Everyday Apocalypse: Minor Realism in the Contemporary Climate Novel

by

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Abstract

This dissertation identifies and theorizes “minor realism” as an understudied feature of many contemporary climate novels. While scholarly attention regarding the literary representation of climate change has grown significantly since the 1990s, realism—a style that depicts ordinary life through detailed description and psychological interiority—remains overlooked in most studies. Literary scholars tend to assume that realism, given its modest scale and focus on daily life, cannot encompass environmental disasters of unprecedented origin and magnitude. I offer “minor realism” as a term that emphasizes aesthetic and generic porosity, demonstrating that realism in fact valences a wide range of contemporary climate novels (including some that are typically read as nonrealist). Examining a broad contemporary archive of U.S. novels between 1991 and 2017, I track how minor realism represents climate change as an everyday experience. I offer sustained interpretations of six novels: Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993), Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011), Ben Lerner’s *10:04* (2014), and Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God* (2017). These analyses primarily employ close reading methodologies as well as supplemental archival study. Beyond the environmental humanities, I apply insights from memory studies, Indigenous critical theory, Black studies, and disability studies to analyze narratives of climate disaster. Bringing together such theoretical interlocutors, I argue that minor realism offers a surprising aesthetic resource for representing climate change and its unevenly dispersed effects.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Habitual disruptions of the habitual are key to experiencing the inexperienceable.
Wendy Hui Kyong Chun,
"*On Hypo-Real Models or Global Climate Change: A Challenge for the Humanities*"

1.1 A Crack in the Pool

As in many contemporary novels, climate change haunts the margins of Julie Otsuka's *The Swimmers* (2022). An impressionistic narrative that follows one woman's experience with dementia, *The Swimmers* opens with a description of the underground pool where she regularly swims laps. Outside of the pool, Otsuka writes,

> there are wildfires, smog alerts, epic droughts, paper jams, teachers' strikes, insurrections, revolutions, blisteringly hot days that never seem to let up (*Massive "Heat Dome" Permanently Stalled over Entire West Coast*), but down below, at the pool, it is always a comfortable eighty-one degrees. The humidity is sixty-five percent. The visibility is clear. The lanes are orderly and calm.[1]

The Swimmers is a novel that is deeply interested in habit, in the rhythms of everyday life, but also in the extraordinary events that interrupt such rhythms. One such event unfolds when a literal fissure opens between the pool and the outside world. A mysterious crack appears at the bottom of the pool; although geologists and structural engineers investigate the crack, no one can determine its cause. They guess, imprecisely, that "[t]he crack is most likely a transient phenomenon brought about by the recent warming trends in the weather."[2] Such weather—a "soul-scorching heat wave"—intensifies as the summer continues, and the swimmers become

[1] Julie Otsuka, *The Swimmers* (Knopf, 2022), 5. Emphasis in original.
[2] Otsuka, *The Swimmers*, 39.

unable to ignore the sense that the world feels off-kilter.[3] "Above ground we go about our lives as usual—we count out our pills, we go to our meetings, we shop, we eat, we placate our colleagues (*What I'm hearing you say is…*), we follow the protocol, we peer into our screens—but nothing feels quite real."[4] Embedding climate disaster in routine, in life "as usual," Otsuka depicts a state of what I call *everyday apocalypse*.

When Otsuka references a "Massive 'Heat Dome' Permanently Stalled over Entire West Coast," moreover, she invokes a historical—and historic—climate disaster: the June 2021 heat dome that shattered temperature records in the western United States.[5] Especially in the Pacific Northwest, where most live without air-conditioning, the heat dome unfolded apocalyptically. Highway pavement cracked and warped, those suffering heatstroke filled emergency rooms, and an Oregon farmworker died from heat-related causes.[6] And yet such unprecedented catastrophes coexisted with a sense of the banal. Journalist James Ross Gardner, for instance, described an ordinary act—placing box fans in windows—to juxtapose the banality and severity of the crisis. "Two strategically stationed box fans create a small tempest, swooshing the parched, artificial wind across the skin in multiple directions. The same fans perched on an open windowsill can blow in the cool air after the sun goes down. Except, for three days here, there was no cool air."[7] From warped highways to windowsill fans, Gardner captures an everyday apocalypse.

Despite the immediacy of such environmental disasters, and scientific consensus on the existence of climate change, the warming globe requires laypeople to grapple with inference and

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[3] Otsuka, *The Swimmers*, 52.
[4] Otsuka, *The Swimmers*, 40-1. Emphasis in original.
[5] Heat domes occur when a region of high-pressure air traps heat over a region, often lasting for days or weeks. Prominent heat domes in U.S. history include those during the 1930s Dust Bowl years, as well one that killed 739 Chicagoans in 1995.
[6] James Ross Gardner, "Seattle Under the Heat Dome," *The New Yorker*, June 30, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/seattle-under-the-heat-dome.
[7] Gardner, "Seattle Under the Heat Dome."

probability. Scientific research on the 2021 heat dome, for instance, illustrates the dispersed effects of climate change. Scientists unambiguously asserted a relationship between climate change and the heat dome but were more cautious in identifying causality; they estimated the heat dome to be a once-in-a-millennium event that "would have been at least 150 times rarer without human-induced climate change."[8] As data theorist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun explains, "[C]limate, like risk, is impossible to experience directly. […] A day's weather can be affected by any number of local patterns and events; there is no one reason that can account for the strength of a hurricane or the existence or intensity of any given weather event."[9] Such statements illustrate the inferential relationship between statistical warming patterns and local effects such as the heat dome. Alongside a decades-long scientific consensus on climate change, that is, scientists employ inference and probability to recognize its effects. In effect, the practice of inference is a practice of uncertainty: climate change conclusively produced the conditions in which the heat dome occurred, but direct causality is more difficult to determine. Yet while uncertainty is central to the scientific method and the formation of modern scientific knowledge, climate deniers have seized upon this uncertainty to cast widespread doubt on the veracity of climate change and shore up support for deregulation and unfettered extraction.[10] "If anything, writes Chun, "the debilitating debate over climate change continues, not because of the simple existence of scientific agreement, but rather because of the bizarre notion that scientific issues can ever be settled, that evidence can ever be complete, that understanding requires certainty,

[8] Sjoukje Y. Philip, Sarah F. Kew, Geert Jan van Oldenborgh, et al., "Rapid Attribution Analysis of the Extraordinary Heat Wave on the Pacific Coast of the US and Canada in June 2021," *Earth System Dynamics* 13, no. 4 (2022): 1707.

[9] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "On Hypo-Real Models or Global Climate Change: A Challenge for the Humanities," *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 3 (2015): 691.

[10] Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Climate Change* (Bloomsbury, 2010), 169-215.

and that consensus is the end of a discussion.”[11] Alongside an unambiguous consensus on the reality of climate change and its ties to reckless consumption and production, therefore, the warming globe requires a certain comfort with inference and probability rather than certainty.

This dissertation theorizes how contemporary novels grapple with such forms of inference and probability, bringing together seemingly disparate scenes in which literary subjects encounter or embody the dispersed effects of climate change. Rather than depict climate change as such, or literary subjects who perceive climate, these scenes of everyday apocalypse foreground the incomplete and unfinished epistemologies therein. To return to *The Swimmers*, for instance, Otsuka’s characters intuit the relationship between climate change (recent warming trends in the weather) and its local manifestation (the crack in the swimming pool), although they do not fully understand it. Briefly, imperfectly, they encounter the warming climate and its diffuse effects.

Across the project, I theorize four instantiations of everyday apocalypse in contemporary novels. I examine four gerunds—watching, waiting, weathering, and walking—that capture indirect and inferential ways of perceiving climate. These gerunds express ongoing, habitual, and unfinished actions or states of being. In Ben Lerner’s 2014 novel *10:04*, for instance, which I discuss in Chapter 2, I interpret *watching* as an instance of everyday apocalypse that suggests how televised disaster coverage and radar images of storms represent mediation rather than reality. To take another example, Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) stages *weathering* as a form of everyday apocalypse that centers the unfinished history of settler colonialism and environmental devastation in the Americas. With such examples in mind, this

[11] Chun, “On Hypo-Real Models or Global Climate Change”: 681.

dissertation attends actions or states of being that may not fully apprehend climate change but that nonetheless glimpse it.

With such glancing and oblique representations in mind, I bring together a broader archive of climate novels than many readers have hitherto recognized.[12] Rather than prioritize texts that take the crisis as an explicit thematic concern, I suggest that a novel is a climate novel if it portrays or evokes climate change in some (often minor) capacity. I model a careful practice of reading for climate, tracing literary engagements with anthropogenic environmental disaster on the level of genre and form. Reading for climate, as I will suggest in the coda to this dissertation, invites a practice of attention that in turn offers the possibility of collective and just practices of living.

1.1.1 Minor Realism

If everyday apocalypse names a recurrent motif in contemporary climate novels, I identify what I call *minor realism* as its corresponding aesthetic. Minor realism evokes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's formulations of "minor literature," which they develop to articulate Franz Kafka's ambivalent relationship—as a Jewish writer—to the Prague German in which he wrote. Deleuze and Guattari's theory considers authors who write in a language to which they are marginal; such "deterritorialization," they write, prompts "strange and minor uses" of the language itself.[13] Deterritorialization is not my concern in this dissertation, although the Black and Indigenous authors whom I discuss certainly foreground their own complicated relationship

[12] I employ the overarching term "climate novels" instead of "climate fiction," or "cli-fi." Although the latter term likely has more critical purchase, I avoid it for three reasons. First, it implies a fixed genre rather than a multi-generic collection of novels. Second, cli-fi compendia typically ignore novels with elliptical representations of climate change, instead emphasizing those (like Kim Stanley Robinson's 2020 novel *Ministry for the Future*, to take one oft-cited example) that take it as their central concern. Third, the term "cli-fi"—with its echoes of "sci-fi"—privileges science fiction and thus tends to obscure other modes of climate representation.

[13] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 6, 17.

both to the English language and to the land that is today known as the United States. Rather, Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the minor indexes the cracks and fissures in a "major" field of expression—German in their case, and realism in mine.[14] Moreover, they demonstrate how Kafka's minor literature connects the individual both to politics and to the collective: "if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community," Deleuze and Guattari contend, "this situation allows the writer all the more possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness."[15] Drawing upon their insight that major linguistic fields contain the means of their own loosening, and in turn the utopian potential for "another possible community," I demonstrate how realism both contains and overspills its literary-critical associations.

As I will discuss throughout this project, realism both affords and constrains new possibilities for climate representation. Literary realism attends to description, interiority, and the habitus of everyday life; consequently, it has the capacity to make climate change thinkable on human scales. And yet realism's association with bourgeois individualism and accumulative capitalism makes it an unlikely resource for authors who hope to transform or at least reflect the collective and unevenly dispersed implications of climate change. As such, minor realism names a leaky aesthetic model: it characterizes contemporary novels that apply realist aesthetics disloyally and inconsistently. To return again to *The Swimmers*, for instance, Otsuka primarily employs realist aesthetics but occasionally injects her narrative with nonrealist elements. Her evocation of the 2021 heat dome—"Massive 'Heat Dome' Permanently Stalled Over Entire West Coast"—simultaneously draws upon and undercuts a claim to realism. In addition to recalling historical weather events, the form of the headline invokes the daily rhythms of newspaper

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[14] Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 16.
[15] Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 17.

delivery and smartphone scrolling. However, in making the heat dome permanent, Otsuka reimagines the inherently transient nature of weather and subtly introduces a nonrealist note into the novel. Mostly realist, but also obliquely nonrealist, *The Swimmers* remains committed to everyday routine even as it embeds such routine with a sense of apocalypse. Minor realism names how realist modes valence the diverse and dispersed aesthetics of contemporary climate novels.

Working with the broader contemporary archive of which *The Swimmers* is a part, my project identifies minor realism as a hitherto overlooked form of climate representation. I argue against the assumption, prevalent among scholars and critics, that literary realism is fundamentally at odds with an effort to depict and respond to climate change. Because anthropogenic climate change marks an unprecedented phenomenon, impossible to perceive in its entirety, scholars typically maintain that it demands new forms of representation that far exceed the existing bounds of literary production. They assume that literary realism, with its attention to psychological interiority and the quotidian, remains unable to represent a crisis of extended scale and magnitude. Here, literary scholars typically trace realism's aesthetic and political commitments to the imperial bourgeois novel. My dissertation instead foregrounds the history of the U.S. novel to trace the contemporary prevalence of foreshortened, compromised, partial, and failed realisms—a loose collection of styles and aesthetic strategies that I group under the term *minor realism*. As climate change becomes ever more embedded in everyday life, contemporary authors incorporate and repurpose realism to articulate the constitutive relationship between environmental disaster and the quotidian.

1.1.2 Everyday Apocalypse

To historicize this project and its contemporary climate archive, I suggest that minor realism has emerged alongside the increasing recognition of climate change as an everyday apocalypse. The climate is "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans," as Timothy Morton maintains in his discussion of "hyperobjects."[16] Climate represents a statistical aggregation that is necessarily beyond individual perception. And yet, I complicate the critical tenet—held by Morton and others—that climate change is "nonlocal" and therefore illegible in its local effects.[17] Climate scientist James Hansen has written that warming temperatures have become increasingly apparent even to laypeople: due to climate change, the chance of extreme weather in the United States has steadily increased since the 1980s (after 1951-80 saw a period of relative stability in global mean temperatures).[18] Tracking observed variability in seasonal mean surface air temperature, Hansen and his collaborators confirm the longstanding prediction that "by the early 21st century the informed public should be able to recognize that the frequency of unusually warm seasons had increased, because the 'climate dice,' describing the probability of unusually warm or unusually cool seasons, would be sufficiently loaded (biased) as to be discernable to the public."[19] Hansen, writing in 2012, emphasizes that "[t]he climate dice are now loaded to a degree that a perceptive person old enough to remember the climate of 1951-1980 should recognize the existence of climate change."[20] Four of the authors whom I discuss in this dissertation fit this profile: Cormac McCarthy (born in 1933), Octavia E. Butler (born in

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[16] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.
[17] Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1.
[18] James Hansen, Makiko Sato, and Reto Ruedy, "Perception of Climate Change," *PNAS: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* (March 29, 2012): E2415.
[19] Hansen, "Perception of Climate Change": E2415.
[20] Hansen, "Perception of Climate Change": E2420.

1947), Leslie Marmon Silko (born in 1948), and Louise Erdrich (born in 1954). Consequently, their works reflect lived observations of the "climate dice" becoming increasingly loaded. Two of this dissertation's authors—Jesmyn Ward (born in 1977) and Ben Lerner (born in 1979)—reflect a later generation of climate novelists. Both Ward and Lerner bookend their novels with cataclysmic storms, framing such storms within a global trend toward more extreme weather. Beginning in the 1990s, observable changes in weather events and surface air temperatures produced a surge of climate novels: to return one final time to *The Swimmers*, for instance, Otsuka juxtaposes daily routines with a "soul-scorching heat wave" to capture a sense of everyday apocalypse.

Alongside these observable changes in local weather, the novels that I analyze respond to key inflection points in the public disaster culture of the United States. These inflection points—the formation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), for instance, or a particularly catastrophic storm—mark moments when climate change, itself an ongoing and chronic crisis, rises above the threshold of legibility. Such moments of becoming-legible often occur either due to shifting political and cultural norms or to discrete environmental disasters. My archive begins in the early 1990s, with Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993). These novels both explicitly reflect a growing public recognition of the "greenhouse effect," a term that grew in prominence during the 1980s before reaching its peak in 1990.[21] The archive picks up again with Hurricane Katrina (2005) which laid bare the racialized effects of "unnatural disasters" and their increasing frequency; Jesmyn Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011) narrativizes these racialized effects.

[21] The late 1980s and early 1990s represent a key period in the public recognition of climate change in the United States. In 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established and Hansen (then affiliated with NASA) delivered the first Congressional testimony on climate change. In 1989, Bill McKibben published *The End of Nature*.

David Guggenheim's 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, which Adeline Johns-Putra calls "[o]ne of the best-known expressions of climate-change anxiety," substantially influenced the reception of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) as a climate-apocalypse novel.[22] Further cataclysmic hurricanes punctuated the following decade, including the 2012 Hurricane Sandy that Ben Lerner depicts in *10:04* (2014). Finally, inspired by the 2016 election of Donald Trump and a wave of environmental deregulation, Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) explores intertwined political and environmental disasters. And yet, although these novels index key inflection points in American disaster culture, they also thematize the ongoing and diffuse qualities of everyday apocalypse: *Future Home of the Living God* gestures to the *longue durée* of settler-colonial violence, for instance, while *Salvage the Bones* frames Hurricane Katrina within what Saidiya Hartman calls the "afterlives of slavery."[23] Such novels thus situate contemporary disasters within ongoing structures of harm.

In identifying the recent historical phenomenon of everyday apocalypse, with its seemingly contradictory purchase on both ordinary life and shattering crisis, I also draw from scientific and humanistic discussions of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene names the fact that humans—or, more accurately, some humans—have altered the Earth's geological and atmospheric systems to the extent that scientists have provisionally recognized a new geologic epoch.[24] (While humanists tend to use the terms "Anthropocene" and "climate change"

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[22] Adeline Johns-Putra, "'My Job Is to Take Care of You': Climate Change, Humanity, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 62, no. 3 (2016): 523.
[23] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 6.
[24] There exist a range of critiques that focus on the universalizing bent of *Anthropos*, foregrounding histories of capitalism and colonialism instead. See Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities*, no. 6 (2015): 159–65; Jason Moore, "Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason Moore (PM Press, 2016), 1–13; and Kyle Powys Whyte, "Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene," in *The Routledge Companion to the*

interchangeably, climate change is in fact just one effect of the many complex processes that produced the Anthropocene.[25]) As Dipesh Chakrabarty influentially argues, the new geologic epoch brings significant implications for how subjects conceptualize themselves in history: responses to the deep time of the Anthropocene, he writes, "saturate our sense of the now."[26] For Stephanie LeMenager, the "everyday Anthropocene" indexes how the geologic epoch "will register in those genres intended to query and explore what is understood as probable, cyclical, and even trivial experience."[27] Working from Chakrabarty and LeMenager to theorize everyday apocalypse, I join a range of contemporary ecocritics who reformulate climate disaster as an ongoing and continuous condition rather than as a looming future state. Building upon Frederick Buell's seminal 2003 analysis of environmental apocalypse as a "way of life," more recent scholarship has emphasized the uneven material conditions along which this "dwelling place" unspools.[28] From Jessica Hurley's analysis of "infrastructures of apocalypse" to Rebecca Oh's identification of "apocalyptic realism," a newer generation of scholars centers race and indigeneity in their analyses of how apocalypse embeds itself in the everyday.[29] Like Rob Nixon's influential work on "slow violence," my dissertation emphasizes how the effects of climate change often emerge illegibly, unevenly dispersed along axes of geography, race, and

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Environmental Humanities, ed. Ursula K. Heise, John Christensen, and Michelle Niemann (Routledge, 2017), 206–15.

[25] The Anthropocene and climate change also represent phenomena with distinct epistemological and methodological implications. To determine the origin point of the Anthropocene, scientists look for stratigraphically significant markers in the geologic record (such as the detritus of plastic consumer goods, or the fallout from nuclear tests such as the 1945 Trinity detonation). Scientists measure climate change, on the other hand, not through the geologic record but rather through the statistical aggregation of indicators such as surface air temperatures, sea temperatures, and global sea levels.

[26] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 197.

[27] Stephanie LeMenager, "Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre," in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, ed. Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 221.

[28] Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century* (Routledge, 2003), 314.

[29] Jessica Hurley, *Infrastructures of Apocalypse: American Literature and the Nuclear Complex* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 3; Rebecca S. Oh, "Apocalyptic Realism: 'A New Category of the Event,'" *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 29, no. 4 (2022): 969.

class.[30] Such effects have long been more proximate to "those for whom the world has already ended," to borrow Oh's formulation.[31] In diagnosing the historical condition of everyday apocalypse, I examine the diffuse and overlapping relationship between ordinary life and environmental disaster while also resisting the universalizing bent that characterizes some Anthropocene discourses.

1.2 Minor Realism and the Contemporary Climate Archive

Minor realism characterizes the aesthetic commitments of a wide-ranging contemporary climate archive. By realism, I refer to a constellation of literary styles and topoi that contribute to a sense of verisimilitude.[32] I define minor realism, in turn, as an aesthetic mode in which key elements of literary realism—description, interiority, and dailiness—valence texts that also undermine their own claims to verisimilitude. Minor realism unfolds when novelists like Otsuka inject their realist narratives with nonrealist elements, on the one hand; on the other, it arises when nonrealist modes (like science fiction and dystopia) incorporate realist motifs. It is an aesthetic mode both flexible and permeable. I theorize two inverse tendencies in the minor realism of contemporary climate novels: *ordinary realism* and *disaster realism*. Ordinary realism foregrounds realist aesthetics to represent a sense that ordinary life has become disastrous; meanwhile, disaster realism injects primarily nonrealist texts with a sense of mundane and ongoing routine. While both subgroups employ realism to depict everyday apocalypse, they do so in distinct and often inverse ways. I offer in-depth examinations of six exemplary texts.

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[30] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 2.
[31] Oh, "Apocalyptic Realism": 969.
[32] I here invoke a range of canonical scholarly works on literary realism. See Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, translated by Anna Bostock (MIT Press, 1974); Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, 2013); Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (University of California Press, 1957); and George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Minor Realism		
Aesthetic Tendency	**Literary Effect**	**Exemplary Novels (in-depth discussions here)**
Ordinary realism	Ordinary life is disastrous	Ben Lerner, *10:04* Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*
Disaster realism	Disaster is ordinary	Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

Figure 1: Table of Minor Realism and Aesthetic Tendencies

1.2.1 Ordinary Realism

Before situating minor realism in critical discourse and literary history, let me characterize its two contemporary iterations more broadly. Ordinary realism captures what Lauren Berlant calls "crisis ordinariness" and locates a sense of disaster that is embedded within everyday life.[33] This project takes Lerner's *10:04*, Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, and Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* as exemplary texts of ordinary realism. Each of these three novels, as I will explore in the proceeding chapters, primarily employs realist aesthetics to amplify a topos of everyday life: through Ward's detailed descriptions of summer heat, for instance, or Silko's emphasis on domestic space, they capture an accretive sense of the mundane. Yet the three novels also draw upon nonrealist elements—realist failure, the gothic, and Indigenous cosmopolitics, respectively—to inject their narratives with a sense of immanent environmental disaster. Beyond these exemplary texts, other contemporary climate novels to employ ordinary realism include Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* (1994); Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997); Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011); Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011); Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012); Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013); Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) and *Bewilderment* (2021); Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020);

[33] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 10.

and Otsuka's *The Swimmers*. These novels, different as they are, employ realist aesthetics to foreground a sense of everyday life—the daily toil of laboring, caretaking, driving, reading the news—and yet inject such everydayness with a sense of immanent catastrophe. They offer a contemporary archive of novels whose commitment to the ordinary does not foreclose but rather reveals a constitutive relationship to disaster.

1.2.2 Disaster Realism

Disaster realism, inversely, valences apocalyptic disaster with a sense of enduring ordinariness. Here, I examine Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*, Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and McCarthy's *The Road* as three exemplary novels. These three novels all draw upon nonrealist genres, with apocalypses that range from evolutionary reversal to the near-total annihilation of the biosphere. And yet, minor realism constitutes a largely overlooked feature of these dystopian narratives. Erdrich, for instance, emphasizes the sustaining and even insurgent power of domestic routine, while Butler's representation of walking encapsulates the mundane and ongoing work of survival. These novels exemplify a broader contemporary archive of disaster realism that spans Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* (1992), *Green Mars* (1993), and *Blue Mars* (1996), as well as *The Ministry for the Future* (2020); Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013); Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009) and *The Water Knife* (2015); Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihiliation* (2014), *Authority* (2014), and *Acceptance* (2014); N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017); and Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018). As distinct as they are, these novels characterize the state of disaster through depictions of duration and routine that draw upon literary realism. What ordinary and disaster realism share, then, is a commitment to minor realism—foreshortened and partial

realism—as a means of representing the constitutive relationship between climate change and everyday life.

1.2.3 Literary-Critical Intervention

I offer the schema of minor realism in response to what I have observed as a persistent literary-critical tendency to overlook or disregard realism as a viable representational strategy for climate change. This tendency is most pronounced in ecocritical scholarship, a subdiscipline that has recently begun to prioritize speculative themes and genres.[34] Min Hyoung Song, for instance, writes that "[c]limate change figures, if at all, in stories of the extraordinary and fantastic, while its absence is associated with the realistic."[35] Although LeMenager includes realist texts in her genealogy of climate novels, she aligns "cli-fi" primarily with science fiction.[36] Jesse Oak Taylor suggests that "Anthropocene reality is simply too weird for realism."[37] Even an edited collection called *Climate Realism* begins with the resigned observation of "the strain that comes with attempting to fully represent the volatility of climate change […] using the literary techniques of the realist novel."[38] Such ecocritical pronouncements share one prominent source as the basis for their claims: Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2015), which finds literary realism sutured to bourgeois predictability and therefore unsuited to climate representation.

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[34] This shift is overdue, and it rightly and it rightly recognizes speculative fiction and science fiction for their capacity to imagine better worlds and defamiliarize the current one. However, alongside the popular attention to "cli-fi," this speculative turn tends to overlook the significance or even presence of realist modes.
[35] Min Hyoung Song, *Climate Lyricism* (Duke University Press, 2022), 83.
[36] LeMenager, "Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre," 223.
[37] Jesse Oak Taylor, "The Work of Fiction in an Age of Anthropogenic Climate Change: Review of Amitav Ghosh's 'The Great Derangement,'" *Boundary2*, January 31, 2018, https://www.boundary2.org/2018/01/jesse-oak-taylor-the-work-of-fiction-in-an-age-of-anthropogenic-climate-change-review-of-amitav-ghoshs-the-great-derangement/.
[38] Lynn Badia, Marija Cetinić, and Jeff Diamanti, "Introduction," in *Climate Realism: The Aesthetics of Weather and Atmosphere in the Anthropocene*, edited by Lynn Badia, Marija Cetinić, and Jeff Diamanti (Routledge, 2020), 4.

Although the disregard for realism in climate-change scholarship does not begin with Ghosh, no scholarly text has proven more influential than *The Great Derangement*.[39] How, Ghosh asks, will future generations regard the art of the late 20th and early 21st centuries? He predicts that they will puzzle over this era's apparent refusal to represent climate change in literary fiction. Pace Ghosh, "serious fiction" remains blissfully unaware of the unfolding disaster; meanwhile, the representation of global warming is relegated to genres like science fiction and fantasy.[40] Whence this disregard for climate change? For Ghosh, the answer lies in literary history. He links the origins of the realist novel to the emergence of the 19th-century science of probability, arguing (primarily via Franco Moretti) that the realist novel emerged as a form in which to contain and manage the new regularity of bourgeois life. This matrix of probability excluded the representation of unusual climatic events such as hurricanes or floods—the very events, Ghosh argues, that literary fiction must represent if it is to face the reality of global warming. Although literary scholars met the publication of *The Great Derangement* with many critiques—not least of all of Ghosh's dismissal of genre fiction—the vast majority have nonetheless accepted his core argument that realist fiction simply has no place in the literary-aesthetic response to climate change.[41]

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[39] Although I focus here on Ghosh's influence on literary criticism, it is worth noting that his concept of the "great derangement" has gained traction well beyond literary studies and even the humanities. The citation index for *The Great Derangement* includes publications in media studies, sociology, political science, human geography, international relations, geology, and sustainable development.

[40] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 9.

[41] One notable recent exception is John Thieme, who explicitly counters Ghosh in arguing that "'realism,' either in variants of its classic modes or in newly configured extensions of the genre, has been, and is, highly effective in representing the climate emergency." While I echo Thieme's central claim, my project differs from Thieme's in several crucial ways. First, I focus on American literature and its unique genealogy of realism. Additionally, while Thieme identifies a host of realist subsets, I offer the schema of "minor realism" to identify the style's complex role in contemporary climate literature. Finally, I examine a wholly different archive than does Thieme and offer a distinct periodization. John Thieme, *Anthropocene Realism: Fiction in the Age of Climate Change* (Bloomsbury, 2023), 8.

Although Ghosh himself writes postcolonial fiction, and his archive in *The Great Derangement* consists of 19th-century European and Indian novels, scholars tend to take his arguments as universal rather than geographically and historically specific.[42] Despite the specificity of Ghosh's archive and methodology, it passes for accepted wisdom—rather than an assumption worthy of investigation—that climate change simply does not appear in realist narratives. Americanists, in particular, might instead look to the histories of the U.S. novel that foreground gothic and naturalistic modes instead of the bourgeois-imperial realism of their British and European counterparts. A full literary history of American minor realism is beyond the scope of this project, but I trace its genealogy as far back as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). *Moby-Dick* oscillates between realism and romanticism, from intricate discussions of whaling to extended symbolism; its minor realism catalogs not only the horrors of whaling but also the violent processes of oil extraction from whale blubber. The sentimental style of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, meanwhile, employs both explicit appeals to emotion and morality but also a detailed chronicle of everyday life: it, too, offers an early example of how American literature leverages minor realism to represent disasters (in this case, plantation slavery) of extended duration. Looking to the next century, American realism's associations with naturalism and muckraking journalism offer a far more productive relationship to both disaster and social consciousness than does the archive that Ghosh examines. From Charles Chesnutt's fictionalization of the Wilmington race riot in *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) to Upton Sinclair's exposé of the meatpacking industry in *The Jungle* (1906) to the horrors of settler-colonial missionary schools in Zitkála-Šá's *American*

[42] For instance, Ghosh establishes his argument about the bourgeois novel's regularity through Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmodan's Wife* (1864) and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856). Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 17-9.

Indian Stories (1921), American realism has long turned a documentary eye onto the nation's racial and political catastrophes. With its relation to eyewitness reportage, and its formal capacity to chronicle crises of episodic and chronic nature, the American novel was born alongside disaster.[43]

Recognizing the historical and geographic particularity of literary realism, this dissertation calls for a thicker description of realist modes and how they function in contemporary climate novels. Thus, while many scholars advance a monolithic model of realism, I offer ordinary realism and disaster realism as a spectrum that recognizes the heterogeneity of contemporary American fiction and its relationship to climate change. The novels in this climate archive, I argue, employ these subsets of minor realism to depict climate change and its conceptual nonlinearity, and to refract conditions of everyday apocalypse.

1.3 Realist Affordances: Description, Interiority, Dailiness

Tracing how American novelists have turned to minor realism in the past three decades, I identify several realist affordances—description, interiority, and dailiness—that in turn register the complex relationship between climate disaster and everyday life. And yet, in identifying the partiality and incompleteness of these affordances, I diverge from Ghosh not only in my archive but also by advancing a comparatively weak theory of realism. *The Great Derangement*, that is, promotes a strong theory of realism as what Fredric Jameson calls a "strategy of containment."[44] Following the scholarship of such critics as D.A. Miller, who in 1988 identified the novel's carceral production of the liberal subject, Ghosh understands the 19th-century novel as

[43] Although beyond the scope of this project, one could offer a similar counterhistory of the British novel through texts like Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) and its narrativization of slavery, or Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) and their respective representations of storms and epidemics.
[44] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell University Press, 1981), 37.

consolidating bourgeois regimes of predictability that in turn foreclose the representation of environmental disaster.[45] For Ghosh, realist novels are always already complicit in the containment of bourgeois life and its incommensurability with climate change.[46] In the weak theory that I put forth, conversely, an American genealogy of the form emphasizes both realism's porosity to nonrealist forms and its frequent appearance in otherwise nonrealist texts.

In articulating a weak theory of realism, I both draw upon and join critical currents to attend to theories and methodologies that are associative, reparative, "low-key and steadfast."[47] Weak theory is a notion that has gained literary-critical traction through what Jeffrey J. Williams calls "the new modesty" in literary studies.[48] Theories of weakness, Paul K. Saint-Amour writes, share "not a vehement, dialectical negation of either strength or critique but an interest in the work accomplished by the proximate, the provisional, the probabilistic."[49] My investment in minor realism joins an interest in such weak forms, as well as in "the everyday, the domestic, the affective, the middlebrow, the infrastructural."[50] Ecocritical scholars, too, have turned to "methods that are defined by partiality and incompletion."[51] Wai Chee Dimock, a key theorist of

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[45] D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (University of California Press, 1988).
[46] It is beyond the scope of this project to critique Ghosh's account of the 19th-century realist novel, though suffice it to say that a recent scholarly turn has emphasized the form's malleability and incoherence. See, for instance, Nancy Armstrong, "Afterword: Waiting for Foucault," *Modern Language Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2019): 37–49; and Elaine Freedgood, *Worlds Enough: The Invention of Realism in the Victorian Novel* (Princeton University Press, 2019).
[47] Wai Chee Dimock, *Weak Planet: Literature and Assisted Survival* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 12.
[48] Jeffrey J. Williams, "The New Modesty in Literary Criticism," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 5, 2015.
[49] Paul K. Saint-Amour, "Weak Theory, Weak Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 25, no. 3 (2018): 440. Saint-Amour, in articulating weak theory, invokes the psychoanalytic work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her formulations of reparative reading. Other theorists of weakness, like Wai Chee Dimock, draw models of networks and relationality that theorists such as Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Lauren Berlant put forth. Loosely grouped with a range of methodologies that include "surface reading," "just reading," and "thin description," these efforts toward "post-critique" disavow the strong theories of symptomatic reading that scholars have inherited from Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. See Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 4l; and Wai Chee Dimock, "Weak Theory: Henry James, Colm Tóibín, and W.B. Yeats," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Summer 2013): 737.
[50] Saint-Amour, "Weak Theory, Weak Modernism": 437.
[51] Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor, "Introduction," in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, ed. Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 13. See especially Juliana Chow, "Partial Readings: Thoreau's Studies as Natural History's Causalities," in the same volume.

weak theory, has in recent years applied such formulations to the "weak planet" and its contingency and interconnectedness. Given the always-unfinished nature of genre, she suggests, literary history itself models "redress as an incremental process, never finished because never without new input."[52] Against the critical tendency to see certain genres and styles as fundamentally unsuited to climate representation, then, my weak theory of minor realism emphasizes the iteration and aesthetic porosity of this contemporary archive. I turn now minor realism and its aesthetic affordances.

1.3.1 Description

Realist style includes, first and foremost, the incidental description through which novels attend to the minutiae that fill out a sense of mimetic correspondence between text and world. For Roland Barthes, such details contribute to the "reality effect"; for Franco Moretti, they constitute "fillers" that inform neither plot nor character but rather develop a sense of verisimilitude.[53] In the novels that I analyze, description lends narratives of environmental disaster a sense of immediacy. For instance, Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* attends closely to seemingly inconsequential details: set in a post-apocalyptic landscape, what remain are useless highway interchanges, empty oil drums, and looted grocery stores—objects "abandoned long ago by pilgrims enroute to their several and collective deaths."[54] Taken together, however, such descriptions structure a novel that is more interested in in post-apocalyptic setting and mood than in plot; they prove essential to *The Road*'s formulation of a world in which disaster becomes ordinary. Incidental details also texture Leslie Marmon Silko's

[52] Dimock, *Weak Planet*, 7.
[53] Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard (University of California Press, 1989), 142; Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (Verso, 2013), 71.
[54] Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (Vintage, 2006), 200.

vast novel *Almanac of the Dead*, which invokes descriptions of everyday weather to capture a sense of verisimilitude but also to rewrite a key realist trope through Indigenous cosmopolitics. Silko valences her sprawling novel of social realism with what Anne Stewart calls an "angry planet" narrative: *Almanac of the Dead* describes weather that is agential and retributive, situating its vision of climate justice within a long history of Indigenous resistance.[55] Description, in the novels that I discuss in this dissertation, offers a nexus between realist and nonrealist modes. Like *The Swimmers*, which offers only a glancing mention of "blisteringly hot days that never seem to let up," such contemporary novels employ incidental description to evoke a sense of immanent and temporally unbounded catastrophe.

1.3.2 Interiority

Realist style also affords interiority, a feature that emphasizes the embodied proximity and subjective experience of climate change. Interiority produces the reader's intimacy with characters' inner thoughts and observations. Key features of interiority include "interior monologue, free indirect discourse, and the careful restriction of point of view," writes David Kurnick: these features create a sense of proximate, limited, and subjective experience.[56] Each of my chapters include a novel that unfolds in the first person, thus lending an experiential and embodied quality to everyday apocalypse. In Ben Lerner's *10:04*, for instance, the protagonist (himself named Ben) experiences climate change mostly through a sense of indirection. He worries about climate change, habitually notes unseasonably warm weather, and watches televised disasters as they unfold. Consequently, realist interiority embeds the everyday with a sense of immanent disaster. But while such interiority makes climate change narratively

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[55] Anne Stewart, *Angry Planet: Decolonial Fiction and the American Third World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2023), 4.
[56] David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 11.

proximate and habitable, it also thematizes everyday apocalypse and its inequitably distributed effects. While Ben worries constantly about climate change, that is, he remains insulated from immediate disaster. The novel's sense of interiority stages the subjectivity and partiality of his experiences, the incommensurability of his climate anxiety and actual distance from climate change. While realist interiority might seem to privilege a myopic vantage onto environmental disaster, the novels that I discuss employ it to instead amplify the material inequities therein.

1.3.3 Dailiness

If realist description and realist interiority evoke the immanence and partiality of everyday apocalypse, realist dailiness attends to its temporality. While Ghosh and others fault the realist novel for its myopic focus on the everyday, I suggest instead that it attends to the quotidian rhythms that constitute a sense of iterative and enduring disaster.[57] Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, for instance, literalizes realist dailiness: structured as a series of twelve days, it attends to a day-to-day experience of structural violence and environmental disaster. Both Octavia E. Butler and Louise Erdrich, meanwhile, employ diaristic forms in their climate-apocalypse novels. In addition to the first-person subjectivity that marks realist interiority, the diary formalizes a sense of the everyday temporalities in which these environmental disasters unfold. Such modest temporal scales emphasize the immanent and unfolding quality of climate disaster, rather than positioning it as a futural or exceptional event. In foregrounding missing entries and their intrinsic representational elisions, furthermore, *Parable of the Sower* and *Future Home of the Living God* attend to the incomplete nature of climate representation. These key realist features—description, interiority, and dailiness—thus position realism not as a project of

[57] For a discussion of the relationship between realism, everyday life, and incremental politics, see Heather Love, "Small Change: Realism, Immanence, and the Politics of the Micro," *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2016): 419–45.

mimetic totality but rather as one that self-reflexively points to its own gaps, elisions, and limitations.

1.3.4 Realism Under Duress: Theorizing Nonrealist Forms

Given the historical phenomenon of everyday apocalypse, and its distortion of daily life, minor realism incorporates both realist and nonrealist forms. I have already accounted for the key realist affordances—description, interiority, and dailiness—that simultaneously attend to everyday life and gesture to realism's porosity. While this project focuses on realism, given its underrecognized purchase on climate representation, let me explain what I mean by *nonrealist forms*.[58] A capacious term, nonrealism captures a range of overlapping generic categories: science fiction and speculative fiction, the gothic, the New Weird, and literary postmodernism, to name just a few. Given the prevalence of the term "cli-fi," many readers associate climate novels with science fiction and speculative fiction; indeed, texts such as Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy and N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* are climate novels that have also garnered science-fiction accolades like the Hugo Award. In addition to recognizing the importance of science fiction and speculative fiction, however, I also want to consider the environmental implications of other nonrealist genres. The gothic, for instance, valences the haunted afterlives of slavery in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017); Rebecca Evans takes Ward's novel to track the oscillation between realist and gothic modes in what she calls "genre friction."[59] In novels such

[58] I use the term *nonrealist* to avoid a binary between realism and speculative/science fiction, for such a binary not only elides generic interplay but also misses a range of styles that borrow from other genres entirely.
[59] Rebecca Evans, "Geomemory and Genre Friction: Infrastructural Violence and Plantation Afterlives in Contemporary African American Novels," *American Literature* 93, no. 3 (2021): 455. Tracking formal shifts between realism and other genres in literature of the "Plantationocene," Evans identifies genre friction as a "strategy that writers adopt in order to invoke and to subvert readers' expectations about genre." Evans, "Geomemory and Genre Friction": 453, fn 13.

as China Miéville's *The City & the City* (2009) and Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014), meanwhile, topoi of the New Weird represent the strangeness and animacy of the "Capitalocene." So too do postmodern texts evince the representational possibilities for nonrealist modes: think of the "airborne toxic event" of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), which stages a satire of consumer capitalism alongside environmental disaster, or Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), which takes a frequent postmodern conceit—footnotes to the novel's body text—to detail the *longue durée* of colonial extraction in the Dominican Republic. Ramón Saldívar argues that the latter novel exemplifies a new aesthetic that he calls "speculative realism."[60] Building from Saldívar's formulations of speculative realism, as well as Evan's arguments about genre friction, my dissertation tracks an interplay between realist and nonrealist forms—the latter of which include but are not limited to speculative fiction. Minor realism, encompassing a spectrum between ordinary realism and disaster realism, borrows from the three realist affordances that I have identified while also incorporating nonrealist elements.

In identifying minor realism and its formal interplay, I follow scholars of genre who emphasize its permeable and generative—rather than prescriptive and hierarchical—qualities. Dimock, for instance, calls genre "a mixed attempt at cataloging, doomed to come up short because there will always be more specimens coming its way, inconvenient specimens, unforeseen and unrecognizable on its terms."[61] June Howard conceives genres "not as fixed sites in a closed, abstract system but rather as nodes in loose and constantly changing social

[60] Ramón Saldívar, "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction," *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 592.
[61] Dimock, *Weak Planet*, 6.

arrangements."[62] Realism is a literary style, not a genre per se; nevertheless, I invoke these formulations to suggest the dynamism between realist and nonrealist texts. I thus also extend the work of scholars of the novel, many of whom have long positioned realism as a flexible and permeable style instead of a stable and coherent framework.[63] In the past decade, special issues on "peripheral realisms" and "worlding realisms" have expanded such an argument.[64] Theorists of the novel have begun to emphasize its global history and scope, routed through planetary scales of time and space.[65] My study of minor realism, then, contributes to a broader reappraisal of realism's constitutive relationship to other literary styles and forms. In the next section, I turn to not only the structure of the project but also to its methodological and political implications. Routing the history of American realism through nonrealist forms, and through the *longue durée* of environmental injustice, understands the everyday as a site both of harm and of resistance.

1.4 The Structure of the Project

If minor realism characterizes texts that simultaneously draw upon and undercut realist aesthetics, here I trace literary-critical traditions that diverge from a strong theory of realism.[66] Through a theoretical toolkit that draws upon memory studies, Black studies, Native American studies, and disability studies, I discuss how each discourse offers a distinct vantage to the

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[62] June Howard, *The Center of the World: Regional Writing and the Puzzles of Place-Time* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 45.
[63] Cf. Michael McKeon, "Realism," in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 587–91.
[64] Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, "Peripheral Realisms Now," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2012): 279; Lauren M. E. Goodlad, "Introduction: Worlding Realisms Now," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 49, no. 2 (2016): 184.
[65] See Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton University Press, 2006); Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (Columbia University Press, 2018); Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford University Press, 2008); and Franco Moretti, ed., *The Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture* (Princeton University Press, 2007).
[66] I primarily employ close reading methodologies, a literary-critical practice in which detailed analysis of etymology, syntax, form, and reception contributes to a deeper understanding of a text.

problem of verisimilitude and the literary representation of everyday life. Distinct though these discourses are, they all unsettle spectacular and discrete models of disaster in favor of those that emphasize nonlinear, durational, mundane, and nonlinear forms of harm and resistance. Each discourse or related archive, moreover, brings ambivalent claims to realism. By grounding each chapter in distinct literary-critical traditions, I demonstrate that the subcategories of ordinary realism and disaster realism coalesce with specific political and literary histories. I begin with ordinary realism, examining novels that offer a clear counterexample to Ghosh's claim that "serious fiction" necessarily excludes the representation of climate change: Ben Lerner's *10:04*, Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*. These three novels employ ordinary realism to expose the undercurrents of disaster in everyday life. The second half of my project turns to disaster realism, or novels that invoke realist aesthetics to explore how disaster itself becomes ordinary: Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Although readers typically take these latter three novels as speculative fiction, here I show that realist aesthetics are in fact central to their representations of everyday apocalypse. Taken together, then, this archive demonstrates the underrecognized prevalence of minor realism. Through minor realism, these novels thematize ongoing and contingent relations to climate change. Tracking everyday apocalypse as a literary motif, I take each chapter as an opportunity to explore one of gerunds: watching, waiting, weathering, and walking.

1.4.1 Ordinary Realism in Lerner, Ward, and Silko

My second chapter, which analyzes Ben Lerner's 2014 novel *10:04*, interrogates how ordinary realism exposes the inequitably distributed effects of climate change. *10:04* is an autofictional text in which the protagonist engages in precisely the sort of bourgeois ordinariness

for which Ghosh faults the realist novel: Ben goes on long walks through New York, visits galleries and museums, drinks coffee, engages in long conversations, and attempts to write the novel that eventually becomes *10:04*. Yet Lerner undercuts such bourgeois ordinariness with a sense of thrumming disaster. From Ben's persistent climate anxiety to his observation of unseasonably warm days, the novel suggests that ordinariness and immanent disaster are not just coexistent but ultimately constitutive. The key form of everyday apocalypse in Lerner's novel is *watching*: across multiple scenes in with Ben watches city traffic and televised coverage of hurricanes, *10:04* positions him as a spectator to both petrocapitalism and anthropogenic disaster. Despite his attention to climate change, watching emphasizes how Ben's positionality—his whiteness and wealth, primarily—shield him from climate change and its immediate effects; I call this interplay between attention and insulation the *environmentalism of the rich*. But it is also through scenes of watching that *10:04* undercuts its own claims to realism and thereby interrogates the environmentalism of the rich. In scenes that find Ben watching films, or looking at art, the novel undermines its own autofictional hyperrealism by exposing the failure inherent to all forms of mimesis. As it attempts extreme verisimilitude even as it undercuts this very possibility, *10:04* interweaves hyperrealism and realist failure. Here, I identify a subcategory of ordinary realism that I term *implicated realism*—a self-reflexive literary aesthetic that reveals how the canonical features of literary realism rely upon the forms of extraction and exploitation that have also produced the climate crisis. I draw the notion of implication from recent memory-studies work that focuses on belated, systemic, and indirect relationships to harm. Through watching, an action that expresses everyday apocalypse, *10:04* employs implicated realism to examine and critique the environmentalism of the rich.

My third chapter, which analyzes Jesmyn Ward's 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones*, also employs ordinary realism as a lens to examine the unjustly allocated consequences of climate change. Instead of the white and wealthy subjects that inhabit *10:04*, however, *Salvage the Bones* positions environmental disaster within the *longue durée* of slavery. *Salvage the Bones*, which unfolds as a series of twelve consecutive days, narrativizes the experience of a Black family in rural Mississippi before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. The novel offers a first-person account of Ward's protagonist, Esch, and attends to the interiority and embodied experience that structure her experience of the storm. *Salvage the Bones*, I demonstrate, draws upon myriad sources—Ward's personal experience, media narratives, and documentary film—to emphasize *waiting* as a durational form of everyday apocalypse. Indeed, although Ward devotes two chapters to the cataclysmic nature of the storm, much of the novel amplifies more subdued states of disaster preparation, anticipation, and aftermath. The act of waiting, then, indexes not only the undramatic quality of ordinary life but also the relationship between the afterlives of slavery and environmental disaster. I draw here upon Black studies scholars, primarily Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe, who emphasize the temporally unbounded nature of chattel slavery. In attending to these unbounded temporalities, meanwhile, I reveal the aesthetics of ordinary realism at play in *Salvage the Bones*. The novel's description and dailiness mark an affinity with literary realism, simultaneously structuring its sense of attenuated time and positioning it in a genealogy of Black realist writing. And yet *Salvage the Bones* injects such realism with a gothic sensibility, one that Ward reworks from William Faulkner, in which tropes such as abandoned buildings and natural decay emphasize how the past haunts the present. Ordinary realism, in Ward's novel, reveals the afterlives of slavery to structure the uneven distribution of environmental harm.

My fourth chapter bridges ordinary realism and disaster realism, interpreting Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) through the former and Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) through the latter. Connecting these novels, and their distinct aesthetic and political commitments, is a form of everyday apocalypse that I call *weathering*. Both novels, that is, invoke not only corrosive harm but also temporally extended forms of what Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa White Earth) calls "survivance."[67] Here, I foreground Indigenous critical theory to position climate change as one disaster in a long history of settler-colonial catastrophes, and to frame environmental resistance through durational and nonlinear temporalities. I begin with *Almanac of the Dead*, a sprawling novel that takes a clear-eyed look at the effects of petrocapitalist extraction and unsustainable real-estate development in the Southwest. In its close attention to the brutality of capitalism—drug runners, illegal biomaterials traders, paramilitary torture—*Almanac of the Dead* extends the tradition of American social realism. And yet it fractures such ordinary realism through Indigenous cosmopolitics, suggesting the explicitly political implications of putting the realist novel into conversation with Indigenous resistance. Silko's novel thus offers a case study in how Indigenous authors rewrite and repurpose realist topoi in narratives of climate justice.

1.4.2 Disaster Realism in Erdrich, Butler, and McCarthy

I continue the fourth chapter with *Future Home of the Living God*, marking the project's transition to three exemplars of disaster realism. Erdrich's novel is nonrealist in its conceit: it depicts an authoritarian regime that emerges in the United States after a mysterious

[67] For Vizenor, "[n]ative survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent." Gerald Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice," in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1.

environmental phenomenon engenders an acute reproductive crisis. Despite this nonrealist conceit, however, Erdrich foregrounds realist topoi in *Future Home of the Living God*: the novel presents itself as a diary, thus foregrounding the dailiness and intimacy of its protagonist, Cedar, and emphasizes the sustaining and even revolutionary potential of domestic routine. Reading ordinary realism and disaster realism together, I end this chapter by suggesting that such aesthetics foreground everyday apocalypse. Through Erdrich's emphasis on writerly omissions and Silko's representation of textual fragmentation, the two novels emphasize the partiality of climate novels.

Extending this attention to disaster realism, my final chapter looks to two prototypically nonrealist climate novels: Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). Although scholars frequently invoke these two novels to suggest the incommensurability of climate representation and realist aesthetics, I here demonstrate that they employ disaster realism to emphasize the embodied quality of environmental apocalypse. I identify *walking* as the corresponding iteration of everyday apocalypse. In both *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road*, walking serves as a central motif and plot device that in turn emphasizes an accretive, mundane, and embodied experience of climate change and its attendant disasters. *Parable of the Sower* follows a young Black woman named Lauren Olamina as she navigates the intertwined environmental and political catastrophes that characterize Butler's nonrealist dystopia. Lauren escapes her Southern California hometown and walks north on foot, traversing major highways and joining a mass exodus of climate refugees. Although Butler punctuates the novel with moments of violence, much of it attends to protracted experiences of traveling and coalition-building. *Parable of the Sower*, that is, employs disaster realism to explore the slow work of climate resistance. *The Road*, meanwhile, depicts an unnamed father-son pair as they

navigate the near-total annihilation of the biosphere. The man and boy travel exclusively on foot, pushing a grocery cart that carries their belongings, and McCarthy's iterative novel amplifies the rote and mundane work of barest survival: eating, sleeping, guarding, trying to stay warm. Both novels, then, employ disaster realism to emphasize the ongoing and everyday acts of survival that texture extended disasters. In addition to a robust literary-critical discourse about the relationship between speculative fiction and realism, my primary theoretical interlocuters in this chapter are scholars of disability. Emphasizing the social constructedness of disability and the inherent harms of capitalist time-discipline, disability studies articulates both an embodied theory of environmental disaster and the liberatory potential of imagining otherwise. Butler and McCarthy, tracing the contingency and interdependency of their respective walks, gesture to a climate-change imaginary with disability at its center. As exemplary novels of everyday apocalypse, then, *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road* emphasize the generic porosity of realism and the embodied quality of everyday apocalypse.

Across the dissertation, I trace how these six novels employ minor realism to represent the conceptual and epistemological problem of everyday apocalypse. Taken together, they position everyday apocalypse as a schema that recognizes the inequitably distributed effects of environmental harm, the epistemological inference and experiential partiality of climate change, and the embodied experience of the warming globe.

Scholars have already recognized all these novels, independently, as those that take up climate change and its representational challenge. But rarely are they read together, nor are they understood as exemplifying a broader archive of minor realism. Bringing together a disparate set of novels under this formal rubric, I demonstrate the surprising affinities between those novels that foreground everyday life and those that depict environmental cataclysm. Moreover, by

supplementing critical discourses in ecocriticism and the environmental humanities with those from memory studies, Black studies, Native American studies, and disability studies, I emphasize the methodological breadth needed to interpret climate novels: these theoretical discourses offer a range of resources with which to conceptualize accretive, belated, and mundane forms of harm. In their persistent attention to power and its embodied and structural manifestations, such discourses emphasize the unevenly dispersed effects of climate change. Finally, in their political charge, they attend to the urgent and necessary work of resistance. I thus hope to show the aesthetic plenitude of minor realism as it textures a far-ranging contemporary archive of novels that take up the challenge not only of representing climate change but also of resisting it.

Chapter 2 – Watching: Implicated Realism and the Environmentalism of the Rich in Ben Lerner's *10:04*

> To live in a city is to live the life that it was built for, to adapt its schedule and rhythms, to move within the transit layout made for you during the morning and evening rush, winding through the crowds of fellow commuters. To live in a city is to consume its offerings. To eat at its restaurants. To drink at its bars. To shop at its stores. To pay its sales taxes. To give a dollar to its homeless. To live in a city is to take part in and to propagate its impossible systems. To wake up. To go to work in the morning. It is also to take pleasure in those systems because, otherwise, who could repeat the same routines, year in, year out?
>
> Ling Ma, *Severance* (2018)

> I had heard the environmental concern often enough to know how earnest a priority it was for some people, but I did not, as yet, feel it seriously in my bones. I had not experienced a fervor over it.
>
> Teju Cole, *Open City* (2011)

Minor realism coalesces a spectrum of aesthetic strategies that represent the constitutive relationship between disaster and the everyday. I begin this dissertation with one end of that spectrum, ordinary realism, which embeds realist texts with a sense of immanent disaster. Ben Lerner's 2014 novel *10:04* represents the realist climate novel *par excellence*: deeply interested in habit and interiority, it depicts climate change in both its everyday effects and cataclysmic consequences. And yet the novel also questions the very possibility of verisimilitude, troubling the realist aesthetics upon which it depends; this chapter, therefore, identifies *10:04* as a key text of minor realism and its contemporary archive. So too does Lerner's novel, through its persistent attention to environmental harm, evoke the inferential epistemologies and inequitably distributed harms of climate change. I therefore identify *watching* as the key form of everyday apocalypse that *10:04* offers. Through myriad scenes of watching and looking, *10:04* probes the forms of

spectatorship, passivity, and distance that characterize how comparatively wealthy subjects encounter—without themselves experiencing—climate change.

10:04 explores climate change from a position of relative security: its protagonist—perhaps also named Ben—is a successful writer and professor living in New York City.[1] Ben spends his days writing, walking the city, drinking coffee, and attending art shows. He also worries about global warming, though his life remains largely safe from its consequences. The conclusion of *10:04*, which stages a scene of watching, emphasizes this disjuncture between Ben's knowledge of climate change and his material relationship to it. Sitting in a doctor's office after a hurricane of unprecedented magnitude hits New York, Ben describes: "We watched—there was no position in the waiting room from which you could avoid watching—the coverage of the storm we kept failing to experience. They spliced Doppler images of the swirling tentacular mass with footage of it reaching landfall, of houses being swept away, of emergency rescues of the elderly."[2] Such sensational images, however, belie Ben's experience of the storm.

> We talked constantly about the urgency of the situation, but were still unable to feel it, as the festive atmosphere in the higher-elevation areas of Brooklyn recalled a snow day: parents and kids staying home from work and school, playing in the park; the only visible damage within six blocks of us was a large tree that had crushed an empty car. There were no shortages of food or water in the local stores; the restaurants were full. Everyone we knew was okay…[3]

Watching, as an experience of everyday apocalypse, emphasizes the uneven distribution of risk: shielded from the immediate ramifications of the hurricane, Ben instead watches television to follow it. Continuing life as usual in the shadow of a cataclysmic storm, he experiences a state of everyday apocalypse. The inescapability of the television coverage and its horrors contrast with

[1] The name of Lerner's protagonist is a live question. Some critics insist that he remains unnamed, others name him "Ben," and still others refer to him as "Adam" (the name of the protagonist in Lerner's two other linked novels). For the sake of readability, I will refer to *10:04*'s protagonist as "Ben" and to its author as "Lerner."
[2] Ben Lerner, *10:04* (Picador, 2014), 232.
[3] Lerner, *10:04*, 231.

his embodied experience of the "festive atmosphere" in his neighborhood. Awareness of climate change and related environmental disasters coexists with insulation from precisely those harms.

Thus, while Nixon identifies writer-activists who enact an "environmentalism of the poor," *10:04* depicts a contrary environmentalism: an environmentalism of the rich.[4] Throughout the past two decades, political scientists and sociologists have theorized the environmentalism of the rich.[5] They use this term, and related ones, to name the ideologies and everyday habits of those whose awareness of global warming does not preclude their perpetuation of the crisis.[6] Many of these scholars emphasize the primacy of neoliberal economics in shaping the environmentalism of the rich. Neoliberalism produced a version of environmentalism that would remain compatible with free-market economics, or what political scientist Steven Bernstein identified in as 2001 "the compromise of liberal environmentalism."[7] Patricia Ávila-García and Eduardo Luna Sánchez argue that "the environmentalism of the rich aims to legitimize and secure the economic interests of the elite by adopting an environmental discourse and ecological rationales (such as conservation, the adoption of clean technologies, organic food production, and the mitigation of environmental damage) that do not structurally disturb the logic of

[4] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 4.
[5] Activist Sunita Narain has also used the formulation of "environmentalism of the rich." Historian Ramachandra Guha contrasts an "environmentalism of the poor" with "full stomach" environmentalism, though with different implications. Sunita Narain, "Environmentalism of the Poor vs. Environmentalism of the Rich," Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory - Global Institute of Sustainability and Innovation, Arizona State University, March 27, 2013; Ramachandra Guha, *How Much Should a Person Consume?: Environmentalism in India and the United States* (University of California Press, 2006), 1.
[6] The environmentalism of the rich diagnoses the ideology of capitalism rather than the wealth of any one subject, literary or otherwise. If Nixon understands "the poor" as "a compendious category subject to almost infinite local variation as well as to fracture along fault lines of ethnicity, gender, race, class, region, religion, and generation," I use "the rich" as a capacious identifier that includes subjects who by dint of various combinations of wealth, racial privilege, citizenship status, and geography remain shielded from the most pernicious forms of environmental harm. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 4.
[7] Steven Bernstein, *The Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism* (Columbia University Press, 2001), 3.

capitalist accumulation."[8] In terms of policy, the environmentalism of the rich has driven the ascendance of "sustainable development" that pairs economic growth with putative environmental protection. For the private sector, it means "corporate social responsibility." On an individual basis, writes political scientist Peter Dauvergne, "it surfaces as a belief in the power of eco-consumerism and small lifestyle changes as forces of progressive change—walking a recycling bin to the curbside, taking shorter showers, and buying eco-products—even as overall consumption continues to rise."[9] The environmentalism of the rich ignores the constitutive relationship between capitalist accumulation and environmental harm.

Literary scholars have yet to use the precise term "the environmentalism of the rich." However, in the past decade, they have begun to join social scientists in identifying this contradictory behavior. Sociologist Kari Norgaard's discussion of climate denial has proven particularly influential for scholars of literature.[10] Lerner's dual description of "kids… playing in the park" and "houses being swept away" invokes the "double reality" of climate change that Norgaard identifies.[11] In her ethnographic studies, she finds a Janus-like dualism: "In one reality was the collectively constructed sense of normal everyday life. In the other reality existed the troubling knowledge of increasing automobile use, polar ice caps melting, and the predictions of future weather scenarios."[12] Despite a widespread awareness of climate change, Norgaard observes its societal "invisibility."[13] In the United States, she writes, "a majority of the public is concerned but has normalized their knowledge rather than acting on it."[14] It is a surplus of

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[8] Patricia Ávila-García and Eduardo Luna Sánchez, "The Environmentalism of the Rich and the Privatization of Nature: High-End Tourism on the Mexican Coast," trans. Victoria J. Furio, *Latin American Perspectives* 39, no. 6 (2012): 54.
[9] Peter Dauvergne, *Environmentalism of the Rich* (MIT Press, 2018) 4.
[10] For instance, see Song, *Climate Lyricism*, 19-37.
[11] Kari Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (MIT Press, 2011), 5.
[12] Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, 5.
[13] Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, 136.
[14] Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, 179.

relevant and compelling information, not a lack thereof, that contributes to this invisibility. In this vein, Heather Houser offers "infowhelm" as a term to describe "that state of being overcome by the onslaught of information [about climate change] […] myriad streams of information types—scientific, demographic, experiential, economic, cultural—gush out from this tentacular, ongoing crisis."[15] As Houser and other literary scholars recognize, abundant information and awareness paradoxically foreclose environmental action. I join this robust literary-critical discussion and suggest that the environmentalism of the rich—a term that I borrow from social scientists—encapsulates the contradictory ecological concern and neoliberal individualism of contemporary discourse. This chapter's aim, then, is to identify a literary strategy that represents and critiques the environmentalism of the rich. I argue that Lerner employs a distinct form of ordinary realism to do so: I call this form "implicated realism."

In *10:04*, I argue, Lerner employs implicated realism to probe the environmentalism of the rich and its displacement of risk on a warming globe. Implicated realism is a literary mode that takes realist elements—bourgeois settings, narrative description, an emphasis on daily life—and reveals how they rely on extraction and exploitation. A self-reflexive form, implicated realism consists of both hyperrealism and realist failure. First, hyperrealism demonstrates the everyday effects of climate change. Then, because the history of realism also implicates it in the perpetuation of climate change, implicated realism exposes its own limitations through realist failure. The first section of this chapter demonstrates that *10:04* explicitly depicts realist failure while, paradoxically, attempting hyperrealism; Lerner questions the very possibility of realism in ekphrastic encounters with visual art and film. In such encounters, *10:04* takes scenes of looking and watching to foreground the compromised nature of its own realist form. The second section

[15] Heather Houser, *Infowhelm: Environmental Art and Literature in an Age of Data* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 21.

of this chapter shows that *10:04* not only thematizes realist failure but also performs it. Lerner employs realist description to emphasize his protagonist's entanglement in extractive regimes; in these moments, however, he also stages narrative indeterminacy and metafictional awareness. Such passages illustrate two concrete strategies of implicated realism. The third section of this chapter turns from Ben's perpetuation of climate change to his oblique experience of it. I consider how implicated realism structures the novel's representation of natural disasters and their inequitable distribution, as well as the inferential epistemologies that characterize everyday apocalypse. By employing a form of minor realism, I argue, Lerner models a literary style that distills the environmentalism of the rich and its contradictions.

Throughout these three sections, meanwhile, I track how watching indexes the key epistemological features of everyday apocalypse. In *10:04*, I suggest, watching gestures to the inferential epistemologies and inequitable dispersion of climate change. Watching appears three dozen times in *10:04*, and Ben watches such disparate objects as television coverage, passers-by, cars, and films. As Lerner's depiction of televised hurricane coverage indicates, watching implies both attention and distance. The novel stages the distance between the global system of climate change and its local effects, as well as between those who suffer from such effects and those who remain temporarily insulated. Thus Ben watches the fallout of a disastrous hurricane while safely ensconced in a private clinic, uses the televised *Challenger* disaster to periodize "the dawning of our era of live disasters and simulcast wars," and observes Mount Sinai Hospital "from a safe distance" to identify "the devastated or the soon-to-be-devastated" in the stream of people leaving.[16] Lerner often emphasizes the distance—physical, affective, or political—between the viewing subject and the viewed object. Such distance, while echoing realism's

[16] Lerner, *10:04*, 110, 43.

interest in observation, also emphasizes the impossibility of impartiality therein. In scenes that find Ben adopting an observational pose, Lerner shatters the illusion of objectivity by suggesting that Ben remains implicated in that which he observes. But such implication also, ultimately, gestures toward the possibility of solidarity in the face of inequitably distributed harm. Just as the verb "to watch" evokes not only spectatorship but also forms of devotion and vigil, *10:04* investigates what it means not just to watch but also to be *on* watch, to watch *out for*, to watch *together*.

In its metaliterary formulations of observation, implication, and realism, *10:04* complicates literary-critical discussions of realism's role in the representation of climate change. Realism, as I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, is a contentious keyword in ecocritical circles: many scholars, drawing upon Ghosh's indictment of realism in *The Great Derangement*, surmise that its modest scale and reinforcement of bourgeois life leave the form ill-equipped to represent a warming globe and its attendant disasters. Such an assumption focalizes in the scholarship on *10:04*, which has seen robust discussion of both climate change and realism but has tended to keep the two aspects of the novel apart.[17] By reading them together, however, I identify Lerner's realism as a self-reflexive literary form that accentuates its

[17] While Stephanie Bernhard and Ben De Bruyn both discuss climate change and realism in *10:04*, my argument deviates from theirs insofar as I examine how Lerner foregrounds realist failure and interrogates the unevenly distributed effects of global warming. Stephanie Bernhard, "Climate Change as Chronic Crisis in Ben Lerner's *10:04*," *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2021): 1–23; Ben De Bruyn, "Realism 4°: Objects, Weather, and Infrastructure in Ben Lerner's *10:04*," *Textual Practice* 31, no. 5 (2017): 951–71. For further ecocritical considerations of Lerner's novel, see Alison Gibbons, "Metamodernism, the Anthropocene, and the Resurgence of Historicity: Ben Lerner's *10:04* and 'The Utopian Glimmer of Fiction,'" *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 62, no. 2 (2021): 137–51; Sara J. Grossman, "Ugly Data in the Age of Weather Satellites," *American Literature* 88, no. 4 (2016): 815–37; and Henry Ivry, "Writing in the 'Second Person Plural': Ben Lerner, Ambient Esthetics, and Problems of Scale," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 62, no. 2 (2021): 123–36. For analyses of the text as a realist novel, see Nicholas Brown, "Art after Art after Art," *nonsite.org* 18 (October 8, 2015); Arne De Boever, *Finance Fictions: Realism and Psychosis in a Time of Economic Crisis* (Fordham University Press, 2018), 152-180; Marta Figlerowicz, "10:04/10:05," *Post45*, January 21, 2015; Alexander Manshel, "The Rise of the Recent Historical Novel," *Post45*, September 29, 2017; and Jacqueline O'Dell, "One More Time with Feeling: Repetition, Contingency, and Sincerity in Ben Lerner's *10:04*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60, no. 4 (2019): 447–61.

own complicity with environmental and capitalist harm. Joining the critical turn that emphasizes realism's porosity and incoherence, I take *10:04*'s implicated realism to be an adaptive and adapted aesthetic mode that inherits but does not necessarily reproduce the proclivities of its predecessors. I thus suggest that implicated realism not only represents the environmentalism of the rich but also critiques it. For it is through the fissures in ideology and everyday habit, the novel suggests, that models of solidarity begin to emerge.

2.1 "A Glitch in the Pictorial Matrix": Realism and its Failures

As scholars have previously noted, *10:04*'s interweaving of global warming and everyday life offers a rejoinder to those who assume realist aesthetics to be incompatible with the representation of climate change. Stephanie Bernhard argues that the novel depicts the effects of climate change on "our daily lives and long-term consciousness," while Ben De Bruyn identifies "the strangely intertwined environmental and realist dimensions of *10:04*."[18] Indeed, in weaving together global warming and everyday life, *10:04* suggests a correspondence between climate change and minor realism. Early in the novel, Lerner catalogs "walks through Prospect Park as light died in the lindens; walks from our neighborhood of Boerum Hill to Sunset Park, where we would watch the soft-winged kites at magic hour; nocturnal walks along the promenade with the looming intensities of Manhattan glittering across dark water," and this litany constitutes "walks on a warming planet."[19] Ben's many walks constitute narrative fillers, or incidental descriptions, that lend texture to the novel; as Roland Barthes and Franco Moretti have characterized such devices in 19th-century literature, they add detail without offering information about plot or character.[20] The walks create an ambient sense of mimesis, or what Barthes called the "reality

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[18] Bernhard, "Climate Change as Chronic Crisis in Ben Lerner's *10:04*": 7; Ben De Bruyn, "Realism 4°": 954.
[19] Lerner, *10:04*, 7.
[20] Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 71.

effect."[21] And yet, in characterizing such strolls as "walks on a warming planet," *10:04* takes description—a cornerstone of 19th-century literary realism—and yokes it to climate change. In *10:04*, such seemingly banal details do not remain mere filler: minor realism emerges as a mode attentive to the ways in which global warming affects ordinary life.

And yet Lerner does not simply employ realism but also interrogates it: *10:04* is a hyperrealist novel that emerges through realism's failures. Rather than attempt to close the mimetic gap between text and world, Lerner's minor realism exposes it. *10:04*'s hyperrealism emerges primarily through its experimentations with autofiction. Paradoxically, however, in foregrounding *10:04*'s autofictional nature, Lerner unsettles the sense of correspondence between text and world. Calling the referent "the realistic fiction the world appears to be," and positioning *10:04* "on the very edge of fiction," the novel stages its own mimetic breakdown.[22] By undermining realism, Lerner encodes a critique of the form within his novel. That is, given realism's historical association with bourgeois life and contemporary kinship with neoliberalism, Lerner undermines realism even as he attempts an extreme version of it through autofiction. The autofictional mode might seem to be wholly at odds with an attempt to represent climate change in more than just its individual effects; after all, more than one reviewer has accused the novel of navel-gazing.[23] But *10:04*'s minor realism is more than just a flourish of contemporary autofiction: in its attention to the ambient effects of climate change and seemingly random trappings of ordinary life, the novel also reveals how the very state of ordinariness perpetuates an environmentalism of the rich.

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[21] Barthes, "The Reality Effect," 142.
[22] Lerner, *10:04*, 7, 237.
[23] Jennifer Audette, "How I Learned to Love Ben Lerner," *Fiction Writers Review*, June 1, 2015, https://fictionwritersreview.com/essay/how-i-learned-to-love-ben-lerner/; Hari Kunzru, "Impossible Mirrors," *The New York Times*, September 5, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/books/review/1004-by-ben-lerner.html.

Conscious of the expansive possibilities of novelistic form, but also of realism's fraught history, Lerner simultaneously attempts hyperrealism and thematizes realist failure. In this oscillation between hyperrealism and realist failure, *10:04* offers a minor realism that emphasizes its own limitations. *10:04*'s hyperrealism explicitly blurs the line between fiction and nonfiction, thus engaging contemporary strands of what David Shields calls "reality hunger."[24] The novel has become a contemporary classic of autofiction, a hybrid genre whose autobiographical veracity and attention to minute detail make it one of realism's inheritors. Lerner's protagonist shares many biographical details with its author, a correspondence that the novel foregrounds. "Say it was standing there," Lerner writes, "that I decided to replace the book I'd proposed with the book you're reading now, a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them."[25] *10:04*, in this vein, takes a metafictional view of itself. The novel begins just after the successful auctioning of the book that becomes *10:04*: "I managed to draft an earnest if indefinite proposal and soon there was a competitive auction among the major New York houses and we were eating cephalopods in what would become the opening scene."[26] In this way, the novel stages its own production and exposes its position within the literary marketplace.[27] Yet this metafictional conceit also invokes an earnest faith in literature's capacity to activate the forms of collectivity that neoliberalism, in its diffusion of market principles into individualist and extractive modes of existence, has increasingly fractured. When his agent asks him how he will develop the *New Yorker* short story that landed him the advance for *10:04* (and which, in something of a gimmick, Lerner reprints in its entirety therein),

[24] David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (Knopf, 2010).
[25] Lerner, *10:04*, 194.
[26] Lerner, *10:04*, 4.
[27] Ben Davies, "The Darkness-within-the-Light of Contemporary Fiction: Agamben's Missing Reader and Ben Lerner's *10:04*," *Textual Practice* 34, no. 10 (2020): 1740.

Ben imagines that he will “work [his] way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid.”[28] In addition to confronting the mediation and market conditions of the novel’s genesis, Lerner situates *10:04* within a broader turn “from irony to sincerity” that the text will perform through an account of its own production. Such positioning evokes the New Sincerity, or a mainstream return to realism (after ostensibly antirealist periods of modernism and postmodernism), that has encompassed writers including Michael Chabon, Junot Díaz, Jennifer Egan, Dave Eggers, and David Foster Wallace. In explicitly casting his novel between fiction and nonfiction, staging the creation of his own novel, and evoking sincerity, Lerner pursues hyperrealism. Yet such hyperrealism is rarely straightforward, especially since many New Sincerity texts foreground their implication as commodity objects and reiterate marketplace logics.[29] Lerner thus draws upon minor realism to examine implication.

In addition to situating *10:04* within the market logics of the publishing industry, Lerner also employs hyperrealism to explore how his protagonist remains shielded from the effects of climate change. Lerner’s novel, which is closely attentive to minutiae, represents the contingent and associative qualities of everyday experience. Bernhard calls this an “acute psychological realism,” writing that “seldom are novelists capable of showing just how many thoughts the human mind can hold simultaneously.”[30] Such hyperrealism extends to *10:04*’s representation of climate change: *10:04* invokes “unseasonable warmth” in its opening sentence and then returns to this motif periodically throughout; the phenomenon appears over a dozen times in the novel.[31]

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[28] Lerner, *10:04*, 4.

[29] Adam Kelly, “The New Sincerity,” in *Postmodern/Postwar and After: Rethinking American Literature*, ed. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden (University of Iowa Press, 2016), 203; Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, “Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature: An Introduction,” in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 9.

[30] Bernhard, “Climate Change as Chronic Crisis in Ben Lerner’s *10:04*”: 10.

[31] Lerner, *10:04*, 3.

Lerner writes, for instance: "Out of Dr. Andrews's climate-controlled office on the Upper East Side, I walked into the unseasonably warm December afternoon, turned on my phone, and checked my e-mail to find a message from Natali, a mentor and literary hero of mine, about her husband, Bernard, for me an equally important figure."[32] *10:04* here tracks the sensory perceptions and aleatory movements of its protagonist; the passage that follows, which details Ben's relationship to Natali and Bernard, bears no relationship to climate or weather. But such hyperrealist description—the "climate-controlled office," the unseasonable warmth—makes an implicit claim about Ben's literal insulation from the effects of climate change. In the case of this doctor's office, that is, Ben occupies a space that contributes to greenhouse-gas emissions while remaining protected from the vagaries of weather. The relationship between climate control and unseasonable warmth, however, remains implicit. While Ben earlier in the novel anticipates "a future wrecked by dramatically changing weather patterns," he rarely connects unseasonable warmth—or his own actions—to such a future.[33] Indeed, for many, the wrecked future has already arrived; the novel depicts how Ben remains shielded from it. Hyperrealist aesthetics yield a sense that Ben's relative wealth insulates him from the immediate harms of climate change.

Given the compromised state of hyperrealism—its proximity to wealth and association with neoliberal logics—it is perhaps not surprising that Lerner introduces realist failure as a fundamental concern of *10:04*. The novel undermines realism through ekphrastic encounters in which Ben looks at art or watches films. The novel's second scene finds Ben in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, examining Jules Bastien-Lepage's 1879 painting *Joan of Arc*. Describing the painting, and the way in which Joan's hand appears to fade, he reflects that "[t]he museum placard says that Bastien-Lepage was attacked for his failure to reconcile the ethereality of the

[32] Lerner, *10:04*, 32.
[33] Lerner, *10:04*, 14.

angels with the realism of the future saint's body, but that 'failure' is what makes it one of my favorite paintings. It's as if the tension between the metaphysical and physical worlds, between two orders of temporality, produces a glitch in the pictorial matrix."[34] Admiring this gap between representation and reality, Ben here imagines that the mimetic "glitch" is, to extend the computational metaphor, a feature rather than a bug. Juxtaposing 19th-century and contemporary forms, *10:04*'s exemplar of such constitutive failure is Christian Marclay's art film *The Clock*. A 24-hour compilation of found footage, Marclay matches real time and filmic time: if it is 6:30pm for the viewer, the film splices together footage in which it is explicitly 6:30pm as well. Watching *The Clock*, yet compulsively checking the time on his phone, Ben reflects:

> I'd heard *The Clock* described as the ultimate collapse of fictional time into real time, a work designed to obliterate the distance between art and life, fantasy and reality. But part of why I looked at my phone was because that distance hadn't been collapsed for me at all; while the duration of a real minute and *The Clock*'s minute were mathematically indistinguishable, they were nevertheless minutes from different worlds. I watched time in *The Clock*, but wasn't in it, or I was experiencing time as such, not just having experiences through it as a medium. As I made and unmade a variety of overlapping narratives out of its found footage, I felt acutely how many different days could be built out of a day, felt more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction.[35]

Watching, here, is an act that holds open rather than elides the mimetic gap: because they emphasize the distance between subject and object, scenes of looking and watching index realist failure. While the realist failure of *Joan of Arc* unfolds in the encounter between the sacred and profane, it is precisely the ordinariness of *The Clock*—what Ben calls "our collective, unconscious sense of the rhythms of the day"—that stages mimetic breakdown.[36] In failing to obliterate the mimetic gap, *The Clock* instead indexes a sense of plenitude. After observing "how many days could be built out of a day," Ben muses that "I think it was while looking from *The*

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[34] Lerner, *10:04*, 9.
[35] Lerner, *10:04*, 54.
[36] Lerner, *10:04*, 53.

Clock to my cell phone and back again that I decided to write more fiction—something I'd promised my poet friends I wasn't going to do—and over the next week I began to work on a story."[37] This story becomes the novel's interpolated *New Yorker* piece, which in turn becomes *10:04*; as such, Lerner takes realist failure as the condition of possibility for the novel itself.

I have, thus far, tracked the two primary elements of *10:04*'s implicated realism: hyperrealism and realist failure. While *10:04*'s hyperrealism depicts the diffuse and unevenly distributed effects of climate change, Lerner also undermines such realism through ekphrastic encounters with visual art and film. The next section argues that *10:04*, beyond simply thematizing realist failure, employs it as a central technique. I identify specific modes of realist failure—narrative indeterminacy and metafictional awareness—to demonstrate how such modes implicate Ben in the perpetuation of climate change.

2.2 Narrative Indeterminacy and Metafictional Awareness

Implicated realism reveals the implicated subject's perpetuation of extractive regimes and self-reflexively emphasizes the limitations of literary realism. This section more closely examines how *10:04* negotiates hyperrealism and realist failure, the two elements of implicated realism in the novel. Hyperrealism shows that ordinary life and climate change are intertwined, that Ben remains shielded from its worst effects, and that seemingly innocuous scenes are in fact implicated in environmental harm. Meanwhile, because the history of realism is itself implicated in climate change, such hyperrealism produces realist failure. I identify two concrete ways through which *10:04*, in addition to thematizing realist failure, performs it: narrative indeterminacy and metafictional awareness. If the environmentalism of the rich encapsulates a

[37] Lerner, *10:04*, 54.

paradox—concern for the environment and persistent inaction—implicated realism responds to it with a paradoxical form.

I draw the notion of implicated realism from memory-studies scholar Michael Rothberg's formulation of the "implicated subject." Recognizing that the triad of perpetrator, victim, and bystander remains insufficient to describe the indirect relationships to violence that many hold, Rothberg proposes the implicated subject as a figure who occupies positions affiliated with power but does not directly inflict harm. While "perpetration" describes harm wielded directly, "perpetuation" acknowledges the distant, belated, and unconscious relationships to violence that are far more common and collectively perhaps even more pernicious. Rothberg proposes implication as a productive alternative to the framework of complicity, which connotes legalism and causality; implication, on the other hand, encompasses structural injustice as well as the relationship between past and present.[38] Implication names "the entanglement of the diachronic and synchronic, the impure positionings that render subjects fundamentally complex, and the way different forms of power interact and built on each other."[39] Rothberg primarily focuses on race and racism but also considers the ecological stakes of implication. "[W]e citizens of the Global North are not precisely perpetrators of climate change," he observes, "yet we certainly contribute disproportionately to current and future climate-based catastrophes and benefit in the here and now from the geographically and temporally uneven distribution of their catastrophic effects."[40] Not quite a perpetrator of climate change, and certainly not a victim, Ben emerges throughout *10:04* as an implicated subject. Lerner's novel, then, demonstrates the viability of minor realism for the representation of such entangled, impure, and disproportionate relations.

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[38] Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford University Press, 2020), 14.
[39] Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject,* 17.
[40] Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 12.

2.2.1 Narrative Indeterminacy

Lerner subtly reveals Ben's implication in two scenes that find him watching distant scenes of traffic. These scenes yield moments in which Ben seems briefly aware of his implication, but they also undermine such awareness through narrative indeterminacy. In such instances, Lerner casts doubt over the implicated relations that become briefly visible in the text. One of these scenes finds Ben departing from a volunteer stint spent bagging dried mango at the food co-op. He takes advantage of the "unseasonably warm" weather with a long walk.[41]

> I found a bench and looked at the magnificent bridge's necklace lights in the sky and reflected in the water and imagined a future surge crashing over the iron guardrail. I thought I could smell the light, syrupy scent of cottonwoods blooming prematurely, confused by a warmth too early in the year even to be described as a false spring, but that might have been a mild olfactory hallucination triggered by memory—or, I found myself thinking, a brain tumor. […] I breathed in the night air that was or was not laced with anachronistic blossoms and felt the small thrill I always felt to a lesser or greater degree when I looked at Manhattan's skyline and the innumerable illuminated windows and the liquid sapphire and ruby of traffic on the FDR Drive…[42]

The "night air that was or was not laced with anachronistic blossoms" constitutes a site of narrative indeterminacy. The premature cottonwood blooms index the immanent effects of climate change, but Ben interprets their very existence as a hallucination or brain tumor. Lerner simultaneously marks Ben's climate anxiety and denial: although he imagines sea level rise through "a future surge crashing over the iron guardrail," the scene's indeterminacy protects him from the possibility that global warming has already arrived. Instead, the indeterminate scent yields a scene of sensorial pleasure. Ben admires the traffic and finds a "small thrill" in his spectatorship of the parkway. Central to this pleasure, however, is Ben's distance from the traffic. Indeed, he admires vehicles only when he is safely ensconced from them. Unlike an

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[41] Lerner, *10:04*, 107.
[42] Lerner, *10:04*, 107-8.

earlier scene that finds Ben sitting on a different bench and "holding [his] breath until the exhaust from a passing bus dissipated," the distant sight of the "magnificent bridge" protects him from the reality of fossil-fuel combustion and its effects.[43] In this scene of repose, realist description suggests that passivity does not preclude implication in what Stephanie LeMenager calls "petromodernity."[44] Meanwhile Lerner, through narrative indeterminacy, undercuts Ben's brief awareness of his proximity to climate change.

10:04's opening passage offers another spectatorial scene that juxtaposes implicated repose and narrative indeterminacy. Again, Lerner undermines Ben's fleeting awareness of his own implication in systems of uneven harm. Having met for an expensive meal to celebrate the book deal for what eventually becomes *10:04*—the meal includes "baby octopuses the chef had literally massaged to death"—Ben and his agent stroll through Chelsea.[45]

> We walked south among the dimly gleaming disused rails and carefully placed strands of sumac and smoke bush until we reached that part of the High Line where a cut has been made into the deck and wooden steps descend several layers below the structure; the lowest level is fitted with upright windows overlooking Tenth Avenue to form a kind of amphitheater where you can sit and watch the traffic. We sat and watched the traffic and I am kidding and I am not kidding when I say that I intuited an alien intelligence, felt subject to a succession of images, sensations, memories, and affects that did not, properly speaking, belong to me: the ability to perceive polarized light; a conflation of taste and touch as salt was rubbed into the suction cups; a terror localized in my extremities, bypassing the brain completely.[46]

Laden with incidental description—species of cultivated plants, the architecture of the High Line—the passage also foregrounds realist failure through narrative indeterminacy. While watching the traffic, Ben possibly ("I am kidding and I am not kidding") experiences the death of the octopuses that he has just eaten. This "alien intelligence" is no utopian solidarity across

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[43] Lerner, *10:04*, 43-4.
[44] Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 67.
[45] Lerner, *10:04*, 3.
[46] Lerner, *10:04*, 3.

species; rather, Ben glimpses the chain of violence of which he is a part. Yet Lerner's narrative indeterminacy leaves the nature or even existence of this encounter unresolved. In addition to the humor of the scene, realist failure demonstrates that Ben's awareness of his own implication remains partial. Indeed, this brief awareness seems to be made possible by a scene of repose. The passage finds Ben idly observing motor vehicles in an amphitheater, a structure that evokes the collective spectatorship of performance or sports. Yet he watches traffic, an aggregation composed predominantly of private spaces that rely upon the combustion of fossil fuels, while the "upright windows" of the amphitheater shield Ben from the vehicles' toxic fumes. Even an urban-greening project such as the High Line is implicated in the continued reliance on fossil fuels and unequal distribution of environmental harm. Moreover, such uneven exposure to risk structures Ben's brief intuition of his own implication. Scenes of protected repose, though they seemingly make implication legible, nevertheless remain contingent upon what Lerner calls "a system of great majesty and murderous stupidity."[47] Neither this passage nor the one of "anachronistic blossoms" finds Ben actively perpetuating climate change; indeed, they do not so much as find him driving a car. In juxtaposing repose with scenes of watching traffic, however, Lerner simultaneously gestures to implication and suggests that Ben's own awareness of it remains incomplete.

2.2.2 Metafictional Awareness

I turn now to metafictional awareness, a second technique of Lerner's implicated realism. Such awareness structures *10:04*; as I have discussed, the novel begins by exposing the market conditions of its own creation. Its relevance for implicated realism, however, emerges through

[47] Lerner, *10:04*, 47.

Lerner's use of assemblages. These assemblages constitute lists of objects or phenomena that are seemingly unrelated but imply entanglement.[48] They evoke processes of consumption and conditions of structural violence. Lerner's assemblages take banal objects and uncover their relations to extraction, toxicity, and industrial militarism. In juxtaposing these assemblages with metafictional awareness, then, Lerner gestures to the implication of *10:04* itself. In one such example, Ben looks around his writing desk and observes "rain on the skylight, a pigeon cooing beside the idle AC window unit, the smell of cilantro from downstairs, weak yellow of the cactus flower on the sill, beta-blocker beside my glass of water."[49] Such incidental description, which at first seems innocuous, yields a sense of metafictional awareness and eventually implication. The assemblage at the writing desk merely gestures to metafictional awareness, but on the next page Lerner explicitly signals that it marks the scene of *10:04*'s creation: "I tapped and then banged on the actual window to try to dislodge the stout-bodied passerine […] but it only preened and repositioned itself a little. (I just Googled *pigeon* and learned they aren't true passerines; along with doves, they constitute the distinct bird clade *Columbidae*)."[50] Thus disrupting the passage's mimetic conceit, Lerner then suggests that this authorial scene is implicated in militarism and environmental destruction. When Ben expands his observation to the aural realm, the assemblage expands to include "Al Jazeera […] streaming in a separate window. 'Given the gutted institutions,' somebody said, 'a true transition could take years.' Sirens in the distance."[51] Lerner thus juxtaposes the innocuous scene of writing with the unspooling effects of U.S. para-imperialism in the Middle East, presumably the U.S.-Iraq War. The more proximate emergency

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[48] I borrow the notion of assemblages from Anna Tsing, who describes them as "open-ended gatherings. They allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them." Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 23.
[49] Lerner, *10:04*, 212.
[50] Lerner, *10:04*, 213. Emphasis in original.
[51] Lerner, *10:04*, 212-3.

of "sirens in the distance" nevertheless maintains a sense of separation: although Ben can hear the sirens, their distant sound emphasizes that he is not immediately under threat. Finally, the "beta-blocker beside [Ben's] glass of water" recalls an earlier assemblage: "Bundled debt, trace amounts of antidepressants in the municipal water, the vast arterial network of traffic, changing weather patterns of increasing severity."[52] The juxtaposition of pharmaceuticals and water, though harmless on Ben's desk, elsewhere evokes anthropogenic environmental harm and the diffuse threat that toxicity poses; it also serves as a point of entry into a broader meditation on climate. Assemblages in Lerner's novel thus take ordinary objects and throw them into relation with far-flung militarism and toxicity. Metafictional awareness shows *10:04* itself to be implicated in such relations.

10:04 also employs assemblage and metafictional awareness to confront the economic implication of art objects, including the novel itself. Ben visits an "Institute for Totaled Art" exhibiting objects that, due to physical damage, are stripped of financial value. Holding a shattered Jeff Koons balloon dog, Ben reflects that "[i]t probably wasn't originally worth that much money by art world standards—somewhere between five thousand and ten thousand dollars, between one and two IUIs, a year or two of Chinese labor—but it had been worth enough money to charge the experience of holding its ruins with a frisson of transgression."[53] In this form of assemblage, economic fungibility suggests that disparate processes are nonetheless held together by their hypothetical exchange. Lerner then applies the assemblage form to *10:04* itself. During another metafictional scene, the dinner that celebrates Ben's book deal, he reflects on the advance that he received for the novel.

[52] Lerner, *10:04*, 108.
[53] Lerner, *10:04*, 131-2.

> I would clear something like two hundred and seventy thousand dollars. Or Fifty-four IUIs. Or around four Hummer H2 SUVs. Or the first two editions on the market of Leaves of Grass. Or about twenty-five years of a Mexican migrant's labor, seven of Alex's in her current job. Or my rent, if I had rent control, for eleven years. Or thirty-six hundred flights of bluefin, assuming the species held. I swallowed and the majesty and murderous stupidity of it was all about me…[54]

Beyond revealing the exact sum of the advance that he was ostensibly paid for *10:04*—a move that oscillates between a radical act of "reality hunger" and plain arrogance—Lerner here demystifies the novel's creation in favor of a financialized interpretation. The assemblage considers the "financialization of the novel" in relation to militarized SUVs, migrant labor, and a species that has suffered from severe overfishing.[55] By way of hypothetical exchange, *10:04*'s nature as a fungible commodity object implicates it in military-industrial consumption, unevenly valued labor, and unsustainable food production.

In these passages, realist description throws bourgeois minutiae into relation with the forms of extraction and exploitation that buttress it. *10:04*'s minor realism thus foregrounds the everyday habits of the literary elite, but it also emphasizes the implicated nature of these habits and the text's own status as a commodity object. Lerner's novel and its formulations of implicated realism redirect the Ghoshian discourse to consider alternate theories of the realist novel. That is, in addition to recognizing realism's probabilistic emplotments of bourgeois life, *10:04* also draws upon its self-reflexive capacities. It is this latter quality that Ghosh overlooks. Indeed, he passes over several decades of literary criticism to establish an implicit affinity with the poststructuralist critics who saw realism as a naïve faith in the possibility of accurate representation. When he writes, for instance, that "the very gestures with which [the realist novel] conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real," Ghosh echoes J. Hillis Miller's

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[54] Lerner, *10:04*, 155-6.
[55] De Boever, *Finance Fictions*, 153.

formulations of the realist novel's doomed attempt at verisimilitude.[56] But here Ghosh misses an alternative genealogy of scholarship. Such a genealogy sees realism as more varied and self-reflexive than many modernist writers and poststructuralist critics assumed. Michael McKeon writes that "realism, which modern critics tend to treat as a homogenous and synchronic practice, is in fact a diachronic series of 'realisms,'" in which each iteration responds to and thus emphasizes the contingency of its predecessor.[57] This is, for Fredric Jameson, "a historical and even evolutionary process."[58] Elaine Freedgood has recently demonstrated that the putative wholeness of the Victorian novel was invented in the 1970s and '80s after a century of critics lamenting its incoherence; she notes a critical turn toward the "formal heterogeneity" of realism.[59] Meanwhile, postcolonial critics including Oh and Debjani Ganguly have recognized that realism constitutes "a mutant or recombinant form" that articulates multiple scales of environmental harm.[60] *10:04*, then, takes up such environmental harm but considers how realism might articulate its perpetuation rather than its effects. The novel's apprehension of implication frames a protagonist whose perpetuation of climate change looks more like passivity than direction. If the realist novel ostensibly works by suppressing the violence upon which bourgeois life depends, *10:04* asks what might happen were a novel to stage that suppression, to confront it without necessarily circumventing it.

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[56] Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 23; J. Hillis Miller, "The Fiction of Realism," in *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank: Papers Read at a Clark Library Seminar on May 9, 1970 by J. Hillis Miller and David Borowitz* (University of California Press, 1971), 1.
[57] McKeon, "Realism," in *Theory of the Novel*, 589.
[58] Fredric Jameson, *The Antimonies of Realism* (Verso, 2013), 6.
[59] Freedgood, *Worlds Enough*, 32.
[60] Debjani Ganguly, "Catastrophic Form and Planetary Realism," *New Literary History* 51, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 421.

2.3 Transfiguring Implication with the Nonevent

If narrative indeterminacy and metafictional awareness subtly depict how the very ordinariness of bourgeois life perpetuates climate change, I turn here from Ben's perpetuation of climate change to his experience of it. Such experience remains elusive: while the environmentalism of the rich involves an awareness of environmental disaster, many wealthy subjects have yet to encounter such disasters themselves. Nowhere does Lerner depict this paradox—awareness without encounter—more than in the two tropical storms that bookend the novel. These storms represent hurricanes Irene (August 2011) and Sandy (October 2012), although Lerner unsettles this association: as he writes in the novel's acknowledgements, "[t]ime in this novel (when *The Clock* was viewable in New York, when a particular storm made landfall, etc.) does not always correspond to time in the world."[61] Here, again, Lerner simultaneously collapses and holds open the possibility of mimesis. And although both storms incite rituals of frenetic disaster preparation—buying extra food, stockpiling water, tracking precipitation levels—neither of them ultimately threaten Ben directly. The first storm barely arrives at all, while the second arrives unevenly: both unfold as meteorological nonevents. In this section, I argue that Lerner employs the meteorological nonevent to represent the inequitably distributed effects of climate change. Lerner offers the nonevent as a model for narrating how the rich experience environmental catastrophe: emphasizing its ordinariness, and subtly gesturing to the implication therein, he reworks realism to stage climate change and its uneven harms and epistemological gaps. The nonevent, consequently, extends the previous aspects of implicated realism that I have discussed by beginning to "transfigure" implication.[62]

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[61] Lerner, *10:04*, 244.
[62] Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 201.

10:04's first depiction of a hurricane, which arrives only a dozen pages into the novel, initially indexes a sense of shared anticipation and heightened collectivity. "An unusually large cyclonic system with a warm core was approaching New York. The mayor took unprecedented steps: he divided the city into zones and mandated evacuations from the lower-lying ones; he announced the subway system would shut down before the storm made landfall."[63] Ben tracks both the storm and the dissemination of information about the storm: from the mayor's "increasingly frequent press conferences," to the "myriad apps to track it," to strangers "swapping surge level predictions" on the subway, anxiety about the storm becomes both polymorphous and ubiquitous.[64] Through this shared anxiety, however, there emerges a sense of collectivity in advance of the coming storm. Ben observes a sense of "increasing sociability on the subway," as the shared sense of threat produces fellow feeling, and notes "shoppers who seemed unusually polite and buoyant in the grocery store."[65] Ben and his friend Alex listen to the radio as they await the storm, and Lerner writes that "we did most of the things we were told: filled every suitable container we could find with water, unplugged various appliances, located some batteries for the radio and flashlights."[66] Ben and Alex experience real apprehension as they follow this ritual of disaster preparation: "The radio said the storm would make landfall around 4:00 a.m.; it was about ten now and the surges were already alarmingly high."[67] As Lerner describes the storm "approaching," "intensifying," and "increasing," the gerund form tracks its ongoing escalation.[68] In addition to delivering information about the storm, the radio itself produces a kind of collectivity: Ben realizes that "the downstairs neighbors were tuned to

[63] Lerner, *10:04*, 16.
[64] Lerner, *10:04*, 17.
[65] Lerner, *10:04*, 18.
[66] Lerner, *10:04*, 20.
[67] Lerner, *10:04*, 21.
[68] Lerner, *10:04*, 22.

the same station."[69] In this extended scene of disaster preparation, then, a sense of shared risk and ritualized preparation briefly suspends the environmentalism of the rich in favor of solidarity.

When the storm fails to arrive, however, this sense of solidarity dissipates. Ben and Alex fall asleep to a DVD projected on the wall; waking in the night, Ben immediately sees its menu screen and recognizes that they still have power. He fills a glass of water, thus confirming the availability of that particular municipal resource, and tunes into the radio to find the dire predictions unrealized. "Irene had been downgraded before it reached landfall, moderate flooding in the Rockaways in Red Hook, the phrase 'dodged a bullet' was repeated, as was 'better safe than sorry.' I got up and walked to the window; it wasn't even raining hard. The yellow of the streetlamps revealed a familiar scene; a few branches had fallen, but no trees."[70] Instead of waking to cataclysmic disaster, as he expects, Ben instead finds a "familiar scene." This familiar scene marks the meteorological nonevent: while Lerner emphasizes the heightened stakes of weather prediction and disaster preparation, the portended storm fails to arrive. But this nonevent brings a surprising affective response, Ben admitting that "there was disappointment in my relief at the failure of the storm."[71] When the storm fails to arrive, the associated sense of solidarity evaporates. Lerner writes that "it was as though the physical intimacy with Alex, just like the sociability with strangers or the aura around objects, wasn't just over, but retrospectively erased. Because those moments had been enabled by a future that had never arrived, they could not be remembered from this future that, at and as the present, had obtained."[72] The nonevent shatters and even retrospectively effaces the sense of collectively that emerges in response to a

[69] Lerner, *10:04*, 23.
[70] Lerner, *10:04*, 24.
[71] Lerner, *10:04*, 24.
[72] Lerner, *10:04*, 24.

shared threat. If Ben apprehends New York City "becoming one organism, constituting itself in relation to a threat viewable from space," the nonevent returns him to a sense of isolation and to the scale of domestic ordinariness.[73]

A second storm arrives—or, rather, fails to arrive—as the novel closes, and Lerner emphasizes its formal similarity to the first. "An unusually large cyclonic system with a warm core was approaching New York; it was still a few days off the coast of Nicaragua. Soon the mayor would divide the city into zones, mandate evacuations from the lower-lying ones, and shut down the entire subway system. For the second time in a year, we were facing once-in-a-generation weather."[74] This formal similarity, in addition to manifesting *10:04*'s interest in that which is "the same, only a little different," depicts a world in which extreme weather becomes the norm.[75] Ben and Alex again follow the ritual of disaster preparation: collecting water, unplugging appliances, readying battery-powered radios and flashlights. Again, they fall asleep to a projected movie. Waking in the night, Ben registers the nonevent with language reiterated from the novel's first hurricane (italicized in the following passage): "I drifted off too, and when I woke, I *walked to the window*; it was still *raining hard*, but the *yellow of the streetlamps revealed a mundane scene*; a *few large branches had fallen, but no trees*. We never lost power. Another historic storm had failed to arrive, as though we lived outside of history or were falling out of time."[76] The ecological nonevent again coalesces with "a mundane scene," a turn to the ordinary. In recirculating language from the first storm, moreover, Lerner offers to readers a doubly familiar experience of the nonevent. And by constituting the nonevent as a fracturing of history or temporality, *10:04* offers it as a nonteleological account of environmental catastrophe.

[73] Lerner, *10:04*, 17.
[74] Lerner, *10:04*, 213.
[75] Lerner, *10:04*, 156.
[76] Lerner, *10:04*, 230. Emphases added.

Such a representational strategy undermines realism's putative association with predictability and inevitability: while Moretti takes the realist novel to have "inscribe[d] the present so deeply into the past that alternatives became simply unimaginable," *10:04* is interested in precisely those alternatives.[77] The nonevent tracks an anticipated yet unrealized event, but there remains significance even in that anticipation. To "live outside of history" or to "fall outside of time" reveals the possibility of a lateral or speculative history in which anticipated or imagined futures—those that did not or have not arrived—still matter.

As the power outage in Lower Manhattan suggests, Ben's sense that "another historic storm had failed to arrive" is only narrowly true. The novel, amplifying this geographical disparity, thus uses the nonevent to investigate the uneven distribution of climate change and its effects. *10:04* lingers upon the acute nature of the emergency in other parts of the city:

> Except it had arrived, just not for us. Subway and traffic tunnels in lower Manhattan had filled with water, drowning who knows how many rats; I couldn't help imagining their screams. Power and water were knocked out below Thirty-ninth Street and in Red Hook, Coney Island, the Rockaways, much of Staten Island. Hospitals were being evacuated after backup generators failed; newborn babies and patients recovering from heart surgery were carried gingerly down flights of stairs and placed in ambulances that rushed them uptown, where the storm had never happened.[78]

Ben's experience of the nonevent, then, coalesces with his awareness of uneven vulnerability to harm. In the wake of this unequally distributed disaster, his encounters focalize privatization and wealth more than the utopian sense of collectivity with which the novel begins. He and Alex visit a private clinic for a check-up, and in the waiting room "watch the coverage of the storm we kept

[77] Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 93. Davies makes a similar claim to my own, although not in the context of environmental disaster. "Rather than straightforwardly depicting events *as they happen*, the text often brings to light the potentiality (negative and positive) in the now. Most notably, the text emphasizes this non-linear potentiality via the representation and consideration of moments that end up not happening." Davies, "The Darkness-within-the-Light of Contemporary Fiction": 1738. Emphasis in original.
[78] Lerner, *10:04*, 230-31.

failing to experience."[79] In Upper Manhattan, where the damage is minimal, they observe "nannies pushing multiples in thousand-dollar strollers. There was nothing in the speech or laughter or arguments I overheard to indicate crisis or emergency, no erratic behavior among the squirrels or *Columbidae*."[80] Even as they walk south, the disaster becoming increasingly acute, Lerner tracks an absence of social cohesion. They ask a police officer for directions, who "shrugged dismissively"; a pair of men ask for them for money and "I couldn't tell if they were begging or threatening to rob us, making a demand; relations were newly indeterminate, the cues hard for me to read, as if, along with power, we'd lost a kind of social proprioception."[81] Illuminating this sense of fractured collectivity are the Goldman Sachs towers, still somehow replete with electricity while the rest of Lower Manhattan has gone dark (an image that graces the cover of the novel). While *10:04*'s opening identifies a sense of collectivity that emerges in the anticipation of the storm, the novel's close finds the aftermath of disaster structured by uneven precarity, social abandonment, and the eerie persistence of financial markets. As the novel closes with a nonevent, the environmentalism of the rich seems to reign.

And yet, despite the uneven fallout of this catastrophic storm and the social fracturing that it brings, the end of the novel offers a glimmer of solidarity. It begins, in Rothberg's terms, to transfigure implication. "While dwelling in implication involves closing off the self from its responsibilities, complicities, and debts," Rothberg writes, "transfiguring implication opens the self to others—and to one's own otherness, prosthetic agency, and unacknowledged capacity to wound."[82] Transfiguring implication offers the possibility of what Rothberg calls "long-distance

[79] Lerner, *10:04*, 232.
[80] Lerner, *10:04*, 234.
[81] Lerner, *10:04*, 235, 236.
[82] Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 201.

solidarity," a solidarity that acknowledges differential power and harm.[83] *10:04* explores long-distance solidarity on at least two levels: Ben's explicit acts of mutual aid, however modest, and his reflections on the possibility of the collective. His awareness of the crisis still not matched by his actual vulnerability to harm, Ben notes that "we went to the co-op and bought food to donate—there was a relay set up between the co-op and the Rockaways, in part facilitated by 'my' students."[84] This act of mutual aid emphasizes its distance, encapsulated by the "relay" that necessarily involves a transfer of materials across space, but such distance does not foreclose the possibility of action. Meanwhile, on the B63 bus, Ben gives his seat to "an elderly woman with two large houseplants in black plastic bags. My feel will ache only then, my knees stiffen a little."[85] Neither of these acts evoke heroism or transformation, but they offer a sense of minor potential. "We'll give wide berth to a discarded box spring near the curb, as it might contain bedbugs, but tonight even parasitic insects will appear to me as a bad form of collectivity that can stand as a figure of its possibility, circulating blood from host to host. Like a joke cycle, like prosody."[86] Ben offers this vision of collectivity with some humor—upon voicing it to Alex, she says, "Don't get carried away."[87] But as he primarily encounters the hurricane through an observational and imaginative position, watching storm coverage and imagining the screams of drowning rats, such a position does not attempt to collapse distance but rather transfigures it into solidarity. Through the meteorological nonevent, *10:04* takes what initially seems simple—a portended disaster that fails to arrive—and uses it to stage implication, the uneven distribution of harm, and finally a glimmer of collectivity.

[83] Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 200.
[84] Lerner, *10:04*, 231.
[85] Lerner, *10:04*, 239.
[86] Lerner, *10:04*, 239-40.
[87] Lerner, *10:04*, 240.

10:04 explores the resonance between the nonevent and the weak messianism to which Walter Benjamin refers in "Theses on the Philosophy of History": Benjamin identifies a "*weak* Messianic power" to articulate the power of unrealized events and missed potential.[88] Lerner opens *10:04* with an aphorism, typically attributed to Benjamin, in which the "world to come" finds that "[e]verything will be as it is now, just a little different."[89] This logic of recursivity appears repeatedly in *10:04*, both in structure and in prose, and it posits that the nonevent itself contains the seeds of transformation. One early iteration, narrativized in the interpolated short story "The Golden Vanity," finds the protagonist of the story anxious about a dental procedure that eventually turns out to be a "nonevent."[90] A second iteration articulates the experience of discovering a new and painful familial history, Ben reflecting:

> If there had been a way to say it without it sounding like presumptuous co-op nonsense, I would have wanted to tell her that discovering you are not identical with yourself even in the most disturbing and painful way still contains the glimmer, however refracted, of the world to come, where everything is the same but a little different because the past will be citable in all of its moments, including those that from our present present happened but never occurred.[91]

Interpolating "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in this passage, Lerner gestures to a sense of constitutive failure. These two nonevents, however unlikely companions, help to identify the stakes of the meteorological nonevent in *10:04*. For as Ben expects cataclysmic disaster and yet looks out the window to find the scene nearly unchanged, such "moments that had been enabled by a future that had never arrived" nonetheless contain the possibility that the future might be different than the present.

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[88] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 2007), 254. Emphasis in original.
[89] Lerner, *10:04*, epigraph.
[90] Lerner, *10:04*, 79.
[91] Lerner, *10:04*, 109.

As a third element of *10:04*'s implicated realism, the meteorological nonevent subtly identifies the entanglements and inequities of the warming globe. However, while narrative indeterminacy and metafictional awareness subtly represent Ben's implication, the meteorological nonevent considers a transformation therein. By first yielding a sense of long-distance solidarity through compromised forms of collectivity, and then by investigating a weak messianism that identifies unrealized potential in both the past and the future, *10:04* suggests that the nonevent itself yields the possibility of transformation. If Ghosh laments the fact that literary realism constitutively excludes environmental disaster, we might look to Lerner for an instance of how ordinary realism neither depicts disasters nor didactically imagines future worlds. Rather, in *10:04*, Lerner unsettles the inevitability of the current one.

2.4 "Looking Through Our Reflection": Environmentalism Beyond the Individual

As Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith write, *10:04* joins a slate of "contemporary novels deeply invested in revolutionary politics despite not being overtly revolutionary themselves."[92] Nowhere is this minor engagement with revolutionary politics more apparent, I would suggest, than in Lerner's minor realism and its attempt to reimagine the seeming inevitability of both present and future. Such subtle investment in revolutionary politics, for Huehls and Smith, emerges in response to what they call the "ontological phase of neoliberalism" in which market rationality turns from a mode of thinking to a way of being.[93] Given the centrality of neoliberal logics to the environmentalism of the rich, I build upon Huehls and Smith's work to identify *10:04* among an array of contemporary American novels that examine it. This array includes several works of ordinary realism that I identified in the

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[92] Huehls and Smith, "Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature: An Introduction," 11.
[93] Huehls and Smith, "Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature: An Introduction," 9.

introduction to this dissertation, spanning novels as disparate as Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009), Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012), and Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018). Drawing upon ordinary realism, these novels depict the glancing and often inconsequential ways in which the compendious category of "the rich" has begun to experience climate change, as well as the indirect forms of perpetuation that exacerbate it. Within this archive of ordinary realism, *10:04* joins a smaller subset of contemporary novels that explore the possibilities and limitations of realism in apprehending the environmentalism of the rich. In pursuing implicated realism, moreover, this smaller subset of novels also attempts to transform the state of implication.

In *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), for instance, Ruth Ozeki employs realist failure to gesture beyond authorial individualism. Like Lerner, Ozeki shares many biographical details with her protagonist Ruth; as she commented in a 2013 interview, "what can be more real than putting yourself in a book?"[94] One scene finds Ruth's partner Oliver planting a "climate-change forest" called the "Neo-Eocene," and Ozeki's real-life partner Oliver Kellhammer has an ongoing project of the same name.[95] Through such autofictional realism, Ozeki invokes the position of those who recognize the reality of climate change but can also afford to take the "long view."[96] Yet Ozeki also undercuts the realism of this authorial gesture: as *A Tale for the Time Being* continues, it becomes increasingly nonrealist in nature. The novel depicts Ruth's relationship to a salvaged diary by a girl named Nao; as Ruth attempts to discover Nao's fate, the diary turns more and more elusive. "Every time I open the diary, there are more pages […] the

[94] Eleanor Ty and Ruth Ozeki, "'A Universe of Many Worlds': An Interview with Ruth Ozeki," *MELUS* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 168.
[95] Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (Penguin, 2013), 60-1.
[96] Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 60.

end keeps receding, like an outgoing wave."[97] In Ozeki's hands, this magical realism becomes a form of both indeterminacy and interconnectedness. "In your diary, you quoted old Jiko saying something about not-knowing, how not-knowing is the most intimate way, or did I just dream that? […] I'd much rather *know*, but then again, not-knowing keeps all the possibilities open. It keeps all the worlds alive."[98] For Ozeki, the oscillation between authorial realism and its impossibility produces a sense of generative indeterminacy. It offers a mode of collective authorship that in turn might incite more collective ways of being.

To take another example, Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020) thematizes the environmentalism of the rich but also critiques it through a self-undermining psychological realism. Offill's novel depicts climate anxiety; structuring this anxiety, however, is the protagonist Lizzie's distance from actual disaster. "Environmentalists are so dreary," Lizzie comments while becoming progressively drawn into the world of doomsday prepping.[99] *Weather*'s fragmentary style mimics the drift of both everyday thought and atmospheric weather. But while it is a novel of domestic interiority, it also troubles the conventions of that tradition. "And then it is another day and another and another," writes Offill late in the novel, "but I will not go on about this because no doubt you too have experienced time."[100] *Weather* seems to exhaust its own commitment to interiority, and its final sentence is an appeal to a collective that even reaches outside the text: "The core delusion is that I am here and you are there."[101] Offill thus closes her psychological novel with an appeal to connectivity, leaving it unclear whether such connectivity is the grounds of implication or solidarity. However, while *Weather* satirizes the "obligatory note of hope" with

[97] Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 376.
[98] Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 402. Emphasis in original.
[99] Jenny Offill, *Weather* (Knopf, 2020), 51.
[100] Offill, *Weather*, 186.
[101] Offill, *Weather*, 201.

which many climate-change testimonies end, the novel's appendix presents a link to Offill's website of the same name.[102] The site offers a list of sometimes-whimsical "Tips for Trying Times," but it also earnestly refers readers to organizations such as the Sunrise Movement and Extinction Rebellion. In this individualistic narrative of stasis and inaction, then, Offill undermines the tradition's interiority and prompts her readers to engage in collective action. Although different in their scope and generic commitments, both *Weather* and *A Tale for the Time Being* model implicated realism while also attempting to transfigure implication.

If realism marks a literary consolidation of the bourgeois liberal subject, minor realism fractures this tradition to engage a tenuous collective. To return to the environmentalism of the rich, the self-effacing realisms of Lerner, Ozeki, and Offill offer a critique of individualistic environmentalism. In *10:04*, then, Lerner's novel ultimately explores the environmentalism of the rich and its dialectic between systems and the individual. For the environmentalism of the rich names an ideology that encompasses free-market principles, compensatory solutions like carbon offsets and cap-and-trade, and "corporate responsibility": it names the mainstream environmentalism of the neoliberal era. Ben's passivity, consumption habits, and climate anxiety focalize the "compromise of liberal environmentalism" on an individual basis. As Wendy Brown has written, neoliberalism constitutes not just an economic logic but also an ideology that "normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life."[103] For individuals, the environmentalism of the rich rarely materializes either as outright denial or committed activism. It oscillates, instead, between unfettered consumption and anxiety about the environment. Hence realism's promise as an aesthetic strategy for the

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[102] Offill, *Weather*, 67.
[103] Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Culture and Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 42.

environmentalism of the rich: if realism bears a constitutive relationship to both the possessive individual and daily bourgeois life, it aptly depicts the relationship between neoliberal environmentalism and quotidian habits. Its self-reflexive qualities enable the contemporary novels of Lerner, Ozeki, and Offill to simultaneously draw upon realism and unsettle its association with possessive individualism.

10:04 employs minor realism to defamiliarize the daily habits that constitute the environmentalism of the rich. As a literary mode of local effects, minor realism in *10:04* identifies the implicated nature of such seemingly innocuous habits as visiting a museum, sitting in a park, or gazing out a window: these habits are caught up in vast webs of extraction, consumption, and exploitation. In foregrounding realist failure, then, the novel shows the contingency of such habits. Although implicated subjects "inhabit the machinery of political violence, economic exploitation, and ecological devastation," such machinery is neither inevitable nor fixed in its interpellation of individuals.[104] Anna Tsing reminds us that "[a] precarious world is a world without teleology. Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible."[105] Consequently *10:04*, in its final pages, reaches tentatively toward a collective. It offers a paraphrased bit of Walt Whitman in its final line: "I know it's hard to understand / I am with you, and I know how it is."[106] Lerner begins to turn from an environmentalism of the rich to a long-distance solidarity. This final passage, in addition to marking a turn from the environmentalism of the rich to long-distance solidarity, also turns from prose to poetry. It

[104] Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 200.
[105] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 20.
[106] Lerner, *10:04*, 240.

inhabits the edge of realism. Through paraphrased, incomplete, and failed forms, the novel suggests, the environmentalism of the rich begins to fracture.

True to its narrative recursivity, *10:04* begins with Ben watching traffic and ends with a doubled act of looking: as it ends approximately where it began, the novel writes itself into a future that is "almost the same, just a little different." In both scenes, Lerner associates the act of observation with the environmentalism of the rich. In the later passage, however, the act of looking becomes both self-reflexive and the grounds for transfiguring implication.

> We will stop to get something to eat at a sushi restaurant in Prospect Heights—just vegetable rolls, as Alex is pregnant and the seas are poisoned and the superstorm has shut down all the ports. A couple beside us will debate the relative merits of condos and co-ops, the woman insisting with increasing intensity that her partner 'doesn't understand the process,' that this isn't 'the developing world.' Sitting at a small table looking through our reflection in the window onto Flatbush Avenue, I will begin to remember our walk in the third person, as if I'd seen it from the Manhattan Bridge, but, at the time of writing, as I lean against the chain-link fence intended to stop jumpers, I am looking back at the totaled city in the second person plural.[107]

This passage once more foregrounds the comparatively secure position that Ben and Alex occupy: sitting in a restaurant in a gentrifying neighborhood, they shield themselves from the poisoned seas simply by ordering vegetable rolls. Not even a natural disaster keeps their fellow diners from rehashing the finer points of homeownership, a conversation flush with an unwarranted sense of U.S. exceptionalism. Yet the environmentalism of the rich fractures through an act of observation: Ben looks "through our reflection in the window onto Flatbush Avenue," an act that acknowledges a mirror-like state yet transcends it. As he imagines himself remembering their walk through the hurricane's aftermath, Ben positions himself as "looking back at the totaled city in the second person plural." Thus beginning to address a collective, through time and across time, the act of looking does not obliterate the environmentalism of the

[107] Lerner, *10:04*, 240.

rich but rather looks through it. Here, the fleeting and even indirect quality of looking—as opposed to watching—opens *10:04*'s protagonist to the possibility of long-distance solidarity. For to look without duration or attention opens Ben to what he earlier calls "the intimacy of parallel gazes."[108] While watching, in *10:04*, connotes spectatorship and the uneven harms of liberal environmentalism, looking forges a glimmer of collectivity.

10:04's closing glance, as it intuits without necessarily capturing the relationship between the individual and the collective, exemplifies the epistemological inference at the heart of everyday apocalypse. Lerner's novel is interested in the association between individuals and global systems, and, in turn, the partiality and subjectivity of climate change. Crucially, *10:04*'s exploration of such inference does not remain at the level of epistemology alone; rather, it valences the novel's political claims. Ben perceives climate change in a fixated and yet insulated manner precisely because of his protection from material environmental harm. The novel's formulation of everyday apocalypse, consequently, foregrounds the inextricable link between perception and politics. I extend this formulation in the next chapter, which analyzes Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and the aesthetic strategies through which it narrativizes racialized exposure to environmental disaster. While *10:04* depicts the vexed relationship to climate change that many white and wealthy subjects hold, however, *Salvage the Bones* depicts a Black family in rural Mississippi to situate climate change within the afterlives of slavery. Ward's novel, to which I now turn, exemplifies how ordinary realism exposes the historical and geographical dimensions of climate change and its inequitably distributed effects.

[108] Lerner, *10:04*, 233.

Chapter 3 – Waiting: Gothic Realism and the Afterlives of Slavery in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*

I want acts and accounts of care as shared and distributed risk, as mass refusals of the unbearable life, as total rejections of the dead future.
Christina Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes* (2023)

Katrina is not over. We're still being affected right now.
Kimberly Rivers Roberts, *Trouble the Water* (2008)

This chapter builds upon my analysis of *10:04* by further theorizing ordinary realism as a literary mode that attends to the inequitable distribution of environmental harm. Whereas *10:04* examines the environmentalism of the rich, however, Jesmyn Ward's 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones* does precisely the opposite: it identifies how the afterlife of chattel slavery structures the Gulf Coast as an environmental "sacrifice zone."[1] *Salvage the Bones* employs ordinary realism, as I will show, to represent the ongoing and attenuated temporalities that structure the relationship between historical racialized violence and contemporary environmental harm. I identify the novel's particular form of ordinary realism, which I call *gothic realism*, that intertwines realist description and dailiness with gothic tropes like abandoned buildings and environmental decay. The concomitant form of everyday apocalypse is *waiting*: a central motif of *Salvage the Bones*, waiting indexes not only states of racialized neoliberal abandonment but also resilience, mutual aid, and care. This chapter thus represents my first foray into the

[1] Steve Lerner, *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States* (MIT Press, 2012).

argument, which I will continue in Chapter 4, that slowness and attenuation characterize not only "slow violence" but also slow resistance.[2]

As many scholars have discussed, *Salvage the Bones* is an important literary representation of Hurricane Katrina (2005). Although the novel emphasizes the cataclysmic nature of the storm, it also frames the hurricane as an everyday apocalypse. "[O]ne's coming all right," the father of fifteen-year-old Esch Batiste proclaims in the novel's opening pages.[3] As he elaborates, Esch's father parses the storm as both exception and rule. "This year's different," he says. "News is right: every week it's a new storm. Ain't never been this bad."[4] Ward, in situating the yet-unnamed Hurricane Katrina within a historic trend toward worsening storms, positions *Salvage the Bones* as not only a hurricane novel but also, more subtly, as a novel of climate change. The crisis is one that is without precedent ("never been this bad") and yet ongoing and repetitive ("every week"). Such a juxtaposition unfolds within the novel that follows, as *Salvage the Bones* builds toward the hurricane's landfall. Alongside the disaster preparations that the Batiste family undertakes—listening to radio reports, stockpiling food and water, reinforcing their house—everyday life continues to unfold. Esch and her brothers Randall, Skeetah, and Junior care for their dog and her newborn puppies, forage and cook food, swim with their friends, and daydream of crushes and college scholarships. *Salvage the Bones* thus foregrounds the iterative and ongoing quality of everyday apocalypse. However, save for a well-trodden association between Ward's novel and Nixon's theory of slow violence, *Salvage the Bones* has yet to receive attention as a text with key implications for climate aesthetics.[5] This chapter

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[2] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.
[3] Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (Bloomsbury, 2011), 6.
[4] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 7.
[5] For discussions of *Salvage the Bones* in relation to slow violence, see Annie Bares, "'Each Unbearable Day': Narrative Ruthlessness and Environmental and Reproductive Injustice in Jesmyn Ward's Salvage the Bones,"

responds to that lacuna by investigating the relationship between the novel's gothic realism and its representation of everyday apocalypse.

Through gothic realism, I argue, Ward formalizes an iterative model of disaster and attends to the catastrophically inequitable distribution of anthropogenic environmental harm. *Salvage the Bones* is in some ways an unlikely text in which to investigate iterative disaster, for the novel foregrounds the climactic and cataclysmic nature of Hurricane Katrina in its penultimate chapter. My intervention, however, is to offer an against-the-grain reading that situates the cataclysmic hurricane within realist depictions of ongoing and attenuated time. *Salvage the Bones* attends centrally to quotidian activities such as sleeping, hunting, eating, and caretaking; such depictions, along with the regional and environmental particularity of Mississippi's Gulf Coast, draw from a 19th-century realist tradition that encompassed "local color" regionalism.[6] Although *Salvage the Bones* remains plot-driven in many ways, not least in its meteorological narrative, it employs realist description and dailiness to linger within a complex network of relationships. Like other texts of minor realism, however, the aesthetics of *Salvage the Bones* remain generically ambivalent and permeable. Gothic realism, which foregrounds realist tropes (description, dailiness) while embedding within them gothic topoi (ruin, decay), depicts ongoing and belated forms of violence. And yet, as *Salvage the Bones* emphasizes, such structures of violence are neither inevitable nor determinative. Through its gothic-realist aesthetics, *Salvage the Bones* emphasizes that slow time characterizes not just slow violence but also forms of compassion, relationality, and care. As Ward's character wait for

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MELUS 44, no. 3 (2019): 21-40; Anna Hartnell, *After Katrina: Race, Neoliberalism, and the End of the American Century* (State University of New York Press, 2017); Anna Hartnell, "When Cars Become Churches: Jesmyn Ward's Disenchanted America," *Journal of American Studies* 50, no. 1 (2016): 205-218; and Raymond Malewitz, "Climate-Change Infrastructure and the Volatizing of American Regionalism," *Modern Fiction Studies* 61, no. 4 (2015): 715-730. For an analysis of Hurricane Katrina in relation to deep time, see Wai Chee Dimock, "World History According to Katrina," *Differences* 19, no. 2 (2008): 35–53.

[6] Howard, *The Center of the World*, 18.

another, enact forms of care, and forge interdependence and belonging, *Salvage the Bones* understands slow time as not just experienced but also negotiated and enacted.

My primary theoretical interlocuters in this chapter are Black studies scholars and their formulations of nonlinear temporality: *Salvage the Bones*, I suggest, frames Hurricane Katrina within what Saidiya Hartman has influentially called the "afterlife of slavery."[7] Hartman joins Afropessimist scholars who counter narratives of racial progress to posit the constitutive and ongoing relationship between slavery and modernity.[8] The afterlife of slavery marks violences that are nonprogressive, nonlinear, and structural. Hartman maintains, for instance, that slavery in the U.S. cannot be conceptualized as a bounded historical condition since Emancipation did not abolish regimes of bondage and dehumanization so much as transform them. She writes:

> the barbarism of slavery did not express itself singularly in the constitution of the slave as object but also in the forms of subjectivity and circumscribed humanity imputed to the enslaved; by the same token, the failures of Reconstruction cannot be recounted solely as a series of legal reversals or troop withdrawals; they also need to be located in the very language of persons, rights, and liberties.[9]

Emphasizing the mechanisms of language and subjectivity, rather than events, Hartman's methodology draws upon key structures and practices at play in ordinary life. This historical framework—one of continuity rather than transformation—also informs her understanding of the present. Hartman thus writes that "[i]f slavery persists as an issue in the political life of Black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago."[10] It is in this vein that Christina Sharpe,

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[7] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.
[8] Other foundational theorists of Afropessimism include Frank Wilderson III, Orlando Patterson, and Hortense Spillers.
[9] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 6.
[10] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.

more recently, has articulated contemporary Black life within "the wake of slavery," or the "continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding."[11] I situate *Salvage the Bones*' formulations of ongoing and attenuated time within the wake.

Consequently, as I frame *Salvage the Bones* through Afropessimist theories of ongoing time, I situate the novel's ordinary realism within a history of Black realist aesthetics. Realism has long occupied a central, if vexed, role in African American narrative: African American literature emerged as an inherently evidentiary tradition whose aim was to refute racist associations between Black people and illiteracy. As Madhu Dubey writes, "[p]olitical claims about African-American literature have always depended on realist aesthetics," for "Black literature could best fulfill its political purpose of bettering the collective condition of the race by telling the truth about the black experience."[12] This evidentiary impulse forms what Gene Andrew Jarrett terms "racial realism," or the assumption that realist aesthetics yield an authentic and politically expedient portrait of Black subjectivity.[13] Henry Louis Gates, Jr. thus calls realism "perhaps the most consistent aspect of black rhetorical strategy from the slave narratives to *Invisible Man*."[14] Indeed, scholars and critics often interpret *Salvage the Bones* through such evidentiary logics. Sinéad Moynihan argues that the novel rewrites pernicious media representations of rural Black families, for instance, and Annie Bares contends that it revises contemporaneous hurricane coverage and its stereotype of the Black teenage mother.[15] Such

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[11] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 14.
[12] Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 44.
[13] Gene Andrew Jarrett, *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 1. Jarrett also notes that critics, historically, rarely used the term "realist" itself: instead, they invoked words like "authentic," "genuine," and "spontaneous" to advance the assumption that African American literature must represent a true sense of African American life. Ibid, 8.
[14] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 266.
[15] Sinéad Moynihan, "From Disposability to Recycling: William Faulkner and the New Politics of Rewriting in Jesmyn Ward's 'Salvage the Bones,'" *Studies in the Novel* 47, no. 4 (2015): 556; Bares, "'Each Unbearable Day'": 27.

arguments, while empirically sound, nevertheless advance the assumption that Black literature must correct the stereotypes that structure the white imagination. Moreover, as Dubey, Jarrett, Gates, and others note, such privileging of racial realism overlooks the aesthetic plenitude of African American literature. As this chapter demonstrates, *Salvage the Bones* invokes not only the history of African American evidentiary realism but also produces an ordinary realism in which realist topoi intermingle with gothic tropes.

One key literary antecedent is Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937): like *Salvage the Bones*, Hurston's novel employs gothic realism to depict a Gulf Coast hurricane. Hurston narrativizes the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane, a disastrous tropical storm in which failed levees around Florida's Lake Okeechobee caused thousands of migrant farmworkers to drown. Hurston's protagonist Janie escapes from a flooding house, just as Ward's characters do; in passages that anticipate Hurricane Katrina, Hurston notes racial inequities in the collective distribution of risk. As Janie flees the house and escapes to a bridge, for instance, Hurston writes that "[w]hite people had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room."[16] Ward also extends Hurston's attention to dailiness and seasonality, themes that in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* emphasize the temporal dimensions of environmental disaster. "It was next day by the sun and the clock when they reached Palm Beach," writes Hurston, "[w]inters and winters of hardship and suffering."[17] Published in 1937, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* emerges from the social realism of the '30s: Hurston's novel emphasizes psychological interiority and the rhythms of daily life. And yet Hurston writes against the social realism of authors like Richard Wright, offering what Gates calls a "mythic realism, lush and

[16] Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Harper Perennial, 2006), 164.
[17] Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 166.

dense within a lyrical black idiom."[18] Contributing to this mythos is a gothic realism that in turn influences Ward. For Erik Curren, the gothic idiom in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* consists of "the 'monstropolous' and menacing Lake Ocheechobee, grotesque encounters with the bodies of those caught in the storm, the mad dog that bites Tea Cake and gives him rabies, the body-burying detail in Palm Beach, and perhaps most frightening of all, the evil transformation from loving angel to homicidal devil that rabies works on Tea Cake."[19] A generically porous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* offers a gothic realism that embeds the unreality of environmental disaster within daily life. *Salvage the Bones*, as I will show, adapts Hurston's aesthetic to center contemporary extraction and inequity in rural Mississippi.

To historicize Ward's novel and its gothic realism, I situate *Salvage the Bones* within a broader historical-aesthetic engagement with Hurricane Katrina's attenuated time. I identify this engagement through multiple forms and across multiple scales of time. The first is the storm itself, and testimonial sources about it: Ward herself survived Hurricane Katrina in 2005, escaping a flooded house and weathering the storm in trucks parked in an open field.[20] While this chapter focuses primarily on Ward's novel, rather than on her personal experiences, I also draw upon oral histories with Katrina survivors to examine how racialized state abandonment produced the disaster as an ongoing condition rather than an event. Additionally, by examining documentary films about Katrina, I discuss contemporaneous video footage as well as how survivors, policymakers, and media pundits responded to the disaster both in its immediate aftermath and at further temporal remove. Such sources frame the hurricane as a disaster that

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[18] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Zora Neale Hurston: 'A Negro Way of Saying,'" in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Harper Perennial, 1990), 200.
[19] Erik D. Curren, "Should Their Eyes Have Been Watching God?: Hurston's Use of Religious Experiences and Gothic Horror," *African American Review* 29, no. 1 (1995): 18.
[20] Elizabeth Hoover, "Jesmyn Ward on *Salvage the Bones*," *Paris Review*, August 30, 2011, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2011/08/30/jesmyn-ward-on-salvage-the-bones/.

state deferral and racialized abandonment produced and continue to produce. Although they foreground the cataclysmic quality of Hurricane Katrina itself, they also embed such disaster narratives within a *longue durée* of environmental attrition and state neglect. They offer narratives of everyday apocalypse. Through these primary and secondary sources, then, I historicize *Salvage the Bones*' literary treatment of attenuated time to situate it among other sources—both contemporaneous and historical—that identify Hurricane Katrina as an ongoing disaster.

Thus, while media and popular discourses positioned Hurricane Katrina as an "act of God" that transcended infrastructural decision-making and perhaps even historical time, many scholars have argued that the storm is best understood as a manifestation of slow violence. Slow violence marks, in Nixon's influential phrasing, "the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world."[21] To frame Hurricane Katrina as a manifestation of slow violence is in some ways a counterintuitive move, as hurricanes—and especially Hurricane Katrina, with its visual grammar of flooded streets and "looted" stores—encapsulate a schema of disaster as spectacular and temporally bounded. Yet, as Anna Hartnell argues, the hurricane emerged among the "transnational and imperial histories" of the Gulf Coast, especially the histories of chattel slavery and petrochemical extraction.[22] This chapter joins scholars who frame the unnatural disaster of Hurricane Katrina within the *longue durée* of chattel slavery and offers a novel paradigm for understanding the representational strategies that respond to this unbounded history. I demonstrate how, in its ordinary realism,

[21] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 3.
[22] Hartnell, *After Katrina*, 19.

Salvage the Bones foregrounds everyday responses to structural violence and situates such structures within the afterlives of slavery.

3.1 "Terrified and Bored": Waiting, Minor Temporality, and Realist Description

Although Ward's explicit aim, in *Salvage the Bones*, is to narrativize Hurricane Katrina's catastrophic effects upon Black families who the media either ignores or pathologizes, an against-the-grain interpretation of the novel reveals how closely it attends to quotidian habits and temporalities. The implications of such minor temporalities are twofold. First, in challenging the primacy of the catastrophic event in narratives of environmental disaster, Ward situates Hurricane Katrina as an unbounded and ongoing process rather than an exception to the flow of normative history. Second, in attending to habitual time, she positions slowness not just as a mechanism of structural violence but also as a form of relationality and vigilance. In this section, I argue that *Salvage the Bones* proffers waiting as an exemplary form of everyday apocalypse through which the novel challenges the primacy of the event in mainstream disaster narratives. As characters wait for Hurricane Katrina to arrive, but also wait with and for one another, waiting emerges as a key topos of the novel. I demonstrate how *Salvage the Bones* employs a foundational technique of literary realism—description—to narrativize the state of waiting.[23] Ward frequently elongates scenes through extended description, thus evoking a readerly experience of time stretching and stalling. Such formal techniques emphasize waiting both as an action and as an unfinished, partial, and suspended state. In addition to offering a political claim about racialized state abandonment and the inadequacy of the federal response to Hurricane

[23] In identifying the realist topoi of Ward's novel, I I build upon the scholarship of Malewitz, who sees Ward's novel as an instance of "volatile regionalism," as well as that of Moynihan and Brian Railsback, who see *Salvage the Bones* as rewriting William Faulkner's gothicism and John Steinbeck's naturalism respectively. Malewitz, "Climate-Change Infrastructure and the Volatizing of American Regionalism": 720; Brian Railsback, "A Twenty-First-Century *Grapes of Wrath*: Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*," *The Steinbeck Review* 13, no. 2 (2016): 197–195.

Katrina, then, waiting emerges as an experience of everyday apocalypse. Waiting, in *Salvage the Bones*, limns an ongoing relationship to climate change that emphasizes a subjective and embodied experience of environmental disaster.

To foreground waiting in hurricane narratives is to foreground the uneven distribution of environmental harm: as Ward and other testimonial and documentary sources insist, environmental disaster unfolds neither neutrally nor universally. The federal and state response to Katrina prioritized white and wealthy areas while abnegating responsibility for others. In one oral testimony, Katrina survivor Johnny DuPree recalls: "We waited to hear—we were told to wait to hear from FEMA, that we needed to try to hold on for, you know, seventy-two hours or thereabouts, three to four days and they'd be in. Of course, they came in about seven days."[24] Documentary filmmakers also draw out this sense of attenuated time. In Spike Lee's 2006 docuseries *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, for instance, a New Orleanian named Will Chittenden reflects: "They [FEMA] were advertising that they were doing pickup points at various points on I-10 and 210. So I got my lantern, a few supplies that I needed, and I started swimming through the water and wading through the water to get out to the pickup point. There had been people that had been waiting there since the day after the hurricane. I ended up waiting about six and a half hours before they finally got the buses running."[25] Carl Deal and Tia Lessin's documentary *Trouble the Water* (2008), similarly, formalizes Hurricane Katrina as an ongoing disaster. After evacuating New Orleans, Deal and Lessin follow Kimberly Rivers Roberts and Scott Roberts to Pineville, Louisiana. Kimberly and Scott emphasize the continuing abdication of federal aid, opening an empty mailbox and telling the camera: "Can you come get a

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[24] David Tisdale, An Oral History with Mayor Johnny L. DuPree, Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, August 1, 2006. https://hurricanearchive.org/items/show/45588.
[25] Spike Lee, "When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts," HBO Documentary Films, August 21, 2006, Act 2, 0:02:49.

view of this? This is what FEMA does for us. Three weeks later. Going on three weeks."[26] They formulate waiting as a political claim. These primary and secondary accounts of Hurricane Katrina, then, emphasize how everyday apocalypse unspools along racialized lines.

Drawing upon such sources, as well as her firsthand encounter with the storm, Ward evokes waiting to characterize the Batistes' experience of Hurricane Katrina and to complicate the novel's own formulation of the storm as an epochal break. Although the hurricane marks "a great split between now and then," scenes of waiting bookend the novel and coalesce this putative "split."[27] Even the climactic chapter called "The Eleventh Day: Katrina"—evoking the temporal idiom of the "eleventh hour"—begins with a day of boredom. As the Batistes anticipate the storm, huddled in their living room, they do their best to pass the time: Esch's brother Skeetah naps, her other brothers Randall and Junior play UNO, and Esch peruses a novel. Formally, Ward draws upon realist description to emphasize waiting and its attenuated time:

> We have been sitting in the living room, terrified and bored. I'm trying to read by the oil lamp, but the sound of the words are not coming together over the sound of the wind and the rain relentlessly beating down on the house; they are fragments. […] I shut the book, don't even mark my place, and sit on it. I am cold. Skeetah and China look like they've fallen asleep, his hand on her flank and her breastbone on his knee, but when Randall says this, their eyes open to slits at the same time. The half deck of UNO cards that Randall had been attempting to teach Junior how to play stick to the floor around Junior's legs.[28]

Ward's characters here occupy a state of suspension: Esch is "*trying* to read," Skeetah and China open their eyes only to "slits," and Randall "had been *attempting* to teach Junior how to play" UNO. Thus caught in activities completed halfway, *Salvage the Bones* tracks an everyday apocalypse in which slow and partial activities characterize a state of acute environmental disaster. Indeed, after the cataclysmic storm, the novel ends with an unfinished scene of waiting:

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[26] Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, *Trouble the Water*, Zeitgeist Films August 22, 2008, 0:55:06.
[27] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 251.
[28] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 225.

"In the star-suffocated sky, there is a great waiting silence."[29] As the Batistes wait throughout the novel, *Salvage the Bones* offers Hurricane Katrina as a state of suspension without beginning or end.

And yet, through such realist description, waiting marks not simply a state of abandonment but also one of respite, relationality, and vigilance. Indeed, the "great waiting silence" of the novel's close recalls Kevin Quashie's work on the elliptical presence of quiet in Black literature and subjectivity. He recognizes prayer as a vital form of quiet, writing:

> [a]n essential aspect of the idiom of prayer is waiting: the praying subject waits with agency, where waiting is not the result of having been acted upon (as in being made to wait), but is itself action. In waiting, there is no clear language or determined outcome; there is simply the practice of contemplation and discernment. This is a challenge to the way we commonly think of waiting, which is passive; it is also a disruption of the calculus of cause and effect which shapes so much of how we understand the social world.[30]

Quashie's formulation of waiting clarifies the agency and relationality that characterize such a stance in Ward's novel. Waiting appears every few pages in *Salvage the Bone*, 39 times in all, and Ward's characters frequently wait *for* one another. Randall, playing basketball, waits for his friend Manny to pass him the ball; Esch revisits memories of waiting while playing hide-and-seek as a younger child; Skeetah and Esch patiently stake out a neighboring house so that they can steal the medicine that their dog China needs.[31] Several days before the hurricane, when Esch, Skeetah, and their friend Big Henry stock up on supplies, they "have to ride around for ten minutes waiting on a spot. The heat beats at the car like Mardi Gras parade-goers looking for a ride. It slinks in the seams of the windows like beads. Big Henry's air-conditioning brushes across my face and chest, light as cotton candy, and melts like the heat is a tongue. The walk

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[29] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 258.
[30] Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2012), 113.
[31] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 11, 23, 28, 70.

across the parking lot is slow and long, even though we have a decent spot that's almost in the middle."[32] As the three characters wait, Ward's narrative slows, too: the similes ("Mardi Gras," "beads," "cotton candy," "a tongue") extend her descriptions of the heat and the air conditioning such that the attenuation of temperature slinking and brushing becomes a readerly experience of time stretching. The approach of the storm, and the temporality anticipating it, register as deceleration. Such attention to the mundane and to experiential time draws upon the techniques of literary realism. As she invokes celebratory Mardi Gras metaphors and emphasizes the respite of an air-conditioned car, Ward also complicates the assumption that waiting is something simply to get through or get past.

Indeed, drawing out such relationality, *Salvage the Bones* positions waiting as an act of care. The novel begins with Skeetah's dog, China, giving birth to much-awaited puppies. "For the past week," Esch comments, "Skeetah has been sleeping in the shed, waiting for the birth. Every night, I waited until he cut the light off, until I knew he was asleep, and I walked out of the back door to the shed, stood where I am standing now, to check on him."[33] Waiting, in this passage, is a state that marks both interspecies and familial care: Skeetah waits for China to give birth, and Esch waits for him to fall asleep. It constitutes a sense of vigil, protection, and watchfulness. The passage's temporality includes both extended anticipation ("the past week") and repetitive habit ("every night"), as well as multiple forms of biological time in gestation and sleep. Skeetah's watchful relationship to China continues when Katrina arrives; this state consequently spans the full novel. Their house destroyed, most of the Batiste family finds shelter with Big Henry; after realizing that China is nowhere to be found, however, Skeetah waits for his beloved dog. "One or two sodden bugs whirred outside, and I wondered where Skeetah was, saw

[32] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 24.
[33] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 2-3.

him sitting before a fire, his head cocked to the night, which had turned hot after the cold air left by the storm passed. Waiting."[34] The whirring of insects and the change in air temperature, as they track sensory experiences both continuous and gradual, draw out the temporality of Ward's description. Though Skeetah remains alone, his stance links waiting not to passivity or individualism but to relationality. The scene of Skeetah waiting for China, as it bookends the novel, inscribes the text with a sense of continuity. Waiting, in *Salvage the Bones*, constitutes a form of attenuated time that is not merely received but also enacted. The novel thus recognizes the durational and attritional harms of environmental and racial violence but also the ways in which suspended time marks a form of vigilance and care.

In narrativizing Hurricane Katrina through such realist details, *Salvage the Bones* positions the disaster as a temporally unbounded process rather than a spectacular event. By "event," I evoke Alain Badiou's sense of a rupture in the "state of things," an abrupt return of the excluded multiplicity upon which ostensible normalcy rests.[35] Discourses of natural disaster tend to emphasize this sense of disturbance: theorist of risk Kenneth Hewett identified, in 1983, the dominant assumption that "each disaster is an unplanned hole or rupture in the fabric of productive and orderly human relations."[36] Beyond the idea of event-as-disturbance, there is a broad and heterogenous philosophical treatment of the event.[37] With these discourses in mind,

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[34] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 245.

[35] Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Norman Madarasz (State University of New York Press, 1992), 36.

[36] Kenneth Hewitt, "The Idea of Calamity in a Technocratic Age," in *Interpretations of Calamity from the Viewpoint of Human Ecology*, ed. Kenneth Hewitt (Allen & Unwin, 1983), 22.

[37] For Michel Foucault, in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), the event implies historical contingency rather than continuity or "progressive refinement." Foucault argues that the "traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled." See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (Harper Colophon Books, 1972), 4; Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Penguin, 1984), 88. Hence Foucault's neologism of "eventilization," which, as Lauren Berlant writes, "refers to a need to move analytically beyond the moment when a happening moves into common sense, or a process congeals into an object-event that conceals its immanence, its potentially unfinished or enigmatic activity."

however, I follow Hewitt's contention that there remains an extant assumption of disaster as a rupture in a putatively stable and organized state of everyday life.[38] Hewitt's aim is to complicate this notion; indeed, a contribution in the same volume identifies "disaster as an extension of everyday life."[39] So too have postcolonial discourses unsettled such an assumption; as Pallavi Rastogi reminds us, in such contexts "disaster is not a singular event but instead a process or even a continuum."[40] Disaster, as Rastogi argues in her consideration of disasters like the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and financial destitution in postcolonial Zimbabwe, can materialize as a process that eventually becomes ordinary.[41] For Hartman, meanwhile, the turn to the ordinary stakes an ethical claim,"illuminat[ing] the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit[ing] the shocking spectacle."[42] Through such literary techniques as realist description, then, Ward challenges the primacy of the event and instead narrativizes environmental disaster as an everyday apocalypse.

In *Salvage the Bones*, then, realism offers an aesthetic strategy for narrativizing waiting as an exemplary form of everyday apocalypse. Partial, ongoing, and relational, this depiction of everyday apocalypse emerges as a counterstrategy of narrativizing environmental disaster in the *longue durée*. Unlike Lerner's *10:04*, which employs the nonevent to narrativize hurricanes from the perspective of the rich, *Salvage the Bones* depicts a hurricane that arrives catastrophically.

Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* , 64. With regards to conceptions of the event in analytic philosophy, see Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, 2nd ed. (Clarendon Press, 2001), and C.D. Broad, *Scientific Thought: A Philosophical Analysis of Some of Its Fundamental Concepts* (Routledge, 1923).

[38] This notion of catastrophic event reflects twentieth-century ideas, influenced by nuclear warfare, of environmental apocalypse as catastrophic and sudden. Eva Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 70.

[39] Paul Susman, Phil O'Keefe, and Ben Wisner, "Global Disasters, a Radical Interpretation," in *Interpretations of Calamity from the Viewpoint of Human Ecology*, ed. Kenneth Hewitt (Allen & Unwin, 1983), 263.

[40] Pallavi Rastogi, *Postcolonial Disaster: Narrating Catastrophe in the Twenty-First Century* (Northwestern University Press, 2020), 31.

[41] Rastogi, *Postcolonial Disaster*, 26.

[42] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 4.

Yet by foregrounding the mundane habits and temporalities that structure her characters' experience of the hurricane, Ward both emphasizes the ongoing nature of environmental disaster and proffers slow temporalities as not just "slow violence" but also as forms of duration, vigilance, and care.

3.2 Realist Dailiness, Calendrical Form

In this section, I examine how Ward activates a second realist topos—dailiness—to formalize the ongoing and sometimes even mundane ways in which her characters experience environmental catastrophe. Extending the previous section, I reveal how *Salvage the Bones* frames Hurricane Katrina not only as a rupturing event but also as an ongoing and even predictable phenomenon. Ward embeds this formulation of disaster on the level of structure, I demonstrate, through what I call the novel's *calendrical form*. Calendrical form names the way that the novel proceeds as a series of days, thus reinforcing a granular and oft-mundane schema of environmental disaster. But while the calendar might seem to reify a sense of hegemonic time, I situate *Salvage the Bones* within a genealogy of calendrical texts that amplify the negotiable and even metaphysical qualities of the day. Ward's novel positions the day as a nexus between human and nonhuman temporalities, in turn offering a porous sense of everyday apocalypse.

As I argued in the introduction to this dissertation, realism is a mode ideally situated to depict ongoing and repetitive natural disasters. From its earliest pages, *Salvage the Bones* frames hurricanes through cyclicality and predictability rather than aberration. "If one of Daddy's drinking buddies had asked what he's doing tonight," Esch muses, "he would've told them he's fixing up for the hurricane. It's summer, and when it's summer, there's always a hurricane

coming or leaving here."[43] Thus, in the novel's earliest confrontation with natural disaster, it emphasizes both dailiness ("what he's doing tonight") and routine ("there's always a hurricane coming or leaving here.") In framing the impending disaster as both predictable and probable, Esch positions it as a constant rather than as a rupture in everyday life. Even as Katrina approaches and arrives, deadlier than the family anticipates, Ward emphasizes its iterative and routinized aspects. The narrative adopts the voice of Esch's father as he instructs the family in their preparations. "*Cover the windows*," "*Bring the jugs of water in*," "*Fill my gas tank*," "*Cook whatever's in the 'frigerator*," "*Park my truck in the clearing by the pit*": these imperatives emphasize, on a formal level, the cadence of routine.[44] They make no reference to the specific hurricane that looms, although the radio informs the Batistes that Katrina "is now a category three hurricane," "scheduled to make landfall in Buras-Triumph, Louisiana, sometime Monday morning."[45] In the routinized and iterative nature of italicized instructions, however, the novel does not clarify whether they are delivered or merely imperatives that the Batiste children have internalized from many summers spent "fixing up" for hurricanes. Consequently, in addition to *Salvage the Bones*' investment in depicting the hurricane as a catastrophe, it also emphasizes the iterative quality of natural disaster.

As this early passage suggests, *Salvage the Bones* employs dailiness—a key realist topos—to depict the quotidian qualities of the hurricane. Ward structures the novel as a series of days: the first chapter is "The First Day," the second chapter "The Second Day," and so on. The novel's relationship to realism, that is, unfolds not only on the level of the sentence but also in a broader formal sense. I call this *calendrical form*: as Ward's novel offers each chapter as a

[43] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 4.
[44] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 187-190. Emphases in original.
[45] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 182.

discrete and consecutive day, it situates Hurricane Katrina within the bounded, gridded, and progressive nature of a calendar. Ward's novel employs calendrical form in several ways: each chapter contains a discrete day, each chapter unfolds linearly, and Esch's narrative takes place entirely in the present (even memories remain grounded in a retrospective point of view). By literalizing the dailiness of the everyday, and by detailing twelve days as the cataclysmic weather approaches, unfolds, and then retreats, Ward reinforces a deep relationship between her novel and the temporal unit of the day. The novel employs this calendrical from to inscribe a constitutive relationship between disaster and the ordinary.

Through its calendrical form, *Salvage the Bones* draws upon a disparate genealogy of texts that includes but extends beyond realism. In addition to realism's affinity for the everyday, calendrical form evokes both epistolary and diaristic novels.[46] Ward draws upon a history of diaristic and epistolary modes in Black women's writing: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) unfolds as a series of letters, while Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) takes the form of diary entries.[47] Such forms, as *Parable of the Sower* makes plain, do not fall exclusively within the purview of realism. (I discuss Butler's novel and its minor realism in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.) To take one prominent example, Mary Shelley frames *Frankenstein* (1818)—the inaugural work of science fiction—with a series of letters. And yet George Levine suggests, anticipating theories of generic hybridity and my own identification of minor realism, that *Frankenstein* demonstrates "how naturally 'realistic' methods slip over into

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[46] From the earliest realist novels, such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1749), the iterative and quotidian nature of letter-writing ties the origins of the novel form to an emphasis on dailiness. See Levine, *The Realistic Imagination* and Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*.
[47] Ward has emphasized Walker's influence on her work. "Alice Walker was really important to me when I was younger, specifically *The Color Purple*. The first time I read *The Color Purple* I was in junior high, I think, maybe thirteen or fourteen. It's first-person point of view, a poor young black girl in the South that's telling the story. I had to read it in order to realize that this was possible. I thought a lot about Alice Walker and particularly *The Color Purple* when I was writing *Salvage the Bones*." Hartnell, "When Cars Become Churches": 217.

romance, or gothicism, or other non-realist categories."[48] Calendrical forms structure gothic urtexts such as Ann Radcliffe's *Gaston de Blondeville* (1826) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), while variations appear in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930).[49] In such works, dailiness and bounded time cohere with haunted and supernatural sites, disintegrating families, financial collapse, and tragic death. Calendrical form also appears in modernist works such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), both of which reject the narrative coherence of realism yet employ the conceit of a single day. Worth noting, too, is that dailiness structures medieval and ancient texts such as Bocaccio's *Decameron* (1353) and Genesis I. This complex genealogy demonstrates that form is neither the sole purview of realism nor of the standardizing time of the modern nation. Calendrical form, rather, emerges as a focal point for ordi nary realism.

Consequently, although calendrical form evokes a bounded and gridded temporality, *Salvage the Bones* indexes slippages in the apparently stable unit of the day. Tracing chicken-pox scars on her torso, for instance, Esch remembers that "Mama must've rubbed us down with chamomile lotion every hour, but it felt like an endless dark day, like the kind they have in Alaska midwinter, and between each time she'd lay my head in her lap, lift my shift, and rub ease and sleep into my skin."[50] The attenuated time of illness, "the endless dark day," reminds Esch of the cyclicality of seasonal time and the contingency of her own calendrical knowledge. Both human and more-than-human temporalities warp, with the divisions of her mother's hourly ministrations blurring and the sun's regular patterns dissolving. As with waiting, which Ward

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[48] George Levine, "*Frankenstein* and the Tradition of Realism," *Novel* 7, no. 1 (Fall 1973): 14–15.
[49] *Salvage the Bones*, from its opening pages, cites and then reworks Faulkner. Ward has, on several occasions, noted Faulkner's influence while also critiquing his tendency to flatten characters of color: Moynihan, in an extended treatment of Ward's relationship to Faulkner, notes that the former exerts a forceful social critique by alluding to Faulkner yet conferring on her characters an integrity that both Faulkner and the post-Katrina media deny them. Moynihan, "From Disposability to Recycling": 550-51.
[50] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 87.

links not to passivity but to caregiving and attentiveness, a different childhood memory identifies the temporal elasticity of summer vacation. At age twelve, Esch reflects, "The three of us would run out back and get lost in Daddy's woods, would spend days floating in the water in the Pit on our backs. We spent the summer dusted an orange color, and when we woke up every day of our months-long sleepover, the sheets would feel powdery like dry red clay."[51] Here time both stretches and condenses: time spent floating in the water feels like days, while a months-long summer shrinks to a single sleepover. Ward suggests that natural time, such as seasonality, challenges the regularity and boundedness of the calendar. Consequently, calendrical form both formalizes everydayness and immediately complicates it by emphasizing the permeability of the day as a temporal unit.

In *Salvage the Bones*, then, Ward depicts the day as a nexus between human and nonhuman time. Even more so than a year or a month, the day constitutes a modestly human scale of time. Yet unlike artificial units of time, like minutes, hours, or weeks, it remains grounded in the diurnal rhythms of the sun. Such an interplay surfaces frequently in *Salvage the Bones*. After hunting squirrels, for instance, Esch remarks: "The sun had set while Skeetah and I were looking for wood for the grill; the sky burst to color above us, and then the sun sank through the trees so that color ran out of the sky like water out of a drain and left the sky bleached white to navy dark."[52] As Esch measures duration by the time it takes to look for wood, she evokes what E.P. Thompson called "task time" and tracks such a temporality along the setting sun.[53] Yet her metaphor for the sunset's temporality, "like water out of a drain," remains grounded in the built world. Throughout *Salvage the Bones*, moreover, the calendrical day

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[51] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 22-23.
[52] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 49.
[53] E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present* 38 (December 1967): 60.

signifies not just a temporal metric but also a barometric one. *Salvage the Bones* frequently associates day and weather, such that "day" refers not to a scale of time but rather to atmosphere, temperature, and humidity.[54] Esch notices that her "neck felt hot, hotter than the day," Skeetah's "figure dwindles in the high, hot day," Randall's muscles strain "against the hot day."[55] Immediately after a garbled news report that predicts Katrina's severity, Esch again yokes day to weather: "There is only the day, hotter than the one that came before it, dense as water approaching boiling."[56] And as the hurricane approaches, "[o]nly Daddy can stand being inside the house, dark and close. All of us, as soon as we can, are outside. There is a blue-gray sheet over the sky and there is no sun, and the day is only better than the house because there is a pushy wind blowing."[57] In invoking heat, the day offers a local manifestation of climate change and its dispersed effects.

Salvage the Bones, in its attention to dailiness and description, formally incorporates and unsettles key realist topoi. As such, it examines the immanent and yet constructed qualities of everyday apocalypse—the partial and subjective experience of knowing or perceiving climate. Like everyday apocalypse, which gestures to an epistemology of both human and geologic time, Ward's formal realism operates on multiple scales. Indeed, for Ward, the day marks a unit of time that is both local and collective. She has explained:

> when I was writing Esch in *Salvage the Bones*, I would think about the ways that what she's seen, in the place where she's from, and how the culture in the place that she's from, would influence the way that she's seeing the world in those twelve days. On the level of language, I would think about what are the metaphors for what she would see,

[54] This is not a typical use of the word "day," according to the *OED*: "day" has historically been linked to sun and sunlight, but not to heat, atmosphere, or weather. "day, n.," OED Online, December 2021, Oxford University Press.
[55] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 9, 116, 209.
[56] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 136.
[57] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 196.

> what are the similes that she'd see, what will stand out for her, what is informing what she's seeing, giving her context for what she's seeing.[58]

Ward casts the day as an experiential and observable unit of time, emphasizing such time as negotiated rather than simply received. These twelve days, for Ward, remain inextricably linked to place: as Esch negotiates both place and time, the particularity of this "chronotope" unfurls on the level of metaphor.[59] Within the gridded matrix of calendrical time, that is, Esch encounters and shapes her own world. Henry Ivry writes that metaphor, in *Salvage the Bones*, "does not operate on one scale. Rather, metaphor is about showing how language is part of a large ecology, always already dispersed across a world in excess of its human subjects."[60] Metaphor enacts multiscalarity on the level of the sentence: more than simply juxtaposing divergent scales like human and geologic time, it illuminates each through the other. Ward's metaphors, in illuminating divergence, thus circumvent what Mary Pat Brady has recognized as the "cosmic scalar imaginary" and its tendency to reinforce the putatively neutral, abstract, and rational mechanism of scale itself.[61] Ward's investigation of the day, consequently, marks more than just a small-scale encounter with climate change: it approaches a "multiversal" encounter with lived catastrophe.[62] On a formal level, *Salvage the Bones* enacts the minutiae of everyday apocalypse while also embedding such minutiae within enigmatic and unpredictable forms of environmental time.

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[58] Hartnell, "When Cars Become Churches": 212. Emphasis added.

[59] Mikhail Bakhtin introduced the term "chronotope" to refer to configurations of space and time in literary texts. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson (University of Texas Press, 1983), 84.

[60] Henry Ivry, "'Improbable Metaphor': Jesmyn Ward's Asymmetrical Anthropocene," *European Review* 29, no. 3 (2020): 391.

[61] Mary Pat Brady, "Hemispheric Routes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First Century American Fiction*, ed. Joshua Miller (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 157–8.

[62] Brady, "Hemispheric Routes," 159.

3.3 "Shrinking Shallows": Gothic Realism and Environmental Attrition

Having established how *Salvage the Bones* both formalizes and unsettles key realist topoi, I turn now to its generic porosity with gothic tropes. I situate Ward's gothic realism within a Black gothic genealogy: the Black gothic, as Maisha Wester writes, is a mode historically invested in spectatorship and violent spectacle.[63] Drawing upon this literary lineage, then, Ward employs gothic topoi to embed her settings with the afterlives of slavery and to formalize a past that remains present. And yet, although *Salvage the Bones* incorporates spectacle in its climactic narrativization of Hurricane Katrina, Ward's ordinary realism unsettles this gothic tendency. Interweaving realist description and gothic settings, *Salvage the Bones* depicts a haunted past that manifests in daily life. The novel's gothic settings—an elementary school, the family home—form a quotidian architecture that Ward reveals to constitute an environmental sacrifice zone. However, paralleling the novel's realist topi, she employs gothic tropes to invoke not just a haunted past but also forms of resilience and enduring familial love.

In the moldering Batiste house, the personification of Hurricane Katrina, and the simmering racial tensions that characterize Esch's experience of the Gulf Coast, Ward joins a Black gothic literary tradition. Corinna Lenhardt argues that the American gothic emerged as an intrinsically racialized and racializing genre, deployed to encode and interrogate the racial anxieties of a nation built upon Indigenous dispossession and chattel slavery.[64] And yet she also traces how Black authors have adapted and rewritten such conventions, calling the gothic "an ultra-adaptable, discursively active writing strategy whose racialized (and racializing) quality can also be employed creatively and critically by historically and culturally marginalized groups and

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[63] Maisha L. Wester, *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 7.
[64] Corinna Lenhardt, *Savage Horrors: The Intrinsic Raciality of the American Gothic* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 15.

individuals."[65] Lenhardt thus identifies a uniquely Black gothic tradition, not just a reactive "anti-gothic": key contemporary texts include Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011).[66] Indeed, scholars like Rebecca Evans have focused not on *Salvage the Bones* but rather on Ward's third novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) to trace its incorporation of "a canonical gothic element: haunting."[67] Indeed, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* draws upon earlier gothic works by Black novelists—such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) that narrativize the afterlives of slavery through tropes such as ghosts and agential architecture. Although *Salvage the Bones* is less frequently discussed as a novel with gothic elements, I demonstrate here that it subtly infuses its formal and descriptive realism with key gothic topoi.

Meanwhile, New Orleans bears a long association with gothic aesthetics: as a city associated with haunted sites, masquerade, and minoritized racial and religious groups," Sherry Truffin calls the city the "Gothic capital" of the United States.[68] Given Hurricane Katrina's strong association with New Orleans (an association, it should be said, that *Salvage the Bones*' focus on the Mississippi Gulf Coast unsettles), the gothic genre emerges as a ready aesthetic matrix for the representation of the storm. That is, in activating the association between Hurricane Katrina and the gothic, Ward narrativizes how climate change pushes what might seem to be a coherent world into something bizarre, nonsensical, and grotesque.[69] Taking these

[65] Lenhardt, *Savage Horrors*, 16.
[66] Lenhardt, *Savage Horrors*, 23.
[67] Evans, "Geomemory and Genre Friction": 455.
[68] Sherry Truffin, "New Orleans as Gothic Capital," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, ed. Susan Castillo Street and Charles Crow (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 188.
[69] Susan Scott Parrish, "Faulkner and the Outer Weather of 1927," *American Literary History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 55; Phoebe Wagner, "Embracing the Environmental Grotesque and Transforming the Climate Crisis," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2023): 917. For other literary-critical discussions of the gothic and African American literature, see Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Criterion Books, 1960), 127; Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*

two strands of the gothic together—the afterlives of slavery and the otherworldliness of climate change—*Salvage the Bones* invokes gothic tropes to represent racialized environmental harm on the Gulf Coast.

In inheriting such forms, Ward demonstrates the permeability of both realist and gothic aesthetics. Evans, in her work on "genre friction," has demonstrated that Black writers draw upon the gothic in their interrogation of place-based memory and embed such tropes within largely realist novels.[70] For these writers, gothic tropes offer an aesthetic framework in which to infuse the present with a sense of the haunted and violent. Anne Schroder writes, in a discussion of gothic realism, that the gothic makes the uncanny "part of rather than separate from the mundane."[71] As I have demonstrated through my discussion of realist description, Ward's novel represents Hurricane Katrina both as a spectacular event and as a process of accretive racialized and ecological harm. Here, I would like to argue that the novel locates such accretion in the afterlives of slavery by juxtaposing gothic settings with a realist emphasis on everyday habits and social relationships. One instance of this juxtaposition is the elementary school in the nearby town of Bois Sauvage, which Esch describes in terms that evoke the gloom and mystery of gothic buildings. "The inside of the gym is dark, the steel beams lost in a humid haze like cloud cover."[72] Long the town's Black school, Esch's parents attended the school before desegregation. She explains that the racial history of the school is intimately tied to the history of environmental disaster: desegregation of the school only took place in 1969, Esch notes, "after the last big hurricane."[73] The hurricane itself wore down the forces of white supremacy, as "people were too

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(Harvard University Press, 1992), 38; Susan Scott Parrish, *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 275.
[70] Evans, "Geomemory and Genre Friction": 447.
[71] Anne Schroder, "Voodoo and Conjure as Gothic Realism," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, edited by Susan Castillo Street and Charles Crow, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 427.
[72] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 141.
[73] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 140.

tired finding their relatives' uprooted bodies, reburying them, sleeping on platforms that used to be the foundations of their houses, under tents, biking or walking miles for freshwater, for food, to still fight the law outlawing segregation."[74] Ward embeds this gloomy building's history with the architectural residue of Jim Crow, casting the 1969 hurricane as an attenuated disaster that offered, counterintuitively, the grounds for justice. Oscillating between gothic and realist tropes, *Salvage the Bones* locates civic architecture within the afterlives of slavery.

As this interplay between social history and environmental history suggests, Ward employs gothic tropes to emphasize the inextricable ties between the afterlives of slavery and the history of the Gulf Coast as an environmental sacrifice zone. Reflecting on the cyclical nature of hurricane season, early in the novel, Esch comments that "each [hurricane] pushes its way through the flat Gulf to the twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach, where they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses before running over the bayou, through the pines, to lose wind, drip rain, and die in the north."[75] Drawing upon a gothic imaginary of "old summer mansions," Ward situates the contemporary tourist industry within a historical network of trade and capital that depended upon chattel slavery. So too is this legacy one of environmental destruction, with hurricanes positioned not as aberrational events but rather a series of cyclical instantiations that unfold within a long history of anthropogenic interference: the "twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach" is the longest humanmade beach in the world. The novel thus layers a history of enslavement with ongoing anthropogenic harm and an iterative understanding of disaster. This sacrifice zone, as *Salvage the Bones* emphasizes, is familial as well as collective. Esch and her family live in a forest clearing that they call "the Pit"; in generations past, her grandfather let his white workmates dig for clay until they gouged a

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[74] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 140.
[75] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 4.

massive hole in the Batistes' backyard and permanently damaged the land.[76] Thus, as Bares notes, Esch explicitly narrativizes her home as a site that extraction has indelibly shaped.[77] Meanwhile others, like Mary Ruth Marotte, have argued that the bleakness of the Pit and its cabin-like house evoke plantation slavery.[78] Through gothic tropes, and at scales both collective and familial, Ward argues that the very land of the Gulf Coast contain the afterlives of slavery.

In tracking the interplay between chattel slavery and environmental extraction at multiple scales, Ward also embeds the environmental gothic within Esch's interiority. As Katrina approaches, Esch and her siblings attend Randall's basketball game at the elementary school—the Jim Crow-era school for Black students. In the school bathroom, Esch encounters Manny (her unreciprocated crush and the father of her child). This interior space and small-scale encounter expand to encompass Gulf ecology more broadly.

> The bathroom smells like the salt of marsh mud, like tadpoles dying in their shrinking shallows, and he is zipping his pants, folding me into the corner of the stall when he opens it, leaving me standing in the dark bathroom, runny at the legs, breasts aching with bloom, one of Mama's hair clips hanging from one string of hair before it falls into the toilet, lost in the scummy bowl. I wipe myself, flush the toilet, watch the water spin in a spiral, a baby storm, as it sucks the clip down and away.[79]

Ward's description of the bathroom unfolds in both gothic and ecological terms. The passage traces the "corner of the stall," and elsewhere the chapter notes that the bathroom is "dark, darker than the gym."[80] Although this interior space remains occluded and claustrophobically small, the passage uses metaphor to unsettle its sense of scale. This dark, obscured, and paludal space makes Esch think of wetland ecology, the marsh mud that is abundant on the Gulf Coast: a scene

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[76] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 14.
[77] Bares, "'Each Unbearable Day': 26.
[78] Mary Ruth Marotte, "Pregnancies, Storms, and Legacies of Loss in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*," In *Ten Years after Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm's Effect on American Culture and Identity*, edited by Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik, 207–19 (Lexington Books, 2014), 211.
[79] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 146.
[80] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 144.

of both decay and fecundity, the marsh's decomposing plant matter protects shorelines from erosion and creates a crucial habitat in which species raise their young. Wetlands also prevent storm surge during hurricanes, but their erosion—due mostly to the damming of the Mississippi River and the construction of oil and gas canals—has in turn made such disasters deadlier.[81] Thus, while salt marshes offer nursery grounds for fish and birds, Esch formulates these young animals to constitute an image of death rather than futurity. Although the stench of the bathroom evokes the life-giving medium of marsh mud, it also reminds her of "tadpoles dying." Esch recognizes the marsh ecology as an endangered one, with "the shrinking shallows" suggesting not only the dynamism of the wetlands but also the instability and erosion that both climate change and destructive coastal management practices have caused. The odor of the bathroom that for Esch conjures dying tadpoles, then, recalls forms of death that anthropogenic harm has wrought—one in which reproduction marks not futurity but instability and loss. Esch's body mirrors this duality: even as "bloom" suggests the opposite of decay, her aching breasts and loss of a treasured hair clip show such fecundity to be shot through with pain. Destabilizing a sense of scale, this flush of the toilet conjures an image of the impending hurricane, a "baby storm." As Ward's gothic shuttles between a regional sacrifice zone and individual embodiment, such tropes situate extraction, climate change, and the afterlives of slavery within individual subjectivity.

And yet, in a move parallel to Ward's realist descriptions of waiting, *Salvage the Bones* also employs the gothic to represent attenuation as care. Take, for instance, this description of an abandoned house that lies within the Pit:

> Fleas are everywhere. Walking toward Mother Lizbeth and Papa Joseph's house, I wade through scummy puddles of them. They jump and stick to my legs like burrs, biting, until I stand on what's left of the porch: a couple of two-by-fours leaning at a slanted angle

[81] Jillian Maloney et al., "Mississippi River Subaqueous Delta Is Entering a Stage of Retrogradation," *Marine Geology* 400, no. 1 (June 2018): 12–23.

> against the house like an abandoned pier sinking below storm-rising water, the tide of the earth rolling in to cover them. The screen door has long disappeared, and the front door hangs by one hinge. I have to push the wood, which flakes away to dust in my hands, and squeeze sideways through cobwebs tangled with leaves to get into the house. The house is a drying animal skeleton, everything inside that was evidence of living salvaged over the years.[82]

The Pit manifests a state of entropy, with crumbling wood, parasitical insects, and pools of fetid water impeding Esch's entrance to the house. Esch once again finds a weather-related metaphor for what she observes, planks of wood leaning "at a slanted angle against the house like an abandoned pier sinking below storm-rising water, the tide of the earth rolling in to cover them." Evoking infrastructure's vulnerability against storm surge, Ward yokes Esch's observation of the house to the temporal particularity of the impending storm. This metaphor again unsettles hierarchies of scale, with the land of the Pit a "tide… rolling in" and the house a "drying animal skeleton." Such emphasize motion and duration, with the gerund rendering scale permeable. Yet this description, although it shares an affinity for the local and the particular with Ward's realism, instead draws from the gothic: the decaying land and the abandoned house draw upon gothic tropes of haunted and moldering sites. At the end of this description, however, Ward takes a gothic site and casts it as place of sustenance. As the Batistes salvaged "everything that was evidence of living"—a bed for Esch and Skeetah, a new cooking pot for the kitchen—the decaying house of Esch's grandparents nourishes and provides.[83] Within the afterlives of slavery, *Salvage the Bones* finds the lingering past to not just be a force of violence but also one of perdurance and relationality.

Reading the scene of the Pit alongside Ward's realist description, the novel's gothic realism takes processes of wearing and weathering as forms of care. In *Salvage the Bones*,

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[82] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 58.
[83] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 58.

salvaged objects often index relationality and familial love. When Skeetah cuts himself while stealing medicine for China, for instance, Esch bandages his wounds with a wrap that is "worn thin," "so old it's faded white."[84] Esch traces the object biography of the Ace bandage, noting that Randall often uses it when his knee acts up after basketball games; this worn object links the Batiste siblings, their afflictions, and their cures.[85] Later in the novel, as the family prepares for the impending hurricane, the heat of the day makes Esch recall another set of worn objects. "[M]y legs stick to the rugs that Mama laid over the seat when we were small and the upholstery would get so hot in the summer it would feel like it was melting our skin. *It's too hot for them kids*, she'd said, and she'd beaten the rugs until they were clean, and then she'd washed them, and then she'd tucked them under the seats… I could see that Daddy had worn his side thin."[86] Wearing, in this context, indexes not only poverty but also the legacy of Esch's mother's love. The respective history of these objects, especially the way in which the latter responds to the barometric condition of a too-hot car seat, thus suggests a kind of weather or weathering that describes not barometry or erosion but survival.

Ward's ordinary realism—and the iteration that I identify here as gothic realism—frames climate change as an ongoing and slow-moving disaster that extends the afterlives of chattel slavery. Realism, as I argued in the first two sections of this chapter, offers a sense of attenuated and quotidian time that complicates the notion of environmental disaster as a spectacular event. Rather, Hurricane Katrina marks one particularly legible phase in an unending crisis. But by undercutting the novel's realist description and dailiness with the gothic, *Salvage the Bones* embeds the quotidian with a sense of the haunted past. In particular, the inextricable pasts of

[84] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 84.
[85] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 84.
[86] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 189.

chattel slavery and the sacrifice zone of the Gulf Coast both foreground the uneven distribution of environmental harm. Ward's novel thus anticipates theorist Kathryn Yusoff's formulation of "a billion Black Anthropocenes," which troubles the notion that climate change marks a discrete and universal phenomenon. "A billion Black Anthropocenes," Yusoff writes, "names the all too many *voidings* of experience that span multiple scales, manifestations, and ongoing extractive economies, in terms of the materiality and grammars that inculcate antiblackness through a material geophysics of race."[87] *Salvage the Bones*, in its attention to the everyday mechanisms of extractive antiblackness, offers gothic realism as a formal response to the billion Black Anthropocenes that Yusoff identifies. Although—or perhaps because—its engagement with climate change remains elliptical, Ward's novel also offers attenuation as a temporality of relationality and care.

3.4 Katrina Time and Ordinary Resistance

The temporalities of Ward's gothic realism draw upon a broader set of historical narratives that emphasize the hurricane as an ongoing condition rather than a discrete event. A frequent trope across post-Katrina documentary narratives, the extended disaster often produces a sense of ongoing or suspended time. Richard Chenoweth of Pascagoula, Mississippi, for instance, reflects: "You know, a lot of people died *after* the hurricane. I think that's one thing, that's maybe one of the unfold stories. […] …they died several months after the storm."[88] Chenoweth gestures to the tolls of stress, accretive environmental hazard, and a collapsed healthcare system to identify the hurricane's indirect and extended disaster. James Yancey, Jr., of

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[87] Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 11. Emphasis in original.
[88] Stephanie Cull-Millet, An Oral History with Richard Eldon Chenoweth, Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, March 14, 2007, https://hurricanearchive.org/items/show/45649.

the Jackson County Community Coalition, asks: “when did Katrina end? And the answer twelve months ago is the same answer as of this morning. And the answer is, ‘It hasn’t ended.’”[89] Similarly, in Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*, Jefferson Parish resident Daina Saulny observes: “The aftermath, to me, is worse than the actual levees breaking, because at least, you know, you’ve survived with your life. But getting back on track, it’s almost like you’re stuck.”[90] In contrast, the media has long since relinquished the topic of Hurricane Katrina and implicitly positions the disaster as a bounded event. These testimonies emphasize the unbounded nature of Hurricane Katrina, thus offering a rejoinder to the capricious and spectacle-driven appetite of the 24-hour news cycle.

Ward’s novel responds to the accelerative temporality of market-driven extraction as well as to the environmentalism of the rich. As Naomi Klein captures in her discussion of “disaster capitalism,” the federal and state response to the storm abnegated government responsibility to citizens in favor of a neoliberal takeover: for instance, Hurricane Katrina incited the mass privatization of the New Orleans public school system with what Klein calls “military speed and precision.”[91] Hartnell frames this disintegration of the state and its responsibilities within “Katrina time,” borrowing a vernacular term that describes how prison authorities in Orleans Parish moved incarcerated people to unsheltered overpasses during the storm. For Hartnell, Katrina time “encompass[es] the temporalization of the unravelling of a state self-defined by the rule of law and the protection of its citizenry, one that has unapologetically turned its attention to endless wars, hitched the fate of its citizens to the brutalizing trajectory of market logics, and

[89] Olivia Ronkainen and Kelsey Lange, An Oral History with James Yancey Jr., Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, February 22, 2007, https://hurricanearchive.org/items/show/45882.
[90] Spike Lee, “When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts,” Act 3, HBO Documentary Films, August 22, 2006.
[91] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Picador, 2007), 6.

turned a blind eye to the devastation of the environment that inevitably follows."[92] More broadly, the novel subtly counters market-driven climate solutions like the 2015 International Paris Agreement and its reliance on "accelerating, encouraging and enabling innovation […] and promoting economic growth."[93] Such responses to climate disaster, from the New Orleans school system to international climate policy, imagine growth and acceleration not as the problem but as the solution.

Salvage the Bones offers a formal rejoinder to both media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and market-driven responses to climate disaster, foregrounding networks of mutual aid that emerged in the wake of state abandonment. At the end of *Salvage the Bones*, when the novel's ostensible climax has unfolded and Hurricane Katrina's winds have died down, it is again forms of relationality and care that suffuse everyday relationships with a sense of endurance. Esch and her family find shelter with Big Henry and his mother, and again Ward attends to the habits that constitute survival: "Ms. Bernadine gave us a big cup of water each for a bath, a shower was wetting the rag in the water, soaping it, stripping in Big Henry's warm tiled blue bathroom that smelled faintly like rotten eggs, soaping my whole body, and then rinsing off with the water from the cup. It was heaven. [..] Dinner was sardines and Vienna sausages, canned corn, dry ramen we ate like crackers, grape and red soda."[94] In such descriptions of everyday apocalypse, routines coalesce with a state of extreme precarity. Intimations of decay—a rag, rotten eggs—do not preclude so much as substantiate the everyday acts of care and solidarity that Esch catalogues. Here, as throughout *Salvage the Bones*, generic hybridity spans realist description, formal dailiness, and gothic settings; taken together, the aesthetic of gothic realism amplifies slow time

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[92] Hartnell, *After Katrina*, 1.
[93] "Adoption of the Paris Agreement, 21st Conference of the Parties," United Nations/Framework Convention on Climate Change (2015), 15.
[94] Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, 255.

and embeds the past within the present. Slow time, Ward demonstrates, recognizes the gestures of respite, relationality, and vigilance that emerge from her characters' quotidian acts.

Ward's novel, then, joins a theoretical genealogy that finds the everyday to be a site where power is both enacted and resisted. Such a genealogy spans Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the "minor" (which I briefly discussed in the introduction to this dissertation), Michel Foucault's notion of "discontinuous, particular, and local criticism," and Michel de Certeau's recognition of "the oppositional practices of everyday life."[95] These works do not adopt a utopian view of the everyday, but rather identify it as a site where the fissures of power—in failing to encompass local discontinuity—become apparent. Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* draws heavily from Foucault's theory of discipline, and her other work has traced the ways in which extreme violence localizes in the everyday such that the "unimaginable assumes the guise of everyday practices."[96] And yet Black feminist scholars, including Hartman, also pursue methodologies that attempt to "jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done."[97] Sharpe identifies the "multiple Black everydays of the wake" that mark an unbounded and ongoing phenomenon.[98] Feminist historian Stephanie Camp, examining narratives of plantation slavery, sees the everyday as both a site of resistance and a challenge to conventional historiography.[99] Thus, although the quotidian "articulates the wounds of history," in Hartman's words, it is also through everyday practices that imaginative affinities with

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[95] Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*; Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon, (Vintage, 1980), 82; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven F. Rendall (University of California Press, 2011), 96.
[96] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 6.
[97] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts": 11.
[98] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 113.
[99] Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3.

historical figures emerge.[100] These scholars theorize an ordinary that is not solely the realm of attenuated harm and slow violence: it is also a site of imaginative resistance.

With its investment in the lived experience of climate change, finally, *Salvage the Bones* models a form of everyday apocalypse with race and embodiment at its center. In addition to its thematic focus on the unevenly distributed effects of climate disaster, the novel's formal qualities provoke a readerly experience of attenuated and unbounded time. *Salvage the Bones* thus offers representation of everyday apocalypse that is accretive and perceptible, distinct from frameworks of both spectacular catastrophe and geologic depth. In this way, it joins Lerner's *10:04* in employing ordinary realism to undermine the assumption that climate change inherently exceeds human perception. Although *Salvage the Bones* takes seriously the nonhuman forces of weather, water, and decay, it engages human rather than geologic time. Both on the level of sentence and structure, the novel's interest lies in the modest and perceptible scales of feeling the heat on one's skin, waiting for a sibling to fall asleep, tracking a sequence of days, and salvaging family objects. And while such elements contain multiple forms of time—individual, familial, collective, and natural—such forms tend to move laterally rather than vertically. Rather than scale, they traverse. As it situates everyday apocalypse within slow and perceptible temporalities, *Salvage the Bones* takes predictability not as a site of bourgeois constraint but instead as a model of iterative and ongoing disaster. Among the contemporary archive of minor realism, then, the singular contribution of *Salvage the Bones* is to formally emphasize the attenuation of the everyday apocalypse and to situate this apocalypse within ongoing regimes of racial violence.

Of all the novels that this dissertation analyzes, *Salvage the Bones* bears the most elliptical relationship to climate change. The terms "climate" and "global warming" are entirely

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[100] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 72.

absent from the book, and "hotter" refers only to daily and subjective encounters with weather. And yet the novel's descriptions of ever-worsening storms and ongoing extraction in the Gulf Coast situate its representation of Hurricane Katrina within a broader matrix of climate-induced catastrophes. What *Salvage the Bones* also contributes to the contemporary climate archive, then, is the argument that certain environmental and political forces that appear unrelated to climate change in fact constitute an ongoing and unfinished manifestation of it.

In the next chapter, I consider two novels that further position climate change as merely one instantiation in the long emergency of state violence in the Americas: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* and Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*. These two novels share several similarities with *Salvage the Bones*, especially in their investment in attenuation as not only slow violence but also slow resistance: the exemplary form of everyday apocalypse that I consider in the next chapter is weathering, or what feminist scholars Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Lowen Walker explore as "a certain perdurance—a getting on with, a getting by, a getting through."[101] Through their representations of weathering, *Almanac of the Dead* and *Future Home of the Living God* join *Salvage the Bones* in framing domesticity and routine as the grounds for resistance. Consequently, I gesture to this trio of novels as a feminist archive of climate change. And yet Silko and Erdrich also diverge from Ward in several fundamental ways. They offer a much more explicit representation of climate change, for one, and respectively illuminate key shifts in the public understanding of the phenomenon across the turn of the millennium. More importantly, *Almanac of the Dead* and *Future Home of the Living God* invoke Indigenous epistemologies to situate climate change within the ongoing history of settler colonialism in the Americas. Silko and Erdrich, finally, employ aesthetic tendencies that are

[101] Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker, "Weathering: Climate Change and the 'Thick Time' of Transcorporeality." *Hypatia* 29, no. 3 (2014): 560.

distinct from Ward and, indeed, from each other. While I argue that *Almanac of the Dead* constitutes a foundational text of ordinary realism, with *Future Home of the Living God* I turn from ordinary realism to disaster realism. The next chapter, consequently, marks a juncture in my exploration of climate aesthetics and form.

Chapter 4 – Weathering: Iterative Apocalypse and Climate Fragmentation in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* and Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*

> When the current weather was exhausted, there was all the weather that had occurred in recorded history, weather lived through or witnessed by a relative, or even heard about on the news. Catastrophic weather of all types. And when that was done with, there was all the weather that might possibly occur in the future.
> I'd even heard him speculate about weather in the afterlife.
> Louise Erdrich (Chippewa, Turtle Mountain Band),
> *The Round House* (2012)

> If realism in a general sense denotes something about our daily lives—how we live—then there can be no more crucial climate-change discussion than one regarding our daily lives.
> Daniel R. Wildcat (Muscogee),
> *Red Alert!: Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge* (2009)

This chapter extends three central ideas that I developed in the previous chapter on *Salvage the Bones*: it considers what it means to reframe climate change as inextricably linked to racialized extraction, examines temporally nonlinear representations of environmental disaster, and offers a preliminary delineation of a feminist climate archive with quotidian resistance at its center. Here, however, I depart from the previous chapter's focus on the afterlives of slavery and turn to the ongoing structures of settler colonialism. In a discussion of Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko's 1991 novel *Almanac of the Dead*, I analyze a foundational climate-change novel with revolutionary politics at its center. Silko employs ordinary realism, I demonstrate, to consider apocalyptic immanence and the ongoing politics of Indigenous resistance. *Almanac of the Dead* rewrites weather, a canonical realist trope, to emphasize meteorological agency and political charge. I then transition to the second half of this chapter

(and dissertation), offering my first analysis of disaster realism through Chippewa novelist Louise Erdrich's 2017 novel *Future Home of the Living God*. Erdrich, I argue, narrativizes an environmental dystopia while figuring domestic routine as an insurgent politics. Finally, I conclude by arguing that *Almanac of the Dead* and *Future Home of the Living God* emphasize an Indigenous formal response to everyday apocalypse: as both novels simultaneously invoke and undermine realist aesthetics, they intimate the partiality and inference at the heart of knowing climate.

In *Almanac of the Dead*, the effects of climate change mark the earth's punishment for settler-colonial destruction. Silko's novel centers on an Indigenous resistance movement called the "Army of Justice and Retribution."[1] Late in *Almanac of the Dead*, a leader of the Army named the Barefoot Hopi addresses a mostly white audience at a holistic healers' convention. "We are increasing quietly despite your bullets and germ warfare," the Hopi proclaims. "You destroyers can't figure out why you haven't wiped us out in five hundred years of blasting, burning, and slaughter. You destroyers can't figure out what is going wrong for you. You don't know how much the spirits of these continents despise you, how the earth hates you; now your cities burn from the sun, and millions abandon cities in the Southwest for lack of water."[2] Cities burning from the sun, extreme drought forcing settlers to flee: Silko's ordinary realism invokes dystopian tropes to emphasize the immanence of settler-colonial apocalypse. As this passage suggests, *Almanac of the Dead* explicitly formulates environmental apocalypse as the end of settler occupation. Written throughout the 1980s, Silko foregrounds a revolutionary politics in response to the individualism, racism, environmental deregulation, and military interventionism

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[1] Readers have noted the novel's prescience in anticipating political movements that include the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico and the ongoing Idle No More protests.
[2] Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (Penguin, 1991), 734.

of the Reagan era.[3] These political commitments make *Almanac of the Dead* an important environmental-justice text as well as a key early example of climate-change fiction.

Erdrich, in *Future Home of the Living God*, foregrounds disaster realism to emphasize the everyday qualities of environmental and political dystopia. Cedar Hawk Songmaker, Erdrich's protagonist, is an Ojibwe woman who discovers that she is pregnant just as a mysterious evolutionary crisis begins. (Although Erdrich never specifies the exact nature of this crisis, it involves evolution "going backward."[4]) The novel, which follows Cedar as she attempts to evade the authoritarian regime, invokes climate change to reinforce its sense of mounting disaster. Such invocations of climate change span Cedar's memories of "our first winter without snow" to her observations of "an unusually cool day for August, which means that it is only ninety degrees."[5] Consequently, although climate change is not *Future Home*'s primary focus, it contributes to an atmosphere of ambient crisis therein. Erdrich began the novel in 2001 after George W. Bush signed the "global gag rule" to prohibit federal funding for international NGOs with abortion-related work. She set the manuscript aside for over a decade, then picked it back up during the misogyny of Donald Trump's presidency. Although many aspects of *Future Home of the Living God* draw upon speculative and dystopian elements, Erdrich reflected in an interview: "I thought of it as a sort of realistic scenario. That's why I don't know I can call it a dystopia. It's set as

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[3] Silko has cited the Reagan administration as the basis of its portrayal of neoliberalism's cruelty. The broader political context of the novel's context includes both the overt racism of Arizona's gubernatorial contest in 1986 and the Iran-Contra scandal. The Iran-Contra scandal, or "Irangate," saw senior officials in the Reagan administration conduct illegal arms sales to Iran and then use those proceeds to fund the right-wing Contras group in Nicaragua. These funds supported the Contra campaign against the socialist, and democratically elected, Sandinista government. See Laura Coltelli, "*Almanac*: Reading Its Story Maps After Twenty Years: An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko," in *Howling for Justice: New Perspectives on Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead*, ed. Rebecca Tillett (University of Arizona Press, 2014), 206; and Rebecca Tillett, "'Sixty Million Dead Souls Howl for Justice in the Americas!': *Almanac* as Political Activism and Environmental and Social Justice," also in *Howling for Justice*.
[4] Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* (Harper, 2017), 60.
[5] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 62, 9.

though this could happen tomorrow in Minneapolis and St. Paul [where Erdrich lives and the novel is set], or it could happen in fifty years."[6] Indeed, in *Future Home*, disaster realism buttresses the novel's sense of dystopian immanence.

Erdrich's observation reflects a surprising point of connection between *Almanac of the Dead* and *Future Home of the Living God*: while the two novels offer inverse aesthetics of ordinary realism and disaster realism, respectively, both foreground Indigenous models of iterative apocalypse.[7] Iterative apocalypse emphasizes the partial, recurrent, and everyday qualities of environmental disaster, and foregrounds the centrality of settler-colonial structures in the uneven distribution of environmental harm.[8] In such partiality and recurrence, I identify *weathering* as the corresponding form of everyday apocalypse that both novels share. Weathering names the many forms of Indigenous survivance—resilience, resistance, survival, and vitality—that structure both *Almanac of the Dead* and *Future Home of the Living God*. In theorizing weathering, I extend Neimanis and Walker's formulation of weathering with which I ended the previous chapter: "a certain perdurance—a getting on with, a getting by, and getting through."[9] With Indigenous critical theory in mind, however, I also foreground Lower Brule Sioux scholar Nick Estes' argument that residual and enduring temporalities are the realm not just of slow violence but also of resistance. Estes theorizes that "another kind of accumulation,

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[6] Kerri Miller, "What Happens When Evolution Stops? Louise Erdrich's Novel Starts," MPR News | Minnesota Public Radio, November 14, 2017, https://www.mprnews.org/story/2017/11/14/books-louise-erdrich-future-home.
[7] B. Jamieson Stanley mentions the term "iterable apocalypse" in an analysis of *Future Home of the Living God*. B. Jamieson Stanley, "'Cornmeal Pancakes to Stave Off the Apocalypse: Ordinary Food in 'Poison' and *Future Home of the Living God*, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 300, no. 4 (2023): 826.
[8] As scholars such as Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte and Anishinaabe critic Grace Dillon have written, the Indigenous apocalypse arrived long ago. Kyle Powys Whyte, "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises," *Environmental and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1, no. 1–2 (2018): 227; Whyte, "Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now," 207; Grace Dillon, "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms," in *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, ed. Grace Dillon (University of Arizona Press, 2012), 8.
[9] Neimanis and Walker, "Weathering": 560.

one that is not always spectacular, nor instantaneous, but that nevertheless makes the [settler-colonial] endgame of elimination an impossibility: the tradition of Indigenous resistance."[10] Weathering names the ongoing and quotidian acts of resistance in both *Almanac of the Dead* and *Future Home of the Living God*.

In this chapter, I explore how Silko and Erdrich employ minor realism to represent iterative apocalypse and theorize Indigenous weathering.[11] Literary realism represents an understudied aesthetic in the work of both Silko and Erdrich.[12] Reviewers and critics have instead tended to associate their work with a broader Indigenous postmodernism that, during the 1980s and '90s, unsettled and deconstructed the very notion of the "real."[13] Such associations characterize scholarship on these two authors—and, indeed, their responses to one another—during the 1980s and '90s.[14] They also, however, characterize contemporary scholarship on the two authors. In a 2014 interview with Silko, for instance, Laura Coltelli identifies postmodern features in *Almanac of the Dead* that include "atemporality, space-time unified and circular, fragmented identity, the strategy of irony, and hyperbolic descriptions."[15] Meanwhile, Madhu Dubey has recently described Erdrich as "quintessentially postmodern," while Sarah Parker and

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[10] Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (Verso, 2019), 167.

[11] Both Daniel R. Wildcat and Kyle Powys white use the keyword "realism" to theorize Indigenous responses to climate change, but they use it to evoke the pragmatism of Indigenous knowledge rather than to identify aesthetic styles. See Daniel R. Wildcat, *Red Alert!: Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge* (Fulcrum, 2009), and Kyle Powys Whyte, "Indigenous Realism and Climate Change," in *Climate Realism: The Aesthetics of Weather and Atmosphere in the Anthropocene*, ed. Lynn Badia, Marija Cetinić, and Jeff Diamanti (Routledge, 2020), 69–81.

[12] For a discussion of realism in Erdrich's 1986 novel *The Beet Queen*, see Hans Bak, "Toward a Native American 'Realism': The Amphibious Fiction of Louise Erdrich," in *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Kristiaan Versluys (Rodopi, 1992), 145–70.

[13] Vizenor led this turn to Indigenous postmodernism in novels such as *Bearheart* (1990).

[14] For a discussion of Silko and Erdrich, see Susan Pérez Castillo, "Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy," *The Massachusetts Review* 32, no. 2 (1991): 285–94; Nancy J. Peterson, "History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," *PMLA* 109, no. 5 (1994): 982–94.

[15] Laura Coltelli, "*Almanac*: Reading Its Story Maps After Twenty Years," 206.

Wilson Kaiser have explored how her novels rework postmodern aesthetics.[16] In contrast, I demonstrate how *Almanac of the Dead* and *Future Home of the Living God* both invoke and revise realist tropes within their respective Pueblo and Ojibwe narrative traditions. Indeed, Native American literature often represents a hybrid of Indigenous and settler narrative forms: Acoma Pueblo writer Simon Ortiz notes "the creative ability of Indian people to gather in many forms the socio-political colonizing force which beset them and to make those forms meaningful in their own terms."[17] As Lee Schweninger notes, many Indigenous texts employ literary realism while also critiquing settler literary cultures and their histories. "This resistance," he writes, "comes in large measure as a response to historical context, especially in that much of what scholars call literary realism was written during the era of intense westward expansion."[18] While they do so in different ways and with different aesthetic-political stakes, both Silko and Erdrich simultaneously claim and critique the realist novel.

Bringing these disparate texts together, and offering a new formal interpretation of each, I uncover central realist topoi in the two novels: weather in *Almanac of the Dead* and domesticity in *Future Home of the Living God*. Unruly weather, in *Almanac of the Dead*, infuses a narrative of social realism with a sense of immanent apocalypse; domestic spaces and habits, in *Future Home of the Living God*, valence acute disaster with a sense of enduring ordinariness. The novels thus employ and revise two topoi that were key to the consolidation of the realist novel in the 19th century. Narrativizations of everyday weather and domesticity, as an extensive bibliography

[16] Madhu Dubey, "Race and the Crisis of the Postmodern Social Novel," in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, ed. Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 43; Sarah Parker and Wilson Kaiser, "Native American Literature and 'L'Écriture Féminine': The Case of Louise Erdrich," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 36, no. 1 (2017): 151–73.
[17] Simon J. Ortiz, "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 8, no. 2 (1981): 8.
[18] Lee Schweninger, "Native American Realism," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Realism*, ed. Keith Newlin (Oxford University Press, 2019), 167.

suggests, contributed to the cultural naturalization of empire and the forms of bourgeois life that it produced.[19] In realist novels, both historical and contemporary, details about the weather produce a sense of narrative verisimilitude. Associated with normalcy, regularity, and the statistical science of meteorology, weather indexes ordinary life.[20] Meanwhile, both canonical and recent scholarship on literary realism emphasize the centrality of domestic space in its construction of psychological interiority and everyday life. Domestic fiction, wrote Nancy Armstrong in her seminal account, "helped to formulate the ordered space we now recognize as the household, make that space totally functional, and used it as the context for representing normal behavior."[21] The history of the realist novel implicates weather and domesticity as key tropes for the depiction of modern subjectivity and its containment. But while scholars like Ghosh perceive the incompatibility of this literary history and climate-change narratives, *Almanac of the Dead* and *Future Home of the Living God* employ minor realism as a tool for critique as well as aesthetic hybridity.

Indeed, the generic porosity by which both novels proceed models the inference and partiality at the heart of climate epistemology. In the final section of this chapter, I consider how Silko and Erdrich represent and unsettle the literariness of climate representation. The titular

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[19] I refer here to the cumulative work of scholars such as Georg Lukács, Franco Moretti, Raymond Williams, Edward Said, and Patrick Brantlinger. See especially Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*; Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford University Press, 1975); Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (Verso, 2000); Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Cornell University Press, 1990); and Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage, 1994).

[20] As Jan Golinski has detailed, the weather became associated with ordinary life in 18th-century Britain. Subsequently, as the realist novel and meteorology arose in tandem during the 19th century, both drew upon the new science of statistics and its production of regularity. Jan Golinski, "Time, Talk, and the Weather in Eighteenth-Century Britain," in *Weather, Climate, Culture*, ed. Benjamin Orlove and Sarah Strauss (Berg, 2003), 21. See also Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 15 and Katharine Anderson, *Predicting the Weather: Victorians and the Science of Meteorology* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 286.

[21] Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 23-4. See also Elif S. Armbruster, "Dwelling in American Realism," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Realism*, ed. Keith Newlin (Oxford University Press, 2019), 410-425; Megan Ward, "The Cybernetic Character of Domestic Realism," *Genre* 51, no. 1 (2018): 1–25.

almanac at the heart of *Almanac of the Dead* is an ancient Mayan codex that portends the end of settler colonialism. Fragmentary, incomplete, and fragile, Silko's characters piece together and interpret elements of the almanac: consequently, *Almanac of the Dead* positions reading and interpretation at the center of how it envisions a revolutionary climate politics. As she interpolates sections of the fictional almanac into the novel itself, Silko emphasizes the fragmentary quality of her own novel. Meanwhile, if *Almanac of the Dead* interrogates what it means to be a climate reader, *Future Home of the Living God* questions what it means to be a climate writer. Positioning her novel as Cedar's diary—one that grows increasingly fragmentary as she becomes under greater levels of duress—Erdrich takes up the question that animates Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*: how will future generations look back on this present moment of environmental crisis and political inaction? The novel's fragmentary form emphasizes the impossibility of writing a complete history of the present, as well as the multitemporal links between writers and imagined readers even amid such impossibility. As they self-consciously probe the impossible task of absolute climate representation, then, *Almanac of the Dead* and *Future Home of the Living God* offer minor realism as a form that does not elide its fragmentation but rather amplifies it.

4.1 Cosmopolitical Weather in *Almanac of the Dead*

A theorist of environmental justice *avant la lettre*, Leslie Marmon Silko emphasizes that climate change is intimately bound to settler colonialism and genocide.[22] Climate crisis plagues

[22] Activists and theorists of environmental justice have long recognized the intertwined nature of colonialism, racism, and environmental harm. Such theories were initially formalized in the 1980s, '90s, and early 2000s: Benjamin Chavis coined the term "environmental racism" in 1982, and the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit took place in 1991. Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, "Introduction: Environmental Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy," in *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy*, ed. Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein (University of Arizona Press, 2002), 4-5.

both the present and the future in *Almanac of the Dead*, and Silko imagines Indigenous survivance in the face of settler society and its inevitable collapse.[23] Scholars have thus recognized the novel's foundational contribution to the literature of environmental justice: T.V. Reed writes that "*Almanac of the Dead* was already doing global decolonial environmental justice cultural studies many years before the field was named," and Rebecca Tillett argues that the novel "maps many of the founding principles of both the social justice and environmental justice movements."[24] However, due to the vast spatial and temporal scope of *Almanac of the Dead*, many critics have overlooked the significance of realist aesthetics and everyday time in the novel.[25] I examine how Silko rewrites a key realist trope—weather—through an Indigenous cosmopolitics, in turn endowing weather with an agential and political capacity. Her ordinary realism thus offers a model of weathering that is grounded in both Indigenous aesthetics and revolutionary politics.

Silko's novels and essays reflect an ambivalent stance toward literary realism, one that more broadly characterizes a hybrid aesthetic born of both settler and Pueblo forms. *Almanac of the Dead* indexes the everyday through myriad incidental description: such details as televisions, golf courses, cars, ammunition, garden furniture, and plastic prescription vials all populate her

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[23] "Survivance" is a term associated with the White Earth Chippewa author and theorist Gerald Vizenor. He writes that "[n]ative survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent." Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance," 1.

[24] T.V. Reed, "Toxic Colonialism, Environmental Justice, and Native Resistance in Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 34, no. 2 (2009): 25; Rebecca Tillett, *Otherwise, Revolution!: Leslie Marmon Silko's* Almanac of the Dead (Bloomsbury, 2018), 17. For another foundational discussion of the novel in the context of environmental justice, see Joni Adamson, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (University of Arizona Press, 2001), 128-161.

[25] Jessica Hurley recognizes that "Silko depicts a world in which apocalypse saturates the everyday," but she focuses on nuclear apocalypse rather than climate change. Jessica Hurley, "Impossible Futures: Fictions of Risk in the Longue Durée," *American Literature* 89, no. 4 (2017): 773.

novel and characterize the everyday texture of settler-colonial "petromodernity."[26] And yet, in her essays on aesthetics, Silko writes:

> Standing deep within the natural world, the ancient Pueblo understood the thing as it was—the squash blossom, grasshopper, or rabbit itself could never be created by the human hand. Ancient Pueblos took the modest view that the thing itself (the landscape) could not be improved upon. The ancients did not presume to tamper with what had already been created. Thus *realism*, as we now recognize it in painting and sculpture, did not catch the imaginations of Pueblo people until recently.[27]

Silko charts a Pueblo narrative genealogy, emphasizing the power and knowledge that stories contain. "Through the narratives Pueblo people have for thousands of years maintained and transmitted their entire culture; not all the strategies and beliefs necessary to Pueblo survival are written, but they are remembered and repeated generation after generation. Even the most ordinary deer-hunting story is dense with information, from stalking techniques to weather forecasting and the correct rituals to be performed in honor of the dead deer."[28] Silko's example of the "most ordinary deer-hunting story" emphasizes how seemingly incidental details in fact impart crucial information about survival and spiritual practice. Consequently, *Almanac of the Dead* reworks the realist tropes of petromodernity to reflect not the genealogy of the European realist novel but rather a Pueblo ontology of agency, interconnection, and revolutionary solidarity. Iteration, then, characterizes not only Silko's model of environmental apocalypse but also her complex relationship to literary form.

In addition to Pueblo aesthetics, Silko's ordinary realism draws upon Indigenous theories of ongoing colonial and environmental harm. A sprawling novel of 750 pages and over 70 characters, *Almanac of the Dead* centers upon the Army of Justice and Retribution yet offers a

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[26] For LeMenager, "petromodernity" characterizes "modern life based in the cheap energy systems made possible by oil." LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 67.
[27] Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (Simon & Schuster, 1997), 28. Emphasis in original.
[28] Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, 178.

vast spread of overlocking narratives. Given its length and scope, a concise summary of *Almanac of the Dead* is impossible. Elizabeth Ammons, however, offers a useful sense of the narrative threads that make up the novel, especially how it tracks a sense of disaster that embeds itself in everyday life:

> Uranium mining slices off mesas and dumps toxic waste in mammoth radioactive tailings. Poor women in the Southern Hemisphere abandon newborns in trash cans while children in the North, of which there are almost none, disappear. Torture videos, sadomasochistic pornography, drugs of every sort, and high-powered automatic weapons command lucrative global markets. Rich retirees build golf courses and canals in the Arizona desert that drain millions of gallons of water from underground aquifers while undocumented workers from Mexico die of dehydration trying to cross the border to find work. […] A thriving international trade in body parts from living donors in poor nations stocks Western hospitals and laboratories with human flesh to save the rich and satisfy the curiosity of scientists. Hollywood moguls film holy places on the earth that indigenous people have asked them not to violate. And artificial biospheres are in the works to provide elites with a new habitat once the planet Earth has been destroyed.[29]

In correlating economic exploitation, environmental harm, and settler occupation, Silko illustrates how settler colonialism is itself a form of ecological crisis. Indeed, as Colville journalist Dina Gilio-Whitaker writes, the "origin of environmental injustice for all Indigenous peoples is dispossession of land in all its forms."[30] *Almanac of the Dead* emphasizes the ongoing nature of such dispossession in, for instance, linking colonial expansion to contemporary mining and extraction practices. Gilio-Whitaker frames land dispossession as an ongoing process, one that "is continually reproduced in what is inherently a culturally genocidal structure that systematically erases Indigenous peoples' relationships and responsibilities to their ancestral places."[31] Indigenous theorists emphasize that settler colonialism is an ongoing structure rather

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[29] Elizabeth Ammons, *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet* (University of Iowa Press, 2010), 168.
[30] Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Beacon Press, 2019), 21.
[31] Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows*, 21.

than a bounded historical event.[32] In its overtly revolutionary tone, *Almanac of the Dead* demonstrates that the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their land is not only a cultural, affective, and spiritual relationship, but also a political one encompassing claims to territoriality and sovereignty.[33]

With these ongoing and structural harms in mind, Silko employs ordinary weather to depict the embedded and immanent quality of climate disaster. In *Almanac of the Dead*, even seemingly incidental descriptions of weather evoke settler-colonialism: “The skies to the west were hazy blue, which might signal extra pollution drifting down Interstate 10 from Phoenix, or it might be the first traces of rain clouds drifting off the Sea of Cortés. But the judge didn’t worry about those clouds; he worried when he saw purple, big-headed clouds that billowed into anvil shapes thousands for feet high.”[34] Silko connects such ordinariness to the diffuse toxicity of traffic and, through the Sea of Cortés, the violent legacy of the conquistadors. Elsewhere, she makes this link even more explicitly: in a chapter called “Vampire Capitalists,” the Yaqui activist La Escapía traverses the streets of Mexico City “in a daze at what she was seeing—at the immensity of wealth behind the towers of steel and concrete and glass, built on this empire for

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[32] Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows*, 31; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 45; Stephanie J. Fitzgerald, *Native Women and Land: Narratives of Dispossession and Resurgence* (University of New Mexico Press, 2015), 47. For an extended critique of the multicultural liberal state and the politics of recognition, see Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

[33] Through treaties, bloodshed, and outright theft (including the Indian Removal Act of 1830), settlers occupied ever-expanding tracts of land during the nineteenth century. After these forcible relocations, some of which are now known as the Trail of Tears, the Indian Appropriations Act of 1851 authorized the first reservations as a means of containing Indigenous nations and making land available for white settlement. Widespread resistance took many forms, but this official process of dispossession continued: the Dawes Act of 1887 subdivided and privatized what was previously a communal land base. In addition to forcing Indigenous peoples into a capitalistic and proprietary relationship with the land, the Dawes Act entailed a massive loss of land that totaled over 90 million acres. Maureen Konkle, *Writing Indian Nations: Native Intellectuals and the Politics of Historiography, 1827-1863* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2; Fitzgerald, *Native Women and Land*, 52.

[34] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 649-50.

European princes."[35] Walking a city that bears the legacy of colonialism, La Escapía observes the weather. "In the filthy, smog-choked streets with deafening reverberations of traffic jammed solid around her, La Escapía had laughed out loud. This was the end of what the white man had to offer the Americas: poison smog in the winter and the choking clouds that swirled off sewage treatment leaching fields and filled the sky with fecal dust in early spring."[36] Traffic might seem commonplace and routine, a misery to be endured, but Silko indexes the immediate effects of massive fossil-fuel consumption that the everyday commute demands. The passage also evokes what Nixon calls the "elusive violence of delayed effects," as La Escapía notes a seasonal rhythm to the effects of fossil-fuel combustion and the industrial treatment of human waste.[37] Framing Mexico City as an "empire for European princes," finally, *Almanac of the Dead* links the ongoing disaster of toxic weather to the bloody history of colonialism.

As she inherits weather, a key realist trope, Silko revises it within a narrative logic of Indigenous cosmopolitics. A term mostly associated with philosopher of science Isabel Stegners and ecocritic Joni Adamson, Indigenous cosmopolitics names "extended personhood, including interspecies being and animate-inanimate connections."[38] The weather narratives in *Almanac of the Dead* constitute a cosmopolitical sense of extended personhood, thus offering a climate-change narrative in which the Earth and its atmospheric systems wield an active response to settler-colonial destruction and dispossession. For instance, Silko describes a Yupik medicine woman who alters the clouds and wind in Alaska by rubbing a televised weather map with a

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[35] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 312.
[36] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 312.
[37] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 3.
[38] Mascha N. Gemein, "'Seeds Must Be Among the Greatest Travelers of All': Native American Literatures Planting the Seeds for a Cosmopolitical Environmental Justice Discourse," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 23, no. 3 (2016): 494. For an extended discussion of cosmopolitics, see also Joni Adamson, "Indigenous Literatures, Multinaturalism, and *Avatar*: The Emergence of Indigenous Cosmopolitics," *American Literary History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 143–62; and Isabel Stegners, "The Cosmopolitical Proposal," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy.*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (MIT Press, 2005), 994–1004.

weasel pelt. "The old woman had gathered great surges of energy out of the atmosphere, by summoning spirit beings through recitations of the stories that were also indictments of the greedy destroyers of the land. With the stories the old woman was able to assemble powerful forces flowing from the spirits of ancestors."[39] The woman uses such energy, such "indictments of the greedy destroyers of the land," on a satellite weather map.

> She rubbed the weasel fur rapidly over the glass of the TV screen, faster and faster; the crackling and sparks became louder and brighter until the image of the weather map on the image of the weather map on the TV screen began to swirl with masses of storm clouds moving more rapidly with each stroke of the fur. Then the old woman had closed her eyes and summoned all the energy, all the force of the spirit beings furious and vengeful. […] White steam rises off the river, but gray sea fog rushes over it, rapidly filling the river bank to bank.[40]

The woman changes not just the televised representation of the weather, but the weather itself. With the power of explicitly decolonial spirits, the medicine woman disrupts the satellite map to in turn disrupt the weather, thus "turn[ing] the destruction back on its senders."[41] With this narrative of "a piece of weasel fur, a satellite weather map on a TV screen, and the spirit energy of a story," Silko insists that weather is not passive but agential, not benign but retributive, not positivist but spiritual.[42] She thus revises weather, a key realist trope, to insist upon its cosmopolitical force.

Almanac of the Dead also employs cosmopolitical weather to critique contemporary land-management practices as an ongoing form of settler colonialism. Max Blue, a mafioso who moves with his family from New Jersey to Tucson, exemplifies the corrupt and violent mechanisms of power at play in *Almanac*. Max spends all his time in Tucson golfing, where he

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[39] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 156.
[40] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 157.
[41] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 156.
[42] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 424.

"arrange[s] executions from the golf course."[43] Golf courses, which serve as a microcosm of corruption in Silko's novel, carry acute environmental costs: Silko writes that they "require millions of gallons of water every year" in an already drought-stricken region.[44] As Christina Boyles and Jane Griffith both note, golf courses constitute a locus for Silko's critique of settler-colonial water management practices in the U.S. Southwest.[45] But while golf courses represent a paradise for the wealthy, they are not immune to the vagaries of weather: while Max exemplifies a sense of moral, legal, and natural impunity, Silko comments that "[e]lectricity no longer obeyed the white man."[46] Indeed, it is through a thunderstorm that the cosmopolitical weather takes its revenge on Max's greed and brutality. With a thunderstorm approaching, other characters evacuate the course and leave him at the fourteenth hole. Readers later learn that "Max had been struck by lightning on the golf course," killed immediately as "[t]he lightning had melted the putter in Max Blue's hand."[47] The weather's retributive force kills Max, and this retribution unfolds on the golf course—an exemplary site of both corrupt violence and environmental harm. Silko reinforces an Indigenous conception of weather as active and agential, in this case framing it as explicit retribution for settler-colonial violence and unfettered resource extraction.

As Silko rewrites the realist trope of weather, then, its cosmopolitical force draws from Silko's broader formulation of the "earth's power."[48] Tacho, a Tohono O'odham character who

[43] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 234.
[44] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 650. Emphasizing the environmental costs of water practices, Max's wife Leah is a real-estate developer determined to create a verdant community in the Arizona desert—at any environmental cost. "They are in the real estate business to make profits, not to save wildlife or save the desert. It was too late for the desert around Tucson anyway." Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 274.
[45] Christina Boyles, "Writing Water, Writing Life: Silko as Environmental Activist," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 39, no. 3–4 (2018): 26; Jane Griffith, "Law, Literature, and Leslie Marmon Silko: Competing Narratives of Water," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 29, no. 2 (2017): 36.
[46] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 511.
[47] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 655, 751.
[48] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 424.

serves as a spy for the resistance, "blamed all the storms with landslides and floods, all the earthquakes and erupting volcanoes, on the angry spirits of the earth fed up with the blood of the poor."[49] He traces disastrous storms and other natural disasters to cosmopolitical agency rather than to a sense of the earth as inert. Similarly, the Yaqui activist Angelita La Escapía proclaims: "We are the army to retake tribal land. Our army is only one of many all over the earth quietly preparing. The ancestors' spirits speak in dreams. We wait. We simply wait for the earth's natural forces already set loose, the exploding, fierce energy of all the dead slaves and dead ancestors haunting the Americas."[50] La Escapía understands natural disasters—"the earth's natural forces"—not as geologic or meteorological phenomena but instead as the haunted presence of chattel slavery and settler colonialism. Such formulations exemplify Silko's rejection of linear time: the novel's cyclical temporality, writes Ann Brigham, "signifies its rejection of Euro-American capitalist and colonialist ideology."[51] Speaking from a nonlinear Indigenous temporality, Tacho and La Escapía understand weather as the force of still-present "dead ancestors" and "angry spirits of the earth" who bring disaster upon the settler world.

Central to Silko's conception of Indigenous resistance is the Ghost Dance and its temporal nonlinearity.[52] In the Ghost Dance prophecy, environmental disaster (including calamitous weather) brings an end to settler colonialism. Estes explains that Wovoka's prophecy "envisioned the end of the present world through settlers' erasure from the earth, and the return of human and nonhuman relations that had been vanquished by colonialism. It was foretold that,

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[49] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 336.
[50] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 518.
[51] Ann Brigham, "Productions of Geographic Scale and Capitalist-Colonialist Enterprise in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no. 2 (2004): 304.
[52] The Ghost Dance was an Indigenous religious and political movement that spread from the Paiute holy man Wovoka in 1889: Wovoka's prophecy foresaw that the dance would restore Indigenous lands and sovereignty, reuniting dancers with dead ancestors and the bison (more commonly called buffalo) that settlers had slaughtered to near-extinction. The U.S. military responded to the Ghost Dance with the massacre of almost 300 Lakota people in what became known as the Wounded Knee Massacre.

at some unspecified time in the near future, a cataclysmic event—such as an earthquake or whirlwind—would wipe the United States off the surface of the earth."[53] The Ghost Dance embodied an Indigenous framework of nonlinear time: Estes calls it "a utopian dream that briefly suspended the nightmare of the 'wretched present' by folding the remembered experience of a precolonial freedom into an anti-colonial future."[54] A central motif in *Almanac of the Dead*, the Ghost Dance informs how Silko situates climate activism within a long history of Indigenous resistance. Late in the novel, the Lakota eco-activist and lawyer-poet Wilson Weasel Tail situates the Ghost Dance as an ongoing practice of resistance.

> You think there is no hope for indigenous tribal people here to prevail against the violence and greed of the destroyers? But you forget the inestimable power of the earth and all the forces of the universe. You forget the colliding meteors. You forget the earth's outrage and the trembling that will not stop. Overnight the wealth of nations will be reclaimed by the Earth. The trembling does not stop and the rain clouds no longer gather; the sun burns the earth until the plants and animals disappear and die. The truth is the Ghost Dance did not end with the murder of Big Foot and one hundred and forty-four Ghost Dance worshipers at Wounded Knee. The Ghost Dance has never ended, it has continued, and the people have never stopped dancing; they may call it by other names, but when they dance, their hearts are reunited with the spirits of beloved ancestors and the loved ones recently lost in the struggle.[55]

While Weasel Tail describes an apocalyptic vision of climate change in which "the sun burns the earth until the plants and animals disappear and die," such an apocalypse takes what Estes calls "the end of the present world" as the grounds for Indigenous restoration and sovereignty. Weather is thus not only agential but also central to an ongoing history of Indigenous resistance to settler colonialism.

At the center of this resistance, in *Almanac of the Dead*, is the eponymous Mayan almanac. Silko's fictional codex predicts the end of settler colonialism and thus grounds the

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[53] Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 122.
[54] Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 124.
[55] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 724.

novel's articulation of climate justice.[56] In the novel, a Yaqui woman named Yoeme gives her twin granddaughters Lecha and Zeta the almanac and tells them to protect the extant fragments.[57] "Yoeme and others believed the almanac had living power within it, a power that would bring all the tribal people of the Americas together to retake the land."[58] Silko interpolates Lecha's translation of the almanac, beginning with the following observation: "After days of searing heat the Earth no longer cools at night. The wind carries away the heat for a few hours, and by dawn the air is motionless, and faint warmth emanates from luminous pale ridges of limestone and tufa. The lower skirt leaves of jojoba and brittle bushes are parched white and shriveled from drought."[59] Multiple temporalities buttress this description of climate change, from the *longue durée* of its predicted scale of change to the dailiness of solar cycles (night, dawn). It is, moreover, a site-specific description of the earth's warming: from the geologic specificity of limestone and tufa to the botanical precision of jojoba and brittlebush, the ancient almanac describes not a universal phenomenon but rather a local one. Later in *Almanac of the Dead*, having translated much of the fragmented codex, Lecha reasons that "[o]nce the earth had been blasted open and brutally exploited, it was only logical that the earth's offspring, all of the earth's beings, would similarly be destroyed. […] As the prophecies had warned, the earth's weather was in chaos; the rain clouds had disappeared while terrible winds and freezing had

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[56] As Robert M. Nelson notes, Silko invokes "the Great Calendar of the Mayan tradition, a way of reckoning time that involves creating and preserving a pictorial image (or "glyph") of each of the faces of time in the understanding that time is a life form that periodically renews itself through transformation." Robert M. Nelson, "Leslie Marmon Silko: Storyteller," in *Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, ed. Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 253.
[57] Silko adds a fourth fictional codex to the three known extant Mayan codices, named for the cities where they are held: the Codex Dresden, the Codex Madrid, and the Codex Paris. For Silko's discussion of these codices, see Leslie Marmon Silko, "Books: Notes on Mixtec and Maya Screenfolds, Picture Books of Preconquest Mexico," in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, 155–65.
[58] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 569.
[59] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 173.

followed burning, dry summers."[60] The interpolated text thus emphasizes the relationship between changing weather patterns and the exploitative mechanisms of settler colonialism and, throughout *Almanac of the Dead*, descriptions of weather fuel the novel's righteous anger and representation of Indigenous resistance.

As a point of transition between *Almanac of the Dead*'s depiction of weather and *Future Home of the Living God*'s depiction of domesticity, I will end with a brief discussion of how domesticity appears in Silko's 1991 novel. Indeed, it is through the ancient almanac that Silko extends the political charge of everyday life to the domestic sphere.[61] In addition to the domestic and agricultural rhythms that the almanac form evokes, Lecha and Zeta's translation of the almanac unfolds within the home. The almanac draws Lecha back to Tucson; she realizes that "[i]t was time to go back home. She had made Yoeme a promise. She had to take care of the old notebooks."[62] In such formulations, Silko frames the translation and conservation of this revolutionary text as a form of caretaking. When Lecha begins her work on the almanac, Silko emphasizes the domestic context of this work. "Lecha reached under the pile of pillows beside her and found the wooden ammunition box with the notebooks and fragments of the old manuscript."[63] The juxtaposition of textures in this passage—pillows and wood—emphasizes the confluence of the domesticity of the bed and the militarism of the ammunition box. As Lecha begins work on the almanac, Silko details the femininity and circumscription of her surroundings. "She was up and out of the pale blue satin nightgown and into her white garden

[60] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 718.
[61] I am not the first to discuss the political charge of the domestic in Silko's novels: for instance, Stephanie Li analyzes the political valence of domestic activities in Silko's 1999 novel *Gardens in the Dunes*. The role of the domestic in *Almanac of the Dead*, however, remains underrecognized in the scholarship. Stephanie Li, "Domestic Resistance: Gardening, Mothering, and Storytelling in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 21, no. 1 (2009): 18–37.
[62] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 142.
[63] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 244.

caftan. Shoes were not important. She seized the wooden ammunition box full of notebooks and the loose squares of the old manuscript; the strange parchment got drier and more curled each season until someday the old almanac would reveal nothing more to an interpreter. She headed for the chaise lounge on the patio."[64] Soft fabrics again contrast with the texture of the ammunition box that holds the ancient codex; by suggesting that "shoes were not important," Silko insists that the conservation of the text is a form of work to be completed within the domestic sphere. The chaise lounge, a furniture style associated with repose, further inscribes the association between the home and the almanac's political stakes. Domesticity, then, does not foreclose but rather accompanies the militant radicalism of the ancient almanac. As the almanac itself weathers, its parchment growing "drier and more curled each season," Silko evokes the simultaneous erosion and resistance of Indigenous weathering. I turn now to a discussion of how *Future Home of the Living God* employs disaster realism to politicize domestic routine.

4.2 Disaster Realism and Domestic Routine in *Future Home of the Living God*

Louise Erdrich opens *Future Home of the Living God* in an apocalyptic key, a "perilous time in the history of creation."[65] Evolution has mysteriously begun running backward, children are born with undeveloped organs, and Cedar, the novel's protagonist, finds herself pregnant. A theocratic regime takes over the United States and begins to capture and incarcerate pregnant people. The dystopian emphasis of this narrative indexes Erdrich's commitment to disaster realism, an aesthetic mode in which realism valences nonrealist narratives to emphasize the ordinariness of disaster. Indeed, in an encounter between Cedar and her Ojibwe birth family, Erdrich emphasizes a sense of disaster becoming ordinary. Spurred by these overlapping crises,

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[64] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 245.
[65] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 4.

Cedar resolves to seek out her Ojibwe birth family. "[W]hat's going to happen?" Cedar asks her Ojibwe stepfather, Eddy.

> "Indians have been adapted since before 1492 so I guess we'll keep adapting."
> "But the world is going to pieces."
> "It is always going to pieces."
> "This is different."
> "It is always different. We'll adapt."[66]

Thus, even as Erdrich offers an explicitly apocalyptic novel, she unsettles the singularity of this apocalypse and emphasizes that, for many Indigenous peoples, the world is "always going to pieces." Indigenous history of the past 500 years is a history of iterative apocalypse: Anishinaabe scholar Lawrence Gross, for instance, writes that the privatization and vast dispossession of the 1887 Dawes Act "marked the end of the world as the Anishinaabeg had known it."[67] Yet Eddy's emphasis on adaptation also gestures to an ongoing process of weathering. Thus, like *Almanac of the Dead*, *Future Home of the Living God* depicts the breakdown of settler colonialism and land dispossession: after white settler flee, Cedar's Ojibwe relatives begin the process of retaking the land that was stolen during the Dawes Act. Like Silko's investment in climate change and its vengeance upon settlers, Erdrich's novel identifies how iterative apocalypse makes possible new forms of Ojibwe land sovereignty.

And yet, although *Future Home of the Living God* opens in an explicitly apocalyptic key, it offers a disaster realism that traces a process of disaster becoming ordinary. While "white-centric narratives tend to categorize apocalypse as a singular future event," writes B. Jamieson Stanley, *Future Home of the Living God* casts apocalypse as "iterable… and even as quotidian."[68] During the first section of the novel, in which the evolutionary disaster unfolds,

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[66] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 31.
[67] Lawrence W. Gross, "The Trickster and World Maintenance: An Anishinaabe Reading of Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 17, no. 3 (2005): 49.
[68] Stanley, "'Cornmeal Pancakes to Stave Off the Apocalypse'": 835.

Cedar comments upon an uncanny and pervasive sense of ordinariness. Traveling north to meet her Ojibwe family for the first time, Cedar observes: "Everything that I am seeing—the pines, the maples, the roadside malls, insurance companies and tattoo joints, the ditch weeds and the people in the houses—is all physically balanced on this cusp between the now of things and the big, incomprehensible change to come. And yet nothing seems terribly unusual."[69] Erdrich's realist description indexes details—trees, malls, companies—that foreground a sense of the ordinary even in the context of a nonrealist disaster. After her first and only ultrasound, Cedar visits her parents and then drives home. "The whole neighborhood has lost power. Which is not unusual, and yet it seems that something much worse has happened, for my graceful childhood street has the stillness of an ancient dream, the muted perfection of a 'before' disaster photograph. I try to shake off this disquiet. But all the way back along the calm, empty South Minneapolis streets, I feel that, instead of the past, it is the future that haunts us now."[70] Cedar perceives the ordinariness of the "graceful childhood street" nonlinearly, both as an "ancient dream" and as a present that is haunted by the future. As the novel pursues disaster realism, then, it casts ordinary life within a framework of nonlinear time.

Like *Almanac of the Dead*, *Future Home of the Living God* foregrounds Indigenous conceptions of temporal nonlinearity in its depiction of iterative apocalypse. Cedar's embodied experience of the evolutionary crisis emphasizes its nonlinearity. She first realizes the severity of both the biological catastrophe and the theocratic state takeover when she visits the doctor for her first ultrasound. Gazing at the image, Cedar notes that "[t]he room yawns open. I have the sensation time has shifted, that we are in a directionless flow of time that goes back down infinite tunnels and corridors, as if this one room in the hospital has opened out onto the farthest

[69] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 15.
[70] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 70.

stretches of the universe."[71] Consequently, while *Almanac of the Dead* claims that the "past times were not lost," and instead "[t]the days, months, and years were living beings who roamed the starry universe until they came around again," *Future Home of the Living God* literalizes such narrative nonlinearity by describing a speculative society in which evolution runs backward.[72] As Estes notes, "Indigenous notions of time consider the present to be structured entirely by the past and by our ancestors. There is no separation between the past and the present."[73] Grace Dillon (Anishinaabe) identifies nonlinear time in Indigenous slipstream, a genre that offers "pasts, presents and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream."[74] Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte, meanwhile, locates forms of "spiraling time" in many Indigenous ontologies, including "narratives of cyclicality, reversal, dream-like scenarios, simultaneity, counter-factuality, irregular rhythms, ironic un-cyclicality, slipstream, parodies of linear pragmatism, [and] eternality".[75] To emphasize a temporally nonlinear understanding of apocalypse, then, is to foreground Indigenous narrative forms and to insist upon the continuity between past and present iterations of settler-colonial harm.

Key to Erdrich's disaster realism is her ambient narrative of climate change. *Future Home of the Living God*, published in 2017, has only recently begun to garner critical attention for its engagement with climate change.[76] For Conrad Scott, the biological and evolutionary reversals of Erdrich's novel "are very likely tied to anthropogenic climate change," though he

[71] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 56.
[72]Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 313.
[73] Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 14.
[74] Dillon, "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms," 3.
[75] Whyte, "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene": 232.
[76] Emma Schneider has written, about Erdrich's earlier novels, that they "share an attention to healing and relationships within rural communities of color that is often absent in environmental texts that focus on individualistic wilderness narratives or alarm-raising cli-fi." Emma Schneider, "Listening to Landscapes: Ecological Healing in *The Birchbark House* and *Mama Day*," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 27, no. 1 (2020): 47.

acknowledges that the narrative itself makes this connection only tenuously.[77] I begin this section by demonstrating how, in addition to valancing the novel with an ongoing sense of environmental crisis, *Future Home of the Living God* subtly links climate change to the racialized politics of settler colonialism. Like Lerner's *10:04*, Erdrich's novel depicts the environmentalism of the rich to reveal how white and wealthy families avoid the worst effects of climate change. And yet, despite this initial association with the white bourgeois family, Erdrich also rewrites domesticity to probe its relevance for insurgent politics. Both Stanley and Megan Cannella have recently observed the primacy of the ordinary in *Future Home of the Living God*.[78] "While sudden events do rupture characters' worlds," writes Stanley, "the vector of ordinary food creates a sense of continuity with historical and present violences, situating apocalypse as recurring and even quotidian rather than singular."[79] The second half of this section therefore turns to Erdrich's rewriting of realist domesticity, and I demonstrate how *Future Home of the Living God* rewrites this realist trope to situate it within a tradition of Indigenous feminist resistance.

Although climate change initially seems like a descriptive backdrop to other, more acute crises, Erdrich subtly relates the warming seasons to settler colonialism and its racialized logics. Cedar reflects, "We're well into September and soon I hope will come a slight edge of coolness in the morning air, just a hint of the fall I remember from childhood. This used to be my favorite time. As for winter, that is gone, a ghost season."[80] Although Cedar also comments on hotter

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[77] Conrad Scott, "'Changing Landscapes': Ecocritical Dystopianism in Contemporary Indigenous SF Literature," *Transmotion* 8, no. 1 (2022): 18.
[78] Stanley, "'Cornmeal Pancakes to Stave Off the Apocalypse'": 826-45; Megan E. Cannella, "Dreams in a Time of Dystopic Colonialism: Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* and Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*," in *Displaced: Literature of Indigeneity, Migration, and Trauma*, ed. Kate Rose (Taylor & Francis, 2020), 111–20.
[79] Stanley, "'Cornmeal Pancakes to Stave Off the Apocalypse'": 842.
[80] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 129-30. Emphasis in original.

summers, it is not surprising that a novel depicting Minnesota—the U.S.'s third-coldest state—elegizes the disappearance of winter. Glen and Sera, her white adoptive parents, teach Cedar to remember winter as a prelapsarian "heaven," but Cedar's own framework of the "ghost season" accrues more sinister overtones.[81] The trope of a lost world takes on a different significance for Cedar, an Ojibwe character, given the historical apocalypse of settler colonialism. Further, in describing winter as a "ghost season," Erdrich evokes the Ghost Dance. The novel's elegy for winter intensifies in its final pages, again alluding to these intertwined phenomena:

> And I can remember how I was there the last time it snowed in heaven. I was eight years old. I can feel it now. The cold seizing my body, its clarity. The snow poured out of the sky. Come! Sera cried. Glen shouted, Snow! […] The air went still and still the snow kept falling. People drifted by like white shadows and their voices were the cries of lost children. Snow filled the air and kept on coming, like ecstasy, in shifting curtains. It didn't stop. […] In the streets, over sidewalks, in the gutter, it snowed. And I am in it, falling down in it, shoveling snow into my mouth and throwing snow up in the air, pelting snow at my mother and my father. Whiteness fills the air and whiteness is all there is. I am here, and I was there. And I have wondered, ever since your birth. Where will you be, my darling, the last time it snows on earth?[82]

Referencing both Cedar's positionality as an Ojibwe woman raised in the settler world of her adoptive parents, as well as Indian termination policies that sought to make "whiteness… all there is," this depiction of the snowstorm evokes forces of racialized violence.[83] To deepen this association, Erdrich pairs Cedar's ecstasy in the snow with a sense of bodily threat or vulnerability: Cedar remembers the cold "seizing [her body]," and "falling down" in the snow. Given the legacy of boarding schools that abducted Indigenous children and forcibly separated them from their families, languages, and cultures—not to mention *Future Home*'s theocratic regime that separates children and parents—the image of "lost children" in the snowstorm takes

[81] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 326.
[82] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 332.
[83] Reinforcing this overwhelming whiteness is the fact that Cedar experiences this final snowstorm with Glen and Sera, her white adoptive parents. (Although she was raised to believe that Sera and Glen were her adoptive parents, Cedar eventually learns that Glen is her biological father.)

on a sinister tone. Like Silko, although more subtly, Erdrich depicts climate change's diffuse effects through a grammar of settler colonialism.

The politics of settler colonialism also valence the novel's representation of realist domesticity. Initially, *Future Home of the Living God* associates domesticity with an environmentalism of the rich. Cedar and her family, at the beginning of the novel, remain largely insulated from the ecological and political disasters of the 21st century. This is a position that Cedar attributes to the fact that her adoptive parents are "shrewd as only… trust-fund liberals can be."[84] She lists the crises that they have adroitly navigated: "I remember how Glen and Sera often congratulate themselves on their prescience regarding the tech and housing bubbles, then Iraq, the Mideast, Afghanistan, then Russia, the increasing chaos of our elections, and our first winter without snow, among others things, and how good their track record is on political idiocies and wars and natural disasters."[85] In this formulation, climate change is among many crises that the wealthy can navigate through a combination of good fortune and shrewdness; Cedar even evokes her parents' smug attitude. Indeed, although Glen and Sera work in ostensibly laudable professions—both lawyers, she advocates for reproductive rights and he for the environment—Erdrich emphasizes that their "prescience" is both product and process of possessive individualism. "They rely on substantial trust funds, which they shifted back to bonds way back before the technology stock bubble burst the second time, then shifted out again, into real estate, then flipped their houses just before the last housing crash."[86] Sera and Glen's shrewdness and deft navigation of contemporary disasters, that is, functions mostly to shore up their own wealth. Indeed, Sera responds to the evolutionary disaster with an eye to profit: "We

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[84] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 63.
[85] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 9.
[86] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 63.

should invest in one of those genetics companies. They'll try to turn this thing around with gene manipulation. It will be big."[87] In this formulation, climate change presents itself to white and wealthy settlers more as a financial opportunity than as a collective disaster. It evokes the "shock doctrine" that Klein identifies in the wave of privatization that followed Hurricane Katrina, as well as the "compromise of liberal environmentalism" that Bernstein has theorized and which I discuss in Chapter 2.

Indeed, Erdrich tracks domestic behaviors that shore up the environmentalism of the rich in response to crisis. In particular, as Stanley argues, "ordinary food" and cooking constitute a protective and individualist response to environmental crisis. "Sera has always loved presenting Glen and me with artful snacks," Cedar explains, "with made-from-scratch chicken soup when we were sick, with bowls of garlic mashed potatoes when we were sad, and now, with cornmeal pancakes to stave off the apocalypse."[88] Such forms of bourgeois domesticity function as a withdrawal from unfolding crises, much like Sera's comment that the evolutionary disaster presents an opportunity to invest in genetics companies. As Stanley writes, "[c]arrying on with everyday cooking and eating can constitute an emotional retreat to the domestic, downplaying emergency; in this register, the eating patterns of Erdrich's white characters stand in for failures to address climate change, biodiversity loss, and other catastrophes."[89] Beyond cooking, *Future Home of the Living God* initially positions domestic cleaning as an emotional retreat. Cedar reflects that Sera "has taught me to clean the way she cleans and I have recognized it as one thing given to me through nurture, a tool I can use to stave off despair. I've soothed anguish and fought madness by minutely scraping a stain on the counter or a burnt-in bit of soot on the side

[87] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 60.
[88] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 67.
[89] Stanley, "'Cornmeal Pancakes to Stave Off the Apocalypse'": 835.

of a pot."[90] The echo between "stave off despair" and "stave off the apocalypse" correlates Sera's acts of cooking and cleaning as individualistic responses to crisis.

Erdrich reworks the novel's relationship to realist domesticity, however, as the nonrealist apocalypse intensifies in scope and degree. As a theocratic state emerges in the wake of the evolutionary disaster, the regime begins to track and abduct the rare pregnant people who seem to have weathered the reproductive crisis.[91] When Cedar hides from the authoritarian regime, she shelters in homes—first her own, and then that of her Ojibwe family on the reservation—and domestic routines keep her alive. While in hiding, she adopts Sera's recourse to domestic habit: "I have constructed a minute order in my day that I follow to the letter—not just as best I can, but *no matter what*."[92] The day-to-day repetition enables Cedar to maintain her cover, and she describes it in detail:

> I get up each morning at seven a.m. That is the first act of will, the supreme one. […] I go into the bathroom and wash my face with a washcloth. I bury my face in the wet weave and it is often here that fear overcomes me. […] Will this be the day that I am discovered and taken away? And what then? What would they do to you? I use a cleansing cream to wash my face. […] One hour of stretches, weights, resistance bands, yoga from a book. If I do the hour the good endorphins will be released in my brain and I will be able to stick to the day's redemptive routine. If I don't do it, I don't know. I don't want to know. Finally, when my exercises are finished, I clean one room of the house besides the kitchen, which I always clean. I clean just one room because I need to rotate them, I need them to actually get dirty.[93]

Erdrich interweaves the central crisis of dystopia—the control and abduction of pregnant women and babies—with an emphasis on routine. Cedar emphasizes that, without the strict nature of this routine, she "will curl up in a fetal ball […] for the next three months, or might sink into an

[90] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 266.
[91] As Kaylee Jangula Mootz argues, Erdrich intimates that only non-white people can conceive. Kaylee Jangula Mootz, "The Body and the Archive in Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 31, no. 2 (2020): 268.
[92] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 128. Emphasis in original.
[93] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*,128-30.

undifferentiated state or go catatonic."[94] As the novel's nonrealist dystopian intensifies, then, Sera's form of bourgeois domestic coping proves central to Cedar's ability to weather a crisis of unprecedented nature and magnitude. *Future Home of the Living God* therefore situates realist description not just as an aesthetic means to depict how disaster becomes ordinary but also to depict weathering.

As Erdrich extends domesticity to the explicit act of resistance, she also rewrites realist description within Ojibwe craft traditions. After weeks hiding in her home, the theocratic state abducts Cedar and incarcerates her in a prison-hospital with other pregnant women. At first drugged and despairing, Cedar gradually builds a resistance network within the hospital and eventually uses a finger-woven ladder to escape. Erdrich first establishes the importance of these craft traditions when Cedar visits her Ojibwe family on the reservation. Sitting with her grandmother Mary Virginia in the family home, Cedar observes her at work. "She shows me that she is making a belt, finger-weaving it from strands of yarn, braiding a sash with such precision that it will look like it was created on a loom. She pulls the flat piece of weaving taut and frowns at it, picks at an invisible flaw. Here's how to do it, she says, and makes my fingers follow hers."[95] Although Cedar is assimilated into settler culture, with little familiarity of Ojibwe teachings beyond what she's read, Mary Virginia's craft techniques provide both her first embodied introduction to Ojibwe tradition and ultimately a technique of resistance. In the hospital, Cedar and her roommate (Tia Jackson, or, as Cedar nicknames her, "Spider Nun") compose a schedule that allows them to clandestinely unravel their hospital blankets and finger-weave them into an escape ladder. Their alliance begins when Cedar wakes in the night to find Tia weaving: "Old-time finger-weaving. Grandma Mary Virginia's trick. An Ojibwe method of

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[94] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 128.
[95] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 38.

creating fancy sashes, wall hangings, belts, tumplines, and ropes."[96] Cedar and Tia repurpose the domestic skill of finger-weaving to escape. Weaving at night until her fingers "chafe and bleed," the art of weaving becomes an act of resistance.[97] "Over and over, as I pick apart and wind, unknot, unravel, wind, by the inch, by the hour, by the piece, by the skein, my freedom and your life, I repeat these lines that seem so perfect to me. I'm working on *the secret ladder*."[98] Ojibwe finger-weaving—a domestic craft—becomes the very grounds for Cedar to seek freedom, as she eventually does when she and Tia break the hospital window and lower themselves to the ground on their woven ladder.

Cedar's notebook, which she turns into a scrapbook, finally offers a metaliterary reflection on the correspondence between feminized craft traditions and climate narratives. Immediately after Cedar's grandmother Mary Virginia teaches her to finger-weave, she begins to tell stories. "Listening, I realize that her tales are so practiced that Grandma Virginia probably tells and retells them all the time. And here I am, new audience! I doesn't matter who I am. Her memory shifts. The narrative is all that matters. She seems to have lived out many versions of her own history."[99] Erdrich here emphasizes the iterative nature of storytelling, both in terms of their retelling and in terms of the correspondence between narrative and life. Much later, hiding after her escape from the prison-hospital, Cedar keeps her mind busy by creating her own record. "In the facility's medicine cabinet I find a bottle of glue, and a pair of tiny nail scissors. Fitting and gluing my little tag-bag of treasures occupies me."[100] Evoking her learned practice of cleaning to "stave off despair," Cedar details the "treasures" that she incorporates into the

[96] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 170.
[97] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 184.
[98] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 174. Emphasis in original.
[99] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 38.
[100] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 208.

notebook—and thus into the narrative of *Future Home* itself. "I have picked up bits of paper from the now and from the before, as mementos of the curious world you will be entering soon."[101] These mementos form an archive of everyday life—candy wrappers, food labels, clothing tags.[102] Again, the everyday oscillates between a shoring-up of bourgeois domesticity and the necessary work of weathering. "This notebook has become my life," Cedar reflects, "or perhaps better to say that this notebook has become the way I remain connected with my life, and with you."[103] As narrative becomes life, much like Mary Virginia has "lived out many versions of her own history," the notebook—and, consequently, *Future Home* itself—models an iterative record of an unfolding apocalypse.

Cedar's scrapbook, her repurposing of bourgeois domesticity, also meditates on the act of narrative construction itself. For in offering the novel as her protagonist's diary, Erdrich reflects the significance of reading and writing in weathering crisis. I turn now to a juxtaposition of *Almanac of the Dead* and *Future Home of the Living God* to explore how both novels offer a formal response to climate fragmentation—the partial and inferential experience of everyday apocalypse.

4.3 Climate Fragmentation: Reading and Writing the Iterative Apocalypse

Almanac of the Dead and *Future Home of the Living God* offer different models of how Indigenous novels represent everyday apocalypse: Silko employs ordinary realism to embed her social realism with an immanent sense of settler apocalypse, while Erdrich demonstrates how disaster realism reworks key realist tropes to instill disaster with ongoing and everyday temporalities. Both novels, despite their evident political and aesthetic differences, also pursue

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[101] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 207.
[102] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 207-8.
[103] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 206.

the metaliterary question of how to represent the partiality and indirection of everyday apocalypse. As I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, the experience of everyday apocalypse requires that subjects grapple with both the immediacy of climatic effects and the inference required to understand the relationship between such effects and the larger phenomenon. *Almanac of the Dead*, in its depiction of reading and textual interpretation, and *Future Home of the Living God*, in its representation of writing, foreground narrative fragmentation as one aesthetic response to the partiality of everyday apocalypse.

Almanac of the Dead takes up fragmentary forms to emphasize the uncertainty and elision of climate narrative. The novel's investment in reading unfolds through its eponymous ancient almanac, a codex that is central to *Almanac*'s formulation of iterative apocalypse. As Lecha and Zeta attempt to decode, interpret, and transcribe the codex, Silko includes passages in which the ancient text is incomplete or illegible. As such, she formally incorporates its fragmentation into *Almanac of the Dead* itself.[104] The materiality of the codex provides its own historical account: "all of the material transcribed into the notebooks had been on thin sheets of membrane, perhaps primitive parchment the Europeans had taught the native Americans to make. Yoeme had told them the skins had been stretched and pressed of horse stomachs, and the little half-moon marks were places the stomach worms had chewed."[105] Rather than position the almanac's materiality as secondary to its content, Silko instead suggests that such materiality captures the very history of settler colonialism. Its pages record an object biography: "For hundreds of years, guardians of the almanac notebooks had made clumsy attempts to repair torn pages. Some sections had been splashed with wine, others with water or blood. Only fragments of the original pages remained, carefully placed between blank pages; those of ancient paper had

[104] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 573.
[105] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 246.

yellowed, but the red and black painted glyphs had still been clear."[106] This object biography, a history of preservation and destruction, casts into question the very authenticity of the almanac. "Not even the parchment pages or fragments of ancient paper could be trusted; they might have been clever forgeries, recopied, drawn, and colored painstakingly."[107] To read the ancient almanac is to materially encounter the past, and Silko emphasizes the primacy of this encounter with the myriad organic materials that the codex contains: horses' intestines, stomach worms, wine, blood. The manuscript encodes the past both in its material immediacy and in its incompletion and loss. In a climate narrative that embeds ongoing disaster in realist depictions of everyday life, the almanac emphasizes the impossibility of complete representation.

Although *Future Home of the Living God* emphasizes writing more than reading, it also offers a formal manifestation of climate fragmentation. Erdrich positions the novel as Cedar's diary that she writes to one day share with her unborn son, thus inscribing the present act of writing within the novel's narrative. Consequently, *Future Home of the Living God* offers writing as a strategy for recording and memorializing the iterative apocalypse. "Where will you be, my darling," Cedar asks in the novel's final sentence, "the last time it snows on earth?"[108] A historian of the present, Cedar transcribes her own memories of Minnesota's last snow, her parents' memories of winter, and the imagined future time when Earth will finally see no snow. This braiding of lived experience, intergenerational memory, and future projection distills the iterative nature of climate apocalypse as an accumulation of both cataclysmic and ordinary losses. *Future Home of the Living God*, in its diaristic form, thus offers writing as a durational, extended, and multitemporal form for capturing crises of the same nature. Yet it also emphasizes

[106] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 569.
[107] Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 570.
[108] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 332.

the fragmentary quality of written narrative, for the entries that precede Cedar's final meditation on snow record her inability to write. Held hostage by a brutal theocratic regime, she records:

> December
> Extremely weak. But still here.
>
> January
> They say my heart is damaged.[109]

Her return to long-form prose in the proceeding entry implicitly attests to her survival, to her weathering of twinned biological and political catastrophes. But Erdrich, in emphasizing the attrition of Cedar's writing, also evokes the limits of representation more broadly. In a novel that ends with the explicit invocation of climate change, the possibility of fully representing everyday apocalypse remains unrealized. *Future Home of the Living God* thus preserves not only the nature of these catastrophes but also their resistance to representation.

As Cedar writes to an imagined future reader, *Future Home of the Living God* conceptualizes writing as a relational act: Cedar writes and distributes a Catholic magazine called *Zeal*, her Ojibwe stepfather Eddy works on a 3,000-page book, and multiple characters write and pass clandestine notes to defy the theocratic authorities. These relational narratives bind together the present tense of writing with the imagined and anticipated future tense of someone else reading the words. From the beginning of *Future Home*, Cedar considers herself a historian of the present. "Whatever is actually occurring, there is constant breaking news about how it will be handled—speculation, really, concerning what comes next—which is why I am writing an account. Historic times! There have always been letters and diaries written in times of tumult and discovered later, and my thought is that I could be writing one of those."[110] Cedar balances the unknowability of the future, intensified during a time of crisis, with the desire to

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[109] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 327-8.
[110] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 3.

leave a historical account for future readers. The diary also becomes a way for her to weather the extended and polymorphous crises that she experiences: she describes it as a "chronicle that I am writing for you, in spite of you, and for myself, to calm myself."[111] Indeed, throughout much of the novel, Cedar remains ambivalent about whether she writes the chronicle for her son or for herself. Erdrich thus offers writing as a means of weathering, in spite—or perhaps because—of its fragmentary qualities.

Taken together, then, *Future Home of the Living God* and *Almanac of the Dead* interrogate what it means to read, write, and weather the iterative apocalypse. The novels amplify the inherently multitemporal and fragmentary nature of reading and writing. They thus suggest the importance of textuality in apprehending climate change, a vast and diffuse "hyperobject" that contains pasts and futures of incomprehensible scale.[112] Jesse Oak Taylor, in a discussion of how Victorian novels encode climate, writes that "[t]he novel is well suited to the challenges of modeling climate as both a historical and meteorological condition because its expansive scale and diffusive complexity intersect with the temporality of reading. […] Reading novels, in other words, involves the kind of suspended and associative thinking necessary for modeling the experience of climate as an aggregation of atmosphere effects."[113] What *Future Home of the Living God* and *Almanac of the Dead* suggest, then, is that this perceptual multitemporality extends beyond reading to also include acts of writing, transcription, and interpretation. Such multitemporality models a catastrophe that is iterative and unfolding rather than singular and coherent. And yet, if climate names an abstraction that is impossible to perceive in its entirety, Erdrich and Silko offer texts that investigate and foreground this

[111] Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*, 228.
[112] Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 3.
[113] Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (University of Virginia Press, 2016), 14.

impossibility. Both novels amplify incomplete and fragmentary textual records and, in so doing, gesture to the incompleteness inherent to all narrative forms. Rather than attempt to resolve the epistemological problems of iterative apocalypse—and of climate more broadly—*Almanac of the Dead* and *Future Home of the Living God* instead respond with fragmentary forms.

Their respective investments in reading and writing also help to clarify the formal and political differences between *Almanac of the Dead* and *Future Home of the Living God*. Silko's novel, with its emphasis on historical materiality and textual interpretation, is ambitious in its historical scope. Although set in a social-realist present, the novel incorporates myriad historical phenomena as diverse as Geronimo's biography, uranium mining on Pueblo land, the Vietnam War, and the 1983 Korean Air Lines Flight 007 disaster. *Almanac of the Dead*, that is, weaves together environmental harm, colonial violence, and U.S. imperialism through an explicit engagement with the historical record. Such historical engagement shapes the righteous anger and political intensity that saturates Silko's novel. As *Almanac of the Dead* limns a series of iterative apocalypses, weathering connects Indigenous revolutionary movements to a long history of resistance. Silko's novel, as scholars have frequently noted, anticipates much of the Indigenous organizing of the 2010s. From the Dakota Access Pipeline protests (#NoDAPL) in 2016 and 2017 to the ongoing First Nations Idle No More protest movement, contemporary Indigenous resistance emphasizes a long history of sovereignty. In explicitly connecting Indigenous environmental activism to what Estes calls "another kind of accumulation, one that is not always spectacular, nor instantaneous […] the tradition of Indigenous resistance," Silko's emphasis on the historical record takes the ongoing past as the grounds to transform the present.

Given the contemporary surge of Indigenous activism, it is perhaps surprising that *Future Home of the Living God* engages more elliptically with both climate change and Indigenous

sovereignty. If Silko responded to the Reagan-era neoliberalism and U.S. imperialism of the 1980s, the political context of Erdrich's novel instead draws from a Trump-era feminism that saw Women's March attendees wearing red-and-white costumes to evoke Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Many reviewers drew comparisons between Erdrich's novel and Atwood's earlier one, for both depict theocratic states that gain power during reproductive disasters; as Anita Felicelli comments in a review of Erdrich's novel, however, *Future Home of the Living God* diverges from *The Handmaid's Tale* insofar as it recognizes that the pre-dystopian world is no utopia.[114] From Erdrich's subtle discussion of the Dawes Act to her oblique engagement with global warming, *Future Home*'s iterative apocalypse begins long before the evolutionary catastrophe arrives. Erdrich laces snowstorms with invocations of the Ghost Dance, ordinary objects with the global reach of overseas manufacturing, and daily routines with the threat of capture and incarceration: *Future Home of the Living God*, like Lerner's implicated realism, subtly reveals how ordinary events and objects are bound up in systems of violence. Such subtlety resonates, too, in *Future Home*'s narrative of weathering. In investigating seemingly innocuous domestic practices, like cleaning, weaving, and scrapbooking, Erdrich instead emphasizes their intergenerational transmission and considers how they help characters to weather extended and durational disasters. *Future Home of the Living God*, as Erdrich's engagement with the act of writing suggests, is more interested in a speculative future than a historical past. But its formulations suggest not an elision of the past but rather a history of the present. Reading Silko and Erdrich together, then, suggests the vitality of both past- and future-oriented narrative accounts of weathering: Indigenous weathering, like the iterative

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[114] Anita Felicelli, "Louise Erdrich's Dystopian Dreams in 'Future Home of the Living God,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 12, 2017, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/louise-erdrichs-dystopian-dreams-in-future-home-of-the-living-god/.

apocalypse to which it responds, represents extended, polyvalent, and nonlinear forms of temporality.

This chapter marks my transition to disaster realism, a subcategory of minor realism that infuses nonrealist narratives with realist elements. As I demonstrated through an analysis of realist domesticity in *Future Home of the Living God*, such realist elements represent a form of acute crisis that eventually becomes mundane. In my fourth and final chapter, then, I extend this discussion of disaster realism to trace the surprising realist elements in two canonical climate narratives: Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. While scholars and critics often invoke these two novels to typify the incommensurability between literary realism and climate-change representation, I instead focus on a fourth experience of everyday apocalypse—walking—to demonstrate that their efficacy as climate narratives instead relies on a shared realist element. Through these perambulatory narratives, moreover, I demonstrate disaster realism's purchase on narratives of climate embodiment and disability, as well as its utility for apprehending climate along axes of gender and race.

Chapter 5 – Walking: Embodied Apocalypse and Nonrealist Disaster in Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

My novel shows us a society that did not prepare itself to deal with Global warming because the warming isn't just an incident like a fire, a flood, or an earthquake. Global warming is an ongoing trend—a trend that feeds on itself—boring, lasting, deadly.
Octavia E. Butler, notecards on *Parable of the Sower* (ca. 1992)

We need stories in which getting where you're going—individually or as a society—mostly happens step by step.
Rebecca Solnit, "Slow Change Can Be Radical Change" (2024)

No story is wholly science fiction.
Paul Kincaid, "On the Origins of Genre" (2003)

In the previous chapter, examining Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*, I introduced the second half of this dissertation and its focus on disaster realism. As I explain in the project's introduction, disaster realism inflects nonrealist narrative conceits with realist elements; the effect is a sense of acute disaster that eventually becomes ordinary. In this chapter, I extend this focus on disaster realism and apply it to two prominent climate novels: Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). I bring these two novels together not just due to their prominence but also because they share an investment in *walking* as an experience of everyday apocalypse. Slow, banal, and repetitive, walking indexes a state in which disaster becomes ordinary. Drawing upon scholars of disability, however, I demonstrate how both Butler and McCarthy refigure walking as a contingent and interdependent act. As such, *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road* offer surprising rejoinders to mainstream environmentalism. Reading the particularities of race, gender, and disability across the two

novels, I parse walking as a form of everyday apocalypse that foregrounds the embodied proximity of climate and its effects.

A realist mode embedded in a speculative setting, walking typifies disaster realism in *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road*. Both novels, through their perambulatory narratives, depict the ongoing and oft-undramatic qualities of environmental disaster. Characters in both works walk along roads and highways once built for cars; they consult old road atlases to plot their journeys; they ration food and water. As they walk slowly, repetitively, and painfully, their journeys become a struggle to meet the most basic of human needs. Yet both *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road* situate these realist scenes of walking in speculative dystopias. In the collapse of civil society and petromodern economies, both authors offer walking as a mode that climate crisis and political violence necessitate. Although they evoke the close tie between environmentalist writing and walking, then, Butler and McCarthy also offer a rejoinder to the environmentalist canon. Their characters walk neither for leisure nor to reduce their carbon footprint; instead, the novels invoke narratives of climate refugees. Consequently, *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road* anticipate recent ecocritical writing that emphasizes both the utility and limitations of walking as a mode of apprehending climate change. Min Hyoung Song, for instance, formulates walking as an "everyday-life project" that both lessens his reliance on fossil fuels and focuses his attention upon the warming climate.[1] But so too does he reflect upon the contingency of this practice, writing: "How different the same experience would be if I were a woman, or of a difference race, or gay, or transgender, or out of work, or younger, or older, or living in a place where mobility is severely circumscribed (like Gaza). How different the

[1] Song, *Climate Lyricism*, 96. Song borrows the idea of the "everyday-life project" from Andrew Epstein's 2017 monograph *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

experience would be if I were in a wheelchair or had to lean on crutches or were blind or deaf or neurodivergent."[2] Song captures both the immediacy and contingency of walking on a warming planet.

To briefly introduce Butler's perambulatory novel, *Parable of the Sower* offers a representation of walking that distills the novel's sense of attenuated disaster yet decenters the individual "bodymind."[3] Written in the form of diary entries, *Parable of the Sower* details the life of a young Black woman named Lauren Oya Olamina as she responds to intertwined environmental and political crises—drought, crop scarcity, economic inflation, and political authoritarianism. The beginning of *Parable of the Sower* finds Lauren living with her family in a middle-class community outside of Los Angeles; she flees after the community is attacked and her family killed. Lauren travels north, walking on highways, and attempts to spread her new religion of "Earthseed." Throughout this perambulatory narrative, *Parable of the Sower* casts walking as an ongoing, rote, and repetitive response to environmental disaster. As Lauren gathers an intergenerational and multiracial group of traveling companions, however, the novel also offers an intersubjective and therefore contingent model of walking. Lauren's disability—hyperempathy syndrome, which forces her to feel the proximate pain of others—means that she shares the embodied experience of her companions. In framing hyperempathy within the history of chattel slavery in the United States, moreover, Butler insists on historical continuity rather than rupture. Butler therefore probes the racial and political conditions of everyday apocalypse, refusing the notion of an absolute break between her writerly present and the novel's speculative

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[2] Song, *Climate Lyricism*, 96.

[3] I borrow the term "bodymind" from disability studies scholar Margaret Price, who draws upon materialist feminism to articulate the interwoven nature of mind and body. Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 2. Sami Schalk employs the term to discuss *Parable of the Sower*. Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Duke University Press, 2018), 89.

future. Alys Eve Weinbaum argues that "the power of Butler's engagement with the new dystopian genre lies in its refusal of clear-cut divisions between old and new dystopias, past and present. Rather than mapping historical ruptures, Butler exposes historical continuities […] she reveals connections between our present and the long history of chattel slavery."[4] Like *Salvage the Bones*, which I discussed in Chapter 2, *Parable of the Sower* attends to the afterlives of slavery to counter the universalizing bent of the term "Anthropocene."[5]

Whereas *Parable of the Sower* emphasizes climate change as a racialized process, *The Road* positions environmental apocalypse as a temporal rupture that defies historical understanding. McCarthy's novel opens in a postapocalyptic landscape, an unexplained disaster having laid waste to the earth's biosphere. The disaster has killed almost all plant and animal life, save for a few humans, and McCarthy's unnamed protagonists are a father and son who navigate this ruined landscape. They walk south, through a landscape that resembles Appalachia, in search of a milder winter and the distant hope of safety and food. Although *The Road* takes place in a speculative future as opposed to the realist past of his previous novels, McCarthy's oeuvre coalesces around its overt interest in masculinity and rugged individualism.[6] Moreover, while novels like *Parable of the Sower* and *Future Home of the Living God* amplify a sense of prelapsarian dystopia—a sense that what came before apocalypse was itself dystopic—*The Road* also offers a deep nostalgia for what it calls "the richness of a vanished world."[7] Such nostalgia

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[4] Alys Eve Weinbaum, "The Afterlife of Slavery and the Problem of Reproductive Freedom," *Social Text* 31, no. 2 (2013): 50.
[5] As I have already mentioned, there are a host of critiques of this term, particularly focusing on its obfuscation of colonialism and capitalism. See, for instance, Moore, "Anthropocene or Capitalocene?", 1–13; Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene": 159–65; and Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*.
[6] The notion of "rugged individualism," popularized through Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 "frontier theses" and Herbert Hoover's 1928 presidential campaign, drew from frontier mythologies of Manifest Destiny, individual self-sufficiency, and minimal government intervention.
[7] McCarthy, *The Road*, 146.

is most visible through the novel's rituals around consumerism and survivalism.[8] And yet, a deeper examination of McCarthy's perambulatory narrative complicates the rugged individualism and masculinist nostalgia with which it is typically associated. *The Road* has been surprisingly generative for scholars of disability, as I discuss, especially as it depicts a world in which signifiers of (dis)ability no longer obtain. Moreover, the novel rewrites canonical perambulation narratives to instead represent the contingency of the walking body and to unsettle the morality typically associated with able-bodiedness. So too, as I demonstrate, *The Road* probes the social and environmental costs of mobility and unsettles the sense of infrastructure as a neutral backdrop to everyday life. Finally, in perhaps its most significant rejoinder to mainstream environmentalism, McCarthy's novel renounces possessive and strictly familial ethics of care.

After tracing forms of disaster realism in *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road*, exploring the divergent politics of their respective perambulatory narratives, I turn to an investigation of how these two novels critique environmentalist discourse. Mainstream environmentalism, as I will discuss, has long granted walking a privileged position as both an environmental encounter and ethic. Reading Butler and McCarthy alongside the disability studies scholars who elucidate their depictions of walking, then, I consider these novelists and their rejoinder to mainstream environmentalism. In offering walking as an experience of everyday apocalypse, and in drawing upon disaster realism to do so, *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road* suggest how the aesthetics of minor realism not only represent unequal life on a warming planet but also chart a new path for how to articulate it.

[8] The much-noted scene in which the father finds a can of Coca Cola and offers it to his son is one such example; McCarthy writes that "he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can and then handed it to the boy" McCarthy, *The Road*, 22.

5.1 Intersubjective Walking and Infrastructural Environmentalism in *Parable of the Sower*

Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* opens with a meditation on everyday apocalypse: the night stars were brighter decades ago, Lauren's stepmother tells her, because of "lights, progress, growth, all those things we're too hot and too poor to bother with anymore."[9] Stars in the night sky now index the degradation of social, economic, and environmental systems. Lauren later reflects: "I've changed my mind. I used to wait for the explosion, the big crash, the sudden chaos that would destroy the neighborhood. Instead, things are unraveling, disintegrating bit by bit."[10] At this moment in the novel, Butler's teenaged protagonist still lives with her family in the middle-class enclave of Robledo, a walled community that has largely managed to keep extreme drought, food scarcity, and groups of arsonists at bay. The deferred arrival of catastrophe eventually comes, with an attack on Robledo that constitutes an epochal break for the novel. And yet, through disaster realism, Butler emphasizes how even such catastrophe eventually becomes a durational state of emergency. Following the attack on Robledo, *Parable of the Sower* evolves into a road novel: following Lauren, as she escapes from her hometown and traverses California's highways on foot, Butler employs disaster realism to emphasize the ongoing and undramatic qualities of economic, political, and environmental disaster. Rather than flatten the acuity of climate change and its effects, however, such ongoingness instead emphasizes the uneven distribution of environmental disaster along axes of race, gender, and disability.

Many scholars identify, in Janet Fiskio's words, that "*Parable of the Sower*'s intervention in the context of climate justice is its depiction of the mutually reinforcing forces of

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[9] Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Grand Central, 1993), 5.
[10] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 123.

privatization, white supremacy, and climate destabilization."[11] But while many literary critics acknowledge *Parable of the Sower* as a text of everyday apocalypse and others interrogate its generic implications, my aim here is to bring the two approaches together. I argue that Butler employs disaster realism as a formal strategy both for representing the ongoing nature of climate change and for depicting the ongoing relationship between climate change, chattel slavery, and other enduring forms of racialized environmental harm. As Butler frames walking (a realist conceit) through Lauren's speculative disability (a nonrealist one), *Parable of the Sower*'s perambulatory narrative offers a hybrid of realist and nonrealist modes. Hyperempathy inflects the novel's walking narrative by centering the contingency and interrelatedness of the body, ultimately offering a rejoinder to the environmentalist canon.

In its depiction of acute drought, intensifying food scarcity, rising sea levels, and things "unraveling, disintegrating bit by bit," *Parable of the Sower* is a foundational climate novel. Stephanie LeMenager argues that Butler's novel inaugurates a literary-aesthetic turn to the "everyday Anthropocene," which she characterizes as "enduring crises that never quite come to a head."[12] Indeed, Butler casts climate change as a state of stasis or suspension. "People have changed the climate of the world," Lauren comments in the early pages of the novel. "Now they're waiting for the old days to come back."[13] Waiting here manifests denial and passivity, but it also identifies a phenomenological experience of climate change as mundane and ongoing. Shelley Streeby argues that "Butler's speculative archiving and imagining of worlds that were significant distortions of her present are connected and make her an important early climate

[11] Janet Fiskio, *Climate Change, Literature, and Environmental Justice: Poetics of Dissent and Repair* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 72.
[12] LeMenager, "Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre," 224.
[13] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 57.

change intellectual."[14] LeMenager and Streeby exemplify a broader critical recognition of Butler's foundational contribution both to the emerging category of climate novels as well as to cultural conceptions of climate change more broadly.

My own archival work in the Octavia E. Butler Papers at the Huntington Library reveals how thoroughly Butler theorized climate change not as cataclysm but as ongoing and everyday harm.[15] Butler's research materials and "commonplace books" (notebooks in which she jotted manuscript notes, observed vignettes, shopping lists, and other miscellany) reveal a decades-long interest in the durational and attenuated qualities of the "greenhouse effect" and "global warming." In 1989, in an early draft of *Parable of the Sower*, she wrote: "And let us <u>not</u> forget the ecological catastrophes waiting in the wings or already in progress. Southern California will be dryer, warmer, dirtier, poorer, sicker."[16] Butler recognized climate change as a phenomenon that was "already in progress," drawing upon extensive research in science and policy to resist framing it as a futural or far-off phenomenon. That same year, in a commonplace book that listed the "greenhouse effect" alongside other environmental harms, Butler wrote in the margins: "Everybody's disaster is Nobody's disaster."[17] This aphorism distills Butler's hypothesis about persistent inaction and inattention in response to climate change. An early theorist of climate change, its diffuse temporality, and the inaction that follows "nobody's disaster," she wrote around the same time:

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[14] Shelley Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making Through Science Fiction and Activism* (University of California Press, 2019), 72.
[15] I follow Sami Schalk in leaving Butler's capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and underlining unedited, and without the "sic" designation. Schalk offers an excellent discussion of the political implications of such a choice. Sami Schalk, "Experience, Research, and Writing: Octavia E. Butler as an Author of Disability Literature," *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 6, no. 2 (2017): 156-7.
[16] Octavia E. Butler, "Commonplace Book (Large)" (Huntington Library, August 16, 1989), OEB 3243, Octavia E. Butler Papers.
[17] Octavia E. Butler, "Commonplace Book (Large)" (Huntington Library, November 22, 1989), OEB 3244, Octavia E. Butler Papers.

> Consider the deterioration of the Ozone layer, the problem of global warming, and the serious problem of pollution of air, water, and soil. Consider soil erosion in our vast agricultural areas, Caliche build up in the southwest, and simple mismanagement in the Midwest. All these things seize our attention briefly, noisily. Politicians and business people respectively reassure and deny. Bush tells us that since scientists disagree over the timing & consequences of global warming, he needs do nothing but give them time for study—rather like the way Reagan gave scientists time for more study until they could agree on every aspect of acid rain—or until hell froze over.[18]

In these reflections, Butler emphasized a key element of everyday apocalypse as I have theorized it in this dissertation: the political establishment wields the lack of scientific certainty to undermine efforts toward regulation and decarbonization. Butler understood that climate change often lay beneath the threshold of legibility, that it required close and extended forms of attention, and that its diffuse culpability stymied political action.

As she observed her present and theorized about the proximate future, Butler drew upon disaster realism to pen a novel that oscillates between realist and speculative modes. Although she is best known as an author of science fiction, Butler herself emphasized the realist qualities of *Parable of the Sower* and its 1998 sequel. "The idea in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*," she wrote in an afterword to the first novel, "is to consider a possible future unaffected by parapsychological abilities such as telepathy or telekinesis, unaffected by alien intervention, unaffected by magic. It is to look at where we are now, what we are doing now, and to consider where some of our current behaviors and unattended problems might take us."[19] Working from Butler's own recognition of her realist tendencies, scholars have discussed the interplay of speculative and realist modes in *Parable of the Sower*.[20] Lawrence Buell argued that the novel "reads more like a work of realistic, even naturalistic fiction than like an extrapolative

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[18] Octavia E. Butler, "Commonplace Book (Large)" (Huntington Library, 2004 1990), OEB 3246, Octavia E. Butler Papers.

[19] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 367, 290.

[20] Mary E. Papke, "Necessary Interventions in the Face of Very Curious Compulsions: Octavia Butler's Naturalist Science Fiction," *Studies in American Naturalism* 8, no. 1 (2013): 79–92; Jennifer Terry, "Time Lapse and Time Capsules: The Chronopolitics of Octavia E. Butler's Fiction," *Women's Studies* 48, no. 1 (2019): 26–46.

fantasy," and noted "the novel's dissent from […] hyperexuberant speculative fiction."[21] Jeff Menne identifies the "implicit claim on realism in both *Parable* novels."[22] Kevin Modestino focuses on the events that unfold in *Parable of the Sower* rather than its formal qualities: "for many African Americans," he writes, "the environmental harms of Butler's future Southern California can look more like realities of the present than prophecies of the future."[23] For these critics, the novel's intertwined realist and speculative modes alternately make political claims about the immanence of apocalypse and suggest the porosity of genre itself.

Butler draws upon disaster realism in her depiction of walking, offering a hybrid between realist perambulation and speculative disability. Walking distills *Parable of the Sower*'s sense of attenuated disaster. After fleeing Robledo, Lauren joins a mass of people traveling north on foot. "Walking hurts," she writes in one journal entry.

> I've never done enough walking to learn that before, but I know it now. It isn't only the blisters and sore feet, although we've got those. After a while, everything hurts. I think my back and shoulders would like to desert to another body. Nothing eases the pain except rest. Even though we got a late start, we stopped twice today to rest. We went off the freeway, into the hills or bushes to sit down, drink water, eat dried fruit and nuts. Then we went on. The days are long this time of year.[24]

The pain that Lauren catalogues is one of cumulation, the result of many repeated actions. She offers a series of mundane verbs—"sit down, drink water, eat dried fruit and nuts"—that emphasize the habitual nature of their days. So too does Butler emphasize a sense of ongoing and attenuated time, as Lauren and her companions Zahra and Harry "went on" aided by "days [that] are long." Within this sense of rote and ongoing time, however, remains an acute sense of risk.

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[21] Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life*, 314.
[22] Jeff Menne, "'I Live in This World, Too': Octavia Butler and the State of Realism," *MFS - Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no. 4 (2011): 717.
[23] Kevin Modestino, "Octavia Butler's *Parable* Novels and Genealogies of African American Environmental Literature," *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 9, no. 1 (2021): 71.
[24] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 179.

"People get killed on freeways all the time," Zahra reminds Lauren, mostly due to fights over increasingly scarce water.[25] The group travels with a sense of omnipresent danger, one that Butler accentuates through the inescapable sound of people walking. One night, Lauren and her companions camp "out of sight, but not out of hearing of the shuffling hordes of people on the move. I think that's a sound we'll hear for the whole of our journey."[26] Butler frames Lauren's journey north as a collective experience, one that is characterized primarily by the rote and listless sounds of "shuffling." Consequently, Butler invokes a realist mode to depict walking as the attenuated experience of survival in a speculative dystopia: although the ills of this dystopia is are not precisely new, Butler imagines their intensification in an increasingly warming world.

Scholars have begun to explicate the central role that walking plays in the novel, mostly focusing on environmental disaster, but have yet to recognize the perambulatory narrative's relevance for disability studies.[27] Lauren's hyperempathy, which causes her to feel the observed pain (or occasional pleasure) of others, materially changes the way that she is able to walk. Forced to "walk all day" on highways, the sheer number of people and frequency of violence—the "ambient misery of the highway"—mean that Lauren encounters near-constant pain.[28] Early in this journey, Butler indexes how Lauren's ability to walk remains contingent on the pain or lack thereof for those around her. "A woman alongside us collapsed. I got no impression of pain from her, except at the sudden impact of her body weight on her knees. That made me stumble,

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[25] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 178.
[26] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 197.
[27] Frederick Buell's analysis of *Parable of the Sower* represents an early analysis of the novel's perambulatory narrative. Anne Stewart describes walking in *Parable of the Sower* as "a profoundly decolonial and anticapitalist activity capable of generating new modes of being human." Jeremy Withers notes Butler's ambivalence toward walking: while the novel critiques the forms of overextraction and neglect that make walking necessary, it also imagines a near-messianic quality to the forms of community that emerge on the road. Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life*, 317; Stewart, *Angry Planet*, 160; Jeremy Withers, *Futuristic Cars and Space Bicycles: Contesting the Road in American Science Fiction* (Liverpool University Press, 2020), 165-8
[28] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 242, 240.

but not fall. The woman sat where she had fallen for a few seconds, then lurched to her feet and began walking again, leaning forward under her huge pack."[29] Even relatively banal instances such as this early one, then, with a stranger's collapse making Lauren "stumble, but not fall," suggests that Lauren's walk is mediated by others rather than independent. Butler thus employs minor realism to refigure walking as a shared, interdependent, and contingent act.

As *Parable of the Sower* progresses, Butler expands this mediation to consider how Lauren's own pain affects other "sharers."[30] Later, when Lauren's group is attacked, she experiences intense secondhand pain: "I was lost, no more good for anything. I died with someone. The shooting stopped. I died with someone else."[31] Alongside this secondhand pain, however, is a bullet that "plowed a furrow straight through the flesh" of her side.[32] This wound affects Lauren's ability to walk, and she tells the others, "I feel like I'm walking on stilts. I don't know if I can keep the usual pace."[33] Thus calling attention to the contingency of Lauren's ability to walk, Butler also emphasizes how this wound affects the other sharers in Lauren's group. "You didn't give me any pain when we were walking," Emery, a fellow hyperempath, tells Lauren, who reflects: "She settled down as though she felt better. No doubt she did. If I moaned and groaned, I'd have all four of them moaning and groaning. The kids might even bleed along with me."[34] Butler thus attends not only to how others' pain affects Lauren but also how Lauren's pain affects others. Within the group, then, emerges a collectively formulated model of ability and disability that physically affects the way that they walk together. Through the

[29] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 177.
[30] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 178.
[31] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 297.
[32] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 298.
[33] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 300.
[34] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 306.

speculative elements of hyperempathy, then, *Parable of the Sower* emphasizes a collective and contingent model of walking.

As *Parable of the Sower* inextricably links walking with hyperempathy, Butler's manuscript drafts demonstrate how she theorized disability and climate change in tandem. In her early notes for *Parable of the Sower*, Butler wrote that "We must begin with an event of mutual Biological Rejection. A sick person (not too sick or perhaps suffering <u>intermittent</u> attacks) spots and takes action concerning some 'sickness' of the planet, newly manifested."[35] Butler soon rewrote these attacks as hyperempathy, explicitly framing this speculative illness as a disability. "Truth to tell: P.P. [pain and pleasure] is, for the m.c. [main character] who spreads it, like a handicap."[36] The margins of Butler's handwritten drafts reveal that she was preoccupied with disability and climate change simultaneously. In one draft, from 1991, Butler wrote "From the time L.O. was an infant, she cried if she saw someone hurt. She bled if she saw someone bleeding."[37] On the same page, in the margins, Butler noted in red ink: "The redwoods were dying—the great giant sequoias—dying. They were not the oldest living things on Earth, but they were the most majestic—vast, towering, living cathedrals. Dying."[38] She seems to have been reflecting on both drought and sea-level rise in other marginalia on the same page, from "Phoenix area in general, Las Vegas, Palm Springs, Los Angeles, San Diego thirsting, dying" to "Indonesia—much gone, Maldaves—Gone, Everglades—gone."[39] These juxtaposed notes point, suggestively, to the way in which Butler conceptualized hyperempathy and climate change in

[35] Octavia E. Butler, "Commonplace Book (Large)" (Huntington Library, June 13, 1989), OEB 3242, Octavia E. Butler Papers.
[36] Octavia E. Butler, "Commonplace Book (Large)" (Huntington Library, November 9, 1988), OEB 3242, Octavia E. Butler Papers.
[37] Octavia E. Butler, "Commonplace Book (Large)" (Huntington Library, March 27, 1991), OEB 3262, Octavia E. Butler Papers.
[38] Butler, "Commonplace Book (Large)," OEB 3262.
[39] Butler, "Commonplace Book (Large)," OEB 3262.

tandem: Butler understood climate change as a process of chronic and intersubjective pain, one that she theorized through a speculative disability. As I will discuss in the final section of this chapter, Butler also anticipated a recent nexus between ecocriticism and disability studies.

Through hyperempathy, moreover, Butler's novel situates walking within a history of racial capitalism. *Parable of the Sower* explicitly frames the political conditions of its dystopia as the return of the past, especially as the novel tracks enslavement and the company towns that emerge in the wake of political and environmental collapse. Weinbaum writes that Butler's fiction "offers a philosophy of history that articulates the long history of racial capitalism, including chattel slavery, with contemporary biocapitalism under conditions of neoliberalism," and descriptions of hyperempathy in *Parable of the Sower* suggest that Butler conceptualizes such contemporary biocapitalism through a vocabulary of disability.[40] As they encounter self-liberated travelers on the road, Bankole (a fellow climate refugee and Lauren's lover) comments: "This country has slipped back two hundred years."[41] In these encounters with self-liberated people, Butler emphasizes the relationship between hyperempathy and enslavement. Emery, a self-liberated woman, tells Lauren that "sometimes they [enslavers] pay more for people who have it [hyperempathy]."[42] In guessing that some of these freedom seekers share her hyperempathic condition, Lauren muses: "I did notice something odd: that tentativeness and touchiness—not wanting to be touched, I mean. And they were all slaves. My brother Marcus once said what good slaves sharers would make."[43] Aware of the material risks of revealing her disability, Lauren carefully conceals her hyperempathy and strategically reveals it only to those she trusts. "A person who knows what I am can hurt me, betray me, disable me with little

[40] Weinbaum, "The Afterlife of Slavery and the Problem of Reproductive Freedom": 50-51.
[41] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 305.
[42] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 305.
[43] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 299-300.

effort."[44] Reading Lauren's strategic disclosurse of her disability, Therí Pickens points out that "she often exists in a constant state of becoming where she is […] disabled to some and nondisabled to others"; the novel, consequently, emphasizes the fluidity of such identity categories.[45] Hyperempathy, argues Pickens, contributes to "a larger concern with and critique of identity essentialism within Butler's oeuvre."[46] As she situates hyperempathy—and, by extension, walking—within the afterlives of chattel slavery, Butler offers a political and embodied theory of perambulation.

The particularity of walking in *Parable of the Sower*, especially along lines of race and disability, contributes to the novel's rejoinder to mainstream environmentalism. Modestino argues that "Butler's reversal of aesthetic expectations about the natural world's meaning signals a different mode of environmental thinking than the mainstream environmental movement had produced up to the publication of the *Parable* books."[47] Indeed, although walking is a quintessential symbol of environmentalism and wilderness exploration, Butler refigures it to emphasize the porosity between built and natural spaces. Her characters in *Parable of the Sower*, for instance, walk almost exclusively on highways and roads. Lauren details her journey: "We walked down the freeway—the 188—and turned west. We would take the 118 to the 23 and the 23 to U.S. 101. The 101 would take us up the coast toward Oregon. We became part of a broad river of people walking west on the freeway."[48] In the aftermath of economic collapse and industrial attrition, highways become the primary site of perambulation in the novel. Lauren understands highways in ecological terms, as a "river," thus unsettling the distinction between

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[44] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 177.
[45] Therí Pickens, "Octavia Butler and the Aesthetics of the Novel," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 174.
[46] Pickens, "Octavia Butler and the Aesthetics of the Novel": 174.
[47] Modestino, "Octavia Butler's Parable Novels and Genealogies of African American Environmental Literature": 57.
[48] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 176.

built and natural environments not only in practice but also in vocabulary. As the novel progresses, *Parable of the Sower* more explicitly engages the environmentalist imagination to further unsettle this distinction. Resting in a partially burned campground, Lauren notes that "it's far enough from the highway not to be found by the ever-flowing river of people moving north. I found it because I had maps—in particular, a street map of much of Santa Barbara County. My grandparents' maps helped us explore away from the highways even though many street signs were fallen or gone."[49] Even off the highways, then, the group inhabits the built spaces of city streets and campgrounds. *Parable of the Sower* evokes wilderness practices like thru-hiking and camping yet refuses the notion that such practices represent pure or unfettered encounters with the natural world.[50]

Butler further unsettles the environmentalist canon by framing Lauren's intimacy with the highway system as a form of eco-knowledge. Lauren spends the first third of the novel in Robledo, where seemingly she alone recognizes the severity of the political and environmental instability that the community faces. To prepare, she assembles both a "grab-and-run pack" and an autodidactic library scrounged from her father's books.[51] These books include "[t]hree books on survival in the wilderness, three on guns and shooting, two each on handling medical emergencies, California nature and naturalized plants and their uses, and basic living: logcabin-building, livestock raising, plant cultivation, soap making—that kind of thing," as well as road maps.[52] Through her informal studies, Lauren accrues wilderness knowledge that proves

[49] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 215.
[50] The Pacific Crest Trail, a 2,650-mile thru-hiking trail that travels from southern California to the U.S.-Canada border, may have provided inspiration for the journey that Lauren undertakes in *Parable of the Sower*. Butler's archive includes a map of the trail and articles about it. Octavia E. Butler, "California (2)" (Huntington Library, ca 1984), Box 284, Folder 7, Octavia E. Butler Papers.
[50] Butler, "Commonplace Book (Large)," OEB 3262.
[51] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 79.
[52] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 57-8.

key to the group's survival. On an oceanside beach, for instance, Lauren references "a couple of books" in determining how to collect freshwater from the sand.[53] Throughout *Parable of the Sower*, Butler casts Lauren's familiarity with road maps as a similar kind of eco-knowledge. "We spread maps on the ground, studied them as we ate breakfast, and decided to turn off U.S. 101 this morning. We'll follow a smaller, no doubt emptier road inland to the little town of San Juan Bautista, then east along State Route 156. From 156 to Interstate 5. We'll use I-5 to circle around the Bay Area."[54] Lauren uses her intricate geographical knowledge to avoid cities, doing so not in pursuit of the sanctity of nature but rather for safety. As she offers a dystopia in which highway walking becomes acutely dangerous, Butler draws upon realist sources like road maps to unsettle the distinction between infrastructural and environmental knowledge.

In a novel that evokes thru-hiking, camping, and water-gathering, Butler draws upon canonical environmentalist narratives of walking and wilderness survival yet refuses to recapitulate their investment in untarnished nature and the individualist body. As Lauren and her traveling companions walk not on trails or in the backcountry but rather on major highways, Butler juxtaposes the wilderness tradition with an exemplary setting of industrial modernity. More broadly, in constituting the shared physical experience among the "sharers" in Lauren's group, Butler revises what Sarah Jaquette Ray has called the "wilderness body ideal"—as well as the gendered, racialized, and ableist connotations that accompany it.[55] This rejoinder unfolds in the novel's disaster realism, its dialectic between speculative and realist modes. While the rote, embodied act of walking and the numbered interstate system constitute a realist node in *Parable of the Sower*, Butler also frames her perambulatory narrative through a speculative disability.

[53] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 205.
[54] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 247.
[55] Sarah Jaquette Ray, "Risking Bodies in the Wild: The 'Corporeal Unconscious' of American Adventure Culture," *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 33, no. 3 (2009): 261.

Neither fully realist nor fully speculative, this oscillation between genres allows the novel to imagine a sense of apocalyptic ordinariness that does not recapitulate the romance of the independent and unmediated wilderness encounter. In the next section, I extend my consideration of everyday apocalypse, disaster realism, and perambulation to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Readers often interpret *The Road* in relation to ideologies of white male environmentalism, in contrast to *Parable of the Sower*'s potent critique of climate change as an extension of racial capitalism. While such interpretations recognize crucial differences in the racial politics of the respective novels, and their representations of everyday apocalypse, they also disregard *The Road*'s productive critique of canonical environmentalism.

5.2 *The Road*: Contingent Mobility, Rugged Individualism?

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* joins *Parable of the Sower* as a canonical climate novel: Scottish novelist Andrew O'Hagan apocryphally called *The Road* "the first great masterpiece of the globally warmed generation."[56] And yet, despite this enduring association between *The Road* and climate change, McCarthy does not specify the disaster at the center of his novel.[57] Nor does he trace its immediate ramifications, although readers learn that the boy in the novel's father-son due was born a few days after the disaster first unfolded.[58] Despite the popular association between McCarthy's novel and climate change, then, the novel stakes no definite claim on

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[56] Quoted in Johns-Putra, "'My Job Is to Take Care of You'": 519.

[57] Some scholars understand the central disaster it as a meteorite, while others note its apparently anthropogenic origins. For the meteorite theory, see Derek Thiess, "On the Road to Santa Fe: Complexity in Cormac McCarthy and Climate Change," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 20, no. 3 (2013): 532–52; Laura Wright, "Vegans, Zombies and Eco-Apocalypse: McCarthy's *The Road* and Atwood's *Year of the Flood*," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 22, no. 3 (2015): 507–24. For an interpretation that privileges anthropogenic harm, see Nell Sullivan, "The Good Guys: McCarthy's *The Road* as Post-9/11 Male Sentimental Novel," *Genre* 46, no. 1 (2013): 79–101.

[58] Climate change is only one of the disasters that McCarthy's novel obliquely evokes: the smoldering, ash-filled landscapes nod too to the aftermath of 9/11 and the contemporaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while "the mudstained shapes of flooded cities burned to the waterline" conjures the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (McCarthy 278). For an analysis of *The Road* as a 9/11 novel, see Sullivan, "The Good Guys."

climate representation. And yet Adeline Johns-Putra argues that *The Road* "owes much of its cultural impact to climate change, at least to the anxieties that have accompanied it": the novel's appeal "trades, uneasily and not always logically, on contemporary collective guilt and anxiety that any care extended by the current generation to future generations is not enough, nor is it likely to endure."[59] This reception likely originates from *The Road*'s publication in September 2006, almost exactly four months after the release of Davis Guggenheim's documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth*: Guggenheim's documentary primed U.S. readers to understand *The Road* as a climate parable. Many scholars have perpetuated this reception, considering *The Road* in relation to climate: recent scholarship explicitly frames the novel in terms of the Anthropocene and "climate apocalypse."[60]

In this chapter, I take this tension between representation and reception to typify the novel's broader ambivalence toward the possibility of collective survival, as well as toward canonical environmentalist ideologies and narratives. I begin with a discussion of the disaster realism at play in *The Road*, investigating how the novel's perambulatory narrative contributes to a sense of acute environmental disaster that eventually becomes rote and ongoing. Despite its popular association with masculinist survival narratives, I demonstrate how McCarthy's novel unsettles both ableist norms of embodiment as well as the expansionist fantasies at the core of Cold War-era transportation modernity.[61] As McCarthy reworks the fantasies of mobility at play

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[59] Johns-Putra, "'My Job Is to Take Care of You'": 520, 531.

[60] For scholarly articles that engage *The Road* as climate-change literature, see Ben De Bruyn, "Anthropocene Audio: The Animal Soundtrack of the Contemporary Novel," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 57, no. 2 (2016): 151–65; Nels Anchor Christensen, "Facing the Weather in James Galvin's *The Meadow* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, no. 1 (2014): 192–204; Sarah McFarland, "'Just Meat on Legs': The Last Stragglers of Climate Apocalypse," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 26, no. 4 (2019): 864–81; and Wright, "Vegans, Zombies and Eco-Apocalypse."

[61] Author Jess Row, for instance, writes that "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* […] has been invoked as a prophetic text by conservative commentators like Peggy Noonan, in the same way Octavia Butler's work is seen as a prophetic

in his own oeuvre, as well as conventions of nature writing, *The Road* emerges not only as a depiction of everyday apocalypse but also as a critique of the possessive futurities that environmentalism typically affords.

McCarthy's novel has also seen robust discussion of its relationship to genre. In many ways, its generic positioning is opposite to that of *Parable of the Sower*: while Butler self-identified as a science-fiction author who wrote one novel with significant realist elements, McCarthy is best known for realist and picaresque novels but seemingly took a detour to nonrealist settings with *The Road*. Many critics and scholars frame *The Road* as a work of science fiction: author Alan Warner, for instance, wrote in a 2006 *Guardian* review that its "culture references [...] obviously come from science fiction."[62] Andrew Hoberek calls *The Road* a "post-apocalyptic science-fiction story," and Bill Hardwig suggests the text's investment in an uncertain future characterizes it as science fiction.[63] While Christopher Pizzino notes that "[i]t is certainly difficult to justify a science-fictional reading of *The Road* if we see it as a portrait of selfless parental love," he argues that its ideological underpinnings in fact situate it within a speculative genre.[64] In a somewhat unlikely argument, Pizzino contends that the compromised forms of remembrance and invention at play in *The Road* make it "a novel about

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text for those of us on the left. To prepare for *The Road,* you don't need a philosophy of living in community; you need guns, ammunition, ideally a vehicle and gas to drive it—just enough resources for one person or maybe a small family, based on the cultural fantasy, going back at least as far as *Robinson Crusoe*, that one man can be an island, or, as Margaret Thatcher once said: there is no such thing as society." While *The Road* has certainly been received in this way, I follow such scholars as Johns-Putra in revealing the novel offers a significantly more complex—and ambivalent—depiction of survivalism. Jess Row, "A Novel Is Like a Camp: What Fiction Can Teach Us About Surviving the Slow Apocalypse," LitHub, March 28, 2023, https://lithub.com/a-novel-is-like-a-camp-what-fiction-can-teach-us-about-surviving-the-slow-apocalypse/.

[62] Alan Warner, "The Road to Hell," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/nov/04/featuresreviews.guardianreview4.

[63] Andrew Hoberek, "Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion," *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 485; Bill Hardwig, "Cormac McCarthy's 'The Road' and 'A World to Come,'" *Studies in American Naturalism* 8, no. 1 (2013): 39.

[64] Christopher Pizzino, "Utopia at Last: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as Science Fiction," *Extrapolation* 51, no. 3 (2010): 359.

the origin of sf [science-fiction] narratives."[65] Following the argument about genre and aesthetics that I laid out in the introduction to this dissertation, I prefer not to categorize any one novel as satisfying the conventions of a particular genre; as such, I am less interested in whether or not *The Road* qualifies as science fiction than in the generic dialectic that its version of disaster realism offers.

Even more than *Parable of the Sower*, *The Road* employs disaster realism to frame devastating environmental apocalypse through a sense of enduring banality. "The road was empty," writes McCarthy in the novel's opening pages. "Below in the little valley the still gray serpentine of a river. Motionless and precise. Along the shore a burden of dead reeds. Are you okay? He said. The boy nodded. Then they set out along the blacktop in the gunmetal light, shuffling through the ash, each the other's world entire."[66] This passage indexes the novel's key aesthetic: a nonrealist setting of absolute environmental devastation that is nonetheless narrated through realist description (the "motionless and precise river," the "dead reeds," the "gunmetal light"). As the novel's title suggests, walking is *The Road*'s central topos and realist conceit. The boy and the man "shuffle," "trudge," and "plod" through the novel.[67] McCarthy's use of disaster realism imparts the mundanity of post-apocalyptic survival, and scholars have noted that its repetitive structure and narrative circularity undermine a sense of cataclysmic disaster. (Like Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, which I discussed in Chapter 3, *The Road* unsettles the assumption that environmental catastrophe presents itself as a bounded event.) Johns-Putra suggests that McCarthy formulates loss as "an ongoing sense of being rather than a single event," thus rejecting "conventional apocalyptic structures of spectacular disaster."[68] Hoberek argues that

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[65] Pizzino, "Utopia at Last": 367.
[66] McCarthy, *The Road*, 6.
[67] McCarthy, *The Road*, 4, 13, 17.
[68] Johns-Putra, "'My Job Is to Take Care of You'":126-7.

"McCarthy radically underplays the precipitating disaster […] in order to focus on the blighted world it produces," thus offering "something like the antithesis of [a] disaster film" and its spectacles.[69] Despite this critical attention to *The Road*'s undramatic depiction of nonrealist disaster, however, scholars have yet to identify walking as a key realist topos that valences the novel's extrapolative elements.

In its depiction of walking, *The Road* extends McCarthy's career-long investment in travel narratives but refigures them through a post-apocalyptic setting and disaster realism.[70] "Long days," McCarthy writes, "Open country with the ash blowing over the road. The boy sat by the fire at night with the pieces of the map across his knees. He had the names of towns and rivers by heart and he measured their progress daily."[71] Save for the "ash blowing over the road" that indexes a postapocalyptic landscape, McCarthy's realist description in this passage would not be out of place in his Westerns such as *Blood Meridian* (1985) or *All the Pretty Horses* (1992). The open country, long days, nighttime campfires, and cartographical knowledge evoke a sense of adventure that squares with the passage's sense of "progress daily." Indeed, the novel's seemingly linear propulsion follows the novel's protagonists as they advance along the road. And yet, Johns-Putra notes, "perversely for a narrative of seeming progress, the road affords to characters and readers an almost unchanging experience of constant threat, bare survival, and eternal vigilance."[72] In recurrent scenes of walking, McCarthy emphasizes the unchanging and iterative quality of their movement. "They stood listening in the utter silence. Then they set out along the road through the gray slush, the boy at his side with his hands in his pockets. They

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[69] Hoberek, "Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion": 487.
[70] Allen Josephs writes that "[v]irtually all of Cormac McCarthy's fragmentary, often picaresque novels are road or trail novels, involving walking, riding, driving, rowing, or some combination thereof." Allen Josephs, "What's at the End of *The Road*?," *South Atlantic Review* 74, no. 3 (2009): 20.
[71] McCarthy, *The Road*, 215.
[72] Johns-Putra, "'My Job Is to Take Care of You'": 529.

trudged all day, the boy in silence. By afternoon the slush had melted off the road and by evening it was dry. They didnt stop. How many miles? Ten, twelve."[73] This passage employs formal qualities, including a repetitive sentence structure, to emphasize both the futility of the characters' ostensible progress and the unchanging quality of their journey. Late in the novel, McCarthy writes that "[t]hey went on. Treading the dead world under like rats on a wheel."[74] The rats offer an image that invokes both stasis and confinement, rather than the adventure and propulsion that the motifs of roadmaps and campfires might suggest. Through such instances of realist description, then, McCarthy employs walking as a form of movement whose repetitive quality signifies an everyday apocalypse. Describing a realist conceit in a nonrealist setting, *The Road*'s disaster realism structures a narrative in which even acute catastrophe becomes ordinary.

In addition to imbuing the novel with a sense of enduring ordinariness, McCarthy's perambulatory narrative emphasizes the contingency of mobility. As the boy and the man walk along the road, they push a repurposed shopping cart that carries their supplies and belongings.[75] McCarthy's descriptions of the shopping cart both index the end of post-Cold War consumerism and refigure the ordinary object as a mobility aid.[76] The cart breaks frequently, and even with their resourcefulness McCarthy's characters must simply tolerate its disrepair. "One of the front wheels of the cart had gone wonky. What was there to do about it? Nothing.[77]" True to the novel's formal recursion, a passage much later in the novel again finds that "[o]ne wheel on the

[73] McCarthy, *The Road*, 79.
[74] McCarthy, *The Road*, 273.
[75] Sullivan argues that this cart constitutes part of the "iconography of homelessness" that situates the narrative outside the domestic realm. Sullivan, "The Good Guys": 92.
[76] The shopping cart accrues what Raymond Malewitz calls "rugged consumerism," or a post-industrial practice of "creatively misusing, repairing, and repurposing" objects while also inscribing such practices within "myths of primal nature and rugged individualism." Raymond Malewitz, "Regeneration through Misuse: Rugged Consumerism in Contemporary American Culture," *PMLA* 127, no. 3 (2012): 527.
[77] McCarthy, *The Road*, 14.

cart had developed a periodic squeak but there was nothing to be done about it."[78] The "wonky" and squeaky wheel, as the novel progresses, echoes the stumbling and struggling gain of its characters. As the man grows sicker, he increasingly relies on the cart to remain upright. "He leaned his forehead on his arms crossed upon the bar handle of the cart and coughed. He spat a bloody drool. More and more he had to stop and rest."[79] Their walk punctuated with rest, McCarthy emphasizes the co-constitutive nature of cart and body. "Slumping along. Filthy, ragged, hopeless. He'd stop and lean on the cart and the boy would go on and then stop and look back."[80] *The Road* thus reframes the cart as a mobility aid, invoking disability narratives and refiguring the novel's perambulatory narrative into one that emphasizes contingency and eroding mobility rather than individualism.

Although it at first seems aligned with narratives of masculinist survivalism, then, *The Road*'s representation of walking ultimately offers a critique of rugged individualism. Disability-studies scholar Matthew Cella calls *The Road* a "novel about a possible future world that explodes the norms of embodiment."[81] Cella argues that the novel, as it represents the aftermath of environmental, social, and political apocalypse, depicts a world in which the very category of disability no longer obtains. Furthermore, in its distinction between well-fed cannibals and emaciated non-cannibals, *The Road* inverts the moral codes typically associated with what Cella calls "the healthy and unimpaired body."[82] Such an inversion, writes Cella, "powerfully reveals the central claim of the social model: the social-environmental context has the power to disable the impaired body. If you change the context, you can liberate the body by eliminating disability

[78] McCarthy, *The Road*, 197.
[79] McCarthy, *The Road*, 291.
[80] McCarthy, *The Road*, 291.
[81] Matthew J.C. Cella, "The Ecosomatic Paradigm in Literature: Merging Disability Studies and Ecocriticism," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 20, no. 3 (2013): 587.
[82] Cella, "The Ecosomatic Paradigm in Literature": 582.

as a defining maker of difference."[83] The ideological implications of such liberation emerge in the distinct ethical codes that the man and the boy practice. While the father prioritizes the familial unit above all other beings, refusing to consider the possibility of trusting or caring for strangers, Cella writes that "the boy implicitly understands how the ashen environment equalizes all mind-bodies that inhabit it."[84] The boy's persistent care for others reaches beyond the horizon of the nuclear family, argues Johns-Putra, suggesting "an alternative ethos in which doing the best by our children, insofar as they represent the generations of the future, requires more than simply caring about and for them alone."[85] Through its representation of disability, then, *The Road* complicates the equation of "reproductive futurism" with environmental ethics.[86] *The Road* takes walking, an action that environmentalism normatively associates with expansionism and the wilderness body ideal, as the very grounds for a critique of bodily autonomy, reproductive futurism, and possessive individualism.

Although *The Road* literalizes Bill McKibben's notion of "the end of nature," McCarthy's novel both invokes and rewrites the genre of nature writing.[87] McCarthy is, as Michael Lynn Crews notes, "strongly drawn" to nature writing: as Crews found in his archival work in the Cormac McCarthy Papers, McCarthy's notes and drafts reference Aldo Leopold and Edward Abbey among other environmental writers.[88] In *The Road*'s attention to topography, landscape, and blighted flora, McCarthy inherits a tradition of nature writing even as he depicts

[83] Cella, "The Ecosomatic Paradigm in Literature": 582.
[84] Cella, "The Ecosomatic Paradigm in Literature": 583.
[85] Johns-Putra, "'My Job Is to Take Care of You'": 534-5.
[86] Lee Edelman calls reproductive futurism "the affirmation of a value so unquestioned, because so obviously unquestionable, as that of the Child whose innocence solicits our defense." Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004), 2.
[87] Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1989) is often cited as the first public-facing book about climate change. Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (Random House, 1989).
[88] Michael Lynn Crews, *Books Are Made Out of Books: A Guide to Cormac McCarthy's Literary Influences* (University of Texas Press, 2017), 167.

near-absolute environmental devastation. “They bore on south in the days and weeks to come. Solitary and dogged. A raw hill country. Aluminum houses. At times they could see stretches of the interstate highway below them through the bare strands of secondgrowth timber.”[89] In this juxtaposition of natural and built landscapes, McCarthy weaves together hills, trees, houses, and highway. The forest constitutes the frame through which the protagonists glimpse the interstate highway, and its “bare strands of secondgrowth timber” invoke a history of resource extraction. As the “raw hill country” beside the highway first suggests, McCarthy takes the seemingly neutral topos of the interstate and emphasizes its environmental implications. *The Road*, fittingly for a novel that depicts environmental devastation, offers nature writing without nature.

Indeed, whereas *Parable of the Sower* positions infrastructural knowledge as a form of environmental knowledge, *The Road* employs realist description to probe the environmental foundations of highway infrastructure. The novel offers a critique of the Cold War consensus on technology and transportation modes, evoking a post-World War II, Eisenhower-led era of expansionist ideology and highway development. A frequent trope across both speculative narratives and realist travelogues, McCarthy’s highway descriptions index a breakdown in fantasies of Cold War modernity. Theorists of infrastructure detail how roads emerged as a privileged form of modern connectivity, participating in “the organization of a national space and the construction of a domestic market” and symbolizing that “which brings together, unites, and promotes the free flow of people and goods.”[90] In the 1950s, as Helen Burgess writes, the U.S. interstate system developed with an appeal to both progress and nostalgia; highways promised

[89] McCarthy, *The Road*, 14.
[90] Armand Mattelart, *Networking the World, 1794-2000*, trans. Elizabeth Carey-Libbrecht and James A. Cohen (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 2.

both techno-commercial development and unfettered access to the pristine countryside.[91] In *The Road*, then, highways represent not only a nexus between realist and nonrealist mode but also a critique of the modern narratives that underpin such infrastructure.

If *The Road* posits, archaeologically, that "[p]erhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made," it defamiliarizes both the extractive and political foundations of highway infrastructure. McCarthy writes:

> At night when he woke coughing he'd sit up with his hand pushed over his head against the blackness. Like a man waking in a grave. Like those disinterred dead from his childhood that had been relocated to accommodate a highway. Many had died in a cholera epidemic and they'd been buried in haste in wooden boxes and the boxes were rotting and falling apart. The dead came to light lying on their sides with their legs drawn up and some lay on their stomachs. The dull green antique coppers spilled out from the tills of their eyesockets onto the stained and rotted coffin floors.[92]

Here, McCarthy defamiliarizes the highway that his protagonists traverse; while this infrastructural network appears natural and eternal, he traces its making. *The Road* emphasizes the political implications of such construction, detailing one instance of the displacement that such infrastructure projects so often precipitate. Gruesomely, the novel identifies the environmental and financial entanglements of the "disinterred dead." Cholera, a disease that spreads primarily through contaminated water, suggests the environmental aspects of disease. More metaphorically, the "dull green antique coppers" that spill "from the tills of their eyesockets" cast the disinterment in financial terms and insist upon the interweaving of capital, environmental risk, and infrastructure. If highways evoke a midcentury fantasy of mobility and connectivity, McCarthy defamiliarizes their environmental and political costs.

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[91] Helen J. Burgess, "'Road of Giants': Nostalgia and the Ruins of the Superhighway in Kim Stanley Robinson's Three Californias Trilogy," *Science Fiction Studies* 33, no. 2 (2006): 275–6.
[92] McCarthy, *The Road*, 213-14.

In this section, I have identified how McCarthy's perambulatory narrative offers a key realist topos in a largely nonrealist novel, valancing the absolute environmental devastation of *The Road*'s post-apocalypse with a sense of enduring ordinariness. Read as an extension of his oeuvre, *The Road*'s depiction of walking seems initially to recapitulate its investments in adventure and individualism—not to mention the familial and social bonds of men. (Women seem an afterthought in most of McCarthy's novels and appear primarily as memories or as enslaved people in *The Road*.) And yet, the novel's perambulatory narrative also centers disability, offering a contingent model of walking in a post-apocalyptic world where categories of ability and disability no longer obtain. McCarthy performs a similar defamiliarizing move with this description of the highways on which his characters walk, unsettling their literary and ideological centrality and revealing their environmental and human costs. In the final section of this chapter, I bring together *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road* to elucidate the implications that these two novels bring for a disability-informed climate discourse. I subsequently end with a meditation on disaster realism and the perplexities of genre.

5.3 Minor Realism, Minor Environmentalism

Juxtaposing *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road*, and drawing upon theorists of disability, reveals the critiques of environmentalism that the novels offer. I have already begun to trace the ways in which Butler and McCarthy unsettle the norms and assumptions of environmentalism. Butler invokes wilderness tropes like camping and thru-hiking, for instance, while also unsettling the putative distinction between natural and built environments; McCarthy, meanwhile, draws upon a vernacular of nature writing yet applies it to a world in which nature has ended. Here, I wish to focus on how these novelists interrogate the long association between walking and canonical environmental narratives. It is precisely in their minor realism, I suggest, that *Parable*

of the Sower and *The Road* rewrite the perambulatory narrative to instead amplify a contingent and interdependent walking body. I thus end the chapter by considering the relationship between literary genre and a non-individualist environmentalism.

5.3.1 Rewriting the Wilderness Walk

Environmental writers have long exalted walking as the wilderness encounter *par excellence*. Through the figure of the wilderness explorer who walks, hikes, and climbs, such writers often presume that it is through self-propulsive movement that environmental experience, knowledge, and even ethics emerge. Walking preoccupied American proto- and early environmentalists like Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Perkins Marsh, and Theodore Roosevelt: it symbolized a form of mobility unfettered by modern technology and connoted, as geographer Paul Adams writes, "an experience of solitude, simplicity, and moral transcendence."[93] In this association between rugged individualism and mobility, however, environmentalist thought binds walking to colonialist and ableist ideologies. Thoreau wrote in his 1851 essay "Walking," for instance: "I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe. And that way the nation is moving, and I may say that mankind progress from east to west."[94] As Ray writes, Thoreau's essay "marries the fantasy of western escape to both colonial expansion and environmental protection in contemporary environmental thought" and makes mobility central to both settler colonialism and wilderness encounter.[95] The turn of the 20th century saw dominant American institutions besieged by anxiety about widespread

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[93] Paul C. Adams, "Peripatetic Imagery and Peripatetic Sense of Place," in *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies*, ed. Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher, and Karen E. Till (University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 193.
[94] Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays & Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherall (Library of America, 2001), 234.
[95] Sarah Jaquette Ray, *The Ecological Other: The Disabled Body in Environmental Thought and Literature* (University of Arizona Press, 2013), 36.

urbanization, unprecedented immigration, and the rise of putatively feminine labor; such anxieties led to perceived crises in wilderness, nationhood, whiteness, and masculinity.[96] In responding to such anxieties, environmentalism produced the ideal of the fit and independent male body—the wilderness body ideal, in Jaquette Ray's terms. In tracing the underrecognized relationship between environmentalism and ableism, she argues that "if the wilderness movement was responsible for imbuing the fit body with values of independence, self-reliance, genetic superiority, and willpower, and if wilderness was the setting in which to rehearse these values and reify the fit and healthy body, then the concepts of wilderness and disability are constitutively constructed."[97]

More recent strains of environmentalism, although usually less explicitly colonial, nonetheless privilege walking as a putatively unmediated and independent relationship with nature. Edward Abbey, in *Desert Solitaire* (1968), finds walking to be "the one and only mode of locomotion in which a man proceeds entirely on his own, upright, as a human being should be."[98] Unfettered by cars or planes (or wheelchairs or scooters), walking constitutes, for Abbey and others, a close relationship to the land. They then take such proximity to produce a sensory and even spiritual experience: Abbey writes that walking can "produce a heightened sensitivity to the environment, as well as a heightened or special sense of self."[99] For Abbey, affective and ethical proximity to nature depends upon perambulation that is independent, "entirely on his own," and bipedal, "as a human being should be." Adams, more recently, echoes Abbey; he has written that "[t]o climb and descend a hill on foot is therefore to establish a kind of dialogue with the earth, a direct imprinting of place on self; this physical dialogue becomes silent when one

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[96] Jaquette Ray, *The Ecological Other*, 48.
[97] Jaquette Ray, *The Ecological Other*, 60.
[98] Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (University of Arizona Press, 1988), 78.
[99] Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 135.

moves by merely pressing on a gas pedal."[100] These writers exemplify several decades of writing that privilege the self-sufficient body, demonstrating how the close relationship between ableist notions of mobility and wilderness culture continues to inform contemporary mainstream environmentalism.[101]

"But what if you can't climb a mountain?" asks disability studies scholar Elizabeth Wheeler.[102] Taking up this question, scholars and activists of disability have sought to defamiliarize the wilderness body ideal. Disability studies focuses on identifying such norms of embodiment and, in Cella's words, "recasts disability as something *created* by discriminatory social, political, and economic practices and environments."[103] The social model of disability emphasizes the contexts that constitute disability. "Responsibility for that exclusion," writes Claire Tresgakis, "is placed at the door of a normalizing society that has rigidly developed and maintained structures to [..] reward those who most closely conform to socially prescribed models of appearance and behavior."[104] In an essay that represents an early nexus between disability studies and ecocriticism, Cella offers an ecocritical formulation of the social model. The "ecosomatic paradigm," Cella suggests, refigures the ideal of the unmediated or independent body to recognize the entanglement of body and place. Such a paradigm "assumes contiguity between the mind-body and its social and natural environments: thus, under this scheme, the work of negotiating a 'habitable body' and 'habitable world' go hand in hand."[105] The ecosomatic paradigm identifies bodies and environments as continuous and mutually constitutive.

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[100] Adams, "Peripatetic Imagery and Peripatetic Sense of Place," 188.
[101] Elizabeth A. Wheeler, "Don't Climb Every Mountain," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 20, no. 3 (2013): 553.
[102] Wheeler, "Don't Climb Every Mountain": 553.
[103] Cella, "The Ecosomatic Paradigm in Literature": 578. Emphasis in original.
[104] Claire Tregaskis, "Social Model Theory: The Story So Far," *Disability & Society* 17, no. 4 (2002): 457.
[105] Cella, "The Ecosomatic Paradigm in Literature": 575.

To read *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road* within this disability-studies discourse, the respective forms of disaster realism in each novel unsettle the norms of embodiment at play in perambulatory ideology. *Parable of the Sower*'s depiction of walking offers a hybrid of realist and nonrealist forms: the novel emphasizes realist description and habitual temporalities in its depiction of Lauren's journey north, while also making Lauren's nonrealist disability central to its depiction of perambulation. Butler employs nonrealist aesthetics to literalize the contiguity between bodies and places that scholars of disability identify. *The Road*, meanwhile, undermines its own ostensible commitment to individualist survivalism by representing a world of contingent mobility and unstable categories of ability and disability. As two novels of environmental collapse, *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road* employ disaster realism both to evoke a sense of banal catastrophe and to query the ideologies of ability, gender, race, and nation that structure many environmentalist narratives. These novels offer depictions of environmental catastrophe in which canonical environmentalist narratives no longer obtain.

Emerging in the place of canonical environmentalism, then, are vexed relationships to the notion of collectivity. It is instructive to examine how *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road*, respectively, theorize the role of strangers—strange and unknown people—in the projects of liberation and survival. Although I generally position *Parable of the Sower* as a climate novel attuned to the ongoing effects of race, gender, and power, here *The Road* offers a potentially more generative path forward. While *Parable of the Sower* centers upon Earthseed, Lauren's new faith system that worships change and advocates for collective work, Butler remains ambivalent about whether the movement merely reinscribes the colonialist and extractive

practices that it aims to transcend.[106] In particular, Lauren carefully evaluates those she meets while walking and selects those who appear fit or resourceful to join her group. As Anne Stewart notes, "*Parable of the Sower* is untroubled by the terms of quantifying the value of human life" and "reinforces the rights of those that have—supplies, able bodies, property, and diaries in which to record the new history unfolding—over those that have nothing."[107] And yet, it is precisely because of Lauren's particular vulnerability as a Black woman with a disability that she practices such forms of vigilance against strangers. Butler's novel thus remains ambivalent about the possibility of true collectivity within its perambulatory narrative. In contrast, although *The Road* traces the man's suspicions of all strangers on the road—even in the face of the abject suffering of others—the novel ends with his death. Newly alone in a brutally harsh post-apocalyptic world, the boy joins a family of strangers and thus practices the alternative ethic of care, collectivity, and trust for which he advocates throughout the novel.[108] McCarthy's disaster realism points to an environmental ethic that functions laterally rather than by heredity, one in which care exceeds the protective realm of the nuclear family. The novel thus suggests how minor realism might offer the grounds for an alternative environmentalism—a minor environmentalism.

5.3.2 The Perplexities of Genre

In ending this project with *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road*, I have reached the terminus of the spectrum between ordinary realism and disaster realism: while I began with the

[106] This ambivalence grows even more pronounced at the end of *Parable of the Talents*, when Butler names the first Earthseed starship the "Christopher Columbus." Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (Grand Central, 2019), 394.
[107] Stewart, *Angry Planet*, 166.
[108] My analysis here is informed by Johns-Putra's discussion of the novel's end. Johns-Putra, "'My Job Is to Take Care of You'": 533-5.

unequivocally realist novel *10:04*, I end with two works that many would characterize instead as speculative. As I noted in the introduction to this dissertation, the past decade has increasingly seen ecocriticism turn toward speculative fiction. Streeby writes, for instance, that "climate change fiction is best situated within the larger category of speculative fiction, an umbrella genre that includes science fiction and fantasy."[109] Meanwhile, scholars of science fiction have positioned it as "a body of literature that reflects, sometimes prefigures, and in its finest moments theorizes transformative environmentalism."[110] Indeed, a brief look at the speculative canon reveals its long investment in environmental concerns.[111] Speculative modes offer one response to the ontological and epistemological quandaries of everyday apocalypse because they allow authors to negotiate time and space. Seo-Young Chu writes that "everyday reality for people all over the world has grown less and less concretely accessible over the past several centuries […] Global climate change is more cognitively estranging than yesterday's local weather. […] Science fiction, then, is an increasingly appropriate and convenient language for handling questions about so-called mundane reality."[112] Influential science-fiction scholar Darko Suvin called science fiction "an escape from constructive old norms into a different and alternative

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[109] Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 4.
[110] Eric C. Otto, *Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism* (The Ohio State University Press, 2012), 4.
[111] For an extended genealogy of environmental SF, beginning as early as *Beowulf*, see Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson, "Of Further Interest," in *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, ed. Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson (Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 261–80. Notable texts include Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1897), J.G. Ballard's *The Burning World* (1964) and *The Drowned World* (1965), Arthur Herzog's *Heat* (1977), Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy (1992-96), Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-13), Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009), David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks* (2014), and N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-17).
[112] Seo-Young Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?: A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 81.

timestream."[113] Ecocritical scholars have adopted versions of this reasoning to explain why "cli-fi" has increasingly turned to speculative modes.

And yet, as I hope I've shown, both realist and nonrealist literary forms are best understood as a permeable aesthetic mode rather than a genre. In including *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road* among the contemporary canon of minor realism, I've demonstrated how disaster realism valences largely nonrealist texts with realist topoi and in turn depicts a sense of environmental apocalypse that eventually turns banal. Scholars of speculative fiction have themselves complicated the notion of genre as fixed or static, instead emphasizing the porosity and modal quality of speculative aesthetics. As genre theory has increasingly recognized "spillovers at front and center," scholars of speculative fiction have emphasized forms of borrowing and porosity.[114] Even Suvin, so invested in the estranging capabilities of science fiction, saw it as "the constant intermingling of imaginary and empirical possibilities."[115] Summarizing this turn, Rebecca Evans notes that "canonical definitions of sf have evolved from a bounded literary genre to a tendency or mode called science fictionality."[116] Such formulations of the speculative invite its intertwinement with other modes.

Scholars and critics often cite literary texts—and particularly novels—as an important cultural means of representing and modeling climate change. As I have argued in this dissertation, novels can represent the unrepresentable; that is to say, they can represent the associative and nonlinear inference necessary to apprehend climate. Others argue that novels can envision future worlds, thus functioning alternately as a warning and as a chance to think, plan,

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[113] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Yale University Press, 1979), 84.
[114] Wai Chee Dimock, "Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge," *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (2007): 1378.
[115] Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 6.
[116] Rebecca Evans, "Nomenclature, Narrative, and Novum: 'The Anthropocene' and/as Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 45, no. 3 (2018): 486. See also Veronica Hollinger, "Genre vs. Mode," in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, ed. Rob Latham (Oxford University Press, 2014), 139–52.

and dream beyond the strictures of the present. Novels offer an immersive and affective experience of textual subjectivity, provoking empathetic encounters with human and even nonhuman subjects beyond the self. This latter assumption about climate novels, however, finds troubling resonance with the interpellation of the individual neoliberal subject. As Jodi Melamed has argued, neoliberal multiculturalism encompasses "assumptions about the transparency of literature, the close and intimate access it offers to racialized others, its authenticity and representativeness, and its power to transform attitudes in a way that guarantees social progress."[117] As I hope I have made clear throughout this project, I am dubious about the claim that novels provoke empathy with material stakes. There is a difference between feeling empathetically and acting materially. So, too, am I dubious about the possibility of environmental consciousness-raising efforts to bring material change.

And yet, minor realism gestures beyond the individual. It does so in the way that all novels do, in the readerly act of encountering textual subjectivity. In a subtler and more powerful way, though, the texts of minor realism model relationality and interdependence on the level of form. From Lerner's fractured reach to the "second-person plural," to Ward's thick description of waiting for others, to Silko's depiction of fragmentary and collective textual interpretation, to Erdrich's epistolary conceit, to Butler's literalizing of bodily contiguity, to McCarthy's late break from narrative circularity, the contemporary canon of minor realism not only depicts but also formalizes a reach beyond the individual. This may be a surprising claim about realism, a literary aesthetic that is wholly intertwined with the modern production of individual subjectivity. But it is precisely in the oscillation between realist and nonrealist forms that the novels that I have discussed here reach toward other forms and beings, across space and time.

[117] Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 45.

Without doing so explicitly, nor often even with a direct engagement with environmentalist practice, these texts of minor realism gesture toward a minor environmentalism.

Chapter 6 – Coda: Part of the Problem, Part of the Solution

Across the six climate novels that I have discussed—*10:04*, *Salvage the Bones*, *Almanac of the Dead*, *Future Home of the Living God*, *Parable of the Sower*, and *The Road*—all offer a meditation on what it means to tell a story of unfolding crisis. Some stage their own scenes of creation, while others instead emphasize oral narrative modes; still others grapple with the difficulty of writing a history of the compromised present. Following Chakrabarty and others, it is essential to understand the epistemological and temporal crisis that climate change poses for historiography. The deep time of climate change, and its far-flung causes and effects, reinforce the limits of historical knowledge. And yet the novels that I have considered in this dissertation also suggest that it is important to see climate change in and as history, as linked, especially, to ongoing capitalist-colonial extraction and the theft of land and resources that fuels it. These novels position climate change neither as a far-off futural event nor as an incomprehensible rupture in business as usual. Their representation of everyday apocalypse, and accompanying aesthetics of minor realism, point not to deep pasts and futures but to the everyday acts and experiences that already characterize the uneven distribution of risk on a planet aflame.

The motivating principle of this dissertation has been what I call the "unevenly dispersed effects of climate change." I have made the argument that minor realism offers a surprising aesthetic resource for narrativizing how climate change and its effects disproportionately affect the poor, those living in the wake of chattel slavery and settler colonialism, those with disabilities. I have also, especially in Chapters 2 and 4, argued that contemporary climate novels

employ minor realism to depict the "implicated subjects" who perpetuate climate change and its disastrous effects upon those they cannot and will not see. In this investigation, therefore, I have tracked both what Nixon calls "the environmentalism of the poor" and its inverse, what I call "the environmentalism of the rich."[1] Although they expose and narrativize these dueling environmentalisms, few contemporary novels offer calls to action. They do not claim to be a praxis for environmental or political awareness, much less for material change. And yet, contemporary climate novels model and invite a practice of attention to the everyday perpetuation of climate disaster and the everyday experience of its inequitably dispersed effects. They ask what it means to conceptualize the self as a historical subject in relationship to climate change, with actions and experiences that become a part of history. These stakes—these practices of attention—feel admittedly humble. Indeed, many contemporary novels remain skeptical of literary works as a consciousness-raising project. And yet, with the cruelly inequitable effects of climate change in mind, I would like to conclude with what I see as the broader implications for subjects, such as myself, who remain shielded from the worst effects of climate change while also continuing—regardless of their individual intentions—to perpetuate it. Here, I share how living with these climate novels has shaped my own practices of attention.

When I began this project, I disparaged the notion that individualist solutions to climate change had any potential for transformative change. *Plastic recycling was clearly a scam—so much of supposedly recycled material ends up in landfills anyway. Carbon offsets for individual actions were shoddily calculated and utterly unregulated; the likelihood that anyone would plant trees to nullify my flight was laughably small. Electric cars? Their manufacture alone was more*

[1] As I explain in Chapter 1, I see "the rich" not as an identitarian category but rather a shorthand for the way that capital structures the uneven exposure to environmentalism harm. The environmentalism of the rich names the ideology and context of subjects, who by various dints of class, race, geography (among other factors) remain shielded from climate change while also continuing to perpetuate it.

resource-intensive than just driving an old vehicle. I was, and still am, especially suspicious of any climate solution that proposes consumption as an ethical action. Any individual action pales in comparison to corporate emissions, a single drop in the massive pond of anthropogenic harm. We must hold corporations accountable, as well as the policymakers across the political spectrum who serve corporate interests rather than citizens. And such work is underway, from the Sunrise Movement to Idle No More to policy and infrastructural changes in my adopted home of Ann Arbor, Michigan—the territory of the Anishinaabe people.

But despite the vitality of these activist coalitions, and the material change that is indeed underway, I've also come to see how the impetus to hold corporations and policymakers accountable sometimes also functions as yet another element of the environmentalism of the rich. Paradoxically, although the environmentalism of the rich proposes individual solutions to collective problems, it also abnegates individual responsibility. To pursue unfettered consumption and growth—amid a crisis caused by unfettered consumption and growth—requires an elision of the self as a political and historical agent. "My actions don't really matter," I think, boarding a transatlantic flight. "It's all the corporations!" What might be a radical call to corporate and political accountability instead becomes *carte blanche* for the individual to continue consumption as usual. I feel similarly about the meme-ified credo that "there is no ethical consumption under capitalism," a potentially revealing insight about the inherent extraction of capitalist production that I hear uttered to justify purchasing goods associated with horrifying labor practices. The ability to opt out of practices like flying and buying, of course, is one—like climate change itself—that is unevenly distributed. And yet, in spending three years thinking about literary realism and ongoing forms of everyday resistance, I've come to see habit as vitally important in an individual response to climate change.

In the past few years, while reading and living with climate novels, I've returned to the very environmentalist practices that I once disdained as futile and falsely virtuous. I got comfortable with urban biking and joined bicycle advocacy communities. I started composting for the first time in my adult life. I stopped eating meat, mostly. I joined a CSA. I decided to buy only clothes with good labor and sustainability practices, which on a graduate stipend meant simply not buying clothes. The hardest habit to kick is air travel, especially for work or to visit friends or family, but I weigh the externalities of each flight much more than I used to. These practices feel both necessary and woefully insufficient. Indeed, while I once disdained individual habits because they engendered a false sense of innocence, these practices have largely made me feel worse. One byproduct of living with climate novels is that I have spent a lot of time thinking about the staggering scale of the problem, the mundane and catastrophic effects of it, and the lack of collective will to resist it. I grieve the loss of small things, both read and lived: the deep winter cold that Erdrich describes in *Future Home of the Living God* (gone, in the novel's minorly realist future), for instance, or making campfires in the Pacific Northwest (impossible, with chronic drought and rampant wildfires). I also situate this sense of loss within my own perpetuation of climate change and relative insulation from its harms. Climate novels have prompted these practices of attention, and in turn my everyday habits.

As such, I've come to value my environmentalist habits not for their material effect but rather for the way that they keep climate change and its unevenly dispersed effects front of mind. I find Song's conception of the "everyday-life project," which I discuss in Chapter 4, to be clarifying here. "Insist on your obligation to critique every facet of business as usual, and continually work to imagine alternatives, work-arounds, something better," Song writes. "These activities may not in themselves have any meaningful impact on mitigation efforts, but they help

nonetheless to keep the topic in mind, make new social collectivities possible, and act as the nucleus of whatever might emerge as vibrant public discourses that center on this topic."[2] It is this imperative—to keep the topic in mind—that informs what I have come to think of as a set of everyday-life projects.

When I was in high school, my chemistry teacher led us through the process of calculating our carbon footprint. This was an exercise that I was skeptical of at the time, and still am: BP, of course, popularized the notion of a "carbon footprint" as part of a massive effort to place responsibility for anthropogenic harm on the individual consumer. And yet my teacher framed this individual culpability for climate change as a call to action. "You are part of the problem," she told us, "So you can also be part of the solution." Part of the problem, part of the solution: over a decade later, living through possibly the warmest winter in recorded history, I repeat this mantra as the heartbeat of my everyday-life projects.

And so, although my weak theory of realism draws upon what Williams calls a "new modesty" in literary studies, I want to claim more for the novel. Despite this dissertation's investment in weak theory as a means to articulate generic porosity and minor affects, that is, I would like to end with a more ambitious stance on the novel and its capacity to effect change. Such utopianism remains relatively unfashionable in literary studies: I entered graduate school in the decade that followed Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus' call for "political realism about the revolutionary capacities of both texts and critics."[3] I heed their caution against conflating criticism with activism. Nonetheless, with the constitutive relationship between climate fiction and my own everyday-life projects in mind, I am hesitant to leave behind both criticism and its utopian promise.

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[2] Song, *Climate Lyricism*, 92.
[3] Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction": 15-6.

If climate novels "keep the topic in mind," as I have myself found, their utopian promise may lie precisely in their ability to provoke and sustain attention. Here, I return to Octavia E. Butler's theory and practice of attention to climate change. Because global warming represents a slow-moving, diffuse, and illegible phenomenon, Butler wrote in her commonplace books, it "seize[s] our attention briefly" while "[p]oliticians and businesspeople respectively reassure and deny."[4] To counteract such willful ignorance, as well as the diffuse nature of the catastrophe, Butler proposes that climate change requires both attention and vigilance. In a 1989 draft of *Parable of the Sower*, Butler demands: "And let us <u>not</u> forget the ecological catastrophes waiting in the wings or already in progress."[5] Climate novels—such as Butler's own—represent one route into such attention. Reading them, and living alongside them, offers an everyday-life project that facilitates attention rather than reassurance and denial. Neither fully utopian nor fully nihilistic, such attention names a practice of vigilance to the catastrophically warming world.

[4] Butler, "Commonplace Book (Large)," OEB 3246.
[5] Butler, "Commonplace Book (Large)," OEB 3243.

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