Epistolary Embodiment(s) in 21st-Century British Climate Change Novels

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Department of European, American and Intercultural Studies
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Asia Battiloro
Sapienza Student ID 1848096   **Silesia Student ID 9155**

Supervisor   Supervisor
Prof. Riccardo Capoferro   Prof. Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech

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Abstracts

Abstract (EN)

Over the past three decades, ecocritical studies have undergone a marked shift from an emphasis on thematic and ethical engagement with environmental content to a more sustained attention to form and mediation. While early ecocriticism was not indifferent to questions of form, it tended to privilege moral and thematic readings, defining itself in opposition to poststructuralist pantextualism and wary of approaches that seemed to abstract texts from their ecological referents. By the turn of the millennium, however, scholars began to foreground how narrative structures and aesthetic patterns participate in ecological understanding, emphasising the reciprocal interplay between nature and text. Building on this formal turn, the present thesis investigates how literary form mediates the representation of climate change, foregrounding its epistemological and affective dimensions. In line with new formalist criticism, form is approached not as an autonomous aesthetic container but as a relational structure that shapes perception, organises meaning, and connects textual experience to material reality. The study thus addresses a critical gap in ecocritical discourse by examining how epistolary forms in contemporary climate fiction translate the complexity of climate change into embodied and narratable experience.

Although eco-narratological and eco-cognitive approaches have productively explored issues of form and reader response, they have tended to overlook the narrative (experiential) significance of epistolarity. This thesis seeks to redress this omission by analysing how epistolary and partially epistolary forms contribute to the formal configuration of the climate change novel, mediating between individual perception and climate change as a vast and complex system. It asks: how do contemporary British novels formally and thematically render climate change thinkable, perceptible, and affectively

resonant? More specifically, how do epistolary and partially epistolary forms enable experiential engagement with climate complexity and epistemological instability? Combining eco-narratology, second-generation cognitive narratology, and epistolary theory, the present study examines how the narrative forms of selected twenty-first-century British climate change novels—David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), Amy Sackville's *The Still Point* (2010), Guinevere Glasfurd's *The Year Without Summer* (2020), and Naomi Alderman's *The Future* (2023)—mediate the multiscalar, heterogeneous, and cognitively challenging dimensions of climate change.

The findings demonstrate that epistolarity functions both as a narrative strategy and as a central structuring principle in shaping the novel's formal design, operating alongside other devices to mirror the epistemologies of climate change. Through fragmentation, multispatial and multitemporal polyphony, and self-reflexive mediation, these novels re-enact tensions between local experience and global abstraction, engaging with temporal dislocation, nonlinearity, and superimposition to foster embodied reader engagement despite the conceptual abstraction of climate change. Ultimately, the thesis argues that these works reactivate the novel's historical function as a site of epistemological experimentation and moral imagination, revealing that literary form, far from merely representing environmental transformation, actively participates in shaping the cultural cognition of a world in the throes of climate crisis.

Abstract (IT)

Negli ultimi trent'anni, gli studi ecocritici hanno conosciuto un profondo mutamento di prospettiva, passando da un'enfasi sull'impegno tematico ed etico nei confronti dei contenuti ambientali a una più attenta riflessione sulla forma e sulla mediazione. Se il primo ecocriticismo non era del tutto indifferente alle questioni formali, tendeva tuttavia a privilegiare letture di tipo morale e tematico, definendosi in opposizione al pan-testualismo poststrutturalista e diffidando di approcci che sembravano astrarre la letteratura dal suo ancoraggio al mondo naturale. All'inizio del nuovo millennio, tuttavia, gli studiosi hanno iniziato a porre in primo piano il modo in cui le strutture narrative e i modelli estetici partecipano alla formazione di una visione ecologica, sottolineando l'interazione reciproca tra natura e testo. In linea con questa svolta formalista, la presente tesi indaga come la forma letteraria medii la rappresentazione del cambiamento climatico, mettendone in risalto le dimensioni epistemologiche e affettive. In accordo con la critica neoformalista, la forma viene considerata non come un contenitore estetico autonomo, bensì come una struttura relazionale che modella la percezione, organizza il significato e connette l'esperienza testuale alla realtà materiale. Lo studio affronta così una lacuna rilevante nel discorso ecocritico, analizzando come le forme epistolari nella narrativa climatica contemporanea traducano la complessità del cambiamento climatico in un'esperienza narrabile e incarnata.

Sebbene gli approcci eco-narratologici ed eco-cognitivi abbiano esplorato in modo produttivo le questioni di forma e di risposta del lettore, essi hanno spesso trascurato la rilevanza narrativa (ed esperienziale) dell'epistolarità. La presente tesi intende colmare tale lacuna analizzando come le forme epistolari e parzialmente epistolari contribuiscano alla configurazione formalista del romanzo sul cambiamento climatico, mediando tra la percezione individuale e il

cambiamento climatico come sistema vasto e complesso. Le domande centrali che guidano l'indagine sono: come i romanzi britannici contemporanei rappresentano formalmente e tematicamente il cambiamento climatico, rendendolo pensabile, percepibile e affettivamente risonante? E più nello specifico, in che modo le forme epistolari e parzialmente epistolari permettono un coinvolgimento esperienziale con la complessità climatica e l'instabilità epistemologica? Combinando l'eco-narratologia, la narratologia cognitiva di seconda generazione e la teoria epistolare, lo studio esamina come le forme narrative di alcuni romanzi britannici del XXI secolo—*Cloud Atlas* (2004) di David Mitchell, *The Still Point* (2010) di Amy Sackville, *The Year Without Summer* (2020) di Guinevere Glasfurd e *The Future* (2023) di Naomi Alderman—medino le dimensioni multiscalari, eterogenee e cognitivamente complesse del cambiamento climatico.

I risultati dimostrano che l'epistolarità funziona sia come strategia narrativa sia come principio strutturale centrale nella configurazione del romanzo, operando insieme ad altri dispositivi per rispecchiare le epistemologie del cambiamento climatico. Attraverso la frammentazione, la polifonia multispatiale e multitemporale e la mediazione autoriflessiva, questi romanzi mettono in scena le tensioni tra esperienza locale e astrazione globale, affrontando dislocazione temporale, non linearità e sovrapposizione per favorire un coinvolgimento incarnato del lettore, nonostante l'astrazione concettuale del fenomeno climatico. In ultima analisi, la tesi sostiene che queste opere riattivano la funzione storica del romanzo come luogo di sperimentazione epistemologica e immaginazione morale, rivelando che la forma letteraria, lungi dal limitarsi a rappresentare la trasformazione ambientale, partecipa attivamente alla configurazione della cognizione culturale di un mondo attraversato dalla crisi climatica.

Abstract (PL)

W ciągu ostatnich trzech dekad studia ekokrytyczne przeszły wyraźną ewolucję – od nacisku na tematyczne i etyczne zaangażowanie w kwestie środowiskowe do bardziej pogłębionej refleksji nad formą i mediacją. Choć wczesna ekokrytyka nie była obojętna na kwestie formalne, skłaniała się ku lekturom moralnym i tematycznym, definiując się w opozycji do poststrukturalistycznego pantekstualizmu i z rezerwą podchodząc do podejść, które wydawały się abstrahować tekst od jego ekologicznych odniesień. Jednak na przełomie dwudziestego i dwudziestego pierwszego wieku badacze zaczęli podkreślać, w jaki sposób struktury narracyjne i wzory estetyczne uczestniczą w procesie ekologicznego poznania, akcentując wzajemne oddziaływanie natury i tekstu. Nawiązując do tego zwrotu formalnego, niniejsza rozprawa bada, w jaki sposób forma literacka pośredniczy w reprezentacji zmian klimatycznych, ujmując ich epistemologiczne i afektywne wymiary. Zgodnie z założeniami nowego formalizmu, forma traktowana jest nie jako autonomiczne, estetyczne naczynie, lecz jako relacyjna struktura, która kształtuje percepcję, organizuje znaczenie i łączy doświadczenie tekstowe z rzeczywistością materialną. W ten sposób praca wypełnia istotną lukę w dyskursie ekokrytycznym, analizując, w jaki sposób formy epistolarne w literaturze klimatycznej przekładają złożoność zmian klimatycznych na doświadczenie ucieleśnione i możliwe do opowiedzenia.

Chociaż podejścia ekonarratologiczne i ekokognitywne wniosły istotny wkład w badanie formy i reakcji czytelniczej, zazwyczaj pomijały narracyjną (doświadczalną) rolę epistolarności. Niniejsza rozprawa stara się wypełnić tę lukę, analizując, w jaki sposób formy epistolarne i częściowo epistolarne wpływają na formalną konfigurację powieści o zmianach klimatycznych, pośrednicząc między indywidualnym postrzeganiem a zmianami klimatu jako zjawiskiem rozległym i złożonym. Zadaje następujące pytania badawcze: w jaki

sposób współczesne powieści brytyjskie formalnie i tematycznie czynią zmiany klimatyczne czymś możliwym do pomyślenia, dostrzeżenia i emocjonalnego przeżycia? A bardziej szczegółowo: w jaki sposób formy epistolarne i częściowo epistolarne umożliwiają doświadczalne zaangażowanie w złożoność klimatyczną i epistemologiczną niestabilność? Łącząc ekonarratologię, narratologię poznawczą drugiej generacji oraz teorię epistolarności, praca analizuje, w jaki sposób formy narracyjne wybranych brytyjskich powieści XXI wieku – *Cloud Atlas* David Mitchell (2004), *The Still Point* Amy Sackville (2010), *The Year Without Summer* Guinevere Glasfurd (2020) oraz *The Future* Naomi Alderman (2023) – pośredniczą w przedstawianiu wielkoskalowych, heterogenicznych i poznawczo wymagających aspektów zmian klimatycznych.

Wyniki badań pokazują, że epistolarność pełni funkcję zarówno strategii narracyjnej, jak i centralnej zasady strukturalnej w kształtowaniu formy powieści, współdziałając z innymi środkami w odzwierciedlaniu epistemologii zmian klimatycznych. Poprzez fragmentaryczność, wieloprzestrzenną i wieloczasową polifonię oraz autorefleksyjną mediację, powieści te odtwarzają napięcia między doświadczeniem lokalnym a globalną abstrakcją, angażując się w tematy przesunięcia czasowego, nielinearności i nakładania się perspektyw, by sprzyjać ucieleśnionemu odbiorowi mimo konceptualnej abstrakcyjności zjawiska. Ostatecznie rozprawa dowodzi, że utwory te reaktywują historyczną funkcję powieści jako przestrzeni epistemologicznego eksperymentu i moralnej wyobraźni, ukazując, iż forma literacka – daleka od biernego odzwierciedlania przemian środowiskowych – aktywnie uczestniczy w kształtowaniu kulturowego poznania świata pogrążonego w kryzysie klimatycznym.

Introduction

Climate change is the defining environmental challenge of the twenty-first century and a complex system that strains the representational capacities of narrative itself. Because its causes and consequences unfold across vast temporal and spatial scales, it eludes immediate perception and resists conventional modes of storytelling, demanding narrative forms capable of mediating fragmentation, uncertainty, and interconnection. Within this context, literature emerges as a vital cultural practice that renders climate change culturally legible, emotionally resonant, and ethically charged. In response, contemporary climate fiction, commonly referred to as "cli-fi", reconfigures narrative mediation and the temporal and spatial dynamics of the storyworld, developing modes of representation that can register climate change as both global and local, abstract and embodied, temporally dispersed and immediate. These narratives transform the difficulty of representation into a generative aesthetic principle, revealing how literary form itself becomes a mode of ecological cognition that fosters new ways of sensing and imagining planetary change.

This thesis draws on eco-cognitive narratology to examine how a selection of climate change novels reimagines narrative form in response to the epistemological and affective challenges of the climate crisis. It focuses on the inclusion of analogue and digital epistolary forms that translate real-world communicative practices into narrative structures. By foregrounding acts of writing, reading, and transmission through which experience is shared, deferred, or shattered, these narratives transform mediation into a means of making climate change thinkable. They articulate the tensions of unpredictability, distance, and interdependence, mirroring the distributed and systemic nature of the climate crisis while engaging readers in interpretive processes that attune the act of reading to the complex epistemologies of climate change. Their

engagement with the conventions of realist, modernist, and postmodernist fiction, and the interweaving of their formal strategies, transforms representational challenges into an aesthetic method and translates the dispersed and relational nature of climate change into narrative architectures that invite readers to inhabit its multiplicity and layered mediation.

Methodologically, the eco-cognitive narratological framework adopted by this thesis treats storytelling as both a formal and an epistemological practice. It attends to how literary structures mediate perception and shape readers' understanding of what it means to inhabit ecological worlds. Fiction is thus approached as a communicative medium that reconfigures the relationship between mind and environment, revealing how narrative form can register and translate the distributed cognition required to apprehend climate change. By foregrounding both the aesthetic and epistemological dimensions of narrative, this thesis understands literary form as a mode of ecological thought—one that negotiates the entanglements of perception, mediation, and environment.

Building on this perspective, this thesis develops close readings of four novels, namely *Cloud Atlas* (2004) by David Mitchell, *The Still Point* (2010) by Amy Sackville, *The Year Without Summer* (2020) by Guinevere Glasfurd, and *The Future* (2023) by Naomi Alderman. Through the analyses developed in the following chapters, these works are shown to conceptualize climate change through intertwined temporalities, mediated voices, and spatially distributed perspectives. Each novel employs epistolary or partially epistolary forms to test the boundaries of representation, foregrounding the communicative processes through which ecological awareness takes shape. Across their distinct historical, contemporary, and speculative settings, they collectively trace an evolving aesthetic of mediation that redefines the possibilities of fiction's engagement with climate change representation. Together, these analyses form a coherent trajectory that unfolds across five chapters, each examining different dimensions

of the relationship between epistolary form and climate change representation. The following outline summarises the structure of the thesis and the specific focus of each chapter.

The first chapter establishes the conceptual, historical, and methodological foundations of the thesis. It differentiates between the Anthropocene, understood as a totalising discourse that risks universalising responsibility and erasing social and historical specificity, and climate change, approached as a complex system unfolding across interdependent scientific, social, cultural, and material networks. This chapter traces the intellectual history of climatic thought, exposing the persistence of deterministic and reductionist models that simplify ecological relations, and argues that literature counters these tendencies by restoring relational, situated, and moral dimensions to environmental discourse. It also situates the thesis within ongoing debates on climate fiction, narratology, and epistolary studies, establishing the conceptual vocabulary and methodological framework that underpin the analyses developed in the subsequent chapters. Drawing on theories of embodied and extended cognition, it then positions eco-cognitive narratology as the principal analytical framework for examining how narrative form mediates the experience of ecological complexity. Particular attention is given to the epistolary mode, whose emphasis on mediation, fragmentation, and deferred communication mirrors the distributed and uncertain dynamics of climate systems. By examining how letters, diaries, emails, and contemporary digital forms of communication stage acts of writing, reading, and transmission, the chapter conceptualises the epistolary mode as a crucial interface between embodied cognition and environmental imagination. This intersection provides the interpretive foundation for the analyses developed in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter two focuses on David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, a formally intricate and thematically expansive novel whose indirect engagement with ecological

crisis emerges through its recursive structure, temporal layering, and mediation of historical and planetary processes. The chapter argues that *Cloud Atlas*'s interlinked narratives, ranging from the colonial Pacific to a post-apocalyptic future, trace the ideological and material continuities linking imperial exploitation, capitalist modernity, and environmental collapse, while modelling the nonlinearity, cumulative temporality, and interdependence characteristic of climate change. Building on the methodological framework established in chapter one, the analysis shows how *Cloud Atlas* turns the problem of representing global interconnection into a principle of formal design. Through its nested structure and self-reflexive engagement with diverse media, including a journal, letters, a report, a memoir, and an oral tale, the novel constructs a transhistorical ecology of storytelling that mirrors the layered and mediated processes through which climate change is registered historically and imaginatively. Its polyphonic composition invites readers to trace patterns of recurrence and transformation across time, revealing how narrative form can render planetary processes perceptible as cumulative histories of extraction, domination, and renewal. By foregrounding mediation and transmission, the chapter positions *Cloud Atlas* as a foundational example of how contemporary fiction reimagines the relationship between narrative, knowledge, and ecological consciousness.

Chapter three turns to Amy Sackville's *The Still Point*, a climate narrative in which ecological crisis is registered not through straightforward thematic engagement but through atmosphere and mediation. The chapter argues that the novel's bifocal structure, which juxtaposes an Arctic expedition at the end of the nineteenth century with a single summer day in a contemporary English household, renders climate change as an ambient presence. By superimposing polar and domestic spaces and merging sensory perception with dream and reverie, *The Still Point* develops an embodied, atmospheric phenomenology that

makes perceptible the ways climate conditions our sense of place. Central to this reading is the concept of "epistolary illusion" whereby the protagonist's absorption in diaries and letters collapses temporal and affective distance, transforming identification with imperial and romantic myths into critical awareness. Tracing the novel's modernist inheritance—its temporal condensation, fragmentation, and recursive structure—the chapter shows how *The Still Point* models climate knowledge as emerging through the recovery and reinterpretation of past voices, including journals, letters, and testimonies, whose transmission through time creates a layered sense of perception and history. The novel's form thus demonstrates that understanding the climate depends on acts of reading and rereading, in which memory and imagination continually reshape the past. In dialogue with *Cloud Atlas*, it shows how fiction can register climate change indirectly, through aesthetic form and mediation, anticipating the more self-aware ecological articulations of later narratives.

Chapter four turns to Guinevere Glasfurd's *The Year Without Summer*, a polyphonic historical novel that formalizes climate crisis through spatial fragmentation and media plurality. Set in the aftermath of the 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora, the novel interlaces six geographically and socially stratified narratives to depict climate change as uneven in its effects, deferred in time, and mediated through intersecting networks of communication. Letters, journals, sermons, newspapers, sketches, songs, and proclamations together form a dense media ecology through which climate is recorded and transmitted. Epistolarity functions as both a connective and a disruptive force capable of forging correspondence across distance yet marked by erasure. Tracing how communicative forms shape cognition, ethics, and collective response, the chapter argues that Glasfurd's novel transforms historical fiction into a laboratory for representing distributed climate experience. Its fragmented,

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constellation-like structure translates climate crisis into an affective and cognitive pattern of belated and fragile interconnection.

Chapter five examines Naomi Alderman's *The Future*, which extends the thesis's exploration of narrative mediation into a speculative yet recognisable present where ecological collapse, technological control, and digital communication intersect. Building on the spatial, temporal, and formal dynamics traced in the preceding chapters, the novel turns questions of representation toward immediacy, examining how climate crisis is narrated when it unfolds within the contemporary moment rather than at historical or futuristic distance. The chapter argues that Alderman engages with apocalyptic and utopian traditions to explore how contemporary culture imagines both catastrophe and renewal. Through its shift from analogue to digital epistolarity, *The Future* reconfigures apocalyptic revelation into a process of collective interpretations, transforming prophecy and end-time discourses into participatory ethical reflections grounded in shared agency. Its polyphonic narrative, spanning multiple voices and global locations, expands the aesthetics of dispersal developed in *Cloud Atlas*, *The Still Point*, and *The Year Without Summer*, turning fragmentation into a mode of ecological interrelation and imaginative repair.

Taken as a whole, the novels examined in this thesis reconfigure the representational challenge of climate change as an inquiry into mediation and narrative form. Through their engagement with epistolarity, they confront the complexity of ecological experience across its temporal, spatial, and affective dimensions. In doing so, they reveal how acts of correspondence and documentation become sites where environmental and cognitive processes converge. The thesis ultimately contends that literature's engagement with climate change lies not only in what it represents but in how it reconfigures the conditions of narrative communication itself, transforming form into a mode of ecological understanding and ethical imagination.

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Chapter One

Climate Fiction, Epistolarity, and Cognitive Narratology

1.1 Introduction

The year 2000 marks a watershed in ecological thought, as Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer (2000) introduced and popularized the term "Anthropocene" to define a new geological epoch, highlighting "the central role of human activity in geology and ecology" (17). While the Anthropocene has emerged as a focal point of scholarly inquiry in disciplines such as environmental science, geology, and philosophy, it has similarly galvanized artistic engagement across a diverse array of media. Consequently, the humanities have undertaken critical examinations of these artistic forms, particularly within the fields of literary, media, and cultural studies, encompassing print works, such as novels, short stories, poetry, graphic novels, and comics, as well as non-print forms, including theatre, documentaries, films, television series, video games, and visual art[1]. While the concept of the Anthropocene has proved successful in opening up critical discussions in academia, "climate change" has emerged as the dominant buzzword in public discourse and communication on environmental issues.

Nevertheless, the two terms are frequently used interchangeably in academic contexts, despite not being full synonyms. "Anthropocene" is the broader and more encompassing term, denoting the cumulative imprint of human activity on the planet's geological and ecological systems. "Climate change", by contrast, refers more specifically to alterations in the Earth's climate, primarily as a consequence of those human activities. In spite of their conceptual differences, the two are intimately linked: addressing one often entails engaging with the other. Both are essential to building a fuller understanding of

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[1] I will provide an extensive review of the literature on the Anthropocene and the novel form later in the chapter. For short stories, see Love 2004 and Lilley and Solnick 2019. For poetry, see Bryson 2002; Finch and Elder 2002; Knickerbocker 2012; and Serrano and Gamez-Fernandez 2021. For graphic novels and comics, see Perry 2018 and Frangos's 2023. Regarding theatre, see Ahmadi 2022 and Lonergan 2023. For documentaries, films, TV series, and visual art, see Kara 2016; Rangan 2024; Paszkiewicz and Ruthven 2025; and Ballard 2021. For video games, see Backe 2017 and op de Beke, Raessens, Werning, and 2024.

anthropogenic environmental impact, raising awareness, and fostering public engagement with ecological crises.[2]

In prose literature, generic labels such as "Anthropocene fiction" and "climate fiction" have been used by critics to describe narratives that engage with the current environmental crisis, its historical roots, or speculative future ecological scenarios[3]. Significant critical attention has been devoted to examining the analytical and didactic functions of these works, particularly their capacity to reframe scientific knowledge by infusing it with emotional resonance and encouraging readers to take action (Abraham 2017; Waldman 2018; Benedetti 2021; von Mossner 2017). In this respect, ecocritic Antonia Mehnert (2016) acknowledges literature's role as "a cultural-political attempt and innovative alternative of communicating climate change" (4). Similarly, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson (2018) notes that the growing interest in climate fiction is tied to its "potential psychological and ecopolitical influence" (475), underscoring how fiction can affect readers' perceptions and emotions concerning environmental challenges. While literature often conveys scientific knowledge or represents climate change, it also actively participates in the Anthropocene as a mode of

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[2]   In response to the conceptual entanglement of climate change and the Anthropocene, and the urgency of their implications, institutions have sought to stabilize the meaning of "climate change" through authoritative definitions. The IPCC defines it as "unequivocally caused" by human activity—primarily greenhouse gas emissions—which raised global surface temperatures by 1.1°C above 1850–1900 levels between 2011 and 2020, driven by unequal contributions linked to energy use, land-use change, and consumption patterns across and within nations (IPCC 2023, 4). This builds on the 1992 UNFCCC, which described climate change as human-induced alteration of atmospheric composition (UNFCCC 1992, 168). Together, these frameworks distinguish anthropogenic change from natural variability and underpin global efforts to assess risks and guide mitigation.

[3]   Scholars have addressed the complexities associated with both terms. For instance, Marco Caracciolo (2021) employs the term "only with keen awareness of this sociopolitical specificity of the Anthropocene" (10). Similarly, Pieter Vermeulen (2020) adopts the term, though he remains conscious of its shortcomings, suggesting that "the Anthropocene is more useful as a catalyst for debate than as a fully adequate name for the present. In this spirit, we can welcome notions such as the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene, the Chthulucene, or even the Oliganthropocene and the Homogenocene as helpful additions to the ongoing debate over the challenges we face" (11). In contrast, Astrid Bracke (2018) critiques the "Anthropocene", arguing that it signals an irreversible threshold, whereas the term "climate crisis" conveys a critical point that, although urgent, retains the possibility of being reversed. As a result, she opts for "us[ing] the term 'climate crisis' rather than 'Anthropocene' to denote both the physical realities as well as the contemporary discourses surrounding humankind's effects on the environment" (18).

inscription, shaping it both materially and discursively, much like the geological, climatological, and biochemical "records" that humanity must now learn to read (Boes and Marshall 2014). This thesis focuses on a particular form of "eco-literature" that seeks to narrate, reinterpret, and make sense of our emerging Anthropocenic condition: the climate change novel.

The form of the novel has long sustained a complex and evolving relationship with the real world, developing in response to changing social, ideological, and epistemological conditions, and producing representations that serve both didactic and aesthetic purposes[4]. As Catherine Gallagher (2006) argues, the novel creates a protected imaginative space in which readers can make "safe" emotional investments in invented characters, that is to say, figures that are, paradoxically, affectively compelling precisely because they are fictional (349). This engagement with fictionality does not isolate the novel from reality;

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[4]   For an understanding of the genesis of the novel, its historical development, its didactic and aesthetic functions, and its evolving relationship with reality, see Watt 1957; McKeon 1987; Levine 1983. For the didactic role of the novel, see Watt 1957, particularly his readings of Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, which he interprets as failing to sustain a coherent moral agenda (116), and Richardson's *Clarissa*, whose characters are crafted to embody specific vices and virtues while retaining psychological complexity (219). On the aesthetic dimension, Watt proposes two categories to classify eighteenth-century fiction. The first, formal realism, which is often aligned with realism of presentation, is characterized by the use of factual styles such as autobiographies, letters, and journals, which aim to convey reality through the ordinary language of individual experience (31-32). The second category, realism in assessment, is associated with an omniscient narrative voice capable of evaluating events and establishing a moral distance between the reader and the fictional world (296-297). For a revision of Watt's account, see McKeon 1987. While Watt associates the rise of the novel with the emergence of formal realism and a didactic interest in moral individualism, McKeon views the novel as a formal response to a deeper ideological and epistemological crisis. In McKeon's reading, the novel serves a didactic role by helping readers navigate competing value systems (aristocratic vs progressive ideologies) and by staging moral and social conflicts. At the same time, it assumes an aesthetic role as a form capable of expressing historical complexity through formal experimentation and epistemological ambiguity. McKeon identifies two dialectical "trials" at the core of the novel's emergence: one ideological (conflicting views of social value) and one epistemological (between romance idealism, naïve empiricism, and scepticism) (266-267). These tensions are negotiated through narrative strategies that reflect broader cultural transformations, making the novel both a product of, and a means to understand, historical change. In line with McKeon's understanding of the novel as a form that evolves in dialectical response to ideological and epistemological crises, George L. Levine (1983) presents novelistic realism not as a fixed set of techniques but as a dynamic and evolving literary practice. He emphasizes that the realist novel is marked by its self-awareness and its continual effort to revise the means by which it represents the complexities of human experience. In fact, Levine argues that realism did not emerge from a naïve faith in language's transparency, but rather from a self-conscious engagement with the limitations of representation and the epistemological pressures of a world increasingly shaped by empirical science, rational inquiry, and the modern pursuit of unmediated experience (8).

rather, it fosters a particular kind of cognitive and emotional training. Gallagher contends that the novel's invitation to suspend disbelief parallels the forms of speculative, provisional thinking that became central to modern life in fields such as commerce, politics, and science (346-347). In this way, the novel's fictionality supports both moral instruction and epistemological experimentation, allowing readers to explore plausible scenarios with real-world implications while maintaining aesthetic distance. This understanding resonates with Peter Brooks's (2005) earlier description of realist fiction as a form of "modeling for play purposes", namely a scaled-down model of the world that offers a compact, immersive version of reality (2). Similarly, Riccardo Capoferro (2017), working within a post-classical historical approach to narrative study, argues that realism in the novel constructs virtual experiences through codes and mental models akin to those used to navigate empirical life, such as quantitative data and evaluations grounded in empirical epistemologies (205). He further argues that the novel engages in a close and critical relationship with the "public sphere", namely the modern virtual space for the circulation and confrontation of cultural, political, social, and scientific information, which, as theorized by Jürgen Habermas and further elaborated by Charles Taylor, is a key component of the modern social imaginary. For Taylor (2004), the public sphere is not only a site of rational-critical debate, as in Habermas, but also a culturally embedded and extrapolitical space where individuals come together, either physically or virtually, to deliberate on matters of common concern and to form a "common mind" (83). As part of the broader modern social imaginary, the public sphere is shaped by shared expectations, narratives, and normative beliefs that give meaning to collective life (23, 69, 92-93). In this context, Riccardo Capoferro (2017) reads the novel as a medium that operates within the public sphere, serving not only to reflect but also to interrogate the epistemological structures that shape both empirical reality and public discourse (211).

While these perspectives offer valuable insights into the novel's historical development and its structural relationship with the real world, they tend to focus primarily on the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, engaging only occasionally and briefly with developments in the twenty-first century. Building on these foundational insights, one might ask: in the context of twenty-first-century crises, how does the novel continue to serve an experiential function, immersing readers in narrative environments that mediate the complex intersections between fiction and reality? In a world increasingly shaped by environmental crises, media saturation, and the layered epistemologies of climate science, how does fiction construct immersive spaces that offer simplified yet resonant versions of a fragmented and often inaccessible real world? If the novel has historically provided readers with a structured, interpretable version of experience, what role might it now play in helping us feel, and make sense of, systems and conditions marked by uncertainty, abstraction, and global scale? Attending to the twenty-first-century lifeworld reveals a landscape in which everyday experience is increasingly shaped by complex knowledge systems, evolving technologies, and shifting media practices, which leave their mark on the thematic and formal strategies of contemporary novels. As Heather Houser argues in *Infowhelm* (2020), contemporary environmental literature responds to the overwhelming influx of scientific and ecological data not simply by translating it, but by reworking its forms and affects. Novels, in this view, serve as sites for negotiating the excess of information that defines the digital age, shaping how readers engage, cognitively and emotionally, with large-scale crises.

In view of this, this research explores the novel as a dynamic means of engaging with the environmental crisis, focusing on how thematic and formal elements intricately work together to navigate ecological complexity. It considers how narrative form mediates between abstract systems of knowledge and lived

experience, particularly in climate change narratives that interrogate the production and circulation of information by exposing the dissonance between global scientific frameworks and uneven, localized experiences of disruption. These texts also recover the historical conditions that have shaped the present crisis, confront the unequal distribution of responsibility, and imagine speculative futures marked by anxiety, collapse, and resilience. In doing so, they foreground the affective and imaginative work required to render climate complexity narratively intelligible, revealing the novel's capacity to engage with the epistemological, ethical, and representational challenges posed by the Anthropocene. This inquiry is grounded in a close analysis of contemporary British climate change novels, namely *Cloud Atlas* (2004, 2014) by David Mitchell, *The Still Point* (2011) [2010] by Amy Sackville, *The Year Without Summer* (2021) [2020] by Guinevere Glasfurd, and *The Future* (2023) by Naomi Alderman. These works variously illuminate the narrative strategies and imaginative vocabularies through which the climate crisis is rendered thinkable.

The decision to concentrate on the twenty-first century, while acknowledging the longer tradition of British fiction addressing climate change (Clark 2015; Trexler 2015; Bracke 2017; Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2019; Baysal 2021), is rooted in the understanding that the year 2000 marks a turning point in discourse surrounding climate warming, representing "an irreversible break in consciousness and understanding between the past and present" (Clark 2015). The selection of these novels was guided by several additional criteria. Initially, my research assessed a pre-established corpus of climate change novels, featuring relevant works of prominent authors such as Jeanette Winterson, Ian McEwan, Maggie Gee, and Sarah Hall. While also drawing from this existing canon of cli-fi, my selection ultimately aimed to prioritize works that had yet to gain significant traction in critical discourse, exemplified by *The Still Point*, *The Year Without Summer*, and *The Future*. Most importantly, however, the selection

sought to give pride of place to climate change novels that are "partially epistolary" (Löschnigg and Schuh 2018, "Introduction"), thus integrating a variety of media practices. These practices encompass traditional epistolary forms, such as letters and diaries, alongside modern mediums like social media communication.

The significance of studying epistolarity within climate change narratives is manifold. First, traditional letters can enhance historical realism, particularly in historical fiction, enabling a reinterpretation of history that re-includes voices lost to the past while highlighting the natural world as an active participant rather than mere background. At the same time, epistolary forms can also prompt a mode of historical revisionism, one that incorporates alternative visions of nature and the non-human and that invites a critical re-evaluation of the past and of the ideological frameworks that shaped earlier relationships with the environment. This emphasis underscores how the environment shapes the embodied and embedded minds of characters, deepening our understanding of how their experiences are influenced by a diverse array of factors, including social, cultural, political, and environmental elements. Second, the metafictional quality of the narrative can emerge also through the thematization and formal engagement with epistolary media practices. This deepens an understanding of climate change as a complex system shaped by overlapping systems of representation, mediation, and lived experience, inviting reflection on the narrative's inherent artificiality and instability as a textual product. In doing so, it embraces and mirrors the uncertainty that characterizes climate change as a defining trait. Epistolary forms allow for the integration of multiple perspectives and a non-linear narrative structure, mirroring the scientific understanding of climate change as a complex system. This approach reflects how climate change unfolds in unpredictable ways across different places and time periods. In doing so, it not only mirrors but also critiques and questions more abstract and

decontextualized understandings of climate change, emphasizing the everyday phenomenology of the climate crisis as experienced by the characters.

Ultimately, the analysis of the complex formal elements in partially epistolary climate change novels can contribute significantly to an eco-oriented narratology, offering new insights into the relationship between narrative structure and environmental discourse. These novels reflect the unpredictability and interdependence of ecological systems while simultaneously reworking inherited literary traditions. By evoking the disorienting effects of environmental instability through formal experimentation, they also destabilize the reader's cognitive and affective engagement. In this interplay between narrative unpredictability and ecological complexity, the act of reading itself becomes a means of negotiating the uncertainties that define the experience of climate change.

This chapter establishes the contextual, thematic, and theoretical foundations essential for the analysis of the selected narratives. The second section of the chapter (1.2) defines foundational concepts such as "climate" and "climate change" and provides a historical overview of climate science, introducing key terms like "climate determinism" and "climate reductionism". These definitions and historical insights are crucial for framing the role of climate fiction within contemporary environmental discourse. The discussion then considers how climate change novels respond to and critique deterministic and reductionist models in climate science, particularly those grounded in predictive abstraction that often overlook social, cultural, and historical dimensions. Taken together, these considerations draw attention to the potential of literature to restore localized, relational, and moral dimensions to ecological discourse, challenging reductive framings of climate change as a decontextualized, universal phenomenon. This narrative work is crucial not only for exposing the human and ethical stakes of the crisis, but also for cultivating forms of

understanding attuned to lived experience, structural inequality, and the uneven distribution of environmental harm. By employing affective and embodied language, these texts allow readers to attune to climate change discourse at a sensory and emotional level that exceeds the reach of the sterile, abstract language of scientific data. Ultimately, this section shows how narratives deepen our grasp of environmental complexity by foregrounding the entanglement between individual experience and broader systemic instability.

The third section (1.3) provides an overview of the diverse definitions of climate fiction, addressing the challenges of genre identification and the limits of realism in climate change representation. Furthermore, it presents a literature review of climate fiction studies, with a focus on new-formalist[5] approaches and their recent contributions to the field of ecocriticism. This examination elucidates the foundational theoretical work underpinning the research while delineating the specific area explored in greater depth.

The fourth and final section (1.4) is devoted to clarifying the intersection of climate fiction, the epistolary form, and eco-cognitive narratology. It presents a critical overview of scholarly works that engage with the epistolary genre, incorporating both historical and formal analyses while emphasizing the contributions of seminal theorists and contemporary scholars to the understanding of epistolarity within twenty-first-century fiction. Furthermore, this section examines second-generation cognitive approaches that investigate epistolary forms as a key media practice shaping the evolution of the novel. It also offers a more detailed articulation of the main thesis statement and makes explicit reference to the novels included in the corpus.

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[5]   When I refer to "new formalism", I draw specifically on Caroline Levine's understanding of form as articulated in *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015). Levine redefines form not simply as a literary or aesthetic structure, but more broadly as any pattern that organizes experience, whether in literature, politics, institutions, or everyday life. Her central claim is that forms shape the world and that narratives should be read in relation to the political and social forms with which they intersect.

1.2 Climate Change and Climate Fiction: Origins, Definition, and Existing Literature

Understanding the emergence and cultural impact of climate change within the public sphere is a complex and challenging endeavour. Climate change has evolved into a global existential challenge, influencing societal values, policies, and cultural representations. Before proceeding to explore the cultural implications of climate change, it is essential to first establish a foundational perspective by examining its evolution as a discourse in both scientific and public realms. Therefore, this section contextualizes the complex interplay between climate change and culture, delving into its historical roots, contemporary scientific understanding, and literary expressions.

1.2.1 The Making of Climate: From Scientific Determinism to Cultural Imagination

The word "climate" originates from the Greek *klíma*, meaning a region of the earth, and was used by Aristotle to describe five zones of the earth: two Frigid zones (Arctic and Antarctic), the Torrid zone, and two Temperate zones (Meteorology II.5).[6] The modern concept began to emerge in the late sixteenth century, focusing on long-term weather patterns in specific regions (Barry 2012, 1318). Today, the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO 2024) defines climate as the average weather conditions over extended periods, from months to millions of years. To avoid conflating climate with weather—a distinction that is often blurred in public discourse and popular media—it is important to recognize that weather refers to short-term atmospheric conditions (temperature, precipitation, wind, cloud cover), while climate encompasses longer-term

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[6] Ptolemy later expanded these to seven climes, maintaining the Aristotelian framework (Martin 2006, 4). In ancient Greece, climate was thus closely linked to latitude and astronomy (Barry 2012, 1317; Fleming 1998, 11).

patterns shaped by complex interactions between five major components: the atmosphere, hydrosphere (oceans, lakes, rivers), cryosphere (ice and snow), lithosphere (land surfaces), and biosphere (living organisms) (Ahlonsou, Ding, and Schimel 2001, 87).

This distinction is crucial not only for scientific precision, but also because it has significant implications for how climate is conceptualized and communicated: the climate system operates across vast temporal and spatial scales and is influenced by both natural variability and human activity. As a result, it exhibits an inherent complexity and non-linearity that make its long-term behaviour profoundly difficult to predict (Ahlonsou, Ding, and Schimel 2001, 89-96). This unpredictability has become a central concern in contemporary climate science and policy, but it also resonates in the cultural and narrative responses to climate change. It is likewise a central theme in my thesis, echoed in both the form and content of the climate change novels under discussion.

Yet this understanding of climate as a dynamic, multi-scalar system is a relatively recent development. For much of Western intellectual history, this complexity was obscured by simplified causal models that treated climate as a primary force shaping human behaviour and societal development. While the intricate and unpredictable nature of climate reflects the dynamic interplay of natural and human forces, earlier frameworks often flattened these interactions through deterministic thinking.[7] From Aristotle's linkage of climate to racial characteristics to Enlightenment theories that tied environmental conditions to national character, determinism offered a convenient explanation for human difference. It also helped justify colonial expansion, casting non-European societies as environmentally preconditioned for stagnation or failure.[8]

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[7]   "Deterministic thinking", particularly in the context of climate discourse, refer to theories that attribute social, cultural, or historical developments primarily to environmental factors, especially climate. Such approaches often ignore political, economic, and cultural complexity.
[8]   According to James Rodger Fleming (1998), climatic determinism can be traced to Aristotle's linkage of climate and racial traits—an idea sustained by medieval thinkers and later

Contemporary critiques of this legacy underscore how environmental determinism continues to inform certain strands of climate discourse today. William Meyer, in his survey *Americans and Their Weather*, introduces the term "meteorological fundamentalism" to rebuke the belief that climate's significance can be established solely through its physical properties, disregarding the role of cultural meaning and human agency (Meyer as quoted in Hulme 2009, 20). As Mike Hulme further observes, this kind of thinking persists in present-day narratives that directly link climate change to violence, displacement, and civil unrest (20-21). These framings mirror older deterministic logics that, particularly from the eighteenth century onward, became deeply entwined with imperial ideologies. As European empires expanded, climatological knowledge was increasingly systematized to serve administrative and economic goals (Heymann and Dalmedico 2019, 1140), while environmental conditions were invoked to legitimize civilisational hierarchies and racial inequality (Hulme 2011; von Storch 2022). Although such views have been widely challenged within academia, their legacy still shapes public and political understandings of climate, often reducing complex sociopolitical phenomena to simplified environmental causality.

Rather than treating such deterministic narratives as mere relics of the past, scholars like Hulme emphasize their ongoing power to shape how climate change is imagined and responded to. Deterministic thinking, in fact, did not

revived by Enlightenment figures like Montesquieu and Hume, who saw climate as shaping not only physical and psychological traits but also societal institutions (11-12). Until the eighteenth century, Enlightenment climatology relied on literary methods, drawing from ancient texts to explain civilizational change (12). Empirical climatology emerged in the early nineteenth century with Noah Webster's advocacy for statistical approaches (53), giving rise to 'classical climatology' during the imperial era (1815-1914) (Heymann and Dalmedico 2019, 1140). Although later challenged by physical reductionism (1141), climatic determinism resurfaced in the early twentieth century with Ellsworth Huntington's influential—if scientifically weak—claims linking climate to civilization, productivity, and intelligence (Fleming 1998, 95). His work, despite its flaws, supported narratives of European superiority and colonial legitimacy (Hulme 2011; von Storch 2022). While climate determinism was "largely discredited and marginalized" after the twentieth century's ideological shifts (Hulme 2011, 252), its legacy persisted in the work of figures like Austin Miller and in the Cold War-era politicisation of climate science, especially in the U.S., where environmental control became a strategic tool (Harper and Doel 2010; Carey 2012; Harper 2008).

disappear with the rise of modern science; it continued to shape how climate was understood, especially in the emerging field of climate change science.[9] From the 1960s to the late 1980s, the field became increasingly complex, with climate conceptualized as the product of an interconnected biogeophysical global system. This system's past, present, and future behaviour could now be modelled, and thus "predicted", through mathematical equations and advanced computing technology. As Hulme (2011) notes, this marked a clear departure from the more plural and regionally grounded understandings of climate that had previously prevailed among geographers, climatologists, and synoptic meteorologists (258). The growing authority attributed to model-based predictions generated by the natural sciences contributed to the resurgence of deterministic thinking, now reframed through the lens of computational precision and future-oriented forecasting (McGrail 2013, 25). By the 1990s, much of the climate science community had come to view computer modelling not only as a tool for analysis, but as a means of assessing truth itself (Hulme 2011, 258). As these scientific findings were increasingly recognized as having concrete implications for the social world, the political weight of predictive modelling grew accordingly, amplifying the role of climate determinism in shaping public and policy discourses around the future.

Yet this trajectory was not without resistance. Some climatologists expressed concern about the epistemologies underpinning this model-driven

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[9] The scientific discourse on climate change dates back to 1807, when Joseph Fourier first explored terrestrial temperatures (Fleming 1998, 61). In 1856, Eunice Foote demonstrated that water vapour and carbon dioxide absorb radiant heat, suggesting that fluctuations in these gases could drive climate change (Jackson 2019, 105)—a hypothesis preceding John Tyndall's identification of CO_2 as a greenhouse gas by three years (Fleming 1998, 58-59). Svante Arrhenius later established a connection between fossil fuel combustion and the greenhouse effect, making him a key figure in modern climate science (Fleming 1998, 82; von Storch 2022, 32; Smith and Howe 2015, 55). Stewart Callendar expanded on this in the 1930s and 1940s, definitively linking anthropogenic carbon emissions to global warming (Carey 2012, 238). By the 1950s, the CO_2 theory gained wider scientific consensus, correlating atmospheric carbon levels with shifts in global climate (Fleming 1998, 128). Advances during WWII and the Cold War further propelled climate science, ushering in a paradigm shift toward theory-based, computer-driven models that enabled virtual experiments to simulate and analyse global climate trends (Heymann and Dalmedico 2019, 1141; Hulme 2011, 257).

paradigm, arguing that it reduced climate change to a de-historicized and de-localized physical phenomenon (Heymann and Dalmedico 2019, 1142). Their critiques align with more recent interdisciplinary efforts to historicize climate change and to challenge the reductive assumptions of statistical and quantitative modelling. As Jean-Baptiste Fressoz (2015) argues, such models often "create the image of a global humanity united by carbon dioxide, thereby erasing the incommensurability of responsibilities" (70). These efforts extend beyond the boundaries of climate science, advocating for a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates historical, social, cultural, and literary analysis.

Hulme's (2009) contribution is central in this regard. Building on his earlier critiques of determinism, his work helps reframe climate not only as a physical system, but also as a cultural idea, circulating through symbolic, political, and moral frameworks that shape how societies make sense of environmental change. This shift in emphasis invites closer scrutiny of the narratives through which communities understand and respond to ecological transformation. In this view, climate change emerges not merely as a scientific or policy challenge, but as a deeply embedded cultural phenomenon: a lens through which anxieties about modernity, identity, justice, and historical responsibility are negotiated (356-357).

Literature, particularly climate change fiction, plays a significant role in shaping climate as a cultural idea by offering critical counter-narratives to deterministic thinking. It possesses a unique capacity to represent the complexity of human experience as it emerges from the interplay of social, cultural, psychological, historical, and environmental conditions. In doing so, literature contributes to the broader discursive landscape that interrogates the roles of nations, ideologies, imaginaries, and economic systems in their uneven contributions to climate change. Through its attention to the entanglements of ecological crisis with histories of extraction, resistance, systemic violence, and

capitalism, climate fiction holds the potential to re-shape cultural perceptions of climate discourse and our relationship to environmental change. The novels examined in this thesis embed climate within global histories of empire, enclosure, and dispossession, foregrounding differentiated responsibility, structural injustice, and human adaptability.

As Andreas Malm (2017) argues, climate change should not be framed as a shared burden borne by a unified humanity, since the history of capitalism demonstrates that humanity has never acted as a single, undifferentiated agent marching toward planetary mastery (133). These novels align with this perspective, rejecting universalist narratives and instead offering historically grounded accounts of climate change as a product of systemic inequality, colonial violence, and environmental exploitation. At the same time, they contribute to the historicisation of climate change through their formal and medial strategies. Media practices, such as letters and other narrative devices, play a key role in this process. By reintroducing subjectivity and locality into the discourse, these narrative forms partially challenge dominant climate science epistemologies that often reduce climate change to abstract systems and predictive models. Yet they enable novels to remain self-reflexive about the limits of fiction, sustaining a critical awareness of their own representational boundaries even as they seek to reimagine climate narratives from the ground up.

What emerges from this discussion is a picture of climate discourse defined by enduring tensions between scientific and cultural ways of knowing, an ambivalence that, as Hulme (2011) suggests, can be understood through the "issue of symmetry" between scientific and social claims about climate (259). From ancient philosophy to modern modelling, the persistence of deterministic reasoning reveals how climate has long been framed through systems that seek stability and causality, even as the phenomenon itself resists such closure. Contemporary climate science inherits this tension: while its models have

expanded understanding of the Earth's systems, they also reproduce the epistemological desire to render the future calculable. This conflict, increasingly apparent at what McGrail calls "the social juncture" (2013, 22), exposes the epistemological gap between predictive modelling and cultural meaning-making, which operate on divergent temporalities, assumptions, and modes of causality. Literature occupies a crucial position within this landscape. By translating the abstractions of climate science into lived, affective, and historically situated experience, climate fiction exposes the limits of prediction while imagining alternative ways of apprehending planetary change. In this sense, the cultural history of climate determinism not only illuminates how climate knowledge has been produced, but also underscores the need to read its ongoing transformations across scientific, political, and aesthetic domains.

1.2.2 Climate Change Uncertainty and the Social Nexus: Challenging Climate Reductionism

This tension between scientific and cultural epistemologies serves as the conceptual hinge for what follows. While the preceding section traced the historical persistence of deterministic thinking and its reformulation through modern modelling practices, the next examines how these epistemological legacies reappear in contemporary debates on climate change uncertainty. The same desire to stabilize and predict the future that once animated deterministic frameworks continues to shape the methodologies of climate science today, even as these methods expose their own limits. Understanding how uncertainty operates within climate discourse, both as a scientific condition and as a cultural construct, therefore becomes crucial for grasping the evolving relationship between knowledge, representation, and response. It is within this context that the notion of climate reductionism emerges, signalling a renewed attempt to

isolate climate as a dominant causal variable and inviting the critical interventions of the social sciences and the humanities.

Notwithstanding the progressive evolution that climate change science has experienced, at present, the accessibility of evidence and the intricate interplay of factors influencing global climate still add to unpredictability (Kampourakis and McCain 2019). In particular, Le Treut et al. (2007) clarify that climate models have been gradually influenced by a more advanced understanding of the Earth system's interactive processes and by the increase in computers' computational capacity, but in spite of the optimization of models for observational studies and causality assessments, climate science remains marked by uncertainty. In this respect, Vineis et al. (2011) argue that climate change science has evolved beyond the Galilean paradigm of controlled experiments, as research in this field now relies on counterfactual inferences and thought experiments from which conclusions are drawn. Moreover, climate change has driven the extreme application of the Precautionary Principle, which advocates for preventive measures even in the absence of conclusive scientific evidence of a cause-effect relationship. This can result in an imbalance between the seriousness of potential consequences and the likelihood of their occurrence (500), revealing a core dimension of climate complexity: the need to act under conditions of deep uncertainty.

There seems to be no easy way out of the uncertainty paradigm. For climate scientist Mark Maslin (2014), climate models are themselves activators of uncertainty, as they provide a multitude of different predictions, sometimes contradictory (chap. 4). In this sense, the very tools developed to manage and anticipate climate futures also expose the limits of prediction and control, reinforcing the non-linear, multivariable nature of the climate system. Geographer Mike Hulme (2011) has articulated this epistemological tension in

terms of a contemporary variant of climate determinism, which he calls "climate reductionism":

> a form of analysis and prediction in which climate is first extracted from the matrix of inter-dependencies that shape human life within the physical world. Once isolated, climate is then elevated to the role of dominant predictor variable. […] [C]limate reductionism is a methodology that has become dominant in analyses of present and future environmental change—and that as a methodology it has deficiencies[…]. (247)

For Hulme, this methodological flaw results in an "epistemological slippage", wherein the future is imagined in ways that marginalize ideological, cultural, and political variables, rendering it ideologically hollow (255-265). Jonathan Rigg and Lisa Reyes Mason (2018) echo this concern by criticizing the way climate change is often stripped of its social context in scientific discourse. Such reductionism, they argue, leads to "a disembodied process acting on an undifferentiated world" (1030), masking the differentiated, uneven ways in which climate change is shaped by socio-political structures.

A more fundamental conceptual challenge lies in the fact that climate change resists not only prediction but also perception, reflecting the broader epistemological complexity at play. Timothy Morton's (2013) conceptualisation of climate change as a "hyperobject" sheds light on its complexity as a non-local phenomenon that adheres to the beings involved with it, is distributed across enormous timescales, and is impossible to grasp in its entirety or experience directly. These characteristics pose significant obstacles for climate change advocacy, which often struggles to convey urgency around something so diffuse and elusive.

This persistent epistemological uncertainty is not just a challenge for climate science itself; it becomes especially potent and politically charged once it enters the realm of public and institutional response. The difficulty of producing stable, predictive models has not only complicated the task of policy-making, but

also created fertile ground for strategic manipulation. In other words, uncertainty does not remain within the confines of scientific method; it circulates socially, economically, and ideologically. For instance, the epistemological uncertainty surrounding climate predictions has been mobilized by actors seeking to delay or obstruct climate action. As Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway (2011) have shown, "the merchants of doubt" have strategically exploited methodological scepticism to cast uncertainty on the scientific consensus, advancing market-driven economic agendas in the process. The uncertainty paradigm has thus become a trigger issue in the development of mitigation strategies, often complicating policymaking and even serving to justify the continuation of high-emission activities (Lewandowsky et al. 2014). As Barbara Herrnstein Smith (2018) argues, even when the influence of "the merchants of doubt" and their economic interests is acknowledged, deeper social and psychological forces such as cultural habits, cognitive biases, and ideological commitments continue to obstruct climate action. This underscores the broader insight that knowledge alone is insufficient to motivate effective change.

In light of this, confronting a phenomenon as entangled and multivalent as climate change reveals the limitations of singular disciplinary approaches and underscores the need for epistemological pluralism. The scientific tools developed to manage climate uncertainty remain essential, but they cannot, on their own, account for the full complexity of climate systems or the socio-political dynamics that shape our responses to them. Bringing together insights from the sciences, social sciences, and the humanities, interdisciplinary cooperation becomes not only beneficial but necessary in grappling with both the material realities of climate change and the cultural, ethical, and ideological structures through which it is mediated. Crucially, this does not entail abandoning scientific knowledge, but rather contextualizing it within a broader interpretive

framework, one capable of addressing the full spectrum of challenges posed by the climate crisis.

Indeed, despite the limits of modelling and persistent efforts to undermine consensus, anthropogenic climate change (ACC) is now fundamentally recognized as a fact by the international scientific community (Chavalarias et al. 2023; Forchtner and Lubarda 2023). The challenge, then, lies in understanding how such recognition intersects with cultural, political, and philosophical discourse, a task that has increasingly drawn the humanities into dialogue with the Earth sciences. Nowhere is this convergence more evident than in the way the term "Anthropocene", originally introduced within the Earth sciences, has migrated into the humanities, where it has generated significant debate.[10] Far from remaining a strictly geological classification, it has been taken up as a critical concept used to interrogate the cultural, historical, and political dimensions of human impact on the planet. Among these critical voices, Sighard Neckel (2021) argues that the conceptual migration of the Anthropocene from the natural to the social sciences is marked by what he terms a "scholastic fallacy", namely an uncritical transposition that strips the term of analytic clarity and explanatory depth. According to Neckel, this fallacy reveals itself through several limitations: a normative overreach that imagines a unified global citizenry with the capacity for collective action; a failure to account for the uneven distribution of ecological degradation produced by capitalism; a normative indeterminacy regarding possible avenues for redress; and an abstract ecological universalism that serves

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[10]   On March 26, 2024, the proposal to formally include the Anthropocene as a unit in the geologic timescale was rejected by the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy (SQS 2024). The decision underscored the contentious nature of the term not only in the humanities and social sciences but also within the geological community itself. Many scientists, particularly members of the Anthropocene Working Group within the SQS, expressed frustration after years of research dedicated to identifying stratigraphic evidence of human impact on the Earth system (Witze 2024). Despite such concerns, the term continues to provoke widespread academic and public engagement (Witze 2024). Pieter Vermeulen (2020) contends that these very critiques underscore the term's value—not as a precise concept, but as a productive misnomer that fuels critical reflection on the genealogies, contradictions, and urgencies of the present (8).

as a moral panacea (136).[11] These critiques underscore the risks of importing scientific terminology into socio-political analysis without sufficient reflection on its conceptual and normative implications.

In this context, the contribution of the social sciences to the debate has been decisive in emphasizing the need to develop a climate science grounded in "deep interdisciplinarity", an approach capable of accounting not only for the complexity of climate systems, but also for the socio-historical conditions and systemic inequalities through which climate change is produced and experienced (Rigg and Reyes Mason 2018, 1031). Such interdisciplinarity does not simply involve adding perspectives to scientific accounts; rather, it challenges us to remain critically attentive to the epistemological assumptions that underpin climate science itself. It invites reflection on how knowledge is produced, circulated, and legitimized, and encourages modes of inquiry that resist the uncritical adoption of scientific categories as neutral descriptors of global reality.

Encouragingly, this critical orientation has not remained purely theoretical. Over the last four decades, the urgency to build adaptation strategies have prompted the need for social analyses to be included in the debate around climate change mitigation and adaptation (Agrawal et al. 2012; Hulme 2011; Rigg and Reyes Mason 2018). The prevailing paradigm in climate change discourse appears to be shifting towards a self-reflexive approach to scientific knowledge, which involves critically examining how scientific understanding is constructed,

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[11]   For an illuminating overview of the debates surrounding the term "Anthropocene", see Vermeulen 2020, 1-19. In response to what many see as a conceptual fallacy, namely, the term's universalizing and homogenizing implications, a wide range of alternative designations have been proposed. Steve Mentz (2019) identifies at least 24 such alternatives, reflecting growing discomfort with the idea that "the human" as a unified category can be held accountable for the ecological crisis. Prominent among these are "Capitalocene", coined by Andreas Malm and further developed by Jason W. Moore (Moore 2016), "Wasteocene" (Armiero and De Angelis 2017), and "Plantationocene" (Haraway 2015). For a more extensive inventory, see Mark Bould's *The Anthropocene Unconscious* (2021). Notably, Caracciolo (2021, 10) emphasizes that terms such as "Capitalocene" and "Plantationocene" shift the focus onto the actual historical agents of ecological degradation, namely capitalism and colonialism. Further discussion of these terminological debates is available in "Anthropologists Are Talking – About the Anthropocene" (2015).

disseminated, and utilized within society, acknowledging that it is not a value-neutral process (Hulme 2011; Keller 2011; Smith and Howe 2015).

Being self-reflexive about climate science does not entail questioning the physical reality of climate change; rather, it involves critically examining the epistemological slippage that Hulme identifies, namely the risk of reducing complex socio-environmental phenomena to isolated, predictive models that overlook their cultural, ideological, and historical embeddedness. In this respect, my work does not address uncertainty as a means to deny the existence of climate change as a physical phenomenon, but to stress that meanings are always embedded in broader social dynamics. This slippage is one that literature has the potential to renegotiate, serving as a powerful counterpoint to the simplifying rhetoric and epistemological limits of climate reductionism. As Caracciolo (2022b) argues, "rather than attempting (and failing) to eliminate uncertainty, we should learn to coexist with it and take the most of it intellectually and ethically" (3). Building on this view, literature can be understood as a medium capable of navigating the complexities of climate change by thematically and formally engaging with epistemologies that embrace uncertainty, using it as a critical resource rather than treating it as inherently detrimental. This raises a crucial question that underpins the next stage of this inquiry: what role can culture, and fictional narratives in particular, play in shaping how we understand, live with, and respond to the complex, uncertain realities of climate change?

1.2.3 Literature as a Cultural Practice: Navigating Climate Change Beyond Reductionism

One way the humanities have begun to address this question is by interrogating the assumption that scientific and technical knowledge alone is sufficient to

catalyze meaningful climate action at either the individual or structural level. As Marouli and Duroy (2014) report:

> [S]cientific/technical knowledge by itself is not sufficient to mobilize changes in individual practices. This may signify that knowledge about strategies to bring about a low carbon lifestyle is needed. This then should be followed by an analysis of what knowledge is imparted and how, in order to make it relevant to individuals and to mobilize alternative behaviors. (134)

Their observation constitutes a clear invitation to carve out space within the overwhelming predominance of quantitative data for qualitative, culturally situated approaches to climate change mitigation and adaptation. In this regard, Adger et al. (2013) argue that the cultural dimension is not peripheral but central to how societies respond to environmental change. Culture, they contend, mediates both individual and collective action and must be recognized as a key site for reconfiguring the relationship between mitigation and adaptation strategies. Herrnstein Smith (2018) reinforces this point by contending that scientific facts alone cannot generate sufficient public engagement or policy change; instead, entrenched socio-cultural and political factors must be acknowledged as fundamental barriers to effective action. The implication here is that knowledge, to be transformative, must be culturally legible, emotionally resonant, and narratively meaningful.[12]

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[12] This cultural turn in climate discourse is further evidenced by growing scholarly attention to the role of media and communication. Crow and Boykoff (2014) highlight the importance of media as a key site for disseminating climate knowledge and shaping public understanding. By analysing how climate change is framed across different platforms and sociopolitical contexts, they reveal the contested cultural politics that underpin environmental discourse (3-4). The recognition of culture as a critical framework for addressing climate change has been consolidated in recent interdisciplinary works such as *Climate and Culture: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on a Warming World* (Feola, Geoghegan and Arnall 2019). This volume brings together contributions from across the humanities and social sciences to explore the entanglements of climate change with power, temporality, and identity. Topics include nonlinear historical perspectives, the risks of cultural extractivism, and the role of cultural narratives in shaping both perceptions of risk and potential avenues for response.

Building on this cultural turn, the discussion now shifts to the literary sphere, treating literature as a vital cultural practice that shapes collective understandings and responses to climate change beyond the confines of scientific determinism and reductionism. If, as argued above, knowledge must be culturally legible and emotionally resonant to prompt meaningful action, then literature offers a particularly rich mode of engagement. It enables readers to grapple with the complexity of climate change as a multifaceted, nonlinear system, while attuning them to its inherent uncertainties and temporal scales. At the same time, literature often maintains a self-reflexive awareness of its own limitations, acknowledging that the difficulty of representing climate change is not confined to scientific discourse but extends into the domain of narrative, imagination, and aesthetic form. Yet precisely because of this complexity, literature offers a distinctive space for negotiating the intersections of environmental, epistemological, and cultural concerns. As Vermeulen (2020) argues, it engages what he calls "this intellectual area X": an as-yet-uncharted space where science and the humanities converge, and where the entanglements between the human and non-human can be explored through cultural practice (3).

Twenty-first-century fiction has emerged as a particularly fertile site for exploring the cultural dimensions of climate change. Contemporary literature engages not only thematically with climate change, but also formally, experimenting with structure, voice, and temporality to reflect the non-linear, multiscalar nature of the climate crisis. Lynn Keller's (2017) concept of the "self-conscious Anthropocene" provides a valuable framework for understanding this literary development:

> The phrase acknowledges that, whatever the status of the Anthropocene as a geological category and regardless of whether that epoch is deemed to have begun half a century or many centuries ago, the broad appeal of the term Anthropocene signals a powerful cultural phenomenon tied to

reflexive, critical, and often anxious awareness of the scale and severity of human effects on the planet. (Intro.)

Keller's notion of self-consciousness helps explain why so much postmillennial fiction foregrounds its own representational challenges. Rather than claiming to objectively represent climate change, these narratives often reflect on the limits of perception, knowledge, and form, acknowledging that to write in the Anthropocene is to write within conditions of uncertainty, scale dissonance, and affective instability. In this sense, literary texts become not just reflections of crisis, but also sites of epistemological and aesthetic negotiation.

While Keller's position stands in partial contrast to Jean-Baptiste Fressoz's (2015) critique of the Anthropocene narrative, which he sees as reproducing a simplistic binary between a blind past and an enlightened, ecologically aware present, it remains persuasive for understanding the specific cultural work of twenty-first-century literature. Even if ecological awareness is not unique to the present, what distinguishes recent fiction is its explicit engagement with the representational, ethical, and affective dilemmas posed by the climate crisis. This is the context in which the term "climate fiction" (or "cli-fi") has gained traction, not merely as a thematic label, but as an indicator of a broader cultural and aesthetic shift in how literature processes and contributes to environmental consciousness.[13]

Given the increasing literary engagement with ecological themes, some clarification of terminology is necessary. Up to this point, the terms Anthropocene and climate change have been used somewhat interchangeably. While each carries both critical potential and conceptual limitations, the term "climate change fiction" is adopted here as a more inclusive and politically

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[13]   In addition to "climate fiction" or "cli-fi", several other terms have been employed to describe literature that engages with ecological themes in general and the current environmental crisis in particular, such as "ecofiction", "nature writing", "environmental fiction", and "Anthropocene fiction", "petrofiction", "solarpunk", "the risk novel", among others.

sensitive umbrella concept. This choice reflects the critiques of the Anthropocene for its universalizing rhetoric, which can obscure the disproportionate responsibility borne by industrialized Western societies for the ecological crisis and minimize the structural inequalities that have shaped environmental vulnerability in the Global South, particularly in former colonies. The label "climate change fiction", by contrast, allows for a more historically situated analysis. It foregrounds the ways in which many twenty-first-century British novels engage in a renegotiation of imperial and colonial legacies, historicizing climate change as a process rooted in extractive capitalism, systemic injustice, and uneven development. Rather than flattening the narrative of humanity into a monolithic agent, these texts frequently acknowledge differentiated responsibilities and asymmetrical experiences of climate impact.

At the same time, attention must be paid to the limitations inherent in climate terminology itself. Terms such as "climate warming", "climate change", and "climate crisis" each carry semantic ambiguities: "warming" can be appropriated by denialist rhetoric, "change" may suggest natural fluctuations independent of human activity, and "crisis" risks framing the issue as a temporary emergency rather than an ongoing structural transformation. Nevertheless, the terms "climate change fiction", "climate fiction", and "cli-fi" are employed here with the understanding that cultural awareness has reached a point where climate change can reliably denote human-induced planetary transformation.

1.3 What Is Cli-Fi? Mapping the Contours of Climate Change Fiction

In 2007, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its Fourth Assessment Report, asserting that climate warming is unequivocal. In the same year, journalist Dan Bloom reportedly coined the term

"cli-fi", a label reminiscent of the popular abbreviation "sci-fi", to describe a new genre of literature and film addressing "the local and global impact of man-made global warming" (Bloom 2022). Following Bloom's alleged coinage of the term and the media's acknowledgment of the rise of the genre[14], cli-fi began to attract more serious scholarly attention and raise some puzzlement.

The difficulty of addressing cli-fi as a genre in the traditional academic sense was initially due to its unclear place within the literary canon. Scholarly debates about genre often revolve around conventions and form, but the primary challenge with cli-fi lay in its scale and in assessing its cultural significance and absorption into broader discussions of climate change. Unlike well-established genres, cli-fi lacked a critical mass of works and the sustained academic discourse needed to crystallize its identity. In a 2011 survey, Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra identified an earlier phase of cli-fi development, lasting roughly until the end of the twentieth century, during which the genre began to emerge from the broader realm of science fiction. Critics started to recognize works from this period as what Jim Clarke would later term "proto-climate fiction" (2013, 8), namely a category of fiction that addressed climate change without explicitly focusing on anthropogenic causation (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2019, 2-3)[15].

In this context, three major factions emerged within the critical arena. One position acknowledged the limitations of both realism, for its exclusion of the non-human and focus on everyday individual experience, and science fiction, fearing that linking cli-fi too closely with sci-fi would undermine its legitimacy by associating it with what some regard as less serious literature (Ghosh 2016).

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[14]   For example, Rodge Glass, 'Global warning: The rise of "cli-fi"', *The Guardian* (31 May 2013); Pilita Clark, 'Global literary circles warm to climate fiction', *Financial Times* (31 May 2013); Hanna Gal, "From Noa's Ark to Superstorm Sandy – The Rise and Rise of CliFi", *The Huffington Post* (23 October 2013); Bernie Bulkin, "'Cli-Fi': One Answer to a Climate Problem?", *The Huffington Post* (1 November 2013); Bill Chameides, "A look at the growing genre of climate fiction", *The Huffington Post* (18 December 2013).
[15]   Examples of proto-climate fiction include Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), Matthew Phipps Shiel *The Purple Cloud* (1901), J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), Richard Cowper's *The Road to Corlay* (1976), Max Frisch's *Man in the Holocene* (1980) and Ignacio Brandão's *And Still the Earth* (1981).

The second advocated for the recognition of cli-fi as a subgenre of sci-fi, given that its practitioners related to the SF tradition, according centrality to science and technology within their narratives (Milner and Burgmann 2020). The third faction worried that completely disavowing cli-fi as science fiction would mistakenly assign it predictive value, competing with scientific models, rather than embracing the critical speculative value often associated with sci-fi (Frelik 2017, 128).

Amid these debates, the most convincing argument appears to lie in a balanced perspective that neither fully aligns cli-fi with science fiction nor entirely separates it from the genre. While it is undeniable that many cli-fi novels exhibit science fictional elements and adhere to the conventions of this genre, a closer examination of the critical literature on cli-fi reveals a more diverse landscape (Trexler 2015; Bracke 2018; Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2019). Numerous cli-fi works do not fit neatly into the science fiction category but are instead classified into various subgenres, such as "realist cli-fi", "thriller cli-fi", "indigenous cli-fi", "epic cli-fi", "historical cli-fi" and more. This diversity suggests that treating cli-fi strictly as a subgenre of science fiction risks marginalizing a significant portion of literature that engages more or less deeply with climate change but does not conform to the typical science fiction framework. Such an approach could overlook novels that, while not strictly science fictional, offer critical insights and powerful narratives on climate-related themes.

Given the vast array of climate change fiction produced since the beginning of the millennium, critics have understandably sought to craft definitions of the genre that are either all-encompassing or, at the very least, sufficiently inclusive of its diversity. In *Cli-Fi: A Companion* (2019), Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra made a first comprehensive effort of systematizing the genre and tried to fill the descriptive void by arguing that

cli-fi may be best thought of as a distinctive body of cultural work which engages with anthropogenic climate change, exploring the phenomenon not just in terms of setting, but with regard to psychological and social issues, combining fictional plots with meteorological facts, speculation on the future and reflection on the human-nature relationship, with an open border to the wider archive of related work on whose models it sometimes draws for the depiction of climatic crisis. (2)

Like any definition, however, this one cannot be truly all-encompassing. It inevitably leaves something out, reflecting the challenges of capturing the full diversity and complexity of cli-fi within a single taxonomical framework. Other definitions, aware of the limitations of theoretical approximation, have become overly broad, thereby diminishing their analytical precision. Mark Bould's argument serves as a compelling example in this respect. His concept of the "unconscious Anthropocene" proposes that even works of fiction that do not explicitly engage with climate change are still influenced by it (Bould 2021). The pervasive nature of environmental issues means they infiltrate all areas of cultural production, even those that do not directly acknowledge them. As a result, virtually every piece of fiction can potentially be considered climate fiction, reflecting the broad and often unconscious impact of the Anthropocene on our narratives and cultural expressions. Caracciolo et al. (2022) echo this perspective, suggesting that climate fictions "need not be about climate change, but they speak to complex challenges of the current moment by implementing a number of formal strategies" (6).

At present, the greatest critical concerns associated with representing climate change generally continue to revolve around issues of genre, but they are also deeply concerned with audience reception[16] and the practical challenges of

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[16]   See, for instance, Schneider-Mayerson (2018), who claims that readers who are already ecologically aware are likely to be more affected by climate fiction, or Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017), who explores how affective elements in literature can influence readers' ecological awareness. For more recent work, see the volume *Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Narratives for Social Change* (2023), edited by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Alexa Weik von Mossner, W. P. Malecki, and Frank Hakemulder. This collection advocates for integrating empirical research

storytelling, none of which are isolated or sealed compartments. Climate change indeed presents a representational conundrum. It unfolds over long timescales, involves a complex interplay of numerous interacting systems, cannot be experienced directly, and has diverse impacts on both local and global scales. Therefore, narrative techniques must adapt to effectively address its uncertain and abstract nature, sometimes conflating aesthetic realism with the generic conventions of more fabulous or speculative genres.[17] In this context, Caracciolo et al.'s definition is especially pertinent, as it reflects the wider scholarly turn toward analyzing the formal and structural dynamics of climate fiction. This emphasis on form and structure also underpins the approach adopted in this study. The following sections provide a brief review of existing critical work on climate fiction, with particular attention to studies focused on anglophone literature. This review will clarify the relevance of formal aspects to my thesis and identify the specific gap that this research aims to address within the current scholarship on British climate change novels.

1.3.1 Cli-Fi: Scholarly Perspectives and Formal Analysis

As already suggested in the previous section, scholarly work on climate change fiction has oscillated between the need to systematize and canonize the genre, shaping a theoretical framework for climate fiction that both diverges from and converges with pre-existing genres and their conventions, and a more formalist approach that analyses how the climate change novel is narratively constructed to address the complex representational challenges posed by the climate crisis. Caracciolo (2021) provides insight in this respect by recontextualizing the

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methods with ecocriticism, arguing that environmental narratives have the potential to foster both social and ecological change.

[17]   This is the case with Paolo Bacigalupi's _The Water's Knife_ (2015), Richard Powers's _The Overstory_ (2018), Matt Bell's _Appleseed_ (2021) and Amitav Ghosh's _Gun Island_ (2019).

scholarly work on climate fiction within the broader framework of ecocriticism. Engaging with Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), where Buell outlines a non-definitive trajectory for ecocriticism and distinguishes between a "first wave" focused on pristine natural environments and a "second wave" that transcends the human/nature binary to address the interweaving of natural and artificial spaces (2005, 17-22), Caracciolo critiques these approaches. He argues that "[i]n both cases, the thematic dimension of literature tends to take center stage" (2021, 189), while narrative form remains underexplored. This gap in focus only recently began to be addressed with the emergence of "the third wave" and the "fourth wave" in ecocritical studies. These new waves not only mark a shift towards transcultural approaches to narrative analysis, as they bridge the divide between global and local perspectives, foster the emergence of new ecofeminist methodologies, and emphasize the agency of the more-than-human world (Slovic 2010; Vermeulen 2020), but they also increasingly delve into examining how nature is shaped through narrative techniques and textual constructs (Lehtimäki 2019, 85).

Ecocriticism has long exhibited a relative disinterest in literary form, a stance arguably rooted in its early efforts to distance itself from poststructuralist theory's pantextualism, that is, the tendency to treat all aspects of reality as textual constructs, which was seen to risk obscuring the materiality of the nonhuman world.[18] However, this resistance to formal analysis has gradually shifted, as evidenced by a growing body of scholarship that foregrounds the narrative, aesthetic, and cognitive dimensions of environmental representation (see Heise 2005; Easterlin 2010; Lehtimäki 2013, 2019; James 2015; von Mossner 2017; Bracke 2018; Vermeulen 2020; Caracciolo 2021, 2022a, 2022b). By tracing

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[18]   Caracciolo (2021) also critiques what he terms the "form blindness" of ecocriticism, that is, its tendency to privilege thematic content and focus on literature's engagement with environmental issues primarily at the level of plot. This emphasis has historically directed critical attention toward genres such as nature writing, which make their ecological concerns more overt and explicit (19).

conceptual and methodological intersections, this section examines key contributions by scholars who have employed ecocritical frameworks to analyse eco-literature, particularly contemporary British climate change novels, while attending to questions of narrative form, structure, and mediation. This will include engaging with key theoretical concepts, such as Ursula K. Heise's (2008) discussion of "deterritorialization" and "eco-cosmopolitanism" vis-à-vis risk theory, as well as the limitations of traditional realism in addressing climate change. Further attention is given to Vermeulen's perspective on genre flexibility in the Anthropocene and to the implications of narrative form for reader experience, as explored by scholars such as Marco Caracciolo and Astrid Bracke. The analysis also draws on Alexa Weik von Mossner's eco-cognitive approach, which examines the embodied and affective processes involved in literary engagement. Together, these perspectives help clarify key contributions to the field and establish the conceptual foundation for examining the interplay between form, reader engagement, and the representation of environmental uncertainty.

In her seminal book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008), Ursula K. Heise critically examines the theoretical concepts of "deterritorialization" and "eco-cosmopolitanism" in conjunction with risk theory, assessing their implications for literature and art. Heise's concept of eco-cosmopolitanism underscores the necessity of adopting a perspective that transcends localized attachments, advocating for a more comprehensive and interconnected understanding of environmental issues. In contrast, her exploration of deterritorialization illuminates the fluidity of cultural identities and the dynamic interplay between people and places amid global ecological challenges. Importantly, these ideas do not seek to erase the tensions between a shared human history and regional diversity; rather, they strive to honour both commitments without sacrificing one for the other (Heise 2008, 210).

In particular, she highlights exemplary formal strategies in fiction that align with the concept of "planetarity", a term originally coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as a counterpoint to globalisation. Heise adopts the term to describe narratives that develop aesthetic forms capable of capturing both the interconnectedness of local places with the planet as a whole and the profound heterogeneity embedded within that global scale. Rather than envisioning the planet as a unified system, such narratives imagine the global environment as a kind of collage, namely a constellation of sites that are interconnected yet retain distinct, autonomous trajectories (64). One of the examples Heise discusses is John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), a narrative that uses the conventions of the high-modernist urban novel to depict an enlarged community that is both local and globalized, physical and virtual, simultaneously connected and highly fragmented (68-90).

The tension Heise highlights between local and global scales, along with the impact of communication technology and hyperdigitalization, foreshadows several concerns that will be addressed later in this thesis. Her work provides a foundation for examining the role of epistolarity, alongside other formal configurations, in climate change fiction, particularly in relation to representations of climate as operating non-linearly across multiple spatial and temporal scales. Equally significant is Heise's discussion of satire and its capacity to unsettle readers' assumptions about reality. She calls for a reconsideration of satirical uncertainty, not as an anti-realist narrative form, but as one with realist potential in addressing the environmental uncertainties of the real world (169). Her perspective resonates with earlier discussions on climate change complexity and on the novel's capacity, as a cultural artifact, to equip readers with tools to navigate and embrace uncertainty, a view supported by Caracciolo (2022b).

Crucially, Heise's work interrogates a central tension within this critical tradition: the extent to which the novel form, and realism in particular, can

adequately capture the vast scale, complexity, and unpredictability of climate change. Before turning to a broader overview of recent scholarship on climate fiction, it is worth considering how this question has shaped much of the field's foundational discourse. In this context, climate realism has frequently been positioned as formally inadequate, prompting many critics to champion genres more open to speculation, hybridity, and narrative risk, most notably science fiction, but also dystopian, mythic, and experimental modes. Much of the critical momentum behind aligning climate fiction with more imaginative genres such as science fiction, as discussed earlier in this chapter, stems from this broader concern with realism's limitations. In particular, it is rooted in a sustained critique of nineteenth-century literary realism—understood here in line with Franco Moretti's account of the serious prose fiction of the period, particularly the novel form, as committed to rationalisation, regularity, and the foregrounding of everyday life.[19] Ghosh (2016) is perhaps the foremost advocate of this view, arguing that realism, relying on static mimetic conventions and an understanding of nature as stable and predictable, struggles and ultimately fails to address the unthinkable irregularities of climate change.

Yet this position arguably overlooks the extent to which climate change has already reshaped the experiential fabric of everyday life. In the twenty-first century, environmental irregularity is no longer an anomaly but a defining feature of lived experience. Fluctuating temperatures, increasingly extreme weather events, and the constant circulation of climate-related news have rendered ecological instability a part of daily consciousness. Rather than being

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[19]   When referring to nineteenth-century realism, I draw on Franco Moretti's (2006) theorisation of the novel as a form increasingly structured around "fillers", stretches of narrative that emphasize the routine and the uneventful. According to Moretti, the novelistic universe of this period is "a world of few surprises, few adventures and no miracles at all" (381). Amitav Ghosh, whose work is central to critiques of the novel's limitations in representing climate change, bases much of his argument on this reading. He sees in Moretti's account a structural commitment to regularity and predictability that renders the novel ill-equipped to capture the scale, uncertainty, and extremity of climate-related events.

excluded from realism's traditional domain, that is, the ordinary and the habitual, climate change now saturates it. As such, the conditions Ghosh sees as resistant to realist representation are, in fact, becoming increasingly compatible with the very narrative strategies realism privileges. Moreover, if we return to Moretti's formal analysis of nineteenth-century fiction, particularly his reading of Balzac and Scott, it is possible to recover within realism a different kind of potential. For Moretti, lengthy descriptive passages serve not merely to slow the narrative but to embed characters within highly specified historical and social environments. This attention to *milieu*, to space as both materially and socially charged, readily extends into an ecological framework. From this perspective, realism's capacity to generate thick environmental settings, attentive to landscape, atmosphere, and embedded experience, can be repurposed for the task of representing climate change not as an isolated catastrophe, but as a structural condition.

This potential is further reinforced by Erich Auerbach's (1953) reading of Balzac, particularly his insistence on the realist novel's commitment to portraying the present as shaped by and inseparable from the historical past. In Balzac's fiction, Auerbach sees a deliberate effort to trace contemporary social conditions back to the economic, political, and cultural forces that produced them (480). This historiographical impulse, namely the desire to frame the present as historically determined, resonates strongly with the narrative imperatives of climate change, which cannot be understood without acknowledging the long histories of anthropogenic intervention, resource extraction, capitalism, and colonialism. Realism, in this light, offers not only spatial but also temporal depth, enabling literary forms to register climate change as both a present condition and a historical consequence.

Rather than viewing the realist novel as inherently ill-suited to this task, it is worth asking how its formal repertoire, including its capacity to render

embeddedness, causality, and continuity, might be adapted to accommodate and illuminate the slow, cumulative temporalities and systemic entanglements of the climate crisis. To illustrate this potential and delineate its critical focus, this thesis investigates how the realist novel responds to the representational challenges of climate change by reactivating one of its most enduring and adaptable narrative structures: the epistolary form. Closely linked to the legacy of the British realist tradition, epistolarity has long functioned as a means of anchoring narrative in personal voice and embodied experience. At the same time, its reliance on mediation, fragmentation, and perspectival multiplicity opens up formal space for representing uncertainty, disruption, and non-linearity.

This investment in the realist tradition, however, does not preclude engagement with more hybrid, speculative, or cross-genre strategies. On the contrary, my analysis suggests that realism can be a site of formal negotiation, where generic conventions are neither abandoned nor rigidly upheld, but reworked in response to the narrative demands of climate change. It is in this spirit of formal flexibility that Pieter Vermeulen (2020) intervenes in the genre debate, refusing to take sides and positing instead that "genres are never stable and rigid sets of prescriptions (a sort of recipe for baking literature), but rather function as flexible templates that, moreover, intermix with one another within particular works" (62). He argues that the cognitive challenge posed by the Anthropocene often leads to the intermixing of existing genres and a reshuffling of established templates.[20] This interlocking of various generic frameworks, affects, and life forms "makes predicting reader responses and their translation into real-world action a very speculative affair" (66). For Vermeulen, the

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[20] While this emphasis on genre mixing and formal experimentation may recall the poetics of postmodernism, it is important to note that many contemporary theorists of Anthropocene literature, including Vermeulen, maintain a commitment to referentiality. Unlike postmodernist texts that often foreground the instability or impossibility of reference, Anthropocene narratives tend to retain a strong orientation toward the material world, seeking to grapple with the real-world implications of environmental crisis rather than displacing or dissolving them.

literature of the Anthropocene offers a rich venue to explore the intersection of biological and cultural forms.[21] In his analysis of *Submergence* (2011) and *Terra Firma Triptych: When Robots Fly* (2015), both novels by Scottish author J.M. Ledgard, he examines this interaction between the biological and the social and reaffirms literature's power to bridge the gap between scientific and cultural knowledge (43).

In this context, the present study advances Vermeulen's insights by exploring how epistolary structures in historical climate change novels function as mediating forms through which the past is reimagined to include the agency of the non-human. Vermeulen's ecocritical engagement with texts, grounded in interpretations of form as a heuristic device that helps us understand the role literature plays in articulating social, historical, cultural, and biological differences aligns with Caracciolo's perspective on ecocritical practice. Both scholars draw on Caroline Levine's (2015) definition of "form" as the structuring principles that shape texts and their sociopolitical contexts (3). However, they do not limit their analysis to social and literary projects but expand their understanding of formal configurations to include "biological, geological, and cosmic dimensions" (Vermeulen 2020, 42). A prime example of the potential of this ecocritical approach is the work by Caracciolo, funded by the NARMESH project under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program. This work resulted in the publication of three books that are significant to my thesis: *Narrating the Mesh: Form and Story in the Anthropocene* (2021), *Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities* (2022a), and *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty: Narrating Unstable Futures* (2022b).

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[21]   Vermeulen is not alone in seeking to associate natural forms with narrative structures. Caracciolo (2021), for instance, draws on Timothy Morton's concept of the "mesh"—understood as "a form alternative to linear and hierarchical ways of thinking about humans' relationship with nonhuman realities […] and processes" (11)—to explore how narrative might embody more entangled, non-linear models of ecological thought. Like Vermeulen, Caracciolo emphasizes the need for formal strategies that reflect the interconnectedness and complexity of environmental systems.

The first volume of the 'trilogy' is concerned with the power of narrative forms to represent our "enmeshment"—in Timothy Morton's (2010) sense of the term—"in climatological, geological, or biological phenomena that have long been seen as operating independently of human societies and cultures" (Caracciolo 2021, 3). What is particularly relevant to my work is the book's engagement with climate change as a complex system, whose key features include nonlinearity, interdependence, and multiscalarity[22], and which are mirrored in the formal structures of certain narratives (24–26). An illustrative example is Ian McEwan's novel *Solar* (2010), which is examined as a testament to how metaphorical patterns can bridge the gap between human and non-human scales, thereby achieving multiscalarity. The key features outlined above underpin the analysis carried out throughout my work, which explores how epistolary forms generate thematic and formal configurations that characterize climate change as a complex system.

The second volume, *Slow Narrative*, examines the ecocritical significance of slowing down reader engagement. This deceleration facilitates incorporating a non-human perspective on storytelling pace and fosters a vision of interconnectedness between human and non-human elements. The methodological framework adopted by Caracciolo (2022a) closely aligns with my own critical approach. *Slow Narrative* not only examines formal strategies that challenge the anthropocentric tendencies of novelistic practice, which typically favours human timeframes and rhythms over the slower temporalities of non-human entities, but also emphasizes how these strategies interact with readers' experiential and affective interpretations ("Introduction"). Informed by this

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[22] Caracciolo (2021) bases his understanding of nonlinearity, multiscalarity, and interdependency on the definition of complex systems provided by physicist Michel Barangey. In this context, "nonlinearity" refers to the unpredictable, non-linear interactions among components of complex systems like climate change, "interdependency" denotes the mutual influence of factors within the systems, and "multiscalarity" involves the operation of complex systems across various spatial and temporal scales, with structures existing at all these levels (29).

framework, this study will examine how epistolary forms not only reflect the complexities of climate change but also shape readers' embodied experiences and overall interpretations of the narrative. Specifically, the interaction between epistolary sections and a multiplicity of other narrative voices contributes to the overall nonlinearity and fragmentation of the narratives under scrutiny. To illustrate Caracciolo's exploration of slowness within textual media, which encompasses both formal and experiential patterns of slowness while highlighting their potential convergence, it is helpful to reflect on his analysis of *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* (2011) by British author A. S. Byatt. According to Caracciolo (2022a), this novel employs enumerations to foreground and celebrate the heterogeneity of the non-human world. It functions as an "ontocatalog", a term he coins to describe texts that act as lists or inventories, reconfiguring human/non-human relations beyond the binary of traditional Western dualism, thereby interrupting the plot's flow and slowing down the reading experience ("Chapter 3").

Finally, the last volume, *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty*, engages with literary narratives and future imaginaries, exploring how literature can help make climate uncertainty more existentially manageable by serving, as Caracciolo (2022b) suggests, as a training device for the audience to become more at ease with a present destabilized by uncertainty (ix). Even in this closing volume of the NARMESH project, form takes centre stage, as narratives are critically interpreted as capable of negotiating readers' experience of uncertainty through formal experimentation that conveys key aspects of the phenomenology of uncertainty.[23] This includes the circulation and renegotiation of stories through

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[23]   The use of formal experimentation to convey uncertainty has deep roots in literary history, particularly in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Impressionist and modernist literature. In these periods, uncertainty became a structuring principle, employed to challenge established literary conventions and explore epistemological, existential, and phenomenological questions—an approach that has continued to shape narrative form into the postmodern and contemporary periods (Høeg 2021, 10).

the breakdown of linearity, the destabilization of spatial description, the inclusion of unreadable non-human minds, metalepsis, and other elements rooted in the reading experience. Such narratives are marked by gaps and ambiguities that remain unresolved by the conclusion, adding to their complexity (16-17). While the notion of storyworld temporality and spatiality as disrupted by narrative formal arrangements will be a key critical engagement of this thesis, Caracciolo's work is particularly relevant because it engages with *Cloud Atlas* (2004), a novel that will be analysed in this thesis and that is exemplary of how metafictionality can negotiate uncertainty. In Caracciolo's own words: "The nonlinear organization and metafictional self-reflexivity of *Cloud Atlas* effectively prevent readers from establishing a coherent internal ontology" (118). This observation prompts a closer examination of how epistolary formats in *Cloud Atlas* may contribute to the depiction of multiscalarity and underscore the narrative's self-awareness, as well as the limits of representing climate change. In this way, the analysis of *Cloud Atlas* carried out in this thesis aims to build on Caracciolo's insights by exploring how the self-reflexive tendency of climate fiction, particularly evident in these formats, resonates with ongoing concerns among scholars in the environmental humanities, particularly those concerned with the mediation of knowledge and the limits of human understanding in ecological contexts.

Astrid Bracke (2018) also reflects on issues of uncertainty and self-reflexivity, noting in her analysis of postmillennial British climate change novels:

> When the reader's attention is drawn to the instability, corruption, or loss of narratives within a novel, she may also reflect on a similar instability when interpreting climate crisis discourses and predictions. Narrative instability thus becomes a metafictional device by which postmillennial British novels engage with the broader cultural awareness of the climate crisis. (47)

In particular, she focuses on British novels that engage with and respond to traditional forms of British nature writing by crafting pastoral narratives (idealized landscapes), narratives of collapse (the loss of idealized landscapes), and narratives set in urban and arctic landscapes. In line with the scholars whose work has been systematized so far, she adopts an econarratological perspective, paying significant attention to form. For instance, in her analysis of *Cloud Atlas*, thematic and formal concerns intertwine, as she argues that the six distinct storylines contribute to the perception of the climate crisis as a longstanding issue, positioning it as a process that originated centuries ago and will continue in the future (13). Furthermore, she emphasizes the significance of temporal cues and narrativity in narratives of environmental collapse. By employing the principle of minimal departure, authors can strategically align the reader's temporal frame with that of the narrated stories, rendering references to the storyworld's time as vague as possible in order to create an illusion of proximity (19). More broadly, Bracke's work resonates with the present study in two key respects. First, her analysis of historical climate crisis novels aligns with the central concern of how traditional forms are reintegrated into postmillennial fiction. This reintegration not only reworks both the forms and contents of the past but also challenges previous relationships with and representations of the environment, striving to foreground the presence of the non-human in recent Anthropocene history. Second, her questions about narrative perspective and focalization, and their effects on shaping environmental experiences, resonate with concerns about how epistolary narratives, in interaction with other narrative voices, shape readers' experiences, both stylistic and thematic, of the narrated environments. The issue of reader response, as engaged by Bracke, circles back to the broader question of whether traditional or experimental narrative forms are better suited to capture the complexity and uncertainty of

climate change, while still maintaining readers' engagement and influencing their attitudes and behaviours.

A concern with reader's response is shared more in general by those approaches that embrace the tools of second-generation cognition (4E cognition) for the study of eco-literature. Alexa Weik von Mossner's (2017) should be referenced in this context, as it tests the individual and social impact of literature by adopting an eco-cognitive approach to studying readers' embodied mental and emotional interactions with narratives. While she situates herself in the recent domain of eco-cognitive-narratology, her framework draws from affective studies and it looks at "questions of perception, embodiment, and emotion" (13). While the framework adopted here is strongly indebted to von Mossner's critical engagement with the concept of "embodied simulation," which posits that reading narrative involves an internal reenactment or simulation of the verbally evoked situations (26), as well as to her analysis of the affective processes involved in readers' engagement with space, it is not limited to these aspects alone. She draws on the 4E approach to cognition, which postulates that cognition is not confined to the mind. Instead, it is understood as being variously embodied (shaped by the makeup of the body), embedded (shaped by the interaction with the environment), enacted (emerging from sensual, emotional, and intersubjective patterns), and extended (through technological devices) (Rowlands 2010; Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, "Introduction"). However, she only deals with the first two "E"s and remains skeptical of the enactive and extended aspects of the mind (Mossner 2017, 4-5). In contrast, this thesis strives to conceptualize the mind as both enactive and extended, highlighting the interplay among cognition, bodily experience, media practices (such as letters), and cultural technologies (like the novel). This perspective aligns more closely with scholars who have aimed to integrate cognitive neuroscience, phenomenological and enactivist philosophy, and narratology (Caracciolo 2013a,

2013b, 2014, 2016; Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021; Garratt 2016; Kukkonen 2019; Kuzmičová 2012, 2013, 2014), including those working in the field of econarratology (Caracciolo 2021; Lehtimäki 2019).

1.4 Epistolarity and Climate Fiction

While the literature discussed in the previous section interrogates climate change fiction from both econarratological and eco-cognitive narratological perspectives, offering insights into the narrative forms and structures that address the representational challenges posed by the climate crisis, they fall short of engaging with a narrative device central to the investigation carried out in this thesis: epistolarity.[24] Despite their attention to formal configurations, these studies overlook the role that epistolary forms play in shaping the experiential and thematic dimensions of climate change narratives. The definition of epistolarity adopted in this work primarily encompasses letters but is not confined to them. It also includes diaries and journals, while remaining attentive to the well-documented differences between these forms.[25] Additionally, this work draws on Toni Bowers' (2009) understanding of epistolary fiction as encompassing a variety of communication forms that have evolved from traditional letters, such as "e-mails, text messages, telegrams, postcards, tweets, transcribed tapes, greeting cards, answering machine messages, and so on" ("The Literary

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[24]   Bracke (2017) is the only one to mention letters in passing. In her analysis of *Cloud Atlas*, she refers to Heather Hicks (2010), who discusses the role of letters, diaries, and, more generally, written media in the post-apocalyptic societies depicted in the novel. However, Hicks does not elaborate on this point, as she argues that the loss of the written word does not play a primary role in the unfolding events (44). On the contrary, Bracke contends that *Cloud Atlas* complicates any simplistic association between the loss of written narratives and societal collapse, as the inclusion of narrative storytelling challenges the Western view that written media such as letters and diaries are inherently linked to civilization.

[25]   My understanding of the distinctions between the letter and diary genres draws significantly from the insightful contributions of scholars such as Janet Gurkin Altman (1982), H. Porter Abbott (1984), Lorna Martens (1985), Wulf Koepke (1990), Thomas O. Beebee (1998), Joe Bray (2003), Gerd Bayer (2009), and Maria Löschnigg and Rebekka Schuh (2018). Their works have provided invaluable perspectives that inform my approach.

Encyclopedia"). More specifically, the climate change novels examined here can be classified as "partially epistolary", a term coined by Maria Löschnigg and Rebekka Schuh (2018) to describe

> texts in which the quantitative proportion of the epistolary is rather limited and where epistolary segments are not essential for the basic plot of the narrative, yet where the impact of such segments on the aesthetic effect of narrative transmission is nonetheless considerable. ("Epistolarity")

The present research addresses this gap, exploring how epistolarity contributes to the multiscalarity, uncertainty, and nonlinearity central to the representation of climate change, while also interacting with readers' embodied and cognitive engagement with the text. Furthermore, the metafictional potential of epistolarity prompts reflections on the limits of climate change knowledge and representation, as well as on the epistemic shifts brought about by climate change science.

The following section outlines a theoretical framework for understanding epistolarity as a literary form. It highlights seminal studies that have shaped the discourse on epistolary narratives and examines recent critical approaches that address the role of epistolarity in contemporary fiction. Rather than attempting to systematize the entire body of scholarship on the epistolary genre—an undertaking too extensive to fall within the scope of this study—the discussion delineates the most influential contributions that have defined and redirected the field.[26] The discussion charts key critical developments, tracing a synthetic progression from early historical studies that document and contextualize the letter form in English literature to more recent analyses focused on its formal and

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[26] For a more comprehensive examination of current literature on epistolarity, see Löschnigg and Schuh 2018. In their extensive review, they trace historical developments primarily rooted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but also refer to critical discussions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. Additionally, they emphasize the significance of works that explore the intersection of epistolary fiction and gender studies, identifying this area as a key focal point in contemporary scholarship.

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narratological dimensions. This will encompass a shift from initial scholarship on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century works to later critical engagements that explore the letter genre's manifestations in contemporary literature. The critical overview will be framed by examining the relationship between the rise of realism and the evolving configurations of the novel form, with particular attention to how epistolarity has been treated in recent scholarship. To this end, three key areas will be addressed: first, historical approaches that examine the novel's development in relation to letter-writing media; second, the critical engagement with twenty-first-century epistolarity; and third, insights from second-generation cognitive narratology into the analysis of epistolarity.

1.4.1 Epistolarity in Focus: Existing Literature

In the field of epistolary studies, the work of literary historians has been fundamental in scrutinizing the genesis of the letter genre and contributing to an understanding of the novel's origins. Notable contributions to this historical perspective include F. G. Black's *The Epistolary Novel in the Late Eighteenth Century* (1940) and R. A. Day's *Told in Letters: Epistolary Fiction before Richardson* (1966), both of which illuminate the development of the epistolary form in England. Additionally, while not exclusively focused on the letter genre, Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* ([1957] 1959) and McKeon's *Origins of the English Novel: 1600-1740* ([1987] 2002) also contribute to systematizing it. According to these accounts, the letter genre emerged in the seventeenth century and reached its peak in eighteenth-century Europe, coinciding with the novel's establishment as a major literary form. In Watt's (1959) seminal work, the alliance between the letter as a functional medium for early novelistic formations steeped in empiricism is most evident in texts such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), where first-person narration foregrounds individual experience and perception,

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employing "natural" language that grounds the narrative in realism. Other accounts, such as McKeon's (2000), emphasize the novel's capacity to navigate societal and epistemological changes through innovations in narrative technology that parallel "[t]he emergence of realism during the latter decades of the eighteenth century" (608). The intersecting histories of the letter genre and the novel form have long attracted the attention of literary critics, particularly those focused on their origins. Within this context, the inclusion of letters is often seen as essential to producing the illusion of reality for the reader.

Other studies have concentrated on the formal properties of the letter genre. Notably, Janet Gurkin Altman's influential book *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982) examines the narratological potential of the letter and its unique modes of communication. Altman (1982) highlights how epistolarity foregrounds the drama of indirect (mis)communication and underscores the fundamental impossibility of unmediated contact between writer and addressee. The letter form negotiates polar oppositions between absence and presence, obstacle and bridge, as well as reliability and unreliability (43). As these tensions are generated by letters, suspense seems to be triggered by communication and miscommunication (60). Most importantly, when examining the letter genre from a formalist perspective, Altman highlights the significance of one of its most distinctive features: the presence of an internal reader, which influences both the message and the manner in which it is conveyed (88). This opens up bigger questions on the nature of the letter genre, being the presence of the addressee the main feature that distinguishes epistolary form from other first-person narratives, like the diary form. In addition to this, a crucial aspect of the dramatization of the writer and reader in epistolary fictional communication lies in the meta-discursive potential inherent in this *mise en abyme*, which self-reflexively "exposes the conflicting impulses that generate all literature" (212). The metafictional potential of epistolarity is highly pertinent to my examination

of climate fiction. Many of the novels under consideration employ the letter form to convey characters' experiences of specific environments, highlighting both the possibilities and limitations inherent in letters as a medium. This is particularly significant given that the reliability of the letter writer or narrator is often called into question, steeping the communication in uncertainty. Alongside the writer-reader relationship, Altman also addresses the presence of a reader or editor figure in certain letter narratives, distinct from the original addressee, as a means to make "exegesis part of the diegesis" (201). This further enhances the text's self-reflexive quality and illuminates the limitations of knowledge production, particularly at its intersection with historical fiction. This will also be a matter of critical inquiry in my work.

In addition to Altman's work, Joe Bray's *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (2003) serves as another foundational text, offering significant insights into the narratological aspects of the letter form. Particular attention is given to Bray's (2003) analysis of how epistolary narratives expose tensions between a letter-writer's past and present selves, and between the experiencing and narrating selves, resulting in complex negotiations of identity. His investigation into the multiple temporalities inherent in letter writing complicates the conception of epistolarity as "a vital and immediate source for free indirect thought" (22), which presents a "relatively unsophisticated and transparent version of subjectivity" (1). In the critical analysis of this thesis, the issue of letter writers' unreliability is frequently highlighted, not only indicating an instability in the character's self-narration, but also undermining their authority as reliable sources of understanding. This challenge is particularly pronounced in their accounts of experiences within the environment in which they are situated.

While both Altman's and Bray's contributions are foundational to this study's critical framework, their analyses do not address twenty-first-century

fiction, owing to the timing of their publications. This critical gap has been recently addressed by Kym Brindle in *Epistolary Encounters in Neo-Victorian Fiction Diaries and Letters* (2013), where the accent is placed on the metafictional role played by embedded letters and diaries in the neo-Victorian novel. Brindle's work is especially relevant, as my thesis will engage with novels that can be labelled as variants of the neo-historical novel, such as neo-Georgian or neo-Victorian fiction, which will be explored in greater depth later.

Apart from Brindle's efforts, the presence of the letter genre in contemporary fiction has also been noticed and investigated in *The Epistolary Renaissance: A Critical Approach to Contemporary Letter Narratives in Anglophone Fiction* (2018), edited by Maria Löschnigg and Rebekka Schuh. The authors in this collection primarily draw on Altman's theoretical foundations while engaging with recent developments in epistolary writing, ultimately arguing that the twenty-first century marks a Renaissance for the epistolary mode. The analytical frameworks of the present work owe much to the critical efforts presented in this volume, especially for their treatment of "digital modes" of epistolarity (e.g. Internet communication), their engagement with contemporary historical short stories and Rebekkah Schuh's introduction of the concept of "epistolary illusion" (2018, "Introducton to this Volume"). This last theoretical concept emerges out of the more famous idea of "aesthetic illusion" from reader-response theory. Whereas aesthetic illusion operates at the extratextual level, epistolary illusion refers to "an intratextual response to reading, writing, or waiting for letters" (Schuh 2018, "Enveloped in Epistolary Illusion"), which induces a dissociative, imaginative state in the character. This concept will prove valuable for examining how acts of letter- and diary-reading shape the psychological and affective experiences of several characters in the novels discussed. Finally, Löschnigg and Schuh's edited volume deserves to be acknowledged because it not only offers practical tools but also challenges a prevailing misconception: that the epistolary

novel is a relic of the past and an exhausted field of study. They counter the arguments of critics like Elaine Showalter and Siv Gøril Brandtzæg, who consider the epistolary form as merely a precursor to the third-person novel (Löschnigg and Schuh 2018, "Introduction").

1.4.2 Epistolarity and Second-Generation Cognitive Narratology

Extending this recent reappraisal of the epistolary novel, the present work draws on cognitive narratology to examine the form's enduring relevance and expressive capacities. In this respect, Karin Kukkonen's *4E Cognition and Eighteenth-Century Fiction: How the Novel Found Its Feet* (2019) provides a compelling framework for understanding how letter writing shaped narrative structure and reader engagement in the eighteenth-century novel. Kukkonen's (2019) work is highly relevant to this thesis for two key reasons: (1) her application of cognitive narratology offers a perspective on literary history that foregrounds the dialectic between stylistic tendencies, poetic principles, and cultural norms ("Chapter 1"), and (2) her examination of letters as a medium that shaped embodied experience in the eighteenth-century novel, viewed through the lens of second-generation cognitive approaches (4E cognition). As far as available evidence suggests, Kukkonen's study remains the only critical work that explores the narratological potential of the epistolary form from a cognitive perspective. While her focus is on eighteenth-century fiction, Kukkonen's framework provides a crucial point of departure for investigating how twenty-first-century novels reactivate and reconfigure the embodied affordances of the epistolary form under contemporary cultural and technological conditions.

To elaborate on the first point mentioned above, Kukkonen posits that culture and cognition co-evolve, emphasizing that there is no pre-linguistic or pre-writing state for the text to mirror. The mind, she asserts, is already shaped

by culture and written narratives are one of the ways through which the co-evolution of cognition and culture plays out ("Chapter 1"). Consequently, she conceptualizes the novel as a "cultural technology" that "develops [its] language of embodiment in dialogue with the media of letters and the theatre, written modes of organizing knowledge and behavior, and the practices of life-writing" ("Chapter 6"). Therefore, the novel is not merely embedded in the lifeworld or a reproduction of it; rather, it actively shapes and develops embodied engagements. Through its unique practices of mediation, the novel has the potential to transform cognitive processes rather than merely mirror them.[27] Ultimately, what Kukkonen "argue[s] for is that narrative itself changes in tandem with the cultural, technological environments that we inhabit" ("Chapter 6"). In much the same way, the twenty-first-century climate change novel is embodied and embedded in specific socio-historical, cultural, and technological contexts, which inevitably contribute to its shaping.

This conceptualization is further supported by the cognitive framework Kukkonen develops, which draws on Wolfgang Iser's (1993) distinction between the real (anything that exists in the physical world), the imaginary (anything that is imagined or invented), and the fictive (anything that arises from "the act of fictionalisation"), and integrates it with the theory of predictive processing. Borrowing from cognitive science and the philosophy of mind—particularly Andy Clark's (2015) work on embodied prediction—Kukkonen argues that perception, movement, and thought are all guided by expectations, which are constantly adjusted in response to sensory input. Likewise, the experience of reading operates in much the same way (Kukkonen 2019, "Chapter 1"). Only, in

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[27] Kukkonen (2019) refers to David Herman's understanding of narratives as a device for sensemaking that helps give structure to experience, provides a model for making causal deductions, enhances problem-solving skills, offers readers shared protocols of communication, and allows for constructing stories that hold a unique social role ("Chapter 6"). On the role of literature in culture, see also Michelle Scalise Sugiyama (2001) for the evolutionary basis of storytelling practices and Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley (2008) for narrative's role in social behaviour.

Kukkonen's theory, the "act of fictionalisation" is "[t]he 'probability design' of the sensory flow of a literary text […] grounded in the embodied language, but connect[ed] with the larger dynamics of the plot (and its prediction-changing properties) and the cultural models that inform, for example, the logic of interaction between characters" ("Chapter 1"). The probability design of a text is what guides and influences readers' predictive processing. In other words, as we understand and operate in our real life environments through the feedback loop between the flow of embodied perceptions and our predictions, we seemingly understand narratives, only that the reading experience is guided by an imaginary sensory flow that is structured, a "designed sensory flow" ("Chapter 1") that can incorporate diverse styles of embodiment. Among these diverse styles of embodiment, she highlights letters and explores how the novel both recreates and reflects the embodiment implied in the mediation of letters.

This brings this discussion to the second key point: her attention to literary language as embedded within specific mediated contexts, combined with her analysis of how letters shape embodied experience and inform the broader structure of the text, is central to my critical approach. Kukkonen's conception of letters as "relays" of embodiment, understood as media through which embodied experience passes from narrative to reader, forms the basis of my critical engagement with letters in climate fiction. Embedded narratives, such as letters, function as devices for precision management, namely for changes in embodied simulation ("Chapter 2"). Shifts in embodied simulation can exhibit varying levels of precision: (1) the inside perspective, characterized by immersion, allows the reader to "see" the world through the experiencing character's point of view, resulting in a high level of precision; (2) the outside perspective, "joint attention", where the reader "sees" the character from an external, reflective position, offers a lower level of precision; (3) the general perspective, in which the character is evaluated against a shared background of

cultural norms and expectations, such as through comparisons to well-known figures from popular dramas, further reduces precision ("Chapter 2"). Letters help shape embodiment through "joint attention", a mechanism where communication operates through

> a double set of relations: first, between the narrator and what they pay attention to and, second, between the narrator and the readers as they pay attention to this together […]. [It has to do] with the multiple relations between the person telling, the person receiving the info and the info that they both pay attention to. (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, "Chapter 2")

However, embodiment is not solely shaped by joint attention established through embedded narratives; letters must also be interpreted as functioning in relation to the overall plot and the broader probabilistic design of the narrative (Kukkonen 2019, "Chapter 2"). It is crucial to highlight this point because, as previously noted, the novels analysed in this work are not traditionally epistolary but instead "use a mixed mode, in which letters carry not all of the narrative" (Beebee 1998, 385). In line with Kukkonen's interpretation of letters as embedded narratives, the present work treats epistolary sections as "adopting a different semantic status as soon as they are deciphered as parts of the whole narrative" (Löschnigg and Schuh 2018, "Epistolarity").

With the field of epistolary studies now broadly outlined, the discussion turns to a more detailed examination of the postclassical narratological stance adopted here, which, while deeply indebted to Kukkonen's critical insights, also extends beyond them. The focus on embedded media shifts toward an ecocritical perspective, emphasizing environmental rather than historical reconfigurations of the novel's genesis. This approach forms a triangulation between cognitive narratology, epistolary studies, and climate fiction studies, reflecting the specialized yet interconnected areas that underpin my analysis.

1.4.3 Postclassical Narratology: A Critical Overview

The methodological framework of this thesis is situated within the critical domain of postclassical narratology and therefore considers narratives as processes rather than products.[28] To contextualize this framework, it is essential to provide a brief overview of the discipline and the seminal thinkers who shaped its development. Accordingly, the discussion will engage with the works of Monika Fludernik, David Herman, Jan Alber, Brian Richardson, Marco Caracciolo, and Karin Kukkonen, highlighting their respective contributions to the field. This engagement serves to clarify how the present study aligns with or diverges from existing critical paradigms and how established narratological tools can be employed to develop an ecocritically informed reading of epistolary forms in the climate change novels under consideration.

Throughout the history of narratology as a method for exploring the operationality of texts and their mimetic or non-mimetic relationship to the real world, the cognitive turn marks a pivotal shift, emphasizing the influence of contexts on narrative understanding[29]. Monika Fludernik, with her theorization of "natural narratology", is a pivotal figure in this cognitive shift within narratological methods. She argues that

> [r]eaders actively construct meanings and impose frames on their interpretations of texts just as people have to interpret real-life experience in terms of available schemata. […] [O]ral narratives (more precisely: narratives of spontaneous conversational storytelling) cognitively correlate with perceptual parameters of human experience and […] these parameters remain in force even in more sophisticated written narratives, although the textual make-up of these stories changes drastically over time. (2005, 9)

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[28]   For a review of postclassical narratology, see Liveley 2019.
[29]   In his 2009 overview of postclassical narratologies, Ansgar Nünning describes contextualist narratologies as approaches that connect the elements readers encounter within a narrative to particular cultural, historical, thematic, and ideological contexts (55-56).

Her idea is ultimately that of considering narrativity as "experientiality", namely "the quasi-mimetic evocation of 'real-life experience'" (9). As Caracciolo (2013c) explains:

> Experientiality refers to the ways in which narrative taps into readers' familiarity with experience through the activation of "natural" cognitive parameters (see Fludernik 2003), and particularly the embodiment of cognitive faculties, the understanding of intentional action, the perception of temporality, and the emotional evaluation of experience.[30]

This concept highlights the active role of readers in constructing meaning and underscores the significance of cognitive dimensions within narratological studies. As a key figure in the cognitive turn, David Herman's work also merits particular attention, especially in relation to *Story Logic* (2002) and *The Emergence of Mind* (2011). His notion of narrativity aligns with Fludernik's perspective, emphasizing that the literary text is fundamentally contingent on our cognitive operations. In fact, Herman (2002) theorizes the concept of "storyworld", arguing that the world depicted in a literary text is co-created by readers who draw on their real-world knowledge to comprehend and navigate the narrative.

Opposition to Fludernik's and Herman's argument that narrativity mirrors natural storytelling and conversational practices led postclassical narratology to incorporate approaches that critique the mimetic bias of natural narratology and explore "unnatural narratives" that push the boundaries of real-world conventions. Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson (2010) have addressed this blind spot highlighting that

> narratives are also full of unnatural elements. Many narratives defy, flaunt, mock, play, and experiment with some (or all) of these core assumptions about narrative. More specifically, they may radically deconstruct the anthropomorphic narrator, the traditional human character, and the minds associated with them, or they may move beyond

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[30]   For a definition of "experientiality", particularly regarding its various afterlives in subsequent narratological discussions, see Caracciolo 2013c.

real-world notions of time and space, thus taking us to the most remote territories of conceptual possibilities. (114)

For instance, Alber associates "unnaturalness" with the defamiliarizing power of certain narratives triggered by their departure from "(what a culture considers to be) logically or physically possible in reality" (Alber et al. 2018, 449), while Richardson "defines unnatural narratives as anti-mimetic texts that violate the parameters of traditional realism ('Beyond Story') or move beyond the conventions of natural narrative, i.e., forms of spontaneous oral storytelling (Unnatural Voices)" (115). The debate ultimately centres on the question of fiction's "(un)exceptionality": natural narratology argues for the similarities between real-world nonfictional and fictional narratives, while unnatural narratology posits that exceptionality is an inherent feature of fiction, distinguishing it from everyday textual communication.[31] Second-generation cognitive narratology, particularly the insights of Kukkonen and Caracciolo, provide a solid foundation for moving beyond this impasse. The role of 4E cognition in addressing the limitations of both natural and unnatural narratologies was partly introduced in the previous section. However, it is essential to revisit this topic briefly to reconnect some dots.

Kukkonen's (2019) perspective is particularly useful in this respect, as it elucidates that the accusation of mimetic bias directed at cognitive narratologists arises from the conflation of mimesis with natural, conversational narratives by unnatural narratologists. In reality, cognitivist notions of narrativity are not solely grounded in imitation; rather, they are based on an understanding of mimesis as emerging from both culture and cognition. Thus, "the accusation of a

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[31] In 2018, *Poetics Today* published a special issue titled "Unnatural and Cognitive Perspectives on Narrative (A Theory Crossover)", which sought to reconcile cognitive and unnatural approaches. The essays in this issue provide a clear overview of the status of both perspectives, propose ways to align them, and address some of the challenges associated with each.

mimetic bias becomes meaningless" ("Chapter 1"). To reassess the issue of exceptionality, it is more pertinent to consider the definitions of "fiction" and "narrativity". In particular, as illustrated earlier in the chapter, Iser's tripartite definition of the real, imaginary, and fictional, where fictional encompasses both the real and the imaginary as shaped by fiction, serves as a foundational element for second-generation cognitive narratology. This categorization enables Kukkonen to argue that the binary opposition between the real and the fictional is unfounded and that

> the engagement with fiction depends on the particular textual design enabled by acts of fictionalization. Such textual design lends a global coherence to the text, but the account of fiction that emerges from it cannot be satisfyingly defined through "invention" and its (posited) interpretive protocols, since these also apply to imaginary activities more generally. Fiction would then be a specific, text-based transformation of the everyday thought processes connected to the real (or noninvented) and the imaginary (or invented). (Kukkonen and Nielsen 2018, 482)

This definition of fiction is ultimately the one this work embraces, along with Kukkonen's understanding of the reader's experience as guided by "the designed sensory flow particular to fictional uses of language" (489). Aligned with second-generation cognitive approaches to fiction, this study conceives of narratives as experientially grounded and deliberately constructed acts of fictionalization shaped by embodied language, cultural frameworks, and narrative dynamics.

The concept of narrative as experientiality, which underpins the critical approach adopted in this study, is likewise grounded in Caracciolo's contributions to the field. In his volume, *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* (2014), Caracciolo elucidates the points of convergence between cognitive and unnatural approaches to narrative studies, paralleling Kukkonen's insights. He argues that while fictional storytelling can stretch the boundaries of reality and challenge real-world conventions, readers' interactions

with narratives remain contingent upon their experiential backgrounds. In addition to this predicament, he adds:

> All in all, there is a two-way movement between the background and narrative: like experiential machines, stories need experiential input, but also produce some output, since they can bring about a restructuring of each reader's experiential background by generating new "story-driven" experiences. (2014, 5)

This suggests that the mimetic relationship between experience and narrative is bi-directional, where fictional stories not only draw on readers' knowledge of the world, but they "can [also] impact recipients' interaction with reality by leaving a mark on their values and attitudes" (Caracciolo 2013, "Par. 14"). Caracciolo's work is also illuminating in another regard, as it clarifies the model of the reader endorsed by second-generation cognitive narratological approaches and how this model informs a type of interpretation that considers both formal and contextual patterns. For Caracciolo (2014), the model of the reader supported by cognitive narratology does not rest on extrapolating the "content" of readers' responses—an aspect that may vary from reader to reader—but rather on the "structure" of those responses, which tends to be consistent across readers (13). Such universal structures emerge through embodied cognitive mechanisms, including "image schemata" and "predictive processing". Image schemata are mental templates formed from physical interactions with the world, and they provide a shared structure for understanding abstract ideas. To clarify this, Kukkonen and Caracciolo (2021) explain that readers can interpret an abstract concept like a "career" as an "obstacle course", drawing on common experiences of linear movement (the path of the course) and obstructions (challenges along the way). These structures help readers map real-world actions onto narrative developments, creating universal patterns in story comprehension. Predictive processing further explains how readers intuitively anticipate plot developments by unconsciously forming and revising mental predictions based on narrative

cues. Together, they create a shared foundation for narrative understanding, allowing readers to engage with stories in ways that feel consistent and universally relatable ("Introduction"). This model of the reader allows for speculations regarding the impact of narratives on readers, even if these speculations are not backed by empirical data (Caracciolo 2014, 13).

The concept of the embodied reader is further expanded in Caracciolo's joint publication with Kukkonen, *With Bodies: Narrative Theory and Embodied Cognition* (2021). This seminal work unites the authors' efforts to offer a systematic approach to embodied narratological analysis, addressing key concerns of narrative theory, such as time, space, focalization, plot, and so on. Similarly aligned with Caracciolo's argument, the model of the embodied reader is described as dependent on shared patterns and biases that inform the reading process and are empirically determined by 4E cognition, while also projecting the critic's intuitions ("A Note on Readers"). Ultimately, it serves as a guiding principle to investigate how a subset of real-world readers may respond to the narratives under scrutiny, as the embodied mind interacts with real-world sociocultural issues ("A Note on Readers"). The book highlights posthumanism as one of these sociocultural issues, illustrating how embodied narratology can inspire a thematically and contextually conscious reading of literary narratives, or how effectively it can support ecocritically oriented readings of texts. The next section expands on the potential of 4E cognition, with particular attention to the model of the embodied reader, as a framework for econarratological inquiry into partially epistolary climate fiction.

1.4.4 Embodied Cognition, Narratology, and Ecocriticism

In examining efforts to theorize an ecologically informed narratology, Markku Lehtimäki's (2013, 2019) work serves as an insightful starting point. He advocates

for integrating ecocriticism with cognitive narratology, highlighting the necessity of attending to "the synthetic level, that is, the self-conscious, artificial design of the text" (2019, 87), to explore the mimetic and didactic forms that underlie contemporary eco-fiction. His efforts are part of a larger project inaugurated by Erin James in 2015, who coined the term "econarratology" and defined it as follows:

> Econarratology embraces the key concerns of each of its parent discourses—it maintains an interest in studying the relationship between literature and the physical environment, but does so with sensitivity to the literary structures and devices that we use to communicate representations of the physical environment to each other via narratives. It also highlights the potential that narratives stand to make to readers' understandings of what it is like for people in different spaces and times to live in their ecological homes by foregrounding the comparative nature of narrative immersion. (23)

Both authors emphasize that narratology, when approached contextually and attentive to historical, cultural, and environmental factors, can deepen ecocritical analysis and strengthen the communicative power of narrative in addressing environmental issues. Lehtimäki (2019) in particular emphasizes the didactic function of eco-literature, highlighting the rhetorical power inherent in fictionality and its capacity to renegotiate the complex dimensions of climate change and explore the epistemological questions connected to the natural world. At the same time, he remains mindful of the risks associated with authorial patronizing, moralizing, and didacticism, as well as the challenges of representing something as abstract and complex as climate change, which defies the limits of traditional realist formats. While also voicing the same concerns, James (2015) expresses confidence in the power of econarratological frameworks to illuminate how narratives can negotiate, either by perpetuating, challenging, or creating, the formal configurations associated with realism (24).

How, then, does narratology, specifically second-generation cognitive approaches to narrative studies, intersect with the conceptual shifts introduced by climate change? Caracciolo (2021) addresses this issue by arguing that both cognitive narratology and recent conceptualizations of climate change challenge dualistic frameworks, such as the separation of mind and matter, or that of humans and inanimate objects. He also critiques the notion of representation, which assumes that a subject can exist independently of its environment (118). The critical approach he adopts uses fiction as a tool to explore these intersections, particularly examining how they are renegotiated through narrative formal patterns and how they function as a form of translation that reintroduces climate science "into the human-scale, embodied language of everyday perception" (12). Herman's (2018) argument similarly highlights literature's communicative potential, as he suggests that narratives can "reframe the cultural models or ontologies that undergird hierarchical understandings of humans' place in the larger biotic communities of which they are members" (4). The eco-cognitive narratological framework adopted in this thesis builds upon this foundation by acknowledging the rhetorical power of narrative within a broader discursive landscape that shapes climate change communication. It critically engages with the limitations and possibilities inherent in mimetic practices and their self-reflexive nature. This approach emphasizes the potential of narratives to illuminate and negotiate the complexities of climate change while remaining attuned to the ways in which they reflect and shape our understanding of ecological realities.

1.4.5 Embodied Narratology, Epistolarity, and Climate Fiction

Having so far delineated the object of inquiry, reviewed the existing scholarly landscape, identified the critical gap to be addressed, and outlined the

methodological traditions and tools employed, several pivotal questions emerge. What connections do these narratives forge with established realist principles? As they endeavour to portray the complexities of climate change, how do they navigate the intricate challenges posed by this pressing issue? Furthermore, what significance does the epistolary form hold in their representation of reality? How does embodied narratology help to shed light on how these narratives engage with the complexities of human experience and ecological realities? These inquiries aim to establish a foundation for the critical and focused explorations of the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

In examining the relationship between the selected novels—*Cloud Atlas*, *The Still Point*, *The Year Without Summer* and *The Future*—and realism, it is essential to consider both their attitudes toward reality and their engagement with the conventions of realism. To clarify both points, it may be beneficial to consider a broader perspective on twenty-first-century novels and their relationship with earlier forms of realism, spanning from the eighteenth-century tradition to postmodern variations. Capoferro's (2017) insight on this matter is particularly illuminating. He interprets the attitudes of fiction over the past twenty years as shaped by a desire to re-engage with the conventions of traditional eighteenth-century realism and modernist realism. In his view, narratives of the new millennium acknowledge postmodernist scepticism and the inherent limitations of their own perspectives; nonetheless, they uphold a belief in literature's capacity to provide a view of reality, however partial, which reinforces the bond between literature and experience (230). The climate change novels under scrutiny in this work demonstrate an acute awareness of the limitations inherent in novelistic mimetic practices for representing climate change. Nevertheless, they remain committed to this task by critically engaging with the epistemologies of climate science and the moral implications of climate discourse. To this end, these novels navigate traditional, modernist, and

postmodern practices of realism, adopting a self-reflexive attitude that, while recognizing the constraints of representation, never entirely dismisses the possibility of accessing and depicting certain dimensions of real-world experience, no matter how incomplete.

In this regard, it is also worth situating these novels in relation to what James Wood famously diagnosed as "hysterical realism", a mode he critiqued in his 2000 essay "Human, All Too Inhuman" for its frenetic narrative energy, intellectual overextension, and thin emotional resonance. According to Wood (2000), this style, exemplified by authors such as Zadie Smith, Don DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace, is characterized by a relentless proliferation of plot and ideas at the expense of psychological realism and affective depth. While the climate novels discussed here share certain surface-level traits with this mode, such as formal excess, generic hybridity, and encyclopaedic range, they repurpose these features to meet the cognitive and ethical demands of the climate crisis. Rather than substituting structure for substance, these novels engage in what might be better termed "post-hysterical realism": a narrative mode that preserves the scale and heterogeneity of hysterical realism but inflects it with epistemological humility and ecological urgency. This mode resists both naïve realism and ironic detachment, offering instead a literary form that is at once critically self-aware and ethically committed to the partial yet vital act of representing a world in crisis.

This post-hysterical realism is thus particularly suited to confronting the narrative challenges posed by climate change. It preserves the structural ambition and formal hybridity of hysterical realism but reorients these qualities toward grappling with the epistemological limits and ethical stakes of climate change. The limitations these novels address stem from the fact that climate change, as a complex system operating across vast temporal and spatial scales, cannot be directly experienced by any single individual. Moreover, responsibility

for its causation, as well as the solutions for mitigating its future impacts, cannot be attributed to or rest solely with one person or a select few. At the same time, although scientific data and the epistemologies of visualization derived from climate change modelling provide insights into its workings, they remain inaccessible to those lacking the critical tools and expertise needed to extrapolate this information. This complexity makes it challenging to translate these data into compelling narratives that are both entertaining and scientifically sound. While the anthropocentric bias in literature presents certain challenges, as it stems from its inherent focus on human experience and scale, which often leads to the oversimplification or distortion of complex environmental issues, it can also function as a strength. This is particularly relevant when considering the deterministic and reductionist tendencies of climate modelling, which often struggle to incorporate socio-cultural contextual information into their predictive frameworks. In contrast, literature has the potential to reintroduce these socio-cultural and empirical factors into the discussion, not by overcoming anthropocentrism, but by using it purposefully to enrich our understanding of climate change and its complex impacts.

Unlike the emotionally flattened characters of hysterical realism, post-hysterical realism sustains both a focus on large-scale systems and a genuine investment in individual lives. This balance is particularly valuable for representing climate change, whose abstraction often resists emotional engagement. By grounding vast environmental and social forces in the everyday experiences of characters, these novels offer the emotional intensity and narrative immediacy that climate discourse often lacks. This resonates with what Caracciolo (2022b) describes as a "phenomenology of uncertainty" (16) in fiction:

> climate change faces us with a failure of probability, mirroring the lack of empirical data that could support predictions, the spatiotemporal scale of the ecological crisis, and its complexity as it straddles the divide between

human cultures and decision-making and the history of the Earth system. (26)

This conflation between the experience of uncertainty and climate change is also picked up by Ingrid Diran and Antoine Traisnel (2021) for their definition of "climate realism" which is associated with a crisis in reproduction that leads to fictional representation of this instability and unpredictability (123). In accordance with these premises, the works examined here evoke a mode of climate realism that reveals how climate change unsettles humanity's evolving predictive grasp, rendering the calculation of environmental probabilities increasingly uncertain amid the growing volatility of ecosystems. These narratives capture the unsettling effects of ecological unpredictability, where shifting environmental conditions defy straightforward forecasting.

The central argument advanced here is that these works participate in an aesthetic regime that seeks to render the complexity and unpredictability of ecological systems, aligning formal experimentation with the dynamic and nonlinear behaviour of the environment itself. Each novel translates the epistemic conditions of climate change, including its nonlinearity, interdependence, and uncertainty, into formal strategies that resists closure and challenges the reader's predictive grasp. Rather than constituting a single aesthetic lineage, the novels examined in this thesis draw "intertextually" and "architextually", in Gérard Genette's sense of the terms, on a long-standing tradition of realist fiction while simultaneously incorporating a heterogeneous range of genres—not all of them typically associated with realism[32]—as well as diverse media forms such as letters, journals, memoirs, sermons, testimonies, and

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[32] My concept of "realism" is grounded in Capoferro's (2017) understanding of realism as a spectrum, which includes "weak realism". This approach encompasses representations that utilize the models and stylistic patterns of realism but are not confined by its boundaries, as it also engages with phenomena that do not exist in the real world, such as those found in science fiction (203).

digital posts. This level of hybridization produces what might be described as "textual ecosystems", where diverse narrative practices coexist and interact, generating emergent patterns that evade linear expectation. The effect is not simple randomness for its own sake but a dynamic complexity that mirrors the relational and non-linear processes of the climate system, whose feedback loops and cascading effects epitomize the unpredictability central to climate change epistemology.

Across the corpus, formal complexity manifests differently. *Cloud Atlas* draws on generic hybridisation typical of postmodernism to build a recursive and nested storytelling, namely a non-linear narrative model of systemic interconnection. *The Still Point* draws on modernist aesthetics, particularly their temporal fragmentation and introspective focus, to translate ecological awareness into "atmospheric phenomenology", where perception and environment become mutually constitutive. *The Year Without Summer*, very similarly to *Cloud Atlas* but also to *The Still Point* in its engagement with postmodernist and modernist practices of non-linearity and fragmentation, formalizes spatial and medial disjunction, staging climate crisis through dispersed voices and patchy distribution. *The Future* projects these dynamics into the digital sphere, where networked communication and algorithmic systems mediate both apocalypse and renewal. Each of these works turns the representational difficulty of climate change, its scale, temporality, and multiplicity, into an aesthetic principle, transforming epistemological uncertainty into narrative form.

In this sense, ecological complexity functions both thematically and formally. Readers encounter characters confronting unstable environments while simultaneously experiencing interpretive instability through recursive structures, fragmented temporality, and cross-media narration. The embodied reader thus participates in an aesthetics of cognitive and affective disorientation,

navigating the text as a complex system that resists prediction and demands interpretive adaptability. Following Serpil Opperman's (2006) call for an "ecological conception of textuality", in which "textual diversity and biodiversity […] shake hands" (109), this thesis understands literary form itself as an ecological phenomenon, one that is adaptive, interactive, and open-ended. Within this framework, particular attention is given to epistolary modes, ranging from the handwritten letter to the digital post, as privileged sites where mediation, uncertainty, and relationality converge. Rather than isolating epistolarity as a discrete formal device, the discussion considers it in dynamic relation to plot architecture and probabilistic design, following Kukkonen's (2019) model of narrative as a cognitive engagement with possibilities. Across these texts, epistolarity becomes a key mechanism through which climate change's epistemic conditions are both represented and enacted, transforming reading into an experience of embodied contingency and ecological thought.

Looking ahead to the analyses developed in the following chapters, this thesis explores how contemporary climate change novels engage with realism and the epistolary form to grapple with the complexities and unpredictabilities of ecological realities under climate change. The framework of cognitive narratology proves particularly useful for examining how readers engage with epistolary forms and how this engagement produces distinctive cognitive and affective effects. By emphasizing the reader's interpretive navigation of these narratives, we can better understand how form mediates the experience of climate uncertainty. This interplay between form and content underscores the potential of epistolarity to expand readers' perceptual and ethical engagement with climate change, which is an inquiry that the subsequent chapters pursue in detail.

1.5 Conclusion

This opening chapter outlines the conceptual, historical, and methodological framework that underpins the analyses developed in the remainder of this thesis. It investigates the varied epistemological frameworks informing scientific, cultural, and narrative conceptions of climate. By situating climate fiction within these intersecting discourses, the chapter establishes a critical vocabulary for exploring how narrative form mediates the relationship between abstract systems of knowledge and lived experience. It also foregrounds the value of formalist and cognitive approaches to narrative studies in illuminating how readers engage with climate fiction as both an imaginative and epistemological challenge. Finally, by positioning the epistolary mode as a site of mediation between embodiment, cognition, and environmental discourse, the chapter sets out the interpretive framework through which the selected novels will be examined. The following chapters build on this foundation, offering close readings of *Cloud Atlas*, *The Still Point*, *The Year Without Summer*, and *The Future* to show how partially epistolary forms articulate the temporal, spatial, and affective dimensions of climate change, inviting readers to engage cognitively and ethically with the uncertainties of the Anthropocene.

Chapter Two

The Emergent Imagination of Climate Change:

Multitemporal Interruption and Recurrence in *Cloud Atlas*

2.1 Introduction

First published in 2004, *Cloud Atlas* (2004, 2014)[1] by David Mitchell is not only the earliest novel in the chosen corpus of my dissertation, but also the first literary work to be addressed within this thesis. The decision to start with *Cloud Atlas* is not only chronological but also methodological, for the novel exemplifies a mode of ecological engagement characteristic of early twenty-first-century eco-fiction, in which climate change is not thematised directly. Rather, what surfaces is a climate aesthetic that emerges only indirectly, as a secondary effect of the novel's deeper engagement with histories of dispossession, extractivism, settler colonialism, imperial capitalism, and the entwined violences of geno- and eco-cide. In this sense, the ecological dimension of the novel is best understood as tacit, crystallised through its engagement with long-standing structures of power and exploitation, where climate change surfaces less as a direct theme than as a derivative consequence and continuation of them. Because of this, *Cloud Atlas* can be understood as exemplifying an early stage of climate change aesthetics in which ecological crisis comes to light obliquely as derivative of wider social and historical logics.

In spite of its indirect engagement with climate change, *Cloud Atlas* has increasingly been read as a climate narrative since the second decade of the twenty-first century (Baucom 2015; Bracke 2018; Caracciolo 2022b; Hicks 2016). This retrospective positioning reflects the growing critical awareness of ecological crisis, yet it also risks engendering a certain anachronism insofar as it presumes climate change to have been the novel's explicit target. A more careful approach, adopted here, intends to treat *Cloud Atlas* as climate fiction only to the extent that its thematic layering and formal strategies allow ecological crisis to

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[1] This chapter primarily cites the 2014 Sceptre edition of *Cloud Atlas* (originally published in 2004), which incorporates revisions made at the request of Mitchell's UK editor. However, it also refers—on one occasion—to the 2004 Random House edition published in the United States, which differs in places due to the absence of those editorial interventions. The US edition is consulted only where its textual variation is relevant to the analysis.

register obliquely, surfacing both as a derivative theme and through the workings of narrative architecture, rather than as a direct concern.

If, thematically, the novel only subtly traces the entanglement of human history with that of environmental disruption, even at the formal level, *Cloud Atlas* is not a novel whose structure is directed at representing climate change, but one that mobilises postmodernist strategies, such as non-linearity, fragmentation, recursive structures, generic hybridity, and self-reflexivity, to foreground the complex interlockings of socio-historical dynamics. These strategies disrupt linear causality and expose the fragility of narratives of progress, while also emphasising mediation and the processes through which history is transmitted, consumed, and re-narrated. Within this configuration, ecological collapse surfaces evasively, as an emergent dimension of the systemic logics the novel portrays. In this sense, the postmodernist aesthetic of *Cloud Atlas* functions as a framework that incidentally mirrors the very conditions under which climate change becomes representable: real and perceptible in its effects, dispersed globally so that its totality can only be apprehended through the accumulation of phenomena across multiple spaces; epistemologically accessible only through mediation and re-mediation, through data, records, and projections, and temporally marked by latency, uneven unfolding, deferred consequences, and patterns of multitemporality and repetition.

Building on these premises, this chapter examines the multitemporal dimensions of climate change representation in *Cloud Atlas*. While the novel's multispatial configuration, which links Polynesia, Europe, the United States, the United Kingdom, Korea, and Hawaii, is significant in registering the planetary diffuseness of ecological crisis[2], my analysis shifts emphasis to its temporal

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[2]   The relevance of multispatiality to climate change lies in its demand to think across scales: while ecological disruption is registered locally, its full operation extends globally and resists containment within any single perspective. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (2015) notion of planetarity underscores this difficulty, framing the planet as an ungraspable alterity that both exceeds and contains us (290-292). Marco Caracciolo (2021) similarly highlights climate change's

architecture, namely he structuring of time through interruption and resumption, recursive remediation, and the folding together of past, present, and future. This focus on temporality is not exclusive, but rather methodological, as it allows other issues to emerge, such as the question of epistemology highlighted above.

Accordingly, the first part of this chapter will briefly introduce *Cloud Atlas* and its formal design structured around six interlinked narratives before turning to the question of time. The discussion proceeds to examine the centrality of temporality to the representation of climate change, situating the novel within wider ecocritical debates on climate storytelling and the aesthetic mediation of time. The remainder of the chapter offers a close analysis of the six narratives, showing how *Cloud Atlas* negotiates temporal complexity through its layered architecture and repertoire of embedded media. Particular attention will be given to the role of epistolarity, in the form of a journal, letters, a memoir, and an interview transcript, not only as a mediating device, but also as a way of structuring and complicating the novel's treatment of time. These first-person forms create an illusion of reliability and help to render vast, often abstract processes more tangible and affective. At the same time, as each narrative resurfaces within the next, mediated and reframed across shifting diegetic levels, the novel sheds new light on these voices, superimposing them in ways that call for their revision and underscore their interconnectedness. In doing so, the novel foregrounds multiplicity across vast temporal scales, layering it through processes of remediation and revision. This dynamic further supports my reading of the novel's indirect engagement with climate change, for it mirrors the conditions under which climate change itself becomes scientifically

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scalar abstraction noting how it unfolds across temporal and spatial registers that surpass direct perception. *Cloud Atlas* formally responds to this challenge by dispersing its narratives across the globe, thereby evoking climate change's planetary diffuseness. A fuller discussion of space in relation to climate change will follow in chapter four.

apprehensible as a complex system, wherein delayed effects surface only after extended intervals, compelling us to re-interpret the past in order to grasp the present and anticipate the future. In *Cloud Atlas*, this logic is staged formally through epistolary mediation, where each resurfacing text is interrupted, reframed, and reinterpreted in light of the others. Meaning emerges cumulatively, through superimposition and revision, much like climate knowledge itself, which depends on aggregating and recontextualising data, and tracing deferred consequences across vast spans of time. Thus, this layering doesn't present climate change head-on. Instead, it immerses the reader in the very process by which ecological crisis becomes knowable: a slow accumulation of reframed perspectives across time and space that incidentally models the elusive, systemic complexity of climate change.

What this chapter aims to show is that *Cloud Atlas*, even if not explicitly conceived as a climate novel, nevertheless anticipates several narrative strategies that other British literary works more directly concerned with climate change would adopt in the following decade. Two of these literary works will be discussed in chapters four and five of this thesis. At the same time, it provides a useful starting point for considering how contemporary fiction reworks inherited literary forms. The novel draws on both traditional devices, such as epistolarity, and experimental modes associated with modernism and postmodernism, reconfiguring them in ways that make the complex temporalities and spatialities of the climate crisis newly perceptible. In this respect, *Cloud Atlas* not only lays important groundwork for later texts but also demonstrates the potential of the novel form itself as a medium for representing climate change.

2.2 Framing Climate Change: Mediation, Recursion, and Spatiotemporal Complexity

Like two of Mitchell's other works, *Ghostwritten* (1999) and *The Bone Clocks* (2014), *Cloud Atlas* adheres to the structural framework that he terms "compounded short stories", namely those "novel[s] made of chapters that are theoretically extractable short stories" (Mitchell, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum, 2006). This framework organises the narrative through interruption, resumption, and recursive framing: formal dynamics that reflect the novel's concern with temporal discontinuity and repetition. As anticipated above, these compounded stories take the form of six distinct narratives:

1. "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing": it recounts the mid-nineteenth-century voyage of an American notary sailing from the Chatham Islands to San Francisco, as he gradually becomes aware of the violence and injustice underpinning colonial enterprise.

2. "Letters from Zedelghem": it narrates the story of Robert Frobisher, a disinherited English composer in 1930s Belgium, who serves as amanuensis to a fading musical icon.

3. "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery": it follows a 1970s journalist in San Francisco as she uncovers a conspiracy surrounding a nuclear facility, placing herself in the crosshairs of powerful corporate interests.

4. "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish": it retraces the comic misfortunes of a vanity press publisher in early twenty-first-century Britain, who is unwillingly confined to a nursing home and attempts a daring escape.

5. "An Orison of Sonmi-451": it presents the recorded testimony of a genetically engineered clone in twenty-second-century Korea, whose brief emancipation and critique of corporate oppression are co-opted by the resistance, which uses her as a symbolic figure of rebellion.

6. "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After": it tells the post-apocalyptic tale of Zachry, a tribesman in future Hawaii, whose encounter with a technologically advanced visitor leads to revelations about civilization's past collapses and possible futures.

Spanning from the mid-nineteenth century to a distant post-apocalyptic future, these narratives are bound together by recurring motifs, echoic language, and dreamlike resonances, tracing a temporal arc that exceeds the scale of individual human experience and gestures toward a deeper cyclicality that extends to geological and planetary scales. This expansive scope is reinforced by the novel's symmetrical structure: the first five narratives are interrupted midway and resumed in reverse order after the sixth, central tale, which alone is presented in full without interruption.[3]

Further adding to this complexity are the novel's shifting diegetic levels. Each story, beginning with the first, resurfaces in the narrative that follows, encountered by a character as a textual or otherwise mediated artefact. Thus, the first tale is read or watched by a character in the second, the second by one in the third, and so on, thereby forming a cumulative chain of narrative transmission that concludes with the sixth and final story, "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After", which remains unembedded in any subsequent frame. This formal pattern underscores the novel's self-reflexive concern with how stories are consumed, interpreted, and re-narrated across time, amplifying its meditation on ecological and historical recurrence. Will McMorran (2011) aptly interprets this structural logic through the metaphor of "narratological consumption" (165), describing how each tale is successively swallowed by the next. Rather than advancing linearly, the novel unfolds as a recursive chain of textual ingestion, resurfacing, and reinterpretation. While not explicitly directed at ecological concerns, this dynamic can be read as resonating with the epistemological challenges of climate change, which similarly calls for non-linear and multitemporal frameworks to apprehend its scale and impact.

The novel's formal architecture and thematic layering thus establish a rich, if often indirect, engagement with environmental crisis. As already anticipated

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[3]   For a visualization of the narrative structure of *Cloud Atlas*, see Caracciolo 2022b,115.

in the introduction, this has been sufficient to stimulate significant critical interest, with a number of scholars reading *Cloud Atlas* as a work of climate fiction.[4] Much of this scholarship argues that the novel's expansive temporal range, fragmented narrative structure, and resistance to ontological stability reflect the disjointed, multiscalar, and uncertain nature of the current climate crisis. Ian Baucom (2015), for instance, describes it as historical climate fiction, a genre which, in his view, seeks to "reveal the intimate causal linkages between human and nonhuman across time, while remaining within the bounds of literary realism" (137). Building on the same concern with temporality, Astrid Bracke (2018) suggests that the novel's six distinct storylines contribute to the perception of the climate crisis as a long-term historical process, one whose origins lie in the past and whose consequences extend into the future (13). From a narratological perspective, Marco Caracciolo (2022b) reinforces this view by focusing on how *Cloud Atlas* trains readers to engage with climate uncertainty. He argues that the novel's nonlinear structure and metafictional self-reflexivity work to destabilise the reading experience, impeding any fixed ontological understanding and thereby mirroring the disorientation that accompanies ecological crisis (ix, 118). Similarly, Heather J. Hicks (2016) highlights how the novel never resolves the tension between linear and circular models of time, instead staging that tension through a series of inconsistent metaphors that foreground narrative instability despite the novel's symmetrical architecture.

While the existing scholarship recognises *Cloud Atlas* as a work of climate fiction, it tends to focus on broad temporal or structural features, or isolate a single narrative thread, without fully accounting for the novel's medial ecology. This chapter extends these readings by foregrounding the role of narrative mediation, particularly the use of embedded texts and compounded structures,

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[4]   For a collection of relevant scholarship on David Mitchell's work, see Dillon 2011. See also other important contributions such as O'Donnell 2015, which offers a comprehensive overview of Mitchell's oeuvre.

as central to showing how the novel registers ecological crisis obliquely, through the transhistorical and transspatial trajectory traced by its interlinked narratives. More precisely, attention is directed toward these mediated interconnections, which foreground the novel's temporal dynamics through resurfacing, recursion, and interruption, forming the principal focus of this chapter. The issue of time is not only central to climate change representation in general, but also key to understanding *Cloud Atlas* as a text that foregrounds temporality as a key factor in how ecological crisis becomes perceptible.

Time, as much as space, conditions the narrative and epistemological challenges of representing climate change. Recent ecocritical scholarship has increasingly foregrounded this temporal dimension, emphasising the need for narrative forms capable of capturing the nonlinearity, latency, and disjunctive rhythms of environmental change. Scholars such as Tobias Menely (2017) and Barbara Leckie (2022) have been particularly influential in articulating this perspective.[5] Menely (2017) identifies climate change as a problem of "how we perceive, conceptualize, and give form to temporal heterogeneity in the interface between social systems and planetary systems" (85). He calls for a turn away from linear models of narrative progression and evolutionary development in favour of forms that can register the cyclicality characteristic of planetary processes (85, 93). Leckie (2022) similarly contends that narrative innovation is required to expose and rethink the hidden temporal frames that structure perception. She introduces "post-time"[6] as a theoretical category that not only

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[5]   Leckie and Menely are by no means the first, nor the only, critics to frame climate change as a problem of temporality. Menely, in particular, offers a valuable overview of how this issue has been addressed across a range of critical approaches, while also advancing his own account of the challenges posed by temporal heterogeneity at the interface of social and planetary systems. For further perspectives on the temporal dimensions of climate change, see also Chakrabarty 2021, Latour 2017, Baucom 2014, Nixon 2011, and Caracciolo 2021 and 2022a.

[6]   In *Adam Bede* (1859), George Eliot's narrator contrasts the slow, cyclical temporality of pre-industrial life, with a new, media-driven temporality defined by the "periodicity of sensations" (Leckie 2022, 27) delivered by the postal system. This shift is termed "post-time", a concept Barbara Leckie (Ibid.) revisits to describe how temporality becomes shaped by media rhythms. In her view, "post-time" not only marks a transition in temporal experience under industrial modernity, but also serves as a flexible term for addressing the representational

foregrounds the layering or superimposition of multiple, often discordant, temporalities within a single narrative structure, but also links this "temporal polyphony"[7] to its material mediations and its resonance within lived culture (33-34). In this sense, "post-time" functions not only as a critical lens through which to examine literature, but also as a shaping force within narrative itself, revealing how literary form can register and structure the uneven, recursive, and deferred nature of climate crisis, thereby making visible the slow changes and delayed consequences that often escape immediate perception.

In line with these concerns, *Cloud Atlas* develops narrative strategies that respond to the problem of representing temporal heterogeneity. Multitemporality in the novel is mediated through a diverse repertoire of embedded forms, such as a journal, letters, a memoir, a thriller novel, a digital interview transcript, and an oral storytelling frame, that foreground the material and mediated nature of narrative, and the ways in which time is recorded, transmitted, and experienced across a multitude of spaces. In formal terms, then, the novel does more than mimic fragmentation; through the interruption and layering of these different media and their resurfacing across diegetic levels, it performs a mode of temporal thinking appropriate to the disjunctive experience of climate change. This becomes visible from the outset in "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing". The diary's ostensibly private record already stages the novel's concern with mediation and delay through its citational play with the adventure tradition, its later editorial reframing, and its eventual resurfacing in the subsequent narrative. Simultaneously, the diary exposes colonial violence,

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challenges posed by climate change: foregrounding time's multiplicity, materiality, and mediation (28).

[7]   The concept of temporal polyphony appears in Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), where she develops it to describe how multiple, overlapping, and incommensurable temporalities coexist within ecological and social assemblages. In contrast to the linear temporality embedded in capitalist "progress stories", Tsing proposes "third nature", which she defines as what manages to live despite capitalism, as an emergent form that becomes perceptible only when we attend to the diverse rhythms and durations of human and nonhuman life. This temporal polyphony resists singular futurity and allows for an open-ended view of history and possibility. Leckie draws on this concept to develop her own theory of "post-time".

ecological disturbance, and the fractures of imperial time. In this way, the "Journal" both grounds the novel historically and initiates the recursive structures that shape it, laying the foundation for the temporal and epistemological inquiries that follow.

2.2.1 Colonial Geographies, Narrative Mediation, and Moral Transformation

The first narrative of *Cloud Atlas*, "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing", opens the novel's multitemporal and multispatial design. Set in the mid-nineteenth century, it adopts the form of a travel journal and is formally indebted to the colonial adventure novel tradition.[8] The story follows Adam Ewing, an American lawyer travelling aboard the *Prophetess*, a trim schooner captained by the rootless Cpt. Molineux and his Dutch first mate, Mr. Boerhaave. The name of the vessel carries an ironic weight: the *Prophetess* is a site of imperial machinery, as it isone of the many schooners that circulate goods, bodies, and power across colonial trade routes, steeped in violence and deception. Its very name prophesies the recurring structures of power and exploitation that the novel as a whole will go on to expose. It is fitting, too, that this first story should belong to a character named "Adam", a name suggestive of origins and, perhaps, of a modern fall from grace, played out against the backdrop of imperial expansion in the Pacific.

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[8]   My understanding of the colonial adventure novel is informed by Andrew Lang (1887) and Robert Luis Stevenson (1882) as well as by more contemporary critiques. Lang and Stevenson conceptualize the genre through its opposition to realism, which favors the ordinary and the study of character and social manners, whereas the romance genre privileges adventure, extraordinariness, excitement, and engagement with the unknown. Building on this foundation, Martin Green (1979) defines adventure as a sequence of events that unfolds as the protagonist ventures far from home, undertaking heroic challenges to prove themselves. He considers *Robinson Crusoe* as embodying the foundational elements of the adventure story (21). Additionally, Linda Dryden (2000) links the genre to narratives of British imperial exploration and colonization, highlighting how these works either reinforce notions of English superiority and justify territorial plunder, or deconstruct and critique imperialist endeavors, with Joseph Conrad's literary works serving as a key example of the latter. Reference should also be made to Joseph A. Kestner (2010), as his analysis of the adventure novel elucidates how the genre becomes a locus for articulating diverse masculinities, structured around wanderings and encounters with the (predominantly male) Other (11).

This fall begins in the Chatham Islands, where the *Prophetess* undergoes repairs and Adam encounters Dr. Henry Goose, a self-proclaimed surgeon. Henry is initially perceived by Adam as a "Bedlamite" (Mitchell 2014, 4), scavenging for teeth supposedly left by cannibals to sell as dentures in Britain— a grotesque detail that foregrounds the extractive logic of empire and its anatomical reach. Henry's eccentricity, however, conceals a more insidious agenda. After ingratiating himself with Adam, he falsely diagnoses him with a tropical parasite and begins to poison him with arsenic and opiates with the aim of robbing him. In the final pages of the novel, the illness is unmasked as "[a] fiction, implanted by the doctor's power of suggestion" (523) and the deception is fully exposed. Yet, luckily for Adam, Henry is not the only pivotal encounter of his journey. Another figure aboard the *Prophetess* is Autua, a Moriori slave whom Adam first sees being brutally flogged back in the Chathams, before the ship's departure. Their eyes meet in a moment of mutual recognition: "The beaten savage raised his slumped head, found *my* eye & shone me a look of uncanny, amicable knowing!" (6, italics in the original). The encounter proves decisive: when Autua later stows away on the *Prophetess*, Adam chooses to intervene on his behalf, securing him a position as a sailor. This moral decision ultimately proves life-saving. After Henry Goose escapes in Honolulu with Adam's belongings, it is Autua who rescues the poisoned lawyer and carries him to a group of missionary nuns, who nurse him back to health.

These opening observations on plot and setting frame Adam's journal as a colonial maritime episode shaped by deception and unexpected solidarity. Simultaneously, the journal functions as a subtle prelude to *Cloud Atlas*'s broader formal and thematic ambitions, anticipating its recursive structure, intertextual layering, and literary self-reflexivity. Across its six interlinked narratives, the novel charts not only the arc of human history but also the evolution of the novel as a literary form. This initial section, in particular, revisits the genre's roots in

adventure literature, grounding the narrative in a historically familiar mode that provides both a temporal and structural point of departure. This relationship to the adventure genre, however, is not merely foundational but also reflexive. The novel's engagement with the genre, as articulated through this opening section, is both citational and critical: it draws on familiar tropes, motifs, and intertextual echoes, from castaway narratives to colonial encounters, while simultaneously exposing and reworking the ideological assumptions embedded within them. In this respect, the novel's citational practice exemplifies the postmodernist strategy of reworking inherited forms, and it channels parody and intertextual play toward critical ends. *Cloud Atlas* reappropriates the adventure tradition not only to acknowledge its literary legacy but also to interrogate the historical complicities embedded within it. More broadly, this reworking underscores how the novel mobilises postmodernist techniques to grapple with the complex entanglements of power and history across time. Within this framework, the "Pacific Journal" also initiates the novel's indirect engagement with climate change: by exposing how colonial expansion produces both environmental degradation and distorted temporal frameworks, it foregrounds the difficulties of apprehending ecological change across uneven and deferred scales.

One early and emblematic instance of this meta-generic engagement occurs on the very first page, where the narrative enters into a parodic dialogue with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). The connection is made explicit when Adam discovers a line of footprints along the beach: "Beyond the Indian hamlet, upon a forlorn strand, I happened on a trail of recent footprints" (Mitchell 2014, 3). This passage deliberately echoes Crusoe's iconic encounter with Friday. Yet where Friday's footprints mark a symbolic confrontation with alterity, Ewing's merely leads to "a white man" (3), Dr. Goose. This ironic inversion punctures the solemnity of the colonial adventure narrative, replacing its gravitas with an anticlimactic twist that invites a wry chuckle from the reader. In doing so, it

deflates the genre's heroic posturing and signals a self-aware, critical engagement with the ideological foundations of imperial storytelling. The moment's satirical tone is sharpened by Adam's own observation that British imperial power reaches even the most remote outposts: "If there be any eyrie so desolate, or isle so remote that one may there resort unchallenged by an Englishman, 'tis not down on any map I ever saw" (3). As Hélène Machinal (2011) argues, Mitchell's intertextual play with the adventure form exposes the all-pervasiveness of colonial ideology and the violence it entails, unmasking the genre's deep entanglement with imperial domination (128-129). In such moments, Mitchell initiates a critique of the ideological underpinnings of colonial expansion and invites reflection on the narrative conventions that sustain them. This critical impulse originates in Adam's journal and resonates throughout the novel's unfolding structure.

This critique is articulated most forcefully through the journal's sustained attention to spatial and ecological transformations. As a carefully maintained archive, Adam's journal traces a moral awakening that unfolds alongside his traversal and documentation of Pacific geographies, stretching from the Chatham Islands to Raiatea and, finally, Honolulu. Each one of these locations is marked by the violent logics of colonialism and extractive capitalism. These spaces are depicted not as pristine or untouched, but as profoundly altered environments, reshaped by the demands and coercive structures of colonial rule. In this respect, Adam's descriptions of Indigenous settlements highlight stark hierarchies of habitation:

> An outer ring of *ponga* huts […] groveled in the lees of 'grandee' dwellings. (Mitchell 2014, 6)

> Ashore was a stratum of cruder thatched dwellings erected on 'stilts' near the water-line, occupied (I correctly assumed) by the baptized Indians. Above these were a dozen timber buildings crafted by civilized hands, & higher still […] stood a proud church denoted by a white cruciform. (494-495)

The vertical stratification of space described here encodes a clear symbolic and material hierarchy. The physical elevation of the "proud church" at the top of the hill not only asserts Christian dominance but also naturalizes the authority of colonial religious structures over Indigenous ways of life. Below the church, the timber buildings "crafted by civilized hands" implicitly mark a transition from native to European habitation, associating architectural style with cultural superiority. At the bottom, the "ponga huts" of the Indigenous population "grovel" in the "lees", both literally and metaphorically cast in shadow. This downward positioning does not simply reflect socioeconomic status but performs a visual rhetoric of inferiority, aligning Indigenous life with the ground, (the subordinate). The passage thus offers more than topographical description: it reveals how spatial arrangements enact and reinforce colonial ideologies, inscribing racial and cultural hierarchies into the very fabric of the built environment.

In Adam's journal, colonial practices are portrayed not only as reshaping local landscapes but also as altering the balance between human and nonhuman life, setting the stage for broader patterns of disruption. The remaking of the land coincides with the deterioration of Indigenous health and life expectancy, as colonial incursion brings with it not only environmental transformation but also epidemiological catastrophe. The introduction of foreign pathogens, to which Adam refers as "motley maladies which cull the darker races whene'er White civilization draws near" (13), ravages Indigenous communities already weakened by dispossession and resource depletion. This link between ecological destruction and biopolitical violence is made stark in Autua's reported lament: "Not enough Indians. Ships bring disease dust here, the Blacks breathe it in & they swell up sick & fall like spinney-tops" (505). His words distil the brutal efficiency of settler colonialism's demographic violence, one in which illness, like extraction, becomes a mechanism of erasure.

This logic of dehumanisation also operates at the level of language and representation. The spatial descriptions recorded in Adam's journal are inextricably entangled with his perceptions of the Indigenous peoples inhabiting the colonial geographies through which he travels. At the outset, Adam's language reflects the racial hierarchies and dehumanising assumptions of his time. He refers to Indigenous communities using derogatory and zoomorphic terms, calling them a "jungle breed" (5), attributing to them a state of "bovine torpor" (6), and describing their murmurs and chants as a "bee-like 'hum'" (6). Such imagery reduces human beings to animalistic caricatures, reinforcing their perceived uncivilised status and marking them as Other within the colonial imaginary. Yet Adam's perspective is far from stable. Over the course of his journey, his worldview is repeatedly unsettled, not only by the ultimate intervention of Autua, a man he had earlier dismissed as a savage who later saves his life, but also by the historical knowledge he acquires about colonial violence and the economic motivations masked as civilising missions.

A crucial turning point in this evolving awareness occurs when Adam is exposed to the history of the Moriori and Maori peoples, as recounted by Mr. D'Arnoq, the self-appointed preacher of Ocean Bay on the Chatham Islands. Thanks to this testimony, he learns that the Moriori were systematically exterminated by the Maori, with the tacit and strategic support of the British. Far from being agents of benevolent enlightenment, the British had tutored the Maori in "'the dark arts of colonization'" (14), harnessing their violence for imperial ends. In this narrative, the Maori are portrayed as unwitting agents of a British land-clearance strategy used to displace them and pave the way for a more compliant colonial order. The Moriori, by contrast, are framed as a radically peaceful society, one that rejected warfare and institutionalised nonviolence through what D'Arnoq describes as "an oral 'Magna Carta'" (12), grounded in the commandment "*Thou Shalt Not Kill*" (12, italics in the original). This account

prompts a profound ideological reckoning. Mr. D'Arnoq himself offers a striking commentary on the failure of imperial moral superiority, asking: "Who can deny Old Rēkohu [the old name of the Chathams] lay closer to More's Utopia than our States of Progress governed by war-hungry princelings in Versailles & Vienna, Washington & Westminster?" (12). While these are not Adam's words, their inclusion in the journal and their resonance within the surrounding narrative signal a shift in Adam's own thinking. The supposed "savages" are refigured as stewards of a more ethical and sustainable form of social organisation than the imperial powers that claim to civilise them. Through this encounter, Adam's moral compass begins to realign, and the narrative mounts a broader critique of colonialism not only as a violent historical process, but as a flawed ideological framework for defining civilisation itself.

The contradictions at the heart of the colonial "civilising mission" continue to crystallise in Adam's account, particularly during his time in Raiatea in the Society Islands. Here, he comes to realise that the professed aim of converting the so-called savages and spreading Christian enlightenment is in fact a thin veil for more cynical motives: the consolidation of economic control, the entrenchment of racial hierarchies, and the systematic exploitation of land and labour. The missionary settlers, fluent in the language of the Bible, deploy scripture not as a guide to spiritual care, but as a rhetorical instrument to legitimise mastery, enslavement, and extraction. As this disillusionment deepens, Adam's journal begins to register a series of fundamental questions. These questions underpin not only his narrative but the novel as a whole. What moves history? What ideologies, what language, what narrative structures shape the world? And with what consequences?

These questions are given concrete expression through the recurrent presence and strategic manipulation of biblical discourse. Figures such as Henry Goose and Preacher Horrox, the theocratic leader of Raiatea, mobilise Christian

scripture to legitimise violence and domination, revealing how sacred texts can be co-opted in the service of imperial ideology. Preacher Horrox's theology of Progress lays bare the racial hierarchy underpinning the colonial civilising mission. As the missionary authority on Raiatea, Horrox presents himself as a spiritual guide, yet his actions betray a deeply exploitative agenda. Cloaked in Christian rhetoric, he justifies the use of forced Indigenous labour as divinely sanctioned: "The blacks work on our plantation to pay for the school, Bible study & church. In a week, God will it, we shall have an abundant harvest of copra" (499). The mission's piety is hollow and its rituals funded by the coerced productivity of enslaved subjects. Even the island's so-called "Smoking School" (501), designed to cultivate a dependency on tobacco bought from the mission's trading post, exemplifies the calculated convergence of religious discipline and commercial exploitation: "by instilling in the slothful so-an'-sos a gentle craving for this harmless leaf, we give him an incentive to earn money, so he can buy his baccy […] from the Mission trading post. Ingenious, wouldn't you say?" (Ibid.).

This instrumentalization of Christian teaching is grounded in a teleological worldview that conflates racial superiority with divine favour. In a sermon-like conversation with Adam, Captain Molyneux, Mr. Boerhaave, and Harry Goose, Horrox unveils a pseudo-theological racial taxonomy, the "Civilization's Ladder" (506), that elevates Anglo-Saxons to the highest rung and condemns "Irreclaimable Races" (507) to inevitable extinction. Far from lamenting this trajectory, Horrox celebrates it as historical necessity, declaring that "Nature's Law & Progress move as one" (507). Here, biblical scripture is weaponised in the service of colonial violence, naturalising submission and enslavement as a stage in human advancement. Faced with this ideology of supremacy, Adam's reaction is one of uneasy acquiescence; his moral unease simmers beneath the surface but does not yet crystallise into resistance.

This theology of domination finds a darker, more cynical counterpart in the philosophy espoused by Henry Goose. Where Horrox couches racial supremacy in a rhetoric of divine order and historical necessity, Goose articulates it in the raw idiom of survivalism and predation. His invocation of Psalm 8, "*Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands, thou has put all things under his feet*" (8, italics in the original), reaffirms a vision of man's God-given supremacy over creation. Yet this scriptural authority is used not to inspire stewardship or compassion, but to legitimise the extermination of so-called inferior peoples. Goose's position is unapologetically exterminationist. Framing the extinction of Indigenous populations as both inevitable and desirable, he declares: "'More humane, surely, & more honest, just to knock the savages on the head & get it over with?" (17). His brutal logic reaches its fullest expression in what he terms "Goose's Two Laws of Survival": "The Weak are Meat the Strong do Eat. […] The second law of survival states that there *is* no second law. Eat or be eaten. That's it" (508-509). Unlike Horrox's pseudo-theological ladder of progress, Goose offers no moral veneer, only a bald, violent reduction of history to a game of domination.

Together, Horrox and Goose exemplify two interlocking strands of imperial ideology: the sanctimonious logic of Christian civilisation and the amoral pragmatism of natural selection. These overlapping narratives do not simply shape Adam's moral world; rather, they prompt his growing disillusionment with the ideologies they uphold. Through his encounters with these justificatory logics of domination, Adam begins to question the narratives that claim to explain the forces driving history. As he reflects:

> What precipitates outcomes? Vicious acts & virtuous acts. What precipitates acts? Belief. Belief is both prize & battlefield, within the mind & in the mind's mirror, the world. [...] In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction. […] If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw [...] such a world will come to pass. [...] (528)

He comes to understand history not as a linear, preordained progression governed by some natural law or teleological design, but as an ongoing contest between opposing belief systems, one rooted in consumption and parasitism, the other in care and collaboration. This contest's outcome is neither fixed nor inevitable, but continually shaped by human choice and action. Rejecting the ideology of domination and racial hierarchy he has witnessed, Adam commits himself instead to "the Abolitionist cause" (528), a choice he acknowledges as modest but meaningful: "no more than one drop in a limitless ocean! Yet, what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?" (529). This closing affirmation—both Adam's and the novel's—encapsulates *Cloud Atlas*'s central concern with the forces that shape history. Across its nested narratives, the novel tracks cycles of violence and extraction, yet it also marks moments of resistance and care, where collaboration enables survival. History, in this sense, is not depicted as a linear trajectory but as a composite field of competing temporalities and moral frameworks.

This reimagining of history also extends to the novel's treatment of time, particularly in its representation of the colonial experience as perceived by European subjects. While Adam's journal foregrounds the spatial transformations wrought by colonialism, it also registers the temporal dislocations experienced by the coloniser, revealing how colonial geographies unsettle the coherence of Western modernity's timekeeping. Colonialism, in this context, not only reconfigures the physical landscape of the Pacific through occupation and resource extraction, but also generates a distinct temporal experience—one marked by disorientation and estrangement. The colony emerges not merely as an exoticized space, but as a temporal elsewhere: a zone where the rhythms of European modernity falter and lose their grip. It is a space transformed by empire, yet also capable of transforming the imperial subject in return, disrupting the presumed continuity of Enlightenment historical

progression. This is subtly illustrated when, at a lunch with Mr. D'Arnoq, Adam notes that the "Grand-father clock" is "at odds with [his] own pocket-watch by a margin of hours" (9), and during a strenuous climb on the Chathams, he admits, "I conquered the summit grievously torn & scratched at I know not What o'Clock, for I neglected to wind my pocket-watch last night" (19). These details signal a perceptual rift between the time structures imposed by imperial institutions and the temporal rhythms of the colonial world. A similar sense of temporal regression emerges when Adam compares a local Shabbat service to the worship of "the Early Christians of Rome" (9), suggesting that the colonial periphery is imagined not only as spatially remote but as temporally out of joint. The effect recalls *Heart of Darkness*'s evocation of the Congo as a journey into deep time, "back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (Conrad 1983, 66). Yet, as in Joseph Conrad's novella, this constructed temporal alterity ultimately reflects back on Europe itself. The darkness that appears to reside in the colonies is exposed as internal to European modernity, a projected primitivism that unsettles the very foundations of imperial ideology. Such moments reveal how colonial discourse constructs these spaces as suspended in a pre-modern temporality, even as the narratives themselves undercut that illusion, revealing the complicity and fragility of the imperial order that sustains it.

This layered sense of temporal disjunction, revealed through Adam's disorientation and the slippages in imperial chronologies, not only destabilises Enlightenment assumptions of historical linearity but also foregrounds the uneven and contested nature of historical experience itself. Rather than presenting colonialism as a coherent project of progress, the narrative reveals it as a site of epistemological rupture, where conflicting beliefs and temporalities collide. These moments, though rooted in Adam's individual perceptions, also begin to prefigure a temporal condition in which linear development gives way to overlapping, recursive, and asynchronous layers of experience. While this

fractured temporality only comes into full view across the novel's composite structure, it is already subtly anticipated in Adam's disoriented encounters with colonial space and time. The colonial encounter thus illustrates how imperial practices involved not only spectacular acts of conquest but also what Rob Nixon (2011) terms "slow violence": attritional processes of environmental degradation, dispossession, and disease whose effects manifest gradually across extended timescales. By staging colonialism as a generator of both immediate and delayed forms of harm, Adam's journal touches upon the temporal logic of climate change, where causality and consequence are similarly deferred and unevenly distributed. This splintering of temporal linearity will, as the next section explores, find further expression in the journal's formal mediation of history, memory, and selfhood.

As a matter of fact, this formal attention to historical complexity is not limited to content alone but is deeply embedded in the narrative structures that convey it. Having examined the narrative's engagement through its portrayal of colonial space and time, as well as through its intertextual dialogue with the adventure tradition, it is now important to turn to the formal configuration of Adam's journal and to consider more deeply the implications this structure holds for the novel's broader aesthetic and thematic concerns. Far from serving as a neutral container for events, the journal's epistolary form actively mediates and shapes the representation of colonial experience.

Structured as a first-person account recorded between November 7th and January 13th—likely in the mid-nineteenth century—the journal follows the course of several months' travel and presents itself as a record of personal reflection. This sense of interiority, however, is complicated by the journal's porous boundaries: letters, poems, songs, and biblical passages[9] enter the

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9 The letter mentioned in this section is a brief reference to "a letter of introduction to the Partridges in Sydney" (Mitchell 2014, 5), which gestures toward the socially mediated nature of relationships in the mid-nineteenth century. Such letters served not only to introduce individuals

narrative as quotations, allusions, or embedded texts, interrupting the illusion of private introspection and pointing toward a more layered model of narrative mediation. One example of this is the use of biblical references, which are often voiced by others, such as Horrox and Goose, who invoke scripture to justify ideological positions ranging from racial hierarchy to ruthless self-interest. As previously discussed, these appropriated texts contribute significantly to the disruption of Adam's initial assumptions and to the shaping of his ethical development. In this way, Adam's colonial experience is not recorded in isolation but emerges through contested and overlapping discourses that shape how events are interpreted and understood.

This epistemological layering, already evident in the discursive multiplicity shaping Adam's perspective, is further compounded by the formal ambiguity of the journal itself. The status of Adam's journal as a private document is, in fact, more complex than it initially appears. While the journal is conventionally regarded as a solipsistic form, an introspective record not intended for other readers, it contrasts with the letter, which is inherently dialogic and presupposes an addressee. As Janet G. Altman (1982) argues, the letter's "internal reader" shapes both what is communicated and how it is framed, establishing a relational dynamic between writer and recipient (88). Yet this distinction between private record and communicative intent is less stable than it might seem. Journals, particularly those kept by colonial travellers and

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but also to secure access to specific social circles, signalling their significant cultural capital. The embedded song, "Oh Shenandoah", a traditional American folk tune, appears at the close of the first (interrupted) section of Adam's story (39). Sung by the gentle young sailor Rafael, the song serves as a characterisation device: Rafael's emotional musical sensibility stands in sharp contrast to the coarseness and brutality of the rest of the crew, whose repertoire is limited to bawdy brothel songs. The reference to "an epic in Byronic stanzas entitled 'True History of Autua, Last Moriori'" (511) arises from Henry's unsuccessful attempt to versify Autua's story, which repeatedly disrupts Adam's journal-writing: Henry keeps "interrupt[ing] my journal-writing to ask what rhymes with what" (Ibid.). This contrast highlights a tension between intellectual posturing and opportunistic manipulation—Henry's contrived literary ambition set against Adam's ostensibly sincere mode of documentation. Finally, biblical passages are embedded throughout the narrative. Examined in greater detail earlier in this section, it is worth to reiterate here that they function as argumentative markers delineating opposing ideological positions on the driving forces of history: predacity versus care.

explorers, were frequently written with future publication in mind, anticipating an audience beyond the self, especially within the booming editorial market for travel literature at the time (Bill 2020; Thompson 2019). Though Adam's journal is fictional, it nevertheless inhabits this ambiguity. At key moments, it gestures toward an implied internal and external readership, troubling the notion of privacy and positioning the journal as a hybrid form: at once a space for interior reflection and a prospective act of testimony.

This ambivalence between inward reflection and outward address is apparent from the opening pages. On the one hand, Adam expresses a clear desire to keep his journal private. When he forgets it in his room at the Musket Inn in the Chathams, he writes:

> I remembered this journal, lying on the table in my room at the *Musket*, visible to any drunken sailor who might break in. Fearful for its safety (& my own, were Mr. Boerhaave to get his hands on it), I retraced my steps to conceal it more artfully. Broad smirks greeted my return & I assumed I was 'the devil being spoken of' […]. (Mitchell 2014, 7)

He is ridiculed by the *Prophetess* crew and nicknamed "Quillcock" (Ibid.)—a mocking allusion that implies awareness of, and disdain for, his writing. His efforts to hide the journal suggest a vulnerability tied to the act of narration itself, one that hints at the precarious status of the written word within the violent, masculine world of the schooner. On the other hand, the journal does not operate as a wholly private record. Adam occasionally gestures toward its testimonial function, revealing an awareness of future readers and a desire to bear witness through the act of writing. For instance, in moments of mortal danger, he acknowledges its role as a communicative vessel, meant not only to preserve his thoughts but to reach others. When he entrusts it to Henry with the instruction "I made Henry promise to deliver this journal to Bedford's in Honolulu. From there it will reach my bereaved family" (521), the journal is explicitly framed as a document intended for transmission, reception, and interpretation. This

moment confirms that the journal is not simply a record of private reflection, but a document designed to be received and read by others.

This is further corroborated by the presence of footnotes, which reveal that Adam's diary does not survive in its original form, but has been edited and annotated by his son, Jackson, for publication. Jackson turns the handwritten manuscript into a typescript.[10] Consequently, what initially appears to be the novel's foundational narrative, namely the point of origin of its intricate structure, clearly appears to the reader as fragmented, mediated, and shaped by retrospective intervention. This editorial layer draws attention to the constructedness of the narrative and invites reflection on the processes of framing and historical reconstruction. In one footnote, for instance, Jackson reflects on the belatedness of historical understanding and the irreversible loss of the Moriori people:

> *My father never spoke to me of the dendroglyphs & I learnt of them only in the manner described in the Introduction. Now that the Moriori of Chatham Island are a race over extinction's brink, I hold them to be beyond betrayal. — J.E. (21)

Though the "Introduction" is absent from the novel, the footnote clearly hints at an editorial presence that reframes the journal as a mediated artefact, one whose meaning is shaped by a clear interpretive frame. This fictional editorial framing aligns closely with the historical realities of nineteenth-century travel literature, where published accounts were rarely straightforward reproductions of private journals.[11] This not only challenges the supposed interiority of journal narration,

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[10] Despite the diary entries being organized by date and appearing in a font that mimics handwritten cursive, signs of editorial intervention and remediation through typescript remain evident.

[11] Rather than being unfiltered expressions of personal experience, such texts were often commissioned or written with commercial considerations in mind, and typically underwent extensive revision by publishers, editors, and literary advisors. As a result, the final versions often departed significantly from the original manuscripts, reflecting both institutional interventions and market demands (Bill 2020, 130)

but also underscores the novel's concern with layered authorship and the historical conditions of narrative production.

This layered mediation of experience, shaped by both Adam's self-narration and Jackson's editorial intervention, is further extended through the novel's formal strategy of transmission across diegetic levels, whereby one narrative becomes a textual object within another. As Adam's journal is read and questioned by Robert Frobisher in the next section, the novel foregrounds the processes by which meaning is reframed in new contexts. Each textual handover entails a shift in perspective and interpretive framing, emphasising how knowledge is filtered through subjective reception and embedded material forms. This process is illustrated most clearly in the following narrative, where Robert Frobisher discovers Ewing's "curious dismembered volume" (64):

> It begins on the 99th page, its covers are gone, its binding unstitched. From what little I can glean, it's the edited journal of a voyage from Sydney to California by a notary of San Francisco named Adam Ewing. [...] The journal seems to be published posthumously, by Ewing's son (?). [...] Something shifty about the journal's authenticity—seems too structured for a genuine diary, and its language doesn't ring quite true—but who would bother forging such a journal, and why? (Ibid.)

Frobisher's response is both interested and suspicious: he acknowledges the journal's affective power and narrative structure, but also questions its authenticity, noting that its "language doesn't ring quite true" and that it feels "too structured for a genuine diary". These remarks draw attention not only to the hybrid status of Adam's account, at once a personal narrative and a possibly curated document, but also to its narrative unreliability. In this sense, the journal, in both its edited form and its later rediscovery by another character, embodies a temporal mode that foregrounds the gap between an event and its narration, revision, or interpretation, in line the notion of "post-time". Adam's journal, as we encounter it in its edited and republished form, is shaped through layers of re-mediation. Crucially, like each of the novel's six nested narratives, the journal

operates as a synecdoche for the novel's broader inquiry into how stories circulate and gather meaning through layered acts of transmission over time. This recursive process of meaning-making does not only take shape through the novel's structure or through the figure of the intradiegetic reader, such as Frobisher, who encounters the journal in fragmented, suspicious form, but is also embedded within Adam's own act of narration. In this sense, the novel maps an epistemology of deferred understanding: meaning emerges not at the moment of experience but through acts of rereading and rewriting. Taken in this way, the journal should be read as a serial form that enables and reflects Adam's evolving moral consciousness. Because each entry is written after the fact, and sometimes reconsidered in light of later experiences, the journal stages a recursive process of introspection, allowing Adam to register doubt, reassess earlier assumptions, and acknowledge ethical failures. "I come to my journal as a Catholick to a confessor" (18), he writes early on, foregrounding its function as a medium through which guilt and doubt are processed. The journal thus records remorse as much as it does fact: "Yesterday's entry sentences me to a prison of remorse for the rest of my days. How perversely it reads, how flippant I was!" (518). These admissions of fallibility initially appear to enhance Adam's credibility, suggesting an honest attempt at truth-telling, but they also destabilise his reliability as a narrator. Each moment of moral certainty is in fact liable to be revised in later entries, as new events shed retrospective light on earlier experiences. This belatedness, apparent both in Adam's self-revisions and in the later reinterpretations of his journal by Frobisher, underpins a broader epistemological claim: knowledge in *Cloud Atlas* is not the product of solitary consciousness, but of cumulative accretion across multiple minds, times, and texts. Adam's individual reflections form only one fragment within a larger mosaic, whose coherence arises not from the authority of a single narrator but from the interconnections that the novel stages between disparate voices and

media. What emerges, therefore, is less the moral certainty of an individual subject than the outline of a collective or even planetary intelligence, painstakingly assembled "brick by brick" through each narrative's partial perspective and its recontextualization within others. This epistemological orientation, away from the individual mind and toward an interconnected archive of human experience, anticipates the novel's larger ambition: to model the mediated processes through which planetary history—of which climate change is an emergent component—can be apprehended.

Belatedness and recursivity do not simply revise narrative content; they actively reshape the reader's interpretive stance. As Karin Kukkonen (2019) observes, narrative form governs how readers navigate a text's shifting terrain, guiding attention, fostering immersion, and continuously recalibrating expectations. In *Cloud Atlas*, the journal's belated insights and retrospective corrections exemplify this dynamic, prompting the reader to revisit earlier assumptions and reframe them in light of accumulating knowledge. This recursive engagement is not just a formal feature but a temporal condition, one that reflects the emergence of understanding through revision and the layered interplay between past and present.

In conclusion, "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing" lays the epistemological and formal groundwork for *Cloud Atlas*'s recursive engagement with history, narrative mediation, and moral agency. Through its depiction of colonial violence, ecological disruption, and ideological conflict, the journal resists any vision of history as a coherent or linear process. Instead, it frames historical understanding as affectively charged and always mediated by memory, by narrative form, and by shifting interpretive frames. Its interrupted structure and later rediscovery dramatize a temporal condition marked by fragmentation and overlapping layers of experience. At the same time, this initial narrative lays the groundwork for the novel's planetary scope and its entangled

temporalities, which echo the structures of climate epistemology. The reader is asked not only to navigate a fragmented account, but to reconstruct meaning retrospectively, across deferred and intersecting timescales. This mimics the interpretive demands of climate discourse itself, where impacts unfold unevenly and often retroactively. The colonial Pacific becomes the initial site in a network of ecological and historical disruptions that will echo across the novel's future-set narratives. In this sense, Adam's journal functions not just as a chronicle of individual transformation, but as the opening patch in a quilt of intersecting geographies and temporalities through which *Cloud Atlas* explores the conditions of planetary crisis and moral inheritance.

2.2.2 Letters, Music, and the Recurrence of Narrative Time

The second narrative, "Letters from Zedelghem", shifts the novel's setting from Polynesia to interwar Europe, specifically Belgium in 1931. Composed as an epistolary short story, it consists of a series of letters written by Robert Frobisher, a disowned English musician, to his lover Rufus Sixsmith. The narrative opens with Frobisher fleeing England and seeking refuge and employment at "Château Zedelghem", the decaying estate of composer Vyvyan Ayrs in West Vlaanderen. It is from this estate that Frobisher writes the majority of his letters, each one bearing the heading "Zedelghem", thereby anchoring his narrative voice to this particular location. There, he becomes Ayrs's amanuensis, earning the trust and favour of the household, particularly of Jocasta van Outryve de Crommelynck, Ayrs's wife, while encountering tension with their daughter, Eva. Eventually, Frobisher and Jocasta become lovers. As his relationship with Ayrs deteriorates, largely due to the latter's appropriation of his compositions, Frobisher steals Ayrs's gun, flees, and takes refuge at Le Royal hotel. Following this rocambolesque escape, he completes his masterwork, the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*, before ultimately taking his own life.

While this narrative, like the others in *Cloud Atlas*, does not explicitly address climate change, it nonetheless contributes to the novel's cumulative meditation on systemic decline. Read in relation to the broader arc that stretches from Adam Ewing's colonial journal to the dystopian landscapes of later narratives, Frobisher's story becomes one fragment in a mosaic that obliquely gestures toward the ecological and ethical crises underpinning contemporary climate discourse. Its significance lies less in direct environmental thematics than in its interrogation of the contradictions at the heart of European civilisation. Like Adam's journal, which exposed the fractures of imperial ideology, Frobisher's story reveals the hypocrisy that underwrite claims to cultural and intellectual authority.

The intertextual continuity with Adam's story is most overtly marked, as it was anticipated in the previous section, by Frobisher's discovery of Adam's journal:

> Poking through an alcove of books in my room I came across a curious dismembered volume, and I want you to track down a complete copy for me. [...] To my great annoyance, the pages cease, mid-sentence, some forty pages later, where the binding is worn through. Searched high and low in the library for the rest of the damn thing. No luck. (Mitchell 2014, 64)

The journal's partial transmission prompts a fragmented but resonant engagement with the past. Like the reader, Frobisher becomes entangled in a recursive act of interpretation, revisiting another's testimony and absorbing its warnings, uncertainties, and ethical provocations. His own narrative is shaped by this mediated encounter: his reflections often echo Adam's words and are refracted through the lingering trauma of the First World War. Hallucinatory images, such as a trench patrolled by "[s]avages [...] giant, evil-toothed, brown rats" (63), and his paranoid musings about doctors—"Never met a quack whom I didn't half-suspect of plotting to do me in" (457)—suggest that Adam's experiences in the colonial Pacific, including his fear of medical exploitation, have

filtered into Frobisher's consciousness. These echoes produce a cross-temporal affective resonance, binding the two narratives through common anxieties and the haunting reappearance of past traumas.

Extending this connection, Frobisher's experience of European privilege is shown to be deeply entangled with histories of colonial exploitation. His detailed account of the crumbling Château Zedelghem unearths the legacy of imperial wealth, while also exposing its erosion over time: "The Crommelyncks did well from Congo investments, but not one male sibling survived the war, and Zedelghem's Boche 'lodgers' selectively gutted whatever was worth looting" (62-63). The estate's physical decay, visible in images such as "fallen plaster hangs in nets of cobwebs," "crenellations toppled to the ground," and "rainwater runneling medieval sandstone" (Ibid.), serves as a material metaphor for the degradation of the civilisation it once embodied. The passage not only ties European affluence to colonial extraction but also foreshadows the environmental and economic unravelling traced across the novel's subsequent narratives. In this way, the grandeur of imperial civilisation is revealed as both morally compromised and structurally unsustainable.

This critique of "civilisation" extends to Frobisher's characterisation of European high society, which he casts not as refined or superior, but as grotesque and animalistic. Whereas Adam's journal draws on zoological metaphors to dehumanise colonised peoples, Frobisher inverts the trope to expose the performative savagery of the elite. In a moment of emotional breakdown, he drags Eva's fiancé, Grigoire, from a party: "I embraced Grigoire in a rugger grip, determined that smug cockatoo was coming with me. Birds-of-paradise in the hallway shrieked, baboons roared" (484). The image satirises the supposed decorum of the upper classes by likening their appalled outcries to the cries of exotic animals, reducing their cultivated façade to a cacophony of base instinct. In another scene, Frobisher imagines himself as the target of classist scorn: "All

those cannibals, feasting on my dignity" (484). This metaphor reverses the colonial gaze, portraying the European elite not as civilised observers but as predatory figures driven by appetite and cruelty. Taken together, these moments unmask the latent violence beneath bourgeois refinement and suggest that savagery resides not in the colonial margins but at the very centre of European modernity.

This anti-elitist thread culminates in a striking reflection on artistic legacy and the role of culture in shaping history, one that appears to directly respond to the questions raised in Adam's journal. Having read Adam's account of colonial exploitation and its justificatory ideologies, Frobisher turns his gaze inward, interrogating the foundations of European civilisation and the myth of cultural superiority. His disillusionment with Vyvyan Ayrs becomes the occasion for a broader critique:

> To men like Ayrs, it occurs to me, this temple is civilization. The masses, slaves, peasants, and foot soldiers exist in the cracks of its flagstones, ignorant even of their ignorance. Not so the great statesmen, scientists, artists, and most of all, the composers of the age, any age, who are civilization's architects, masons, and priests. Ayrs sees our role is to make civilization ever more resplendent. My employer's profoundest, or only, wish is to create a minaret that inheritors of Progress a thousand years from now will point to and say, 'Look, there is Vyvyan Ayrs!' How vulgar, this hankering after immortality how vain, how false. Composers are merely scribblers of cave paintings. One writes music because winter is eternal and because, if one didn't, the wolves and blizzards would be at one's throat all the sooner. (82)

Here, Frobisher dismantles the romanticised image of the artist as a civilising force, revealing instead the egotism and historical blindness at the heart of such myths. This opposition between Frobisher and Ayrs, between survival and self-aggrandisement, mirrors the earlier tension in Adam's narrative between his emergent ethical stance and the violent justifications of figures like Horrox and Dr. Goose. In both cases, the novel stages a confrontation between competing visions of history: one linear and teleological, grounded in domination and

progress; the other recursive, ethical, and open to revision. Frobisher's rejection of the civilising myth thus resonates with a broader conceptual shift in *Cloud Atlas* toward cyclical temporality.

This shift is philosophically grounded in the Nietzschean notion of eternal recurrence, which subtly shapes Frobisher's reflections on art, time, and agency. Nietzsche's vision rejects a teleological understanding of history in favour of a perpetual return, where events are not moving toward a final resolution but are endlessly repeated in altered forms. It is within this framework that the character's encounter with Nietzsche acquires deeper meaning, as the philosopher's notion of eternal recurrence subtly inflects Frobisher's worldview, reshaping it around the idea that history is a series of returns and repetitions. In a moment of solitude, he recounts reading *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "After ten pages I felt Nietzsche was reading me, not I him" (63). The remark captures more than just literary identification; it signals an epistemic transformation. Frobisher's sense of being read gestures toward the idea that literature is not a static artefact but a dynamic event, capable of inhabiting its readers, reanimating the past, and reshaping the present. The act of reading becomes a form of temporal transgression: the dead speak again, not merely remembered but re-enacted. In *Cloud Atlas*, this porous boundary between text and life, between the past and the present, is continually foregrounded. Each reading becomes a re-living; each story, when revisited, unsettles the linear separation between historical loss and embodied experience. Frobisher's insight that "composers are merely scribblers of cave paintings", then, gains new resonance here: not merely as a rejection of cultural hubris, but as a recognition of art's embeddedness within a long continuum of inherited forms and voices. Creation, in this view, is not an exclusive or singular act, but one always entangled in citation, iteration, and dialogue with the past. Rather than authoring a final word in a grand narrative, the artist participates in a palimpsestic process, reworking inherited motifs,

responding to existing structures, and shaping meaning through repetition and rearticulation.

This vision of recurrence is also reinforced by Frobisher's own figurative language. Reflecting on the death of his brother Adrian, killed in the First World War, he writes: "We cut a pack of cards called historical context—our generation, Sixsmith, cut tens, Jacks, and Queens. Adrian's cut threes, fours, and fives. That's all" (459). Here, the image of shuffled cards evokes a sense of historical contingency, but also of repetition: the same deck dealt out again and again, determining the lives and deaths of those caught within its logic. Frobisher does not speak of history as a forward march but as a game played with familiar pieces, where the combination may vary, but the stakes remain unchanged. In this way, Frobisher's narrative deepens the novel's investigation into how time, history, and narrative intersect. His embrace of recurrence challenges Enlightenment ideals of progress and instead points toward a more fragmented, looping temporal structure, one that will find increasingly urgent resonance throughout the novel.

The conceptual understanding of history as recursive is not only articulated by Frobisher, but also embedded in the very form of his narrative. As mentioned earlier, his story is told through a series of letters addressed to his lover Rufus Sixsmith, a format that brings with it both epistemological and affective implications. In this context, the epistolary form reinforces two core ideas: first, that literature possesses the power to inhabit and transform its readers—almost as if it 'reads' them—and second, that literary texts, like letters, are inherently recursive, designed to circulate, return, and "reincarnate" across time.

In the first instance, Frobisher's letters enact an intimacy that draws both the addressee and, by extension, the novel's reader into a deeply embodied act of interpretation. Unlike a journal, which performs introspection for the self, the

letter is inherently relational (Altman 1982). Its utterances are shaped by the presence, real or imagined, of the person who will read them. This dialogic structure creates a powerful sense of immediacy and vulnerability. Frobisher confides not only in Sixsmith's affection but also in his complicity. He shares the erotic details of his affair with Jocasta, writing: "Ayrs's wife and I are lovers. […] Only in the carnal sense [...] you should try to enjoy lovemaking in total silence. All that ballyhooing transmutes into bliss if you'll only seal your lips" (Mitchell 2014, 69). He also confesses to the more legally fraught theft of books: "Will post the three referred volumes to you from Bruges next time I go—the post-master here in Neerbeke has an inquisitive streak I don't trust" (68). These admissions build a narrative persona that is both performative and confessional, foregrounding the porous boundary between the writer's self and the reader's gaze.

Moreover, Frobisher frequently addresses Sixsmith directly, anticipating his reactions: "You groan and shake your head, Sixsmith, I know, but you smile too, which is why I love you" (45). At other times, he invites him into a richly embodied fantasy of reunion: "Lose yourself in the city's rickety streets, blind canals, wrought-iron gates [...] cobbled whirlpools that suck your eye in [...] sooty doves, and three or four octaves of bells" (47). These second-person appeals not only construct the intimate world of the letter but also draw the reader into a similarly implicated position. The reader is compelled to question their relationship to Frobisher: Do we trust him? Admire him? Judge him? As Karin Kukkonen (2019) argues, the internal addressee of a letter functions as a "relay" of "joint attention", mediating the reader's engagement with the narrative. In this framework, the fictional addressee becomes a focal point through which perception and emotion are directed, allowing the external reader to engage in "secondary joint attention", experiencing the narrative not just as content but as an interaction shaped for another, thereby blurring the boundary between

author, addressee, and audience. In doing so, the narrative solicits a deeply embodied and relational form of attention, whereby the reader's own affective responses are anticipated, mirrored, or even manipulated. It is this quality that grants literature its uncanny power to "read" its readers, to reach into their expectations, emotions, and judgments, and reflect them back with unsettling precision. The boundary between reading and being read dissolves, as the text becomes an active participant in shaping the reader's position, drawing them into its ethical and emotional circuitry.

In the second instance, the epistolary form contributes to the novel's larger meditation on recurrence and return. Letters are not only read; they are re-read. As Janet Altman (1982) observes, they function as privileged "souvenirs" of time, whose "rereadability" sustains the illusion that a moment, a feeling, or a moment of intimacy can be suspended and retrieved at will (102). In the case of Frobisher, this recursive temporality is literalized in the novel's structure: just as Adam Ewing's journal reappears in Frobisher's hands, so too do Frobisher's letters return in the following section, where they are discovered and read by Luisa Rey, the protagonist of the next narrative. The moment of their rediscovery is striking: "Luisa has reread Sixsmith's letters a dozen times or more […]. They disturb her. [...] the dizzying vividness of the images of places and people that the letters have unlocked. Images so vivid she can only call them memories" (Mitchell 2014, 121). Here, the idea that literature "reads" the reader is taken further. The letters, like Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, do not simply relay a past, they animate it. For Luisa, they blur the line between imagination and memory, as if Frobisher's story inhabits her. The porous boundary between text and reader, already suggested in Frobisher's own reading of Nietzsche, becomes a mode of textual reincarnation. As such, the epistolary form reinforces *Cloud Atlas*'s broader meditation on narrative recurrence, not just as thematic content, but as formal experience.

The idea that letters preserve presence across time, reanimating the voices of the dead and collapsing the boundary between memory and imagination, finds a striking intensification in Frobisher's final letter, namely his suicide note. If, as Luisa's reading of the letters suggests, the epistolary form enables a kind of "textual reincarnation", then this final missive pushes that logic to its extreme. Here, the temporality of the letter is stretched to its limit: written in the hours before his death but addressed to a reader in the aftermath, it speaks from a threshold where life and death blur. Frobisher's final words echo through this dissonance: "Shot myself through the roof of my mouth at 5 a.m. this morning with VA.'s Luger. But I saw you, my dear, dear fellow!" (487). The immediacy of the greeting clashes with the retrospective finality of the act: he is simultaneously alive in the act of writing and dead in the moment of reading. This effect is amplified by the self-conscious narration of his own posthumous discovery:

> Last night I left a letter under the manager's day-office door—he'll find it at 8 a.m. tomorrow—informing him of the change in my existential status, so with luck an innocent chambermaid will be spared an unpleasant surprise. (489)

The irony is sharp, but so too is the letter's awareness of its own function. It is a message that travels beyond death, bridging a gap not only between people but between temporal timelines. The written word, in this case, becomes a vessel for temporal transgression: the "I" persists beyond the life of its speaker, animating the text with a voice that refuses to vanish.

In this sense, Frobisher's suicide does not mark a narrative or ontological closure. Instead, it becomes the site of return. His final letter, inflected by Nietzschean imagery, explicitly embraces recurrence as a metaphysical certainty: "Rome'll decline and fall again, Cortazar'll sail again and, later, Ewing will too, [...] you'll read this letter again, the Sun'll grow cold again [...] Time cannot permeate this sabbatical. We do not stay dead long" (490). This passage does

more than express fatalism or resignation; it asserts the eternity of narrative itself. Frobisher imagines not only his own rebirth, but the repetition of reading, writing, loving, and dying as a structural condition of existence. The phrase "you'll read this letter again" encapsulates this logic: the text envisions its own cyclical return, staging a process of ceaseless reanimation in the reader's mind), each time encountered as if anew. Thus, the epistolary form becomes the perfect vehicle for dramatizing the novel's larger meditation on time and recurrence: Frobisher does not merely narrate his death; he aestheticizes its repetition, embedding his suicide within a literary logic that ensures he will never truly vanish. His letters are structured to return, to be reread, re-experienced, and reanimated across temporal boundaries, just like Ewing's diary and all the other narratives that make up *Cloud Atlas*.

This recursive logic extends beyond the textual and into the musical. His *Cloud Atlas Sextet*, described as "a sextet for overlapping soloists" (463), embodies the same principles of disjunction and return that shape the novel's form. Composed of six instruments "each in its own language of key, scale, and colour" (Ibid.), the piece unfolds in two symmetrical halves: in the first "each solo is interrupted by its successor" (Ibid.), while in the second "each interruption is recontinued, in order" (Ibid.). This structure mirrors the novel's own architecture, offering a symphonic metaphor for its nested temporality. The piece invites the listener, just as the novel invites the reader, to hear the echo of one movement in another, to feel the return of a theme from a different angle, refracted through a new instrument, key, or tone. It enacts a temporal structure that is not progressive but cyclical. In doing so, the sextet becomes more than a metaphor for Mitchell's narrative; it functions as a formal crystallization of *Cloud Atlas*'s broader epistemology of return, where meaning emerges not from linear resolution but from layered resonance and repetition. In this light, Frobisher's

music, like his narrative, is ultimately "many-headed" (490), a multiplicity bound together by recurring rhythms.

Frobisher's letters, his music, and ultimately his death all participate in a narrative structure that refuses linearity, embracing instead a model of time as refracted through affective and formal returns. His epistolary voice lingers beyond his life; his sextet renders interruption and recontinuation an aesthetic principle. This layered temporality is not unique to his section but reverberates across *Cloud Atlas*, where each story speaks to and through the others, invoking the past not as a fixed origin but as a pattern of return. Frobisher's section exemplifies how the novel continuously enacts a form of historical consciousness no longer bound by teleology. Instead, meaning emerges through recursive embodiment and narrative reincarnation, wherein the past is never truly past, and the act of reading becomes a reanimation of the dead, a return that is never the same twice, yet always bears the traces of what has come before. In this sense, the epistemological structure of Frobisher's narrative mirrors the challenge of making sense of history and, consequently, of climate change itself, where understanding is necessarily retrospective, distributed, and shaped by recursive patterns across time.

2.2.3 Echoes Across Time: Memory, Media, and Reincarnation

The third narrative, "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery", is a crime fiction story[12] set in 1975 in the fictional Californian city of "Buenas Yerbas", described by Mitchell as "a city of nowhere" (2014, 95). Temporally, the story unfolds "nearly half a century" (112) after Robert Frobisher's letters were written, marking a significant chronological shift in the novel's emergent transhistorical

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[12]   Following Charles J. Rzepka (2005), the Luisa Rey short story can be interpreted as an adventure-crime narrative with a detective figure, as it incorporates the "first three elements of detective fiction—detective, mystery, and investigation" (10).

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architecture. In terms of genre, this section immerses the reader in the world of the American thriller[13], with a journalist, Luisa Rey, investigating a perilous conspiracy involving a nuclear power plant operated by the corrupt energy corporation Seaboard. More precisely, however, it takes the form of an eco-thriller[14], centring on the attempted cover-up of a fatal design flaw in Seaboard's HYDRA-ZERO nuclear reactor, which, if left unaddressed, could trigger an environmental catastrophe capable of "turn[ing] Southern California into Hiroshima" (120). Although Luisa works for *Spyglass*, a gossip magazine, she nevertheless embodies the archetype of the investigative protagonist typical of eco-thrillers: a figure who pursues the truth behind environmental wrongdoing against a backdrop of institutional corruption and escalating danger. Her investigation is set in motion by a chance encounter with physicist Rufus Sixsmith, the original addressee of Frobisher's letters in the preceding narrative, who has authored a confidential report exposing the reactor's fatal vulnerabilities. This moment marks the first overt connection to earlier narrative threads, as diegetic levels begin to shift and interlock across time. This dynamic will deepen as the section unfolds, revealing further echoes, correspondences, and recursions that bind this story to the novel's preceding narratives. These connections are not merely incidental or referential, but form part of the novel's broader ethical pattern, which stages recurring conflicts across time between those complicit in and those resisting systems of power. Like Adam Ewing and Robert Frobisher before her, Luisa Rey finds herself caught in a struggle between those who uphold the values of care, accountability, and truth, and those who

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[13]   According to Machinal (2011), Luisa Rey's short story maintains a parodic relationship not only with the literary conventions of crime fiction but also with the visual arts, as it evokes the stylistic elements of American thriller films from the 1970s.

[14]   The "eco-thriller" blends the suspense and high-stakes tension typical of classic thrillers with urgent environmental themes (Moore 2017). These narratives often revolve around ecological disasters—such as pollution, climate change, or deforestation—and feature protagonists and antagonists whose actions are directly tied to environmental issues. Far from offering escapism, they foreground real-world ecological and human threats through conspiracies and life-threatening scenarios driven by environmental concerns (97-98).

serve an ideology rooted in domination, economic self-interest, and institutional violence. Her pursuit of the truth aligns her with the novel's recurring figures of resistance, namely those who attempt, often at great personal cost, to expose hidden structures of abuse and exploitation.

As Luisa's investigation deepens, the full extent of Seaboard's reach becomes increasingly apparent. Those who edge too close to the truth—first Sixsmith, then Isaac Sachs, another scientist willing to speak out—are silenced before their findings can surface. Luisa herself narrowly survives a murder attempt on her life, a harrowing moment that makes clear just how dangerous her pursuit of justice has become. Among those complicit in suppressing the truth are Seaboard's CEO Albert Grimaldi, the fictional Federal Power Commissioner Lloyd Hooks, and the duplicitous Fay Li, a PR executive secretly working with the mob. Luisa's effort to expose the concealed dangers of the HYDRA-ZERO reactor pits her against a powerful alliance of corporate and governmental actors invested in obfuscation and oppression. Such an ideological configuration echoes the antagonism between imperial apologists and ethical dissenters in Adam Ewing's journal. The worldview espoused by figures like Dr. Goose and Preacher Horrox, who justified domination as natural law, resurfaces in the rhetoric of Grimaldi, whose internal monologue chillingly asserts:

> *the* will *to power. This is the enigma at the core of the various destinies of men. What drives some to accrue power where the majority of their compatriots lose, mishandle, or eschew power? Is it addiction? Wealth? Survival? Natural selection? I propose these are all pretexts and results, not the root cause. The only answer can be, "There is no 'Why.' This is our nature." "Who" and "What" run deeper than "Why"* (131-132, italics in the original).

Grimaldi's nihilistic reasoning echoes the social Darwinism of his predecessors, confirming that the ideological frameworks that once legitimised colonial conquest are now recycled to justify environmental exploitation and institutionalised coercion.

These colonial continuities are not merely rhetorical but also spatially inscribed. The nuclear facility at the heart of the narrative is situated on Swannekke Island, a fictional site whose name evokes the dispossession of Indigenous lands and the long history of settler colonial encroachment. Protesters, including Native American residents of a nearby trailer park, mobilise against Seaboard's expansion, seeking to resist a new form of territorial seizure masked as technological progress. Yet their resistance is fragile and, in some cases, compromised. One protester, Milton, himself a Native American, ultimately betrays Luisa's location, underscoring the precariousness of marginalised solidarities when confronted with the pervasive pressures of racial discrimination. Taken in this way, the Luisa Rey narrative presents environmental destruction not as an isolated crisis but as the cumulative outcome of systemic forces: land seizure, extractivism, and settler-colonial expansion. Besides offering a textual thread that links 1970s U.S. nuclear anxieties to a longer history of Western domination over land, resources, and Indigenous communities, Grimaldi's monologue articulates one vision of what propels history: a fatalistic belief in the will to power as an innate human drive.

Yet the Luisa Rey narrative is equally invested in questioning how historical understanding itself is mediated and potentially transformed. A more meditative counterpoint to the will-to-power logic articulated by Grimaldi emerges in the form of Isaac Sachs's notebook, composed minutes before his and Grimaldi's deaths in a mid-air explosion. In one entry, Sachs draws a distinction between the "actual" and "virtual" past, offering a temporal model that foregrounds the instability of memory and the recursive nature of historical understanding:

> *Exposition: the workings of the* actual *past + the* virtual *past may be illustrated by an event well known to collective history, such as the sinking of the* Titanic. *The disaster as it* actually *occurred descends into obscurity as its eyewitnesses die off, documents perish + the wreck of the ship dissolves in its Atlantic grave. Yet a* virtual *sinking of the* Titanic, *created from reworked memories, papers,*

hearsay, fiction—in short, belief—grows ever "truer." The actual past is brittle, ever-dimming + ever more problematic to access + reconstruct: in contrast, the virtual past is malleable, ever-brightening + ever more difficult to circumvent/expose as fraudulent. (408, italics in the original)

Here, Sachs distinguishes between the "actual past", understood as the concrete and finite sequence of events that once occurred, and the "virtual past", a fluid and evolving composite shaped by memory, narrative reconstruction, hearsay, and belief. While the actual past gradually recedes from reach as eyewitnesses die and records are lost, the virtual past gains symbolic and affective power, becoming the version most readily available to collective consciousness. Sachs's example of the *Titanic* illustrates this shift: as the factual details of the disaster fade, they are supplanted by mythologised versions reconstituted through stories, media, and cultural memory. Crucially, he applies this same logic to the future, differentiating between the "*actual future*" (409, italics in the original) (what will come to pass) and the "*virtual future*" (Ibid.) (what is imagined, projected, or feared). In both cases, he underscores how human understanding of time is mediated through representation and imagination. Ultimately, he proposes a model of temporality as "*an infinite matryoshka doll of painted moments*" (Ibid.) where each moment, whether past, present, or anticipated, contains and is contained by others. This layered, recursive conception of time radically departs from linear chronology and illuminates the novel's ongoing engagement with the ways histories are layered, revisited, and reinterpreted.

Indeed, beyond staging a philosophical distinction between experienced events and their mediated reconstructions, this passage also operates as a metacommentary on the novel's own temporal design, its entanglement of past, present, and future narratives that fold into one another across multiple diegetic levels. By embedding this temporal model within a narrative about environmental conspiracy and political violence, Mitchell situates the ecological crisis within the material and discursive systems that generate and obscure it,

while also exposing the epistemological challenge of how time itself is perceived and narrated. Sachs's meditation in fact subtly echoes the central difficulty of representing climate change: the disjunction between immediate human perception and the vast, nonlinear temporalities of planetary processes. His account of virtual and actual pasts and futures parallels the cognitive demands of climate crisis discourse, where speculative projections and historical accountability must be held in tension. Recorded in a private notebook, Sach's reflections recall, in their form, the introspective mode of journal writing; yet, destroyed along with its author before it even reaches an audience, this unread document the fragility and contingency of individual insight in the face of systemic brutality. And still, it is still a part of those fragments, personal and partial, that scaffold the novel's multivocal structure. The Luisa Rey narrative, then, gestures toward a deeper reckoning with the multiscalar nature of ecological time, where, as already argued, proximate events are shaped by distant causes, and long-term consequences ripple backward into present ethical dilemmas. The notebook stands as one quiet node in a dispersed epistemology of climate crisis, in which the convergence of plural voices, temporalities, and locations is necessary for the emergence of planetary understanding.

While Sachs's notebook, with its introspective, fragmentary, and partial record of temporal reflection, mirrors *Cloud Atlas*'s broader experimentation with multivocal narration and embedded textual forms, the Luisa Rey narrative also unfolds within a markedly different narrative framework, one that enables further reflections on the novel's narrative voices. Whereas earlier sections, such as Ewing's journal and Frobisher's letters, are structured around first-person testimony, this section adopts a heterodiegetic, third-person omniscient narrator capable of moving fluidly between characters' internal consciousness and external commentary. The narrator's omniscience is particularly evident in moments of italicised interior monologue, which capture the immediacy of

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thought while allowing for retrospective modulation. In a scene where Sixsmith contemplates suicide, for example, the narrator undercuts the moment's apparent gravity: "*Propose a suicide pact, why don't you?* Sixsmith isn't serious, and he isn't going to jump either, not if an ember of humor still glows" (89, italics in the original). This gesture establishes a gap between appearance and intention that the all-knowing narrator can bridge. Such narratorial control not only grants the reader epistemic advantages but also allegorises the novel's broader inquiry into the limits and structures of knowledge. In this way, the Rey narrative sustains *Cloud Atlas*'s multiperspectival layering while advancing its reflection on how narrative form shapes our understanding of history, memory, and truth.

Indeed, this modulation in narrative technique, through which omniscient narration frames yet does not flatten other voices, is achieved through a proliferation of embedded media that reinforce the section's polyvocal structure. Sachs's private notebook, for instance, introduces a voice that is both introspective and speculative, yet still embedded within the broader omniscient frame, thereby exemplifying the novel's sustained concern with experience and its mediation. Just as Sachs's notebook exemplifies how a distinct, introspective voice can be woven into the fabric of a third-person account, so too do a range of other textual insertions expand this dynamic. These include newspaper clippings (115; 431; 452), a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson (451), and most significantly, the mediated presence of Frobisher's correspondence. Each of these forms introduces alternative registers, enriching the narrative while remaining subordinate to the overarching heterodiegetic frame. In particular, the epistolary form, previously encountered in Frobisher's own narrative, reemerges here through Luisa's sequential reading of his letters. Although the letters are not reproduced in full, their reappearance through mediated access creates an intertextual echo, inviting the reader to perceive narrative memory as a layered process of return and recognition. These formal insertions do not merely

authenticate the plot or link disparate sections; they actively participate in the novel's exploration of how knowledge is recorded and passed across time.

Through this interplay between omniscient narration and embedded media, *Cloud Atlas* continues to stage its central concern with narrative transmission and epistemic fragmentation. The result is not a simple collage of voices but a carefully orchestrated "many-headed hydra" (529) of human perspectives, in which each medium retains its specificity while contributing to the overall narrative design. These transhistorical insertions thus signal more than shifts in setting or periodisation; they mark the novel's engagement with the evolving conventions of narrative form and the ways in which those forms mediate historical experience. Among their various functions, these embedded media negotiate narrative authority, temporality, and scale, while sustaining the novel's recursive structure through patterns of interconnection, repetition, and déjà vu. Most strikingly, Luisa Rey's encounter with Frobisher's letters reveals how such media can transmit experience across temporal and personal boundaries, drawing past lives into the present through the circulation of memory.

In this respect, one of the most consequential intradiegetic references to epistolary media in this section occurs when Luisa comes across the first half of Frobisher's letters, hidden in a Gideon's Bible in the hotel where Sixsmith had been killed. Posing as Sixsmith's niece, she is handed the correspondence by the hotel staff. Luisa's encounter with the letters sparks a disorienting response. After re-reading them multiple times, she begins to experience sensations that resemble memory: "the dizzying vividness of the images of places and people that the letters have unlocked. Images so vivid she can only call them memories" (121). A comet-shaped birthmark, described in one of the letters and matching Luisa's own, further destabilises the boundary between coincidence and metaphysical continuity. Her pragmatic instincts urge disbelief, as she insists, "*I*

just don't believe in this crap. I just don't believe it" (121, italics in the original). Yet the narrative continues to stage small, recursive echoes that reinforce the feeling of recurrence: "The journalist steps into the shower, but her mind walks the passageways of Zedelghem chateau" (124); "A swarm of *déjà vu* haunts Luisa as she stuffs her belongings into her overnight bag. *Robert Frobisher doing a dine and dash from another hotel*" (142, italics in the original). These moments exemplify what was earlier defined, in chapter one, as "epistolary illusion": an intradiegetic phenomenon in which the act of reading letters induces a dissociative state of imagination, collapsing the boundary between self and other, present and past (Schuh 2018). Unlike "aesthetic illusion", which refers to the reader's absorption in the fictional world, "epistolary illusion" describes the character's immersion in the text they read, a state in which subjectivity and memory become porous (Ibid.). In Luisa's case, the letters serve less as material artefacts and more as portals, catalysts of temporal and psychological slippage that suggest reincarnation is not merely a metaphysical theme, but a formally enacted process of textual transmission and readerly identification.

Luisa's disoriented reaction to the letters not only dramatizes the novel's layered epistemology of time, where texts bridge narrative sections and lifetimes, but also signals a shift in readerly engagement, foregrounding the interpretive complexity that arises from narrative recursion and textual circulation. As Karin Kukkonen (2019) argues, epistolary narratives generate a structure of "joint attention" in which the reader is cued to interpret letters in relation to their implied addressee. In the Zedelghem section, the reader was invited to adopt a stance of "secondary joint attention" alongside Sixsmith, Frobisher's intended recipient. The intimacy between the two characters, underscored by their romantic and intellectual bond, created a voyeuristic dynamic, whereby the reader effectively read over Sixsmith's shoulder. This positioning intensified the embodied re-enactment of Frobisher's experiences, enhancing the affective

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charge of the narrative. However, when the same letters resurface in the Luisa Rey narrative, a second layer of internal readership is introduced. Luisa is not the letters' intended recipient; her reading is not grounded in shared history but in accidental discovery. Yet her experience is no less immersive: falling prey to "epistolary illusion", Luisa finds herself unable to distinguish between her own memories and those conjured by the letters, which represents an affective entanglement that leads her to interpret Frobisher's recollections as her own. For the reader, this doubling of "joint attention" introduces a new interpretive challenge: not only must we recall the original emotional context of the letters, but we must now also negotiate Luisa's encounter with them. The act of reading becomes palimpsestic, layered with competing timelines and affective orientations. As a result, the metafictional nature of the novel becomes increasingly legible. The letters' ability to resurface and take on new significance foregrounds their fictional status, and in doing so, heightens the reader's awareness of the text as a constructed artefact. This recursive attention to the material and affective circulation of narrative, mirrored by Sachs's meditation on the virtual and actual past and Frobisher's image of history as a shuffled pack of cards, ultimately foregrounds the role of narrative form not only in representing time, but in *performing* it, with return and resonance functioning not merely as thematic concerns but as structuring mechanisms of reading itself. The layered experience of temporality generated through Luisa's encounter with the letters, dislocated from their original context, emotionally reabsorbed, and refracted through a new reader, thus models a broader epistemological disorientation. It is through these formal and affective disruptions that the novel begins to gesture toward temporal complexity of "post-time". While *Cloud Atlas* does not explicitly frame this dynamic in terms of climate change, the interpretive demands it places on the reader, such as navigating mediated memory, disjunctive timelines, and deferred meaning, echo the cognitive challenges posed by the climate crisis. In

this way, the epistemology of climate change remains an emergent, formally encoded dimension of the novel's recursive narrative design.

Interestingly, the interplay between media, memory, and recurrence extends beyond the epistolary form to include other sensory and material artefacts, most notably, music. Just as Luisa Rey's reading of Frobisher's letters prompts an episode of "epistolary illusion", her encounter with his *Cloud Atlas Sextet* induces a similarly uncanny sense of recognition, reinforcing the novel's exploration of transhistorical reincarnation. When she finally listens to the music in the "Lost Chord Music Store", the experience is immersive and inexplicable: "The sound is pristine, riverlike, spectral, hypnotic … *intimately familiar*. Luisa stands, entranced, as if living in a stream of time" (425, italics in the original). This moment echoes her earlier reaction to the letters, another instance of media-induced temporal dislocation in which the boundary between past and present begins to blur. Luisa's claim, "I *know* this music" (Ibid.), evokes the same effect that underpins the phenomenon of "epistolary illusion"; yet here it is music, not writing, that mediates the temporal slippage. The embodied reaction is nearly identical: dissociation, entrancement, and a collapse of experiential boundaries. The store clerk's disbelief, expressed in the remark "Can't be more than a handful in North America" (Ibid.), heightens the improbability of recognition and underscores the metafictional dimension of the scene. The reader is once again drawn into a layered interpretive structure. Music, like letters, becomes a vector of narrative recursion—capable of transmitting the past into the present, enabling characters to access memories they should not possess, and generating a metafictional awareness of how media carry experiential residues across diegetic levels.

This slippage of temporal boundaries extends still further. Later in the narrative, Luisa passes by the *Prophetess*, the schooner that carried Adam Ewing during his Pacific voyage, and experiences a moment of inexplicable gravity:

"Luisa is distracted by a strange gravity that makes her pause for a moment and look at its rigging, listen to its wooden bones creaking" (448). The moment is wordless and fleeting, but her reaction, her pause, her vague sense of being pulled toward something, is physically marked by her throbbing birthmark. That mark, which connects her to Frobisher and other characters across the novel's narratives, flares up again at this point of uncanny recognition. The ship, like the letters and the *Sextet*, becomes a narrative artifact that retains the memory of past lives. Its "wooden bones creaking" function as aural triggers in the same way that Frobisher's music does: a corporealized echo of lives lived before.

Together, these moments stage an intricate interplay between the sensory echoes and the transhistorical remediation of experience. Luisa's responses to the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*, the *Prophetess*, and Frobisher's letters suggest that her narrative is not merely connected to others through plot, but through affective resonance and mnemonic embodiment. These connections operate less through linear causality than through recurrence, functioning as a form of what we may call narrative "rhyming". Then, media such as letters, music, and ships are not only thematised as repositories of memory, but structurally enacted as temporal bridges, serving as conduits through which characters and, by extension, readers, experience the palimpsestic layering of time that defines *Cloud Atlas*'s aesthetic. In this way, reincarnation emerges less as a metaphysical proposition than as a narrative strategy for articulating continuity across lives and epochs.

Luisa's disorientation upon reading Frobisher's letters, her uncanny recognition of the *Sextet*, and her arrest at the sight of the *Prophetess* exemplify how objects and texts carry affective and mnemonic charge. These are not mere allusions to earlier narratives but formal mechanisms that collapse temporal distance, layering past and present and drawing characters into a recursive system of experience. The comet-shaped birthmark further anchors this structure, functioning as a bodily trace that marks certain figures as nodes in a

network of repetition and return. What emerges from these recurrences is, then, a vision of history untethered from Enlightenment ideals of progress and causality: not a linear trajectory but a palimpsest of overlapping presents, in which past voices and artefacts continually resurface in altered form, ultimately revealing the precariousness of human efforts to impose order on historical records. The Rey narrative besides demonstrating how systemic violence, whether colonial expansion or corporate exploitation, reappears across epochs in new guises, sustained by recurring justifications of domination and power, also foregrounds the fragile persistence of countervailing voices in letters, in music, in fleeting recognitions that refuse to be extinguished. In this way, the section extends the novel's epistemological inquiry into the conditions under which history is reanimated or suppressed. These concerns, as contended beforehand, are fundamentally inseparable from the epistemology of climate change. Just as Luisa's experiences reveal how memory is mediated by artefacts and narrative returns, so too does climate discourse rely on fragments, projections, and recursive temporalities that exceed immediate perception. Understanding environmental crisis, like reading *Cloud Atlas*, demands attention to persistence of traces across vast temporal scales. The Luisa Rey narrative, then, not only dramatizes the repetition of historical violence but also models the interpretive stance required to engage with planetary crisis: one in which history is grasped not as a single path toward progress, but as a recursive field of entangled temporalities where the future can only be apprehended through mediated fragments of the past.

2.2.4 Recollection, Adaptation, and the Performance of "Post-Time"

The fourth short story, "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish", is a satirical picaresque[15] presented as a fictional memoir[16] written by its protagonist, Timothy Cavendish, who introduces it as a series of notes intended to be adapted "into a film script" (Mitchell 2014, 403). Marking both a temporal and spatial disjunction from the preceding narrative, the story shifts from the late twentieth-century Californian setting of Luisa Rey to early twenty-first-century Britain, a setting that coincides with the period of the novel's composition. The narrative follows Timothy Cavendish, a beleaguered vanity publisher, as he flees London for Hull and ultimately finds himself involuntarily confined to a nursing home. This jump in both geography and historical moment underscores *Cloud Atlas*'s structural principle of discontinuity across its nested stories, while also contributing to the novel's broader multispatiotemporal configuration. Each shift in setting and era propels the narrative further into the future, and the familiar British locations and contemporary tone of Cavendish's story draw the reader closer to the present, reinforcing the novel's cumulative movement through time and space.

The story opens with an unforeseen stroke of luck for Cavendish. One of his authors, Dermot Hoggins, the writer of *Knuckle Sandwich*, described by Cavendish as "a well-written gutsy fictional memoir" (153), murders a prominent critic, Sir Felix Finch, who had reviewed the book for "The Trafalgar Review of Books". During the "Lemon Prize Awards", held in a rooftop bar and attended

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[15] As J.A. Garrido Ardila (2015) notes, there is no consensus regarding the definition of the picaresque as a genre, as its definition largely depends on the national literary canon to which critics refer (2). As Mitchell's novel is situated within the British literary tradition, the application of the picaresque label is informed by an understanding of the genre derived from the works of Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Charles Dickens, all of whom preserve distinctive elements of picaresque narrative. In line with Garrido Ardila's (2015) theorization, "The Ghastly Ordeal" exhibits several features characteristic of the genre. These include: (1) the narration of life events leading to a final situation; (2) the satirical quality of the narrative, which implies a degree of social realism and critique; and (3) the presence of a picaro, an anti-heroic figure, an outcast of society who is, by circumstance, compelled to act in a particular way, even resorting to delinquency if necessary, in his attempts to better his situation (16-18).

[16] The story is framed as the memoir of a fictional character, Timothy Cavendish, who recounts events from the later years of his life.

by the London publishing elite, Hoggins hurls Finch to his death. The scandal turns Hoggins's book into a commercial sensation, "the impassioned memoir of Britain's soon-to-be most famous murderer" (152), and brings sudden prosperity to Cavendish's struggling press. But fortune quickly reverses: Hoggins's criminal brothers soon appear, demanding a substantial cut of the profits. Unable to pay and fearful for his safety, Cavendish flees London. His brother Denholme offers him refuge in Hull, supposedly at a hotel where he can "lay low". However, the hotel turns out to be a nursing home for the elderly, and Cavendish finds himself trapped in a nightmare of bureaucratic indifference and physical confinement. The memoir he composes recounts this series of absurd misfortunes and culminates in his ultimately rocambolesque yet successful escape from the institution.

After this brief introduction to the genre and plot of the Cavendish's "Ghastly Ordeal", it may seem unclear why a similar story would have anything to do with climate change or any form of eco-critical thematization. However, as previously suggested, *Cloud Atlas* reveals itself as a work of climate change fiction when approached comprehensively, and this includes Cavendish's seemingly disconnected narrative. While his story does not directly engage with ecological themes, it is not entirely detached from the novel's environmental concerns: indeed, the transhistorical trajectory in which Cavendish's section is embedded contributes to the novel's gradual progression toward a future defined by ecological collapse. In this sense, the section plays a crucial role in the novel's broader temporal structure, advancing the reader toward a dystopian horizon while reflecting a present in which personal misfortunes dominate, and systemic crises like climate change remain largely deferred or obscured. Moreover, Cavendish's story participates in the novel's overarching formal architecture, which itself reflects the systemic complexity of climate change: its multiscalar temporality, nonlinear causality, and planetary distribution. Most importantly,

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however, Cavendish's section continues to obliquely reflect the epistemology of climate change through its sustained thematization of time. Just as the preceding narratives foregrounded models of time structured around return, cyclicality, interconnection, and superimposition—models that resonate with the experience of climate crisis understood in terms of "post-time"—Cavendish's story also participates in this temporal logic.

Despite its comic tone and seemingly mundane setting, both the narrative, with its reflexive play on memory and storytelling, and its aging protagonist are deeply preoccupied with the experience and meaning of time. Aging, recollection, and mortality come to the forefront as Cavendish's perception of temporality becomes a recurring motif, articulated through metaphors of looping and return. These moments of distortion, comic yet philosophically charged, reflect the narrative's cyclical conception of history and experience, resonating with the broader temporal logic of *Cloud Atlas*. During the Lemon Prize event, for instance, Cavendish becomes intoxicated and muses: "Time's Arrow became Time's Boomerang and I lost count of all my majors" (149). The boomerang image gestures toward a non-linear temporality that is subjective and recursive. Later, under the influence of marijuana, he again experiences time as looping: "The taxi seemed to have been going round the same roundabout for a miniature eternity. A howling singer on the radio strummed a song about how everything that dies some day comes back" (173). Such episodes of déjà vu, triggered by sensory stimuli like motion, intoxication, and sound, anticipate Cavendish's later reflections on mortality and renewal. "Middle-age is flown", he writes, "but it is attitude, not years that condemns one to the ranks of the Undead, or else proffers salvation" (403). Imagining his own comeback, he invokes Solzhenitsyn, writing "Like Solzhenitsyn, I shall return, one bright dusk" (404). The reference to the Russian dissident who exposed the brutality of the Gulag system becomes fitting for Cavendish, himself a prisoner envisioning release. These cyclical impressions,

accumulated across the memoir, mirror the novel's broader logic of recursion, evoking the afterlives of both personal and planetary histories. The most striking articulation of this idea arrives after Cavendish's stroke, when he no longer conceives of time as either arrow or boomerang but as "a concertina" (370). Unlike the boomerang, which implies circular return, the concertina evokes compression and expansion: time folding and unfolding upon itself. This image transforms recurrence into simultaneity, suggesting a temporality that is not merely circular but stratified and condensed. It encapsulates, at once personally and allegorically, the essence of "post-time": a temporality in which past actions persist in the present and reverberate into the future, folding time into itself until its boundaries collapse.

Cavendish's memoir, then, is not just a comic interlude, but a formally and thematically resonant contribution to *Cloud Atlas*'s planetary ethics of time. The epistemological challenge of understanding climate change, its dispersed causes, deferred effects, and resistance to linear narrative or stable representation, finds a striking analogue in this section of the novel. Cavendish's struggle to reassemble a coherent self after neurological trauma further exemplifies this difficulty. As he writes:

> I offer that trio of vignettes for the benefit of lucky readers whose psyches have never been razed to rubble by capillaries rupturing in their brains. Putting Timothy Cavendish together again was a Tolstoyan editing job [...] Memories refused to fit, or fitted but came unglued. Even months later, how would I know if some major tranche of myself remained lost?" (370).

Thus, the epistemological labour required to reconstitute the fragmented and partial self after crisis mirrors the cognitive demands of grasping climate change, whose temporality and causality are equally distributed and unstable. Like the climate system, Cavendish's identity emerges as a patchwork of traces, its coherence always provisional. The return of the self, like the effort to

comprehend ecological consequence, is not a linear process but a recursive reverberation within a dispersed and unstable system of meaning.

In addition to re-thematising the question of time, Cavendish's narrative also echoes and amplifies earlier reflections on the movement of history and the fate of civilisation, which are central concerns of the novel as a whole. While earlier sections, such as those of Adam Ewing and Robert Frobisher, explored these ideas through colonialism and through reflections on how cultural production depends on privilege, Cavendish's memoir approaches them through satire, invoking the rise and fall of empires from the perspective of a weary, embittered observer of late-capitalist Britain. A key intertext for these reflections is Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which Cavendish quotes in a moment of ironic self-appraisal: "The Mighty Gibbon's assessment of history — *little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind* — ticker-taped by for no apparent reason. Timothy Cavendish's time on Earth, in thirteen words" (169, italics in the original). This comic reduction of his own life into Gibbon's sweeping historical pessimism offers both a humorous moment of self-deprecation and a wry alignment of personal misfortune with a larger civilisational trajectory. In this sense, Cavendish's individual narrative becomes a miniature of historical decline, refracted through the lens of the picaresque, where absurdity and survival replace grandeur and heroism. His farcical imprisonment, desperate escape, and reflections on ageing and irrelevance register a personal version of civilisational disintegration, one that resonates with the novel's larger exploration of historical entropy.

This allegorical register is grounded in, and often sharpened by, Cavendish's pointed critique of contemporary England. His narrative satirises the country's post-industrial landscapes as sites of cultural and infrastructural

decay. In a moment of crowded disorientation during his flight from London, he narrates:

> Commuters, these hapless souls who enter a lottery of death twice daily on Britain's decrepit railways, packed the dirty train. Airplanes circled in holding patterns over Heathrow, densely as gnats over a summer puddle. Too much matter in this ruddy city (162).

Here, the language of congestion and decay casts London not as a symbol of modernity or progress, but as a bloated relic of itself. Similarly, when recalling his upbringing in Essex, Cavendish notes with a bitter sense of cultural loss:

> Essex raised its ugly head. When I was a scholarship boy at the local grammar, son of a city-hall toiler on the make, this county was synonymous with liberty, success, and Cambridge. Now look at it. Shopping malls and housing estates pursue their creeping invasion of our ancient land. (163)

The pastoral past is here imagined as consumed by suburban sprawl and commercial monoculture, which results in a quiet elegy for a landscape overwritten by neoliberal modernity. This ironic historiography culminates in one of Cavendish's most metaphoric assessments of England: "Poor England. Too much history for its acreage. Years grow inwards here, like my toenails" (386). The metaphor, at once grotesque and poignant, captures a central tension in *Cloud Atlas*: the compression of time and history into the local and the bodily. Cavendish's grotesque ageing body becomes a site where the burden of history is inscribed, echoing the novel's broader project of mapping civilisational rise and fall onto individual experience.

Moreover, Cavendish's reflections on historical rise and fall are mirrored in his personal experience of captivity at Aurora House, which is framed in terms that explicitly evoke histories of slavery and imprisonment. Realising the futility of resistance, he writes:

> My strategy had been wrong from square one. I had tried to shout my way out of this absurdity but the institutionalized cannot do this. Slavers welcome the odd rebel to dress down before the others. In all the prison literature I've read, from *The Gulag Archipelago* to *An Evil Cradling* to *Knuckle Sandwich*, rights must be horse-traded and accrued with cunning. (183)

The analogy between the nursing home and the prison invokes a dark genealogy of modern institutions as sites of dehumanisation and control. Though framed comically, these references conjure serious reflections on the recurring structures of oppression that underpin civilisational development.

Cavendish's sense of entrapment is further reinforced by his bitter reflections on freedom, a word he explicitly links to the ideological hollowness of modern civilisation: "A clock with no hands. 'Freedom!' is the fatuous jingle of our civilization, but only those deprived of it have the barest inkling *re*: what the stuff actually is" (372). In these moments, the picaresque humour of Cavendish's ordeal gives way to a more profound critique of the ideological illusions that sustain historical narratives of progress. His intertextual invocations underscore this shift. Alluding to *The Drowned and the Saved*, he frames his own experience via Primo Levi, thus implicitly drawing parallels between modern care institutions and the systemic dehumanisation Levi described in Nazi concentration camps. Even his parody of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "Oh, the horror, the horror. My mashed banana clagged my throat" (371), serves to ironically reframe the colonial critique of moral decay and existential dread within the setting of a nursing home.

Taken together, these allusions suggest that Cavendish's narrative, far from being a comic digression, offers a trenchant parody of modern Britain's cultural and institutional decay. His grotesque picaresque reframes grand historical narratives of decline through the textures of the everyday: overcrowded trains, invasive shopping malls, and the banal cruelties of elder

care. Rather than echoing *Cloud Atlas*'s vision of historical recurrence in abstract or epic terms, Cavendish's story localises this decline, compressing it into the landscape of contemporary England and the ageing body itself. His ordeal at Aurora House functions not merely as slapstick, but as a parody of institutionalised violence, drawing upon the discourses of internment and colonialism to expose how such structures persist beneath the surface of liberal modernity. In doing so, Cavendish's narrative stages a deeply embodied and spatially situated confrontation with the ideological residues of domination that shape present life. This ironic historiography not only reinforces the novel's recursive temporal structure but also underscores its epistemological engagement with climate change: showing how large-scale historical and ecological trajectories, though often obscured or domesticated within everyday life, nonetheless emerge from it and are imbricated with it. Cavendish's narrative thus becomes a crucial node in the novel's broader meditation on how systemic collapse is experienced not as spectacle, but as slow attrition: something lived, often absurdly, within the spaces and routines of the ordinary. Yet this attrition is not linear; it follows a recursive logic, where decay and repetition intertwine, and where the past continually resurfaces within the present in altered, often diminished forms. Through this temporal circularity, Cavendish's story highlights how historical and ecological decline are not only endured but re-enacted, again and again, under different guises.

This logic of return and recurrence is further reinforced by a moment of diegetic re-entry, when the previous narrative, "The Luisa Rey Mystery", resurfaces within Cavendish's storyline. As we have seen throughout the novel, each narrative re-emerges in the next, forming a chain of embedded diegetic levels. In this case, the return is signalled by the arrival of a manuscript entitled "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery", which Cavendish receives in the post. The moment is described in typically sardonic tones: "a package addressed 'FAO

The Visionary Editor of "Knuckle Sandwich"'" containing a MS titled *Half-lives*—lousy name for a work of fiction—and subtitled *The First Luisa Rey Mystery*. […] Nutcase ahoy" (157-158). At first, Cavendish dismisses the manuscript outright, relegating it to his "'Urgent Business' tray" (Ibid.) and retreating to a game of Minesweeper. Yet the presence of this manuscript is significant: it reintroduces the previous narrative, thereby continuing the novel's meditation on interconnection.

If the return of The Luisa Rey Mystery enacts a structural recursion across narratives, Cavendish's own reflections on retracing familiar ground introduce a more self-conscious, metafictional dimension. As Cavendish later reflects on his journey through familiar landscapes, he remarks:

> You would think a place the size of England could easily hold all the happenings in one humble lifetime without much overlap […] but no, we cross, criss-cross, and recross our old tracks like figure skaters. (165)

Though prompted by his literal return to Chesterford Station, once home to a former lover, the passage also functions as a reflexive prompt to consider the crisscrossing of narratives throughout the novel. It gestures beyond Cavendish's personal history toward the broader architecture of *Cloud Atlas*, inviting recognition of the interpenetration of personal stories and historical moments. In this way, it aligns with the novel's recursive meditation on time and identity as non-linear and intricately interlinked.

The reference to the novel's recursive structure becomes even more pointed once Cavendish begins to read "Half-Lives" in earnest and considers editing it for publication. His response evolves into a further metafictional reflection on the manuscript's content, its stylistic potential, and its conceptual flaws. In particular, Cavendish critiques the idea that Luisa Rey might be the reincarnation of Robert Frobisher: "Far too hippie-druggy-new age. (I, too, have a birthmark, below my left armpit, but no lover ever compared it to a comet.

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[…])" (373). His scepticism toward reincarnation, framed as cliché or kitsch, ironically draws attention to the very mechanism the novel employs to link its narratives across time. More importantly, Cavendish's editorial reflections underscore a fundamental thematic concern: *Cloud Atlas* is less about what is told than *how* it is told. As he observes while defending the potential of Half-Lives, "as if Art is the What, not the How!" (Ibid.), a pointed assertion that affirms the novel's overarching investment in the recursive nature of storytelling. Through Cavendish's parody and editorialising, Mitchell offers a metatextual commentary on his own project: a recursive meditation on the transmission of stories, the structure of historical consciousness, and the aesthetic and ethical possibilities of formal innovation.

This concern with the transmission of stories also plays out at the level of narrative design, where the Cavendish section both continues and departs from the formal patterns established in the preceding narratives. Like the earlier sections, it is interrupted at its midpoint, preserving the novel's overarching nested structure and reinforcing the sense of fragmentation and deferred understanding that characterises the reading experience. At the same time, "The Ghastly Ordeal" marks a shift in narrative voice: while "The Luisa Rey Mystery" adopts a third-person perspective filtered through thriller conventions, Cavendish reintroduces a first-person, homodiegetic narrator. In doing so, the section realigns itself with the epistolary forms of the Adam Ewing and Robert Frobisher narratives. As Joe Bray (2003) argues, epistolary fiction tends to construct an illusion of coherent and unmediated subjectivity, giving the impression that the letter-writer's voice offers direct access to thought and experience. Yet this illusion is always undercut by the temporal and psychological distance between the narrating and experiencing selves (22). While this dynamic is already at play in the epistolary sections, it becomes even more pronounced in Cavendish's memoir, where the retrospective stance foregrounds

the unreliability of memory and the inevitable distortion of recollection. From the outset, the narrator draws attention to the fallibility of his own account:

> Odd how the wrong stories pop into one's head at my age. It's not odd, no, it's ruddy scary. I meant to begin this narrative with Dermot Hoggins. That's the problem with inking one's memoirs in longhand. You can't go changing what you've already set down, not without botching things up even more. (148)

This self-conscious framing not only highlights the instability of narrative authority but also draws attention to the materiality of storytelling and the limits of retrospective coherence. These issues lie at the heart of *Cloud Atlas*'s recursive meditation on form and the truth of historical narration.

Compared to previous sections, Cavendish's memoir continues to foreground the act of narration itself not only by acknowledging its subjective and fallible nature, but also by openly commenting on its formal construction. "As an experienced editor", he declares, "I disapprove of flashbacks, foreshadowings, and tricksy devices; they belong in the 1980s with MAs in Postmodernism and Chaos Theory. I make no apology, however, for (re)starting my own narrative with my version of that shocking affair" (152). This metafictional aside does more than satirise literary fashion; it signals a self-conscious return to the narrative logic of realist memoir and epistolary fiction, even as it continues to operate within a novel that openly experiments with form. What emerges is a double movement: on one hand, an alignment with the self-referential play associated with postmodernism; on the other, a recognition of the irreducible subjectivity and partiality that mark any act of recollection. In this way, Cavendish's narrative aligns with *Cloud Atlas*'s broader engagement with the novel as a historically evolving form—one that must grapple with the limitations of representation while still aspiring to convey meaningful stories about the world.

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This tension is underscored by Cavendish's reflections on the value of literature in conditions of confinement and despair: "Books don't offer real escape, but they can stop a mind scratching itself raw" (373). His comment echoes Frobisher's earlier assertion that "One writes music because winter is eternal and because, if one didn't, the wolves and blizzards would be at one's throat all the sooner" (82). In both cases, artistic expression is not merely a diversion but a fragile, vital act of endurance. Read alongside climate discourse, such moments illustrate how literature helps to render the abstraction of climate change experientially and affectively legible. While climate science relies on models, measurements, and projections, literature translates these temporal and spatial complexities into forms that can be felt and imagined. Cavendish's memoir, with its acknowledged distortions and revisions, thus becomes more than a parody of self-narration: it exemplifies how narrative can give texture and resonance to the otherwise impersonal scales of climate change, shaping the discourse not by undermining its truth but by embedding it in lived experience.

Both memory and climate modelling reveal the fragility of human understanding in the face of complexity, while ultimately reaffirming the indispensable role of narrative, however imperfect, in making sense of such complexity. This tension is powerfully encapsulated in one of Cavendish's most lyrical reflections:

> Three or four times only in my youth did I glimpse the Joyous Isles, before they were lost to fogs, depressions, cold fronts, ill winds, and contrary tides … I mistook them for adulthood. Assuming they were a fixed feature in my life's voyage, I neglected to record their latitude, their longitude, their approach. Young ruddy fool. What wouldn't I give now for a never-changing map of the ever-constant ineffable? To possess, as it were, an atlas of clouds. (389)

Here, Cavendish offers what reads as an all-encompassing meditation on perception, transience, and the false certainties we attach to a shifting world. His nostalgic longing for a "never-changing map" evokes not only the human desire

for stability but also the imaginative need to grasp complexity through metaphor. The "atlas of clouds" becomes a paradoxical image: a yearning for total comprehension, yet one articulated in the very terms of flux and evanescence. In this sense, Mitchell's novel itself performs the work of such an atlas, not as a fixed chart of knowledge, but as a literary form that renders climate and historical complexity affectively and narratively tangible. Through its transhistorical structure and multivocal narration, *Cloud Atlas* transforms abstraction into lived resonance. It resists closure not to deny meaning, but to affirm literature's power to shape climate discourse: by embedding planetary change in human stories, it turns indeterminacy into a space for imaginative engagement, ethical reflection, and affective recognition.

This unstable narrative terrain shapes not only Cavendish's self-presentation but also the reader's experience of his memoir. Like the journal and letters that precede it, the memoir form foregrounds the constructed nature of personal narrative, revealing how truth emerges through the shaping influence of audience awareness. From its opening episode the narrative draws the reader into an absurd, yet emotionally compelling scene shaped by selective memory and retrospective justification. This oscillation between versions becomes especially clear when Cavendish later admits to having fabricated a more socially palatable explanation for the benefit of his ex-wife: "Alas, I had already amplified the truth and told her my muggers were five louts with swastikas shaved onto their skulls. […] The boys in blue would have choked on their Penguin biscuits" (148). Similarly, his reflections on being cuckolded reveal an escalating confessional style in which personal vulnerability is gradually disclosed through parenthetical asides. This approach performs honesty while simultaneously drawing attention to the constructed and selective nature of the truth he presents: "I confess that since Madame X left me (my cuckold was a dentist, I shall reveal the truth no matter how painful) Housekeeping Anarchy had reigned o'er my

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Putney domicile (oh, very well, the bastard was a German)" (154). The performative repetition of reluctant disclosure functions as a rhetorical gesture aimed at the reader which reinforces a sense of intimacy and trust, even as it foregrounds the narrator's manipulation of tone and detail.

Indeed, Cavendish cultivates this relationship through a range of techniques that assume the reader's intelligence and complicity. His use of direct address establishes a rapport that feels personal, even advisory: "Old Father Timothy offers this advice to his younger readers […] conduct your life in such a way that, when your train breaks down in the eve of your years, you have a warm, dry car […] to take you home" (168). At times, he goes further, acknowledging the reader's superior insight into the events being narrated: "I had it. You probably spotted it pages ago, dear Reader" (177). These moments not only underscore the memoir's theatricality but also highlight its narrative function: to stage indeterminacy while simultaneously transforming it into an affective resource that draws the reader closer through a shared sense of fallibility and discovery. In this way, Cavendish's memoir participates in *Cloud Atlas*'s broader interrogation of narrative authority. This shows how literature does not merely waver between sincerity and performance, doubt and intimacy, or truth and fiction, but harnesses these tensions to create resonance.

Yet what most clearly distinguishes Cavendish's section is its overt awareness of mediation and marketability. The memoir is not only addressed to the reader but repeatedly staged as a pre-script for adaptation. Cavendish, ever the editor, reveals his intention to frame his experiences for future consumption: "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish, if you will. Now *that* is a snappy title" (149, italics in the original); "I shall find a hungry ghostwriter to turn these notes you've been reading into a film script of my own" (403). At several points, he even imagines cinematic staging, offering instructions to an imagined director: "(Lars: zoom the camera in from the outside car park, across the busy bar, and

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right down between Mr. Meeks's rotted tonsils.)" (400). In this context, the memoir becomes a self-aware artefact of remediation: not a private record but a performative text written for adaptation and always aware of its audience. The reader must negotiate not only the personal voice of the memoirist but also the presence of a projected audience, the film-viewer, who is a mass-market consumer and the film's director. The result is a layered structure of address in which Cavendish's voice oscillates between intimate confession and calculated pitch.

This is where the concept of "post-time" becomes especially relevant. Cavendish's storytelling does not simply reflect on a past event; rather, it reconstructs the past within the logic of entertainment, commercialisation, and reception in the future. His memoir inhabits "post-time" by turning lived experience into scripted narrative, aligning memory with audience expectation, and anticipating its afterlife in other media forms. In this way, Cavendish's narrative exemplifies how literature, like climate discourse, translates complex and non-linear temporalities into forms that can be communicated across time. Whereas climate science must model long-term systemic change for present audiences whose decisions shape future conditions, literature can reduce abstraction and imbue such models with affective resonance. *Cloud Atlas*, through the figure of Cavendish, thus extends its broader meditation on narrative mediation, historical entanglement, and the epistemology of climate crisis. In doing so, it demonstrates that narrative does not merely thematise uncertainty but actively enables readers to inhabit complexity, thereby transforming recursive temporality and systemic change into imaginative experiences that foster ethical reflection and engagement.

2.2.5 Narrating Climate Collapse: Testimony and Historical Recursion

The fifth narrative, "An Orison of Sonmi~451"[17], leaps forward to the twenty-second century, where South Korea—now renamed "Nea So Copros"—provides the setting a hundred years after Cavendish's narrative. This spatiotemporal transition continues *Cloud Atlas*'s transhistorical trajectory, propelling the reader deeper into a future shaped by political upheaval, technological acceleration, and environmental degradation. The narrative unfolds in the aftermath of a mysterious rupture known as "the Skirmishes", a series of events whose nature remains largely unexplained but whose effects are deeply embedded in the narrative's "storyworld". Cultural references such as works by George Orwell and Aldous Huxley are described as the products of "pre-Skirmish thinkers" (Mitchell 2014, 220), and even animated films are referred to as "Disneys from before the Skirmishes" (243), marking the Skirmishes as a threshold that divided epochs, ideologies, and ways of life.

In this future setting, power has fully consolidated under a regime known as "Unanimity", where corporate authority and state control have fused into a single system of governance. Life in Nea So Copros is rigidly stratified, and the population is managed through a logic of endless commodification. Citizens are transformed into pure consumers whose very souls are "deposited" as digital wealth, debited with every transaction. A subclass of cloned labourers known as fabricants is assigned the menial and extractive tasks that sustain the system: "factory lines", "sewage", "fishfarms", "oil and coal", "reactors", "cordon" and "harvest" (342). Engineered by corporations through genetic replication, these beings are programmed for obedience and denied the status of personhood.

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[17]   Formally, this section maintains the interrupted structure established in earlier narratives, with Sonmi's account unfolding in two parts that are split by the novel's sixth and central story. The interruption of Sonmi's narrative contributes to this recursive architecture, reinforcing the novel's layered temporality and its refusal of linear progression. As countered multiple times throughout this chapter, time in *Cloud Atlas* unfolds not as a straight line but as a pattern of returns and resonances, with each narrative echoing, refracting, and looping back through others.

Among them is Sonmi-451, a server at a "Papa Song Corp." fast-food franchise, whose life is governed by "the Six Catechisms" (188), a strict behavioural code designed to regulate every aspect of her existence. Her daily routine is numbing in its repetition: cleaning, serving, and the administration of "Soap" (189), a substance that serves both as food and as a soporific drug. The system promises Sonmi and every server a final reward: after twelve years of loyal service, the fabricants are supposedly granted freedom and sent to Hawaii, where they are believed to live out their lives as emancipated beings with newly granted souls. This utopian retirement, however, is an elaborate lie designed to pacify the fabricants and conceal a far more sinister reality. The promised liberation is revealed as a calculated deception: rather than being granted freedom, fabricants are slaughtered. Their bodies are repurposed either as biomass to sustain new clones through artificial "wombtanks" or, more gruesomely, as raw material to produce the very Soap they have consumed throughout their lives. The cycle is not only exploitative but cannibalistic, a grotesque metaphor for the self-consuming logic of late capitalism and its treatment of labouring bodies as raw material for continued production.

The narrative's central tension lies in the unfolding of Sonmi's "ascension" (205), an event initially presented as an anomaly but later revealed to be part of a tightly controlled political experiment. This "ascension" refers to the gaining of self-awareness, the development of advanced linguistic capabilities, the ability to retain and access memory, and the emergence of emotional depth. Her rising intelligence and sense of autonomy are orchestrated by "Union", an apparent resistance movement claiming to fight for fabricant liberation. Its stated aim is "to engineer the ascension of six million fabricants" (342) and thereby "alter history" (343). Or so it seems. As the narrative progresses, Sonmi discovers that Union is not a revolutionary force but a false front for Unanimity itself, an arm of the same system it claims to resist. Her rebellion and subsequent arrest are

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staged as part of a state-sanctioned spectacle, designed to justify more repressive legislations. In her words, the plan was:

> To generate a show-trial, Archivist! To make every last pureblood in Nea So Copros mistrustful of every last fabricant. To manufacture consent for the Fabricant Containment Act being presented to the Juche. To discredit Abolitionism. The whole conspiracy was a resounding success. (364)

This revelation reconfigures the entire narrative as a meticulously choreographed performance: Sonmi becomes both victim and instrument of a propaganda machine that weaponizes truth in the service of control. Her apparent awakening is instrumentalised to vilify the very cause she comes to represent, revealing the extent to which dissent itself is co-opted by the structures it aims to disrupt.

Within this framework of surveillance, commodification, and manufactured consent, the novel reveals ecological degradation as a deeply entrenched and normalized condition of everyday life. In Nea So Copros, the illusion of abundance, engineered through genetic manipulation of clones, food, and livestock, coexists with a landscape marked by ecological exhaustion. Environmental collapse is not overtly dramatized, but silently saturates the fabric of society, sustained by systems of overproduction that perpetuate dependence on synthetic abundance. This underlying crisis is intermittently disclosed through interspersed references to planetary damage and dislocation. What emerges is a vision of a world reshaped by unchecked genetic manipulation and widespread environmental contamination, conditions under which climate change is still a background condition, but one exacerbated by uncontrolled technological and industrial progress. Its consequences are unevenly distributed, intensifying existing inequalities across Nea So Copros. In the slums of Seoul, "scalding rain" (331) burns the skin of those too poor to shelter from its effects, while migrants from "the Production Zones" flee "malaria, flooding, drought, rogue crop-genomes, parasites, encroaching deadlands" (332) in search of

survival. Wing-027, a fabricant engineered for work in contaminated zones, describes operating in "deadlands so infected or radioactive that purebloods perish there like bacteria in bleach" (215). Rising sea levels are briefly alluded to by a taxi driver reminiscing about his childhood: "in a distant conurb called Mumbai, now flooded, when the moon was always naked" (236). These scattered glimpses cohere in Sonmi's diagnosis that "Nea So Copros is poisoning itself to death […] Its only other response is that strategy beloved of all bankrupt ideologues: denial" (341). In this narrative world, climate change is easiest to deny precisely because it functions as a pervasive background condition, subsumed into toxic infrastructures and social precarity, rather than as a singular, primary problem.

This reading also clarifies how "An Orison of Sonmi~451" reframes the novel's engagement with environmental crisis. While earlier narratives rarely name ecological crisis explicitly, they still gesture toward the deep-rooted forces, such as extractivism, imperialism, enslavement, and systemic violence, that have historically shaped environmental degradation. Sonmi's narrative, on the other hand, foregrounds these entanglements, portraying climate collapse not as a looming threat but as a lived condition under corporate modernity. In doing so, it exemplifies what Marco Malvestio (2022) terms "eco-dystopia": a speculative form that fuses dystopian and post-apocalyptic conventions to expose the environmental fallout of late capitalism and the Anthropocene (24). Crucially, this narrative does not isolate that fallout in a futuristic scenario; rather, it traces its origins through the novel's earlier timelines, revealing how ecological breakdown is the cumulative expression of centuries of extractivism. What emerges, then, is not only a vision of environmental ruin, but a reconfiguration of history itself, in which climate collapse becomes the endpoint of recurring structures of exploitation. In this way, the novel's multitemporal architecture is not merely a formal experiment, but a necessary strategy to reflect the

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temporality of climate change itself, its dispersed causality, slow unfolding, and recursive impacts across centuries and narrative frames.

This historical reconfiguration is further developed through the novel's evolving meditation on time and the forces that drive history. In fact, many questions are raised in each preceding narrative, from the messianic rhetoric of Preacher Horrox and the exterminationist ideology of Dr. Goose, to Frobisher's Nietzschean reflections, Luisa Rey's exposure of the predatory hierarchies sustaining nuclear capitalism, and Cavendish's ironic engagement with the cyclical struggle between oppression and resistance. Each layer repositions the reader's understanding of what constitutes historical progress, and Sonmi's story, in particular, revisits and radicalises these concerns within the context of a future that denies the past. While Nea So Copros presents itself as a fully "civilized state" (Mitchell 2014, 360) in which "there are no slaves […] The very word is abolished!" (193), Sonmi exposes this as an ideological illusion. Her revolutionary fifth *Declaration* challenges this official narrative:

> It is a cycle as old as tribalism. In the beginning there is ignorance. Ignorance engenders fear. Fear engenders hatred, and hatred engenders violence. Violence breeds further violence until the only law is whatever is *willed* by the most powerful. What is willed by the Juche is the creation, subjugation and tidy extermination of a vast tribe of duped slaves. (360-361)

For Sonmi, history is not abolished; it is silenced, forbidden, distorted. Ignorance, in this context, refers not simply to a lack of information, but to a condition actively imposed by the regime to sever people from their past. Without access to historical knowledge, individuals are unable to recognise patterns of oppression or imagine alternatives to the present order. As she observes, the past has become "a zone even more forbidden" (243), precisely because the "corpocratic state outlaws *any* historical discourse" (Ibid.). Her questioning of this erasure reveals a growing awareness of history's subversive potential: "Is it

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that history provides a bank of human experience that rivals Media's? If so, why preserve archives […] whose very xistence is a state's secret?" (243). This question shifts the stakes from information to experience: if media manufacture a perpetual present, history safeguards conscious life across time. By criminalising the archive, the corpocracy severs intergenerational transmission, depriving subjects of the means to situate their own moment within a longer historical field.

The elimination of history, then, is not merely a tool of censorship, it is a means of eradicating the capacity to perceive structural recursions and historical continuity. By severing access to the past, the corpocracy suppresses recognition of how domination mutates across time and thwarts the imagination of resistance grounded in collective memory. Yet *Cloud Atlas* as a whole, and Sonmi's narrative in particular, work precisely against this logic. Through its nested, interlinked narratives, the novel foregrounds the recursive nature of history, drawing lines of continuity across centuries. In doing so, it engages an epistemology of climate change that requires readers to continually shift between past, present, and future to perceive not isolated events, but systemic patterns that reassert themselves across time.

This sense of recursion is reinforced not only thematically, but also through recurring motifs and intertextual echoes that connect the novel's layered narratives. One such motif is the comet-shaped birthmark, which appears on five central characters across the six narratives, including Sonmi, who locates hers "between my collar-bone and shoulder-blade: here" (204). Described as resembling "a comet" (205), the mark functions as an embodied trace of interconnection or transmigration, subtly linking characters across disparate times and spaces. Yet this is only one of the many ways the novel signals continuity across time. A particularly striking instance of recursion occurs in the narrative when Cavendish's story resurfaces, not as a memoir, but as a film Sonmi watches with Hae-Joo, a member of the Union. Through this mediated

glimpse of the past, she accesses a long-forgotten history and engages in its interpretation, offering layered commentary on the distance and proximity between epochs. The film, then, becomes a vehicle for historiographical reflection.

In the UK edition of *Cloud Atlas*[18], Sonmi's response to the film foregrounds her emotional and intellectual engagement with a vanished world, underscoring the stakes of historical memory and the interplay of continuity and rupture with her own present:

> Its world intrigued me; its differences from our own were indescribable. Purebloods [humans] did all the menial work then; the only fabricants were sickly sheep. People sagged and uglified as they aged; no dewdrugs. Elderly people waited to die in prisons for the senile and incontinent; no fixed-term lifespans, no euthanasium. [...] Time is what stops history happening at once; time is the speed at which the past disappears. Film gives those lost worlds a brief resurrection. Those since-fallen buildings, those long-decayed faces, they engrossed me. *We were as you are*, they said. *The present doesn't matter*. (244, italics in the original)

The US edition sharpens this dynamic even further. Sonmi reads Cavendish's world not simply as historical curiosity but as a window onto the conditions that prefigure her own life in Nea So Copros: the rise of corpocracy, racialised social hierarchies, and systemic ecological decay. As she reflects:

> Whatever the reason, I was engrossed. The past is a world both indescribably different from and yet subtly similar to Nea So Copros. People sagged and uglified as they aged in those days: no dewdrugs. Elderly purebloods waited to die in prisons for the senile: no fixed-term life spans, no euthanasium. Dollars circulated as little sheets of paper and the only fabricants were sickly livestock. However, corpocracy was emerging and social strata was demarked, based on dollars and, curiously, the quantity of melanin in one's skin. [...] Time is the speed at which the past decays, but disneys [films] enable a brief resurrection. Those since

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[18]   As first noted by Martin Paul Eve (2016), the US and UK editions of David Mitchell's novel contain significant variations, as the text was edited in the UK, but these changes were not carried over into the US edition. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the 2014 UK edition is used as the primary reference throughout this thesis; however, where substantial narrative differences occur, as in the example presented here, such divergences are treated as analytically significant.

> fallen buildings, those long-eroded faces: Your present, not we, is the true illusion, they seem to say. For fifty minutes, for the first time since my ascension, I forgot myself, utterly, ineluctably. (Mitchell 2004, 125)

In this version, the signs of societal collapse are made even clearer. Sonmi's recognition of corpocracy's rise and the stratification of society based on wealth and race underscores the novel's critique of unchecked technological and economic expansion. Through Cavendish's film, she observes not only a distant past but also a world in which the seeds of the dystopia she inhabits have already been planted. Her reflection—"Your present, not we, is the true illusion"—reverses the gaze of historical distance, destabilizing any assumption of progress and revealing the illusions that underwrite the contemporary world. The film, then, becomes more than mere entertainment; it serves as both a warning and a testament to the cyclical nature of history, one in which progress and oppression remain entangled.

In both versions, the recursive dynamic of the novel's structure is foregrounded: past narratives resurface in future contexts, not only as echoes but as living memory reinterpreted through new frames. The viewing of Cavendish's film thus dramatizes the very logic of *Cloud Atlas*, a logic that, as already contended, refuses linearity and instead insists on the active, felt re-presencing of history across time, media, and narrative form. In doing so, the novel sustains its commitment to "post-time", allowing mediated fragments of the past to rupture the present and reassert their ethical and historical force. This structure also resonates with an epistemology of climate change, in which interruption and repetition are key to apprehending its temporality and impact.

In addition to its thematic focus on tracing the historical forces contributing to ecological degradation, Sonmi's section also extends the novel's formal engagement with the mediation of history and climate knowledge. Just as Cavendish's memoir is re-encountered as a film—a transformation that

dramatizes *Cloud Atlas*'s pattern of remediation and historical re-presencing—Sonmi's own narrative is shaped by the medium through which it is delivered: an orison, a "silver egg-shaped device" that "records both an image of your face and your words" (Mitchell 2014, 187). Her account is not framed as "an interrogation […] or a trial" but as a version of truth, intended for "historians of the future" and to be "archived at the Ministry of Testaments" (187). The orison therefore functions simultaneously as a recording device and a vessel for historical preservation. Its explicitly archival purpose, addressed to a future audience of historians, underscores the novel's engagement with the idea that narrative meaning emerges across asynchronous moments. This delayed transmission of Sonmi's testimony points to the novel's broader structure, in which stories are not only retold but reanimated, allowing historical knowledge to surface recursively through mediated forms.

Zooming in on the narrative configuration of this archival trace reveals a structure that closely resembles the epistolary mode, an observation that opens interesting avenues for further reflection. As previously discussed in this thesis, Altman (1982) defines epistolary form by the presence of an internal reader, an addressee within the text who anchors the exchange and shapes the production of meaning (88). This is clearly the case here: Sonmi's words are directly addressed to the archivist conducting the interview, whose presence determines the direction and content of her testimony. At the same time, the stated audience, namely the "historians of the future", invokes a projected internal readership, reinforcing what Altman identifies as a key trait of the epistolary form: its strong self-reflexivity, which arises from the narrator's awareness of being read and recorded across time (210). In this way, the narrative not only conveys content, but meditates on its own mode of transmission and reception.

The formatting of the page materializes this layered dynamic. The archivist's questions appear in bold, while Sonmi's responses are rendered in

regular typeface, visually enacting the asymmetrical power relation between speaker and recorder. Though Sonmi narrates in the first person, her voice is continuously shaped by the questions that frame it. As a matter of fact, while the interview format conveys a sense of immediacy, giving the impression of an authentic, recorded testimony, it also introduces a layer of ambiguity. Sonmi's responses are inevitably constrained by the interviewer's agenda, prompting the reader to question the objectivity of the narrative and the trustworthiness of her account. This trust is further destabilized at the conclusion of her testimony, when it is revealed that the revolutionary group she joined, the Union, was orchestrated by the government itself, designed to manufacture fear around the idea that fabricants might possess consciousness. In the end, her actions, rather than advancing her cause, serve to reinforce the very system she sought to resist. Nevertheless, Sonmi does not frame her story as a failure. Instead, she expresses hope that her interview will preserve her legacy, that it will be read by historians of the future who might recognise her intentions and restore some ethical value to her resistance. This hope is not purely speculative; it is grounded in her awareness that her ideas are already circulating widely. As she notes, "[m]y ideas have been reproduced a billionfold" (Mitchell 2014, 365), suggesting that the ideological seeds she has sown are already taking root. This hope proves to be partially fulfilled: in the sixth and final section of the novel—the highest diegetic level—her testimony is remediated as sacred text. The orison turns out to be more than a recording device; it becomes a revered object, a vessel believed to contain divine truth. From the perspective of the future protagonist, Sonmi's account functions as a holy text, a cautionary tale imbued with spiritual authority yet still open to reinterpretation. While her revolutionary actions ultimately served the regime she meant to oppose, her words endure, transformed through belief and repetition into a new kind of legacy.

This final transformation underscores the novel's sustained interest in how narratives are recontextualized across temporal and ideological divides. Each level of transmission reshapes meaning, reminding the reader that truth is not fixed but continually constructed. At the same time, this recursive structure continues to reflect the novel's ecological investment. As in earlier sections, the novel reworks and hybridizes literary genres and media forms, adapting them to the narrative and epistemological demands posed by complex historical and ecological entanglements. Through this experimentation, *Cloud Atlas* advances a formal logic grounded in interconnection suggesting that to represent planetary crisis meaningfully requires not only thematic engagement but a narrative form capable of inhabiting temporal, generic, and medial complexity.

Alongside this inspiring aspect of Sonmi's life story, vessel for future change, including ecological transformation, the formal configuration of her narrative deepens this potential by shaping a reading experience that mirrors the epistemology of climate change. Just as climate knowledge requires the superimposition of multiple perspectives across time and scale, so too does the orison narrative demand that the reader navigate layered positions of reception and interpretation. As previously noted, Kukkonen (2019) argues that epistolary narratives generate a structure of "joint attention", cueing the reader to interpret the text in relation to its implied addressee. Here, the reader is invited to adopt a stance of "secondary joint attention" alongside the archivist, Sonmi's addressee, while also considering the perspective of a possible intended audience of "historians of the future". These layered positions of reception act as "relays" of "joint attention", mediating the real-world reader's engagement with the narrative. In this way, the actual reader experiences the testimony not as a neutral record but as an interaction shaped by another, while the boundaries between narrator, addressee, intended audience and actual readership become blurred. This dynamic is also resonant with an epistemology of climate change, which

cannot be grasped through direct sensory experience, as it is not a discrete phenomenon, but a complex, distributed process apprehended through mediated forms, such as scientific models, data projections, and diffused testimony. Like climate knowledge, Sonmi's account reaches the reader only through a chain of mediation shaped by the purposes, audiences, and interpretive frameworks of those who transmit it, underscoring that understanding emerges not from unfiltered immediacy but from the negotiation of overlapping perspectives across temporal and epistemic distance.

This structure crystallises the novel's broader commitment to narrative mediation and reflexivity, aligning its form with an exploration of climate temporality, testimonial authority, and the politics of memory. The layering of perspectives and constraints within the interview format, mediated through both the orison and its dual audience, mirrors what Leckie (2022) defines as a post-temporal framework, in which cause and effect are displaced, time is fractured, and the past re-emerges unpredictably within the present. As both testimonial device and archival object, the orison embodies this dynamic: it preserves a record shaped by immediate political manipulation yet addressed to multiple, asynchronous futures. In inscribing these formal tensions, *Cloud Atlas* does more than represent climate crisis; it actively stages the epistemological challenges of a temporally dispersed catastrophe. Just as climate change knowledge depends on mediated accounts, projections, and reconstructions across timescales too vast for direct perception, Sonmi's testimony reaches the reader only through layers of redirection and reinterpretation. The result is a model of narrative agency that acknowledges the instability of truth while insisting on the necessity of transmitting knowledge across uncertain and fractured temporal horizons.

2.2.6 Encircling the Future: Zachry's Oral Testimony

The sixth and final narrative, "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After", is set in a post-apocalyptic future on the Hawaiian Archipelago. It forms the structural and thematic core of *Cloud Atlas*: unlike the other narratives, it is not divided in two but unfolds continuously, underscoring its centrality. This formal distinction mirrors its thematic weight, as the narrative gathers and refracts the concerns of the preceding stories while projecting them into a speculative future. The leap it stages—the novel's last—plunges the reader into a world reshaped by "the Fall", a civilizational collapse that has reduced human societies to scattered tribal groups. Zachry, the protagonist and narrator, belongs to "the Valleysmen", a pastoral community living on "Big I", the largest remaining Hawaiian island. The Valleysmen's world bears the scars of long-term climate change: rising sea levels have submerged much of the archipelago, leaving only parts of Big I habitable. As Zachry recalls, "Honokaa was the bustlin'est town o' nor-east Windward, see, Old'uns'd [humans before the Fall] builded it high 'nuff to s'vive the risin' ocean, not like half o' Hilo nor Kona neither what was flooded most moons" (Mitchell 2014, 299). Ecological collapse here is not background detail but an inescapable marker of place and history.

By returning the reader to the Pacific, Mitchell forges a symmetry with the novel's opening in Adam Ewing's Pacific Journal. Yet this continuity is shadowed by rupture: the same oceanic world that once staged imperial expansion and colonial exploitation has, by Zachry's time, been radically transformed by catastrophic environmental alterations. This parallel does more than close the circle of the novel's geography. It crystallises the spatiotemporal horizon of *Cloud Atlas* as one measured not by individual lifetimes but by intergenerational survival and planetary history. In this respect, it can be argued that the story's emergent exploration of climate change is, in fact, framed through post-

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apocalypticism[19], a mode that foregrounds the fragility of civilisation and the entanglement of human survival with natural systems. In this respect, Zachry's world not only depicts a specific future but also retrospectively comments on the preceding narratives, casting their histories of domination, extraction, and resistance as stages in a longer trajectory of planetary crises. The reference to ancestral migration, "the Flotilla what bringed our ancestors got to Big I to 'scape the Fall" (255), locates the Valleysmen within this continuum and positions their struggle as both a consequence of past disasters and a prelude to uncertain futures.

The plot begins with Zachry as a boy, camping with his Pa and his brother Adam at Sloosha's Crossing, a passage point on Big Isle. While briefly away from camp, Zachry strays into the territory of the Kona, a violent and expansionist tribe infamous for conquering, enslaving, or killing other tribal groups on Big I. Chased by the Kona after stumbling into their encampment, Zachry flees blindly back toward his family. Hidden after a fall, he watches as the attackers descend on his father and brother, killing his father and enslaving his brother Adam. This event leaves Zachry with a lasting burden of guilt: he believes he led the Kona to their camp but conceals this by claiming that he only hid in terror. His failure to act, compounded by silence, inaugurates a recurring struggle with fear and shame that shadows his life and frames the narrative to come. Allegorically, Zachry's burden gestures toward humanity's uneasy relationship with its own past, characterized by violence, complicity, and denial that continues to shape its fate. The story's movement from the intimate scale of one boy's trauma to the wider scale of civilizational destiny is triggered by the arrival of Meronym on Big I. A member of the Prescients, a technologically advanced community who not

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[19]   For a definition of post-apocalyptic fiction, this work draws on Heather J. Hicks (2016), who characterizes the genre as encompassing both the concept of apocalypse and its aftermath. Hicks describes post-apocalyptic fiction as focusing on catastrophic events of local or global proportions and their consequences.

only possess superior technological tools but also preserve knowledge of the past that the Valleysmen have almost entirely lost, Meronym comes from the island of Prescience, whose exact location is uncertain. She travels with her people on a great ship, visiting Big I to barter technology for food, fresh water, and wool for clothing. She declares that her purpose is to stay on Big I for a year to study the life of the Valleysmen, and she is welcomed into Zachry's household, hosted by his mother and siblings. Her presence precipitates the confrontation between Zachry's inward struggle with fear and the broader arc of human history across the centuries.

This confrontation is already foreshadowed by Zachry's troubled conscience, haunted from the very beginning by visions of Old Georgie, the devil who tempts him towards violence and mistrust: "Old Georgie's path an' mine crossed more times'n I'm comfy mem'ryin', an' after I'm died, no sayin' what that fangy devil won't try an' do to me…" (249). Old Georgie personifies Zachry's turmoil, embodying a philosophy of life rooted in the principle that the strong eats the weak. His voice resonates not only with the predatory logic of the Kona but also with the destructive ethos of the Old'uns, whose pursuit of domination and exploitation echoes the imperialist ideology voiced by Horrox in Ewing's journal and the parasitism embodied by Dr. Goose. The reader is invited to perceive in Zachry's dilemma a repetition of humanity's oldest choice: whether to perpetuate cycles of greed and violence or to resist them.

The ethical dilemma Zachry faces, whether to resist or yield to Old Georgie's whisperings, cannot be disentangled from the problem of knowledge itself. As a member of a tribe with little grasp of history, Zachry lacks the means to comprehend the mistakes of the past and therefore cannot easily distinguish between good and evil. His ignorance is counterbalanced by Meronym, who preserves fragments of lost knowledge. When Zachry asks who caused the Fall if not Old Georgie, Meronym replies:

> ***Old'uns tripped their own Fall.***
> Oh, her words was a rope o' smoke. *But Old'uns'd got the Smart!*
> *I mem'ry she answered, Yay, Old'uns' Smart mastered sicks, miles, seeds an'*
> *made miracles ord'nary,* **but it din't master one thing, nay, a hunger in the**
> **hearts o' humans, yay, a hunger for more.**
> *More what? I asked. Old'uns'd got ev'rythin'.*
> *Oh, more gear, more food, faster speeds, longer lifes, easier lifes, more power, yay.*
> **Now the Hole World is big, but it weren't big 'nuff for that hunger what**
> **made Old'uns rip out the skies an' boil up the seas an' poison soil with**
> **crazed atoms an' donkey 'bout with rotted seeds so new plagues was**
> **borned an' babbits was freak-birthed. Fin'ly, bit'ly, then quicksharp,**
> **states busted into bar'bric tribes an' the Civ'lize Days ended, 'cept for a**
> **few folds'n'pockets here'n'there, where its last embers glimmer.** (Mitchell
> 2004, 286; italics in the original, bold added)

In this exchange, the history of human civilization is refigured as a cautionary tale of self-destruction: the Old'uns, endowed with "the Smart" to master science and technology, are undone by their unmastered hunger for more. Their rapacity leads to ecological devastation, skies ripped open, seas boiled, soil poisoned, genetic manipulation gone awry, and, ultimately, civilizational collapse. Zachry's personal ethical journey is thus bound to this larger historical arc: resisting Old Georgie's temptations requires him to grapple with Meronym's account of humanity's past mistakes. At the same time, the narrative rearticulates a concern already voiced in the preceding sections of the novel: what force drives history forward, and toward what ends? From Ewing's journal to Frobisher's letters, from Luisa Rey's investigation to Cavendish's memoir and Sonmi's testimony, each narrative foregrounded the tension between individual agency and systemic compulsion in shaping historical time. In Zachry's world, this question is reframed as the stark aftermath of ecological collapse. The narrative's engagement with climate change, then, emerges not as a warning of what might come, but as a meditation on what has already taken place: a world where collapse has remade human existence, leaving survivors to confront the central question of what kind of future to build.

Far from closing off that future, however, the novel insists on its indeterminacy. This openness is encoded in the very structure of *Cloud Atlas*: the sixth narrative, though set furthest in the future, does not conclude the novel but is encircled by earlier stories that temporally belong to the past. The effect is to suggest that the future is never self-contained but always entangled with the histories that precede it. This structural choice resonates a temporality of climate change in which the future is not linear or progressive, but recursive, continually reshaped by its relation to past and present. Zachry's world of ecological aftermath is thus not presented as a final ending, but as one moment in a continuum where repetition and renewal remain unresolved. Just as climate change in reality binds the fate of the future to the cumulative consequences of past and present actions, the novel's recursive design demands that readers look back in order to move forward. To read *Cloud Atlas* is to experience this epistemology of climate change: the apparent end point of collapse is enfolded within stories that belong to earlier centuries, and the act of rereading those stories in light of what comes after mirrors the way futures are continually reconfigured by retrospection. In this way, the novel transforms its own narrative temporality into an analogue of climate temporality itself, where what is to come cannot be disentangled from what has already been.

If Cloud Atlas's structure encircles the future within the past, "Sloosha's Crossin'" intensifies this entanglement by dramatizing an act of speech that addresses both "what is gone" and "what is yet to come", as Zachry, in old age, recounts his life to a younger audience, foregrounding the intergenerational reach of his testimony.[20] His awareness that "no matter how loud I shout, Boy

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[20] Zachry's first-person voice, while resonant with the epistolary forms that pervade earlier narratives, crucially departs from them. Rather than a letter written to a specific addressee, his account takes the form of oral storytelling, apparently unmediated and recorded in a register that mimics speech. As the previous quotations illustrate, both Zachry and Meronym speak in a broken English whose grammar and syntax are deliberately altered, producing a language that appears regressed, less polished, and marked by loss. This linguistic strategy immerses the reader

Zachry, he don't hear me nor never will" (252) underscores the impossibility of correcting one's own past self; his story cannot alter the choices already made. Yet the telling matters precisely because, although the past cannot be altered, it can be revisited and understood anew. By reframing his experience for others, Zachry transforms past mistakes into lessons for the future. In this way, the narrative positions itself as both retrospective and prospective: bound to the fixity of what has been, yet oriented toward the possibility of transmitting knowledge across generations.

The ethical weight of oral transmission in Zachry's voice thus mirrors the novel's broader preoccupation with climate temporality, where the past cannot be undone but can be recounted in the hope of altering the trajectory of the future. Yet this act of recounting does more than preserve memory: it participates in *Cloud Atlas*'s recursive logic of narrative remediation. Each section of the novel, as already observed, consumes and re-purposes the stories that came before, layering them into new contexts. Zachry's narration enacts this same process. His own story is framed as oral testimony to younger generations, but it also overlaps with the survival of Sonmi's story, which resurfaces here not as testimony but as the legacy of a sacred figure. Among the Valleysmen, Sonmi is worshipped as a deity, though little is actually known of her words or deeds. No written scripture preserves her story; instead, fragments have circulated orally, detached from their original context. The precise historical process by which her testimony, once orchestrated as a tool of state control, became a divine narrative is left obscure, and this very obscurity highlights the fragility and volatility of transmission across time.

The section's coda makes this instability explicit. After Zachry's death, his son reflects on his father's "yarnin's" (324) with a mixture of scepticism and

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in a post-apocalyptic "storyworld" not only through setting and plot, but also at the level of voice and form.

partial belief, admitting that "most yarnin's got a bit o' true, some yarnin's got some true, an' a few yarnin's got a lot o' true" (Ibid.). His discovery of the "silv'ry egg" (Ibid.) orison, however, confirms that some part of Zachry's story was not mere invention. The orison's projection of the "ghost-girl" (Ibid.) speaking in an Old-Un tongue embodies the survival of the past as both wonder and opacity. What is transmitted is not practical knowledge that can "fill empty guts" or defend against Kona raiders, but a flickering remnant of memory, repurposed for new audiences.

In its engagement with oral storytelling and digital transmission, the novel continues to reveal how histories persist through partial, distorted, and re-mediated forms. At the same time, this recursive dynamic also structures the reader's experience: placed at the core of the novel, Zachry's narrative interrupts the first halves of the preceding five stories, which only resume afterwards in reverse order. This positioning means that the far-future world of collapse reframes how the earlier narratives are retrospectively read, casting its shadow backward across them. Just as Zachry's tale of survival retroactively alters the meanings of earlier stories, so too climate discourse requires us to revisit history through the lens of deferred consequences and to read the present as already inscribed by the future. In both cases, the future functions not as a distant horizon but as a disruptive interpretive frame that unsettles linear temporality and forces recognition of systemic recurrence across centuries.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that by examining how *Cloud Atlas* structures and disrupts temporality, we can discern how ecological crisis registers not as an explicit theme but as a marginal and cumulative presence within the narrative. Rather than treating climate change as an isolated future threat, the novel allows

it to emerge indirectly from the historical and systemic forces it depicts (e.g., those of empire and industrial capitalism). The focus on temporal disjunction highlights how the novel's fragmented yet recursive design mirrors the epistemological conditions through which climate change becomes knowable: deferred in its effects, dispersed across scales, and perceptible only through mediation and return.

Across its six interwoven narratives, from Adam Ewing's colonial journal to Zachry's post-apocalyptic oral tale, *Cloud Atlas* transforms the novel's own formal history into a meditation on historical recurrence and ecological entanglement. Mitchell's use of postmodern pastiche is not mere stylistic display, but a means of probing how narrative form mediates the relationship between individual experience and planetary knowledge. By reworking the conventions of diary, letter, memoir, archival testimony, and oral storytelling, the novel exposes the instability of historical transmission and the dependence of meaning on acts of remediation. In this sense, *Cloud Atlas* affirms the novel's continuing capacity to think through climatic indeterminacy: its fragmentation becomes an analogue for the temporal and epistemological fractures through which climate change is experienced and narrated.

Finally, although this chapter has concentrated on *Cloud Atlas* in its own right, it is worth noting how its formal innovations anticipate and inform the narrative strategies examined in the following chapters. Like Mitchell's novel, *The Still Point*, *The Year Without Summer*, and *The Future* engage multispatiality, multiperspectivity, and narrative heterogeneity to register climate change across uneven historical, geographical, and social terrains. Published in 2004, well before the others, *Cloud Atlas* may thus be seen as laying critical groundwork for these later novels, whose attempts to capture planetary scale, historical embeddedness, and the shifting epistemologies of ecological crisis appear to retain traces of its influence.

Chapter Three

Atmospheric Phenomenology and Epistolary Illusion:
Climate Change as Background Condition in *The Still Point*

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3.1 Introduction

Amy Sackville's The Still Point (2011) [2010] allows the inquiry to extend further, as it engages with similar questions to those of Cloud Atlas but does so through a different orientation and set of formal strategies. Both novels belong to an early wave of twenty-first-century fiction in which environmental crisis operates both thematically and formally, not as an overt subject but as a latent condition shaping the narrative's margins. While *Cloud Atlas* employs postmodernist strategies to probe the complexity of history and to chart humanity's trajectory toward ecological collapse, *The Still Point* turns to modernist techniques of interiority, temporality, and affective dislocation to register climate change as a looming presence within everyday life. It does so by reactivating nineteenth-century narratives that imagined the Arctic as land to be discovered and claimed, and then slowly unsettling this frame, so that the Arctic becomes less a stage for imperial heroics than a backdrop against which contemporary climate anxieties quietly surface. Despite their differences, both texts reveal how histories of imperialism, colonialism, exploration, extraction, ecocide, genocide, and capitalism are historically entangled with climate crisis. Rather than being easily identifiable with a wave of climate change fiction, more explicitly engaged with the issue, these novels perform a kind of thematic and formal attunement. Their layered, recursive, and multiscalar structures resonate with the aesthetic and epistemological challenges of representing climate change, remaining acutely sensitive to its distinctive temporal and spatial complexity.

With respect to plot structure and the narrative strands at work in Sackville's novel, *The Still Point* contrasts with the expansive polyphonic sprawl of *Cloud Atlas*. Whereas *Cloud Atlas* relies on a multiplicity of voices, spaces, and temporalities, *The Still Point* narrows its scope to two interwoven spatiotemporal strands. One follows the fictional polar expedition of Edward Mackley, who departs from Vardø, Norway in 1899 in pursuit of the North Pole. The other takes

place over the course of a single summer day in the early twenty-first century, within the enclosed setting of an English country house. There, Edward's great-grand-niece Julia, recently withdrawn from her career in arts heritage and struggling to navigate her marriage to Simon, has undertaken the task of, as the narrator puts it, "sort[ing] the orts and fragments of her inheritance" (Sackville 2011, 17)—a process that involves not just piecing together the material remains of a family history but confronting the ideological residues they carry. Rather than staging a strict and clear division between these two narrative threads, the novel moves fluidly between the two, drawing the reader in and out of past and present, polar landscapes and domestic interiors, the scale of exploration and the scale of everyday life.

This movement is not merely spatial or temporal but generic: *The Still Point* stages a formal dialogue between the polar adventure narrative and the domestic novel. Each strand brings with it distinct temporalities and affective textures: the forward-looking time of exploration versus the habitual, recursive rhythms of domestic life. Yet Sackville renders these temporalities porous. The result is a layered narrative in which imperial ambition and intimate memory, exploration and inheritance converge in a meditation on history, gender, and ecological haunting. This interlacing exceeds formal play; it underpins the novel's ecological orientation. It is in this juxtaposition that climate change becomes visible as an emergent theme of intersecting discourses. As Astrid Bracke (2017) notes,

> postmillennial narratives about polar nature explore the intersections created by, on the one hand, the centenaries of the last important British polar expeditions and, on the other, the significance of the Arctic and Antarctic as spaces of climate crisis. The result of this intersection is a narrative that looks back and forward, that combines the sense of nationalism, exploration and environmental destruction common to nineteenth-century polar journeys with an awareness of environmentalism, extinction and melting poles. (10)

In *The Still Point*, climate change thus surfaces through these layered intersections rather than through direct representation. What emerges is not a depiction of climate crisis per se, but a dispersed affective pattern through which the long afterlives of imperial expansion and ecological instrumentalization continue to reverberate across time.

Because climate change remains largely implicit, the novel invites readers to apprehend it through what can be called a diffuse, atmospheric phenomenology.[1] This entails not only the registration of domestic ambience, including the stuffiness or chill of rooms, the textures of inherited objects, and the shifting moods of familiar interiors, but also the sensory evocation of the Arctic: the glare of white light, the enveloping cold, the silence broken only by wind, and the textures of snow and ice described in Edward's diary. The narrative alternates between these spaces and at times superimposes them, so that the English house, the polar landscape, and the cityscape echo and refract one another. At one point, this movement expands further, bringing the Arctic into direct relation with the city landscape, producing a momentary clash of spaces that makes the climate crisis more legible than elsewhere in the text, though still ambiguously. In this interplay of domestic, polar, and urban ambiences, climate change surfaces as the background condition that binds together disparate times and places.

More in detail, ecological and atmospheric phenomenology is reinforced at the level of form. *The Still Point* situates itself in a modernist lineage: its oscillation between focal perspectives, sustained attention to interiority, and

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[1] My use of the term "atmospheric phenomenology" is close to Rowan Boyson's (2022) account of atmosphere as both material and affective medium, through which literature mediates environmental experience across time and space (7-9). Drawing on Leo Spitzer, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Luce Irigaray, Gernot Böhme, and Peter Sloterdijk (7–8), Boyson situates atmosphere at the intersection of embodiment and perception. She also shows how literary form registers historical transformations of air—from Enlightenment pneumatic science (Robert Boyle, Joseph Priestley) to Romantic and Victorian ambiences—alongside sensory and political studies by Alain Corbin, Holly Dugan, and Hsuan L. Hsu (8-10). This framework clarifies how atmospheric writing exposes the uneven distribution of air and climate along lines of class, gender, and race, making literature a site for the remediation of environmental ideologies (10-11).

layered handling of temporality recall early twentieth-century experiments. Nonetheless, Sackville's recursive movement between past and present adapts these techniques to a twenty-first-century eco-phenomenological horizon, namely to an embodied experience of environment in which climate change and ecological shifts are mediated through perception and memory. At the same time, this modernist inheritance is inflected by features characteristic of nineteenth-century realism, marked by an often voyeuristic attention to the intimate and embodied dimensions of experience. These aspects are evident in the narrator's dual function: offering commentary while foregrounding its own presence, drawing attention to the act of narration itself. In doing so, the narrative makes visible the processes of selection, mediation, and framing through which the story is shaped.

In this respect, the narrator seems to echo Julia's role, as she edits and reconstructs the fragments of Edward's expedition, choosing what to preserve and how to imagine it. Rather than multiplying narrative threads, the novel intensifies resonance by holding two domains in recursive relation: archival traces and atmospheric description in the Arctic chapters echo and refract the textures of contemporary domestic life, and vice versa. In this way, climate change appears less as spectacle than as a form of atmospheric continuity. It is materially real, yet graspable only through complex systems of mediation. Sackville's bifocal structure thus mirrors this dynamic by showing how climate crisis is both lived and known: experienced through environment and atmosphere, yet apprehended through processes of editing, framing, and re-enactment. This provides a conceptual foundation for the analysis that follows, which extends the argument through three interrelated lines of inquiry: the novel's atmospheric phenomenology; its reworking of the polar and domestic genres; and its formal dialogue with modernist aesthetics.

The following sections develop this argument in three stages. First, I examine how the novel allows climate change to emerge obliquely through a mode of diffuse and implicit atmospheric phenomenology. By atmospheric phenomenology, I refer not only to the narrative's attention to weather, including the heat, cold, breeze, or damp, but also to the sensory atmosphere of built spaces, such as the stuffiness or chill inside a house, and to the Arctic environment with its glare, silence, and cold. Crucially, the narrative often works by juxtaposing and overlaying the Arctic and the domestic sphere in ways that blur their boundaries, so that it becomes difficult to separate where the experience is actually located, whether in Julia's concrete surroundings or in her imaginative inhabiting of Edward's expedition. In this indeterminacy, the house and the polar landscape echo and refract one another. Closely tied to this is what I call the texture of the narrative voice, the embodied language through which such atmospheric perceptions are articulated. This texture matters because it shapes how the reader senses and internalises the environment of the novel, inviting an affective engagement with climate and atmosphere that exceeds purely descriptive content. Alongside this more ambient register, the novel also offers a single moment where climate change is more directly suggested, when Arctic and city landscapes are brought into sharp relation and climate crisis is foregrounded, though still obliquely, through this contamination between spaces.

Second, I turn to the novel's dialogue with the polar narrative and the domestic novel, with particular attention to the role of Edward's diary. As a textual form, the diary recalls the conventions of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century explorer fiction, which underpinned the heroic construction of the explorer and cast imperial expansion as a narrative of mastery, conquest, and national greatness. Yet Sackville unsettles this tradition by placing the diary in the hands of Julia, a twenty-first-century editor whose imaginative engagement

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with the text risks reproducing its fascination with conquest but ultimately works to expose and deconstruct it. The diary produces what can be described as an "epistolary illusion": Julia is momentarily drawn into the explorer's perspective, inhabiting Edward's experience as if it were her own, while at the same time slipping into the position of Emily, his wife, so that she becomes both his companion on the journey and, imaginatively, his lover. This conflation of roles underscores how the diary collapses temporal, spatial, and gendered boundaries, pulling Julia into the text before she re-emerges with a more critical awareness of the imperial and patriarchal logics at its core. In this way, the novel participates in a broader postmillennial re-reading of polar exploration narratives, in which the imperial drive toward conquest and mastery is revisited under the shadow of ecological crisis. The Arctic, long imagined as the ultimate site of imperial endurance and scientific triumph, is thus reframed as a locus of ethical and environmental reckoning, where the language of heroism and discovery is revealed as complicit with ideologies of domination over both nature and the feminine. Yet this exposure of imperial ideology is not purely demystifying: by unsettling the aesthetic and emotional structures that once sustained those myths, the novel also opens a space for alternative modes of ethical, affective and ecological relationality to emerge. Reading Edward's diary alongside the domestic frame therefore exposes how these intertwined discourses of empire, gender, and environment structure historical knowledge itself, while also suggesting that new epistemologies relevant to climate change arise from this oscillation between critique and reimagining, between different temporal and spatial registers of experience.

Third, I consider the novel's formal debt to modernism and its intertextual references, focusing on how its inherited aesthetic strategies, though not explicitly oriented toward climate representation, nonetheless resonate with the epistemological demands of climate change. Drawing on the temporal and

spiritual concerns of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, the novel explores subjective time, memory, and the failure of transcendence through recursive, fragmented narration. It also adopts the compressed temporality of the modernist 'one-day novel', layering the textures of domestic routine with broader historical and ecological undercurrents. These strategies are extended through the use of embedded media, multiperspectival focalisation, and narrative disjunction, cultivating a readerly phenomenology of temporal and spatial dislocation. Taken together, these inheritances do not simply foreground temporality and mediation, but play along a logic of complexity, through non-linearity, fragmentation, and superimposition, that mirrors the interpretive and perceptual challenges of the climate crisis.

3.2 Embodied Language and Overlapping Atmospheres

As outlined in the introduction, this chapter begins by examining how the novel allows climate change to emerge obliquely through what has been referred to as a mode of diffuse and implicit atmospheric phenomenology. Before turning to this analysis, however, it is necessary to outline the storyline more concretely, since the dynamics of atmosphere, indeterminacy and spatial juxtaposition only become legible in relation to its unfolding events.

The narrative takes place in a Victorian house on the outskirts of London, where Julia Mackley lives with her husband Simon. Over the course "of a glorious midsummer day in the first decade of the twenty-first century" (Sackville 2011, 33), Julia moves between reconstructing her family history and reflecting on the fractures in her marriage. She is devoting herself to editing and publishing the story of her great-great-uncle, remembered within the family as "the famous Edward Mackley, the explorer" (16). At the core of this archival and editorial work lies Edward's diary, discovered decades after his death: "found in

an aluminium case in a frozen grave in Franz Josef Land, still clutched in his blackened hand along with a picture of his wife and a pocket watch, in the spring of 1959" (29). His final entries tell of exhaustion, endless darkness, and the recognition of defeat: "'I cannot go on with it, I fear;' […] 'I cannot go on'" (29). Although Edward's expedition ended in failure, the version preserved within Julia's family recast it not as a story of loss but as one of enduring fidelity. "[T]he story that the family has told itself for a century, that has passed down the years through a dozen retellings to reach Julia now—the story that has been her favourite since childhood" (35) is that of Edward's noble struggle and of Emily, his wife, who waited faithfully for sixty years. This legend of "[p]arting, waiting, and romantic loss" (56) looms over Julia's own marriage, casting a shadow on her strained relationship with Simon, who is quietly wrestling with guilt after a brief infidelity. Over the course of the day that the novel narrates, Julia's attempts to draw closer to her husband are repeatedly inflected by the weight of her family's myth and the image of Edward and Emily's seemingly flawless union.

Yet this narrative of unwavering devotion is quietly dismantled by a late revelation. Julia's cousin Jonathan discloses that Emily became pregnant following an affair with Edward's brother, John. To avert scandal, John's wife, Arabella, "feigned a pregnancy of her own" (226) and adopted the child, allowing "the legend of [Emily's] patience" (227) to endure. For Julia, this disclosure unsettles a foundational family story and reframes it as a fiction sustained through silence and erasure. Her reflection reinterprets the romantic ideal she inherited: "Emily did not wait. She could not wait no longer alone, in the cold. She could not go on without. So soon, she betrayed him. Julia herself exists because of this betrayal" (225). The discovery collapses the sentimental legacy of self-sacrificing love. What had long functioned as a moral touchstone, an emblem of devotion and endurance, is revealed instead as a carefully preserved illusion, the maintenance of which has come at the cost of a far more complex truth.

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Despite its destabilising effect on Julia's sense of identity, the revelation proves unexpectedly liberating. Having long judged her own marriage against the impossible standard of an idealised ancestral romance, Julia is able to reconfigure her expectations: recognising the myth's fragility allows her to see the ordinariness of imperfection not as failure, but as the ground of real intimacy. As the day ends and she drifts into sleep, her final thought, "*Simon. Pure as the driven…*" (306, italics in the original), marks a subtle but meaningful shift in perspective. Where Edward's driven heroism once set the bar for romantic devotion, Julia now begins to apprehend a different kind of strength in Simon's quiet presence. The novel's closing image captures this realignment with understated lyricism:

> Their breathing falls into a rhythm with a harmony of its own, a syncopated sighing that cannot be transcribed. But listen: it is peaceful. The symmetry of them, naked above the sheets, the shape of an urn. His knees are drawn up higher so that if they were to move their feet backwards… but look: the soles of their feet are already touching, her toes curled hot under his. (307)

The symmetry of their bodies, the warmth of their contact, and the rhythm they share contrast with the distant love between Emily and Edward, defined by absence, longing, and irrevocable loss. In place of that impossible romance, the novel offers the quiet possibility of renewed connection: not dramatic, transcendent love, but the imperfect and enduring intimacies of ordinary life.

At first glance, this overview of *The Still Point* suggests little relevance to climate change: the narrative appears preoccupied with domestic intimacy, family mythmaking, and the emotional reverberations of archival work. Yet, as outlined in the introduction, the novel's ecological dimension does not lie in thematic centrality. Rather, it surfaces incidentally, through atmospheric, temporal and spatial disjunctions that obfuscate the boundary between past and present, domestic comforts and Arctic desolation, yielding a narrative that

registers, however indirectly, the ecological anxieties of contemporary culture. This emergent concern with environmental crisis can be traced through several of the novel's representational strategies: most notably in the juxtaposition and subsequent superimposition of the house and the Arctic, but also in the embodied texture of the narratorial voice, which conveys both the characters' immediate experience of their surroundings and the reimagined encounter with the Arctic in strikingly corporeal terms.

With respect to the spatial opposition, the novel continually oscillates between the Arctic landscapes recorded in Edward's diary and the domestic interiors of Julia's twenty-first-century life, staging a sharp contrast between the sublime extremity of polar exploration and the sensuous familiarity of the English home. Edward's entries register the Arctic as a realm of vast, hostile transformations: the crew of his expedition witness "mountains, monsters and beasts rise and topple" (69) in the shifting ice, hear the ship groan under pressure as if the sea itself sought to "crush her and drown her deep in the freezing underworld" (70), and endure the blinding glare of the clouded sky that "suffused the whole flat world around them, shadowless and too bright to bear" (173). The Arctic silence, captured in the phrase "no wind and nothing to stir in it anyway" (71), possesses the same intensity as its overwhelming visual and physical dangers, becoming a space of both sensory saturation and existential emptiness. In striking opposition, Julia's domestic environment is rendered in terms of warmth, fragrance, and sensual plenitude: the light in the attic "gilding Julia's naked skin" (12), the garden thick with trees, cherries, and "tiny flowers dense as stars" (27), or the romantic comfort of the chaise longue in which she reclines "in the manner of an opium addict" (96). Where Edward struggles to record a hostile world in "barely a sentence each day" (173), Julia luxuriates in her surroundings, her body, and the memory of her girlhood summers. From this oscillation between icy tedium and domestic liveliness, the novel begins to

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reconfigure the Arctic not as a remote elsewhere but as a space refracted through the ambience of twenty-first-century domesticity.

With regard to the superimposition of Edward's early twentieth-century Arctic diary and Julia and Simon's domestic environment, several aspects merit attention. Most importantly, the narration of the couple's embodied experience of the house is rendered through a voice that lingers on tactile, corporeal detail. This embodied texture generates an effect of atmospheric phenomenology, crucial to how the novel brings Arctic and domestic spaces into relation. The boundaries between them blur as sensory encounters within the home resonate with, and at times evoke, the imagined polar landscape. Such resonance is enabled by the mediating processes that carry Edward's account into the twenty-first century, through its transmission and Julia's editorial labour. In this way, the novel dramatizes how domestic life becomes haunted by polar experience, refracted through narrative memory. What results is not only a historical contrast but also a sensory superimposition: the icy desolation of Edward's record reverberates in Julia's present, transposed into the oppressive heat of a modern summer. Arctic cold and contemporary heat do not simply mark different climates; they become affectively entangled through the characters' embodied perception. Thus, *The Still Point* reframes the North Pole not as a distant elsewhere but as a space that intrudes upon and reshapes contemporary life.

Zooming in on the novel's opening scene makes visible the atmospheric effects that emerge from the embodied texture of the narratorial voice. The summer night's oppressive heat is inscribed directly onto Julia and Simon's bodies in their overheated bedroom. In the aftermath of sex, physical intimacy dissolves into sweaty discomfort: "Then they are unsticking from each other and, unstuck, are two separate bodies again in a too-hot room together" (3). The effect of sensory immersion is contingent on the narratorial perspective that produces it. The third-person omniscient, extradiegetic narrator proves notably intrusive,

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almost voyeuristic in its attention to bodily detail and atmospheric condition. Rather than offering a neutral or distanced account, the narration lingers with tactile precision on surfaces, textures, and movements. As Julia shifts on the bed, "she lets a hand rest on the bone between her breasts; her skin is slick, still sticky, clamming to the sheet" (Ibid.). The narrator does not simply describe but probes and exposes, drawing the reader into a sensory proximity that mirrors the characters' physical closeness while exceeding their own awareness. At times, this voice seems to hover ghostlike through the house, moving from room to room, recording even the "hours [that] pass without event" (5) or the stifling heat of the windowless bathroom, before returning to the bed to observe the bodies' shifting forms. This haunting presence is intensified by the narrator's direct address to the readers, drawing them into the narrative's atmospheric intimacy: "You can draw a little nearer if you are very quiet" (5); "Listen, and you will catch the echoes" (16); "Quietly, now" (105). Such moments fold the readers into the scene, inviting them not only to see but to feel the "rumble and stink" (5) of Simon's breath, or the narrow, sweaty gap "moist with their sweat" (Ibid.) between Simon's and Julia's bodies. This intrusive, corporeally attuned narration is crucial to how *The Still Point* develops its mode of atmospheric phenomenology, in which emotional and environmental states are registered through the sensory language of the body. The effect is not merely descriptive, but affective: it immerses the reader in the dense, airless atmosphere of the moment.

This immersive effect needs to be read considering what Karin Kukkonen (2019) terms the "designed sensory flow" of narrative, whereby narrative form guides the reader's embodied engagement with storyworld events. The third-person omniscient voice here does not merely report but triggers re-enaction, inducing an embodied mode of reading that encourages affective resonance with the characters' sensory experiences. Through this modulation of narrative

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attention, the reader is drawn into a process of embodied simulation, experiencing heat and bodily discomfort cognitively and, therefore, somatically. Kukkonen and Caracciolo's (2021) model of "joint attention" is also relevant: the reader, invited by direct address to "draw a little nearer" or "listen" participates in a mediated act of shared attention that transforms description into guided re-enactment. In this sense, the novel encourages a phenomenological intimacy with both domestic and environmental conditions, one that moves beyond narrative comprehension into physical recognition.

The strongly intrusive tone and embodied precision of the narratorial voice are essential to producing the vivid phenomenology of domestic heat, but this same voice also grants privileged access to the characters' dreams, thoughts, and memories. It is through this access, most notably to their dreams, that the novel continues to stage the superimposition of Arctic and domestic space. As the narrator observes, maintaining its intrusive, almost clinical perspective: "[c]loser inspection of their eyelids will reveal that she is dreaming" (Sackville 2011, 7). From this privileged vantage point, the narration conjures not merely an imagined Arctic landscape, but a sensorially rich and embodied experience of it: "*North, north, blue and white; silent, still. Beyond the world in a clean air. Unused, I am bare skin, against the snow. […] It is not heaven, it is just air, deep, blue, indigo air, smattered silver*" (Ibid., italics in the original). In this frozen elsewhere, Julia's body is exposed and waiting, immersed in a stillness that contrasts starkly with the heat of the preceding scene. Simon, too, dreams of the far North, but his vision is darker, more angular and threatening: a "sea churning with chunks of sea-ice" (8) that grips his ship until "he woke, chilled, to air so hot that moving feels like swimming" (Ibid.). While Julia's vision leans toward serenity and dissolution, his suggests pressure and confinement; yet both ultimately converge in the same sensory recognition of heat, a shared return to the dense and inescapable atmosphere of the present. This dream sequence contributes to staging an

atmospheric and affective superimposition: the embodied reality of an overheated twenty-first-century night merges with the imagined sensations of a remote polar past. Here again, the reader is not positioned at a remove from the experience but drawn into it affectively, re-enacting the oscillation between extreme heat and cold, present and past. This narrative design collapses the spatial and temporal distance between past and contemporary ecological circumstances, allowing the reader to encounter environmental conditions not through explanatory exposition, but as atmospheric sensation felt on the skin, in the lungs, through the sweat-soaked sheets or the cold press of snow.

Another way the narrative develops its atmospheric phenomenology is through the depiction of the house not merely as a setting but as a site of historical sedimentation and affective permeability. The attic, in particular, becomes a portal through which Julia accesses the sensory and emotional atmosphere of the Arctic. Described as "stacked literally to the rafters with books, papers, letters, chests, boots and sealskins, skis and ski poles, instruments of navigation—all the saved scraps of Edward's legacy" (11), the attic is crowded with remnants of polar exploration that collapse temporal and spatial distance. This is not only the house Julia grew up in, but also the repository of a story she inherited, passed down through maternal figures who sustained the family myth of Edward's voyage. As the narrator recalls, there was "always, for Julia, something enchanted about their nights out in the garden, or by the fire in the sitting room […] the spaces that were not all oak and grandeur but filled with secrets and softness" (53), where "the story passed from Emily to Helen [her aunt] and on, through a line of surrogate daughters" (Ibid.). In these intimate domestic rituals, "they cast a spell of ice so that it crept over the walls and enclosed them, glittering" (Ibid.), overlaying childhood memories of warmth and safety with the imagined aura of snow and loss.

This enchantment returns in moments of reverie, when the heat of the attic becomes a threshold into an embodied Arctic elsewhere. As Julia is drawn to the attic, she hears an internal summons: "*Back to the animals, back to the snow, the sunrise this morning so beautiful pale blue*" (41, italics in the original). In the "gloomy warmth" (48) of the room, she suddenly "tastes cold sea salt on her lip" (Ibid.). The sensory registers of salt and cold emerge within a space otherwise defined by sun, heat, and dust. Later on, Julia experiences something like ecstasy, suspended between the physical reality of her surroundings and a vividly imagined elsewhere: "*Brightness, blue, blue and white, silent still; skin against the snow. […] I am elated, I am waiting…*" (98, italics in the original). The attic, saturated with sun and the scent of wood, becomes a site of imaginative transport, where two distinct temporal and spatial conditions blur into each other. Julia does not just remember stories of the Arctic; she feels them too. In these moments, the narrative gives shapes to the novel's atmospheric poetics, allowing memory, sensation, and environment to intermingle across the entwined timelines and settings of the novel.

Just as Julia's reveries blur the boundaries between domestic space and polar imagination, so too does Simon experience involuntary moments of atmospheric collapse during the day's work in his London office. Yet unlike Julia's Arctic visions, which emerge from deliberate, almost ritualistic, encounters with objects and memory, Simon's are unbidden, surfacing through heat-induced distraction and sensory disorientation. He is particularly affected by the oppressive heat of the day: "He was still hot. The windows were down but the air, like the cars, was at a standstill" (110); "Feeling hot and bloated in a loud restaurant, the staleness of the morning's sweat lingering under new dampness" (116). Despite his efforts to concentrate, the intensity of the heat seeps into his consciousness, triggering a resurgence of the Arctic dreamscape first introduced in the opening pages. He begins to conflate his bodily sensation of

entrapment with a remembered Polar image: "He is pressed upon from all sides; he is still trapped in that Arctic he dreamed of, jagged, bitter, hard, crushed by the frozen sea" (149). The imagery becomes increasingly hallucinatory, culminating in a mirage-like vision that overlays the urban with the glacial: "[h]e is looking at the river, and he is seeing a cold grey sea, and between its banks, just drifting past the plane trees of Victoria Gardens, an iceberg is jutting out absurdly into the summer day, vast, overwhelming, vertiginous" (149). The effect is uncanny: an atmospheric rupture in which the contemporary space of London is momentarily overtaken by the imagined Arctic. While Simon insists, "he's not a person that ever dreams" (Ibid.), the vision suggests otherwise: a waking reverie shaped by both subconscious anxiety and latent historical knowledge.

In this moment—perhaps the only instance in the novel where climate change surfaces with a bit more clarity—the Arctic becomes not only a site shaped by narrative legacy but a space of climate instability, its intrusion into the present tethered to the contemporary imagination of melting ice, rising seas, and planetary precarity. This moment further exemplifies the novel's broader approach to environmental crisis through a diffuse pattern of sensory convergence and spatial doubling. Rather than presenting climate change as a narrative focal point, *The Still Point* renders it through atmospheric impressions and embodied reveries in which heat and cold, interior and exterior, present and past become entangled. The porous boundary between domestic space and Arctic landscape allows ecological anxiety to emerge as ambient dissonance, a felt disruption in the textures of everyday life.

In staging this affective permeability, the reader is drawn into a process of bitemporal and bispatial negotiation, moving between the embodied heat of a present-day summer and the imagined chill of the historical Arctic. These alternating environments do not resolve into a singular meaning, but rather articulate the kind of epistemological complexity required to apprehend climate

change as a system that unfolds unevenly across space and time. The novel thus constructs a mode of environmental engagement that privileges sensory immersion and spatial superimposition over explanatory exposition. In doing so, it emphasizes the necessity of attending to the local, not as an isolated setting, but as a node in a wider network of climatic and temporal relations. The reader's experience, much like the characters', is dislocated and reoriented across these layered atmospheres, suggesting that the reality of climate change might best be approached not through narrative linearity or thematic declaration, but through the shifting textures of intermingling sensory experiences. By rendering the Arctic perceptible within the sensory fabric of the present, the novel invites a recalibration of environmental awareness, one grounded less in direct representation than in affective attunement and atmospheric resonance.

3.3 The Shattering of Epistolary Illusion: From Ideological Inheritance to Ecological Reorientation

The North Pole has long held a place in the Western imagination that transcends its status as a mere point on the map. As Francis Spufford observes, the Arctic should be understood not only in geographical or political terms, but also as a cultural construct, shaped as much by aesthetic fascination, symbolic associations, and imaginative responses as by empirical, scientific, or technical knowledge (Spufford 1996, quoted in Stensvaag Kaasa 2019, 478). It is, in this sense, not only a real but also a written place, a literary construct mediated through stories, maps, diaries, and myths. Given the Arctic's long-standing construction through narrative and representation, acts of exploration are inseparable from acts of inscription. As Michael Bravo (2019) observes, writing and narrating polar history is central to the very enterprise of Arctic exploration: from the early days of John Barrow's British expeditions to the later

autobiographical accounts of figures such as Nansen, Peary, and Nordenskiöld, Arctic exploration was not only accompanied by but fundamentally constituted through narrative production, as these explorers sought not merely to reach the Pole but to author its meaning, positioning their journeys as both personal testimony and as expressions of Western scientific and civilizational progress. The Arctic, in this light, is not simply discovered, it is narrated into being (8-16).

All through the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, this entanglement of exploration and narration was not only a matter of cultural fascination or personal legacy—it was also deeply embedded in the economic and imperial structures that enabled and sustained Arctic ventures. As Bravo notes, the longstanding belief in a navigable polar sea was "a commercially attractive proposition" (106), holding out the promise of new trade routes and immense profit. At the same time, the pursuit of the Pole was "reimagined as a race and an expression of imperial desire" (107), and the narratives it generated mirrored "the materials and organization of industrial societies" (Ibid.) from which they emerged. In this context, writing was not simply retrospective documentation but a condition of possibility for such voyages. Explorers relied on the public appetite for polar narratives to secure funding, and the success of an expedition was often judged less by its geographic achievements than by the marketability of its account. By the mid-to-late nineteenth century, "yarns to entertain readers and raise funds for expeditions became part of the planning [itself]" (125), encouraging a shift away from technical reportage toward popular storytelling. Journals and diaries, punctuated by moments of sublimity, danger, or wonder, became the narrative form through which Arctic experience was both lived and commodified. As Kari Herbert (2012) observes, polar explorers were elevated to the status of cultural icons, celebrated as embodiments of imperial confidence whose ordeals at the limits of the known world were cast as struggles to master nature and secure modern myths of heroism (9).

It is within this tradition of narrated exploration, in which the Arctic exists as much on the page as in the world, that *The Still Point* situates itself. Although Sackville's protagonist, Edward Mackley, is a fictional explorer, his diary and related materials evoke the rhetorical style of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century expedition narratives. Sackville draws on these narrative forms not to produce travel literature, but to reimagine and reconfigure their conventions within a fictional frame. As she notes in her acknowledgements, the novel is informed by a wide range of sources, including not only historical and literary accounts such as Fridtjof Nansen's *Farthest North* (1897), Valerian Albanov's *In the Land of White Death* (2001), and Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* (1986), but also critical works that reflect on the cultural meanings of the Arctic, including the work of Francis Spufford (Sackville 2011, 309). These intertexts signal Sackville's sustained engagement with the literature of polar exploration and position *The Still Point* within the broader tradition of historical fiction set during the Heroic Age of polar discovery. By integrating these materials into the fabric of the novel, she both honours and reanimates a form of storytelling through which the North Pole has long been imagined, recorded, and remembered.

In spite of this close affiliation, *The Still Point* not only draws upon the narrative conventions of Arctic exploration but also interrogates and reconfigures them. While Edward's embedded story reflects the dominant tropes of his time, presenting the Arctic as a space of imperial ambition, heroic endurance, and environmental mastery, it is subtly reframed through the embodied and affective experiences of contemporary life. Therefore, the Arctic continues to bear the symbolic weight of nationalist and colonial history, but the novel gradually reimagines it from the perspective of twenty-first-century characters whose environmental consciousness and emotional registers are markedly different. Edward's narrative is thus mediated and refracted through the perspective of Julia, the novel's highest diegetic level. As a curator of familial

memory, Julia functions as both editor and reader of Edward's diaries. It is primarily through her engagement with the archival remnants of his expedition that Edward's story emerges, at once mythologised and demystified. While Julia's perspective initially reinforces the aura of heroism surrounding her great-great-uncle's polar venture, it simultaneously enables a process of critical reflection, exposing the contradictions and darker undercurrents embedded in the legacy of Arctic exploration.

This critical reflection that helps to reconfigure the genre of Arctic exploration under a new light also needs to be read in relation to the generic conventions that shape the contemporary storyline of Julia and Simon's framing narrative. In contrast to Edward's embedded account, Julia's narrative unfolds within the domestic sphere, focusing on the quiet details of everyday life. The novel's attention to routines of cleaning and caretaking carries forward the heritage of nineteenth-century domestic realism,[2] a genre concerned not only with the material practices of housework but also with the moral expectations placed upon women as guardians of domestic harmony. While *The Still Point* does not fully adopt the formal structure of the domestic novel, it draws on its thematic emphasis on duty, decorum, and the quiet labour of relational maintenance. Initially, Sackville herself expressed some ambivalence about this narrative setting, acknowledging the risk of writing female characters who "write themselves into [...] passivity" (Lea 2010). Yet her engagement with domestic realism is far from static or deferential. The home is not presented as a passive space of waiting but becomes a site of interpretive labour and emotional introspection. By embedding Edward's narrative within Julia's contemporary storyline, Sackville orchestrates a critically productive dialogue that exposes the

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[2]   My understanding of the domestic novel is shaped by Susan Fraiman's (2011) analysis of how these narratives address class dynamics and gender roles, and how they are formally constructed. For a discussion of how domestic fiction has been reimagined in the twenty-first century, see Karen Schaller's "Feminist Dwellings: Imagining the Domestic in the Twenty-first-century Literary Novel" (2020).

ideological assumptions underpinning both genres, from the unexamined heroism of imperial conquest to the supposed passivity of the domestic feminine ideal.

What emerges from this interweaving of narrative forms is not simply a formal experiment but a powerful mechanism for re-evaluating the legacy of Arctic exploration from a contemporary perspective. The novel leverages the distance between its temporal layers, namely between Edward's late nineteenth-century expedition and Julia's present-day reading, to illuminate the contradictions embedded in narratives that glorified imperial enterprises of exploration and environmental domination, particularly those aimed at mastering remote and extreme landscapes like the Arctic. In particular, Julia's response to Edward's diary encapsulates this tension: she is drawn in by the grandeur of his endeavour, its aura of discovery and sacrifice, yet this initial admiration is gradually unsettled by the emotional costs that surface through her archival engagement. As the truth of Edward's journey comes into view, it is no longer a story of noble ambition but one marked by abandonment, egotism, and emotional devastation. The woman he left behind becomes a spectral presence in the narrative, a reminder of what was sacrificed for Edward's pursuit of greatness. In this reframing, the Arctic emerges not exclusively as a symbol of conquest or sublime nature. It becomes a site of ethical reckoning, shaped by loss and absence. Sackville thus uses the juxtaposition of domestic and Arctic narratives to expose the human and relational fallout that exploration histories too often obscure.

Regarding the first element of this tension in Julia's response to Edward's narrative, namely the dynamic of attraction, the affective pull exerted by Edward's diary is articulated in the novel through what Schuh (2018) terms "epistolary illusion": a state of immersive identification in which a fictional character's consciousness becomes entangled with that of either the writer or the

imagined recipient of an epistolary narrative. As introduced in the previous chapter's discussion of Luisa Rey's reading of Robert Frobisher's letters in *Cloud Atlas*, this concept describes a near-dissociative imaginative state experienced by a character within the storyworld, triggered by the act of reading. In *The Still Point*, Julia's reading of her great-great-uncle's diary and her great-great-aunt Emily's letters exemplifies this mechanism. Yet the novel stages two different modes of affective engagement. While Edward's diary prompts Julia to imaginatively re-enact Arctic exploration, visualising the ice, the light, and the bodily sensations of the frozen landscape, her response remains an embodied readerly experience, vivid and sensorial, yet distinct from Edward's consciousness: she does not lose herself in his subjectivity. It is in Julia's engagement with Emily, rather than Edward, that the phenomenon of epistolary illusion takes hold. Julia's consciousness becomes entangled with that of her great-great-aunt, not merely empathising with her, but embodying her role as the woman left behind. This merging is narratively foregrounded, as Julia doesn't just reflect on Emily's longing, but she also inhabits it, often to the point where the boundary between their identities collapses.

The implications of Julia's epistolary illusion lie in its potential to dislocate the reader from the present and to internalise a gendered ideology that romanticises male ambition and casts female loyalty and emotional sacrifice as its natural counterpart. For Julia, the merging of consciousness with Emily becomes a form of existential entrapment that distorts her understanding of history, love, marriage, and selfhood. The novel dramatizes this danger through Julia's recurring childhood memory, that functions as both metaphor and warning:

> *When I was a girl, we cut holes in the world. My sister took a pair of scissors and cut two lines in the air in parallel, horizontal, and then cut down between them to make invisible curtains which she took carefully between finger and thumb and, drawing them back, invited me to put my hand through the gap. The air beyond was a different air, we'd have sworn it. Cleaner, I called it. Cool, unused. I'd*

wriggle my fingers, circle my wrist and then pull it out again. In time, my sister forgot the game but I tried that little magic again, alone, again and again, even after I was caught and scolded for playing with scissors. But I never cut a hole that was large enough to step through, for fear of being stranded in that other air. I think now that perhaps I slipped through one of those holes without noticing, after all. (Sackville 2011, 3-4, italics in the original)

What begins as an innocent fantasy, Julia's childhood imagining of slipping into another, purer atmosphere, becomes in adulthood a perilous condition of disconnection. Her confession, "*I think now that perhaps I slipped through one of those holes without noticing, after all*", crystallises this danger. Immersion in the mythologised past, particularly in the love story between Edward and Emily and in Edward's portrayal as heroic explorer, strands her "*in a different air*", alienated from her own time, her own body, and her relationship with Simon. This is not only a personal crisis, but an ideological one: epistolary illusion exposes the ease with which narratives animated by the uncritical pursuit of the unknown and by the drive to subordinate nature to ideals of human greatness continue to exert affective power, especially when their underlying assumptions remain unexamined.

Julia's idealisation of Edward's courage, his quest for glory, and Emily's unwavering devotion signals her absorption into a worldview that valorises the unrestrained pursuit of distant frontiers while upholding an imperial logic that conceives of the world as a reservoir of extractable value. Within this framework, both the Arctic and women like Emily are cast as passive, silent resources, whose primary function is to uphold and magnify the ambitions of heroic men. The private costs of this identification, including emotional detachment and marital disaffection, mirror the broader cultural risks of allowing such myths to persist unquestioned. By foregrounding the entanglement of private fantasy with public ideology, *The Still Point* invites a reconfiguration of how we understand both gendered roles and environmental imaginaries. If left unchallenged, the romanticisation of nature's subjugation risks perpetuating the very logics that

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have driven us to the brink of ecological collapse. By reorienting the reader's perspective through Julia's compromised engagement, the novel recasts the Arctic from a stage for heroic projection into a site of critical reflection, compelling us to confront the ideological afterlives of conquest and progress in a present shadowed by the looming threats of climate crisis.

Beyond Julia's recollection of childhood moments spent lost in imagination, the novel presents further instances of epistolary illusion and its destabilising effects, most strikingly in an extended reverie as she reads Edward's diary in a sunlit attic: "She lets the diary fall against her chest, so that her entire body is no more than that square of paperweight, a weight made of paper to hold her down" (98). The narrative then slides into a dream-like sequence in which Julia imagines waiting in the Arctic, naked and exposed, for Edward to arrive: "'I'm waiting, I was waiting for you,' she says. And he opens his coat and folds her inside with him to keep her warm" (99). But what begins as romantic fantasy curdles into horror, as the imagined Edward's body collapses: "his fingers are black all through" (Ibid.), his "eyes turn to milk" (Ibid.). The scene seamlessly transitions into a memory that is explicitly marked as Emily's dream: "this is how, more than a hundred years ago, Emily woke beside her husband for the last time, for this is her dream, recurring always" (Ibid.). At this point, it becomes impossible to disentangle Julia's imagination from Emily's historical experience; the "I" in the reverie, the sensory landscape, and even the emotion of waiting, now belong to both women at once.

This superimposition of identities continues to recur throughout the novel. As Julia reads Edward's diary, "[t]he words whisper about the house and into the garden and out, a sigh caught on the breeze […] Julia is lost in the snow" (204). The narrative voice then shifts again into a first-person perspective that appears to be Emily's but is conjured through Julia's reading: "*Waiting all that time, outstretched at the still point, I did not weep. I waited and he did not come, and I*

could not go on without" (Ibid., italics in the original). The italicised voice signals the dissolution of narrative boundaries: Julia does not simply imagine Emily's pain; she experiences it through her own body. She feels so deeply for her ancestor that she inhabits her grief and longing, imagining herself stretched across time in the act of waiting.

Perhaps the most striking confirmation of this immersive alignment occurs when Julia surfaces from her reverie: "She is a little light-headed, a little giddy from her reverie […]. She almost had him, today, she thinks. She could almost touch him, with Emily's hand" (217). This final image captures the full extent of epistolary illusion, encompassing not only Julia's psychological projection but also her bodily absorption into a historical role. She reaches for Edward not as herself but through Emily, with the hand of the woman who once waited and mourned. The gesture exemplifies the recursive intimacy the novel stages between past and present, arctic and domestic spaces, reader and text, and above all, between two women whose identities briefly become one.

The seductive power of epistolary illusion lies precisely in how it sustains Julia's idealisation of Edward as a hero and of the love story that frames his absence. Her absorption into Emily's perspective becomes a way of safeguarding a particular narrative of noble endeavour, romantic sacrifice, and enduring faith. This is a narrative that Julia not only inherits but internalises. She knows Edward "always as a hero to the last" (161), his diary a document of self-fashioning that allows him to remain "complete" (160), untouched by edits. "This diary is a testament to his best self" (Ibid.), she believes, "he writes as a safeguard against the loss of the man he was, husband and hero" (Ibid.). By embodying Emily's consciousness, Julia relives the myth of the steadfast woman awaiting her courageous husband's return: "*She would wait for her husband the hero who would not fail. She could not have him fail*" (263, italics in the original). This faith, echoed

across generations, becomes the emotional scaffolding for Julia's own ideal of love, defined not by presence or reciprocity, but by longing and hope.

This fantasy of love as loss and fidelity is seeded in her childhood and ritualised through narrative repetition. As the novel reveals, Julia "imagined, that first time, that she was Emily" (106), and even into adulthood, "still when she thinks of love, she thinks of longing" (107). What began as a bedtime fantasy in her great-great-aunt's bed, "the romantic farewell" (106) and "the promise of return" (Ibid.), has hardened into a habitual frame through which Julia understands intimacy itself. Even her sexual experiences are coloured by the myth: the man undressing her is imagined as "her Arctic hero" (107). In this frame, Simon becomes a proxy, always overshadowed by the spectre of the heroic lover who vanishes rather than falters. However, it is not simply Edward's ambition that enchants Julia, it is the aura of devotion his absence permits, the purity of a love untouched by daily compromise or decline.

Crucially, this vision of Edward's heroism is upheld not by his actions alone but by the emotional labour of Emily's waiting. As the narrator puts it:

> Had she not waited so faithfully, as if there could be no man on earth to replace him — this man who wasn't made for earth at all, but for a place beyond its edge. Had she not made of him a hero. (56–57)

In this acknowledgement lies the first subtle crack in the myth. The figure of Edward the explorer, husband, and hero is not an objective truth but a construct sustained through acts of loving and waiting. Emily's fidelity, romanticised and memorialised, becomes the condition for Edward's symbolic elevation. Julia, by inhabiting Emily's role, participates in that construction, somehow alongside the reader. But epistolary illusion, then, while functioning as a medium of ideological transmission, also becomes, through its eventual shattering, a vehicle for ideological rupture.

The shattering of epistolary illusion occurs with devastating force when Julia learns the truth about Emily's infidelity and her own genealogical connection to it. The revelation, as mentioned above, is delivered by her cousin Jonathan, and breaks open the mythic narrative she has inherited and inhabited. Her reaction is marked by affective disorientation and corporeal unease:

> Far out on the edge of her awareness, Julia hears something massive groaning. A judder in the world that resounds in her chest. Something shifts and threatens to split. Sometimes secrets are patient and will wait a century to be revealed; they seem solid enough to build upon; they will hold, perhaps; but perhaps there is some animal sense, something that tells us that they will eventually give way. So we should not be surprised by the freeze that is stealing upon Julia, a sensation akin to panic. She has waited for this, without knowing there was anything to know. If she'd looked closer, she might have seen it in her own eyes in the mirror, but why would she think to seek secrets there? What does that indigo at the centre hide, dark as the Arctic night? (222–23)

This moment of rupture acts as an epistemological thaw, breaking the emotional solidity of Edward and Emily's love story, which had long guided Julia's sense of feeling and morality, and exposing a truth that overturns the basis of her fantasy. The secrets that "seem solid enough to build upon" have underpinned more than familial myth; they have supported Julia's existential alignment with the same ideological logics that sustained Edward's enterprise.

Their collapse initiates not simply disillusionment but a re-entry into the real. As she lies disoriented in the morning room, the force of this disintegration is laid bare:

> Julia retreats numbly to the morning room and lies down upon the rug; but it gives no comfort. The Arctic hero, the wife bidding farewell, waiting… It is all spoiled.
>
> *Laid out on bearskin, desolate. Poor Edward in the night, the snow and the darkness for miles around him and the north wind, struggling, nearing the still point where she should be waiting, unable to go on, unable without… I cannot fill this want, this lack… I want Simon.* (242, italics in the original)

Here, the romantic fantasy collapses into a recognition of emotional lack. It is no longer a yearning for an absent hero but a desire for presence, for the flawed and tangible relationship she has with Simon. The symbolic elements that once sustained Julia's internalised narrative become hollow, "spoiled". This deflation marks the end of her enchantment not only with Edward but with the ideological frame that cast male ambition and female sacrifice as noble and necessary. Her turning toward Simon, her admission of want in the present tense, signals a re-emergence from the suspended temporality of myth into the affective immediacy of embodied life. By disavowing the illusions upheld by Edward's diary and the idealised love story it enshrined, Julia also begins to relinquish the structures of the erasure of nature and of women that were bound up within it. What is spoiled, then, is not simply a personal narrative but the ideological scaffolding that rendered that narrative desirable in the first place. The collapse of epistolary illusion becomes, ultimately, the condition for renewal: a moment in which the reader, together with Julia, is invited into critical distance, ethical recalibration, and a reorientation toward the present.

Just as Julia's epistolary illusion collapses under the weight of revelation, prompting a readjustment of her emotional reality, the reader is likewise drawn into a parallel trajectory from immersion to disillusion, from aesthetic enchantment to critical re-evaluation. The narrative initially invites the reader into a state of "aesthetic illusion": a pleasurable, quasi-experiential absorption in the represented world that mimics real-life perception and emotion.[3] As Werner Wolf (2014) explains, aesthetic illusion arises from a dynamic interplay between narrative form, readerly cognition, and cultural context. It is a state of imaginative immersion that depends on a delicate balance: foregrounded

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[3]   For an in-depth theoretical discussion of aesthetic illusion, see *Immersion and Distance: Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media*, ed. Werner Wolf, Walter Bernhart, and Andreas Mahler (Brill, 2013), especially Wolf's introduction and chapter on the conceptual foundations of aesthetic illusion. This volume is part of the *Studies in Intermediality* series and provides comprehensive insight into the concept across literature, film, and other media.

emotional simulation and background awareness of fictionality. Through "joint attention", as theorised by Caracciolo and Kukkonen (2021), the reader becomes affectively attuned to Julia's inner world, experiencing her longing and idealisation not as distant observation but as co-participation. Yet this alignment renders the reader equally vulnerable to the narrative's reversal. When Julia's illusion is shattered and the myth of Edward and Emily disintegrates, the reader is likewise compelled to confront the constructedness of the story and their own susceptibility to its ideological allure. In this way, *The Still Point* stages not only the seduction of narrative immersion but also its undoing, making the reader's disillusionment structurally and affectively mirror Julia's. This mirroring is crucial: it transforms the narrative from a vehicle of ideological transmission into a site of ideological rupture. By destabilising aesthetic illusion at a key emotional juncture, the novel compels the reader to reckon with the ways in which narratives encode and reproduce cultural values, particularly those tied to gender, love, heroism, and conquest.

Crucially, this reflective movement is ideological in a double sense: it exposes the affective pull of inherited myths of imperial mastery, while also gesturing, however obliquely, towards a counter-ideology grounded in ecological critique. As the novel dismantles the narrative structures that naturalise domination and conquest, it simultaneously disorients the anthropocentric logic that underpins them. In this respect, *The Still Point*, like *Cloud Atlas*, inevitably bears the imprint of twenty-first-century anxieties about climate crisis. Yet its engagement with these concerns remains largely ambient, emerging not through direct thematic exposition but through a destabilisation of the values that made imperial heroism and environmental exploitation appear desirable. The novel's aesthetic structure thus enables a subtle ideological revision, one that allows new ecological and ethical imaginaries to surface from

within the disenchanted space left behind by the collapse of both epistolary and aesthetic illusions.

3.4 Modernist Echoes and Temporal Dislocation: Reading Climate Complexity

The Still Point does not register its concern with climate change solely through the juxtaposition of Arctic and domestic spatialities, as examined in Section 3.2, nor merely through the construction and eventual shattering of epistolary illusion that corrodes imperial ideologies and opens space for ecological revision, as discussed in Section 3.3. Beyond these mechanisms, the novel also engages with climate crisis aesthetically, through its formal architecture, which draws intertextual connections with modernism. In particular, its temporal structure, which is fragmented, recursive, and, therefore resistant to linear causality, invites readers to inhabit a mode of temporal experience that mirrors the epistemological challenges of understanding climate change itself. Like *Cloud Atlas*, Sackville's novel compels the reader to negotiate a narrative that disrupts conventional chronologies, instead cultivating a reading phenomenology attuned to non-linearity and deferred meaning. These formal strategies not only reflect the influence of earlier literary movements but also map onto contemporary demands for more complex ecological temporalities, understood as modes of perception capable of grappling with post-time, slow violence, and multi-scalar causality that define the Anthropocene.

The connection to modernism and its temporal epistemology is established from the very opening of *The Still Point*, whose title is a direct quotation from T.S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton" (1936), the first of the Four Quartets. This is made explicit through the novel's epigraph:

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> At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
> Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
> But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
> Where past and future are gathered. (Sackville 2010, 1)

This intertextual reference to Eliot's *Four Quartets* is central to the novel's meditation on time, memory, and the limits of human knowledge. As Steve Ellis (2021) notes, "Burnt Norton" is a poem concerned with the purification from the temporal world and a quest for an absolute, higher and eternal reality, which recalls the Garden of Eden, from which we are exiled because it lies on the other side of a temporal barrier that can only be crossed in the afterlife (103-104). This framework proves highly relevant for interpreting *The Still Point*, in which Julia's immersion in Edward's journal and her epistolary illusion mark a similar yearning for access to a higher truth, a still point beyond the chaos of lived time. Her search becomes, in this sense, a secular counterpart to Eliot's spiritual journey: a desire to find clarity and permanence through history and memory, only to discover that such transcendence is ultimately inaccessible within the bounds of temporal life.

And yet, as in "Burnt Norton", the failure to arrive does not negate the value of the journey. As Ellis writes of the later Quartets,

> there can be no simple and direct return to the garden, but [...] the journey
> back to it has to be a circuitous one, taking on board rather than rejecting
> time and history as the medium through which the final destination has to
> be won. The disappointments and disillusions of time are in fact necessary
> stages in the journey, strengthening the desire for transcendence through
> the repeated experiences of life's insufficiency which they bring. (105)

This is the arc Julia follows: the shattering of illusion does not obliterate meaning, but reorients her understanding of both past and present. Quoting "Little Gidding": "History may be servitude, / History may be freedom" (CPP 195); it becomes freedom, Ellis suggests, when we are able to apprehend what Eliot

identifies as the true events of history, understood as "a pattern / Of timeless moments" (CPP 197; quoted in Ellis 2021, 108). Julia's eventual awareness of the "true" events of her family's past, stripped of romantic idealisation, performs this transformation: illusion gives way to historical pattern, and revelation takes the place of nostalgia. Her disappointment and re-entry into the present, painful as it is, enables a deeper reckoning with history, one that does not leave her stranded in what she had earlier imagined as "*a different air, [...] Cleaner, [...] Cool, unused*" (Sackville 2011, 4, italics in the original), but opens her instead to the complexity of time as lived and felt.

This reorientation toward the complexity of time in *The Still Point* can be further deepened by returning to the broader legacy of T.S. Eliot, not just as a modernist poet, but as a theorist of temporal and cultural interdependence. As Matthew Griffiths (2013) argues, Eliot's seminal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" can be productively reread in the context of climate change. Eliot's emphasis on impersonality and the shaping force of collective tradition offers a framework for understanding how the climate crisis disrupts and reshapes literary and cultural production (83). More specifically, Griffiths traces a parallel between Eliot's idea of tradition and the temporality of climate change: both require the present to be understood not in isolation, but as inextricably entangled with the accumulated actions of the past. From this angle, climate change can be conceptualized as a kind of "tradition", an inherited legacy of greenhouse emissions, extractive economies, and industrial expansion, that has become visible through its material effects in the present. Just as literary tradition subtly informs new expression, the climate crisis structures contemporary experience through recursive, often imperceptible processes. This perspective resists narratives that frame climate change as a purely "contemporary" or sudden rupture; instead, like tradition, it is an evolving historical condition in

which the present simultaneously carries and reinterprets the weight of the past (89).

In *The Still Point*, this logic of recursive temporality manifests through the reconfiguration of imperial history in the present. Edward's Arctic expedition, originally framed within a heroic, imperialist narrative, becomes reabsorbed and questioned by Julia's contemporary perspective, inflected by postcolonial and ecological awareness. The past does not return as static memory or moral lesson, but as a looping movement of re-inscription in which imperial and environmental histories echo through the textures of domestic life. This layering of temporal frames is not presented as a didactic environmental message but emerges obliquely, as a slow surfacing of unconscious cultural sediment. In this sense, Sackville's novel aligns with what Adrian Ivakhiv describes as the "virtue of the 'unconscious'" in environmental fiction: while overtly ecological narratives risk being dismissed as polemical or reductive, more compelling texts allow crisis to "remain inassimilable, hovering uneasily at the edges of our awareness" (Ivakhiv 2008, 108; quoted in Griffiths 2013, 86). *The Still Point*, like *Cloud Atlas*, sustains this kind of atmospheric, almost subterranean engagement with environmental crisis, one that mirrors the elusive temporalities of climate change itself, where cause and effect, past and future, fold back upon one another in slow, spiralling recognition.

This engagement with complex, recursive temporalities, which is so crucial for allowing the emergence of the epistemological conditions of climate change, is not confined to *The Still Point*'s thematic treatment of time or its direct intertextual dialogue with T.S. Eliot. Rather, the novel's entire formal architecture bears the imprint of a broader modernist inheritance, extending beyond the *Four Quartets* to encompass a range of aesthetic strategies characteristic of twentieth-century literary experimentation. These include fragmentation, simultaneity, narrative disjunction (analeptic shifts via memory and epistolary mediation), and

a refusal of linear progression, which function not merely as stylistic flourishes but as integral components of the novel's deeper engagement with temporal experience.

This modernist legacy, as Matthew Griffiths (2017) suggests in *The New Poetics of Climate Change*, is particularly well-suited to the demands of climate representation. Though his focus is on poetry, Griffiths argues that the aesthetic techniques originating in modernist verse, particularly the flexibility of "open" verse, offer a powerful means of registering the discontinuities and scalar dissonances that define climate crisis. The same can be said of the novel form, particularly in Sackville's handling of time and narrative structure. By invoking and reanimating modernist strategies, *The Still Point* cultivates a temporal sensitivity attuned to delay, simultaneity, multiplicity, and historical rewriting. These are precisely the perceptual capacities demanded by climate change, in which causality is dispersed across time and space, and in which the visible present is saturated with the latent residues of the past.

One of the most distinctive ways in which *The Still Point* inherits and reanimates modernist narrative strategies is through its temporal compression: the main storyline, centred on Julia and Simon, unfolds over the course of a single summer day. From the early morning when the characters wake to the late-night return to bed, the narrative adopts a structure reminiscent of canonical modernist texts such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. As Michael Sayeau argues in *Against the Event: The Everyday and the Evolution of Modernist Narrative* (2013), such novels compress the temporal and thematic scope of the realist novel into the span of a single day, unsettling the conventional narrative rhythm that treats eventfulness and uneventfulness as a balanced pattern (37). Instead, they interrogate the category of the "event" itself, allowing the mundane to acquire narrative weight. By refusing the logic of exceptionalism and dramatized progression, *The Still Point* situates itself within this lineage of the

modernist one-day novel, which, as Bryony Randall (2016) argues, explores the phenomenology of lived time across three key registers: scale, agency, and temporal perspective.[4]

With respect to scale, *The Still Point* magnifies the textures of domestic routine while layering them with other temporalities. The novel's detailed attention to mundane acts, such as preparing breakfast, elevates ordinary life into ritual, registering the temporality of care and habit:

> She will wait until she hears it stop, and then depress the toaster's lever, and then wait a further minute, and then she will carefully lower the eggs into the pan and the toast will pop and she will spread both slices with butter, not too much but all the way to the edges, by which time precisely the whites of the eggs will be just set. (Sackville 2010, 17–18)

The same attention to quotidian rhythms governs later moments of domestic upkeep: "daily comforts must be served even as the world turns through its more momentous changes, and if Julia is unsettled then there is at least the certainty of cool, clean linen to lie down on" (279). These intimate routines are continually disrupted by recollection. Julia recalls fragments from the previous night: "Simon, impatient, driving too fast. […] Julia in the morning, over her slice of toast and second mug of tea, lulled by the wet rumble of the washing machine, is remembering [...]" (21). At other times, memory reaches further back into childhood: "*When I was a girl there was a swing at the end of this garden. [...] Gumbles it was, the imaginary badger*" (27, italics in the original). Still other recollections

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[4]   In her theorisation of the one-day novel, Randall (2016) identifies three core dimensions that structure the genre's engagement with temporality and everyday life. First, scale: the one-day narrative magnifies ordinary routines and sensory detail, while simultaneously connecting the single day to other days through memory, anticipation, and repetition, creating a paradox in which one day stands both as itself and as a representative of many (596–601). Second, agency: by focusing on days often detached from formal employment (e.g. holidays, weekends, or domestic time), these novels foreground the types of agency shaped by gender roles, social structures, and unpaid labour—activities that are habitual, relational, and identity-forming (601–605). Third, temporal perspective: the one-day novel tends to resist privileging singular or disruptive events. Instead, it locates meaning in the repetition and revision of experience, showing how the significance of events often emerges retrospectively, in relation to the continuum of lived time (606–607).

arise through mediation, triggered by the objects scattered around the house and the imaginative pull of epistolary illusion: "On a fine evening in October 1897, this very glass had the good fortune to reflect the image of nineteen-year-old Emily Gardiner" (34).

This focus on the ordinary also foregrounds questions of agency. As Randall (2016) observes, one-day novels often depict time outside of formal employment, thereby centring feminised forms of labour. In *The Still Point*, Julia and Emily's narrative arcs expose the ideological residues of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century gender roles: the woman who waits, the man who acts. These roles, however, are not merely preserved but interrogated and ultimately destabilised. Julia's ambivalence toward Simon and her disenchantment with Edward's legacy register a broader re-evaluation of the masculinist scripts that sustained imperial exploration on the one hand and enforced women's domestic subordination on the other. The novel reframes these roles not through spectacle but through slow realisation and quiet resistance, allowing agency to emerge as an uneven, processual negotiation shaped by affect, memory, and cultural inheritance.

Finally, the novel's approach to temporal perspective resists privileging singular, disruptive events in favour of accumulated repetition and resonance. The reader is invited to perceive meaning not in the moment of action, but in the recursive rhythms through which events are recollected and reinscribed over time. This aligns with Barbara Leckie's (2022) theorisation of "post-time" and the epistemology of climate change, in which linear models of time are replaced by overlapping and asynchronous durations. In *The Still Point*, this sense of layered temporality is intensified through epistolary illusion, which enables the superimposition of Arctic and domestic spaces, past and present consciousnesses, and individual and cultural memory. Such a structure reinforces the novel's central concern: how histories of empire, family or

environment are not merely remembered, but re-lived, revised, and re-felt across time.

Yet this recursive movement between temporal layers is not smooth or seamless. On the contrary, it produces a kind of formal fragmentation, as the narrative continually disrupts the flow of present-tense domesticity with abrupt analeptic incursions, namely memories and reveries triggered by archival traces and by the pull of epistolary illusion. This formal disjunction reflects a deeper ontological instability in which cause and effect are not neatly aligned but scattered across uneven and often invisible scales. The novel's scattered interruptions fracture the linearity of the domestic present and insist on the unfinished business of the past and these fragments never quite resolve into a totalising picture. Instead, they accumulate unevenly, creating a patchwork temporality that resists narrative closure. Crucially, this narrative fragmentation resonates with the epistemological structure of climate change, whose temporal disjunctions similarly challenge linear models. In this sense, fragmentation becomes more than an aesthetic strategy, as it gestures toward a mode of historical consciousness attuned to the complexities of ecological crisis. The novel's deployment of modernist techniques supports an ecologically attuned aesthetic in which the present is continually unsettled by the spectral traces of other times. These formal strategies sustain a narrative atmosphere haunted by the unspoken impact of climate change, where temporal rupture and disorientation become not only expressive tools but epistemological cues.

The reader, too, is drawn into this atmosphere of rupture and disorientation, experiencing firsthand the demands of navigating a fractured narrative world. The novel distributes attention across a dispersed system of focalisation, encompassing Julia, Simon, Edward, and Emily, each anchored in different temporal and affective registers. This structure produces not only multiperspectival narration but also a network of "joint attention" (Caracciolo

and Kukkonen 2021), in which the reader must track what each character attends to, and how that attention is mediated across narrative layers. In Kukkonen's (2019) terms, these characters function as distinct relays of embodiment, whose shifting perspectives trigger modulations in the reader's own embodied simulation of events (Chapter 2). Some perspectives offer immersive, high-precision experiences (such as Julia's morning routine), while others foreground reflective distance or generalised cultural frames (such as the imperial romance projected onto Edward's expedition). Epistolary illusion further complicates this network by introducing embedded narratives, such as letters and journals, that demand both immersive identification and critical repositioning within the broader probabilistic design of the narrative. The result is a readerly phenomenology shaped by fragmentation, temporal drift, and spatial dislocation.

Rather than orienting the reader through a stable narrative frame, *The Still Point* solicits a form of cognitive and emotional labour that mirrors the interpretive effort demanded by climate crisis, which is an effort to reconcile scattered information and conflicting scales of significance. In this way, the novel's form enacts an aesthetic simulation of ecological cognition, offering a model of literary engagement attuned to the challenges of inhabiting deferred forms of crisis.

3.5 Conclusion

In tracing the formal strategies of *The Still Point*, alongside its discreet thematic engagement with climate change, this chapter has shown how Amy Sackville's novel articulates an aesthetics of subtle ecological resonance rather than overt climate representation. Climate crisis in the novel does not appear as explicit content but is embedded in its narrative architecture, namely in the recursive

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relation between its temporal layers, the porousness of domestic and polar spaces, and the persistent tension between perception and mediation. What emerges is not a story about climate change, but a narrative structure shaped by the conditions under which ecological crisis becomes thinkable: fragmented, deferred, and refracted through historical legacies.

The novel's twin narrative strands do not merely juxtapose two timelines, but fold into one another. This layered structure makes environmental change perceptible through atmospheric resonance. Climate crisis appears as background condition, haunting the textures of everyday life and reshaping the affective registers through which space and time are experienced.

At the centre of this structure is the act of mediation. Just as climate knowledge relies on records, projections, and interpretive frameworks, Sackville's novel foregrounds editorial labour and narrative construction. Julia's engagement with Edward's diary, filtered through the affective pull of epistolary illusion, exposes the ideological scaffolding of inherited myths: of exploration, dominance, endurance, and romantic fidelity. As that scaffolding falters, the narrative opens a space not only for emotional disorientation but also for ethical recalibration. What emerges is a reorientation away from the imperial obsession with conquest and greatness through natural mastery, and toward a vision of relationality with human and non-human others that is grounded in attentiveness, vulnerability, and presence rather than in idealised detachment.

Formally, the novel's debt to modernism becomes a vehicle for climate representation. These techniques do not dramatize crisis but simulate its disjointed temporality and scalar complexity. In this way, *The Still Point* performs the cognitive conditions through which climate change itself becomes legible.

In this sense, read alongside *Cloud Atlas*, Sackville's novel forms part of an early phase in twenty-first-century climate fiction: one in which ecological crisis is not yet thematically central, but subconsciously evoked and formally

anticipated. Both novels develop narrative strategies that make climate thinkable before it is fully nameable. In doing so, they lay the groundwork for a wave of climate narratives more overtly shaped by planetary crisis, while remaining crucial for understanding the aesthetic and epistemological shifts that preceded them.

Chapter Four

A Constellation of Places and Voices: Narrative Mediation and Climate Crisis in *The Year Without Summer*

4.1 Introduction

Following the analyses of *Cloud Atlas* and *The Still Point*, this chapter turns to Guinevere Glasfurd's *The Year Without Summer* (2021) [2020], a novel that engages climate change more explicitly through its focus on the 1815 Tambora eruption and its global climatic repercussions. In Mitchell's and Sackville's works, climate change looms in the background: in *Cloud Atlas* it emerges gradually as part of a larger historical trajectory, while in *The Still Point* it registers as an ambient condition, diffused through the atmospheres and textures of early twenty-first-century life. In both novels, ecological crisis is not thematised directly but is instead detectable in formal choices, in the juxtaposition of spaces and the superimposition of times, which allow climate change to be perceived obliquely and, at times, belatedly. This obliqueness produces a quasi-hidden attunement to climate epistemology and signals an engagement with aesthetic strategies that prove responsive to the representational difficulties of allowing a complex and abstract system such as climate change to emerge in fiction. *The Year Without Summer* inherits these strategies but redeploys them to make climate crisis its central concern. While it retains an interest in constructing a temporal framework attuned to the complex temporality of climate change, its formal emphasis falls instead on spatial distribution, that is to say on the dispersed geographical circulation of climatic effects across the planet, and on deferred perceptibility, understood as the delayed and uneven recognition of environmental disruption.

The novel's fragmented historical narrative registers environmental disturbance across multiple locations, spanning colonial Southeast Asia, postwar England, continental Europe, and New England in the United States. Rather than assembling a unified or global vision of environmental crisis, it traces how climate disruption is mediated and imagined within localised ecologies shaped by enclosure, colonialism, class inequality, and historical contingency. In this respect, Glasfurd's novel continues the pattern observed in *Cloud Atlas* and *The*

Still Point, where climate change becomes legible only in entanglement with other systemic issues, thus reinforcing the idea that environmental crisis is inseparable from the broader historical and cultural forces through which it is determined, lived, and represented. Importantly, this continuity extends beyond thematic entanglement to the novels' relationships with earlier literary traditions. The previous chapters showed how Mitchell and Sackville reworked narrative strategies inherited from realism, modernism, and postmodernism to grapple with complexity; Glasfurd similarly mobilises the resources of earlier traditions, but in different ways. Her use of epistolarity recalls realist poetics, while her reliance on fragmentation and multitemporality resonates with modernist experimentation. Yet these strategies are not merely reproduced: while individual narrative fragments conform to recognisable twentieth-century patterns, their arrangement within the novel generates a system of meaning that exceeds these precedents. The interplay between part and whole, between the situatedness of each narrative strand and the cumulative structure they form together, produces a configuration that speaks directly to contemporary understandings of climate change, particularly its multiscalar nature.

One of the principal means by which this dynamic is articulated is through the novel's use of epistolarity. As a medial form, it not only conveys affect and intention, but constructs, negotiates, and unsettles spatial relationships. Letters in *The Year Without Summer* function as instruments of imagined proximity and emotional relay: they seek to span geographic distance, to hold together geographies strained by crisis. At the same time, the novel persistently foregrounds the instability of this form. Letters are delayed, lost, unread, withheld, or only partially quoted. Some remain private traces of memory; others fail to reach their intended destination or arrive too late to repair what has been broken. As such, epistolarity becomes a medium not just of communication but of spatial (dis)orientation, constructing tenuous connections across distance

while also staging the impossibility of restoring a coherent or inhabited relationship to place. The letter thus figures both the desire for reconnection and the material and structural conditions of war, migration, enclosure, and environmental breakdown that interrupt or foreclose that desire. Across the novel, epistolarity gives voice to a diverse range of spaces, contributing to the representation of climate change as a process whose causes and effects are globally diffused yet experienced in profoundly local and situated forms.

Epistolarity, however, is not read in isolation. Its significance emerges in relation to the narrative voice and structural composition of each section, where shifting modes of focalisation shape how letters are framed. The meaning and function of letters are also brought into conversation with other media forms dispersed throughout the novel, such as newspapers, journals, sketches, proclamations, poems, biblical citations, fictional fragments, and folk songs, which collectively form a dense medial environment. This intermedial texture invites attention not only to what is said, but to how climate, crisis, and connection are registered through diverse modes of cultural transmission. The chapter thus attends to epistolarity both as a distinct formal feature and as part of a larger constellation of embedded[1] media through which *The Year Without Summer* explores the limits and possibilities of narrating environmental disruption.

The first part of the chapter situates the novel within ecocritical debates on the spatiality of climate change, drawing on concepts such as "eco-cosmopolitanism", "the patchy Anthropocene", and "planetarity" to explore how *The Year Without Summer* resists totalising framings. The second part of the

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[1]   By "embedded" I refer to the incorporation of distinct textual or medial forms, such as letters, proclamations, poems, or biblical citations, within the narrative. These forms interrupt or intersect with the main narrative voice while still being integrated into its structure, producing layers of mediation that complicate how information, voice, and authority circulate in the text. In *The Year Without Summer*, embedded media function both as representational devices and as material traces of cultural transmission, foregrounding the ways in which environmental disruption is mediated through heterogeneous discursive forms.

chapter offers a close analysis of each of the novel's six[2] narrative strands, examining how distinct medial forms and narrative perspectives shape the representation of places under environmental stress. From the carefully constructed letters of Henry Hogg to the oral testimony of Sarah Hobbs, from John Constable's visual framing to Charles Whitlock's sermonic manipulation of scripture, from Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin's turn to fiction to Hope Peter's entanglement with letters, poetry, and revolutionary propaganda, each section foregrounds how media shape not only the transmission of experience but also the possibilities, and limits, of bearing witness to climate disruption. Particular attention is paid to how these forms register ecological change alongside social upheaval, revealing how enclosure, colonial displacement, poverty, and political revolt intersect with environmental precarity in ways that are mediated differently depending on access to literacy, voice, and authority.

By situating epistolarity within this broader media ecology, the chapter argues that *The Year Without Summer* articulates a multiperspectival and formally fragmented response to the Tambora climate crisis, one that resists the coherence of a single narrative or medium. Instead, Glasfurd's novel mobilises formal and medial plurality to explore how environmental crisis is not only experienced unevenly across space and class, but also differently remembered and communicated. Crucially, these formal strategies are not only mimetic, but cognitive: they shape how knowledge is structured within each narrative strand and exert pressure on the epistemological framework of the reading experience itself. Fragmentation and medial layering create disjunctions, narrative gaps, and

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[2]   While the novel includes a brief narrative section focalised through the character of Roísín Tierney, I have chosen not to count it as a seventh strand. Roísín's section, only two pages long, functions more as an appendix or coda to the preceding Hope Peter narrative. Unlike the six main narrative threads, which are fragmented and interwoven throughout the novel, Roísín's section is self-contained, opening and closing within a single uninterrupted sequence. Furthermore, in the foreword to *The Year Without Summer*, Glasfurd explicitly introduces the protagonists of the six central strands but does not mention Roísín's perspective, reinforcing its supplementary framing within the novel's overall structure.

shifting frames of reference that unsettle certainty, foreground questions of reliability, and draw attention to the constructedness and indeterminacy of narrative. The multiplicity of forms not only offers competing perspectives on crisis, but also generates metafictional awareness. Glasfurd's structural choices, then, are not simply aesthetic responses to the difficulty of narrating climate change; they are invitations to the reader to grapple with that difficulty directly, feeling its emotional rhythms, questioning its mediating forms, and acknowledging its epistemological limits.

4.2 Climate, History, and the Spatial Imagination

How can literature represent the spatial dimensions of climate change, when it is not directly experienced in any one place, but unfolds as a complex system shaped by regional and planetary weather patterns over vast periods of time? This question becomes particularly pressing in climate fiction, where authors must navigate both the scalar enormity and the experiential fragmentation of climate disruption. Guinevere Glasfurd's *The Year Without Summer* (2021) addresses this challenge with remarkable formal control and thematic insight.

Set in the aftermath of the 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora, a volcanic event that triggered a global climate anomaly known as "the year without a summer", the novel represents climate change as both planetary and situated, global in its reach yet uneven in its regional effects. Although the novel portrays climate change triggered by a natural geophysical event, its concerns resonate strongly with contemporary debates around anthropogenic climate change. By focusing on the transregional and delayed consequences of a single eruption, *The Year Without Summer* highlights the same structural conditions that make contemporary climate change so difficult to narrate. In this sense, the novel's historical setting becomes a means of grappling with the representational

challenges posed by the spatial complexity of climate crisis, namely how to narrate an environmental disruption that unfolds unevenly across geographies. At the same time, it foregrounds the entanglement of environmental conditions with social, political, and economic realities, revealing how these forces do not operate in isolation but risk exacerbating one another, deepening precarity, amplifying unrest, and intensifying the urgency of artistic and narrative response.

This temporal and geographical framing positions *The Year Without Summer* within what Elodie Rousselot (2014) identifies as "neo-Georgian" fiction, which consists in historical fiction set during the Georgian era that privileges realism and historical accuracy over the metafictional reflexivity of postmodern historiography (4). Glasfurd's novel exemplifies this mode; it is deeply grounded in the material and social conditions of the early nineteenth century, particularly those shaped by the General Enclosure Act, agrarian instability, and postwar economic precarity, and it mobilises the historical novel as a form capable of tracing interwoven, transregional dynamics of environmental and social crisis. The narrative's attention to local hardship, including enclosure, hunger, and displacement, does more than reconstruct a past moment; it reveals how ecological vulnerability is distributed unevenly across space, shaped by systems of land use and political economy.

As scholars like Ian Baucom (2015) and Adam Grener (2020) have argued, historical climate fiction must navigate two core tensions: how to situate climate change within broader historical trajectories, and how to represent the unsettling agency of environmental forces that defy conventional narrative logic. Glasfurd's novel takes up both. The Tambora eruption is not presented as an isolated natural event but as part of a wider constellation of historical conditions through which the effects of climate disruption are mediated and made visible. By depicting the crisis at this intersection, the novel exposes how environmental catastrophe

intensifies pre-existing inequalities and how the experience of climate is conditioned by class, gender, and geography. Formally, Glasfurd meets the representational challenge identified by Baucom and Grener through a polyphonic structure that brings together multiple, geographically dispersed lives, reconciling the immediacy of local experience with the diffuse causality of planetary weather systems. The Tambora eruption thus becomes a gravitational centre linking these lives, while its far-reaching effects continually test the limits of narrative containment. This tension between the local and the planetary—previously discussed in chapter one through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (2015) notion of "planetarity"—finds a compelling analogue here. Spivak (2015) describes the planet as something fundamentally ungraspable and untranslatable, a kind of alterity that both contains and exceeds us (290-292). Glasfurd's narrative mirrors this tension between containment and excess: the eruption operates as a planetary force, shaping the lived experiences of characters scattered across the globe, yet never fully apprehended by any one of them.

The novel is in fact structured around six narrative strands, each anchored in a different location and focalised through a distinct character. In the "Foreword", Glasfurd (2021) introduces the protagonists of these six sections and the spaces they inhabit. In Indonesia, "Henry Hogg is ship's surgeon on board the Benares. He is sailing into the aftermath of a disaster and has no idea of what he is about to see" (xiii). Elsewhere in England, "John Constable is on his way to East Bergholt to visit his ailing father" (Ibid.), "Sarah Hobbs has had enough of working all day and always being hungry" (Ibid.) and "Hope Peter, a soldier returning from the Napoleonic Wars, is headed to Corringham, Essex, to find what remains of his family home" (Ibid.). Meanwhile, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, Claire Mary Jane Clairmont, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron

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spend the summer together in Switzerland, while in Vermont, "Charles Whitlock rides his pony to spread God's word to any who might be interested" (xiv).

These geographically dispersed characters, some fully fictional and some historical, never meet. Their stories are spatially and socially distinct, yet they are all shaped by the invisible force of a global climatic event. Glasfurd's use of spatial multiplicity thus enacts what Ursula Heise (2008) calls "eco-cosmopolitanism": a narrative mode that does not flatten difference into a universalising globalism but instead constructs the planet as a kind of mosaic, a constellation of sites that are linked across space and time, while still retaining their distinct and autonomous trajectories (64). In *The Year Without Summer*, this constellation unfolds through these six distinct yet thematically intertwined storylines, each rooted in a localized context. These are not interchangeable settings, but ecologies defined by specific vulnerabilities and historical trajectories, shaped by forces such as colonialism, land enclosure, and persistent inequalities in access to resources.

In this sense, the spatial structure of the novel's storyworld resonates with Anna Tsing et al.'s (2019) concept of "the patchy Anthropocene", which urges us to understand environmental transformation not as a smooth, globally uniform process, but as something that unfolds through fragmented, overlapping zones of disruption, vulnerability, and survival (186-187). The eruption's effects in the novel are, in fact, anything but homogeneous: in Indonesia, Henry Hogg witnesses the devastation firsthand in 1815, while the other narratives, set in 1816, trace the slow, delayed arrival of climate disruption across the Northern Hemisphere. This temporal lag reinforces the novel's spatial logic. Climate change, like the Anthropocene, travels across space and accumulates unevenly, shaped by the broader web of historical and structural conditions that govern how people and environments interact. Glasfurd thus reveals how even an event triggered by a single geophysical cause reverberates differently in Vermont than

it does in Essex or Switzerland, highlighting the contingency of climate experience and the inequities of planetary impact.

Although the novel constructs a spatial mosaic, its fragmentation also gestures toward the temporal complexity of climate crisis. Most of the narrative strands unfold during the summer of 1816, offering a synchronous yet geographically dispersed portrait of social and environmental disruption. The exception is Henry Hogg's section, which recounts events from the previous year and thus introduces a note of temporal dissonance. This asymmetry, between Hogg's immediate experience of environmental upheaval and the delayed consequences perceived elsewhere, recalls Anna Tsing's (2015) notion of "temporal polyphony", the coexistence of overlapping and discordant temporal rhythms within the same narrative or ecological field. In *The Year Without Summer*, however, it is spatial "polyphony" or rather spatial "heteroglossia"[3] that takes precedence. The novel juxtaposes multiple coeval locations, each marked by distinct forms of ecological pressure, class tension, and cultural mediation. In this sense, the different narrative voices do not merely multiply perspectives but articulate diverse experiences and representations of space. By doing so, the novel resists any singular framing of climate crisis, insisting instead on its uneven effects and the multiplicity of localized responses it provokes.

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[3]   By polyphony I mean, following Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1984), a literary structure in which multiple autonomous voices or consciousnesses coexist in a text without being subordinated to a single, authorial voice; each speaks with its own validity and may even contest or respond to the others (6). By heteroglossia I refer to the multiplicity of social speech-types, discursive styles, and worldviews embedded in language itself, which represent the diversity of ideological and evaluative positions that any utterance inherits and addresses (Bakhtin 1981)).

4.3 Fragmented Geographies: Narrative Form and Spatial Unevenness

If *The Year Without Summer* constructs climate crisis through spatial multiplicity, it does so not only through setting but also through form. The novel's engagement with the unevenness of climate impact is inseparable from its formal strategies, including its narrative structure, shifts in focalisation, and medial heterogeneity. Representing climate change demands more than evoking its effects; it requires navigating how those effects unfold across incompatible scales, disrupted chronologies, and geographically disjointed experiences.

One of the central challenges in this regard is climate change's scalar abstraction, which is a difficulty Marco Caracciolo (2021) identifies as crucial to the narrative imagination of the Anthropocene. While climate change may be materially felt in localised forms such as failed harvests, hunger, and displacement, its broader operation remains largely invisible, unfolding across temporal and spatial registers that exceed direct perception. This disjunction demands narrative forms capable of moving between the immediacy of lived experience and the abstraction of planetary systems. In Glasfurd's novel, such movement is embedded in the novel's very structure. Its six storylines do not just document discrete experiences of disruption; they formally enact the difficulty of grasping climate as a shared but uneven process. This section examines how variations in narrative voice and embedded media function as formal strategies that mediate the distributed temporality and spatial fragmentation of climate.

A glance at the "paratext", particularly the table of contents, immediately foregrounds the novel's structural disjunction: each of the six storylines is broken into discontinuous segments, scattered across the novel's timeline and repeatedly interrupted before being resumed.[4] For instance, Henry Hogg's narrative begins

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[4]   The novel's table of contents reveals the following sequence of narratives: Henry, John, Sarah, Mary, John, Sarah, Mary, John, Sarah, Henry, Hope Peter, Charles, John, Hope Peter, Charles, Sarah, Hope Peter, Charles, Henry, Sarah, John, Mary, Hope Peter, John, Charles, Henry,

the novel but is continually deferred, its development interrupted by returns to other geographically and socially distinct storylines. This narrative pattern recurs across the novel, as each strand is periodically suspended to make space for others, reinforcing the epistemic disorientation climate change induces: the collapse of stable cause-and-effect relationships, the deferral of consequences, and the difficulty of registering planetary-scale disruption through individual perception. In this way, the novel assembles a patchwork of entangled experiences across temporal and spatial scales, staging climate as a systemic process that resists containment within a single narrative arc.

In its formal structure, the novel draws on strategies characteristic of modernist fiction, such as fragmentation, disrupted chronology, and multiple focalisations, to reflect the disjointed nature of lived experience. These techniques allow Glasfurd to convey the indeterminacy and dislocation induced by climate disruption, foregrounding the epistemic limits of perception and narrative coherence. Beyond these formal affinities, however, the novel also gestures toward postmodernist poetics in its use of intermedial elements and textual self-awareness. Paratextual forms, including letters, property signs, landscape sketches, newspapers, function as both narrative devices and historical artefacts.[5] These discursive fragments deepen the novel's formal complexity and contribute to what David Higgins (2017) calls "a discursive-material entanglement", that is, "a set of interactions between earth systems, organic beings, and their discursive-material constructions" (25).[6] Glasfurd thus foregrounds not only the difficulties

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Sarah, Mary, John, Hope Peter, Sarah, Mary, Charles, John, Sarah, Mary, Hope Peter, Sarah, Hope Peter, Roísín, Sarah.

[5]   Here is a complete list of media, as they appear in the various sections of the novel: Henry – letters, official reports; John – letters, visual art (landscape painting), proclamation notices, newspapers; Sarah – warning Signs, handbills; Mary – letters, journal, fiction, poetry; Hope-Peter – letters, poetry, notices, Bible, leaflets; Charles – Bible; Roísín – newspapers.

[6]   It is important to note that Higgins's (2017) notion of discursive-material assemblage is indebted to Jane Bennet's work on material ecocriticism. Bennet (2010) draws on Bruno Latour and Deleuze and Guattari to develop the idea of assemblage, namely "a confederation of human and non-human elements" (23). Additionally, Higgins (2017) draws on the work of Kate Rigby and her theorisation of disasters as "material-discursive processes" (6).

of narrating climate change, but the epistemological limits of historical climate change fiction itself: any account of environmental crisis, no matter how carefully structured, remains partial, mediated, and contingent.

If the novel's use of fragmentation and intermediality foregrounds the epistemological limits of historical representations of climate change, this formal disunity is further extended through the narrative differentiation of its constituent parts. Each of the novel's "patches"—to borrow Anna Tsing et al.'s (2019) term—not only marks a distinct point within a constellation of planetary geographies but also enacts a unique narrative strategy. These patches are not merely spatially dispersed; they are also formally heterogeneous, requiring the reader to navigate not just spatial and temporal discontinuity but also narrative variation. This variation plays a central role in the novel's attempt to construct the aesthetic illusion of immersion in the historical world of 1815-1816. Rather than relying on a single narrative voice or stylistic register, the novel presents a shifting assemblage of modes that reflect the distinct temporalities, social positions, and environmental conditions of each setting.

In what follows, I examine each narrative patch individually in order to provide a clearer overview of the novel's storylines and the formal configurations that shape them, with particular attention to how these variations contribute to the representation of climate change and its uneven spatial distribution. Special emphasis is placed on the role of epistolarity, which emerges as a key medial and narrative device for mediating spatial relations, affective distance, and the partial representation of climate experience.

4.3.1 Lost Letters and Imperial Silences: Epistolarity, Climate Witnessing, and the Fictional Archive

The first narrative patch introduces the figure of Henry Hogg, whose story sets the stage for the novel's interplay between historical immersion and formal

experimentation. The novel opens with his voice in the form of a letter, which is a media form that immediately evokes the communicative conventions of the early nineteenth century. As Wulf Koepke (1990) observes, the epistolary mode often arises from urgency and spatial separation, functioning as a means of bridging geographical distance between writer and recipient (265). In Hogg's case, this distance is both literal and expansive: the letters are written near Sumbawa Island and addressed to his wife, Emmalina, in England. This detail is far from incidental. As Altman (1982) argues, the presence of an addressee is one of the defining formal features of the epistolary genre, shaping not only the message but also the manner in which it is conveyed. The writer's awareness of being read, even at a temporal and spatial remove, generates a form of discourse deeply shaped by relationship, intention, and projection (88). This is particularly relevant in Hogg's case, where the emotional intimacy of the address creates an illusion of authenticity and transparency that the narrative will later subtly undermine.

This spatial and temporal disjunction is further thematised in a later moment of meta-reflection on the letter as a medium, conveyed through third-person figural narration—understood here, following Stanzel (1984), as a perspective mediated through the character's consciousness:[7]

> He considers the small pile of letters he has written to her. An absurd thing to do when he had no means to post them until he was landed again in Makassar. He would send them in intervals so she would receive his news over a period of time and have the anticipation of a story in parts, well told. (Glasfurd 2021, 8)

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[7] Stanzel (1984) differentiates between three narrative situations: first-person, authorial, and figural. In the first-person mode, the narrator is also a character within the story. The authorial mode features an external narrator who is not part of the story world and is partly aligned with the real author's voice. The figural mode also employs a third-person narrator, but the narrative is focalised through a character's inner experience, offering the reader access to the story as it is filtered through that character's consciousness (4-5).

This passage foregrounds not only the material contingencies of epistolary exchange, such as its delays, gaps, and reliance on physical circulation, but also reveals the letter as a self-conscious narrative form. Writing becomes an aesthetic and affective gesture: a way of constructing a story in fragments, anticipating both the rhythm of its reception and the emotional response it might elicit. As Janet G. Altman (1982) observes, the letter inherently dramatizes the tension between presence and absence, communication and miscommunication; meaning often arises not from what is conveyed, but from what is withheld, lost, or misunderstood (43, 60). In this context, the tension in Hogg's letters lies not simply in their delayed delivery, but in their epistemic status as retrospective constructions whose truth-value remains contingent, shaped as much by narrative intention as by factual accuracy. This moment of meta-reflection thus invites the reader to consider the letter not only as a medium of connection, but as a literary artefact within the novel's layered formal structure.

As the section unfolds, the epistolary voice that initially structures the narrative begins to recede, giving way to a heterodiegetic third-person narration that remains tightly internally focalised. This shift broadens the temporal and spatial frame while remaining anchored in Hogg's consciousness, inviting a retrospective reassessment of the letters' content through a more reflective and affectively charged lens. As Joe Bray (2003) notes, epistolary fiction often produces a deceptively unified and transparent form of subjectivity, presenting the letter-writer's account as immediate and unfiltered. Yet this illusion is destabilised by the inherent tensions between the narrating and experiencing selves, and between past and present (22). In *The Year Without Summer*, this shift to third-person narration functions precisely in this way: it reframes Hogg's epistolary voice not as a direct window into lived experience, but as a curated and strategic mode of self-presentation. As a matter of fact, within the third-person narrative, there are several moments where the reader is subtly

encouraged to question the reliability of Hogg's account. In one instance, he reflects on a story told in his letter:

> He thought about crossing out the boast about himself and the Rajah, the story of them climbing Tambora together. If he did, it would mean writing the letter again and he hadn't the appetite for that. Besides, the story was true in that it wasn't a lie—only it was his captain's story, not his. (Glasfurd 2021, 8)

This moment of hesitation, in which Hogg nearly edits the boast but ultimately allows it to remain, highlights the layered and performative nature of "truth" in his account. What passes for truth here is shaped less by factual accuracy than by convenience. A later observation reinforces this point: "And he realised then that he had sheathed the truest part of himself in his letters as carefully as his sword" (9). Such moments foreground the constructed nature of Hogg's epistolary voice, underscoring the degree to which personal testimony within the letter form is always mediated, selective, and shaped by the rhetorical demands of self-presentation.

This narratological shift is also an experiential one, shaping not only how the story is told, but how it is registered and felt by the reader. As Karin Kukkonen (2019) argues, narrative form shapes the reader's "designed sensory flow," that is, the way attention, immersion, and expectation are modulated across a text. Embedded media such as letters contribute to this modulation by managing levels of embodied simulation and by structuring narrative through acts of joint attention. In *The Year Without Summer*, the epistolary voice constructs a homodiegetic first-person narration that remains internally focalised through Hogg's sensorium and cognition. The fictional addressee, namely his wife, serves as a relay for embodied experience, anchoring Hogg's descriptions in relational terms. Drawing on Kukkonen's model, the letter functions as a medium of joint attention: Hogg directs his account toward Emmalina, and the reader engages in

a form of secondary joint attention, observing how perception is shaped for the benefit of another person. This dual orientation to narrated event and relational address modulates how emotional and epistemic cues are processed. As the narrative shifts to a heterodiegetic third-person mode, the attentional structure is reconfigured. The communication no longer flows from Hogg to Emmalina, but from narrator to reader, who now co-attend to Hogg's interiority and the rhetorical shaping of his letters. This transition marks a shift in joint intentionality, corresponding to a move from immersive internal focalisation to a more distanced, reflective stance. Hogg's epistolary self-presentation is reframed not as a transparent, unmediated expression, but as a curated narrative act shaped by context, audience, and emotional restraint.

This dynamic aligns with Altman's (1982) account of epistolarity, which emphasises the letter's inherently relational structure. Emmalina's implied presence not only shapes the tone and content of Hogg's writing but also foregrounds the performative nature of the letter as a form of mediated self-expression (88). Once reframed through third-person narration, the letters are no longer documents of immersive and affective immediacy, but interpretive artefacts embedded within the novel's broader narrative design. Altman's account of the letter's *mise-en-abyme* potential, understood as its capacity to reflect on its own narrative construction, finds a clear analogue in Kukkonen's model of precision management, wherein readerly immersion is continually recalibrated across narrative levels. As the narrative moves from an inside perspective aligned with individual intentionality, which is immersive and centred on the character's self-monitoring, to an outside perspective associated with joint intentionality, where the reader reflects on the character's actions in cooperation with the narrator, the letters are recontextualised. No longer received as transparent disclosures, they become curated performances shaped by relational address and narrative intention. The interplay between epistolary voice and

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figural narration thus destabilises any illusion of documentary realism and exposes the epistemological limits of personal testimony.

This reflection on the constructedness of narrative is reinforced by a parallel moment of meta-commentary, not on language, but on visual representation. As Hogg recalls his medical training in anatomical drawing, he reflects on the inadequacy of representation itself:

> The training was supposed to provide insight, in sight, a way to see into. But, as he suspected it was the same for many seated on the bench with him, their knowledge seemed stuck resolutely to the surface of the paper and went no deeper. For a pencil was not a scalpel. And paper was not skin. (Glasfurd 2021, 184-185)

This passage thematises the failure of representational media, sketches and letters alike, to penetrate the surface of lived experience. The precision of line does not equate to understanding; anatomical clarity does not guarantee insight. The metaphor extends beyond the visual to encompass the written: just as drawing cannot substitute for tactile engagement, written testimony cannot fully capture the layered, affective complexity of experience, especially when filtered through the disruptions of climate trauma and colonial distance. Taken together, these moments construct a layered critique of mimesis. Whether through letters or drawings, the novel insists on the fallibility of representational forms and their entanglement with narrative intention, material constraint, and epistemological failure. Hogg's voice, both written and sketched, thus becomes emblematic of a larger narrative question: how can climate disruption be rendered narratively when it exceeds individual comprehension, sensory immediacy, and the limits of language itself?

At this stage in the novel, the power of historical fiction to convey the scale and complexity of environmental crisis appears fundamentally compromised. What emerges is not the authority of the historical novel but its vulnerability, expressed through its openness to epistemic gaps, mediation, and narrative

distortion. Yet this sceptical stance does not remain static. A crucial shift occurs when Hogg, now confronted with the full extent of the devastation caused by the Tambora eruption, becomes acutely aware of the failure of official discourse to adequately represent the catastrophe. Upon arriving on Sumbawa Island, he finds the landscape obliterated by ash and pumice, the ground covered in grey, the vegetation scorched. He encounters survivors starving, dehydrated, and severely burned. Entire villages have vanished; of the more than twelve thousand inhabitants of Tambora and Precate, only a few remain, and even these are unlikely to survive. The scale of suffering is overwhelming and immediate, far exceeding what can be captured through detached observation or bureaucratic abstraction.

It is in light of this experience that Hogg realises, upon reading his captain's report, the full extent of his omissions: "nothing on the appalling condition of the survivors, nor the cowardly manner with which the expedition had quitted the place" (255). In response, he feels compelled to write his own account, in the form of a letter that would bear witness not only to the physical destruction, but to the moral and affective dimensions of the event. No longer a passive observer or a recorder of travel impressions, Hogg becomes a figure of narrative resistance, trying to articulate what official channels have silenced. The novel thus pivots from foregrounding the limits of historical fiction to exploring its potential as a space for supplementary testimony, especially when institutional forms of knowledge prove insufficient to account for lived catastrophe.

This moment marks a narrative and ethical turning point. If earlier in the novel letters functioned primarily as mediated and constrained performances, here they become instruments of critical supplementation, acts of narrative repair that challenge institutional silences. The tension between form and content remains, but it is now charged with a renewed sense of urgency and

responsibility. Hogg's attempt to articulate what has been elided by official reportage signals a shift from representational scepticism toward a more provisional affirmation of the letter's testimonial potential. In doing so, the novel begins to reframe the role of historical fiction, not simply as a genre hampered by its own limitations, but as one uniquely positioned to address what remains unspeakable or unrecorded in dominant historical narratives, particularly in the context of environmental catastrophe.

This shift is underscored by a moment of explicit meta-commentary on letter writing itself: "Henry paused, caught between the release of writing what was in his heart and the shame of revealing his thoughts in such explicit, intimate form" (256). The affective labour of witnessing, which renders the catastrophe legible not only as fact but also as emotion, entails vulnerability, risk, and self-exposure. Hogg no longer writes simply to report or describe, but to communicate something felt, something that exceeds empirical detail. In an attempt to render the unimaginable scale of destruction comprehensible to his wife—and, by extension, to any English reader—he turns to a striking analogy:

> Snowdon blown into the sky, utterly destroyed in a manner of hours and the hellish force required to do it and all that stone become dust; if you can imagine that perhaps you can begin to imagine the calamity that has beset the island of Sumbawa and its people. (256)

Here, the letter becomes a site of cognitive and affective translation, namely a way to render the planetary in terms of the familiar, to turn colonial distance into domestic proximity. In doing so, the novel stages a moment of narrative transformation: from mediated recollection to an emergent ethics of shared attention. In this respect, *The Year Without Summer* also recuperates a legacy of the nineteenth-century realist novel (George Eliot, for instance) in which fiction was conceived as a medium capable of cultivating sympathy across distance and

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difference, and of rendering visible the moral weight of otherwise inaccessible lives.

This emergent testimonial urgency is ultimately undone by a final and devastating irony: Hogg's letter, an attempt to bear witness to what official channels omitted, is never sent. As he collapses from respiratory failure, his lungs damaged by prolonged exposure to volcanic ash, his final letter is snatched by the wind, its contents lost at sea. His voice is silenced just as it seeks to register the full human cost of the disaster. This narrative gesture resonates with David Higgins's (2021) reading of the historical British account of Tambora, compiled under the authority of Sir Stamford Raffles. As Higgins shows, the eruption was framed through an imperial epistemology that prioritised bureaucratic documentation over empathetic testimony, reducing eyewitness accounts to administrative data and subjugating indigenous voices to the margins of scientific and colonial discourse. The official 1816 narrative, published in the *Transactions of the Batavian Society*, delays its acknowledgment of human devastation and largely omits the suffering of native populations, relying instead on rationalised summaries authored by colonial Residents and naval officers (30-31). Hogg's fictional testimony can thus be read as a counterfactual insertion into this discursive gap. His experience echoes that of Lieutenant Phillips and the Rajah of Saugar, whose voices, as Higgins (Ibid.) argues, were belatedly and partially incorporated into the historical record, filtered and mediated by layers of colonial narration (30). By giving narrative weight to a character like Hogg, whose attempt to document the appalling condition of the survivors is both ethically motivated and narratively thwarted, *The Year Without Summer* points toward what remains unwritten and unmourned in the official archive. The destruction of his final letter is more than a plot detail: it becomes a symbol of the very historical erasure the novel seeks to address. In this way, *The Year Without Summer* joins Higgins's critique, not only exposing the limits of imperial record-

keeping, but imagining the emotional and ethical intensities that such documents failed to preserve. Crucially, it also gestures toward the potential of historical fiction itself to intervene in these silences not by recuperating lost facts, but by staging the conditions of loss, erasure, and affective residue that haunt the colonial archive. At the same time, Hogg's fragmented letter exemplifies how personal testimony, even when precarious, remains vital for representing the climate crisis: it resists abstraction by grounding catastrophe in situated experience and by conveying its impact through the rhetoric of a specific voice. Such localized accounts cannot encompass the totality of climate disruption, yet their very multiplicity, when placed side by side, constitutes a form of spatial polyphony, where diverse singular experiences of distinct spaces collectively illuminate the unevenness and complexity of crisis.

4.3.2 Sketching Crisis: Visual Art, Epistolarity, and Environmental Mediation in 1816 England

The second narrative patch shifts both temporally and geographically, transporting the reader from Henry Hogg's volcanic tropics of 1815 to the rain-soaked English landscapes of 1816. Here, the protagonist is the painter John Constable, whose storyline moves across three key locations, including Suffolk, London, and Weymouth, each characterised by environmental and social conditions that exemplify the wider-reaching consequences of the Tambora eruption. While Constable is a historical figure, Glasfurd fictionalises this year of his life by focusing on a moment of personal and professional crisis: the death of his father, his inability to secure financial stability through his art, and his thwarted attempts to marry Maria Elizabeth Bicknell. Initially self-absorbed and preoccupied with his own frustrations, Constable's perspective is gradually shaped by the socio-ecological conditions unfolding around him. His visits to Suffolk expose him to the aftermath of agrarian enclosure, as desperate farmers

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fence off ever-smaller plots of land, hunt illegally for food, and begin to organise in protest. Meanwhile, in London, Maria languishes in poor health, and the city's atmosphere, damp with rain and choked by coal smoke, intensifies both physical and emotional affliction. Even the couple's eventual honeymoon in Weymouth is shadowed by the presence of displaced Welsh migrants driven there by hunger.

Alongside these spatial and social trajectories, Glasfurd extends her exploration of mediated narration. Here, epistolarity serves a different function from that seen in Hogg's earlier letters. Rather than spanning vast colonial distances, Constable's letters navigate shorter, domestic geographies and offer a medium through which personal, affective, and environmental experiences circulate between locations. Like the earlier narrative patch centred on Hogg, this section is mediated through third-person figural narration, with the focalisation consistently aligned with Constable's perspective. However, unlike Hogg's fully rendered letters, here the letters Constable writes are never presented in full. Instead, their presence is felt obliquely through brief quotations, summaries, or Constable's own reflections on their composition. This narrative choice reinforces the sense that epistolary communication is shaped by emotional restraint and strategic self-presentation, rather than unfiltered self-expression.

When writing to Maria, for instance, Constable reflects carefully on what to reveal and what to withhold, a tension shaped by the courtship dynamic and the emotional expectations of the addressee: "He would keep his letter to her brief. He summarised the parlous state of his father's health in as few words as possible and avoided description" (Glasfurd 2021, 43). The letter here functions less as a transparent record of experience than as a carefully calibrated performance, shaped by the fear of causing distress, of being judged, or of jeopardising the fragile progress of their relationship. By contrast, his letters to his friend Fisher allow for greater openness: in these, he can "set out his worries"

(43), signalling a shift in tone and communicative freedom that reflects the different emotional and social terms of that relationship. Other letters, such as brief business notes to Joseph Farington, serve primarily transactional purposes, mentioning, for instance, a possible "Wivenhoe commission" (44).

Significantly, the only letter presented in full is one from Maria to Constable. Her voice here becomes momentarily central, offering not only clues about future events, but also insight into the environmental conditions shaping life in London. Her commentary on the weather, laced with dry irony, evokes the oppressive and unrelenting damp: "*London draws its long grey coat around us most days. If it's meant to warm us, then it certainly does not*" (78, italics in the original). This glimpse into her embodied experience conveys the atmosphere of London with sensory immediacy, while the letter itself, containing an invitation to dinner, also signals a likely shift in Constable's movements.

While the letters in Constable's section primarily shed light on interpersonal relationships and offer partial insight into the climatic disturbances affecting the lived environment, it is other media, such as newspapers and official proclamations, that more fully capture the broader socio-ecological dynamics of 1816 England. One example of how the novel embeds such media is the scene in which Constable, while walking through the Suffolk countryside, encounters a royal proclamation affixed to a post, which represents an intrusion of official discourse into the rural landscape. The notice warns of arson, machine-breaking, and unlawful assemblies. Its tone is urgent and disciplinary:

> Persons have, for some Time past, unlawfully assembled themselves together […] set fire to several Dwelling Houses, Barns, Outbuildings, and Stacks of Corn; and have destroyed Cattle, Corn, Threshing Machines, and other Instruments of Husbandry. (49)

The proclamation casts rural protest as criminal disorder, obscuring the conditions of desperation that fuel it. Constable, initially startled to see such a

notice in the countryside, is forced to confront the fact that the violence he had assumed to be confined to London is also present in Suffolk, unsettling the pastoral ideal through which he had imagined the rural landscape.

Newspapers, too, are embedded within the narrative and offer another medium through which Constable's idealised view of the countryside is challenged. In one instance, his father's newspaper, its pages charting the sharp increase in corn prices, forces him to recognise the economic suffering of rural communities. The moment strikes a note of realisation, but it remains insufficient for Constable to fully grasp the gravity of the situation. Even a newspaper account of the Tambora eruption, reporting on "the most violent that ever happened in the history of the world" (129), fails to provoke serious reflection. Instead, Constable responds with artistic envy: "Volcanoes? There was a subject for Turner!" (Ibid.). The eruption, which annihilates entire towns and reshapes coastlines, is sublimated into an aesthetic problem, revealing how Constable processes catastrophe not through moral reckoning but through artistic rivalry. This moment underscores a broader dynamic at play in this section: the competing representational logics of different media. Alongside letters, newspapers, and proclamations, visual art emerges, albeit indirectly, as a further mode of mediation.

Although none of Constable's paintings are visually reproduced within the novel, the act of painting is frequently invoked as a narrative and perceptual frame. His artistic practice becomes the medium through which he interprets his surroundings, narrating his times, landscapes, and the people within them. These places emerge not only through his embodied movement across them, but through his painterly attempts to fix them in image, and the uncertainty he expresses about doing so. His experience of place is therefore consistently filtered through the act of visual representation. At moments, Constable is animated by conviction: his attention to work, texture, and gesture reveals a belief in the

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political and aesthetic value of everyday rural labour. As he prepares to sketch on a rainy afternoon, he reflects on his choice of subject, namely "this track, these trees, the field beyond" (50), and flips through earlier pages filled with figures of working men and gleaning women. For him, the moment before pencil meets paper carries a sense of majesty rooted in the ordinary, in the labour and textures of rural life: "Majesty? Here it was... in the arch of a man's back as he shouldered the weight of a sack of corn from off a cart and into his father's mill" (51). In this sense, painting becomes a way of registering the material and social textures of place, resisting the elevated spectacle of Turner's sublime in favour of what Constable sees as a quieter, more grounded form of truth. And yet, landscape painting in *The Year Without Summer* is not merely a backdrop to the plot, but a contested site of environmental perception and historical interpretation. Constable's efforts to represent space and climate through his art are shadowed by doubt: can landscape painting capture crisis, or is it inherently escapist? Does it retain political significance in a time of enclosure, hunger, and atmospheric instability?

These questions take on particular resonance in Constable's storyline, where his attempts to engage with the changing countryside through art reveal the complex interplay between perception, representation, and historical and environmental change. In Suffolk, Constable's return to the countryside of his youth is marked by a deepening sense of estrangement. Once a landscape of familiarity and artistic inspiration, East Bergholt now appears altered beyond recognition. The visual signs of enclosure, including fences, subdivided fields, and new boundaries, register a transformation of both the land's material structure and its social meaning. "The enclosure of the East Bergholt common was a wretched development: field laid to field fencing it into smaller plots" (17), Constable observes, recognising how spatial reconfiguration is tied to social exclusion. Watching a group of men ploughing in unseasonable weather, he

reflects: "A strange time of year to be ploughing" (16), a brief yet pointed moment that registers the ecological irregularities of the climate as well as the desperate adaptations it necessitates. The once-idealised rural space is no longer static or picturesque, but restless and degraded, transformed by both natural and legislative forces. "Bergholt, beloved Bergholt. Was it him that was changing, or it?" (17), he wonders, capturing the novel's ongoing concern with how environmental and historical crisis disrupt affective attachments to place. What emerges here is a profound sense of defamiliarization: the landscape he once knew and represented has become unrecognisable, and his artistic gaze is rendered inadequate by the pace of environmental and social upheaval. Constable's visual grammar, which was once a means of understanding place, proves insufficient to capture the realities of enclosure and ecological disruption. His images, recently sketched, already seem out of date and are overtaken, instead, by the forces they try to depict.

This failure is further underlined in a subsequent scene at Dedham lock, where Constable attempts to paint a familiar setting under altered conditions. The sluices, unusually opened due to spring flooding, signal environmental instability that he registers but quickly dismisses: "He pushed the thought away. It wasn't his concern" (79). His sketch, though technically competent, appears "oddly estranged" (80) and "too dark" (Ibid.), a reflection of his inability, or even unwillingness, to fully engage with the transformations occurring around him. The landscape resists not only representation but recognition, exposing the limitations of a visual idiom shaped by more stable times. This representational tension is made even more explicit in a conversation with his old friend Dunthorne. When asked whether he plans to paint the common "before it is gone" (52), Constable retorts that he has painted it "many times" (Ibid.). Dunthorne counters: "'But never like this. With the fences. Are you blind?'" (Ibid.). The accusation is not just that Constable has failed to depict the literal

presence of enclosure, but that he has wilfully excluded its social and political significance. Dunthorne's comment, "'You only see what you want to see. A comfort to you, I suppose'" (Ibid.), highlights Constable's detachment from the lived consequences of enclosure, even as he imagines himself documenting rural life.

This tension between perception and representation sharpens as Constable is increasingly forced to confront not only the political implications of his subject matter but also the aesthetic ideologies and market forces shaping his practice. What begins as a reluctance to fully engage with the realities of enclosure becomes, in the context of patronage and exhibition, a broader struggle over artistic autonomy. The conflict between direct observation and imaginative embellishment comes to a head during the Wivenhoe commission, where Mr. Rebow, seeking a picturesque scene, pressures Constable to imagine "something brighter than this endless fucking rain" (281). The climate instability brought about by Tambora's eruption, marked by dampness, gloom, and flooding, collides here with market expectations. Constable insists on his observational method: "I paint, when I can, from nature, as I am now... I refer to a library of oil sketches, captured on the spot" (280). But Rebow's dismissal of this approach and his demand for imaginative revision frames a broader conflict between artistic integrity and the commodification of landscape. Constable's resistance to Turner's "bravura" and the idealising impulse in landscape art is not just aesthetic but ethical, a defence of representation grounded in embodied experience and direct perception. Yet the pressure to conform to the expectations of buyers, patrons, and the Academy, who demanded idealised landscapes, threatens to hollow out that artistic practice.

Late in the narrative, however, painting seems to find a kind of redemption. After Constable's marriage to Maria, a brief period of personal happiness seems to sharpen his sensitivity to the world beyond his own

suffering. During their honeymoon in Weymouth, he paints with renewed intensity and clarity. Observing beachgoers and children on the shore, he sketches "with furious concentration" (340), capturing movement and gesture in a scene that is both socially inclusive and environmentally attuned: "He had captured, truly, what it was to paint outside, nature's urgent force, and had brought colour fully into its service" (Ibid.). In this moment, painting regains its documentary and affective force, able to convey the urgency of the weather, the landscape, and the lives unfolding within it. When a little Welsh girl interrupts his work, he paints her portrait and shares his lunch with her; she runs to her family and offers them the food he gave her. The portrait, like Hogg's letter in the earlier section, is snatched away by the wind. The image, ephemeral and barely fixed, is forever lost. In this small encounter, Glasfurd gestures toward the precariousness of visual testimony: some fragments of history, even when captured, will be swept away. And yet others may endure. Constable's painting, in this moment, becomes not a retreat from crisis but a brief, compassionate response to it.

Taken together, the diverse media embedded in this section construct a layered framework for representing place under environmental and social stress. Each medium brings with it a distinct mode of perception: letters convey emotional mediation and interpersonal constraint; official texts project authority and crisis management; newspapers offer fragmentary economic and scientific indicators; and painting, though the least literal, offers a sustained, if troubled, attempt to grasp the textures of lived experience. Through Constable's shifting relationship to the places he inhabits and depicts, the novel probes the limits and potential of visual art as a form of environmental testimony. His painterly gaze, at times detached, at others newly attuned, becomes the vehicle through which Glasfurd explores how landscapes are not only seen and felt, but also narrated through competing discourses and unstable modes of representation. In this way,

the Constable section stages a complex meditation on how environments are rendered knowable, and how art might register, resist, or even repair the fractures of a world in crisis. Read against the backdrop of the Tambora eruption, Constable's troubled vision resonates with present-day anxieties about climate change: it underscores how environmental disruption resists singular representation, but it nevertheless demands situated, layered, and imaginative modes of testimony that remain urgent in the twenty-first century and that, in their multiplicity and fragmentariness, can bring a mosaic-like clarity to its complexity and indeterminacy.

4.3.3 Speaking from Within the Storm: Sarah Hobbs and the Geography of Climate Injustice

The third narrative patch in *The Year Without Summer* adds another English locality to the novel's widening geography of climate crisis: the fenlands surrounding Littleport and Ely. While still situated within England, this spatial shift carries significant socio-political weight, as the focus turns from John Constable to Sarah Hobbs, an illiterate labourer living in conditions of extreme poverty. Based on a historical figure who participated in the 1816 Ely and Littleport riots, Sarah's character narrates the social and environmental conditions of this turbulent year from the position of those most devastated by them, that is, those deprived of land, food, and institutional protection. If Constable's experience of climate disruption is buffered by his class position and refracted through a third-person figural narrative voice, Sarah's narrative is immediate and unmediated, rendered in a first-person voice marked by strongly embodied language, shaped by hunger, cold, and the visceral pressures of survival. This narrative immediacy is not just a matter of style, but of epistemology: climate change is experienced from the inside out, registered

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through a first-person voice that foregrounds spoken storytelling, interoception, and the somatic language of cold and hunger.

The context of her story is, in fact, one of acute deprivation. The spring of 1816 fails to arrive. Cold rain alternates with snow, crops fail to germinate, and the fenlands, newly enclosed and increasingly drained, become a site of stagnation rather than growth. "Winter had come upon me in spring" (Glasfurd 2021, 155), Sarah reflects, capturing the strange seasonal dislocation that defines the year. Hunger dominates her account, conveyed through intensely embodied language: "Some days, I was so made of hunger, I imagined a stone in me that started as grit then got bigger and bigger till it felt like I had the whole of Ely Cathedral in there" (56). The passage fuses physical sensation with environmental scale, rendering hunger both corporeal and monumental. The hunger is not metaphorical but somatically real; the narration enacts it through a metaphor rooted in bodily experience, as Ely Cathedral becomes the internal measure of starvation's immensity. In this moment, the scale of the human body and its experiential interiority is mapped onto the scale of inhabited place, collapsing the distinction between inner sensation and external landscape. Her voice enacts what Caracciolo and Kukkonen (2021) have called a deeply embodied perspective, where cognition and affect are filtered through somatic experience: "I gave a hard shiver and dropped my hand to my side. Hard enough to be hungry and now I was cold. I hadn't the words for what I was feeling. Everything inside of me and outside of me was wrong" (Glasfurd 2021, 155). Here, Sarah's bodily self-awareness is not merely descriptive, it is the core of her cognitive and emotional orientation, establishing the body as the primary site through which environmental disturbance is registered and understood. Her pain is often mapped with precision: "I kicked at a stone then hopped up and down as the pain of it shot up to my ears and back to my toes" (56). This is a narrative in which perception moves through the body, where physical sensation

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structures how the world is apprehended. Such embodied moments continually reassert the scale of the body as both sensory instrument and site of meaning, even as it is overwhelmed by the external pressures of extreme weather. This first-person account is not only formally distinctive, but affectively charged. Sarah's embodied language immerses the reader in her perspective, enlisting what cognitive narratologists have termed "embodied simulation" (Gallese and Wojciehowski 2011) or "re-enactment" (Kukkonen 2019) effects. The result is a mode of reading that does not remain at the level of empathy or observation, but demands a somatic response. The sensations of cold and hunger are not only described but transferred: they are felt, however fleetingly, on the reader's own skin.

Crucially, the relationship between body and place in Sarah's narrative is both metaphorically mapped and materially lived. The fenland she inhabits is not a passive backdrop but a terrain continually reshaped by enclosure and drainage, forms of spatial control that restrict her movement and labour, endangering her subsistence. As access to the commons is restricted and rights to the land withdrawn, these transformations are not simply observed; they are registered somatically. "There were straight lines everywhere now" (Glasfurd 2021, 26), she observes, as enclosure imposes geometric order upon the landscape, dividing and fencing it into rigid containment. These lines do not only mark space; they also regulate it: "Not all the land was fenced off… but that didn't give us the say-so to walk over it" (Ibid.). As the commons are subdivided and access restricted, the body registers these changes through physical exhaustion. The land does not simply reflect hardship; it becomes its medium. The straightness of paths and ditches is juxtaposed with the complexity of lived experience, as Sarah muses on "the differences between straight and simple" (Ibid.). Her observation gestures toward a mode of thinking that does not conform to the rationalising logic of enclosure but instead arises from daily

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confrontation with its consequences. Her understanding of land and labour articulates a counter-discourse to the economic and legal frameworks that justify dispossession, a discourse grounded not in abstraction, but in the physical and moral registers of experience. Seen through this lens, the ideological violence of enclosure becomes visible, for although it is systemically concealed, it remains unmistakably inscribed in the bodies and voices of those it harms.

Her voice, in this sense, resists not only material deprivation but epistemic erasure. It does not emerge from education or institutional discourse, but from the sheer need to comprehend and articulate a reality that official structures refuse to acknowledge. There are no letters in Sarah's narrative, because she cannot read or write. Her historical counterpart left no written testimony; in the novel, her voice is imaginatively reconstructed. This contributes to foregrounding orality as both a narrative strategy and a historically embedded mode of expression, one that restores the presence of a forgotten account. That orality, however, is not only established narratively via the choice of first-person voice, but also stylistically. Glasfurd renders Sarah's speech in a voice rich with regional and sociolectal inflections: "Mairster" (Master), "bastid" (bastard), "oss" (horse), "'summat" (something), "'un" (one). These phonetic idiosyncrasies root Sarah's testimony in a linguistic register that resists standardisation. Here, language functions not merely as a medium of representation but as a form of social inscription, serving as a marker of class, a vessel of oral tradition, and a subtle assertion of cultural memory. Glasfurd's choice to craft this voice in the rhythms and sounds of a historically situated vernacular signals a refusal to sanitise or universalise Sarah's perspective. Her speculative reflections, "Did you never, wonder, Tessie, how you got to be you and I got to be me? […] Do you reckon the King thinks on it? Why it is he is the King and not someone else?" (154), express a political consciousness rooted in inequality, articulated in the vernacular of a speaker historically denied the means of preservation. This

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emphasis on spoken thought, rather than textual authority, becomes all the more significant when set against the written signs that punctuate the landscape but remain inaccessible to her.

The only written texts that appear in the form of warning notices against poaching or fence-breaking are in fact unreadable to Sarah, but fully visible to the reader. The choice of including these notices underscores the injustice of a system in which laws are enforced upon those who cannot even read them, let alone challenge their authority. The very instruments of regulation exist beyond Sarah's reach, deepening her exclusion from the legal order they impose. In contrast, the oral fragments embedded in the narrative, such as folk rhyme and shouted slogans, offer a counter-discourse grounded in shared experience and collective memory:

'Higher wages and the price of bread cheaper!' (205)

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But leaves the greater villain loose
Who steals the common off the goose. (90)

The latter chant, though only partially quoted in the novel, has a long history within oral protest culture. Although the earliest recorded instance in print dates to 1821—five years after the events narrated in Glasfurd's work—it was almost certainly circulating orally beforehand, with some sources attributing its origins to the eighteenth or even late seventeenth century.[8] Its anonymous transmission and lack of fixed textual origin highlight the enduring role of oral culture in articulating resistance to enclosure, well before such expressions were legitimised in the written archives of history. Glasfurd's inclusion of it in *The Year Without Summer* thus deepens the novel's commitment to recovering unofficial

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[8]   See Boyle 2008.

voices and non-textual forms of dissent. But in a world where oral protest holds no institutional weight, where chants go unheard, letters are unwritten, and legal avenues are inaccessible, expression alone proves insufficient.

Whereas Constable struggles with how best to represent a world in flux, despite his access to writing and the visual arts, Sarah's inner life is marked by the absence of any such tools. Constable may experience doubt or hesitation, but his letters, sketches, and paintings ultimately contribute to a cultural archive; they are preserved, circulated, and remembered. Sarah, by contrast, cannot write or paint her experience. Her thoughts cannot be externalised through conventional forms: "I watched him walk off, him with his thoughts, me with mine. And it made me wonder, how did anyone get their thoughts out of their head so as to make anything different?" (61). In the absence of any form of transmission, thought must become deed. "In the morning, that's when it come to me. That's how the thoughts get out of your head" (159). Sarah speaks from the margins of literacy and legality. For her, action is the only viable form of expression available: it is through riot, not rhetoric, that her voice enters history.

This section, then, does not resolve the novel's representational tensions, but expands them spatially and politically, adding the fenlands of Ely and Littleport to the novel's growing geography of climate crisis. Sarah's account captures how the global shock of the Tambora eruption manifests with brutal specificity in one of England's most vulnerable landscapes, where drainage, enclosure, and failing crops intersect with the absence of institutional support. Her voice introduces not only a new narrative modality, one that is oral, strongly embodied, and unlettered, but a different spatial register, one where the changing climate is not a matter of artistic reflection or mediated representation, but of hunger and revolt. As the novel moves on to incorporate further narrative strands, Sarah's patch of experience remains a radical intervention, a grounded

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testimony to how place, class, and weather converge in uneven and often devastating ways.

4.3.4 "Trespasser or Tenant": Climate and the Artistic Imagination

The fourth narrative patch in *The Year Without Summer* extends the novel's climate geography beyond Britain, tracing a transnational arc from France to Switzerland and back to Bath. The narrative voice returns to third-person figural, this time focalised through the character of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. Like John Constable, Mary belongs to a class buffered from the most immediate effects of the climate crisis. Yet unlike Constable's introspective and aesthetically preoccupied gaze, which remains largely inward and fixed, Mary's perspective, though also shaped by self-reflection and artistic ambition, is counterbalanced by a pronounced outward attentiveness, sharpened by the fact that she is travelling and thus more inclined to observe the world around her. She is accompanied on her journey by Percy Bysshe Shelley, her infant son William (nicknamed Willmouse) and her stepsister Claire Clairmont, John Polidori, and Lord Byron. The group stays in Maison Chapuis, a modest cottage near Cologny, while Byron and Polidori reside in the nearby Villa Diodati. As a traveller retracing familiar ground in a France already scarred by the Napoleonic wars and now stricken by climatic disruption, Mary brings both a cultivated sensibility and a comparative awareness. Her gaze, shaped by memory, movement, and empathetic witnessing, registers the compounded fallout of geopolitical and environmental crisis: emaciated children, displaced families, and the deepening desperation of rural poverty.

From the moment she arrives on the French coast, Mary's narrative repeatedly foregrounds the presence of beggars, especially children, marking them as a visible and persistent element of the social landscape through which she travels. "She saw them running over the dunes before they reached shore.

Then came their cries: *Un sou, un sou! Pour l'amour de Dieu... un sou!*" (Glasfurd 2021, 34, italics in the original). The affective force of this encounter is sharpened by Shelley's reaction of discomfort: "On seeing the basket of food, more children came running. Shelley lifted the basket above his head with one hand, leaving him the other to defend his pockets from attack" (35). The children's hunger becomes palpable not only through their cries and physical presence, but through the awkward defences it elicits, exposing how uncomfortable the encounter between social classes can be under the pressures of environmental crisis. Mary and her companions are physically close to suffering yet shielded from it. They witness deprivation at close range, speak to those in need, and are themselves affected by food scarcity. But their responses are shaped by ambivalence: sympathy is undercut by fear, and visibility does not lead to engagement.

This contrast persists as the narrative moves across the French border into Switzerland. In Cologny, where Mary and her companions settle near Villa Diodati, hunger remains legible on the faces of the local poor: "She caught the eye of a young mother and her child and looked away. She knew what was there without needing to look longer: hunger, keening and unguarded" (68-69). The gesture of recognition is immediate, but it is also cut short, as the glance is averted and the encounter aborted. Emotional engagement is present, but it coexists with an instinctive need to place physical distance. This ambivalence deepens in the following scene: after a confrontation between a local baker and a destitute man, Mary and Claire flee with a group of beggars trailing behind. Once home, their response is swift and defensive:

> Quickly, they bolted the door and drew back into a corner of the room with Elise and Willmouse, out of sight. There they remained, huddled in silence for some time, and it seemed to Mary that, truly, they were mice under a cup: a cup they had willingly hidden beneath. (70)

They are close enough to be frightened, but remain protected by their privileged access to structures of property. Despite their material anxieties and moments of sympathy, their position affords them escape, while those they encounter remain visibly exposed to the effects of a world in crisis.

Class stratification in this narrative patch is articulated not only through the Shelleys' encounters with the rural poor, but also within the social dynamics of their own travelling circle. The contrast between the Shelleys' household and Lord Byron's is narratively encoded through a sustained emphasis on spatial hierarchy. While Byron resides in the imposing Villa Diodati, perched high above the lake, Mary, Percy Shelley, Claire Clairmont, and the infant William occupy the humbler, darker Maison Chapuis below: "They were here together in Cologny, but it was Byron who looked down on them from the hill; […]The lord on the hill, and Mary had taken to calling him Albé" (71). The villa itself reflects its inhabitant: "Diodati, like its lord, was all shoulders" (Ibid.), suggesting that Byron's physical and social presence is inseparable from the architecture that contains it. Topography becomes a metaphor for class distinction: Byron's elevated residence signifies not only material privilege, but also a symbolic detachment from the hunger and hardship below, even as it affirms an aesthetic attachment to nature, situated high above, facing lake and mountain. Mary's own relationship to landscape is likewise shaped by position and reinforced through elevation: "Mary felt less cowed by the view than she did from their small house by the lake. The elevation in some way seemed to raise her up to it, to meet the mountains with a level gaze" (72). In both cases, spatial positioning mediates perception, encoding class distinctions through the literal and symbolic contours of the landscape.

This spatial and social asymmetry extends to questions of material comfort and daily life. While the Shelleys are not starving, their insulation from scarcity is not complete. Food shortages shape their routine in subtle but insistent ways.

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Their diet is described as "plain and simple" (70), dictated not by taste but by necessity. Claire's exasperated lament, "No honey in Cologny. No honey in Choulex. No honey in Meinier or in Annemasse" (63), together with Shelley's wry comment, "Sour milk, old apples. Riches, beyond compare" (270), points to a shared experience of lack that cuts across class lines, albeit unevenly. While Byron still exhibits pickiness in his eating, largely ignoring the food prepared for him, Polidori, who eats his rejected dishes "with great gusto" (71). The dynamics of consumption thus reproduce a hierarchy of dependency even within this privileged circle. Byron's aloof fastidiousness, Mary's silent exasperation, Claire's resourceful improvisations, and Polidori's secondary access to provisions stage a quiet drama of middle-class precarity and subordination, where the memory of abundance collides with a new, unsettling experience of absence. Though buffered from absolute need, their discomfort becomes a narrative instrument for registering the unevenness of climate impact, not through catastrophe, but through the slow pressure of daily scarcity and quiet retreat.

The lived frustration of these unsummery summer days is registered not only through food scarcity but also through a persistent emphasis on registering the unseasonal weather. Throughout Mary's narrative patch, Glasfurd foregrounds weather as a force that alters mood, derails plans, and reshapes experience. From the outset, the group is dogged by atmospheric instability. Their arrival in Calais is marked by "a grey drizzle" (33); near Troyes, "they were delayed by floods", and "on the road to Champagnole, [...] a storm came upon them" (37). The spring is "unusually late", with cold "sunk fathoms deep into the ground", raising existential questions: "Could anything survive beneath it?" (39). Snow reappears on the road to Nion, described as "a great white plane of snow" (40), and returns with persistence: "The snow had started again. I pressed against the carriage window, coating it white. Never was a scene more awfully desolate"

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(41). These are not occasional weather events but a sustained disintegration of seasonal norms: "the season had fallen in on itself like discarded bagpipes dropped to the floor at a party's end" (64). The narrative thus repeatedly underscores the abnormality and extremity of the conditions: "The sun, when it shone, did so with sudden, shocking heat. But the ground was so saturated that even the few dry days they had were heavy and leaden" (214). Indoors, the cottage provides little refuge, as the "[r]ain beat against every quarter of the cottage. It chased under the door, coming in around the window frames and pooled in puddles on the sills" (273). Weather becomes both environmental backdrop and narrative pressure point, a condition that structures the characters' movement, mood, and capacity to act.

Confinement indoors due to rain and cold disrupts the rhythms of summer leisure, preventing dining on terraces and long walks, and it reorients the group's activities. They turn inward, toward reading aloud, debating, and writing. If bad weather frustrates their plans, it also creates the conditions for artistic production. The social and atmospheric enclosure of this dismal summer becomes a crucible of creativity, forcing a reconfiguration of space and time in which imagination must substitute for travel. It is within this constraining context that their literary output begins to take shape, not in spite of the climate, but because of it. As Mary wryly reflects, "Perhaps, from now on, they should all stand out in the rain to write" (73). Yet the forms of writing that emerge in this section, including letters, journals, and fiction, are not mere responses to the constraints of weather, but carry deeper tensions between communication, avoidance, and creation. The letters exchanged with her sister Fanny, the references to the journal Mary keeps while travelling, and, most significantly, the fictional composition that will become *Frankenstein*, all play a key narrative role. These writings serve multiple functions: letters attempt to reconnect distant places and strained relationships, or else become burdens that reanimate what

one seeks to leave behind; the journal registers the texture of daily experience within a specific, weather-bound location, even as its value is framed as limited when compared to fiction; and fiction, finally, offers a generative outlet for processing the embodied environmental pressures of a summer that fails to arrive.

Letters, more specifically, are presented ambivalently: they are at once a source of potential intimacy and a conduit for emotional burden. Early in the journey, Mary reflects on letter writing with a tinge of both guilt and relief as she thinks of her sister Fanny:

> She would miss her. And yet […] the excitement at the thought of quitting England and leaving certain vexatious matters behind—of which, she admitted, her sister was one and her father another—was impossible to suppress. Besides, she had promised she would write and rather than the brief, lived moment, Fanny would have the pleasure of those letters again and again. (29)

Here, the epistolary form is associated not only with affection but with a sort of displacement: a gesture that allows one to be absent while still performing care. Crucially, Mary assumes that the letter's value lies in its rereadability, its capacity to be returned to and re-experienced. As Altman (1982) observes, letters function as privileged "souvenirs" of time, whose "rereadability" offers the illusion of preserving an earlier emotional or narrative moment (102). This temporal function of the letter, namely the possibility it offers of reliving a moment across time, has already been discussed in relation to *Cloud Atlas* in chapter two and it resurfaces here as a means of underscoring how epistolarity mediates presence and absence. This fantasy of temporal condensation underpins Mary's reasoning. She imagines that her sister will be satisfied with delayed, repeated contact in written form, as if re-reading can replace actual experience or relationship. At the same time, her anticipation of rereading as compensation already signals a retreat from real encounter: an effort to manage connection at a distance, in a temporally

suspended form. Yet the narrative quietly undoes this gesture: although Mary promises to write, the novel never depicts her doing so. Her apparent affirmation of the epistolary form as a privileged medium of memory and affect is undercut by silence. What might have served to bridge the gap between sisters and spaces instead becomes a marker of emotional evasion.

The absence of any meaningful communication is further underscored by the fact that the first letter to be fully embedded in the narrative arrives only much later, just as the group is preparing to leave Cologny and return to England. Crucially, it is not a letter from Mary, despite her earlier promise to write, but one from Fanny, who reaches out instead. In it, Fanny speaks of political disillusionment and financial anxiety: "*They talk of a change of Ministers; but […] [i]t is a change of the whole system of things that is wanted […] Mr Owen tells us to cheer up […] But how he can help to make the rich give up their possessions […] is too romantic to be believed….*" (Glasfurd 2021, 312, italics in the original). Her tone is tentative and indirect, suggesting both a fear of alienating her sister and an awareness of the growing distance between them. She does not plead directly but instead invokes broader questions of inequality and reform. For the reader, this moment pieces back together the novel's fragmented geography. The suffering visible in rural France, witnessed by Mary with a mix of empathy and discomfort, is echoed in the economic and social precarity in England that Fanny's letter describes. The novel insists that these crises are not separate, but profoundly entangled. What Mary sought to escape by leaving England re-emerges in altered but recognisable form across borders, and is now voiced by the very sister she has tried to shut out. Furthermore, the letter appears truncated, a reminder that the reader is only granted access to what Mary herself chooses to read. She does not dwell on her sister's reflections but skips ahead to the numbers, which reveal that the letter's true purpose is to remind her of debt and unresolved familial obligations: "*You seem to have forgotten Kingdon's £300... […] Papa has had a great*

deal of plague and uneasiness about it […]" (313). Her reaction is visceral: "Mary touched her hand to her brow. The world could not be shut out, trouble had found them even here" (Ibid.). In this context, the letter functions not as a bridge, but as an emissary of unwanted return, an intrusion of old burdens into the fragile refuge of self-imposed exile.

The narrative's selective presentation of letters, truncated and focalised entirely through Mary, foregrounds a precise mode of "joint attention", in Kukkonen and Caracciolo's (2021) sense of the term: the reader encounters each letter as Mary does, shaped by her reactions, evasions, and emotional resistance. This narrative strategy aligns the reader with Mary's perspective, drawing them into her escapist stance and a disinterest in communication that they come to share, only to later implicate them in its limitations. That alignment becomes all the more charged in what follows. When another letter arrives with a further request for money, it is not embedded in the text at all. Instead, it is reported only in passing, as a narrative absence. The letter exists solely as a silence that mirrors Mary's refusal to read or respond. Fanny's voice is no longer heard: not quoted, not explored, simply dismissed. The reader, still tethered to Mary's limited perspective, experiences this second plea only through its erasure. This narrative withholding prepares for a devastating reversal: when Fanny's final letter arrives, too late, it breaks through the silence with full emotional force. Only then does the cost of withdrawal become tragically clear, not only for Mary, but for the reader who has shared her limited, self-protective view. This time, Fanny's final letter, which is also her suicide note, is given in full:

> *I have long determined that the best thing I could do was to*
> *put an end to the existence of a being whose birth was*
> *unfortunate, and whose life has only been a series of pain to*
> *those persons who have hurt their health in endeavouring to*
> *promote her welfare...* (Glasfurd 2021, 354, italics in the original)

It ends without a name and its anonymity speaks volumes. Fanny's voice and identity have been gradually erased, and Mary's decision to ignore her letters is cast in retrospective tragedy: "And then it was as if the avalanche that had missed Mary that day had come down upon her after all, sweeping her into oblivion" (Ibid.). Mary's attempt to insulate herself geographically, emotionally, and narratively from familial burdens and social unrest is gradually undone: what she tries to escape from eventually catches up with her. Just as the letters Mary avoids eventually arrive, bringing with them grief and guilt, so too does the weather she hoped to outrun offer no reprieve. The summer never comes. Despite her retreat southward, the cold, the rain, and the desolation follow her, mirroring the return of the "vexatious" responsibilities and sorrows she had tried to escape. The section's treatment of letters is shaped by avoidance and belated recognition. Rather than engaging with the voices of others, Mary turns inward: her imaginative energy is channelled into her own writing—first her journal, then the fiction that will become *Frankenstein*. If letters reopen the past and reinscribe unwanted obligations, these other forms of writing offer something different.

Journal writing, unlike the emotionally fraught letters Mary receives, is portrayed with ambivalence. It offers a private outlet, a space for introspection, yet it proves inadequate for articulating deeper frustrations. One entry written at Maison Chapuis, *"I was his inestimable treasure […] But a treasure, much looked at, becomes an ordinary thing […]"* (74, italics in the original), is swiftly crossed out, as Mary angrily rejects what she sees as petty self-pity. Here, the journal becomes a symbol of constrained affect and frustrated expression, unable to accommodate the complexity of her experience. Its role is further diminished later in the narrative, when journal writing is reinscribed not as creative or cathartic, but commercial: "She […] was working on an account of their travels too. This had the prospect of selling; at least it was her sincere hope it would" (351). Rather

than a space of reflection, the journal becomes a tool of marketability, as its value is dictated not by its expressive power, but by its economic potential.

In this context, the journal stands in stark contrast to the fictional project that begins to take shape, which is animated not merely by Mary's exposure to the strange weather and sublime Alpine landscapes, but also by the philosophical debates and speculative conversations that unfold indoors, where the group takes refuge from the storm. It is this convergence of environmental and intellectual stimuli that crystallises into the imaginative vision of *Frankenstein*. What begins as light-hearted parlour talk, an absurd speculation about frog legs and vermicelli, quickly turns uncanny. The group's discussion of galvanism and vitalism, captured in the question "'Ah, but could life be made to begin in such a manner? […] A corpse reanimated?'" (276), plants the grotesque seed of artificial animation. Mary's initial reaction is one of repulsion, but the idea remains. It unsettles her, resurfacing first as nightmare and later as narrative. On one of the many storm-lashed nights she spends in Cologny, this grotesque speculation in fact returns in the form of a dream, a gothic crystallisation of both the conversations she has absorbed and her own submerged emotional state. In it, Mary sees "the hideous phantasm of a man" (277) for the first time. What begins as fear quickly gives way to creative clarity: "finally, she had a story to tell" (278). The dream functions not merely as inspiration but as an imaginative condensation of environmental disquiet, philosophical dread, and personal vulnerability.

The landscape itself, far from serving as a passive backdrop, actively informs Mary's imaginative process. During a hike to the Mer de Glace, the stark, icy desolation impresses itself upon her mind, helping to shape the contours of the bleak and sublime settings that will later populate *Frankenstein*'s storyworld: "Beautiful, dreadful; relentless in its desolation; the most desolate place in the world!" (304). Lost in contemplation, she feels the gravitational pull of her

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emerging narrative: "She felt the tug of the story she had begun […] She closed her eyes and thought of her monster, *her Prometheus*" (305). The environment, in all its strangeness and sublimity, merges with intellectual stimulation and emotional isolation to generate what will become one of the nineteenth century's most enduring fictional myths. As the novel progresses, this creative preoccupation becomes increasingly obsessive: "So occupied was she by it, it seemed utterly habited within her. Trespasser or tenant? Both, she decided" (314). This moment encapsulates how profoundly the environmental conditions of that summer become internalised. The embodied experience of climate crisis resurfaces in Mary's creative process. The place she inhabits inhabits her in return; shaped by the world, she reshapes it through narrative. There is, as the line suggests, no stable boundary between the experience of a place and the creative reinvention of it. Shelley may dismiss fiction as a distraction: "'poetry makes immortal all that is best […] A story is […] [a]musing for a day or two'" (271). Nevertheless, for Mary, the stakes are different. Fiction is not diversion but expression. It absorbs the storms outside and the grief within, becoming a vessel for mourning and imaginative survival.

This tension between art as self-indulgent retreat and art as an active confrontation with life reaches its culmination late in the narrative. Mary confronts the limits of aesthetic refuge: "Did they believe poetry could inure them from tragedy, that clever conversation could hold life's harsh realities at bay?" (356). And yet, when she returns to a discarded fragment of her manuscript, where she reads a passage from *Frankenstein* describing the numb despair following the death of a loved one, it offers not escape but recognition:

> *It is so long before the mind can persuade itself that she, whom we saw everyday, and whose very existence appeared a part of our own, can be departed for ever […]. These are the reflections of the first days; but when the lapse of time proves the reality of the evil, then the actual bitterness of grief commences…* (356-357)

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Her own fiction, once feared as a distraction, now offers a language for loss, a structure for grief. In it, life glimpses back at her. Fiction does not undo the suffering, but it bears witness to it and, in doing so, makes it just a little more bearable.

In this narrative patch, the experience of climate crisis is not framed as a historical backdrop for literary production, but as a lived, embodied condition that shapes artistic creativity. The various modes of writing, in the form of letters, journal entries, and fiction, each register different relationships to that condition. Letters are marked by avoidance and narrative delay; they return only to disrupt, reintroducing what Mary attempts to escape. Journals, by contrast, are constrained by the expectations of the market and by their own expressive limitations. They offer neither aesthetic depth nor emotional release. Fiction, however, assumes a different role. It is not merely an outlet for creative energy but a site where emotional, environmental, and philosophical pressures converge. The strange weather, the sublime landscapes, the disturbing conversations, and the grief Mary refuses to acknowledge all find form in the monster's story. Fiction here is not a distraction from crisis but its imaginative corollary. It is a space where the unspoken becomes speakable, and where suffering, however irreducible, is made narratable.

4.3.5 Climate, Class, and Reform History

The fifth narrative patch of *The Year Without Summer* returns the reader to England, shifting focus to the rural village of Corringham and the urban turbulence of London. Like the sections focalised through John, Henry, and Mary, this one is shaped by a third-person figural narrator, closely aligned with the perspective of Hope Peter, a fictional soldier recently returned from the Napoleonic Wars. His journey home maps a terrain shaped by overlapping forms of loss: war trauma, environmental degradation, and the dispossession of the

rural poor amid post-war economic collapse. Along the road to Corringham, Peter encounters Willie Hutcheon, a disabled boy and social outcast, whom he protects and gradually adopts. Their shared sense of unbelonging draws them into a fragile companionship. Both wanderers in a landscape marked by enclosure and dislocation, they seek in each other a semblance of stability and care, even as the world around them continues to unravel.

Despite their differences in age and experience, Peter and Willie are united by a restless desire to find a place where they might finally settle. Each of them clings to a destination imagined as a form of refuge: for Willie, it is London, a city that holds the promise of possibility. "'So, how far south are you headed, Willie Hutchen?'" (Glasfurd 2021, 112), Peter asks. The boy answers with a sudden, uncontainable joy: "'To London, of course!' And it seemed at that moment that if he could, little Willie Hutchen would have skipped" (Ibid.). But Willie's destination is as much fantasy as plan, a projection that fills the void left by abandonment. Peter, by contrast, carries a more concrete, if no less fragile, hope: to return home to Corringham and reclaim his mother's cottage. Yet this too proves impossible. When he arrives, the house is gone, replaced by fencing that signals enclosure and private ownership: "Peter turned in a circle, for a moment unable to speak. 'It's gone...'" (135). The loss of this home, long imagined and held onto, crystallises the deeper pattern that shapes both Peter's and Willie's journeys: they are driven not by the certainty of return or restoration, but by a hope that must be endlessly revised, a restless and adaptive force in a world that denies permanence. This evolving, repeatedly deferred hope becomes the quiet engine of this narrative.

Besides functioning as a central force that propels the story, hope is also ironically inscribed in Peter's given name. This irony becomes increasingly pronounced as the plot unfolds, especially when he recalls his childhood, where early memories begin to undercut the very promise his name was meant to

embody. In fact, while not defined by outright neglect, his early years in a modest cottage with his mother were shaped by material precarity and the quiet resilience of working-class life. His mother's choice of name was an act of care, a gesture toward a future she wished for him. But that hope was quickly tested. Peter left for war at fourteen, an age that speaks less to romanticised patriotism than to the structural pressures that push children into adult roles far too early. Within the masculine culture of the oil mill where he had worked, his name was treated as laughable, ill-suited to the brutality of the world he was entering: "'*Hope*,' said Boyce […]. 'Godfool name for a boy'" (110, italics in the original). His co-workers renamed him "Peter" a performative act of redefinition that strips him of his given name's idealism and rebrands him in terms of perceived suitability for war. The renaming both mocks and effaces; "hope" is turned into a joke and then erased. And yet, the very act of discarding the name underscores its power. Hope continues to animate his journey, even as it remains perpetually deferred.

This deferral functions almost rhythmically in the narrative, like a wave that crests with the promise of return or restoration, only to collapse with disappointment or further loss. Each time the narrative offers a potential point of settlement, something undermines it, and Peter is forced to reorient his expectations, only to be disappointed again. This recursive cycle begins with the letter from his mother, which offers the initial prospect of inheritance and homecoming. The letter operates not only as an emotional anchor but as a legal document. Penned by Reverend Cruikshank on his mother's behalf, it states:

> *My Dear Son — If you are surviving this bl--dy War then*
> *this house will be yours and if you are not then it is for*
> *Lizzie's boy as he has a family now.*
> *I hope to see you returned home again*
> *X The mark of Peggy Dunn*
> *& put into words on her behalf by Rev Cruikshank* (134, italics in the original)

Its brevity belies its weight: within a few lines, the letter carries inheritance, maternal love, and the fraught uncertainty of wartime survival. Despite its informality and worn phrasing, it becomes the most concrete link Peter has to both his past and his future. Peter carries this letter through every battlefield, every displacement, every tentative step toward home. It becomes a tattered surrogate for the home itself:

> Home: like the letter he kept in his pocket, took out and considered, folded, refolded, till the words had near rubbed off and the paper fell apart at the creases. His homecoming being delayed, he knew not if his mother lived, or, if she did, what would be his welcome. (105)

The letter's physical decay reflects, first and foremost, the fragility of the connection it represents. As the ink fades and the creases deepen, the letter comes to embody not permanence but loss. Its deterioration symbolically echoes the erosion of the place he calls home: a space that, like the paper, has been worn away and overwritten. Rather than safeguarding a sense of continuity, the letter charts a slow process of erosion of the social and spatial claims it was meant to uphold. Folded and refolded through every step of Peter's wartime journey, it registers the disintegration of the world he hopes to return to.

At the same time, the letter produces a powerful temporal effect. As Altman (1982) argues, epistolary writing often generates a mode of "presentification" whereby the spatial and temporal gaps between writer and addressee are imaginatively collapsed (202). The letter becomes a site in which the narrated past is made to feel vividly present, an affective strategy that draws both the character and the reader into a shared illusion of immediacy. For Peter, the act of repeatedly reading and carrying the letter allows him to momentarily sustain the belief that the home he left still exists, awaiting his return. This aesthetic illusion, however, is not sustained unproblematically. The narrative draws explicit attention to the material wear of the letter, which works to

counterbalance the temporal compression that epistolarity typically enables. In this way, the letter enacts a tension between presentism and decay: it invites the reader to collapse time, to imagine reunion, but simultaneously insists on the passage of time and the fragility of the hope the letter carries. The erosion of the letter thus does not negate the epistolary desire for recovery; rather, it complicates it. Peter clings to the letter as a means of sustaining an emotional and temporal connection to his mother and to the home he longs to reclaim. Yet the letter's damaged state continually reminds both Peter and the reader that the conditions of its writing are slipping further into the past. The document becomes a paradox: a record of continuity and of loss.

This symbolic weight is only heightened by the letter's legal fragility: despite its emotional significance, it offers no real legal protection against the enclosures and dispossessions that have already erased the home it promises. Though it functions as Peter's sole claim to the cottage, it proves entirely ineffectual. By the time he arrives in Corringham, the house no longer exists; in its place stands a fence marking private property. The letter, once a bearer of belonging, is rendered meaningless in the face of systemic transformation. It cannot secure the connection it was meant to preserve; instead, it exposes the futility of relying on written assurances in a world where land, home, and identity are increasingly determined by shifting legal and economic forces. What remains is not homecoming, but dispossession.

For the readers, too, the letter carries extraordinary emotional weight, because of the hopes it stirs and the reunion it seems to anticipate. It invites them to invest in Peter's return, to believe, as he does, that the past might still be recoverable. Its simplicity, dictated by a mother who cannot write, expressed in plain, functional language, amplifies its emotional charge. It bears the imprint of care shaped by class and literacy, and becomes a talisman of hope, not only for Peter but for the reader. This is where the affective labour of narrative form comes

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into play. As Kukkonen (2019) suggests, readers engage stories through dynamic processes of prediction, embodied re-enactment, and retrospective re-evaluation of predictions. The material cue of the letter primes the reader's emotional investment, shaping expectations around Peter's return and the possibility of restoration. When that expectation collapses, it is not merely a plot twist but a cognitive recalibration. The disappointment resonates precisely because the reader has been drawn into a narrative rhythm of deferred hope. Kukkonen's (Ibid.) insight into the interplay of "predictive processing" helps account for how Glasfurd constructs not only the temporal arc of Peter's journey but the embodied and affective rhythm of reading it. The reader, like Peter, experiences a deferred and ultimately broken promise, underscoring the affective force of epistolary mediation in a novel where climate crisis and enclosure repeatedly sever the ties between a written, promised world and the actual world.

Like the letter, the fragment of poetry Hope Peter recites to Willie functions as another embedded medium that sustains, and simultaneously undercuts, a hopeful vision of possible renewal. While walking toward Corringham, Peter begins to recite lines from William Blake's Preface to *Milton*, but his memory is imperfect. The words arrive in fragments:

> *And did the...*
> *Shine forth upon our...*
> *clouded hills?*
> *And was Jerusalem...*
> *builded here,*
> *Among these dark Satanic Mills?*
> *Bring me my...* (Glasfurd 2021, 113, italics in the original)

This faltering recollection reflects both the persistence and the fracture of poetic vision. Blake's poem imagines a spiritual Jerusalem rising from the soil of England, a vision starkly at odds with the desolate, famine-stricken countryside through which Peter and Willie now travel. Peter's fractured memory of the lines mirrors the brokenness of the world around him and of his own aspirations.

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What remains is not the full verse, but a scattered trace of longing, a hope repeatedly deferred, vulnerable, and at odds with the reality it seeks to transcend. The gap between poetic vision and material reality is laid bare in the exchange that follows:

> 'A poet? What's that?'
> 'Someone with different eyes in his head to me.' He lifted Willie up on to a wall. They looked out over the bareworn land. A fatstock bull, bare able to stand, lifted its head and snorted.
> 'It don't look green and pleasant.'
> 'No, lad. It don't.' (114)

The poem's idealised vision is disfigured by the reality of environmental degradation. In this moment, poetry becomes both a vehicle of imagined transformation and a stark reminder of its limits. Like the letter, it contains a desire for place, for healing and belonging. But like the letter, its utopian impulse proves fragile, unable to withstand the weight of historical and ecological crisis. Together, the embedded forms of writing, such as the mother's letter and Blake's poem, contribute to the text's rhythm of deferred hope. They punctuate the narrative like crests in a tidal pattern: moments where the possibility of settlement, home, or spiritual renewal momentarily surfaces, only to collapse under the pressure of loss and change. In this way, Glasfurd mobilises these fragments not just for symbolic resonance, but for narrative structure. They enact the emotional pattern of the novel itself: a cycle of rising and falling hopes, where each imagined future is overwritten by a harder present.

If much of Peter's hope has thus far been carried by the symbolic weight of words, the reality of Corringham confronts him with the limits of language. This is no longer a place described or remembered, but one lived and experienced in its full degradation. Unlike the lyrical landscapes of Blake's poetry or the idealised home preserved in his mother's letter, the Corringham of Peter's return is stripped bare: depopulated, enclosed, and scarred by environmental decline.

The aftermath of enclosure is recounted through a litany of dispossessed families: "'John Simpson, the Carters, Arthur Brown and his father. All of them, out on their ear'" (137). The village's social fabric is shown to have unravelled. These stories of absence are compounded by an acute awareness of climate volatility: "'Terrible the wind we've had of late […] Branches bloody everywhere, but will the bastards let us have a stick of it?'" (138). The bitterness here lies not only in the destructive weather, but in the legal restrictions that prevent the poor from accessing even fallen branches for fuel.

Where poetry imagines England as a "green and pleasant Land", Peter's actual surroundings appear anything but pleasant. The sensory experience of place is jarringly at odds with the idealised landscapes of imagination. Corringham is not just abandoned, but hollowed out: "Not the dozens of boats he had expected, nor even a single dozen" (164). Hope, here, becomes untenable. The village has been emptied of work and people. Faced with this desolation, Peter and Willie's only remaining option is to leave. Their departure is prompted not by a new opportunity but by an act of desperation, namely Peter's highly symbolic act of rebellion in hanging skinned hares outside the estate that replaced his home. What follows is a flight rather than a journey, a movement not toward a new beginning but away from certain punishment. If the letter once promised home, and poetry imagined renewal, the lived environment offers neither. In this patch of narrative, language fails to secure place, and experience overwrites the illusions of writing.

Another place that seems to promise hope but ultimately denies it is London, the city to which Hope Peter and Willie Hutcheon travel in search of a new beginning. Their arrival at Billingsgate Market is marked by an overwhelming sensory experience of abundance, as they are momentarily stunned by the sheer excess of fish: "Peter had never heard a clamour like it: *Live eels! Crabs! Fresh Cod! Oysters-oh!*" (168, italics in the original). The scale of this

abundance is staggering: "Fish in baskets, spilling over the top, carried away and more baskets filled after. […] Barrel after barrel hoisted on to carts, stacked in pyramids and then driven off" (Ibid.). The scene creates the illusion of plenitude, as if London might offer respite from the scarcity they've known. And yet, this apparent bounty proves deceptive. When they enter a pub to eat, Peter asks, "'What chops have you got?'" (222), and the barmaid replies with dry irony: "'Eel chops. Plaice chops. Hake chops. Cod chops. That do you?'" (Ibid.). The exhaustive list of variations on the same food reveals the illusion for what it is: not true abundance, but monotony. What seems like plenty is in fact a symptom of underlying deprivation, an excess of one thing because there is nothing else.

This false promise of abundance extends to the search for work. Peter and Willie try to find jobs as fishermen but are repeatedly turned away, Peter for lacking the right experience and Willie for being disabled. Their frustration and desperation grow until they are drawn into the orbit of political unrest. In a public speech delivered in the street, Peter listens to a fictionalised version of Arthur Thistlewood, a historical figure who played a key role in the Spa Fields Riots, railing against government inaction: "'It is not only this country that has been thus oppressed—our sister in Ireland has shared in our misfortune.' […] 'And if they will not give us what we want, *shall we not take it*?'" (230, italics in the original). The language stirs a familiar longing in Peter, not for personal restoration, but for collective transformation. Later, Peter and Willie formally encounter Thistlewood and other historical figures fictionalised in the novel: James Watson, Thomas Preston, and John Hooper. In this way, Glasfurd continues to blend fiction with real history, embedding Hope Peter's personal trajectory within a broader political movement, that of the Spencean Philanthropists. This integration of fictional and historical characters situates Peter's personal search for meaning within broader socio-political currents. His story becomes a lens through which the reader confronts the frustrations and

failures of early nineteenth-century working-class reformism. Yet this historical embedding serves more than an illustrative function. It allows the novel to dramatize how socio-political unrest is deeply entangled with ecological disruption, each exacerbating the other in a feedback loop of precarity.

At the same time, this encounter with revolutionary rhetoric marks another swell in the novel's emotional tide: a fragile wave of hope that rises, only to break once more. The men Peter meets offer not only ideological fervour but the promise of concrete support. "'If it's work you're after, we can find you something to do. We have plenty of money for everything'" (288), one assures him, ordering ale and porter and displaying a fistful of coins, "guineas among them" (Ibid.), as Peter notices. For a moment, it seems that political solidarity might also bring economic relief. But words, however impassioned, cannot conjure material change overnight, just as they cannot alter the weather. That night, the temperature drops, and Peter and Willie, still without work or shelter, are forced to sleep outside. In an effort to keep Willie warm, Peter turns to memory and storytelling: "He told Willie of when he was his age and larking about in the shallows without a stitch on and the sun burning his arse red. […] Stories. Only stories. What part of it was true no longer mattered. It was comfort for him too" (292). The warmth recalled in these tales stands in stark contrast to the cold reality they inhabit. Like revolutionary promises, the stories offer fleeting solace, but not survival. Willie dies that night. With him dies another form of hope. The tidal rhythm of the novel persists: hope crests, collapses, and recedes, only to gather again, more fragile each time.

The final act of hope in Hope Peter's narrative emerges after the death of Willie and takes the form of revolutionary resolve, an attempt to channel grief into action. In the aftermath of Willie's passing, Peter is nearly paralysed by sorrow. The only person who stops to help him in the street is Roísín Tierney, an Irish woman whose kindness stands in stark contrast to the indifference of the

crowds. Roísín assists Peter with Willie's burial and becomes a steadying presence during his recovery from depression. Her compassion reopens the possibility of human connection at a moment when Peter is most vulnerable. It is during this period of mourning that Peter stumbles upon a leaflet calling for armed uprising. The message is direct and incendiary: "*Break open all Gun & Sword shops, Pawnbrokers or other likely places to find Arms. […] The whole Country waits the Signall from London to fly to Arms. […] Stand firm now or never!*" (360, italics in the original). Once again, it is words—this time not in the form of poetry or letters, but of revolutionary propaganda—that trigger a surge of hope. Peter is reminded of the rhetoric he once heard from the Spencean Philanthropists, but what had seemed only theoretical now materialises into concrete mobilisation: "It had all seemed like talking when they had met at the Cock [a pub]. Never had he imagined it would lead to this, to a crowd so big he'd not the numbers in his head to count it" (364). The abstract ideals voiced in pubs and pamphlets suddenly take on mass and momentum, as hope becomes agency and is no longer confined to speech.

The power of language continues to shape Peter's emotional and political trajectory. Blake's words return to him, as the ideological backbone of his final act of commitment. He does not fully grasp why the poem resurfaces, but its emotional force is undeniable: "'Jerusalem, was that what they were building here?'" (363). It is this imagined future, a better one, that leads Peter, alongside Roísín, to declare allegiance to the Spencean cause. The gesture is solemn, sealed with a shared drink and a tacit belief in the possibility of transformation. Yet, as with every preceding crest of hope in Peter's story, this one too crashes. During the riot, Peter is struck on the head by a soldier and arrested. His vision of a new Jerusalem dissolves into violence, repression, and renewed containment. The final scene thus echoes the larger pattern of the narrative: each act of hope, voiced through language and pursued through action, is met by a counterforce that

reasserts misery. For his role in the riots and the earlier act of skinning hares in Corringham, Peter is sentenced to seven years for affray and transportation for life. In this last surge of the novel's emotional tide, even revolution becomes another wave that rises only to break and its momentum is unable to carry forward immediate change.

The conclusion of Hope Peter's narrative arc is not delivered within his own section, but in the brief and poignant one that follows, focalised through Roísín Tierney. At just two pages long, Roísín's fragment serves as an appendix to Peter's story, while also offering a rare moment in the novel where two distinct narrative trajectories, those of Roísín and Peter, intersect. These are the only characters whose perspectives span patches and whose stories are entwined across their respective narrative borders. In this short section, it is Roísín who receives news of Peter's fate not from him directly, but from Thistlewood, who reads aloud a newspaper article reporting the wreckage of the *Albion*, the transport ship meant to carry Peter to Australia. "*Of a hundred and twenty-two souls, all perished save for the three already mentioned*" (379, italics in the original), it reads, the disaster suspected to be caused by a "*vast raft of pumice that has plagued vessels bound for Calcutta*" (380, italics in the original). With this, Peter's story is unexpectedly drawn back into the planetary consequences of the Tambora eruption, which has haunted the entire novel through its atmospheric and climatic fallout.

The revolutionary failure at Spa Fields thus intersects with the geological violence of the volcano in a final moment of narrative convergence: political and ecological crises collapse into one another. This loss also loops back to earlier acts of dissent, as Thistlewood tries to reassure Roísín by invoking the memory of those executed after the Littleport riots: "'Five good men in Littleport — all put to death for wanting the same'" (380). Peter's death, like those before him, is

framed not as an isolated tragedy but as part of a broader continuum of struggle, one that insists their lives, and their losses, will not have been in vain.

This narrative loop, which links revolutionary stories across the novel, is also reinforced at the formal level. Roísín's brief, first-person section mirrors the structure of the earlier Littleport section. Roísín and Sarah Hobbs are in fact the only characters in the novel granted a first-person voice, and neither woman can read or write. Their embodied, oral relationships to language stand in stark contrast to the epistolary, poetic, and documentary media that animate other parts of the narrative. In both cases, the limits of literacy highlight a deeper resistance to mere rhetoric. As Roísín quietly reflects, echoing Sarah's earlier stance: "The time for words was over" (380). Where written texts have repeatedly raised—but failed to fulfil—expectation, these women's oral testimony offers a grounded, alternative way of bearing witness. Together, their voices offer a quieter but no less urgent perspective on the year's upheavals: one rooted not in textual authority, but in lived experience.

Roísín's brief first-person section reframes the representational work of Hope Peter's narrative strand. While Peter's third-person figural narration traces how ecological disruption intertwines with enclosure, post-war poverty, and political unrest, Roísín's voice offers a sharper perspective on the cumulative failures of rhetoric, reform, and written promises. Her oral, embodied testimony counters the mediated hopes that have defined Peter's journey, whether inscribed in letters, poetry, or revolutionary pamphlets. Taken together, their narratives illuminate how the Tambora climate crisis is not abstractly global, but locally and socially textured. In Corringham and London, environmental degradation intensifies existing forms of structural inequality, generating unrest not simply as a reaction to climate, but as a desperate response to political injustice.

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4.3.6 Preaching Climate in Vermont: Egotism, Faith, and the Collapse of Moral Authority

The sixth and final narrative patch of *The Year Without Summer* shifts the novel's geographical scope across the Atlantic to Vermont, where the effects of the 1815 Tambora eruption manifest as a meteorological and agricultural crisis. Like the narratives centred on Henry, John, Mary, and Hope Peter, this section is narrated in third-person figural mode, focalised through the consciousness of Charles Whitlock, a self-appointed preacher who travels between Bethel and Londonderry offering open-air sermons to rural farming communities. At the outset, Charles is not a formally ordained minister but a layman who seizes the opportunity to fill a spiritual vacuum following the sudden death of the local reverend, who is said to have been "struck down, mid-sermonising" (Glasfurd 2021, 117). Charles steps into this vacancy guided by ambition and personal interest, renting a room and imagining the eventual construction of a church.

This narrative strand reinforces the novel's broader project of mapping the impact of the Tambora climate crisis across the Northern Hemisphere, while also interrogating the role of religious authority in times of environmental collapse. In Vermont, the effects of the eruption are registered most clearly through anomalous weather patterns that cause crop failure and livestock decline. "'The season is very backwards. Never been dry like this'" (123), one character observes, capturing the disorientation and anxiety shared by local communities. For those living through these disruptions, the causes remain uncertain. Newspapers speculate that sunspots may be responsible, but Charles, sceptical of scientific reasoning and openly dismissive of Boston's intellectual culture, rejects such explanations out of hand: "'Newsprint?' […] Another Boston habit, which would pass soon enough" (124).[9] Charles's failure to engage meaningfully

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[9]   During the "year without a summer", the scientific connection between the 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora and the ensuing global climatic anomalies had not yet been established. In New England, where unseasonal cold and agricultural collapse were especially severe, early

with the material and environmental conditions around him leaves him fundamentally unable to grasp the full extent of the crisis. His neglect of any attempt to understand the realities of the land he inhabits results in a blurred perception of both the tragedy unfolding and its foreseeable consequences. When rain finally arrives, the farming community understands it comes too late to reverse the damage: "the ground was too hard and the rain had run off or was too late anyway for anything much of use to grow" (170). This collective knowledge, grounded in attunement to seasonal rhythms, stands in sharp contrast to Charles's perspective. Alienated from the land and detached from the labour that sustains it, he remains oblivious to the severity of the threat his community is facing, despite the fact that they are all on the brink of starvation.

Indeed, Charles emerges as one of the novel's most morally ambivalent figures. Charles's trajectory is defined by self-interest and spiritual opportunism. He is not a farmer and does not share the embodied experience of hardship that defines his community. The dry weather, in fact, is a convenience for his outdoor ministry: "Dry it had been with little rain for months. It gave Charles no cause for complaint and had made the path of his ministering easier, it not being the usual muddy mire" (123). The passage underscores his inability to register drought as a form of suffering. Climate disruption, here, becomes a background condition from which Charles extracts advantages. Rather than acknowledging the desperate reality of those around him, he uses faith as a rhetorical tool to maintain control, insisting that: "[t]he rain would come again. The land would provide. The burden would ease" (125).

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nineteenth-century observers speculated about solar causes. The marked scarcity of sunspots— now recognised as characteristic of the Dalton Minimum (1790–1830)—led many to attribute the extreme weather to diminished solar activity. Though incorrect by modern standards, this interpretation reflected the limited meteorological knowledge of the period and the contemporary impulse to seek explanations in celestial phenomena. (Denig and McVaugh 2017, 857).

What makes Charles's character particularly troubling is not simply his blindness to others' suffering, but the degree to which he manipulates scripture to reinforce his own authority. Embedded biblical quotations surface throughout the narrative, yet unlike the letters and poems in earlier sections, these fragments are deployed as rhetorical tools, serving persuasion over solidarity, and control over connection. When faced with rumours of mass migration westward to Ohio, a plan encouraged by many, including Laurel Gray, the woman Charles secretly loves, he responds not by acknowledging the reasons driving people to leave but by doubling down on theological appeals: "'*Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. […] the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain*'" (150, italics in the original). While this appears to advocate spiritual endurance, the passage's rhetorical function is transparent. It appeals to tradition, patience, and divine timing, but what it conceals is Charles's selfish desire to keep his congregation, and Laurel, from leaving. His spiritual counsel, then, is not shaped by a sensitivity to the reality of ecological collapse, but by fear of abandonment. The invocation of scripture in this moment is instrumental, designed to defer action and preserve personal influence. The underlying motive is laid bare in the line: "He swallowed as he thought of his congregation deserting him" (149). It marks a moment of internal clarity, a tacit admission that his leadership is rooted not in moral obligation but in ego. This thought, coming immediately before the delivery of the sermon, suggests that Charles's faith functions primarily as a buffer against personal loss, rather than a response to communal need.

Eventually, Charles manages to persuade several members of the community to remain in Vermont, drawing on a combination of scriptural and emotional manipulation. In one telling moment, he appeals to the memory of a deceased parent to sway Teddy Spalding, one of the community's wealthiest farmers: "'And what would your father think to your selling up on that? On all

he went through? To move to Ohio?' […] 'Would you get his approval on it?' […] 'No, I would not'" (174). The narrator's description, "Charles felt the pull of the hook, as of a trout in the stream" (Ibid.), lays bare the calculated nature of his tactic, exposing the subtle coercion at work beneath his pastoral tone. This same strategic logic underpins Charles's most personal pursuit: his desire to marry Laurel. Among those convinced to stay are Laurel and her father, Seth Gray, whose worsening health makes him increasingly dependent on others. Seizing the opportunity, Charles secures Seth's consent by promising to assist with the farm work, an offer that mimics care but ultimately serves his own longing for proximity, possession, and permanence.

Their marriage, instead of marking a turn toward stability, coincides with a dramatic worsening of conditions. On the morning after their wedding, Charles awakes to snow: "the deep, hard hush of winter when every bird is stunned into silence" (177). The clash of seasons seems to fall from the sky, as "[s]ummer and winter had been tipped from the heavens together and looked to have fought their way down from there" (244), a grotesque convergence that signals the tipping point of climatic collapse. That same night, their only foal dies; by morning, Charles and Laurel are forced to confront the full extent of their loss: the crops have failed beyond recovery, and the livestock is destined to starve. "There'd be no corn, little wheat or oats or barley, no fodder to bring in for the winter […] The rain held away and the land dried more" (248). Charles, who once used biblical language to promise renewal, is now faced with the consequences of his rhetoric. The community soon turns against him, holding him responsible for convincing them to remain: "'Was you got us to stay. We were ready to leave […] God doesn't want us here. Seems he gave us fair warning on that months ago'" (249), Teddy tells him bluntly, his words stripped of sympathy. Only at this point does Charles realise that the failure of the harvests is absolute: "Not locusts, not flood, not frogs" (316), for no biblical plague could rival this devastation. The

hollowness of sacred scripture is ultimately laid bare. The very text Charles once relied upon to guide his congregation through crisis is exposed as inadequate in the face of unprecedented ecological collapse. His sermons now ring empty. This last reference to biblical calamities serves only to underscore the failure of sacred language to account for the scale and material reality of the disaster. If the Bible once offered moral and metaphysical bearings, here it is stripped of explanatory power and its symbolic framework overwhelmed by the brute, disorienting reality of climate breakdown.

The situation is so dire that at a public meeting, the town doctor warns of mass starvation, noting that it will be felt most acutely by "the very young and old" (319), but that no one will be exempt: "Without nourishment, a young man will soon lose his strength — same as a sapling deprived of water" (Ibid.). The migration westward that Charles had so fervently resisted now becomes a survival imperative: "not a day went by without word that another family had gone or was thinking of it" (321). All of Vermont, the narrator remarks, would eventually "empty that way" (Ibid.). Yet Charles, along with Seth and Laurel, remains behind, whether out of pride, paralysis, or the simple fact that it is now too late to leave.

The final blow comes during a storm, when Charles and Laurel are caught in a lightning strike. Laurel, gravely injured, dies that night. Charles's response is not one of anger, but of recognition: "He should have let her go to Ohio. He should never have tried to keep her for himself. […] Vanity and arrogance had been his mission. To have a congregation and keep it. A church? What right did he have to break ground?" (324). In this moment, Charles's journey comes full circle. The false piety that underpinned his entire narrative is laid bare as self-deception, and he sees with agonising clarity the cost of his actions. His final acts are ones of despair. He shoots Bella, Laurel's pony, then fires into the sky in an act of defiance or supplication to the God he no longer believes in, and finally,

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"turning the pistol to him, he heard the sound come again. But this time it passed straight through him and the sound never did come back" (327). These closing lines render Charles's failure total: he has lost faith, love, purpose, and community.

The Vermont patch thus completes the novel's global tapestry of climate devastation. It is the last node in a network of interconnected human responses to ecological trauma. In this narrative strand, Glasfurd explores how spiritual authority, when untethered from communal responsibility and grounded instead in self-interest, can exacerbate harm in moments of shared crisis. Here, famine is not only material but moral. Unlike the figures of Mary, Hope, or Sarah, Charles offers no model of communal resilience or care. His failure is theological and structural: a vision of faith divorced from responsibility, of language decoupled from listening. Through Charles, Glasfurd explores how environmental precarity can be exacerbated by spiritual misdirection and how even sacred words can be turned to selfish ends.

4.4 Conclusion

Across its six narrative strands, *The Year Without Summer* offers not only a geographically dispersed account of the 1815–1816 Tambora climate crisis but also a formally varied one. Rather than presenting a single, linear narrative, Glasfurd constructs a mosaic of perspectives that, read together, evoke the planetary scale of the eruption's effects. From rural Essex to colonial Makassar, from London's riotous streets to the literary circles of Geneva, each setting becomes a point where environmental instability meets other social and historical transformations.

This diversity of form is central to the novel's vision. Glasfurd weaves together a range of embedded media that shape how each character's experience

of crisis is formed and communicated. The interplay of these materials creates a layered narrative structure that portrays climate change as a spatially and socially uneven process, while exposing how mediation can both reveal and obscure the lived experience of environmental disruption. Her experiment is not merely aesthetic: by contrasting different relationships to literacy, language, and authority, Glasfurd develops a vision of ecological crisis that is at once planetary and local, dispersed yet emotionally immediate. These formal and medial strategies also affect the reader. The novel's fragmented composition produces emotional friction and leaves space for reflection on the limits of narrative knowledge. In this sense, *The Year Without Summer* does more than mirror the unevenness of climate disruption, it actually draws the reader into its perceptual and affective complexity.

Through these structural and thematic choices, *The Year Without Summer* engages in dialogue with earlier works of climate fiction such as David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and Amy Sackville's *The Still Point*. Like *Cloud Atlas*, it employs a polyphonic architecture and embedded media to question the stability of historical knowledge and the uneven distribution of environmental experience. Like *The Still Point*, it explores the atmospheric and emotional registers of climate crisis. Yet Glasfurd's novel diverges from both in its historical and material grounding: whereas *Cloud Atlas* disperses ecological collapse across long temporal spans and *The Still Point* lets climate disruption linger as an ambient presence within domestic and historical time, *The Year Without Summer* locates climate crisis directly in the 1816 aftermath of Tambora, insisting on its social, ecological, and emotional consequences as lived history.

Chapter Five

The Future: Climate Realism, Digital Epistolarity, and the Apocalyptic Imagination

5.1 Introduction

This final chapter turns to *The Future* (2023), a novel by British author Naomi Alderman, which brings ecological crisis into sharp contemporary focus. To establish its position within the trajectory traced so far, it is necessary to recall how the preceding texts engaged with climate change. In *Cloud Atlas*, environmental concerns are not addressed directly, yet the trajectories of its multiple storylines, their fragmentation, and the novel's formal complexity collectively anticipate representational concerns that critics in the later twenty-first century have associated with its depiction. In *The Still Point*, the climate crisis remains in the background, registering chiefly through the atmospheric textures of temporal and spatial configuration rather than through direct thematization. *The Year Without Summer* brings the issue more clearly to the fore by reconstructing the consequences of the eruption of a volcano in Indonesia, which triggered worldwide changes in climate patterns. At the same time, it continues to rely on narrative strategies already present in the other works, such as heterogeneous focalisation, multitemporality, and multispatiality. In addition, all three novels previously discussed are, in different ways, oriented towards the past. *The Year Without Summer* does so most directly, retracing the planetary consequences of the Tambora eruption at the turn of the nineteenth century. *The Still Point* establishes its temporal horizon through the oscillation between nineteenth-century past and contemporary present. *Cloud Atlas* is the most wide-ranging, situating ecological crisis within a historical arc that extends from the nineteenth century into a speculative post-apocalyptic future. Against this background, *The Future* is more closely aligned with *Cloud Atlas* and *The Still Point*, since it too looks beyond the present, but its emphasis falls on the imminence of ecological collapse, with climate change as one of its central drivers. As such, Alderman's novel stands out as the text most decisively oriented towards what lies ahead.

Temporal orientation also has important consequences for narrative form. The analyses developed so far have been guided by a consistent *fil rouge,* namely the role of epistolarity, which, in different ways, has proved central to how the earlier novels mediate climate change representation. However, Alderman's novel introduces a significant shift by projecting its narrative forward into what feels like the threshold of ecological collapse. This focus on contemporary experience calls for representational strategies more closely attuned to the present, and it is in this context that epistolarity itself is reconfigured in digital form. What earlier texts conveyed through traditional modes of address now appears as digital epistolarity, carrying new implications for how climate change is imagined and narrated. Tracing these implications, and the ways in which digital epistolarity shapes Alderman's vision of the near future, will be the central concern of this chapter. At the same time, the discussion offered here can only be preliminary: the analysis of *The Future* opens onto broader questions about digital epistolarity that extend beyond the scope of this thesis, pointing towards future research directions. The analysis is structured in three sections. The first provides a concise summary of the novel's plot in order to present its setting, characters, and events. This groundwork opens onto a discussion of the novel's generic affiliations with the apocalyptic tradition and eco-utopian writing. Particular attention will be given to how Alderman reworks apocalyptic motifs, since apocalypticism, from a reader-oriented perspective, carries the risk of inducing despair or apathy rather than fostering hope and agency. By focusing instead on eco-utopian possibilities, the novel mitigates these risks and reconfigures the affective horizon of its reception.

The second section turns to the role of digital epistolarity in shaping the novel's engagement with ecological collapse. Here the focus falls on how digitally mediated forms of address sustain yet also unsettle the novel's apocalyptic register. This is carried out through the re-framing of biblical

exegesis in digital contexts, which, in turn, is achieved through passages that reproduce on the printed page the format of online forums, alongside the presentation of utopian projects in the form of short videos. Consideration will also be given to the formatting of the page, which plays a crucial role in determining how readers encounter these materials.

The third section addresses the novel's overall form, bringing into dialogue earlier concerns with multitemporality, multispatiality, and fragmentation. This final discussion highlights how *The Future* adapts strategies already encountered in the other texts examined in this thesis, extending them to the representation of climate change in ways that foreground epistemological complexity and prompt reflection on the effects such forms may have on readers. At the same time, the novel's formal construction also seeks to reproduce the experience of inhabiting a highly mediated and fragmented world, where information is abundant, overwhelming, and often uncertain. This aesthetic strategy resonates with the difficulty of understanding climate change itself and of coping with the radical uncertainty it generates about the future, producing in the reader a sense of disorientation that mirrors the very condition the novel seeks to represent.

5.2 Rewriting the End: Plotting the Shift from Apocalyptic Inevitability to Green Utopianism

Although its title may suggest a narrative set in the distant future, *The Future* (2023) instead engages with the symbolic and rhetorical force of "the future" as a category that actively shapes the present: an all-encompassing concern rather than merely the temporal ground of a world yet to come. The story unfolds primarily in the United States but extends across multiple geographical sites, and is set only a few decades ahead of our own moment. This temporal horizon can

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be understood, following John Thieme's (2023) concept of "the long present", as encompassing "the actual present, the near future, and a historical past that interacts with the present" (2). The gap between the novel's setting and today's world is therefore narrow, and the conditions it portrays remain uncannily close to contemporary reality.

In this near-future world, climate change continues to accelerate at an alarming pace: the years are described simply as "too hot" (Alderman 2023, 41), and the landscapes of cities across the globe have been reshaped to cope with rising sea levels: "the Thames barrier raised again, the river full and deep" (66). News reports repeatedly testify to environmental catastrophe: "Miami's flood defences had failed again and thirty-eight thousand people's homes were underwater" (64); "Another storm was heading for Bangladesh; estimates were that more than thirteen thousand people would die in the next forty-eight hours" (Ibid.); and "[f]or the fourth year, the Colorado River had failed to refill over the winter" (Ibid.). At the same time, economic inequality deepens as wealth and power concentrate ever more tightly in the hands of a few billionaires. These wealthy figures present themselves as seeking technological solutions to the crisis: "as a way to protect against climate change by using tiny drones at high altitudes to rearrange the weather" (40) but the reality is that they benefit from it, as the narrator remarks that "[t]he apocalypse industry was thriving" (64). As one character bluntly observes:

> [technology] has nothing to do with helping anyone, anywhere. It's for their own bunkers. They can control the weather. Make sure that whatever happens everywhere else, there's always rain when they want it, always sun when they need it. No matter where they are. No matter what happens to the rest of us. (42)

The situation is exacerbated by the algorithmic mobilisation of the internet and artificial intelligence to steer collective attention, manufacture consent, and perpetuate dominant power relations.

Against this backdrop of apparent mimetic continuity with today's society, the narrative immediately establishes the expectation that the world is about to end. From its opening words, "On the day the world ended" (3), the reader is placed under the shadow of imminent catastrophe. The sense of inevitability is reiterated again and again: "It was no minor escape. It was the end of days" (7); "This was the midnight beginning. This was the smooth running-out of the old world and the birth of the new" (17). Later passages intensify the impression that collapse is not merely approaching but unavoidable:

> Look at what's coming. Look at what's coming. It can only be a few months at most. The weather. The black mould. The war in the South China Sea. The thing is coming and it's not going to wait for long (170–171).

The language of inexorability recurs throughout the novel's first five sections: "Things became, slowly but inexorably, worse" (234); "The world was a boxer, unsteady on its feet, wavering, waiting for the final punch" (240); "It's coming now" (253); "the infection started to spread" (283); "there had been a terrible plague" (285). In each case, the narrative confirms that disaster is not a remote possibility but a foregone conclusion: "The world that they knew was gone, as suddenly, completely and irretrievably as if it had sunk beneath the glass-green ocean" (289); "Out there, the world is ending" (314).

Within this apocalyptic horizon, the narrative introduces a cast of central characters whose identities underscore the entanglement of ecological crisis with contemporary structures of power. Lenk Sketlish, the CEO and founder of Fantail, presides over a social network that echoes the architecture and influence of real-world social media platforms. He is joined by Zimni Nomnik, the head of Anvil, and Ellen Bywater, the CEO of Medlar. These companies evoke the Silicon Valley ecosystem of hardware, computing, e-commerce, distribution, and consumer technology. Through these characters, Alderman mobilises a familiar trope of climate fiction: the wealthy elite, whose industries are principal

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contributors to planetary destruction, who simultaneously develop means to shield themselves from the environmental consequences. Their survival strategies are predicated on exclusion, ensuring that the privileged few retain access to security and abundance, while those most vulnerable to environmental catastrophe are left to bear its harshest effects and, in many cases, to perish. As the narrator observes,

> This was what Lenk Sketlish and Ellen Bywater and Zimri Nommik believed. This was what they had paid for. They would not die. It was the world that would end. It was not Sketlish, Bywater and Nommik who were missing, it was the future. (252)

In this way, the novel crystallises how privilege not only seeks to insulate itself from collapse, but also redefines survival itself as the preservation of the few at the expense of the many. The fantasy of survival among Alderman's billionaire protagonists is cast as a kind of exclusive privilege, a "golden ticket" to outlast the collapse that will engulf everyone else:

> They're all getting ready to use the golden ticket. They're feeling guilty about it or fine about it, but they're preparing. Of course. […] The superrich and their entourages were picking their partners for the end-of-the-world dance. (95)

Their imagined escape depends on "this whole system, of warnings and private jets and hidden safe bunkers" (14), infrastructures designed to guarantee that they will be able to flee at the critical moment. What ultimately secures their advantage, however, is not simply material preparedness but privileged access to information. The CEOs invest in AUGR, "a highly flexible algorithm set that monitors current events […], a piece of predictive, protective software" (76), capable of forecasting "when a catastrophic threat is approaching" (85). Marketed as "for a select group" (180), AUGR provides the crucial answer to the question haunting every survivalist scheme: "How do you know when to go?

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Because by the time you know the world's ending it's already too late" (71). Through this system, the tech elite not only shield themselves from disaster but also transform foreknowledge itself into the ultimate form of capital, enabling their withdrawal into secure bunkers while the rest of humanity is left to perish.

At least until the later stages of the novel, AUGR appears to function as intended, fulfilling its promise of anticipation and securing the elite's bid for survival. Soon after its acquisition, the system issues an alarming notice: the end of the world is imminent. Acting on its warning, the CEOs scramble to activate their evacuation protocols, boarding a plane that is meant to carry them to their fortified safe locations. During the flight, as they monitor unfolding events, they learn of a deadly virus, far more lethal than COVID-19, spreading with terrifying speed and capable of wiping out half the global population. Its lethality lies precisely in its deceptive latency: "The flu had a silent incubation period of seventeen days, and then became deadly almost at once. The first symptom could be coughing up huge quantities of blood, followed by heart failure" (285). The collapse of society seems no longer a possibility but an immediate certainty. Yet in a dramatic reversal, the plane crashes, leaving the survivors stranded on one of Lenk Sketlish's islands in New Zealand, a supposed sanctuary outfitted with AI-operated tech suits and advanced survival gear. Cut off from the world by the destruction of their satellite communication, the group suddenly finds themselves isolated in the very conditions they had sought to master. From this moment, the narrative exposes the fragility of even the most carefully engineered strategies of elite survival.

At this stage, the narrative fully enters its dystopian phase. What I have yet to mention, however, is that throughout the novel the stories of the CEOs intersect with those of other focalising characters who, though initially marginal, gradually move to the centre of the plot. These include Martha Einkorn, who is Lenk's assistant; Selah Nomnik, Zimri Nomnik's "Black British wife […] once a

computer science graduate from Cambridge" (37) and a skilled coder; Albert Dabrowski, "the ousted founder of Medlar" (134); Badger Bywater, Ellen's "non-binary child with a radical political stance" (14); and Zhen, a widely followed survivalist influencer. All are connected, directly or indirectly, to the world's billionaires, and as is revealed only in the sixth part of the narrative, together they bring about a radical reversal. The apparent apocalypse turns out never to have taken place at all. Instead, the entire catastrophe was a meticulously staged deception orchestrated by Martha, Selah, Albert, Badger, and Zhen. The CEOs were deliberately manipulated into activating a survival protocol that led to their isolation on a remote island, cut off from the rest of the world. As the narrator explains:

> It needn't have been technology billionaires. There were plenty of other forces of merciless capital and power in the world. These simply happened to be the ones to whom Martha Einkorn had access. They were the ones who were so focused on the future that they could be dazzled by a vision of all they feared coming to pass. They were the ones she could persuade to buy AUGR and to think that a set of matchboxes and beads could learn to transcend time, who believed so strongly in the promises of artificial intelligence that they took its words more seriously than their own senses and reason. For this to work, they just had to be willing for the computers to know more than them, and they had to want—in their heart of hearts—for the world to come to an end. All of life is contingent, and if Martha had found herself in the middle of a different kind of revolution, she would have swum upstream in it nonetheless. It hadn't been easy. Deciding to do it is never enough. Having the idea is never enough. Moving the world takes a thousand tiny pieces. (364)

With this revelation, the narrative retroactively redefines itself: what had appeared to be the inexorable unfolding of ecological collapse is exposed as a carefully manufactured apocalypse, one made plausible precisely because the billionaires' apocalyptic imagination and reliance on algorithmic systems predisposed them to believe it. By exposing the apocalypse as a fabricated illusion, the novel compels readers to question the expectations that structure their own imaginative understanding of the future.

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This narrative transformation also unfolds at the level of genre: the trajectory and final twist of *The Future* call for interpretation through its alignment with, and eventual subversion of, the apocalyptic mode, redirecting the narrative towards an eco-utopian closure and marking a major reorientation in the imaginative treatment of the climate crisis. Such a reconfiguration can only be fully understood by situating the novel within the broader generic and ideological history of apocalypticism, a mode that has long dominated the cultural imagination of environmental catastrophe. The narrative trajectory thus invites a set of critical questions: how does *The Future* destabilise the narrative logic of apocalypticism, and why does it do so? In order to address these questions, it is first necessary to clarify the connotations and implications that the apocalyptic mode carries in contemporary climate fiction.

Apocalypticism has become one of the most pervasive modes through which climate crisis is imagined and narrated. As Lawrence Buell (1995) famously observes, apocalypse constitutes "the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (285). Its enduring appeal lies in its ability to render the scale and urgency of planetary crisis visible, translating slow and often imperceptible ecological transformations into moral and emotional terms that demand attention. In Buell's formulation, apocalyptic rhetoric mobilises the imagination itself as the key site of ecological awakening: "the fate of the world", he writes, depends on arousing "the imagination to a sense of crisis" (Ibid.). In this way, apocalypse functions simultaneously as a narrative device and as a moral technology, namely a representational mode designed to provoke awareness and action by dramatizing environmental threat.

Yet the imaginative potency of the apocalyptic mode is also the source of its limitations. As Greg Garrard (2012) argues, it "brings with it philosophical and political problems that seriously compromise its usefulness, especially in the

radical, tragic form" (33). Rooted in Judeo-Christian frameworks of judgment, revelation, and redemption, apocalypse displaces attention from the material conditions of the present toward a transcendental narrative of ultimate ends. The environmental crisis, within this frame, becomes a singular and terminal event: a cosmic reckoning that both condemns the present and gestures toward a total transformation. This eschatological logic, as Delf Rothe (2020) remarks, is underpinned by "a linear temporality and a common orientation towards the threat of the end of time" (145). Drawing on Christian cosmology, it presupposes a unidirectional conception of history, "a flow or movement from a starting point (the creation) towards a final event in the divine plan (the eschaton)" (156). Even in secular discourses of the Anthropocene, this teleological structure persists, producing what Rothe terms an "essentially eschatological" orientation (147), in which environmental crisis appears both inevitable and final. Within such a framework, continuity, adaptation, and relationality are subordinated to the expectation of culmination and revelation. This ideological legacy helps explain the structural and emotional appeal of apocalyptic storytelling. As scholars such as Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra (2019) note, apocalypticism functions as one of the most influential genres of environmental storytelling precisely because it combines moral urgency with a narrative of judgment and redemption (12). Drawing on biblical models such as the Flood and the Apocalypse, it transforms environmental transgression into a drama of punishment and renewal. Its affective appeal lies in the intensity of this emotional pattern, which "plays on fears and conveys a sense of the extreme urgency of radical action" (Ibid.) while simultaneously invoking a nostalgic longing for restoration. Yet the same structure that lends apocalypse its rhetorical force simultaneously limits its imaginative reach, reducing extended and interconnected ecological processes to isolated, emotionally heightened moments of collapse. As Antonia Mehnert (2016) notes, this reliance on clear

antagonists and discrete temporal divisions proves ill-suited to the diffuse, multi-causal nature of climate change (33).

While the above-mentioned ideological and structural features expose the epistemological limits of apocalypticism, its persistence as a dominant imaginative form also owes much to its affective force. The apocalyptic mode is compelling precisely because it translates ecological anxiety into moral and emotional intensity: it offers the consolation of narrative coherence and the urgency of impending judgment. Yet the same qualities that make it persuasive also render it problematic. As Garrard (2012) observes, apocalyptic rhetoric often "tends to inflect the evidence so as to 'produce' the crisis it describes or predicts" (63), generating a self-fulfilling narrative logic in which catastrophe becomes inevitable by virtue of its constant anticipation. Within cultural imagination, this logic translates into a compulsive reading of every environmental disturbance as a "crypto-Biblical 'sign' of catastrophic global warming" (64). The apocalyptic mode thus blurs the boundary between representation and event, between describing crisis and enacting it, producing a feedback loop of anxiety and fatalism that compromises its ethical potential.

From an affective standpoint, then, the apocalyptic imagination risks reinforcing the very fatalism it seeks to overcome. By presenting collapse as preordained and unchangeable, it transforms ecological crisis into a spectacle of inevitability. The result, as scholars such as Simone Kotvá and Eva-Charlotta Mebius (2021) have shown, can be a form of environmental apathy or even quietist acceptance, particularly where apocalyptic expectations merge with theological determinism (3). Similarly, Astrid Bracke (2017) argues that the apocalyptic frame, particularly as mediated through popular culture, tends to deprive readers and viewers of a sense of effective agency, fostering instead attitudes of resignation or denial (24, 137). The imaginative energy that animates ecological awareness thus risks being turned inward, generating despair,

detachment, or passive spectatorship rather than the sustained forms of hope and agency that the climate crisis demands.

Echoing these dynamics, Naomi Alderman's *The Future* gives narrative form to the apocalyptic desire for certainty. From the opening pages, Alderman's novel cultivates the conviction that collapse is not merely possible but certain. The storyworld operates on the premise that the end of the world is imminent and unstoppable; the only rational response is to prepare to survive it. In this context, "the future" in the title does not denote a temporal horizon so much as an imagined condition, one in which systemic breakdown has already been accepted as inevitable. This imagined future exerts immense power over the present, shaping behaviour and political decision-making. Alderman thereby exposes one of the most insidious dimensions of apocalyptic thought: when catastrophe is assumed to be unavoidable, the very will to avert it is lost. Crisis becomes perpetual, and the possibility of meaningful transformation recedes. The novel's characters embody this fatalistic logic, repeatedly expressing a preference for the certainty of collapse over the anxiety of uncertainty. Lenk, for instance, finds "peace" in the thought that "it would be soon now", even if it means "a minor apocalypse" (Alderman 2023, 18). His resignation echoes the broader psychological pattern that Alderman's narrator identifies: "human beings long for certainty so much that we're willing to even undermine and sabotage ourselves in the search for it" (64). The same impulse governs the novel's broader social critique, "Just keep believing you can control the future, that you know what's coming and what's coming is nothing good" (68), and culminates in the recognition that "imagining bad futures creates fear and fear creates bad futures […]. At a certain point, things become inevitable" (312). The only perceived way out of this loop lies in the attempt to master time itself: "The only way to know the future is to control it" (341). It is through such recursive patterns that *The Future* fosters and dramatizes an apocalyptic imagination

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grounded in the desire for certainty, one that paradoxically generates the very inevitability it fears.

However, as anticipated above, if *The Future* appears for much of its narrative to be fully aligned with the apocalyptic logic of inevitability, this alignment also brings with it certain affective and ethical risks. As Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017) argues, when environmental narratives become overwhelmingly bleak or catastrophist, they can alienate readers or induce paralysis rather than action, underscoring the need to maintain an affective balance between despair and hope to sustain engagement and foster response (98). Alderman's novel seems acutely aware of this tension: while it immerses readers in a world governed by fatalism and collapse, it ultimately reopens the imaginative horizon of the future. The novel's final movement performs a decisive shift away from the rhetoric of inevitability, reframing apocalypse not as an end-point but as a precondition for transformation. This shift can be read through what Lisa Garforth (2017) defines as "green utopianism", a key mode through which contemporary Western literature reimagines ecological futures (2). As Garforth explains, twenty-first-century green utopianism no longer envisions perfected blueprint societies but instead operates within the conditions of ongoing crisis, "structured around apocalyptic and adaptive logics" (99). Yet even within this framework, such narratives resist dystopian finality: they allow utopian desire to surface through fear, mourning, and nostalgia, reconfiguring apocalypse as a generative form that opens space for renewal and ecological possibility (23, 109).

Naomi Alderman's *The Future* (2023) exemplifies this dynamic through what might be described as apocalypse-dependent green utopianism—a narrative mode that invites readers to inhabit the inevitability of collapse only to dismantle it in its closing movement. Following the disappearance of the technology magnates, the novel envisions a slow but radical transformation of

the world order. Marta Einkorn, Badge Bywater, and Albert Dabrowski redirect the immense wealth and infrastructure of their former employers toward ecological regeneration, prompting a global "realignment of priorities" (Alderman 2023, 373). A growing "relish for doing dramatic and fast things to solve the world environmental crises" (Ibid.) leads to widespread support for large-scale ecological initiatives, such as the expansion of FutureSafe zones and the implementation of "RacerMonth" (376), a collective transition to electric infrastructure. Over time, these efforts culminate in the establishment of the United Autonomous Regions (UAR), a transnational alliance "dedicated […] to the preservation of the natural world for the benefit of all humankind" (416).

Yet the novel's closing gesture resists any illusion of final redemption. Alderman's utopianism is defined by its provisionality: "Nothing can be permanently settled or solved. No state is perfect; no utopia exists but that it leaves someone out" (416). True transformation is figured not as an achieved harmony but as an ongoing ethical task, a "constant tense balance between the present and the future" (417). In this sense, *The Future* explicitly distances itself from the rhetoric of the technological fix, in which environmental breakdown is imagined as a problem to be solved through innovation within the parameters of existing economic and political systems. Although the novel's utopian reconstruction unfolds through the repurposing of corporate infrastructures and digital technologies, these are reframed not as instruments of mastery but as provisional means of collective responsibility and repair, steps forward that remain partial, contested, and imperfect. Alderman thus refuses the fantasy of total resolution: the new order carries its own tensions and compromises, yet it gestures toward the possibility of transformation through continuous struggle rather than definitive salvation. By reimagining apocalypse as a site of renewal rather than annihilation, *The Future* transforms the rhetoric of inevitable collapse

into an open-ended meditation on continuity, care, and the unfinished labour of imagining a liveable world.

5.3 Mediating the End: Scriptural Exegesis, Digital Epistolarity, and Eco-Utopian Imagination

The novel's engagement with the apocalyptic tradition, and, more specifically, with its Judeo-Christian variant, extends well beyond the mere creation of an expectation that the narrative will recount the end of the world. *The Future* embeds within its structure a series of reinterpretations of biblical scripture, particularly of Genesis, which it mobilises as a framework through which to read contemporary crises. This scriptural undercurrent operates on two intertwined levels. On the one hand, it reinforces apocalyptic thinking, confronting readers with the moral and emotional weight of inevitability and despair. On the other, these very reinterpretations begin to dismantle that logic from within, suggesting that collapse need not be the sole or final horizon. The emotional effect is one of productive ambivalence: the narrative sustains the dread of ecological and moral downfall while simultaneously opening a cautious space for alternative possibilities.

This intertextual engagement with Scripture is channelled most explicitly through the character of Martha Einkorn, an ex-Enochite and, more significantly, the daughter of Enoch himself, the founder of the Enochite community.[1] The

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[1] The name "Enoch" recalls *The Book of Enoch*, an apocryphal Jewish text excluded from most Biblical canons but preserved in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition. Its opening section, "The Book of the Watchers", retells Genesis 6 from the perspective of Noah's great-grandfather, Enoch, who witnesses the corruption of the earth by the Nephilim, a race of antediluvian giants born from the union of angels and human women. As Simone Kotvá and Eva-Charlotta Mebius (2021) observe, these beings "possess a voracious appetite and begin to consume all that 'which the labour of men produced,' as well as birds, beasts, reptiles and fishes… [until] they resort to eating humans also" (12). The Watchers also teach humans exploitative technologies such as metallurgy, which accelerate both material progress and moral decline (Ibid.). The ensuing flood, as described in *Genesis*, thus becomes a divine response to technological excess and ecological devastation—a mythic pattern that Alderman reworks through Enoch, who interprets the climate crisis as the inevitable outcome of moral corruption under technocapitalism. For Kotvá and Mebius, *The Book*

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Enochites are portrayed as a survivalist sect that combined biblical exegesis with environmental prophecy. Enoch's theology centred on the belief that climate change was a manifestation of divine judgment: "He believed that God would use the weather, like in the flood, to separate the righteous from the sinners" (Alderman 2023, 53). Under his leadership, the Enochites withdrew to "fifteen thousand green acres in Oregon" (51), where they lived off grid. As Martha later recalls,

> we were a survivalist group raising children […] and waiting for the end of the Babble. The Babble being this world [...] the complicated place full of signs where we all live. Enoch believed it would and should come to an end (52).

The community's ethos fused patriarchal traditionalism, such as "floral-patterned dresses, braids and guns" (46), with an eco-theological vision drawn from *Genesis*: "a new Judaism-based, Genesis-inflected American religion that flared up and died away rapidly" (52–53). Although Martha eventually leaves the Enochite community and reintegrates into society, her upbringing continues to shape her moral and imaginative outlook. The teachings she inherits are not simply discarded but reactivated in a radically transformed context. Rather than rejecting the world of "pieces", namely the fractured, hyper-technological system of extraction and consumption that defines contemporary life, Martha learns to navigate and, ultimately, to redirect it. The interpretive discipline instilled by her Enochite past, once devoted to discerning divine meaning in natural signs, becomes the foundation for a new kind of agency: the effort to assemble coherence and care within a world structured by fragmentation.

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of Enoch exemplifies an alternative form of apocalypticism, one that resists the logic of destruction and judgement, instead foregrounding the possibility of renewed attention to the world. In their reading, it functions as resistance literature: transforming apocalyptic vision from a prophecy of the end into a call for environmental attentiveness and moral reorientation.

In particular, Martha maintains her religious identity through her activity on an online survivalist forum called *Name the Day*, where she writes under the alias *OneCorn*. It is within this digital space that the reader gains access to much of the contextual information about the Enochites, as well as to Martha's ongoing reinterpretations of their teachings. On threads such as "ntd/strategic", "ntd/enoch", and "ntd/strategic/biblestudywithonecorn", she offers new readings of *Genesis*, especially the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and of Lot and Abraham, as well as retellings of sermons she heard during her childhood, such as the fable of the Rabbit and the Fox in "ntd/foxandrabbit".

Martha's online exchanges with other forum users exemplify the novel's engagement with the mode of digital epistolarity: a contemporary reconfiguration of letter-writing and moral instruction through online dialogue. In *The Future*, this form functions almost as a kind of preaching, yet one that is continually reshaped through the collective dynamics of the forum. Each of Martha's posts invites comment, disagreement, and elaboration, transforming what might once have been a sermon delivered from a position of authority into a participatory and evolving conversation. It is through this digitally mediated form of address that the novel's movement from apocalypticism to eco-utopianism is most fully realised. The forum replaces prophetic monologue with reciprocal communication, reframing revelation as a collaborative act of interpretation. Within this space, Martha gradually reinterprets both parts of *The Book of Genesis* and her father's Enochite teachings under a new light. Her posts begin to expose that, beneath their insistence on divine punishment and inevitability, these doctrines conceal an ethical potential: a call to care, to community, and to responsibility toward the Earth. What had once been a theology of fear becomes, through digital rearticulation, a framework for mutual aid and ecological repair. By reinterpreting apocalyptic narratives, Martha

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transforms their logic of inevitable ruin into the groundwork for revolution, a collective endeavour to avert, rather than endure, the end of the world.

The trajectory from resignation to eco-resistance is, however, neither linear nor immediate. At first, Martha's posts on *Name the Day* appear consistent with a conventional apocalyptic eschatology, functioning as moral reflections or cautionary tales that echo the didactic tone of her Enochite upbringing. Yet even from the earliest instances of the forum posts, which are interspersed throughout the novel, it becomes clear that her purpose extends beyond abstract moral reflection: she seeks to uncover the latent meanings within these scriptural narratives, revealing that they are far less straightforward than they first appear. Her commentary on the destruction of Sodom, for instance, reframes the biblical episode not as a prophecy of divine punishment but as an ethical conundrum about the limits of redemption:

> Anyway it turned out there really weren't ten good people in the city. There was just one barely adequate man – Lot, Abraham's nephew – and his family. The Lord was tired of talking to Abraham, that guy was smart but he made his head ache. And so the Lord decided to rain down fire and ash upon the cities of the plains. But I mean that is the question really, isn't it? Is it OK to decide to give up on a place? How little goodness is too little? When is there no future left? (25)

Through this commentary, Martha invites her readers to reinterpret divine wrath not as an act of inevitable destruction but as a moral provocation: a question about the threshold of worth that justifies salvation. If only one good person remains, is that enough to make the world worth saving, or should it be abandoned as irredeemable? By posing this dilemma, Martha exposes the moral hazard of apocalyptic reasoning: the temptation to give up on the world because it seems populated by the undeserving. Her retelling instead insists on the value of persistence, asking what it means to continue caring and fighting for a flawed world rather than yielding to despair.

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Later, Martha revisits the same episode through a radically different lens. Her reading goes deeper, moving beyond the destruction of Sodom to the aftermath of Lot and his daughters' salvation, examining what becomes of those who survive catastrophe. In doing so, she focuses on the patriarchal narrative of *Genesis*, reflecting on its moral hypocrisy and the patterns of gendered violence it perpetuates, while also opening a deeper question about survival itself: what should those who outlive catastrophe do? Should they withdraw from the world, or seek to rebuild community? Her retelling of Lot's final descent into isolation and moral ruin exposes the corruption underlying the biblical ideal of righteousness:

> Lot offered his daughters' vaginas to the mob. So they felt justified in doing what they wanted with his cock. That's the last we ever see of Lot in the Bible. That's where he ends. Sitting alone in a cave, having involuntarily knocked up both his daughters. I think we can all agree: he might have gotten out of Sodom but he didn't thrive. (188)

Here, Martha reframes the episode as a meditation on the perils of isolation. Lot's survival is not redemption but moral and relational collapse; those who retreat from others do not thrive. Her reinterpretation thus transforms a story of divine punishment into a call for community-building, suggesting that true survival depends on restoring relations rather than escaping them. In her rewriting of this biblical episode, Martha traces a movement away from the rhetoric of inevitability and divine retribution. Instead of accepting "the end" as providential, her readings open an emotional space for hope. Even amid destruction and violence, the possibility of collective restoration endures through the reorientation that anticipates the novel's broader transformation of apocalyptic logic into eco-utopian imagination.

As with her retelling of Sodom and Gomorrah, Martha's other biblical reinterpretations follow a similar oscillation: they first appear to reanimate the rhetoric of divine punishment and inevitability, only to unravel it from within.

Among these other re-reading of *Genesis*, a recurring motif emerges: the story of "men, mostly brothers, who hate each other. Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Abraham and Lot" (109). In her posts, Martha notes that in each of these biblical pairings, one brother is a farmer and the other a wanderer or hunter-gatherer. She summarises this pattern through a simple but striking schema:

CAIN: farmer   ABEL: wanderer

JACOB: stayed home   ESAU: went out hunting

ISAAC: stayed home   ISHMAEL: sent to wander

JOSEPH: daddy's boy   BROTHERS: sold him to wandering Ishmaelites

LOT: lived in Sodom   ABRAHAM: wandered the desert. (109)

This diagrammatic rewriting of *Genesis* reframes the recurring fraternal conflicts as an allegory of human history, tracing a long tension between settled and nomadic modes of existence. In doing so, it extends Martha's broader project of reinterpreting apocalyptic scripture: instead of dramatizing divine punishment, she exposes a structural conflict at the core of civilization itself, such as the opposition between rootedness and mobility, possession and interdependence, control and uncertainty. Her posts invite the forum's members to reflect on these ancient divisions not as remote myth but as a prehistory of the ecological crisis.

The conversation on *Name the Day* soon expands beyond Martha's own posts. Another participant, writing under the alias *FoxInTheHenHouse*, opens a new thread by uploading a recording of one of Enoch's sermons, the so-called "sermon of Rabbit and Fox" (259), and using it as a basis for further reflection. Through this contribution, Enoch's voice re-enters the narrative, reframed within the digital space of the forum where his teachings are reinterpreted by a dispersed online community. The sermon transforms the biblical stories of brothers and rivals into a myth of human evolution, tracing a long-standing

tension between two modes of existence: those who lived in accordance with the rhythms of nature and those who, through cultivation and ownership, progressively detached themselves from it. The pastoral imagery of *Genesis* becomes, in this context, an ecological genealogy of human domination and estrangement:

> All of us know how it ended, of course. Fields and orchards and flocks and harvests. And intensive nitrogen-based fertilizer and cows pumped full of hormones to speed their growth and battery chickens with no space to turn in their cages. (263)

In Enoch's sermon, Rabbit embodies the fearful desire for certainty, the drive to domesticate, own, and control:

> Rabbit was, above all, afraid. He feared the unknowable future, the darkness that lay over each hunt concealing its outcome. (261)

> Rabbit liked to know what was coming next [...] [and] believed in owning as a sacred right. (Ibid.)

By contrast, Fox represents the acceptance of uncertainty and interdependence with the natural world:

> Fox had heard from Rabbit of 'owning' but found the idea of owning land as absurd as the idea of owning breath. (260)

> Fox knew there was no certainty in the hunt [...] He wished for a more certain future but he was not driven to attain it. (Ibid.)

Through this allegory, Enoch reconfigures biblical genealogy as a meditation on the origins of techno-capitalist modernity: the triumph of Rabbit's fearful desire for mastery becomes the theological prehistory of human self-destruction. "This is the essential problem", he concludes, "[w]e can imagine the future. And once we've imagined it, we can't stop. The dicebox of evolution optimized us for brain and then let us get on with it" (265). Humanity's fatal gift, namely the capacity

for foresight, thus becomes its downfall, transforming anticipation into domination. Yet, as in Martha's reinterpretations, the sermon does not culminate in despair. Its final lines offer a modest counter-revelation: "We are not going to be able to go back. Maybe we can go back a bit. [...] We have to try. We have to raise our children to be less Rabbit than us" (268). Even Enoch's apocalyptic theology carries the seed of renewal: an appeal to partial reversal, to learning to live differently within the world rather than abandoning it.

Martha's final contribution to *Name the Day* brings this trajectory from eco-apocalypticism to eco-utopianism to its culmination, echoing the simultaneous development of the plot. Her last post returns once more to the story of Abraham and Lot, but this time the tone has shifted decisively from prophecy to exhortation, from the inevitability of punishment to the possibility of moral choice:

> Abraham and Lot are a warning against what we have already done. Abraham and Lot are a warning not to do it more. Abraham and Lot tell us that we will often have the choice between accumulating more gold or objects and creating more trust. Choose to trust. The road to ruin is paved with certainty. The end of the world is only ever hastened by those who think they will be able to protect their own from the coming storm. (363)

In this closing reflection, the Bible ceases to function as a prophetic script foretelling inevitable ruin. Instead, it becomes a living text that teaches the possibility of transformation. The moral of the story no longer lies in divine punishment or human depravity, but in the ethical imperative to act otherwise: to replace possession with trust, isolation with solidarity, and fear with responsibility. The Bible, once invoked to justify retreat and survivalism, is reconfigured as a call to community, care, and imaginative change towards a different and more sustainable lifestyle.

If, on the level of content, the *Name the Day* forum traces Marta's exegetic movement from apocalyptic prophecy toward a theology of repair, the novel's

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distinctive use of digital epistolarity extends this oscillation between visions of collapse and possibilities of restoration into the reader's own experience. It is therefore important to consider the effect this formal strategy produces on readers through the lens of "joint attention" (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021). In this sense, *The Future*'s forum pages exemplify a narrative situation in which the narrator/poster, addressee/user, and the real-world reader are bound together through shared yet differentiated acts of focus. Each post enacts a double relation of attention: first, between the poster and what they attend to, namely the biblical episode or moral problem under discussion; and, secondly, between the poster and their immediate audience, the other users in the forum, who engage in this act of attention with them. The real-world reader is drawn into this dynamic as a third participant, negotiating shared focus both with the poster and with the forum's internal audience, and thus becoming implicated in the same processes of interpretation and response that the narrative depicts. Through this structure, Alderman translates the dialogic intimacy of epistolarity into a networked form of communication, where meaning arises through the interplay of multiple participants.

In addition to this readerly experience of shared attention, the printed layout of the forum threads, which mimics the design of online discussion boards, invites readers to navigate multiple layers of discourse at once. These layers are the main posts written by users (such as *OneCorn*), the comment chains that expand or contest them, and the encompassing narrative of *The Future* within which these exchanges are embedded. This structure interrupts linear immersion and demands a constant recalibration of focus. As readers move between the self-contained exchanges of the forum and the broader diegetic world in which these exchanges circulate, they engage in what Karin Kukkonen (2019) terms "precision management": the modulation of simulation according to shifting levels of narrative embodiment. These continual shifts in narrative embodiment

trigger both immersion and critical awareness, allowing readers to experience the immediacy of digital exchange while simultaneously reflecting on the mediated nature of communication itself.

If "joint attention" helps to describe how readers are cognitively and affectively drawn into the networked dynamics of *The Future*'s forum pages, the novel's remediation of these digital exchanges also produces broader experiential effects. By transferring the affordances of digital reading environments into the material space of print, *The Future* creates an effect of defamiliarization. The reader must reappropriate the practices of online reading, such as scrolling through posts, following comment threads, and mentally situating each contribution within a wider discussion, within the sequential and materially fixed medium of the printed novel. This relocation of digital forms into print disrupts habitual modes of literary engagement, prompting reflection on how communication technologies shape perception and interpretation. At the same time, this experience is not entirely alien: it evokes a strange familiarity, as the rhythms and structures of the digital world reappear within a traditionally analogue format. The result is a heightened sense of realism that captures real-world practices of readerly engagement in digital communication.

In this sense, the novel's use of online forum formatting performs its thematic work at a formal level. Just as Martha and her interlocutors reinterpret scripture collectively within *Name the Day*, readers are invited into an analogous practice of interpretive co-presence: an act of shared attention that blurs the line between reading and witnessing, between fiction and the social realities it mirrors. By remediating survivalist discussions, conspiracy rhetoric, and digital eschatology, *The Future* reappropriates online discursive spaces as sites of collective dialogue. It thereby turns the experience of reading itself into a reflection on the cultural conditions of climate discourse: the saturation of information, the tension between isolation and connection, and the ongoing

question of whether new forms of communication can still foster hope and community rather than accelerate collapse.

The participatory and rearticulative impulse that defines Martha's digital sermons finds a visual counterpart in Badger Bywater's viral reel "Enclosures." Here, the mode of digital epistolarity shifts from textual dialogue to audiovisual address, expanding the novel's exploration of digital communication. This section of the novel reproduces, through narrated description, the visual, auditory, and rhetorical grammar of the contemporary reel format. The narration follows the video as Badger speaks rapidly to camera, layering performance, meme aesthetics, and pop-cultural allusions to convey a complex critique of enclosure policies and data capitalism. Their opening address, "My mom's great-grandparents were Irish immigrants. They came to the US during the potato famine, which was caused by centuries of oppression by the English" (88), establishes a conversational and confessional tone that blurs the boundary between private testimony and public commentary. When the narration recounts Badger pausing to look directly into the camera and saying, "You see where I'm going with this" (Ibid.), the effect is one of mediated interpellation: the imagined viewer is drawn into the act of shared recognition, and so is the reader who reconstructs this scene through text. In this sense, the description itself enacts a form of joint attention. Badger, their digital audience, and the real-world reader are bound together in a triangulated act of focus, oriented toward the same object of critique, namely the enclosure of data and the commodification of digital life.

Much like the *Name the Day* threads, this sequence functions as a remediated form of digital epistolarity, translating the immediacy of online discourse into the slower, reflective temporality of print. Badger's costume changes, inserted memes, and tonal shifts, representing a detailed evocation of visual and auditory cues, make the multimodal strategies through which digital communication builds authority and intimacy visible. Yet, within the novel, this

frenetic density is filtered through the act of reading. The reader, positioned as both observer and addressee, must navigate between Badger's address to their imagined followers and the novel's narratorial frame, participating in the same oscillation between immersion and reflection that defines *The Future*'s broader engagement with digital forms. Just as *Name the Day* demonstrates how online forums can enable reinterpretation and collective reflection, "Enclosures" shows that these same platforms can be used for activism and ideological engagement. By translating the immediacy and reach of viral communication into the reflective medium of prose, Alderman explores how the rhetorical force of digital media can be redirected toward the moral and ecological purposes of pushing "good" ideas into the world.

In ideological terms, Badger's "Enclosures" reel aligns closely with both the novel's broader trajectory, which, as described earlier in this chapter, moves from apocalypse to eco-utopia. It also aligns with the exegetic movement traced in *Name the Day*, from biblical eschatology toward renewal and change-before-collapse. The reel participates directly in this shift by reimagining technology not as a tool of domination but as a potential instrument for collective repair. In its closing moments, Badger includes a rapidly flashing column list of proposals for how the resources of Anvil, Medlar, and Fantail could be redirected toward environmental regeneration, nothing less than a visual blueprint for a "green revolution" (see **Fig. 1**).

Break up Anvil and use their infrastructure to . . .	Take public ownership of Medlar and . . .	Use Fantail's enormous reach to . . .	Not to mention use all of their collective, mind-boggling wealth to . . .
subsidise at-cost, simple vegan meals to be produced using supermarket-rejected fruit and veggies and distributed using their existing networks.	invest and work with their amazing designers to create new battery technology.	invest in the free education of women, girls and nb people – the simplest and quickest way to reduce inequality and improve the environment.	pay rain-forested countries to keep the land as rain forest.
insulate every home in the world. Organise a volunteer army just like we did for vaccinations and get it done. Every single one of those tech companies has expertise in huge international projects like this.	make sure that every tablet, computer or other digital product is easily repairable by the end user – include detailed repair manuals and commit to repairing and upgrading Medlar products rather than just selling new ones.	organise a global paid corps to plant fourteen billion trees, particularly on degraded land and to restore tropical forests.	pay for developing economies to go straight to renewable energy with no coal-powered phase and invest in research into hydropower, wind power and solar power – it can always be more efficient and better.
enable sharing of consumer goods; if you look for a lawn mower on Anvil, it'll suggest neighbours who have signed up to a lend-and-share service for their lawn mower.	reuse and recycle every component currently considered 'disposable' in the Medlar ecosystem.	create a globally networked project to replace dirty ovens with ovens that run on renewable energy, designed in each region with local cooking styles in mind.	build seawalls to stop the ice caps from sliding into the sea, melting and destroying us all.
rationalise deliveries – you the consumer only have to accept one delivery a day; other companies and governments can use Anvil's network for deliveries.	pay for electrified vehicles to replace petrol-driven vehicles around the world and make most of them publicly owned and borrowable via an app or a card scheme.	work with every urban centre to make the city more walkable, with better public transport infrastructure; Fantail has the information on where you go every day – use it for something worthwhile.	repair coral reefs by regrowing coral and creating new ecosystems of oysters and robust plants to outcompete algal blooms.

Fig. 1. Excerpt from *The Future,* showing the column list of proposals from Badger's "Enclosures" reel (p. 90).

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The list embodies her conviction that "we can use our own resources to fix our own problems" (91), turning critique into concrete possibility. This moment encapsulates the novel's ethical reorientation: despair gives way to agency, and prophecy becomes praxis.

Taken together, these instances of digital epistolarity illustrate how *The Future* transforms the rhetoric of apocalypticism into a vision of reparative futurity. The novel's dispersed digital artefacts, such as forum threads, recorded sermons, and viral videos, each stage moments of interpretive instability that suspend collapse rather than resolve it. Yet this very instability becomes productive: a space in which communication, the very sense of collectivity, and imagination are reconfigured. The fragmentation produced by the remediation of digital forms, then, does not merely signify disruption; it reclaims fragmentation as a generative condition for ethical and communal reorientation. Through the polyphonic and networked design of its digital adaptations, *The Future* enacts the resistance described above by transforming the affective and epistemic uncertainty of crisis into a site of shared attention and open possibility. In doing so, Alderman reconfigures the end of the world not as an inevitability to await, but as a horizon to resist through the very act of connection.

5.4 The Aesthetic of Multiplicity: Reimagining Narrative Space and Time

If *The Future* reconfigures apocalypse through the dispersed and polyphonic design of its digital artefacts, this logic of multiplicity also extends to the novel's overall narrative architecture. The interpretive instability fostered by digital epistolarity is not confined to the forum threads or viral videos; rather, it reverberates across the entire text, shaping its structure and rhythm. The novel's polyphony arises from the interplay between these embedded digital forms and

a shifting third-person heterodiegetic narration that continually migrates across focalising characters. In this sense, *The Future* operates less as a single narrative voice than as a concerto of interwoven perspectives. Each voice enters, withdraws, and returns in counterpoint to others throughout the novel. The first part of the novel, "the essential problem"(Alderman 2023, 1), exemplifies this compositional method, moving through subsections titled "lenk" (3), "zimri" (8), "ellen" (13), and "lenk" again (17), while later parts continue this pattern: "zhen" (27), "martha" (113), and, in the later sections, an alternating sequence of "zhen" (190), "martha" (197), "zhen" (202), "martha" (211), "zhen" (216), "martha" (221) and so on. Rather than merely producing a rhythmic pattern of interruption and return, this shifting focalisation has a destabilising effect on the reader, who must continually renegotiate perspective and empathy as the narrative voice moves between different consciousnesses. The act of reading becomes an exercise in cognitive and ethical recalibration: a continual reorientation across divergent registers of experience. Like the narrative strategies seen in *Cloud Atlas*, *The Still Point*, and *The Year Without Summer*, Alderman's use of multiplicity evokes the unevenness of how climate crisis is lived and understood, characterized as it is by simultaneous local intensities and global interconnections. Through this dispersed and dialogic form, *The Future* constructs not a single vision of ecological collapse or renewal, but a composite one: a mosaic of perspectives through which the planetary crisis becomes legible as both differentiated and shared.

This multiplicity of focalisation also carries profound spatial and temporal consequences. The fragmentation of perspectives in *The Future* does not merely disperse consciousness; it dislocates the narrative's sense of time and place. As in *Cloud Atlas*, *The Still Point*, and *The Year Without Summer*, polyphony here entails more than a plurality of voices: it produces a form of narrative dispersal that unsettles linear chronology and geographic fixity alike. The novel's plot

development is far from temporally straightforward or spatially localised; instead, it unfolds through discontinuous shifts that mirror the cognitive and affective instability of a world approaching ecological collapse.

If we consider the distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet*, *i.e.* the chronological sequence of events versus their narrative arrangement, we can begin to trace the depth of this temporal and spatial dislocation (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Fabula and Syuzhet in *The Future*

Fabula (Location / Chronological Order of Events)	Syuzhet (Narrative Arrangement in the Novel)
Hong Kong	Part 5.5
Oregon	Parts 3.3 and 3.9
San Francisco	Parts 3.5 and 3.7
San Francisco	Parts 3.4, 3.6, 3.8, and 3.10
Washington D.C.	Part 3.11
London	Parts 2.2, 2.4, 2.6, and 3.12
East London	Part 2.8
New Zealand	Part 2.10
Singapore and Manila	Parts 2.1, 2.3, 2.5, 2.7, 2.9, 2.11
San Francisco	Parts 4.2, 4.4, and 4.6
Palo Alto, Ohio, Washington D.C.	Part 4.8
Manila, Ankara, Skopje, Madrid, Across Europe, Bucharest	Parts 4.3, 4.5, and 4.7
Canada	Parts 4.9 and 4.10
Plane crash above Papua New Guinea	Part 5.7
Papua New Guinea	Parts 5.1–5.6 and 5.8–5.21
San Francisco	Part 5.22
No fixed location (planetary overview)	Parts 6.1–6.11

The Future continually oscillates between past, present, and speculative future, juxtaposing flashbacks to Martha's Enochite upbringing, references to Zhen's earlier life in Hong Kong, the orchestrated "end of the world," the preparations

for the corporate-technological coup, and flashforwards to the transformed world that follows. These recursive movements destabilise the reader's capacity to reconstruct a coherent chronology, producing instead a sense of simultaneity and suspended anticipation. This temporal fragmentation is mirrored spatially: the narrative shifts restlessly from Oregon's isolation to Hong Kong's vertiginous density, from Silicon Valley's corporate enclosures to diffuse, placeless urban environments. Such spatial dispersion fractures the possibility of a fixed setting and compels the reader to piece together a global map from discontinuous fragments. Through this dispersal, Alderman renders the planetary crisis as both ubiquitous and ungraspable, everywhere and nowhere at once, distributed across interlinked but uneven sites of agency, power, and vulnerability.

This narrative architecture recalls the strategies observed in *Cloud Atlas*, *The Still Point*, and *The Year Without Summer*, each of which constructs its representation of climate change through spatial and temporal multiplicity. Like those earlier texts, *The Future* deploys formal fragmentation as a way of modelling the heterogeneity and interconnection that define the planetary condition. In this sense, Alderman's novel aligns with the notion of planetarity, introduced in chapter one in relation to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's and Ursula Heise's formulations of the term. Rather than conceiving the planet as a singular, unified totality, Heise (2008) proposes a planetary aesthetics that captures both global interdependence and local distinctiveness or, in other words, a world imagined not as a seamless whole but as a constellation of sites that are interconnected yet retain their own trajectories (64). *The Future* enacts precisely this vision: its geographically and temporally dispersed structure creates a narrative collage in which each perspective maintains autonomy while remaining entangled in larger ecological and technological networks. The result is a form that mirrors the spatial and temporal complexity of climate change itself: a complex system that cannot be contained within a single time, place, or

perspective, but must instead be apprehended through a network of overlapping temporalities and dispersed spatial locations.

This fragmented architecture also shapes the reader's experience, demanding continual acts of cognitive and imaginative adjustment. Each new section requires the reader to relocate themselves within the novel's shifting coordinates to discern not only whose consciousness is being inhabited, but also where and when the narrative now unfolds. The reader must piece together temporal relations, determining whether an event precedes or follows those previously narrated, while simultaneously reorienting across diverse geographies. Reading thus becomes an active process of navigation: a repeated negotiation between times and spaces that resists any stable or linear understanding of plot. Yet amid this continual dislocation, the novel maintains a sense of underlying coherence, a latent awareness that these scattered perspectives belong to a larger pattern. Connections emerge gradually, not as explicit revelations but as resonances that accumulate across the text, inviting the reader to participate in assembling the planetary mosaic the novel itself performs.

This demand for interpretive reconstruction recalls both modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. Like modernist experiments in fragmentation and stream of consciousness, *The Future* explores the limits of perception and coherence; and like postmodernist metafiction, it foregrounds the act of assembling meaning from dispersed and discontinuous fragments. Yet Alderman's use of these techniques is not merely retrospective. As with *Cloud Atlas*, *The Still Point*, and *The Year Without Summer*, *The Future* reclaims narrative strategies from earlier literary traditions and redeploys them to address the representational challenges of climate change. Fragmentation, multiplicity, and self-reflexivity become instruments for envisioning interconnectedness, resilience, and the possibility of renewed understanding within a destabilised world.

5.5 Conclusion

Naomi Alderman's *The Future* (2023) brings to culmination the thesis's exploration of narrative mediation in climate fiction, extending the temporal and formal trajectories traced in *Cloud Atlas*, *The Still Point*, and *The Year Without Summer* into a near-future world of climate collapse and technological control. The novel envisions a society shaped by algorithmic governance, corporate power, and ecological breakdown. Through its speculative yet recognisable setting, *The Future* probes the entanglement of environmental and technological crisis, examining how digital systems mediate fear, hope, and collective action in an age defined by planetary precarity. The result is a narrative that tests the limits of how contemporary culture narrates and potentially reconfigures the experience of ecological crisis.

Throughout the chapter, I have argued that *The Future* reworks apocalyptic and utopian traditions to challenge the dominant cultural scripts of inevitability and despair. By transforming apocalypse from revelation to dialogue, and from fatalism to continuity, Alderman articulates what might be called an apocalypse-dependent utopianism: a mode of renewal that arises within, rather than beyond, catastrophe. The novel's final movement gestures not toward resolution or closure but toward a renewed ethical horizon that privileges care and collective responsibility over redemption or transcendence.

This ethical reorientation is inseparable from the novel's formal experimentation. The transition from analogue to digital epistolarity transforms the act of correspondence into a much more complex networked practice of shared attention and interpretation. Martha Einkorn's contributions to the online forum *Name the Day* exemplify this shift, remediating scriptural exegesis through participatory dialogue that reimagines revelation not as a truth handed down from above, but as a process of collective interpretation. Similarly, Badger Bywater's viral reel "Enclosures" translates the immediacy of digital activism

into epistolary address, aligning individual expression with collective ethical agency. These digital forms reclaim fragmentation and mediation as conditions for ecological communication and repair, demonstrating how technology can enable relational possibility rather than alienation.

Finally, the novel's polyphonic structure and global dispersal extend the thesis's broader analysis of narrative form as a mode of ecological thinking. Through multiple focalizations and a transnational narrative architecture, *The Future* renders the unevenness and interdependence of planetary crisis. Fragmentation here becomes both aesthetic and epistemological, a way of registering the distributed, multiscalar nature of environmental experience. In doing so, Alderman transforms reading itself into an ethical act: an exercise in orientation within uncertainty and participation in collective imagination.

The Future, then, stands as a culmination of the thesis's central concerns, while also marking a point of departure. By translating traditional epistolary mediation into digital relationality, Alderman reimagines apocalypse as a narrative of resistance and co-creation. Yet this brief and final exploration of digital epistolarity and eco-utopian imagination gestures toward the need for further critical engagement with the digital infrastructures, participatory forms, social-media aesthetics that increasingly shape contemporary eco-oriented fiction. The novel thus is part of an emergent phase of ecological storytelling, one in which digital mediation is not merely a narrative device, but a lived condition of imagining and acting within the planetary crisis.

Conclusion

The novels analysed in this thesis respond to the challenge of narrativising climate change, translating a complex system that operates across vast temporal and spatial scales into forms perceptible at a human level. Through this act of mediation, climate change becomes ethically consequential, as literature fosters the affective engagement and moral attention often absent from scientific discourse. Across the corpus, each novel articulates this translation through distinct aesthetic inflections, situating its more or less direct exploration of climate change within different historical and spatial contexts, from colonial and industrial pasts to contemporary domesticity and speculative futures. Yet these diverse settings converge in a shared response that takes the form of an engagement with epistolary form and its interaction with other narrative strategies. Through their staging of acts of correspondence, transmission, and interpretation, these formal practices foreground mediation, non-linearity, fragmentation, multitemporality, multispatiality, deferred communication, and, at times, reconnection and recursivity, articulating the epistemological conditions through which climate change can be apprehended and narrated.

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* establishes the conceptual foundation for this inquiry. Its recursive design and nested narratives turn the problem of planetary interconnection and historical movement into an organizing principle of form. The novel constructs an evolving archive of human attempts to record and rationalize progress, revealing how cycles of exploitation and ecological devastation underwrite the rhetoric of advancement that drives historical development. Moving from the colonial Pacific to a post-apocalyptic future where environmental collapse repeats the logics of imperial and capitalist expansion, *Cloud Atlas* exposes how the pursuit of improvement depends upon systemic violence against both human and nonhuman life. Journals, letters,

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reports, memoirs, and oral testimonies form a chain of mediated transmission through which history is framed in terms of recursivity and accumulation rather than rupture or renewal. This structure of deferred revelation, where readers recognise only belatedly how each narrative contains and transforms the previous ones, recreates the temporal and epistemological disjunctions that define climate change. Yet the novel's circular architecture, which concludes with the resumption of Ewing's journal, gestures toward the possibility of rewriting the future. By returning to its point of origin, *Cloud Atlas* reframes historical repetition not as fatal closure but as a site where transformative agency remains possible. Recognition of recurrence becomes, therefore, not only a hermeneutic act but an ethical summons: to perceive continuity is to confront responsibility, and to read recursively is to imagine the possibility of interruption. Ecological consciousness, in this vision, arises through the novel's mediation of reading and cognition, namely through the recursive acts of interpretation that train readers to perceive distributed causality, deferred consequence, and the fragile capacity of human choice to alter collective trajectories.

Amy Sackville's *The Still Point* scales down the planetary scope explored in *Cloud Atlas*, translating the vast trajectories of history into the confined yet resonant dimensions of two times and two spaces, where climatic processes are mediated through atmosphere, embodiment, and memory. This bitemporal and bispatial design juxtaposes two sites of environmental experience: the Arctic, where narratives of exploration and mastery were historically constructed and which now serves as a measure of ecological vulnerability, and the domestic interior, where climate crisis seeps into consciousness through sensory articulations. The novel's third-person voice draws these realms into relation, allowing sensations of the domestic to evoke the polar and vice versa, creating a layered geography where the Arctic environment, first inscribed and later reimagined through archival research, returns as lived experience in the present.

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At the centre of this structure lies the act of reading. Julia's absorption in Edward Mackley's diary and Emily's letters induces a form of near-dissociative identification that collapses temporal and emotional distance. Her immersion in the textual remains of the past initially reproduces the romantic and imperial myth of heroic exploration, but this imaginative fusion eventually gives way to rupture when a family revelation destabilises the legend of Edward. The breaking of this illusion marks a shift from inherited myth to critical awareness, mirroring the novel's broader movement from unconscious absorption to ecological awareness. In this sense, *The Still Point* articulates an aesthetics of subtle ecological resonance rather than overt representation. Climate crisis does not appear as thematic focus but as a condition registered in its temporal layering, in the porousness between domestic and polar space, and in the tension between perception and mediation. The collapse of epistolary illusion parallels the collapse of an ideological framework that once naturalised mastery over nature; in its place emerges a more attentive and relational mode of being, grounded in vulnerability and presence. Through its modernist inheritance, its fragmentation, simultaneity, and recursive time, the novel performs the cognitive and affective conditions through which climate change becomes perceptible. Read alongside *Cloud Atlas*, Sackville's novel exemplifies a mode of contemporary fiction that engages with climate change obliquely, through affective engagement. It demonstrates how literature can render ecological crisis perceptible through atmospheric phenomenology. By inhabiting the diffuse registers of direct perception and mediated perception, *The Still Point* shows that narrative can make the ungraspable dimensions of climate legible, not by naming them, but by tracing how they give a certain shape to experience.

Guinevere Glasfurd's *The Year Without Summer* both inherits and exceeds the formal and epistemological paradigms established by *Cloud Atlas* and *The Still Point*, transforming the oblique mediation of ecological crisis into a direct

engagement with climate change as an historical event and a narrative principle. By reconstructing the global aftermath of the 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora, the novel renders climate not as a latent condition but as an historical force, perceptible through its uneven social and geographical repercussions. Its polyphonic constellation of six interwoven narratives makes visible how environmental disruption circulates across distant sites and unequal lives, turning the planetary scale of climate into an assemblage of local experiences and mediated testimonies. Letters, journals, sermons, sketches, and songs constitute a dense media network through which crisis is perceived and sometimes distorted, exposing the asymmetries that govern who can record environmental change and whose voices remain unheard. Through this fragmented yet interconnected form, *The Year Without Summer* converts mediation itself into a site of ecological inquiry, revealing that climate crisis operates as both environmental and communicative event, an interplay between material conditions, epistemic frameworks, and the uneven distribution of narrative agency.

Naomi Alderman's *The Future* brings the trajectory traced across this thesis to its culmination, shifting from the retrospective engagements of the previous novels to a forward-looking exploration of ecological collapse and digital mediation. Whereas *Cloud Atlas*, *The Still Point*, and *The Year Without Summer* turn toward the past to examine how climate and history intertwine, *The Future* looks ahead, situating ecological crisis in an imminent and recognisable world. Building on the temporal experimentation and affective depth of its predecessors, Alderman's novel translates their concerns into the register of digital mediation, where climate anxiety intersects with techno-corpocracy and ecological breakdown. At the centre of Alderman's narrative lies the reconfiguration of apocalypse as a form of collective interpretation rather than divine revelation. The fabricated end orchestrated by those characters who

operate from within, yet in resistance to, the circuits of corporate and technological power exposes apocalypse as an ideological construct that sustains the illusion of inevitability and control. In dismantling this structure, *The Future* reclaims the rhetoric of ending as a space for ethical renewal, replacing fatalism with interdependence and continuity. The transformation of apocalypticism into a participatory and dialogic form, one mediated through forum posts and short videos, extends the thesis' attention to epistolarity into the digital sphere. The novel's networked exchanges rearticulate revelation through communication and imagination rather than isolation or prophecy. Through these digital forms, Alderman redefines mediation itself as an ecological practice. The novel's polyphonic structure, dispersed across global sites and perspectives, models the distributed cognition required to perceive planetary crisis. Read alongside *Cloud Atlas*, *The Still Point*, and *The Year Without Summer*, Alderman's novel marks both a continuation and a transformation of the narrative strategies examined in this study. It inherits their concern with mediation, temporality, and perception, yet rearticulates them within the infrastructures of digital communication and late-capitalist precarity. In doing so, *The Future* closes this thesis' trajectory by returning to its central question: how literature can make climate change perceptible, ethically consequential, and narratively meaningful. Its vision of apocalypse not as closure but as a collective beginning affirms the potential of narrative to imagine forms of coexistence and care amid the accelerating climate crisis.

Returning to the premise outlined in the opening chapter, this study argues that contemporary climate change novels cultivate an aesthetic that seeks to reproduce the complexity and unpredictability of the climate system, translating its nonlinearity, feedback loops, and emergent patterns into narrative form. Through hybrid and recursive structures, these novels build textual ecosystems that mirror the interdependence and cascading effects of climate

processes. In doing so, they turn the epistemological complexity of climate change into an aesthetic and ethical resource, inviting readers to inhabit its instability rather than resolve it. Epistolary mediation, in particular, becomes a means of representing and enacting the dispersed and relational cognition demanded by the climate crisis, transforming the act of reading into an embodied engagement with planetary change.

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