors' effect (2012: 56). Indeed, we are eventually invited to understand climate change *through* Beard's ailments, foibles, and failed diets, rather than the other way around. At one point Beard is talking about a carbon trading scheme which might permit a 'coal-burning company' to 'rightfully claim that its operations were carbon neutral' (187). Whereas we might (in light of the hype surrounding novel) begin reading *Solar* unable to avoid reading Beard's personal life in light of the politics of climate change, the situation has now reversed. It is now carbon trading that we understand in terms of self-delusion, as a mechanism designed to deflect cognitive dissonance and permit contradictions to stand. What are we to make of this 'hall of mirrors' vis-à-vis a reading of *Solar's* environmental politics? Are we, as Garrard argues, to take it as an 'essentialist' and defeatist statement about human

incapacity? The proposition, as I've already acknowledged, is certainly compelling, for the two fit neatly side by side, one reinforcing the other. But I would argue there is another more compelling way to read the situation. That is as the logical breakdown of the analogical connection between personal responsibility and global climate change.

This reading cannot, as Jameson's theory suggests, resolve itself simply at the social horizon. Instead, it is a problem which can only be surmounted by pushing the analysis to the point where Beard's character is seen not as representative of 'human nature' but a symptom of a systemic flaw, a doomed position which will ultimately give way to other ideas and social configurations. Such an idea, I would suggest, begs an analysis at the level of the 'mode of production', and the identification of the antagonisms between what Raymond Williams, called the 'dominant, residual and emergent' modes of thinking and being. Seen from this perspective – as I will go on to argue below – Beard is no longer straightforwardly an obstacle to social change, but, instead, belongs to a dialectical structure, one which moves precisely because of its contradictions.

The Political Unconscious III: The Historical Horizon

By moving out into the third horizon, where, as we have already seen with *The Flood*, the idea is to consider texts in 'the ultimate horizon of human history as a whole' as 'the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production' (Jameson 1981: 76). With *Solar*, it is by making this move that the contradictions

which appear, *prima facie*, to militate against a positive reading of environmental action can, for the first time, be deconstructed. By positioning Beard in the 'untranscendable horizon' of history, rather than as a representative of an immovable and 'essentialised human nature', one is first able to grasp his role within a historical contestation at the level of class which is itself subject to inevitable revisions and displacements. As suggested above, a similar idea is advocated by Raymond Williams in his theory of the 'dominant, residual or emergent' (1978: 121-7) archetypes of cultural forces. Williams believed that all texts are inevitably composed of elements of all three; each in contradiction with the other. These three positions describe the adversarial dynamic which catalyses social change. By reference to this theory I wish to suggest that Beard's position represents the out-going 'dominant' mode increasingly undermined by its own environmental and social contradictions.

The utopian impulse of *Solar* is buried beneath the (admittedly distracting) surface of Beard's moral turpitude. By looking beyond this façade, one not only sees more clearly the mobilisation of 'emergent' forms (i.e. those emerging in reaction to a world in the midst of environmental catastrophe), but also the logic behind McEwan's decision not to put them at the centre of his novel. They are – appropriately for emergent forms – at the periphery of the novel's plot; yet, they are 'there'. Beard's own 'dominant' position manifests with increasing severity its crises, incoherence, and contradictions, as his comic foibles and moral turpitude attest.

Beard's dominance is signalled via a cluster of features befitting his identity position (i.e. white, straight, male) as well as his economic class (i.e. upper-middle,

Oxford educated, affluent). Each simultaneously confirms Beard's 'dominant' position, though arguably, too, his inevitable demise. He is, as we have seen, utterly atomised: 'self-sufficient, self-absorbed, his mind a cluster of appetites and dreamy thoughts', but in such a way which leaves him stranded emotionally and politically, for 'like many clever men who prize objectivity, he was a solipsist at heart, and in his heart was a nugget of ice' (169). Beard is irredeemable, and as a 'childless man at a certain age at the end of his fifth marriage could afford a touch of nihilism' (75). Yet he is simultaneously able to acknowledge that any solution to climate change requires us to step beyond the individualism he so stridently embodies and confesses to: during his speech to investors, he remarks 'Virtue is too passive, too narrow. Virtue can motivate individuals, but for groups, societies, a whole civilisation, it's a weak force' (149).

The speech is perhaps the best example in the book of Beard's desperate incoherence, dressed up in the clothes of sense. In his review of the novel, climate scientist, Stefan Rahmstorf (2010), even went as far as to call it a 'riveting speech', one that he would be 'tempted to steal and use verbatim myself at some occasion'. As we have already seen, Beard is on the verge of bodily and mental breakdown throughout the speech; his value system, too, is equally on the verge of collapse. Though Beard points to the obvious need to move away from individual thinking, recommending what he calls 'the pleasures of ingenuity and co-operation' (149), he concludes 'that in a grave situation, a crisis, we understand, sometimes too late, that it is not in other people, or in the system, or in the nature of things that the problem lies, but in ourselves, our own follies and unexamined assumptions' (155). As we discover, the remarks are not part of a coherent world-view but merely the first thing that came into his head to say as 'he hurried towards his

conclusion': 'Were his points somewhat forced, or had he stumbled upon two important truths? No time to consider' (155). As well as providing an entertaining farce, Beard's incoherence is contingent on the contradictory objectives which have been set for him in the speech; that is, to find a way for a dominant economic and political class to both participate in the revolutionary overturning of their mode of production while miraculously retaining a grip on power. Beard's aim, in other words, appears to be to encourage the progenitors of inequality and industrial-scale environmental ruin to be both 'part of the process' and 'make very large sums of money, staggering sums' by precipitating 'another industrial revolution' (148). The reference to 'another industrial revolution' is, indeed, where Beard's proposal is most nakedly contradictory, citing as it does a period in history during which the current dominance of the capitalist classes were secured, not to mention the intensification of large-scale environmental despoilment. Beard's role is to dress up the reproduction of power in the rhetoric of revolution; it is this fatal contradiction which Beard's character comes to embody.

A number of theorists have come to identify climate change as symptomatic of the limitations of the current mode of production (Klein 2014; Baer & Singer 2014). This is no less true in *Solar*, where, in Beard's words, climate change involves the search for a 'new energy source for the whole of civilisation' (34). Yet Beard's attempts to cash in on solar energy are indicative of the contradictions at the heart of his attempt as a 'dominant' to retain power in the transition to a new mode of production. When Beard encounters difficulties he not only imagines 'conspiracy' (236) but blames the 'sclerotic' markets (205) for impeding his attempts to give 'his gift to the world' (236). On the contrary, Beard's difficulties can be traced to his failure to identify a politically appropriate strategy for rolling out a solar energy

project. For many commentators, not only does solar energy promise a clean energy source, but also an opportunity to decentralise control of energy generation to the advantage of local communities (Farrell 2014; Platform 2014); Beard's attempt to patent solar energy comes to symbolise the illogic of, on the one hand, enclosing an emblematic commons, and, on the other, the belief that such a resource would be amenable to large-scale capital accumulation. Beard's plan is incoherent within both dominant and emergent-collective economic paradigms. Again, the problem is best captured in Beard's own words. During a speech to mark the unveiling of the project, Beard – with blatant false modesty – claims that 'I can claim nothing for myself. I stood, like Newton, on the shoulders of giants' (249), not only this, but that 'I borrowed slavishly from nature [...] by imitating photosynthesis' (249-50). Beard thus describes the project not only as a historical 'inevitability' but in terms of a common heritage, promising 'we will have clean energy, endlessly self-renewing, and we can begin to draw back from the brink of disastrous, self-destructive global warming' (250). However, Beard's vision stands in direct contradiction to how the solar project is actually rolled out. Beard has not only stolen the idea from Aldous, but is desperately trying to ensure no one but him benefits financially from it – 'his thoughts turned obsessively, uselessly around the project. He held seventeen patents in the panels' (230). Neither is Beard motivated by a desire to save the planet. In order to generate the kind of financial (and political) buy-in necessary to kick-start his business – which Beard alone hopes to profit from using his patents – the planet must first reach near oblivion. After hearing that from numerous mainstream media sources that 'the scientists have gotten it wrong' about climate change (215), Beard gleefully reassures his associate, Hammer, that 'The UN estimates that already a third of a million people a year are dying from climate change. [...] It's a catastrophe. Relax!' (217).

Far from being an indication of some universal truth about 'human nature', Beard's character flaws show 'dominant' modes of thought and production – especially those couched in liberal individualism – to be decadent and redundant. Beard, we are told, 'does not believe in inner change only slow inner and outer decay' (66). The unravelling of Beard's personal life – concretised in his turbulent love affairs, aggrieved family, the wrongly imprisoned Tarpin, and unpaid debts – functions as an allegory for the anachronism of the way he thinks, embodying a dangerously outdated mode of production in personal foibles. This reading is in stark contrast to, for example, Garrard's (2013: 182) concerns over the 'the representation of both forms of "excess" as failures of individual resolve'. But if Beard is the embodiment of a mode of production on the verge of collapse, where are the viable alternatives, or, as Jameson (1981: 76) would put it, the 'traces or anticipations of modes of production'? The short answer is almost everywhere that Beard isn't. Alternatives to Beard's doomed thinking occur in the spaces not occupied by Beard's emblematically 'dominant' modes of thought and action. Nonetheless, the peripheral alternatives represent the hope – the 'utopian impulse' – within the 'emergent' forces of anticipated modes of production. These concern behaviours at conspicuous odds with one we associate with Beard, such as emotional sensitivity, openness, honesty, collective ownership, loyalty, forgiveness, and generosity.

Perhaps the most straightforward example is Beard's daughter, Catriona. She is described as having an extreme degree of 'emotional delicacy', even, we are told, to the point of 'experienc[ing] another mind as a tangible force field, whose waves were overwhelming, like Atlantic breakers' (220). Alongside Beard's own emotional

void, this description is damning. Similarly Beard's lover, Melissa, whose love and commitment to him is, from Beard's perspective of emotional vacuity, merely 'a flaw in her character', the product of a 'delusion' (159). Beard, by contrast, was 'pleased that he himself had never fallen properly in love' (257).

Beard does not always fail to recognise 'emergent' behaviours when he sees them, though can glimpse them momentarily or after the fact. In perhaps the book's most famous passage Beard becomes what McEwan calls an 'unwitting thief' (157). The episode concerns Beard's silent confrontation with a man on the train who he assumes is eating his packet of crisps. Readers are led to believe that indeed the man sitting across from Beard is openly stealing his food, only to discover later that they indeed belonged to the other man. After discovering his error Beard

stood so completely revealed to himself, a naked fool, that he felt purified and redeemed, like a penitent, like an elated medieval flagellant with a newly flayed back. That poor fellow whose food and drink you devoured, who offered you his last morsels, fetched down your luggage, was a friend to man. No, no, that was not for now, the agony of retrospection must be postponed (127).

Beard grasps very well the other man's vast tolerance and magnanimity – in stark contrast to his own brutish and petty behaviour. Yet in the same moment he 'postpones' any serious self-analysis.

Lastly, and most importantly, Tom Aldous, the man whose accidental death Beard frames Tarpin for, and from whom he ultimately steals the designs for the revolutionary solar panels. Despite the effectiveness of Beard's ridicule, Aldous' character is nonetheless representative of a contrasting faith in the common good and environmental sustainability. Aldous' sense of collectivity is so automatic, in fact, that he is quite prepared to bring Beard in on the solar energy project, simply as a means to "do what's right by the planet" (34). Aldous' idealism, however, easily becomes the target of Beard's world weary cynicism:

Aldous had a mind that was designed, through the medium of a Norfolk accent, to offer tireless advice, make recommendations, urge changes, or express enthusiasm for some journey or holiday or book or vitamin, which itself was a form of exhortation (29).

Beard detests the man from the outset, and while his character assassination of Aldous is executed with acerbic and comedic aplomb, as the novel develops it is Aldous who is vindicated. His designs turn out to be inspired, his invention potentially world-changing; it is only in Beard's selfish hands that it all falls apart. Indeed, without Aldous (who otherwise demonstrated the intention to direct the project towards democratic ownership) the solar project collapses under the weight of its economic contradiction. Interestingly, the novel's conclusion brings an (admittedly ambiguous hint) that the project will be brought under some form of collective control. With Aldous dead and the work he did at the Centre now owned by the government, Beard is sued by those "keen to see the Centre own the patents and show the taxpayer a decent return" (272). This ending is by no means an ideal resolution; however, it is certainly more promising than Beard's vision of

private capitalisation. Either way, Beard's main role as protagonist is instrumental in revealing the 'emergent' dynamic of a collectivist and sustainable solution to power generation and distribution. What's more, Beard's individualism casts those around him in a more noticeably collective form. Aldous himself is anonymous to Beard, at least until he catches him sleeping with his wife(!). Up to that point Aldous belonged to a group which Beard

could not, or chose not to, tell [...] apart. They ranged in age from twenty-six to twenty-eight and all stood above six feet. Two had ponytails, four had identical rimless glasses, two were called Mike, two had Scots accents, three wore coloured string around their wrists, all wore faded jeans and trainers and tracksuit tops. Far better to treat them all the same, somewhat distantly, or as if they were one person (20).

Though the passage arrives to us initially as part of Beard's comedic disdain, it is essential in highlighting the ideological antagonism between an 'emergent' collective will and the individualistic drive which undergirds a capitalist mode of production. If Aldous (one of *Solar's* understated, 'emergent' collective heroes) had occupied a more central role, the novel would not only have 'fallen flat with moral intent', as McEwan feared, but also reproduced the same contradiction which afflicts numerous other novels about climate change. With Beard's ideological antagonists at the periphery, this sort of challenge is circumvented, allowing those around him to take on the form of structural, cultural rhythms of the 'multitude'. Beard, again, is deeply and comically mistaken when he muses, 'If he was sometimes greedy, selfish, calculating, mendacious, when to be otherwise would embarrass him, then so was everyone else' (170). It is Beard, in fact, who is the

odd one out, who is struggling to hold on to a world which around him, is moving rapidly and ineluctably towards new forms of thinking, governing and producing.

*

Not only is Garrard wrong to worry about the ‘message’ conveyed by *Solar* regarding individual responsibility, he is wrong about the role played in its messaging by generic constraints. *Solar’s* comic frame is, on the contrary, key to helping us recognise the farcically out of date thinking (and *inaction*) which nonetheless prevails in our world. By the end of the novel Beard is a joke, eaten out from the inside by emotional and physical contradiction. Everything he says is hollow, especially his final words before (what we can only presume will be) a fatal heart attack. In asserting that ‘barring accidents life did not change’ (225), Beard reveals himself as farcically out of touch with a world which is, especially at the current conjuncture, undergoing accelerated changes. In order to be symbolically purged as an idea, Beard is singled out, and then unambiguously despatched.

Solar does not, it has to be said, permit an uncomplicated blueprint to, in Adorno’s words, a fully realised ‘emancipated society’. Indeed, the likely transfer of the solar project into government hands, as already mentioned, could be read either as an acceptable surrogate for democratic control or a worrying co-optation by a resolutely capitalist and neo-imperialist state. Far from being fatal to the value of the novel, however, this is precisely the kind of process to which we must all – in cultural contexts or otherwise – be sensitive. The search for the political unconscious is not exclusively the preserve of literary criticism. Discourse around the environment in general must be examined in similar ways for signs of history

being apprehended, not in its observable effects (as climate change deserves to be understood) but as a reifying and depoliticising force. The attempt to understand, let alone retrieve, these 'submerged stories of injustice' (Nixon 2011: 280), is (as I hope I have not understated) an extremely difficult task, not least because these are problems to which only a collective response is appropriate. Nonetheless, the germ of this response is already visible across the globe, from the most concerned of our writers to the burgeoning resistance gathering at the periphery of the capitalist world system.⁹ In ever more compelling ways, our literary engagements with climate change should be directed towards alerting new generations of social actors to the co-constitutive relationship between ourselves and the environment, not least via the entanglement of social and environmental injustices, exposing where possible attempts to deny collective agency, and providing a robust theoretical grounding for collective action aimed at altering and mitigating our currently unsustainable mode of production.

The next chapter will take forward concerns regarding the 'liberal individual' in representations of environmental social movements (and the activists of whom they are comprised). The aim in doing so is to gain an insight into how social problems (like climate change) are articulated, along with the contradictions, modes of resistance, struggles, and tensions between social movements and mainstream political and economic agendas.

⁹ Agroecological groups like La Via Campesina and the Landless Workers' Movement (Portuguese: 'Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra', or MST) have enjoyed considerable success in mobilising many millions of the world's rural poor against environmental injustices (among other things), though also of note are groups like 350.org, who via their 'Go Fossil Free: Divest from Fossil Fuels!' campaign have successfully co-ordinated acts of synchronised civil disobedience in over 180 countries. Instrumental in this effort has been the various so-called 'writer-activists' – such as Bill McKibben, Rob Nixon, Vandana Shiva, Arundhati Roy, and Chris Hedges – who continue to write about and (often) directly participate in the campaigns organised by such groups.

2: ACTIVISM LTD – Representations of Environmental Activism and Neoliberal Capture

Most political groups, even including the ALF, aim at negotiation with the government, using their activity as a lever to encourage the state to change its policies. I have repeatedly said...this tactic is futile. The political system does not recognise any interests outside its own. CCTV in every street, computer data bases, phone taps, the whole economic system dedicated to destroying the earth's resources, and an increasingly moronic mass culture aimed at annihilating all individuality; this vast Machine can never be negotiated with, or persuaded into some kind of 'Softer Gentler Ecocide'. It can only be dismantled, physically destroyed and culturally undermined. Trials and prison do not refute this truth. (Steve Booth qtd. in Wall 1999: 188-9)

Introduction

Environmental criticism aims to 'move the notion of environment from abstraction to a tangible concern' (Dixon 1999: 87). In this respect, ecocritics share a clear objective with environmental activists, who, through a range of direct, representational and discursive strategies, aim to bring environmental dangers to greater prominence. Over the course of this chapter I will explore some of the political implications which inhere in the representation of both environmental

social movements (ESMs) and the activists of which they are comprised. Cultural output has material consequences, and, as such must be viewed, among other things, as crucial in shaping how activists see themselves and the wider horizons of the contemporary political subject; that is, how we *all* think about (and act in) the world. While contemporary culture provides no shortage of examples on which one might base such a study – whether via the kaleidoscope of the mainstream media, the objectivising discourses of the social sciences, or the imaginative and exploratory arenas of literary writing – very few engagements have yet been made with the topic. This shortfall is one, I argue, which requires urgent redress.

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A 2012 advertisement for the Rainforest Alliance (RA) called ‘Follow the Frog’ (2012 [\[video\]](#)) exemplifies the tensions at play in representations of environmental activism. The RA is an organisation which provides certification for products sourced from sustainable forestries, which it does, it claims, in an effort ‘to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods by transforming land-use practices, business practices and consumer behavior’ (RA 2012). The brand of activism (if it can be so called) to which it subscribes is one couched within the neoliberal consensus, which, in David Harvey’s terms, consists in the belief that ‘human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade’ (2005: 2). The advertisement, which is in essence designed to promote products participating in RA’s certification scheme (the logo for which is a small green frog), is an intentionally humorous take on the inner turmoil generated by, on the one hand, awareness of

environmental problems and, on the other, a feeling that no meaningful or effective options for action are available, either to individuals or groups. The advertisement begins with a description of 'you': 'a good person' who is outraged to learn that 'the rainforest is being destroyed at staggering rate of 32 million acres a year'. This person, in fact, is a highly particularised 'you' – a man in his late twenties who works in an office (though this choice is perhaps not surprising given the normative status of adult, white, middleclass men). The man has, we are told, been 'apathetic for too long', and suddenly decides that he 'must do something about it'. While the advert acknowledges the scope and scale of environmental problems like deforestation, its comic momentum comes from its rejection of what it presents as a direct action 'fantasy'. 'This', the advertisement's narrator tells us 'is what you're *not* going to do':

quit your job. Leave your family. Get on the next flight to Nicaragua. Take a bus to the edge of the jungle [...] Lead a revolution against the deforesters and their multi-national employers in an apocalyptic 'once-and-for-all' battle to save humanity.

In preference to extreme actions – which the RA rejects not simply because of their 'extreme' nature but also because of their implication within what is purported to be a 'cliché[d] gringo fantasy' – the RA advocates pursuing an exclusively consumer-based programme of action: 'what you can do is follow the frog. Buying Rainforest Alliance Certified products ensures the future of our rainforests so that you don't have to do the things you shouldn't do anyway. Just follow the frog'. The RA's apparently benign, pragmatic, and playful approach frames a dilemma that

doubtless many people do feel – that an awareness of environmental problems forces us to choose between ‘fantasy’ radical action or resigned inaction. The solution, the RA assures us, is much more straightforward: we can avoid and mitigate systemically produced environmental problems simply by consuming in a more ‘ethical’ fashion.

Such ‘consumer activism’, as numerous commentators have attested, is now deeply embedded in how many see possibilities for social change (Friedman 1995; Kozinets & Handelman 2004; Hilton 2008). One only has to walk into a branch of Starbucks, or, indeed, read the promotional literature of a fossil fuel company (such as the disingenuously rebranded ‘Beyond Petroleum’) to appreciate the apparent weight of belief behind the idea that we can consume our way out of a resource crisis. The idea has, nonetheless, repeatedly drawn fire for the apparently circular logic of proffering consumer solutions to environmental problems, themselves demonstrably exacerbated by high rates of consumption (Frey 1997, 2001; Spash 2010; Gatzweiler 2014).

RA’s advertisement appears to advocate a far-reaching intervention into systemic problems and crises, in reality, however, it merely offers a slightly more palatable version of the status quo, or as Slavoj Žižek (2009: 34) put it, ‘a “socially responsible” eco-capitalism’. Moreover, RA constructs and rejects a straw-man model for direct action – drawing on a crude caricature of what activism is in a way that elides what Nelson Pichardo, *et al.* (1998: 203) call the wide ‘range or menu of acceptable reasons for engaging in an action’ into the ‘things you shouldn’t do anyway’ (RA 2012). As a result, the complexities of what it means to be an activist are glossed over, and any sense of the difficult strategic and moral predicaments

which structure activist politics are lost. That said, activism should not be regarded as prohibitively difficult; indeed, resistance is clearly a fundamental mode of politics enacted by all peoples, instinctively and since time immemorial. Rather than representing an obscure or exclusive position, it is the dynamics which precipitate from acts of resistance where one can locate complexity. It is these dynamics which are in view in this chapter.

With regards to a phenomenon like climate change the problem in view has now unquestionably changed, at least since its first theorisation and articulation; no longer is it a question of simply how best to describe the mechanisms which underlie and sustain climate change, or even to innovate technical or economic remedies, but how to actually effect change at the social level. As Bill McKibben (2014) puts it, 'reason, having won the argument, has so far lost the fight'. It is in light of this predicament that our conceptions of what it means to be an activist and what motivates activism begin to reveal their significance. 'Follow the Frog' is, admittedly, *just* an advertisement; however, despite their short format, advertisements clearly possess an immense imaginary (and thus material) power – not to mention a wide public platform. What follows is a brief survey of other media – specifically, novels and films – which have also thematised contemporary environmental activism. The survey is intended as a means to highlight the various ways that the topic has been registered in contemporary culture. Following this summary, the chapter turns to a consideration of the political contexts for contemporary activism and social movements as discussed in the social sciences – this is intended as a means to extend the critical programme already begun, to further open up perspectives on a highly contested (and often misunderstood) area of contemporary culture and politics.

Environmental activism in contemporary fiction and film

Despite a relatively slow start, representations of environmental activism have, by the second decade of the 21st century, begun to feature more prominently in the literature and film of the Global North. Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), is widely considered to be the earliest novelistic depiction of environmental activism, at least in its contemporary form. The novel depicts a small but committed group of activists prepared to destroy – or otherwise render unusable – equipment associated with mining, logging and the construction of dams. Though the book was written, as Derek Wall (1999: 3) suggests as 'a vehicle for a thinly disguised, no-holds-barred, sabotage handbook', what drives the plot (and has ensured its long-lasting appeal) certainly goes beyond its practical content. Whatever the apparent logic that informs the protagonists' respective oppositional stances, their accompanying actions are invariably fraught with moral and strategic ambiguity (e.g. unintended consequences, mortal danger, social ostracism, etc.). Indeed, the relationship between activist and literary impulses is, it may seem obvious, not always a straightforward one. Though Abbey was himself a *soi-disant* activist, he repeatedly voiced his concern about the effectiveness of his writing to mobilise its readers around environmental issues, famously warning, 'What may be written as a literature of protest may be consumed as a literature of escape' (qtd. in Clark 2011: 30).

Since the turn of the millennium, and largely in response to the groups and actions inspired by Abbey's radical vision of 'eco-sabotage' (Cahalan 2001; Philippon 2005: 254), novelistic treatments of the environmental activist have carried forward

and enlarged upon Abbey's exploration of the particular tensions and pressures encountered by environmentalists of the Global North. T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) – an extensive reading of which follows the first section of this chapter – provides a telegraphed reimagining of Abbey's 1975 work in light of the movements inspired by Abbey and the new environmental contexts which emerged in the interim. In a similar vein, John Nichols' *The Voice of the Butterfly* (2001) presents a story of an ageing activist who has his roots in the early environmental movement and is now fighting a much more localised (not to mention ill-conceived and poorly executed) battle to protect an endangered butterfly species. Much more successful and ambitious in scope than Nichol's work is Ruth Ozeki's *All Over Creation* (2003), which depicts an anarcho-environmentalist group seeking to form a coalition with an elderly farming couple. Perhaps the most well-known novel of the early 2000s, however, is Michael Crichton's *State of Fear* (2004) which, while shaped by the sensationalist conventions of its 'thriller' genre, courted controversy by depicting a group of deluded and murderous activists who 'engineer' severe weather events in order to generate popular belief in climate change.

In film, while representations of large-scale environmental crises have been extensive, depictions of grassroots activism have been comparatively less widespread. Of the examples that do exist the struggles depicted have often been localised. *A Civil Action* (1998) and *Erin Brockovich* (2000) both concern non-fiction dramatisations of exceptional, localised environmental disputes pursued through the courts, rather than the broader concerns, contexts, and methodologies of a grassroots environmental movement. Though *Promised Land* (2012) does avoid localism insofar as it mediatised the (now) global debate around hydraulic

fracturing, again it does so at the local level, and, in a telling twist, its only recognisable grassroots activist turns out to be a corporate 'plant', leaving no stable model on which to map the activist identity. Contemporary, grassroots environmental activism did get a rare treatment with *The East* (2013), which, like Crichton's *State of Fear*, opted to focus on the radical eco-sabotage fringe, depicting a cult-like group intent on targeting a series of corporate criminals through various direct actions, some of which involve harming humans. Similarly, *Night Moves* (2013), which depicts an ill-fated act of 'ecotage' resulting in an unintended fatality. While all these films arguably reflect actually-existing tensions in environmental discourses, the incidents chosen for portrayal tend to be exceptional in nature, and fall short of reflecting the broader experiences of environmentalists. Such portrayals fit more readily into what Rob Nixon (2011: 2) described as events or actions that are 'immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility', as opposed to what he calls the 'long dyings' of environmental 'slow violence' which can 'hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively'.

Like mainstream cinema, science fiction (or 'SF') has long been preoccupied with environmental issues; however, depictions of activism resembling contemporary movements have been less common here, too. For example, while the final two books in Margaret Atwood's dystopian trilogy, *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013) depict a group of activists called 'God's Gardeners', it is difficult to connect them to contemporary movements, not least because of the futuristic and post-apocalyptic conditions which shape their particular political and discursive strategies. One notable exception to SF's mimetic distance from the conditions of contemporary social movements, however, is Kim Stanley

Robinson's *Science in the Capital* (2004-7) trilogy that tells the story of a group of scientists, politicians and activists who endeavor to mitigate and avert the emerging effects of climate change. The trilogy was, according to its author, conceived as a means of pre-figuring solutions to the problems posed by climate change. As Robinson (2007a) stated in an interview, 'you need a positive vision of what could happen and you need it written out as a narrative or a scenario so that you can kind of envision it and begin to believe in its possibility'. Though set in the near future, *Science in the Capital* is structured by contemporary conditions and the need – as outlined by one of its characters – to “‘imagine ourselves out’” of climate change (Robinson 2007: 473).

It is perhaps worth mentioning again at this point Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth*, a novel which comprises features of both historical realism (via the exploits of its activist protagonists between 1989 and 1997) and speculative fiction (via the novel's second time period: a 'post-apocalyptic', climate change stricken scenario in the years 2025-26). Interestingly, the novel's second time period takes place after disaster has struck (or rather, *emerged*; Boyle's (2000a) presentation of climate change, as he described in an interview, is of a gradual decline: 'Mold will be growing on everything. We will be bereft of almost all animals. And we'll be on the Internet'). Unsurprisingly, the second time period includes no ESM activism, and *A Friend of the Earth*'s hybrid schema goes a long way, perhaps, to explain the relative absence of environmental activism in SF: in short, its imagined worlds are invariably (and often cataclysmically) different to our own, frequently in ways which render preventative environmental activism definitively pointless. This is not to rule out the politically radical potential of SF or the scenarios it images, but precisely to point out the terrible reality that in a post-apocalyptic scenario the

moment for environmental action has passed, permanently. While the rupture between real and imagined worlds is arguably what gives SF its radical power, it also represents a rupture between real and imagined conditions within which ESMs emerge and operate.

In the second decade of the 21st century some more consciously 'literary' engagements with environmental activism have come to prominence. These novels have tended to depict the embeddedness of activism within the daily life of its characters across society as a whole. As I have already noted, *Solar* (2009), which, though in part motivated by McEwan's own concern for the environment, has been, unfortunately, recognised primarily for its foregrounding of the personal foibles of its protagonist (a climate change expert) over the urgency of the environmental threats themselves. Similarly, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) – which I examine at length in the final section of this chapter – depicts the life-long and often frustrated efforts of a white, middle class family man to organise campaigns around overpopulation, song bird extinction, and coal mining. Franzen shows repeatedly the degree to which personal, localized narratives often obstruct, supersede, or eclipse more globally-situated ones such as climate change and species extinction. Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012) tells the story of a poor farming family in Tennessee. The novel's principal character, Dellarobia (young, troubled wife and mother of two), happens upon over 100 million Monarch butterflies which have unaccountably and uncharacteristically 'chosen' – en masse – to overwinter in a forested section of the family's land. Dellarobia struggles as the episode plunges her into the centre of the contemporary climate change debate. Scientists, activists, journalists,

neighbouring farmers and local community members descend on the farm to contest the significance of the phenomenon.

If there is a theme that unites these depictions it is the image of the activist as a centre of contradiction, as a focal point of the tensions that exist between 'the individual' and the conditions we find ourselves in; that is, the extent to which the sheer weight of history, the momentum of development paradigms and modern conceptions of self set the parameters for political engagement. The following section will comprise a review of sociological writing on activism, which, taken as a whole, tracks across the two ends of this contradictory structure; i.e., individual motivations and identifications to the 'collective' and ideological discourses which shape how activists are understood and understand themselves. Is contemporary activism, I ask, truly capable of shifting the notion of environment from 'abstraction to a tangible concern' (Dixon, 1999: 87), or – as a product of neoliberal capitalism – a force which inadvertently forecloses the collective politics many see as essential in tackling large-scale environmental crises? As the following section is meant to demonstrate, the valences of activist politics are many and complex, the close readings which follow it are intended to act as a way to concretise these observations and the tensions which characterise contemporary ESMs.

Environmental activism and the social sciences

Microsociology

Whilst tensions between individuals and the structures in which they operate provide a unifying theme in literary representations of activism, the strategies and politics depicted in each case vary considerably. *Science in the Capital's* presentation of environmentalist mainstreaming, for example, sits in stark contrast to the communitarianism depicted in *All Over Creation*, or the sensational and irreverent acts of 'ecotage' described by Abbey or Boyle. For those trying to map and understand what activism is and what motivates it, this diverse repertoire can provide real challenges. In the social sciences – arguably the discipline most engaged with such research – the plurality of identities and motivations which comprise ESMs have become a major feature of such research. In an assessment of the political potency of personal actions, Nelson Pichardo, *et al.* (1998: 203) observes, 'culture can be seen as providing a range or menu of acceptable reasons for engaging in an action'. Examples of common motivations proposed by sociologists include phrases as jargon-heavy as 'ontological security' (Shepherd 2002), the 'ecological self' (Ingalsbee 1996; Plumwood 1997: 145), 'ecological habitus' (Haluza-DeLay 2008), and 'symmetric identities' (Diani & Pilati 2011) – to mention just a few. Even more bewildering again are considerations of what processes and experiences lead individuals to self-identify as activists. Common criteria include prior contact with other movement participants (McAdam 1986; Snow, *et al.* 1980), membership in organisations (Orum 1972; McAdam 1986), history of prior activism (Gamson, *et al.* 1982; McAdam 1986, 1988), biographical availability (McAdam 1986; Pichardo & Herring 1994) and 'everyday' actions

outside ESMs (Pichardo, *et al.* 1998). Doug McAdam and Mario Diana (2003: 1) underline this complexity, suggesting that ‘social movements are [...] complex and highly heterogeneous network structures’.

While the heterogeneity within such movements is undeniable, it does seem fair to suggest, as Nicole Shepherd (2002) has done, that environmental activism consists in more than just passing concern towards (and occasional gestures designed to address) environmental issues. Rather, in its strongest formation, environmental activism is understood as a ‘vocation’ and marked by an ‘extraordinary commitment’ (Shepherd 2002: 151). Shepherd (2002: 142), who offers this definition, borrows from Max Weber’s description of religious ascetics, who he felt were remarkable not only for their extreme lifestyles but also because ‘on one hand [they] reject the world, and on the other [seek] to transform the world’s wicked ways’.

Numerous other definitions of activism exist which similarly reflect Shepherd’s view of activism as an outsider position: for example, ‘contentious politics’ (McAdam, *et al.* 2001; Morrill, *et al.* 2003), activity outside ‘politics as usual’ (Snow, *et al.* 2004), ‘change won not through conventional decision-making process’ (Arthur 2011) or the challenge to ‘the normative orientation at the core of modernization [promoting] alternative values and practices’ (Pleyer 2015: 105). While the idea of ‘extraordinary commitment’ does not entirely capture the manifold motivations underpinning environmental activism, it does begin to sketch a notion of activists as individuals or minority groups in adversarial stances with much larger forces and organisations. Individual motivations fall short, of course, of fully explaining social movement and activist cultures. Indeed, putting too much

emphasis on individual choice not only exceptionalises activists but may mean we overlook the effect on activists of more salient structural forces. As Wall (1999: 114) suggests, in order to provide a fuller picture, the 'microsociology of personal identity formation [...] must be linked to larger social and political change'. Such an activity, of course, brings with it its own complexities and challenges, as I will go on to explore in the following section.

Political opportunity

Examined from the perspective of the group and society as a whole, environmental activists have often been defined by the impact they have on the world around them. Taken from this perspective, however, research suggests that activists have historically struggled to achieve their stated objectives. A study by Marco Giugni (2007: 70) using a time-series analysis of the policy outcomes of ecology movements in the United States between 1977 and 1995, concluded 'that [grass-roots or non-mainstream] movements have little leverage on policy'. Giugni (2007: 70) found 'at best a marginal to moderate effect and only when protest activities are supported by crucial external resources that are available precisely when the movements' mobilization occurs'. These are results, moreover, which have been reproduced numerous times (e.g. Amenta 2005, 2006; Amenta *et al.* 1992, 1994, 2005; Cress & Snow 2000; Kane 2003; Schumaker 1978; Soule & Olzak 2004). These findings may, indeed, be surprising to some. They are in stark contrast, for example, to the popular notion that protests from the fringe – led and organised by committed individuals – have played (and will continue to play) a major role in the history of political change. The well-known caveat, often

attributed to the cultural anthropologist, Margaret Mead – to ‘never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has’ – is emblematic of this view (qtd. in Sommers & Dineen 158).

Sociologists rarely speak with one voice, and much doubt remains as to the validity of the data gathered by researchers like Giugni (including from Giugni himself (2004)). For some sociologists, though, fears over the speciousness of such data occasionally manifest in active opposition towards what they see as a sociology which will only ‘intensify injustice’ (Jowers 1994: 200) through its championing of crude metrics as indicators of dynamic phenomena (like activism). Wall (1999: 11), also sees ‘the pursuit of a realist social science’ as at once ‘practically unachievable, ethically undesirable and politically oppressive’. Attempts to define activism in terms of political motivation seem, moreover, to be at odds with the practice it seeks to understand. Phil McLeish, a prominent figure in the road protests of the late 1980s and early 1990s is reported to have said that academics tend to ask ‘why social movements exist, [whereas] activists want to know how to win’ (qtd. in Wall 8). Whereas the formation of an ‘activist identity’, as advocated by a number of sociologists (Ingalsbee 1996; Wall 1999), may seem compelling, it can also be limiting, setting parameters on what may ultimately be a definitively amorphous and heterogeneous group. As McLeish’s comments suggest, activists are really concerned, straightforwardly, with winning particular campaigns or struggles, rather than the mapping of motivations observable within their networks.

There is wariness among some sociologists, in other words, that the way we represent social movements can have profound and material effects on social movements themselves. Though social movement theorists are far from certain, there is a fear, for example, that a commitment to measuring the success of environmental groups has contributed to a trend towards burdensome institutionalisation (Rootes 2003: 3; Doherty *et al.* 2002: 53) and forms of protest which are easy to ignore or deflect. At the other end of the spectrum, those dissatisfied with such conventional and moderate conceptions of activist politics have been able to command the attention of a mass media with an 'insatiable appetite for novelty, spectacle, and conflict' (Rootes 2003: 7). The result, suggest some theorists, has been the division (both perceived and actual) of a movement into two equally ineffective extremes: the tame and the terrifying.

Terror

Acts of terror, have, according to numerous reports, come to dominate public perception of environmental activism, at least in the US and UK. Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe (2005) went so far as to call direct action groups like Earth First! and the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) 'the number 1 domestic terror concern, [more so than] white supremacists, militias, or anti-abortion groups'. Inhofe's view, however, has been seen by some as part of a broader overreaction. Though, as Will Potter (2011: 61) suggests, 'at some point [since the 1980s] the eco-terror language went viral', it is 'impossible to decipher who is creating the threat and who is responding to it'. Potter nonetheless highlights a number of key players in the process who have been able to enlarge – often way beyond

proportion – the reality of the terror threat posed by environmental groups. For example, the ‘private intelligence firm’ Stratfor (Potter 2011: 156) or Ron Arnold of the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise who claims to have invented the term ‘eco-terrorism’ (55) with the aim of ‘destroy[ing] environmentalists by taking away their money and their members’ (61). Similarly, the Foundation for Biomedical Research (FBR), who, according to Potter (48), are ‘the only group in the world that tracks the crimes of eco-terrorists’. The FBR’s ‘Top 20 List of Illegal Actions by Animal and Eco-Terrorists 1996-2006’, however, refers to ‘not one single injury or death’ (48).

By comparison, numerous groups on the far-right in the US *have* repeatedly perpetrated actions resulting in injury and death. The National Abortion Agency, for example have logged hundreds of attacks by anti-abortion extremists since ‘9/11’, including ‘twenty four assaults, eight arsons, seven attempted bombings/arsons, 240 acts of vandalism, forty-eight bomb threats, twenty-four anthrax threats, [...] twenty-four death threats [and between 1977 and 2009...] eight murders’. None of these, however, have been recorded by the FBI as ‘acts of domestic terrorism’ (Potter 46). This discrepancy often takes on a farcical stature. For example, a Southern Poverty Law Centre report claimed that between 1984 and 2002 animal and environmental activists had carried out ‘thousands of violent crimes’. However, its report only detailed 95 of these, a large proportion of which were listed as ‘pie-ings’. ‘A pie-ing’, Potter (49) informs us, ‘is exactly what the name implies’.

Despite what appears to be an overreaction, it is easy to see that the idea of the terrorist can easily exacerbate public safety fears. As Lawrence Buell (2009: 163) suggests, 'the revolutionary paradigms of environmental value on which ecoradicalism tends to be based convert more quickly from harmlessly eccentric into grotesquely terrifying when cast in militant language'. As an example Buell (2009: 163) quotes ELF spokesman, Craig Rosenbraugh, (profiled by *The New York Times Magazine* in an article entitled 'The Face of Eco-Terrorism') as saying: 'All power to the people. Long live the earth liberation front. Long live the animal liberation front. Long live all the sparks attempting to ignite the revolution. Sooner or later the sparks will turn into flame'. The language of an environmental critique can, in short, readily reflect a politics which threatens (directly or indirectly) the dissolution of modern life as we know it. As such, argues Potter (47), in seeking to understand why eco-terrorism has taken on the profile and proportions it has in recent decades we should pay more attention to what he calls the 'politics of the crime'; that is, the challenge to powerful vested interests of trade and industry posed by environmental actions. More than actual numbers or specific tactics, it appears to be the threat felt by, for example, the fossil fuel industry, which has driven the portrayal of environmental activists as 'dangerous', irrespective of whether they have the capacity to be so or not. The behaviour of organisations like Strator and the FBR agrees at least with 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' (qtd. in Cahalan 2001: 161).

Though 'the spectre of eco-terror' has, according to Buell and Potter, been stage-managed by those wishing to vindicate invested capital (Potter 243), the broader political milieu in which such fears have thrived can perhaps be best understood through the lens of 'individualism'. From a social movement perspective a strong culture of individualism can produce an all-too-brittle sense of agency, either by intensifying feelings of isolation, or the sense that only extreme (and often violent) actions can possibly have any lasting impact. At the same time, a common corollary to individualism is the notion of a 'total-system', an edifice so robust and so resolutely driven by invested capital that actions of individuals are invariably absorbed within its movement. This "'total-system" view of contemporary society', suggests Jameson (1981: 80), 'reduces the options of resistance to anarchist gestures, to the sole remaining ultimate protests of the wildcat strike, terrorism, and death'. From the perspective of large-scale industrial polluters, the attempts to delegitimise activist behaviours have been hugely dependent on a compelling (and irrational) combination of eco-terror rhetoric and the growing currency of individualism. For while the majority of the prosecutions using 'anti-terror laws' during the past two decades have been animal rights and environmental activists, not one of these pertained to the harm of a human being (Potter 48-9). Despite this, encroachments into personal liberty implied and actualised by anti-terror laws have been predicated on the protections they afford to the general public (Manningham-Butler 2012). Such a contradiction persists, argues Potter, precisely due to the visceral power that personal safety fears have compared to threats articulated in systemic terms. In short, the ecological irresponsibility of invested capital has, it seems, been further concealed by measures to criminalise the actions of its most vocal and committed opponents.

Terrorism may be an extreme example, but it nonetheless highlights tensions which affect all activists – tensions between the individual and the collective, between the compulsion to act autonomously and the tidal forces of invested capital. Contemporary discourse on terror consistently reveals homologies between individual and collective developments, ones which go some way to explaining the narratological and aesthetic prospects it affords modern audiences seeking to understand the interaction between these two poles. Indeed, what links the preceding sections on personal motivation, political opportunity, and acts of ‘terror’ are questions of *structure and agency* – an antinomy which, due to its focus on the capacity of the individuals to affect the world around them, has long been central to thinking about activism (Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994; Emirbayer & Mische 1998; McAdam & Diani 2003), and, latterly, for environmental activism as well. As David Manuel-Navarrete and Christine Buzinde (2010: 147) put it, ‘global environmental change is forcing us to redefine our agency in terms of global stewardship’. ‘Modernist conceptions of agency’, Manuel-Navarrete and Christine Buzinde continue, ‘while possibly buying some time, will eventually dig us deeper into the environmental crisis’. Depending on where one stands, environmental crisis offers not only imperatives to change how we act, but also a reminder that, as William Sewell suggests, the ‘specific forms that agency will take consequently vary enormously and are culturally and historically determined’ (qtd. in Manuel-Navarrete & Buzinde 2010: 141). The following section will consider the environmental, cultural and historical conditions which *enable and constrain* ‘the specific forms’ that political action takes in the modern era, ones which – as is now generally agreed – are characterised by ‘neoliberal capitalism’s violent imposition of market relations’ and its ‘severe social and ecological consequences across the world’ (McMichael 2008: 219).

The neoliberal turn

Neoliberalism as a means to explain changes in how contemporary activism is viewed and enacted is certainly not unique to McMichael's writings. Indeed, discussion of neoliberalism in a wide range of academic contexts is dominated by a consideration of it as a world-historical phenomenon which shapes not only global economic systems but the way we think and act. Despite the fairly straightforward definition of neoliberalism provided by Harvey (2005: 64) as an economic programme promoting 'strong individual private property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade', discussion in the academy has focused on what Julie Guthman calls neoliberalism's 'indeterminacy', and its status as a hegemonic force that naturally moves to limit options for insurgency (2008: 1181). Moreover, neoliberalism is also increasingly seen as an economic and cultural phenomenon which is not predisposed to acknowledge its own limitations. As McMichael's comments above suggest, 'neoliberal capitalism' is increasingly understood as the driving force behind a vast array of contemporary environmental and social crises. In short, the discourse on neoliberalism offers a lens through which to understand the forces which produce social and environmental contradictions at the same time that it pushes down on, limits and undermines opportunities for political agency.

Returning to the sociological literature, discussion of the effect of neoliberalism on activism takes two major and connected forms. Firstly, the *naturalisation* of markets as means of realising public and private goods. 'The hegemony of neoliberalism', James McCarthy and Scott Prudham (2004: 276) tell us, 'is made

most evident by the ways in which profoundly political and ideological projects have successfully masqueraded as a set of objective, natural, and technocratic truisms'. For McCarthy and Prudham (276) the main challenge to such a predicament comes from activism, which is able to give the lie to such disguises, 'exposing the political negotiations and myriad contradictions, tensions, and failures of neoliberalizations'. While compelling, however, this assertion only confronts us once more with the problem – which ESMs repeatedly encounter – of effectively identifying destructive practices which have been strenuously and systematically normalised. As a number of other theorists point out, though early iterations of neoliberalism were seen by those who opposed them to be characterised by a conspicuous and callous withdrawal of state support – as typified by the austerity policies of Reagan and Thatcher governments – the 1990s, suggests Adalberto Aguirre, *et al.* (2006: 2), marked the advent of a “roll-out” neoliberalism’ comprising the construction of new institutions ‘designed to embed the neoliberal project more deeply in civil society’. The result of this has not only been the development of a neoliberalism difficult to identify and contest, but also the ruling out of other options for conceiving agency and activism. As demonstrated in the RA advertisement which opened this chapter, options which don’t fit a conception of consumer and market driven behaviours can easily end up appearing either foolish, disconnected from reality, or dangerously extreme. ‘For activist projects’, claims Guthman (2008: 1180), ‘neoliberalization limits the conceivable because it limits the arguable, the fundable, the organizable, the scale of effective action, and compels activists to focus on putting out fires’.

The second key theme in academic approaches to neoliberalism is its capacity to enclose activist impulses within its own project. As Guthman (2008: 1172) puts it,

certain forms of activism 'seem to produce and reproduce neoliberal forms and spaces of governance, at the same time they oppose neoliberalism writ large'. A number of other academics have echoed these fears, suggesting that groups now 'revolve around axes the very essences of which have been neoliberalized' (Peck & Tickell 2002: 400) or that 'many environmentalists have adopted elements of neoliberal ideology and discourse' such as "Free-market" environmentalism' via a 'vast tide of corporate green-wash' (McCarthy & Prudham 2004: 279). For Liz Bondi and Nina Laurie (2005: 399), such a trend has been made possible due 'to the "fit" between the terms of [neoliberal] economic theory and liberal democracy': because neoliberalism defines subjects as 'self-governing individuals who exercise economic and political choices' such an identification allows neoliberalism to '(mis)recognise such features of subjectivity as consistent with its own framework'. If neoliberalism 'recognises' political resistance as the performance of neoliberal subjectivity, numerous theorists fear, there is no way of resisting neoliberalism itself. 'In other words', claims Bondi and Laurie (2005: 399), 'there is no uncontaminated form of, or space for, political resistance' only that which serves to reproduce incumbent power structures.

Despite, as one theorist suggests, it being 'difficult to imagine a future in which there is neither reason nor will to protest' (Rootes 2003: 256) the sheer 'will to protest' does not immunise ESMs against deflection and strategic error. As this extended overview was meant to demonstrate, sites of resistance, while channelling deep and apparently timeless impulses of resistance, are simultaneously places where political justifications, representations, and outcomes are extremely vulnerable to manipulation or error. Whether representing the stories of individual activists, the characteristics and success of movements as a

whole, or the machinations and counter-actions of those systematically opposed to such groups, environmental activism does not lend itself to simple portrayal (even while, as 'Follow the Frog' (RA 2012) suggests, there are those who would have us believe that all we have to do is buy the right products). Such complexity is precisely why such features have dominated not only the attention of social scientists and political theorists, but also begun to be registered in contemporary fiction and film.

In the readings of two novels, T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) and Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), I offer a more situated account of the tensions within contemporary environmentalism that previously I have only been able to describe in abstract. As with the previous chapter my theoretical framework will be Jameson's 'political unconscious'. It is used here once more as a means of traversing the different levels at which activism can be understood: from the personal or micro-sociological level, the social relations by which individuals understand their role within groups, to the widest horizon of all – the environmental (and dialectically 'produced') history of the planet. These three horizons will gesture towards, respectively, the micro-sociology of the 'activist identity', the social movement theory appraisal of activism and the discourses of terror, and, finally, neoliberal studies as a lens to explain these contradictions (or at least their exacerbation) within the current mode of production. Only by moving through these levels can activism – in its fictive representations or otherwise – be understood as an activity which depends at once on individuals and their dialectical relationship with groups and the mode of production within (and against) which they operate.

2.1: Readings

If defining activism in the context of sociological study is complicated by the sheer variety of qualifying criteria – not to mention the vast ‘range or menu of acceptable reasons for engaging in an action’ (Pichardo, *et al.* 1998: 203) – this is no less true in the literary depictions. In recent decades sociologists have begun to demonstrate an increasing readiness to engage in the discourses and disciplines of cultural studies as a means of expanding their own research capacities (Sims 2009: 322; also Bearman & Stove 2000; White 2000; Mohr 2000). In an article on network theory and social movements, John Mohr (2000: 62) suggests that ‘the network scholars who are making the move toward culture are by and large doing so out of a frustration with the limitations of an oversimplified model of social structure’. Much like the members of the Frankfurt School fifty years before them, cultural contexts are being viewed more readily by sociologists as complex, privileged sites of social representation and reproduction which can help to elucidate phenomena left unexplained by purely quantitative analyses. My decision to turn to literature to address these issues is based on a similar understanding of literary works as offering effective means to explore complex social phenomena, to, in short, ‘unmask [...] cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts’ (Jameson 1981: 20).

The authors I focus on in this chapter have both noted the usefulness of their work in exploring complex political issues. Though Boyle (2000b) is at pains to say ‘I am an environmentalist and I believe in it’, he is also outwardly drawn to environmentalism because of its internal contradictions. For ‘on the other hand’, he

tells us, 'environmentalism is very elitist. I write these books to sort out my own feelings and also as a corrective to my own behavior'. His writing, he claims, does not 'have a message' or a way of 'supplying answers' but instead is a means 'to see how [he] feel[s]' about issues which have live implications. In interviews, Jonathan Franzen (2010a) similarly claims to 'avoid overt advocacy with [his] writing', and points to the exploratory function of literature. Though (as we have seen) some criticisms have been levelled at novelists for failing to provide positive engagements with issues like climate change (Macfarlane 2005; Garrard 2013), such views offer a very particular, and, I would add, limited remit for how political issues can be engaged through literature. Though Boyle is quick to say that his work doesn't have a 'message' and Franzen is only incidentally concerned that 'people become aware of an issue' (as a 'byproduct'), there is still an important 'message' delivery at work in their writing; that is, one which inheres in literature's capacity to channel the discursive forces at play in political contexts. Representations of environmental activism are – at least from Boyle's and Franzen's perspective – politically productive precisely because they resist discursive closure. Rather than simply championing environmentalism, they demonstrate hidden tensions within social movements and the sense that (for better or for worse) change is not only possible, but inevitable. In highlighting the unsustainability of our current mode of production, ESMs are – despite being plagued by misrepresentation, internal contradiction, and error – vital to the future of the planet. Indeed, a critical study of the cultural representation of social movements promises valuable insight, as Subhabrata Banerjee's also argues (2008: 1560), into 'how social problems are articulated, along with the contradictions, forms of resistance', as well as the tensions between social movements and mainstream political and economic agendas.

2.1.1: T.C. Boyle - *A Friend of the Earth* (2000)

A Friend of the Earth (*FOE*) is a novel set in two time periods. The first, set principally in the late 80s and early 90s, tells the story of Tyrone Tierwater, a widowed father of one and his involvement in a radical environmental group called Earth Forever! (EF!) (a telegraphed reference to the actual group, Earth First!¹⁰). As well as recounting several direct actions – some of them nonviolent, some of them involving property damage, but all intended to cause significant disruption – the novel also describes how Tierwater becomes involved in EF! after meeting his long term partner, Andrea (an avid environmentalist and community organiser); the radicalisation of his daughter, Sierra (who eventually dies after falling out of the tree she was ‘occupying’ to prevent logging); several periods Tierwater spends in prison; and one month in the wilderness trying ‘to live off the land’ (172). The second period, set between the years 2025 and 2026, focuses on the experience of living in a post-climate change dystopia which Boyle presents as a ‘permanent fucking el Niño’ (221); that is, a slow, creeping decay and decline rather than an explosive apocalypse. In *FOE*’s future Tierwater works as an animal keeper for a rich, ageing rockstar, Maclovio, who has taken it upon himself ‘to do what Nature and the zoos were incapable of’ (219) and keep many of the extant large mammals alive in an increasingly unstable and inhospitable climate. This second time period focalises an utterly embittered, misanthropic and apathetic Tierwater who can do nothing but reflect morbidly on the failings of his generation to avert climate change.

¹⁰ An American grassroots environmental organisation founded in 1979 with a specific emphasis on ‘direct action’.

The Political Unconscious I: The Political Horizon

I will begin with a short recapitulation of Jameson's (1981: 75) methodological understanding of the first of 'three concentric frameworks' within which he conducts his search for the 'political unconscious' behind all cultural production. This is in order to recontextualise the value of such activity for the consideration of the representation of environmental activism, specifically. The first horizon, Jameson (1981: 75) explains, reflects 'the narrow sense of punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time' and 'the passionate immediacy of struggles between historical individuals'. This, according to Jameson (1981: 76; 79) is a reasonably straightforward process – the 'ordinary *explication de texte*' – in which the text and its narrative are understood as 'a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm'. The function of such a process is to grasp the political tensions contemporaneous with a text's publication before moving on to more historically abstract concepts. Moreover, such a process, argues Jameson (1981: 79), is particularly important for grasping the way in which all cultural artefacts approach issues 'insurmountable in their own terms' and as 'mythic resolutions of issues that they are unable to articulate conceptually'.

As discussed in the previous chapter, an analysis addressing problems which are simply too big to 'articulate conceptually' has an obvious pertinence in the consideration of a decades-old, international social movement, not least the vast geo-physical forces behind (and social consequences of) an atmospheric phenomenon like climate change. Jameson's own starting point for such

considerations was anthropological work by Claude Lévi-Strauss which posits that the cultural artefacts of tribal societies performed such 'mythic resolutions' as a way to work through the problems of their day. As Jameson (1981: 79-80) goes on to claim, this is no less true in 'developed' societies where, in the context of the twentieth century, political subjects have been, among many things, 'faced with the great constitutional options' and 'the social homogenization and psychic constriction of the rise of the industrial city and its "masses," the sudden appearance of the great transnational forces of communism and fascism'. This pressure, Jameson (80) suggests, is not only important to understand but will inevitably be registered via our cultural expressions:

It does not, indeed, seem particularly farfetched to suggest that these texts of history, with their fantasmatic collective "actants," their narrative organization, and their immense charge of anxiety and libidinal investment, are lived by the contemporary subject as a genuine politico-historical *pensee sauvage* which necessarily informs all of our cultural artifacts, from the literary institutions of high modernism all the way to the products of mass culture.

The 'immense charge of anxiety and libidinal investment' is, of course, no less relevant to the contemporary political subject aware of (or subject to) the crises which flow from environmental crises. Being attentive to such representations is, moreover, essential not only for grasping the particular pressures on (and characteristics of) such subjectivities (i.e. activists) but also for recognising that each representation is invariably an attempt to resolve such tensions. The

'chroniclelike sequence' of events in Tierwater's life, moreover, need to be understood before moving out into what Jameson (1981: 75) describes as the 'now already less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes'. In this endeavour I will consider the micro-sociological research on activists' motivations and qualifying criteria already discussed. In this regard, Tierwater's description of how he came to identify as an activist maps very closely on to the descriptions provided by social movement research.

By way of summary, the main points reviewed in the introduction were as follows: 'prior contact with other movement participants' (McAdam 1986; Snow, *et al.* 1980); 'membership in organizations' (Orum 1972; McAdam 1986); 'history of prior activism' (Gamson, *et al.* 1982; McAdam 1986, 1988); 'biographical availability' (McAdam 1986; Pichardo & Herring 1994); and 'everyday' actions *outside* ESMs (Pichardo, *et al.* 1998). Tierwater's description of how he met Andrea encapsulates a number of these. Tierwater meets Andrea at an event he hears about as a result of being a member of the Sierra Club. Meeting Andrea is, of course, instrumental in securing this identity shift – echoing research that stresses the importance of 'prior contact with other movement participants' in personal development towards an activist identity. In contrast to the retrospective narration of *FOE*, Tierwater consciously shifts the account of their meeting into the present tense, remarking, '*I need to describe her as she was then [...] because you have to experience it for yourself. Be there*' (64). The description given is telling; though Tierwater initially focuses on Andrea's beauty – 'her lips and the intensity of her eyes' – it is not the most significant feature of his description. In addition to such features Tierwater notes that she is 'Earnest' and 'Committed', and in a way which

registers physically, too: 'her hands were big and mannish, hands that had accomplished things – *An activist's hands*'. Tierwater, in short, is attracted to her as *an activist*, and though there is an attempt to comically undercut this effusive tone – Tierwater being 'already sick with the romance of it: *'Save the world, sure, and get laid too'* (64) – we are nonetheless left with a compelling account of Tierwater's radicalisation; that is, a deeply personal reason for his involvement which sugars the pill of the rapid and reckless radicalisation which follows. The personal dimensions of Tierwater's entry, in other words, allow us to confront more easily the huge structural implications and lifestyle shifts which characterise other facets of the activist identity.

Though Tierwater has at this early point no specific 'history of prior activism', his first gestures of activism do set him on a path that (initially at least) grows steadily in intensity. As he articulates it later on, Tierwater eventually finds himself 'craving action. It was an addiction' (237). Tierwater is also self-employed. After inheriting his father's shop he finds he has (what sociologists term) 'biographical availability', or 'personal time flexibility' (Wall 110). We are told, too, that Tierwater had long been a member of the Sierra Club¹¹ but had remained inactive. As a result, Tierwater

felt guilty but he never accepted any of these high-minded invitations, and worse he never recycled a scrap of them. Then one day [...] He went. Why? Boredom, curiosity [...to] meet some environmentally minded women [...]

¹¹ An American grassroots environmental organisation founded in 1892 by John Muir.

and more – and he wouldn't want to make light of this – because he believed. He did. He genuinely did. He needed an awakening (63).

This description, indeed, touches on his desire to meet other activists ('environmentally minded women'), his availability ('i.e. 'boredom, curiosity'), his familiarity with 'everyday' actions *outside* ESMs (i.e. the 'recycling' which, admittedly in this case, he doesn't do), and of course his membership in an environmental organisation (the Sierra Club). Above all, though, Tierwater also 'believed'; he is, in McAdam's (1986: 71) terms, 'deeply committed to the ideology and goals of the movement' – understandably the most privileged factor among many sociologists for predicting the longevity of activist identification. Tierwater, in literary terms, might be best understood as an activist 'archetype', predisposed to environmental activism (corroborated in this instance by research from the social sciences). It is here, however, that we can note a hugely important difference in the representational constraints of literature and the social sciences. Whereas the social sciences are (to a degree) tightly bound to their statistical norms, literature isn't – Tierwater's identity formation and development may develop in whatever way the author wishes. This being the case, *FOE's* relative adherence to (or divergence from) norms and expectations take on a new, *political* significance. As we shall see later on, Tierwater's personal development as an activist, while beginning archetypally, soon develops an extremist tendency, and in a way which, I argue, suggests that ESMs' shortcomings are not *sui generis*, but discursively intertwined with the logic of our mode of production.

That said, for social movement theorists, deliberate personal motivations also fall far short of fully explaining an activist's identity formation: the activist identity is not merely determined by an 'extraordinary commitment' (Shepherd 2002: 151), but also numerous other tensions and forces outside an individual's control. Indeed, what *FOE* offers beyond this surface impression of identity formation is a sense of the counter-pull of other life factors; that is, the deeply contradictory impulses which, counter-intuitively, keep Tierwater locked into his pursuit of increasingly extreme environmental action. Indeed, as we have seen, rationales for activist identity formation are not always understood or articulated in positive terms. Despite Tierwater's desire for an 'awakening' and genuine 'concern', 'guilt' is a key factor in Tierwater's development as an activist. Though initially a minor factor – i.e. the kind of guilt on a par with neglecting to recycle (63) – it is interesting to note the increasingly important role guilt plays over the course of the novel. Sylvia Mayer (2007) reads this development as a form of 'the abject', and her description is a useful one in explaining the precarious momentum of Tierwater's identification. In ways reminiscent of Michael Beard's bodily registration of environmental contradiction in *Solar*, Tierwater's doubts and fears manifest internally: 'My guts are rumbling ... one more fart's worth of global warming. I'm a mess and I know it. Jewish guilt, Catholic guilt, enviro-ecocapitalistico guilt: I can't even expel gas in peace' (106). At other times Tierwater's guilt and sense of failure manifests as a general misanthropy. During one excursion Tierwater notes that

There was trash everywhere, scattered up and down the off-ramp like the leavings of a bombed out civilization, cans, bottles, fast-food wrappers, yellowing diapers and rusting shop carts, oil filters, Styrofoam cups, cigarette butts. The grass was dead, the oleanders were buried in dust [...].

Sure, there were individuals out there, human beings worthy of compassion, sacrifice, love, but that didn't absolve them of collective guilt. There were too many people in the world, six billion already and more coming, endless people, people like locusts, and nothing would survive their onslaught. (240)

Tierwater is evidently unable to construct a stable understanding of his responsibilities in relation to the whole (and vice versa), resulting in a sort of moral confusion. At times guilt evidently compels Tierwater to self-correct and admonish, yet at others it provides him with an external target for his indignation and outrage. Reflecting on how he became an activist, Tierwater comments 'for the better part of my life I was a criminal [...] I guess I was dimly aware – way out there on the periphery of my consciousness [...] let's just say I saw the light' (42-3). In doing so, Tierwater constructs an image of a 'criminal' who can be cured, if exposed to the right systems of logic. Yet it is precisely this notion of the self-governing individual which appears to get eroded over the course of the novel. 'At this juncture [...] he thought things mattered, believed in the power of individuals to influence events, illuminate issues, effect change, resuscitate the earth' (53-4). Tierwater is constantly represented as beset by perplexing forces, problematising the simple, naive conception of the rational actor. 'None of this', we are told 'did his digestion any good' (54).

Numerous other elements are observable which demonstrably destabilise Tierwater's sense of himself as an activist. These come out first during the action at Siskiyou. Firstly, in feelings of inertia and laziness. Hours into the action,

Tierwater steels himself against the discomfort of the experience – ‘his head will droop, his back will scream’ (28) – by reminding himself that it is ‘the smallest thing, the sacrifice of one night in bed with a book or narcotized in front of the tube’ but nonetheless the experience weighs heavy with discomfort and indignity. As he wakes part way through the action ‘his upper body, is suddenly floundering forward without support’ (28-9). Indeed, Tierwater is soon confronted with feelings of inadequacy. A fellow activist, Teo, we are told, was comparatively a ‘model of stoicism. Hunched over the upended bucket like a man perched on the throne in the privacy of his bathroom [...] he’s utterly at home, unperturbed, perfectly willing to accept the role of martyr [...] Tierwater isn’t in this league, and he’d be the first to admit it’ (32).

Another destabilising influence is Tierwater’s daughter. Tierwater’s vague, ‘Deep Ecology’ (30) approach to the environment is often in tension with his parental concerns – not least because she provides a permanent reminder of his hypocrisy vis-a-vis ‘overpopulation’. Despite being utterly committed to a life of ‘destruction’ (135) he is also ‘determined’ that his daughter ‘was going to have a normal life ... she could even have her identity back’ (137). In sketching this portrait of inner turmoil and often contradictory impulses, *FOE* registers very effectively the ‘immense charge of anxiety and libidinal investment’ which Jameson (1981: 80) talks about in his approach to this first horizon. Yet as Jameson (80) also remarks

With political allegory, then, a sometimes repressed ur-narrative or master fantasy about the interaction of collective subjects, we have moved to the very borders of our second horizon, in which what we formerly regarded as

individual texts are grasped as “utterances” in an essentially collective or class discourse.

It is to the functioning of *FOE*'s portrayal of environmental activism within ‘collective discourse’ to which I now turn.

The Political Unconscious II: The Social Horizon

As well as providing a personal account of radicalisation, *FOE*, of course, also reflects the broader social contexts within which environmental activism is conceived and enacted. This reflection is (it is impossible to deny) dominated by a sense of the pointlessness of environmental protest. As I have argued in the previous chapter, this does not necessarily mean it cannot offer constructive reflections on activist theory and practice. While *FOE* is narrated from the perspective of failure – looking ‘back [to] a time when we thought it mattered’ (1) – the question remains if there is anything to be recuperated from this representation that could be edifying with regard to contemporary activism?

To move away from the particulars of plot and into the ‘collective or class discourse’, Jameson (1981: 80) reminds us, marks a crucial juncture in his three-tiered ideological analysis of texts. As Jameson (80) notes, ‘conventional sociology of literature or culture, which modestly limits itself to the identification of class motifs or values in a given text, and feels that its work is done when it shows how a given artifact “reflects” its social background, is utterly unacceptable’. Instead,

what Jameson (81) has in view is a type of interpretation which involves 'the rewriting of the literary text' where an 'external reality' is 'not immediately present as such [...] nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact'. Such an acknowledgement, of course, raises key questions regarding the relationship between 'text' and 'reality'. For Jameson (81), texts must be understood to 'retain a relationship with the Real', for, in being composed, they bring 'into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction'. Though texts can only provide a symbolic resolution or 'ideological closure' to the problems they register, this, for Jameson (83), 'is taken as the symptomatic projection of something quite different, namely of social contradiction'. It is precisely the discrepancy between text and the "absent cause" (24) of such social contradiction wherein the ideological significance of any given representation can be grasped. Climate change and the activism it generates are narratives which continue to produce and reproduce meaning – meaning which crystallises in texts like *FOE* 'after the fact'. In other words, *FOE* not only registers a political 'reality', but allows us to reconstruct it in new ways, ones which, in Jameson's (1981: 20) words, restore 'to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality' of "oppressor and oppressed".

As discussed earlier in the chapter, a number of sociologists claim that 'the pursuit of a realist social science' is not always desirable in (and in some cases inimical to) the effort to understand social movements (Wall 1999: 11; Jowers 1994: 200). In this regard, literature is arguably well positioned to go beyond the quantitative investigations conducted by social scientists, particularly in terms of the discursive possibilities afforded by imaginative and speculative modes of writing. *FOE*, specifically, happens to reflect reasonably accurately the quantitative observations

of social scientists (e.g. the limited direct impact of protest on government policy); however, *FOE's* most salient features are the moments when it deviates, embellishes, or complicates the discourses of environmental activism, not least those pertaining to 'class discourse'. As Jameson (1981: 83) notes, 'individual phenomena are revealed as social facts and institutions, only at the moment in which the organizing categories of analysis become those of social class'. The action at Siskiyou, – specifically the scene in which the loggers first encounter the group cemented into the road – is exemplary in its portrayal of the ideological and class tension between the activists and the loggers. On first encountering the activists one logger betrays a 'look of pure, other worldly astonishment' before eventually asking "what are you [...] environmentalists or something?" (30-1). To the loggers the activists are aliens, having only a distant and caricatured image of who they are and why they do the things they do, let alone being conversant in 'Arne Naess or Deep Ecology or the mycorrhizal fungi that cling to the roots of old growth trees and make the forest possible' (30). Indeed, there is an elitist slant to this observation itself – reminding us of the cultural (and even financial) capital required to be an environmentalist like Tierwater and his group.

The action amounts to a violent confrontation for Tierwater with the mountain of indifference felt by 'ordinary folk' like the loggers. To make matters worse for Tierwater, he soon becomes well aware it is not their 'fault', telling himself to not 'blame these men – or not yet, anyway [...] he's just earning his paycheck [...] he's not the enemy. His bosses are' (30-1). Though Tierwater's realisation is a pertinent one, it belongs to a structural critique inimical to the type of direct action in which he is participating. However, instead of triggering an explicitly 'class discourse', *FOE's* remainder is almost entirely devoid of direct considerations of

class. As Mayer (2007: 232) points out, in *FOE* 'environmental justice and ecofeminist concerns are, in fact, a telling absence'. This absence, far from limiting the insight *FOE* gives into class discourse, can help to explain the novel's emphasis on failure at the level of the environmental movement, specifically the movement's historical difficulty in assimilating class disputes, or combining into its repertoire discourses of inequality (DeLoughrey 2005; Dolezal 2008; Nixon 2011). Work by writers like Robert Nixon (2011), along with the mainstreaming of ecofeminism and environmental justice within academic discourses, have begun a welcome reframing of environmentalism in this regard. That said, class contradictions within environmentalism continue to be of huge significance, especially in literary or cultural discourses. As already suggested, this interpretation is part of, in Jameson's (1981: 81) terms, the (re)construction the social history of environmental activism 'after the fact', in ways which uncover the histories and dynamics of 'class struggles'. In narrating events from the late-80s to mid-90s, *FOE* belongs very much to this past: the problems it rehearses – disorganisation, poor communication, and extremism – should be understood in the contexts of the difficulties environmentalists have had realising an inclusive and class conscious movement.

Undoubtedly the largest of these problems is the sense of disconnect between analysis and strategy – as we have already heard, 'reason, having won the argument, has so far lost the fight' (McKibben 2014). 'Earth Forever!' (EF!) in *FOE* certainly lack the latter, and the action at Siskiyou is indicative of this. The implementation of the action is not only ill-fated, but ill-conceived; not only do the group profoundly underestimate the acrimonious sentiment directed at them by the loggers and police – the kind of people who sport bumper stickers that read 'Save

a Skunk, Roadkill and Activist or Do You Work for a Living? or Are You an Environmentalist? (20) – but also the finer points of the plan. Though the group plan to fix their feet in concrete and thereby block access to the logging site, they realise only upon arrival that they have no idea how to actually make concrete. The discovery causes Tierwater's daughter, Sierra, to let out 'a sigh of exasperation' saying "I can't believe you guys – I mean, three adults, and we come all the way out here, with all this planning and all, and nobody knows what they're doing? No wonder my generation is going to wind up inheriting the desert" (27). Even when the group finally work out how to make the concrete, they succeed only too well in reproducing a comedic tableau of a group frozen (i.e. cemented) in hapless inaction.

Undoubtedly part of the reason for the group's disorganisation is its general tendency towards fragmentation. Indeed, within the small cohort numerous tactical positions and political philosophies are represented. Andrea and Teo, for example, often define themselves against Tierwater's rogue activism. Andrea ('the one with experience [...] the organizer, the protestor, the activist' (21)) and Teo (the '*Eco-Agitor*') are certainly 'deeply committed to the ideology and goals of the movement' (to use McAdam's (1986: 71) phrase) but are also wary of certain tactics. Over the course of the novel they become increasingly mainstream: 'all we need to do is get [the public] to vote' Andrea declares at one point, 'we don't need violence anymore' (238). Andrea and Teo eventually set up an 'action camp' training 'neophyte protestors' in a variety of resistance tactics like 'how best to bicycle-lock their heads to bulldozers' (167). One recruit to the action camp is Sierra who occupies the extreme end of non-violent spectrum. The self-sacrifice demonstrated during the tree-sit – though framed by Tierwater as an act of

individual sacrifice and an attempt 'to [save] the world on her own' (155) – has its roots, more accurately, in Deep Ecology, a movement known for its nominal opposition to anthropocentrism and individualism. Her sacrifice is not dependent, apparently, on personal resolve; even the corporate logging giant 'couldn't intimidate her [...] she didn't care or didn't notice' (261).

Tierwater's position, by comparison, is undoubtedly the most disruptive to the functioning of the group. As already suggested, his divergence from his fellow activists unquestionably originates from the action at Siskiyou and what Tierwater describes as its 'deflating and piss poor denouement' (35). Without the press there to amplify their 'message', the action, as Tierwater puts it, amounts to nothing more than 'a big joke' (35). Though the section opens with the promise that 'This is the way it begins' (19), it does not provide the insight into political radicalisation that one might expect – but rather Tierwater's steady descent into what amounts to nihilist incoherence and hasty extremism. In bitterly ironic contrast to these failures (and there are numerous others) are the consequences which emerge from Tierwater's rogue actions one night in Big Timber. Originally intending to 'destroy every working [vehicle he] could locate – but subtly, subtly, so they'd see nothing amiss and run their stinking engines till they choked and seized' (138), Tierwater ends up burning down '*thirty-five thousand acres of habitat*' along with '*the deer, the squirrels, the trees and ferns and all the rest*' (165). The initial motivation for Tierwater's actions, we hear, is quite simply 'anger', catalysed by the feeling that even such an act of property damage

was nothing, the smallest pinprick in the web of progress, the death of a few machines – maybe if he was lucky, of a logging company. But what about the trees? What about all those artificial pulpwood trees [...] they were there still, weren't they, and until they were gone, eliminated, erased from the face of the mountain, there was no forest here. No forest at all (139)

Though the action is compulsive, self-destructive, and, at points, unashamedly indulgent, it ends up producing perhaps the biggest discernible impact of all the actions depicted in the novel. And, while Tierwater is hastily disowned by fellow activists and associated groups (not to mention friends and family), and the devastation huge, when Tierwater returns to the land he finds that 'seedlings were sprouting everywhere. Better yet: the Penny Pines plantation was no more [...] And where the sawmill trees had stood in all their bio-engineered uniformity, there were now fields of wild flowers, rose everlasting, arnica, fireweed [...] This was nature as it was meant to be' (168). Though this portrayal suggests little optimism for concerted grassroots organising, it usefully reflects the genuine disorganisation and fragmentation that can afflict ESMs. It represents, moreover, the divisive nature of extreme actions. Tierwater is consistently shown to embrace his extremism; after being ostracized by EFi, Tierwater reflects 'where did that leave Tierwater?' The answer: 'Right where he wanted to be, on the unravelling edge of a disaffected fringe' (160).

Tierwater's form of 'ecotage', in contrast to commentators who have noticed the media distortion of extremist acts (as neither a danger to human safety or particularly extreme (Buell 2009; Potter 2011)), represents a confused, desperate

and disaffected position. Though there always remain vestiges of environmental analysis in what Tierwater does – for example, his concern ahead of the act of arson already mentioned: ‘Would it save the forest? And beyond that, would it save the world?’ (134) – a more compelling though decidedly less altruistic motive is often evident in what he does. ‘Tierwater understood’, we are told ‘that he didn’t care [...] all he cared about now was destruction’ (134-5). On the one hand Tierwater offers an analysis familiar to quantitative social movement theorists that ‘Peaceful protests had no effect. Lobbying failed’ yet on the other he remains locked in to vindicating his strategy of ‘one man acting alone’ in order to show ‘the world what commitment was. Or could be’ (126). Yet, beneath all this Tierwater’s rhetorical justification for his actions is invariably his hatred of people, ‘Because’, he claims, ‘to be a friend to the earth, you have to be an enemy of the people’ (44). Though this is also apparently the view of Boyle himself¹² it is interesting to note that Boyle chooses to enlarge an image of the ‘ecotage’ activist as committed to a dead end – one without hope and destined to be defeated. In the novel’s final chapter, for example, Tierwater is asked to summarise what his actions accomplished. The ‘answer’, he tells us, ‘is on my lips like the fleck of something so rank and acidic you just have to spit it out: “Nothing,” I say, “Absolutely nothing.”’ (270)

Tierwater’s feelings of ‘abjection’ towards the futility of environmental action, as Mayer (2007) notes, is certainly the most salient aesthetic feature of his development as a character. While Tierwater admits defeat, he does not deny that it leaves a ‘rank and acidic’ taste in his mouth; Tierwater’s sense of the abject,

¹² ‘I really, truly believe that it’s the population pressure that’s killing us [...] I think it’s way too late to have any impact on a world with 6 billion people. And so I feel guilty about eating, breathing, drinking water, turning on a light -- so does everybody else’ (Boyle 2000a [interview])

however, is emphatically symptomatic rather than explanatory of *FOE's* operation within a 'collective or class discourse'. Instead, the presiding contradiction in *FOE's* representation of environmental activism is precisely its presentation of a form of activism which actively forecloses any possibility of a collective action; that 'to be a friend to the earth, you have to be an enemy of the people' (44). That being said, *FOE's* 'intolerable closure' of class discourse, as Jameson (1981: 83) would put it, permits more than an insight into failure; it invites an inquiry into what systemic features – or 'code', as Jameson (88) calls it – can be said to produce the 'fundamental difference of antagonistic class positions'. This 'code, sign system, or system of the production of signs and codes', Jameson (88-9) continues,

thus becomes an index of an entity of study which greatly transcends those earlier ones of the narrowly political (the symbolic act), and the social (class discourse and the ideologeme), and which we have proposed to term the historical in the larger sense of this word. Here the organizing unity will be what the Marxian tradition designates as a *mode of production*.

As the move is made into Jameson's final horizon, what I attempt to focalise are the historically accumulated conditions which make up a particular 'mode of production', and which, thereby, provide a means to understand the antagonisms which have shaped *FOE's* representation of activism thus far.

The Political Unconscious III: The Historical Horizon

At the social level, *FOE* presents an activist culture in crisis, beset by fragmentation, contradiction and confusion. As the novel's central protagonist, Tierwater is the focus of these problems, and though these problems are clearly structural, Tierwater's unstable self-conception is indispensable for moving beyond an impression of these antagonisms to an analysis of what produces them. In accordance with this approach, Mayer's reading begins by highlighting the shifting identities which comprise the environmental movement: 'The notion', Mayer (2007: 231) suggests, 'that an environmentalist identity has to rest first and foremost on a love of wilderness is dismissed' over the course of the novel. This widening of scope, while permitting greater inclusivity, is demonstrably confusing for Tierwater who regularly contradicts himself, at moments declaring 'no compromise in defence of mother earth' and at others that 'he didn't care, not about [...] the organization or the trees or anything else; all he cared about now was destruction' (134-5). As Rootes (2003: 4) suggests, one unanticipated result of the mainstreaming of the environmental movement has been that its 'virtual monopoly on "ecological discourse" has been lost. Lost with it have been the unproblematic identities of EMOs themselves'. In extending his reading, Mayer (221) points to the literary devices which highlight and structure the issues of 'subjectivity and identity formation' behind the collapse of Tierwater's activist commitment. The first being the 'change in narrative perspective' (to which I will return later) and the other, a 'multilayered web of intertextual references which [foreground] the protagonist's

subjectivity as constituted in discourse' (221-2). Regarding the latter, the chief focus is 'the abject', which, Mayer (222) suggests,

manifests itself in phenomena such as "a piece of filth, waste, or dung" [...] that threaten the body's assumed cleanliness, purity, and health; it is experienced spontaneously as horror, disgust, and loathing. Abjection is part of the dynamics of subject formation, of the process of constituting subjectivity. It can be regarded as the psychic strategy that a subject uses to fight the destabilizing impact of the abject, to reaffirm his or her identity, and to avert the abject's ultimate effect, the confrontation with death.

For Mayer (2007: 233), the abject has 'specific implications in an environmentally precarious situation', namely its role in the 'repression of the insight that many [environmentally detrimental] forces are, in fact, human-made'. Beyond this observation, Mayer's reading falls short of telling us much about the conditions under which such processes of identity formation take hold. For example, Mayer (226) posits the complexity of environmental contexts as the primary driver behind Tierwater's apostasy, which, in the case of seemingly unstoppable climate change 'has defied human aspiration to exert total control'. Unfortunately, this reading provides only half the story. While environmental crises undoubtedly impact the political subject, to privilege them above all other factors can occlude the social factors in shaping not only the climate itself but also the parameters of 'human aspiration'. Mayer's reading thus fails to sufficiently highlight the discursively produced and hence changeable elements in *FOE's* presentation of activist identity formation. What explains, for instance, Tierwater's shift from someone who

'thought things mattered, believed in the power of individuals to influence events, illuminate issues, effect change, resuscitate the earth' (53-4) to someone who ends up 'way out there on the naked edge of nothing, beyond sense or reason, or even hope' (43-4)? Changes in the climate alone? Such an analysis fails to account for the hegemonic forces which influence and undergird the metabolism between humans and nature.

The reading offered here puts significantly more emphasis (following Jameson) on the social contexts in which such shifts in subjectivity occur. An analysis of the current mode of production – 'neoliberalism' – provides an optic through which to view both the physical production of environmental crises as well as the ideological processes which constrain the discursive possibilities of political engagement. 'The abject' – a term borrowed from psychoanalysis – identifies a symptom, rather than an aetiology; by contrast, the study of neoliberalism – which frames an emergent world-historical phenomenon – understands environmental crises *and* crises of the self as constituent parts of a larger whole.

As a mode of production driven by 'endless compound growth' (Harvey 2010: 28), neoliberalism is well known to be environmentally unsustainable. As an economic philosophy, neoliberalism also causes problems for the political subject. By 2025 Tierwater's sense of political possibility is in tatters, as evidenced in his confession, 'accident rules the universe, I know that' (73). What caused such a shift? Alongside the pressures of the 'collapsing biosphere' *FOE* consciously registers the ineluctable unfolding of the neoliberal project. The action at Siskiyou, for example, revolves around a violent confrontation with the procedures of

neoliberalism. The forest wardens, far from working to protect the forests, are there, Tierwater points out, to facilitate 'the plunder of the national forests' (50). Moreover, the views of the wardens and loggers are resolutely economically minded, miles away from seeing the connection between collective wellbeing and the survival of the forests. '*You could put all the owls in the world in a meat grinder*' one of the loggers remarks, '*they aren't worth one American job*' (50). The activists' approach is, however, blind to this disconnect. When Andrea portends the collapse of 'the whole fucking biosphere' as a result of the logging (50-1) the absurdity of the claim is palpable, especially given the extent of structural illiteracy (not to mention outward animosity toward environmentalists) on the part of their adversaries. The sensational rhetoric of collapse is not only shrill and alienating, it is also incorrect in environmental terms – as the future time period of *FOE* attests, there is no moment of collapse, decline will be slow and incremental. The intervention is easily ignored because it does not speak either to the reality of the situation, or attempt to directly address the position adopted by the loggers and police. Both activists and their adversaries are, it turns out, poorly acquainted with the real antagonisms that separate them – what Jameson (1981: 84) would call 'the dialogue of class struggle' where 'two opposing discourses fight it out within the general unity of a shared code' – and, of course, fail to effect a rapprochement.

While, as Jameson suggests, the 'dialogue of class struggle' is an antagonistic one, that there is dialogue at all depends upon '*shared*' conceptions, not least those pertaining to the status of the individual. Indeed, the action at Siskiyou is crucial in marking the point of Tierwater's catastrophic reconception of his subjectivity: 'This', as we are told in the opening lines to Part One, 'is the way it begins' (19). While the police are sledgehammering the activists out of their

cement locks, Tierwater tries to remind himself 'to remain calm' and of the value of 'passive resistance' which was 'the strategy that brought the British Empire to its knees [and] stopped the war in Vietnam' (51). The attempt is short-lived, however; 'the smallest exhalation of surprise' from his daughter is enough to break his pacifist resolve: 'before he could think, he rose up off the concrete like a leashed animal and hit the nearest man to him' (51). The men are not harmed by Tierwater's attack and quickly retaliate, knocking Tierwater unconscious. Just before passing out, Tierwater glimpses his daughter 'shrinking into herself, dwindling, growing smaller and ever smaller, a puddle of black, a spot, an insignificant vanishing little speck caught between the mighty legs of the trees and the crushing stupendous lid of the sky' (52). This vision of his daughter is instrumental in Tierwater's shift away from collective environmental action, a vision of an atomised self, vulnerable to both an oppressive regime, and the forces unleashed by an unstable ecosystem.

Tierwater is never the same again. The encounter fatally undermines his belief in the possibility of change and causes him to actively avoid thinking about the intricacy of the problems around him. Indeed, he tells us in 2025, he tries 'to avoid perspective as much as possible. Perspective hurts. Live in the present [...] forget history' (111) – a sentiment that Jameson would no doubt find particularly egregious. The position Tierwater subsequently adopts is not simply the inverse of his 'activist' position (i.e. straightforward nihilism), but rather a non-position characterised by a profound incoherence and confusion. In his analysis of Sierra's 'tree-sit', for example, Tierwater experiences particular difficulty. When asked if the action was 'her own thing, something spontaneous [...] for the love of the earth [...]?' (152). Tierwater finds himself 'fumbling around for an answer', eventually

replying that she was ‘in love with the idea of heroic sacrifice and so imbued with the principles of Deep Ecology’ (152). Later on, he adds, she ‘gave up everything for an ideal, and if that isn’t the very definition of heroism I don’t know what is’ (222). In doing so, Tierwater misidentifies his daughter’s selfless act (of what Lewis Williams (2013) calls ‘ecological relationality’) as an act of individualist heroism. Even so, Tierwater at other points appears to pointedly acknowledge the anti-hero stance of his daughter:

She didn’t care – or didn’t notice – that she was the idol of thousands, didn’t care that she was incrementally extending the record for consecutive days aloft till no one could hope to exceed it, and she barely mentioned Coast Lumber anymore. Toward the end, I think, she’d forgotten what she was doing up there (262-3).

While these observations do register a sense that Sierra’s politics offer a compelling alternative to those of her father, Tierwater himself does not appear to take this on at all. His description of his daughter’s actions, while deferential, betray a conspicuous lack of understanding, and, moreover, a regret that she somehow squandered an opportunity to capitalise on her fame and public exposure. ‘Sierra’, Tierwater tells us, ‘had begun to take on the trappings of a mad saint [...] the martyr who suffers not so much for the cause but for the sake of suffering itself’ (262). In an attempt to convince Sierra that it was perhaps ‘time to come down. Time to get on with life. Go to graduate school, get married, have children, take a shower for Christ’s sake’, Tierwater gets his daughter a cake ‘with a groomless bride set on top’ (264). When Tierwater remarks ‘if she got the

meaning of the lone figurine, she didn't let on', it becomes clear it is in fact he who has not grasped the meaning – either of his daughter's failure to respond or of her action as a whole – the whole spirit of which is patently towards a rejection of the life Tierwater envisages for Sierra, of 'business as usual'. Her death shortly after provides the novel's bleakest moment, and an extremely significant facet of the portrayal of activism in *FOE*. Following her fall, we hear that 'then the forest was silent', that Sierra went to the grave without being fully understood, even by those closest to her. Her model of activism, motivated neither by money nor fame, but by an earnest, studied, and relational understanding of the environment, is passed over by Tierwater in gormless silence.

Other than his daughter, Tierwater unceremoniously abandons any faith in humankind's capacity act in the interests of the planet – or even themselves – and fully embraces misanthropy. At times this has the tone of morose and nihilistic resignation – 'let's eat each other, that's what I propose [...] I'm not going to preach [...] preaching never did anybody any good anyway' (42), or (while attempting to repudiate vegetarianism), that 'meat isn't the problem, people are' (114). At other points, Tierwater appears to wish to revive a sense of his own singular agency, claiming that he 'stand[s] alone against' all humans, before reverting back to wave a 'futilitarian banner' (260). Certainly this vacillation between nihilism and victimisation is instrumental in driving his reckless acts of 'ecotage'. Tierwater frequently acknowledges this, even revelling in it, describing himself as a 'crank' who has found himself 'craving action. It was an addiction' (237). The result is the rapid development of an 'irrational' subject; that is, as opposed to Plumwood's conception of the 'ecological superman': 'young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully

employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports' (qtd. in Kimmel 1996: 5). For Tierwater such a bourgeois model for activism becomes increasingly difficult to countenance, reflecting as it does, and in no uncertain terms, mainstream conceptions of the 'neoliberal' subject (Harvey 2005). Tierwater's steady political estrangement from his fellow activists is linked precisely to this problem, not least when Andrea declares

No more guerilla tactics. We can't afford it. Every time some eco-nut blows something up or spikes a grove of trees, we lose points with the public, not to mention the legislature. Seventy-three percent of California voters say they're for the environment. All we need to do is get them to vote – and we are. We're succeeding. We don't need violence anymore – I don't know if we ever did' (238)

While mainstreaming ESMs is often a desirable aim, by the mid-nineties EF! are increasingly conceptualising their movement in mainstream *economic* terms. We have already heard how 'EF! took eighty thousand dollars in campaign contributions and new memberships [in one] month alone' (125). But by the time Andrea makes the above statement it is undoubtedly the motivating logic behind their whole operation. In line with the problems posed to ESMs by 'institutionalisation' (Rootes 2003: 3-8) and 'embedded' neoliberalism (Peck & Tickell 2002: 380) described in the introduction, EF! Begin to lose their political autonomy. They cannot 'afford' to deal with the reputational damage from extreme actions, losing 'points' with the legislature and voters if they do. Moreover, as Tierwater observes shortly after 'she and Teo and all the rest of them [...] made

money' from their activism (238). And for what? To secure a vote based on a potentially meaningless assertion that the public are 'for the environment'. Environmentalism, as Tierwater observes drearily, is 'just another career' (238).

The EF! depicted in *FOE*, it must be stressed, is far from being fully 'enclosed' within the neoliberal project. For instance, a big part of their remit remains direct action against the corporate loggers, which they pursue and promote through their 'action camps' (167). It is, nonetheless, interesting to note, as do Peck and Tickell (2002: 400), the extent to which environmental groups increasingly and inadvertently end up 'revolv[ing] around axes the very essences of which have been neoliberalized'. Indeed, it is EF!'s *proximity* to (as opposed to their total reproduction of) the central tenets of neoliberalism – namely its 'utopian promises' of free markets, free individuals and minimal government interference (Heynen, *et al.* 2007: 3) – which leads Tierwater to feel increasingly unsure about what position he himself should be occupying. As already mentioned, one theory as to why such overlap can be so problematic is simply what Bondi and Laurie (2005: 399) call 'the "fit" between the terms of [neoliberal] economic theory and liberal democracy'. Like the would-be neoliberal actor to which Bondi and Laurie (2005: 399) refer, Tierwater too begins to '(mis)recognise such features of subjectivity as consistent with [the neoliberal] framework', leading him, apparently, to reject wholesale all forms of individual action other than extreme and violent acts. As already discussed, such an attitude belongs to a 'total system' way of thinking, which, Jameson (1981: 80) suggests, fatally limits the options of resistance to extremist gestures. In other words, convinced that no basis exists for conceiving of his political subjectivity other than in economic terms, Tierwater begins to cultivate a wanton irrationality.

Though an obvious reading might be to see *FOE's* portrayal of Tierwater's rejection of environmentalism as a cynical presentation of human nature, or a doomsday prediction of the inevitability of widespread environmental catastrophe, another reading is possible which more effectively captures the political forces – sometimes deliberate, sometimes indirect – which work against an expansive understanding of activism and political subjectivity. While this may not be Boyle's view (2000a), *FOE* nonetheless provides a space in which multiple readings can occur. Boyle (2000a) emphasises, for example, literature's value in exploring his concerns by setting them 'into a story with characters, set them in operation, put them against impossible tasks and have fun with the misery that they suffer as a result'. Whatever Boyle's own views on environmentalism, they do not inhibit the novel's registering of the conditions which impact and produce Tierwater's various thoughts and actions.

Tierwater's irrationality (or, rather, *anti-rationality*), is framed in terms of a catastrophic loss of belief in the possibility of the future, producing a wanton futility, a position of hateful and toxic atomisation that leaves him 'alone in himself' feeling 'nothing but hate and fear' (256). Indeed, it is this future of depleted possibility we see played out in *FOE's* second time period, one which permits a complete unfolding of what is only partially realised in the first – the neoliberal capture of activism and the political subject. Despite his strenuous attempts to avoid conformity, 2025 finds a Tierwater utterly compromised as a political subject. Whereas previously Tierwater worked voluntarily, independently, and compulsively (albeit ineffectually) for a better world, he is now paid to do so by the billionaire Maclovio. In the future imagined by Boyle, only money is seen to be capable of

achieving social goods, Maclovio having ‘hatched [the] scheme to do what Nature and the zoos were incapable of’ (219). Tierwater seems oblivious to this irony, even while going on to itemise a dystopian future suspiciously amenable to the neoliberal project: a future in which corporations thrive, the super-rich abound, the welfare state has collapsed, in which people are still in denial about climate change(!), the agricultural system has been completely enclosed (there being only a few things that will grow anyway), and, most importantly, the spirit of resistance has been utterly annihilated. As Guthman (2008: 1180) suggests neoliberalism ‘limits the conceivable because it limits the arguable, the fundable, the organizable’.

The extent to which the politically ‘conceivable’ has been limited in *FOE*’s later time period is demonstrated emphatically in the novel’s final scenes. Tierwater and Andrea, having been made redundant and homeless after Maclovio’s death (killed, in grizzly irony, by his own animals) end up returning to Big Timber to live in a dilapidated EF!-owned hut. (As an aside, this also effectively demonstrates the profound lack of resilience in models of social action that depend on the altruism of the super-rich – such initiatives hinge all too heavily on the caprices, and continued existence, of their benefactors). Accepting their fate, Tierwater and Andrea head to the town and find it in abject ruin. After entering a local bar, Andrea asks ‘What happened to all the trees?’ Tierwater’s response is deeply revealing. There was, he reports,

a moment then [...] when I feel like we’re all plugged in, all attuned to the question and its ramifications, the three young-old men at the end of the

bar, the bartender, Andrea, me. What happened, indeed. But the bartender, a wet rag flicking from hand to hand like the tongue of a lizard breaks the spell. He shrugs, an eloquent compression of his heavy shoulders. 'Beats the hell out of me,' he says, finally (268).

The apparent inability of those present to engage with the environmental catastrophe unfolding around them is testament to the extent to which the conceptual (as well as practical) basis for action has been effectively negated. That the 'biosphere' is in the process of collapsing might suggest to some that environmental conditions straightforwardly determine political possibilities; however, as Tierwater's descent into the vortex of a 'neoliberal governmentality'¹³ demonstrates, this is only partially true. Instead, environmental conditions are shown to develop in dialectic with discursive processes, each fuelling the other. *FOE's* presentation of activism suggests, moreover, that ESMs' shortcomings are not *sui generis*, but discursively intertwined with the logic of our mode of production. In sum, Boyle's dystopian vision can be seen as a stark reminder that the forces which drive environmental despoilment tend to stand in powerful opposition to the logic of collective mobilisation on which ESMs are predicated. While the novel examined in the following section, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), is set exclusively in the recent past (i.e. the late 20th to early 21st century), the reading of it offered is similarly oriented to the above. Although *Freedom* certainly lacks the particular imaginative latitude afforded by *FOE's* futuristic time

¹³ That is, following Foucault (1991), the social reproduction of political subjects predisposed to act with a market-based rationale, or otherwise adhere to neoliberal forms of governance. (Rose 1999; MacKinnon 2000; Larner & Craig 2005).

frame, its registration of the discursive and strategic possibilities open (and closed) to activists is affected in no less productive ways by its contemporary focus.

2.1.2: Jonathan Franzen - *Freedom* (2010)

Freedom tells the story of the Berglunds – a quintessentially white, middle-class, liberal American family. Walter and Patty meet at college in the late 70s and, after graduating, settle down in a newly gentrified neighbourhood of St Paul, Minnesota to raise their two children, Joey and Jessica. Despite being attentive and earnest parents and committed to each other, the turn of the millennium finds Walter and Patty worryingly at odds with their children and in a marriage weighted with regret and resentment. As the marriage continues to disintegrate, Walter quits his job as a lawyer and takes a conservation job funded by a major coal magnate, Vin Haven. When the project (named the Cerulean Mountain Trust) falters and Walter is fired following a public outburst, Walter launches his own campaign to raise awareness about the environmental problems connected to overpopulation. Meanwhile, Walter separates from his wife and – after an extended period of principled forbearance – begins an affair with his young assistant, Lalitha. All comes to a dramatic end, however, when, while driving along a country road, Lalitha is killed in car accident. Walter is devastated by Lalitha's death and in the novel's final chapter is living alone in rural Minnesota fighting to protect indigenous songbirds from local residents' house cats. In the novel's final scenes Patty returns (after a six year absence) to seek a rapprochement with her husband. Despite much confusion and anger Walter eventually agrees to take her back.

Freedom contains numerous other plot lines, often narrated from Patty's perspective, including her affair with Walter's best friend, Richard Katz; Richard's own uneven success as a rock musician; and the rakish rebelliousness of Walter

and Patty's son, Joey. I have chosen to focus principally on Walter's environmentalism for reasons pertaining to my brief; however, the entanglement of Walter with all characters in the novel cannot be underplayed, for, as I will go on to demonstrate, *Freedom's* presentation of activism and its broader political contexts are complexly intertwined with otherwise personal and private concerns – indeed, the two (the environmental and the personal) are repeatedly, and, it appears, deliberately conflated. As I will go on to demonstrate, this has important consequences for the kind of politics which *Freedom* registers; that is, a framing of the environmental politics resolutely in terms of the individual. While such a framing is far from unheard of in novels – indeed, we have already seen a similar conceit in McEwan's *Solar* – it has particularly problematic implications for a political movement increasingly identified with (and demanding of) collective action, and, as such, must be situated in a critical framework able to explain and begin to redress the problems it highlights; that is, as we have seen, a social history of activism which is '(re)constructed after the fact' (Jameson 1981: 81).

The critical reception of *Freedom* has understandably highlighted its personal and family focus, often though, as a result, muting or even completely overlooking its environmental themes. One reviewer (Secher 2010), for example, described the novel as a story concerning a 'family at war with itself' and the HarperCollins blurb for the novel declares it to be an 'epic of contemporary love and marriage' (Franzen 2010: cover). Other reviews have tended to foreground the insight the novel gives into the psychology of its central characters, with one critic (Arnett 2011: 315) declaring that 'good fiction writers are usually good psychologists, too' and that one is likely to learn more from rising stars like Franzen than one would from 'a whole stack of journal articles'. While these observations are not surprising

– reflecting *Freedom's* straightforward focus on the Berglund family – critical responses have sometimes fallen short of engaging with the wider issues of politics and the environment which undoubtedly feed and shape these ‘psychological’ tensions. One critic (Weinstein 2011: xlvi), for example, notes the paradox of the novel’s title, suggesting its major point is that ‘the only freedom we possess inheres in how we negotiate our endless array of constraints’. At the heart of this, Philip Weinstein (xlvi) concedes, are political phenomena, not least what he calls ‘the essential bourgeois commandment: Behave thyself! However hard they try, they fail’. Yet the implications for environmental action – or, indeed, political action of any kind – are left unexplored.

Despite this critical focus, *Freedom's* political explorations, I argue, develop out of the way in which its patterns of personal dysfunction focalise much larger social and historical phenomena. As Weinstein (2011: xlv) intimates, *Freedom* ‘explores dysfunction so compellingly because [Franzen] sees no alternative to it’, but the political implications of such a bleak vision of human activity (personal, political or otherwise) cannot be easily put aside; in novels like *Freedom* the individual may stand centre-stage, yet the type of individual presented there can easily be situated within broader frameworks. Admittedly, not all critics have overlooked this dimension of *Freedom's* politics. Jeffrey Williams (2013: 94), for example, notes that ‘although Walter appears to be progressive, his reasoning follows much of the neoliberal creed: government is cumbersome and inefficient, social problems can be more effectively handled through private means than public ones’. Williams’ article, however, is short, simply noting the tension rather than rigorously unpacking what it means for the novel to select these themes for its portrayal of the activist.

Interestingly, during interviews Franzen (2010a; 2010b) himself has noted the muted response to his novel's environmental content, speculating that 'maybe interviewers are trying to do me a kindness and not scare away readers by making the book sound too environmental'. Like Boyle, Franzen has been keen to point out not only the extent of his own environmental concern, but also to insist that his fictive writings are not (accordingly) simply a vehicle for 'overt advocacy' (2010b). By the same token, Franzen (2010a) has also rejected the notion that *Freedom* is a 'satire' of environmentalism, countering that 'in fact, what I was after was a purely realistic portrayal of contemporary conservation work in Appalachia'. Whilst one would hope that issues like climate change and conservation activism are reflected accurately in all media, this claim is nonetheless a bold one for a work of fiction, one which glosses over the problems of representing one issue or movement in a single narrative. As Jameson (1981: 79) notes, 'the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions'. The reading offered here is an attempt to explore this claim and, more broadly the function of Franzen's writing in relation to its own ideological position and presentation.

So why a Jamesonian reading? As Jameson's comments above suggest, in only being able to invent 'solutions', literature is always already politically problematic: the 'reality' of problems literature addresses seem to be trapped within – or even obscured by – its very form and 'fictional' content. With the conventional form of the bourgeois novel especially, its 'protagonist-led' form (in combination with the historical moment in which it was popularised) may provide a clue as to its

peculiarly problematic status. As Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957: 13) attests (one of the most respected and 'durable' studies of the 'Western' novel form (Schwarz 1983, Black 2010)) 'the novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects [the] individualist and innovating reorientation' of its period. From the renaissance onwards, suggests Watt (1957: 14), there was 'a growing tendency for individual experience to replace collective tradition as the ultimate arbiter of reality'; indeed, the 'primary criterion' of the novel is, in Watt's view, to provide 'truth to individual experience – individual experience which is always unique and therefore new'. Though more recent appraisals of the novel form have begun to reposition it as a 'truly planetary form'¹⁴ exhibiting 'endless flexibility [bordering] on chaos' (Moretti 2006: ix), a view remains of the specifically bourgeois, western form of the novel – still evident today – as one for which '*regularity*, not disequilibrium, was the great narrative invention' (Moretti 2013: 15). In an environmental context, which, as numerous commentators have suggested, the success of activism demands a collective response, the novel may not at first seem well placed to offer useful insight. However, as Jameson (1981: 49) suggests,

the literary structure, far from being completely realized on any one of its levels tilts powerfully into the underside or *impense* or *non-dit*, in short, into the very political unconscious, of the text, such that the latter's dispersed semes—when reconstructed according to this model of ideological closure—themselves then insistently direct us to the informing power of

¹⁴ Franco Moretti's phrase, 'truly planetary form', might suggest a conception of the novel apposite to thinking about a mode of activism which has global (or *planetary*) import. Indeed, I go on to consider this idea in the following chapter. That said, I am interested here in how the apparently constricting form and philosophical orientation of protagonist-led fiction can be read subversively – for evidence of the 'contradictions which the text seeks in vain wholly to control' (Jameson 1981: 49).

forces or contradictions which the text seeks in vain wholly to control or master (or manage, to use Norman Holland's suggestive term). Thus, by means of a radically historicizing reappropriation, the ideal of logical closure which initially seemed incompatible with dialectical thinking, now proves to be an indispensable instrument for revealing those logical and ideological centers a particular historical text fails to realize, or on the contrary seeks desperately to repress.

The thing about the novel, then, which at first seems to capture the essence of its political limitations, may in fact be the thing that, once grasped, can readily split open to reveal the contradictions at the heart of its politics (or, indeed, Western political thinking, in general). As suggested elsewhere, the political unconscious is offered as a means to move from the details at the level of plot to the ideological and historical context of a text's production. For a novel as concerned with personal and psychological detail as *Freedom* is, the movement through the three different levels of the political unconscious allows the analysis conducted at the personal (political) 'level' to '[retain] its formal structure as a symbolic act' while 'the value and character of such symbolic action [becomes] significantly modified and enlarged' during subsequent levels (Jameson 1981: 85). In short, the dimensions of Walter's personal life provide a microcosm of those in the broadest horizon of historical production, those which shape the environmental and political tensions touched on in the novel, even in spite of the novel's outward intent.

The Political Unconscious I: The Political Horizon

As already mentioned, the first stage (or 'horizon') of Jameson's (1981: 75) analysis is at the level of 'the narrow sense of punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time'. Much of *Freedom*'s plot is concerned with the sequence of events which lead to Walter becoming who he is; in large part, that is, concerning his political development. Like *FOE*, *Freedom* registers many of the key criteria isolated by social movement theorists as instrumental in the formation of an 'activist identity'. Firstly, Walter is shown to have a long standing 'membership in [environmental] organizations' (Orum 1972; McAdam 1986); indeed, one of the first details we hear regarding Walter's environmental development is his interest in the Club of Rome – an organisation he describes as being concerned with 'seeking more rational and humane ways of putting the brakes on growth than simply destroying the planet' (121). By this same token we are shown that Walter had a long 'history of prior activism' (Gamson, *et al.* 1982; McAdam 1986: 82, 1988) stretching back, in fact, to his early childhood, when, among other things, Walter made a 'No Smoking sign, lettered in red crayon, its N and its S unsteady but tall in their defiance' in order to protect his little brother who had 'bad asthma' from his elder brother's cigarette smoke. Walter describes the gesture as his "'first act of rebellion'" (126), and the passage exemplifies Walter's long-standing compulsion to resist authority for the sake of the vulnerable and voiceless. By the novel's end, this aspect of Walter's personality has become a liability, developing into a restless and toxic 'anger'. In the main, however, Walter is known to be 'a nice guy' (a term which, admittedly, soon acquires a negative connotation for him) with a 'keen interest in nature' (77). Much like Tierwater, Walter is introduced as having a predisposition to contest needless destruction of

the natural world, before the effects of time and frustration begin to diminish his optimism.

Though Walter 'set aside his planet saving aspiration' (124) after marrying Patty and starting a family, this temporary detour into a handsomely paid law career is nonetheless instrumental in securing the 'biographical availability', so often the *sine qua non* of the activist profile (McAdam 1986: 70; Pichardo and Herring 1994, Wall 1999). When the children leave home, Walter is well placed to return to environmental campaigning, full time. It is evident, moreover, that Walter has kept up his resolve through various 'everyday' actions *outside* ESMs (Pichardo, et al. 1998): he is, for example, committed to low impact lifestyle, 'having commuted on bicycle or on foot for the last twenty-five years' (486). This sort of commitment isn't, it must be noted, presented uncomplicatedly, but rather as a form of rigid self-flagellation. One holiday, for example, Walter feels the need to justify an extended car journey, feeling he 'was owed one petroleum splurge after a lifetime of virtue' (486). At another juncture, Walter celebrates a significant victory at work by choosing to eat a steak, which he ends up 'devour[ing] with guilty savagery, holding it in his hands and tearing off pieces with his teeth, covering his chin with grease' (319).

While Walter's guilt and inner turmoil are indeed defining features of his 'activist identity' and development, it is, it must be noted, very difficult to isolate their exacerbation from the other (non-political) sources of stress in his life. Whatever its precise origins, however, while appearing at times to work against his resolve, at others Walter's guilt ends up positively reinforcing his commitment. Indeed, Walter often defines himself against his momentary lapses – 'it was the way he

knew how to live: with discipline and denial' (319). Much of these insights we gain from Patty who repeatedly psychoanalyses her husband. In one instance Patty describes Walter as being a combination of 'hopelessly naive and very shrewd and dogged and well-informed' (205). The combination (while evidently frustrating for Walter) is fitting, at least insofar as it rationalises his energetic (though rarely fruitful) endeavours – as Weinstein (2011: xlv) observes, 'being "good"—a good parent, a good child—remains mandatory but impossible'. Walter is, of course, much too heavily invested to simply abandon his commitments as 'impossible'; the unattainability of his environmental aims, conversely, seem only to drive him on.

Patty also notes the importance of others in this self-identification – for it is often the weaknesses and uncaring behaviour of others that motivates Walter. At one point Patty rationalises Walter's activism as a 'sibling thing' (131) and later speculates that 'It was obvious [...] that [Walter's] resolve to go to Washington and create the Cerulean Mountain Trust and become a more ambitious international player was fuelled by competition' with his friend, Richard (186).

Despite Franzen's (2010a) comments about presenting 'a purely realistic portrayal of contemporary conservation', the activism enacted by Walter is – while recognisable – a very particular form of social engagement, one with characteristic features of a middle-class, politically liberal outlook. That said, *Freedom's* particular adumbration of activism, like *FOE*, allows us to consider the processes of capture that political subjects like Walter and Tierwater are susceptible to. To understand the broader implications of these details, however, Jameson encourages us to view move from a consideration of plot to an analytical perspective where 'texts are grasped as "utterances" in an essentially collective or

class discourse'. As I will go on to show, the tensions represented as purely symbolic events in a character's life become, in this transition, '(re)constructed after the fact' (Jameson 1981: 81) in terms of class 'antagonisms', otherwise veiled behind quotidian norms.

The Political Unconscious II: The Social Horizon

As discussed in this chapter's introduction, numerous ways of measuring the success of environmental activism have been developed. *Freedom* neatly reflects this discourse, foregrounding Walter's consideration of the relative merits of his various campaigns. It is clear throughout that Walter is self-consciously reformist. For example, his overpopulation organisation 'Free Space' is described by him as "a pragmatic organization", not designed "to overthrow the whole system", but rather "to mitigate [...] to help the cultural conversation catch up with the crisis, before it's too late" (362). In practice Walter is an advocate of the kind of institutionalisation described by sociologists like Rootes (2003: 3-8), and though 'pragmatism' had certainly been the watchword with Walter's work with Haven, in retrospect Walter comes to understand the approach quite differently. The project, funded by the 'big coal' magnate, was designed to allow the controversial mining technique of Mountaintop Removal (MTR) on previously protected land under the proviso that following any extractive activity the land would be (re)converted into habitat tailored to support an endangered species of songbird, the Cerulean Warbler. In retrospect Walter's understanding of the pragmatic rigour (let alone 'success') of this project is cast in decidedly different terms.

To achieve even this, Vin Haven had had to sell off \$20 million in mineral rights, elsewhere in the state, to gas drillers poised to rape the land, and then hand over the proceeds to further parties whom Walter didn't like. And all for what? For an endangered-species 'strong-hold' that you could cover with a postage stamp on a road-atlas map of West Virginia.

Walter felt, himself, in his anger and disappointment with the world, like the gray northern woods [...] The only thing he felt like celebrating tonight was that, having 'succeeded' in West Virginia, they could now plunge forward with their overpopulation initiative (293).

The project's only 'success' was, in typically ambiguous terms, that it allowed Walter to focus on overpopulation. Like *FOE*, *Freedom's* portrayal of activism, suggests not only that certain tactics are bad but that conventional understandings of success (or failure) in ESMs do not capture its most important features. As Jameson (1981: 83) puts it, though texts can only provide a symbolic resolution or 'ideological closure' to the problems they register, this 'is taken as the symptomatic projection of something quite different, namely of social contradiction'. The environmental critique is, it is well known, not immune to problems which go deeper than tactics, funding streams, or membership numbers. As Jameson's comments suggest, narrative is very good at revealing (deliberately or otherwise) contradictions at the level of ideology – contradictions, in fact, with which environmentalism is uncommonly afflicted.

Walter's default position on environmentalism is, as already noted, one of opposing rising populations. At a superficial level his reason for this is to avoid 'destroying the planet' (121), but as more about his history and character is

revealed this is augmented by his particular distaste towards people in general. Towards the novel's end this has developed into a strident misanthropy. "My problem is" he tells his daughter, "I don't like people enough [...] I don't really believe they can change" (495). The theoretical framework Walter uses to scaffold his advocacy of the overpopulation narrative is a notorious one, one which he claims to have long-held: "I was part of a larger cultural shift that was happening in the eighties and nineties. Overpopulation was definitely part of the public conversation in the seventies, with Paul Ehrlich, and the Club of Rome, and ZPG" – but had subsequently become 'unmentionable' like a "cancer that you know is growing inside you but you decide you're just not going to think about" (220-1).

Walter's attempt to vindicate the overpopulation position is nothing if not against the grain of contemporary environmental theory. In leftist politics generally, its claims have been almost entirely discredited, in tandem with the rise in popularity of environmental justice, which, following Engels, argues that 'the limits of production are determined not by the number of hungry bellies, but rather by the number of purchasers with full purses' (qtd. in Meek 87). Ecocritics like Ursula Heise (2008: 73) have finessed this move by arguing that such an emphasis on population rather than systemic features is part of a 'Neo-Malthusian anxiety' which has more to do with 'an emotional confrontation rather than rational comprehension. It is intended to give the "feel" rather than the facts of overpopulation, the visceral experience of what are otherwise abstract mathematical figures'. That is, as a form of anxiety overpopulation is culturally and socio-economically driven, rather than environmentally logical. Such a view is shared by Jameson (1991: 286) who notes that 'in the crowded conurbations of the immediate future [...] the fear is that of proletarianization, of slipping down the

ladder, of losing a comfort and a set of privileges which we tend increasingly to think of in spatial terms: privacy, empty rooms, silence, walling other people out, protection against crowds and other bodies'. In short, overpopulation has been discredited on the basis of its betrayal of a class bias.

As he has stated in interviews, Franzen (like Boyle) has publicly supported the overpopulation narrative (2010b). Far from problematising an analysis dependent upon the intellectual bankruptcy of overpopulation, this only makes the presentation of Walter's struggle even more interesting, for notwithstanding Franzen's and Walter's advocacy, it is a position that readily spells its own contradictions. Walter's first major confrontation over environmental issues comes from Coyle Mathis, the head of a family who occupy the land proposed for the MTR conservation site. Mathis is hostile from the outset, and is described as the 'embodi[ment] of the pure negative spirit of backcountry West Virginia [...] consistent in disliking absolutely everybody' (295). In a standoff reminiscent of the Siskiyou protest early on in *FOE*, communication between Walter and Mathis is dysfunctional in the extreme, for 'not only did Walter lack the common touch; his entire personality had been formed in opposition to the backcountry he'd come from' (298). Beyond mere interpersonal acrimony, the class dynamic behind this confrontation is palpable, and what is presented as 'stubborn, self-destructive spite' also amounts to the novel's most tenacious example of resistance to the machinations of big industry. By comparison, Walter's increasingly misanthropically inflected environmentalism, as much as his job, prevent him from siding with an 'economic irrationality he at some level recognised and admired' (295). Instead, all he can say to Mathis (who doggedly refuses to accept 'the outrageously expensive offer' of \$1,200 an acre for his land) is 'I'm sorry [...] but

that is just stupid””, a remark which only results in Walter and his assistant, Lalitha, being summarily (and understandably) ejected from Mathis’ property (295). Mathis is unquestionably an extremely objectionable individual, but, at the level of social discourse, his disruption of Walter’s dehumanising (not to mention intellectually dishonest) position could not be more apposite.

Numerous other features of the plot contribute in the same way – that is, in Jameson’s (1981: 83) terms, as ‘the symptomatic projection of [...] social contradiction’. The impasse with Mathis is eventually resolved (by Lalitha’s more affable engagement) yet, in the interaction between Walter and Lalitha which immediately follows, this resolution becomes shot through with the same sense of tortured impossibility. Walter, it seems, cannot abide the thought of himself being happy – ‘it was the way he knew how to live: with discipline and denial’ – and ends up retreating to ‘the loneliness and sterility of his room’ (319). His position in love – intentionally or not – mirrors his unpeopled and hopeless position on the environment; Walter’s ‘anger’, becomes a symbolic manifestation of Walter’s untenable politics. ‘In a place like West Virginia’ we are told

he got angry pretty much every time he ventured into daylight, which no doubt contributed to his road rage. And it wasn’t just religion, and it wasn’t just the jumbo everything to which his fellow Americans seemed to feel uniquely entitled, it wasn’t just the Walmarts and the buckets of corn syrup and the high-clearance monster trucks; it was the feeling that nobody else in the country was giving even five seconds’ thought to what it meant to be packing another 13,000,000 large primates onto the world’s limited surface

every month. The unclouded serenity of his countrymen's indifference made him wild with anger (314).

In short, Walter blames *individuals* – particularly poor individuals – for the choices they make in environmental contexts. His public attempts to 'emphasize that the villain was the System, not the people of Forster Hollow' are quickly abandoned in favour of a 'loony rage' that (only inadvertently) ends up winning public support for Free Space when a video of Walter decrying the Cerulean Mountain Trust goes 'viral' (487). Tellingly though, Walter's attempts to critique 'big coal' and the MTR project are rejected by Mathis and his fellow displaced residents, who end up beating him up mid-rant (484). In the aftermath, and after firing Walter, Haven states 'with surprisingly little anger. "It's a pity he had to overintellectualize like that"' (486). If there is anything that Walter's approach lacks, however, it is a systematic analysis, especially regarding his class position and the possibility that his anger and indignation would be greeted with anything other than incredulity and hostility.

The same ineptitude is displayed again (though on a much smaller scale) in the novel's final chapter – 'Canterbridge Estates Lake' – which recounts Walter's clashes with local residents. Walter attempts to convince his new neighbours to keep their house cats indoors in order to protect local songbirds who 'never evolved any defenses' against small cats, an 'old-world species' (542). Walter's approach, we are told, 'rubbed the families of Canterbridge Court the wrong way', and though unnerving idiosyncrasies like 'the political trembling in his voice' clearly contribute, there is also a class dimension to this acrimony (542). Indeed, the estate comprises a community beset by economic pressures, new and old; Walter,

by comparison, 'obviously had no such worries'. Yet when he complained to them 'about their cats, they felt they understood his worry about birds a lot better than he understood what a hyper-refined privilege it was to worry about them' (542).

Linda – a particularly headstrong local resident – is quickly offended by Walter's apparent economic tactlessness, convinced that Walter knows nothing about what she calls the 'plight of hard working families' (544). Linda's hostility towards Walter, it must be noted, reaches extreme degrees; however, like Mathis, her opposition and disruptive influence crystallise the very real class-blindness promulgated by some environmentalists, not least Walter himself. In short, her inability to empathise with Walter's position is at least as extreme as Walter's own. The importance of this confrontation is profound, highlighting that, as Daniel Tanuro puts it, both problems, 'social and environmental, must be met at the same time', but that 'those four little words – at the same time – encapsulate the difficulty and the novelty of the situation' (2010: 100). For Linda and Walter, too, the difficulty also concerns a question of priority; each side thinks their own set of problems the more urgent.

Interestingly, *Freedom* presents this impasse in terms of a failure of empathy and imagination. Indeed, when Walter leaves the house during the Christmas holidays, Linda, we hear, found it 'hard to *imagine* [...] that such a crank was nonetheless loved by somebody' and is ultimately relieved (when he returns alone) that 'she could return to a hatred unclouded' by such details (547, emphasis added). In framing this issue in terms of imagination and empathy, the novel form is, of course, well placed to gesture towards an empathetic rapprochement that would link up these otherwise alienated groups. With contemporary activist strategies,

the strategic trend has also increasingly tipped towards redressing these imaginative shortfalls by opening up the 'experience' of otherwise opaque phenomena like social inequality and climate change. Only as we move into the final horizon of Jameson's political unconscious is the significance of such a strategy apparent; that is, as part of a historical moment which privileges 'experience' and 'feel' of social phenomena, rather than their structural character.

The Political Unconscious III: The Historical Horizon

White Americans always think racism is a feeling, and they reject it or they embrace it. To most [white] Americans, it seems more honorable and nicer to reject it, so they do, but they almost invariably fail to understand that how they feel means very little to black Americans, who understand racism as a way of structuring American culture, American politics, and the American economy. (Smiley 1996: 63)

*

In Jeffery Williams' reading of *Freedom*, the novel is categorized, among a number of other writings, as a 'neoliberal novel'. In justification of the claim, Williams (2011: 94) writes,

although Walter appears to be progressive, his reasoning follows much of the neoliberal creed: government is cumbersome and inefficient, social

problems can be more effectively handled through private means than public ones, the super-rich are not only entitled to political power but also make the best political choices, their interest serves the public interest, and those not rich are naturally supplicants to those who are.

Indeed, rather than attempting to mobilise a groundswell of popular support, the campaign Walter becomes involved in seeks instead to recruit billionaires to fix conservation problems. As the 'megamillionaire' (186) Vin Haven describes it, all one would need for effective conservation is 'one man, one species': 'If we could round up six hundred and twenty other men, we'd have every North American breed covered' (300). When Walter questions him on the logic of such a patently short-sighted approach, Haven simply replies, "My thinking is, it's my hundred million, I can spend it whatever way I like" (299). Haven's (and, by uncomfortable association, Walter's) logic here is a lot like that of Tierwater's, in *FOE*. As Williams (2011: 97) puts it, terrorism (even the exclusively property-damage variety advocated by Tierwater) merely 'inverts the politics of the super-rich: if the neoliberal novel displays a world in which wealthy individuals dominate political power and there is no procedural recourse, then the only political option is not collective action but the individual action of the terrorist'. Understood in these terms, one of neoliberalism's most pernicious influences has been to evacuate all possibility of anything other than the agential capacity of powerful individuals, either in terms of wealth or (as in Tierwater's case) violence. Yet while critical engagements with it have proliferated, individualism's function within economic regimes has only become more central, providing what some have seen as a decisive factor in allowing big business to avoid culpability for environmental and social injustices, while consumers take on greater responsibility for their

purchases, and, beyond that, fail to understand their own political agency in anything other than consumer terms. Judith Butler (2009: 37) has referred to this process as 'responsibilization', and one we have already seen Bondi and Laurie (2005: 399) explain via what they call the specious (though nonetheless compelling) 'fit' between political and economic freedoms. Invoking Judith Butler's idea of 'responsibilization', Mark Fisher (2009: 70) discusses the problems inherent in focusing on individual responsibility in the context of a systemic crisis: 'Instead of saying that everyone – i.e. *every one* – is responsible for climate change, we all have to do our bit, it would be better to say that no-one is, and that's the very problem'. The challenge, as Butler herself refers to it, is 'to rethink and reformulate a conception of global responsibility' (2009: 37) in order to create grounds for a collective response as yet not manifest or obvious.

For theorists like Butler and Fisher the rise of liberal individualism is perhaps the most important feature of our current mode of production, whose social, economic, and environmental contradictions are deftly concealed behind a culture of privileging individuals (and not structures) as the most important analytical focus in describing social issues. For Jameson (1981: 88), too, the modern conception of the individual is instrumental in sustaining, for example, simple diagnoses understood through 'binary oppositions of good and evil'; such binaries, Jameson claims, betray an 'ethical' structure and represent 'one of the fundamental forms of ideological thought in Western culture'. Key to such thinking, Jameson (59) suggests, is a compulsion to project as 'permanent features of human "experience," and thus as a kind of "wisdom" about personal life and interpersonal relations, what are in reality the historical and institutional specifics of a determinate type of group solidarity or class cohesion'. In the third horizon of his

analytical method, Jameson (60) informs us, his objective is to deconstruct such thinking by finding a means of “decentering” the subject concretely, and for transcending the “ethical” in the direction of the political and the collective’. In Jameson’s thinking, of course, the ‘collective’ is, as Staci Boeckmann (1998: 32) puts it, ‘the form of thinking [...] which has been effectively pushed to the netherside of our (political) unconscious’.

The word ‘ethical’ has, indeed, become closely associated with environmentalism, though more accurately with the type of environmental consumerism or ‘green liberalism’ (Steinberg 2010; Erickson 2011) which characterises the RA advert which opened this chapter. ‘Being ethical’ (choosing the right brand, avoiding certain forms of consumption, and so on) has nonetheless come to dominate mainstream environmental rhetoric, and Jameson’s comments go to the heart of the contradictions often overlooked in the environmental movement, particularly the manner in which the individual is unthinkingly freighted with responsibility, regardless of the historical and geopolitical contexts in which environmental problems inhere. As a cultural form which has emerged out of these contexts, and, which, as we have heard, speaks ‘truth to individual experience’ (Watt 1957: 13-4), the conventional novel is well positioned to reproduce these structures, though in ways which can permit confrontations with their internal (and ultimately fatal) contradictions. As Franco Moretti (2013: 14) puts it, there is ‘something ghostly’ in the history of the conventional bourgeois literature (within which I would position a novel like *Freedom*), where ‘questions disappear, and answers survive’.

In terms of conveying individual experience *Freedom* is no different, indeed, to many other novels (of our times or otherwise). However, regarding its

representation of 'individual experiences' of environmental issues, it is remarkable. With Walter in particular, along with the quotidian anxieties which come along with family life, we are repeatedly confronted with what climate change *feels* like; that is, the transfer of the weight of a global crisis onto one individual. The entire operation of *Freedom's* 'exploration', like Patty's confessional 'document' (included in full 29-186), 'attest[s] to the exhausting difficulty of figuring out [...] what was "good" and what wasn't' (378). Walter himself is, in fact, the extreme embodiment of the 'ethical' compulsion to internalise global problems:

To pass the time, Walter did mental tallies of what had gone wrong in the world in the hours since he'd awakened [...] Net population gain: 60,000. New acres of American sprawl: 1,000. Birds killed by domestic and feral cats in the United States: 500,000. Barrels of oil burned worldwide: 12,000,000. Metric tons of carbon dioxide dumped into the atmosphere: 11,000,000 (342-3).

In this passage Walter takes statistics that might in other contexts be easily deflected or misunderstood and 'feels' them – as if by sitting idle he was somehow responsible for their steady accumulation. The effect on Walter is, perversely, a calming one: the morbid and compulsive tallying bringing him 'a strange spiteful satisfaction' (343). Walter does not, of course, apportion blame solely to himself, he is driven to equal distraction by the thought of the wanton indifference he identifies in everyone and everything around him: 'The message of every single radio station was that nobody else in America was thinking about the planet's ruination' (314). Yet the way in which Walter conceives of this seemingly pandemic

obliviousness, mirrors directly the dysfunction of his personal life, his capacity to bury his head, to 'let the flower beds go to seed' in his own backyard (26). Like mental cataclysms experienced by his wife and son, it is in domestic settings that Walter images ecological catastrophe. Faced with the chance to act on his desires – to sleep with his assistant, Lalitha – he feels as if 'a chasm was opening up in front' of him, the very fabric of the world shifts and crumbles as his domestic life falters (309). These moments are crucial, I argue, to the way in which *Freedom* manages the 'feel' of the environmental problems which motivate its central character; it is in the terms of ecological catastrophe that Walter conceives and *understands* his personal crises. Personal crisis, moreover, becomes *contaminated* by the ecological, looming mysteriously and unfathomable in Walter's life, rather than as a stable or edifying horizon.

Walter and Patty's marital collapse (a consistent preoccupation in the bourgeois novel¹⁵) – is itself glacial and accumulative, and geological themes – enlarged elsewhere in the narrative in straightforward scientific terms – begin to leach into the imaginative landscape of the novel as a whole. Walter's personal disasters possess a slow, accretive violence, their manifestation a monolithic and immovable heft. So interpenetrated do they become, in fact, that it is unclear where one space ends and the other begins:

Walter was frightened by the long-term toxicity they were creating with their fights. He could feel it pooling in their marriage like the coal-sludge ponds in Appalachian valleys. Where there were really huge coal deposits, as in

¹⁵ Especially regarding its registration of shifting property relations. (See London 1999; Wynne 2010; Livingston 2012)

Wyoming County, the coal companies built processing plants right next to their mines and used water from the nearest stream to wash the coal. The polluted water was collected in big ponds of toxic sludge [...] once certain things had been said, how could they ever be forgotten again? (333)

This juxtaposition is so unavoidable, so apposite – the imaginative contamination so telling – as to tip over, at points, into farce. The two – personal catastrophe and ecological despoilment – become comically interchangeable: the personal *becomes* the part that contains the ecological whole.

“We’re heading for a catastrophe, Patty. We are heading for a total collapse.”

“Well, and, frankly, I don’t know about you, but that’s starting to sound like kind of a relief to me.”

“I’m not talking about us!”

“Ha-ha-ha! I actually didn’t get that. I truly didn’t realize what you meant.” (323)

The reverse is also true: the ecological insistently demands to be understood as the personal and familial: Patty ‘knew too well the costs at home of doing good in the world’ (515). Walter’s eventual despair at his own concern for the planet and his family, finds him declaring “I’m tired of being Mr. Good,” an admission which is immediately embodied – given a physical reality – in the ‘biotically desolate countryside’ in which Walter then stands (481). Walter’s personal dilemmas dramatize the pain of his ecological crises; his dilemmas, more accessible perhaps in domestic terms, betray the same structure of moral dilemmas as his environmental quandaries. Though ‘Lalitha was better than Patty,’ we are told, ‘he

loved Patty in some wholly other way, some larger and more abstract but nevertheless essential way that was about a lifetime of responsibility; about being a good person' (304). But this love becomes hollowed out, a sordid act of self-flagellation, seeming 'more impossible every day' (304-5). As Patty and Walter's fights become more frequent and the ecological anxieties accumulating in the background more intense, the juxtaposition of the two becomes unavoidable. During one fight, the sight of Patty's 'wild, pleading eyes' becomes 'so crestingly painful and disgusting' that it produces 'a paroxysm of cumulative revulsion at the pain they'd caused each other in their marriage' (463). The result is utter abandon, and a classic activist 'burnout' ensues: "Fuck fairness! And fuck you!" (463).

These imaginatively interpenetrated scenes are not simply aids to understanding the vast and geological scales of environmental crises, they, instead, reflect the very real politics of Walter's position, one which the novel itself cannot escape. Or rather, as Jameson (1981: 49) puts it, 'the informing power of forces or contradictions which the text seeks in vain wholly to control or master'. In many ways it is the very driving force of the book, it is part of how we are encouraged to understand our relationship with the world: as delineated by the contours of our skulls. The pattern of our personal foibles resonates across much larger horizons, they are presented as the same foibles, the same shortfalls in imagination, the same conceitedness and greed, simply enacted on a global scale. All politics, in other words, degrades into feeling.

Seen this way *Freedom* appears to find a way to convey the structural logic of the ecological problems the novel presents. We have reference points: one in the mind

and one in the landscape. Walter's failings in his family – that 'he couldn't accept that Joey wasn't like him' (149); his 'toxic' marriage; his pathologically internalised guilt for wanting to be happy – provide an analogue of the patterns of engagement he so struggles with as an environmentalist: why 'nobody else in America was thinking about the planet's ruination' (314), why he ultimately burns out, resigning himself to a weary hatred of people's incapacity for "change" (495). Walter's mistake, we learn, is to treat everyone like himself, to think that social change is simply a matter of politely spreading information about the world's problems. He is crestfallen to find that almost no-one 'feels' climate change in the same way he does. Nonetheless, Walter 'was aware, of course, that it was wrong to feel this way – if only because, for almost twenty years, in St. Paul, he hadn't' (315). And here is the major contradiction which *Freedom* cannot avoid. Though *Freedom* invests much energy in providing a way to 'feel' climate change, and in a way which actually demonstrates the difficulty in understanding structural causes, it actually reproduces the governmentality of the neoliberal subject. It also consolidates this position in its resolution. When Walter's tactics fail – both on a personal and a global level – Walter shuts down. Like his father before him, he re-enacts the terrible paradox of 'the personality susceptible to the dream of limitless freedom' as one 'also prone, should the dream ever sour, to misanthropy and rage' (445). The final chapter, indeed, sees Walter expressly avoiding 'feeling'

The other work he did--writing grant proposals, reviewing wildlife population literature, making cold calls on behalf of a new sales tax to support a state Land Conservation Fund, which had eventually garnered more votes in the 2008 election than even Obama had--was similarly unobjectionable. In the late evening, he prepared one of the five simple suppers he now bothered

with, and then, because he could no longer read novels or listen to music or do anything else associated with feeling, he treated himself to computer chess and computer poker and, sometimes, to the raw sort of pornography that bore no relation to human emotion (550).

In an attempt to escape its own contradiction, Walter and Patty's eventual rapprochement mirrors this attempt to obliterate all traces of feeling. Before one last look at the raw emotion of 'two thousand solitary nights' and the 'sum [...] of every pain they'd inflicted, every joy they'd shared', the novel's denouement marks a refocusing of attention to the 'beyond, out into the cold space of the future in which they would both soon be dead' and in which all this *feeling* 'would weigh less than the smallest feather on the wind' (559). Despite this resolution – which quite literally allows Patty and Walter to kiss and make up (559) – its symbolic function is unmistakable, a 'closure' of the very real contradictions which afflict ESMs and their activists. It is a problem which, throughout its duration, the novel itself has been uncomfortably complicit within, one which, in seeking to explore and represent the 'governmentalities' which exacerbate environmental problems only ends up reproducing them, in Watt's (1957: 13-4) terms, as 'the truth of individual experience'. Not only is this experience one in which Walter is lost – in which, as he remarks 'there's never any center, there's no communal agreement, there's just a trillion little bits of distracting noise' (218) and repeatedly laments that he does not know 'how to live' (318, 336, 557) – it is also one which forgoes a structural critique in favour of a politics based on 'feeling' alone. For, though *Freedom* can be read as, in Jameson's (1981: 88) terms, a means of "unmasking" the ethical binary opposition of good and evil as one of the fundamental forms of ideological thought in Western culture', rather than enacting a confrontation with

the structural character of environmental problems, *Freedom's* ending gestures to a nihilistic acceptance of the 'the cold space of the future in which they would both soon be dead' (559). *Freedom's* denouement cannot, in the end, escape the vortex of its own individualistic form; the note of despair on which it ends is not one that simply reflects a social reality (as Franzen might have hoped), but one which it consolidates. The aesthetic registration of such a crisis is useful (even inevitable) if we are to identify the problems with neoliberal society and move beyond them; in the next chapter, however, I ask if the novel can do more than this – to reflect or anticipate forms of resistance which are disruptive of (rather than complicit within) neoliberal politics.

3: HUNGER GAMES – Agroecology, Activism and the ‘Corporate Food Regime’

Introduction

Confronted with the omnipresent efficiency of the given system of life, its alternatives have always appeared utopian (Marcuse 2002: 258).

Alongside numerous other ‘globalised’ systems, the industrial food system arguably offers a structure of feeling analogous with Marcuse’s ‘omnipresent efficiency’. For the majority of us, especially in the Global North, food arrives in our cities, our homes, and on our plates as if by magic, delivered by systems whose reach and complexity many of us are unable (or unwilling) to comprehend. Recent attempts to explore and critique industrial foodways have regularly been situated within a critique of the neoliberal project, bracketing the large, private companies within the ‘corporate food regime’ (CFR) (McMichael 2007, 2009; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck 2011). Though the term ‘neoliberalism’ can readily degrade, as has been noted, into ‘a consolatory shibboleth for left-leaning academics’ (Heynen, *et al.* 2007: 4), this bracketing remains part of an urgent attempt to filter the vital components of food production from those which merely masquerade as such. Predicated on short-term profit motives and underwritten by a programme of trade regulation and deregulation tailored to corporate interests, it is now widely accepted among environmental scientists and sociologists that an industrial, ‘neoliberal’ food regime is environmentally and socially unsustainable – its very continuation, unthinkable.

Despite a growing concern, however, attempts to radically alter the modes of production that underpin the CFR have, as Marcuse would put it, consistently been rejected as 'utopian', even unthinkable (Aerni 2011). To critique the environmentally and socially problematic aspects of the CFR, or mobilise to prevent their consolidation, it seems, is to be caught between these two unthinkable outcomes: pointless action or fatal *inaction*. Yet, while progress has been slow, efforts to highlight and contest the environmentally and socially unsustainable elements of the CFR have powerfully demonstrated that resistance is far from impossible, and that current conditions are far from inevitable. Indeed, research suggests that the CFR is far from a fully realised project, but rather an on-going and turbulent process of capture and consolidation, as evidenced by a sharp climb in the number of so-called 'land grabs' in the Global South (Hall, *et al.* 2015). Even the actual extent and power of the CFR may be routinely overcooked; as things stand only around 30% of the 'world's food [...] comes from the industrial food chain' (ETC Group 2009: 1). While the current impact and globalising aspirations¹⁶ of the CFR is cause for urgent critique and intervention, its most salient feature is its appearance of – rather than actual – omnipresence.

The widespread but inaccurate perception of the inevitability of the CFR has not been lost on commentators. As Philip McMichael (2008: 219) suggests, 'the significance of the [alternative food] movement is that, in the narrative of capitalist

¹⁶ Though I have talked thus far of the *global* food system it is important to note the distinction between 'global' and 'world' within world-systems thinking; that is, between a *global* 'totality', and *world-view*; that is, one *globe*, many *worlds*. The CFR is far from being a globally realised phenomenon (as witnessed by the ETC Group (2009) study), yet it aspires to bring its world-view to bear on the rest of the globe. For this reason specific emphasis is placed on the global *aspirations* of the CFR, or, as Peter Hitchcock (2013: 142) puts it 'contemporary capitalism's attempted saturation of social relations'. This attempt is part of what Hitchcock (2013: 142) calls the 'the assumption that the world is a totality rather than a whole', which, as he elaborates elsewhere (2010: 89) constitutes a 'claim for globality that [is invariably] itself an illusionary, inclusionary logic of domination'.

modernity, its project is virtually *unthinkable*' [emphasis added] – at least to those who have been drawn in by what Mark Fisher (2010) describes as the specious common sense position of 'capitalist realism'. Even more fundamental than pointing to the extent of current resistance or offering concrete alternatives, one of the most powerful challenges posed to actors and institutions set on resisting the CFR are, as McMichael's comments suggest, ones of the political imagination and 'narrative'; in other words, the fostering of the belief that there *are* alternatives to prevalent developmental and production paradigms. Indeed, commentators sympathetic to this resistance 'project' have repeatedly pointed to the stifling effect of the 'narrative of capitalist modernity' on alternative and opposing narratives, especially those which promise to expose as fraudulent claims as to the inevitability of systems like the CFR.

Within this confluence of political imagination and narrative, the salience of literary contributions may already be obvious. In his work on the early history of agribusiness in South America, Michael Taussig (2010: 232) goes as far as to suggest that agrarian resistance movements 'have inspired some of the mightiest class struggles and poets of our times'. Literary engagement with these problems continues to the present day, extending our understanding of resistance movements (from both Global North and South) that call into question the sustainability and ethics of an industrial agriculture with globalising aspirations. In an effort to further explore this relationship, the following chapter will pay particular reference to two novels – Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1986) and Ruth Ozeki's *All Over Creation* (2003) – written during a crucial period in the development and consolidation of the CFR, as well as the forms of resistance which emerged to contest it. In reading them I will draw on research from the

social sciences that highlights food activists' capacity to contest the CFR and demonstrate the political and ecological advantages of alternative production systems.

Critical responses to these two novels have already acknowledged their usefulness in problematising the narratives of capitalist modernity, highlighting their use of heterogeneous narratives (Barnes 1992; Smith 2008; McHugh 2007; Carruth 2013) to configure representations of struggle around the 'real material conditions of real, living people' (Richards 2005: 29), and their focus on negative environmental consequences of the capitalist mode of production (Smith 2008; Carruth 2013). These observations, however, have yet to be effectively connected to the experience of actually existing agroecological¹⁷ resistance movements, both in the novels' particular settings, and further afield. As a result, readings of the novels to date have been unable to adequately explain the logic behind the strategies adopted by their respective protagonists; that is, resistance efforts by anti-colonial and anti-corporate groups who advocate existing outside of and/or dismantling the CFR. Both novels strikingly reflect the experience of agrarian activists during the period and (in the case of *No Telephone*) seem to anticipate the strategies needed to contest the 'rolling out' (Peck & Tickell 2002) of liberalised and global trade in food. As with previous chapters, a key assumption here is that the cultural frames deployed to represent activism have implications for social and

¹⁷ The groups under consideration in this chapter are those which mobilise in response to any or all of the above issues, though which privilege (or at least heavily emphasise) food production. In this sense I am not using 'agroecological' in the way it is sometimes deployed to describe specific agricultural techniques (Wezel, *et al.* 2009). Though my use of the term may include the advocates of such practices, I have in mind a usage broad enough to capture all forms of political action aimed at demonstrating the interconnectivity of agricultural and environmental issues. Some groups that fall comfortably within these parameters – e.g. La Via Campesina (LVC) and Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra (MST) (the second of which began by exclusively targeting land-reform issues) have only latterly become associated with (or actively opened their 'frames' to include) environmental concerns (Voss & Williams 2012: 363; Caldeira 2008: 147).

ecological relations that go beyond their particular sites of resistance. As these examples demonstrate, fiction has an important role to play in interrogating the discourses which portray environmentally destructive modes of production as inevitable, and, by doing so, in making the new possibilities for resistance visible.

3.1: Corporatism and resistance in the new world (dis)order

‘Ecology’ is not a specific part or form of crisis. It is a way of seeing the manifold expressions of the crisis today – from climate change to financialization to food sovereignty – as bundles of human and extra-human natures. (Moore 2011: 39)

In recent decades discussion around food production and distribution has outlined a worryingly expanding catalogue of problems, which, taken together, describe a system not only in crisis but increasingly toxic to the webs of life. Problems include the steady increase in the extent of global hunger (FAO 2013), the unevenness of nutritive distribution (Hawkes 2006); the volatility of food markets (de Schutter 2010); the oligopoly of corporate food production, distribution, and technology sectors (Patel 2009); ‘dietary related diseases; growing links between food and fuel economies, a “supermarket revolution”, liberalized global trade in food, increasingly concentrated land ownership, a shrinking natural resource base’ (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck 2011: 111), increasing resistance by food producers globally (McMichael 2009); as well as the disruptive impact of food production on life-supporting geological and biological systems (Garnett 2008; Nelson 2009).

The sheer range of problems, while distressing, demonstrates the need for an integrative analysis of social and ecological crises within the food system. As Moore's claim above suggests, ecology provides just this sort of inclusive frame. In a similar vein, social theorists Sonnenfeld and Mol (2011: 771) have described the current conjuncture of world crises (including those pertaining directly to food) as part of an unprecedented turbulence that they call the 'new world (dis)order'. In doing so they not only highlight the genuine severity of such crises, but how 'ever-increasing' financial, ecological and humanitarian turmoil has produced a 'world order in accelerated change' (2011: 773). Though such instability, as we saw in the previous chapter might benefit 'social actors who challenge the normative orientation at the core of modernization' (Pleyer 2015: 105), not all actors and institutions envisage change in terms of ecological and social sustainability. Against a backdrop of cascading crises in and outside the food system since the mid-1970s, the CFR (or rather the corporate sector in general) has enjoyed unprecedented growth and consolidation, transforming beyond recognition not only the planet's surface, but prevailing attitudes and relationships to food.

Though the CFR's success is due in no small part to the inherited inequalities consolidated and exacerbated by colonialism and the early capitalist world-system (as well as recent 'regulatory capture' achieved via various world trade forums (Pogge 2010: 539)), many sociologists tend to highlight the hegemonic dimensions of the CFR's continued dominance. In what has been a remarkably rapid power-shift towards the corporate sector, described by some as the 'market episteme' (McMichael 2010 and 2011; Reber 2012), where the state's ability to protect civil society from the 'ravages of the [global] market' has significantly diminished (Voss & Williams 2012: 360). It is in this context that the CFR has thrived, and, more

importantly, within which resistance groups and social movements must now also search for ways to make their presence felt. A consideration of the food crisis as envisaged here is attentive to the ways disorder associated with food production opens up new possibilities while foreclosing others (as Naomi Klein's (2007) now famous phrase 'shock doctrine' neatly denotes). This chapter looks again to fiction as a medium conducive to exploring such issues.

As with previous chapters, the novels under examination here have been chosen not only for their thematisation of agroecological resistance but also for reasons of periodisation. The mid-1980s to the early 2000s mark a crucial period in the history of industrial food production and contingent environmental issues. From the controversial 'Uruguay Round' (1986-1994) of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (during which agriculture ceased to be an 'exception' in international trade agreements (Tansey & Rajotte 2008)) to the founding of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1994 (a key forum for the consolidation and extension of a liberalised trade in food) as well as a number of other controversial policy reforms often cited as catalysts of an unprecedented wave of grassroots opposition to liberalised trade agreements (Klein 2010) culminating in the incendiary protests at the 1999 WTO Ministerial Conference in Seattle, Washington. As a number of writers have argued, not only has a 'market episteme' licensed and catalysed unprecedented environmental problems, its proponents have also tended to foreclose alternatives to market liberalism. Such imaginative foreclosure has, according to a number of theorists, created an ever more pressing need for innovative and resourceful resistance (Fisher 2009; McMichael 2010), a need, in fact, which many see strong indications of being fulfilled (McMichael 2009; Pleyer 2015).

The agroecological movement

Commentators from across the political spectrum have repeatedly acknowledged the success enjoyed in recent years by an increasingly globalised network of agroecological activists. Claims as to the success of these groups have been largely focused on factors such as membership size (Desmarais 2007), acreage of land reclaimed (Voss & Williams 2012; Caldeira 2008), number of protests staged (Giugni 2007). La Via Campesina (LVC)¹⁸, for example, has been internationally recognised for its extensive recruitment of small-scale producers. LVC now claims to represent over 200 million (LVC 2014), the adoption of its core principles into the constitutions of numerous countries – Venezuela (2008), Ecuador (2008), Bolivia (2009), Mali (2006), and Nepal (2007) – as well as its rigorous deployment of progressive governing structures (e.g. consensus decision making, quotas on female and male regional delegates, and regular regional conferences to communicate to the entire organisation the ‘reality on the ground’ (Desmarais 2007: 30). Similarly, the Landless Workers Movement (MST)¹⁹, who, according to one estimate, ‘redistributed [land] through MST-led occupations’ to 350,000 families (approximately four million people) (Voss & Williams 2012: 365). Like LVC, this success, commentators suggest, is down to effective and autonomous governance:

¹⁸ Founded in 1993, La Via Campesina describes itself as an ‘international movement which brings together millions of peasants, small and medium-size farmers, landless people, women farmers, indigenous people, migrants and agricultural workers from around the world. It defends small-scale sustainable agriculture as a way to promote social justice and dignity. It strongly opposes corporate driven agriculture and transnational companies that are destroying people and nature’ (LVC 2015).

¹⁹ Formed in 1984 MST (or ‘Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra’ in Portuguese) describes itself as ‘a mass social movement, formed by rural workers and by all those who want to fight for land reform and against injustice and social inequality in rural areas’ (MST 2015)

Intensive planning goes into each land seizure, and the MST insists that the whole process must be led and implemented by the farmers themselves. The farmers raise their own money to buy food, rent trucks, and finance the take-over (Voss & Williams 363).

Inroads into the agricultural establishment by agroecological actors and institutions have also been significant in the Global North (which technically includes LVC, representing, as it does, '183 local and national organizations in 88 countries' including many in Europe and North America (LVC 2013)). In Europe, specifically: bodies like the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) report that 'up to 50 percent of farmers are, to varying degrees, following broader or deeper rural development strategies, with many of them combining these with continued participation in conventional agricultural markets' (qtd. in Morgan, *et al.* 2006: 85).

The success of these groups, however – and of the agroecological movement more generally – cannot simply be measured in terms of members recruited or hectares cultivated. As numerous commentators suggest, attention must be paid to the political tensions generated between the CFR and advocates of agroecology. As Marx (1967: 121) once wrote, 'a rational agriculture is incompatible with the capitalist system', referring to the immanent contradiction between regimes of accumulation and sustaining finite ecological systems. Indeed, the rolling out of capitalist agronomies has left advocates of agroecological practices little choice but to organise against them. As McMichael (2011: 807) observes, 'the more states are beholden to agro-industrial interests, the more organised are environmental groups'. And, as McMichael's comments suggest, this resistance is clearly more than just an impulsive reaction. So too, Voss and Williams (2012) and Caldiera (2008), who have noted groups' success in

'reframing' their campaign foci to capitalise on key shifts in global politics, especially regarding environmental issues. Agroecological groups, these commentators suggest, have been particularly successful in providing an impressive mix of direct and indirect interventions, specifically by using land occupation as a platform for 'generative' politics. Williams and Voss (2012: 353), again, have noted that a regular feature of agroecological movements is to conceive of land reclamations as 'new spaces for practicing democracy' that prefigure a society with sustainable ecological and social governance. Such an approach allows at once a physical withdrawal from the influence of the CFR and an interrogation of its defining terms. As McMichael (2010: 238-9) suggests, perhaps the most salient contribution of groups like LVC and MST has been their insistence that 'emancipation is not simply about access to resources but the *terms* of access'. Such groups have, in short used their engagements with production regimes as a way of contesting historically ingrained power structures. Of particular interest to many commentators has been the concept of 'food sovereignty', which, in opposition to mainstream conceptions of 'food security'

places peasants' and small-scale farmer's interests at the centre. The movement argues for the fundamental shift in who defines and determines the purpose and terms of knowledge, research, science, production, technology, and trade related to food. (Desmarais 2007: 37)

Numerous other sociologists have echoed McMichael's sentiments, highlighting the capacity of these groups to register their resistance via the language or 'terms' in which their access to land is framed. As Voss and Williams (2012: 363) note, groups like MST have 'engendered an "imagined community" that frames the movement as an effort to build an alternative grounded in group norms and

expectations with moral legitimacy' (see also, Caldeira 2008: 147). For Hannah Wittman (2010: 180), contestation of 'terms of access' provides the basis for changing 'the politics of the possible and broadens horizons for action'. Adopting a similarly conceptual focus, Annette Desmarais (2007: 26) has argued that part of LVC's impact comes from the fact that they 'do not speak the same language' as actors and institutions belonging to the CFR. Again, for McMichael (2010: 11), LVC's struggle is one notable for its capacity to yield imaginative gains: by problematising what he calls 'the coherence of contemporary development claims', these struggles 'particularise the world, disclosing history and uncovering "unthinkable" possibilities'. For all these theorists, producing agricultural systems with greater equity and sustainability is dependent on the ability to *imagine* new terms on which access to land is framed, not just the way in which that land is used.

Where fictive literature thematises the history of agrarian struggle, I argue, this dynamic of imaginative subversion is often evident. For Sylvia Wynter (1971: 99), the Caribbean novel has repeatedly registered a resistance dynamic in the movement between 'plot' (i.e. land given to slaves 'on which to grow food to feed themselves') and 'plantation'. Whereas the latter unquestionably signals the production of a nation and people as an 'adjunct to the market', the former, according to Wynter (1971: 99), provides 'like the novel form in literature terms, the focus of resistance to the market system and market values'. Wynter's comparison is dependent on an understanding of the novel as 'in essence a question mark', which, though 'linked to the very existence of the market system, nevertheless [...] develops and expands as a form of resistance to this very market society'. In so doing, Wynter offers an understanding of novelistic form

capable of revealing 'that we are all, without exception still "enchanted", imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in [the market economy's] bewitched reality'. Taussig (2010: 122) also notes, in more general terms, the capacity within peasant cultural lexicon of resisting the market system by exposing capitalism as 'a magico-religious world [...] consecrated in rituals' which seek to '[affirm] its naturalness', a process which 'turns plantation crops like sugarcane into monsters or gods'. In other words, literature is championed by such writers as a means to invert attempts to position capitalism as a 'natural' or inevitable economic and political form – to reclaim the rationality and sustainability of 'peasant' socio-ecological relations and recast capital as a bewitching and dangerously contradictory force.

The Caribbean and South American examples are indeed salient; understandably, the literary output of areas markedly burdened by the emergence of the global food system over recent centuries (overwhelmingly in the Global South) have repeatedly registered the social and ecological violence of industrial-scale production regimes. The literary response in the Global North to the modern era of agricultural development has, by contrast, been less extensive (see Deloughrey, *et al.* 2005, 27ff). It is precisely this lack of scope – one which, ironically, a globalised system itself demands – that informs my reasoning in choosing two texts that span the Global North/South divide.

3.2: Michelle Cliff - *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987)

My first example is Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), particularly the narrative thread concerned with Clare Savage, a mixed-race Jamaican woman. After moving to the US as a child, and then on to the UK to pursue a university education, Clare eventually returns to her birthplace of Jamaica. Though Clare makes the move ostensibly to care for her terminally-ill mother, she soon becomes deeply involved in an effort to understand and intervene in the catalogue of problems which afflict her homeland. What Clare had previously been unable to understand or successfully ignore – e.g. Jamaica's legacy of slavery, the patchwork of canefields, bauxite mines, and tourist hotspots which have shaped the landscape in confounding uneven ways (see Sheller 2009), ongoing civil unrest, racial discrimination, and widespread malnutrition – begins to emerge to her as part of a terrible whole. Upon her return, Clare forms an association with an armed resistance group intent on purging what they see as a financially and culturally exploitative presence from the island. Clare 'donates' to the group some land once owned by her grandmother, and together they begin growing much of their own food, bartering for the rest, and planning disruptive interventions on conspicuously foreign targets.

No Telephone registers the widespread economic, social, and environmental upheaval in 1980s Jamaica and anticipates the consolidation over the coming decades of a 'market episteme' characterised by the deregulation of 'developing' production regimes to prepare them for the international market. The novel not only registers the instability and unevenness produced by such forces at the level of landscape and demography, but also in the psychological experiences of its

characters. These effects are, moreover, reflected in the novel's form – that is, a fractured, multi-perspectival narrative – through which an overall challenge to linear development paradigms is given literary flesh. *No Telephone's* narrative structure dramatises the ways in which such instability and unevenness is 'productive' of civil unrest and rebellion, though not always in coherent or organised ways (as evidenced in the actions of the novel's numerous characters). Crucially for the novel's aesthetic and formal registration of resistance, Clare's group's successes are consistently shown to be couched in an understanding of the cultural and ecological value of 'place', through which they generate and/or revive a robust understanding of themselves as activists. In so doing, *No Telephone* also reflects and anticipates the kind of resistance strategies adopted by agroecological activists over the following decades, in particular the attempt to undermine the dominance of the CFR by establishing 'new spaces for practicing democracy' (Voss & Williams 2012: 353).

Critical literature on *No Telephone* has acknowledged many of these features – highlighting the novel's non-linear narratives (Barnes 1992; Smith 2008), its representations of struggle around the 'real material conditions of real, living people', and its specific focus on negative environmental consequences of a capitalist mode of production (Richards 2005: 29). However, these observations have not yet been connected to the experience of actually existing agroecological resistance movements both in the Caribbean²⁰ and further afield. As a result,

²⁰ If can be summarised at all, agrarian struggle in the Caribbean has been characterised by robust and wide-ranging (though not always successful) defence of small-scale farming systems, especially where threatened by the encroachment of transnational food regimes, most notably in the case of Windward bananas (Torgerson 2010 and Fridell 2011). In addition, Caribbean agronomists have also been noted for their agroecological tendencies, deploying 'local knowledge' (Beckford and Barker 2007) and adaptive 'innovation' (Beckford 2002) at the local level to mitigate increased agro-environmental stresses.

these readings have been unable to adequately explain the logic underpinning the strategies adopted by Clare and her comrades; that is, the logic which motivates resistance groups from anti-colonial and anti-corporate groups who seek to exist outside of and/or actively dismantle the CFR. *No Telephone* strikingly reflects the experience of agrarian activists during the period and anticipates the strategies they would need to adopt following the rolling out of liberalised, global trade in food.

Restructuring and instability

The context of Clare's story is – appropriately for a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) in the 1980s – defined, as I have noted, by the instability and unevenness characteristic of the 'market episteme'. As Clare herself observes, 'There are no facts in Jamaica. Not one single fact. Nothing to join us to the real. Facts move around you. Magic moves through you' (92). Clare's reference to the forces of 'magic' within this instability is the felt effect of what Caribbean economist C. Y. Thomas (1974: 108) called the 'neocolonial mode of production', characterised by the deep-running alienation of production and consumption regimes. More recently, the Caribbean has been noted for its 'complex, polymorphic, and multiscale regulatory geographies' (Brenner 2004: 67), ones which 'undercut or even contradict local self-determination and place specificity' (Sheller 2009: 197). The attempt to outline the cultural and psychological dimensions to the experience of neoliberal restructuring is common in the sociological literature. As Cecilia Green (2007: 45) suggests,

small developing nations find themselves always operating with a kind of Du Boisian 'double consciousness'. On the one hand, they must be alert to the hegemonic reality that not only are they peripheral to world trade negotiations, but they are also among the acted-upon objects of these negotiations.

The general experience across the region of, *inter alia*, Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPS), the influence on developmental paradigms of the 'Washington Consensus' (Moon 2011; Richardson & Nwenya 2013), and the specific examples of locally-felt deregulatory catastrophes (e.g. the demise of the Commonwealth sugar trade and Windward Island banana production (Richardson & Nwenya 2013; Fridell 2011)) fit this pattern of far reaching instability and convey the disappointment of the hopes that globalisation would deliver positive outcomes like access to land and freedom of movement for all. According to numerous commentators, despite massive foreign direct investment the legacy of globalisation in the region has been inconsistent, characterised by concentrated wealth, an increasingly precarious labour force, spiralling crime rates, and widespread environmental damage (Girvan 1970; Green 2007; Moon 2011).

Indeed, this sense of being 'acted-upon' by external forces is, for many commentators, a commonplace in the literature of the region. For example, Michael Niblett (2012: 23) draws a specific relation between 'the imposition of cash-crop monocultures' which 'reorganize and defamiliarize the existing socio-ecological unity' and the 'use of elements of the schizophrenic, the delirious, and the fantastical' in related literature, in order to evidence the aesthetic registration of 'the unreal quality of a reality thoroughly imprinted by external forces'. *No*

Telephone not only narrativises the psychologically bewildering experience of these globally-imposed restructurings and their uneven outcomes, but also runs counter to such developmental paradigms in the very arrangement of its narrative. Clare's journey is conspicuously non-linear: the story begins neither at the onset nor prior to Clare's identity crisis, but with her already involved in a group intent on seizing power back from transnational organizations. The narrative continues by crisscrossing over the stories of other characters, each uniquely afflicted by the ravages of post-colonial Jamaica, periodically returning to Clare. This technique suggests not a classic *bildung* development, but an uncovering of a hidden past, an experience made literal in the founding acts of the group's settlement. As the group clear the land they have reclaimed, they uncover not only 'bones of people in unmarked graves' – in a gruesome intimation of some forgotten colonial-era atrocity – but also uncover a hidden agricultural history of crops which had 'been planted long before' like 'Cassava. Afu. Fufu. Plantain.' (11). To go back – back to the land, roots, and foodways of Clare's ancestors – becomes at once a subversive and positive (though definitively non-linear) development.

Recognition of the applicability of 'uneven development' in understanding the history and geography of capital accumulation in the Caribbean has been widespread (Girvan 1970; Thomas 1974; Sheller 2009). *No Telephone*, too, provides an insight into this dynamic, registering Jamaica's agro-industrial patterns as part of world-systems phenomenon, as Franco Moretti (2000: 56) would say, 'simultaneously one, and unequal'. The farm, for example, which (with Clare's permission) the resistance group 'reclaims', has, we are told, been left 'to *ruination*' (8). According to the epigraph in chapter one, *ruination* denotes 'lands which were once cleared for agricultural purposes and have now lapsed back into

... “bush”, and is an ‘all-too-frequent sign on the Jamaican landscape, despite population pressure on the land’ (1). Though *ruination* might in some cases be rightly viewed as environmentally beneficial (especially depending on who is using the word), here it is instead suggestive of humanitarian and environmental problems which have simply been displaced to other parts of the island. As the epigraph suggests, ‘population pressure’ on the island in general was high, hinting at the numerous negative outputs associated with acute urbanisation. What has been left behind may be thriving in ecological terms (in the sense that it is now an ‘unhumaned place’), however, it is clear that what it replaced was an agricultural approach in many ways preferable to industrial-scale production. The now overgrown ‘hillside of coffee and shade trees’, for example, references a form of coffee cultivation highly regarded among agricultural ecologists (Beer 1992) and the loss of ‘precious, delicate coffee bushes’ and the garden of ‘carefully planned flowers, a devotion of fifty years’ registers the loss – now two generations removed – of valuable agroecological knowledges. Moreover, what was once a farm which might have provided food and employment to a rural population – thereby easing concentrated urban population impacts – is now outwardly inhospitable to human life: ‘there was no forgiveness in this disorder’, only rats and starvation (9). The displacement of rural populations (as well as the loss of knowledges best suited to ecological safeguarding) is, in Neil Smith’s (2008: 6) terms, part of the ‘geographical pattern of capital accumulation’. Clare’s grandmother’s farm – transformed into yet another ‘abandoned [remnant] of capital’ – is yet another sign of this process. Using Trotsky’s concept of ‘uneven development’, Smith (2008: 167) has argued that the ‘rhythms’ and ‘patterns’ of ‘capital accumulation’ are invariably inscribed into the landscape itself, where one sees not only the ‘flow’ of capital concentration but also its ‘ebb’ in the ‘abandoned remnants of capital which

have been rendered valueless’.

Like the uneven geographical distribution of wealth across Jamaica, textual evidence of the urban counterparts to rural decline is dispersed irregularly throughout *No Telephone*. It is up to readers, for example, to notice the interdependence of rural ghost towns and the ‘Dungle’ slums, where we are shown ‘women and children jammed together’ among ‘mountains of garbage’, rife with ‘white ringworm’ and starving children, ‘their legs and arms, bent into bows’ (32). Instead of a landscape organized via the greater equity characteristic of the ‘plot’ system (Wynter 1971) *No Telephone* depicts a Jamaica with concentrated social and ecological problems, and not merely in terms of depravation; Jamaica’s wealth concentrations are also shown to be brittle and precarious. When ‘Mas’ Charles’ and his family are murdered by their employee, Christopher (‘who sometimes tended the yard for them’ (27)), the act is a direct consequence of concentrated land ownership. Approaching his ‘master’ in the hope of being granted “a lickle piece of lan” (48), Christopher is deranged by his master’s refusal, killing the entire family in their home. Even though, we are told, he ‘could not have said why’ he did it (48), Christopher’s interaction with food immediately following the murders provides a telling insight. Christopher doesn’t simply kill his victims, he also brutally mutilates their bodies, and it is food – or rather his employer’s abundant stores – which provide the cathetic focus for Christopher’s actions. After smashing ‘jars of food he had never tasted’ and eating some bacon and eggs, Christopher then castrates his employers’ already dead bodies with a broken bottle of ‘Appleton Estate’ (49). Christopher – in incoherent and violent actions, if not reasoned words – articulates the terrible effects of his alienation from the land and from food production, ‘exacting not just silence but obliteration’ (48) upon

those instrumental in perpetuating his life of deprivation and oppression.

Christopher's spontaneous and violent revenge is strikingly reminiscent of numerous instances of civil unrest throughout recorded history where deep-running political grievances get projected onto materials symbolic of inequality and dispossession. In its spectacular juxtaposition of moral outrage and widespread looting, the 'London Riots' of 2011 provide perhaps the most recent example; though this is by no means a strictly contemporary phenomenon. In his discussion of 'La Violencia' – the Colombian civil war from 1948 to 1958 – Taussig (2010: 82) refers to eyewitness accounts of insurgents targeting 'the stores of the political chiefs who ran the town', noting that instead of attacking people, 'they took sugar, rice, candles, soap.' As Taussig suggests, though 'this was not an organized uprising', it was nonetheless

a spontaneous outburst of the people, led by years of humiliation and outrage [...] founded on generations of oppression and clearly focused morally. The *pueblo* was always ruled from the outside and from the top down. There were no formal organizations that the people could call their own. Small wonder that when the levees of state control gave, the flood that had been mounting for years poured wildly, taking with it the goods that not so many years before the people had prepared on their own plots (82).

The parallels between this incident, the London Riots, and Christopher's violent reprisals are remarkable, connected by their protagonists' attempts to redress conspicuous inequality and the unevenness of capital accumulation by targeting

the material symbols of that inequality.²¹ Such behaviour, as Taussig puts it, is ‘led by years of humiliation and outrage’ unacknowledged by the actors and institutions of state control. However, as all these examples of misdirected energy demonstrate, one of the chief obstacles to translating social unrest into lasting change is organisation. Lack of organisation among the poorest and least empowered demographics is invariably over-determined: top-down repression, restrictions on the independent organisation of labour, extreme poverty, and the relative invisibility of accumulation regimes might each individually be sufficient to disrupt the often ephemeral organisational structures of democratic social movements. It is the latter of these, however, which *No Telephone* helps to demonstrate; that is, the degree to which the operation of oppressive and toxic production regimes can go unnoticed, even by those standing right next to them. During a key scene, Harry/Harriet (a transgendered friend of Clare instrumental in alerting her to the possibilities of resistance), remarks that “‘There is a vast cane field right behind us. Less than ten yards from our blessed bodies is cane. Do you know what went on, what happened along those avenues?’” (131). Harry/Harriet refers of course to slave-labour regimes which have since disappeared from the island, traceable only now in the ‘ruins’ of the old plantation house (132). Their inability to see these ruins serves not only to highlight the impressive size of the cane, but the political import of its capacity to conceal: the cane acts as both a physical and mental barrier to political contestation, it being ‘too high’ and

²¹ It is important here to note that though these incidents reveal interesting similarities they are not equivalent. The hyper-consumer culture underpinning the behaviour witnessed during the ‘London Riots’ of 2011, for example, was evidently not a factor during ‘La Violencia’, where the recent and rapid dispossession and proletarianisation of Colombian peasants was likely the most significant causal component of the unrest. That said, likenesses in cultural experience can emerge out of very different social contexts and cultural formations. The point in view here, as Niblett (2012: 19) summarises, is that their ‘simultaneity is (borrowing Ernst Bloch’s formulation) the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous [...] In other words, for any location integrated into the world-system, the shared experience of capitalist modernization provides “a certain baseline of universality [...] even as this experience is lived differently across different locations”’.

consisting of 'sharp, sharp ... blades' liable to 'slice fine' one's legs should one attempt to walk through them for a closer look (131). As the 'ruins' suggest, the machinations of big capital are more than simply screened from view with *physical* barriers, but hide also within the shifting rhythms of capital accumulation. As Harriet/Harry goes onto say "'t'ings not so different now. Do you know what happens on this island still?" (132). For on the same site sits a 'new landlord', and instead of slaves it is now the 'lives of cutters, of timekeepers' (132) which endure the inequities of later iterations of (to use C. Y. Thomas's (1974: 108) phrase) the 'neocolonial mode of production'. The old plantation house may be in ruins, but the exploitative power relations remain, transferred, concealed, and legitimized in the commercial respectability of the CFR.

What *No Telephone* does consistently is to show the effect of this encounter *upon* Clare. When Harry/Harriet shows concern towards the end of her 'tirade' that she is 'preaching', another (132), subtler barrier to social change is highlighted. That is, the operation of propriety vis-à-vis processes of political radicalisation. In a moment similar to the renunciation of resistance by other characters in the book, Clare herself admits that the conversation about the sugar trade 'is too morbid', and attempts to return to her day of recreation on the beach (132). However, just at the point at which Harry/Harriet's political indignation looks set to fall on deaf ears, 'his words', we are told, began to reach Clare 'through levels of consciousness' (132). As Clare will discover, to enjoy one's time in Jamaica (or anywhere in the world) becomes extremely difficult following the kind of physical and conceptual encounter she has with the canefields. Indeed, in the next scene we are back again with Clare in the truck that is carrying her toward the armed intervention that provides the climax to the novel. At this juncture, Clare reflects on

the 'impatience spoken to herself' and the desperate question of 'what am I supposed to do about it?' which 'her friend's talk of the canefields' later elicited (132-3). The presentation of the tangled patterns in space and time of the CFR are given apposite mirroring in the process of Clare's radicalization, one which involves extensive and often non-linear process of personal development. Once again the novel does not merely register Jamaica's environmental and social problems in *what* it says, but *how* it says it; i.e. at a formal level.

'New spaces for practicing democracy'

No Telephone presents injustice and political instability in such a way that resistance seems not only possible, but inevitable. While intent on maintaining a critical distance from the 'forms of organizational accumulation that involve dispossession and death' (Banerjee 2008: 1542) which operate in the region, Clare's group are often shown to be in the vortex of its most volatile and destructive processes. For example, we learn that the group grow marijuana in order to fund their interventions, reflecting the very real way in which the enclosure of Jamaica's agricultural resources, infrastructures, and labour forces by the CFR has created perverse incentives for illegal drug rather than food production, further destabilising the region via gang violence and food shortages (Griffith & Munroe 1995). Despite the group's complicity in the drug market, the conspicuous withdrawal of the group does – as Sylvia Wynter's (1971: 95) comments suggest – nonetheless permit an alternative space which becomes 'the focus of resistance to the market system and market values' simply in being external to it; it is here – outside industrial food ways – that new politics and identities can develop.

Conversely, for those not consciously or deliberately 'outside' the system, options for resisting are frequently portrayed as limited or distorted. The story of Clare's family, for example, is one littered with details of how the spirit of resistance can be stifled or forgotten. When the family move to America, fleeing 'bad debts and racetrack losses', their life there soon becomes an exercise in turning a blind eye to racial prejudice, with Clare's father (provocatively named 'Boy Savage') hoping to pass as a white man and avoid friction between his family and the country that has, he says, "give[n] us a home" (102). His name at least gives some indication of his difficulty in this regard, coding him as always already both submissive and wild. Boy takes a particularly dim view of "the burgeoning civil rights movement" (103) – then ongoing in the US – seeking to 'distract' Clare's attention away from it in fear that to engage such issues would be "to labor forever as an outsider" (102). Clare's mother, Kitty, is less satisfied with the conditions she finds in the US, though does not have much more success in contesting the injustices she encounters. After long enduring the racism of her laundry service employer (and of US culture more broadly), Kitty begins writing anonymous and seditious notes secreted in their customers' freshly laundered clothes. One reads 'EVER TRY CLEANSING YOUR MIND OF HATRED?' (78) and later, 'WHITE PEOPLE CAN BE BLACK-HEARTED' (81). The acts appear to herald the emergence of rebellious intent, and, indeed, Kitty initially reports feeling 'free' and 'released' (83). These feelings are short-lived, however; after finding some of the notes, the proprietor, Mr B., proceeds to dismiss two of Kitty's colleagues. As a woman of lighter complexion and of a safer, 'exotic' (74) origin, Kitty is overlooked as the perpetrator; Mr B. will not even believe her when she confesses: "A nice girl like you? ...No. No, I can't believe that" (84). For Kitty the episode is catastrophic,

leading her to see her rebellion in retrospect as ‘an act of luxury’ that condemned two of her colleagues to destitution (84). She promptly leaves the job and soon after returns to Jamaica, her fires of rebellion permanently extinguished.

Whether it is Christopher’s violent and unfocused revenge, the Savages’ aborted attempts to realise political agency, or any other instances of the strangled spirit of rebellion, *No Telephone*’s fragmented structure repeatedly posits these examples in direct conversation with the novel’s actually existing forms of resistance. As one episode of failed resistance ends, we are always brought back (however briefly) to Clare – ‘in the present moment’ – actively seeking out a workable model of resistance which would overcome the doubts, inertia, and incoherence that afflicts *No Telephone*’s other characters. As ‘memory crosses memory crosses memory’ (92) this conversation deepens. While complications inevitably arise concerning the precise forms and strategies which should comprise such resistance, *to resist* takes on the obviousness and insistence of an ontological predicate: ‘*Resistez*. What else was there?’ (113). Despite the sheer weight of the problems Claire encounters, this is a strong and spiring attitude; as Christopher Rootes (2003: 256) suggests, ‘given the inherent conflicts between the requirements of economic development and human interests in the protection of the environment, it is difficult to imagine a future in which there is neither reason nor will to protest’.

Clare’s inclusion into the group is precipitated by Harry/Harriet’s appeals ‘to do something besides pray for the souls of our old women’ (160), to ‘come home’ and ‘work to make [Jamaica] change’ (127). However, the reason why her engagement is sustained is more than just a result of these invitations. Instead, a tightly developed language around pluralist identity provides a conceptual grounding for

Clare's actions. Crucial within this is the notion that the group must withdraw to a space consciously exterior to mainstream society and the immediate influence of 'market values' in such a way that allows alternative social relations and identity narratives to emerge. In direct contrast to the sense of self Clare's father has encouraged in her – of a 'girl taught to conceal unsettling evidence of herself' (157) – signifiers of (sometimes tangled) origins are dealt with differently by the group. Though Clare, as a 'light-skinned woman, daughter of landowners [...] Carib, Ashanti, English', is well aware that she sits 'alongside people who easily could have hated her' (5), the ethos to which the group aspire works to diffuse (rather than reproduce and aggravate) these differences. Their success in this regard is of huge significance, for, in cooperating, the group has overturned what, 'as part of this small nation' is allegedly only 'to be expected'; that any attempt to 'to escape' the intensely divided society of contemporary Jamaica would mean 'taking your life into your own hands' or 'crashing through barriers positioned by people not unlike yourself. People you knew should call you brother and sister' (4-5).

The decision by Clare and her group to withdraw from everyday procedures of consumption and production comes at great expense. Indeed, it stands as a perfect example of what Doug McAdam (1986: 76) calls 'high-risk' activism; that is, where the 'anticipated dangers – whether legal, social, physical, financial, and so forth – of engaging in a particular type of activity' are heightened. McAdam's (1986: 76) analysis of the process of recruitment into activist groups, among other things, reveals the importance of processes of identification: 'activists are expected to be more integrated than nonactivists into networks, relationships, or communities that serve to "pull" them into activism'. McAdam's description neatly

echoes *No Telephone's* representation of the group's effort to sustain itself through the appropriation, or even active creation, of resistance identity narratives which foster the spirit of collective opposition. Often it is simple, material signifiers like uniforms or other military paraphernalia that allow the group to validate the *idea* of their collaboration: 'signifying some agreement, some purpose [...] in these clothes, at least, they appeared to blend together' (4). Yet via the collective storytelling of shared 'appearance' and 'purpose' that their uniforms encode, the group is able to reach something much more significant. Not only do the uniforms connect them to a history of 'real freedom fighters, like their comrades in the ANC' (7), but also the naked immediacy and urgency of their own struggle: 'it was never only a matter of appearance, symbol. Not at all. [...] the whole damn blasted t'ing – a matter of survival' (5).

As activists in a SIDS, Clare's group find themselves in a context of rapid symbolic and geographical reorganisation. For example, the Jamaican tourist advertisement promising 'A WORLD OF CULTURE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES' (6) offers a jarring reminder of the very real ways in which the island was (and is) being opened up to foreign investment and tourism while excluding others lacking the requisite wealth, power, and race profiles. That said, Clare's group are not in simple 'realist' opposition to what Niblett (2012: 23) calls the 'irreal quality of a reality thoroughly imprinted by external forces', they are themselves equally invested in their own symbolic reconfigurations: the 'uniforms', 'khaki', and 'camouflage jackets' worn 'in strict rotation' (7) by the group's members also use symbolic power to produce a material and 'felt' reality of their own. The uniforms, we are told, 'added a further awareness, a touch of realism, cinematic verité, that anyone who eyed them would believe they were faced with *real* soldiers' (7). Yet the group not only appropriate

and subvert military modes of representation – revitalising a ‘cinematic verité’ already ‘screenplayed to death’ by cultural institutions of global cultural hegemony – they begin to ‘feel’ their effects, for ‘that *is* what they were, what they *felt* they were, what they *were* in fact’: ‘real freedom fighters’ (7).

Like the attempts by South American activists to expose the ‘magico-religious [...] rituals’ (Taussig 2010: 122) of free-market capitalism (such as wage-labour, private property, and capital accumulation), Clare’s group cannot simply assert their perspective as ‘capital-T-Truth’, but rather as itself a constructed world-view. As we saw with the Rainforest Alliance ‘Follow the Frog’ advert, activism is invariably a highly contested site of presentation and *re*-presentation. *No Telephone*, too, embraces rather than conceals such symbolic power plays, and as the novel progresses its very form repeatedly reminds us of (and reflects) this paradigm. As Clare tells us later on,

she is composed of fragments. In this journey she hopes is her restoration. She has travelled far. Courted escape. Stopped and started. Some of the details of her travels may pass through her mind as she stands in the back of this truck – No Telephone to Heaven. She may interrupt her memory to concentrate on the instant, on the immediate and terrible need (87).

Reading *No Telephone* rehearses the experience of Clare’s journey toward ‘her restoration’. As readers, we too have ‘stopped and started’, witnessing ‘the details of her travels pass through her mind’, themselves repeatedly ‘interrupt[ed]’ by the ‘immediate and terrible need’ of the cause she has devoted herself to. The effect is to trace a development which is antithetical to the linear logic that dominates not

only conventional literary narratives, but the myths of capital accumulation and growth. As one of Clare's comrades suggests later on, 'if you have been here for the last two years, then you will realize all progress is backward' (195). Clare's psychological experience and the anti-teleological, achronological movement of her narrative testify to this realization: that capital is dependent on enchantment, advertising linear growth and transcendence while concealing an 'uneven' trail of booms, busts, and shifting commodity frontiers. In order to escape this enchantment, to confront the reality of capital's spatio-temporal (and social) unevenness, the group withdraw. In doing so, not only do they discover greater freedom to experiment with identity narratives (beyond the gravitational pull and distortion of market values), but to find in that movement a physical focal point for their critique of capitalism: a sense of place.

Place

As we have already seen with LVC and MST, the diminishing of the nation-state's political potency (especially in the case of SIDS) left discontented and marginalized groups little choice but to establish new spaces for practicing democracy, outside globalised and liberalised markets. Where once members of civil society might have expected the state to intervene between them and the deleterious consequences of unfettered trade and industry, the neoliberal period has seen state actors and institutions increasingly less able (or willing) to do anything to curtail market appetites. Caribbean intellectuals and the region's political mainstream over recent decades, suggest Richardson and Nwenya, overwhelmingly advocated to 'trade away direct support' for previously lucrative

regional agricultural staples like sugar 'in favour of a transnational development strategy focused on the circulation of foreign money into the economy through tourism, banking and overseas remittances' (2013: 275). As we have already heard, the 'market episteme' combined with escalating environmental problems to create productive conditions for reconceiving and reimagining political action. For MST specifically, the lack of options regarding land-access forced the group to refocus their campaigns to include the environmental issues contiguous with concentrated land ownership (Caldeira 2008). The same hefty combination of social and environmental stresses can be seen in the way Clare and her group approach their own predicament. On the one hand the environment provides an effective lens to critique the detrimental effects of global industries in and around their homeland, and on the other their 'sense of place' (and its cultural and environmental fragility) provides the basis to reimagine and rekindle political resistance.

After returning to Jamaica Clare immediately visits her grandmother's farm, given, we are told, 'that she had to start somewhere' (171-2). For Clare, her sense that this is a journey of historical and cultural (as well as self-) discovery is repeatedly underlined. As Clare explores the grounds and the house which was 'once the centre of their life in this place', so extreme has the place descended into '*ruination*' that 'it seemed to exist no longer' (172). As Clare wanders deeper into the undergrowth she is able to uncover not only the physical remains of the house but also vivid memories, ones which consolidate her sense of the place's importance. While contemplating a section of the river traditionally used by washerwomen, suddenly the 'importance of this water came back to her. Sweet on an island surrounded by salt' (172). In exploring her family's land, a strong

environmental sensibility begins to develop. It is not just her memories, indeed, but her grandmother's and her mother's too, which Clare is able to channel. Speaking to Harry/Harriet, Clare talks of her mother's "passion of place. Her sense of the people", adding "it was where she was alive, came alive, I think. She knew every bush ... its danger and its cure" (173). As the passage continues more and more memories of the place (its names and idiosyncrasies, its ecological and geological features) build toward a heightened concern for its vulnerability – and not just to being forgotten, but to the toxic effects of industry. At one point Clare's mind suddenly turns to consider 'how efficiently the chemical in the striped drum could strip her mother's landscape' (174). In this comparison Clare rearticulates the link between place and the struggle against those who profit from environmental despoilment.

That said, during her initiation into the resistance group Clare and her unnamed interviewer debate the political significance of understanding the *history* of place:

You know then that the rivers run red ... and the underground aquifers are coloured ... from the waste from the bauxite mines and the aluminium refineries? We do not speak of past here, but present, future. These things are connected ... women wash in it. Men fish from it ... the waste leaches into the land [...] *what good is your history to a child with bone cancer [...]*?
(195 [emphasis added])

Clare does well to convince her interviewer of the value of 'past' – simply answering, 'My history brought me to this room' (195). The passage as a whole demonstrates the straightforward subversive power in pointing out that heavy

industry, the environment, and the deterritorialized poor 'are connected' (195).

The apparent disagreements generated between Clare and her interviewer are not only part of the group's apparently rigorous vetting procedures, but part-and-parcel of the group's deliberate heterogeneity. The group's position on land occupation, for example, is developed through these discussions. Much more than a simple battle for control of a resource, it emerges as a bold articulation of a collective politics facing-off against a prevalent logic of private property. Collective governance, for all its democratic value, is a notoriously fraught affair – *all* parties must be satisfied, not just majority shareholders. The result is a recurrent (and productive) discursive tension. Alongside this, Clare is anxious that her grandmother's intentions for the land to be used 'to feed people' be respected, citing her 'communist' heritage (189). It is clear that Clare expects some kind of change in social relations and environmental sustainability to flow from the formal change made to the way land is owned and used; this is what Clare had been 'given to understand' (189). The ends the group's representatives plan to realise, however, appear much less straightforward. 'We do not offer the standard form of nourishment' they suggest, euphemistically. While the land may eventually be redistributed and food grown for collective good, they confess that such activities are 'not our main purpose' (189).

One way of seeing these disagreements is as part of complications that arise when an attempt is made to contest and dislodge paradigms of private ownership. While Clare is exploring her grandmother's farm she recalls with 'shame' an altercation she initiated with 'a dark woman' for using her 'grandmother's river' (173). Rather than take offence, the woman, we are told, merely 'screamed

laughter in response, telling Clare 'only Massa God could *possess* river' (173 [emphasis added]). 'Possession' as a means for understanding place occurs more than once, and in ways which work to undermine straightforward notions of private land ownership. Clare's sister, for example, when describing the overgrown condition of her grandmother's land, suggests that now 'it possess itself' (105), reminding us of the indomitable state to which all land inevitably inclines. On another occasion, Clare is talking with one of the few remaining residents in her grandmother's village about Jamaica's financial problems. Following food shortages and price hikes, the woman reports rumours that 'the IMF might *repossess* the country' (187 [emphasis added]). Possession in this context reflects not only the extent to which SIDS like Jamaica were 'owned' by foreign powers (state or market driven) which have historically sought to exploit their natural resources, but how such a trend has been made possible via an ideological contest akin to sorcery. Once again, *No Telephone's* portrayal of Jamaica as a place which has been systematically duped into 'trading away' its independence – where there is, as a result, '[n]othing to join us to the real. Facts move around you. Magic moves through you' (92) – is structured via a language of enchantment, both on the part of transnational capital and their activist adversaries. Clare's response is to offer a subversive counterpoint to the chimeric abstraction of global capital: to foster and reclaim a sense of self and community dependent not on the logic of capital accumulation and private ownership, but on an environmentally and socially equitable interaction with 'place', whether in agricultural terms or otherwise.

Though land access is key in this search for an alternative politics, it is not its end point. As McMichael (2010: 238-9) puts it, 'emancipation is not simply about

access to resources but the *terms* of access'. Land provides an effective means to understand and critique the 'terms of access' that currently dominate, but to actually change these terms is repeatedly linked to a broader culture of resistance. 'Chapter VII', entitled 'Magnanimous Warrior!', describes the indigenous figure vital in the broader search for a resistance identity robust enough to contest the 'neocolonial mode of production' (Thomas 1974: 108) and the rekindling of new identity via place. The 'Magnanimous Warrior' provides an obvious vehicle for a number of features of *No Telephone's* resistance politics. She is, firstly, in imminent danger of being forgotten. 'What has become of this warrior?', the narrator asks, 'Her children have left her. Her powers are known no longer' (164). Moreover, as she fades from cultural memory she becomes, we are told, sick and powerless, 'her bag of magic' (164) having been stolen from her. To rekindle knowledge of her is shown to be urgently political, as part of an attempt to roll back the beguiling effects of the magico-religious rituals of globalised capitalism that have displaced her. She is, secondly, the embodiment of the collective: she can 'cure', 'kill', 'give jobs', and protect 'her children' from disease; she is 'magnanimous' (164). Thirdly, hers is a form of governance rooted in 'place': she 'knows the ground' (163) intimately, and in a way antithetical to the unevenness of capitalist resource exploitation. Her knowledge of flora and fauna is democratic, totalising, and encyclopedic: she 'brews the most beautiful tea from the ugliest bush' (163) and 'treats cholera with bitterbush' (164). More than this, she *is* 'place', and creates it: 'she is River Mother. Sky Mother' (164). But most powerfully of all, in combining all these elements she provides a model for resistance identity. The Magnanimous Warrior is known for her capacity to act decisively, to turn 'her attention to the evildoer', to '[burn] the canefield', and to '[trump] and [wheel] counterclockwise around the power-stone' (163-4). She is, in short, a 'warrior', the

embodiment of action and countermovement.

Clare's group's interest in this figure becomes explicit in *No Telephone's* final chapter. The journey we have intermittently glimpsed throughout the novel – which has, indeed, structured the various stories which make up *No Telephone* as 'interrupt[ions]' into her 'memory [of] immediate and terrible need' (87) – is toward a film set. The film being shot there, it becomes clear, is a crude travesty of Caribbean folkloric traditions, many of which have been mentioned (often in passing) during *No Telephone*. A young actress wearing a 'pair of leather breeches and a silk shirt' plays 'Nanny', in jarring contrast to the latter's description in other sources as 'an old woman naked except for a necklace made from the teeth of whitemen' (206). Another figure, 'Cudjoe', traditionally a 'tiny humpbacked soul' is played by 'a strapping man, former heavyweight or running back' (206). The cultural authenticity of the film is clearly not a priority; instead, the film's greater concern appears (unsurprisingly, perhaps) to channel the exotic appeal of the Caribbean for profit. Such a scenario is indeed in keeping, again, with cultural commentators on the region, critical of such 'carefully spatialized and curated stages, [which] attempt to secure a generic, deterritorialized Caribbean of desire through modes of performance' (Tittley qtd. in Sheller 2009: 197). The film, as Clare's group no doubt see it, amounts to the expropriation and enclosure of their identity, ethnicity and culture into the circuits of capital; their resistance to it is accordingly part of an attempt to reappropriate a precious cultural symbol from those who would likely diminish and dilute its power to inspire resistance.

The group's attack on the film set ends in failure: they are betrayed by local mercenaries and die in a hail of bullets. Understandably, this ending has troubled

some critics. In their book, *Borders, Exiles, Diasporas*, Elazar Barkan and Marie-Denise Shelton (1988: 231) ask, 'How are we to read this paradoxical defeat at the moment of agency?' An obvious answer might be to read the group's betrayal and death as a form of political resignation. An alternative answer emerges, however, by placing the novel in contemporaneous contexts of agroecological resistance. Though bleak, the ending acknowledges the huge obstacle posed to agroecological activists by neoliberal regimes. The decision to have the group attack a film crew rather than an organisation more directly linked to the environmental and social despoilment of the island also signals the crucial material significance of representation – and the conflict of representation – that governs and influences environmental politics. As discussed above, the film crew's representation of Nanny and other folkloric figures can be seen as utterly inimical to a culture of resistance that the group are energetically attempting to protect and revive.

The group's actions should also be seen in light of the approaches adopted and evolved by agroecological activists over the coming years. The group reflect what was, at the time, an emergent anti-corporate resistance (the MST and their land occupations only began in 1984). *No Telephone* articulates with prescience the type of calculated political withdrawal and ideological refocusing that would become increasingly necessary over coming decades. In having the insight and imagination to combine social and environmental critiques, to envisage a coalition of interests contesting a world-historical power, and to depict the instrumental role played in this by traditional knowledges, *No Telephone* enlarges a tendency which was only then in its infancy. 'They were', we hear early on, 'making something new, approached not without difficulty, with the gravest opposition' (5). Over the

coming decades groups would begin to organise as never before, echoing the approaches advocated by Clare and her group.

Precisely in an attempt to track this development, the next novel under examination is set deeper within the 'market episteme', both chronologically (i.e. later), but also geographically; that is, from the perspective of an increasingly globalised resistance, one which began at the periphery of the world-system, but found its way increasingly toward its centre.

3.3: Ruth Ozeki - *All Over Creation* (2003)

Published in 2003, telling a story set just before the WTO Ministerial Conference in 1999, Ozeki's *All Over Creation* provides one of the few literary treatments of contemporary agroecological resistance within the agricultural regimes of the Global North. The story concerns a farming family in rural Idaho who, by virtue of their commitment to organic potato farming, attract the attention of an 'anarcho-environmental' resistance group called 'the Seeds of Resistance'. The farmers, Lloyd and Momoko Fuller, are both elderly and burdened with ill-health, Lloyd having recently been diagnosed with stomach cancer and Momoko with dementia. 'The Seeds' arrive on the farm with the intention of learning from the Fullers, helping them keep their farm and its subsidiary 'seed-saving' network alive, and contesting the use of GMOs in the area. The story draws heavily on elements from what is described by one character as the 'American farming crisis' (228), a phenomenon characterised by falling agricultural populations, centralisation of farming systems, marginalisation of traditional agricultural techniques (e.g. 'biological' rather than 'chemical' pest and disease control methods, seed saving, crop rotations, low-energy inputs, etc.), as well as the steady intensification of various agro-ecological stresses (Abelson 1992; Rosenberg 2010; Mayer 2013). The two parties come together across a substantial gap of cultural and political difference to unite against the forces of the CFR that threaten the lifestyles and politics espoused by both.

Critical responses to *Creation* have acknowledged its engagement with discourses on the problems associated with industrial foodways. These responses have put particular stress, for obvious reasons, on biotechnology and GMOs (particularly

their supposed health risks (Black 2004)) as well as what the novel tells us about the entanglement of nature and culture (Philippon 2010). Though there has latterly been a development of the politically 'generative' aspects of Ozeki's work, much of the commentary has ignored or muted its importance in representing industrial foodscapes as crucial 'sites of resistance', particularly in ways that consider mobilisation around food as capable of both combining an imaginative coalition of political interests and nurturing new democratic spaces. Though Molly Wallace (2011: 159, 162) acknowledges the extent to which *Creation* frames a variety of approaches and strategies within agroecological discourses it is presented as a problem rather than a virtue; Wallace even goes as far as to deny that the novel seriously engages with issues of democratic space at all (165). Both Susan McHugh (2007: 33) and Allison Carruth (2013: 122) highlight the capacity of the novel's form to symbolise 'the "wildly heterozygous" nature of alternative food movements', though little attempt is made to link this to actual practice by agroecological resistance groups. The chance is accordingly missed to enlarge and extend the co-constitutive link between actually existing resistance movements and their representation in literary contexts.

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At the level of plot, *Creation* does a comprehensive job of registering many of the salient features in the contest between industrial food production and grassroots resistance. *Creation* references many of the principal organisations, agricultural techniques and financial mechanisms now familiar to those even casually acquainted with the CFR and its associated politics. For example, the WTO (167, 185, 399, 415), GMOs (such as the notorious *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) and its

use as a biological pesticide (271)), intellectual property law (such as TRIPS (302) (see Tansey & Rajotte 2008)), as well as details of many of the environmental and social impacts associated more broadly with industrial food production. *Creation* is also particularly attentive to the political dynamics that arise between special interest groups targeting socially and environmentally problematic aspects of food production. Beyond the obvious tensions between proponents of the CFR and their detractors, *Creation* also registers the frictions that often exist between activists and traditional farmers. Importantly, the novel reflects not just the occasional acrimony and ideological tensions which have been reported by some ethnographers (e.g. Gross 2009) but also the extent to which some sites of resistance have resulted in the formation of surprisingly successful coalitions of interests; where, according to Klein, rising critical pressure on corporate actors and institutions has resulted in the surmounting of 'old rivalries within the social and ecological movements' (Klein 2010: 342). *Creation*, in terms of its content at least, manages to cover an impressive amount of detail relating to the CFR, as well as the resistance movements which have emerged to contest it.

As with *No Telephone*, my aim here is not simply to provide evidence of a thematic engagement with agroecological resistance in fictive writing, but to also ask if the medium's formal features help us better understand (and even extend) these movements by showing them in a different, hitherto under-appreciated ways. Does *Creation*, in other words, make new possibilities for resistance more visible beyond simply writing *about* them?

Thesis-antithesis-synthesis, or, 'reimagining community'

Much of *Creation* is concerned with a programmatic exploration of how intentional communities form around agroecological issues. Like *No Telephone*, *Creation* deploys various formal techniques that help to explore contestations around industrial food production. In general terms, this exploration is structured as a resolution of oppositions: if the Seeds represent a modern 'antithesis' to the traditional farming 'thesis' of the Fullers (i.e. traditional family values, Protestant work-ethic, etc.), then what they appear to produce in collaboration is a 'synthesis': an imagining of a more sustainable community around food production and consumption, incorporating elements from both.

In terms of narrative, this rapprochement of ostensibly contrasting value systems is choreographed through the convergence of two separate storylines. In short, *Creation* delays the meeting of the two groups; the Seeds only arrive on the Fullers' farm part way through chapter 3, almost 150 pages in the novel. This delay allows the initial representation of the Seeds to be coordinated through the conservative gaze of local townspeople, thereby magnifying and embellishing their 'extreme' behaviour (not to mention the hostility of 'local' residents to the 'change-oriented' worldview of activists themselves). As the group meander their way through the Idaho countryside, engaging in numerous acts of civil disobedience, they repeatedly elicit feelings of disgust from those who encounter them. They are called 'freaks', 'hippies', and various other terms that code them as dangerous outsiders. Shortly after arriving, for example, the local Sheriff expresses his surprise that Lloyd is content to have 'that gang of hippies' stay on his land: 'He said the word "hippies" like he was hawking up a ball of phlegm and blowing it out

his lips' (155). This portrayal is one that the third person narrative (as distinct from first person voice of Yumi Fuller) is instrumental in developing. In one of their first appearances the narrative description draws heavily on an aesthetic of abjection, menace, and dirt:

A door on the side of the vehicle creaked open, and a figure emerged. He was skinny, wearing army-surplus pants and a ragged sweater with a knitted vest on top. His dirty blond hair was matted into finger-thick dreadlocks that hung down. (48)

If outwardly shambolic, though, the Seeds are earnest in their efforts and combine a number of ostensibly 'ethical' lifestyle choices (vegetarianism, anti-sexism, recycling, etc.) to form a (just about) coherent stance against a mode of production they see as environmentally and socially destructive.

The Fullers, by comparison, are of a much more conservative disposition, in social as well as agricultural terms. The early stages of the novel (which look back to Yumi's childhood in the 60s and 70s) are largely concerned with the romantic involvement of the first person narrator, Yumi, and her teacher, Elliot Rhodes. At the time, Lloyd is shown to be suspicious of proponents of the political left. Elliot, for example, a 'conscientious objector', is denounced by members of the local church congregation as 'a hippie, a commie, an anarchist, a freak', and is described by Lloyd (in slightly more diplomatic terms) as a man of 'dubious morals' (21). Though these attitudes are understandable, especially given the political atmosphere in the US at the time (The Cold War, McCarthyism, etc.) and Elliot's unconscionable abuse of power in seducing Yumi, they function on a structural

level to widen the gap between the Fullers and the Seeds in advance of their meeting, and in such a way that emphasises the significance of their eventual collaboration. Nevertheless, elements of this cultural tension remain through the Seeds' stay on the Fullers' farm, maintained via the sceptical gaze of family, friends, and local townspeople. It is occasionally suggested, for example, that 'the young radical environmentalist and the old fundamentalist farmer—made a ridiculous alliance' (267). On the other hand, Lloyd himself quickly cultivates an appreciation for the group, approving not just their agroecological interests and deferent manner – 'He liked the way they gathered in his room, settling around his bed, to listen to him talk about seeds and farming' – but their aesthetic qualities, too: 'The air in the room changed when they all trooped in, like someone had opened a window. They smelled of oxygen and peat-moss' (144).

Alongside such moments of cultural, social and aesthetic rapprochement, *Creation* structures an overall convergence around agricultural practice, demonstrating how initial incongruity can diminish in the face of shared interests and concerns. While being 'living proof' that 'the diligent application of seasonable cultural practices, man could [...] create a relationship of perfect symbiotic mutualism' with nature (6), the Fullers are patently ill-equipped to safeguard (let alone promote) their way of life. Their illness and infirmity immediately functions as metaphor – a real and imminent threat of what they practice passing into oblivion. Added to this, they are, we discover, viewed as 'crackpot(s)' (221) by certain members from their local community, and Lloyd struggles on an even more profound level with the idea of social engagement, repeatedly reminding his new acquaintances that he is 'not a politician' (301). The Fullers in isolation, much like the Seeds, offer an

'unsustainable' model for promoting agroecology in an era of corporate dominance; in collaboration, however, they present a very different proposition.

It is in this framing of the collaboration between farmer and activist where *Creation* is most overtly engaged in the exploration and enlargement (by fictive means) of agroecological resistance; that is, in imagining a socio-technical project combining knowledge from agroecological food production and social movement theory and practice. Indeed, from the collaboration a political vision begins to emerge driven not only by the desire to engage and mitigate environmental problems, but to create, in Voss and Williams' (2012: 353) terms, 'new spaces for practicing democracy'. Like the MST and LVC, the Seeds and other members of their 'activist network' are shown to advocate attitudes towards land ownership and techniques of cultivation as a means of establishing these spaces:

“We’re hacking the landscape, dude,” they told Frankie. “Bringing back the commons.” [...] They made seed bombs [...] This was agriculture that Frankie could get his head around. Guerrilla gardening. Defiance farming. Radical acts of cultivation. [...] “We’re like a seed bomb, dude.” (256-7)

The Seeds' principal aim in coming to the Fullers is to attempt to discover and initiate such 'radical acts of cultivation'. Not only do they offer a critical analysis of the CFR, but they are intent on organising those – namely the Fullers – who are moved by what they have to say. In a thinly veiled reference to the WTO's Trade Related agreements on Intellectual Property rights (TRIPS), the Seeds are successful in radicalising Lloyd, informing him of one its more notorious outcomes. On learning of the power TRIPS mechanisms can give corporations to control the

propagation and ownership of plants, he pledges then and there to fully commit to their two-day direct action, having 'never heard anything more frightening in [his] life' (266). Lloyd hosts a farm 'open day' and on the second day participates in 'digging up' potatoes to 'protest genetic engineering without our consent.' (265).

Crucially, such behaviour adaptation is not just shown to flow in one direction. Though the Seeds have come "to learn about the seeds" (135), they soon begin to take on more than simply agricultural knowledge. After coming across an advert for 'Fuller's Seeds' with its rhetorical flourishes and extensive references to 'God's Will' (105), some of the Seeds are hesitant, 'all this God shit' being a little 'too heavy' for their tastes. However, Geek (perhaps the group's most vocal member) can see immediately the overlap between their objectives: "He's an icon! Totally salt of the earth. The American farmer making a lonely stand, defending his seed against the hubris and rapacious greed of the new multinational life-sciences cartel" (106-7). Soon, the entire group is fully on board, happily celebrating the religious content informing Lloyd's rhetoric. "Did you hear what he was saying about the death of the land?" another member exclaims following one of their initial meetings, "That blew me away. I want to use that on the Web site" (150). Indeed, Lloyd's rhetoric (though too 'fire and brimstone' for some) provides the Seeds with a powerful metanarrative and aesthetic authenticity, which they readily combine with other materials distributed through their online network. Lloyd's sensibility, moreover, softens the edges of the Seeds' extremist stance, and by the end the group have fully taken on board Lloyd's wizened and stoical insistence that 'this is not about politics this is about life' (267). Though far from a religious 'conversion', the scene represents a tacit admission that spiritual forms of belief offer a pragmatic means of recruiting more to their political worldview and activist

cause. In addition, the scene underscores the extent to which, like Claire's resistance group in *No Telephone*, activists themselves participate in a conscious identity constructing project, enacting new socio-ecological relations across hitherto formidable social and cultural divides.

Compared to Lloyd's subtle grounding influence, the Seeds' impact on life in and around the Fullers' community is much easier to identify. The farm open day and contingent direct action are almost exclusively orchestrated by them, and though they do not stay on the farm much beyond Lloyd's death, they do leave a discernable imprint of their vision of community. Using the internet – something the group has already described as 'the perfect vehicle for dissemination' (354) – the Seeds revamp the Fullers' seed business ('Fuller's Seeds'), creating 'a computerised seed-library database' they say 'will take care of itself' (356). The organisation is literally a living network, operating on the basis of 'customers' pledging to germinate seeds from the library, and then returning a portion of fresh seeds to keep the process alive. As Geek suggests, the organisation harnesses 'the nonhierarchical networking potential of the web' (356), thus embodying a democratic space in stark contrast to conventional agricultural communities. In keeping with the Seeds' anti-capitalist politics, the business does appear to operate not on the logic of accumulation, but according to phenological cycles and its members' interest in diversified horticulture. As such, the episode not only concretises the group's itinerant and dispersed nature (the physical counterpart to Momoko Fuller's belief that 'everywhere is garden' (414)), but is also a practical response to the homogenising practices (especially, monocropping and pesticide use) incentivised and advocated by the CFR. Its particular significance in the face of ongoing resistance to the CFR, however, is far from straightforward. Though the

revamping does echo the efforts of agroecological activists to reimagine and reframe their resistance strategies (in this case moving the fight 'online'), this does not alter the fact that the new direction marks a retreat from the land, rather than a renewed or strengthened interaction with it. Indeed, given the real-world contexts of concentrated land ownership within which this novel operates, the implications of closing down agricultural activity on the Fullers' farm, as I will go on to explore, are not without their problems.

'Rhizomatic stories'?

Despite an ambiguous handling of content, it is in considerations of form where most critics have found political promise in *Creation*. Carruth (2013: 122), for example, has argued *Creation's* narrative structure reflects what she calls its 'politics of form'; that is, a form capable of 'distribut[ing] competing moral and political concerns across characters' in ways which register the 'hyperconnect[ivity]' of 'local food cultures' within increasingly globalised networks. McHugh (2007: 49) also recognises the congruence of form and politics, describing *Creation's* arrangement of 'rhizomatic stories', a reference to the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 7) who notably appropriated the botanical term 'rhizome' to denote a thing that 'ceaselessly establish[es] connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles'. (Fittingly, the most well-known rhizome is the potato, the central agricultural focus in *Creation*). On first appearance, these arguments are compelling. In narrative terms, *Creation*, like the rhizome, is indeed centre-less. Though Yumi is the chief narrator, the narrative focus shifts

periodically to the third person, 'complicating', as McHugh (2007: 49) puts it, 'the top-down model of human control' assumed in corporate control of agriculture. In this sense, and in a similar way to *No Telephone*, *Creation's* narrative de-centring is complemented by its political content, that is, its imaginative reflection on non-hierarchical social relations, particularly those motivated by ecological concern. Luther Burbank (the pioneer ecologist and agricultural scientist whose quotations provide epigraphs for each chapter of *Creation*), sums up the virtues of a decentring politics when he is quoted as saying man's folly is that he 'thinks of himself as the centre' (243). Accordingly, the Seeds repeatedly point out that the problems they attack are systemic, part of a diffuse network. "People are starving because [...] food isn't being distributed fairly" (272), Geek exclaims at one point. This 'distribution' of critical focus, as Carruth would put it, is writ-large in the Seeds' culminating direct action. The action is described as "something like the Boston Tea Party," (265) referencing the famous act of rebellion against what its organisers saw as an unrepresentative and pernicious colonial power.

It is in the formal decentring of the narrative voice, however, that *Creation's* 'politics of form' is most visible. In shifting repeatedly between first person and third person address in order to manage its numerous storylines, *Creation* is able to set the formal conditions conducive to imagining non-hierarchical social (and environmental) relations. One of the effects of *Creation's* shifts in narrative address is to render unclear the identity of the central protagonist. Like *No Telephone*, this indeterminacy can provide political insight, redolent of the sometimes harmonious, sometimes adversarial dynamics that abound within coalitions. During a disagreement, for example, concerning the use of the Bt biological pesticide between Geek and Will Quinn (an old family friend of the

Fullers and one half of the couple who are due to take over the Fuller's farm after Lloyd's death), there is clear sense that the issue is moot. Like *No Telephone*, clashes of this sort are not fatal to the functioning of the community, but part of the conflicts of interest that will inevitably arise within communally governed spaces. As a tenant farmer using 'conventional' techniques, Will's perspective is shaped by a conscious pragmatism. For him the decision to plant the 'NuLife' Bt potatoes 'is the lesser of two evils': 'Chemical pesticides', Will claims, 'kill off' a lot more wildlife, and, furthermore, his overarching concern is to feed the 'six billion humans on the earth', a lot of whom 'are starving' (272). While Will is 'no lover of the corporations' – likening them to 'pushers' and the farmers to 'users' – his decision to use GM biological (rather than chemical) controls is very much part of 'trying to cut down' (272) on inputs he knows to be problematic. Will's position signals itself as *realistic*, structured by a strong belief that the only way to improve the situation is by gradual reform.

Geek's position is, conversely, much more idealistic, a position Will and Cass feel he can afford to take, having no formal stake in conventional farming systems. Nonetheless, Geek advocates numerous well-substantiated agroecological techniques as alternatives to chemical and GM dependence, such as 'rotating crops', diversifying 'varieties', and the attempt to foster populations of 'beneficial insects' as long-term pest control mechanisms. Geek's position is, in short, characterised by a critical distance from the supposedly practical exigencies of modern farming. "The problem", Geek claims, is "with the system", which, through its commitment to 'monoculture', lacks diversity and resilience.

The two positions are the product of delicately opposed structural pressures, and,

importantly, the conversation doesn't end with either one miraculously converting the other. The key to this tension is, as Carruth and McHugh might also argue, *Creation's* heterogeneous and decentred narrative. Though narrated from the third person, the narrative is focalised by Will's wife, Cass, a close friend of Yumi's since childhood and a key figure in the novel. The insights we get into her thinking manage our sense of the power dynamics that flow between the two men. It is Cass, for example, who first signals the tension lurking behind the conversation, reporting in an early aside that she 'felt uneasy'. At first Cass clearly sympathises with her husband's dim view of Geek's agricultural expertise: 'He was a nice guy, she thought. He knew computers, but he sure didn't know much about potatoes, or life for that matter. The fact was, some things had to die so that others could live' (270). However, as Geek continues to interrogate Will's pragmatism, Cass soon registers this power shift, and with anxiety acknowledges that 'maybe he knew more about potatoes than she had thought' (272). Cass is silent throughout the conversation, even remaining behind after the two men depart to observe a bee dying mid-coitus, presumably from the toxic effects of Bt. Along with Cass's focalising role, this detail is crucial not only in signalling the ecological horizon which encompasses agricultural practice, but, again in underlining the novel's 'politics of form'. Beneath Will's and Geek's disagreement are joint fears about market control of agricultural systems, and the episode approximates what discussions of that sort might look like if communities of producers were able to more democratically assert themselves. Cass's perspective as a mute-witness on the scene, though almost lost in the background, has a unifying influence. As the two men fight it out, each in their folly thinking himself 'as the centre' (243), it is rather the community (in its greater number) and the ecology (in its non-negotiable limits) which will ultimately determine the agricultural and community practices of

the future.

The episode is part of a broader thematisation of democratic discussion and exchange, often evident in topics other than agriculture. The Seeds' repeated efforts to highlight the 'bigger picture' (e.g. 139, 218, 412, 414, etc.) can be seen, for example, in terms of how Yumi begins to describe her relationship with her children. Yumi – who is throughout the most sceptical of participants – eventually ponders the rhizomatic and collectivist logic of their 'message': "to accept the responsibility and forgo the control?" (410). In doing so she – along with a number of the other characters – appear to make the imaginative leap of acknowledging the collective and ecological value of the rhizome, for which no place (or thing, or person) is privileged over another. Yet, as some of these resolutions are announced, their precise function within the novel's 'politics of form' becomes confused. Indeed, some of these epiphanies end up appearing fairly far-fetched, particularly Will's clumsy admission that "just because I'm a spud farmer doesn't mean I'm not interested in all that alternative ... you know ... stuff" (413). The moment appears to offer assurance that the inheritor of the Fullers' farm will, after all, be sympathetic to agroecological practices, but instead gives one grounds to suspect that such a transition has been precipitated by a need to resolve the plot. One is left with the feeling that tendency of the novel (identified by Carruth (2013: 122)) to 'distribute competing moral and political concerns across [its] characters' is now militating against the compulsion to offer a familiar and comforting image of the future of the Fullers' farm.

Given the 'live' status of many of *Creation's* 'issues', the compulsion toward resolution is obviously a considerable one, though not one which the novel always

manages to align with its so-called 'politics of form'. In some cases *Creation* appears to want to get around the messiness of its 'big issues' by leaving space for a resolution to occur 'outside the text', yet in others a more straightforward 'closure' is evident. The result is, as I will now go on to explore, is a confusing tangle of real and imagined futures. As with *No Telephone*, *Creation* looks forward to the (ongoing) development of a social movement. *Creation's* dynamic with its future, however, is profoundly different to *No Telephone's*, due in large part to the fact that the novel takes as its immediate horizon specific historical events contemporaneous with its composition – most notably the WTO protests (not to mention the continued consolidation and expansion of the CFR (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck 2011)). As such, *Creation* confronts a hoped-for future of continued resistance while simultaneously narrowing the horizons of what its characters can be seen to achieve. In practical terms, *Creation* can only make muted gestures towards the possibilities of change. Will's decision that he is 'not going to plant [NuLifes] if people don't want to buy them', is part of this procedure; 'real life' must play itself out. Indeed, it would be hard to suggest otherwise given that, as of 2013, the 'US continued to be the lead country' in GM agriculture 'with 70.1 million hectares' cultivated and 'with an average ~90% adoption across all crops' (James 2013: 6).

As we have seen, with *No Telephone*, pointing beyond the text is not in and of itself problematic, but arguably part-and-parcel of dealing with political issues which are still 'live' (as in the debate around GMOs), and consistent with an understanding of how 'ever-increasing' financial, ecological and humanitarian turmoil has produced a 'world order in accelerated change' (Sonnenfeld & Mol 2011: 773). Nonetheless, numerous instances accumulate which demonstrably

work against *Creation's* overall formal problematisation of hierarchy and control. Undoubtedly the novel's most spectacular example of this can be found in *Creation's* final section, which comes in the form of a letter from Frankie, written from the WTO Ministerial Conference demonstrations. The letter, addressed to his newborn child, is full of hope and wonder at the capacity of 'environmentalists and anarchists and direct action factions [to pull] together to take back the power' (414). *Prima facie*, the letter allows *Creation* to look forward to a period – still ongoing – in which a coalition of once fragmented interests would find increasing political traction in contesting corporatism together (Klein 2010: 342). However, in the context of the novel's denouement it does much to undermine the 'politics of form' discernible elsewhere. Though the letter appears to fit neatly within the decentring procedures explored throughout *Creation* (providing as it does a final voice with which to complete Yumi's displacement from the centre of the narrative) it is also a point from which these patterns can be seen to unravel. Thus far, *Creation* has proceeded understatedly, focusing on one locale, with particular concerns. Yet, even in its final lines the novel steps jarringly over these bounds, forcing the sort of 'ideological closure' (Jameson 1981: 83) it has thus far otherwise been able to avoid.

The letter, in fact, does not provide the novel's final words. Instead these come from Cass, Tibet's adopted mother, who has been reading the letter aloud to the baby. Tibet is, of course, insensible to the import of the letter, though Cass and, indeed, Frankie hardly fare much better. Frankie's letter, though optimistic, is deeply confused, to such a degree, moreover, that we must wonder at its prominence in the novel's crucial final moments. At one point Frankie describes an epiphany during which he suddenly realised 'why [he's] doing all these political

actions': 'because I've gotta make sure there's some nature around for when you grow up' (414). The sentiment is not, in and of itself, totally without merit, but has already been largely undercut by the admission that, if the episode happened at all, it 'was probably on account of the dube we'd been smoking' (414). Frankie clearly identifies as an activist (even earnestly so), but it is, evidently, a confused kind of identification. Though he is intent on 'fighting for the planet', for example, his conception of how this will happen is mediated by a crude violent compulsion: 'Daddy's going to kick some ass', he promises toward the end of the letter (415). Cass too, offers little sense of really having understood the letter as anything other than a nice fatherly gesture; nice, but politically empty. We learn too, during these last moments that Cass's pet name for the baby is 'Betty', practically obscuring the political import of her given name, Tibet, behind an apolitical homeliness (416). The transfer of the baby into the Quinns' care, it seems, signifies a partial foreclosure of the baby's own (potential) radical identity. When Cass, in the final words of the novel remarks to 'Betty', that her 'Daddy's going to save the world' (416), it is difficult to read this outside this politically flat and neutralising atmosphere generated over the preceding pages. For Cass, Frankie's activism amounts to no more than some noble – yet distant and improbable – game.

The roots of *Creation's* jarring denouement go much deeper, in fact, than these closing moments. Over the novel's last thirty or forty pages a tension emerges between the novel's earlier structure and content, and its move towards resolution. In the section immediately after Lloyd's funeral the following passage appears:

Oh, God, how nice it would be if the story could just end here! With Lloyd's earthly body dead and buried in the ground and his heavenly body in transit

to the hereafter. With his seeds safely disseminated, his wife wading in the shadows of forgetfulness, and his daughter poised on the threshold of reconciliation with her onetime rapist [...] Cass and Will could get back to their business of growing potatoes, a little lonelier – no, a lot lonelier – than before, and the Seeds of Resistance could pack up [...] and move along down the road sowing their message and saving the world.

How nice it would be ...

Wouldn't it?

Impossible to say, because something went suddenly and terribly wrong in the story (374-5).

Despite what this passage's narrator, Yumi, wants, the 'reality' subsequently played-out in *Creation* doesn't 'just end here'. Indeed, the denouement offered by Ozeki and the one envisaged by Yumi aren't so simply distinguishable in terms of their relative neatness. It is interesting to note, for example, that though Lloyd's passing might reasonably qualify as neat – achieving a last moment's grace through reconciliation with his daughter and assurances that his agroecological practices will be taken on by the next generation – Momoko's fate of 'wading in the shadows of forgetfulness' and even Yumi's own of 'reconciliation with her onetime rapist', push the boundaries of what might reasonably be called a 'nice' resolution. So too, the Seeds' continued efforts to 'save the world'; both here and in the novel's final words, betray a worryingly superficial understanding of what acts of environmental resistance really involve. Though a less jarring turn might have been to embrace the messiness of reality (using, as Geek does, an ecological understanding of chaotic systems, which 'when you release an agent, randomly and carelessly, into an environment [...] all hell breaks loose' (375)) the novel

instead works hard to contain its messiness – suggestive, we might say, of the ‘informing power of forces or contradictions which the text seeks in vain wholly to control or master’ (Jameson 1981: 49).

Even though an ironical reflexivity is in evidence – witness the references to dementia, rape, and loneliness – the novel’s actual closure is deeply problematic. Whereas *No Telephone* unreservedly embraces the harsh realities of ongoing political struggle, *Creation* simultaneously attempts to acknowledge the difficulties encountered by resistance movements in the long-term *and* effect a neat resolution in the short-term (to have its cake and eat it, as it were). To this end, *Creation* engineers a number of ‘small victories’ that come off feeling like concessionary afterthoughts. The most prominent, as already mentioned, is the establishing of the online seed library. In light of the uncertain fate of the Fullers’ farm and the transferal of the farm into a virtual, online format feels more like a defeat than a victory. So too the withdrawal of GM products manufactured by Cynaco (the novel’s fictional agribusiness). Upon hearing the news, Geek dismisses the event as a ‘PR maneuver’. Yet the overall opinion of the group is that ‘it’s a start’ and that ‘the little victories count’ (399). The move feels like an attempt to gesture towards change without actually imagining what the real-world consequences would be. Similarly with death of Seed-member, Charmey, the mother of the newborn ‘Tibet’: though her death is presented as a ‘tragedy’, it arguably functions to hasten a resolution that folds the promise of radical democracy and resistance back into the status quo. Ultimately, her death allows ‘Cass and Will [to] get back to their business of growing potatoes’, and, as the now adoptive parents of Tibet, a lot less ‘lonelier [...] than before’ (374).

Not only is the traditional family unit – as opposed to alternative communal forms – reproduced and secured in this baby-transfer, it is done in a conspicuously anti-democratic manner. In a discussion – precipitated, in fact, by the Seeds’ imminent departure – about who should parent the recently bereaved ‘Tibet’, the episode starts off as an open debate. Indeed, Seed-member, Lilith, speaks up, arguing that ‘we should decide this together’ and that the group could “parent her collectively” (402). Given the collective politics espoused throughout *Creation*, the moment looks promising, as an (albeit concessionary) act of non-hierarchical decision-making in contrast to the patriarchal governance typical of the traditional family unit. That is until Geek steps in, announcing “it’s Frankie’s call. He’s her dad” (402), fatally undercutting the democratic potential of the discussion. Instead, the episode enacts an overturning of horizontal and collective governance, as if marking the point at which *Creation*’s political imagination hits up against the monolithic inevitability of the bourgeois family unit as *the sine qua non* of agricultural social relations, as opposed to the ‘collective’ family envisioned by Lilith.

It is not only the communal politics rehearsed during *Creation* that are summarily overturned in this moment, but a consolidation of the very problem the novel ostensibly highlights – i.e. the ‘American farming crisis’ (228). As the numerous protagonists depart, leaving Will and Cass to inherit the farm, they begin to exemplify the precarity of farming communities more generally; i.e. a dwindling agricultural population increasingly circumspect about the practicality of agroecological (or even non-GM) techniques. Remember, Will only says he’s ‘not going to plant [NuLifes] *if people don’t want to buy them*’ (411, emphasis added), not because of any robust commitment to sustainability principles or anti-corporate

politics. All previous efforts to establish new democratic spaces and communal forms with which to resist the CFR are swept aside, only to reinstate ‘conventional’ – patently unsustainable – organisational paradigms.

From the WTO Ministerial Conference demonstrations in Seattle (which provides the post-plot, ‘real-world’ backdrop of *Creation*’s narrative), building towards the Occupy movement more than a decade later, to the mainstreaming of organics (and to a lesser extent) ‘Food Sovereignty’ (Patel 2009; Holt-Giménez 2009) which occurred in the interim, purposive opposition to the CFR around the time of *Creation*’s publication was extensive. The effect is not unlike the jarring coda which, as we saw in chapter 1, concludes Maggie Gee’s *The Flood*: in *Creation*’s final scenes the considerable momentum generated through the novel appears to evaporate. How should this symbolic resolution be read at the moment, as the novel itself indicates, of the unprecedented flowering of the agroecological movement? There is little doubt that the demands of literary representation and earnest moral intent can easily generate contradiction. As Ian McEwan (qtd. in Rahmstorf, 2010) commented of his own writing on climate change, ‘I couldn’t quite see how a novel [about climate change] would work without falling flat with moral intent’.²² In its denouement, *Creation* appears to register a similar anxiety, though not so much on the level of calculated literary procedures. Though these tensions are an inevitable part of the environmental discourse – indeed, part of resistance politics in general – *Creation*’s denouement acts ‘to control or master’ them (Jameson 1981: 49), resolving all and any loose ends into neat and tidy bow. The attempt is problematic for *Creation*’s presentation of resistance, and, though

²² As I have discussed in Chapter 1, McEwan gets round these problems by systematically pushing ‘moral intent’ to the margins of the text and letting the defeatist, neoliberal logic of his comic protagonist deconstruct itself.

no doubt pursued as a way to resolve potentially demoralising and depoliticising details of the plot, the move, I argue, works to undermine the novel's political (and aesthetic) potential. As opposed to *No Telephone* which bares its burdens (even morbidly so), *Creation* resolves the challenges faced by the environmental movement with clumsy repression.

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This chapter began by pointing to the globalising aspirations of the CFR, and the efforts within agroecological resistance movements to contest this narrative and reveal its socially and ecological unsustainable outcomes. In this sense the discrepancy between the presentation of activism in *No Telephone* and *Creation* offers an odd situation: though the former presents 'failure' and the latter 'success', the possibility of resistance is palpably delimited in *Creation*, even while it gestures towards new and dynamic vistas, and, despite confronting us with obliteration, *No Telephone* retains a strong grasp on the power and inevitability of resistance. As I have tried to argue throughout this thesis the cultural frames we use to describe activism can tell us a lot about wider social and ecological relations. A reading which highlights these discrepancies would certainly align with the default world-literary studies position that literature from 'the other side of the international division of labour' displays a marked homology between its literary form and the disunity and violence generated by the rapid reconfiguration of socio-ecological relations and regimes; literature from the Global North is apparently less deeply imprinted with this violence, both in its literary forms and the modes of activism it depicts. That said, to do no more than acknowledge the discrepancy would be to assume that agroecological stresses will merely remain, as Niblett (2012: 20) puts

it, 'distant and dimly perceived' at the 'core' of the world-system. If the predictions of climate scientists and sociologists are correct, this violence will manifest at the core with increasing prominence. This is, as has been argued throughout this thesis, readable in the 'political unconscious' of texts like *Creation*; that is, in the 'logical and ideological centers a particular historical text fails to realize' (Jameson 1981: 49). In other words, *Creation's* contradictions in its ideological framing of activism register the dynamics in activist politics of the Global North – that is, one which is not simply problematic but itself in the throes of a rapid and extensive reconfiguration (Sonnenfeld and Mol 2011; McKibben 2013; Klein 2014; Pleyer 2015).

Creation's ideological closure regarding the future of agroecological activism, then, may be best understood as emerging from a sense of the sheer scale of the political challenges presented by factors like climate change, TRIPs, and the ongoing enclosure of agricultural land by the CFR. It will be essential in the years to come to continue to read literature from the 'core' as the threat to the integrity of its food supply grows, a threat already visible in 'the rise of food banks' in the UK (Lambie-Mumford & Dowler 2014), drought (particularly in North America (Cook, *et al.* 2015)), and emerging sites of resistance (Pleyer 2015) like The Landworkers' Alliance in the UK (Smaje 2014), but also the possibility of a 'shift' towards a decentralised and urban agriculture (Orsini, *et al.* 2014) – indeed, these are just some of the emerging areas of future research which this thesis points towards. To date, this corpus is relatively underdeveloped, though mainstream titles like Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012) or the undercurrent of farming crisis in film *Promised Land* (2012) – provide an indication of the direction such writing might take. That said, in order to get an immediate snapshot of the shifting socio-

ecological regimes and contexts at the core (though also to expand this scope of this thesis), I turn in the following chapter to a medium which provides a more direct focalisation of these contexts. The next chapter will move away from fictive writing and ask how the particular features of 'literary non-fiction' register the conditions of contemporary environmental crises and represent the groups mobilising against them. Does non-fiction allow writers to more directly register the dynamics of new sites of resistance (without, for example, having 'to control or master' political contradictions and tensions (Jameson 1981: 49)) or does non-fiction bring with it new problems relating to the activism it represents?

4: ACTIVIST REALISM – Environmental Activism and Literary Non-fiction

Introduction

At a conference in 2006 Kim Stanley Robinson stated that, in changing the physical, chemical, and biological composition of the planet we are effectively ‘co-authoring’ our own ‘science fiction novel’ (2006). Robinson made the comment while discussing his *Science in the Capital* Trilogy, which was then among the most ‘realist’ narrative he had composed, and represented a telegraphed move away from his more speculative writing. Following the *Mars* trilogy, *Science in the Capital* was literally a ‘return to earth’, guided ostensibly by the belief that there was at least as much sensation, weirdness and speculation to be found in the unfolding and on-going calamity of climate change than could be found in any other topic, real or imaginary.

Aside from the aesthetic prospects afforded by the simultaneous presence of real and imagined environmental calamity, Robinson’s comments were motivated by a long-held belief that climate change is an urgent problem, demanding a rapid but considered response. As he has stated elsewhere (2010), imagining beyond climate change means ‘inventing [a sustainable civilisation] while we are in the midst of the emergency’. As a writer of speculative fiction, Robinson’s (2010) tactic is, in his words, to ‘tell the story of the future’ as ‘thought experiments’ pertaining to major crises of the day. Whatever the merits of such a tactic, his explanation prompts us to consider questions concerning the role that literary writing has to

play in environmental crises. One preoccupation of this thesis has been to question and investigate the relationship between literary form and environmental discourses. So far, I have dealt largely with literary fiction – novels, specifically – but here I want to change tack, and examine how literary non-fiction engages with environmental activism.

Compared to the speculative modes of science fiction, literary non-fiction might seem to adopt a more straightforward approach to its subject matter. However, as Timothy Clark (2011: 177) suggests, environmental non-fiction ‘often subjects itself to an ethic of truthfulness, accuracy and coherence of a kind more normally associated with scientific or professional academic work’; that is, the duty to *get things right* in a way not always applicable to creative writers dealing with other types of content. ‘This seems’, Clark continues (2011: 177), to be a *new kind of critical problem*, one specific to the ethical commitment of this kind of environmentalist writing and quite distinct from, say, Thomas Hardy getting his astronomy wrong in *Two on a Tower* [emphasis added]. A topic like climate change, famous for the large discrepancies it routinely generates between scientific and public consensus (Leiserowitz, *et al.* 2014), can easily confound stable distinctions between fiction and reality, not least those pertaining to the perceived success or failure of resistance movements. What ways should we approach this ‘new kind of critical problem’ in writing concerning environmental *activism*? Why might writers choose non-fiction to explore environmental issues and enlarge their associated struggles? And, when they do, what are the consequences?

This chapter will take up such questions by considering non-fiction works from two environmental writers – Chris Hedges and Bill McKibben – asking how literary

procedure functions alongside a so-called 'ethic of truthfulness', as well as material with explicit political focus.

The politics of literary non-fiction

The first problem this inquiry highlights is that of reaching a satisfactory agreement about what the term literary non-fiction actually denotes. The creative writing academic, Robert Root (2003: 244), defines non-fiction as 'the expression of, reflection upon, and/or interpretation of observed, perceived, or recollected experience'. Fiction, by contrast, denotes writing with conspicuously imagined or fabricated content, a distinction James Clifford (1986: 6) frames as the difference between 'making' and the 'making up, of inventing things not actually real'. In the first instance, then, fiction and non-fiction seem to be distinguished by their degrees of relation to the 'real world'. Though fictive writing does clearly deal with reality in some sense – its language, plots and characters are all, like non-fiction, derived (however indirectly) from 'observed, perceived, or recollected experience[s]' (Root 2003: 244) – they signal their fictional status (some more conspicuously than others) in what Jameson (2005: 232) describes as their 'radical break [...] from reality itself'. Jameson (2005: 232), though referring specifically to 'utopian' fiction, sees such literature's contemporary political value precisely in terms of this rupture. 'The very political weakness of Utopia in previous generations', claims Jameson (2005: 232),

– namely that it furnished nothing like an account of agency, nor [...] a coherent historical and practical-political picture of transition – now

becomes a strength in a situation in which neither of these problems seems currently to offer candidates for a solution.

Whether we agree with Jameson or not about the political advantages provided by certain forms of fiction today, his comments invite us to consider the political consequences of making the choice either way. For Jameson, it is fictive writing's capacity to step *outside* worldly events – his so called 'radical break' – which permits the kind of cognitive and speculative leaps which many hope will catalyse social change.

In acknowledging the different function and meaning of utopias to 'previous generations' Jameson himself signals that his claim makes no pretence to universal and static truth, and is instead still subject to the fundamental contingency of all political discourses. In a similar vein, Walter Benjamin (1998: 89) – writing over a century ago – urges us to

rethink the notions of literary forms or genres if we are to find forms appropriate to the literary energy of our time. Novels did not always exist in the past, nor must they necessarily always exist in the future [...] we are in the midst of a vast process in which literary forms are being melted down.

As Benjamin's comments here suggest, the numerous literary modes available to writers (the novel, autobiography, travelogue, etc.) affect their audiences differently depending on when and where they were written. Writing which might

have agitated political action in one place and time may serve only to mollify its audiences in another.

As I have remarked numerous times, environmental problems (like climate change) can be difficult to see, or perceived as too big or complicated to stop; this tends to make agreeing on what action to take extremely difficult. In this regard, non-fiction has an obvious characteristic which can help to combat disbelief and inaction – one implicit, in fact, in Root's (2003: 244) definition of non-fiction as 'the expression of, reflection upon, and/or interpretation of observed, perceived, or recollected experience'; that is, its narration of events where the claim (at least) is that they *actually occurred*. In contrast to Jameson, Tom Wolfe (1990) even goes as far as to state categorically that this is what gives non-fictional writing (specifically in his case 'New Journalism') the advantage over more conventional fictive writing. New Journalism, Wolfe (1990: 48-9) claims,

is a form that is not merely like a novel. It consumes devices that happen to have originated with the novel and mixes them with every other device known to prose. And all the while, quite beyond matters of technique, it enjoys an advantage so obvious, so built-in, one almost forgets what a power it has: *the simple fact that the reader knows all this actually happened*. The disclaimers have been erased. The screen is gone. The writer is one step closer to the absolute involvement of the reader that Henry James and James Joyce dreamed of and never achieved [emphasis added].

Informed by a feeling that what they are writing about 'actually happened', proponents of non-fiction frequently argue in accordance with Wolfe's position: that, put simply, the mode gives them a heightened capacity to *convince* their readership that what they are reading is 'true'. Philip Gerard (1996: 208), for instance, defines creative non-fiction as 'stories that carry both literal truthfulness and a larger Truth, told in a clear voice, with grace, and out of a passionate curiosity about the world'. Lyn Bloom (2003: 277), similarly, stresses the capacity for her writing 'to get at the truth; to make sense of things that don't make sense; to set the record straight'. Much more than conventional academic or journalistic writing, creative non-fiction, Bloom (286) claims, 'is more honest and therefore more ethical than writing that purports to be balanced and objective but in fact is not'. This is possible, Bloom (286) explains, because 'the author's point of view and process of exploring the subject are identifiable'. For this kind of writing, it is claimed, the 'creative process' is laid bare in a way that neither diminishes creativity nor compromises truth content. As Bloom (278) puts it, 'writers of creative nonfiction are dealing with versions of the truth'; as such, they 'perhaps more consistently than writers in fictive genres [...] have a perennial ethical obligation to question authority [...] and an aesthetic obligation to render their versions of reality with sufficient power to compel readers' belief'.

It is in claims of this sort, however, that controversies emerge. What gives an explicitly non-fictional version of the truth superiority over an explicitly fictional one? Wolfe's claims in particular are certainly (and intentionally) provocative, not least because of the way they seem to set up a *contest* between fiction and non-fiction. Understandably, a number of commentators have since sought to take issue with the validity of Wolfe's contestation; non-fiction (especially the literary or

'creative' variety), is, in short, still a 'version' of history, one which can distort and mislead, even at the same time as opening up the perspectives it focalises. One must consider, as Bloom (2003: 282) herself does,

the writer's selecting of intimate details, discussing 'hitherto unspeakable things', 'merchandising pain', ventriloquizing – 'making the other talk', and 'making someone else into "episodes"' in one's own narrative.

Such observations, moreover, highlight the phantom objectivity of even the most transparent narrative: that on some level to render in narrative is to distort the reality to which it refers. As James Clifford (1986: 53) puts it, the figure of the ethnographer, once assumed to write with a "disinterested" perspective' [...] objectivity, and [...] sincerity', can no longer easily claim to hold such positions. 'It is useful to recall', Clifford (8) reminds us, 'that the [ethnographer] was speaking artfully, in a determining context of power'. While for Gerard 'the governing ethic of the creative nonfiction writer' is that 'You don't make it up' (1996: 201), the mere act of assembling narrative – whether in terms of selection and arrangement of certain details, the omission of others, or the influence on the creative process of preparing writing for commercial consumption – signals the 'made up' nature of that writing. In accordance with this observation, Bloom refers to the changing of names in a narrative, 'whether to protect the innocent or the guilty – as the slippery "slope to fiction"' (2003: 278). Lee Gutkind, similarly suspicious, asks, '[o]nce you change a name, what else have you changed?', and goes on to remark that any such change gives the reader the 'right to doubt [the author's] credibility' (qtd. in Gerard 201-02). Beyond the particular strategies advocated by non-fiction writers,

however, it is now taken as read that 'literary procedures pervade [all] work of cultural representation'. Instead of simply foregrounding or endorsing non-fiction's claims to objectivity, Clifford (1986: 9) and numerous other ethnographers have sought to demonstrate that even the most professedly 'scientific' writing is ripe for literary and discursive analysis, especially in terms of how it 'enacts power relations'. For such commentators not only does this help to expose the mechanisms of texts writing in a 'determining context of power' (Clifford 8) – as with early ethnographic writing – but also the 'complex, often ambivalent, potentially counter-hegemonic' ways in which texts can operate in contemporary political struggles (Clifford 9).

All controversy aside, Wolfe was certainly not alone in proffering journalistic writing as a form particularly well-suited to 'compel[ing] readers' belief[s]' and actions (Bloom 2003: 278), especially in a 'counter-hegemonic' fashion. In his aforementioned address, Benjamin (1998: 90) nominated 'the press' as that institution best suited to effect what he calls 'the literarization of living conditions' as a way of 'surmounting otherwise insoluble antinomies' which abound in all political discourse. The current historical juncture (as Benjamin, Jameson, and Wolfe would all concede) is one with social and historical conditions specific to it – not least those pertaining to the environment and its hastening degradation. Nonetheless, journalism remains of special interest to contemporary commentators as a form of writing which can readily incorporate elements from other literary modes, or, in Wolfe's (1990: 49) terms, as that which 'consumes devices that happen to have originated with the novel and mixes them with every other device known to prose'. Duncan Brown (2011: 57) also writes about 'creative non-fiction' as a form of writing that sits exactly on the 'unstable fault line of the

literary and journalistic, the imaginative and the reportorial'. Importantly, Brown's articulation lacks the divisive and aggressive edge of Wolfe's provocation (1990: 50) that journalists 'enjoy a tremendous technical advantage [over the novel]'. At the same time, Brown's comments help to identify creative non-fiction as a mode which straddles both camps: the literary and the journalistic.

Literary or 'creative' non-fiction, then, is presented by its proponents as a medium which can both expose via direct comment things deemed to be worthy of redress – a process Sartre (1970: 37) famously called 'action by disclosure' – whilst also deploying literary techniques intended to compel belief and interest. Literary theorists from Victor Shklovsky (1925) to Darko Suvin (1979) have roundly lauded the political power of literature to *estrangle* us of our unexamined beliefs, compelling us not only to notice them, but to challenge them as well. Literary critics interested in the operation of non-fictional writing in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, for example, have noted the capacity of literary estrangement to help explore its recent historical tensions. In Antjie Krog's words, for example, such writing is able to 'unearth a hidden or unacknowledged or unnoticed life' (Brown 2011: 57). For some, so remarkable has this history been that there is little need (yet) for purely fictional or speculative modes of writing. For Rita Barnard (2012: 3), for example, South Africa is literally 'a Country where You couldn't Make this Shit up', and where 'literary fiction has been outstripped and outdone—in its seriousness, originality, and capacity to account for the state of the nation—by non-fiction'. In an interview with Duncan Brown, South African writer Krog suggests that literary non-fiction affords writers and their audiences the 'stability and a confident grip on one's surroundings [required] in order to begin to imagine' (qtd. in Brown 58). 'It's like trying to catch a fish', Krog explains,

But you cannot begin to use the fishing rod if you don't know and understand the embankment on which you have to plant yourself. Without the fish we will die of hunger, but you will not get there if you don't sort out the embankment and the water – this is what non-fiction does. The role of fiction is to lift above the water for one incredible moment: a living fish (qtd. in Brown 58).

Given the unprecedented scope and scale of a problem like climate change, the stabilising effects afforded by non-fictional modes might be similarly appealing to environmental writers. If so, then Clark's (2011: 177) 'critical problem' referred to above might not be as *new* as it first appears. Such writing is invested, not only in the specific emergency of climate change, but enmeshed in age-old contestations over power and authority; it is these specific contestations that make environmental non-fiction ripe for literary analysis.

Literary non-fiction and environmental crisis

In the case of environmental problems like climate change the need for clarity and consensus is particularly urgent. As Robinson (2006) suggests, we are not only 'co-authoring' our own 'science fiction story' but we are doing so 'in the midst of an emergency'. In a state of emergency, or at least in conditions of critical uncertainty, non-fiction (understood as 'the expression of, reflection upon, and/or interpretation of observed, perceived, or recollected experience') recommends itself as an apparently straightforward way to manage our understanding of (and encounters with) the environment. Non-fiction's disclosures, as Krog would

understand it, proffer a foundation 'on which you have to plant yourself' before more complicated and abstract writing can begin. Like Bloom's (2003: 277) notion of writing which aims to 'set the record straight', literary non-fiction is a form which can depict rapidly unfolding events while also leaving space for more speculative content.

Patrick Murphy (2000), Lawrence Buell (2005), and Timothy Clark (2011), among others, have shown particular interest in 'creative non-fiction' as a way to describe environmental writing less constrained by literary convention. By extension, these writers have come to see such writing as particularly well-suited to generating estranging effects (or, what Benjamin (2003: 402) describes as revolutionary 'interruption'). In contrast to the novel, Buell (2005: 89) claims, 'literary nonfiction' has 'the spatial reach' to convey phenomena such as 'acid rain, airborne species migration both planned and happenstance, ozone depletion, and global warming'. This scope, or 'postcolonial multivision' (96) as he calls it, enables writers to challenge 'the artifice of "the social construction"' (84) Buell sees as underlying many environmentally and politically destructive patterns of behaviour. A term like 'spatial reach', for example, refers in the first instance to the geographical scope of writing which attempts to image global phenomena, but which is equally wide ranging in a discursive, formal, and *biospheric* sense.

Buell's early speculations (as discussed above) regarding the future of environmental writing have, it seems, been at least partially vindicated. The overwhelming majority of contemporary writing about environmental problems undoubtedly qualifies as non-fiction; yet barely a fraction of it could realistically be considered literary or 'creative'. On the one hand this is not surprising given that

the vast proportion of such material, which (in consciously participating in a scientific discourse) outwardly aspires to be straightforward and unadorned; on the other hand though, as a number of writers have noted,²³ it is perhaps surprising that more attempts are not being made to artfully convey expressly environmental messages. As Patrick Murphy (2000: 52) suggests ‘the really salient feature of an environmental literary work may be its impact on the reader’s point of view’. In an environmental context – given both the readily invisible aspects of environmental crises and the predominance of technical language within supposedly explanatory discourses – calculated synergy of scientific findings and creative presentation is not only desirable, but essential.

Regarding an issue like climate change, which poses numerous challenges – both imaginative and cognitive – proponents of creative non-fiction recommend its versatility. Rob Nixon (2011: 25), for example, notes ‘nonfiction’s robust adaptability, imaginative and political, as well as to its information-carrying capacity and its aura of the real’. Similarly, Gretel Ehrlich (2004: 193) in her travelogue, *The Future of Ice*, describes what she calls the ‘possibilities of beauty’ which emerge from her direct encounters with the natural world, but also from her writing itself, which she sees as a means to imagine ‘how we want the world to be’. As Elizabeth Kolbert (2006: 3) puts it, her *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* attempts to explore ‘the complicated relationship between the science and the politics of global warming, between what we know and what we refuse to know’. In *Storming the Gates of Paradise*, Rebecca Solnit (2007: 5) goes as far as to say that failing to make connections between social and environmental spheres ‘makes politics dreary and landscape trivial, a vacation site’. To illustrate this point, she quotes

²³ See footnote 1, chapter 1.

Bertolt Brecht, who asks, “[w]hat kind of times are they, when / A talk about trees is almost a crime / Because it implies silence about so many horrors?” (6). While remaining deferential to her source, Solnit rejects the statement as short-sighted. ‘To imagine the woods as an escape’ she writes, ‘is to have already escaped awareness of the political factors weighing in on their fate and their importance’ (6). For Solnit, grasping environmental politics is as much an imaginative task as it is a technical one, for not only is ‘paradise [...] the reclaimed commons with the fences thrown down’ but also any form of ‘connection and communion’ (8). In short, Solnit’s work demonstrates that ‘connections’ are made through literary technique (of metaphor, narrative, character, and so on) overlaying and contesting narratives which lie at the root of social and environmental crises.

The two texts under examination in this chapter, Chris Hedges’ and Joe Sacco’s *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (2012), and Bill McKibben *Oil and Honey* (2013) embody many of the above features; the former combines graphic novel-style illustrations, journalistic prose, highly charged polemic, cartoon strip narratives, and ethnographic reportage; *Oil and Honey*, also, juxtaposes various extraneous media, including blog posts, tweets, letters, excerpts from newspaper articles, and exhibits a stylistic repertoire ranging from the scientific and ethnographical to more intimate registers of the journal entry or lament.

When creative non-fiction displays such hybridity it is certainly tempting to point out its congruence with the kaleidoscopic, wide-ranging and unstable political contexts which are signalled by and emerge from environmental crises themselves. In her writing on disaster, for example, Solnit (2009: 6), even goes as far as to claim that it is not writers who ‘create these gifts’, but disasters

themselves which 'provide an extraordinary window into social desire and possibility'. The central premise of *Paradise Built in Hell* (2009), in fact, is not only that disasters shake us out of our old ways, 'drag[ging] us into emergencies that require we act', but, more controversially, in such a way as to make us 'act altruistically'. 'If paradise now arises in hell', Solnit continues, 'it's because in the suspension of usual order and failure of most systems, we are free to live and act in another way' (2009: 6-7). While Solnit's optimism here regarding the altruistic influence of catastrophe may be overcooked, where Solnit does resonate with her environmentalist colleagues is in her conception of what disasters (and writing about them) can afford in imaginative terms. For not only do such confrontations allow us to be 'free to live and act in another way', but also to think in other ways, to make imaginative connections not normally made in everyday contexts. For example, in reference to the aftermath of 'natural disasters', Solnit twice comments on the imaginative and political effects of a city-wide power cut. With the lights out, the night sky and all its stars become visible. 'You can think', suggests Solnit (2009: 10), 'of the current social order as something akin to this artificial light: another kind of power that fails in disaster'.

Other writers have a less positive approach to disasters. Mark Anderson (2011), for example, argues for a collapsing of the distinction between natural and anthropogenic environmental disasters, especially with regard to how they are handled and manipulated in public discourse. Whatever the origin of environmental disasters, Anderson argues, they are remarkable in their capacity to open up possibilities for political change, but also manipulation, specifically as an opportunity to reinscribe meaning to a place and time. '[T]he works I study', suggests Anderson (2011: 21-2),

all play off definitions of the grammar of disaster for political purposes, redefining concepts of risk, vulnerability, trauma, and normalisation in order to promote and, in many cases, institutionalise highly politicised interrelations of particular disaster events.

Pablo Mukherjee (2013: 27) similarly looks to a number of sources which frame disaster relief in ways which work, he claims, to 'legitimise forms of coercive rulership'. Like Kim Stanley Robinson, Anderson, and Solnit, Mukherjee looks to draw political insight from connections between material, environmental conditions and the social relations which emerge in dialectic with them. While comprising a mix of outrage and optimism all these writers are attentive to the political opportunities which can emerge out of environmental crises, namely the power they have to reconstitute and reimagine our political horizons, for better or worse.

For these writers, then, it is not simply the content of environmental non-fiction which recommends such writing as politically subversive, but its formal possibilities, too. Such formal hybridity and fluidity underpin its efforts to realise and strengthen its imaginative connections. Rob Nixon (2011: 14), for example, highlights the capacity of non-fiction (alongside other forms of writing) to combine disparate forms, engaging with what he calls the 'layered predicaments' of environmental crises:

To engage slow violence is to confront layered predicaments of apprehension: to apprehend—to arrest, or at least mitigate—often imperceptible threats requires rendering them apprehensible to the senses

through the work of scientific and imaginative testimony.

For Nixon (2011: 23) too, there is clearly an activist purpose to this work. In engaging these issues in a spirit of altruism and with a view to uncovering injustice '[s]uch precedents—whether through iconic figureheads or entire social movements—offer resources of hope in the unequal battle to apprehend [slow violence]'. Time and again, this process is developed in terms of the imagination, as part of an effort to forcefully reconnect with otherwise forgotten or concealed instances of violence and injustice. One of Nixon's (159-60) examples is the writer and journalist, Arundhati Roy, whose career he characterises as having 'integrative ambition', citing her remarkable willingness to 'imagine the Narmada Valley dams' both from the perspective of the 'powerless' but also 'powerful modernizers'. Not only is Roy's method (like the other writers discussed already in this chapter) 'integrative' in a formal sense (using a variety of formal techniques), but in imaginative terms, too. For example, Nixon notes how the figure of the dam is used to revelatory effect as Roy connects the way in which dams literally drown 'memory' and – by association – 'the past' (162), through what Nixon calls a politics of 'violent invisibility' (160). Roy's aim in this regard is to highlight what she describes as 'unimagined communities' (150), actively obscured by environmental despoilers, who seek to conceal the communities and places affected by the toxic fallouts of their respective industrial projects.

If activists manifest not only, in Sartre's (1970: 37) terms, to 'disclose', but also to make imaginative connections, then they have more in common with their writerly counterparts than on first appearance: each, in short, must invest an exceptionally large amount of imaginative labour. As the above discussion is intended to

highlight, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction may at times appear arbitrary. That said, for many commentators it is precisely the combination of non-fiction's 'actuality' and its use of literary procedures that give it its political pertinence. As we have seen this poses only new questions, rather than straightforward solutions. As Clifford (1986: 4) puts it, for ethnographers *in the field* 'literary processes—metaphor, figuration, narrative—affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered, from the first jotted "observations," to the completed book, to the ways these configurations "make sense" in determined acts of reading'. Indeed, though writers of environmental non-fiction write 'in the midst of an emergency' (Robinson 2010), this doesn't mean they speak plainly or without 'enacting power relations', 'counter-hegemonic' or otherwise (Clifford 1986: 9). Added to this, environmental problems and their associated movements are global problems, and 'cultural analysis', as Clifford (22) again reminds us, 'is always enmeshed in global movements of difference and power'. This is certainly where we do encounter a 'new critical problem' *a la* Clark: how do writers of literary non-fiction negotiate these deceptively simple, multi-levelled terrains of injustice, invisibility, and intrigue?

4.1 Chris Hedges & Joe Sacco - *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (2012)

In so far as millions of families get a living under economic conditions of existence that divide their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes and counterpose them as enemies, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection amongst peasant proprietors, the similarity of their interests produces no community, no national linkage and no political organisation, they do not form a class. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interests in their own name, whether through a parliament or constitutional convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. (Marx 2002: 100-1)

Scientists: Don't freak out about Ebola.

Everyone: *Panic!*

Scientists: Freak out about climate change.

Everyone: LOL! Pass me some coal.

(Kay 2014: on *Twitter*)

*

Introduction

In the context of this thesis, what links these two statements is a concern for the relative invisibility of social and environmental problems, as well as the contingent obstacles to mass-mobilisation. This is also an interest which clearly motivates *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, a collaborative piece of literary journalism

combining the prose of Chris Hedges and the illustrations of Joe Sacco. In the authors' (2012: xi) own words the book is an attempt to explore what they call, 'sacrifice zones, those areas of the US that have been offered up for exploitation in the name of profit, progress, and technological advancement'. *Days of Destruction* is structured around five case studies, each designed to illustrate the variety and extent of both 'destruction' and 'revolt' related to industrialisation in the US. The first focuses on the town of Pine Ridge, South Dakota, a Native American reservation: its story – like so many in *Days of Destruction* – is one of unemployment, alcoholism, and alienation; the second focuses on Camden, New Jersey, a community afflicted with both industrial decline and political corruption; the third focuses on Welch, West Virginia, an Appalachian mining town despoiled by extensive coal mining; the fourth explores the impact of industrialised agriculture and its accompanying exploitative labour conditions in the town of Immokalee, Florida; finally, the fifth, moves to Liberty Square, New York City at the time of the Occupy Wall Street encampment.

All sections of *Days of Destruction* draw heavily on personal testimony, periodically given form via Sacco's illustrations, in a collaborative attempt, as Hedges describes it, 'to show in words and drawings what life looks like when the marketplace rules without constraints' (xi). As this broad range suggests, *Days of Destruction's* presentation of resistance is nothing if not ambitious; its multiple forms of representation and narrative compel us to think through the *relation* of environmental and social issues, often by their complementary or parallel distinction, but also their apparent disjunction. In a conspicuous attempt to overturn an otherwise prevailing narrative of 'business as usual', *Days of Destruction's* narrative fits well within Nixon's (2011) now familiar paradigm of

‘slow violence’, but also those of numerous other theorists who have sought to describe how economic norms can conceal systems of death – most strikingly, Subhabrata Banerjee’s (2008: 1541) ‘Necrocapitalism’: ‘contemporary forms of organizational accumulation that involve dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death’.

The principal reason for *Days of Destruction*’s inclusion in this chapter, however, is of course its presentation of resistance, a portrayal which is self-consciously literary, combining forms in a fashion appropriate to its discursive *and* ‘spatial reach’ (to use Buell’s (2005: 89) term): including, ethnography, interviews, cartoon strip, activist polemic, and ‘simple prose’. In its effects, this presentation is one in which, at first blush, sees activism as complex and always in process. As Hedges tells us in his introduction, when he and Sacco began researching the book ‘the revolt was conjecture [...w]e expected a beleaguered population to push back, but we did not know when the revolt would come or what it would look like’ (xii-xiii). *Days of Destruction* is marked with this uncertainty, not only explicitly in what it says, but in how it says it, moving rapidly through spaces, genres, and the stories of its subjects in search of a revolutionary moment it expects never fully to grasp. The effect is both aesthetic, comprising the ‘partial’ (Clifford 1986) and contemporaneous, but also political, leading us to consider Clark’s (2011: 177) ‘new critical problem’ in terms of how such texts construct their own authority. *Days of Destruction*’s movement through rapidly shifting political contexts often problematises the ‘simple fact’, as Wolfe (1990: 48-9) puts it ‘that the reader knows all this actually happened’. However, as Wolfe (1990: 48-9) himself reminds us, this ‘simple fact’ is ‘so obvious, so built-in, *one almost forgets what a power it has*’ [emphasis added]. Far from offering an unadorned activist ‘realism’, *Days of*

Destruction epitomises what Clifford (1986: 2) calls the ‘the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts’. Along with the forms of hegemonic power it contests, this kind of literary and graphic non-fiction frames activism in ways which outline a politics comprising highly-contested and unstable representations.

The re-imagining of ‘slow violence’

Uncovering stories of injustice are familiar concerns in environmental non-fiction. As we have seen, the problem has been described most succinctly by Rob Nixon (2011: 14) in his book on ‘slow violence’, in which he highlighted the need to ‘apprehend—to arrest, or at least mitigate—often imperceptible threats’ by ‘rendering them apprehensible to the senses through the work of scientific and imaginative testimony’. Themes of visibility have become a regular feature of Hedges’ own work, most directly in *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (2009: 52) in which Hedges examines the problem of our collective insensibility to subtle, long-term violent processes, especially when combined with our appetite for spectacular events; that is, phenomena which ‘destabilize truth’. Such experiences, claims Hedges (2009: 52),

are convincing enough and appear real enough to manufacture their own facts [...] Those who slip into this illusion ignore the signs of impending disaster. The physical degradation of the planet, the cruelty of global capitalism, the looming oil crisis, the collapse of financial markets, and the danger of overpopulation rarely impinge to prick the illusions that warp our consciousness. The words, images, stories, and phrases used to describe

the world in pseudo-events have no relation to what is happening around us. The advances of technology and science, rather than obliterating the world of myth, have enhanced its power to deceive. *We live in imaginary, virtual worlds* created by corporations that profit from our deception. [emphasis added]

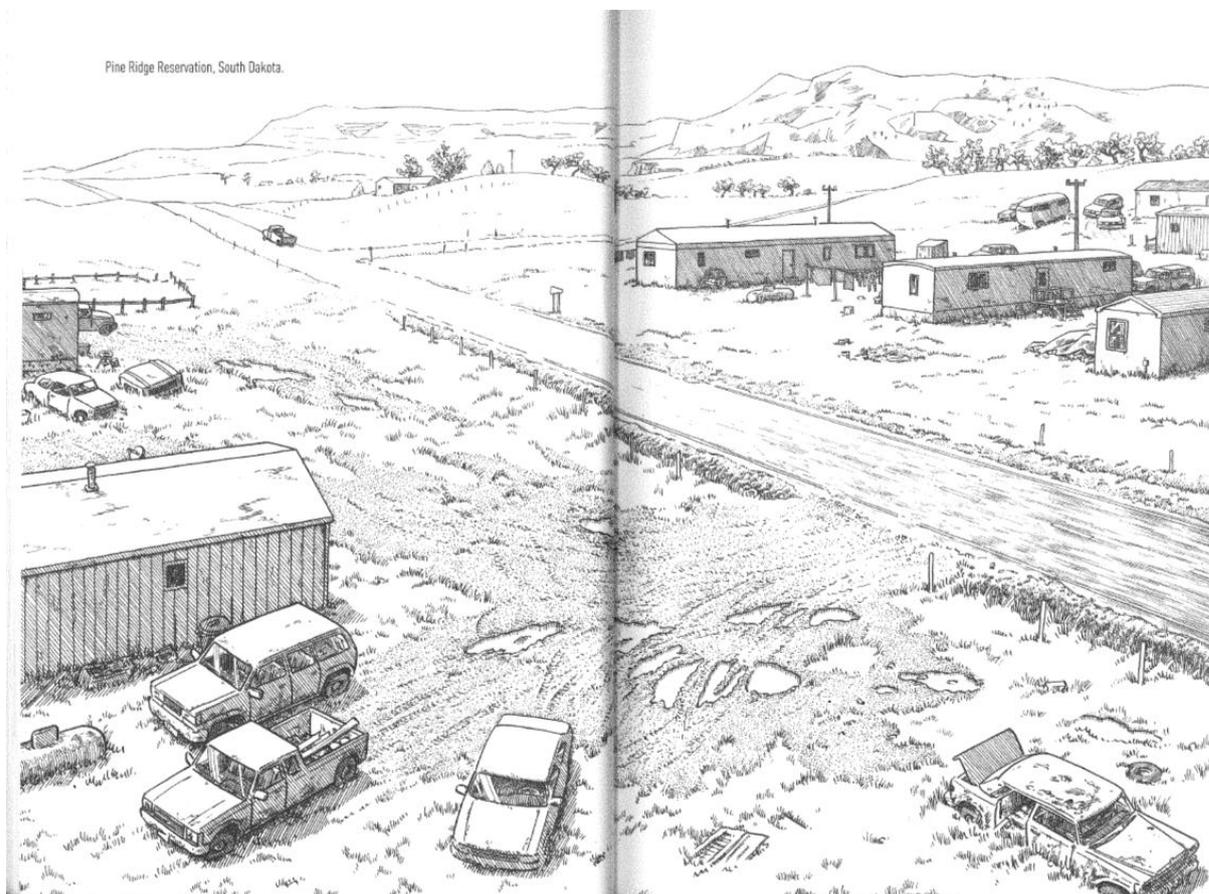
The result, Hedges (2009: 51) claims, is '[a] public that can no longer distinguish between truth and fiction' which is 'left to interpret reality through illusion'. The approach signals Hedges' interest in media, which, in contrast to the 'spectacular', he hopes will be able to counter such a tendency. This concern, at least, may explain many of the stylistic features of *Days of Destruction* which engage with these 'imaginary, virtual worlds' head on, ostensibly to deconstruct them, though, as I shall explore later, also to reappropriate and enlist their forces to mediatise struggles against environmental degradation. In the most straightforward sense, this means using the conventional literary techniques of narrative, character, and story – that is, the 'imaginary' – to expose the hidden relationship between poverty and environmental problems, offering stories about ordinary people struggling to alleviate the financial and environmental burdens on them and their communities.

Sacco's illustrations provide a useful starting point to consider how *Days of Destruction* engages the problematic of 'slow violence' and the often unsuccessful mobilisations against it. The illustrations are indeed the most obvious way in which *Days of Destruction* attempts to literally *make visible* the destruction suffered by the individuals and communities it features. As Hedges (2012a) himself indicates, 'illustrations bring a filmic quality to problems that simple prose finds it difficult to make visible'. Sacco's illustrations do this in a literal sense, but also by capitalising

on the conceptual dynamics afforded by comic book, or graphic novel illustrations. As Scott McCloud (1993: 36) puts it, the basic forms of a 'cartoon' (as opposed to 'real life' renderings) facilitate affective identification with the characters depicted. 'The cartoon', McCloud (36) writes, 'is a vacuum into which identity and awareness are pulled ... an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel to another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon we become it'.

At the same time, Sacco's illustrations do not always straightforwardly belong in the 'cartoon' category, and have been noted for their 'realistic' qualities (Schack 2014; Scherr 2014; Shay 2014). Sacco's illustrations are, at times, heavily wrought, cross-hatched and awash with detail and expression. As McCloud (1993: 41) puts it, 'if an artist wants to portray the beauty and complexity of the physical world --- realism of some sort is going to play a part'. Indeed, it is precisely in the move between basic 'cartoon' and realistic draughtsmanship that the political dynamic of Sacco's illustrations can be grasped. In Sacco's work the abstract/realist dichotomy is modulated in the move between character and setting: his rendering of human subjects tends towards the simple lines of a cartoon figure – aiding reader identification; however, when drawing industrialised landscapes – where instead the most important ideas to grasp are complex despoilment and fragile beauty – Sacco favours a more textured approach. At numerous junctures, *Days of Destruction* presents us with what Sacco describes as a 'splash page', a double page spread, usually of an intricately rendered landscape. For example, a picture of the desolate and haunting Pine Ridge Reservation (14-15) or the aerial shot of mountaintop removal (MTR) in West Virginia (126-127), a sprawling and busy shot which goes a long way to convey the scale of the devastation caused by MTR. Both illustrations give the eye and

mind pause amid the rush of information in the prose or comic book sequences. Their 'interruption' of *Day's of Destruction's* regularity is striking, highlighting the different politics of representation at work in the personal identification of the comic strip sequences and the awesome visibility realised in the 'splash pages'.



(Above) 'Splash page' illustration of *Pine Ridge* (14-15)

In their attentiveness to, and explicit representation of, the despoilment and reconfiguration of landscape, Sacco's splash pages are part of a deliberate attempt to overturn these simple and destructive narratives, to imaginatively re-connect with a history of 'bottom up' movements. As previously mentioned, Nixon (2011: 159) describes 'unimagining' as a process whereby communities, sometimes entire peoples, become the victims of the 'violent habits of imaginative disconnection'. For Nixon, it is not enough to say that communities were simply

overlooked, but to re-ascribe culpability to those who benefit financially from socially and environmentally destructive actions. What Nixon (150) calls '[n]arratives of national development' are in his view often only 'partial narratives that depend on energetically inculcated habits of imaginative limit,' where the huge projects of modern industrialisation 'divert attention, their glistening enchantments throwing into shadow unimagined communities' (172). The mere presence of these communities invariably 'inconvenience or disturb the implied trajectory of unitary national ascent' (150) creating the incentive for them to be actively unimagined, 'lost in the mix' and 'overshadowed' (167) by narratives designed to sanitise and ameliorate large-scale engineering projects.



(Above) 'Splash page' illustration of Mountaintop removal (MTR) (126-7)

Though using what Hedges (2012a) describes as 'simple prose' (Hedges 2012a), *Days of Destruction* is no less invested in an imaginative effort to counter the invisibilising processes of 'slow violence'. In doing so, *Days of Destruction* is haunted by a literal *absence* of the otherwise mobilising markers of violence. Hedges notes, for example, an incident in which Virginia coal operatives 'stole more than one hundred and twenty headstones in an effort to erase the face of the [town's] cemetery and open it up for mining. These vandalized grave sites are now marked by simple wooden crosses' (118). Similarly, during a visit to the agribusiness fields of Florida, Hedges notes the difficulty he and Sacco experienced getting testimonies from workers who, due to their often undocumented status, lived extremely precarious lives: 'Contact with the outside world, especially the white world, can mean deportation, a personal and economic catastrophe' (187). As such, any possibility of a challenge to the system becomes diminished, their precarity a 'powerful incentive to remain silent and unseen' (187). At the same time, Hedges' focuses on the discursive processes which make such concealments possible, repeatedly pointing to a language of power:

The technical jargon, learned in business schools and on trading floors, effectively masks the reality of what is happening: murder. The cold, neutral words of business and commerce are designed to make systems operate, even systems of death, with a ruthless efficiency (268).

Hedges' aim is indeed to retrieve from the quotidian veil of 'business as usual' an impression of the social and environmental violence perpetrated under the aegis of a corporate mandate. Part of Hedges' strategy for this is to attempt to spell out the fatal logic that underpins the pursuit of unlimited capital accumulation: it is the

language corporations use – ‘the cold, neutral words of business’ – which helps them avoid a confrontation with, what Hedges calls, ‘the death they have unleashed, the relentless contamination of air, soil, and water, the physical collapse of communities, and the eventual exhaustion of coal and fossil fuels’ (130). ‘Those who carry out this pillage’, Hedges suggests, ‘probably believe they can outrun their own destructiveness’ (130). In a manner consistent with what Nixon (2011: 159) calls the ‘violent habits of imaginative disconnection’, the result can imply the psychological form of a double consciousness: ‘The corporate state’, Hedges suggests, ‘if it understood the depth of the suffering and rage of tens of millions of Americans, would institute profound reforms to mitigate the poverty and despair’ (237); at the same time, Hedges suggests, the ‘corporate state’ has insulated itself against – and ‘unimagined’ – the consequences of their actions through the language they use, as well as the spaces they put between themselves and those they affect, in some cases wholly excising inconvenient reminders of their toxic operations.

While the subjects of such ‘violent habits of imaginative disconnection’ are presented as victims, Hedges is nonetheless keen to show that some are also unwitting accessories, unable to make the requisite imaginative connections themselves:

‘Everybody had health problems,’ she says, ‘but you know how it is. You’re busy with your life. You’re going through your work, taking care of your family, doing whatever. Unless it’s real close family, people just weren’t talking about all these things and *connectin’ the dots.*’ (169) [emphasis added].

If the words used to conceal the violence perpetrated in the name of growth are mundane and 'neutral', so in the end is the representation of the violence itself. The sheer monotony of the violence depicted by Hedges and Sacco provides a salutary reminder that the violence experienced may be slow and invisible at the level of demography, but to the victim they are explosive and catastrophic in the extreme. Indeed, what makes them invisible is their banality, their 'everyday' familiarity. In so doing, Hedges' strategy may appear counter-intuitive. Nonetheless, it is utterly in keeping with the politics of representation which emerge out of a recognition of slow violence. Hedges' strategy cannot simply be to cultivate sensation, such a move would be counter-productive; instead, what makes the violence *Days of Destruction* depicts so terrible must be its banal qualities. Consider, for example, the characterisation of the lone activist, Larry Gibson. Larry has been resisting the coal companies in his home town of Welch, West Virginia, for decades, almost single-handedly, and has, we are told,

endured drive-by shootings, and a couple of weeks before we visited, his Porta-Johns were overturned. A camper he once lived in was shot up. He lost his water in 2001 when the blasting dropped the water table. He has reinforced his cabin door with six inches of wood to keep it from being kicked in by intruders [hired by 'Big Coal']. The door weighs five hundred pounds and has wheels at the base to open and close it. A black bullet-proof vest hangs near the entrance on the wall, although he admits he has never put it on. He keeps stacks of dead birds in his freezer that choked [...]
(119).

Note that, despite containing much of the ingredients of a sensational plot, Hedges' amplifies the banal by listing the details with a clinical thoroughness – dates, dimensions, and colours all feature as if we were reading a police report. Gibson's experience captures the imaginative tension which is caught in Nixon's deliberately oxymoronic 'slow violence'. The violences endured by Gibson and his fellow townspeople are certainly not slow in the sense that they arrive without bite, but that they fade readily into the everyday. Even for Gibson the bulletproof vest hanging by his heavily fortified front door has already lost its exceptional quality, imperfectly conveying the explosive violence of the complex series of events which have led to its appearance at the threshold of his home. Indeed, domestic settings are indispensable in this structure of feeling. At numerous junctures we are shown portraits of the interviewees sitting in their homes: in armchairs (39; 133; 156-7), with photos of loved ones in the background (133), sipping tea and cookies (163), or, in one case (18-9), with a caption which reads: 'in front of his hut where two FBI agents were shot and killed' – all provide a jarring counterpoint to the violence recounted during interviews.

Hedges describes the slow-violence paradox best, however, when describing the Native American community in Pine Ridge. 'Violence [in Pine Ridge]', Hedges tells us, 'does not oppress you on every street corner [... it comes] upon you like a lightning bolt' (16). The 'lightning bolt' may seem, in fact, like archetypal *fast*-violence; instead, it is a violence which is *too* quick to be cognised (or 'seen') at the social level, even by the affected communities themselves. The forms of violence *Days of Destruction* depicts, then, rapidly shift between the 'lightning' quick and the glacially slow. At one point Hedges describes his subjects as victims of what one witness describes as the 'slow moving Katrina' of environmental and

social despoilment, who have been 'abused for so long they think abuse is normal' (94). The process of 'unimagining' has numerous components, comprising violences which, via habitude, are made further invisible by the remoteness of the victims, their political disenfranchisement, their poverty, but also, as Hedges' observations suggest, passively by the communities themselves. *Days of Destruction* repeatedly confronts us with the absurdity of these situations, depicting violence which unfolds even 'while we drink water contaminated with lead, while our pipes burst and raw sewage leaks into our houses' (94).

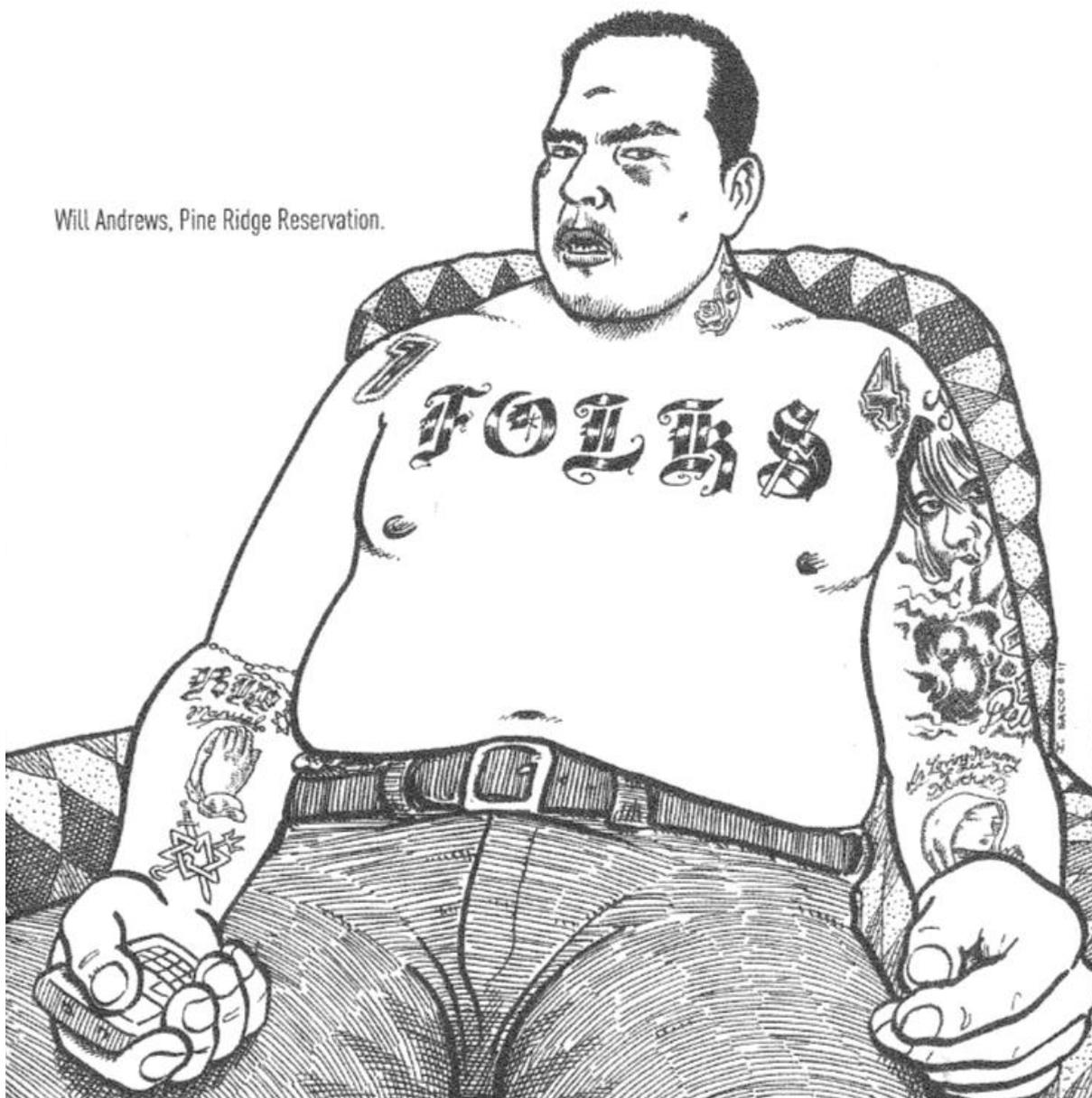
Community and resistance

It is widely-held that an excessive focus and effect of late capitalism has been a narrow individualism; that is, the incentives to sacrifice long-term and collective goals for the immediate advantages of the next pay-check, or otherwise to safeguard short-term comforts and wellbeing. Beyond the needs and experiences which inform such short-termism lie the less obvious conceptual horizons of the community (or 'collective') within which individuals and families are networked. Indeed, due to the extent to which the whole spectrum of environmental and social problems seems to depend upon people and communities putting up with (or not noticing) their burdens, Hedges puts a lot of emphasis on the potential political power of radicalised community. Like Gadamer's (2006) and Jameson's (1981) understanding of 'Horizon' which I have used throughout this thesis, community is the privileged horizon for marshalling, not only the forces of resistance, but the conceptual framework within which to understand and deconstruct contemporary economic assumptions which otherwise go unexamined. 'To acquire a horizon',

Gadamer (2006: 304) writes, 'means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion'.

Hedges repeatedly conceives of community in terms of its imminent degradation – indeed, this is explicit in his labelling of the communities on which he focuses as 'sacrifice zones', a term which provides a community equivalent of the now well-known concept of *homo sacer*. Developed by Giorgio Agamben (1998: 27) from the ancient Roman legal notion of sacred man – 'one who may be killed but not sacrificed', such individuals, while certainly the *objects* of sovereign power (in the sense that they contribute huge amounts of what Marx calls 'productive labour'), are excluded from being its *subjects*; they become, instead, 'mute bearers of bare life deprived of language and the political life that language makes possible' (Gregory 2004: 63). Though Hedges' stories repeatedly refer to silenced individuals – most notably the agricultural workers who flee from Hedges' and Sacco's attempts to interview them (187) – it is Sacco's illustrations which best convey a sense of their subjects as 'mute bearers of bare life'. Sacco regularly pictures the interviewees sitting mute, desolate, and apparently beyond consolation. These images, in contrast to Hedges' prose, are static, their subjects stare blankly back at us, their bodies themselves providing mute testimony of the violence visited on them and their communities.

Will Andrews, Pine Ridge Reservation.



(Above) Illustration of Will Andrews (39)

Without self-awareness or any sense of community sovereignty, Hedges suggests, the ability to organise is 'obliterated', any sense of political power destroyed. *Days of Destruction* is full of stories of communities and families effaced and occluded by their own poverty: 'Poverty here. Poverty at home' one parent comments, '[it] is a vice. We sacrifice our lives for our boys, but we wonder if their future will be any different' (223). Without a community within which to mobilise and organise, this sort of imiseration, as *Days of Destruction* presents it, will only worsen. That said,

Hedges does reserve some degree of optimism for areas where there is evidence of strong community. 'People can band together', we are told, 'in their community and solve a problem in the community. They can create a worker-owned collaborative of some kind. They can develop models of collective living' (235). The hope behind these statements, however, is conspicuously at odds with the isolation and fragmentation faced by the communities which feature in *Days of Destruction*. Palpable behind many contributions is a due sense of the effort still required to prepare communities for political engagement: 'You have to be there to build the community and the movement', on interviewee claims, 'You have to participate in the general assemblies' (236). Indicating this shortfall is essential, however, when making the connections that Hedges and Sacco are intent to draw between the destruction of the communities they visit and the landscapes which encompass them. As activist Tim DeChristopher puts it, 'the only way to convince someone to blow up their backyard or poison their water is to make sure they are so desperate that they have no other option' (262). As such, Hedges repeatedly highlights connections between environmental decline and, among other things, drug use, labour exploitation, rising unemployment, and impulsive consumerism, sometimes in disarmingly direct ways – for example, as one activist declares, "Walmart makes farmworkers poor" (183).



(Above) *Illustration of Don Paquito (201)*

While Hedges occasionally backs up such claims with reference to secondary material, on the whole *Days of Destruction* is an ethnographic account, drawing more heavily on subjective and qualitative evidence. That said, numerous attempts are made to draw generalisations. Following one story we are told, almost as an

aside, that it was ‘a story that, with a few variations, we could have heard from most of the workers around us’ (208). *Days of Destruction* sits – consciously and strategically, we must assume – between the particular and the universal, much like the aesthetic dynamics of Sacco’s graphic-novel illustrations. For example, it is always ‘the corporate state’, as Hedges refers to it, around which *Days of Destruction* orbits – the unwavering focal point for *Days of Destruction*’s particular diagnosis of slow violence. The ‘corporate state’, as Hedges describes it, wholly embodies the confounding nature of systemic problems, as a force that hits individuals hard but whose corrosive influence creeps gradually through communities, taking one job here, one life there, and silencing and alienating those who would otherwise speak up or organise resistance. As Hedges sees it, corporations maintain a healthy distance from responsibility throughout, indeed ‘[t]his is part of [their] appeal’, unburdening all ‘from moral choice [...it is] as Hannah Arendt wrote, “the rule of nobody and for this very reason perhaps the least human and most cruel form of rulership”’ (269). Via Sacco’s desolate portraits, as well as isolating and detached format of the interviews themselves (focalising defeated, crestfallen individuals, often both physically and emotionally cut-off) the obliteration of community becomes deeply imprinted on the text’s form. In the face of such bleakness one may applaud Hedges’ apparently unflinching and gritty commitment to ‘tell it how it is’; it only remains for us to ask, however, what political assumptions inform such realism, and what imaginative prospects it affords future activism.

'... and the environmentalism of the poor'

If the causes of environmental and social violence depicted in *Days of Destruction* are shown to be arcane and confounding, its presentation of resistance is similarly characterised by an attentiveness to its inscrutable – even 'mysterious' – qualities. Indeed, the final chapter begins with an epigraph from Lenin which reads: '[i]t is impossible to predict the time and progress of revolution. It is governed by its own more or less mysterious laws. But when it comes, it moves irresistibly' (225). Hedges himself echoes this view later on, claiming, '[t]here is a mysterious quality to all popular uprisings. Astute observers know the tinder is there, but never when it will be lit' (227). Though these examples go some way toward elucidating the aesthetic of resistance developed in *Days of Destruction* – an appeal which is couched in its very contemporaneous and 'partial' elucidation – they also foreshadow the problems inherent in Hedges' and Sacco's representational brief. *Days of Destruction's* aim, in other words, is not only to identify 'the tinder' of revolution, but also to second guess what it has shown elsewhere to be beyond scrutiny; that is, to write with authority at the emergence of a revolutionary moment.

While this is a compelling objective, *Days of Destruction* can appear to be pulling in opposing directions – at times championing the exhilarating uncertainty of a contemporaneous activism, while at others portraying activism with grim and claustrophobic 'realism'. For example, the text spends a lot of time demonstrating the problems which weigh down the environmental movement. In the West Virginia coal fields, for example, the 'relentless stripping of the forests, the vast impoundments filled with billions of gallons of toxic coal waste known as slurry'

has combined with what Hedges describes as the 'steady flight by residents whose nerves and health are shattered' (119). While Hedges repeatedly champions resistance of all forms, the examples he cites are often problematic. For instance, when describing 'Gunnoe', 'a thin woman with curly black hair [...] part Cherokee', Hedges notes that her 'vocal opposition to the coal companies, like Larry Gibson's, has engendered the fury of many of her neighbors, who fear the loss of the coal industry will mean an end to any viable employment' (149). Activism's divisive qualities are of course vital components for understanding why such movements often persist merely in symbolic form, or even wither away entirely. In many instances, activism is understood by locals (many of whom are themselves employed by environmentally and socially problematic organisations) as a threat to their livelihoods.

Such 'realism' can work to diminish or limit the scope and vision of the activism depicted. Hedges notes, too, those areas where there is little or no resistance – such as in Pine Ridge, where the quandary, "“Why men do not revolt”" (38), has long vexed those interested in Native American politics (e.g. Gamer 1982; Lear 2006), or where small, embattled groups and besieged individuals hold on desperately against the tide. Activists like Larry Gibson (in his mid-sixties, at time of writing) have endured chronic hardships (as we have already seen: 'drive-by shootings' (119) among other forms of physical and environmental violence). In spite of all, however, Larry fights on, admitting "“I expect to lose my life to it, I guess”" (121).

That said, *Days of Destruction* does itemise a handful of successes. For example, the campaign for a 'Fair Food premium' by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers,

which secured numerous 'concrete changes in the fields, from the provision of shade to prevent heat-related illnesses to the institution of time clocks, so that workers are paid for all the hours they are on the job' (222). 'All this', we are told 'is new to the produce industry in Florida' (222). Sometimes such moments and accompanying strife accumulate to give the impression that successful revolution is simply inevitable (in spite of what we are told elsewhere). Indeed, Hedges concludes the work by declaring with 'utter certainty that the impossible is possible, the realization that the mighty can fall' (271). Here, as elsewhere, the (sometimes productive) contradiction at the heart of *Days of Destruction's* is visible: the collision of the possible and the impossible, the feasible and the speculative.

Despite what Hedges sometimes describes as the 'inevitability' of revolution, at times he does not avoid betraying a desperate urgency when calling his readership to action. As it stands, he claims, we are 'accomplices in our own demise. Revolt is all we have left. It is the only hope' (227). Though many of these tensions can be read in terms of *Days of Destruction's* appetite for rhetorical and sensational flourishes, the juxtaposition of these and otherwise detached 'observations' may account for the book's occasional jarring moments. One such moment comes in the form of an ultimatum – 'so either you rise up and supplant them, either you dismantle the corporate state for a world of sanity [...] or we are frog-marched toward self-annihilation' (266). This strident foray into demagoguery comes during *Days of Destruction's* final chapter, primarily focused on the Occupy Wall Street movement, which he comes to invest with a high (and arguably problematic) degree of optimism. 'The Occupy movements', we are told, 'are the physical embodiment of hope' (266).

It is interesting to note that Hedges' more rhetorical passages are those which depart markedly from the brief outlined in the book's introduction – that is, to 'take a look at the sacrifice zones [...] to show in words and drawings what life looks like in places where the marketplace rules without restraint' (xi) – launching headlong into the realms of speculation or highly-charged demagoguery. At these moments, far from exploring these tensions, Hedges can end up making some fairly outlandish claims, scaffolded implicitly by his authority as academic, witness, and (occasional) participant. These moments stick out because they suggest that Hedges can lose sight (however consciously) of what Clifford (1986: 2) calls the 'the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts'. On-going tensions and predicaments, instead of being confronted, get absorbed as just another feature of a grimly 'realist' landscape. For example, Larry Gibson, is presented as 'one of the few survivors', whose death would result in an effective end to localised resistance. Understood in such terms, activism becomes a brittle construct: activists may well pursue righteous objectives, but through manifestly unsustainable means. That is to say, the environmentalism which Hedges seems to despair of in *Days of Destruction* frequently aligns with what Nixon (2011: 4) calls 'the environmentalism of the poor' – a self-consciously 'compendious category', comprising communities that 'typically have to patch together threadbare improvised alliances against vastly superior military, corporate, and media forces' and whose 'green commitments are seamed through with other economic and cultural causes as they experience environmental threat not as a planetary abstraction but as a set of inhabited risks'. 'Poor' environmentalists, while vulnerable, are, in Nixon's (4) view, part of a 'resurgent' and 'intensified resistance' which has 'reached across national boundaries' to contest the assaults

on resources of the neoliberal era. By contrast, Hedges (intentionally or otherwise) repeatedly presents such resistance as resolutely isolated, fragmentary, with any hope of success coming only when its effects ‘work [their] way upward’ (226). (as it was, according to Hedges, during the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations).

Though Occupy is undoubtedly an emblem of populist resistance, *Days of Destruction*'s presentation of it can betray an unconscious division between its middle-class readership and its ‘poor’ environmentalists.²⁴ For example, at one point Hedges suggests ‘we’ must act because ‘the tyranny we imposed on others is now being imposed upon us. We too are wage slaves. We too no longer know how to sustain ourselves. We, too, do not grow our own food or make our own clothes’ (54). Elsewhere, such divisions are readable in the environmental language Hedges uses; for example, in the descriptions of climate change in chapter 3. Following an episode recounting environmental problems endured by localised coal-mining activists, Hedges proceeds to give us a potted account of climate change (128-9). This episode is not, as it happens, linked by *Days of Destruction*'s interviewees to climate change. The account feels like an accretion, conspicuous as the kind of debate which is precisely not of paramount importance to the activists Hedges interviews. Many environmental movements in low-income communities and environmental movements around the world are, of course, deeply concerned with climate change (for example, La Via Campesina and the

²⁴ *Days of Destruction* has been generally lauded; one reviewer (Utz 2013), for example, highlights the text's ‘vividly described accounts’ as those which ‘neatly slice through our tendency to convince ourselves that negative circumstances aren't such a big deal—unless they're happening to us’. Some reviewers have had problems, however, with the dour tone of the work, with one (*Kirkus* 2012) noting that apart from the Occupy movement ‘they find no hope in politics as usual’. Other reviews have focused on *Days of Destruction*'s stridently polemical tendencies. ‘Hedges sees this book’, one reviewer (Meyer 2012) claims, ‘as a call to revolution’, concluding, ‘[if] you're a believer, it will all be fuel for the fire, but the people who would learn the most from these stories will very likely have trouble getting past the first pages [...] But maybe that is the problem with all calls to revolution: You hear them only if you want to.’

MST, as discussed in a previous chapter). The assumption that Hedges makes here is that this group do too (when they don't), or, worse, that they *should*. One cannot help feel that climate change makes an appearance because, in contrast to localised water and air contamination, or 'sacrificed' communities, it is an issue which mobilises more affluent demographics, whereas localised environmental problems do not.

This wouldn't be a problem if Hedges didn't take such a hard-line stance on the value of large-scale co-ordinated organisation. Though its first four chapters present poor demographics as disorganised, diminishing, and increasingly unaware, Hedges readily denounces Marx's own castigation of the '*lumpenproletariat*' (as a 'sack of potatoes'). Hedges position, at least in this instance, appears to be that such a view is condescending and a travesty of the real-world experience of low-income environmentalist groups. His objection to Marx, however, is somewhat misleading. In the passage from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (2002) to which Hedges alludes, Marx does not dismiss the poor out-of-hand, but rather laments the conditions which exacerbate inaction, conditions entirely consistent with those that Hedges has been describing and diagnosing throughout *Days of Destruction*. The *lumpenproletariat*, itself, denotes for Marx a specific layer of the working classes thought to be particularly resistant to gaining class consciousness. Despite forming a class in basic economic terms, claims Marx (2002: 101), 'the similarity of their interests produces no community, no national linkage and no political organisation'. Even beyond what the term specifically denotes for Marx, however, a similar concern for the practicalities of mobilising the poor is evidenced by Hedges over the course of *Days of*

Destruction, especially in his contention that unfettered markets work best when its participants have ‘no medical coverage, no overtime, no ability to organize’ (194).

Aside from the ‘sack of potatoes’ analogy, the other passage which could conceivably be seen to betray Marx’s ‘disdain’, as Hedges calls it, is the moment at which Marx (2002: 100) claims ‘[t]hey cannot represent themselves, they must be represented’. Depending on how one reads it, there is certainly a bitter edge to this claim, as if reflecting an element of frustration informed by direct experience. But stripped of its playful presentation, it is effectively the same as Hedges’ claim (via Bakunin) that the ‘alliance of an estranged class of intellectuals with dispossessed masses creates the tinder [...] for successful revolt’ (253). As Hedges presents it here, this moment would presumably emerge spontaneously, rather than through the processes of organisation and advocacy championed by Marx. Nonetheless, Hedges’ combination of proletarianised masses and disaffected intellectuals neatly mirrors Marx’s own of a depoliticised working-class and the organisational and representational elites. Due, however, to the polemical momentum which Hedges has gathered thus far, Hedges seems bound to choosing iconoclasm over sober agnosticism. The truth is that a stable strategy regarding how to link up the grievances and discourses of the environmental activism of the poor and a disaffected middle (and intellectual) classes continues to evade consensus. They remain, especially in the current conjuncture, at loggerheads. This is where a consideration of *Days of Destruction’s* vis-à-vis Clark’s ‘new critical problem’ is most apposite; in short, the text’s emergent form – literally ‘written in the midst of an emergency’ – means it often encounters tension in the move between appeals to the ‘simple fact [that] all this actually happened’ and its more speculative registers. While, as we have seen, this can imply a

foreclosing of political horizons in the powerful presentation of 'simple fact', it may also offer unexpected advantages – as we shall see in the following section.

The activist aesthetic

While I have taken time to focus on some of the errors which result from its ad hoc approach, *Days of Destruction's* emergent form can also offer useful insight into the activism it depicts. In the text, emergent tensions generate an aesthetic properly reflective of its shifting political contexts; that is, an activist aesthetic – 'partial' and contemporaneous – which, like the understanding of the revolutionary moment to which Hedges repeatedly refers, is encountered, in the first instances, as inscrutable. Once again, the usefulness of the political unconscious is obvious as a way to understand literary non-fiction about activism – and maybe activism itself – as a political discourse which has little choice but to offer 'mythic resolutions of issues [like climate change] that [we] are unable to articulate conceptually' (Jameson 1981: 79). As Robinson's (2006) observation which opens this chapter neatly summarises, while climate change creates the kind of calamities reminiscent of a science fiction plot, it also signals that to write about the current conjuncture is to do so 'in the midst of an emergency' (Robinson 2010). Such conditions are known to be hostile to reliable prognosis; however, to expect anything less would surely be quixotic. Writing about the work of fellow 'SF' author, Gene Wolfe, for example, Robinson (2013) also outlined what he called the 'slingshot ending'; that is, a narrative which terminates just before the realisation of a long-anticipated objective, an effect which Robert Frost (1964: 344) recognised, too, as that which 'trips the reader head foremost into the boundless'. Robinson's

own work has been noted for such dynamics, and appropriately so – such are undoubtedly the conditions and direct experience of contemporary environmental and political turmoil which inform his writing. Writing about such subject matter always already precipitates a ‘slingshot ending’, for no matter how considered and well-researched the writing, the effort must continue: a problem like climate change will (sadly) remain unsolved; that is, without an accompanying real-world response.

Though Hedges frequently makes recourse to portentous rhetoric – especially in the final chapter – there is some indication he remains conscious of activism’s confounding dynamic; that is, in accordance the phrase which he borrows from Vaclav Havel, the understanding of ‘revolt [as] an attempt to *live within the truth*’ (243) [emphasis added]. This, again, suggests a point of contrast between fiction and literary non-fiction – the latter being bound to a degree by actual events, it cannot ‘make-up’ its ending or alter its plot to suggest ‘success’ (or even ‘failure’). ‘To live within the truth’, Hedges admits, may often lead to ‘ostracism and retribution’ (243) for those at its vanguard, but it is often the only viable position for those who refuse to accept the world-view offered by the ‘corporate state’, but ‘for this reason’ he maintains, ‘it is a genuine threat’ (244). ‘To live in truth’, then, is to live with the paradox that the only consistent feature of reality is that there is no singular or stable ‘Truth’. This is the same ‘truth’, in fact, to which Bloom (2003: 277) and Gerard (1996: 208) refer; that is, when writing consciously presents ‘versions of the truth’, rather than positing static ones. So too, Clifford (1986: 7), who acknowledges that ‘[e]thnographic truths are thus inherently *partial*—committed and incomplete’ simply because “‘Cultures” do not hold still for their portraits’. David Graeber (2009: 269), in his ethnographic work, *Direct Action*,

observes a similar ephemeral or 'tenuous' quality to activist groups, as well as the buildings they occupy:

Like the squats, they had been won by struggle, usually by direct action, maintained under great pressure from state institutions, and all were in constant danger of being taken away.

This is the tension which can seem to burden (though which also motivates) *Days of Destruction* and, for that matter, all writing about political activism. On the one hand it can gravitate towards its own forms of mythologising and illusion, yet, on the other, it is capable of folding elements of contradiction back into what it understands resistance to mean. Like Graeber's observation about squats, *Days of Destruction* attests that the environmental movement, *per se*, does not really exist, at least not in static, institutional form. At one point, for example, Hedges notes the hostility of local activists to what they unreflexively call 'environmental activists'; that is,

those who come from outside the state to protest mountaintop removal. The activists, often dressed in baggy cotton clothes and not given much to bathing, are a public relations gift to the coal companies, which tag them and their local supporters as 'tree huggers'. 'If I was runnin' things I would put them on a ship, send them out to sea, and sink 'em', White says of the activists. 'They don't belong here. They never worked a day in their life. They draw a lot of benefits, Social Security, anything they want. They are lazy' (159).

Like we saw in some fictional texts – most notably *All Over Creation* (2003) – episodes like this begin to convey the sense of a movement in motion and in negotiation with its constituent parts. Similarly, Occupy Wall Street, whose own encounters with casual racism or anti-social behaviour precipitated some difficult procedural questions. As one activist puts it,

‘People have been yelled out of the park,’ she says. ‘Someone had a sign the other day that said ‘Kill the Jew Bankers.’ They got screamed out of the park. Someone else had a sign with the n-word on it. That person’s sign was ripped up, but that person is apparently still in the park. ‘We’re trying to make this a space that everyone can join’ (260)

The moment offers a useful insight into the challenges which face social movements trying to create spaces that “everyone can join”, but where rules can also be adhered to. This particular tension will likely never find a permanent resolution, and yet, for *Days of Destruction* this is entirely consistent with an understanding of a political *process* rather than a static structure. Unlike *Creation*, however, we are not offered a symbolic resolution here; for Hedges, something ultimately more mobilising emerges precisely in the collision between different demographics. ‘Those who resist’, suggests Hedges, ‘rarely come from the elite. They ask different questions. They seek something else: a life of meaning’ (269-70).

Whatever the truth behind Hedges’ speculations on the demographics of resistance, they draw attention to his writing itself as a process of finding (and generating) meaning. As already discussed, writing and activism are linked by the

imaginative effort which goes into uncovering submerged injustices, or rather the undoing of what Nixon (2011: 160) calls a politics of ‘violent invisibility’. Despite its realist form and sensibility, then, *Days of Destruction* is more than capable of uncovering otherwise hidden perspectives on resistance, belonging as they do to marginalised constituents. One such example is Larry Gibson, whose own questions (re)confront us with (and ‘re-imagine’) the absurd violence of MTR. “Do you know” he asks,

“what it’s like to hear a mountain get blowed up? A mountain is a live vessel, man; it’s life itself. You walk through the woods here and you’re gonna hear the critters moving, scampering around, that’s what a mountain is. *Try to imagine what it would be like for a mountain when it’s getting blowed up*, fifteen times a day, blowed up, every day, what that mountain must feel like as far as pain, as life”. (121) [emphasis added].

Gibson’s appeal is for us all to reimagine, not only from his perspective, but the mountain’s, too – offering a powerful echo of Aldo Leopold’s (1970: 140) famous charge, that we ‘think like the mountain’, or Nan Shepherd’s masterful evocations in *The Living Mountain* (1977). Each appeal is fiendishly simple, but reveals the imaginative objectives which unite writer-activists and ‘regular’ activists. Of course, we cannot actually think like the mountain, but what might happen if we continued to write and act as if we could? For Leopold (1970: 140) we might avoid ‘dustbowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea’; for Gibson, it would mean the preservation of the mountain itself. Hedges, Leopold, and Gibson are all in the business of constructing narratives to countervail the logic underpinning ecological devastation, itself manifested in normative narratives of profit, human dominion

and technological progress. Whereas the latter group might be characterised by a 'common-sense' position, successful resistance begins by being attentive to what is not readily visible; that is, the perspectives of society's most marginalised, the vital ecological processes which underpin all life, and the role played by narratives of 'common-sense' in structuring socio-ecological relations.

4.2 Bill McKibben - *Oil and Honey* (2013)

As an actor I pretend for a living. I play fictitious characters often solving fictitious problems. I believe that mankind has looked at climate change in that same way: as if it were a fiction, as if pretending that climate change wasn't real would somehow make it go away. (Leonardo DiCaprio 2014: UN Climate Summit speech)

Whereas *Days of Destruction* makes repeated reference to the mysterious and inscrutable aspects of activism, in contrast, *Oil and Honey*'s prime objective is to demystify the motivations and procedures which comprise modern environmental activism. It recounts, McKibben claims, the 'tumult and conflict of my own life, as I helped to build and lead an active resistance to the fossil fuel industry' (6). This much is obvious from biographical evidence alone: the book's author is also its main protagonist, founder of 350.org and the 'accidental' leader of the 'fossil fuel resistance' (184). The text's strategies for achieving this are specifically literary in nature (that is, its organisation of language into plot, metaphor, character and so on) as well as in its negotiation of normative expectations of genre and form. *Oil and Honey*'s combination of a variety of literary strategies and registers, moreover, complements the globally dispersed and often chimeric nature of climate change itself, as well as the activism that has emerged to contest it.

Literary status

A prominent concern in *Oil and Honey* is indeed that McKibben is writing at all, or rather that he is writing *about* activism rather than simply *doing* it. The two activities are introduced in the first instance as contradictory – ‘the two sides of my life’, McKibben tells us, ‘were so at odds’ (26) – yet it is precisely this opposition which structures the work as a whole and the resolution towards which it logically moves. The structural conversion of oppositions is telegraphed in the text’s opening passage, which McKibben presents as ‘a story of two lives lived in response to a crazy time’, only to reveal that, in fact, ‘[e]ach story is mine, at least in part’ (6). In simple terms, these ‘two lives’ are McKibben’s ‘regular’ life as a writer (based in rural Vermont) and his precipitous entry into the world of modern climate change activism. ‘These stories’, McKibben adds shortly after, ‘mesh together, I hope: awkwardly right now, but perhaps, with luck, more easily in the time to come’ (6). Despite this confession, *Oil and Honey* is nothing if not considered in its construction, setting in meticulous convergence a range of binaries: writer and activist, countryside and city, local and global, and (as the book’s title suggests) oil and honey production. Indeed, McKibben’s admission that the story meshes together ‘awkwardly right now’ is, on reflection, a calculated exaggeration, part of the sense he cultivates throughout of the aleatory and improvisational nature of the social movement within which he has carved a central role.²⁵

²⁵ In this sense McKibben’s work raises questions pertaining to the long trajectory of theorisation over the role of the committed intellectual, for example, measuring the distance between ‘intellectual labour’ and ‘activist labour’, which often manifests as the distinction between work in the field and (in the parlance of anthropology) ‘armchair’ observations.

Over the course of the book, McKibben makes repeated reference to a handful of well-known American environmental writers, such as Thoreau and Emerson, though also more contemporary figures such as Gary Snyder and Terry Tempest Williams. At such moments McKibben offers for consideration the literary stature of *Oil and Honey* itself, even remarking on the relative dearth of literary writing on one of its central topics: industrial agriculture (6). Whatever McKibben's literary aspirations, it is clear that he views his writing as an effective means to amplify his (and the movement's) ideas, to open up what could otherwise be, in his words, 'the arcane and somewhat dull topic of fossil fuels' (141). As we shall see, McKibben's engagement with the arcane and difficult nature of his field is one with significant political implications.

For James Clifford (1986: 25), the 'vision of a complex, problematic, partial ethnography' will not (if it is done well) lead to defeat, 'but to more subtle, concrete ways of writing and reading, to new conceptions of culture as interactive and historical', or, put simply, 'better modes of writing'. Can McKibben's writing be understood as a part of a comparably 'complex, problematic, partial ethnography'? As previously suggested, the activism it depicts is certainly problematic. At one point, in defence of his reliance on air-travel, McKibben remarks, 'I'd left my solar panels at home and gotten on the airplane because addition alone isn't going to work' (101). For McKibben, it is precisely these sorts of tensions – for example, the shortfalls in consistency and organisation – which motivate his writing. As McMichael (2008: 219) puts it, any given group is "mobilized" precisely because it cannot do this just as it pleases – its political intervention is conditioned by the historical political-economic conjuncture through which it is emboldened to act'. For McKibben, though, the environmental movement's inability to do 'just as it

pleases' has even more fundamentally to do with the history of the movement itself, one characterised by various forms of dysfunction. As McKibben suggests, 'all we were lacking for a real movement was the movement part' (14). McKibben turns these problematic tensions into a subtle and pragmatic heroism of the committed activist willing to forgo his carbon principles, further securing his and his groups' mandate for intervention, by material *and* writerly means.

In keeping with its literary, ethnographic and journalistic modalities, McKibben spends a lot of *Oil and Honey* developing a persona, one which signals its writerly authority in having 'been there', a move typical of early ethnography and documentary realism (including Wolfe's New Journalism). As McKibben describes it, the book's activism (and the movement as a whole) is sustained through the capacity to act as a 'moral witness' (23). Such claims on their own are key to understanding how *Oil and Honey's* appeals to authenticity are meant to work; as we have already seen, such authenticity is often underwritten in non-fictional environmental writing by claims that 'all this actually happened' (Wolfe 1990: 48-9), or at least as interventions designed to '[set] the record straight' (Bloom 2003: 277). Moreover, the key component which holds all this together is what Timothy Clark (2011: 177) describes as an unspoken 'ethic of truthfulness', or rather 'accuracy and coherence of a kind more normally associated with scientific or professional academic work'. Much of this credibility is secured outside the text (i.e. the credibility which McKibben has gained over the course of his career) but also at the level of the text itself – it is McKibben's persona which provides the emotive foundation for this trust. Counter-intuitively, this persona is one which is repeatedly revealed to be fallible. At one point McKibben intimates that

I felt like the marble in the pinball machine, bouncing off one flipper after another. Or maybe I was the one playing the game, shaking the machine. I was good at this, after all; we were on about our fourth extra ball with Keystone. But it wasn't me, or at least it wasn't the me that used to be, the one that wrote difficult books, that had the time to figure things out *instead of just reacting* (213 [emphasis added]).

In *Days of Destruction*, we saw a similar interplay between the simple and the complex. Sacco's illustrations, for example, modulate between the complexity of environmental despoilment and the simplicity of identification at the level of character. For McKibben, too, it is crucial that we identify with his persona (warts and all) while not losing credence in the accompanying scientific and political claims. Indeed, while *Oil and Honey* does a lot to convey the episodic and random experiences of McKibben's character, a narrative form is clearly discernible, to which I now turn.

Narrative

Oil and Honey and *Days of Destruction* both use broad understandings of community to give narrative structure to their otherwise disordered movements. For McKibben community is central; one of his main points, in fact, is that the places most likely to withstand the impacts of climate change are simply 'any place with strong community' (40). Unlike *Days of Destruction*, however, which invests a great amount of time examining communities otherwise cut off from mainstream social movements, McKibben's participatory stance appears to alleviate this

burden – instead, more time is spent describing the ease with which the movement has formed coalitions between community groups from across the globe. During meetings with Occupy and Native Peoples’ movement representatives, McKibben claims off-handedly, ‘our messages synched easily’ (59). This may also be because for McKibben the value of community is a given, the starting point for the more complicated work of social movements. Indeed, he is quick to point out that in an increasingly unstable climate ‘there comes a point past which neighbors are no longer sufficient, a point we are fast approaching’ (40). McKibben’s extensive travels brings slightly more clarity to what he means by ‘community’; that is, organised groups from *across the globe* capable of mobilising immediately to halt the effects of climate change. It is this narrative which McKibben invests most of his creative labour developing.

As McKibben indicates numerous times, the campaign trail is dominated by the concerns of timing and believability, key concerns in the construction of literary narratives. When he plans, for example, to take on the fossil fuel industry through a strategy of ‘divestment’, rather than play party politics directly, the project, we are told, ‘would have to wait’ since ‘Naomi [Klein] was seven months pregnant, and since [...] presidential politics would drown out every story for months to come’ (90). At such times, more than one level of narrative becomes visible: the narrative of *Oil and Honey* as well as the narratives which activist groups project to the world. McKibben even acknowledges the power of narrative in explaining good farming: ‘It’s about stories. The real challenge of doing something like farming is to string all these stories together so they end up making sense’ (215). Narrative is not only useful as entertainment, but something which is essential to have an influence on: ‘we had to somehow make climate change a visible fight or we’d lose

almost every time' (100). Indeed, the juxtaposition of narratives designed to entertain with those designed to 'influence' isn't always clear. During his 'fossil free tour', McKibben drops by a session being hosted by American TV producers, Norman and Lyn Lear, 'for fifty or sixty screenwriters in the hopes they'd insert storylines about climate change into their films and TV shows'. He seizes on the opportunity to tell them 'the moment for screwing new lightbulbs had passed [...] now we [need] real activism' (200).

The episode is estranging, forcing us to wonder where we as readers are in this web of narratives – in what ways is *Oil and Honey* itself part of the effort 'to somehow make climate change a visible fight'? Are we assumed to be already *part* of McKibben's activist community, or a potential convert to it? As a book about activism, *Oil and Honey* demonstrates that to be an activist is to be inextricably embroiled in a highly fraught contest of narratives; indeed, McKibben's anxiety to sustain intrigue and interest clearly applies as much to *Oil and Honey's* readership as it does to participants in the environmental movement as a whole. The numerous tensions which he identifies – such as the global scope of 350.org's campaign versus his compulsion as a writer to simply 'hole up in a room and type' (213) – are presented agonistically: '[t]hat the two sides of my life were so at odds bothered me no end, far more than the jet fuel my travels burned. I couldn't quite make them connect' (26). As McKibben moves through his story, he actively sustains these tensions. The sequences on the farm in Vermont with Kirk which intersperse the 'activist' passages, instead of feeling tacked-on, offer bucolic relief from the hard slog of 'on-the-road' 21st century global activism: 'the automated morning wakeup call, the plastic cup in its plastic wrap, and the sign explaining that the environment is being saved by not washing your towel' (63). Not only do

they provide a means to introduce a large amount of information – on topics such as organic farming, bee-keeping and community organising – but also narrative *structure*. They exemplify what Nixon (2011: 14) calls ‘scientific and imaginative testimony’, permitting the scope and reach commensurate with a global movement, while allowing McKibben to remain attentive to the exigencies of a compelling narrative.

Oil and Honey’s binary tensions (writer/activist, local/global, victory/defeat, etc.) do not ever completely resolve, for reasons which reflect McKibben’s activist politics and aesthetics. The narrative concludes, for example, at a highpoint of the campaign, as McKibben speaks at a rally of over 50,000 people: a ‘vast crowd, the largest [he had] ever addressed’ (227). In social movement theory, rallies and demonstrations are rarely seen as moments of consummation, but rather events which validate and catalyse subsequent actions. As the historian of social movements, Jesus Casquete (2006: 56) puts it, mass demonstrations ‘fulfil the function of giving form to an abstraction’ in a way which makes subsequent actions more likely to happen. Indeed, *Oil and Honey*’s ending closely resembles Robinson’s (2013) own description of a ‘slingshot ending’, in this case toward the hoped for actions yet to be realised by McKibben and his supporters. McKibben uses, in other words, the incompleteness of his narrative to his advantage, drawing the reader in to find out more and (ultimately) join the movement.

Genre

Much of what *Oil and Honey* achieves in narrative terms is dependent on an accompanying genre-related flexibility. As has been noted in the above discussion, literary or creative non-fiction is often characterised by its 'hybrid form', encapsulated in Nixon's (2011: 14) phrase 'scientific and imaginative testimony', or Buell's (2005: 96) of 'spatial reach' – an idea which denotes both literary and geographic discursiveness. While such hybridity formally complements the representation of shifting global phenomena like climate change, it also strategically befits a movement that wants (and needs) representation on any platform it can get. *Oil and Honey* follows suit. Unadorned scientific explanation is deployed incidentally in shifts between locales and modes of narration. For instance, consider the way McKibben discusses findings from the Carbon Tracker Initiative (CTI). Of any one organisation, their findings have undoubtedly provided the most important evidence for McKibben's various campaigns, not only in their reflected respectability and rigour, but also in their straightforwardness. For McKibben the implications of CTI's research boils down to three numbers: 2°C, 565 gigatons and 2,795 gigatons. The first represents the level of warming agreed upon in Copenhagen in 2009, the latter two, quantities of remaining and unburnable carbon. McKibben devotes a lot of time explaining the significance behind these numbers. The numbers come up again, however, when McKibben mentions an article he wrote for *Rolling Stone* Magazine called 'Global Warming's Terrifying New Math' (2012), an article in which he first outlined the CTI argument. This time he does it with contrasting brevity: 'the stuff about how 565 gigatons of carbon would take us past two degrees, but the fossil fuel industry had 2,795 gigatons on hand' (166). Not only does the mention of the article provide another opportunity to succinctly summarise some difficult material, but McKibben is thereby able to reference an important co-text to *Oil and Honey*; i.e. the article

itself, which was a milestone event in the history of 350.org, receiving, McKibben tells us, two million online views and ‘100,000 likes on Facebook [...] by the time the week was out’ (166).

Elsewhere, McKibben simply cuts extraneous material directly into *Oil and Honey*. At various points he includes Tweets (79, 85), blog posts (55, 207), open and private letters (20-3, 110), emails (156, 161), and already published articles (166, 194). These formal interjections not only allow stylistic variety (as do the converging narratives of writer/activist, local/global, and country/city), they also contribute to the overall effect of a textured and ad hoc campaign diary, a scrapbook of lived experiences which – true to form – ‘mesh together [...] awkwardly right now, but perhaps, with luck, more easily in the time to come’ (6). Again, the hybridity contributes to a sense of McKibben’s activism as ‘in process’ and, more importantly, as something readers can interact with, should they choose to. As McKibben suggests, *Oil and Honey* is not presented ‘as suggestions for how others should live’ but as two distinct perspectives which ‘I hope the reader won’t feel the need to choose, or reject’ (6).

In recounting McKibben’s experiences on the road (but also periodically returning to his rural Vermont home and Webster’s nearby apiary), another genre that *Oil and Honey* certainly cleaves to is undoubtedly the ‘travelogue’. *Oil and Honey*’s highlighting of these dynamic moments is again complementary to the other conceptual movements in the story, most notably McKibben’s personal journey from ‘writer to activist’ (184) (or, rather, from being a writer *and* an activist to a combined form of *writer-activist*). This sense of personal journey is emphasised throughout, from the book’s first moments to its Kim Stanley Robinson-style ‘sling

shot ending'. Occasionally this gives *Oil and Honey* the feel of a journey that doesn't really go anywhere. Early on, McKibben describes himself as 'an accidental activist, making it up as I went along, and kind of sorry to be having to bother anyone', yet even by the end not much has changed, describing himself as an 'unlikely and somewhat reluctant activist' who was not 'cut out to be a leader'. What sustains interest here is precisely language redolent of a personal quest. As writers like Robert Root (2003: 253) have suggested the 'personal presence' of the writer is often a central concern for non-fiction writers, a view McKibben evidently shares. 'You need to offer up a bit of yourself', McKibben claims, confessing that his career as an activist has been 'accidental' and that he was essentially 'making it up as he went along' (184).

Whether 'personal presence' does in fact produce high quality non-fiction is moot; for McKibben, though, personal intimacy fits neatly alongside the form of activism he has chosen to portray. Indeed, a slight (if understandable) disingenuousness becomes evident in McKibben's confession when he reveals that his amateurism is 'at least half true', and certainly all worth it if it 'let other people see that they, too, could be leaders' (184). Much of McKibben's story, it seems, fits into this paradigm of the 'half true', a narrative designed to finesse and embellish his own aleatory brand of activism. Moments where McKibben's doubts rise to the surface – his perennial worry, for example, 'that we were losing. Badly' (127) – reap dividends later on. When we are told the various ways in which McKibben and his organisation have triumphed, we understand them in the context of the chaos and adversity which preceded it. In other words, *Oil and Honey* constructs its authority, even as it apparently undermines it, coalescing the need for more activism with an aesthetic refusal to end in a conventional sense. In an instance already cited,

McKibben intimates, 'my life didn't feel like my life [...] I felt like the marble in the pinball machine, bouncing off one flipper after another' (213). The move is deliberate, of course, part of the attempt to cultivate a confessional register, fostering trust in McKibben (and his accompanying politics). None of this is surprising, of course, especially when one considers the power and extent of the PR 'truths' of the fossil fuel industry to which McKibben is opposed. Like Clifford (1986: 8), however, it is important to remain alert to the fact that McKibben is 'speaking artfully, in a determining context of power', even if he does so in the name of 'environmental justice'.

McKibben's travelogue approach is a case in point; it shapes profoundly the world McKibben presents to us, permitting views across inordinate geographical distances. True to its itinerant form, McKibben frequently reflects on the way his view of the landscape around him depends on the mode of transport he uses. Flying across America, McKibben tells us, gives a wide angle view of the country below, but ultimately it is 'reduced to a two-dimensional map' (210), lacking any real definition. When riding through the country by bus, however, McKibben describes the sense of 'revelation' he felt being able 'to sense the size and relief of the country: to start out amid those great volcanoes of the Northwest, to meander south through the coastal forest and toward the Hollywood hills' (210). McKibben's reason for being on the road is straightforward – to promote his campaign; but again, the insight that this form affords him does not go unremarked. Such a trip allows him, he claims, to see what many apparently cannot – that the earth 'was still so beautiful, still so worth saving from the radical simplifiers of the fossil fuel industry who were crashing a million years of evolved gorgeousness and meaning into a homogenized layer of hot, bare, broken planet' (210).

The 'global eye' of *Oil and Honey* is extended yet further by presenting an organisation heavily reliant on online media. In an extended passage, McKibben lists actions from a wide range of locales already hit hard by the effects of climate change:

The first were from the Marshall Islands in the Pacific, where the sun crosses the international date line. Our crew there was underwater, all in scuba gear, holding a giant banner above a dying reef: 'Your Carbon Emissions Kills Our Coral.' After that the images poured in to our Flickr photo stream faster than I could post the best of them on the blog. An early picture arrived from Rajasthan in India, where the wells in four villages around the Ranthambore National Park tiger sanctuary have gone dry; women in saris, holding black umbrellas against the heat, circled the empty cement hole (110).

The passage continues on at length, citing photos from the now ice-free Arctic Northwest Passage, floods in southern Sindh in Pakistan, '[p]arched tea estates in Assam', forest fires in the suburbs of Melbourne; a dry lake bed in Garissa, Kenya, and the similarly imperilled Dead Sea in Jordan, a well as Tel Aviv, Burma, Cairo, La Paz, Entebbe, Harlem, Ho Chi Minh City, Tajikistan, Michigan, and McKibben's home town of Vermont (110-5), which had recently been hit by flooding 'worse than anything any Vermonter could remember' (193). The effect is striking – its 'spatial reach', as Buell (2005: 96) would put it, permits an opening up of climate change as a tangibly global phenomenon, mirroring attempts to make similar representations in fiction and film. At times, as in the above example, we are taken

rapidly across the globe, grasping in condensed form the dissipated effects of an incremental and otherwise invisible crisis. At others we are transported into the contrastingly claustrophobic, technological hub of the online-activist, with McKibben himself 'transfixed at the computer, hour after hour' as the pictures came in (113). 'It was like eating salted peanuts', he explains, 'it was hard to stop hitting refresh, even for a minute, especially since I could begin to make patterns out of the confusion' (113).

Aesthetics I – SF

Oil and Honey's global and technological lenses bring with them more than just the trappings of the travelogue. The above tableau, for example, is at times redolent with an information-age paranoia, with McKibben frantically trying to read patterns in the vast flow of information coming in via the web. Indeed, *Oil and Honey's* aesthetics are in many ways reminiscent of those we might expect to find in a sci-fi plot. Once again, Robinson's (2006) point about SF and climate change is salutary: though Robinson highlights that we are now able to witness *first-hand* the kind of effects akin to the plot of a sci-fi novel, for most, climate change is precisely something we have encountered first of all as fiction, and are only now coding back into our sense of reality. It is certainly the topsy-turvy nature of this relationship between imagination and reality which informs and structures McKibben's representations of environmental crisis. On occasion, these references are direct; for example, when describing the extreme weather events in the summer of 2011, he reports that 'weather historian Christopher Burt would be calling it "almost like science fiction"' (85); shortly after these comments McKibben

himself reminds us that '[t]his was not the old planet. This was a new one, the "Eaarth" [sic] I'd described in my last grim book, where the atmosphere contained enough carbon to change everything' (87). In other descriptions of extreme weather events the approach even more directly reflects this SF ambience. In one scene, McKibben describes a conversation with the researcher who first discovered the extent and speed of the ice melt in Greenland. The description, again, takes on the proportions of a science fiction plot:

'my heart skipped a beat when I saw how steep the drop was', Jason told me when I called. 'I thought it meant the satellite sensor might have degraded.' [...] 'Greenland is a sleeping giant that's waking,' Jason said. 'In this climate trajectory, the ice sheet is doomed—the only question is how fast it goes' (168).

The inclusion of the researcher's highly-charged account gives the impression that he – like us – has been plunged into the centre of a world-historical crisis. Not only does the scene allow breathless sensation, but draws back immediately to permit a moment of scientific analysis – 'the island', we are told, 'now absorbs more extra energy each summer than the U.S. consumes each year' (169). Like many others, the episode is constructed to allow movement between two registers, much like Nixon's 'scientific and imaginative testimony'. In *Oil and Honey's* description of rising temperatures and contingent risks of disease transmission, the strategy is repeated. The problem rehearses the familiar risks of reduced visibility – as the climate warms, the geographical range of tropical diseases increases, though still not in ways readily discernible to audiences in the Global North. Rather than simply stating this, McKibben imagines

watching our planet through a telescope from some other galaxy and trying to figure out why we were changing the atmosphere, a reasonable hypothesis would be that we'd decided to embark on a planetwide mosquito-ranching business. Along with the deer ticks spreading Lyme disease, they were the clear local beneficiaries of our new climate (177).

The strategy is similar to that known amongst SF theorists as 'cognitive estrangement' – a plot conceit which forces us into a new cognitive relation with our everyday surroundings, an effect Darko Suvin (1979: 6) calls the 'factual reporting of fictions'. The specific conceit of viewing our world through the eyes of an alien intelligence can, in accordance with this theory, help to uncover invisibilised absurdities, and is a commonplace in SF; it is used here to overturn very real misconceptions about the extent and influence of climate change. As McKibben states, 'the future, as pressing as it is, sometimes gives way to sheer awe at the scale of what we've already done' (169). Like proponents of SF, McKibben is similarly involved in Suvin's 'factual reporting of fictions'; that is, the attempt to dislodge the *fiction* of 'business as usual' with the awesome *reality* of 'what we've already done'.

When Hurricane Sandy hits in 2010, the same technique is deployed. Though his home state of Vermont is hit hard 'it wasn't', McKibben confesses, 'somehow, weird'; '[w]atching Sandy flood New York, though, was different. It felt scarier by far, like a glimpse into the way the world ends' (193). It is significant, as well, that McKibben chooses to splice in another article he wrote for *The Guardian*. The insertion allows for another stylistic gear change, as it is observed that 'New York

is as beautiful and diverse and glorious as an old-growth forest. It's as grand, in its unplanned tumble, as anything ever devised by man or nature. And now, I fear, its roots are being severed' (195). The analogy is disarming, offering an unexpected inversion of urban and wilderness images, but it works particularly well here because of the momentum already generated around inversions of real and imaginary worlds. We are so used to climate change's invisibility – not only from our lived experience, but also our news feeds – that its cinematic and documentarian depiction *as happening* acts like another such inversion. The moment of estrangement from our fictional understanding of climate change comes, then, when we acknowledge *Oil and Honey* is not imaginary, but self-consciously non-fictional. As McKibben himself remarks,

unprecedented, I emphasized, didn't mean unexpected: this was what happened when you changed the planet's ground rules, and scientists had been warning for years to expect a cataclysm of this kind, right down to predicting how deeply it would flood the subway tunnels (195).

Aesthetics II – 'becoming'

If *Oil and Honey* generates political insight through its re-imagining of environmental disasters, this is at least as true for its representations of resistance itself. As Hedges (2009: 52) suggests elsewhere, the current historical moment finds us living 'in imaginary, virtual worlds', also echoing DiCaprio's (2014) observations 'that mankind has looked at climate change [...] as if it were a fiction'. What remains implicit in these observations, however, is explicitly enacted in *Oil and Honey*: a confrontation with the activist reality that so many pretend or claim is

not happening. As already suggested, *Oil and Honey*'s formal features make this more apparent (e.g. its itinerant form, converging narratives, 'spatial reach', and genre hybridity). Out of these formal features emerges, much like in *Days of Destruction*, an aesthetic which complements many of the features common to grassroots activism; that is, an ad hoc, dynamic, aleatory 'movement'. In other words, the activism *Oil and Honey* presents – like its style – is unpredictable and *contemporaneous*, dealing with rapidly changing biospheric conditions, as well as emergent and unexpected strategic dynamics. As McKibben suggests,

if you've built a movement, you've eventually got to put it to work. And now "eventually" had come. Education needed to yield to action. So while Kirk was starting to build his barn in that early summer of 2011, I was stepping off a small cliff into the next phase of my life (17).

In framing an emergent movement, *Oil and Honey* must hold two ideas in tension: on the one hand the book recounts McKibben's role in the re-emergence and strengthening of the climate change movement, post-Copenhagen (2009), while on the other it presents the environmental movement's inherited dysfunctionalities and weaknesses. McKibben describes, for example, his involvement in a walkout at the 'Rio+20' environmental summit in June 2012, where no binding targets for emissions reductions were set, and where, as McKibben suggests, a 'prevailing mood of futility' dominated the proceedings (144). As the group walk out, they choose to rip up the summit document (ironically entitled 'The Future We Want'), hand in their conference accreditations, all while chanting 'the future we want is not found here' (146). The episode clearly demonstrates not only McKibben's sensitivity to the ironic shifting of reality within international, collective

engagements with climate change (especially with regard to imagined futures), but also brings us to the heart of an emerging alternative. As with all emergences, the development of the movement which *Oil and Honey* recounts does not itself escape the instabilities which afflict Rio+20. Indeed, McKibben is keen throughout to demonstrate that while he might have the requisite energy and moral drive, he remains an ‘unlikely and somewhat reluctant activist’ (223).

This much explains McKibben’s decision to include his campaign’s less successful moments. Take, for example, the aborted campaign idea of allowing a huge ice sculpture in the shape of the word ‘HOAX?’ to melt on Capitol Hill in the record summer heat of 2011 (158). The ‘stunt’ (156), as McKibben refers to it, was designed not only to highlight the record temperatures, but was itself a response to a stunt organised by Senator James Inhofe, (in)famously one of US Congress’ most vocal critics of global warming. The stunt, which involved the building of an igloo in central Washington by Inhofe and his family (during the heavy snow falls in winter 2010), was dedicated – tongue-in-cheek – to Al Gore and ‘global warming’ (156). Despite successfully crowd sourcing the \$5,000 funds to produce the sculpture and place it on Capitol Hill, McKibben’s counter-stunt is cancelled last minute when he receives a letter from Bob Kincaid, the then president of West Virginian environmental group, Coal River Mountain Watch, who interpreted the decision to melt the ice as ‘insincere, elitist blindness to the very real trouble we suffer’ (157), with many in the region suffering from the extreme heat and water shortages. The episode provides yet another insight into the problems faced by those managing disparate social movement interests, but its particular value lies in the way it portrays McKibben’s personal journey as an activist. After laying out the two sides, McKibben writes

[i]f the criticism wasn't entirely rational, it felt emotionally true. And I thought about my own emotions for a moment. Calling this thing off wouldn't really damage the cause [...] My reluctance came, I feared, from embarrassment. To me. I'd have to say I'd made a mistake— which isn't a very good reason not to do something (158).

The confessional tone, combined with the emphasis on McKibben's 'own emotions', provides a clear rationale for the inclusion of this otherwise anti-climactic event. It is the fallibility of McKibben (and others in the movement) which we are invited to contemplate, in order to see that '[they] were different— not an environmental organization but a campaign, not a group of slick professionals but a homemade effort that relied on everyone doing what they could' (160).

While McKibben's confessional tone does a lot to make his experience accessible, an accompanying and (sometimes) problematic outcome is that the activism can appear somewhat dull. In a review of *Oil and Honey*, Verlyn Klinkenborg (2013), suggests, somewhat apologetically, 'if it reads like a campaign diary, that is only one of the many burdens this book carries'. This and *Oil and Honey's* other so-called 'many burdens' will be familiar to those even casually acquainted with environmental writing. Explaining climate change, for instance, has fast become an invidious task;²⁶ many of the 'facts', while startling in their implications, often

²⁶ The difficulty of converting scientific consensus into widespread belief and/or behaviour change has indeed become a common feature of writing on climate change. The complexity of such processes has been well documented (see Stern & Kaspersen 2010; Whitmarsh, *et al.* 2010; Weintrobe 2013). Evident too, however, is a sense of exasperation which characterises the contributions from some key commentators on the topic. See, for example, Naomi Klein's (2014: 15) observation that 'if enough of us stop looking away and decide that climate change is a crisis worthy of Marshall Plan levels of response, then it will become one', or McKibben's (2014) own, that 'reason having won the argument has so far lost the war'.

possess a tedious and remote familiarity: rising sea levels, 'the greenhouse effect', biodiversity loss, etc., etc. We have heard it all before. Yet most of us are still as far (or feel increasingly distant) from a practical understanding of what an effective response to these problems might look like, and Klinkenborg is right to emphasise the campaign-trail aesthetic as a 'burden'. While McKibben readily admits being troubled by having to write 'one book after another' in an attempt to explain climate change (13), crucially, the problem in view has now changed; no longer is it a question of simply how best to hammer home the 'patterns behind climate change' in the hope that awareness alone will change behaviour, but how to *actually* effect that change at the social level. 'Over the course of the last decade', McKibben tells us, 'I figured out that I needed to do more than write' (14).

Though no one will deny that McKibben has become more active in recent years, he has most certainly not stopped writing. The logic of social change, as McKibben is only too aware, remains dominated by communicational challenges – the need to marshal, as he puts it, 'the currencies of movement' – 'if this fight was about power, then we who wanted change had to assemble some' (14). Much like climate change itself, however, social movements possess a paradoxical nature; though they threaten sensation (and, of course, sometimes they deliver), most of the time their effects are accretive or difficult to predict. In this sense, environmental social movements mirror the political and ecological patterns they exist to challenge. In *Oil and Honey*, McKibben appears intent, though, on reclaiming positive ownership over the social reality of environmental activism as a long and arduous vocation. 'The trick', McKibben claims, 'is to say something for the hundredth time and have it sound fresh, to mean it as you say it' (101). This

sense of worthy attrition is prominent in McKibben's account of his life on the road, which he frequently describes as lonely, disruptive and repetitious (e.g. 65-6, 117).

This realist sensibility, far from being a cast-iron burden, helps to frame an important point: that 'civil disobedience is hard work' (53). Indeed, for this claim to be at all meaningful the grasping of it must itself be hard-earned, and McKibben asks a lot of his readers at times in laying out his campaign itinerary in such detail. But McKibben is also acutely concerned with how his narratives unfold, and clearly tries to dilute the monotony. When McKibben confesses 'we knew it would be tough to keep the positive vibe, we knew that our tone would start to slip' (61), the reader must wonder if the book will do the same. The result is compelling, strengthening the impression that the book and the activism it talks about will eventually converge. (We know, incidentally, that this convergence happens – in a tokenistic sense, at least – with the establishment of Webster's farm, paid for using the advance of the book (11)). This tension delineates the simultaneously unstable and exciting space of McKibben's activist aesthetic. Much like Nixon's (2011) 'slow violence', the representation of climate change and its accompanying activism must be at once mundane *and* terrifying, and to make this work McKibben makes sure to acknowledge those elements from his past writing that are no longer congruent with his politics: 'I miss sometimes desperately', McKibben confesses, 'the other me: the one who knew lots about reason and beauty and very little about the way power works' (17). Though conspicuously staged, his sense of stoical commitment to the gritty realism of climate change activism comes across as genuine – McKibben may have sacrificed beauty in *Oil and Honey*, but he does so as part of a conscious effort to build another aesthetic, one more readily compatible with his activist work ethic.

Though McKibben writes as if his status as a ‘writer’ is frequently problematised by the pragmatism of activist politics, this, again, is something McKibben makes an effort to show has been overcome, and is thus central to *Oil and Honey*’s aesthetic development: to strip down the reflective passages, to lay bare the realities of the campaign trail, to invest creative energies in the weaving of a deceptively beguiling and mobilising narrative. Again, the narrativization of McKibben’s journey is part of his development of an aesthetic befitting his activism, one which reclaims (and even emphasises) the arduous nature of political struggle from the grip of romanticism. This result is instructive: the more people understand about how social movements *move*, the more we will all be able to play an active role in shaping the greener future McKibben and his allies so energetically fight for. Part of McKibben’s struggle is simply the extent to which this is still a ‘battle for all’ being fought by a minority; the gains are small and slow, the campaign trail long and monotonous. But what *Oil and Honey* reveals is precisely the overlap between writer and activist: the need for both to tell stories well, to uncover and enlarge otherwise ‘submerged stories of struggle and injustice’.

Conclusions

How we frame activism is crucial to our understanding of political possibility. As environmental crises loom ever larger, our political lives become increasingly defined by our capacity (both perceived and actual) to limit their destructive effects. Literary non-fiction about environmental activism is certainly distinct from the fictive writing examined elsewhere in this thesis – its overt advocacy, plus its

adherence to realist sensibilities and aesthetics, as well as the simple power it commands in claiming that 'all this actually happened', means it necessarily negotiates the challenges of mobilisation and representation in particular ways, not least in its attempt to popularise activism by portraying ordinary, even 'unlikely' activists as models for emulation.

That said, literary non-fiction fits into the larger context of environmental writing as part of the struggle to 'move the notion of environment from abstraction to a tangible concern' (Dixon 1999: 87). This thesis has understood this process in a variety of ways; namely, the effort to uncover the otherwise obscured aspects of ecological cognition (chapter 1), to understand and expose the threat of neoliberal capture or deflection (chapter 2), literature's capacity to demonstrate that such capture is far from inevitable (chapter 3), or, finally, the use of literary strategies in non-fiction to develop an accessible and inclusive activist aesthetic (chapter 4).

In a time when more environmental activists than ever are being arrested (Potter 2011) or killed – especially in the Global South (Global Witness 2014) – not to mention the increasingly grave dangers posed to the environment as a whole, these representations take on a life-or-death significance. As Rootes (2003: 256) suggests, though it is 'difficult to imagine a future in which there is neither reason nor will to protest', it remains worryingly uncertain *how many* of us will assimilate that 'reason or will'. In a time when the health of our environment is increasingly measurable in numbers – 350 parts per million, 2 degrees centigrade, 2,795 gigatons – the only numbers that matter will be the numbers of people willing to organise, mobilise, and cooperate in the fight for a more just and sustainable environmental politics.

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