

# Beyond “the Obligatory Note of Hope”: Buddhism, Ecology, and Affect in the Everyday Anthropocene Novel

An Ethics of Care, Shifting Spaces, and Enchanting Ordinary Matter

Word count: 24,808

Edith Declercq

Student number: 01710050

Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Marco Caracciolo and Shannon Lambert

A dissertation submitted to Ghent University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English Linguistics and Literature

Academic year: 2020 – 2021

## Preface

Ever since Covid, I have become increasingly interested in ecology. I felt an urgency to work on something that could contribute to this large project of re-imagining our world under circumstances that would only grow more uncertain as climate disaster—viruses, draughts, floods, fires, species extinction—increases. However, this also meant that I had to explore a completely new way of looking at the world by delving into sources on ecology, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, econarratology, affect theory, New Materialism, and—as I discovered early on—Buddhism that I had not encountered before throughout my Bachelor's program. Luckily, I had a dedicated promotor at my side who encouraged me along the way and was always quick to respond to my questions, whether they were practical or complex and philosophical. Thank you for your guidance, feedback and kind words, Marco. I also had a stellar co-promotor. Thank you, Shannon, for your insightful feedback and your enthusiasm about ecofeminism, New Materialism, and the other philosophies I explored in this paper. Both of you helped me look at the world in different, inspiring ways.

The writing process was rocky at times, especially because writing about new philosophies in English is no easy feat if it is not your native language. But I was lucky to have the unwavering support of my parents. Thank you so much mom and dad. I could genuinely not have done this without you two. I also want to thank my brother, the friends who encouraged and helped me along the way, the supportive fellow students of the writing seminar, and prof. Stef Craps whose course on Imagining Climate Change helped me look at this dissertation in a new light. I believe that we need the humanities to cope with the emotional, spiritual, and psychological strain that climate change causes. In my case, reading and writing about these inspiring new works of literature has made me feel seen and validated as a person struggling to deal with the uncertainties and complexities of climate change herself. I hope this paper proves how useful literature can be in bridging the large gap between the cold, scientific facts, on the one hand, and our personal, everyday struggles in the Anthropocene, on the other hand.

## Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>2. The Dark Side of Ethical Care: Interdependence and the Mesh</b> .....	<b>16</b>
2.1. <i>Interdependence and Ecological Ethics</i> .....	16
2.1.1. The Mesh and Dark Ecology .....	22
2.1.2. Rethinking an Ethics of Care .....	23
2.2. <i>The Dark Side of Care in the Everyday Anthropocene Novel</i> .....	25
2.2.1. <i>Arcadia</i> : The Danger of Attentive (Non-)Human Care.....	25
2.2.2. <i>Weather</i> : From Parental Care to Enmeshed Acts of Care .....	28
2.2.3. Conclusion: Enmeshed Acts of Care .....	34
<b>3. Shifting Identities: The Non-Self, Space, and Story</b> .....	<b>36</b>
3.1. <i>Deconstructing the Fixed Self: The Ecological Self and the Non-Self</i> .....	37
3.2. <i>Self, Space and Story in the Everyday Anthropocene Novel</i> .....	40
3.2.1. <i>Arcadia</i> : Nature, Beauty, and the Non-Self.....	40
3.2.1.1. Losing the Arcadian Utopia .....	41
3.2.1.2. Losing Helle, Finding Astonishments of Helle .....	47
3.2.2. <i>Weather</i> : Anthropocene Anxiety and the Non-Self .....	49
3.2.2.1. Anthropocene Anxiety and the Deconstructed Self.....	50
3.2.2.2. Anthropocene Anxiety and Displacement.....	51
3.2.2.3. "Learning to Die": Not a No-Body, but an Any-Body .....	55
3.2.3. Conclusion: Spatial Selves .....	57
<b>4. (Dis-)Enchanting Ordinary Matter: Rebirth and Impermanence</b> .....	<b>59</b>
4.1. <i>Rebirth and Animistic Materialism</i> .....	62
4.2. <i>Rebirth in the Everyday Anthropocene Novel</i> .....	64
4.2.1. <i>Weather</i> : Rebirth as a Hybrid Ethics of Compassion .....	64
4.2.2. <i>Arcadia</i> : Rebirth as a Moment of Everyday Enchantment .....	67
4.3. <i>Images of History and the Affirmation of the Ordinary</i> .....	68
4.4. <i>Historical Materialism and the Buddhist Affirmation of Ordinary Matter</i> .....	69
4.5. <i>Images of History in the Everyday Anthropocene Novel</i> .....	71
4.5.1. <i>Arcadia</i> : The Extraordinary Affirmation of Slow, Ordinary Life .....	71
4.5.2. <i>Weather</i> : The Nonhuman Experience: Beyond the Rational and Sacral .....	75
4.6. <i>Defamiliarization in the Everyday Anthropocene Novel</i> .....	77
4.6.1. Conclusion: (Dis-)Enchanting Nonhuman Matter .....	79
<b>5. Conclusion</b> .....	<b>81</b>
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	<b>84</b>

## 1. Introduction

*Ecology isn't just about global warming, recycling, and solar power—and also not just to do with everyday relationships between humans and nonhumans. It has to do with love, loss, despair, and compassion. It has to do with depression and psychosis. It has to do with capitalism and with what might exist after capitalism. It has to do with amazement, open-mindedness, and wonder. It has to do with doubt, confusion, and skepticism. It has to do with concepts of space and time. It has to do with consciousness and awareness. It has to do with ideology and critique. It has to do with reading and writing. It has to do with race, class, and gender. It has to do with sexuality. It has to do with society. It has to do with coexistence.*

— Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*

When it comes to climate change, there is a gap between our knowledge of the scientific facts and our emotional and ethical engagement with the issue in our everyday lives, where we are often hesitant to think about and feel climate change more deeply and prefer it to remain a peripheral presence in our minds. This psychological mechanism is referred to as 'splitting' and it is also the reason why climate denial is still prevalent, even though we have 'hard' rational proof for climate change's existence as popular psychological works such as George Marshall's *Don't Even Think About It* explain (Kerridge 365). Splitting allows us to react defensively or evasively to the didactic, even accusatory tone of public environmentalist discourse. On top of that, and as the main character of Jenny Offill's *Weather* Lizzie Benson shrewdly points out: "Environmentalists [and their rhetoric] are so dreary" (50). So, a familiar response to another lecture on ham sandwiches and the intelligence of cows and pigs by environmentalist activists might be to resort to irony and say, "Who asked you anyway?" (Offill 17). One could also make a more abstract remark on street activism to avoid having to engage more deeply with these statements, such as "people will lecture you about anything these days" (Offill 17). These responses might not

show a keen sense of engagement with the issue, but they are often funnier and more relatable than the moralizing, didactic environmentalist rhetoric. Irony and other 'bad' environmentalist affects, such as anxiety and horror tend to be neglected in public environmentalist discourse even though they characterize what thinking (or avoiding to think) about climate change is like for a lot of people (Seymour 25).

What is interesting, however, about 'bad' environmentalist affects is that many individuals already experience them to a certain degree—even if they are in denial. Affects are singular preconscious bodily responses that are perceived as personal and subjective in the western world, but they have a public and objective "social, historical, and therefore shared dimension" as well because changes in our political, social, and natural surroundings trigger them (Greenwald Smith "Postmodernism" 429, 423). While these western dichotomies between the subjective and the objective, and the private and the public are usually intact when we experience 'big' feelings, such as happiness, or anger, 'ugly' or 'bad' environmentalist affects typically resist conscious emotional codification and easy narrativization, thus undermining these dyadic boundaries of western culture (Clark "EG" 71, Ngai 22). In other words, 'bad' environmentalist affects' status as subjectively felt, but objectively engendered affects makes them inherently subversive. Subsequently, these affects create a state of interconnection and radical receptivity in our minds. A similar subversion of western dichotomies is found in Buddhist thinking, which centralizes interdependence in its ethics. One such divide that Buddhist philosophy erodes, is that between the human and the nonhuman. Consequently, affect theory and Buddhism could contribute to the creation of an ecological ethics that centralizes how both nonhuman and human entities are living interconnected lives—which is the foundation of ecological thinking according to Timothy Morton—and could replace western anthropocentrism (4).

For my thesis, I want to operationalize this transformative potential of affects and Buddhist thinking to show how a non-normative narrative about affective thinking on climate change can work against the splitting mechanism, which rigidly enforces the boundary between public and private discourses. It is my contention that effective and sustained emotional and ethical engagement with climate change issues also requires exposure to fictional ecological discourses that do not restrict themselves to the declamatory “obligatory note of hope” of many scientific articles and podcasts or the doom and gloom of popular “apocalypse porn” movies (Offill 67, Theriault & Mitchell 27). These narratives focus on emotional extremes and fail to take into account the spectrum of feelings that ethical thinking about climate change issues entails. In other words, thinking ‘the ecological thought’ is a slow, sustained, trial-and-error “process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings” that does not just manifest itself emotionally and spiritually as the sudden realization that we should either remain hopeful or that all is lost, yet it is often portrayed as such in popular environmentalist rhetoric (Morton 7). And who better to fill this gap in sustained affective and ethical thinking on climate change than the environmental humanities?

As Robert Nixon discerns, the environmental humanities can foster “new ways of thinking and feeling” about the planet that could bridge the gap between the public discourse of scientific facts on climate change and our everyday lives. This is necessary because the Anthropocene requires new ethical thinking (Hamilton 155).<sup>1</sup> However, one of

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘Anthropocene’ to refer to the unit of geologic time that describes the period in Earth’s history when certain human activity started to have a detrimental effect on the planet’s climate and ecosystems. Although I use this general term, I do not claim all of humanity has had the same share in the destruction of the Earth’s climate, which would be a pitfall of the Anthropocene idea as Nixon acknowledges. In fact, this thesis will study how both novels unveil and subvert the dualistic thinking of the specific oppressive colonialist, capitalist, and patriarchal systems that have largely been the cause of anthropogenic climate change.

the aims of my research is to point out that the ways of thinking and feeling that we encounter in cli-fi are not necessarily 'new', but oftentimes they are considered to be new because they do not belong to the dominant mode of thinking and feeling in the contemporary western world. In the two everyday Anthropocene novels I explore in this thesis, for instance, we find many Buddhist concepts that resemble and add to 'new' ecological concepts in western critical theory. This is no coincidence, because the foundation of contemporary Buddhist ethics involves becoming attuned to the interconnectedness of our existence with nonhuman and human beings as I mentioned above (McMahan 150-151, 4). David McMahan tracks the advent of the contemporary 'hybrid' Buddhist mode in his *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (2009). He states that the contemporary Buddhist mode is a fluid mode of Buddhist modernism which is a hybrid of Protestantism, scientific rationalism, and Romanticism (242). I will refer to this strand of Buddhism as contemporary or modern Buddhism and in this paper, I will show how contemporary Buddhism, ecology, and 'bad' environmentalist affects shape the ecological thinking of the main characters in the everyday Anthropocene novels analyzed in this thesis.

My focus will be on two works of fiction that could be categorized as *everyday Anthropocene novels*, which is a term I based off Stephanie LeMenager's view on the project of the Anthropocene novel, which is:

a project of paying close attention to what it means to live through climate shift, moment by moment, in individual, fragile bodies. It is at best a project of reinventing the everyday as a means of paying attention and preparing, collectively, a project of staying home and, in a sense distant from settler-colonialist mentalities, making home of a broken world. (225-226)

Because I want to distinguish a particular mode of cli-fi that is not concerned with heroic action-packed events, I refer to the novels I discuss as *everyday* Anthropocene novels, since they primarily focus on and reinvent ordinary life. I have distinguished three other characteristics of the everyday Anthropocene novel that LeMenager touches upon in this excerpt and I will dedicate one chapter of this paper to each of them. I want to explore how these types of novels (1) show a heightened awareness of our interconnected existence with other species, (2) detail how climate change causes shifts in our surroundings which impact our bodies and sense of self, and (3) explore a new temporality, namely that of the impermanent moment. LeMenager also suggests that a novel does not have to be marketed as cli-fi or mention the words 'climate change' to be an everyday Anthropocene novel since cli-fi is a "novelistic mode", not a genre (222). Moreover, Richard Kerridge notes that such realistic novels on our everyday struggles in the Anthropocene are hard to find even though they tend to be the novelistic mode that is "best equipped to explore people's current reactions and evasions (such as 'splitting')" (374). Instead, a lot of ecocritical scholars and writers seem to think that the power of literature lies in its ability to imagine a climate changed future "and make it seem real" so they can bring "its implications for ourselves and others home to readers" (Goodbody 321). However, this implies that cli-fi only has a didactic purpose and it neglects how impactful a narrative on the struggle of thinking climate change in our everyday lives can be that does not aim to be didactic. For instance, the funny and relatable examples of reactions to climate change activism I mentioned earlier come from *Weather* by American novelist Jenny Offill. In this paper I argue that everyday Anthropocene novels like Offill's are an important strand of cli-fi, which is why I will study it alongside *Arcadia* (2011) written by American novelist and main contributor to the Greenpeace Climate Visionaries Project, Lauren Groff.

*Weather* is an experimental work of fiction in which Lizzie, the protagonist, narrates her everyday experiences using a fragmented and dense narrative style. At first, Lizzie tries to balance caring for her drug-addicted brother with taking care of her son and being a librarian. Her attitude towards climate change is mostly one of neglect as the quotes above show, because she already has so many people to care for. When Sylvia, Lizzie's former academic mentor, asks her to answer emails with questions about her podcast on climate change, Lizzie starts thinking about climate change more deeply, until the topic eventually takes over her everyday thoughts and feelings, so that ultimately every utterance in the novel resonates on various scales of experience and distinctions between private and public discourse are challenged. Moreover, this fragmented structure also points to a post-structuralist breakdown of the unified self. However, to do so Offill does not "need to deconstruct ordinary language, and thus its dependency on forbiddingly dense, technical and alien linguistic formations, far removed from the idiom and conventional narrative structure of personal experience" as Kerridge believes is the risk of ecocritical avant-garde, such as New Materialist and post-structuralist experimental narratives (369). *Weather* as an everyday Anthropocene novel shows how complex linguistic formations are not alien and not even inorganically dense, but central to the multivocal, enmeshed everyday conversations and experiences that continuously break down and rebuild Lizzie's identity. Thus, it dismantles the idea that theoretically dense narratives cannot draw from experiential and affective experience (Kerridge 369). I will be comparing *Weather's* focus on the affective, everyday experience and its Buddhist exploration of the complexity of ordinary life to the interaction with Buddhism, ecology and affect in Groff's *Arcadia*.

*Arcadia* (2011) tracks protagonist Bit's experiences as he grows up in a 1960s hippie commune named after the pastoral utopia Arcadia. He is a small, imaginative boy who feels

at home in the commune, but as he grows older, the commune changes, passes its heyday and eventually disappears. Bit goes to live in New York, gives photography lessons, marries but loses the love of his life, Helle, and raises his daughter Grete. The narrative takes on a dystopian tone as climate disasters strike, such as a now eerily familiar virus. While this is happening, Bit takes care of his mother Hannah who eventually passes away. This is a less experimental work of fiction than *Weather*, but it similarly deals with the affective impact of climate change and our changing surroundings in general on our identity. Through the hippie commune, Groff reflects on the hope for a future of peaceful co-existence with nature and how this is difficult to maintain in the face of dystopian climate disaster.

Because these novels deal with the emotional and psychological implications of the strain that thinking climate change causes, studying them could fill the gap in affective and ethical explorations of the consequences of climate change in environmentalist rhetoric. Moreover, a discussion of two novels that belong to the genre of the everyday Anthropocene novel could add to the study of more realistic narratives set primarily in the present day (and in a truthful version of the past) which is a genre that tends to be backgrounded in favor of novels that are set in a (radically) climate changed future. Lastly, the interaction with Buddhist concepts in these cli-fi novels lays bare how the dominant anthropocentric western mode can be productively challenged by non-western philosophies with the help of affect theory to create 'new' ecological representations of the world.

In this thesis, I explore how *Arcadia* and *Weather* interact with the characteristics of the everyday Anthropocene novel, how they challenge the conventions of fictional realism to capture a more ecological worldview, and which literary techniques they use to do so. Moreover, I investigate which affects and Buddhist concepts are present in the narration and ethical thinking of the main characters and if they are used to work against anthropocentric

religious and philosophical western conceptualizations of nonhuman and human matter. Finally and more generally, I explore how these everyday Anthropocene novels challenge the divide between public and private scales of experience and how that impacts the ethics of the main characters in the Anthropocene.

I stress again that one of the primary aims and interests of this thesis is in tracing back new ecologically ethical and affective ways of thinking and feeling to Buddhism, because my thesis has the ecocritical aim to unveil the anthropocentric assumptions that are present in our dualistic, teleological trends of western thought and to draw attention to alternative ecological and Buddhist thinking in the novels that counteracts them (Clark *Ecocriticism* 5). In fact, Buddhist thinking itself is “fundamentally non-dualistic” precisely because it recognizes what western individuals have trouble conceptualizing: the deep enmeshment and interdependence of all things in the phenomenal world, no matter if they are human or nonhuman entities (Gross 27). Therefore, Buddhist thinking together with affect theory will be the lens through which I will approach each western anthropocentric paradigm that the everyday Anthropocene novel challenges or deconstructs. A close reading of specific passages of *Weather* and *Arcadia* should reveal how Buddhist and ecological thinking is present in the narration. Moreover, it should identify which structural changes accommodate this new awareness of the interconnectedness of things and how the anthropocentric, linear conventions of the realist novel are challenged.

In each chapter I will discuss one characteristic of the everyday Anthropocene novel and show how it challenges fundamental anthropocentric western notions. In the first chapter on the dark side of ethical care, I study Bit and Lizzie’s receptiveness towards the entanglement of their own life with that of other human beings and species. I use the Buddhist concept of interdependence and the ecological concept of the mesh to

contextualize what this awareness entails. Because of this heightened awareness, Bit and Lizzie show a strong propensity to care and perform acts of care that challenge the western conceptualization of care as an apolitical, private, act that women perform in a dyadic relationship between two humans (Puig de la Bellacasa 4-5). Bit is able to channel this propensity to be receptive towards all impulses into his photography so that he is no longer overwhelmed by all these impressions. It is implied that this targeted attentiveness and the fact that he himself also takes care of his dying mother helps him cope with feelings of Anthropocene dread and horror. Lizzie experiences more difficulty with focusing her awareness of the things around her and finds it difficult to balance caring for her loved ones, especially while she is experiencing an increasing amount of dread about a future filled with climate disaster because of her side job for Sylvia. However, she discovers that acts of care—and not the pervading sense of inaction that predominates her narration—are necessary to mitigate her dread and eventually channels her receptivity into a more political form of caring for nonhuman and unfamiliar others as well during the uncertain period that preceded Trump's 2016 election in the United States. Thus, it is suggested that an environmentalist ethics should centralize care for all enmeshed beings and aid people in becoming more attentive to the interdependencies of everyday existence and in focusing their attentiveness.

In the next chapter on shifting identities, I explore how *Arcadia* and *Weather* track the impact of the shifting narrative and physical spaces around us on our bodies and sense of self. These novels challenge the western anthropocentric conception of the self as egoistic and hyperseparated from nonhuman others by telling stories that do not represent identity as a clearly delineated, coherent narrative space, but a narrative that is constructed and deconstructed through other cultural and physical spaces. Consequently, both main characters' sense of self comes to resemble the Buddhist non-self. When Bit loses the

Arcadian pastoral narrative of the commune he grew up in once its members scatter, he realizes how much impact that narrative had on his sense of self and grief. Similarly, when he loses what he thought was the one true love of his life, Helle, he realizes how much that romantic narrative affected him. However, with the realization that these interconnected imaginative and physical spaces impacted his life comes a new way of interacting with concepts such as nature, beauty, and love. Bit's 'new' pastoral tradition reminisces on the beauty of nature without losing sight of the dangers and complexities of nonhuman-human entanglements in a time of anthropogenic climate change. Unlike *Arcadia*, *Weather* challenges the unified self both through its formal and thematic qualities. Lizzie's narration is not linear and separate from the narratives of others around her but is enmeshed with them which is reflected in its fragmented structure. Since she finds herself in a context of displacement and inaction during the uncertain period that preceded Trump's 2016 election in America and because she is growing increasingly worried about climate change and how it will affect her son's life, Lizzie experiences a sense of Anthropocene anxiety which blurs the boundaries between self and space and public and private discourses. As a result, she feels a pervasive powerlessness and uncertainty, which the enmeshed fragments of her everyday thoughts and feelings that are tangentially related to one another reflect. Although the shift in the political and ecological narrative spaces around her cause anxiety—characterized by displacement and stagnation—which result in a breakdown of self since she can no longer distinguish what belongs to her subjective reality and what is objective, it also comes with an affirmative reappreciation of the ordinary, impermanent moment as she tries to embrace an uncertain future that might lead to her own and other loved ones' death.

In the final chapter on the (dis-)enchantment of ordinary matter, I discuss how these novels work against the western, capitalist assumptions that life has a teleological, 'progress'

temporality and that nonhuman matter is only a means to an end for humanity. *Arcadia* does this through its re-enchantment of ordinary matter which works against rationalizing hyperseparation and commodification in a way that is reminiscent of the enchanting descriptions of everyday objects as impetuses for the main characters' imaginative reflections in modernist works. *Weather* transcends the dichotomy between either rationalizing or enchanting ordinary matter and suggests that individuals in the western world should focus on nonhuman matter itself and that we should critically assess all anthropocentric conceptualizations we have of it. Both novels make use of the Buddhist concept of rebirth to do so. In *Arcadia* the passage on the rebirth of Bit's mother's ashes evinces that there is a circular rather than linear rhythm to life and death, which is strung together by moments of everyday enchantment with matter. In *Weather* rebirth challenges the divide between human and nonhuman matter as Offill critiques how a female robot is harassed and thus critiques both the sexism and the backgrounding of hybrid forms of nonhuman and human matter in western societies. *Weather* therefore proposes an inclusive, hybrid ethics of compassion.

In both novels, the Buddhist concept of impermanence is present in the images of history which ephemerally link moments in the past to moments in the present through a historical object. That the historical object is crucial for these images of history to occur reflects the Buddhist emphasis on the value and insight that ordinary matter can bring. In *Arcadia* the enchanting images of history Bit sees affirm slow, everyday existence and show how the Anthropocene anxiety and fear we currently feel is a constant in interdependent existence and determines our inter-species history which contrasts with prevalent linear conceptualizations of human history. Bit himself finally argues that he will live for the impermanent, enchanting moments of life, so impermanence is a determining characteristic

of his ethics. In *Weather* the image of history undermines the belief that our western realities are separate from disastrous futures and pasts and instead argues that holding these various scales of experience together is an ethical means of interacting with the present. Both novels use the artistic technique of defamiliarization to re-sensitize us to the ordinary matter around us. However, in *Weather's* case, defamiliarization is mostly used to centralize the experience of nonhuman objects, not our own experiences. Thus, Offill suggests that our ecological ethics should be considerate of the experiences of nonhuman matter in times of anthropogenic climate change through her innovative use of defamiliarization in her everyday Anthropocene novel.

## 2. The Dark Side of Ethical Care: Interdependence and the Mesh

The real and tangible state of being dependent upon someone or something else—a caregiver—is often glossed over in our western individualized societies. As a result, caregivers, such as nurses, therapists or close family members that try to mitigate some of the distress and horrors of interdependent existence are often overlooked. Buddhist and ecological thought, however, tends to differ from the dominant individualist mode. The ethics of Buddhist and ecologist thinkers is founded on the principle of interdependence and shows how centralizing interdependence entails redefining what care means in today's society, which is what *Weather*, and *Arcadia* also do by exploring both the negative or dark *and* positive sides of caring for nonhuman and human others and showing how private and public acts of care can become part of a political, ecological ethics.

### 2.1. *Interdependence and Ecological Ethics*

Since interdependence entails that an entity is made up of everything else, every entity—insect, plant, or animal—is subject to the same three marks of existence. They have no transcendent self (*anatta*), exist impermanently (*anicca*) and suffer (*dukkha*) without exception. This implies that one should be compassionate with (*karuṇā*), or care for, all beings that are tangled up in the net of interdependence, and coincides with the emphasis on practicing 'loving-kindness' (*mettā*) towards everything in Buddhist meditations (Curry 147-148). As I mentioned in the introduction, the doctrine of interdependence has become the foundation on which contemporary western Buddhism builds its political, psychological, and social philosophy and practice. Interdependence, whether it is the traditional or modernized version, can be an elusive concept for our modern, hyperindividualized minds to grasp. Therefore, I want to use this section to explain how the doctrine evolved within

Buddhism and shaped other teachings of the Buddhist tradition that I will expand on in the next two chapters, such as the non-self and rebirth.

Early Buddhist literature defined interdependence or dependent arising (*pratitya-samutpada*) as “a chain of causes and conditions that give rise to all phenomenal existence in the world of impermanence, birth, death, and rebirth” (McMahan 155). Unlike contemporary interpretations of interdependence, the *Pali Suttas*—which are the early texts of the Pali canon that are traditionally regarded as a discourse of the Buddha—did not describe interdependence as a fascinating web of interconnected species that encourages humans to identify deeply with the world around them. On the contrary, they encouraged people to *disengage* from this web of interconnectedness, because they believed that the phenomenal world is a construct that comes into being through the interaction between a constructed self or non-self and objects. Our tendency to identify with this constituted phenomenal world lays at the root of all suffering because it is based on craving, aversion, and delusion (McMahan 155). Thus, early Buddhists wanted to reverse their phenomenal impermanent existence within this chain of causes. In other words, to achieve nirvana and follow in the Buddha’s footsteps, they needed to transcend embodied life and its cycle of rebirth and become intransient (McMahan 156). This, however, does not mean that none of the Pali literature’s values align with the Buddhist modernist definition of interdependence, but its main train of thought diverged significantly from contemporary western interdependence (McMahan 156).

Contemporary Buddhist interdependence emphasizes that Buddhist students should engage with and become more aware of their deeply interconnected existence with human and nonhuman matter. In the age of systems theory and with Morton and other ecologists’ call for interdisciplinary research in mind, this interpretation fits right into our modern

research climate (*Ecological Thought* 2). According to McMahan, the contemporary interpretation of dependent arising is hybrid because it “combines empirical description, world-affirming wonder, and an ethical imperative” (McMahan 150). Modern interpretations of interdependence emphasize empirical description because contemporary Buddhists seek to learn how to see our dependent origination in all its complexity, which is liberating in its own right (McMahan 159). In the Chinese Huayan school of Buddhism, the metaphor of Indra’s net is used to help people visualize what interdependence entails:

At every connection in this infinite net hangs a magnificently polished and infinitely faceted jewel, which reflects in each of its facets all the facets of every other jewel in the net. Since the net itself, the number of jewels, and the facets of every jewel are infinite, the number of reflections is infinite as well. (Morton 40)

The metaphor of a bejewelled net represents the idea that the self is not autonomous, delineated and unchanging as the Cartesian ego and a mechanistic view of the natural world imply, because every link in the net is deeply dependent on and constituted by others’ ‘reflections’. This idea is founded on the early Buddhist doctrine of the non-self (*anattā*) which will be discussed in the chapter on shifting identities. The radical interconnectedness and interplay of all things that this metaphor captures, also modifies contemporary Buddhist interpretations of the doctrine of rebirth (*saṃsāra*). The aim is not to transcend the cycle of rebirth, but to live more consciously, more awakened “in the midst of the world” (McMahan 159).

Additionally, Romantic and Transcendentalist authors continued to mold interdependence into a tool for creating world-affirming wonder and unity between the human and nonhuman. In fact, Transcendentalist writers such as Henry David Thoreau were inspired by Buddhist literature when they wrote against the stressful, bureaucratic

modernized world, the mechanistic view of the natural world as a mere industrial 'source', and the Cartesian split between the mind and the material, and in favor of the re-enchantment of the world by infusing the natural world with sacredness (McMahan 166-167). This re-enchanting mechanism that works against rationalization and habituation will be discussed in the final chapter.

Furthermore, contemporary interdependence has ethical and political implications because it emphasizes the undeniable fragility of this highly interconnected networks of beings and the importance of maintaining its balance through relieving others' suffering and ensuring mutuality and reciprocity. This ethical imperative embedded in Buddhist modernist definitions of interdependence is the basis for even younger strands of Buddhism, such as Green and Engaged Buddhism. Engaged Buddhism is a recent phenomenon that is unlike the "privatized, commercialized interpretations and appropriations" of Buddhism we encounter in mainstream media as part of self-care culture (McMahan 252).<sup>2</sup> It combines key Buddhist doctrines, and modern western ideals of social justice and emancipation (McMahan 252). Advocates of Engaged Buddhism recognize "that the interdependencies of the modern world are often sources of suffering" and cause economic inequality, so they set out to find the hidden causes of such social problems (McMahan 153).<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Although the modern Buddhist strands that are discussed in this paper are also westernized, they differ from commercialized forms of Buddhism that either present the religion as "a purely personalized mode of self-help with scant ethical ramifications" or a "commercial trope" which neutralizes Buddhism's capacity to critique contemporary capitalist culture (McMahan 262).

<sup>3</sup> Engaged Buddhism's concern for systemic causes of suffering and their interdependencies entails that Engaged and Green Buddhism should not be thought of as separate, but as two sides of the same coin. The two strands of Buddhism can merge into a movement that takes interdependence as its core principle because it recognizes how environmental and social justice crises "are interconnected, and how the solutions are too". Naomi Klein has argued in favor of this idea to confront climate change "in the context of austerity and privatization, of colonialism and militarism, and of the various systems of othering needed to sustain them all".

Green Buddhism or Buddhist environmentalism is an umbrella term for a handful of influential Buddhist-inspired environmentalist and social movements, such as the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka, Sokka Gakai International, and the Sathirakoses-Nagapradeepa Foundation in Thailand, where monks are fighting against deforestation. It is also used to describe the work of prominent Buddhists, such as the current Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh (Curry 146-147). Although Green Buddhism is a heterogeneous movement, most Buddhists concerned with environmental issues contend that the mechanistic view of the natural world that is dominant in most capitalist societies fails to recognize the reciprocity and interconnectedness of the human and nonhuman, which results in the othering of nature as a mere source of freely exploitable raw materials. However, such a view of nature fails to acknowledge how we are dependent upon the matter around us and how such mechanistic thinking endangers our own life and the lives of animals and plants. Interconnectedness implies that to hurt others—human or nonhuman—is to hurt oneself essentially, which rings truer than ever in the age of environmental disaster, poverty, and pollution.<sup>4</sup>

Scholars, such as Patrick Curry, who find a Green Buddhist virtue ethic inspiring, or Buddhists concerned with the environment often recuperate elements of the Pali literature to solidify the value of Buddhism to environmentalist ethics. Both the Pali literature and Green Buddhist movement state that suffering and the desire to be free “is common to all, and it is this desire that forms the basis for the sense of solidarity at the root of solicitude”

---

<sup>4</sup> The notion that actions against or for others impact the self negatively or positively is similar to the Buddhist notion of karma. Anil Narine’s notion of eco-trauma expands on how inflicting harm upon nonhuman others can impact our own lives negatively and increase our suffering. She discerns that trauma is not a private, but symbiotic experience: “The traumas we perpetuate in an ecosystem through pollution and unsustainable resource management inevitably return to harm us” (9).

(Cooper and James 130). Additionally, *meta* meditations in early Buddhist texts advocate compassion with all 'sentient' beings, "so that someone who was compassionate in his dealings with other humans but not in his relations with nonhuman animals would not be regarded as compassionate at all" (Cooper and James 128-129). Contemporary interdependence is thus often grounded in an idea of ethical responsibility towards the human *and* nonhuman world.

However, such responsibility complicates western anthropocentric, idealistic, and positive representations of ethical care, because interdependent existence as Indra's net shows, implies that care is not a one-sided, clearly delineated virtue, but a messy act that is complicated by our entanglement with others and which runs the risk of a momentary loss of one's own sense of identity. Although what follows might not seem like a Buddhist conceptualization of care at first, since I will flesh this out using the work of ecologist and ecofeminist western scholars, it is important to bear in mind that Buddhism stresses that "beliefs and views only matter insofar as they help or hinder practice" (Curry 148). It is my contention everyday Anthropocene novels, such as *Arcadia* and *Weather*, with their examples of care as a complicated, not decidedly virtuous *action*, follow from this line of Buddhist thinking with its emphasis on practice and the messy interrelations between all kinds of beings that are both a source of suffering—or Anthropocene horror—and an incentive for compassion—or an act of care. First, I will discuss ecologist Timothy Morton's dark ecology as an example of a more affective ethics to expand on the idea that ethical care is not necessarily characterized by positive feelings or limited to the human realm. Next, I will use Joan Tronto, Bernice Fisher and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's theories on care to complicate our western conception of care and re-politicize it as a crucial, repeated activity.

I will use these philosophies to expand on the mesh and the forms of care we encounter in *Arcadia* and *Weather*.

### 2.1.1. The Mesh and Dark Ecology

The most well-known ecological concept that builds on Buddhist interdependence is Morton's mesh. Morton defines the mesh as an open, non-linear system without center or edge in which "all beings are related to each other negatively and differentially" (39). So, the mesh is an 'ecologized' version of contemporary interdependence. He even uses the metaphor of Indra's net to illustrate that negative difference entails that these beings are not "positive, really existing (independent, solid) things", echoing the doctrine of the non-self (39). The concept of the mesh is a tool to understand our interconnectedness and the all-encompassing scale on which ecological thinking must take place. However, to Morton, an ethics where we think big while remaining concerned with minute particulars encompasses more than the idea of seeking harmony between the human and nonhuman world by caring for it, as contemporary Buddhism advocates.

In chapter three "Dark Thoughts" of *The Ecological Thought* (2010), Morton describes the move beyond caring for the nonhuman and decidedly sentient and beyond Transcendentalist awe-inspiring, world-affirming experiences of nature as 'dark ecology'. He encourages us to love the uncanny, "the radically strange, dangerous, even 'evil'", because "the inhuman is the strangely strange core of the human" (*Ecological Thought* 92). This radical redefinition of care might not seem to correspond with initial ideas about the everyday Anthropocene novel, since it appears to be less likely that characters that live at a time similar to ours will have to take care of the completely nonhuman, which we would associate with futuristic novels set in a time of complete ecological disaster. Yet that

judgement is inherently predicated on the idea that care is an exclusively positive and fairly unproblematic concept that we do not tend to associate with the nonhuman, let alone the inhuman in our daily lives. Morton's dark ecology shares with the everyday Anthropocene novel a recognition of the need for stretching the boundaries of our contemporary conception of care. He suggests that we need to rethink our ethics into one that is "nurtured by the contribution of feelings and passions (and that is not characterized exclusively as a rationalist analysis of our actions or as a mere risk/benefit calculation)" which is what (eco-)feminist scholars also set out to do, as Luca Valera articulates (20). Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher outlined such an affective ethics when they also set out to rethink the concept of care and its ethical implications. I would like to build on their work to argue that the everyday Anthropocene novel employs care's potential "to disrupt the status quo and to unhinge some of the moral rigidities of ethical questioning" (Maria Puig de la Bellacasa 11).

### 2.1.2. Rethinking an Ethics of Care

When we think of care, we think of paradigmatic relationships between two individuals, such as the idealized Christian relationship between a mother and son. However, this western representation of care dismisses the fact that care is not always individualistic, dyadic, or limited to human interaction (Tronto 103). These—often feminized and overly idealized—conceptions of care limit its potential to an anthropocentric abstract value that reinforces highly privatized conceptions of care—such as the care between a mother and son or daughter—without questioning the ethical implications of these often unpaid and undervalued acts of labor. Moreover, the virtuous character of our conceptualization of care fails to address the real-life physical actions that go into the care practices in today's society

and the strain that is put on professional caregivers such as nurses and therapists due to the difficulty and often anything but pretty or even virtuous reality of taking care of others.

Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher recognized the need for a more inclusive definition of care that did not dismiss “the ways in which care can function socially and politically in a culture” (Tronto 103). They proposed to view care as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Tronto 103). With this definition, these scholars surpass the culturally imposed dyadic and anthropocentric boundaries of the concept of care, which makes it a fitting starting point to analyze the ways in which *Weather* and *Arcadia* will set out to displace those boundaries as well. They add that the world includes “our bodies, our selves, our environment” that we “seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Tronto 103). Because Tronto and Fisher’s definition recognizes the ways in which care is a messy, complicated entanglement between humans, objects, and nonhumans in one ‘life-sustaining web’ it foregrounds a link between care and the mesh. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa also points this out when she argues that care is an ethico-affective everyday doing “that is vital to engage with the inescapable troubles of interdependent existences” (161).

She proposes that an ethics of care should not subsist in a realm of moral obligations and normativity, but that taking care of someone, or something is a dynamic process that we reinforce as we engage and perform *acts* of care (156). However, for that inclination or affect we experience as a driving force to truly transform into care, the affect has to be re-enacted through maintenance work, which is the repeated act or practice of caring for someone else (Puig de la Bellacasa 5). Of interest for our exploration of the darker side of care is the implication that even affects that consist of more negative emotions, such as Anthropocene horror, could be narrativized into care through maintenance work. I want to use Morton,

Tronto, Fisher and Puig de la Bellacasa's non-normative approaches to care to show how both *Arcadia* and *Weather* challenge the idea that care is a defining characteristic of humans, of what we consider to be 'humane' by implicating that care does not solely refer to compassion and kindness, but that it has its own 'dark' side that we need to recognize as care as well. *Weather* in particular dismantles the idea that acts of care belong exclusively in the private sphere to suggest that they should be operationalized as a political, ecological tool in the public domain.

## 2.2. *The Dark Side of Care in the Everyday Anthropocene Novel*

In Groff and Offill's novels, the protagonists are consciously aware of their enmeshment in human and nonhuman networks, which differs from realist network novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, where "most of the characters are unaware of their function as nodes in a dense overlapping of networks" (Levine 125).<sup>5</sup> However, the 'openness' that comes with such a heightened awareness of their enmeshment and that stimulates them to take care of others shows how their caring acts can also have damaging effects, which dismantles western virtuous conceptions of care.

### 2.2.1. *Arcadia*: The Danger of Attentive (Non-)Human Care

In *Arcadia*, Groff's characterization of Bit shows how his fine attunement to his surroundings is not only a good, but also a threatening, dangerous trait. Bit is described as someone who "*emanated* care" because he is small and gentle (182). But those same

---

<sup>5</sup> Levine uses the term network novel in a broad and narrow sense, but here I am referring to the realist multiplot novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as *Bleak House*. As Levine discerns, they try to capture the dense overlapping of social networks that approach "a complexity so great their wholeness defies full knowledge" in a narrative that suggests and withholds and is thus suspenseful (129-130).

characteristics also typify him as a character that is particularly and at times consciously *enmeshed* in the web of life around him. His small stature and gentle nature are matched to his “eyes so vast in his face they threaten to swallow the world just now spinning past, threaten to be swallowed by it” (165). Thus, this metaphor implies how his caring and open nature makes him vulnerable to the world around him and could lead to a loss of self, since his body and mind are only a ‘Bit’ of the vast interdependent network of existence. Bit’s favorite quote from George Eliot similarly captures the threat that such an openness to the slow, often nonhuman forms of life that surround us can pose to our own survival, be it emotional or physical: “*If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, he quotes, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence*” (210). Thus, Bit tends to absorb all information and feeling around him, which makes him want to take care of and think about everything he perceives. In *Weather*, Lizzie also has this problem because she struggles to perceive “the true nature” of things “beneath the terrible music” of humanity and fast-paced life (5). However, such constant receptivity is unsustainable because it could lead to a total loss of self. In *Arcadia* Bit deals with this problem by imposing limits on his propensity to care, otherwise he could not only hurt himself, but also force his need to care onto others, which is a type of forceful one-sided, dyadic care that does not match the messy, real-life interdependent entanglements that he is faced with. This is what his daughter Grete is referring to when she calls his caretaking aggressive because ‘he always has to take care of everyone else but does not let anyone take care of him’ (272). Even though Bit’s propensity to care makes him aware of the beauty and complexity of what lies ‘on the other side of silence’, as he grows older, he realizes this trait comes with the dangerous side-effect of a

loss of self and can result in forceful caring relationships that strip our interdependent, ecological selves of the mutuality they need (Plumwood "Feminism" 157, 160).

However, Bit has found ways to mitigate his openness through intentional, almost meditative moments of attentive engagement with his surroundings. He starts teaching a photography class at university, for instance, which he sees as a tool to help people "slow down and appreciate what they're doing", to stop them enough to *see* how their existence is enmeshed with that of others (175). Art is his medium to temper the danger that comes with his propensity to care for everything, because it allows him to care about things in a more intentional way and set boundaries. Bit having found ways to balance his own needs and his need to take care of those around him is exemplified by his reaction to his mother when she tells him he wasted his life and could have been an artist if he "didn't have to *nurse* everyone" (254). He responds that he *is* an artist, implying that art—which is often seen as the culmination of originality and independence—and being a caring person are not mutually exclusive, but that in his case, they cross-pollinate.

Moreover, art mitigates the implicit Anthropocene horror that he experiences as the animals and plants he has come to care for vanish because of climate change which he describes metaphorically as species that have gone extinct, "bald eagles, the bullfrogs, the honeybees", which are "filling up his throat" (241). Anthropocene horror is an affect Timothy Clark describes as "a sense of horror about the changing environment globally" that creates a feeling of imminent threats "that need not be anchored to any particular place, but which are both everywhere and anywhere" ("Ecological Grief" 61). This makes someone feel anxious because they are personally trapped in a context of latent environmental violence (Clark "EG" 62). Groff only draws an implicit connection between an attentive awareness of one's surroundings and the deprecating feeling of loss and horror that this engagement with

one's surroundings could engender because of global warming. However, this connection is expanded on in *Weather*, where Offill's narrator Lizzie struggles more clearly with Anthropocene horror which prevents her from seeing the mesh as something that is not solely terrifying and suffocating.

### 2.2.2. *Weather*: From Parental Care to Enmeshed Acts of Care

Lizzie is initially so enmeshed in the network around her, that she fails to realize that her caring commitments are stifling her. Her friend Margot, who is a Buddhist teacher and a "shrink", draws attention to this when she says Lizzie is not just close with her brother who struggles with drug addiction, but "enmeshed" with him, meaning that their relationship is one of co-dependency (58). She takes care of him after he relapses from his drug addiction, which she always does, and in doing so she forgets the obligations she has to her own family and to herself as she starts taking sleeping pills and hides them from her husband (149). She also uses Mr. Jimmy's care service, because she is scared she is his only client, even though it costs more, and she cannot afford it. Thus, *Weather* unsettles care as an individualistic dyadic relationship, and shows how Lizzie's messy entanglements can make care a cruel and dangerous thing.

In this respect, the contrast that Offill draws between our relatively unreliable narrator Lizzie and Margot is interesting. Lizzie's deep enmeshment with the people around her makes their relationships co-dependent and unhealthy at times because she loses sight of her own needs. Whereas Margot "listens differently": "she pays attention, but leaves her own stories out of it" (15). This implies that Lizzie, much like Bit, should also set boundaries to her need to care for others so that she does not create a one-sided, exploitative caring

relationship and can recognize both the mutuality and differences between her and her sibling in an uncomplicated way.

Furthermore, as Lizzie takes Sylvia up on her offer to answer the emails she gets in response to her podcast on climate change, Anthropocene horror starts trickling into her thoughts and feelings. This exacerbates the feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy that she already experiences as she tries to value her caring commitments, because now the realization starts to settle in that she needs to 'take care' of the environment as well. It starts out as "a present but subdued and barely realized 'affect,' a background unease to be met even by indifference or denial" as her ironic and funny responses I included in the introduction show (Clark "EG" 66). The fragmented narrative conveys the peripherality of this grief through snippets of thought like these: "In those disaster movies, if a person sees something from the time before, a phone charger, say, or the Statue of Liberty, she starts to weep" (146). Lizzie does not appropriate the feeling of grief yet, but the person is given the same gender as her, which suggests that she projects herself into the character's experience of grief.

In general, Lizzie's narration resembles stream-of-consciousness because we follow her thoughts and feelings, but most of the time she refrains from elucidating the links between the layered anecdotes that she offers us. This innovative, evocative writing style captures the peripheral, contemporary experience of an affect such as Anthropocene horror that is particularly difficult to narrativize, because it "resists being assimilated to any simple narrative" or emotional codification (Clark "EG" 71). It conveys her affective crisis to the reader who can only work from the associations Lizzie makes to draw their own conclusions. They have to sit and struggle with the questions she raises and make sense of the affects that

are latently present in her narration. We live with Lizzie through this feeling, and it gives us the same affect of unease and slippery sadness.

Because this affect escapes cognitive or semantic determination, it complicates the idea that the public and private are strictly separate scales (Clark "EG" 71). Clare Fisher remarks how Lizzie's narration continuously challenges the distinctions between "the ecological and the personal, the big and the small, the important and the trivial" which is a fundamental characteristic of Anthropocene horror because it is a sense of horror that is not anchored to a particular place, but pervades all domains, including the private one (Clark "EG" 61). Offill does this through the subtle but profound circular patterning in Lizzie's narration that connects a public fact with a private anecdote which, in turn, brings about a new connotation. When Margot calls Lizzie and her brother 'enmeshed', for instance, she refers to the mesh concept that Sylvia also uses in her lectures. Thus, this implicit associative link dissolves the boundaries between the political or environmental and Lizzie's personal caring commitments, which hints at the sense of horror and anxiety about climate that pervades both scales of her experience. Additionally, because the reader has to trace back Lizzie's thoughts and work from their own associative memory, reading *Weather* requires them to slow down. So, *Weather* draws the reader in one step further than *Arcadia* because it does not merely mention how the act of slowing down could be a coping mechanism, as Bit's narration does, but it forces the reader to do so as they venture into Lizzie's complex narration.

In addition, Anthropocene horror's 'weirding' of ordinary life also complicates decidedly public or private conceptions of care in *Weather*. Anthropocene horror challenges the distinction between the ordinary and trivial and other scales of space and time because it is the result of "being trapped in a context which is unprecedented, complex" and all-

encompassing (Clark "EG" 71). Often, this makes the ordinary seem "senseless, incoherent or ridiculous", since what was once taken for granted "has crossed over from the normal to the destructive" (Clark "EG" 71, 66). *Weather* captures this breakdown of the cocoons we have created for ourselves in our modern lives through its associative style, which strings an utterance about daily life together with data on the drastic changes in temperature in the future:

Eli is at the kitchen table, trying all his markers one by one to see which still work. Ben brings him a bowl of water so he can dip them in to test. According to the current trajectory, New York City will begin to experience dramatic, life-altering temperatures by 2047. (106)

The ecological fact coats the trivial—the water, the markers and Eli—with feelings of anxiety, loss, and anger. It "heightens the stakes of day to day actions" and subverts any distinction we make between "the rational and paranoiac" (Clark "EG" 77). Doing "prepper" things, such as learning how to "Start a Fire with Gum Wrapper and a Battery" lose their sense of ridiculousness and start to seem rational (148). Anthropocene horror pervades every aspect of Lizzie's life whether she is aware of it or not, because "the affective dimensions of ecology are more stubbornly resistant to economic codification than those cultivated in relation to other systems of circulation", such as the environmental rhetoric and lifestyle that has been appropriated into the discourse of consumerism (Greenwald Smith 102-103).

Thus, there lies a transformative, non-normative ethical potential in an affective narrative on Anthropocene horror that a traditional environmental rhetoric cannot access. *Weather* can implicate the reader in Lizzie's anxious and mourning state-of-mind without calling for immediate practical or societal action. Those activist discourses, such as the lifestyle environmental rhetoric often encourages us to take actions—such as buying a

bamboo toothbrush—that do little to change our mindset more profoundly if that is the only ‘environmentalist commitment’ we make. This contrasts with Lizzie’s narration that gets under our skin and infects us with uneasy feelings such as Anthropocene horror that complicate our thinking patterns and ask us to reconsider them in light of the imagination-challenging scale and range of this ‘hyperobject’ called climate change (Morton *Hyperobjects*).

Furthermore, the passage above not only expresses Lizzie’s sense of dread and Anthropocene horror, but it also attests to her warped sense of her own normative caring commitment to her son Eli. Although she performs all of these small, private acts of care for Eli throughout the novel, her Anthropocene horror is fueled by the realization that all her caring actions will not ensure that Eli has a safe and happy future. Although this is a realization all mothers are struck with to some degree, it is exacerbated by the Anthropocene anxiety that scientific facts about life-altering temperatures, extinct species and melting ice caps bring about. Thus, implicit in Lizzie’s affective narration is the realization that private acts of care, such as building a doomstead, must coincide with larger, public actions against climate change to engender real changes. Moreover, this entails that Anthropocene horror puts pressure on our dyadic, anthropocentric, mostly private, and idealized notions of what it means to take care of something or someone, which is exemplified by the relationship between Lizzie and Eli that implies that we need more than parental care to mitigate climate change disaster. In the Anthropocene, care should not be restricted to the private domain, but it should pervade all aspects of life and should encompass the nonhuman as well, which is something Lizzie hesitantly seems to realize. At the end of the novel, Anthropocene horror is not only a feeling that is characterized by the need to care about the environment, but it is also what spurs Lizzie into performing real-life *acts* of care for unfamiliar others.

Although Lizzie never undergoes drastic changes in her attitude and remains an indecisive, at times co-dependent and unreliable narrator, she also channels her Anthropocene horror into something more “precisely aimed, thoughtful and genuinely mitigating in effect from such inchoate emotions” (Clark “EG” 77). She purposefully focuses on caring for her family, Ben and Eli, by making plans to build a doomstead and starts to connect the feeling of grief and loss to a Buddhist sense of shared suffering that consolidates her own: “They say people who are lost will walk trancelike past their own search parties. Maybe I saw you. Maybe I passed you on my street. How will I know you? Trust me, you’ll say” (194, 199). The scope of the caring network in her head seems to expand, as this second-person address to the reader expresses the hope that the mesh and other entities within the mesh, such as the reader, can be relied on for taking care of and taking responsibility as well. Left implicit is the idea that the caring obligation is no longer a personal burden, but a shared responsibility.

Moreover, she pays more attention to the everyday, human and nonhuman acts of care that happen around her: “There’s a man sleeping in a doorway and one comes and curls itself around his feet” (199). The ‘one’, the nameless other, takes the shape of a dog, her religious mother, the other voters who wait for the result that will determine the political weather, and a mouse that they trap and set free down the road. This increased attentiveness and her more purposefully ethico-affective acts of care eventually lead her to an understanding of her larger entanglement in the mesh as she picks up on Margot’s Buddhist question that is left unanswered during her therapy session which is: “what is the core delusion?” (193). Her eventual response in the last lines of the novel could be read as a vision of what the mesh is like: “Dreams of running, of other animals. I wake to the sound of gunshots. Walnuts on the roof, Ben says. The core delusion is that I am here and you are

there" (201). Her dog and the other animals, the walnuts outside, the gunshots in a country at war, in a future at war, and her warm bed and safe house all amalgamate into a sense of awareness of the deep interconnectedness of things that transcends time, space and the conceptual boundary between the human and nonhuman. It is implied that this understanding of the mesh is also spurred on by the more active and inclusive attitude Lizzie develops towards caregiving.

### 2.2.3. Conclusion: Enmeshed Acts of Care

The protagonists in both Groff and Offill's everyday Anthropocene novels struggle with their receptiveness to the world around them and their urgency to care for others. This suggests that our normative private and positive conceptions of care as a virtue or dyadic, anthropocentric act are complicated by the main character's increased awareness of their interdependent existence in the Anthropocene. For Bit, this crisis takes shape when he is a young boy who is overwhelmed with the world at large, which results in his need to take care of others, but also in his disregard for his own needs as his daughter Grete reminds him later in his life. Bit is able to focus his propensity to care and pay attention to the world around him through his photography, which limits his impulse to direct all his attention to the feelings and needs of others and mitigates some of the Anthropocene horror he experiences as the world around him grows less certain.

In *Weather*, the tension between Anthropocene horror—a decidedly negative effect of living in our current, enmeshed world affected by global warming—and Lizzie's tendency to take care of the people around her is foregrounded. It lays bare how her 'normative' acts of parental and familial care fail to subdue the Anthropocene horror that she experiences. In addition, it unsettles the idea that care is an apolitical, private, dyadic act because

Anthropocene horror makes such distinctions between the private and the public superfluous. Consequently, Lizzie tries to include nonhuman and strange others in her caring thoughts and actions—which reflect the Buddhist emphasis on indiscriminatory compassionate thoughts and actions—to mend this lack of care for the world on a larger scale. Offill's link to the 'obligatory note of hope' website at the end of the book could be read as a continuation of what Lizzie started, as another attempt at connecting people, and making readers aware of the care obligation that comes with life in an interconnected web of species. Perhaps the 'hope' she wants us to feel, and spread is not so much the hope that we can change the future, but that we can comfort each other through it.

### 3. Shifting Identities: The Non-Self, Space, and Story

It may not seem very Buddhist to include a chapter on identity in my thesis, however, identity is still a major—if not *the* major—theme of western philosophy. In the western world, telling your own stories and curating your own identity is encouraged through social media. Although this need to control all stories about ourselves and make the self a fixed, coherent, and separate narrative space is normal according to evolutionary psychology, this does not mean that it is a good way to engage with the everyday thoughts and feelings we encounter and the spaces we live in. Evolutionary psychologist Richard Wright uses the Buddhist notion of non-self to argue that we need to practice a way of thinking that allows us to separate observation from evaluation, so that we recognize the shifts in our selves, and the spaces and stories that surround us without keenly and quickly evaluating and categorizing them (82). In other words, we need to recognize that they are 'not self'. This seems particularly useful to our modern minds that are encouraged to judge or pick sides in today's polarized social climate in the face of overstimulation, whereby the nuance in modern debates is often lost. Contemplation and the refusal to yield to polemic answers to the issues of this day and age seem equally important in the development of an ecological self.

Groff and Offill try to resist telling such a coherent, delineated narrative by registering minute shifts in selves, spaces, and time rather than imposing a clearly delineated narrative arch on the stories of *Arcadia* and *Weather*. In other words, they embrace the narrative equivalent of 'suspending evaluation', which is a text that refuses totality by withholding knowledge through telling a more fragmented narrative instead of a narrative with a predetermined narrative arch, for instance, so that it can track changes in selves and spaces better (Levine 129).

In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which identity and space are interconnected in both novels. In the first section I will briefly discuss Buddhist and ecological notions of identity which differ substantially from and criticize western anthropocentric and fixed notions of identity. Because they break down one of the most pervasive thought patterns in western philosophy, they bring us closer to a fundamental understanding of what Buddhism and ecology are and could come to mean in the everyday Anthropocene. I will use these theoretical concepts to analyze the relationship between identity, space and story in *Arcadia* and *Weather* and to show how they hint at selves that are enmeshed with their surroundings—both narrative or cultural and actual or physical spaces—and become selves that resemble the non-self and Val Plumwood’s ecological self.

### 3.1. *Deconstructing the Fixed Self: The Ecological Self and the Non-Self*

Ecologist Val Plumwood developed her theory of the ecological self as an explicit critique on the (human-)self/other and reason/nature dualism that prevails in modern western thinking. According to her, the supposedly rational liberal self that sees itself as hyperseparated from (non-)human others and as fixed is characterized by egoism. Egoism “is taken to be the dominant rational mode and altruism a subsidiary one, a praiseworthy but irrational exception” (“Feminism” 143). Moreover, science has gradually defined reason in a Cartesian sense of objectivity or a “disengagement from internal sources of error in nature as the body, the senses and emotions” which suggests that there is a fixed, rational self (“Feminism” 141). This sets nature apart from the hyperseparated rational self as an alien other and denies that the self is dependent on and part of nature or its surroundings more generally (“Feminism” 141-142). From the dominant, egocentric perspective, there is a radical divide between the other, nature or the ‘means’ and the hyperseparated ‘self’ or the

'ends' ("Feminism" 145-146). Plumwood argues that this rigid divide between means and ends creates an instrumentalism that we have learned to accept as the dominant western model to engage with nature ("Feminism" 147). Therefore, this new form of 'mastery' comes to define "rationality as egoism, and sociality as an instrumental association driven by self-interest" ("Feminism" 141).

To counter the hyperseparated rational self and the instrumentalization it entails, Plumwood founds her understanding of the *ecological self* on what the hyperseparated self blatantly denies: the relational nature of the self. The self is "*essentially* related and interdependent" and the development of self "takes place through involvement and interaction with the other" ("Feminism" 153). Because our self is relational, our interests are not individuated, but connected to those of others. This altruism is foregrounded through acts of care that are not restricted to our personal lives, but also include strange and nonhuman others as we have discussed in the previous chapter. They provide an alternative to instrumental relationships with the human and nonhuman. In contrast with the hyperseparated self, the ecological self recognizes "both the otherness of nature and its continuity with the human self" and breaks down the dichotomy between means and ends (Plumwood "Feminism" 160). Thus, at the heart of Plumwood's ecological self lies *mutuality*, which she defines as a dialectal move between recognizing kinship or 'empathy' and recognizing difference or 'otherness'. I already touched upon this mechanism in the previous chapter when I discussed how Bit and Lizzie tend to care for everything without recognizing differences between themselves and the ones they care for ("Feminism" 157, 160).

Similarly, the Buddhist doctrine of the non-self vouches for an understanding of the self as selfless, a non-self which, in turn, makes an individual more altruistic and aware of their interdependence with others. It is commonly understood as a radical critique of the idea that

an unchanging self or soul—or separate rational self—underlies all experience (Gethin 146). According to Buddhism, the belief in the construct of self is egoistic because it stems from ignorance and greed and leads to suffering “for both ourselves and others” (Gethin 147). In contemporary Buddhism, the non-self is interpreted as a separate Cartesian ego that “finds its way back to wholeness in expanding its boundaries to identify with the vast interrelated cosmos and all its inhabitants, giving up its separate, egocentric existence” (McMahan 165). Wright’s work on Buddhism reflects this contemporary reading of the non-self. Wright’s interpretation of the non-self does not deny that there are differences between the self and others, which is why it coincides with Plumwood’s notion of the ecological self. Wright’s non-self denotes a more liberated state-of-consciousness that you can reach through meditation once you realize that the relationship between your consciousness and the things you normally think of as its “contents”—your feelings, your thoughts—are “not-self”. This realization can turn the relationship between your consciousness and its contents from impulsive, often unnecessary engagement with feelings into meditative *contemplation*, which is a more moderate and modern interpretation of the nonattachment to the self (67). In other words, your mind learns how to separate “the act of observation from the act of evaluation” (71).

In the next section, I will analyze how the non-self—both in the broader Buddhist sense and in Wright’s meditative sense—, space and story are interconnected in *Arcadia* and *Weather*. I will develop the connection between identity and space in *Arcadia* through Bit’s changing relationship with nature and beauty. Through a play on the phrase *Et in Arcadia Ego* I will argue that his perception of nature changes from assuaging and elegiac to a heightened awareness of the complex nonhuman and human entanglements which shows how his sense of self expands to encompass the nonhuman. I will also be using his relationship with Helle

as an example of his changing ideas on beauty and love, which also become less idealistic, and more inclusive. For *Weather* I will use the concept of Anthropocene anxiety to argue that this affect in combination with the shifts Lizzie perceives in the spaces around her cause a breakdown or 'deconstruction' of self. The ensuing feeling of displacement is particularly relevant because it shows how such a breakdown of self not only engenders negative feelings, such as powerlessness, but can also has affirmative effects, because it can make us reappraise what still is in the face of impending death and disaster.

### 3.2. *Self, Space and Story in the Everyday Anthropocene Novel*

#### 3.2.1. *Arcadia: Nature, Beauty, and the Non-Self*

*Arcadia* shows how Bit grows older and realizes that as his perception of the world around him changes, so too does his perception of his self. This relationship between identity and spatiality will be the focus of my discussion of *Arcadia* for this chapter. He eventually gains conscious insight into the fact that he has no fixed, bounded self, and that he is just as caught up in a constant process of self-renewal as other organisms on this earth. Interestingly enough for this argument on spatiality and identity, he uses the image of landscapes to conceptualize his own impermanence:

If he cannot be infinite—his love meeting its eventual exhaustion, his light its shadow—this is the nature of landscapes. The forest meets mountain, the sea the shore. Brain meets bone, meets skin, meets hair; meets air. Day would not be, without night. (284)

It implies that even his far-reaching, caring non-self has its limits because the experiences and memories that constitute the self are under the influence of perpetual change. The "day" of existence or life is always followed by the "night" of existence or death. In what follows on

*Arcadia*, I will strengthen this claim by showing how Bit comes to this realization because he loses two dominant stories of his life—what he thought his relationship with nature should be like, and what he believed to be the epitome of beauty and love—or better yet, those stories change into more relational, non-teleological narratives that are dependent on particular moments in time. The first one is the underlying utopia of the *Arcadia* commune in which he grows up that encourages peaceful co-existence with nature, which has roots in what Carolyn Merchant calls the Edenistic Recovery narrative of the first settlers. I will show how Bit dismantles this narrative and becomes aware of the affective reverberations it has on Americans. He reappropriates such an *Arcadia* by focusing on the complex, everchanging features of nature and our relationship with it. The second story is that of his one true love for Helle, who has long been the epitome of (female) beauty and love to him until he realizes that his private aesthetics is a public one and that beauty is much more dependent on specific ephemeral moments.

### 3.2.1.1. Losing the Arcadian Utopia

#### a) *"I, too, lived in Arcadia": An Assuaging, but Elegiac Pastoral Narrative on Nature*

The first narrative is that of *Arcadia*, the commune that Bit's parents helped found and that aims to "[l]ive with the land, not on it" which represents an assuaging view on humanity's connection with nature (14). However, the ideals of the commune seem to be outpaced by the selfish, greedy nature of humanity as *Arcadia* crumbles under the pressure of freeloaders, criminality, drug abuse, poverty, and the leader's loose reign. Groff's depiction of the downfall of *Arcadia* considers the increasingly nuanced and complex picture that our Anthropocene reality draws of the titular utopias of Edenistic human-nature relations by contrasting these hopeful representations of life with our "dystopian anxiety" about the

future and our individualistic, egoistic capitalist reality ("A Conversation").<sup>6</sup> I would like to focus on the titular utopia first, namely the Arcadia of the pastoral tradition by playing on the textual ambivalence of the phrase *Et in Arcadia Ego* for which the commonly accepted "elegiac and assuaging interpretation" is *I, too, lived in Arcadia* (Love 200). However, there is also a revised, more originally accurate interpretation of this phrase as *Even in Arcadia am I* which I will touch upon in the next section. Groff references the common comforting interpretation when Handy, the spiritual leader of the commune, straightforwardly infers that it means "No egos in this Arcadia!", foregrounding Arcadia as the unambiguous utopia of equality and harmony between nature and humanity (29). His reference also alludes at the Buddhist idea that a breakdown of self or ego allows us to live more in tune with our surroundings and be more compassionate.

Furthermore, Groff connects this Arcadian utopia to the American one. When Bit first sees the New Yorkers soon after 9/11, he recognizes the story that made up their American identity instantly:

It was the story they had told themselves from the moment the Dutch had decanted from their ships onto the oyster-strewn island and traded land for guilders: that this place filled with water and wildlife was special, rare, equitable. That it could embrace everyone who came here, that there would be room and a chance to thrive, glamour and beauty. That this equality of purpose would keep them safe. (207-208)

The 'American utopia' of the first settlers resembles that of the commune, because the hippie movement of the 60s can be read as symptomatic of the loss of this ideal and denotes a need to go back to it. In turn, this American 'New World' utopia stems from the Christian

---

<sup>6</sup> The titles of *Arcadia's* chapters refer to utopian worlds that past societies told stories about often because they believed in a harmonious co-existence with nature. A few examples of utopia's included in *Arcadia* are *City of the Sun*, *Heliopolis*, *Isles of the Blest*, and the *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

utopia of the Garden of Eden that still dominates western culture, as Carolyn Merchant writes in her work *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*. She argues that Christianity's fall from the Garden of Eden resulted in the need for a Recovery narrative "to convert the fallen world of deserts and wilderness into a new earthly Eden" based on the Christian faith in redemption (22). During the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, a secularized version of this same Recovery narrative emerged and was particularly popular with settlers in the New World, who wanted to build a real-life Eden. This ideal where "science and technology would be the means of transforming nature, while labor in the earth would be the means of saving human souls" reflects the common belief in an Arcadia, a place where humans live peacefully alongside one another in nature (Merchant 61).

However, the utopian interpretation of Arcadia as *I, too, lived in Arcadia* also contains the elegiac implication that such a harmonious utopia no longer exists—or never existed in the first place and was simply a product of humanity's idealism. Bit and other Americans also lose these utopian narratives of equality because the hippie movement fades out and later because of 9/11. As a result, they leave an affective imprint of loss and mourning of the Edenistic conception of nature as singularly authentic, equitable and beautiful on our cultural consciousness. Now that the Arcadian commune no longer exists and its members have left Ersatz Arcadia, Arcadia "feels like a book with the pages ripped out, the cover loose in Bit's hands" (155). Similarly, in the space around him the New Yorkers are "withholding their fullest joy" because they have lost the America as a New World Eden—a place of equality and freedom—to 9/11 and the global downturn (207).

Bit is aware of the affective power of utopian imagery when he argues that stories such as the New World Eden narrative "don't need to be factual to be vital" (208). In other words, even though Americans might have stopped believing *rationaly* in such utopias of equality,

*affectively* and perhaps subconsciously they are still mourning the loss of such utopias because they learn that they were never or hardly real in the first place and have to acknowledge America's or in Bit's case, the commune's flaws. Thus, a purely rational Cartesian view of one's identity, loses sight of these affective consequences of our changing perceptions and rationalizations of the world. In addition, it unsettles the pastoral imagery of Arcadia as a garden or a harmonious reconciliation between humanity and nature, where nature is mostly represented as authentic, tame, equitable and beautiful (202). It implies that that conception of nature itself is dying (Love 201). With it, a part of the western conception of identity crumbles to the ground because as Bit discerns "when we lose the stories we have believed about ourselves, we are losing more than stories, we are losing ourselves" (208). In what follows, I will argue that this breakdown of self and collective identities is in part the result of a breakdown of socioculturally induced anthropocentric views on nature, which supports the idea that selves and spaces are interconnected and that these connections are under constant change.

b) "*Even in Arcadia am I*": A Dangerous, Changing Experience of the (Non-)Human

The actual translation of the Latin inscription *Et in Arcadia Ego* that I opened my discussion of Arcadia with is *Even in Arcadia am I*, which Astrid was about to explain in Groff's *Arcadia* before Handy interrupted. The 'I', in this case, refers to 'death'. Thus, the original meaning of the phrase is *Even in Arcadia there is death*. This translation plays up an element of the Latin phrase that went unnoticed for centuries: utopias such as Arcadia are grounded in an anthropocentric bias, where nature is reduced to a comfortable, accommodating, and steady décor for human events. The mortality and 'foodiness' of humans, the ephemerality of our lives in comparison to those of other species, and the lethal characteristics of nature

are endlessly backgrounded in our imagination, especially in the pastoral tradition. These are elements that we tend to deny in our idealistic representations, as is exemplified in *Arcadia* by the fact that no one listens to Astrid's less idealistic explanation of the phrase. However, the literary representation of nature as an increasingly uncertain and "baleful or threatened presence" that is not as distinctly different from humanity as we might believe, could have the capacity to reel in our Recovery or New World Eden narrative, "insisting upon our implacable connection to a nature finally resistant to our controlling and ideologizing tendencies" (Love 200-201, 204). Although *Arcadia's* focus is on the lingering affective aftershock of the loss of these anthropocentric utopia's, through the eyes of Bit an alternative, more 'realistic' and less anthropocentric view of nature emerges.

Contrary to the New World Eden narrative, Bit does not distinguish between the human and nonhuman because his interactions with nature are grounded in a relinquishment of control or instrumentalism. Young Bit experiences nature as something that poses a threat but also stupefies him with awe: "The world is sometimes too much for Bit, too full of terror and beauty. Every day he finds himself squeezed under a new astonishment. The universe pulses outward at impossible speeds. Bit feels its spin into nothing" (96). Abe and Hannah named their son Bit because he was exceptionally small as a premature baby, but it also speaks to his early vision of a vibrantly alive world that is so overpowering he can barely take it in because he wants to pay attention to all of it, as discussed in the previous chapter on care. This contrasts with the utopian visions of nature that function as externalizations of human longings for control over nature to mold it into an Edenic garden. Moreover, because his experience of the world is still largely untainted by anthropocentric doxa, his childhood world is alive with both anthropomorphic descriptions of nature and zoomorphic descriptions of people. From his perspective, the commune's pastoral goal to "[l]ive with the

land, not on it" takes on a whole new meaning, as Bit does not distinguish between the human and nonhuman, between his imagination and reality (14). After he has read Grimm's fairy tales, for instance, the creatures come alive and enrich his perception of the world. Footsteps turn into a "giant come to eat him" (57). The New World Eden is replaced by fantastical visions that express "the complexity of the old-growth forest" as a healing experience because Bit forgets about his depressed mother for a moment, which is what ecocritic Glen Love would have liked the new pastoral to be (205). While these experiences are healing, they are also disorienting and frightful in *Arcadia* which Love neglects even though this shows the complexity of human-nonhuman relationships.

As Love discerns, this take on the pastoral tradition matches our contemporary anxieties about the future as we lose the simplistic, seemingly permanent affective pastoral story we have told ourselves about nature and replace it by exploring the *complexity* and *change* that lies in conceptualizations of wilderness (203, 205). In other words, *Arcadia* does not devalue wilderness and the danger that lies within it as is the case in the utopian pastoral tradition where nature can only be beautiful because it is authentic, tame and equitable, but rather *revalues* it because of the aesthetic affects it engenders. Now, Bit's sense of beauty comes to encompass not just harmonious, immaculate imagery of nature, but also the complex interweaving of the non-natural nonhuman and human that is exemplified by "the tree outside full of plastic bags, white-bellied in the wind" which he finds beautiful (193). It shows how he recognizes the unintended consequences of our western instrumentalism without idealizing them. This foregrounds how Bit's self is dependent on particular, everchanging and complex experiences of a networked world that dismantle the overarching stories he encounters in his life. This allows him to reframe the abstract vision of his Life as a decidedly utopian narrative into "one that is embodied and embedded in specific

relationships, communities and places” and gives him the ability to expand his sense of selfhood into something that resembles the non-self (Curry 143).

### 3.2.1.2. Losing Helle, Finding Astonishments of Helle

Another example of such an evolving idealized story is that of his love for Helle who is the epitome of beauty to him until he realizes that such a definition of love and beauty is too restrictive. Bit’s wife, Helle, constitutes his vision of beauty and love in the world, however, this idealistic tendency is not evaluated positively, but rather as morally ambiguous within *Arcadia*, because Bit still fails to notice what lies beyond her exterior, since Helle goes for a walk and never comes back, and he cannot fathom what happened. Her sudden departure is ambiguously described afterwards, as Bit tries to figure out whether she had left him any clues during their last moment together: “Go, she said; and did or didn’t say, I can’t come. Go, she said; and did or didn’t say, I can’t come back” (174). With this description, Groff sketches out Bit’s emotional landscape: the question as to why Helle disappeared creates constant uncertainty. Bit “keeps thinking it will all be explained to him, that he will wake up one morning to hear the key in the lock and Helle will come in” (172). Helle’s departure makes Bit realize once more that stories “can wound” and “can blister” and make you lose what you thought belonged to you, because these ‘selfstories’ are not purely rational or inherent to his identity (216).

He becomes painfully aware of this when his idea of Helle as the epitome of beauty is appropriated and generalized by the depiction of young celebrities in Hollywood and now becomes a narrative space that is used separately from his own personal life: “It is as if the idea of Helle he’d carried around with him for twenty-five years had bloomed external into the world” (186). So, the overarching narrative of his love for Helle, which he thought was

personal and private, turns out to be an external idea, which is what also happened with Arcadia. However, the use of the word 'bloom' suggests that this is not evaluated negatively, but that he has given up the idea that Helle—or the romantic narrative he had spun around her—is a stable part of his identity. This, in turn, allows him to expand his notion of beauty into a more inclusive, less restrictive one.

His sense of beauty becomes much more context-dependent and less embedded in the one-true-love narrative he had spun around Helle. This is foregrounded when he mentions that he is still looking for Helle, but not for the singularly authentic woman that had embodied his sense of love, but for every "astonishment of Helle" he can find (217). When he finally rediscovers her beauty and the love he felt for her in the faces of women he passes on the street or in "Grete's face as she grows" are only for "a glimmering breath" (217-218). Thus, Bit's aesthetics become even more context-dependent and less idealistic, as his complex outlook on the beauty of nature also implies. Thus, I argue that Bit's sense of self has expanded into something larger that resembles the contemporary non-self since the 'contents' of his identity—his thoughts and feelings on beauty and nature—are revealed to be 'not-self'. Or rather, they are dependent on his awareness of the shifting spaces and stories around him. Once he recognizes this, his definitions of nature and beauty become much more inclusive. I will argue that his aesthetic focus on impermanent moments has ethical implications in the next chapter on enchanting ordinary matter.

In addition, Bit's sense of self also resembles McMahan's expanding non-self because he realizes that the networked form of kinship that ideals on nature and love, such as the Arcadian utopia and one-true-love narrative try to encompass, are much more complex and dependent on impermanent experiences. The networked form of kinship with nonhuman and human others is "never whole, but always emerging, perpetually in process" (Levine

129). As a result, *Arcadia*, which aims to track Bit's experiences growing up, also resists the totality of more comfortable, predetermined coming-of-age narratives, such as the love or 'pastoral' plot. Thus, *Arcadia* is a story about the fragmentation of these highly idealistic stories Bit interacts with in his life, which is how it resists the tendency to tell a coherent narrative. In *Weather*, Offill also uses fragmentation as a theme, but she also resists evaluation through the fragmented structure of Lizzie's narration.

### 3.2.2. *Weather*: Anthropocene Anxiety and the Non-Self

In *Weather*, Lizzie's narration of her own everyday experiences as a series of anecdotes, jokes and thoughts does not give in to the tendency to tell coherent, evaluative stories about the self because through its fragmentation. The fragmentation points to Lizzie's constructed self because it shows how she continuously practices her identity through her narration. She does not experience her identity as something stable and delineated, but "rather as something that is multiple, contradictory, and distributed over time and place, held together contextually and locally" through everyday interactions (Bamberg). Thus, spatialization or the state of being in changing spaces and perceiving changing actions influences her thoughts and feelings or her sense of self. Such a sense of self shares with the contemporary Buddhist non-self and the ecological self its move away from a solid, defined identity that is not tied to local and spatial constraints.

However, *Weather* complicates the idea that this conception of identity leads to selflessness and the other exclusively positive emotions Plumwood foregrounds, such as care, friendship, solidarity, mutuality, or Buddhist compassion by exploring the initially negative or 'ugly feeling' of Anthropocene anxiety. Lizzie's fragmented self does not stem from a positive feeling, but from her anxiety which is an effect of her spatialization or the fact

that she perceives displacement and stagnation in her surroundings—New York just before Trump was elected, where people have an increasing sense of anxiety about potential wars and global warming—and in her own middle-aged life as a mother who had wanted to do a PhD, but works in a library now and who just recently had to send her son to a cheaper school. However, I will argue that Anthropocene anxiety also has a transformative potential in *Weather*. It causes Lizzie's breakdown of self which creates an open feeling and a new way of perceiving one's life, potentially even beyond the egoistic and anthropocentric boundaries western views of identity have put in place.

### 3.2.2.1. Anthropocene Anxiety and the Deconstructed Self

Anxiety occurs when we experience a loss of control. It solidifies the perceived displacement and inaction that accompanies such powerlessness. Although Sianne Ngai, author of the book on *Ugly Feelings*, does not explicitly connect anxiety to a growing awareness of climate change and its implications, she makes the crucial reflection that in thinking the aesthetic and the political together, ugly feelings such as anxiety arise (3). Furthermore, ugly feelings are sentiments of disenchantment that are fundamentally ambivalent and are intimately tied to the loss of control that is thematized through moments of suspended action and spatial confusion (5, 14). Consequently, these negative affects often challenge the boundaries between the inside and outside, the self and the world, the private and the public, or the psyche and the body, which is where their transformative potential lies (Ngai 22).<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, these boundary confusions are often central to the aesthetic forms and genres that ugly feelings determine (Ngai 22). Climate fiction in particular is prone

---

<sup>7</sup> For more on the potential productivity of ugly feelings in environmentalist discourse, see Nicole Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism* (2018).

to ugly feelings because it often thematizes a “derangement of scales” as Clark notes (“Derangements”). The derangement of scales implies that our divisions of time and space into private and personal scales of experience will continue to be unsettled as the need to recognize new ecological concepts that challenge the imagination, such as deep time and space or the mesh increases. As more people are starting to think about climate change, they will experience scale derangements more strongly and as a result, the ugly feeling of anxiety that accompanies this powerless state will intensify. I will refer to the specific feeling of anxiety about an uncertain future marked by environmental disaster as Anthropocene anxiety. Thus, the primary characteristic of Anthropocene anxiety is that it is an affect that is shared by others on an equally imagination-challenging scale, which comes with debilitating, but also potentially empowering consequences.<sup>8</sup>

#### 3.2.2.2. Anthropocene Anxiety and Displacement

In *Weather*, the protagonist’s anxiety is always peripherally present in her narration. The tumultuous political setting of the United States in 2016 right before Donald Trump got elected amplifies this affect. America anno 2016 “feels the way it does just before [war] starts”, which is a reflection on the temporal experience of anxiety as an *expectant emotion*, something that is aimed at “the configuration of the world in general” or the future disposition of the self rather than at a specific object (165, Ngai 210). This definition of anxiety anticipates Paul Saint-Amour’s contention that we should take seriously “the

---

<sup>8</sup> Contrary to Ngai who prefers not to categorize anxiety as either a feeling or affect, I would like to define anxiety as an affect because it is less contained by an identity than individuated feelings. Moreover, it is a structure of feeling posed by social experiences that I will argue, already “exert[s] palpable pressures and set[s] effective limits on experience and action” even though it has not yet been culturally defined, classified, or rationalized as a defined feeling would and it often, quite literally in *Weather*, lies “at the edge of semantic availability” (Williams 132, 134).

traumatizing power of anticipation” that can result from such anticipatory anxiety and that we should work to remove the post-traumatic bias in trauma studies to include the study of pre-traumatic stress syndromes (17). In his *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (2015) he uses the cultural production of the interwar period to argue that “the years 1918-39 were characterized by a pervasive sense of anxious anticipation and were thus experienced ‘in real time as an interwar period’” (Craps 279). Moreover, the pervasive anxious feeling that a war is coming in *Weather* is likely more than a reflection on the political unrest in America because pre-traumatic stress syndrome is increasingly recognized as an effect of the pervasive Anthropocene anxiety that Lizzie is peripherally expressing throughout her narration (Craps 297). Will, Lizzie’s platonic love interest, describes this awareness as “more physical than mental” and Lizzie compares it to “the way a dog’s hackles go up”, which alludes to the fact that anxiety is felt as an affect, an impersonal feeling even that we share with other embodied species, rather than a culturally codified one (165, Greenwald Smith 2).<sup>9</sup> Because this impersonal feeling is less culturally codified and harder to incorporate into a capitalist logic due to its ambiguous nature, anxiety has the potential to disrupt our perception of the world and our contemporary sense of self.

Furthermore, the novel foregrounds how the feeling of emotional *displacement* is intimately related to the physical experience of displacement, which erases the boundaries between the objective and subjective because it implies that a supposedly subjective feeling such as anxiety is a “structural effect of spatialization in general” and that the future

---

<sup>9</sup> I have borrowed the term impersonal feeling from Rachel Greenwald-Smith’s work: “Impersonal feelings do not straightforwardly conform to a market model, because they are not easily codifiable or recognizable; they do not allow for strategic emotional associations to be made between readers and characters; and they emphasize the unpredictability of affective connections. As a result, these modes of textual affectivity, if they are recognized and defined as forms of feeling, challenge the principles of subjectivity that underpin not only our aesthetic judgments but our economic, political, and social convictions as well” (“Affect and American Literature” 2). Anthropocene horror can also be defined as an impersonal feeling.

disposition of the self is equally context-dependent (Ngai 212). Offill's writing style is built around the suggestive and the non-evaluative: every paragraph captures a different thought that is never quite finished and implicitly resurfaces in a later paragraph. This narrative style suggests that Lizzie's affective state is one of 'disconcertedness' or affective indeterminacy which is where ugly feelings that consist of ontological doubt occur. They contrast with decidedly moral or cathartic feelings that often try to dispel the feelers' "confusion about the feeling's objective or subjective status" (Ngai 14,19). Additionally, we can interpret Lizzie's fragmented construction of her identity in *Weather* through her anxiety-ridden narration as a variant of the Buddhist non-self because it similarly creates a state of indeterminacy where boundaries between objective and subjective realities fade. In other words, she does not—and cannot—narrate her experiences in a way that would distance herself from them through evaluation or by subjectifying or objectifying them under the influence of Anthropocene anxiety.

However, Lizzie's identity-formation nuances the idea that a non-self is a manageable ideal that we should aim to accomplish and that the anxiety that stems from such an indeterminate ontological state will fade into a decidedly compassionate self. Instead, it suggests that indeterminacy will always come with anxiety because it is a structural effect of spatialization—our changing surroundings—and that there will always be downsides to the mental state of anxiety such as the feeling of disorientation. Offill accomplishes this by using survival tips on what to do when you are lost as a metaphor for what to do when you *feel* lost. When you read the next passage of *Weather* on its own, it seems like a normal piece of prepper information: "If you think you are lost: beware bending the map. Don't say it was a pond, not a lake; maybe the stream flowed east, not west. Leave a trail as you go. Try to mark trees. (199). However, if you read it as one of the final passages of *Weather* after Lizzie has

detailed the unhealthy cycle of care for her brother she is stuck in, her struggles with her growing awareness of the immensity of climate change and its impact on her personal life, and when you know that she casts her vote in the 2016 elections after this passage, you realize that these circumstances have trapped her in a state of suspended action and have created an emotional state of displacement and powerlessness.

Lizzie never makes explicit how prepper tips could alternatively also help her cope with climate change disaster on an emotional level, so a secondary conclusion that we can draw from this is that Offill exposes the bias against emotional explorations of disaster in the prepper books and the other climate change narratives. Sylvia's podcast where the meagre 'obligatory note of hope' is the only emotional consolation her listeners get is a good example of this lack of psychological and affective environmentalist discourses.<sup>10</sup> However, the prepper tips—for lack of a better aid in guiding her through her Anthropocene anxiety—help her mend some of the Anthropocene anxiety she experiences and re-construct her sense of self at its most basic level: she sees her own feelings of disorientation reflected in them, which helps her acknowledge what she is experiencing and thinking—she 'marks the trees'—and she learns that she should not evaluate or categorize them—she does not 'say it was a pond, not a lake'—which is how Wright's interpretation of the concept of non-self suggests we should deal with our emotions and thoughts. That Anthropocene anxiety and its accompanying state of displacement do not always function in a paralyzing way is further explored in the next section where I argue that they can create an openness that helps us imagine what it must be like to inhabit other bodies and raises our awareness of other selves.

---

<sup>10</sup> The pervasive feeling of peripheral anxiety also dismantles the stereotypical survivalist representation of disaster as a sudden, unexpected event, which is how it is often portrayed in popular media. Instead, Offill's experimental work of fiction implies that we need to recognize and learn to take note of the affective presence of anxieties about disaster in the back of our minds.

### 3.2.2.3. “Learning to Die”: Not a No-Body, but an Any-Body

Anthropocene anxiety, displacement and stagnation create Lizzie’s fragmented sense of self. However, they do not merely produce negative affects such as powerlessness and disorientation. In fact, what makes the experience so unique is that the anxiety deconstructs a solid, internalized sense of self, which can feel scary, hence the powerlessness and disorientation, but can also lead to a new awareness of others and of the self. In other words, Lizzie’s fragmented identity is ambiguous, and has both positive and negative consequences. The last pages of *Weather* support this idea because they allude to one of such consequences that work both ways: the feeling of being lost when facing an impending disaster. When we feel lost, we are in a stupor that is hard to get out of. Our brain “get[s] stuck on a loop, trying to find a similar situation for comparison” (171). We project our anxiety onto other situations and people as Lizzie does in the following passage, for instance (Ngai 210): “They say people who are lost walk trancelike past their own search parties. Maybe I saw you. Maybe I passed you on my street. How will I know you? Trust me, you’ll say” (199). The ‘you’ could be the one who is lost and the one who is searching. ‘You’ and ‘I’, self and other have become interchangeable. They are both self and other and it is impossible to recognize who is who because displacement and projection blur the boundaries. The panic we experience in such situations will lead to a “blinking out of one’s own subjectivity and singular identity” (Clark “EG” 71). When climate disaster strikes—or when we are under the impression that disaster will strike soon—we will not become a nobody, but an any-body, which is here foregrounded through the displacement and ontological uncertainty about who the speaker is and who they are addressing in the second person. However, this blinking

out of our own identity comes with an “open feeling” or “a condition of utter receptivity” (Ngai 261).

Chiefly, and quite straightforwardly: the breakdown of our identity and the increasing awareness of what we can potentially lose lead to a reappraisal of everything that still is in spite of the unpredictable, grim future that is to come. Lizzie alludes to this when she thinks about what old monks at Mount Athos tell visitors when they ask them what they do all day: “*We have died and we are in love with everything*” (200). In her signature style, Offill lets us fill in the gaps, but the quotation speaks to a breakdown of what they know and who they are as a loss that can evoke a new way of looking at everything and any-body there is in life, potentially even beyond the anthropocentric boundaries we have imposed on ourselves. This reappraisal is probably what Offill was referring to in her working title of *Weather* “Learning to Die” (“Learning”). This reappraisal can entail that the projection of anxiety onto others is something possibly empowering, that can incite us to care for one another even if it is an inherently amoral, non-cathartic and apolitical feeling because more and more people *share* Lizzie’s anxieties about the future. That we can gain some sense of comfort and even trust in one another from the realization that, unlike other forms of anxiety, we are increasingly consciously sharing our Anthropocene anxiety (and grief, anger, and despair) with others. Offill implies that we can use this shared feeling to take action together instead of being looped into a state of panic and powerlessness that makes us ‘walk past our own search parties’. Thus, even though the breakdown of self that Anthropocene anxiety and displacement create engenders negative affects such as angst and uncertainty, it also creates new possibilities to reappraisal the everyday things and experiences that we still have, which is something I will explore further in the next chapter on the re-enchantment of ordinary matter.

### 3.2.3. Conclusion: Spatial Selves

*Arcadia* and *Weather* are everyday Anthropocene novels that lay bare how self, and space are interconnected and in doing so they undermine the western conception of the egoistic, hyperseparated self that we feel the need to capture in a separate, coherent narrative. In *Arcadia* Bit discovers that the commune's loss of the Arcadian utopia is one he shares with other Americans, after the events of 9/11 unveil how equality and democracy were in part only fictional, as both hopeful, but idealistic representations of reality are dismantled. Although he realizes, rationally, that this utopia is unachievable after the commune collapses, affectively he struggles with the loss of such a big story in his life, which shows how the Cartesian split between the mind and the material fails to account for how the loss of a fictional narrative can cause real-life grief and sadness. Moreover, it points to how both real-life and narrative spaces affect one's sense of self. Once Bit recognizes that beauty and nature are much more context-dependent and complex, his sense of self expands into a contemporary non-self because he becomes more aware of his real-life entanglements with others.

Alternatively, Bit's story shows how the pastoral conceptualization of harmonious co-existence between humanity—an Arcadia—needs to make room for a new conceptualization of nature where the consequences of human instrumentalism are not shunned, but where the complexity of nonhuman and human interdependent relationships—and the awe and terror that characterize them—are continuously recognized. This new pastoral mode that manages to be both hopeful and aware of the danger of nonhuman-human entanglements

shows how *Arcadia* is part of the larger cultural project of re-imagining our connections with nature in the face of climate disaster.

*Weather* also challenges the idea of a unified self represented by a separate, coherent narrative of one's life, but its narrative style and structure critique this idea more explicitly. Lizzie experiences a breakdown of self because the uncertain context in which she finds herself—characterized by inaction and displacement—creates Anthropocene anxiety that challenges the boundaries between the subjective and the objective and between self and space. As a result, she experiences powerlessness or an inability to narrate her own experiences coherently and to evaluate them in a straight-forward manner. The fragmented structure of *Weather* reflects how Lizzie builds her self-narration using only implicitly and variously related and evaluated anecdotes. However, this sense of displacement also brings about affirmative experiences because it allows her to focus on what she does have and what she has not lost to climate disaster yet. This reappraisal of the ordinary, impermanent moment in the face of 'species vulnerability' and death is a theme in both novels, but as I will argue in the next chapter, this tendency is more than a common reflex to reappraise what we have and still know for certain as we grow more aware of the constant threat of climate disaster in the Anthropocene. It also has ethical implications.

#### 4. (Dis-)Enchanting Ordinary Matter: Rebirth and Impermanence

Although sociologist Max Weber's claim that the modern world is disenchanted dates back to 1919, his social commentary is often used today to describe the pervasive sense of meaninglessness of human and nonhuman life in our highly commodified western culture. In "Science as a Vocation", Weber argues that increasing rationalization and intellectualization causes us to believe that "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" (Weber 117). Subsequently, we are caught up in the desire to reach a telos or endpoint at which all there is to know is calculated and categorized, both in our private and public lives. Because progress never ends, civilized "man" can never seize something definitive. This contrasts with "some peasant of the past" who has lived a satisfactory life "because he stood in the organic cycle of life" according to Weber (117). However, in this chapter I will argue that Jane Bennett's New Materialism and contemporary Buddhism have worked against the idea that there are no sites of enchantment in everyday modern life by revalorizing the recurrently enchanting effects of materiality in the face of rationalizing, objectifying modern forces. In other words, they have argued that an existence amidst the cycle of life is not a thing of the past but is still present in recurring moments of enchantment in our everyday lives in technologically advanced, capitalist societies.

Bennett's New Materialism argues against the idea that the world "need[s] to be designed, or predisposed toward human happiness, or expressive of intrinsic purpose or meaning" to be enchanting, as is often believed in religious or secular myths (11). In line with contemporary mindfulness practices, she defines enchantment as "the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement" or a Woolfian 'moment of being' that includes "acute sensory activity" and the simultaneous experience of transfixed wonder

and transportation by sense (5). In other words, to be enchanted is to be struck by the imbued extraordinariness of the familiar and ordinary. Crucial in Bennett's approach to enchantment is that not only human matter, but all matter possesses this capacity to surprise and re-sensitize us (166). In line with my findings in the second chapter on identity where I have developed the claim that identity and space are interconnected, Bennett argues that "the material cosmos functions as a source of the self, that is, an 'ultimate background...to which we find ourselves always already attached". What I want to explore in this chapter is if and how this evokes "something like awe, wonder, or reverence" for the characters of *Arcadia* and *Weather* (166).

The search for the sacred in the mundane is described in traditional Buddhist literature as well, but it is only because modernity has "neutralized, objectified, and commodified the stone" that contemporary Buddhists have revitalized the question whether there is anything more to everyday objects like stones (McMahan 241). Moreover, McMahan notes the striking similarities between descriptions of the extraordinary everyday by modernist authors, such as Virginia Woolf, and modern interpretations of Zen literature (236). He rightfully discerns that Buddhist modernism is a specific discipline that revalorizes ordinary matter and actions which is a project that modernist authors have also contributed to by making matter come to life in their characters' minds through detailed, sensory, and embodied descriptions that often work against rational objectifications.

Lastly, Bennett claims that occasional, everyday enchantment is vital to acquire an ethics of care and love for the earth (4). It follows that Bennett believes enchantment can "motor ethical and political change" (91). In light of this claim, my aim for this chapter is to investigate if such extraordinary descriptions of the ordinary can be found in the everyday Anthropocene novel and to what extent they relate to the ethics of care of the main

characters. As a secondary concern, these moments of enchantment would also attest to the fruitful cross-fertilization between recent ecological philosophers such as Jane Bennett and contemporary Buddhism which is based off readings of the ancient *Pali Suttas*. In the next section, I will focus on rebirth since this Buddhist belief is reframed as an incentive to care for ordinary and extraordinary nonhuman and human matter on earth. This means that rebirth, like enchantment, can encourage us to take care of and be re-sensitized to matter because it shows us how all matter is different from, but also part of ourselves and our loved ones since it implies our interdependence transcends mortality. I will compare rebirth to Plumwood's ecological materialist conception of life and death. For my analysis of rebirth in both novels, I will focus on the hybrid and inclusive ethics of compassion that we can find in a passage of *Weather* and the representation of rebirth as a moment of everyday enchantment in *Arcadia*. For the second part, I will focus on the concept of impermanence—a universal tenet of all religions—because the heightened perception and visceral experience of the present, singular moment is central to any definition of enchantment. I will be using Walter Benjamin's concept 'image of history' to detail these moments of everyday enchantment and to tease out their critical and ethical implications. In *Arcadia's* case, these impermanent images of history point to Bit's ethical affirmation of slow, everyday life which is established by defamiliarizing ordinary matter, only to re-enchant it and counter rationalizing forces. In *Weather*, Lizzie's image of history breaks down the divide between the rationalization and sacralization of the ordinary to point to the nonhuman experience itself. Thus, defamiliarization is used to centralize the experiences of nonhuman things in our ecological ethics as well.

#### 4.1. *Rebirth and Animistic Materialism*

As discussed above, rebirth and enchantment have the same ability to re-sensitize us to and re-imbue matter with qualities that drive us to take care of ordinary materiality. This has also been a theme within ecology, which tries to find similar materialist conceptions of death and life to foster an ethics of care for ordinary nonhuman and human matter. In this section I will argue that contemporary Buddhism's interpretation of rebirth shares characteristics with materialist conceptions of death that ecologists have presented as alternatives to Christian and modernist-atheist death narratives. The conception of rebirth in the *Pali Suttas* differs significantly from re-interpretations by modern Buddhists such as Thich Nhat Hanh. In the Buddhist tradition, life in a cycle of rebirth is dissatisfactory because it implicates people in a causal chain of suffering that prevents us from disengaging from the phenomenal world (McMahan 155). As stated previously, this disengagement is a necessary step in the process of transcending the phenomenal world and the embodied self to reach a state of nirvana and become intransient. In addition, the *Pali Suttas* introduce the insightful idea that rebirth "provides a continuity between humans and animals—they could be one's own relative and friends from the past" (McMahan 157).

The implication that rebirth binds humans and nonhumans functions as an incentive for compassion and kindness towards others in contemporary reconceptualizations. Arguably, this is one of the theses of Buddhism that makes it stand out from other (western) religions and philosophies today because Buddhism anticipates the need we experience for conceptualizations of death and life that are inclusive and stress interdependence. For Thich Nhat Hanh these elements of traditional rebirth strengthen his view on interdependence. The former lives metaphor of the traditional literature is now used literally to conceptualize how there is no birth, no death and only *continuation*. In other words, the phenomenon of

rebirth is seen as an ontological reality. This vision of rebirth as a peculiar kind of transmigration that is foreshadowed by Thich Nhat Hanh is “amenable to a scientific view of the universe” and corresponds with Morton’s mesh and the contemporary non-self as an entity that expands to envelop everything (McMahan 177). Of interest for this chapter are the striking philosophical similarities between contemporary Buddhist interpretations of rebirth and Plumwood’s ecological and materialist view on life and death.

In her posthumously published essay “Tasteless: Towards a Food-Based Approach to Death” Val Plumwood argues that our western conceptualizations of death are problematic because they enforce an anthropocentric view of life that causes “alienation from the earth” and “the loss of meaning and narrative continuity for self” (325). She proposes that we reappropriate the ‘foodiness’ of our own bodies to animals which has been uncoupled from modern life. Since modernity, we have denied our status as food because it undermines our philosophies of human exceptionalism. However, our ‘foodiness’ is an opportunity to recognize and appreciate how the death of our bodies stands for our “continuity with and through the earth” and binds us with other species, such as earthworms, flies, beetles, and microbes (Plumwood “Towards” 225). Moreover, Plumwood similarly argues that this conceptualization of death as rebirth accommodates an ethics that works against anthropocentrism because it stresses that we need to care for and nurture all earth others because they are our equals.

What I want to build on for my discussion of materiality in *Arcadia* and *Weather* is that both novels present life and death as a cyclical process. Consequently, the linearity of traditional Buddhist and Christian narratives on death where the aim is to reach a state of transcendence—through nirvana or by reaching heaven—are deconstructed. Together with these narratives, the western teleological progress narrative—which has used these religious

narratives as blueprints—is also deconstructed. In the next section, I will discuss how rebirth is used to unveil the structural inequalities that restrict our ethics of care to the human in *Weather*. Offill achieves this by revitalizing the transmigratory element of contemporary rebirth to suggest deep transcorporeal enmeshments that surpass dichotomous boundaries between the human and nonhuman. Contemporary Buddhism and Bennett’s moments of everyday enchantment adopt the animistic materialist principle of cyclic life as a collection of singular, transient recurring moments and contrast it with linear temporalities where moments of insight are framed as steps towards a decidedly clear *telos*. Rebirth is framed as such a moment of enchantment and can therefore express the circular temporality that Weber thought was structured out of modern life in *Arcadia*.

#### 4.2. *Rebirth in the Everyday Anthropocene Novel*

##### 4.2.1. *Weather*: Rebirth as a Hybrid Ethics of Compassion

In *Weather* Offill reconfigures contemporary rebirth to foreground the lack of compassion for the feminine and technological in today’s society and to hint at a transcorporeal conception of reality.<sup>11</sup> Offill accomplishes this through her fragmentary style, which strings an anecdote about the sex robot Samantha together with a religious reflection on compassion. The sex robot Samantha is introduced as a doll that looks like a human and has two modes: “in sex mode, she can moan if you touch her breasts. In family mode, she can tell jokes or talk about philosophy” (135). Thus, the doll is constructed on the basis of a reductive view of femininity with passive sexuality, on the one hand, and her

---

<sup>11</sup> Trans-corporeality means that human and nonhuman or more-than-human bodies are interconnected with one another and are transformed by these inter- and intra-connections. As such, it challenges western anthropocentrism and emphasizes the materiality of our human bodies and their enmeshment with other matter (Alaimo 2010).

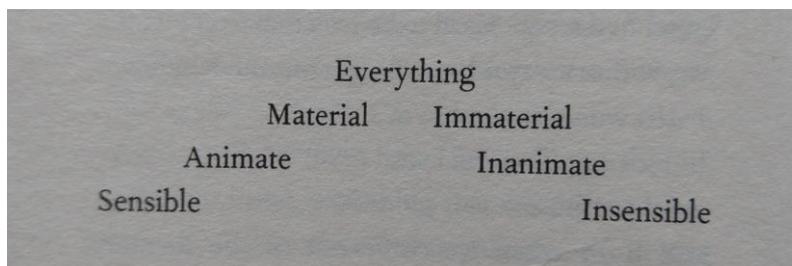
knowledge functions as pleasant domestic entertainment, on the other. At the same time, Lizzie's narration can be summarized as an accumulation of 'jokes and philosophy' as well, so Offill does not want to devalue these skills. If anything, Offill implies that we need to be compassionate with this feminine-robotics hybrid because the way the robot was treated at a tech conference suggests the *othering* of both the feminine and the robotic:

That robot Samantha is in the news again. She was on display at a tech conference in Europe. But too many men tried to test her at once, and by the end of the day she was heavily soiled and had two broken fingers. Her inventor was shaken; he had to ship her back to Spain to be fixed. Luckily, her voice box still worked. I am fine, she said. These people are barbarians, he told a reporter.

Buddhist practice includes the notion that we have all been born many times before and that we have all been each other's mothers and fathers and children and siblings. Therefore, we should treat each person we encounter as if they are our beloved. (156-157)

Samantha is programmed to utter the words "I am fine", an expression that uneasily reminds the reader of what victims say to minimize the impact of sexual assault on their lives when they talk about it, because they often feel ashamed of what happened. Thus, Offill draws attention to this global and gendered problem of violence against women that persists in the treatment of female sex robots and the way they are programmed to be exclusively affirmative and at best two-dimensional. Because Offill ends this section with a reflection on rebirth as an incentive for compassion for others, she suggests that compassion and love for both the feminine and the technological is lacking in today's society. Furthermore, the existence of such female robots shows how the material is also animate and sensible as the

schematic representation below from *Weather* implies. This underlines the need for a new, non-anthropocentric ethics of compassion.



*Figure 1: Schematic representation of the characteristics of matter in Weather, pg. 30*

Unfortunately, the technological nonhuman is often left out of ecological ethics on compassion, care, and inclusivity. In the treatment of the sex robot, we recognize Plumwood's idea of reductive materialism, in which today's society sees matter as an instrument to accomplish its own needs and desires which negates the agency of matter itself ("Feminism" 142). However, Plumwood fails to consider how technological hybrids between the human and nonhuman, such as Samantha, attest to this othering of the feminine and the material as well. Despite her efforts to deconstruct the binary associations between the masculine/feminine and rational/material, Plumwood fails to make room for these hybrid forms of life in her theory. Arguably, her disregard of feminine-robotics and other hybrid forms of life is one of the pitfalls of her theory. This contrasts with the description of Buddhist rebirth as an inclusive type of love for the other as a 'beloved', which implies that there is no other. All beings, even hybrid, 'uncategorizable' beings, are worthy of compassion.

This view on compassion is more transcorporeal than Plumwood's and shows an awareness of the mesh through the concept of rebirth. Subsequently, the agency of the other is recognized because it is not separate from one's own agency in the mesh. However, Offill also foregrounds how concepts such as rebirth and impermanence might be different for a

nonhuman robot. As the concept of rebirth suggests, we are both the same and different than other entities in the interdependent net. As humans, we are different from robots because their mechanical parts are often used to create a new robot or machine. Thus, their lives also pertain to rebirth, but more evidently since their parts are often recycled and are more durable than most parts of the organic human body. This is at first glance, a different 'cycle of life' than that of humanity. However, both the organic and the mechanic cycles indicate that these new lives are impermanent and as Offill's example of Samantha suggests, both cycles of life are interrelated since the lack of compassion and care for nonhuman feminine robots coincides with the lack of compassion and recognition of the sexual assault of women. Thus, transcorporeality is foregrounded as a means of critiquing anthropocentric compassion and addressing the need for a hybrid, inclusive ethics of compassion that recognizes overarching structural discriminations against women.

#### 4.2.2. *Arcadia*: Rebirth as a Moment of Everyday Enchantment

In *Arcadia*, rebirth is presented as a contingent moment of everyday enchantment. Bit describes how Hannah's ashes float in the pond in such a detailed, sensory style that he suggests that the interaction between ordinary matter—the ashes and the water—impresses itself upon him as a moment of wonder and acute sensory awareness, particularly of the visual qualia of the fast decomposition of ash in water.

When Hannah's remains go into the Pond, they fall straight down. When the heavy pieces of her break the surface, the water heals itself. The rest of the ashes are lighter and float; they bloom in a slow flush across the surface. (283)

Bit's description of the water that "heals itself" of her "heavy pieces" and the lighter ashes that "bloom in a slow flush across the surface" suggests that the process where the remains

of the human body go back to the earth—represented by the water—is a natural one. The verb “bloom” stresses the continuity with the earth because it implies that new life emerges out of her ashes. Thus, a cyclic interpretation of death as a form of new life underlies his description. However, ‘bloom’ also indicates that this is an impermanent moment of symbiosis between human and nonhuman matter that makes the experience enchanting to Bit, because the ordinary objects have reconfigured into something extraordinary. The cultural practice of scattering ashes into nature is framed as one of the remaining modern rituals that marks “the marvellous erupting amid the everyday” since it symbolizes a loss of life, but also creates a presence of new life—or rather, a continuation of life—through the interaction between the ashes and water. This makes it a site of re-enchantment (Bennett 4). Although *Arcadia* tracks a presumably teleological temporality, namely Bit’s life, the novel is strung together by these moments of everyday enchantment. This creates a cyclic rhythm to life and death in the novel which supports a more interdependent ethics of care which mirrors contemporary Buddhism and Plumwood’s animistic materialism.

#### 4.3. *Images of History and the Affirmation of the Ordinary*

Although enchantment is a shifty concept, the impermanence of this moment of higher sensory awareness is central to most of its definitions. Since impermanence lies at the basis of the experience of everyday enchantment, I want to use it to investigate whether moments of everyday enchantment can provide an alternative interspecies conceptualization of history rather than the common anthropocentric and teleological one. Impermanence (*anityākāra*) or the problem of change is central to all religions. In western philosophy, Heraclitus’ *panta rhei* doctrine introduced change as a steady undercurrent of life that strips us of the ability to experience the same thing twice. In Buddhism, impermanence is one of

the three 'marks' or "basic characteristics of all phenomenal existence" that we should recognize through meditation (Britannica). The flux of human life is represented through the cycle of rebirth in the traditional *Pali Suttas*. Contemporary western interpretations of impermanence have come to define it as a more specific logic of life to avoid such totalizing representations. In popular mindfulness practices, for instance, the teachings of impermanence are intertwined with "attentive engagement" with your ordinary surroundings and simultaneous "Buddhist detachment" from them (McMahan 229).

By focusing on the importance both Benjamin and contemporary Buddhism attach to the impermanent moment, I want to make a case for a cross-fertilization between Walter Benjamin's insightful concept of the 'image' of history and Buddhism's New Materialist emphasis on the extraordinariness of ordinary matter. I will draw on Adeline Johns-Putra's article "Climate and History in the Anthropocene: Realist Narrative and the Framing of Time" to argue that the everyday Anthropocene novel uses such an ephemeral understanding of history to hold "multiple, inter-, and intra-[species] conceptualizations of history together" (Johns-Putra 248). Thus, the everyday Anthropocene novel changes what history means in the literary realist tradition, by showcasing a propensity to distinguish human history as merely one version of history and proposing instead a more "inter-species understanding of the human" through their focus on the transient, embodied experience (Johns-Putra 248).

#### 4.4. *Historical Materialism and the Buddhist Affirmation of Ordinary Matter*

Contrary to Marxist 'historical materialism', Walter Benjamin argues that the past cannot be freely exploited and used to legitimize representations of the present as the telos of historical forces. Benjamin proposes instead that the past "can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it is recognized and is never seen again [...]. For every

image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (Benjamin 255). Because Benjamin stresses the impermanence of history, he echoes contemporary Buddhism and prefigures new materialist discourse that similarly emphasizes the importance of transience in reflections on one's own experiences and material surroundings.

Furthermore, he insists that the historical materialist should "acknowledge the subjectivity of her position in the present, a point from which the historical object is blasted out of the course of history and a configuration of objects is thought into being as a monad" (Johns-Putra 258). Although it is important to stress that any connection between Walter Benjamin's theory and New Materialism will be anachronistic and therefore remains speculative, it is striking how his emphasis on the recognition of one's own subjectivity and of one's 'position in the present' reflects the New Materialist belief that matter can function as a "formative impetus" and be "co-productive in conditioning and enabling social worlds and expression" (Sencindiver). This is especially the case because the historical object can be read as ideational but also as the physical, historical artefact or 'thing' that the historian interacts with. If Benjamin is in fact implying that an image of history is contingent upon a historical object and its actual, physical presence or 'thingness', this mirrors contemporary Buddhism's understanding of the profound through attentive (dis-)engagement with ordinary things. In other words, they both point to the idea that the interaction with such ordinary, historical objects which have outlived multiple impermanent human generations, such as trees or books, is powerful because our gaze momentarily imbues them with a certain sacrality which causes them to escape the "rationalizing, mechanizing forces of modernity" (McMahan 241).

#### 4.5. *Images of History in the Everyday Anthropocene Novel*

##### 4.5.1. *Arcadia*: The Extraordinary Affirmation of Slow, Everyday Life

In the everyday Anthropocene novels that are discussed in this thesis, we see a combination of the Benjaminian image of history and the Buddhist affirmation of ordinary life and objects. Both main characters show the propensity to zoom in on ordinary life and zoom back out to point to an understanding of history that moves beyond history as we know it and recognizes inter-species history with a “jolt of meta-experiential awareness” and thus “out of a unified sense of history” (Johns-Putra 252, 262). One of the more obvious examples of an image of history is the following passage from *Arcadia* that details Bit’s changed perception of his fairy tale book as a ‘historical object’ that now testifies to an embodied, inter-species history that contrasts with the teleological and moralistic anthropocentrism of the stories themselves:

What moves him are the shadowy people behind the stories, the workers weary from their days, gathering at night in front of a comforting bit of fire, the milk churned, the chickens sleeping, the babies lulled by rocking, the listeners’ own bones allowed to rest, at last, in their chairs. The world then was no less terrifying than it is now, with our nightmares of bombs and disease and technological warfare. Anything held the ability to set off fear: a nail dropped in hay, wolves circling at the edge of the woods, the newest baby in the tired womb. His heart, in the night-struck house of his parents, responds to those once-upon-a-time people, anonymous in the shadows, the faith it took them to come together and rest and listen through the gruesomeness, their patience for the ever after, happy or not. (287)

Bit’s meta-experience of history, instigated by the fairy tale book in his hands shares with Benjamin’s image of history its focus on a ‘historical index’ or those characteristics that

situate the object “both in its moment in the past and in the moment in the present from which it is interpreted” (Johns-Putra 258).<sup>12</sup> However, that shared characteristic is the quiet, ordinary lived existence that the farmer families, who tell each other the fairy tales, and Bit share, and which is positively affirmed in a Buddhist sense because it requires ‘faith’ and ‘patience’.

Moreover, this contingent, Buddhist affirmation of ordinary life is a consequence of the ever present human-made and nonhuman danger that interdependent life entails. As such, it reflects an understanding of inter-species history as “an emergent, new universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of the danger that is climate change” that Bit hints at when he refers to “bombs and disease and technological warfare” (Johns-Putra 256). Because this potential danger creates a fear that is shared across the ages, *Arcadia* shows how the Anthropocene novel is aware of what exists beyond the scales of the immediate and the universal, since such fear is both immediate and felt, yet also universal because it is a constant in interdependent existence. It is able to do so by zooming in on the shared suffering of humans in a way that is not merely a retrospective and exploitative reflection on the past in light of Anthropocene anxiety: both human suffering and danger are perceived as tangible and visceral as the elaborate description implies, which is what creates an image of history.

Furthermore, the final passage of *Arcadia* also contains such an image of history that reflects a nonhuman and human reality:

---

<sup>12</sup> This is a meta-experience because Bit’s narration shows how he has already selected and evaluated the image of history according to his own needs. For instance, he selects those elements that form the historical index of the image of history and evaluates them positively because they express values, such as ‘faith’ and ‘patience’. However, what characterizes these images of history is that not just one, but a “monad” of experiences and realizations linger afterwards as the fragmented list of snapshots suggests. Presumably, one of the flaws of literature is that it is more difficult to capture this instantaneous experience in writing than in photography, for instance, but Walter Benjamin indicates that literary montages can succeed in it (Kerridge 369).

Peace, he knows, can be shattered in a million variations: great visions of the end, a rain of ash, a disease on the wind, a blast in the distance, the sun dying like a kerosene lamp clicked off. And in smaller ways: an overhead remark, his daughter's sour mood, his own body faltering. There's no use in anticipating the mode. He will wait for the hushed spaces in life, for Ellis's snore in the dark, for Grete's stealth kiss, for the warm light inside the gallery, his images on the wall broken beyond beauty into blisters and fragments, returning in the eye to beauty again. [...]. Pay attention, he thinks. Not to the grand gesture, but to the passing breath. (289)

However, here Bit zooms out of that 'universal human history' and focuses on the suffering of the planet itself first: "great visions of the end, a rain of ash, a disease on the wind, a blast in the distance, the sun dying like a kerosene lamp clicked off" (289). Although this enumeration of nonhuman suffering—and consequently also of human suffering—is represented as something that shatters 'peace', Bit recognizes that human-centered suffering can also shatter peace by zooming back in: "an overhead remark, his daughter's sour mood, his own body faltering" (289). This suffering is represented in the same accumulative style which suggests equivalence rather than a hierarchy between the two 'scales' of history. Because both types of suffering are represented through fragmented lists, it is implied that Bit does not just move between the general and the particular or the universal and personal, but that the configuration of objects is "crystallized" into "a monad" absent of hierarchies or dichotomies (Benjamin 262-3).

Thus, *Arcadia* tracks Bit's moments of enchanted materiality that critically affirm the sacrality of ordinary life. In modernist fashion, ordinary perceptions of transhistorical and interconnected "hushed spaces in life" return "in the eye to beauty again", which is also suggested by the list of beautiful everyday moments that Bit repeats to calm himself down.

In the face of interdependent existence, which Bit experiences as both wondrous and terrifying, this focus on ordinary, slow life, which he cultivates through his photography, is represented as ethical, as Jane Bennett and Engaged Buddhism also imply. For instance, the prolonged act of looking at a piece of paper is what makes it “terrifyingly strange” to Bit: “the branched folds across the surface, the incisor dents on one corner, the way the paper holds pores like skin, the feathery scrawl of pencil drawn across it” (193). However, this defamiliarization of the object reaffirms the complexity of ordinary reality and gives the paper “a power beyond that of any other object, merely because it has been seen” (193).

By charging this everyday object with a sense of sacrality, his awareness of the complexity of intermeshed life increases which incites the ethical and philosophical reflection to pay attention to “the passing breath” of these “hushed spaces in life” rather than to the “grand gesture”. The “grand gesture” it takes to progress towards a decided ending, cannot give him the affirmation of the enchanted ordinary experiences that remind him of his enmeshment in the world around him the way the “passing breath” can (289). Thus, *Arcadia* is a contemporary Anthropocene novel that draws inspiration from modernist techniques because it similarly re-enchants our sensory experience of the everyday to counteract the dominant rationalizing and anthropocentric paradigms. However, this means that the novel is still ‘stuck’ in the dichotomy between rational and extraordinary representations of the everyday. Defamiliarization is not used to move beyond this divide and offset these two discourses that balance each other out to point to a different, more uncertain experience of the everyday.

#### 4.5.2. *Weather*: The Nonhuman Experience: Beyond the Rational and Sacral

The final passage of *Weather* also focuses on an image of history and, contrary to the images of history in *Arcadia*, it is used to destabilize the dichotomy between rational and extraordinary representation of everyday reality.

My husband is under the covers reading a long book about an ancient war. He turns out the light, arranges the blankets so we'll stay warm. The dog twitches her paws softly against the bed. Dreams of running, of other animals, I wake to the sound of gunshots. Walnuts on the roof, Ben says. The core delusion is that I am here and you are there. (201)

The passage opens by zooming in on Lizzie and Ben's everyday reality as they are cooped up in their bed—soft, warm, and safe—with their dog lying next to them, just about to go to sleep. However, this peaceful co-existence is disrupted by Lizzie's nightmares in which she dreams "of running, of other animals". This reality is then transferred into the present moment when Lizzie wakes up "to the sound of gunshots". The fear of war and disaster functions as the historical matrix that connects Lizzie's perceptual, anxious present to the past that is represented through "the book about an ancient war" that Ben is reading. Moreover, the momentary confusion of present and past and the shock of meta-experiential awareness that she experiences when she thinks she hears gunshots crystallize this experience into a monad.

Thus, in contrast with modernist novels, *Weather* does not play up the dichotomy between rational and extraordinary representations of reality but retains the ability to hold multiple scales of experience together with continuous and equal affective investment in those realities. In the modernist short story "The Mark on the Wall" by Virginia Woolf, for

instance, the physical reality of the mark on the wall that had functioned as an impetus for extraordinary reflections and had re-enchanted the main character's surroundings is reduced to a reality of rational ontological certainty when her husband categorizes it as a snail on the wall and discredits her imaginative reality in the final lines of the story (52). By contrast, in *Weather* Ben's claim that the sound is caused by walnuts on the roof does not ensure ontological stability, nor does it discredit Lizzie's imaginative war-like reality. Are the walnuts dropping because they are one of the species that are particularly prone to climate change as various studies suggest, or is it simply the season for walnuts to drop and is Lizzie wondering how long it will last until the seasons change? Is Lizzie's Anthropocene anxiety justified and is a disaster that involves animals and the threat of war soon going to take place? Or is she dreaming about a war that took place in the past or is already taking place in poor countries whose species—people, plants, animals—are already affected by climate disaster? Again, this hyperobject called climate change has the ability to unsettle reality to such an extent that a rational, logical explanation is no longer stable, nor sufficient. Instead, the statement points to the object itself—the walnuts—and how climate change implicates us in a reality of inter-species history. Therefore, both Lizzie's imaginative and physical realities remain uncertain. Her pre-traumatic stress and fear of war—a constant in human history—is not assuaged by her physical reality of life in an unstable political climate. Consequently, the seasonal rhythm of dropping walnuts—a constant in nonhuman history—questions the legitimacy of our western perception of the species around us and the seasonal rhythms on which they depend as a mere background to our anthropocentric realities.

To sum this up and allude at the interaction between the scales of experience she holds together in this image of history, Lizzie turns to the Buddhist doctrine of the core delusion which stands for what we are ignorant of in our lives, and states that it is the belief "that I am

here and you are there". She redefines the core delusion of our time—arguably of any time—as our western individualist belief that we can disentangle ourselves from the mesh and do not have to face both the slow, less perceptible and the instantaneous violence that climate change produces. Lizzie thus uses this image of history to suggest that the mechanism of holding multiple scales of experience together is the most valuable aspect about it, because it does not reinforce any dichotomies between the human and nonhuman matter or the extraordinary and rational. She dismantles the belief that our western realities are separate from disastrous futures and pasts because this does not correspond with what she feels is true in that insightful moment: to think that we are separate from our pasts and futures is a spatial and temporal delusion. Instead, our interdependent existence is unpredictable as future disaster is steadily approaching.

#### 4.6. *Defamiliarization in the Everyday Anthropocene Novel*

In contrast with *Arcadia*, where the material is defamiliarized only to reaffirm the extraordinariness of everyday reality, *Weather* uses a different type of defamiliarization where the material reality cannot be used to reaffirm extraordinary nor rational everyday reality because the material no longer provides a stable background for human reflections in the Anthropocene. The mechanism of defamiliarization or *ostranenie* that Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky famously described in his essay "Art as Technique" states that art should "impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" (16). Thus, art should make objects "unfamiliar" which is what Bit does in *Arcadia* when he attentively studies a piece of paper. As a result, the process of perception itself becomes "an aesthetic end" (16). Bit attributes a power to the object, but that is "merely because it has been seen" (193). This technique is similar to Buddhist meditation techniques that encourage one to

study everyday objects attentively while remaining detached from them. It results in the reaffirmation of the extraordinary of the everyday and works against rationalizing forces or “habitualization”, as Shklovsky defines this concept (16). Thus, the defamiliarization of the objects is used for personal aesthetic and ethic means in *Arcadia*, which implies that the objects themselves are a stable ontological background. Although this is not necessarily the case for every defamiliarizing utterance, Shklovsky’s original explanation of defamiliarization similarly suggests that “the object is not important”, or at the very least only of importance in combination with other (human) elements, such as our minds and gaze that have attached what we thought was something “significant” about it to it, without considering how our meaning-making intended to benefit our reality detrimentally affects the object itself (16).

By contrast, in *Weather* the walnuts that lead to the defamiliarizing sensation are the most important element of the defamiliarizing mechanism. Lizzie does not “recover the sensation of life” of the walnuts even though they were ‘made’ unfamiliar when she mistook them for gunshots as is the supposed purpose of defamiliarization. Instead, she starts questioning their existence or ‘liveliness’ itself because her Anthropocene anxiety impacts her perception of other species’ lives and climate change is actively changing the living matter around her. Through this innovative use of defamiliarization, she draws attention to our enmeshment in our physical surroundings and asks us to reconsider our dominant cultural or personal perceptions, affects and aesthetics of the nature around us—including the dominant rationalizing forces and the counteractive enchanting forces—and our lack of impact on nature, since these dominant cultural conceptualizations of nature do so little to ensure the walnut and other species’ survival. Thus, Offill’s particular use of defamiliarization destabilizes our dualistic belief in an either purely rational or extraordinary everyday reality

to draw attention to the histories and realities of the species around us with which we are deeply enmeshed.

#### 4.5.1. Conclusion: (Dis-)Enchanting Nonhuman Matter

Both rebirth and impermanence are concepts that can be used to re-sensitize us to ordinary matter and to argue that an ecological ethics is an ethics that includes caring for human *and* nonhuman matter. However, Groff and Offill do not always combine these ideas with a state of enchantment in their novels to bring this across to the reader. In *Arcadia* there are various sites of enchantment that imbue ordinary matter with extraordinariness which work against the rationalizing forces of modernity. A first example is that of Bit's description of his mother's ashes in the water which signifies both a loss and a continuation of life. This moment of rebirth is also represented as a moment of everyday enchantment that creates a cyclic temporality to life. It follows that this supports a more interdependent and inclusive ethics of care, since it implies we are all implicated in this circular rhythm of life. A second example is that of the images of history we find in *Arcadia*. These impermanent images draw parallels between nonhuman and human suffering to indicate that this connects all species. In other words, they hint at an inter-species history. Moreover, they affirm ordinary, slow ways of living to counter the fast, capitalist modern forces that suggest humans as a species are above such inter-species suffering and reveal the *hubris* that lies in commodifying all ordinary matter for our own needs. Bit argues that these small, impermanent moments of enchantment are what we should centralize in our inclusive ethics of care, because they allow us to take other slower, nonhuman life into account. Thus, *Arcadia* uses defamiliarization and the subsequent enchanting re-sensitization mostly to counter rationalization and not to move beyond it.

In *Weather*, Lizzie is less inclined towards feelings of enchantment, but Offill makes a similar case to re-sensitize and reappraise the ordinary matter around us in order to foster a more inclusive ethics of care. In the first quotation from *Weather* in this thesis chapter, Offill suggests that nonhuman, human and human-nonhuman hybrids, such as female robotics are all enmeshed in the cycle of rebirth. Thus, rebirth also re-sensitizes us to a specific kind of ordinary matter, robotics, to question the scope of our anthropocentric ethics of compassion. Furthermore, it shows how mechanic matter differs in transience, for instance, but is unfortunately also alike because it is subject to the same structural discriminations against women. While we also encounter an image of history in *Weather*, this image of history is not used to re-enchant reality. It is, however, ethical, as it invites us to move beyond rationalizing or sanctifying representations of the nonhuman world around us to centralize the nonhuman experience itself. *Weather* achieves this by evaluating the defamiliarizing experience as an opportunity to come to terms with how the self is enmeshed with other species, *and* to argue that reflections on the lives of nonhuman 'objects' are ethical as well.

## 5. Conclusion

Our lives in the Anthropocene in western capitalist societies are busy, messy, and complex. In such a setting, it is understandable that individuals subconsciously resort to splitting at first to avoid having to feel and think about the all-encompassing scope of climate change. However, if we read a cli-fi book like *Arcadia* or *Weather* that takes as its subject how characters deal with those suppressed worries and anxieties we have every day, we are one step closer in our busy, busy lives to exploring different ways of making sense of the world that do not reinforce the western dualisms that instigated anthropogenic climate change in the first place. As discussed in this thesis, the main characters of these everyday Anthropocene novels have found their own ways to do this through their understanding of their deep enmeshment in complex personal and social networks that complicates dualistic thinking.

In this thesis, I have explored how *Arcadia* and *Weather* consider the affective and ethical implications of thinking climate change that are underdeveloped in mainstream environmentalist discourse. I discovered that both everyday Anthropocene novels explore how 'bad' environmentalist affects, such as Anthropocene horror and anxiety, as well as Buddhist thinking, can contribute to an ecological ethics that works against western dualistic representations of life. The first chapter deals with the positive and negative sides of care and argues that it should not be marginalized, but centralized, politicized and embraced in all its complexity in an ecological ethics. The second chapter shows how the dichotomy between self and space is false and that western critical theory needs to favor complex, more context-dependent narrative spaces that reveal how the public is interlinked with the private over idealistic, linear, and closed ones. The final chapter has complicated the divide between human and nonhuman matter since it explores how nonhuman matter is not just a means to

an end but can be an enchanting object that spurs us into taking care of the earth and gives us a deeper understanding of how our species' history is intimately linked up with the history of other species. *Weather* adds that an ecological ethics should also consider the complexity of the nonhuman experience itself, separate from our rationalizing or enchanting tendencies.

Since the environmental humanities have only just begun to discover how Buddhism and affect theory can contribute to the field of research, there is an array of topics left to explore. Buddhist thinking is also prevalent in plenty of other cli-fi works, such as *The Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler and Thalia Field's *Personhood*, which suggests that there are various formal and ideational ways in which cli-fi interacts with Buddhist thinking. Moreover, there is a lack of understanding in New Materialist research of its connections to the ancient tradition of Buddhism even though Buddhist fragments are often used in literary works as a starting point for the development of New Materialist philosophies, such as transcorporeality. Further research on how everyday Anthropocene novels innovate the realist tradition to de-anthropocentralize it could expand on the formalistic strategies that are used to depict human and nonhuman interconnectedness and the function of images of history in the development of characters' understanding of human history as an inter-species history.

I believe there lies great potential in the budding mode of the everyday Anthropocene novel that flourishes, that is unfinished and painful while beautiful because it wraps itself around the multiplicity of the interconnected present. Reading everyday Anthropocene novels like *Weather* and *Arcadia* that show us how to reconceptualize our own history and the present moment in an ecological way, reveals how important it is not to discard our own history or culture, or think that we are above it. Instead, literature and the arts in general explore how to cope with the same anxieties and fears humanity has felt throughout all of its

interdependent existence. They help us understand how to truly, realistically, but not ultimately hope for a better future while living in the interconnected present.

## Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacey. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010.
- Armstrong, Nancy. "The Affective Turn in Contemporary Fiction." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2014, pp. 441-465.
- Bamberg, Michael. "Identity and Narration." *the living handbook of narratology*, Hühn, Peter et al. (eds.), Hamburg University. [www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/29/revisions/162/view.html](http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/29/revisions/162/view.html). Accessed 15 July 2021.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 255-262.
- Bennett, Jane. *The enchantment of modern life: attachments, crossings, and ethics*. Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Anicca." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5 July 2011, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/anicca>. Accessed 2 August 2021.
- Clark, Timothy. "Derangements of Scale." *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change, Vol. 1*, edited by Tom Cohen, Open Humanities Press, 2012, pp. 148-166.
- Clark, Timothy. *The Value of Ecocriticism*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Clark, Timothy. "Ecological Grief and Anthropocene Horror." *American Imago*, vol. 77, no. 1, 2020, pp. 61-80.
- Cooper, David E., and Simon P. James. *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*. Routledge, 2017.
- Craps, Stef. "Climate trauma." *The Routledge companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by Davis, Colin, and Hanna Meretoja, Routledge, 2020, pp. 275-84.
- Curry, Patrick. *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*. 2nd ed., Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2011.

- Fisher, Clare. "The Centrality of the Trivial: Jenny Offill's *Weather*", *Alluvium*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2020.
- Gethin, Rupert. *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Goodbody, Axel. "Beyond Communication: Climate Change Fiction." *Research Handbook on Communicating Climate Change*, Edwar Elgar Publishing, 2020, pp. 320-329.
- Greenwald Smith, Rachel. "Postmodernism and the Affective Turn." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 57, no. 3-4, 2011, pp. 423-446.
- Greenwald Smith, Rachel. *Affect and American Literature in The Age of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Groff, Lauren. *Arcadia*. Windmill, 2012.
- Groff, Lauren. "A Conversation with Lauren Groff." *Arcadia*, Hyperion, 2016.
- Gross, Rita M. "Buddhism and Ecofeminism: Untangling the Threads of Buddhist Ecology and Western Thought." *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2011.
- Hamilton, Clive. *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*. Polity Press, 2017.
- Johns-Putra, Adeline. "Climate and History in the Anthropocene: Realist Narrative and the Framing of Time." *Climate and Literature*, edited by Adeline Johns-Putra, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019, pp. 246-262.
- Kerridge, Richard. "Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Form and Genre: Urgency, Depth, Provisionality, Temporality." *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, edited by Greg Garrard, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 362-375.
- Klein, Naomi. "Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering in a Warming World." *London Review of Books*, vol. 38, no. 11, 2016, [www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n11/naomi-klein/let-them-drown](http://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n11/naomi-klein/let-them-drown). Accessed 20 June 2021.

- LeMenager, Stephanie. "Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre." *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, edited by Menely, Tobias, and Jesse O. Taylor, Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 220-238.
- Love, Glen A. "Et in Arcadia Ego: Pastoral Theory Meets Ecocriticism." *Western American Literature*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1992, pp. 195-207.
- McMahan, David L. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Narine, Anil. *Eco-Trauma Cinema*. Routledge, 2014.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly feelings*. Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Nixon, Rob. "The Anthropocene: The Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea." *Edge Effects*, 6 Nov. 2014, [edgeeffects.net/anthropocene-promise-and-pitfalls/](http://edgeeffects.net/anthropocene-promise-and-pitfalls/).
- Offill, Jenny. *Weather*. Granta, 2020.
- Offill, Jenny. "Learning to Die: An Interview with Jenny Offill." Interview by Rebecca Godfrey. *The Paris Review*, 14 Feb. 2020, [www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/02/14/learning-to-die-an-interview-with-jenny-offill/](http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/02/14/learning-to-die-an-interview-with-jenny-offill/).
- Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.
- Plumwood, Val. "Tasteless: Towards a Food-Based Approach to Death." *Environmental Values*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2008, pp. 323-330.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, María. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics In More Than Human Worlds*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Saint-Amour, Paul. *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

- Sencindiver, Susan Yi. "New Materialism." *Literary and Critical Theory*, 26 July 2016, *Oxford Bibliographies*. [www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0016.xml](http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0016.xml). Accessed 27 June 2016.
- Seymour, Nicole. *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*. University of Minnesota Press, 2018.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art as Technique." *Literary theory, an anthology*, edited by Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 15-21.
- Therault, Noah, and Audra Mitchell. "Extinction." *Anthropocene Unseen: A Lexicon*, edited by Howe, Cymene, and Anand Pandian, Punctum Books, 2020, pp. 176-182.
- Tronto, Joan C. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. New York, Routledge, 1994.
- Valera, Luca. "Françoise d'Eaubonne and Ecofeminism: Rediscovering the Link between Women and Nature." *Women and Nature? Beyond Dualism in Gender, Body, and Environment*, edited by Vakoch, Douglas A., and Sam Mickey, Routledge, 2018, pp. 10-23.
- Weber, Marx. "Science as a Vocation." *Daedalus*, vol. 87, no. 1, 1958, pp. 111-134.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Woolf, Virginia. "The Mark on the Wall." *A Haunted House and Other Stories*, Penguin Books, 1973, pp. 43-52.
- Wright, Robert. *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*. Simon & Schuster, 2017.