

Emergent worlds: Storytelling and collaboration in the Anthropocene

by

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis. is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the storytellers who connect us with new worlds and new possibilities.

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling shapes human understanding of agency and vulnerability. In the Anthropocene, an epoch defined in many ways by human influences on the world, it is complicated to reconcile the massive agencies of climate change, globalization, and capitalism with the lived experience of individuals, many of whose agency is reduced by these forces. Contemporary weird, speculative, and literary fiction reveals the gap between agency and vulnerable reality created by futile attempts at human control over the environment, the economy, one another, and our own bodies.

Chapter 2 defines what I call “weird feeling,” a diagnostic affect that emerges from the double-consciousness created by the varying agencies of climate change and late-stage capitalism, particularly when individuals and communities are alienated from their changing environment in order to survive. In Lydia Millet’s novel *A Children’s Bible*, I track the way the relationship between the children and their parents in a world wracked with increasing climate disasters is disturbed by the gaps between responsibility and agency. Then, in Helena María Viramontes’ novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, relationships are made weird because of the divorce between individuals laboring in industrial agriculture and their ability to protect themselves and form meaningful relationships with place. Both of these examples illustrate gaps between idealization and reality in which we can more closely examine how relationships in the Anthropocene have become, or been *made*, unhealthy.

In Chapter 3, I illustrate the ways in which powerful economic entities can use the narrative gap between idealization and reality to obscure the violent and poisonous impacts of industrial farming practices. In Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats*, the meta-narrative advertising program *My American Wife!* exports an idealized American lifestyle to Japanese housewives in

order to sell both American beef and American misogyny and consumerism. This chapter emphasizes the compounding dangers of malicious misrepresentation to marginalized and oppressed groups, with a particular focus on gender, poverty, and race, or the mechanisms of environmental justice. I question the ways in which corporate power influences storytelling practices and wields them against consumers, endangering them and denying that danger while reinforcing values of patriarchy, American nationalism, and glamorized consumerism.

Chapter 4 expands upon the interconnected, inter-webbed reality of not only our transcorporeal bodies but also of our imaginative lives wherein humans collaboratively build the world in which we live. I analyze Carmen Maria Machado's short story "Inventory" to understand how citizens of the Anthropocene participate variously in storytelling and world building. Through the multiple subject positions of the short story, the audience practices the cognitive shift between the individual, community, and global perspectives. Embodying multiple scales of storytelling - sometimes simultaneously - is necessary to collaborative world-building practices.

The novels examined in this thesis demonstrate the emergent nature of reality, including the ways in which that relationship can be violent, uncanny, and alienating. Through my analysis, I direct audiences towards conscientious collaboration as a way to heal these disturbed relationships. Together, this thesis asks what it means to be a citizen of the Anthropocene and to exist within - and help bring into being - the cultural narratives that shape human lives and experience and argues the importance of narrative in shaping what humans view as possible futures.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

I am deeply interested in both the powers and failures of narrative in creating, defining, and limiting the world we live in. In particular, how do stories shape our understanding of ourselves in the Anthropocene? In this epoch supposedly defined by human influences, it is difficult to reconcile the massive and morphing influences - climate change, globalization, and capitalism to name a few of the dominant forces - with the lived experience of individuals, many of whose agency in determining not only global outcomes, but also personal ones, is reduced by these forces. Inspired by Brianna Burke's work in "Resonant Silences," I explore the idea of what it means to be a citizen of the Anthropocene in the face of discordant levels of agency, responsibility, safety, and connection.

The desperate need for control—over the environment, the economy, one another, and our own bodies—contributes to futile efforts to assert anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. This need for humans to be separate from the world around them follows a long trend of philosophers and thinkers of all kinds trying to justify or classify humans as somehow separate from the world in which we live. Many scholars in the environmental humanities have theorized human exceptionalism brilliantly: Simon Estok, with his concept of ecophobia, Rob Nixon, as he elucidates slow violence and the particular vulnerabilities of the poor and the marginalized, and Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, just to name a few.

Exceptionalism is both a cultural ideology, reinforced by the structures of daily living, and a limitation of human perception in which we are constrained by the bounded nature of the individual self. The embedded nature of each person within their environment and relationships counters these constraints but cannot eradicate the limits of individual perception. A deep concern with transcorporeality underlines this thesis; the fact that our bodies, fellow beings, and

the environment move between, through, and within one another irrevocably altered the way I think about storytelling, community, and climate change. All beings are interwebbed on a deeper level than white, Western philosophy and capitalism leads people to believe. Humans are inhabitants and, hopefully, stewards of the planet. We hold no dominion.

The term Anthropocene, while complicated, is the word that I use to discuss the current geological epoch because of its use across the humanities and within the theoretical texts I engage within this thesis. I resist the idea of a completely shared temporality; in the texts I look at, time is experienced variously by the characters due to climate change, classism, racism, and sexism. This generates part of the difficulty in articulating what it means to be a human in this epoch—the various -isms of oppression create fragmented and culturally inflected experiences of time. Moreover, the Anthropocene is not an epoch of equal culpability. As Rob Nixon discusses in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, those most endangered by climate change are often the ones least responsible for its creation. Massive corporate entities and global capitalism bear much of the blame for imperiling all beings within the environment. However, being stuck within industrial capitalist systematicity does not mean that humans should give in to domineering narratives of oppression. Other ways of being are possible, and, arguably, it is more important than ever to change human ways of being.

I was awakened to the dynamic power of storytelling several semesters before I contemplated applying for graduate school. I read Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*, the novel I center in the third chapter of this thesis, and was inspired by her use of narrative, metanarrative, and advertising to expose the violence and malicious misrepresentation of industrial agriculture. At the same time, my love for speculative and weird fiction was growing – I was drawn to books that grappled not only with the present but also what the world *could* be, for better and for worse.

My focus in this thesis is on contemporary literature set in North America, with a particular emphasis on speculative fiction because of how it articulates present dangers and concerns while imagining future possibilities for being. Speculative fiction is an amorphous genre, though, that reveals itself in increasing amounts of literature and indicates our preoccupation with what it will mean to live with the consequences of unbounded capitalism.

Burke describes the experience of speculative fiction as “one of residing in the uncanny, a feeling of unease when the recognizable becomes unrecognizable and then suddenly recognizable again, and the gap between the two is slim, sometimes almost unlocatable”

(3). The unlocatable gap is present throughout this thesis; the places where speculation verges into reality and vice versa bear scrutiny. These gaps are where the powers and limits of various agencies emerge; towards which myriad futures do we move? Though I am interested in both the dangerous outcomes and the hopeful, equitable ones that these texts imagine, to date there are many more stories that enumerate the violences inherent in following the status quo of destruction than those that illuminate hope and resilience. The goal of this thesis is to highlight the importance of taking seriously the work of developing positive visions for the future, complete with our gritty past and the growing pains of change.

In Chapter 2, I examine what I call “weird feeling,” a diagnostic affect that emerges when people are denied agency and relationship with the environment and land in which they live. Sara Ahmed’s work in affect theory inspires my understanding of how emotions or affects are formed within and between bodies, running parallel to theories of transcorporeality. Specifically, I look at Helena María Viramontes’ novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* and Lydia Millet’s *A Children’s Bible*. In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the central family of migrant workers in the Western United States evokes weird feeling because they are disenfranchised and divorced from creating

relationships with the land on which they both live and work by corporations in industrial agriculture. Even as the family performs grueling labor harvesting crops, they are hungry and unable to afford the same food they produce. *A Children's Bible* demonstrates weird intergenerational relationships in the face of climate change. Several families go on a summer vacation because the parents want to avoid the responsibility and reality of the current climate crisis; they believe that they can escape climate change by emulating an idealized family vacation. Meanwhile, the children refuse to accept the false narrative that the parents construct. This intergenerational breach of responsibility and agency generates weird feeling because neither party is able to reconcile what a healed relationship with the land or with each other looks like in the face of climate change. Both of these examples illustrate gaps between idealization and reality in which we can more closely examine how relationships in the Anthropocene have become, or been *made*, unhealthy.

Chapter 3 explores the ways that storytelling can be used to obfuscate the environmentally and physically dangerous practices of industrial agriculture through analysis of Ruth Ozeki's novel *My Year of Meats*. In particular, I look at how advertising narratives transform women and animal flesh into what Marx calls a commodity fetish. This chapter emphasizes the compounding dangers of malicious misrepresentation to marginalized and oppressed groups, with a particular focus on gender, poverty, and race, or the mechanisms of environmental justice. I question the ways in which corporate power influences storytelling practices and wields them against consumers, endangering them and denying that danger while reinforcing values of patriarchy, American nationalism, and glamorized consumerism.

Chapter 4 analyzes Carmen Maria Machado's short story "Inventory" in order to understand how citizens of the Anthropocene participate variously in the stories told about the

world being created in order to *enact* that world. I argue that “Inventory” is an example of how to develop the ability to toggle between scales - the individual, the community, and the global – because of its form, which models the flux of the narrator’s perspective with that of other characters. My emphasis in this chapter on imaginative transcorporeality is inspired by Stacy Alaimo’s book *Bodily Natures* and her explanation of bodily transcorporeality. This chapter grapples with the reality of the embeddedness of our bodies and our minds — humans cannot practice world-building in isolation. World-building must take into account the relationships between our material selves and the environment, and the relationships of our minds to one another in constructing worlds. Climate change and the Anthropocene call for us to understand ourselves not only as discrete individuals but as participants in communities and as global citizens. Ideas and stories must move between and within minds, and in this chapter, I argue the importance of embodying multiple scales of storytelling simultaneously.

Overall, this thesis asks what it means to be a citizen in the Anthropocene, to exist within—and help bring into being—the cultural narratives that shape human lives and experiences, as individuals and as global citizens, and that form the planet on which we live. Stories have always been urgent reminders of what it means to live and how to do it, but in the Anthropocene, a time that has been defined, in part, by human agency, stories are more important than ever. Stories shape agency, which in turn alters the structure of the world.

CHAPTER 2. BEYOND SURVIVAL: HEALING WEIRD FEELING IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

The sun beats down on fields that extend as far as the eye can see in any direction. The crops are knee height and green enough to burn the backs of your eyes. In fact, their shape is imprinted when you shut your eyes, reaching up towards the blue sky that quavers in the heat. The foot of air above the crops shimmers, wet corn breath. From the time it was sown until it is harvested, ninety days will pass. The green blanket that covers most of the midwestern United States belongs, in large part, to people who have never farmed in their life: John Malone, CEO of Liberty Media, owns upwards of 2.2 million acres of farmland in the US. The view both physically and financially remains the same across much of the Midwest, with the only variation often being between corn and soybean crops.

Of Iowa's 35.7 million acres, 30.6 million are devoted to agriculture. At the end of ninety days of growth, 57% of the corn harvested will be transformed into ethanol and 30% will be livestock feed. Those responsible for farming the land – a study done by Iowa State University reveals that “there is a continuous shift away from sole owners and joint tenancy to more institutionalized ownership in the form of trusts or corporations” – rely not on income from farming, but on government agricultural subsidies that encourage vast monocultures (Zhang 19). That financial encouragement leads to more land being used for monoculture agricultural practices and encourages irresponsible farming practices in order to get the highest yield from the smallest amount of land. More land is used for agriculture,

but the proportion that actually produces food for human consumption does not increase in turn. Additionally, the disparity between the extended reach of agribusiness and the decreased labor and compensation for labor is visible throughout the United States, though the demographics of people who are exploited and the crops being harvested change from region to region. In Iowa, rates of food insecurity rose above 450,000 people in 2019. The expanse of land will continue to be deceptively green for years to come, even as weather becomes more unpredictable and the measures needed to maintain high yields become more and more extreme, requiring more water, more fertilizer, and more pesticides.

Industrial agriculture in the US epitomizes a weird relationship. People are estranged from place due to ideologies of land ownership competing with their visceral, lived experiences. Workers are denied ownership of their labor because they have no access to ownership of the land. The image of idealized historic farming practices is superimposed over modern agricultural practices in order to make them easier to ignore. The gap between attempts to embody the pastoral ideal and the violent reality of modern agriculture for so many is uncanny: it oscillates between familiarity and strangeness as businesses attempt to manufacture charm that arose from corrupt business practices, dispossession, and socioeconomic disparity. In turn, the way that consumers engage with their food and the place where they live has shifted in the face of industrial agriculture but holds onto a façade of familiarity.

The changing earth, with new weather patterns, altered connections to place, and endemic capitalism requires new understandings of our relationships with the world. Climate change has been referred to as “global weirding” as weather patterns shift and become strange; places that were familiar become unfamiliar and leave people disturbed and detached. The impacts of climate change and human behavior are so massive as to be (nearly) beyond comprehension. The cognitive work – which can so often feel futile – of even recognizing our role in the midst of these massive forces is daunting and exhausting. Many humans – middle-class Americans in particular - attempt to maintain normalcy and a lifestyle of ease by focusing on the familiar amidst the strange. The scope of climate change and how it impacts individuals globally is difficult to conceive. Timothy Morton’s theory of hyper-objects – “massively distributed entities that can be thought and computed but not directly touched or seen” – is essential for understanding how “weird” feeling is created (37). The hyper-object, whether that be climate change, weather, or capitalism, reminds us of “our disturbing, uncanny coexistence with other beings”: a coexistence in which we exert agency and have agency exerted upon us by visible and invisible others (39). Relationships that have been fundamentally altered by collective human action (not all, but many) masquerade as familiar: many of us have seen advertisements that pull from the now-defunct idea of a corporation creating hand-made products. Industrialization obscures both the factory and the hands working to make mass-produced items, professing single progenitors (many of them racist logos that capitalize on stereotypes of people of color: Aunt Jemima’s, Land’O’Lakes, Uncle Ben’s) instead of the over-worked, underpaid, and usually unhappy people actually performing the labor. In addition to disguising the actual workers being exploited for production, this also obscures the exploitation of place and the damages to the

environment by relocating production to an idealized past. Conjuring a “better” historic process for agriculture disguises the dangers of real, contemporary farming practices.

These altered relationships create the sense of weird, as defined throughout this thesis. For example, the relationship between agricultural laborers and the land they rely on has become weird because of the displacement of human agency by capital. Later in this chapter, I will look at the pervading experience of weird in Helen María Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus*, wherein the people working the fields can’t afford the food they harvest. The Oxford English Dictionary defines weird as “unaccountably or uncomfortably strange; uncanny,” and the word has an earlier etymological basis as “having the power to control the fate or destiny of human beings.” I draw from these definitions in conjunction with Sianne Ngai’s “ugly feelings,” or feelings that “are defined by a flatness or ongoingness” and which have the “power to diagnose situations [...] marked by blocked or thwarted action in particular” (7, 26). I propose “weird” as a distinct diagnostic emotion. Weird emerges in response to the double-consciousness created by the varying agencies of climate change and late-stage capitalism, particularly when people are alienated from their changing environment in order to survive. Mark Fisher discusses the alienating sensation of weird feeling in his book *The Weird and the Eerie*, noting that “the weird is a particular kind of perturbation. It involves a sensation of wrongness: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here” (11). Weird feeling and weird relationships subvert Western expectations of security in the face

of climate change – despite the fact that there are myriad stories in which disaster happens *somewhere else* to *someone else* (minorities and under-privileged individuals), all beings experience the same moment in time and are, ultimately, vulnerable to the global forces of climate change.

Weird feeling is a type of embodied knowledge. Elevating embodied knowledge is essential in combating power structures that favor institutional and traditionally white, colonial systems of knowledge over the experience of those who have relationships with place. Embodied knowledge has been dismissed in order to enforce the will of, for example, the collective agencies that have led to the current state of environmental damage and climate change. In other words, the exploitation of immigrant labor in agriculture. Vulnerable communities are expected to perform dangerous, high-labor jobs for very little pay because of their status as a part of marginal communities. The practices that force these communities into dangerous labor are racist, classist, and xenophobic. Without the labor of these humans, industrial agricultural companies and land-owners would be forced to grapple with the fact that their profits rely on exploitation.

The divorce of people from agency recalls precisely what Marx wrote about when theorizing alienation. In *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx asserts that capitalist alienation occurs when workers are unable to determine their lives and destinies as they are subsumed by the bourgeoisie – those who own the means of production. Individual agency cannot be realized when a being's knowledge of both their own body and of their environment is not respected. An individual cannot practice agency if they are forced into contact with things or places that poison them, such as the pesticides

in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, or, in Chapter 3, hormones in animal “meat” flesh, or, in Chapter 4, the extensive reach a global viral pandemic. In her book *Bodily Natures*, Stacy Alaimo emphasizes the ways that we exist as porous bodies that reflect and understand both our own bodies and that of our integrated environment. My concept of weird feeling draws from this alienation but focuses specifically on the environmental dimensions and implications of this embodied sensation.

When discussing weird feelings, I pull from many prominent affect theorists including Sianne Ngai, Sara Ahmed, Brian Massumi, and Lauren Berlant. I use “emotion” to refer to the quality that emerges between parties and through contact. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed notes that “emotions shape the very surface of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others” (4). This *orientation* of emotions is what shapes behavior and agency – the way that we understand our own relationships to objects (emotions or lifestyles alike) is what influences our response. As such, weird affect both emerges from and contributes to the production of these disturbed relationships. My understanding of affect vs. emotion is a matter of degree as opposed to difference; affect maintains a lower degree of narrativity compared to emotions and feelings. I refer to weird as either emotion or feeling interchangeably in this essay because of the importance of narrative in the occurrence of weird feeling – it arises as a result of narratives muted and shaped by the conflicting actions of large entities against the power of exploited individuals.

Weird feeling is diagnostic: this means it is useful to identify the emotion in order to encourage the pursuit of its source. The emergent nature of this feeling means that the source is not an individual but rather, the relationships between individuals and entities. I refer to “weird relationships” to indicate the source of the affect.

Weird feeling is non-cathartic: there is not a violent expression of emotion that can dispel the ambient mood. This is why it functions well as a diagnostic tool in the Anthropocene: it persists in directing our attention to relationships that have been disturbed by massively distributed agencies. Additionally, weird is a response to the attempt to normalize and disguise an exploitative, disturbed relationship. Weird makes one uncomfortable and irritated, inspiring a search for a resolution – as Sianne Ngai notes, “noncathartic feelings [...] could be said to give rise to a noncathartic aesthetic: art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release (another form of suspended “action”) and does so as a kind of politics” (9). The weird feelings that I foreground and analyze are centered around suspended “action” or an inability to exercise agency because of capitalist and environmental forces. Weird feeling endures because the circumstances of its creation are inescapable.

In this chapter, I first argue for the emergence of weird fiction as a response to the weird feeling of the Anthropocene. I illustrate the connections between the concerns of weird fiction as a genre and the emergent conditions of the changing world. The question of human significance – how far does our agency extend and how deeply does our vulnerability run in the face of vast, invisible forces? – is present in weird fiction, climate fiction, and the real experience of weird

feeling. The familial relationships in Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* generate weird feeling in the face of climate change and become strange as the characters reconcile with who is responsible for the vulnerable future. Helen María Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus* demonstrates how agency is stolen from people under American capitalism and industrial agriculture; people are forced to participate in weird relationships with their labor, the land, and food because of the collective power of capitalism. The characters in these novels have incredibly different backgrounds but demonstrate what Anna Tsing refers to as a shared "precarity" that disregards race and class while also illuminating the affordances of wealth. Anna Tsing comments that "precarity once seemed the fate of the less fortunate. Now it seems that all our lives are precarious" (2). Precarity is not something that moves from person to person, rather, "precarity *is* the condition of our time" and "it helps us see what is wrong" (20, 29). Both of these texts emphasize the weird feeling related to a particular combination of precarity, agency, and disrecognition in the Anthropocene. I argue that recognizing weird as a non-cathartic emotion arising from climate change subverts hegemonic power-structures that enforce white, colonial ways of knowing and instead supports embodied, community knowledge in order to reconcile the ways that we retain and forfeit agency through environmental crisis.

Weird Fiction, Weird Feelings: The Co-Emergence of Genre and Relation

Weird fiction became popular in the early 19th century and exists across science fiction, gothic literature, and speculative works, making a hard and fast delineation of the weird difficult, if not impossible. Authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Mary Shelley, and William Chambers wrote some keystone texts of the genre. One of the key features of weird fiction is the presence of dread and alienation (present in weird feeling) that appears as readers question

human significance. Take H.P. Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*, in which eldritch horrors can be read as representations of powers so massive as to make human agency irrelevant. In *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, Mary Shelley grapples with the boundary between human agency and nature or science through the creation of Victor Frankenstein's monster. The life of the monster subverts what Victor believes to be right or "natural," generating a crisis not only of ethics but of reality. In this, there is an emphasis of the embodied knowledge of "wrongness" presented by Victor Frankenstein after the creation of the creature: despite the focus on the empirical science of creation, the relationship that emerges between Frankenstein's creature and Victor as well as between the creature and the rest of the world is disturbed. The "creation" of the contemporary moment, including industrial agriculture, climate change, globalization, and capitalism generate weird relationships as people attempt to navigate varied levels of agency and responsibility in the face of powers larger than life.

The weird, I argue, is particularly pressing in the Anthropocene. The beginning of the Anthropocene is debated amongst scholars, but the actual start is less important than the alterations it represents. Some argue for the advent of agriculture as the beginning of the Anthropocene, and many situate its origins more recently between the 16th and 20th centuries, aligning with the rise of industrialization. The originators of the term, Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, initially proposed that the Anthropocene began in the middle of the 18th century. Weird fiction arose in response to this *noticing* of the changes and the sense of affective difference, regardless of whether it was one particular day or another. In geological time, the difference between one day and another is nearly nonexistent, and between one century and another is barely worth commenting upon. The

accumulation of effects and their impacts are the ultimate concern. When the term was proposed in “The ‘Anthropocene,’” the authors argued that “during the past two centuries, the global effect of humans has become noticeable” (17). The use of the word “noticeable” remembers that those effects have been present and invisible, only just reaching the threshold of human awareness; it does not mean that human impacts cannot or will not be disguised or ignored in favor of a deceitful normalcy. Human impacts on the geological scale have made the familiar strange, transforming not only landscapes but the feelings generated between humans and place. I argue that weird fiction arises as a response to the increasing presence of massive human agency in the Anthropocene. This agency is particularly disturbing because it is not reflective of all humans or even many; rather, this agency is a reflection of the amassed powers of capitalism and industrialism that are divorced from most of humanity by size and interest. The emergence of these concepts is not coincidental: asserting that the Anthropocene reached a critical moment of visibility in the middle of the 18th century, weird fiction then appeared within half a century: a drop in the bucket of geological time.

Weird fiction is a manifestation of weird feeling and is an exceptionally visible testing ground for broad but particular emotional responses to current structures of power and agency. As literature evolves and adapts to the representational demands of the current moment, so, too, do representations of Anthropocene emotions. The genre of “new weird” has gained traction alongside science fiction texts that grapple with our relationship to the

world around us. More prescient, climate fiction, hereon referred to as cli-fi, embodies weird feeling and attempts to navigate an alienated surrounding. Through cli-fi, we can make the cognitive leap to the altered environmental and social conditions under which we experience reality. Because of cli-fi's anticipatory nature, it assists us in imagining alternative futures in ways that don't necessarily resemble the present. More, cli-fi frequently serves as a warning for the potential repercussions of continuing to ignore situated knowledge of disturbed relationships created in our climate-altered present.

The history of weird fiction is necessary to my development of weird feeling. Classical weird fiction created overtly strange story worlds that conceptualize the competing scales of agency in which the audience can practice identifying weird feeling. Recognizing the ways that agency is thwarted or falsified helps readers to identify where it can be wrested back. Additionally, the ties between weird fiction and the Anthropocene gives historical precedent to weird feeling as an affective state particular to this specific moment in history and distinguishes it from other theories of alienation.

Cognitive narratologists propose that the way we participate in narrative influences how we comprehend our lived experiences. David Herman asserts that "narrative [is] a strategy for creating mental representations of the world" (5). Herman emphasizes the importance of the "storyworld" which is a mental representation of the narrative experienced within our cognition of the world around us. It follows, then, that this heuristic model influences our response to different affective circumstances. For weird feeling, the ability to identify weird feeling – to value that embodied knowledge – is a diagnostic tool that can help audiences pinpoint weird

relationships. This skill is necessary to develop a well-informed response to our affective state and the changes occurring in a world altered by human agencies. It should not take decades of research to motivate action against environmental degradation that the people who live there point to regardless. This mediation of knowledge through hierarchy creates spaces in which agency is muted.

For the sake of extended conversation beyond the historical roots of weird fiction, the texts I analyze as emblematic of weird feeling are cli-fi novels. The first is Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible*, which follows a group of children (and their parents, less closely) as they navigate climate crisis in an increasingly strange world. The novel combines biblical references familiar to a Western, Christian audience with disturbing climate events to emphasize the disparity between individual and collective agency. Additionally, the role of the characters as Western and moderately affluent is demonstrative of the shared precarity experienced by all humans in the face of climate change. The second text is Helen María Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Viramontes' novel centers a family of "illegal" migrant agricultural laborers navigating the dissociation of their agricultural labor from its product and investigates how the abundance of food is replaced with poisoning and poverty. In both texts, the environment is destabilized and weird feeling arises between the characters and between the characters and place. They are forced to participate in weird relationships due to human actions over which they have little to no control and that have altered the landscape in such a way that makes them vulnerable, regardless of what degree of responsibility they have in the creation of a precarious, climate-altered present.

Weird Weather and Weird Families in *A Children's Bible*

Climate change has exacerbated intergenerational conflict and the question of agency and responsibility, especially among younger generations. Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* begins at a rented summer home where a group of affluent and middle-class individuals have absconded with their children in an attempt to escape the ramifications of climate change: primarily economic and environmental disaster that was caused, in part, by their lifestyles. The novel is narrated by Evie, the child of "mother scholar, father artist," who is one of the older, relatively mature children in the group (15). She is largely preoccupied with the care of her younger brother, Jack, a particularly empathetic 9-year-old boy who functions as a moral compass and Noah-approximate for the group. A flood strikes and the parents' impotence is revealed by their preference to languish in the house while the children work to survive and preserve wildlife. As disaster literally knocks down the door (and ceiling), the parents prefer an ecstasy induced orgy to responsibility. Following the worst of the flood, a group of most of the children set out in search of help and find a farm that serves as a temporary Eden, where they live until they are attacked by a violent mercenary group. Eventually, the parents make misguided rescue attempts and SWAT rappels in by helicopter to conveniently disappear the mercenaries. Following this, the children and their parents fall back on the affordances of their class: they run to one of the wealthier parent's properties and establish a gated community. Their compound becomes a fortified resource island – they are separated from any outside community or connection.

The world of *A Children's Bible* generates weird feeling between the children and their parents and between the children and their environment because of the distorted sense of agency. The parents masquerade as traditional images of respectable actors, and the children summarily dismiss that façade. The premise of the novel – the families' relocation

to a summer home in order to “wait out” some of the effects of climate change – relies upon the fact that the parents value institutional knowledge over the embodied knowledge that the children embrace. The characters are enmeshed within distinct groups: the parents, the children, and the mercenaries, amongst others. The distinction of these groups evidences various kinds of collective agency, from the children’s active roles to the slow, dormant nature of the parents. This contrast is the motivating force in the weird feeling between the two parties. On one level, the children feel rage and disgust for their parents due to their lack of responsibility that led to the conditions under which the children must now survive: “We knew who was responsible [for climate change], of course: it had been a done deal before we were born” (27). On the other hand, though, the children feel ambivalent toward their parents. They accept that the parents have failed to assist them in a meaningful way: the parents are described as “slack-faced, listless – for practical purposes, deceased” (5). This ambivalence causes the children to assume leadership roles and to deny any parental authority. The children feel superior to the parents in their relative blamelessness. “Had they had goals once? A simple sense of self respect? They shamed us. They were a cautionary tale,” Evie thinks to herself early on (13). As a means of distancing themselves from the crimes of their parents (and their parents’ generation) the children hide the identity of each one’s parents and avoid emulating their behavior, even punishing the parents for their perceived failures, though “the worst of those crimes [were] hard to pin down and therefore hard to punish correctly” (11-12). The oscillation between the

indictment of the parents' behavior and Evie's dread for the oncoming state of the world generates tension—even as Evie accepts the parents' impotence, she desires an alternate world in which the parents somehow take control of the situation, demonstrating how the various agencies generate this suspended, weird relationship. Evie takes on the responsibility of educating Jack about the precarious, cruel world, pulling him aside and saying “I have to tell you a story now. But a real one. A story of the future, Jack,” and it is the real future of the planet that they blame the parents for (42). Idealized parent-child relationships – which rely on the ability of parents to protect their children – are subverted by the blatant vulnerability of the parents.

The idealized American parent-child relationship is totally dissolved in this novel because the children are detached from their parents and assume caretaking roles for their younger siblings. These subverted roles cause a breakdown in values: the parents simultaneously rely on institutional knowledge *over their own experience* and mourn their own impotence in the face of disaster. For example, as they all prepare for the flood, Evie's mother is “kneeling in front of a liquor cabinet, as though before an altar. ‘We could use bourbon, sherry, vodka, and vermouth’ she told her cell. I waved at her, since we hadn't seen each other in days. She saw me but ignored me completely” (51). The parents, Evie's mother in particular, use blatant disregard as a coping mechanism for the world around them. Evie's mother's preoccupation is indicative of a larger trend; this scene is followed by a line break, and then Evie says, “Eventually I got to worrying about Jack, so I went outside looking” (51). Evie, a young teen, becomes responsible for the other children. She caretakes for them all, her own brother especially, but she also enacts many of the generalizations about teenagers in that she wishes to appear aloof and cool to the

others. Her caretaking happens in a roundabout matter to obscure how much she cares, and she largely leaves Jack to his own devices. In this narrative, the twist of responsibility goes beyond just familial care – Evie is filling in a gap in care created by her parents’ helplessness and projected lack of agency. Later, Evie even confronts her mother: “Shouldn’t you be thinking about your nine-year-old son instead of your next cocktail? Honestly.” to which her mother responds “Don’t be ridiculous, [...] I know he’s safe with you. Mature beyond your years” (84). Evie, however, is not interested in her mother’s excuses, and shoots back “You’re flattering me to try to avoid responsibility? That’s low,” unwilling to participate in her mother’s delusion of business-as-usual (84). The mother’s blatant disregard for Evie’s concerns and the children’s well-being is typical of their weird relationship.

Their relationship isn’t simply dysfunctional (though it certainly is dysfunctional): the relationship is influenced by the factors that combine to create what I call weird affect. The parents are both severed from and willingly abdicate their agency in the face of crushing global pressures; at the same time, the children come into their own in a world not of their making. The parents want to maintain normalcy, but this normalcy exists in the context of what Stephanie LeMenager calls the everyday Anthropocene: “a setting or space-time for bioderegulation and slow violence... [and] what it means to live, day by day, through climate shift and economic and sociological injuries” (225). Both parties – children and parents – are trying to develop their own “everyday.” The parents are unwilling to accept that theirs cannot look the same as it did twenty years, ten years, or even one year ago. The children do not have the same experience of ignorance to aspire towards, which motivates their flexible expectations for what their lives ought to look like. They call a meeting: “Much as we need you to sustain the needs of our material existence from a financial standpoint, so you, in turn, have relied on the sociocultural

order. An order that, as we all know, has recently been egregiously disrupted” (213). They imply that they, however, have overcome this need for the past sociocultural order. The children had already valued their own adaptable experience. This core discord between what the adults and the children view as their agency in the world weirds their relationship. The relationship patterns presented in the text were formed prior to the scope of the narrative; from the way Evie discusses her parents’ employment with disdain to the way the children take over responsibility from the parents. The text emphasizes engrained behaviors and habits and the ability – or inability – to break those behaviors when presented with drastic situations. The parents fail entirely to survive in the new “status quo” once the children create a stable lifestyle for them in their gated community. The children develop a system for maintaining the food and safety of everyone in the compound with rotating duties, to the point that survival becomes boring. Everyone completes the tasks that they have divided between the group. The parents become listless in their boredom, until they simply disappear: “One morning, when we woke up, they were simply gone” (221). They disappear for their inability to adapt to both the stresses and mundanity of living in this new world. The children, though, fail their earlier ideals and disdain for their parents’ lack of vibrancy in living as they settle in the affordances of their parents’ wealth – despite their assertion that they could “drink their liquor? Sure, yes, and by all means. Act like *they* acted when they drank it? Receive a demerit,” as the novel progresses the children become more similar to their parents than they realize as they settle into a state of complacency (12). The children’s slow transformation towards the lifestyle of their parents generates weird feeling through the submission to forces beyond their power – the children do not push back against the affordances of their family in favor of the ethics they developed earlier in the text. Instead, they are swept up in it.

Weird feeling culminates in *A Children's Bible* when the children's original defiance turns into secure complacency in the absence of the parents – when the weird relationship reaches its logical conclusion, the parents are obsolete. Once they arrive at the mansion with the protective walls, they turn instead towards a private, wealthy life focused on their agrarian affordances. Eventually, “all the vegetables [they] ate were coming from the hydroponic nursery and the indoor garden in the basement” because “no refrigerated trucks were running, at least not for the average rich person in our neck of the woods” (216). They are subsumed in boredom at the end of the world, the same malaise they despised in their parents. More, this is narrated in the same bland tone as the disdain for the parents early in the text. Their agency is necessarily and obviously a part of the same systems that paralyzed their parents, despite their self-recognition. The affordances or lack of wealth determine what kind of weird relationship we experience – and recognizing that is essential to not only individual agency but also to our collective agency as communities but also as humans.

The children, despite their survival beyond the parents' disappearance, are hinted as being just as vulnerable to the conditions of the world as any other animal. In the last pages of the text, Evie's little brother Jack was “sick by then,” implying that it was inevitable that he would succumb to sickness (222). Evie enforces that “[she] was going to make sure he got better,” but her claim rings with both hope and hopelessness, a certain kind of youthful naivete. This hope is what helped the children to survive, but it is projected beyond the end

of the text that it may not be enough to combat the material conditions of the planet that previous generations had created.

Ultimately, the children emulate the isolated experience of their parents with different coping mechanisms for their psychological well-being. They have the semblance of safety in their fortified resource island; all they have to do is maintain the new status-quo. Jack's illness at the very end of the novel disrupts the sense of safety and reminds both the children and the audience that regardless of how many resources – how much wealth – they amass, their bodies are still vulnerable. The way that they forge a relationship with place, though newly sustainable, is lacking in any form of reciprocity. On a schedule, they maintain their hydroponic gardens and patrol the borders of their property.

Industrial-Agricultural Weird Feeling in *Under the Feet of Jesus*

Under the Feet of Jesus demonstrates weird feeling in the dissociation between displaced workers and the land they farm. The novel follows a teenaged girl, Estrella, and her family, Mexican migrant workers, when they arrive in Central Valley. The story centers in part around Estrella meeting Alejo, who has American citizenship and is working with (seemingly) more agency in agriculture, though it is immediately obvious that within the racialized class structures of America, and especially in this kind of labor, such privilege is an illusion. Alejo is sprayed with pesticides trying to get food from the very orchards where he works all day, and the latter half of the novel revolves around attempts to save Alejo's life despite the hurdles of poverty and the theft of rights and protections.

Estrella's family is migratory, following the agricultural work like most of the people they work alongside, and Estrella's mother Petra struggles with raising children and the pregnancy she discovers midway through the text, especially in the face of the grueling conditions and without access to financial or food security.

The relationship between Estrella's family and place generates weird feeling because their agency is stolen from them. The family has to move according to seasonal crops and work opportunities but also to avoid the legal limitations placed on their bodies and the various exploitations landowners and employers leverage against them in order to survive. Despite the ways that their violence is writ large in the bodies of the characters in the text and all of the marginalized humans working in industrial agriculture, those with agency, whether that is the owners of the agricultural company or the land, are nearly invisible in the text: the foreman rarely appears, and the owners of the land never do. They are able to enact their will from behind the scenes and mediate (for themselves) the impacts of their violence through middlemen such as Big Mac. Their presence is primarily felt through the spaces between the characters and place; they are unable to form sustained connections because of ideologies of land ownership.

In addition to the exploitation and poverty of the workers, the land is poisoned by the practices of the invisible actors: "Estrella had heard through the grapevine about the water, and knew Big Mac the Foreman lied about pesticides not spilling into the ditch; but the water seemed clear and cool and irresistible on such a hot day" (53). This is an example

of experienced knowledge against hierarchal, prescriptive “knowledge:” though all of the people working know that the water is poison, they can’t do anything about it simply because the foreman *says* that there aren’t any pesticides in the irrigation ditch. It is particularly cruel that people performing such intense labor are surrounded by veiled relief from their discomfort. The physical connections to family are constantly present: “You think ‘cause of the water our babies are gonna come out with no mouth or something?” Estrella asks her friend Maxine as they contemplate the risks of drinking from the ditch. The weird relationship generated by capitalism and industrial agriculture causes intergenerational trauma – the threat of not only experiencing the deleterious effects of their lifestyle, but of passing that on (33). More, the image of a baby being born without a mouth – *sin labios* – recurs throughout the text. This symbol conjures both the extreme thirst of a child unable to drink even when clean water is available, and the sense of voicelessness. The hypothetical child’s agency is muted by the poisons their mother was not able to avoid. The trauma is embedded in their body. More than separating the workers from survival, these agents lie in order to avoid responsibility for the bodily safety of the individuals generating their capital. The workers are not provided safe drinking water; even as they are required to sacrifice their health in the fields, they can find no reprieve in their “free” hours because their lives are dictated by the affordances of their employers.

The familial relationships are made weird when the ability to caretake is thwarted by the power of landowners. Early in the text, Estrella recalls memories she has of spending time with

her parents. They were gathered in a grove of trees where they had been working, “and the oranges hung like big ornaments above their heads. [Estrella’s] mother didn’t consider it thievery when she plucked a few, so many were already rotting on the ground. The two were alone with no foreman to tell them the fruit they picked wasn’t free” (12). The act of caring and feeding her child is twisted into thievery despite the work they performed and were horribly under- or unpaid for. This is one moment of reprieve from the ever-encroaching forces of colonialism and industrialism. In order to exert power, those who “own” the land would rather the fruit rot on the ground and the people starve than “give” it away for free. Throughout the text, Petra and Estrella are forced to nickel-and-dime their carefully selected cans of SPAM at the store. Estrella describes how “the fresh produce was dumped into small zinc tubs [...] and hardly resembled the crops harvested days before. The fruits and vegetables were firm and solid out in the hot fields; but here in the store, only the relics remained”: they can’t even afford the near-spoiled fruits and vegetables they had harvested (109). There are multiple scenes where the family is hungry and Petra struggles to provide for her children despite all the work that she does, to the extent that her body is bent and twisted. As she attempts to overcome her family’s hunger and provide care, she, too, is aware of the danger she herself and her family is in from their environment but is not able to remove the family from harm.

Dangerous pesticides are everywhere in the novel and generate the weird feeling between the protagonists and the land. This weird feeling manifests in the dangerous transcorporeality and invisible, slow violence discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. The divorce from the land and the food onto which they are literally bleeding and sweating every day culminates in Alejo’s sickness. Alejo attempts to get peaches to eat and sell to

supplement his miniscule wages, but is sprayed with pesticides in the process which make him deathly ill:

Alejo had not guessed the biplane was so close until its great shadow crossed over him like a crucifix, and he ducked into the leaves. The biplane circles, banking steeply over the trees and then released the shower of white pesticide. [...] Alejo slid through the bushy branches, the tangles twigs scratching his face, and he was ready to jump when he felt the mist. [...] At first it was just a slight moisture until the poison rolled down his face in deep sticky streaks. The lingering smell was a scent of ocean salt and beached kelp until he inhaled again and could detect under the innocence the heavy chemical choke of poison. Air clogged in his lungs and he thought he was just holding his breath, until he tried exhaling but couldn't, which meant he couldn't breathe (82).

The affective relationship between the characters and the land is weird; a place that was once safe, if only imaginatively, is now invisibly, but physically, toxic. This occurs in the direct pursuit of food and ultimately estranges Alejo from his body and agency as he becomes more and more sick over the course of the novel, relying on Estrella to take care of him. This expectation of care, or the ability to receive care, is transformed in the wake of the encompassing, overpowering agencies of large entities; Alejo is denied care at a health clinic because Estrella's family is alienated from their own labor; they are unable to afford gas, much less a doctor. Despite his status as a citizen, which Alejo had imagined would provide him with more affordances, he is not recognized as such. Alejo is indirectly punished for attempting to survive and escape the manipulative system that he works within; more, he is suffering because he attempted to transgress the boundaries of the weird affect that maintains the status quo between agricultural workers and the oppressive powers that dictate the value of their labor and their lives. Alejo and Estrella's family

experience the same vulnerabilities despite having different, invisible affordances; they all have permeable bodies susceptible to the danger of their environment. Alejo is trapped in a position and is aware of its dissonance but is ultimately unable to move beyond these boundaries due to economic and class boundaries.

In turn, Petra, while taking care of her family and Alejo, lays awake considering her pregnancy: “[she] thought of the lima bean in her, the bean floating in the night of her belly, bursting a root with each breath. Would the child be born without a mouth, would the poisons of the fields harden in its tiny little veins?” (125). The language is fecund; even as she worries about the pesticides she comes into contact with daily, she is imagining the baby “bursting a root with each breath” (125). Even as Petra contemplates the growth of her fetus, it is fundamentally connected to their lived affordances and the trauma of her daily life. She cannot protect her child even as it floats in-utero because she has been disconnected from that agency, stranded without the resources to move or undertake a different way of making a living. The recurring image of the child born without a mouth is the fear of passing on her own inability to change her circumstances due to agencies outside of her control.

These class and power distinctions generate weird relationships through the gap between action and agency. The employers and owners of the land where Alejo, Estrella, and her family labor place multiple pressures on the characters that endanger them through their work and their health. More, it creates a disturbed relationship to family and to their ability to care for one

another: Petra cannot change their material affordances despite caring deeply for her family. Her agency as a mother is stolen.

Estrella reckons with the extent of her ability to push back against corrupt and unjust powers; when they take Alejo to the doctor, they are unable to pay for the treatment. After the nurse tells the family that they need to take Alejo to a hospital instead of the small clinic, she charges them ten dollars instead of fifteen “because [she] know[s] times are hard” (144). However, they only have eight dollars: their last eight dollars. When they leave, they discover that the car is out of gas. Estrella, frustrated, returns to the office – “Was this the same panic the mother went through?” – with a crowbar in hand and demands their money back from the nurse (148). For a moment, Estrella wrests a bit of power from the situation, but she is left with the money in her hands, feeling “ugly and sweaty,” and reminded of the power pressing in on all of them. “She did not feel like herself holding the money,” the money that she needed in order to save Alejo’s life (150). Every person in the scenario is at the whims of the invisible agencies governing whose life is valued, though the nurse is highly privileged compared to the family – she refers to the last few dollars the family possesses as “a few pennies” that “don’t mean much,” except that those “pennies” are what stands in between Alejo and access to medical care (144). Estrella, left with impossible choices, is forced to act in a way that will likely lead to more trouble for her and her family later on. This is the double-consciousness of weird feeling – Estrella is halved, unable to make a “good” choice or truly move towards the well-being of her family or Alejo. This experience is indicative of how, over and over again, the family – and all migrant workers – are separated from the ability to care for and value themselves and their loved ones.

Conclusion

Weird feeling is generated in a wide swath of relationships in the Anthropocene. The pressures of capitalism and climate change create dissociation that keeps people from developing more functional relationships both with place and with one another. We can see this clearly in the relationship of agricultural workers and the lifestyle they lead wherein they are severed from stability. That disruption of stability due to labor practices is made even more precarious with climate change, when even the opportunity for a weird, disenfranchised survival is being taken away. Similarly, this loss of opportunity disturbs interpersonal relationships, highlighted by the weird feeling between the parents and the children in *A Children's Bible*. Weird feeling is not restricted to a single class, job, or group of people— it is a shared but varied emotional state.

The ability to understand and recognize weird feeling in dissociated relationships allows us to better navigate the competing agencies of the Anthropocene. Weird feeling may inspire revulsion, but in order to utilize it as a tool for navigating the unstable world we must instead approach weird feeling with curiosity. Comprehending how and why relationships generate weird feeling allows us to mediate them; allowing weird feeling to simmer, unchecked, between individuals or collectives and the environment can lead to disaffection. If we are to develop a future that does not generate more extreme weird feeling – a future where we are *more* instead of *less* connected to ourselves and to others – it is necessary to look to the strange, uncomfortable relationships we participate in now.

Identifying weird relationships is only a diagnostic tool – after that point, there is potential for reaction or acceptance. The goal of identification is to increase the active participation of those who are involved in these relationships (all of us) because weird

relationships are present whether we acknowledge them or not. Privilege allows people to look away, but the effects of these poisonous relationships will make themselves present and unignorable for everyone. It is the non-cathartic nature of these feelings that allow us to consider how much power we can wield and how much we surrender. If we desire to reconcile our lifestyles and relationships with the changing world, we must first see all the ways and how it is changing; only then can we find our place within it.

CHAPTER 3. MINDFUL (M)EATING: NARRATIVE, COMMODITY-FETISHISM, AND THE ERASURE OF VIOLENCE

A woman wields a large, sharp knife in one manicured hand. In the other, a fork. She cuts, painstaking, slicing away a thin piece of pink flesh, dripping with dark red blood. The outside is crisp and brown, the breadcrumbs falling into the juice before turning to mush. She is beautiful and comforting. She uses both the fork and knife and deposits the limp flesh on a waiting plate before any blood can drip onto the floor. “Here you go, honey,” she calls.

A man yells “Cut!” spittle flying out of his mouth from behind the camera. “Reshoot, we need a different angle. Can someone make that juicier?”

The camera stops rolling.

A production team rushes forward and takes the plate, then replaces it with an identical, bleeding steak. A food-dye solution is dripped, carefully, onto the plate to simulate fresh blood. A different team of make-up artists circle around the woman, searching for imperfections. The team scurries off the set and readies a line of identical plates, white and red, for the show.

* * *

Images of American Meat¹ are so prolific that they appear to reproduce on their own – steaks sizzling on the grill recur during football games, on the sides of buses, and spliced into *Men’s Health* and *Good Housekeeping* magazines. These images are so ubiquitous that they become cultural artifacts; they constitute the always-present background in a painting of America. Meat is a vehicle for various ideologies within American culture,

¹ I will refer to Meat with a capital M throughout this chapter to indicate the abstract nature; Meat is not only a food (in fact, it’s nature as food is often obfuscated) but also a vehicle of cultural values. “meat,” on the other hand, is a word used to erase the presence of animal flesh from the product being consumed. I refer to the animals as they and them; the concept of Meat is separated from gender and life and therefore objectified.

communicating masculinity, misogyny, and — in the case of Ruth Ozeki’s novel *My Year of Meats* — imperialism. The transformation from animal flesh to Meat erases the animal that is killed to create the Meat, the environmental impacts and embodied slow violence industrial agricultural practices wreak upon marginalized communities, and the women that are packaged, part and parcel, in order to sell and serve Meat.

My Year of Meats follows two primary narrators; Jane Takagi-Little, an out-of-work Japanese-American producer who takes a job creating advertisement programs for meat export company BEEF-EX, and Akiko Ueno, former artist and reluctant housewife to Joichi Ueno, a BEEF-EX employee who only cares about Akiko for her reproductive capabilities and uses her as a litmus test for the success of *My American Wife!* Throughout the filming of the show, the reader sees Jane’s growing dissonance with the lies told about both the families and the Meat in the show and witnesses the direct impact that the program has on Akiko, who Joichi expects to not only *watch* but to *consume* the content by making all of the dishes presented. An essential part of capitalist consumption is reproduction: of meals, desires, and values. The ultimate goal of narrative advertisement, then, is reproduction and normalization. Through this reproduction, covert ideologies contained within the visible narrative are also reproduced: the violence of sexism, imperialism, and industrial agriculture in millions of homes striving for manufactured “perfection.”

The goal of industrial meat company BEEF-EX’s advertising program *My American Wife!* is not only to export American Meat but to perform neo-colonialism; the program exports American misogyny, masculinity, and consumerism by turning Wives² and Meat into cultural

² I use the phrase “Wife” or “Wives” to refer to the constructed nature of the women in advertisements such as *My American Wife!* but also to refer to the broader cultural construct of a wife as someone who fulfills a particular role and behaves in a certain way, in this case conforming to western, American gender roles.

artifacts to be consumed and erases the national and global impacts of industrial agriculture.

Narrative advertisements transform women and animal flesh into the commodity fetishes of *Wives and Meat*, and through the production and consumption of *My American Wife!* in *My Year of Meats*, Ruth Ozeki demonstrates the way that this transformation erases the embodied abuses of patriarchy and industrial agriculture. The commodity fetish was initially proposed by Karl Marx in *Capital*. He describes how the commodity fetish obscures the relationship between the laborer and the product that they created: “[the commodity fetish’s] value lies not in its use value but in its exchange and its potency as a sign” (Marx). Anne McClintock expands on this in “Soft-Soaping Empire” and emphasizes how the commodity fetish disseminates the values of empire through advertising. This is, for example, the difference between a person hunting a deer and eating the meat and the distinctly American Meat created from industrial agriculture and then marketed by BEEF-EX. The product signifiers associated with BEEF-EX Meats supersede the importance of a food that might nourish a person’s body.

Commodity-Fetishism, Transformation, and Jane Takagi-Little

The conceit of *My American Wife!* is that if Japanese housewives see voluptuous, fertile American women serving meat dishes to their families, they will be inspired to do the same so as to emulate not just the idealized life being presented through virtue of American consumption but also the particularly Western, American misogyny and consumerism. Storytelling is essential to this enterprise: the flesh itself is not as appealing as the fabricated lifestyle surrounding the Meat.

The show’s description, written by Jane Takagi-Little as she explains her “vision” in order to get her job as producer, demonstrates how the boundaries between the public market and

private, domestic life are dissolved so as to reinforce the values being symbolized by the product:

My American Wife!

Each weekly half-hour episode of *My American Wife!* must culminate in the celebration of a featured meat, climaxing in its glorious consumption. It's the meat (not the Mrs.) who's the star of our show! Of course, the "Wife of the Week" is important too. She must be attractive, appetizing, and all-American. She is the Meat Made Manifest: ample, robust, yet never tough or hard to digest. Through her, Japanese housewives will feel the hearty sense of warmth, of comfort, of hearth and home – the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America (8).

In this story, consumption, masculine affirmation, and misogynistic femininity are the focus. The "Wife of the Week" is present in order to serve Meat, to be consumed visually, and most importantly, to "symbolize": her job is to carry the product literally and metaphorically into the home. The enterprise of industrial agriculture and butchering and its environmental impacts are un-sexy and un-appetizing, and as such are erased from the narrative. "Of course" the women are important "too": they have to be "attractive, appetizing, and all-American" (8). The list of attributes is written so that the Meat blends the sexualization of women and Meat; the program encourages the audience to sexualize Meat and objectify the Wife. This transformation creates the commodity fetish because now, Meat is a product deeply associated with the Wife. The symbols mutually reinforce one another, essentially saying that in order to have the idealized image of the good life as a man, you must have both an "attractive" and "appetizing" Wife but also "ample" and "robust" Meat. They feed one another.

The word "appetizing" is defined as "exciting a desire or longing, *especially for food*" but not necessarily food alone, which dissolves the boundaries between animals (humans included) and objects for sale – the sexual desire is conjured and disguised by the particular desire for food (emphasis mine, OED). With this in mind, the manifesto enforces the submission of the Wife and reminds the audience to consume her by describing her as "never tough or hard to digest," a phrase easily used for the Meat. The program separates Meat from the animal to reduce it only to

a food product; in parallel, the program separates the Wife from the individual woman and reduces her to an object of desire and subservience. These transferences are the very nature of commodity fetishism. The culture of American consumption encourages people to buy things in order to signify class, race, nationality, and individual values. The items themselves are irrelevant to the message that they convey.

The language used to describe preparing and eating the meal in the description of *My American Wife!* invokes sexual domination and ejaculation – the meal is not merely eaten, it is “glorious[ly] consum[ed],” resulting in the “climax” or pleasure (Ozeki 8). This image also mimics the language of colonialism; while the producers of the show and executives of the company want to sell individual “units” of animal flesh, they are really trafficking the idea that American culture is superior and should be recreated. The Wives in the show are models for Japanese housewives to emulate American objectification. The show’s description makes even more clear the level at which the Wife is a vehicle for values; it is through the Wife that the audience feels “the hearty sense of warmth, of comfort, [...] the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in America” (8). As a symbol, she is responsible for upholding the emotional ambiance conducive to the consumer – of the advertisement and of the meat – living their idealized life.

The melding of virility and meat-eating is an example of commodity fetishism. Such conflation makes it possible to question a man's adherence to toxic masculinity by examining the contents of his plate. In her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol J. Adams observes that “men who decide to eschew meat eating are deemed effeminate,” because they do not participate in the narrative of *violent* consumption (eating vegetables, for example, does not *necessarily* entail the violence of meat consumption, though the harms against agricultural laborers are real

and obscured) (12). The act of meat-eating affirms patriarchal ideas of what it means to be a man. American Meat, then, affirms a distinct American misogyny. In the case of Helen Dawes and Mr. Purcell, a poor black family that Jane attempts to feature on the show, the true environmental and physical impacts are much more visible. BEEF-EX seeks a market distant from their negative health and environmental impacts because the market for American Meat³ in America is saturated. The Purcell family – and many real American families – have been disillusioned by the flash-sale on perfection because they experience the dangerous embodied impacts of the ideologies of Western consumption. Mr. Purcell confesses that eating the chicken they could afford – “cheap down at the packin’ house” – led to the pitch of his voice changing due to “some medicines they was usin’ in the chickens” (117). The American working class can’t afford the American dream being sold, so that dream must be exported to international middle-classes. When asked if they like beef, Helen Dawes and Mr. Purcell respond that “red meat’s too costly with so many mouths to feed” (117). Ironically, the promise that large, healthy families arise from eating red meat runs counter to the fact that those same large families can’t afford to eat red meat. Despite the lavish meals made with prime cuts of meat on the program, most working-class Americans can only afford to eat less desirable meats, coincidentally the ones most laden with dangerous antibiotics, growth hormones, and other endocrine-altering hormones. The commerce of dangerous food requires the sale of a particular narrative and set of values to obfuscate the violent consequences associated with American Meat.

The sale and consumption of Meat as a commodity fetish in *My Year of Meats* embeds ideologies of misogyny, imperialism, and environmental violence.³⁴ The narratives construct a

³ Violence on the environment is violence upon humans, especially the most disenfranchised and oppressed, whether that be BIPOC, poor people, or those without the ability to escape the damage being done to their homes and bodies, such as those living in Flint, Michigan.

⁴ The reality that the health of the land is the health of the people and that violence to the land is violence to the

false image of a Wife, a consumer, and of industrial agriculture, and in totality erase the real impacts of these ideologies, then replace those impacts with abstracted images of Wives and Meat as commodity fetishes.

Ruth Ozeki demonstrates how animal flesh and women are transformed into the commodity fetishes of Meat and Wives in through the use of narrative advertisement in *My Year of Meats*. BEEF-EX emphasizes that “It’s the Meat, not the Mrs!” that is important: however, neither of these are true. The program emphasizes the dissemination of ideologies that increase revenue for the corporation. By participating in the particular brand of American misogyny and patriarchy evinced in *My American Wife!*, consumers are encouraged to purchase American Meat. The Meat being sold by *My American Wife!* symbolizes traditional American patriarchy, virility, and consumerism. The Meat is carried into the home – a market commodity – and made into a signifier of domestic values through the unseen labor of women, and also through the erased labor and violence that occurs within industrial agricultural practices.

The narratives created in advertisements invite consumers into a hypothetical future where they embody the values sold to them. As discussed in Chapter 2, David Herman theorizes the role of narrative and the construction of storyworlds: they are “mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, and why” (570). These are mental models that audiences may consciously enter into, in the case of reading a book or watching a movie, or unconsciously, in the case of advertising. I consider this “unconscious participation” because of how advertisements and commercials are interspersed into other media that audiences may be more intentionally consuming; what is being marketed as the premise of *My American Wife!*, like sharing delicious recipes and telling authentic stories, is in opposition to the *actual* intention of

people is asserted in the first United Nation’s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007.

the show, which is to present idealized American families – “How could a Japanese housewife relate to a poor black family with nine children?” – and sell American beef (Ozeki 130).

The gap created between the pastoral ideal and the malignant reality of industrial agriculture in the production is visible, repeatedly, throughout *My Year of Meats*. One of the first women that Jane features on the show is Suzie Flowers. Throughout the course of filming, Suzie discovers that her husband, Fred, had been having an affair. Suzie is devastated; the program that airs, though, constructs the narrative that Fred had returned afterwards and reconciled with Suzie using footage shot before the infidelity had been discovered. The infidelity had been revealed during a “Sociological Survey” in which Suzie, Fred, and several neighbors answer questions with cards they could flip to YES or NO:

“Have you ever had an extramarital affair?” The participants held up their Survey cards, and the camera zoomed in on Fred’s big YES. The sound-effect track swelled with canned laughter, and Suzie’s face collapsed into an expression of horror, punctuated with a resounding *boinnngg!* (29)

This example sets of the gap between narrative and reality sets the tone early on in the text; despite Jane’s hopes that she could “use the wives to sell meat in the service of a Larger Truth,” even personal, emotional devastation is mutated in service of the narrative of American families (27). When Akiko sees the completed program, she comments that “...it felt like they were hiding something” (40). She gives the show a three for authenticity but goes on to prepare the Coca-Cola Roast that had, secretly, been made with Pepsi. Despite this inauthenticity, the narrative advertisement has incredible sway; Suzie Flowers herself loves the program and is inspired to reconcile with Fred because she desires the life imagined by the producers, regardless of how intimately familiar she is with its reality.

Beyond interpersonal deception, the narrative of *My American Wife!* hides the ways in which the products it espouses cause physical damage, much like with Mr. Purcell. Later on,

BEEF-EX executives select the Dunn family to be the subject of *My American Wife!* because they are modern ranchers who produce the ideology-laden Meat. The discrepancy between the story told in *My American Wife!* and the damage that happens to those who actively participate in the production of Meat is damning.

In the investigative book *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser discusses how neither the USDA nor the companies in the meatpacking industry take responsibility for the effects of their cheaply processed products. Both possible points of regulation tend to claim that the details that would be revealed by further regulation (unsafe practices for both the animals being murdered as well as the disenfranchised employees) are “trade secrets” and that the publicization of these details would hinder their business (213). This is evident with the Dunn family, who rely on illegal hormones in order to bulk up their cattle even though it has terrifying, puberty-altering effects on the young Rose Dunn. The obfuscation illuminates the distortion of narrative to manipulate consumers. Each of the Wives and families featured on the program are altered to be more easily devoured, leaving the viewer with a lasting hunger for an intangible set of values that supposedly comprise a “good life.”

BEEF-EX executives pick and choose which aspects of wholesomeness to feature in the show. While the loving relationship between Dyann and Lara disturbed heteronormative values and was therefore unacceptable for *My American Wife!* (though it featured double the wives), the disturbances to propriety within the Dunn family are ignored: Bunny Dunn, mother of Rose and step-mother of Gale, “was indeed a rodeo queen ... when she was in high school. Then, ... she ended up as a stripper” (173). Her husband, John, is “old enough to be her grandpa” (173). The difference in how BEEF-EX executives view disruptions to the ideal narrative demonstrate the values most important to the show; the well-being and happiness of the families is secondary to

heterosexual, patriarchal values. Even so, these surface level perturbations to traditional American family archetypes, such as the age-gap and Bunny's history as a stripper, disguise the underlying danger the family is actually in, and the danger they, in turn, expose consumers to. The most important facet of the Dunn family is the projection of their all-American ideals, "Bunny Dunn was amplitude personified, replete with meats, our ideal American Wife" (208). The dangerous practices they employ in their business are irrelevant. The show prizes appearances above all else, and because Bunny is so buxom as to almost be comical, she is the perfect subject for a show that uses women as props instead of human beings. However, the disguised cruelty of industrial meat production, with its dangerous, transcorporeal, body-altering effects, is made visible in the body of Rose Dunn, the youngest member of the family, who suffers from early-onset puberty. Their situation as a family shows how the distribution and consumption of these All-American ideals is prized over all other concerns, particularly human health.

As they are filming the Dunn's portion of the show, Jane is taken to one of the offices by Gale Dunn, who runs the massive cattle feedlot. Jane questions their use of different hormones, asking if they use DES, which Gale refutes. When Jane asks if they ever *did* use it, Gale says "Oh yeah. Who didn't? It's still the best and cheapest growth enhancer around" (212). When his use of the present tense – "still the best" – is questioned, he gets defensive and changes the subject. Shortly thereafter, when everyone is in the office, five-year-old Rose asks Gale for a popsicle, and Jane watches with revulsion as Gale pulls a home-made popsicle out of the same refrigerator where the hormones are stored.

As he opened [the refrigerator] I got a glimpse of the shelves inside, lined with row after row of little rubber-topped bottles. Gale reached into the freezer section above and pulled out a bright-blue popsicle on a little plastic stick from a tray of molds. [...] Rosie took the popsicle in her dust-covered hands and stuck it in her mouth. The heat started melting it almost immediately and the stick blue liquid ran down between her fingers. Contentedly she licked it off and sucked at the pop. (218)

The casual cross-over of human-consumable items displays the enforcement of narrative over reality; for Gale, this moment is about his relationship with his little sister, and so the potential ramifications are erased. This is a small-scale imitation of the erasure that occurs within *My American Wife!* The dust is understood to contain traces of the hormones and other medicines that they use on the livestock. The permeability of bodies is made uncomfortably clear for the reader as Rose Dunn, as most children would, messily eats her popsicle. However, the image of a happy childhood is disturbed by the knowledge that what Rose is consuming is dangerous. The repercussions of this moment – and surely many more like it not captured by the camera crew – are visible in Rose Dunn’s body.

When the film crew views the footage later, one of them draws attention to the fact that Rose is “precocious” – she has developed breasts at the age of five. “‘It’s premature thelarche,’ said Dave ... ‘These little girls with estrogen poisoning’” (220). The crew member brings up case studies that he had read about in Puerto Rico where young girls had been exposed to growth hormones in meat and milk products. The image of the innocent-seeming blue popsicle is in jarring contrast with its dangers. Due to the disperse nature of DES impacts, the repercussions are not immediately recognized, and often this invisible gap between cause and effect allows companies such as BEEF-EX to use narrative to erase the accumulation of environmental injustices in people’s bodies. As Rob Nixon notes, “the representational challenges [of slow violence] are acute” because it is difficult to draw attention to “catastrophic acts” such as DES poisoning “that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects” (15). Companies such

as BEEF-EX exploit low spectacle dangers and overwrite them with glamorous, high-spectacle television programs that entice the audience's attention away from the poisonous reality.

When Jane broaches the subject of Rose's hormone poisoning to Bunny, she is defensive and guilty, and she later comments that "it's hard to make things stop once they've gotten goin'," even as she watches Rose's mutation (244). Bunny shows Rose's alarming development to Jane in the hopes of exposing the dangers of DES and other growth hormones. Rose gives Gale and John sleeping medication so they wouldn't interfere out of shame, then brings the crew to where Rose sleeps. Rose's skin is "still a baby's, milky white and downy," in a disturbing juxtaposition to her full breasts. What Jane previously interpreted as plumpness was not that at all; it was an "illusion created by her shockingly full ... breasts. ... The girl was five years old" (228). Jane repeatedly recalls Rose's incredibly young age; Rose doesn't have the tools to communicate her experience, much less understand what is happening to her body or why. The gap between the Dunn family and knowledge of their slow catastrophe is reflective of the broader erasures of knowledge between audiences and the products they are being encouraged to consume. The danger of this invisible, intentionally hidden knowledge is real: "under-represented casualties – human and environmental – are the casualties most likely to be discounted" (Nixon 15). In the case of advertising propaganda, this representational crisis goes further than simple difficulty: BEEF-EX actively conceals the malignant effects of DES and the consumption of industrial American beef.

In addition, the long-term effects of DES are manifested in Jane's own body, played out in multiple registers. Throughout the novel, Jane discusses her own difficulties with pregnancy: she has a misshapen uterus that she suspects is due to her own mother's use of DES. At the time of her pregnancy with Jane, "researchers and doctors were prescribing it for pregnancy women in

the belief that DES would prevent miscarriages and premature births” (125). Moreover, before the story begins, she had struggled with infertility and had precancerous cells removed from her uterus. Jane experiences the embodied impact of the use of dangerous chemicals when she loses a pregnancy because of this birth defect at the same time she is injured filming in a slaughterhouse.

Industrial meat packing causes Jane immediate physical harm when she enters a factory in order to film. Walking through the swinging, steaming animal carcasses, she is blindsided and thrown off of her feet by the bleeding body of a cow that likely weighed 1,100 – 1,500 pounds: “it slammed me, lifting me right off my feet, and that’s as much as I remember, because on the way back down I hit the base of my skull against the edge of the knocking pen, which, appropriately, knocked me right out” (284). The violence against animals and women that is erased by *My American Wife!* is enacted against Jane simultaneously; like the animals slaughtered, she is rendered unconscious. She wakes to discover that the long-term impacts of DES and this injury have led to her miscarriage. The culmination of DES and the business practices of BEEF-EX - and myriad companies just like DES - occur, still, in the dark. Jane’s miscarriage happened quietly inside of her body and the doctor discovers this while she is unconscious at the hospital. When she awakes, the nurse tells her she is okay, with “nothing to worry about” (242). While the nurse likely had good intentions as she slowly gave Jane the information of her miscarriage, this is representative of the larger silence surrounding the non-spectacular dangers of economically driven agriculture practices, medical practices, and legislation. The gap between reality and the narrative – for the nurse, that everything with Jane is okay – steals agency from Jane and denies her the right to know what is happening in her own body. This is the same gap that alienates people from the agency to make fully informed

decisions about what they consume, where they live, and what is allowed to happen to not only the land but their bodies. People have limited control over the world around them, but that relationship is made weird when they are separated intentionally for the sake of capitalist gain.

The lacuna of information surrounding the meat industry and between marginalized individuals is essential to industrial agriculture's business model – all aspects of the process are separated so that the horror goes unaccumulated and untallied. With minimal communication between the different steps of the violent process, it enables companies to hide behind the lie that they were unaware of the malignant impacts upon those involved. In the factory food system, the people who tend the animals are different from those who slaughter them, who are different from those who transport the meat, who are different from the people who sell the meat. Each part of the process is unique, which allows the assembly line to work as efficiently as possible to render an animal into all of its composite pieces – no single person must be present for both the murder and the packaging, much less the Meat's placement in a market. This thoroughly divorces the Meat from the animal so that it might function effectively as a commodity-fetish. The violence is erased; the animal is transformed from a fake, happy cow to a blood-red steak in the aisle with no interim in the story of *My American Wife!*

Target Audience, Embodied Impacts, and Akiko Ueno

The impact that narrative can have on people is diverse; this is especially visible in Akiko as she experiences the difference between the prescribed advertisement values imposed by BEEF-EX versus the more documentarian approach Jane takes as she bristles under the lies and confines of her job. The episodes that receive the most approval from Joichi and BEEF-EX executives generally are the ones that Akiko responds to the least. With Suzie Flowers, a shining

example of the “American Wife” that BEEF-EX is looking for, Akiko is disturbed by the program. “At first she seemed quite charming, but by the end of the show Akiko felt that something was wrong” (38). She accurately notes that the program seems to be hiding something despite being unaware of the trick of editing used to make the couple reunite at the end of the episode. When Akiko watches the episode of *My American Wife!* featuring Dyann and Lara, a lesbian couple with adopted children, she cries: “these were tears of admiration for the strong women so determined to have their family against all odds” (150). The authenticity of the episode and the values of the women as opposed to BEEF-EX both move and motivate Akiko.

The show initially forces voyeurism onto the viewer – by consuming the content, Akiko also takes onto herself the perspective of the camera, the ultimate surveillance. It becomes an internal panopticon – though Akiko is never a “Wife of the Week,” she attempts to recreate the program engage her in self-regulation. By watching other women perform Wifeness, she is also analyzing her own performance, and the tool being used to influence her no longer relies on her viewership. She enforces her own reproduction of the values. Akiko is “seen but [she] does not see. [She] is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (Foucault 508). Akiko is both an audience and a target being observed due to Joichi’s imposition of her viewership. Storytelling is the mechanism that maintains Akiko’s compliance – she suffers from the narrative that, as a woman, she *must* want to get married and have a child. This imposed narrative leads to her toxic marriage with Joichi Ueno. As Jane takes more control of the program, Akiko is exposed to alternative, non-conforming portraits which create the impetus for change – and for desire – in Akiko. These narratives, though still taking the form of *My American Wife!*, deviate from the values dictated by BEEF-EX and avoid the commodification of the subjects. For example, there is an episode that features two lesbian women as the Wives (Dyann and Lara),

and it offers a mirror in which Akiko questions both her sexuality and her desire to conform: “*I listen to the black lady say she never want man in her life, and all of a sudden I agree!*” (Ozeki 214). The program shifts from compelling the viewer to conform to the values it illustrates to offering insight into the lives of individuals. The change coincides with Jane’s attempt to wrench control away from BEEF-EX and provide *real* documentary, outside of the consumption driven nature of the narrative advertisement.

Akiko is representative of the influence that large corporations enact not only economically, but personally. Throughout the novel, the view that Ozeki gives of the individual (both Akiko and Jane, as well as windows into the lives of some of the women who star as “Wife of the Week) separates the text and the characters from being just an example of the negative effects of malignant corporate power; instead, the transformation of desire and autonomy in Akiko and Jane provide a model for subversion of the dominant cultural force. They also make apparent the dangers of disobeying the narrative governance – they are vulnerable to exploitation regardless their conformation to gender roles. This dichotomy implies that there is no safe way to abide by an exploitative system that seeks to wring out the maximum possible capital from marginalized populations. The globalization of BEEF-EX monetizes and uses women and animals in order to feed the “insatiable modern desire to consume,” and wards off a proper response to the exploitation by setting similarly mistreated people at odds (Fish 3). In order to enact change, exploited parties must bridge the gap by forcing construction and reality to harmonize.

Information is empowering. In this, knowledge about DES and the BEEF-EX helps consumers to understand both what is being sold to them overtly (both meat and American values) as well as the covert substances included (DES, amongst other dangerous chemicals and

hormones). “Since how we tell stories influences how we act in the world, it is necessary to [...] reconsider how we construct the narratives that authorize or challenge them,” (Harrison 458). Without critical consumption, human beings – particularly women - are replaced with television versions of themselves, and become toxic - both ideologically, reinforcing unhealthy gender stereotypes, as well as physically – through violence enacted upon women and long-term health and fertility issues. In order to escape the confines of hyper-masculine, consumptive gender-roles that have been harnessed by corporate greed, the gap between reality and consumable lifestyles must be closed – which begins by rewriting our cultural narratives to endow autonomy and enable true desire and connection as opposed to commodification.

Conclusion

My American Wife! reveals the way that pleasant narratives are specifically created for us – consumers, readers, humans – to make people feel that not only is there nothing wrong with the current model of capitalism, industrial agriculture, and patriarchy, but that these things are somehow *good* for people – if they could just properly mimic the story. These particular stories in narrative advertisements function in service of neo-colonial ideologies and companies that work in direct contrast to the well-being of not only human beings but all beings. Narratives have the power to influence not only what people think is a possible future for themselves but to obscure dangerous truths about their lifestyles and their consumption. Commodity fetishes are sold through the particular use of narrative advertisement; they combine narrative, product, and lifestyle into a 30-minute (or 30-second) parcel.

This reflects the misuse of narrative and the sway it holds over behavior. The stories being told have tangible impacts on the people consuming them, much like the actual animal flesh being sold by BEEF-EX has deleterious impacts on human health because of the hidden effects of illicit growth hormones. This directly mirrors the impacts of large corporations that

have the ability to tell the narrative that they want to in the interest of economic gain. Industrial agriculture relies on images of happy animals and families producing the products that are sold in grocery stores and the idea that not only can you emulate those families but that consumers can support those American ideals through their purchases.

The consumption of these narratives and the emulation of those values is intended to happen unwittingly. The erasures made, however, can be exposed and the systems that function on the silence, violence, pain, and death of invisible parties can be held accountable if the full narratives of commodity narratives are told. This turn is demonstrated by Jane's documentary, which leads to the indictment of the already illegal use of DES. These actions do not counteract corporate interests all at once, but they do allow a window in and the ability to properly ascribe harms. Narrative histories have the potential to both belie and expose the truth. One of the most powerful tools of oppressors is silence. It is necessary to identify malicious storytelling and the apparatuses through which corporations control and obscure the truth of production - whether that be the production of goods or ideologies. Storytelling *can* empower people to make decisions not only for their own benefit, but also for their communities and for the planet.

CHAPTER 4. OUR BODIES, OURSELVES: IMAGINATIVE TRANSCORPOREALITY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

The Anthropocene has been defined in many ways, but it is also an epoch of human narratives – with many successes and failures of representation. For many, it is the narrative of the irreversible human impacts that have led to climate change. For others it is a narrative of human progress and technological advancement. The Anthropocene is also marked by a kind of double-consciousness, a split between the individual and the collective. The collective is multitude; it manifests itself in the community, national, and global scales. Climate change and globalization put pressure on these scales where individual agency is in tension with planetary agency. It is the imaginative task of readers and writers in the Anthropocene to collaboratively construct storyworlds which represent the emergent reality of the current epoch. The narratives constructed about who lives and how informs our ability to function and write our collective experience. People cannot create futures that they have not imagined, including one in which people embrace the varying degrees of agency and connection as they navigate porous borders between themselves and the world, other humans, and their communities.

Stories that invite the reader to participate in this doubling - moving between individual and collective agency - provide spaces in which the audience can practice necessary thinking for surviving in the Anthropocene. Carmen Maria Machado's short story "Inventory" is a good example of how practice occupying multiple levels –

individual, community, global – within a text can help reconceptualize bodily transcorporeality. Each character, regardless of the narrative’s primary protagonist, is vulnerable: an inescapable facet of the Anthropocene. Through these characters, Machado asks the audience to participate in conscientious *imaginative transcorporeality*. While Stacy Alaimo’s concept of bodily transcorporeality elucidates the permeability of our bodies, imaginative transcorporeality extends to our ability to practice mental-modelling and subverts neoliberal individualism, instead reminding us of the permeability of our cognitive processes. The imaginative transcorporeality experienced through narrative worldbuilding influences the real world; as such, narratives that establish multiple subject positions and various scales of experience make it easier to embody various levels of responsibility and agency in the real world. Narrative shapes what people view to be possible and also has the power to shape desires; as demonstrated in Chapter 2, narrative can be used both for malicious influence, such as the consumption of dangerous ideologies and toxic food. Narrative can also be used to positively influence what is possible; it can show people new ways of being and interacting with one another, whether that be the development of new community structures of care or broader political possibilities. The planet, humans included, are always in the process of becoming: the future is a matter of narrative imagining.

Bill McKibben draws our attention to the fact that “On a stable planet, nature provided a background against which human drama took place; on the unstable planet

we're creating, *the background becomes the highest drama*" (4). The environment is foregrounded through and due to crisis. When discussing the strange nature of the changing planet, Gry Ulstein comments that humans broadly are in the unique position in which humanity is "both culpable for *and* victimized by" the conditions of the planet. Determining how to behave and what stories humans will tell in the present and future requires reconciliation between these two realities. Therefore, we ought to understand our participation in narrative with the same duality – we are both responsible *for* and *at the whim of* the narratives that we read.

Imaginative transcorporeality has multiple dimensions: first, a reader participates in storyworld formation in conjunction with narratives and their authors; second, individuals and collectives jointly participate in the formation of the real world through the ability to envision and enact different futures. Collaboration between the individual, subjective "I," the interpersonal "we" and a broader species level collective provides a mental model for how vulnerability and responsibility can co-exist. This is present in many forms; individuals make choices for themselves, but those choices are always located within a web of agencies, human and more-than-human others. A person might consciously consider the consequences and benefits of a choice not only for themselves but for their community and, on a larger scale, consider their community's impacts on other communities and the planet. This toggling between perspectives happens consciously and unconsciously. The presence of disease and intimacy in Carmen Maria Machado's "Inventory" calls the reader

to participate in cognitive doubling in which individual permeability coexists with collective vulnerability and responsibility.

Imagining the Entangled Present

Cognitive narratologists emphasize the importance of storyworlds in interpreting the world around us. David Herman's theory of narrative storyworlds has been present throughout this thesis but is most prevalent within the theorization of imaginative transcorporeality. A narrative refers to a "strategy for creating mental representations of the world," both internal and external to the narrative provided (5). The construction of storyworlds impacts not only the *interpretation* of the world around us but also the *formation*; we cannot create futures that we cannot imagine. In order to engage the role of the human in the Anthropocene, it is necessary to represent the double consciousness of being individual and collective: I *and* we, responsible *and* vulnerable, interior *and* enmeshed.

Interpreting the present is fraught because the "every-day Anthropocene" is enmeshed within hyper objects (LeMenager 223). Timothy Morton describes hyper-objects as "massively distributed entities that can be thought and computed, but not directly touched or seen" (Morton). Hyper objects arise in the Anthropocene because they are the result of humans conceptualizing the environment, nature, climate change, and disease, to name a few, which are invisible but tangible in the subjective experience. Individuals can

experience manifestations of hyper objects, but that experience does not encompass the thing in its entirety. This induces anxiety when the invisible threatens the tangible – altered weather patterns and increased frequencies of extreme weather events threaten personal safety and disease robs individuals of their health and their sense of agency. Moreover, hyper objects disrupt a person’s ability to view themselves as a discrete, internal entity and separate themselves from nature, which is constructed as external, or separate from the self. Humans are manifestations of the environment even when they exert agency over non-human animals and inanimate objects. This agency does not mean that humans are able to *control* the systems in which they intra-act.

As discussed in Chapter 3, food exposes the permeability of bodies as it is consumed and then becomes a part of the body, whether that be nutrients or toxic chemicals. The amount of control that individual humans have over the invisible constituents of their food varies, and this agency often varies along lines of class, race, and gender. Stacy Alaimo comments that “the most palpable trans-corporeal substance is food, since eating transforms plants and animals into human flesh” (12). Humans undertake the task of eating knowingly, even when they are not aware of the composite parts – and beings – within their food. Much like the invisible aspects of food consumption that disregard human agency, pathogens engender an invisible, unwanted risk to the discrete human body. Disease is an expression of the Anthropocene in the wake of globalization that pushes up against and transgresses the boundaries of human agency and control. Contagious disease

is an omnipresent but invisible force that blurs the lines between the individual and the collective. It generates anxiety because it moves unseen within and between bodies, hovering in the air or travelling by the touch of a hand. Historically, disease has been ever-present but localized, whether it be to communities, larger regions, or specific time frames. In 2020, COVID-19 swept the globe and revealed simultaneously our shared vulnerability as permeable bodies and distinct vulnerabilities dependent upon racial-, class-, and gender-based oppression. Those who are white, wealthy, and live in westernized countries experienced better outcomes even as that same demographic was reminded that they are not immune to human frailty (Poor Peoples Campaign, Ndugga). A report on the class and racial disparities in COVID-casualties in the United States notes that “death rates in the lowest income bracket are double the death rates in the highest income group” (Poor Peoples Campaign). Additionally, in a report from the Kaiser Foundation relying on CDC statistics, as of April 2022 “disparities [in vaccination status] have narrowed over time,” yet, the slow mediation of vaccination rates does not account for those already infected and/or deceased from COVID-19 (Ndugga). The trends in COVID death rates demonstrate racial disparity: “overall, Black, Hispanic, and AIAN people have experienced higher rates of COVID-19 infection and death compared to White People” (Hill). This is visible on an international scale as well: those in poor countries or those who are poor, work in service, or are people of color systemically experience worse outcomes and receive less support. Various levels of vulnerability expose the ways that humans can move between and are

imbued with more and less agency over their bodies and the environment in which they live.

Ecocritics and new materialists focus on transcorporeality and our fraught relationship with the world around and within us. In her book *Bodily Natures*, Stacy Alaimo reminds readers that the environment “is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves” (4). Transcorporeality is bodies moving across, through, and inside of one another. The spread of disease is an uncomfortable reminder of this fact. Recent ecogothic criticism closely examines the horrors of an indistinct body. In Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils’ theories of the ecogothic, they explain that the human relationship to the environment is wrought with fear and anxiety in an effort to maintain the body as a distinct form (Keetley and Sivils 1). Simon Estok explores the fearful relationship between humans and the environment in his article “Corporeality, hyper-consciousness, and the Anthropocene ecoGothic: slime and ecophobia” where he argues that this fear is defined by the Anthropocene. The elevation of the individual and the ideals of European Enlightenment are in tension with a time in which “Nature has agencies that are [...] terrifyingly unpredictable;” agencies that humans try desperately to wrest control of (Estok 29). These attempts to gain control over the natural world are an attempt to deny the vulnerability of the human body.

Material ecocritics are more concerned with bodily transcorporeality compared to the permeability of the mind and the imaginative process. Yet through imaginative process,

humans construct meaning in both the “real” world and within the narratives that they both create and are acted upon by. This process contributes to the belief in the discrete body but that can also disrupt that belief. Simon Estok writes that “our consciousness of and capacity to sense ourselves and our worlds are central to [...] a sense of corporeal identity, an understanding of agencies outside of ourselves, and the need to protect ourselves” (37). This consciousness, while perhaps the origin of our urge towards hyper-individualism, is as permeable as the body which it conceives. Both worlds – real and story – are constructed at least partially within and without the body, neither wholly external nor internal. This is modelled explicitly in the way that we engage with narratives – the narrative text must exist but so too must our conscious experience of it. Engagement in narratives is a kind of imaginative transcorporeality; the narrative moves across, through, and within consciousness.

In the first section of this chapter, I illuminate the connections between Carmen Maria’s Machado’s “Inventory” and Stacy Alaimo’s concept of bodily transcorporeality. Within Machado’s writing, representations of disease and intimacy are two modes that allow the reader to inhabit a double-subject position unique to the Anthropocene; disease makes visceral the transference of unseen physical matter, and personal intimacy encompasses more than the relationship between two individuals but requires imaginative and bodily permeability. In the second section, I expand upon (what I call) imaginative transcorporeality and the ways in which individual and collective perceptions of agency are

vulnerable to the ideas and narratives that people participate in. People engage in story formation willingly or unwillingly; stories are how people make sense of agency, individual and collective. By understanding narrative as a permeable collaborative process, readers engage more actively in the construction of story and real worlds. We can practice agency in story world and real world formation by understanding ourselves not just as bodies intra-acting with other bodies but as minds collaboratively writing the Anthropocene.

Infectious Bodies in the Anthropocene

This section focuses on the abilities of narrative to convey bodily transcorporeality in the Anthropocene; bodies are in connection not only with other bodies but with structures larger than comprehension. Bodily transcorporeality is the impetus of the narrative in “Inventory” - simultaneously writing the narrative of the Anthropocene into being and being written upon by the expansive agencies of the epoch.

Carmen Maria Machado’s short story “Inventory” was published in *Her Body and Other Parties*, a collection of stories with unique narration. The story is formatted as a list – an inventory – of all the people with whom the narrator has been intimate throughout her life as she flees from a deadly virus spreading across the United States. The narrator is unnamed and undescribed, and the importance of the intimacy isn’t just the sex but also the close human connection, even when it is brief. Two women stay for several nights and

“they offered to bring [the narrator] with them,” though she declines. The narrator notes that “After they left, [she] only used the generator intermittently, preferring to spend time in the dark.” This preference reveals an ephemerality and value in those connections; in a post-apocalyptic world, that connection is worth shedding light and resources where, alone, the narrator would instead conserve. The style of narration is straightforward and dry – most of the sentences are short and simple, and retain the same structure throughout the majority of the story. The narration is focused on emotions or actions as opposed to description – the audience is left to fill in setting cues. Thus, the audience knows the narrator only through her interactions with others. In these ways, the story not only reminds the reader of physical transcorporeality but encourages collective recognition of imaginative transcorporeality.

“Inventory” places the reader in several subject positions that transgress traditional conceptions of subjectivity throughout the course of the story by moving between the individual and the collective fluidly. The first subject position is the individual. The narrator documents all of the people with whom they have been intimate before the spread of the virus and later, in spite of the plague that is transmitted by human touch. “The fucking thing is only passing through physical contact,” one of her lovers, a former CDC employee, notes as they lay in bed together, and adds ironically: “If people would just stay apart-” (46). The piece itself is in tension as the driving force of the story is the contradiction between the desire for individual safety with the threat of bodily harm. During the inventory, the

reader learns that the narrator had several close calls in which she was left wondering if the virus is already inside of her body, while she frantically checks or is checked for symptoms. The first time she experiences this panic is after the death of her mother – “anxious doctors check[ed] my eyes for the symptoms” - and later “I checked my own face in the mirror, and my eyes were still clear,” after she woke to find her lover dead in the living room. These moments starkly illuminate the unknowability of porous bodies – infected vs. uninfected is not a clear dichotomy, and the narrator finds herself in the liminal space. Anxiety is inspired by the unknowability and invisibility of this threat – the disease can be represented in individuals, but the entity of the disease as a whole cannot be rendered. The virus is unseen, and it is impossible to know which moment or with whom might have been the moment of transmission. Alaimo elaborates that the fear of the porous body is rooted in the fact that “all that scary stuff, supposedly out there, is already within” (18).

In addition, there is combined culpability in endangerment – each time, her and her partner(s) are equally responsible for endangering themselves, but also equally responsible for endangering one another. Each instance of contact risks the reality that the external can become internal. More broadly, anyone who connects intimately with other people is both endangering themselves and those close to them with the threat of the virus. The fact that the narrative is consolidated only to those connections with others and does not focus on the in-between times foregrounds the importance of that connection. The characters

emerge only through contact with one another. Emergence between bodies (human, animal, planetary, and others) is a defining characteristic of the Anthropocene.

The human drive for intimacy and connection often overcomes fear in the face of our fragile bodies. In March 2020, global communities went into lockdown in order to combat the spread of COVID-19. National policies have shifted back and forth in the years since, some countries (like China) pushing for zero transmission rates while others (like the United States) have moved towards pretending that the threat of the virus has ceased to exist. The variously experienced agency, fear, and longing can be seen in the differences between policy and personal choice. At the beginning of the pandemic (and throughout), the internet provided a means of connection and communication, though there was a resounding loneliness as people who could afford to stayed home from work and friends alike. Young people eager to live their lives and find love lamented, and jokes arose about the risk of health and life after meeting strangers for intimacy – sexual or otherwise. The jokes ranged from pickup lines like “Let me take you out before Corona does,” to calls for anonymous “quarantine partners.” Dark humor reveals how the need for contact is worth the vulnerability that it implies. Even in isolation and with the looming presence of our mortality, humans want to create a narrative *with* one another. Where the need for isolation represents how humans are acted upon by the massive forces of both a pandemic and, on a smaller scale, governments, this dark humor demonstrates the desire of humans to act upon their own lives and the world – and humans – around them.

“Inventory” is prescient for its observation of what people are willing to risk for intimacy, including their ideological individuality. The reader participates in the anxiety of the narrator and the people included in the shifting “we.” This use of “we” refers, often, to the narrator and several other parties, but because of the somewhat anonymous nature of the narrator and the parties in the story represents a broader human experience. According to Monica Fludernik’s ideas about second-person narratives, the use of the “we” subject position in “Inventory” asks the reader to conscientiously enter the storyworld. Within it, the reader inhabits multiple tangible subject positions as the narrator and her companions. The reader embodies the experience of characters who are independently vulnerable to disease and collectively reaching out for connection. The threat and desire for intimacy can be extrapolated onto the danger of and reliance upon other humans as social and inventive creatures.

The text represents our codependence through the emergent nature of its characters. Stacy Alaimo comments on the ideological push to separate ourselves from the environment and those with whom we are codependent in one way or another: “Humanism, capitalist individualism, transcendent religions, and utilitarian conceptions of nature have labored to deny the rather biophysical, yet also commonsensical realization that we are permeable, emergent beings, reliant upon the others within and outside our porous border,” (Alaimo 156). The rise of neoliberal individualism labors under the idea that humans can exist in a vacuum, separate from other people; moreover, it values this

isolation. Our vulnerable, porous bodies are insistent, inescapable reminders of our place *with/in* the web of beings. The human narrative and the larger narrative of the virus are made apparent through relationships – neither would exist independently. Breaking down the myth of discrete individuality allows us to view our position in the Anthropocene more truthfully, incorporating permeability into our understanding of ourselves and the dangers and necessities of the world around us.

In his article about the Anthropocene ecoGothic, Simon Estok delves into human discomfort with unclear boundaries. He argues that slime is prevalent in the Gothic and horror because it is both a site of disgust and of desire. It stands in for our fear of mortality and decay while also representing sexual and intimate desire – ideas that are deeply entwined. Our bodies that we strive to maintain as separate from the world are actually “under constant threat from the ravages of age, disease, predators, environment, and a host of other dangers” (27). While “Inventory” does not directly deal in slime as such, it does deal with bodily fluids that represent a threat to the myth of the non-porous body. As the location of contact shifts and the people change, the virus threatens the individual narrator. She comments on a woman that she married and later divorced; “I’m still not sure if I was with her because I wanted to be or because I was afraid of what the world was catching all around us” (Machado 45). The tension in the narrator’s reflection on her relationship displays the double-bind of individuality: the narrator desires to *exist* in a way that only emerges through intimacy, but fears disappearing from the vulnerabilities that intimacy

entails. Even as the virus remains at the forefront, there are also reminders of mortality and aging. One man, “Gray eyes again,” comments “‘When I met you,’ [...] ‘you were so fucking young’” (46). Even as the narrator escapes the virus and writes anxious lists, decay is inevitable.

Discussions of sex and death – sex and the virus – collide and collapse one another. The narrator and one man have sex – “he was reverent and too gentle” – and in the next sentence, he tells her how he walked through Chicago, where “they had stopped bothering to dispose of the bodies after a while” (47). The narrator does not describe the decomposition because she does not need to. The reader can conjure thousands of dead bodies in their imagination more effectively than the narrator can describe. Even the mention of the horror, though, arouses the question of just how close the danger is – slime and decay are sticky concepts whereby even the mention of them (or disease) can bring the eerie feeling that it may be present. The remnants – mental or physical – travel easily and invisibly from person to person. The distance between the characters and the virus – the characters and death – is inscrutable: “I asked him how far behind the virus was, really, and he said he did not know” (44). The narrator wants the virus to be encapsulated more simply than the amorphous reality – the virus, functionally a hyper-object, is invisible and tiny but also massive and dispersed. Much like slime and disease “threatens and enables our sense of corporeal identity,” the reality of connecting and existing with others in “Inventory” and in the world entails embracing vulnerable, permeable bodies and minds (Estok 27).

Imaginative Transcorporeality and Collaborative World-Building

Understanding ourselves in terms of imaginative and bodily transcorporeality allows us to assess our agency and make accommodations for what we may or may not be able to control – our daily survival and intimacy – while also understanding our individual and collective responsibility to one another. The representation of intimacy and disease in “Inventory” embodies transcorporeality in a manner illustrative of the Anthropocene.

We participate in narratives by blending our experiences and conscious processes with the storyworld represented in a text. Whereas Stacy Alaimo’s bodily transcorporeality facilitates comprehension of permeable bodies intra-acting within the environment and allows us to assess our physical vulnerability, imaginative transcorporeality affords knowledge of collaborative and individual agency in world-formation. Imaginative transcorporeality is our collaborative construction of worlds, story and real, through, between, and with other minds. Acknowledging the construction of narrative as such also draws attention to how people collaborate in the formation of the real world and invites people to do so conscientiously.

Collective agency is a slippery concept; environmental justice scholars such as Rob Nixon, Dina Gilio-Whitaker, Giovanna di Clairo, and Kyle Whyte (amongst others) emphasize the varying degrees of culpability amongst different groups of humans for ecological damage and the advent of the Anthropocene and climate change. There are certain privileged groups – whether that be wealthy CEOs, highly industrialized nations or oil oligarchs – that maintain more responsibility for increasing negative ecological impacts that in turn disproportionately affect the poor, working class, people in developing nations, and people of color. “Humans” are not a homogenous group and they do not maintain

homogenous effect. In “Whose Anthropocene? A Response” Dipesh Chakrabarty addresses this, noting that “climate change would only accentuate the inequities of the global capitalist order,” as impacts fall to the poor (Chakrabarty 107). However, most people exist in the in-between of culpability and vulnerability; the majority of citizens in developed nations, for example, have a level of individual agency while still being unable to escape global capitalism.

Toggling between “we” and “I” invites the reader to acknowledge the subjectivity of the singular narrator and participate in the collective behavior of the “we” – both interpersonally, wherein the ‘we’ is a small group of individuals acting together, and the collective experiential ‘we’ – that is participating in and responding to the crises of the Anthropocene. This introduces a necessary double subject position – even triple – as the reader navigates the different occupancy zones of the narration that mimic the reality of placing oneself in the varied scales of the Anthropocene.

Several scholars have theorized the ‘we’ narrative, but Natalia Bekhta defines it very particularly as “narratives in which collective subjectivity defines the dominant mode of narration” (166). She provides context for other forms of ‘we’ narration in which the ‘we’ functions necessarily to represent multiple individuals as well as thematically significant movement between ‘we’ and ‘I’ narration. The story opens and moves quickly between perspectives: “One boy, one girl. My friends. We drank stolen wine coolers in my room, on the vast expanse of my bed. We laughed and talked and passed around the bottles” (41). I argue that this thematic significance in alternating between these two is an effective representation of the

Anthropocene. Straddling the line between those two – a ‘we’ that isn’t perfectly subjective and is inconstant in the narrative – heightens the reader’s awareness of these different but simultaneous experiences.

“Inventory” does not meet Bekhta’s qualifications for a we-narrative – technically, it falls to the coincidental use of the “we” term to refer to the narrator plus one or more others. However, because of the style of the text – both the straightforward, rather dry narration as well as the listed format of the story – the context indicates that the “we” moves beyond simply being indicative. Each use of “we,” no matter how benign, recalls the combined danger of being intimate or participating in a “we.” This is clear when the narrator and “One woman. Brunette. A former CDC employee” discuss the dangers of the virus after endangering one another: “she curled up next to me and we drifted off” (43). Because of the format, the “we” constantly shifts – each inventory entry represents the intimacy of the narrator with one or more other people, different in (nearly) every entry. I discuss later the impact of the varying levels of intimacy between the individual narrator and the other characters and groups represented, as the discussion of intimacy includes both imaginative and bodily transcorporeality.

Narratologist Monica Fludernik writes specifically about the use of the second-person narrative as it gains the audience’s participation. “Inventory” accomplishes some of the same things Fludernik praises in second-person narration through “we” narration, primarily that it “undermines [the] story-discourse dichotomy by the nonnaturalness of [its]

design [...] Whereas the typical story-telling mode allows the reader to sit back and enjoy a narrative of another's tribulations [...] second-person texts (even if only initially) breach this convention of distance, seemingly involving the real reader within the textual world" (Fludernik). The movement from enjoying another's tribulations to that vulnerability being written onto one's own body is essential for humans' understanding of themselves as interwebbed physical, mental, and imaginative beings. By involving readers in the textual world, they are made vulnerable to the realities and ideas in that world – readers, as all beings, are permeable. This breach of convention is essential to recognizing imaginative transcorporeality. By utilizing "we" instead of "you," the reader participates simultaneously in collective and individual agency instead of solo responsibility. This is a way in which narratives can call *in* their audience instead of calling them *out*.

In "Inventory," the narrator is both the "I" and the "we," but the "we" functions on two different levels. The "I" often gives the subjective emotional state of the narrator – "I worried about daddy long legs," or "I was nervous, excited" (Machado 41). On one level, the use of "we" references multiple characters acting in tandem and demonstrating the easy shift between singular and collective behavior and connection – "We lay down," and "We ate pancakes" (41-2). On a different level, the "we" broadens to the species level or at least the community level – particularly when they are acting as both victim of the plague that is sweeping the US and as spectators, gathered together to watch the news. "We watched as the newscaster blinked away and was replaced with a list of symptoms of the virus

blossoming a state away” (43). The narration functions the same, but within the storyworld’s context it expands the role of the “we” – they do not simply *act* together - they *witness* together. The ambiguity of the subjective “I” allows the reader to move freely between the different styles of narration. More, not only is the narrator unnamed, but so too are all of the other individuals that appear. Each section is marked only by the number and gender of the individual referenced – “One boy, one girl,” “One man,” or “One woman,” broadening the scope of the implied “we” not just to individuals but asking the reader to perform the cognitive work of substituting in the possible “One man” or “One woman” (41-2).

The text emphasizes the subjectivity and change of narrative referent by its frequency in the text. Nearly every sentence (aside from those beginning each entry) begins with a pronoun – primarily “I” or “we.” This draws attention to the fluctuation and tasks the reader with oscillating between experiential levels. The oscillating subject position is not the only technique that hails the audience’s participation in the text. The narrative space created by the list format requires the reader to fill in broad gaps between events. This form – either as a list or a series of vignettes – has been used with success by other texts, including Jenny Offill’s *Weather*. While *Weather* is a novel as opposed to a short story and has a higher degree of narrativity than “Inventory,” it still encapsulates the gaps in narration. The text is arranged as a series of disparate paragraphs that can be understood to be in chronological order because of narrative conventions that assume a text is linear if

it isn't explicitly structured in a different way. The author has discussed moving around individual pieces when creating the novel; the reader is then tasked with the work of connecting the pieces and filling in the events in between each vignette.

The low-narrativity of "Inventory" introduces more "gaps" for the reader to collaborate within – both in the narrative space in between entries where the reader must supply background information and in the horrors of the text that the narrator chooses not to describe. In "Stories and Minds: Cognitive Approaches to Literary Narrative" Lars Bernearts elaborates upon the importance of "gaps" in narrative cognition. Gaps are blank spaces in narration that "not only require an additional effort of the reader but also *enable* him or her to see something else and to make new narrative connections" (Berneart 2). This *enabling* emphasizes that the reader collaborates in constructing the storyworld, whereas in higher-narrativity texts with more description the reader may convince themselves that the storyworld is formed entirely by the author.

The stylistic gaps in "Inventory" cue the reader in more, instead of less, to the fact that it is fiction. As Berneart notes, "the interpretation of narratives depends on the absence of information and on discrepancies between the reader's knowledge and the knowledge possessed by narrators and characters" (3). The narrator in "Inventory" provides very specific information – that of intimate relationships – which requires the reader to fill in the knowledge both between events but also outside of the scope of the narration. This forces the reader to participate in imaginative transcorporeality *consciously* and the cognitive

practice provides a framework in which readers can then participate in the formation of the real world.

The reader occupies the position of the first-person narrator as an audience being told a narrative but also as the writer of the list through character identification. The audience is the “we” of the narrator and the other intimate party. The audience is the “we” that witnesses the expansion of Anthropocene impacts in the form of the spreading virus. The idea of the “we” also embraces the shared vulnerability of the parties who are emergent in their contact with one another. The narrative space in between the inventory entries works *with* the deictic shift of the reader to the storyworld; they must construct the in-betweens in order to interpret the overall narrative arc of the story. In between each entry is an ellipsis in storytelling. The regularity of the ellipses that appear in between each entry - paired with the irregularity, or ambiguous and varied differences in ellipsis length - contributes to what Gerard Genette refers to as “increasing discontinuity in the narrative” (Genette 30). This discontinuity requires more cognitive work from the audience.

Both the changing subject position and the low-narrativity in “Inventory” encourage the audience to be aware of their role in collaborating on storyworld formation. The inhabitation of multiple subject positions encourages the audience to think more broadly and consider their various roles in the Anthropocene. Imaginative corporeality is the movement of ideas and collaborative world-building processed between, through, and within minds. (This is not to make the difference between imaginative and physical

transcorporeality one of mind/body dualism, an idea undermined by transcorporeality itself. Rather, the difference lies in the cognitive process before and as it is translated into imagined worlds, fictional or potentially real.)

“Inventory”, then, is a model of active imaginative transcorporeality in literature. The story provides readers the opportunity to grapple with their physical vulnerability in the context of a narrative that they actively participate in forming. Imaginative transcorporeality is a process that we can engage in intentionally in order to develop stronger frameworks for collective agency in the face of massive, anxiety-inducing forces in the Anthropocene.

Conclusion

At the end of “Inventory,” the narrator is driven to further isolation from others as a last result following the spread of the ever-present virus. The list itself is one among many in attempt to remind the narrator of their connections to other people – “Every teacher since preschool. [...] Every home I’ve ever lived in. Every person I’ve ever loved. Every person who has probably loved me” (49). Even isolated from other people, on a small island living out of a tent, the threat of the virus looms – “I keep thinking I can see the virus blooming on the horizon like a sunrise” (49). Much like the virus in this story or the reality of living within and through the Anthropocene and climate change, extreme weather events, widespread disease and the COVID-19 pandemic, within our human bodies,

imaginative and bodily transcorporeality is inescapable. In the face of climate change and global disease, we must decide how to tell the story, not whether or not to tell it.

The imaginative process is as permeable as the physical bounds of the body. We participate in this transmission when we perceive the world, exchange ideas, and read narratives. Stories in the Anthropocene must represent a doubled experience in more than one context – the simultaneous agency and vulnerability of being both individual and part of a collective, and existing imaginatively both in the real and the constructed worlds. In turn, we must understand ourselves not just as bodies in relationship with other bodies, animate and otherwise, but as minds in collaboration writing our collective experience of the Anthropocene. This is necessary to find balance between agency and vulnerability. Anti-humanist rhetoric that asserts that the world will be a better place after humans have vanished and its opposite, blind optimism both surrender to individualism and deny our place within the collective. If we cannot represent and embody these experiences, we are in serious trouble – in order to create a future, we must first imagine it. How will we imagine and build a future that we cannot identify or place ourselves in?

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION
“THERE AIN’T NOTHIN’ TO DO BUT FINISH OUR STORY”:
FLOURISHING IN DESOLATED LANDSCAPES

In the Anthropocene, an age partly defined by human impacts and human stories – both positive and dangerous – there is no idyllic past in which human actions are divorced from their consequences. As a species and within our communities, we must look to the future and imagine – and re-imagine – what we are capable of as individuals, communities, and global citizens. Yet new futures cannot be created out of nothing – they must and should be composed from the re-constituted remnants of our complicated past and present. The mistakes and violences of the past cannot be erased, nor should they be forgotten. A future in which we travel onwards toward repaired relationships with our fellow creatures (which, yes, includes other humans as well) relies upon our ability to integrate our damaged and beloved worlds into our future. Healing takes time. These stories need to be formed and reformed continuously. In Thomas King’s novel *The Back of the Turtle*, collaborative visions of the future emerge from human and more-than-human storytelling to heal ravaged environments. In the narrative, together multiple beings – people, animals, and spirits - create new stories through the salvage of destroyed worlds in an act of continuous becoming.

In *The Back of the Turtle*, Indigenous cosmologies and Judeo-Christian ideologies amongst multitude other cosmologies of creation and re-creation come together for redemption, collaboration, and generation. Gabriel Quinn, an Anishinaabe geneticist, travels to “Samaritan Bay” and the “Smoke River Reservation” to commit suicide because of the guilt he feels for his role in “The Ruin,” wherein “GreenSweep,” a chemical defoliant he designed, destroyed the environment and killed most of the community that lived there, including his own estranged mother and sister. The relationship of all beings in this place is made weird by The Ruin – the

people who lived there are killed through contact with the land and the environment is stripped of life. The landscape is desolate. Gabriel sees the bones of the beings killed in the Ruin as he walks by the creek: “everywhere he looked, everywhere he walked... these bones were different... they lay out on the ground where the creatures had died, one minute alive, the next minute dead, the fall of the creek drowning out the weeping” (403). Environmental violence defamiliarizes the survivors with the land, requiring not only new life to appear, but also the creation of new relationships and understandings of what it means to *be* within the place; in other words, how to form relationships both with other humans and with other beings to create a community in which all not only survive, but *thrive*.

Instead of drowning in his suicide attempt, Gabriel rescues people that appear from the waves: “a hand thrust out of the water, then an arm... and then a pool of black hair, floating around a child’s face” (7). The magical appearance of people in the waves is one of many moments of creation – it turns out that the girl is not alone: “suddenly the sea was alive with people” (9). As Gabriel pulls each one from the waves, he wonders if he summoned them as “a new beginning,” but in his state of exhaustion, the people disappear as though they were a dream. Immediately following this, Gabriel meets Mara, an artist who returned to the Bay after the death of her family, and Nicholas Crisp, a beyond-human man, a trickster (and maybe more) who knows the future and oversees the story of creation. He opens the novel with predictions of what is to come: “... So it would begin” (1).^{[SBE[1]]} The ushering-in of creation recurs throughout the novel – the events are always beginning, always anew.

The events in the novel arise from destruction, but the characters continuously recreate existence in the desolated Bay and reservation, demonstrating the ability of humans and other beings to collaboratively create new possibilities. Gabriel observes that he “destroy[s] worlds,”

but the audience's introduction to him complicates this understanding because of Gabriel's act of salvation. The recollections of Gabriel's role in *The Ruin* are broken up with the continuous revival of the present, and, as it always is, the past is entangled within the future. The importance of storytelling recurs throughout the novel, particularly *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, from which the novel gets its title when she ultimately builds the world on from dirt on the back of the turtle. The storytelling that they participate in mirrors the larger narrative that they are creating in which they discover new ways to live and build that world, one handful of mud at a time.

The Back of the Turtle demonstrates both the healing powers of narrative and how it can be used maliciously. Outside of the Bay, the power of narrative in the hands of corporate power engenders and simultaneously distorts environmental disaster. The CEO of Domidion, the company that employed Gabriel, spreads false narratives to hide the violence of the corporation's conduct. Following yet another dangerous chemical spill, Domidion sends footage of a cleanup to popular news outlets, despite knowing "that the equipment and the trucks were mostly for show" because the "dioxins and heavy metals were already on the bottom of the river," where they would remain to poison the beings living with it. (An event that has an eerie resonance through time, including in this modern moment with the train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio.) The CEO of Domidion reassures himself that "it was a good show;" after all, the corporation needed time to "tell their side of the story" (410). Despite many world-endings on the part of this corporation, they assert their right to tell their story and obscure their cruelty. Narrative is an ambiguous tool that can be used in service of violence, which is what makes it equally powerful when used to create and heal.

The choice to create, even after apocalyptic devastation and tragedy in the novel, is profound. Despite the grief associated with all of the empty houses on the reservation, Mara, Gabriel, Crisp, and all of the beings repopulating the area are able to collaboratively create the future. The community generates hope through storytelling, something Gabriel sorely lacks at the beginning of the novel, fresh from his job at Domidion. Gabriel struggles to connect with others through his guilt; as Mara wonders at his behavior, she thinks that “maybe he didn’t have a community,” and goes on to reflect that “People weren’t single, autonomous entities. They were part of a larger organism” (189). Healthy futures do not emerge from single entities -- the hierarchical narrative enforced by Domidion proves this. Gabriel does not heal himself or his relationships in isolation. Mara reflects on her own interconnectivity: “When [Mara’s] mother and grandmother were alive, [she] had flourished. Now that they were dead, she was diminished” (189). Mara and Gabriel both hold emotional trauma that makes it difficult and messy for them to form community relationships with others, but they persist through the gritty, unpleasant parts of connection and re-creation.

Despite the mystery from which they emerge at the beginning of the narrative, the people that Gabriel pulls from the water are not magical, but shipwrecked refugees struggling from an industrial tanker marooned in the ocean to survival on the shore. Several families survive in the empty homes on the reservation before they are noticed and the community begins to return, one person or being at a time. Crisp returns stored items to the homes on the reserve in order to imbue the place and the people with new life. Mara moves back into her family home on the reservation, the genesis of new possibilities as she continues to paint portraits of the people killed in the Ruin. And Sonny, a small child wandering the scene, builds a biblical tower of shining bone and wire to “call them all home” (478).

Destruction in the novel and in the world makes it feel as though the future, too, has been destroyed – our ways of understanding the world in the past have been yanked out from underneath us. “But what if you lost everything?” Mara asks, then answers: “You could start again... You could move forward, find new opportunities, cultivate new relationships” (190). In healed futures, there must be space held for grief as well as for hope – grief is love for what has been lost and irrevocably changed. If humans are to create anything from what they lose in the wake of environmental violence, they must work through and with the pain.

In this way, the novel argues that the future will not arise shiny and new on its own – the future will be familiar because of how it is built from pieces of the present. Humans use storytelling as a tool, as art, as a way to understand how we exist—and can exist—in the world. Storytelling permeates our lives. The ability to identify not only the stories that no longer serve us, but to create new ones, relies on our participation and our willingness to elevate and include the voices of others. An equitable world arises not from a singular voice but from many. In this way, stories of environmental destruction are necessary to grapple with the repercussions of human impacts, but they can also provide blueprints so that we can learn how to live and thrive in this damaged world, not simply survive. In an era increasingly defined by destruction, hope is necessary for re-creating the future. Towards the end of the novel, the humans gather on the beach to watch as a sea turtle lays her eggs - the first return of wildlife to the damaged bay since *The Ruin*. Regardless of the difficulties in repopulating this desolate place, everyone gathers with hope -- yes, for perhaps a difficult, but also rewarding, future.

Throughout this thesis, I explore what it means to be a citizen locally and globally in the Anthropocene, when agencies beyond comprehension rewrite our daily realities and determine, in part, how we are able to connect to one another. As discussed in Chapter 2, weird feeling

emerges from this disruption of agency as humans attempt to survive in relation with our environment. The places where weird feeling emerges most prominently are rich with clues as to what parts of our relationships to each other and to place have been lost, transformed, and damaged through both the forces of climate change but also through malicious human and corporate agencies. Through moments of diagnosis, we as humans in the Anthropocene can find paths to understanding what has been irrevocably altered and how we can heal and transform those relationships for the future. Irrevocable alteration means that the relationship can never be what it once was - or what we fantasized that it was.

Using storyworlds to practice multi-level cognition of our roles in the Anthropocene can help us to envision, understand, and actively participate in not only storytelling, but also in the creation of reality, of lived experience. Humans as a whole species cannot go back, especially not to a false past. As Nicholas Crisp tells the audience of *The Back of the Turtle*: “there ain’t nothing to do but finish our story” (227). Coming to an understanding that the future is not already determined forces an imaging of divergent futures in which human participation as full citizens of the world is required, including an acknowledgement of all the messy and delicious entanglements humans have with the world.

The work of rebuilding, reconnecting, and recreating is hard. Through the beauty of Thomas King’s novel, there is pain, misunderstanding, and loneliness as the characters attempt to muddle their way through new ways of being. The dominant Western culture that enacts ecological violence and disturbed relationships with the environment and with our fellow beings is not the only option, though this ideology of control inherently tries to write off other ways of being as fantasy. Healing relationships in a world desolated by ideologies of domination requires

struggle. By creating collaborative visions of the future, humans can move forward towards healthy relationships with both the beautiful and damaged parts of the world.

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