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Apocalyptic Worlds: A Contemporary Critique
of the Post-traumatological Novel at the
Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

Nicholas Stavris

A thesis submitted to the University of
Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

February, 2018

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For Suzy,
who would probably survive

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Abstract

This thesis posits that in the twenty-first century we are witnessing a literary turn comprised of a collective authorial attempt to work through and come to terms with the apocalyptic spirit of the contemporary world. The novels explored in this thesis, which are paradigmatic of this wider literary movement, reflect upon the cultural anxieties of contemporary life from what is being referred to here as a *post-traumatological* location of imaginative retrospect. This discussion reveals that contemporary apocalyptic fiction is for the most part motivated not by a sense of post-catastrophic mourning, as was the case with the wave of literature to have arisen in response to the events of 9/11 at the turn of the millennium, but by a speculative condition of post-traumatic recovery, borne out of recent apocalyptic fears and concerns. Apocalyptic fiction responds to collective anxieties concerning the future of the present world. From its distinct temporal location of retrospect, the apocalyptic novel can provide insights surrounding not only the conditions of contemporary crisis, but more importantly, provoke ways and means by which we might confront the narrative of apocalypse that appears to exemplify the early decades of the twenty-first century. Guided by both anxiety and hope, the post-traumatological novel looks back to the present from a time and place in which our concerns about the future have been realised. By imagining the world as if it has come to an end, or is in the process of ending, these novels actively address the anxieties of the twenty-first century from spaces of aftermath.

List of Abbreviations

Chapter One

TF...Maggie Gee, The Flood

TR...Liz Jensen, The Rapture

Chapter Two

C...Edan Lepucki, California

TCA...Sarah Hall, The Carhullan Army

Chapter Three

TBG...Kazuo Ishiguro, The Buried Giant

TP...Jim Crace, The Pesthouse

Chapter Four

TEWSF...Megan Hunter, The End We Start From

TR...Cormac McCarthy, The Road

Introduction

‘I am like a child ready for the apocalypse, I am (*following*) *the apocalypse itself*, that is to say the ultimate and first event of the end, the unveiling and the verdict’

Jacques Derrida

This thesis posits that in the twenty-first century we are witnessing a literary turn comprised of a collective authorial attempt to work through and come to terms with the apocalyptic spirit of the contemporary world. The novels explored in this thesis, which are paradigmatic of this wider literary movement, reflect upon the cultural anxieties of contemporary life from what is being referred to here as a *post-traumatological* location of imaginative retrospect. This discussion reveals that contemporary apocalyptic fiction is for the most part motivated not by a sense of post-catastrophic mourning, as was the case with the wave of literature to have arisen in response to the events of 9/11 at the turn of the millennium, but by a speculative condition of post-traumatic recovery, borne out of present apocalyptic fears and concerns.

Apocalyptic fiction, including the novels discussed in this thesis, brings to light many of the cultural and global anxieties that have become synonymous with life in the contemporary world. For many, the present epoch is marked by something of an apocalyptic condition. Teresa Heffernan notes that in the early decades of the twenty-first century we have seen a proliferation of texts, “novels, films, television shows and video games” (2015: 66-67), that evidence an apparent compulsion within the “cultural imaginary” concerning “the destruction of the world” (2015: 67). This thesis specifically addresses fictional works published since the turn of the millennium. This is because apocalyptic fiction, as with science fiction, is not merely a speculative way of considering the potentialities and possibilities of the future, but an effort to comprehend the here and now, to place the contemporary world under the microscope. Elizabeth K. Rosen, echoing this sentiment, explains: “Apocalypse is a means by which to understand the world and one’s place in it”, and argues that the mythology of the apocalypse is “a vehicle of social criticism” (2008: xi/ xii). This analysis can be viewed as an

investigation into the practice of apocalyptic writing today, as well as an exploration of texts that function as social critiques of the present. Furthermore, and for reasons that will be made clear in due course, this thesis specifically explores apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives produced since the 9/11 attacks that occurred in 2001.

‘Twenty-first-century culture’ and ‘twenty-first-century fiction’ are peculiar phrases through which to describe the current millennium and its writings, given that at the time of writing we are yet to enter into its third decade. This, however, has not hindered attempts to postulate ways and means of comprehending the present world and the conditions by which it continues to be understood, experienced and represented. According to Julia Hoydis: “Regarding the question of the prevailing ‘spirit of the age,’ one answer given by theorists and critics with increasing frequency is the sense of ‘precarity’ (e.g. Morrison 2014) or ‘precariousness’ (e.g. Korte and Regard 2014)” (2015: 8). Hoydis makes clear:

The ‘turn’ towards precariousness (as the abstract general property, atmosphere) or precarity (as the concrete, insecure existence) is firmly embedded in ethical criticism. It emphasizes the fragility and perils of human life, caused by poverty, (ab-)uses of science and technology, war on terror, environmental exploitation, or discrimination. (2015: 8)

The rise of apocalyptic fiction is evidence of this atmosphere of precarity, and as such, this discussion is directed by what has become a considerable body of work that considers the present epoch as in some way marked by a prevailing sense of uncertainty and crisis. At the same time, by focusing specifically on apocalyptic fiction, this thesis departs from an understanding of fiction, which, as will be explained, is noticeably influenced by what Philip Tew has described as something of a “post-9/11 malaise” in twenty-first-century Western culture (2007: 202). The events of 9/11 are still very much part of the Western consciousness, evidenced by Hollywood’s continued production of films that commemorate those who lost their lives on that day, of which Martin Guigui’s *9/11* (2017) is the most recent contribution. This thesis considers novels that are informed by a continued sense of crisis that incorporates post-9/11 culture, but more importantly, has moved beyond it. These texts portray worlds that have come to an end as a result of wider geopolitical concerns, including climate change and natural disasters, advanced capitalism and consumerism, overseas warfare and the fear of nuclear Armageddon, and the relentless crisis of migration. These issues are not specific to the twenty-first century, and yet, alongside the terrorist attacks of 9/11, they have become prevalent concerns that demarcate the present world.

These issues have come to be regarded as cultural traumas, or traumas that affect both social and individual levels of experience simultaneously. The texts explored and analysed in this thesis are examples of the wider movement toward comprehending the present world from retrospective locations of catastrophic and even apocalyptic aftermath. They do so by portraying environments that are marked by the experience of cultural trauma. The end of the world (and what comes next) has become of significant interest in popular culture and there is an apparent concern for the apocalypse in fiction, film, cinema and television. Speaking to *The Literary Hub*, Megan Hunter, whose debut novel *The End We Start From* will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis, suggests: “Even the briefest of glimpses at recent books published or movies made shows that these nightmares are part of our collective consciousness, a near-universal sense that the world might, at any moment, be about to tip into oblivion” (2017). Hunter’s term ‘collective consciousness’ highlights the deeply seated impact of total destruction that appears to be a governing force behind the way in which stories are being told in the twenty-first century, and the growing body of work in popular culture is indicative of the notion that crisis, catastrophe or apocalypse are the narratives of our time.

The Contemporary Apocalypse

This discussion reflects upon apocalyptic novels in accordance with James Berger’s understanding of the apocalypse. For Berger, apocalypse and post-apocalypse are intertwined processes of contemplating the concept of ‘the end’. As such, although a number of the texts explored here are evidently post-apocalyptic novels, they are referred to in this discussion as apocalyptic narratives. According to Berger, the term ‘apocalypse’ can be understood from three positions, beginning first of all as “the *eschaton*, the actual imagined end of the world, as presented in the New Testament Apocalypse of John and other Jewish and early Christian apocalypses” (1999: 5). Apocalypse in this sense can also be “imagined by medieval millenarian movements, or today in visions of nuclear Armageddon or ecological suicide” (1999: 5). Berger subsequently suggests that “apocalypse” can also be thought of as “catastrophes that resemble the imagined final ending, which can be interpreted as *eschaton*, as an end of something, a way of life or thinking” (1999: 5). Concerning representations of the apocalypse, Berger further elucidates that “They function as definitive historical divides, as ruptures, pivots, fulcrums separating what came before from what came after” (1999: 5).

This temporal structure, a separation between the past and the future, is ultimately what leads Berger to the conclusion that representations of the apocalypse typically assume paradoxical locations both spatially and temporally. The apocalypse resists representation because there would be no one alive to recall its occurrence or to tell the story of how the apocalypse occurred, and because of this, Berger makes clear, an apocalyptic representation can only ever be envisaged as a ‘paradox’:

The apocalypse, then, is The End, or resembles the end, or explains the end. But nearly every apocalyptic text presents the same paradox. The end is never the end. The apocalyptic text announces the end of the world, but then the text does not end, nor does the world represented in the text, and neither does the world itself. In nearly every apocalyptic presentation, something remains *after the end*. (1999: 5-6)

The apocalyptic narrative is therefore a commitment to representations of impossibility, of that which in reality resists interpretation and representation but subsequently demands it. “Apocalyptic writing” Berger confirms, “takes us after the end, shows the signs prefiguring the end, the moment of obliteration, and the aftermath” (1999: 6).

The third characteristic of the apocalypse concerns its revelatory position. Its mode of expression looks backwards in order to illuminate conditions that have brought the moment of apocalyptic rupture into being, as Berger confirms:

Apocalypse thus, finally has an interpretive, explanatory function, which is, of course, its etymological sense: as revelation, unveiling, uncovering. The apocalyptic event, in order to be properly apocalyptic, must in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end. (1999: 5)

In the revelatory sense of the term, the apocalyptic narrative, and indeed humanity’s unending and relentless investment in the concept of the ultimate and final moment, amounts to a conceptual process that evidences the very human condition of making sense of reality, of organising and giving to life cohesion and order. Apocalyptic fiction, in its revealing of that which might bring about the end of the world, is at the very least hopeful of diverting humanity from its destructive path.

Although this thesis concerns apocalyptic works that convey contemporary anxieties and recent socio-political issues, it is important to note that many recent apocalyptic texts continue to draw upon traditional apocalyptic imagery and themes. In his analysis of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century apocalyptic representations, John Wallis explains

that we have witnessed a degree of apocalyptic secularisation, “wherein the traditional notion of the apocalypse is secularized and placed within the sphere of human agency” (2014: 72).

In relation to apocalyptic film, Wallis makes clear:

Rather than presenting a traditional image of the apocalypse as a divine event largely outside of the sphere of human agency, films such as, for example, *Armageddon* or *12 Monkeys* not only locate the cause of the apocalyptic event within the natural world (e.g. a comet or a supervirus), but also show how it may be prevented through human agency. (2014: 73)

For Wallis the development or transition of the apocalypse in recent history involves the movement away from the traditional understanding of the term “within Biblical or religious studies” in which it was “typically used to refer to a genre of Jewish and Christian Literature” and involved a divine rupture that gives way to “a new and perfect social order” (2014: 37). Apocalypse in the traditional sense “which has its root in the Greek word *Apokalypsis*”, interpreted as revelation or unveiling, as Wallis asserts, “would include texts such as the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation, as well as other non-Canonical texts such as The Apocalypses of Thomas and Adam or the Revelation of Edras, all of which present prophecies ‘unveiling’ the shape of the future” (2014: 73). In popular culture, Wallis posits, apocalypse has become more broadly centred on imagined representations of “immense cataclysm or destruction; typically involving the whole planet” (2014: 73). Such representations are usually borne out of “fears of all-out nuclear war or planetary environmental disaster” which are “‘apocalyptic’ in nature, even where they are not linked to any Biblical eschatology or a sense of unveiling of history” (Wallis, 2014: 73). However, drawing on the thoughts of Conrad Ostwalt, Wallis further contends that the secularisation of the apocalypse in recent years “has not led to the decline of religion [...] but rather to a blurring of the boundaries between the sacred and the secular” (2014: 74). This has resulted in “a new apocalyptic myth”, which, according to Ostwalt, is “more palatable to contemporary popular culture” (2000: 20). Contemporary apocalyptic fiction appears to diverge from the supernatural features of traditional apocalyptic scripture and instead places any degree of resolution and redemption within the domain of human action. Whilst the focus of this thesis does not in principle concern apocalypse in the traditional sense of the term, it would be problematic to ignore the on-going use of imagery and thematic elements within contemporary texts that are taken directly from historical representations of the apocalypse. Instead, it would perhaps be more appropriate to consider the apocalypse today as a new apocalyptic myth that arrives through an amalgamation of the secular and the sacred.

The twenty-first-century apocalypse, as conveyed in recent Western apocalyptic texts, exposes several key issues surrounding the future of humanity and the planet on which we reside. Matters such as climate change, globalisation, post-9/11 culture, economic uncertainty, advanced capitalism and consumerism, gender inequality, and the future of technology, amongst others, are concerns typically presented as the core trepidations in recent apocalyptic novels. Drawing on Andrew Hoberek's suggestion that the current millennium has ushered in something of a 'genre turn' in literary fiction, Heather J. Hicks notes that "the new post-apocalyptic canon seems a particularly fascinating case study: influential writers from across the globe, all taking up the same genre conventions in order to explore a range of urgent cultural, political, environmental, and economic questions" (2016: 6). Hicks' statement reveals an important point, that the genre of apocalyptic fiction has become an influential vehicle through which significant cultural, political and social developments are being understood, questioned and critiqued. The very fact that Cormac McCarthy was the recipient of the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Road* is telling of the improved literary status of genre fiction in recent years. Notably, as Julian Murphet and Mark Steven suggest, McCarthy's novel has been subject to an "abundant corpus of scholarly research due to its unique narrative style and the endless cultural, ethical, eschatological, environmental, metaphorical, etc. dimensions it encompasses" (2012: 143). The same can be said of the genre of apocalyptic fiction in general.

Furthermore, Hicks' statement confirms that apocalypse has itself become transformed, that the contemporary apocalyptic myth is centred on humanity as both the cause of the apocalypse and simultaneously the possibility for its prevention. The apocalypse no longer appears to be a philosophical vessel for contemplating divine retribution, but rather a framework of sorts that allows contemporary authors to speculate and question current ideologies as well as the future of humankind and the natural world. For many scholars, politicians, scientists and social theorists, as well as fiction writers, contemporary life is one in which apocalyptic crisis abounds, and the current global situation is often viewed as a landscape of apocalyptic potential whereby human action must be taken to avoid future regression. The apocalypse is ultimately the worst-case scenario for the future of the modern world, and the way in which we often contemplate the future is through expressions of apocalyptic fears and through post-apocalyptic narratives.

According to Briohny Doyle (2015), the contemporary apocalypse, whilst related to apocalypse in the revelatory sense of the term, is in fact a separate entity of cultural theory

altogether, and as such, Doyle regards the contemporary apocalypse as specifically ‘postapocalyptic’. Doyle’s definition contrasts with Berger’s understanding of the term, and therefore, apocalypse as it is understood and discussed in this thesis. Nevertheless, Doyle’s reflections are useful for contemplating the nature and characteristics of apocalypse in the contemporary sense. Moreover, Doyle’s interpretation of the contemporary apocalypse as amalgamated with the genre of dystopia is central to the apocalyptic text as it is understood in this thesis. “Contemporarily”, Doyle asserts, “apocalypse is modified to become postapocalypse – a story of catastrophe that does not culminate in revelation, or through which revelation itself is framed as a problematic narrative strategy” (2015: 100). Whilst the traditional apocalypse as revelation spells the temporal progression from one world to the next, ushering in redeemed worlds of salvation, the postapocalypse is an entirely distinct narrative space that favours “scenarios of human survival”. (2015: 100). The postapocalypse rejects the illusory characteristics of redemption, allowing for an examination of the “dangerous possibilities for human and non-human life beyond the artifice of revelation” (2015: 103). The contemporary apocalypse, or the postapocalypse in Doyle’s terminology, might then be thought of as a counter-narrative to the story of revelation.

Doyle further contends that the postapocalypse “can also be framed as a science fiction sub-genre” (2015: 101), stating that through the narrative strategy of defamiliarisation, the “postapocalyptic imagination” draws attention to the “social and environmental breakdown and disorder that define the contemporary moment” (2015: 103), a sentiment that resonates with Roslyn Weaver, who contends that “The relationship between apocalypse and science fiction is very close” (2014: 175). Weaver stipulates that contemporary depictions of the apocalypse often look forward to what lies ahead in order to contemplate the realities and travails of the present: “Apocalyptic science fiction literature reveals a dark future and serves to situate current events ‘under the shadow of the end’, to use Frank Kermode’s term (1967: 5), acting as a counterpoint to more utopic visions” (2014: 174). This reinforces the notion that the apocalypse of revelation, of the progression *through* ‘the end’ to utopian transformation has been somewhat abandoned in the twenty-first century for an apocalyptic vision that resembles a narrative space more akin to dystopia. Contemporary apocalyptic thinking is less of an illusory promise of renewal than it is a way of critiquing the present world. Moreover, authors are able to provoke a sense of social responsibility amongst their readership in the face of possible and impending disasters, as Weaver clarifies: “The potential for critique is especially appealing in science fiction, itself a literature that often imagines

future disaster in order to expose and warn of the dangers of contemporary political and ethical scenarios” (2014: 174). Although dystopia appears to be at the heart of the contemporary apocalypse, Weaver posits “there is also the potential for writers to use apocalypse to generate positive meanings” (2014: 176). This suggestion echoes the well-established approach to science fiction articulated by Darko Suvin, whose definition of ‘cognitive estrangement’ (*On the Poetics* 1972) has been influential for science fiction theorists.

For Suvin, science fiction is “*a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment*” (1972: 375, italics in original). Suvin’s conceptualisation of cognitive estrangement typically concerns worlds that are far removed from the present and comprised of a “strange newness” (1972: 373). In the case of cognitive estrangement, the author establishes a world estranged from that of the reader’s present, but not so far removed that it becomes a world altogether implausible. The author places the reader into these worlds to inform, create and often summon renewed political and ideological viewpoints concerning contemporaneity, as Patrick Parrinder elucidates: “by imagining strange worlds we come to see our own conditions of life in a new and potentially revolutionary perspective” (2000: 4). Parrinder contends that cognitive estrangement is “a mode of thinking” as opposed to a “body of texts”, although “textuality and narrativity are also necessarily part of it” (2000: 6). Importantly, cognitive estrangement “implies a state of partial and incomplete” information (Parrinder, 2000: 7), and “is the result of coming to understand what is just within, and was formerly beyond, our mental horizons” (Parrinder, 2000: 7). In essence, the estranged and imagined world, as Parrinder suggests, “cannot be fully understood” (2000: 7). The contemporary apocalyptic novel functions in a similar fashion, removing the reader from their own surroundings whilst concurrently compelling them to engage with their own reality from a not-too-distant, retrospective position.

Parrinder’s suggestion that the imagined space of the new world can never be understood in its entirety underpins Doyle’s argument concerning recent apocalyptic representations, what she calls the postapocalypse, which typically avoid apocalyptic revelation. For Doyle:

thinking beyond revelation does not involve erasure of what has come before but engages with the past in a necessarily flawed and incomplete way to imagine different kinds of presents and futures

that have no jurisdiction over humanity as a whole and remain as incomplete as visions, treatises, critiques, (dis)organizations, and what-ifs. (2015: 111)

Postapocalyptic texts in Doyle's terminology present estranged worlds that resist revelation and redemption. It is 'flawed and incomplete' and yet deliberately provokes alternative ways of considering the contemporary situation to which the reader belongs. Doyle further purports that the contemporary apocalypse "does not reconcile the contradictions of the old world in a drive toward revelation. Rather, contradiction remains an inherent part of human experience in a catastrophe-marred setting" (2015: 111). As will be revealed, contradiction is one of the pivotal markers of apocalyptic representations discussed in this thesis, and it is likewise one of the core characteristics or traits of trauma. The apocalyptic novels analysed throughout this thesis, which, as suggested, are post-traumatological representations that look back to the present from dislocated and retrospective locations, foreground paradox and contradiction throughout. They do not offer up narratives of redemption and revelation. Instead, they present estranged worlds from which to re-think the present in imaginative and innovative ways.

The post-traumatological Apocalypse

In his discussion, James Berger contends that apocalypse as a theoretical process of imagining the future and of discerning the nature of what constitutes the present can be interpreted and discussed in accordance with "the concept of trauma" (1991: 19). He makes clear:

Apocalypse and trauma are congruent ideas, for both refer to shatterings of existing structures of identity and language, and both effect their own erasures from memory and must be reconstituted by means of their traces, remains, survivors, and ghosts: their symptoms. Post-apocalyptic representations are simultaneously symptoms of historical traumas and attempts to work through them. (1999: 19)

The occurrence of a real-world catastrophe results in what can be understood as a post-traumatic experience in which spatial and temporal reality has become in some way altered and disrupted. The concept of trauma has become an increasingly popular area of research in contemporary literary studies, and while the workings of trauma and the post-traumatic experience are continuously subject to intense debate and disagreement amongst trauma

theorists, the thoughts of Cathy Caruth continue, by and large, to influence how we think about and how we respond to trauma and post-traumatic aftermaths.

Caruth has long since made clear “that the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (1995: 9). Berger’s discussion of the apocalypse and trauma as interrelated concepts is reinforced by Caruth’s understanding of the traumatic experience. The apocalypse is an imagined disruption in the fabric of experiential reality, a rupture, causing the world and all life as we know it to come to an end. Although the apocalypse signifies the absolute end, there is always that which impossibly remains. Trauma functions in much the same way, with a disruptive event that brings into existence a temporal split: a *before* and an *after*.

As readers of the apocalypse, we are permitted access through the text to the world that existed prior to the apocalyptic event. “Trauma”, as Berger makes clear, “produces symptoms in its wake, after the event, and we reconstruct trauma by interpreting its symptoms, reading back in time” (1999: 20). The landscape of the post-apocalyptic aftermath resembles the reality of the post-traumatic experience, and as readers we interpret the symptoms of the apocalyptic event by reading backwards. In this sense, apocalyptic fiction is unusual in that although it takes place in the future, it is read from a position of retrospect.

The apocalyptic novel can thus be read as a trauma narrative. According to Michelle Balaev: “The term ‘trauma novel’ refers to a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels” (2008: 150). Balaev continues:

A defining feature of the trauma novel is the transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world. (2008: 150)

Once again, there is a clear connection to be drawn between trauma and the apocalypse. The trauma novel displays experiential symptoms that occur in the wake of an event that can be understood as overwhelming to the individual or collective psyche, and throughout the narrative of trauma, individuals or societies must embark on a journey or process of ‘coming to terms’ with their post-traumatic existence. The traumatic event results in the transformation of the individual or the collective, usually in respect to the disruption of memory, identity and selfhood. It also, as discussed, produces a rupture in time, separating that which came before the event from that which comes after. Importantly, as Balaev

confirms, fictions that set out to convey the symptoms of trauma typically utilise the individual experience in order to effectively represent trauma on a much larger, societal level:

The trick of trauma in fiction is that the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet, the protagonist also functions to represent and convey an event that was experienced by a group of people, either historically based or prospectively imagined. (2008: 155)

For Balaev, the traumatised individual, the character on which a trauma narrative is centred, “is often connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies” (2008: 155). The traumatic experience is felt by what Balaev refers to as an “‘everyperson’ figure”, one that extends to represent the level of the collective, social experience (2008: 155). Balaev, reflecting upon the notion that identity and selfhood are informed by the culture in which the individual exists, suggests that “the meaning of trauma is found between the poles of the individual and society” (2008: 155). If this is indeed the case, and if as Berger suggests “the apocalyptic sign is the mirror image of the traumatic symptom” (1999: 21), then the meaning of the apocalypse can likewise be understood on both the individual and the collective levels of society. In this sense, this thesis addresses the apocalypse by focusing on the individual experience as a means of understanding and contemplating society more broadly, reading the individuals that traverse the apocalyptic spaces of the texts as ‘everyperson’ figures.

The palpable connection between the apocalypse and trauma, as discussed by Berger, has been likewise addressed by Slavoj Žižek in his extensive study *Living in the End Times*. The title for his work clearly insinuates that there is an apocalyptic sensibility governing life in the twenty-first century, at least in Žižek’s opinion. Indeed, Žižek goes so far as to suggest that “the premise of [his] book” responds to the present system of global capitalism which he argues is “approaching an apocalyptic zero-point” (2010: x). Žižek’s argument, in which he combines the sentiments of apocalypse and trauma, is useful for contemplating twenty-first-century culture *as* apocalyptic, and for considering the contemporary apocalypse as something altogether different from the apocalyptic sensibility that has always been with us.

Žižek’s discussion posits that the world as we know and experience it today contains a distinctive sensibility that marks it out as something entirely new. He argues that “our historical moment [is] unique” (2010: 291), namely, because of what he refers to as *lack of sense* in relation to the traumas of the contemporary world, an argument he adopts from Catherine Malabou, who states:

All traumatizing events tend to neutralize their intention and to assume the lack of motivation proper to chance incidents, the feature of which is that they cannot be interpreted [...]. This erasure of sense is not only discernible in countries at war, it is present everywhere, as the new face of the social which bears witness to an unprecedented psychic pathology, identical in all cases and in contexts, globalized. (2007: 258-9)

It is this ‘unprecedented psychic pathology’ and ‘the new face of the social’ on which Žižek draws most heavily in his discussion of the nature of catastrophe in the modern world, leading to his position that in the twenty-first century we bear witness to an “abstract violence” (2010: 291) that is not only recognised by its unequivocal multiplicity, but, more importantly, by its resistance to interpretation: “the sense that the cause of catastrophe” assumes the location of that which is “libidinally meaningless” (2010: 294). Žižek argues:

Today, [...] our socio-political reality itself imposes multiple versions of external intrusions, traumas, which are just that, brutal but meaningless interruptions that destroy the symbolic texture of the subject’s identity. First, there is external physical violence: terror attacks like 9/11, the “shock and awe” bombing of Iraq, street violence, rape, and so on, but also natural catastrophes, earthquakes, hurricanes. Then there is the “irrational” (meaningless) destruction of the material base of our inner reality (brain-tumors, Alzheimer’s disease, organic cerebral lesions, etc.), which can utterly change, destroy even, the victim’s personality. Finally, there are the destructive effects of socio-symbolic violence (such as social exclusion). (2010: 294)

Žižek’s emphasis is on the multiplicity of trauma in the contemporary world, ranging from the physical to the psychological. Importantly, Žižek purports that although “most of these forms of violence” are not particularly new, “they are much more likely to be directly experienced as meaningless intrusion of the Real” due to the fact that “we live in a ‘disenchanted’ post-religious era” (2010: 292). For Žižek, who lays the blame for the contemporary condition of apocalyptic anxiety at the feet of global capitalism, the contemporary subject is “the post-traumatic disengaged subject [who] is multiplying in the guise of refugees, terror victims, survivors of natural disasters or of family violence” (2010: 294), bound by the collective condition of psychological detachment. Trauma in the contemporary world is, following Žižek’s discussion, a social or collective condition of anxiety. As such, the study of the apocalyptic novel in the twenty-first century is also one in which the issues of cultural trauma and collective anxiety abound.

Cultural trauma, as Jeffery C. Alexander posits, is a relatively “new scientific concept” (2004: 1), and “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a

horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (2004: 1). This definition builds on the work of trauma theorists such as Caruth, among others, by suggesting that a traumatic event, which has the capacity to shatter individual subjectivity and selfhood, causing an individual to experience a sense of social detachment, loss and an overwhelming feeling of temporal discontinuity, can likewise be experienced by social groups or collectives. For cultural trauma to occur, Alexander maintains, moments or experiences of social angst “must become cultural crises” (2004: 10). Cultural trauma “is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity” (2004: 10). For Piotr Sztompka, trauma in the sense of the cultural experience arrives as a direct result of transitional moments in society, what he refers to as instances of “social change” (2000: 452). Sztompka suggests that “social change must have four characteristics, all of which need to be present in conjunction” (2000: 452):

- 1 Such a change is marked by a particular *temporal quality* – it is sudden and rapid.
- 2 It has particular *substance and scope* – it is radical, deep, comprehensive, touching at the core.
- 3 It has particular *origins* – it is perceived as imposed, exogenous, coming from the outside, as something to which we ourselves have not contributed, or if we did, then only unwittingly (we suffer traumas, traumas ‘occur to us’, we ‘encounter’ traumas).
- 4 It is encountered with a particular *mental frame* – it is perceived as unexpected, unpredicted, surprising, shocking, repulsive. (2000: 452)

Sztompka maintains that cultural trauma is directly governed by the collective sensibility of “cultural disorientation” (2000: 453), and is granted existence “when there appears some kind of disorganization, displacement, or incoherence in culture” (2000: 453). This might occur in the wake of an event, “sudden and unexpected”, which “gives a blow to the very assumptions of a culture” (2000: 453). Or in the case of migration, for example, cultural disorientation may arise in the experience of the collective group who enter into a culture with which they have no historical connection “and turn out to be maladjusted or ill-suited to their new environment” (2000: 454). Cultural disorientation is namely the experience felt by the collective who find themselves existing in an environment with which they are unfamiliar, perhaps “emerging due to radically changed technological, economic, or political conditions” (2000: 454).

Sztompka clarifies that social change is not a process of cultural transformation that will always and necessarily bring about the conditions for experiences of cultural trauma, and argues that “If any change were to produce trauma, it would mean that all societies were permanently and irreparably traumatized” (2004: 158). However, he provides a number of examples in which cultural trauma is likely to occur, such as revolution; collapse of the market; radical economic reform; forced migration and deportation; ethnic cleansing; genocide and mass murder; acts of terrorism and violence; assassination of a political leader; the appearance of secret archives that reveal past and historical truths and the collapse of an empire (2000: 452). Importantly for Sztompka, the occurrence of cultural trauma can only be made possible through the experience of cultural disorientation, an expression that strikingly echoes Žižek’s terminology of the ‘abstract’ nature of contemporary trauma and its resistance to interpretation, as well as Alexander’s formulation of cultural trauma as an entity that leaves ‘indelible marks’ on the collective consciousness. The developing trend of apocalyptic fiction in the twenty-first century, as this thesis makes clear, responds to the feelings of cultural disorientation and anxiety in the early decades of the present millennium. Andrew Tate goes so far as to suggest that twenty-first-century fiction more broadly “is characterized by a certain kind of *pre*-apocalyptic anxiety” (2017: 7).

The issues of cultural trauma and cultural anxiety in the twenty-first century lie at the heart of what Philip Tew refers to as the ‘traumatological’ novel, a term he has coined in order to describe post-9/11 fiction (2007). This he suggests has arisen in response to “the aesthetic mood” that came out of 9/11. Tew suggests: “Although characterized by uncertainty, I suggest that much recent fiction is of a traumatological rather than a postmodern bent, abjuring both the latter’s abandonment of certainty and meaning, and its deconstructive dissolution of identities” (2007: 190). The traumatological is for Tew a category of literary fiction that attends to post-9/11 culture specifically, amounting to what he identifies as the “literary zeitgeist” that followed the fall of the World Trade Center in 2001 and succeeding wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (2007: xvii). According to Tew’s discussion, in the aftermath of 9/11 there appeared to be an almost overwhelming interest amongst authors in the “everyday aesthetic of cultural threat and upheaval” that came to delineate the years that followed (2007: xviii). Tew explains that “Post-9/11 events have confirmed a new range of uncertainties, somewhat akin to the always underlying consciousness at the height of the Cold War when fear of nuclear extinction shaped our very dreams” (2007: xviii). Importantly, the traumatological novel need not necessarily concern the event of 9/11. It may in fact “look

back to other recent periods noticeably linked with violent fault-lines” (Tew, 2007: 190). For instance, David Peace’s *GB84* (2004) concerns “the ugly and conflictual dynamics of the 1984 miners’ strike”, while Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005) looks far more closely at the attacks, “evoking 9/11” directly (Tew, 2007: 200). Tew suggests, however, that both novels encapsulate the “post-9/11 malaise” that grew out of the attacks and contribute to an entire genre of post-9/11 fiction that can be characterised by its “pervasive traumatological aesthetic [that] represents an edgy, conflicted, fearful world” (Tew, 2007: 202). Noticeably, Tew’s concept echoes Jago Morisson’s submission that following the 9/11 attacks, we have seen a “turn to precarity” in fiction of the early twenty-first century (2014: 10).

The traumatological can be defined by its concern for the experience of trauma on the collective level as opposed to that of the individual. The experience of individual trauma was, Tew suggests, chiefly exemplified in the majority of trauma narratives produced towards the end of the twentieth century (Tew, 2007: 192). Tew suggests that rather than representing “individual identity and a sense of one’s fractious personal history”, traumatological fiction tends to engage with “concrete and collective fears, exploring a notion of their radical threat to both the individual and one’s sense of collectivity” (2007: 192). In this sense, the traumatological novel diverges from the trauma novel described by Roger Luckhurst in *Traumaculture* (2003), in which he states “‘a new kind of articulation of subjectivity emerged in the 1990s organized around the concept of trauma’ (28)” (Tew, 2007: 192). At the same time, Tew is quick to confirm that the traumatological novel does not abandon representations of trauma at the level of the individual. Instead, traumatological texts “adopt a very different narrative centre”, namely, that of the collective (2007: 200). Tew makes clear that these fictions incorporate “a post-9/11 shift toward a wider ecological awareness, responding to the very socio-political uncertainties which appear to both permeate and transform the public as well as the aesthetic consciousness” (2007: 193). In essence, the traumatological is for Tew a representation of an altered geo-political consciousness on the collective scale that occurred in the wake of the attacks.

In addition, Tew posits that the traumatological novel addresses the sensibility of radical uncertainty, representing the psychological predicament of post-9/11 culture and global culture more broadly as he makes clear:

A historical sense of the continuity of violence underpins the traumatological, as if a post-9/11 malaise responds to an underlying fear and foreboding. However, unlike in wartime, with its sense of the need to sustain normative forms of behaviour collectively, the social determination of the

traumatological self appears more diffuse, being more like an uncertainty principle potentially shared by all, at least unconsciously. (2007: 205)

Tew's formulation of the traumatological novel echoes Tate's suggestion that in the twenty-first century we are witnessing a pervasive rhetoric in recent fiction that appears to have arisen out of some kind of 'pre-apocalyptic anxiety'. The traumatological novel reacts to "an apparently regressive epoch which is either ideologically or ecologically unstable" (Tew, 2007: 220). Building on Tew's conceptualisation of the traumatological novel, this thesis explores a number of twenty-first-century apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic novels that appear to have been fashioned out of the "palpable sense of clear and present dangers" that delineate the contemporary world (Tew, 2007: 220). However, due to the retrospective nature of apocalyptic fiction, the novels analysed here can be understood to be aesthetically *post-traumatological*.

The novels discussed here, as with those explored by Tew, are twenty-first-century texts concerned with cultural anxiety in contemporary Western society. In contrast to Tew's analysis of the traumatological aesthetic, these apocalyptic novels set out to provide evocative interpretations of the present from temporally future-tense locations in which the anxieties that have come to shape contemporary life have finally been realised. As such, they take on a post-traumatological sensibility by looking back to where we are now from an imagined position of retrospect. It could be suggested that all apocalyptic novels are in this sense post-traumatological. However, the post-traumatological novel is specifically influenced by early twenty-first-century culture, encapsulating the multiplicity of both traumatic anxiety and cultural uncertainty by which life in the present has come to be known. As with the traumatological novel, the apocalyptic texts explored here are discussed under the assumption that we have entered into a new socio-political consciousness since the turn of the millennium. In contrast to the traumatological novel, they attempt to articulate the realities of the present by imagining its apocalyptic collapse.

While the events of 9/11 to a large extent represent a turning point for contemporary British fiction the post-traumatological novels detailed in this thesis are less concerned with the events of 9/11 than the traumatological texts explored by Tew. It is to a certain extent problematic to think of 9/11 as a watershed moment for apocalyptic fiction, or that any apocalyptic novel published after the attacks must be in some way influenced by the events of that day. Jim Crace, for example, began working on *The Pesthouse*, one of the apocalyptic texts analysed in this thesis, prior to September 11 2001. However, it is important to note that

without the fall of the World Trade Center, the rise of apocalyptic fiction, particularly in the West, is unlikely to have been so ubiquitous. Post-9/11 apocalyptic fiction is rooted not in the events themselves but in the pervasive sensibility of cultural anxiety that has taken hold in contemporary culture, to which 9/11 can be understood to be a contributing factor. In essence, the post-traumatological novel contains an apocalyptic aesthetic that responds to what Monica Germanà and Aris Mousoutzanis refer to as the “current contextual terrain outlined by late capitalism, globalization and twenty-first-century technology” (2014: 2). Otherwise put, the post-traumatological text is an apocalyptic visualisation of contemporaneity and of the sensibilities by which the global landscape appears to be shaped. While novels of the apocalyptic genre can and indeed often do look back to previous historical moments, they focus predominantly on the times in which they are written; as Sophie Fuggle suggests: “an aesthetics of apocalypse [...] consciously or unconsciously assumes the specific political interests of a certain era” (2014: 38). Therefore, the post-traumatological novel represents specifically the anxieties that exemplify the current epoch.

We might then think of the post-traumatological representations of the contemporary apocalypse that are discussed here as both attempts to manage contemporary anxieties, but also as clear examples of our ongoing attempts to deny the existence of the realities that produce them. In the latter sense, contemporary apocalyptic fiction might come under scrutiny for failing to live up to the serious nature of genuine cultural, political and geographical concerns surrounding social degradation. Christopher McMahon argues, for instance, that this has historically been one of the principal critiques of apocalyptic fiction, which, like science fiction, has “suffered due to the assumption that they were either escapist or irrelevant. They were neglected for the sake of more ‘responsible’ forms of discourse” (2008: 273). However, McMahon notes that in spite of its otherworldly settings and often estranged temporal and spatial environments, it has become widely accepted that apocalyptic fiction “has undergone a sea-change in the course of the twentieth century” (2008: 273), and that “temptation[s] to dismiss or domesticate apocalyptic imagery limits the powerful ‘strangeness’ or alterity of the genre” (2008: 273). This thesis explores contemporary apocalyptic fiction by focusing on the importance of its socio-political engagement in an age of crisis.

It is important to recognise that, historically, the correlation between literary studies and trauma theory is not without its drawbacks. Luckhurst explains for example that at the heart of trauma studies is an inherently “Western aesthetic” (2008: 212) that remains liable to

certain limitations, namely, with respect to engagement with and recognition of non-Western subjectivity, both individually and collectively. Luckhurst argues:

What appears specifically to be a paradigm that might address atrocity, genocide and war might shockingly fail to do so. Western eyes see the persecuted, ‘feel their pain’, and might even contribute to relief funds now and then, convulsing around contagions of traumatic emotion amplified by affective journalism [...]. Yet notions of ‘cultural trauma’ applied to such scenarios might block pathways to practical politics. Abject theories of the ethical and empathetic response to the pain of the other pour out of academic presses, all of which find little purchase in the brutal geo-politics of the contemporary world. (2008: 212-3)

Luckhurst’s assertion is supported by Stef Craps and Gert Beulens, who recognise that in spite of its self-proclaimed and largely vindicated ethical practice, trauma studies surprisingly “risks producing the very opposite effect as a result of this one sided focus” (2008: 2). Craps and Beulens explain that trauma studies, as a model of both literary and cultural criticism, became an influential and eminent model through its challenge to and differentiation from 1970s’ poststructuralism, which, as they suggest, came under scrutiny for its “irrelevance or indifference to real world issues such as history politics and ethics because of its predominantly epistemological focus” (2008: 1). However, in its innate reluctance to step beyond “non-Western traumatic events and histories and non-Western theoretical work”, Craps and Beulens contend, “trauma studies may actually assist in the perpetuation of Eurocentric views and structures that maintain or widen the gap between the West and the rest of the world” (2008: 2). Moreover, Sonya Andermahr and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín submit that narratives of trauma have predominantly been the domain of men, an issue that, they suggest, is gradually being addressed through “a plethora of trauma narratives by representatives of previously marginalised social groups” such as women writers (2013: 4). This suggestion is certainly reflected in the novels discussed throughout this thesis, which, on the whole, portray apocalyptic scenarios from the perspectives of female characters.

The fiction explored throughout this discussion appears to signify a predominantly Western, middle-class sense of anxiety surrounding the contemporary world and a general condition of uncertainty and unease concerning the future. As suggested, this collection of texts reflects the growing popularity and proliferation of apocalyptic fiction in the twenty-first century, and is indicative of the continued desire by Western writers to represent the so-called unrepresentable nature of trauma through apocalyptic writing. However, the texts

analysed in this thesis represent something of a development away from previous trends in representations of trauma through narrative. According to Craps:

there is a need to expand our understanding of trauma from sudden, unexpected catastrophic events that happen to people in socially dominant positions to encompass ongoing, everyday forms of violence and oppression affecting subordinate groups. While the meaning of trauma shifted from a physical to a psychic wound in the late nineteenth century, the concept continued to be thought of in terms of a single devastating blow, an accurate stab that breaks the individual's protected shield, causing serious damage. (2010: 54)

The apocalyptic novels featured and analysed in this discussion consider trauma not as a sudden and unexpected event, or blow, but instead, respond to an ongoing sensibility of crisis, or otherwise put, the 'everyday forms of violence and oppression' that constitute the very core of contemporary crisis.

...

Apocalyptic fiction, portrayed in novels and on screen, has become one of the prominent ways in which contemporary Western culture has come to be critiqued, and there are a number of thematic areas that are continuously explored in the hopes of illuminating the workings of the present. Many texts that set out to represent the end of the world and/or what comes next are concerned with technological developments and consequences associated with technology as a tool of anthropological hubris. Authors such as Margaret Atwood have drawn on fears relating to the relationship between humanity and technology, and present catastrophic futures in which this relationship has led us to fateful and uncontrollable ends. In her apocalyptic novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Atwood imagines an aftermath that has occurred as a result of advances in the field of genetic engineering. David Mitchell has likewise drawn upon anxieties surrounding the future of technology. In *Cloud Atlas* (2005), Mitchell specifically addresses advances in human cloning in his depiction of a society of fabricated beings, aptly named 'fabricants'. The possibilities and pitfalls of technology are imaginatively portrayed in contemporary narratives, and they are more often than not

conveyed through apocalyptic or dystopian settings. Charlie Brooker's television series *Black Mirror* (2011-present), for example, often depicts dystopian realities in which technology has in some way caused alterations not only in the fabric of society but through the development of the human body, usually resulting in the arrival of dystopian environments.

Young Adult Fiction (YAF) has become a particularly popular and noticeably successful medium through which authors are drawing attention to the apocalyptic sensibilities of the contemporary world. Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010), *The Maze Runner* series by James Dashner (2009-2011), and Scott Westerfeld's sequence of post-apocalyptic narratives, *Uglies*, *Pretties* and *Specials* (2005-2006), are prime examples that explore the nature of crisis in recent years within post-cataclysmic and otherworldly settings. Balak Basu, Kathrine R. Broad and Carrie Hintz explain that while "Each Y A dystopia has its own aesthetic and political orientation", it is possible to "trace thematic threads in the genre that reflect how the central fears and concerns of the contemporary world are grafted onto a dystopian landscape" (2013: 3). In their novels, Collins, Dashner and Westerfeld represent narratives of survival, experienced by young adults, who, for one reason or another become detached or exiled from their social environments. Andrew Tate suggests that "A question that haunts the reader of such dystopias is whether these worlds are either speculative visions that imagine far-reaching future consequences of human behaviour or, most disturbingly, allegorical narratives that represent aspects of contemporary reality" (2017: 112). The worlds fashioned by these authors are largely estranged from reality, often taking the form of fantasy texts; however, they simultaneously present us with themes and motifs that draw attention to some of the prevailing concerns of twenty-first-century culture, including issues of migration, technological misuse, globalization and inequalities perpetuated by capitalist culture.

There has likewise been a significant rise in representations of the zombie apocalypse in twenty-first-century popular culture, indicating something of a revival for the genre, as Gerry Canavan explains:

Once banished to the gross-out fringe of straight-to-video horror, all but dead, zombies have come back. Beginning early in the Bush era—even before 9/11, with the filming of *28 Days Later* in London in summer 2001—and continuing unabatedly through the present, the figure of the zombie now lurks at the very center of global mass culture. (2010: 431)

The zombie apocalypse has been embraced by Western culture, evidenced in no small part by the hugely successful television series *The Walking Dead* (2010-present). Novels such as Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) and Max Brooks' *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) and *World War Z* (2006), as well as Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) (a contemporary reworking of Jane Austen's classic), are often cited in discussions of what Mark McGurl refers to as a "zombie renaissance" (2010: 2). For McGurl, the rise of the zombie novel speaks of our anxieties surrounding human agency in today's digital and technologically advanced society, revealing "a sense that the human world is no longer (if it ever was) commanded by individuals making rational decisions" (2010: 2).

The novels explored here are paradigmatic of this wider literary movement in the twenty-first century, a movement concerned with a collective and even global sense of anxiety and crisis. The following discussion is divided into two sections, with each section comprised of two chapters each. The structure of this thesis follows, albeit loosely, James Berger's formulation of the *before* and *after* in his account of apocalyptic representation. The first section provides an analysis of four works that represent some of the core characteristics that delineate the apocalyptic condition in contemporary culture. While all of the novels examined throughout this thesis are apocalyptic, and by the same token, post-apocalyptic, the novels in section one come closer to what we might think of as illustrations of pre- rather than post-disaster culture. By contrast, the novels discussed in section two are marked predominantly by narratives of post-catastrophic survival. This distinction is of course subject to scrutiny, given that the narrative space of the apocalyptic text resists temporal categorisation. Moreover, because the very concepts of catastrophe, apocalypse, and post-apocalypse often overlap, it is equally difficult to situate representations of 'the end' within any one classification.

Chapter one addresses the crisis of climate change, as presented by Maggie Gee in *The Flood* and Liz Jensen in *The Rapture*. Climate change is undoubtedly one of the most pressing concerns of the present world, and a major source of collective anxiety. This chapter explores the opposing ways in which Gee and Jensen interpret the crisis of climate change as it is felt and experienced on both the individual and cultural levels of society. Chapter two moves onto two novels that expose the workings of gender inequality in contemporary culture. Edan Lepucki's *California* and Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* present dystopian societies that have arisen in the aftermath of an apocalyptic catastrophe. In these texts, the world has not ended, but has given way to severely regressed, patriarchal dystopias. As such,

it is suggested in this chapter that Lepucki and Hall utilise the apocalyptic genre in order to illuminate the ways in which society is indeed shaped by the workings (and performance) of gender.

Section two provides an analysis of four novels that are chiefly motivated by experiences of survival in spaces of aftermath. Chapter three explores Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, apocalyptic texts that draw heavily on the historical period of the Middle Ages. This chapter concerns the way in which Crace and Ishiguro confront the notion of the utopian impulse in their respective texts. In his portrayal of a regressed landscape, in which metal has been returned to the earth, Crace espouses in *The Pesthouse* our desire for progress and advancement in the modern world. In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro presents a world bound by the collective experience of amnesia, and illustrates the limitations of memory and remembering as a gateway to historical recovery. Finally, chapter four analyses the figure of the refugee, as presented by Cormac McCarthy in *The Road* and Megan Hunter in *The End We Start From*. McCarthy and Hunter convey through the figure of the refugee the experience of living in times of uncertainty and displacement.

Part 1: Before

Apocalyptic Cli-Fi: The Duality of Climate Change in Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* and Maggie Gee's *The Flood*

Benjamin Kunkel, writing for the *New Yorker*, asks, “How to write about what we’re doing to the planet? In what genre, what form?” (2014) In other words, what style of fiction (or non-fiction) is required in order to adequately respond to climate change as an apocalyptic anxiety? This question is one of the central concerns of this chapter, a concern that, as Danielle Clode and Monika Stasiak confirm, is difficult to answer:

Despite the fact that novels rarely seem to be written with the explicit intention of changing behaviour, climate change novels are often judged on the basis of their message, very often to their detriment (Dobson 2010; MacFarlane 2005; Kramb 2012). When they deliver the climate change message in detail they are often criticised for being too polemic, of lacking a story and for being poorly written. When they focus on story to the detriment of the climate change message, they are criticised for lacking specificity or accuracy. The tensions between the aesthetic requirements of the novel as art and the didactic requirements of the climate change theme (Goodbody 2013) are all too apparent in these commentaries. (2014: 21)

As will be discussed, Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* (2009) and Maggie Gee's *The Flood* (2004) depict the topic of climate change in diverse ways. By examining these differences, but ultimately, by moving beyond them, this discussion highlights the importance of genre fiction as a literary form when it comes to comprehending the environmental uncertainties of the contemporary moment. The following analysis explores the ways in which Gee and Jensen construct alternative worlds to that of our own, and reflects upon the degree to which both authors not only illustrate the workings of climate change as a global anxiety, but also, considers how far these texts go in their delivery of the climate-change message. In focussing on the usefulness of both *The Rapture* and *The Flood* as representations of climate change, this chapter provides an analytical contribution to the developmental understanding of what has come to be known in literary studies as climate-change fiction, or ‘cli-fi’. The issue of climate change is one of the principal cultural anxieties in the twenty-first century, and both Gee and Jensen set out to convey in their texts the sense of precarity produced through the

apocalyptic potential of contemporary environmental fears. They look back to the present from retrospective, post-traumatological locations in order to expose climate change as an apocalyptic threat.

This chapter initially provides an overview of the term cli-fi, suggesting that *The Flood* and *The Rapture* respectively embody the two central strands that define climate fiction. In the case of Gee's novel, climate change is presented in the narrative backdrop, as a lingering undercurrent. This strategy diverges from Jensen's depiction of climatological catastrophe, which arrives in the narrative foreground, forcefully contributing to the development of the novel's plot. This section calls upon Sarah S. Amsler's discussion of the 'crisis narrative', a formulation that can be applied to both novels. As with the development of cli-fi, crisis narratives can be broken down into two key aspects that favour either the portrayal of fear, which, as suggested, is demonstrated in *The Flood*, or the representation of ambiguity, evidenced through an analysis of *The Rapture*. This chapter will explore in detail how climate change is conveyed in each of these cli-fi novels in accordance with the background/foreground dichotomy, and will analyse the way in which Gee and Jensen engage with how contemporary Western society responds to the growing fears surrounding the possibility of environmental collapse. It is suggested here that while Gee presents the nature of denial in *The Flood* in relation to climate change anxiety, Jensen conversely explores the workings of environmental scepticism as an inherent response to existing ecological fears. Additionally, this chapter addresses each author's incorporation of other socio-cultural concerns in her portrayal of apocalyptic-climate change, such as the post-9/11 political landscape, advanced capitalism and social inequality, and contemporary consumerism. Lastly, this chapter determines what conclusions are presented by both Gee and Jensen in relation to ecological anxieties. As will become clear, Jensen complicates the rhetoric of fear that encapsulates her crisis narrative, whilst Gee challenges the nature of apocalyptic thinking in relation to climate change and global warming by disrupting the notion of fixed outcomes.

Climate-Change Fiction

The term 'cli-fi' originally arrived in an online blog in 2007, put forward by climate change activist and journalist Dan Bloom (Whiteley, et al. 2016). The term, in Bloom's usage, refers to science fiction that deals with climate change as its principal modus operandi. According to Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, "Most climate-change fiction is set for obvious reasons, in the

future” (2013: 60). Because discussions that centre on climate change and global warming are often tailored towards apocalyptic thinking, this seems a logical suggestion to make, and the two novels discussed here can be understood as cli-fi works that utilise the apocalyptic genre. Bloom makes clear that due to future uncertainties surrounding these issues, cli-fi often takes the form of a dystopian text, serving “as an alarm bell” to the reader (2014), but maintains that as a relatively new and emerging way of articulating those uncertainties, cli-fi will undergo countless reformulations in the future: “Novelists, screenwriters, literary critics, and academics will determine what makes cli-fi in an organic way over the next 100 years. This is just the beginning of a whole new world of literary and cinematic expression” (2014). Andrea Whiteley, Angie Chiang and Edna Einsendel, drawing on Darko Suvin’s discussion of cognitive estrangement, outline how cli-fi can be interpreted as a subgenre of science fiction, by which science fiction texts express near futures or alternatively far-reaching futures that simultaneously reflect upon “something from our everyday world” (2016: 28), as discussed in the introduction.

Furthermore, “The intersections of climate change fiction and SF”, Whiteley, et al. submit, “build on the latter’s interests in the apocalyptic themes of the utopic/ dystopic [...] and the understanding of the world through change, sometimes constructed as the dark side of progress” (2016: 29). Whiteley, et al. discuss the public response to a question expressed in *The New York Times* in 2014, which asked, “Will fiction influence how we react to climate change?” (2016: 29). Responses to this question are indicative of the two-fold nature of cli-fi, revealing a framework for interpreting texts that represent climate change and global warming as central themes:

Some saw the works as a catalyst to reflect our anxieties about climate change (Telotte, 2014), while others saw fiction as a way to make the issue more palatable to the general public in order to motivate them to take action. (Cullen, 2014). (2016: 29)

This description of cli-fi literature can effectively be broken down into a dichotomy of two opposing poles, with novels that present environmental concerns at the forefront of the narrative for the purpose of emphasising its catastrophic potential through perceptibility, set against those that convey the workings of ecological collapse as a lingering undercurrent, so as to illustrate climate change as an underlying, cultural anxiety. These contrasting approaches to the themes of environmental breakdown are evidenced respectively in *The Rapture* and *The Flood*. Liz Jensen attempts to articulate climate change through her

narrative plot, whilst Maggie Gee primarily establishes the message of environmental collapse through her narrative setting.

Whilst climate change is a strong theme in Gee's *The Flood*, it is a theme that, for the most part, does not drive the plot of the novel. Instead, it is presented in the text as an environmental backdrop, as Gee's localised community, an otherworldly version of the city of London, is slowly engulfed by rising water levels. Rather than structuring the development of the narrative on the occurrence of the flooding, however, the ever-mounting presence of the floods is continuously conveyed as secondary to the novel's other thematic elements. *The Flood* takes the form of a satire, which heavily critiques global Western politics in the early twenty-first century, most markedly drawing on the Bush and Blair administrations and the War on Terror that dominated much of its first decade. Gee's sardonic references to those figures are accompanied in the text by an assemblage of several storylines that follow the lives of many characters of varying ages and social backgrounds. The reader is therefore provided with fragmentary moments and episodes that occur seemingly alongside each other, in the days leading up to the apocalypse. The novel negotiates the boundaries of social interaction and individual angst during times of crisis, exploring the impact of cultural apprehensions, including, but not exclusively centred on, climate change. Other issues of concern are overseas warfare, capitalism, and economic inequality. In a swift and shocking twist, Gee's apocalypse arrives not as a direct result of environmental catastrophe, but as a tsunami that is brought about by the arrival of a comet, as Gee asks the reader to consider the insignificance of humanity in the face of natural activity. Gee's primary focus in *The Flood* is not the manifestation of climate change itself within the natural world, but instead, and interwoven with other socio-cultural forces, its overwhelming impact on human subjectivity. By placing climate change in the narrative background, Gee grasps its complexities by illustrating the ways in which we respond to ecological uncertainties.

Unlike Gee's *The Flood*, in which the changing climate is utilised as the narrative's cultural backdrop, Jensen brings the workings of climate change, and global warming specifically, to the novel's foreground. Where Gee's nameless city is half underwater, Jensen's England is suffering from intense surges in temperature. *The Rapture* takes place in an uncomfortably near future, and has been described as an eco-thriller. Eric C. Otto makes clear that "*Ecothrillers* involve a hero or a heroine who is placed in remediable danger, or more often, irredeemable ecological danger and who then works to halt or flee such danger using the tools of his or her profession" (2012: 108, italics in original). In *The Rapture*, as Susan

Watkins clarifies: “the effects of climate change are [...] increasingly felt and lead to a series of cataclysmic natural events, which culminate in a huge tsunami that destroys the world as we know it” (2012: 121). The narrative is the first-person account of Gabrielle Fox, a therapist who, following a car accident, which has left her in a paraplegic state, returns to work at a psychiatric hospital for troubled adolescents, at which time she becomes entrusted with the care of child psychopath and killer Bethany Krall. Throughout the novel, and as a result of her Electro Compulsion Therapy (ECT), it becomes clear that Bethany is able to predict forthcoming natural catastrophes. The ensuing plot becomes an environmental thriller and a race for survival as the natural world begins to fall apart because of off-shore methane drilling. Gabrielle attempts to use her skills as a therapist in order to ascertain information from Bethany concerning the next cataclysmic event. As such, the narrative progression is based on the relationship that exists between Bethany and the natural world of changing climates. In Jensen’s world, the themes of climate change and global warming spearhead the plot of the novel towards its inevitable apocalyptic moment.

The opposing strategies employed respectively in *The Rapture* and *The Flood*, Jensen opting to engage directly with climate change by depicting it in the foreground of her narrative, and Gee choosing a more evasive approach by inserting it into her narrative backdrop, relates to the dual nature of the contemporary crisis narrative, as discussed by Amsler. Amsler claims that in the present world, we are living in a time of crisis that stems from an accumulation of three distinct areas of social and global uncertainty. She suggests:

The spectre of crisis now casts an urgent but oddly bearable shadow on everyday life. It appears through documentaries on the science of climate change and video footage of melting ice; we manage it through recycling bins and reusable bags. The spectre of the economic crisis also permeates social consciousness via graphs of capitalist decline [...]. And then there is the steady stream of notifications about more peripheral crises, all in need of urgent resolution: flashpoints in conflict situations, social welfare, migration, diplomacy and health. (2010: 129)

In spite of the threatening magnitude of these ecological, economic and political matters, Amsler argues that they are simultaneously interpreted as fundamentally unremarkable: “[t]he erstwhile extraordinary experience of being in crisis punctuates everyday public discourse as something very ordinary indeed” (2010: 129). This experience of crisis as commonplace within society accounts for the lack of an adequate response to such high levels of global threat. Nevertheless, as Amsler makes clear, thinking in terms of crisis is “still regard[ed] as the basis for critique and as a precondition for radical social change” (2010: 129). Crisis

narratives are utilised by activists and theorists for the purpose of motivating action in the face of existing areas of social unrest and imminent forthcoming disasters: “For, it is argued, if people can feel the social contradictions and inequalities that are visible through rational analysis, they will be spontaneously motivated to act upon them” (Amsler, 2010: 129). Such narratives are politically focused, presented by activists, social theorists, politicians and the media, rather than narratives of fiction. However, the same processes put forward in ‘crisis thinking’ can be applied to fictional texts such as *The Flood* and *The Rapture*.

In her discussion, Amsler breaks down the somewhat abstruse term of crisis, and the outcomes of crisis thinking, into two distinct categories, suggesting that “different deployments of crisis thinking have different ‘affect-effects’ and consequences for ethical political practice” (2010: 130). The language of crisis, Amsler posits, is often constructed through either a rhetoric of *fear*, or a discourse of *ambiguity*:

Some work to mobilize political action through articulating a politics of fear, assuming that people take most responsibility for the future when they fear the alternatives. Other forms of crisis thinking work to heighten critical awareness by disrupting existential certainty, asserting an ‘ethics of ambiguity’ which assumes that the continuous production of uncertain futures is a fundamental part of the human condition. (2010: 130)

For Amsler, then, a duality exists in narrative of crisis, which can be applied to the opposing ways in which Gee and Jensen formulate their fictional texts that engage, directly or indirectly, with climate change. Gee takes on a far more ambiguous approach with her apocalypse, while Jensen fashions a narrative of fear that suits the novel’s thriller-based aesthetic. Amsler’s argument settles on an important distinction between these two narrative forms of crisis in environmental politics, proposing that narratives of fear, whilst consciously voicing the conditions of the present, fail to go beyond the fear that drives them, resulting in fixed outcomes that offer no possibility for alternative ways of critiquing the present or reimagining the future. In contrast, Amsler concludes, narratives that favour an ethics of ambiguity are able to combat the notion of a determined future, thereby allowing a space to open up through which experiences of uncertainty in the present can be assessed in more useful and positive ways, and where the future can be imagined with a more critical focus. Amsler’s assumption here implies that Gee’s *The Flood* might function as a more adequate critique of this present crisis than that made by Jensen. However, this discussion observes what both novels are able to offer as both critiques of contemporary life, and as narratives that may promote activism in relation to current environmental conditions. It examines the

apocalyptic worlds fashioned by Gee and Jensen, revealing how far they allow us to consider and respond to the impact of climate change in the contemporary moment.

Apocalypse as prophecy

The use of apocalyptic scenarios in the context of fiction should not be thought of in terms of future predictions, but as a strategy for comprehending the realities of how we live in the present. In the case of these climate change texts, Gee and Jensen are not foretelling the way the future will unfold, but portraying the impact of climate change in the here and now, demonstrating the complexities and uncertainties that climate change and global warming produce. That being said, while prophesy is not the task of the apocalyptic author, such literature is able to fashion imaginable situations that will come about if a suitable degree of action is not taken in the present to prevent certain undesirable futures from occurring. In essence, as attempts to provide an insight into the realities of present uncertainty, they are novels that set out to articulate a politics of crisis in order to provoke a sense of social responsibility.

In *The Rapture*, Bethany's ability to foresee future scenarios establishes the novel's engagement with climate change as an apocalyptic threat. Terry Gifford explains that Bethany's apocalyptic visions are indicative of the primary question put forward by the author, that is, how far are we able to go in our interpretations and readings of environmental signs, and how are we to respond to them? (2010: 720). Bethany embodies a heightened position of what Gifford refers to as 'biosemiotics', a locus from which she is able to harvest information from the world and the environment in which she lives. For Gifford, biosemiology is the "science of evolutionary biology", which relates to the ways in which "individual organisms" evolve by reading the environmental signs around them (2010: 720):

Obviously our evolution as a species has been, in part, determined by our ability to interpret the signs of nature. What does this pattern of storms tell us? Why have these creatures suddenly appeared, or disappeared? What are the implications of this river changing its course? Why are we suddenly feeling irritable or uneasy? Where did these ticks under our skin come from? (2010: 207)

Gifford argues that *The Rapture*, and in particular the character of Bethany, who takes on the form of a "biosemiotic creature" (Gifford, 2010: 720), epitomises the development of evolution based on our interpretation of these 'signs of nature'. Moreover, Gifford maintains

that in “pre-culture”, prior to the existence of “rational” language, humans would have been “highly attuned” to the conditions of environmental activity, and as such, Bethany has returned to an animalistic state of environmental awareness (Gifford, 2010: 721).

In the novel’s early stages, Gabrielle, upon reading Bethany’s medical history, discovers the biosemiotic development of her patient:

Bethany’s recurring themes are ‘classic metaphors for the turmoil of the mind, prompted by the geological disasters and meteorological vagaries of our times: clusters of catastrophes that cry out to fit into a pattern, be it accelerated global heating or divine retribution for man’s sins’. (*TR* 36)

Bethany is able to interpret the anxieties of ‘our times’ in a way that her therapist, and the wider public, cannot, as her ECT treatments allow her to identify the ‘patterns’ of natural occurrences that are causing the world of the novel to collapse. Bethany states: “I can see things [...]. Disasters. I’ve made notes. Dates, times, places, everything. Just like a weather girl [...]. I can see stuff happening before it happens” (*TR* 26). Bethany has accumulated a wealth of material in the form of diary entries and sketches based on her apocalyptic visions. As a result of her ECT treatments, she has become a biological creature who is far more attuned to the environmental conditions of climate change.

Additionally, Jensen’s representation of Bethany combines the imagination of fiction with scientific exploration for the purposes of narrating an incomprehensible future. According to Kathryn Yusoff and Jennifer Gabrys:

Climate change is a social, environmental, and scientific phenomenon that is characterized by its relationship to futures. Scientists predict levels of carbon concentration and future states of the planet through climate models [...]. ‘Futures’ as an area of study has received increasing attention, particularly in relation to risk management, disaster management, and scenario building. Yet within this work, there has been scant attention as to how futures could be deployed as a cultural and creative method of environmental imagining and how the arts and humanities could contribute to future narratives. (2011: 563)

Jensen’s portrayal of Bethany is one such example of how fiction is able to fashion scenarios based on scientific analysis of future environmental conditions. Whilst Bethany’s predictions do appear to be far-fetched, they reveal how Jensen has utilised the science of climate change in order to construct her fictional world. In this respect, Jensen fills what Barbara Adam refers to as the “gap” that exists “between science-based action and scientific knowledge of impacts” (Yusoff and Gabrys, 2011: 563). For Adam, “The scientific production of the

future, in the form of technological innovations, it seems, stands in an inverse relation to the capacity to know the scientific creations with all their potential consequences” (Yusoff and Gabrys, 2011: 563). Yusoff and Gabrys suggest that the fiction of climate change is able to “play an important role in thinking through our *representations of environmental change* and give tangible form to the imagination of different worlds outside of the constraints of the given present” (2011: 563). As such, Bethany’s biosemiotic visions fill the inherent ‘gap’ in the scientific story of climate change which is, according to Adam, lacking in imaginative palpability.

A similar attempt to bridge the gap between science and fiction can be seen in *The Flood*, as Gee formulates a moment of simulation that effectively prophesises a future environmental disaster scenario. In the novel, the school girls Lola and Gracie stumble upon a computer simulation on the internet depicting a tidal wave:

They sat together over Lola’s lap-top. Nothing much happened this weekend. All the exciting stuff was in other cities. Protests in Varna where a massive new dam was said to be threatening the whole coastline. A chunk of the island as big as a city could apparently fall into the sea [...]. The two girls stared riveted, for a moment, at a computer simulation of a tidal wave. Tiny people struggled like ants. Something big and important at last. Something marvellous that would sweep them away and spare them the slow bits of growing up. Something massive, sexual, final. (*TF* 57)

This simulated image embodies what Adam terms a “climate future scenario” (Yusoff and Gabrys, 2011: 563), in which an uncertain environment can be played out within the present, and in doing so, replicates the very function of the novel itself. The simulation acts on a symbolic level as a precursor to the novel’s inevitable conclusion, predicting or playing out the tidal wave event before it happens. According to Christopher Groves, one of the ways we have confronted uncertain futures, such as the threat of nuclear conflict following World War II, in which a post nuclear war situation cannot be imagined “without the total destruction of both sides”, is “through the use of computer simulations”, which have now become used in order to explore possible scenarios that might occur as a result of global warming and climate change (2010: 109). Groves explains that due to the level of uncertainty surrounding our ecological future, accompanying the fact that we do not have the “luxury of waiting until we can be certain about the exact shape of the future” (2010: 109), the only way that we can appropriately respond to the threat of climate change is through the use of simulated projections, or “general climate models (GCMs)” (2010: 109). This fictional scenario

presented by Gee and observed by Lola and Gracie draws on the use of simulation technologies in order to portray how we anticipate the unknown.

At the same time, however, Gee simultaneously replicates how we react to events of such magnitude in reality. Gee satirises how the gravity of such a monumental event becomes interpreted, and ultimately, neglected in contemporary culture. Lola and Gracie only momentarily look at the simulation, the reality of which is lost in the medium of the technology that has created it. While simulation is able to imagine this catastrophe, its artificiality is unable to live up to the reality of that which may occur, and as a result, the affective impact upon Lola and Gracie becomes diluted. Lola announces: ““Not much we can do about it any case. Varna’s a long way away isn’t it?”” (*TF* 57), a statement that signifies Gee’s attempt to demonstrate how the nature of crisis is effectively experienced, and assimilated by twenty-first-century Western consciousness. The way in which society responds to the threat of environmental degradation, climate change, and global warming, becomes for both Gee and Jensen a central aspect of their explorations of these issues within their respective novels.

Environments of Crisis

Maggie Gee’s representation of climate change appears to us in intermittent, fragmentary moments that Gee’s nameless narrator refuses to dwell on, reinforcing the novel’s textual ambiguity in accordance with the dual nature of the crisis narrative. We are told of a town that has been subjected to continuous rainfall in the days, weeks, and months leading up to the events of the narrative. Houses are “being treated for wormwood” (*TF* 19) and there is an “undernote of damp” (*TF* 26). The buildings of the city, “scraping against the rain-washed sky” (*TF* 16), set the environmental tone in the novel’s early stages, and the “submerged” (*TF* 34) sections of the city square, the “drenched car park[s]” (*TF* 28) and the overwhelmed drains demarcate the city’s spatial setting. However, the narrative depicts the effects of constant rain only through fleeting glances, and instead, focuses on the emotional states of Gee’s characters. As one of the characters, Shirley, drives the twins through the city streets, the effects of the flooding give way to her depressed state:

The streets were slippery and parts of them were flooded; her tyres were soft; the car handled badly. She wanted to be somewhere else, another person, in another life, a slimmer, younger,

childless person. She blinked with shock at her disloyalty, she who had longed all her life for children. (TF 20)

It is the negative sensibility of Shirley's character that is most prominent here, as the landscape of the flooded streets remains contextually suppressed. Gee's primary focus is on her characters' reactions to uncertainty, as we are given brief insights into their personal battles with deleterious sentimentalities. As Chris Maughan suggests:

The Flood's chief motif is the localized preoccupations of its various characters. Overwhelmingly, the themes of these preoccupations concern negative emotions – particularly feelings of loneliness, alienation, confusion, misunderstanding and loss, repeatedly dramatized in the disharmonious and dysfunctional interaction of its numerous characters. (2015: 141)

Referring to Theodore Roszak's 1972 call for an alertness to the "apocalyptic quality of our situation", Mark Lavene suggest that "public consciousness" might have come at last to the realisation of impending disaster with the rise in awareness of the "overwhelming nature of global warming" (2010: 59). However, Lavene makes clear that in spite of this threat, there is a general lack of alertness in Western Culture to the "catastrophic" nature of climate change, as fears surrounding the end of the world are to an extent concealed in society as an 'invisible force': "It is not, then, that a sense of the apocalyptic is alien to our culture. On the contrary, it is in some ways very familiar, background noise" (2010: 59). This sense of conflict between awareness and indifference is clearly evidenced through Shirley's response. The shock that should arise amongst the city-dwellers in response to the flooded streets and the rising waters is entirely absent. Instead, Shirley's thoughts turn to her personal struggles and depressed state of mind. Gee's employment of the apocalyptic environment here is indicative of, in Lavene's terminology, climate change as 'background noise'. In this way, climate change arrives in the novel as an ambiguous entity, the threat of which is never truly realised by the characters until the apocalyptic end, and is therefore a thematic element of the text that remains socially repressed. Moreover, the ambiguity surrounding the novel's environmental issues does in turn reflect how climate change is often felt and experienced as a cultural anxiety in the contemporary world.

In contrast, *The Rapture's* engagement with climate change is presented in a more direct manner, as Jensen focuses primarily on the influence of global warming. Gabrielle explains that "The heat is abrasive, a hair-dryer with no off switch. Surfaces glitter in the shimmering air. Everyone is wearing sunglasses" (TR 35). Gabrielle informs the reader that "I can't remember the last time I saw anyone's eyes in the daylight. Or the last time I bared mine"

(TR 35). The setting of Jensen's world is clearly marked by soaring temperatures as climate change has fundamentally affected the environment. Moreover, the author draws upon scientific knowledge and pervasive ecological rhetoric involving apocalyptic scenarios: "The latest projections predict the loss of the Arctic ice cap and a global temperature rise of up to six degrees within Bethany's lifetime, if nothing is done now" (TR 23). During her initial conversations with Bethany, Gabrielle attempts to normalise the apocalyptic nature of her predictions: "It sounds like a dangerous world you're describing. Dangerous and chaotic and life-threatening. A lot of people worry about catastrophic climate change. It's not an irrational fear" (TR 22). Partway through *The Rapture*, however, having investigated some of Bethany's visions, "icy temperatures, and scaffolding, and a platform, and the seabed, and a bad smell" (TR 187), Gabrielle realises that Bethany's predictions are inextricably connected with apocalyptic potential. Additionally, Gabrielle discovers that the same type of scenario has previously occurred in the Earth's lifetime:

I swiftly discover that a massive cataclysm involving sudden sub-oceanic methane gas is not just a theoretical possibility, but a dramatic part of geological history. Twice in the distant past, the planet's atmosphere has been microwaved – resulting in the devastation of most of life on Earth. One of the main culprits was methane. The first, and worst, event took place two hundred and fifty-one million years ago, at the end of the Permian era. The second extreme warming disaster heralded the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum. (TR 188)

It soon becomes clear that Traxorac, the novel's fictional energy company, has been drilling on the ocean-beds of the Earth's surface, beneath layers of ice, to reach pockets of methane that have been accumulating for millions of years, and this drilling becomes the catalyst for the novel's apocalyptic event. This is a scenario that draws upon what Stephen M Gardiner, calling on Berner (2002), has discussed as one of the primary fears surrounding apocalyptic climate change; the "possibility that 'vast stores of methane hydrate – a super-greenhouse gas – that are currently frozen under the oceans will, when global warming has reached some point, rise to the surface and dissipate themselves into the atmosphere'" (2010: 86). Gardiner explains that "Such a release is said to have caused the biggest extinction of all time, the end of the Permian era 251 million years ago, when 90 percent of species were suddenly lost" (2010: 86). Clearly, Jensen is attempting to foreground discussions of climate change taken from scientific discourse for the purpose of exploring what Gabrielle terms "climate-apocalypse" (TR 23).

Although there is a distinct difference in the ways that Gee and Jensen represent or convey climate change, Gee opting for the ‘background noise’ effect, and Jensen engaging with climate change by depicting it as the principal theme within the foreground of her novel, they both attempt to deliver an important truth to the reader concerning the way in which contemporary society often responds to climate change as an apocalyptic anxiety. Shirley, in *The Flood*, as with many of the other characters, does not dwell on the flooding, even though it has pervaded the entirety of the city, and in *The Rapture*, Gabrielle speaks of climate change as “Zeitgeist stuff [...]. Its roots in facts so appalling we turn the other way politely” (TR 23). In both cases, we can see a deliberate effort to draw the reader’s attention to the way we fail to appropriately respond to environmental issues, in spite of the fact that the climate change message has become so alarmingly central to the discourse of crisis and uncertainty in the twenty-first century. By placing climate change as an undertone beneath the layers of political and social inequalities that dominate her narrative, Gee represents the relationship between humanity and the environment as something that lingers in the background behind the public consciousness but is never given the necessary degree of public engagement. Jensen, conversely, places her ecological concerns at the forefront of the novel, and yet simultaneously captures the inherent ignorance regarding the sheer magnitude of climate change as an apocalyptic possibility.

Although an environmental collapse appears to be all-encompassing in the two worlds of *The Flood* and *The Rapture*, there is a remarkable sense of denial that pervades their respective societies. In both novels, it is not until it is too late that the threat of the apocalypse is recognised. In his analysis of *The Flood*, Adam Welstead, referring to Žižek’s discussion of contemporary “social consciousness” (Welstead, 2015: 164), submits:

Despite the glaring evidence of impending disaster and ecological destruction throughout the novel, many of Gee’s characters are unable to comprehend or accept the reality of their situation, exhibiting a condition that Žižek (2011: x-xi) describes as a *collective fetishistic disavowal*: ‘we live in a state of collective fetishistic disavowal: we know very well that this [apocalypse] will happen at some point, but nevertheless cannot bring ourselves to really believe that it will’. (2015: 164)

Žižek’s formulation of ‘collective fetishistic disavowal’, or otherwise put, collective denial, is replicated in the pervasive sense of disbelief portrayed in both novels which subsequently echoes the sense of obliviousness and ignorance in contemporary culture regarding the

possible impacts of these issues. Welstead's example of Gee's representation of collective denial concerns the Gala event that occurs towards the end of the novel:

the Gala's bright lights, extravagant refreshments and whirring cameras all mask the underlying socio-political stasis of a dystopian existence. To adopt Darko Suvin's terminology (2003: 191), the Gala's projected utopian 'horizon' that is, the happiness, wealth, and ephemeral promise of its exotic cuisines, bright lights and glamour) veils the static 'locus' of the city's dystopian present. (2010: 166)

While Welstead's suggestion that the Gala functions as an illustration of "distraction" from the "pre-apocalyptic devastation" that surrounds the characters of *The Flood* (2015: 167) is an astute one, the gala does not in fact fit comfortably with Žižek's terminology of collective fetishistic disavowal. The Gala is indeed an event put on by the Government to, as Welstead submits, draw the attention of the citizens of Gee's city away from their "apocalyptic mood" (*TF* 151); as the narrator makes clear: "the city needed its Gala. The Government would take charge of things" (*TF* 150). However, this is less to do with cultural denial than it is to do with political distraction. Gee constructs the Gala in such a way that it mirrors and subsequently confronts our relationship with celebrity and popular culture in order to satirise the way the contemporary medium of images and spectacles is utilised as a distraction from socio-economic and political concerns:

Only the *crème de la crème* have been chosen, the people the city defines itself by, the rich, the celebrities, the people who count, the styles and the faces that are known and copied, stars, actors, leaders, beauties, all the names baptized in the tabloids, famous chefs and fashionistas, ballet dancers and fancy hairdressers, horoscope-writers and football-players, game-show hosts and TV presenters, all the showmen who make people happy. (*TF* 235)

The layers of artificiality constructed in the guest list of Gee's Gala reveal how elements of popular culture exist to cloud reality, and in this way, the Gala works to distract the rest of the city from Gee's flooded environment. The Gala does not, however, function as a cultural tool of denial in and of itself. For that, Gee turns to her individual characters and communities in order to address the ways in which we respond to the anxieties of climate change and global warming.

Gee depicts the theme of denial in relation to climate change in much the same way that she portrays the issue of climate change itself. It arrives in *The Flood* as an almost subconscious response to the regressing environment, and in this way, is far more in keeping with Žižek's

terminology. Maughan makes clear that “a social discourse of denial pervades the severity of the floods” (2015: 144), and this sense of evasion is encapsulated in Gee’s community. Describing motorists on the busy, blocked roads of the city, for example, the novel’s narrator reflects upon the social consciousness of *The Flood*’s community, primarily its collective sense of denial for the reality of the city’s flooded situation:

Headlights queued in rows on the motorways, workers trying to escape the city, their exits slowed by the many detours put into place where roads were flooded. Water on roads, walls, bridges, washed the lights into long slurs of colour, peacocked-eyes where the traffic lights stared. Trapped motorists listened to their radios; more rains predicted, demonstrations in the south and the east, where the populace claimed they were being neglected, their basements left flooded, their drains left blocked. Business as usual. They sighed and switched off. (*TF* 81)

In this passage, Gee directly sets out to capture the contemporary condition of denial when faced with the growing and all-encompassing rhetoric of climate change that leads Žižek to so heavily criticise our continuing disbelief in potential environmental breakdown. The floods are preventing the motorists from escaping the city, keeping them in place, static, and trapped. However, Gee’s inhabitants fail to address the reality of their present condition. They ‘switch off’ from the news of further flooding and the social unrest that it has caused. Noticeably, Gee draws upon the issues of overpopulation and radical consumerism in the shaping of our environmental concerns, and on our passivity as a culture when it comes to recognising our own responsibility for global warming. Elsewhere, Gee further points towards the overuse of vehicles and the damage that the rise of the motor industry is doing when it comes to global warming, as Faith, speaking with Shirley, makes plain: “‘You car drivers,’ she said, with a meaningful look, ‘whizzing round polluting everything’” (*TF* 26). Despite the ongoing sense of recognition about increased levels of pollution, and the threat that this could cause, there is synchronously an ongoing failure to appropriately engage with the climate change problem, and Gee’s populace represent this continuing inability to recognise the alarming situation of climatological degradation.

In *The Rapture*, Jensen also critiques the inadequacy of Western culture when it comes to responding to the issues and impacts of climate change. However, where Gee presents denial as a cultural sense of subconscious avoidance, Jensen, once again, uses a more direct approach in her narrative through a portrayal of cultural scepticism. Despite the clear connection between reality and Bethany’s catastrophic visions, there is widespread doubt surrounding the probability of her predictions.

For instance, when Frazer Melville, the scientist with whom Gabrielle has entrusted her concerns surrounding Bethany's predictions, attempts to divulge her prophecies to the scientific community, he is met with a response of complete scepticism and disbelief: "Dear Frazer" one email reply begins, "I read your e-mail with great amusement, and have passed it on to Judy, because she's always assuring me we scientists are a humourless bunch" (*TR* 157). Another email, from Melville's ex-wife, reads: "I advise you, dear Frazer, do not take this further. You have a wonderful reputation in the field [...]. I'm sure you have been under strain with your mother's death" (*TR* 158). Where Gee constructs a narrative of denial in *The Flood* so as to illustrate how we respond to ecological anxieties, Jensen depicts a cultural sense of scepticism in *The Rapture*, as articulated in Melville's utterance: "'I'm recontacting people about Hong Kong and Samoa. But I'm not hopeful. The people I tell either think I'm nuts, or they're jealous because they reckon I've invented a new machine that can detect early warning signals'" (*TR* 159). Melville's fears regarding the public reaction to the environmental developments that Gabrielle has presented to him relate to what Jacques, Dunlap and Freeman have discussed as "environmental scepticism" (2008: 353). They argue: "Environmental scepticism encompasses several themes, but denial of the authenticity of environmental problems, particularly problems such as biodiversity loss or climate change that threaten ecological sustainability, is its defining feature" (2008: 353). Jensen establishes a direct correlation between *The Rapture* and environmental scepticism by exploring the degree to which we respond to environmental fears in public and political domains, and this exploration is delineated in the way the society of her novel responds to Bethany's predictions. In this way, *The Rapture* can be seen as an attempt on Jensen's part to motivate a political sense of activism when it comes to environmental degradation, as Jensen deliberately elucidates the challenges faced by climate change activists.

Both Jensen and Gee attempt to illustrate the nature of our collective response to anxiety in contemporary culture; however, they do so in fundamentally different ways. Gee recognises the pervasive sense of denial that is inherent in modern society, whereas, and in contrast, Jensen's novel confronts Western society's scepticism for environmental anxieties, and these diverging narrative strategies correspond with Amsler's discussion of the rhetoric of crisis. Gee's representation of denial serves as an embodiment of collective repression, which in turn fashions an ambiguous atmosphere in relation to the novel's declining climate. Her characters' failure to fully engage with their situation conveys for the reader a vague milieu that remains elusive and non-transparent. Contrarily, Jensen's portrayal of cultural scepticism

establishes a more provocative narrative in which readers of *The Rapture* are granted a clear depiction of decline, and at the same time, met with a society that refuses to accept it, and this dichotomy, between *repression* and *refusal*, is what categorically separates these two cli-fi novels.

The Complexities of Climate Change

Whilst climate change is one of the primary themes that Gee and Jensen set out to explore in their respective novels, both authors actively present climate change as interrelated with other sociocultural concerns that contribute to the apocalyptic sentiment of the twenty-first century. In so doing, they reveal that climate change must be understood as connected with and inseparable from the political and social forces that define the present landscape of Western culture if any degree of engagement with its complexities is to be made. For example, embedded within these narratives are political and social themes of post-9/11 global politics, advanced capitalism, depictions of cultural and social inequalities, and consumerist culture. As a result, Gee and Jensen have constructed worlds where cultural anxiety has arisen in response to the accumulation of several interconnected cultural issues that have an impact upon the subjectivity and experiences of their characters. Moreover, the intersecting forces of contemporary capitalism, consumerism, and global warfare that Gee and Jensen both convey in their texts demonstrate their awareness for the role that humanity plays in ecological degradation. Gee and Jensen thus articulate for the reader a sense of how climate change is one of several cultural issues that we face, and that, taken together, the factors that define the period that we currently occupy effectively delineate the story of the apocalypse as it is felt today, one encapsulated by an overwhelming feeling of cultural anxiety.

Firstly, while the events of 9/11 are not portrayed in *The Flood* and *The Rapture* in ways that are central to the development of either narrative, there is ample evidence to suggest that the worlds presented within both novels contain traces of the post-9/11 world-view. As well as being a city plagued by flooding, *The Flood* presents a political and social landscape that in many respects has come about because of 9/11, and as Sarah Dillon, drawing on Judith Palmer's interview with Gee for *The Independent* in 2005, clarifies, Gee's novel "was written after September 11, 2001, and was directly influenced by the events of that day" (2007: 374). Dillon argues that the novel explores "an anxiety" that relates to the cultural impact of 9/11, driven by a sense that the future could contain "a destruction more complete, more

devastating, than that which had just been experienced” (2007: 374). “In this respect”, Dillon continues, *The Flood* is a novel that responds to 9/11 in a way that typifies “the wider social and cultural affect” produced by the attacks (2007: 374).

The most prominent example of this engagement is the character of Mr Bliss, the city’s President, who, as Alex Beaumont makes clear, “transparently functions as a portmanteau of ‘Blair’ and ‘Bush’, and satirizes the cozy relationship between the two leaders turning them into a gestalt” (2015: 68). In the novel’s opening ‘before’ section, for example, Gee’s narrative clearly establishes a connection between its apocalyptic tone and the post-9/11 landscape that epitomised the ten or so years that followed the New York attacks, and arguably continues to pervade the collective consciousness of Western culture today. As the narrator explains: “Outside the city there was always war. The earthly city was built for war [...]. But most of the time, we kept war outside, and sent our soldiers against other cities, and tried to eliminate the fleas and the vermin, the seething enemy within” (*TF* 8). Gee captures the rhetoric of the Bush and Blair years on numerous occasions throughout the novel by recalling through mockery and parody the statements that grew out of 9/11. As Bliss announces: “Attack [...] is the best form of defence.” (*TF* 37), and as Shirley reflects when watching the news: “Mr Bliss was banging the war drum again. We must have war, or there would never be peace” (*TF* 78). The novel is politically engaged with the times of terror in which it was written. The climatological anxiety defined by a city which “was always raining” (*TF* 9), is therefore intrinsically bound up in the political aftermath of 9/11 and the times of war that succeeded that event.

Gee constantly refers back to this global period of terror, never quite allowing the reader to escape or forget it, as Shirley, whose thoughts often turn to the larger cultural backdrop of global warfare, contemplates:

And the world felt frightening, at the moment. The war was unpredictable. Not that war ever ended, of course, but sometimes it blazed up, horribly alive. Great movements of men and weapons had started. Pop-eyed Mr Bliss was always on telly, telling the people that peace meant war. When you had children, war meant fear. (*TF* 101-2)

Shirley reflects here upon the development of the post-9/11 climate, when the West began to move soldiers and arms across the globe in the name of peace under the Blair and Bush administrations following the attacks, and on how the terms of ‘peace’ and ‘war’ became entwined together under the banner of the anti-terrorist agenda. Gee demonstrates the feeling

of unease that became so dominant in the wake of 9/11. Elsewhere, the character Zoe grapples with the global crisis of the post-9/11 landscape, and reveals how her personal identity has become affected by the lingering warfare that dominates the political backdrop:

Too many things to fret about. She was worried about the war: not just the innate loathsomeness of it [...], the lies that Mr Bliss was telling – but also the effect on her social life [...]. It was anger that motivated her, not hope. War was such a stupid waste of human time and effort. War kept her and Viola apart. (*TF* 163)

Here, Zoe has become subject to these external forces, her identity shaped by factors that she is unable to control, and it is this level of uncertainty that epitomises the city and inhabitants of Gee's novel. To a certain extent, Gee exploits the theme of climate change, and the uncertainty that comes with it, in order to represent the post-9/11 public consciousness of Western culture. However, it is evident that Gee calls upon the political landscape of the early twenty-first century for the purpose of representing how cultural anxiety is deeply rooted in the profusion of various sociocultural issues and structures that shape the contemporary public consciousness.

Jensen's novel also draws on post-9/11 anxiety. However, while the physicality of the attacks is absent from *The Flood*, Jensen directly addresses the event through one of Bethany's early predictions: the fall of Rio's Christ the Redeemer statue:

There are certain moments which you know you will recall for the rest of your life with perfect clarity [...]: you will remember because you have no choice. There's a microsecond when the statue seems to do nothing, as if frozen in mid-decision, before it tips into its long and hallucinatingly beautiful death-dive, the white figure falling head-first in what starts as a slow lunge downwards as it disconnects from the plinth, then surrenders to the terrible law of physics. (*TR* 82)

Jensen's description of the statue's fall conjures up the fall of the World Trade Center in 2001, as she captures the precise ways in which the Towers remained erect before they eventually collapsed in on themselves and plummeted to the ground. Additionally, Jensen specifically speaks of the fall of Christ the Redeemer with reference to 9/11, alongside other significant collapses. As Gabrielle states: "I belong to a generation that has seen statues and icons and buildings come tumbling down on TV: Lenin in Russia, the Berlin Wall, Saddam in Baghdad, the Twin Towers" (*TR* 82). Notably, Jensen simultaneously recreates the way the media captured and repeated the events of 9/11 in the weeks that followed; as Gabrielle

pronounces: “I turn on the TV and they are showing it again, and again because they know from experience that we can never get our fill, that it cannot become real until every detail has been absorbed and digested and processed and reimagined” (TR 83). In Gabrielle’s utterance, Jensen engages with what is known in trauma theory as the *repetition compulsion*, in which a traumatic event is repeated in an attempt to grasp the reality of its occurrence. In ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, Dominick LaCapra explains:

The belated temporality of trauma makes of it an elusive experience of repetition involving a period of latency. At least in Freud’s widely shared view, the trauma as experience is ‘in’ the repetition of an early event in a later event – an early event for which one was not prepared to feel anxiety and a later event that somehow recalls the early one and triggers a traumatic response. (1999: 724-5)

Through Gabrielle’s observations of the Redeemer statue repeatedly falling on TV, Jensen mirrors the way that the fall of World Trade Center was captured by the media and interpolated into the public consciousness through the act of repetition.

However, while Jensen deliberately recreates the trauma of 9/11 in this fictional mirror image of the collapse, her depiction of the fall of the statue conveys an imagined trauma that deviates from the meaning behind the fall of the Towers, and also the fall of the Berlin Wall and the statues of Lenin and Saddam. As Gabrielle reflects: “But those topplings meant something to those who caused them. What does this mean? Who is to blame?” (TR 82). The fundamental difference between the fall of the Redeemer statue when compared with the collapse of the Towers is an environmental one. This is not a terrorist attack, or a revolutionary uprising, but an event of environmental magnitude, and Gabrielle’s questions here relate to the uncertainties regarding climate change in contemporary culture that Jensen sets out to present and articulate in her novel.

Never far away from Gabrielle’s thoughts and her investigations into the nature of Bethany Krall’s behaviour and identity are her reflections on some of the defining cultural moments of the early twenty-first century. As Gabrielle researches Bethany’s childhood and reads some of the comments made from her teachers during her formative years, she comes to the conclusion that part of what drives Bethany’s psychotic state is the influence of external public forces:

Bethany’s teachers described her as highly intelligent but disturbed. Reading between the lines I suspect that like so many kids of her generation, she is a classic product of the last decade’s

‘interesting times’, of its food shortages and mass riots and apocalyptically expanded Middle East War, and in her case, more specifically, of the Faith Wave that followed the global economic crash. (TR 10)

Bethany’s abnormality as a character, evidenced by her psychotic behaviour, her lack of morality, and her violent history, is counterbalanced in this description of her mental state which is interpreted by Gabrielle as a ‘product’ of the social and cultural times into which she was born. By portraying Bethany in this way, Jensen imagines, albeit to a radical degree, how subjectivity can be influenced and shaped by external social forces. In essence, Jensen depicts Bethany as a character whose mental state and anomalous behaviour has been fashioned by the novel’s cultural, political and social landscape, which mirrors that of the twenty-first century, including the financial collapse in 2008, and the post-9/11 epoch demarcated by the Middle Eastern War that Gabrielle describes as apocalyptic. In her characterisation of Bethany, Jensen envisages a child of the contemporary world as we know it today, one who embodies the general feeling of global anxiety. Furthermore, Bethany’s extremely violent personality is placed alongside her biosemiotic connection to the environment, and the themes of climate change and global warming that characterise *The Rapture* are therefore interconnected with a range of issues that contribute to the apocalyptic sensibility of contemporary culture. Jensen’s fictional collapse is marked by environmental catastrophe. At the same time, her portrayal of climate change as a global anxiety is intertwined with her critique of the events of 9/11 and its ensuing political and cultural aftermath.

Central to Maggie Gee’s *The Flood*, and a critical concern employed in her narrative, is the demonstration of social inequality, constructed and preserved by the workings of advanced capitalist culture. Gee is concerned with divisional class structures, and the social inequalities born out of the existing capitalist system permeate the collective consciousness of her mixed group of characters. Once again, as with the novel’s engagement with post-9/11 life, Gee’s thematic inclusion of social inequality is intertwined with the environmental elements of the novel. Ultimately, *The Flood* exposes how climate change in the contemporary period is inseparable from capitalism, a relationship that maintains hierarchical divisions within societies, revealing that climate change is to large extent influenced by human action.

Maughan clarifies that by organizing her narrative from the viewpoint of a variety of characters from differing social backgrounds, Gee is able to present a fictional space that

grasps the omnipresent nature of climate change, and how it is “inextricably bound up in social relations” (2015: 140). Maughan explains that the novel is structured on the basis of antagonistic behaviour that exists between opposing social groups, and that through this fictional process, Gee conveys “a community of stark inequality” (2015: 143). Gee presents this communal sense of opposition and inequality through the two geographical locations into which she divides the city, which subsequently characterise the embedded class structures of her imaginary world. In creating these two opposing spaces in the geography of her fictional city, Gee considers the effects of both climate change and capitalism as interrelated issues. Her world therefore depicts what Robin M. O’Brien and Karen L. Leichenko refer to as the “double exposure” of climate change and globalization (2000: 222). O’Brien and Leichenko suggest that climate change and globalization have been widely accepted as “global processes” that produce “winners and losers” (2000: 222):

The idea of winners and losers has been referred to frequently in discussions of both climate change impacts and the consequences of globalization. Winners are considered those countries, regions or social groups that are likely to benefit from the ongoing processes of climate change or globalization, while losers are those that are disadvantaged by the processes and likely to experience the negative consequences. (2000: 222)

Following this line of thinking, climate change might be understood in the novel, as with the interconnected forces of capitalism and globalisation, as a cultural issue that produces two distinct groups, consisting of those who benefit from climate change, and those who do not: winners and losers. As O’Brien and Leichenko go on to explain, winners of climate change are those who benefit from “increased productivity (e.g. agriculture), increased resource availability (e.g. water), decreased hazards (e.g. frequency of floods), or decreased climate expenditures (e.g. heating expense, snow removal costs)” (2000: 223). Conversely, “[a] loss could refer to any adverse effects that result from climate change, such as decreased agricultural productivity, increased water scarcity, or increased climate-related mortality” (O’Brien and Leichenko, 2000: 223). This process extends from the effects of globalization, or advanced capitalism, whereby the winners of “economic globalization” benefit from economic improvement, improved levels of employment, as well as better access to healthcare and education (O’Brien and Leichenko, 2000: 223). The poor of *The Flood*’s city, who are exploited by those who live in the north, embody the negative consequences of advanced capitalism, and through this conflicted society, defined by these two opposing social spheres, Gee engages with the dual nature of advanced capitalism.

Thinking of climate change in terms of winners and losers is not, however, an altogether accurate process by which we can study how it is portrayed in *The Flood*. Perhaps a better way to explain Gee's use of two opposing locations would be to suggest that in the case of climate change, there are those who are far less exposed to the consequences that it produces, and those who are fundamentally placed at the mercy of environmental degradation. At one end, for example, "the prosperous north of the city", located on "higher ground" (TF 14), we find wealthy characters such as Lottie, "a rich woman" (TF 14) and her husband Harold, and the north itself is characterised by excess, commodity, and affluence:

chic small shops with tiny pots and parcels of exquisitely expensive animal parts, lungs, roes, embryos, fractions of hoof and horn and tail, which people offer each other as gifts; and silvered or gilded brocade clutch-bags, miniscule cards with jokes and mirror-lets, frail silk peonies, porcelain teddy bears, toys too delicate and dangerous for children. Because there is money, objects can be useless. (TF 14)

Gee expresses distaste for contemporary consumption here, emphasising the use of animal parts as commodity and the uselessness of objects as a needless indulgence amongst the populace of the city's northern area. It is a place where "nobody uses the Public Service", and where the inhabitants have the luxury of space, as the narrator makes clear: "Each of these houses holds soft sleeping bodies, sparsely distributed among the big rooms, sleeping well because they have eaten well, and drunk good wine, and been lucky in life" (TF 14). In contrast, Gee presents the counter-side of advanced capitalism in her description of the city's south-eastern suburbs known only as 'the Towers', where we find the poor, the down-trodden, and those who are exploited by the upper classes:

Eastward, southward, there are no more gardens. Every scrap of land has a building on it. Light shears between blackened towers in the east [...]. The towers are packed with rushing bodies, checking their pockets for pens, keys, looking for umbrellas, overalls, tool-kits. (TF 16)

The affluent and bustling life of the north is juxtaposed with the busy and overpopulated domain of the south-east Towers, where "Life is chilly; life is hard" (TF 17). The effects of climate change are felt far more in the Towers than by those in the north, as Gee situates the city's poor in a geographically vulnerable location where umbrellas and overalls are required.

Gee's description of the Towers notably draws on the loss of nature in the novel's degrading landscape, as "They rose above the earth like a forest of dead trees, their tips in the sunlight, their root-balls dark" (TF 22), and the inequalities of class are also imagined

through Gee's apposite and somewhat prescient depiction of the failing 'Public Health Service', appearing to be her satirical nod to the British NHS. May White's concern over the "poor old struggling" 'Public Health Service" (TF 13) is set against the "better services" available to the city's wealthier residents, the services of "trichologists, reflexologists, manicurists, chiropodists, naturopaths, osteopaths, homeopaths" (TF 14). Her more prosperous characters who live on the 'higher ground' are less exposed to the rising flood levels that are consuming their fellow citizens in the Towers. The streets of Gee's city have become saturated with "months of rain" (TF 11), and sections of the cityscape are "blocked off, with the flooding" (TF 63), and as such, the two spheres of society are separated by the declining climate, a sense of division that is maintained by the level of cultural inequality informed by advanced capitalism.

The most prominent observation concerning the pitfalls of advanced capitalism arrives from one of Gee's younger characters, Gracie, who, along with Lola, has taken to rebelling against the capitalist system. Gracie thoughtfully declares to the TV astronomer Davey: "It's capitalism, isn't it? Exploiting nature. You're lucky to deal with the stars,' [...]. 'I mean there isn't any capitalism, up there [...]. Just beauty I guess.'" (TF 87). Gracie perceptively grasps the overwhelming influence of capitalism as a force that negatively impacts the lives of Gee's characters in the novel. As will be discussed in due course, the social inequalities that exist in *The Flood* are largely dismissed in the novel's final sections, as the narrative takes on an almost supernatural turn with the arrival of the comet.

As with Gee's novel, Jensen likewise draws upon the issues of capitalist consumption and the environment, doing so by utilising the apocalyptic transition from one world to the next, and by combining the image of cultural trauma that occurs with the declining climate with that of Gabrielle's individual, traumatic experience. In the initial stages of *The Rapture*, Gabrielle informs the reader that this was "the summer all the rules began to change" (TR 3), and Jensen conveys this altered state from both the level of the collective, with the arrival of a global warming event, and also on the individual level, through Gabrielle's personal catastrophe. In both cases, the reader is confronted with an altered world-view. The environmental collapse is presented to the reader from the outset through a destabilising climate: "The temperatures were merciless: thirty-eight, thirty-nine, then forty in the shade. It was heat to die in, to go nuts in, or to spawn [...]. The sky pressed down like a furnace lid, shrinking the subsoil, cracking concrete, killing shrubs from the roots up" (TR 3). This environmental breakdown occurs alongside the traumatic car accident experienced by

Gabrielle, which leaves her in a paraplegic state and confined to a wheelchair. Because of this, the novel is as much to do with Gabrielle's personal trauma as it is to do with the cultural trauma of climate change.

Throughout the narrative, Gabrielle undergoes a developmental understanding of her own identity, which has altered in the wake of her accident, and the novel can to an extent be defined as a retrospective document of the traumatic experience, both for the culture which experiences the ecological collapse and for Gabrielle herself, who must come to terms with her new identity in what she persistently describes as a new world, or her "new reality" (*TR* 20). Gabrielle suggests as much in the novel's early stages: "Psychological principle has it that buried traumas must be exhumed and dealt with before a patient can move on" (*TR* 13), and the most notable way in which she experiences her own traumatic aftermath is through her self-perceived loss of femininity and sexuality following her accident. Gabrielle's newly constructed identity allows her to perceive the world in a new way, and from a new vantage point. She becomes sensitive to both the changing environment around her, and also to Bethany's apocalyptic sensibility. Moreover, Gabrielle's sense of her "diminished status as a human being" (*TR* 20-1) seems to give her the ability to view the failings of capitalist culture, namely, the relentless consumerism that characterises the contemporary world. In other words, in her traumatic state, and as a result of her altered identity, Gabrielle takes on a retrospective position that is perfectly suited to observe the environmental impact of capitalist consumption.

Jensen illustrates early on how contemporary culture has become reliant on materials that contribute to environmental dilapidation: "As the day rolls itself out, the litter bins fill and then erupt with Starbucks beakers, gossip magazines, buckled beer-cans, burger cartons gaping open like polystyrene clams: the husks of what nourishes the British soul" (*TR* 5). Jensen portrays an extremely tangible scene here, one that draws heavily on contemporary consumption, and from a very early stage of the novel, foreshadows the events to come. The image of litter bins erupting is stark, and highly accessible in the context of accelerated global warming, as Jensen portrays a 'mini-event', symbolic of the wider breakdown of consumer society. Furthermore, Jensen markedly calls upon one of, if not the most palatable icon of contemporary capitalism: the Starbucks brand. Starbucks embodies the power of consumerism in today's capitalist world, and also the speed with which it is able to permeate global culture, as Craig J. Thompson and Zeynep Arsel explain: "Starbucks's model of café

cool has proven readily exportable on a global scale” (2004: 631).¹ By referring to this global brand, Jensen explicitly adopts a tone of environmental activism, as she uses what Thompson and Arsel refer to as “a lightning rod for protest and criticism” (2004: 631). Once again, Jensen foregrounds the topic of climate change, only this time, through an icon of capitalist consumption. However, this image arrives in the text through Gabrielle’s unique perspective, obtained in the aftermath of her personal traumatic event.

Gabrielle’s identity has become redefined, or reconfigured, and as such, she feels “disconnected” (*TR* 63) from both herself and the wider world of capitalist consumerism, a world that she describes as “the scented-candle culture of modern times” (*TR* 6). During an evening meal with Frazer Melville, for example, Gabrielle reflects on how her identity as a woman has been fundamentally refashioned in the wake of her accident:

For some reason, the killer frock I have chosen (olive green linen with cream flecks) has a very low neckline and I have taken special care with my makeup. I have even rather ridiculously, put on a pair of green high heels which I bought in the world of Before [...]. So here I sit in my green dress with matching shoes, with my hair arranged to cover the bald patch, hoping it’s all worth it, but secretly fearing I look like a blow-up sex toy (*TR* 104).

Gabrielle is unable to perceive herself as a woman, and no longer fits the model of her previously idealised self, viewing the green high heels that she now wears as belonging to her former existence in ‘the world of Before’, and as essentially meaningless in her new reality. Elsewhere, at the event of the charity dinner to which she is invited, Gabrielle expresses further discomfort when wearing a dress: “[t]he fact is, I feel fraudulent, undignified and inappropriate: a non-woman pretending to be a real one. The blood-red dress, which would look elegant on an upright woman, feels brash stuffed into a wheelchair” (*TR* 65). Gabrielle’s accident has transformed the way she conceives of her own identity. She is no longer able to align herself with her understood conception of femininity, one that is accepted in a world to which she no longer belongs. Gabrielle’s experience of detachment here equates to the dissolution of the self following a traumatic event, as Michelle Balaev explains: Although psychiatrists and psychologists disagree over the effects of the extreme experience on the survivor’s memory and identity, there is general agreement that traumatic experience can disrupt or alter consciousness, memory, sense of self, and relation to community.” (2008:

¹ While the information provided by Thompson and Arsel is relatively dated (the article being published in 2004), it is worth noting that Jensen’s novel was published only five years later in 2009, and so the statistics concerning the Starbucks brand are largely applicable to the timeframe and context of *The Rapture*.

156). “The traumatic experience, Balaev goes on to suggest, “disrupts the previous framework of reality and the protagonist must reorganize the self in relation to this new view of reality. (2008: 162). Gabrielle explains that she is unable to identify “the category I’d fit into as a woman with no man, no baby, no feeling below the waist, and no imaginable future” (*TR* 109). Essentially, her personal trauma has led to her self-perceived loss of her womanhood, her sexuality, and ultimately, her future. Following her accident, Gabrielle is never able to feel comfortable in her enactment of femininity. She is unable to ‘reorganize’ her sense of self in relation to her new identity; however, her failed attempts to negotiate gender and sexuality simultaneously allow her to observe connections between consumerism and the environmental collapse.

While Gabrielle experiences loss in relation to her gender and sexuality, she concurrently gains a new perspective on the conditions of capitalist consumption that are contributing to the environmental collapse:

When you stop being a woman, as I did on May 14th two years ago, there are things you see more clearly. Sexuality confounds matters, insinuating itself into every exchange. Freed of all that, you can see things for what they are, like kids do, and old people. (*TR* 27)

The traumatic event of the car accident has ended her world, and subsequently brought her into a new one, allowing her to observe the workings of her previous life, and that of the wider cultural situation, from a retrospective vantage point, unconstrained by consumerist values. Balaev explains that in novels that represent the traumatic experience, “the protagonist is forced to reorganize perceptions of reality” and discover “how the event changed previous conceptions of self” (2008: 126). Gabrielle is now able to grasp the complexities and dangers of consumerist culture because she is no longer able to identify herself as being a part of that world. Whilst Jensen’s portrayal of Gabrielle’s disability constitutes a form of exceptionalism, or that Gabrielle’s disabled body is utilised for the purpose of narrative impact, Jensen concurrently establishes through her traumatic experience the novel’s apocalyptic representation of dislocation. In other words, Bethany’s trauma signifies the novel’s post-apocalyptic state. In this way, Jensen establishes a connection between Gabrielle and the reader, as the reader is removed from the world to which they belong through the act of reading the novel itself, gaining a standpoint from which they can grasp their own contemporaneity in the same way that Gabrielle does through her detachment from the world of capitalist consumerism.

Moreover, Gabrielle's altered identity accounts for her connection to Bethany, as both characters are suitably placed to observe the world from a vantage point of detachment because they have both become removed from it. When describing her living space, for example, Gabrielle provides an insight into her new-found perspective when viewing the world around her:

My new home is minimalist. Things like nice cushions once mattered to me. Cushions that match your sofa, and perhaps also your curtains, cushions that end up on the floor [...]. But since my world got recalibrated overnight, I've stopped caring about interior decoration. (TR 31)

As Gabrielle's identity has undergone a period of transition, so too has her world-view been altered, as the consumerist ideology that governed her past has been replaced, or 'recalibrated' towards a minimalistic engagement with her surroundings. Within her 'new world', following her accident, she is able to look beyond consumerism as she develops a new sensibility for nature, in a similar way to Bethany's biosemiotic connection to the natural world; as Gabrielle announces: "Since half of my body withdrew from the game, I have learned to notice, relish and even fetishise life's miniature but extreme delights. Like my oriental lilies opening in a splash of ghost-white petals and filling the flat with their alarming, erotic pungency" (TR 118). Gabrielle's identity is no longer shaped by her sexuality or by her gender, but by her connection to the natural world.

Confronting the Discourse of Crisis

Having discussed the opposing strategies adopted by Gee and Jensen in their respective explorations of the climate change crisis, it is now possible to consider what conclusions, if any, are put forward in the apocalyptic moments presented by the two authors in *The Flood* and *The Rapture*. Once again, and in keeping with Amsler's discussion of the dual nature of crisis narratives, the two apocalyptic collapses are entirely different, and as such, prompt wholly divergent readings as to their final and arguably principal messages. As will now be discussed, although Jensen appears to have elected to use a narrative of fear so as to illustrate the threat of climate change, she ultimately complicates it. In this way, *The Rapture* takes on an educational tone of activism, rather than promoting fear for the purpose of entertainment. In the case of *The Flood*, Gee challenges the notion of inevitability. She disrupts the notion of apocalypse as being a fixed outcome as a result of climate change. Her apocalypse transcends

the certainty of complete annihilation through ambiguity that in turn opens up a space from which the message of climate change as an unavoidable apocalypse can be reformed.

One of the chief ways that Jensen attempts to articulate a politics of fear in *The Rapture* is through her re-creation of how the message of climate change is delivered on the news and in the media. According to the extensive research undertaken by Saffron O'Neill and Sophie Nicholson-Cole, whilst the sensationalism and shock that dictates contemporary discussions of climate change can often work to “capture people’s attention to the issue of climate change” (2009: 375), they can conversely have a counter-productive impact. As they make clear: “they are also likely to distance or disengage individuals from climate change, tending to render them feeling helpless and overwhelmed when they try to comprehend their own relationship with the issue” (2009: 375). Gifford suggests that Jensen’s novel replicates the sensationalism and shock, to which O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole are referring, arguing that Jensen “exploits current anxieties without a sense of the values by which we might act to avoid its narrative outcome” (2010: 726). Gifford’s argument is rooted in the belief that whilst raising ecological concerns, Jensen’s novel works, like the media, as a tool of exploitation as opposed to one of productive activism. However, Jensen in fact constructs a fast-paced narrative that mirrors the media-culture of modern times in order to ultimately expose it through parody. Rather than foregrounding an unproductive rhetoric of hopelessness as it is often constructed in the mass media, Jensen moves beyond her caricature of the mediatisation of climate change, and presents instead a critical interpretation of climate change that invites a productive response from her readership.

In her acknowledgements, Jensen reveals her intentions to raise awareness about the realities of climate change, as she points the reader in the direction of RealClimate.org should they wish to “explore the science further”, adding that “if you feel moved to take action – which I hope you will be – then joining Friends of the Earth (www.foe.org.uk) and signing up to the 10:10 campaign (www.10:10.uk.org) are great ways to start” (*TR*, ‘Acknowledgments’: 343). Taking only her acknowledgments into account for a moment, *The Rapture* can be understood as having one clear aim, which prioritises motivation over entertainment, as Jensen clarifies:

although the disaster that takes place in *The Rapture* is within the realms of possibility, the likelihood of extreme global heating happening so suddenly is small. However, in reality we face a far more potent and immediate threat. If climate change continues unabated, the consequences will

be more devastating than most people – including me – would care to imagine. (*TR*, ‘Acknowledgments’: 343)

Jensen recognises here that her novel exaggerates the speed with which her apocalypse is likely to happen, an exaggeration echoed at one stage by Gabrielle: “Fear and anticipation make for a motivating cocktail” (*TR* 206). It can be understood from Jensen’s acknowledgements that her efforts to shock the reader by fashioning a landscape governed by fear and anxiety are ultimately precursory to the novel’s central message concerning anthropogenic global warming. However, within the novel itself, it is through her deliberate imitation of the media, and her eventual dismissal of the rhetoric of fear that drives it, that Jensen’s message of activism is vividly expressed.

Jensen foregrounds the relationship between fear and the media from an early stage: “Television is a cruel medium, continually ushering newsworthy visitors, uninvited, into your living-room. After the commercial break, the guest of honour is carnage” (*TR* 74). Rather than presenting the effects of climate change through the eyes of any one specific character, Jensen continues to announce to the reader the widespread disasters that are occurring around the planet through televised images or radio broadcasts, revealing therefore that the narrative mirrors twenty-first-century disaster culture by illuminating how the rhetoric of crisis is delivered and subsequently implanted upon the collective consciousness through the digital medium. The narrative of apocalypse in the present world of digitisation, as Jensen is clearly aware, now contains the climate change message, as the boundaries between apocalyptic fears and the reality of impending disaster have become increasingly blurred. As Mike Hulme explains:

the linguistic repertoire of this apocalyptic myth deploys categories such as ‘irreversible tipping points’, ‘billions of humans at risk of devastation, if not death’, ‘climate genocide’. There is an endless supply of headlines in print and on the screen that are so phrased. (2010: 43)

The effects of this persistent and media-driven anxiety are palpable in the context of the novel, as specified in Gabrielle’s avowal: “As the TV horror blooms like a pornographic flower, I close my eyes and inhale, and I am back in the stench of my own private hell” (*TR* 75). Gabrielle’s response, which is in part rooted in her personal catastrophe, is undeniably directed by the rhetoric that is being stridently expressed on the news and in the media, as Gabrielle makes plain: “[t]he TV news bursts at us in disjointed fragments” (*TR* 305). In this way, Jensen sets out to draw attention to the level of cultural fear that is produced in popular

culture. The “electronic bell tolls” (TR 320) in the novel, as Gabrielle suggests, a symbolic utterance that points to the ‘pornographic’ way that the apocalypse is conveyed in contemporary discourse.

However, this reconstructed environment of fear that draws on the culture of information-overload in the twenty-first century essentially gives way to Jensen’s authorial call for environmental activism. Jensen manipulates the thriller-motif by combining the unlikely scenario of an extreme temperature rise suddenly occurring, “*like a thief in the night*” (TR 303), with that of humanity’s influence on accelerated global warming, as conveyed through Gabrielle’s reflection concerning an overwhelming sense of disregard for the future:

What has happened to us? How is it that we, the inventors of devices that fly across oceans, hurtle to other planets, burrow underground, and kill from a distance; we, the atom-splitters, the antibiotic discoverers, the computer-modellers, the artificial-heart implanters, the creators of GM crops and ski-slopes in Dubai, have failed to see five minutes beyond our own lifetimes? (TR 302)

Here, Jensen begins to move beyond the rhetoric of fear encapsulated by her thriller-centric approach to engage far more directly with humanity’s failure to consider the future of the planet, highlighting the irony that comes with our need to continuously progress – namely, that our desire for advancement ultimately leaves us blind to what lies ahead. Markedly, Jensen taps into the dualism of human progress, observing on the one hand how the technological tools of human development have resulted in some extremely beneficial outcomes, such as advances in medicine and scientific knowledge, whilst on the other, portraying the negative consequences of technology by highlighting specifically the connection between human progress and war. This juxtaposition spells out Jensen’s awareness for the complexities of the issues that she is dealing with in *The Rapture*, indicative of her composite subject matter. Otherwise put, the novel moves beyond merely voicing an unproductive rhetoric of fear for fear’s sake. Instead, Jensen applies the thriller mode but only to serve as “a wake-up call” to the reader (TR 303), forcing a consideration of the relationship between humanity and the natural world, and motivating awareness for what humanity has to offer when it comes to the future of the planet, a future that is often overlooked in favour of human development in the here and now.

Jensen’s central message arrives with the apocalyptic event itself, as Jensen replaces the conjectural and abstract rhetoric of fear that mimics the voice of disaster culture with a far more tangible scene of catastrophic environmental breakdown, as articulated by Gabrielle:

“When Kristin Jonsdottir and Harish Modak talked me through the various stages of rapid climate change catastrophe back in the farmhouse, it seemed too theoretical to be terrifying. But now the knowledge is visceral” (*TR* 323-4). The eruption of methane that occurs at the site of the aptly named Buried Hope Alpha drilling rig is described by Gabrielle with an air of scientific proficiency that dwarfs her thriller-centric narrative, as Jensen attempts to fashion a suitably palpable image of apocalyptic collapse that might effectively counterbalance the purely speculative nature of the eco-thriller style:

The sea floor erupting, caving in on itself, tonnes of sediment avalanching in a second earth-shock. [...]. One sub-sea landslide leading to another, each releasing millions of tonnes of trapped hydrates. A vicious chain of tsunamis barrelling through the linked oceans. Everywhere, methane that lay buried for millions of years suddenly freed, roaring to the surface and combusting on contact with the oxygen [...]. The ocean on fire, pulsing gas high into the atmosphere [...]. The heat dislodging more hydrate fields. Until continent after continent and sea after sea has joined the paroxysm. (*TR* 324)

Through her apocalypse, Jensen is convincingly attempting to combine speculative fiction with a concise and realistic image of ecological collapse, doing so for the purpose of moving beyond the rhetoric of fear surrounding apocalyptic scenarios in the present world. Her apocalypse fashions a scientific image of ecological decline, the reality of which contrasts sharply with the falsity of events portrayed through the mediatization of the apocalypse on the television screen. Jensen attempts to educate the reader into action, rather than shock them into disengagement from the crisis of climate change. In this way, the thriller-based mode of the narrative ultimately becomes a conduit for Jensen’s more pressing attempts to instil within the reader the importance of action in the face of climate change. The apocalyptic event of the collapsing rig and the ensuing tsunamis and earthquakes mark Jensen’s intentions to highlight the importance of engaging with anthropogenic global warming, and of recognising the influence that humanity has had upon the natural environment during the current era of the Anthropocene.

Following the collapse, Gabrielle, from her narrative position of retrospect, depicts for the reader the months and years succeeding the methane explosion, as the narrative momentarily enters the post-apocalyptic aftermath:

Glaciers melting, the warmer oceans expanding to drown coasts and cities and forests, crushed by the pressure of salt water and mineral froth, sunk under a deep blue whose surface bears the

poignant relics of human endeavour: hair curlers, oil drums, condoms, empty Evian bottles, plastic Barbie dolls in sexy outfits. (TR 324)

Once again, as with the apocalyptic event itself, Jensen blurs the boundaries of science and speculation. In this passage, it is the Earth's anthropogenic history that appears to have come quite literally to the surface in the ground's destabilisation, as evidenced by the plastic 'relics of human endeavour' that now litter the landscape in this flash-forward moment to the post-apocalyptic world. By foregrounding the reality of anthropogenic climate change in this way, Jensen transcends the rhetoric of fear that encapsulates the majority of both her novel and the cultural discourse of tipping points and climate-centred apocalyptic scenarios articulated throughout culture and society. While Jensen's novel initially calls upon this narrative of fear, it becomes clear that *The Rapture* strikes a positive balance between fear and engagement, allowing for a productive response of activism on the part of the reader. In other words, Jensen utilises a narrative of fear and subsequently complicates it. *The Rapture*, therefore, works not simply as an eco-thriller, but as a narrative that raises awareness for the conditions of AGW and promotes a meaningful level of activism in the face of climate change.

In keeping with Amsler's discussion of the dual nature of crisis, *The Flood* functions in polar opposition to *The Rapture*. Where Jensen's novel draws upon the rhetoric of fear that is so dominant in cultural articulations of climate change, Gee conversely utilises an ethics of ambiguity that works to amplify an alertness to climate change in contemporary culture by disrupting "existential certainty" (Amsler, 2010: 130). Gee creates a space in which new and imaginative ways of critically engaging with uncertainty and crisis can be cultivated (Amsler, 2010: 148). Gee achieves this by deliberately altering the reader's current world-view and successively problematizes their inherent understanding of fixed outcomes. In this way, *The Flood* deviates entirely from the level of certainty, or certain *ends*, often articulated in society in relation to climate change.

As suggested, Gee's apocalypse arrives not with the decline of the climate, but with a "runaway comet" (TF 282). The narrator's depiction of Gee's comet appears to be contextually similar to Gabrielle's consideration of humanity's insignificance in *The Rapture* when placed in relation to the natural world: "Nature is neither good nor motherly nor punitive nor vengeful. It neither blesses nor cherishes. It is indifferent. Which makes us as expendable as the dodo or the polar bear" (TR 308). Gabrielle's utterance is mirrored in Davey's philosophical consideration in *The Flood*: "the truth was humans were brief, ant-like. The earth itself was a flash of dust, briefly flaring in the light of the sun" (TF 90). To an

extent, the comet in *The Flood* serves as a reminder to the reader that humanity is powerless in the face of climate change, an oft-used trope in climate change fiction, as expressed by Clode and Stasiak:

A sense of inevitability and hopelessness pervades much of the modern literature on climate change, irrespective of sub-genre. Rarely is climate change depicted as being solved by human agency. For many the damage of climate change can only be overcome with the assistance of either supernatural or extraterrestrial powers.” (2014: 25)

Upon first glance, it appears that this is the case in *The Flood*. Throughout her narrative, Gee persistently confronts the reader with the notion of time and inevitability, doing so primarily through the character of Harold, whose book, *Living in Time*, is based on an understanding of the “physics of time” (TF 90), which “allowed for no past or future, only an infinite structure” (TF 91). Gee purposefully and repeatedly draws the reader’s attention to Harold’s book, stressing the clear similarities between *Living in Time* and her own novel, as the narrator denotes at the end of the text: “here in this city whose name is time” (TF 324). The narrative space between the ‘Before’ and ‘After’ sections of *The Flood* explicitly resembles Harold’s perception of time, as the narrative passes through a variety of viewpoints and separate stories that all take place in one city and at one time.

Moreover, Gee reinforces the prominence of this theme of simultaneity in her novel by comparing her narrative structure to art and music. For instance, during a conversation between the two characters Isaac and Dirk, Isaac is drawn to a painting of the city, which, as with Harold’s book, appears to be a mirror image of Gee’s novel:

Hopper painted the city like no one else. The woman with her unreal, carnival face stared out at the sunlight and the high red buildings. How did Hopper paint all times, all places? She could almost be looking out over the floods – Hopper had somehow foreseen it all. (TF 183)

Elsewhere, Harold perceives the sound of music in the same vein as he does time: “Listening now, a place of endlessly repeated bliss where nothing counted, not success or failure, only the perfectly rounded chord which held all the particles of life in its hand” (TF 205). In both examples, Gee illustrates the temporal structure of the city as being securely fixed, much like a painting, or a song that cannot be altered, so that the reader is able to observe an entire pattern of stories that are all happening alongside each other simultaneously. As such, Gee is presenting her fictional world as a whole, in the same way that Davey considers the workings of the universe as a fixed pattern: “Davey’s love for astronomy attracted him to patterns” (TF

90). “[T]he planets lie well-spaced”, he observes; “they are plot-able, predictable, as novels” (*TF* 261). Gee’s portrayal of time as being a fixed pattern of simultaneous moments fashions an atmosphere of inevitability in *The Flood*, one that places humanity at the mercy of fate. In this sense, the apocalypse becomes for the reader not a moment of shock but one of predictable inevitability, therefore drawing parallels with how the apocalypse is often viewed in relation to climate change as being wholly unavoidable. However, Gee’s apocalyptic-wielding comet works not to confirm this sense of inevitability, but instead, works to disrupt existential certainty entirely, and ultimately, to challenge the reader’s expectation of a fixed ending.

The ways in which both Harold and Davey view time and space as permanently fixed become displaced in the narrative once the apocalypse becomes apparent:

But every so often, the pattern fractures. Maybe the galaxy is bored with balance [...].

Not so very rarely in a human lifetime, many times in a hundred years, a near-earth object careens towards us. The tiny ones flare into golden dust, but sometimes a large one keeps right on going.

Then senior professors call TV astronomers.

Then stories enter a phase of chaos. (*TF* 261)

Gee’s apocalypse does not represent the end of the world, but instead signifies a break with the pattern of how we tell the story of the climatological apocalypse. Following the event, the narrative of *The Flood* begins to break down as the paragraphs become increasingly shorter. The narrative begins to weave in an increasingly sporadic way between the novel’s various characters, emblematic of the rising sea-waters of the tsunami that is rapidly engulfing the landscape: “And then it comes, the white line of water, moving in from very far away” (*TF* 308). The narration is released from the linguistic rules of punctuation with disjointed paragraphs that have broken away from the main body of the text, as one stand-alone paragraph reveals: “death crashes in through Shirley’s window and takes her and Elroy in its arms” (*TF* 315). The absence of punctuation markers is therefore indicative of the failing world of language, as the story emphatically ‘enters a state of chaos’.

Notably, Gee removes the certainty of an inevitable end by fashioning a sense of future possibility, as articulated by Davey: “There is never a fifty per cent chance of anything. Merely two worlds: one where it happens, where everything returns to nothing, and one

where life goes on” (TF 283). Davey’s statement is confirmed in the city’s final moments as the prose becomes supplanted by poetic duality: “and the last day splits down a thousand tears, each minute, each second, each broken moment, into light and dark, presence and absence, the dead and the living, the lost, the found” (TF 320). Finally, a vision by the character Kilda further illuminates for the reader that the apocalyptic moment does not signal the end of the world but the creation of many possible futures:

What you don’t get is, there’s lots of different endings. It isn’t like, One Way, not at all. There are worlds that are all bright, like worlds of light, and worlds of darkness, but it all, like, splits, it goes on and on, so there’s lots of worlds, and the pieces get shuffled ... It’s doing it now. Every day and every moment (TF 302)

Kilda’s statement, that there isn’t just One Way, or one ending, reinforces Dillon’s suggestion that *The Flood* works to “console the reader with the impossibility of remainderless destruction” (2007: 377). Dillon explains:

The narrative structure of *The Flood* depends upon this nature of apocalypse. The first part of the novel’s frame narrative – entitled “Before” – may well precede the embedded narrative in typography of the novel, but its unidentified first-person narrator is in fact speaking after the catastrophic events of the story that she is about to narrate [...] it ends after the flood, back at the beginning, returning to the location of the frame narrative (titled “Before” and “After”), to the paradisiacal spatial and temporal space before the story, where all differences are erased, children play, adults sunbathe, and the living are reunited with the dead. (2007: 376-7)

For Dillon, the novel’s narrative frame exemplifies the “apocalyptic structure [...] in which the beginning and the end lose their distinction, in which the beginning is the end and the end is the beginning” and therefore works to console the reader by proposing that the end may not in fact represent the death of her characters (2007: 379). Davey’s notion of there being ‘two worlds’ is indicative of Dillon’s explanation that Gee’s narrative, by utilising the “biblical tradition”, in which “narratives predict both the end of the world and the coming of a new age, “confront[s] and diffuse[s] the threat of total destruction” (2007: 376). That being said, Gee’s strategy here is not simply an offer of solace through the possibility of afterlife, but more importantly, the creation of a space from which the reader can constructively consider the future in relation to the growing and persistent crisis of ecological degradation. Consequently, Gee challenges the story of climate change as we know it today, a story that is primarily governed by inevitable collapse. In withholding a fixed or determined ending, or outcome, Gee’s apocalypse complicates our anticipation of certainty through narrative

collapse, and ushers in a counter-narrative to the discourse of apocalyptic inevitability via an ethics of ambiguity. Ultimately, Gee's novel removes the notion of certainty, and subsequently offers up an alternative way of comprehending the future when living in the era of the Anthropocene. The pattern that fractures as the comet collides with the earth does not spell out the end of the world, but a break with the pattern itself, a pattern that has become the dominant trend of engagement with contemporary uncertainty.

. . .

Jensen and Gee look back to the present from post-traumatological vantage points of imaginative retrospect in order to represent climate change as an apocalyptic crisis. Their narratives ask us to engage with the reality of climate change before our apocalyptic fears concerning climate change are realised. It has been suggested in this chapter that Gee and Jensen encapsulate the crisis of ecological uncertainty in their respective novels. Furthermore, it has been considered here how far *The Flood* and *The Rapture* are able to go in their attempts to prompt an emotional and active response from their readership when it comes to the growing fears in contemporary culture in relation to the future of the environment. Jensen's approach to this topic centres primarily on a conveyed rhetoric of fear by situating the theme of climate change within the foreground of her text, accounting for her decision to align her narrative within the genre of eco-thriller writing. Conversely, Gee has utilised an ethics of ambiguity, focusing not on the environment itself, but on the sensibility of her characters, and she presents her environmental concerns as a cultural backdrop to emphasise how they are experienced as a lingering and ambiguous presence in contemporary culture.

Gee's narrative is perhaps the more useful of the two novels, in that it "disrupts the flow of historical time and consciousness enough to make space for criticism, encounter and alternative imaginaries" (Amsler, 2010: 148). In her disruption to the notion of a determined outcome, Gee confronts the apocalyptic rhetoric of climate change and challenges it, thereby, as Amsler would have it, allowing for alternative ways of living with climate change to be deliberated. However, through an analysis of *The Rapture*, it is clear that while at first glance Jensen appears to have fashioned an unproductive rhetoric of fear, she subsequently complicates it. Jensen delivers a narrative that thoughtfully engages with climate change,

explores its impact on human subjectivity, and contrary to Terry Gifford's claim, offers the reader a solution to the environmental crisis through activism. *The Rapture* is a text that is environmentally aware, and as such, its articulation of fear becomes supplanted by environmental activism. This chapter has also observed how both Gee and Jensen recognise in their novels that climate change and the ecological crisis are interconnected with the forces of capitalism, consumerism, and also fears surrounding global warfare. Both novels include in varying ways the influence of these issues in contemporary culture, and as such, provide a clear level of insight into how anxiety is constructed and maintained in the twenty-first century.

In fundamentally different ways, Maggie Gee's *The Flood* and Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* have put forward meaningful contributions that respond to the apocalyptic anxiety of climate change. *The Flood* ends on a message of hope, or consolation, an important message when dealing with such overwhelming conditions of cultural anxiety. But perhaps we must look to Jensen's post-apocalyptic aftermath, which cautions us against ignoring climate change, and our own contributions to it, if we do not wish to lead future generations into "A place where every day will be marked by the rude, clobbering battle for survival and the permanent endurance of regret" (TR 341). The uncertainty that arrives in the discourse of climate change is one fashioned by the possibility that the tipping point has already passed; as Gabrielle initially declares: "Look behind you: perhaps it's been and gone" (TR 4).

The Apocalypse is Gendered: The Performance of Femininity at the End of the World in Edan Lepucki's *California* and Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army*

This chapter brings together two twenty-first-century novels that portray post-catastrophic worlds from the perspectives of women who find themselves trapped in societies dominated by men. Edan Lepucki's *California* (2015) and Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2007) are contemporary examples of what Jeanne Cortiel terms the "feminist dystopia" (2015: 155).

Cortiel explains:

Feminist dystopia is not isolated from or even antagonistic to the dystopian tradition at large: The history, development and characteristics of feminist dystopianism draw from feminist theory and social critique but also from the ways in which the literary utopia and dystopia have articulated cultural hopes and fears grounded in a critical assessment of the present. (2015: 155)

In spite of progressive developments concerning gender relations, the modern world remains subject to patriarchal structures. *California* and *The Carhullan Army* are contemporary examples of the feminist dystopia that expose the ongoing existence of gender inequality in the twenty-first century by looking to the not-so-distant future. Lepucki and Hall specifically engage with gender as a process that shapes and structures society at all levels. This chapter reflects on the post-catastrophic settings fashioned by Hall and Lepucki, in which they represent gender as a structural force that maintains social inequalities between men and women, suggesting that Hall and Lepucki utilise the space of the apocalyptic narrative in order to explore the workings of gender in the contemporary world. Additionally, these novels arguably convey how apocalyptic fears in the twenty-first century are rooted in practices of gender performativity. *California* and *The Carhullan Army* consider the workings of gender in the twenty-first century from retrospective landscapes in which their fictional societies have collapsed. In this way, they take on post-traumatological perspectives in which they are able to convey the structural function of gender in contemporary society.

According to Jeanne Cortiel, “The concept ‘feminism’ as used in dystopian/ utopian studies is usually implicitly understood to refer to a critique of social structures or cultural patterns that have disadvantaged women” (2015: 155). By portraying an imagined economic catastrophe, Hall and Lepucki are able to critique the structures that work to mould the current world, and in turn render for their readers the ongoing existence of female subordination and male authority. *California* and *The Carhullan Army* are novels born out of a feminist dystopian tradition, and yet, as examples of contemporary women’s writing, they are attentive to the anxieties of gender difference that continue to function as pivotal markers of cultural anxiety.

California and *The Carhullan Army* are apocalyptic representations that depict the decline of contemporary Western culture. Although the world of *California* is described as an “afterlife” by its chief character, Lepucki appears to have fashioned a world that is caught in the midst of an apocalypse, rather than one marked by a post-apocalyptic aftermath. Lepucki’s collapse is an economic one. The internet, electricity, fuel and health services have become unavailable to those who can’t afford them, creating an irretrievable gulf between the rich and the poor. The novel follows Frida and her husband Cal, who, having fled the “dying” and “sick” city of L.A, with its “chewed-up streets”, its “shuttered stores” and “its sagging houses” (*California*, 12), have taken refuge at a disused farm, and have attempted to build a new life for themselves in isolation. It soon becomes clear that they will need to move on in search of larger communities in order to stay alive. Their journey takes them to the Land, a small community that offers the promise of salvation. This location, whilst seemingly utopian, is in fact an oppressive community under the patriarchal and authoritative rule of Micah, Frida’s brother, who was thought to have died years ago. The final location of the novel, Pines, is yet another place that promises renewal from the regressed society of Lepucki’s global breakdown. Pines, however, turns out to be nothing more than a dystopian space that continues to function through patriarchal norms in which women remain subject to male authority.

In many respects, the global breakdown presented by Edan Lepucki in *California* represents an apocalypse in the etymological sense of the term, in that Frida’s experience follows a journey from a position of oblivion to a location of awareness. As such, it might be suggested that the significance of the apocalypse in *California* is to be found in its revealing qualities. Stephen D. O’Leary makes clear that “Apocalypse, a Greek word meaning revelation or unveiling, is thus that discourse that renders or makes manifest a vision of ultimate destiny” (1998: 5). With this in mind, the novel appears to deliver a future to be

avoided through revelation, and functions as a warning about the possible resurgence of patriarchal power. At the same time however, Lepucki's revealing is less a venture of illuminating what has caused the arrival of the end (even though this is indeed the overall effect) than it is a project of exposing, through an apocalyptic collapse, the structures that shape contemporary society. In other words, *California* is not exclusively a prevention narrative from which the reader might learn how to prevent the end from occurring. Instead, Lepucki is far more concerned with how contemporary society is itself structured, and with how individuals are gendered. By looking back to the contemporary world from a post-traumatological, retrospective position, the novel's apocalypse reveals therefore that society is structured through divisions of gender disparity. Frida's revelation arrives through her performance and embodiment of various social roles, all of which are marked by her subordinate existence as a woman in relation to male dominance. The questions that Lepucki's novel asks concerning the hierarchical structures of gender are interlaced with her cultural apocalypse and unveiled throughout Frida's journey.

The world of Hall's novel paints a similar image of economic breakdown. Hall's aftermath arrives as a result of intense "global conflicts" and a "recession" that transforms Britain's political landscape (*TCA* 24). Lack of investment in flood defences has led to burst river banks, flooded homes and buildings "window-deep in the current" (*TCA* 10). Democracy has been replaced by the repressive regime called The Authority who have implemented travel restrictions in the country. The narrative follows the journey of Sister, who abandons her life at Rith, a town under the control of the Authority, and one in which women are explicitly subordinate to men, and seeks out a new life at an all-female community that resides at the Carhullan farm. Sister's journey is one of transition. Over the course of the novel and during her time at the farm, Sister's identity is transformed under the strong-armed tactics of Carhullan army's leader, Jackie Nixon, who is attempting to construct a female force that will one day challenge the repressive and authoritarian domain of Rith. Hall's novel imagines a challenge to a system shaped by divisions of gender, and in which men remain dominant, a challenge that arrives in the form of violence and conflict. However, as this chapter suggests, Hall's novel exposes the dangers of confronting gender inequality through violence.

Gender as Performance

For Judith Butler, gender cannot be recognised as static or fixed. Equally, gender cannot be understood as an enduring, permanent trait of selfhood and individuality. However, the notion of a fixed or static identity, what Butler terms a “stable identity”, is nevertheless an “illusion” that is maintained in society (Butler, 1988: 519). Butler contends that it is in the performance of gender, “a *stylized repetition of acts*” (1988: 519), through which identity is constructed. Butler makes clear that performances of gender are so engrained within all areas of social belonging and existence, what might be termed the public consciousness, or the public domain, that the performance itself remains an elusive act to both the “mundane social audience” and to “the actors themselves”, who “come to believe and perform in the mode of belief” (1988: 520): “The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness” (1988: 522). Butler’s contention, in other words, is that an individual’s performance of gender is enacted in the belief that gender is a natural occurrence of identity, or being, or embodiment, as opposed to a social construction, and Butler specifically maintains that it is the body that is both the object, or the ‘locus’ of performance, as well as an instrument of historical expression.

Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir (1974), Butler clarifies:

As an intentionally organized materiality, the body is always an embodying *of* possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention. In other words, the body is a historical situation, as Beauvoir has claimed, and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation. (1988: 521)

Through bodily performances, gender becomes a re-enactment of a “script” set out in history and across time that is “rehearsed” by the actors “and reproduced as reality once again” (1988: 526). Butler’s understanding here implies that gender is a social construction that draws heavily upon an inherent and historical system of belief and knowledge, always subject to a performance that grants the impression of reality rather than reality itself. Butler clarifies that “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (1988: 527). In essence, it is the fluidity of gender that remains concealed through gender performativity.

Butler’s discussion of gender, equating to the process that compels the individual to conform to predetermined notions of gender identity, which subsequently restrict and withhold gender’s fluidity, extends beyond the individual performance of gender and into the

wider domain of society. For example, gender is a means whereby society can be regulated and controlled (1988: 528), and “Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all” (1988: 528). Otherwise put, complying with historical expectations of gender works to enforce and maintain the belief that women and men occupy opposing poles of social existence, and are therefore essential opposites, compelled or driven by the logic that upholds gender hegemony.

Butler’s seminal observations of the workings of gender, by which she comes to the conclusion that it is the “gendered appearance” of an individual that grants an assumed expectation of the body (1988: 523), are similarly addressed by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, who make clear that gender is constructed through social interaction: “gender”, they suggest, “is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort” (1987: 129). For West and Zimmerman, arrangements in society are predicated on the ideology of existing fundamental differences between women and men, but more importantly, those arrangements legitimate such differences (1987: 126). West and Zimmerman’s argument stems largely from an understanding that whilst gender is produced through a constructed process, or a “socially organized achievement” (1987: 129), it is simultaneously interpreted and experienced within social interaction “as natural” (1987: 129). West and Zimmerman’s discussion supports Butler’s clarification of gender essentialism as being played out as an ongoing, historical process, of rehearsing, repeating, and reproducing institutionalised conceptions of gender interaction, “that the doing of gender involves making use of discrete, well-defined bundles of behaviour that can simply be plugged into interactional situations to produce recognizable enactments of masculinity and femininity” (1987: 135). West and Zimmerman make clear that masculinity and femininity are divided, via the process of social interaction, or to a larger extent governed by it into a structure that organises wider areas of social interaction:

The man ‘does’ being masculine by, for example, taking the woman’s arm to guide her across a street, and she ‘does’ being feminine by consenting to be guided and not initiating such behaviour with a man. (1987: 135)

This analogy amounts to the dynamic that shapes social division, evidenced they suggest by the division of labour into women’s and men’s work which is typically organized by the ideological principles of femininity and masculinity.

Mimi Schippers expands on the relationship between femininity and masculinity set out by West and Zimmerman, articulating not only that society is organised by an essential division of gender, but also that it is the practice (or what Butler terms the performance) of masculinity and femininity that effectively ensures and “legitimizes men’s dominion over women as a group” (2007: 87). Drawing on the well-known work of R. W. Connell, Schippers posits that the characteristics that define both masculinity and femininity from within the hierarchical framing of gender hegemony unquestionably work to both structure society and confirm male dominance over female passivity.

Shippers makes clear that hegemonic masculinity is not a process of being, but a social space in which both men and women can exist, or “move into through practice” (2007: 86), and in which they practise “characteristics understood to be ‘masculine’” (2007: 86). Connell posits that femininity must, however, remain compliant within the order of hegemonic masculinity, and argues that compliant femininity can be defined as *emphasised femininity*: “One form [of femininity] is defined around compliance with this subordination and is orientated to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (1987: 184-185). In contrast, there exist alternative femininities that utilise “strategies of resistance or forms of non-compliance” or a combination of both (1987: 184-85), an important factor to which this discussion will directly return when discussing Sarah Hall’s novel.

Schippers posits that there are intrinsic features, or ‘quality content’ belonging to hegemonic masculinity that, when “symbolically paired” with the defining features of subordinate (emphasised) femininity, “guarantee *legitimate* dominance over women” (2007: 91). For example, the “physical strength, the ability to use interpersonal violence in the face of conflict, and authority” symbolically function as superior to those characteristics that are usually assigned to femininity: “physical vulnerability, an inability to use violence effectively, and compliance” (2007: 91). Although these features or attributes are not always embodied by men and women in a way that relates to their specific sex, Shippers suggests, it is the symbolic construction of these binaries that is played out at all levels of society, which “provides a rationale for social practice more generally” (2007: 91), as Shippers confirms:

The idealized features of masculinity and femininity as complementary and hierarchical provide the rationale for social relations at all levels of social organization from the self, to interaction, to institutional structures, to global relations of domination. [...]. Masculinities and femininities provide a legitimating rationale not just for the embodiment and behaviour by individuals but also

for how to coordinate, evaluate, and regulate social practices, and therein lies their hegemonic significance. (2007: 91-92)

In addition, and with reference to Butler, Schippers purports that gender hegemony maintains its power specifically through heterosexuality, the desire or “erotic attachment to difference” that functions as a way of “fusing masculinity and femininity together as complementary opposites” (2007: 90). Heterosexuality, Schippers confirms, is the governing condition that informs the hierarchical structure between women and men, because, irrespective of an individual’s biological sex, “the possession of erotic desire for the feminine object is constructed as masculine and being the object of masculine desire is feminine” (2007: 90). Notably, heterosexuality is not limited to the relationship between a woman and a man, but to the constructed objects of femininity and masculinity. An individual, irrespective of sex, can perform femininity or masculinity, and so “the construction of hetero-desire” (2007: 90) can still be maintained within a same-sex relationship, which would also reinforce the ideological rule of the hegemonic structure, in which men remain dominant over women.

Gender performativity and the structuring of hegemonic gender norms are central to Edan Lepucki’s *California*. This chapter discusses the journey of Lepucki’s female protagonist, Frida, who exemplifies the female embodiment of emphasised femininity. Frida goes through a process of realisation, as she comes to terms with her gender as a performance and as a social construct, and comes to recognise her inferior status in relation to men. Following an analysis of Frida’s journey, this chapter turns to Hall’s *The Carhullan Army*. In contrast to Frida, Hall’s protagonist Sister is already aware of her subordinate status and she challenges the social order of gender imbalance that governs Hall’s future society. During her journey, Sister transitions from one state of social identity to another, via the liminal space, and it is in the liminal space that Hall imagines the possibility of social improvement. As Butler suggests, “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (1988: 520). Sister, if only for a short time, removes herself from hegemonic society by occupying the space of liminality, an ‘arbitrary’ location outside, or between states of essentialist categorisation.

The Social Function of Gender in *California*

Lepucki has made clear that gender was one of her key concerns when writing *California*; as she suggests in an interview for *The Rumpus*: “I was interested in writing about gender in this future world where progress has not only halted but turned backward” (2014). Frida traverses three spatial settings that chronologically unveil to her the gendered positions that she occupies. Her journey begins at the farm, in which she is subject to both her husband’s gaze and to relatively outmoded notions of gender. Subsequently, she becomes indoctrinated into an even more imbalanced social commune once she and Cal reach the Land, and finally, upon her arrival at Pines, Frida is plunged into an artificial environment in which any degree of personal autonomy is completely removed. Throughout her journey, Frida’s understanding of her position within the hegemonic structure increases, and as such, the novel progressively and systematically unveils how gender roles structure the social norms of Lepucki’s post-catastrophic world. Furthermore, because the novel can be read as a fictional reworking of contemporary culture, Lepucki’s novel functions as an estranging representation of the ongoing realities of gender inequality in the twenty-first century.

In the first spatial location of the farm, life for Frida and her husband Cal, whilst plagued by the dangers of the “afterlife” (*California*, 10), is depicted as relatively idyllic. Free from the defining and customary anxieties of the twenty-first century that have ultimately led to Lepucki’s world, “Overpopulation, pollution, drought, disease, oil, terrorism” (C 58), Frida and Cal have managed to survive and “perhaps even prospered” (C 3). Lepucki’s critical observations of contemporary life are clear, as she replaces consumerism and technology with a far more rudimentary epoch in which the couple exist harmoniously in a seemingly endless moment of honeymoon bliss: “they made love all the time. Sometimes their lust was unquenchable [...]. Sex was the only way to have fun, the only way to waste time. It replaced the Internet, reading, going out to dinner, shopping. The universe had righted itself, maybe” (C 17). In this sense, Lepucki’s economic collapse appears to have given way in a revelatory sense to a utopian space inhabited by Frida and Cal. However, Frida’s existence at the farm is simultaneously one bound by her social position in relation to that of her husband: “Cal was the mayor. She was the mayor’s wife” (C 3) and Lepucki primarily portrays Frida’s presence in *California*’s opening setting as objectified and inferior when set against the characterisation of her husband. Through her apocalyptic novel, Lepucki utilises an apocalyptic breakdown so as to reveal the social structures and performances of gender that shape contemporary culture.

Throughout the opening chapters, Frida is subject to the male gaze, to draw upon Laura Mulvey's acclaimed expression, specifically that of her husband's, and it is primarily in the moments when the narrative moves from Frida's point of view to that of Cal that her body becomes the central signifier of her identity:

Cal had to hold himself back from touching Frida's hair as she slept. It lay dark and wavy across the pillow, shinier than the creek at midday [...]. Asleep, her mouth a flat thin line, she looked plainer than she was; without her big soulful eyes [...] her beauty was evident but unremarkable. She looked older than twenty-nine. (C 32)

Within this short passage, Lepucki conveys three main issues that surround Frida's experience. Firstly, that she is only defined by her image within the hierarchical structure, portrayed here as an object to be fetishized by her husband. Her performance of female passivity ultimately reflects her position as inferior to Cal's. Secondly, her fragmentation into bodily parts parallels Lepucki's foregrounding of objects and artefacts that illustrate the deconstruction of the previous world that existed prior to the collapse. Thirdly, Cal's literal observations in this passage mimic the notion of surveillance that Lepucki cultivates throughout the novel through the theme of secrecy, which inevitably exposes and confirms the insidious workings of gender.

This passage is echoed in a flashback to the moment when Cal first met Frida before the economic breakdown occurred, and once again, it is Frida's bodily image that is not only broken down into smaller objects, but used to demonstrate his initial attraction to her:

And there she was: red lip-stick like a glamorous wound, big white teeth, those sparkling eyes. Her strong, pointy chin. Those hips he wanted to kneel before [...]. Falling in love with her had been easy. (C 64)

Cal's objectification of Frida's image here extends into the present world of the novel, and, at times, even Frida herself takes on a role that reflects the gendered hierarchy of their relationship: "She liked being naked outside. Right then she tried to catch her husband's eyes, maybe shimmy her shoulders and bite her lower lip" (C 13). Although Frida seems to be in control of her sexual autonomy here, she remains subject to Cal's gaze. In this sense, while Frida appears to be asserting her sexuality, she does so in typically gendered terms and presents herself as a sexualised object to Cal's gaze. Her performance of gender reinforces the social hierarchy that Lepucki illustrates in *California*. Elsewhere in the novel's opening stages, Lepucki further represents Frida's position in relation to Cal's:

“You know what I like best about this place?”

She frowned. “What?”

“No one can hear me fucking your brains out.”

Frida blushed. He wanted her so badly. He loved that he could say this to her, that she wanted him to say it, and that nothing had ever felt so natural. (C 42)

This exchange evidences Frida’s passivity in relation to Cal’s dominance. Significantly, in this particular instance, Cal’s observations of Frida extend beyond the act of objectification, as Frida’s ‘natural’ submission to his authority allows him to play out his dominant role through fantasy, relating to Laura Mulvey’s argument that “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female form which is styled accordingly” (2003: 62). Furthermore, this exchange marks the commencement of Frida’s journey from oblivion to realisation, and these examples that arrive in the novel’s earlier chapters during the couple’s occupancy of the farm denote the occurrence of gender performativity.

What is often thought of as a natural occurrence of gender performativity might in actual fact be a constructed and inherently (or historically) organised act between individuals that is born out of existing hierarchical structures of gender role-playing that has the consequential effect of maintaining gender inequality, and the reinforcement of male dominance. Erving Goffman argues that “femininity and masculinity are in a sense the prototypes of essential expression – something that can be conveyed fleetingly in any social situation and yet something that strikes at the most basic characterization of the individual” (1976: 75). The performative interaction between Frida and Cal, the ‘fleeting’ occurrence of their behaviour, typifies the gender roles that they perform as naturally occurring enactments.

In the instances described above, it is Frida’s performance of passive femininity in particular that truly marks the institutionalised and accepted normality of her gendered role as a natural way of being, confirming Butler’s earlier suggestion that gender is performed by the actor under the belief of its natural manifestation. Frida, in this case, at least within the spatial setting of the farm, enacts the authorship of her own gender, seemingly in control of her femininity and sexuality. She does not view her experience in negative terms or from a hierarchical perspective of inferiority, nor does she recognise her position as a social individual as being formed by the function of her gender. Instead she views her embodiment

of femininity as a naturally occurring phenomenon. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir, Butler explains:

to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (1988: 522)

Frida's performance or enactment of femininity shows her to be conforming in an obedient, albeit seemingly natural, manner to the culturally prescribed role of femininity, a way of behaving that Goffman contends "is not instinctive but socially learned and socially patterned; it is a socially defined category which employs a particular expression, and a socially established schedule which determines when these expressions will occur" (1976: 75). Frida "employ[s] expressions in what is sensed to be a spontaneous and unselfconscious way" (Goffman, 1976: 75). However, as the narrative develops, so too does her understanding of her socially constructed, gendered identity.

As suggested, Frida's characterisation in the novel's opening chapters, as seen through the gaze of her husband, is reduced to her bodily parts: her "hair", "mouth", "eyes", "teeth", "chin", "lips", "hips", "shoulders", and even her age, are all used alongside the descriptions of her passive sexuality to describe how Cal perceives her and informs us how he has come to love her. In other words, her very character, or her essence of being, is introduced in the text through her individual body parts. One way of analysing the fragmentation of Frida's body would be to suggest that Lepucki is specifically engaging with objectification theory, and on one level, this is true. "Sexual objectification", Gervais et al. make clear, "is a specific type of appearance focus concentrated on sexual body parts" that become regarded as representations of "the entire person" (2012: 743). As has now become evident, Frida is the subject of Cal's male gaze and the object of his sexual desire. However, Lepucki's narrative moves beyond merely addressing the objectification of women by men, and instead presents an environment that foregrounds how individuals are socially structured by gender. Lepucki fills her introductory pages with objects and artefacts from the previous world, and it is through Frida's interest in those objects and artefacts that Lepucki's critique of the relationship between gender and society begins. Lepucki exposes the fact that it is the social construction of gender that in turn structures the shape of society as a whole.

Frida's interest in objects is evident early on: the "dead Device" (C 4); "a matchbook from their favourite bar" (C 4); an "abacus" (C 4); a "ripped shower cap" (C 5); "handwritten cake recipes" (C 5); "antique pencils" (C 5); a "bottle of perfume" (C 5). The objects in Frida's eclectic assortment, which she keeps in an old briefcase, have no real connection to each other. Nor do they appear to hold any real value, purpose, or operational function in the 'afterlife'. The very fact that "Cal later called them her *artifacts*" (C 4) is perhaps an indication that the meaning behind Frida's desire to keep them is to be found in their historical and nostalgic significance: "In a world so disconnected from the past", as Frida reflects, "her attachment to these objects had been her only strategy for remaining sane" (C 4). In this sense, the objects function as a way for Frida to cling onto what has been lost. Additionally, when placed alongside the only object not owned by Frida prior to the collapse, the 'turkey baster', Lepucki's working of these artefacts into her narrative may simply be a way of separating the two temporal spaces of the past and the present, as Frida herself makes clear: "it was something different, a simple object to mark a before and an after" (C 5). It becomes apparent, however, that Frida's interest in these objects is far less straightforward.

Lepucki utilises Frida's artefacts as a way of foregrounding questions relating to the nature and structure of things. For example, Frida's abacus is made up of individual parts, and her fascination with it is driven by her desire to deconstruct it:

Frida pulled the last bead across the abacus. It would be pleasurable, she thought, to pluck the wire from the frame and let the beads fall. She would pop one in her mouth and suck on it like candy.

But then she wouldn't have the abacus. (C 5)

Frida views the abacus as a collection of parts that are fused together or amalgamated in some way. What remains absent here, however, is the function of the abacus. In an apocalyptic landscape where time and numerical ordering are no longer recognisable, nor for that matter relevant within a situation of pure survival, the abacus no longer has a purpose, and has become essentially meaningless. Nevertheless, Frida is drawn to the object, and, more importantly, to its individual parts. As such, this object does have a function, but as a textual clue that signifies Frida's desire to understand how things *become* constructed.

Elsewhere, during their journey from the farm to the Land, Frida contemplates the function and essence of her bra, an object that she trades with August, a nomadic character who arrives at the farm selling various items, in return for Vicodin:

Frida sighed and glanced at the bra she'd given August, now slung over the side of the carriage. "If bras are so in demand, does that mean there are a lot of women out here? How far do you travel? How many of us are there?"

"You know I won't reveal my route." He laughed. "Besides, that bra you gave me is made of fabric and wire, both valuable. And those little metal clasps, those annoying things? Also in demand."

"So it won't be a bra anymore? Is that what you're saying?"

August said he didn't know for sure how it would be used. (C 55)

The significance of Frida's exchange with August, the only other living male character that we meet prior to the couple's arrival at the Land, is two-fold. On the one hand, Frida's bra functions symbolically as a means of sexual currency. On a more subtle level, however, Frida's interest in the functional aspect of the bra, now that it is no longer going to be worn by her, and therefore no longer going to exist as an object related to her own femininity, reveals how it has become reduced to parts without function: 'So it won't be a bra anymore?'

Frida's interest in the bra's function here, echoing her interest in the abacus, is indicative of Lepucki's aim to articulate how gender unifies a person's individual characteristics, an aspect of the novel that resonates with Charlotte Witt's suggestion that the social individual becomes unified or constructed through the function of their gender. Witt argues that "gender is a pervasive and fundamental social position that unifies and determines all of our other social positions both synchronously and diachronically. It unifies them not physically, but by providing a principle of normative unity" (2011: 20). Frida's initial curiosity concerning the structure of seemingly meaningless objects is developed by Lepucki throughout the rest of the narrative as Frida comes to understand that her gender is what defines her existence as a social individual. This revelation is intimately tied up in Frida's realisation that what she originally perceived as a natural embodiment of femininity, is in actuality a socially organised achievement or social construction.

At the farm, we are given numerous flashbacks, not just of the time before the economic collapse, but of the time before the death of the Millers, the family who lived at the farm alongside Frida and Cal. Prior to the Millers' mysterious deaths, which take place before the start of the novel, the various tasks undertaken on the farm are organised through stereotypical understandings of gender. Lepucki portrays the dichotomised relationship of Frida and Cal's marriage, alongside that of the relationship between Bo and Sandy Miller, in

an unmistakable way. For instance, the two women, Frida and Sandy, are expected to perform tasks such as gathering and cooking, whilst Cal and Bo are expected to perform more traditionally masculine roles such as hunting and security, an ideological structure that is introduced during the couple's initial interaction with the Millers: "The Millers had come bearing gifts. A rabbit, already skinned and ready to roast. Also some chanterelles. "Sandy will show you how to find those," Bo said to Frida. The subtext being: *I hunt. You, woman, shall gather*" (C 30). These expectations arrive primarily through the character of Bo, who, as the narrator makes clear, claims that "foraging was women's work" (C 59). Significantly, although Frida appears to be mindful that her existence at the farm is shaped by gender difference, her awareness of this opposition is based largely on the belief that the roles of both men and women are driven by the natural divisions of strength and weakness.

Frida assumes that the reason behind the structuring of gender at the farm is a return to a primitive way of life in the aftermath of the global collapse, when survival has become their primary focus; as the narrator informs us: "Frida thought that the worse things got, the more women lost what they'd worked so hard to gain. No one cared about voting rights and equal pay because everyone was too busy lighting fires to stay warm and looking for food to stay alive" (C 67). The cause of what Frida perceives as an "antiquated division of labour" (C 66) is for Lepucki's protagonist a response embedded in human nature; as Frida claims: "It's like the only thing that matters anymore is upper-body strength" (C 66). However, as the narrative develops, so too does Frida's recognition of the unnatural process of gender division, and Lepucki utilises the theme of secrecy in her novel in order to expose gender as a social construction that ensures male superiority and dominance.

Preceding their journey to the farm, Lepucki introduces the relationship between gender and secrecy, illustrating that the opposing social poles that women and men occupy, and the power dynamic that defines this opposition, are rooted in the social and masculine performance of concealment:

August must have told him something. [...]. While she and Sandy had been discussing their menstrual cycles, or the best techniques for mushroom foraging – Pussy stuff, Frida thought wryly – the men must have mapped out the territories, whispered state secrets. (C 78)

Clearly, there is a layer of satire attached to Frida's understanding of femininity and masculinity here, and once again, her recognition of her own social status in relation to Cal's is palpable. However, the significance of this moment lies in the fact that something is being

concealed by Cal, an important issue that Lepucki returns to later in the novel. The secrets to which Frida is here referring are the circumstances behind the death of the Millers, which are withheld from both Frida and the reader for much of the novel.

Elsewhere, Frida is met with another example of masculine ambiguity as she sees her reflection in August's sunglasses: "Frida hated how she saw herself in their reflection, which kept her from looking him in the eyes. His intention she presumed" (C 47). In this instance, Frida is once more subject to the male gaze. Furthermore, Frida's inability to see through the glass and look August in the eye is indicative of a certain level of authority that August has over her. What this textual moment denotes most prominently is the notion of surveillance. August is observing Frida from a position of authority in which she is unable to return his gaze, connoting the secretive nature that surrounds his masculinity. What becomes clear when Frida and Cal reach Pines, the third location that will be discussed in due course, is the development of male secrecy, which Lepucki portrays in order to emphasise the power structure that governs gender inequality in her future world. Although Frida is not yet aware at this stage that her gendered position is an inherent social construction, it is also clear that she is beginning to comprehend how gender is not as natural an occurrence as she first believed it to be. Frida's persistent return to the structural make-up of her bra continues to function as an indication of this emerging awareness: "what her brain kept turning to was the bra. They, whoever they were, would cut it open and use its parts. The butchery of necessity" (C 78-9). Her interest in the structure of things becomes an ever more present concern that develops in the narrative once Frida and Cal arrive at the Land.

Frida and Cal eventually abandon the farm once it becomes clear that it will not sustain them. Having heard of the existence of the Land, Frida and Cal make the short journey in the hopes that it will provide for them a more secure environment. Once at the Land, Frida and Cal become socially separated from one another and placed into two distinct, gender-based groups that structure the commune in an essentialist fashion. At this stage of the novel, Frida is yet to realise the social construction of gender, or the maintenance of gender-power relations that are ultimately born out of essentialism, and as such, Frida still experiences her roles in relation to Cal's as natural. According to Nick Haslam, Louis Rothschild, and Donald Ernst:

An essentialist belief typically maintains that membership in a category is fixed or *immutable*, that one cannot readily shed or alter the identity that it bestows. It involves the imputation of an *inherent* nature, something underlying the surface characteristics of category members. It often involves a belief that the category is *discrete*, having a sharp boundary and all-or-nothing membership determined by *defining* (necessary and sufficient, i.e. essential) features. It takes category members to be relatively homogeneous or *uniform* because they are all fundamentally the same. It views the category as in some sense *natural*. (2002: 88-89)

Whilst living at the Land, Frida and Cal must contribute to life in the commune by undertaking chores during Morning Labour: “She and Cal were supposed to choose from a number of assignments; kitchen, garden, construction, butchery, security, animals, laundry, or housekeeping” (C 170). Although it at first seems as though the men and women of the commune are granted the choice to pick their own chores and tasks, Lepucki also appears to be stressing the inherent and historical quality of gender essentialism for the reader. Frida, for example, “picked baking because of her baking experience”, whilst Cal finds himself working construction (C 171). Frida and Cal thus find it difficult to ‘shed or alter the identit[ies]’ that gender essentialism ‘bestows’ upon them. Importantly, and once again, they do not experience the way in which they are grouped as being a social and historical construction but a natural occurrence of gender performance.

However, even when they are given the ‘freedom’ to choose their various roles, Lepucki clearly illustrates for the reader that there is something unusual about the Land, and that its inhabitants are to an extent subject to a system based upon heterosexual normativity (Cf. Butler and Schippers): “Per regulation, they were told they could not pick the same job. Couples separated before noon to encourage socialization and independence” (C 170). For the remainder of the novel, Frida’s development arises as the connection between gender and control becomes increasingly apparent.

By separating Frida and Cal into groups that are defined by stereotypical interpretations of gender and ability, Lepucki foregrounds in the simplest of terms the issue of gender essentialism, or *kind* essentialism. In referring to the daily tasks that the commune must strictly carry out, from within an equally strict system of gender division, as Morning Labour, a heading that markedly carries with it connotations of pregnancy and motherhood, Lepucki concurrently draws attention to the inherent inequalities associated with gender in the workplace. Lepucki thus demonstrates that gender is what shapes the social roles that we perform or enact, and that consequently forms the structure of patriarchal society.

The tripartite relationship between gender, hierarchy, and the work place has been examined in detail by Joan Acker, who, in her analysis, confronts the principle of ‘organizational logic’, in which “[g]ender is a constitutive element” (1990: 147). Acker sets out to explore how the work place is constructed through the organisational logic of gender, arguing that if an “organization, or any other analytic unit is gendered [it] means that advantage, disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (1990: 146). Acker clarifies that “gender is not an addition to ongoing processes [of the organisational logic], conceived as gender neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of those processes” (1990: 146). Acker explains that social interaction is divided along “lines of gender”, comprising “divisions of labour”, as well as other interconnected areas of the social structure, such as “behaviours”; “space”; “power”; “the family”, and “the state” (1990: 146). Furthermore, those divisions, Acker contends, are constructed and secured through symbols and images produced in popular culture, specifically through fashion and the media (1990: 146). Therefore, gender not only signifies hierarchies between individuals, but forms the “blueprint” for the “complex organizations” that effectively structure society as a whole (1990: 147/8).

Acker’s discussion applies primarily to the structure of the workplace, in which, via organisational logic, “both jobs and hierarchies have no occupants, no human bodies, no gender (1990: 149). It is, according to Acker, through the inclusion of a worker that the abstract job becomes a “concrete instance” (1990: 149). Importantly, the ideology of the organisational structure creates the illusion of gender-neutrality within the workplace, even though the task or the job is in actuality a gendered, social role:

The concept ‘a job’ is thus implicitly a gendered concept, even though organizational logic presents it as gender neutral. ‘A job’ already contains the gender-based division of labor and the separation between the public and the private sphere. The concept of ‘a job’ assumes a particular gendered organization of domestic life and social production. (Acker, 1990: 149)

The significance of Acker’s discussion lies in its clarification that prior to the inclusion of a body, the role or ‘job’ is entirely abstract and thus devoid of gender. However, a ‘job’ becomes gendered once the body takes on the role. Divisions of labour and also hierarchical divisions, both of which are gendered, are accepted within the domain of the workforce because they are ideologically situated as neutral, which equates to a certain failure to perceive the hierarchical structure of labour as a process of maintaining divisions of power in

gender politics. It is not that the hierarchical structure is understood as productive or ideal, but that it is recognised as a natural manifestation existing outside of gender, and because of this, the constructed reality of gender in the workplace remains an elusive entity.

The acceptance of the hierarchical structure is evidenced in the workforce of the Land in *California*, where men and women play out their gendered roles from positions of subservience, as Frida observes: “Everyone seemed too focused on their work, like they were acting out in the same terrible play” (C 177). The inhabitants of the commune continue to maintain and uphold their roles in the hierarchical structure under the belief that this is a natural, neutral, and productive way to rebuild the fallen world, and as such, they perform gender essentialism accordingly, without any true awareness of the resultant system of power and oppression. In the kitchen, for instance, “Most of the group was female, except for the two guys who were as young as Sailor [a young boy in the commune]” (C 173), whilst it is only the men who work on security detail (C 284). The hierarchical structure is accepted even though it functions as a process that maintains gender divisions delineated by male authority and female subjection. The result in the novel is that gender is presented through an essentialist logic that produces gender inequality. Frida comes to realise, however, that the way in which the commune is fashioned is not a neutral and natural (biological) formation, but a constructed way of existence that reinforces male dominance and legitimates male control over women, and Frida’s awareness of this comes to the forefront of the text once her pregnancy is revealed to the social group.

The Land is presented to Frida and Cal as a space of new beginnings that has “stripped away the fake and dangerous veneer of modern culture” so that its inhabitants can “live freely” (C 164). However, the Land, as Frida learns, is not a place in which renewal from the old world might occur because it functions under a patriarchal system of male governance and control that suppresses and subordinates women. The pivotal example of this arrives with the knowledge that the Land is governed by the total exclusion of pregnancy and children; as Cal reflects: “It hit him all at once. There were no children. Not one” (C 165). This realisation leads Frida and Cal to question the supposed freedom of existence on which, under the leadership of Micah, the Land prides itself: “A place that banned children had to have a streak of insidiousness at its center. These men were up to something” (C 213). The insidiousness being referred to here is the system of oppression that defines the commune, which becomes apparent to Frida once her pregnancy is made public, a factor that ultimately results in the couple’s expulsion from the Land.

During her pregnancy, which for the majority of her time on the Land remains only speculation, Frida is once more subject to the male gaze, only in this environment, it is her pregnant body that is being observed. For instance, Cal is questioned by one of the men concerning Frida's condition: "Any changes in Frida, physically speaking?" [...]. It made Cal feel strange, imagining Peter watching Frida, eyeing her body for that tell-tale rise above her belly button" (C 280). Frida's pregnancy, and Peter's question concerning her body, exposes the subtle position of male authority that is masked behind the ideology of gender neutrality. It soon becomes clear that female autonomy is contained through the regulation and exclusion of childbirth, which is in turn mirrored in the containment of the Land's location; as Micah explains to Cal: "The Land has to be contained, Cal," Micah said. 'so that word of this outpost doesn't grow'" (C 240). Lepucki merges the control of the land with that of female subordination through pregnancy control, and this is confirmed during the communal meeting that occurs towards the end of the novel. Here, the community must vote on the decision concerning whether or not to allow Frida and Cal to remain at the Land.

As soon as Frida's pregnancy becomes public knowledge within the small community, there is an overwhelming refusal to entertain the couple any longer: "What's there to discuss?" a woman called out. [...]. "We believe in containment'" (C 348). In terms of organisational logic in the workplace, as discussed by Acker, Frida's pregnancy is interpreted by the commune as a threat to the 'ideal functioning of the organization'. Acker makes clear:

there is no place within the disembodied job or the gender neutral organization for other "bodied" processes, such as human reproduction (Rothman 1989) or the free expression of emotions (Hochschild 1983). Sexuality, procreation, and emotions all intrude upon and disrupt the ideal functioning of the organization, which tries to control such interferences. (Acker, 1990: 151/2)

With this in mind, the way in which Lepucki structures the society of the Land is indicative of gender functionality in the workplace. Frida's pregnancy poses a threat to the structure of the Land, and as a result, her banishment from the commune becomes an act of scorn undertaken by the compliant community. Acker clarifies that "Women's bodies – female sexuality, their ability to procreate and their pregnancy, breast-feeding, and child care, menstruation, and the mythic 'emotionality' – are suspect, stigmatized, and used as grounds for control and exclusion" (1990: 152). Once her pregnancy is exposed to the community of the Land, Frida's realisation of her gender as being a constructed, social position of inferiority is revealed in the narrative.

In *California*'s third and final location, Frida is confronted with the artificial and constructed nature of gender in society. However, in contrast to the previous settings of the farm and the Land, the society at Pines is heavily regulated through modes of surveillance, as Lepucki presents the reader with an explicitly dystopian environment. At Pines, Frida comes to understand that her gender, defined by her role as a wife and a mother, is both inferior and oppressed within the gendered power structure, and yet, in spite of this awareness, Lepucki's novel culminates in Frida's inability to challenge the social hierarchy that governs her existence, and as a result, Frida continues to embody a passive position in relation to her husband, and also in relation to society itself. Thus, through the spatial setting of Pines, Lepucki presents us with a dystopian climax in which female subjectivity is the central and inescapable condition, demonstrating not only that gender is itself a construct, but also that society is constructed through the performance of gender and the maintenance of gender inequality.

Lepucki draws heavily on Bryan Forbes' 1975 film *The Stepford Wives* in her illustration of the setting at Pines. According to Anna Krugovoy Silver, Forbes' "science fiction rewrite of Betty Friedan's pioneering 1963 liberal feminist polemic *The Feminine Mystique*" (2002: 60) considers three key concerns of the women's movement: "a woman's domestic labour, a woman's role in the nuclear family, and a woman's control over her body" (2002: 60). The environment of Pines is undoubtedly fashioned in the same vein as that of Forbes' town of Stepford. Silver argues that in spite of the criticisms directed at Forbes' attempt to engage with the feminist objectives in *The Stepford Wives*, that it was "anti-male", or "a misrepresentation of feminist goals and cultural critiques" (2002: 61), the film is in actuality "an important document of second wave feminism" (2002: 73). Silver claims that the film is an "examination of the plight of the dissatisfied middle-class housewife", a "parody of the fetishization of house work", an "explicit critique of the nuclear family", and it sustains/has a "relentless focus on the constructedness and artificiality of female beauty" (2002: 60), issues that are central to the setting of Pines in *California*. The society of Pines functions in an entirely different way to that of the Land. Rather than banning children, Pines replicates the ideology of the nuclear family, and in this community, "childless couples were frowned upon" (C 306). Pines is nevertheless another community structured by gender inequality.

Frida and Cal, having been banished from the Land, find themselves model citizens at Pines. Frida is in her "final trimester" (C 383), and Cal is working in the "Education Department" (C 383). At the same time, the couple's existence, along with the rest of the

citizens, is subject to their obedience within the community. Everything they do and say is under surveillance, and life for the couple is strictly a performance of conformity. Notably, their existence at Pines is described exclusively from Frida's perspective, detailing the gendered hierarchy on which life at Pines is structured from the oppressed pole of the social power dynamic. Frida has now become completely aware of her gender as a social construction, and also of her subservient social ranking as a woman, and as such, the narrative reflects this development as it is told solely from Frida's standpoint.

Pines is effectively a society under surveillance, a theme that is introduced at the start of the novel. However, now that they live in the community at Pines, it is no longer an underlying issue but a primary method of regulation, evidenced in the 'Big Brother' style practice of social control through surveillance technologies. Concerning the connection between gender and technological methods of surveillance in contemporary culture, Torin Monahan explicates that one of the primary uses of surveillance technologies involves, quite simply, the voyeuristic act of men watching women (2009: 287). Monahan suggests, however, that this is hardly surprising, and claims that "gender implications of surveillance systems extend well beyond voyeurism, manifesting in radical new forms of disembodied control" (2009: 287), and it is this aspect of surveillance that Lepucki critiques at Pines, as she depicts what Monahan refers to as "masculine control at a distance" (2009: 290), a system of control and regulation that utilises surveillance technologies in order to "enforce a masculinization of space and practice" (2009: 299). Monahan clarifies that these systems of surveillance construct the pretence of gender neutrality, because they "artificially abstract bodies, identities, and interactions from social contexts" (2009: 287). Monahan proposes that "by exposing the dominant rationalities of such systems and critiquing the discourse that supports them one can challenge the supposed neutrality of such technologies and question the power relations to which they give rise" (2009: 287). Pines presents the dream of renewal to its inhabitants, the reconstruction of "a bygone world that no one living had seen firsthand" (C 377). However, it is clear that existence at Pines is subject to perpetual surveillance in both the private and the public spheres, evidenced in the text by "the cameras and microphones on every street corner [that] would pick up their conversations, even inside their home [...]. The signs were posted at every corner: SMILE, YOU'RE ON CAMERA" (C 382). The populace of Pines are therefore subject to a system of oppression and control.

Lepucki's dystopian community is not simply an Orwellian environment, however, persistently being watched by an unseen authority, but also a cultural performance of pretence, and an artificial world that gives the impression of "a start-over feeling" (C 379):

It had been their first week as newly minted citizens of Pines, and they'd been walking through the park nearby, holding hands. They were taking it all in: the cameras, the signs, the park's plastic castle with its slide and shaky rope bridge, the kids squealing as they crossed to safety on the other side. (C 383)

The environment at Pines is a 'plastic' world of simulation that is attempting to recreate the world that was lost during the global collapse, and Lepucki's characters, under constant observation, must perform the act of conformity: "Anyone who didn't follow the rules was thrown out" (C 382). The inauthenticity of the environment extends to the subjectivity of its inhabitants, who must participate in the performance of renewal, most notably achieved through the name changes undertaken by Frida and Cal; now Julie and Gray. Furthermore, the performance of renewal is advertised in the brochure that Frida reads during their journey to Pines:

Thanks to our cutting-edge workout facilities and well-maintained bike paths, our valued citizens live active and healthy lifestyles. Just wait until you try our Good for You Diet Plans™, offered in each of our six shopping districts [...].

We maintain a small-town feel. Come home to us! [...].

Take advantage of our speedy, hand-delivered correspondence system, and our Quality Interaction Centers™, where friends can meet face-to-face for stimulating conversation and a variety of antioxidant teas. At Pines, there is no time but quality time. (C 377)

The brochure conveys the synthetic nature of life at Pines, a name that is itself "meant to summon images of nature and greenery" (C 252), exposing the illusion of a renewed and progressive environment that offers safety from the degradation of the outside world. In this sense, the brochure advertises the illusion of renewal in the aftermath of Lepucki's apocalypse, and the inhabitants of Pines conform to this sense of artificiality. Even the clothing worn by Cal and Frida is unable to maintain its appearance: Cal wears "synthetic fabric that wrinkled easily", and Frida wears dresses that "pill and fade" (C 385). Communication at Pines is also subject to artifice, confirmed when Cal and Frida meet up with their friend Toni: "She had got them to meet her at their local center, for tea and stimulating conversation. Even Toni had used the brochure language" (C 385). By presenting

Pines in this way, Lepucki draws attention to a clearly simulated environment, a location in which Frida comes to perform femininity from a position of subordination, as Frida herself elucidates: “it was an easy myth, and she practised it in her head every day” (C 385). In this utterance, Lepucki demonstrates Frida’s awareness of her subordinate social position, which amounts to the amalgamation of the two principal roles traditionally expected of women: mother and wife.

Forbes’s *The Stepford Wives* portrays a similar environment to that conjured by Lepucki at Pines. In the film, a nuclear family, Joanna, Walter, and their children, have moved from New York to the fictitious suburb of Stepford. Stepford is a society of upper-class families, and the film centres on the experience of the “idealized housewives who occupy the town” (Helford, 2006: 146/7). The wives of the town “are all ‘superhousewives,’ who cook, clean, and are devoted to their husbands, but also seem placid, passive, and unwilling to express their opinions” (Silver, 2002: 61). As the film continues, it becomes clear that the women are being replaced by zombie-type replicas by the men who belong to the secretive Stepford Men’s Association. As Silver explains: “the men of Stepford have found the technological means to create perfect wives” (2002: 61). The film is an expression of “second-wave feminist discourse” (2006: 147), as Elyce Rae Helford explains. As such, Lepucki’s environment of Pines can be seen to display similar concerns to those explored in *The Stepford Wives*, most notably through Frida’s passivity and obedience to the rules and regulations of the idyllic society that is “obsessed with the idea of women being homemakers” (C 387), and also through the secretive nature of men.

Frida’s “job[s]” (C 389) at Pines, as with the rest of the town’s women, are motherhood and domestic house-wife, roles that are defined by her gender: “all the mothers stayed home to bake cakes and whatever else mothers at Pines did. Women were expected to devote everything to raising a family” (C 384). Moreover, due to the constant surveillance by which the town is controlled, the women of Pines must perform their duties with the illusion of complete satisfaction: “Pines wanted every wife to be a cake baker, wearing an apron and a smile” (C 384). In contrast, as with the men of Stepford, the men of Pines work in roles that are unknown to the women: “‘What do those fathers do in those offices all day anyway?’ Frida had asked. It was still a mystery to her, how Pines worked” (C 384). Cal is defined by his secrecy in the concluding pages of the novel, and neither Frida nor the reader learn anything further of what life for men at Pines is like, or what their roles are within the community. Frida comes to accept her position in relation to Cal’s, and the novel ends

without any challenge to the clear inequalities of gender on which Pines as a social community is structured: “Her job was not to ask any questions. She and the child, they would stay here” (C 389).

California, in many ways, takes on a political note in its final setting of Pines, highlighting the “unhappiness of the middle-class suburban housewife” that characterized “American housewives of the 1950s and 1960s” (Silver, 2002: 63). Lepucki foregrounds the unequal dynamic between men and women, revealing how the role of the mother and the housewife actually serves to benefit men. Drawing on Pat Mainardi’s essay, ‘The Politics of Housework’ (1975), Silver makes clear that “something as “trivial” as housework is intensely political, because it reinforces the private sphere as women’s particular area of expertise, keeping the public sphere secure for men. When women do housework, it both enables men to do other, more “important” things” (2002: 65). Cal’s secretive job at Pines is indicative of the ‘important’ role of men, an ideology that is maintained through the subservience of women whose place is at home. Consequentially, the society of Pines is structured by gender, with women at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder, and men, in an unseen, authoritative position, at the top. Throughout the novel, Frida has undergone a developmental understanding of how her social roles, an object of the male gaze, her employed position in the workforce, and her roles of motherhood and housewife, are all quantified by her gendered position as a woman. Ultimately, however, Frida does not overcome her passive position within the hierarchy that structures the society of Pines, and is therefore unable to pose a challenge to the social order. Lepucki ends her novel in this manner for the purpose of exposing the on-going existence of gender inequality in the twenty-first century.

Challenging Gender and Control in *The Carhullan Army*

Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army*, as with *California*, explores the relationship between cultural anxiety and gender. In contrast to Frida, Hall’s female heroine, Sister, steps beyond the patriarchal system that underscores Hall’s dystopian environment. Sister enters into an all-female commune, the members of which inhabit the farm and seek to defy gender disparity through violence. However, Hall exposes the dangers of challenging gender essentialism with violence, and instead, constructs a narrative that utilises the space of liminality, an in-between state devoid of categorisation, allowing for an open-ended outcome and the possibility for social change. Like Frida, Sister’s character undergoes a

developmental transformation of identity as she moves from one environment to another. However, where Frida began from a position of oblivion in relation to her role and her structured social existence as a woman, Sister's position begins from a point of awareness when it comes to her location within a system of inequality. As such, her journey is based on her experience as a woman who refuses to belong to the hierarchical structure of male authority and female passivity. Whilst Frida is never able to overcome her oppressed position, Sister, conversely, physically removes herself from the hierarchical structure.

The environment in which we first see Sister is one not entirely different from the location of Pines in which Frida finds herself at the end of *California*. Both locations are under heavy surveillance and structured by inequalities of gender. However, Hall's portrayal of Rith is more explicitly dystopian than that of Pines. The town of Rith, a linguistically collapsed version of Penrith in the Lake District, is controlled by the Authority, who monitor Rith's inhabitants both physically and spatially. As Sister explains:

For years I had not been out of Rith. No civilian had, unless they were being transported to a detention centre. The zones did not allow for transference. The original register bound people to their areas at the time of the collapse. (TCA 9)

The most notable form of oppression at Rith is envisaged by Hall through the control of women, whose bodies are implanted with a surgical coil to prevent pregnancy, and it is only through a lottery system that women are able to conceive:

The procedure took ten minutes. It was a male doctor that came into the surgery, fingering into his gloves, and I asked if I could have a woman doctor instead but he said no one else was available. (TCA 28)

Taking the contraceptive coil as a starting point, Ian Robinson explains that "*The Carhullan Army* is a novel that foregrounds issues of gender and subjectivity, highlighting how progress in gender equalities fought for by the feminist movement might easily and rapidly regress into the inequalities of old" (2013: 200-1). Through Sister's experience of this procedure, Hall exposes the fundamental workings of the system of gender hierarchy on which this society is maintained and controlled. The connection between the collapsed society and the female body is illustrated during a conversation between Sister and her husband Andrew in the novel's early stages:

When he was promoted to overseer at the refinery he seemed grateful, and told me it was madness to be anything other than complicit in Britain's attempts to rebuild herself. [...].

When he'd said this I'd bitten my lip, and then turned to face him. Out of a deep place in me I'd felt my fury rise. 'She's a female, is she, this country that's been fucked over?' (TCA 31)

Over the course of the novel, the exploitation of women is often represented as intertwined with the exploitation of the environment. Sister's anger here results in her decision to abandon the town of Rith, and thus, the decision to abandon the structure of gender inequality that governs society in Hall's dystopian environment. *The Carhullan Army* depicts a world, like *California*, where a reversal has taken place involving gender in society. The town of Rith, which symbolises Hall's post-apocalyptic future, is built on the ideology of male superiority, and so Sister's journey, in which she abandons this ideology and travels into the hills to find Carhullan, is also one shaped by female resistance to the social order.

Whilst on her journey to Carhullan, having abandoned "the harsh orchestration of the town" (TCA 21), Sister encounters a man on the road, who offers to give her a ride. What starts off as an act of kindness soon turns into a clear illustration of male authority, as revealed in the following exchange:

I felt his gaze on my legs, moving over the wet contours of my thighs. 'Hey, listen, do you mind my asking, are they still, you know, sorting the women out, so we don't get overrun?' He laughed again, his face glowing. 'That's one good thing about all this, I reckon, a return to the era of free love. Mmm, yes.' His fingers flexed on the steering wheel. (TCA 16)

As with Frida's existence at the farm in *California*, Sister is likewise subject to the male gaze in this passage. In contrast, however, Sister's discomfort regarding her role as a sexualised object to be looked upon and controlled is apparent:

A flare of adrenaline went off inside me. I felt it scorch against my breastbone and light my nerve endings. Suddenly I wanted to be out from under everything, I wanted to be as unsnapped and reckless as this journey I was undertaking warranted. (TCA 16/17)

In an act of resistance, Sister makes the decision to reveal her true intentions to the man in response to both his 'gaze', and to his clear delight at women being controlled through the use of the contraceptive coil: "'I'm not going walking,' I said to the man. 'I'm going up to a place called Carhullan.'" (TCA 17). Upon hearing this declaration, the man becomes angry, and expresses both his confusion and resentment towards her:

'You stupid girl. What the hell are you thinking of...?' [...]. 'a nice woman like you' [...]. 'If you think it will be any better up there, you're dead wrong. You've got no bloody idea, have you, girl?'

Give it a week and you'll have your tuss back down here and you'll be begging me to take you home. I guarantee it.' (TCA 20)

This brief encounter demonstrates the way in which the hierarchy of gender is played out. In announcing her intent to abandon the town of Rith, and therefore the social structure of the male/female hierarchy on which it functions, Sister steps outside of the social structure shaped by male dominance and female oppression, and in turn, poses a threat to it.

To return briefly to Schippers and Butler, the strength of the hierarchical structure of gender is to be found through the performance of heterosexual desire (2007: 90). In the example above, Sister is consciously stepping beyond her assigned role of emphasised femininity through the performance of resistance, and is therefore failing to comply with the order of hegemonic masculinity. According to Butler:

because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term '*strategy*' better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished. (1988: 522)

The social structure of gender as it functions in the town of Rith amounts to a strategy of survival. The women submit to the procedure involving the use of the contraceptive coil based on the ideology and understanding that the future of human survival is at stake. This ideology extends to the interaction with the man in the car, a man who expects Sister to perform her role of emphasised femininity under the gaze and authority of hegemonic masculinity. However, Sister resists and confronts the hierarchical structure that is maintained through this ideology, and is verbally punished by the man accordingly, evidenced in his labelling of her as a 'stupid girl'.

Punishment for female non-compliance is also represented in the text as Sister describes the women from Carhullan who used to visit Rith during her childhood. Hall represents the women of Carhullan as devious entities in the eyes of the novel's post-catastrophic society under the control of the patriarchal Authoritarian state. They fail to belong to the social structure that is made up of two simple binary oppositions: male and female. Shippers outlines clearly the model of both hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity, the two poles that form the hierarchy of the social structure:

Hegemonic masculinity is the *qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity* and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. [...]. *Hegemonic femininity consists of the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.* (2007: 94, italics in original)²

Clearly, in both cases, the performance of either role guarantees the dominant position of men and the subsidiary position of women. For Schippers, if women deviate from their performance of hegemonic femininity, and instead, “enact” or displays traits and characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, they are deviating from the structure that ensures male superiority (2007: 94/5):

If hegemonic gender relations depend on the symbolic construction of desire for the feminine object, physical strength, and authority as the characteristics that differentiate men from women and define and legitimate their superiority and social dominance over women, then these characteristics must remain unavailable to women. (2007: 94)

As with the example of the man that Sister meets on the road, women who abandon their role of hegemonic femininity, or women who enact traits of hegemonic masculinity “must be defined as deviant and stigmatized” (Schippers, 2007: 94) in order to maintain the dominant social position of men, which through the female performance of masculine traits is placed under threat. Schippers clarifies:

Practices and characteristics that are stigmatized and sanctioned if embodied by women include having sexual desire for other women, being promiscuous, ‘frigid’, or sexually inaccessible, and being aggressive. These are characteristics that, when embodied by women, constitute a refusal to complement hegemonic masculinity in a relation of subordination and therefore are threatening to male dominance. For this reason, they must be contained. (2007: 95)

Gender hegemony, Schippers clarifies then, is controlled and maintained through the stigmatisation of women who abandon their hegemonic femininity by enacting characteristics that are exclusively accepted in the social sphere as masculine. Moreover, women who perform such traits become understood as embodying a new kind of social individuality entirely, one that contaminates “the relationship between masculinity and femininity”

² In her definition of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity, Schippers expands on R. W. Connell’s definition of hegemonic masculinity. The italicised sections of this quotation mark Schippers’ additions to Connell’s definition.

(Schipper, 2007: 95), and as such, those characteristics become what Schipper terms 'pariah femininities'.

The enactment of pariah femininities results in the creation of a new individual from the perspective of the male gaze: "a lesbian, a 'slut'", a shrew or 'cock-teaser', a bitch [...] master statuses for women who exhibit them" (Schipper, 2007: 95). These features must be interpreted as feminine rather than masculine for them to "maintain their place squarely in masculinity and their only legitimate enactment solely in the hands of men" (2007: 95). In other words, through the male gaze, masculinity must contain and maintain its dominance over pariah femininities to ensure the continuation of gender hegemony, and this is represented in Hall's text through the stigmatisation of the Carhullan women, who, even during Sister's formative years, had "a bad reputation" and were "slightly exotic, slightly disliked" (*TCA* 47).

At one stage of the novel, we are given a brief flashback, a memory from Sister's childhood in which she recollects seeing the Carhullan women. These women, who chose to live outside of the authority as 'Unofficials' "were odd looking" (*TCA* 47): "Their dress was different, unconventional. [...]. Seeing their attire, people thought at first they must be part of a new faith, some modern agrarian strain" (*TCA* 47). Sister reflects:

There had been a skirmish in the market once, not a fight exactly but a physical exchange of sorts. My father and I had only seen the end of it, as it broke up. There was the sound of scraping and a soft thump, and when I looked over I saw that three of the yellow-shirted women were standing over a young man. There were cabbages rolling on the ground around him. He was cursing them, calling them dykes. The expression on his face was one of shock and outrage. But their faces were utterly calm.

Among the locals, speculation about the lives they led was rife, and it was often cruel, or filled with titillation. They were nuns, religious freaks, communists, convicts. They were child-deserters, men-haters, cunt-lickers, or celibates. They were, just as they had been hundreds of years ago, witches, up to no good in the sticks. (*TCA* 48)

Through Sister's memory of this moment, Hall portrays the way in which women who deviate from the social order of gender hegemony, or those who fail to comply with it, are punished through the process of stigmatisation. Sister narrates something of a three-stage development concerning the stigmatisation process in this passage. The women take on an authoritative position of dominance as they stand over the man, thus reversing the inherent

hierarchical structure. This role reversal, and the power that the women have obtained through this exchange, has in turn forced the man to experience ‘shock and outrage’. As a result, the women become stigmatized and categorised as fanatics, lesbians, and criminals, designated ‘master statuses’ through which masculinity is able to maintain its dominance and control within the social order. In other words, the attempt by the women to reverse the social order becomes thwarted through the process of stigmatisation.

Furthermore, Hall exposes the inherent and historical nature of the process through which women who deviate from the accepted position of emphasised femininity are stigmatised, and ultimately excluded. For example, Sister’s interest in and admiration for the leader of the Carhullan women, Jackie Nixon, is met with her father’s attempt to render Jackie a threat to the town:

Before he died my father commented that it would take only a small twist of the dial for Jackie Nixon to become a menace to society. The more he spoke out against her the more intrigued I became. [...]. ‘I think she’s leaning on them lasses to do whatever she damn well wants, and she’s messing with their heads,’ he said, ‘like a cult bloody crackpot. And you, my girl, are to steer clear.’ (TCA 49/50)

Her father’s endeavour to dissuade Sister’s veneration of Jackie, a woman Sister views as “‘some kind of heroine’” (TCA 49), reflects the historical process of maintaining the social norm of gender hegemony across generational lines. Moreover, the stigmatisation process is additionally linked with speculation and conjecture concerning Jackie’s existence, which “‘In Rith it was issued like superstition from the mouths of those discussing her and her girls. ‘Jackie Nixon,’ they said. ‘She’s one of the Border Nixons. They were the ones who went out with bulldogs to meet the reivers.’” (TCA 49).³ Sister’s interest in Jackie refuses to wane, however. Instead, the narrative is directed by Sister’s resistance to the ideology of gender hegemony. Through her characterisation of Sister, and through her portrayal of the Carhullan environment, Hall depicts a communal resistance to the patriarchal order that epitomises the town of Rith. In so doing, Hall subsequently exposes the problematic notion of resistance as a route to social improvement. Instead, it is in the liminal space that the possibility for social improvement might arise. The space of liminality is central to Sister’s development in *The*

³ Notably, Hall draws here on the context of the border reivers, clans who existed along the English/Scottish border during the Tudor and Elizabethan periods, and who lived a lifestyle of plundering and raiding in defiance of both English and Scottish law, having loyalty only to their family names. The family name of Hall is one example of the borderland reivers: see <http://www.englishnortheast.co.uk/BorderReivers.html>

Carhullan Army, and as such, it is worth exploring a brief overview behind its historical development.

The notion of liminality stems originally from the writings of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, who, in his major work *The Rites of Passage* (1909), articulated three stages of identity development, and that of social-group development more broadly. Bjørn Thomassen explains that “[h]e distinguished between rites that mark the passage of an individual or social group from one status to another from those which mark transitions in the passage of time” (2009: 6). This passage, as Nic Beech makes clear, is divided into “three phases”:

separation, characterized by symbols of detachment; liminality, in which the ritual subject or ‘liminar’ is ambiguous and passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the ‘before’ and ‘after’ states; and aggregation, the consummation of the passage. (2011: 287)

Van Gennep termed these stages *rites of separation*, *transition rites*, and *rites of incorporation*, and referred to the intermediary stage, the transitional rites, as the *liminal period* (Thomassen, 2009: 6). The liminal period became a significant area of interest for Victor Turner, whose work on the subject of liminality is indebted to Van Gennep’s philosophy (Thomassen, 2009: 14).

Turner argues that prior to the ritual of transition, the individual, whom he terms the ‘ritual subject’, is located within a “fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’)” (1979: 235). Once the transitional process is complete, the subject “is in a stable state once more” (1979: 235). Significantly, Turner’s definition of ‘state’ is marked by any location or position that is perceived or “culturally recognized” (1979: 234). For example, a state can be a “legal status, profession, office or calling, rank or degree” as well as being applicable to “ecological conditions, or to the physical, mental or emotional conditions in which a person or group may be found at a particular time” (1979: 234). Moreover, the state also applies to “good or bad health; a society in a state of war or peace or a state of famine or of plenty” (1979: 234). As such, the period of liminality is to be found outside of the state, or “betwixt and between” all the recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification” (1979: 236/7).⁴ Turner further explains that the liminal subject, who occupies the transitional location betwixt and between two fixed poles of existence or locations of recognisable states is beyond perception, “structurally, if not physically, ‘invisible’”, and the

⁴ The phrase ‘betwixt and between’ used by Turner, was posited by Dr. Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger* (1966).

“structurally indefinable” subject of liminality belongs to both the “no longer classifiable and the not yet classified” simultaneously (1979: 236). Otherwise put, liminality is both the rejection of previous notions of definition ordered by the centre, and also a space in which possibility for something new is imaginable. Importantly, liminality is not exclusively bound by individual subjectivity, but extends to the “in-between positions between larger civilizations” as Thomassen makes clear (2009: 16). In this way, a novel such as *The Carhullan Army*, which contemplates a sociological breakdown on a vast scale, and also the dissolution of Sister’s identity, is one that presents the liminal on both the individual and social levels of experience.

Turner draws specifically on liminality and gender, primarily because of the significance that the construction of gender has on the way that society is itself structured. As Turner posits: “In societies dominantly structured by kinship institutions, sex distinctions have great structural importance. [...]. Since sex distinctions are important components of structural status, in a structureless realm they do not apply” (1979: 237). The structural realm is the liminal period, in which an individual’s gender becomes invisible, unstructured, and unbound to the definitive states of woman and man. From a sociological standpoint, and concerning the implication of liminality in contemporary culture, Jennifer Howard-Grenville et al., posit that liminality “is a cultural apparatus (Turner 1979) in which structure recedes in importance and the symbolic is illuminated through the simultaneous presence of the familiar and the unfamiliar” (2011: 523), and suggest that “Experience in the liminal invites participants to explore and experiment” and to “think about how they think” (Turner, 1987, p. 102) (2011: 523). Furthermore, Beech clarifies that “changes in identity imply changes in the meanings associated with a person, and meanings are not simply located in the ‘subjects’ but in the relationship between the individual and the organization (or society)” (2010: 4). With this in mind, Sister’s journey is governed by the passage through liminality, and her individual existence as a liminal subject might also be considered a representation of liminality on the societal level. As will be discussed, Sister exemplifies the liminal subject, and her journey through the liminal space is one in which her identity and her gender are collapsed in order for a new social being to emerge. In this sense, Sister takes on a position that is itself apocalyptic. As with the narrative of the apocalypse, in which worlds are collapsed in order to either bring about a new state of existence, or reveal that which brought it into being, Sister’s identity is likewise broken down, collapsed and destroyed, giving way to an entirely new state of existence.

Prior to her arrival at the farm and her subsequent entry into the liminal period, Sister must undergo a process of detachment or separation from both the physical location of Rith and the social structures of gender on which it functions as a location of female oppression and male control. Sister recalls: “I had wilfully turned away from society to become nothing and no one” (*TCA* 23). Noticeably, Sister’s journey is itself motivated by her personal and deliberate effort to free herself from her subordinate position. Beech argues that liminal practice is established through the embodiment of at least one of three acts: “experimentation, in which the liminal constructs and projects identity; reflection, in which the liminal considers the views of others and questions the self; and recognition, in which the liminal reacts to an identity that is projected onto them” (2010: 6). Sister’s passage hinges on the journey through self-identification in accordance with at least two of these acts, as her journey is one of experimentation and also of recognition.

Sister’s separation is demonstrated in the novel both geographically, as she physically removes herself from Rith, and also symbolically through her connection with the natural landscape during her journey to the farm. The novel presents the natural world as intertwined with female subjectivity, and so Sister’s development from a position of subordination at Rith to an autonomous position becomes apparent as she negotiates the landscape. At one stage on her journey, Sister comes across a small and uninhabited village where she begins to experience a sense of detachment from the social order that defines Rith:

But now I was safely away, beyond exposure and explanation. Here in the empty Lakeland village I couldn’t have explained to anyone exactly how secure I felt, even if there had been someone around to listen to me. The village reverberated with silence, with human absence. There was not a soul to be found and I liked it. It had been so long since I had felt that. [...]. Here I was breathing air that no one else’s breath competed for. I was no longer complicit in a wrecked and regulated existence. I was not its sterile subject. (*TCA* 41)

Outside the confines of Rith, Sister physically detaches herself from the social order that controls women under the ideological message of “recovery” (*TCA*, 15). Those who chose not to belong to the new system “were no longer part of the recognised nation. The Authority simply called them Unofficials” (*TCA* 15). As Sister departs from Rith, she detaches herself from the status by which she was previously defined and becomes instead an Unofficial, ‘beyond exposure and explanation’, and therefore unbound to a fixed or culturally accepted state of ‘regulated existence’. As she abandons Rith, Sister simultaneously discards or sheds her essentialist state as a woman of Rith.

It is in this place of isolation, a space of emptiness and silence, where she is granted the possibility of individual autonomy: “in the wet deserted roadway, something unassailable crept over me. I felt the arrival of a new calmness, an assurance of my own company” (*TCA* 41). Sister confirms: “I was aware of my own warm predominance in the environment, my inhabited skin, my being. I suddenly felt myself again” (*TCA* 41). Sister’s movement away from her determined state at Rith parallels the beginnings of a return to nature in the aftermath of social decline:

It was a raw landscape, verging on wilderness. The thick green vegetation overrunning the lowlands was now behind me. Rock was beginning to show through the grassland; the bones of an older district, stripped away by the wind, washed clean by fast-flowing becks. There was heather, bracken, and gorse. (*TCA* 50/1)

The rejuvenation of the landscape described here serves as an extension of female identity in the novel. Sister’s transitional process, in which her identity is broken down and laid bare, is mirrored in the landscape, which is ‘stripped away’ and given the space to re-cultivate itself, free from the control and influence of mankind.

During her arrival at the farm, Sister enters into a liminal period of existence, liberated from definition and categorisation. As she arrives at the farm, she is captured by a group of Carhullan women, an instant where Sister clearly displays attributes of emphasised femininity:

I was disarmed. I hadn’t expected such an aggressive meeting and I wanted to explain myself, but all the things that passed through my mind were submissive and desperate, a reiteration of the position I was already in, so I did not speak. My shoulder was aching but I held as still as I could, was as compliant as I could be. (*TCA* 60)

At this stage of the novel, Sister still functions as a subordinate individual within the heteronormative model of gender hegemony, and as such, her response to these powerful women who embody masculine traits of aggression can only amount to a performance of emphasised femininity: ‘submissive’; ‘desperate’; ‘compliant’. However, Sister’s entry into the farm and the liminal period is exemplified in the text once she is placed unwillingly inside a metal tank, referred to as the dog box, a liminal space that marks the end of the detachment phase in Sister’s transitional passage.

Whilst at the farm, Sister takes on the form of what Turner refers to as the ‘neophyte’ in his discussion of the ‘liminal persona’. The neophyte occupies the space between the two

ontological spaces of fixed categorisation, and is therefore a liminal being that is at first detached from the social structure temporarily before being reinstated within society as an entirely new individual. Turner explains that the neophytes, a term rooted in religious practices of initiation and ritual “are, in many societies, drawn from the biology of death, decomposition, catabolism, and other processes that have a negative tinge” (1979: 236). Additionally, as Turner makes clear, “[i]n so far as a neophyte is structurally ‘dead,’ he or she may be treated, for a long or short period, as a corpse is structurally treated in his or her society” (1979: 236). In Hall’s novel, Sister embodies the liminal persona, or the neophyte, once placed within the dog box: “What followed was unbearable. I was kept in the metal tank for maybe three days, though I received no confirmation of how long it had been” (*TCA* 70). Sister’s existence within the dog box functions as a way of structurally reducing her body and her identity to something beyond definition, whilst additionally demonstrating the ritualistic practice of her initiation into the all-female commune. Turner clarifies:

The neophyte may be buried, forced to lie motionless in the posture and direction of customary burial, may be stained black, or may be forced to live for a while in the company of masked and monstrous mummers representing, *inter alia*, the dead, or worse still, the un-dead. The metaphor of dissolution is often applied to neophytes; they are allowed to go filthy and identified with the earth, the generalized matter into which every individual is rendered down. Particular form here becomes general matter; often their very names are taken from them and each is called solely by the generic term for ‘neophyte’ or ‘initiant’. (1979: 236)

Turner’s understanding of the neophyte is clearly visible through Sister’s isolation in the cell. She is forced into an almost ‘motionless’ pose within the restricted space: “The dimensions of the cell were tiny, perhaps two feet square, and barely wide enough to sit in, let alone lie down or stretch” (*TCA* 70). “Every few minutes”, Sister declares, “I would have to adjust, and if I had drifted into a shallow sleep I’d wake with a start” (*TCA* 71). Sister is made to live in her own filth: “the ground was damp and reeked of piss and shit” (*TCA* 71), as she is ‘rendered down’ to creature-like or sub-human status. Additionally, Sister’s original name is also taken away from her, a name that is never revealed, and replaced by the generic term of ‘Sister’, as all that she once was becomes removed:

The only presence in the iron box was my own. I began to understand that I owned the abuse; I was the only persecutor. They were not killing me slowly. [...]. They were letting me break apart, so I could use the blunt edges of reason to stave in my mind. (*TCA* 74)

Although the liminal space of the cage dissolves Sister's identity, it likewise offers her the possibility for a new, alternative, and possibly heightened existence. It serves as a metaphor for both Sister's death and subsequent rebirth. As suggested, Sister's time at the commune is defined by her journey through liminality, a journey that effectively culminates in her transition of self that arrives in the form of an indoctrinated soldier of the Carhullan army.

If Sister takes on the form of a neophyte once she is granted access to the community of Carhullan, the commune itself takes on the form of a group of neophytes who function with complete devotion to one leader: Jackie Nixon. In his discussion of the neophyte, Turner makes clear that within the space of the liminal period, understood in this case as the Carhullan farm, there exists a structural hierarchy, made up of elders, or an instructor at the top, and the neophytes themselves at the bottom. As Turner suggests: "between instructors and neophytes there is often complete authority and complete submission" (1979: 237). Sister understands early on that the social structure of the farm is not free from hierarchy; as she makes plain: "[I]t had been apparent from the first night that Carhullan operated a system of control; a hierarchy was in place, and Jackie Nixon's orders were obeyed. She was the superior. The alpha" (*TCA* 84). Moreover, Jackie herself refers to the commune as something akin to a religious group: "Everyone has a specific role in this joint. In the copse. Or the dairy. Or the fishery. Each to her own corner of expertise. We're a bit like a monastery that way." (*TCA* 100). In essence, the commune is structured by a hierarchical dynamic between neophyte and elder, as opposed to the man/woman binary that defines the social structure at Rith.

As Turner suggests, however, while the relationship between neophyte and elder is one that rests on the complete obedience of the neophyte, the relationship between neophytes is based on "complete equality" (1979: 237):

The liminal group is a comity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions. This comradeship transcends distinctions of rank, age, kinship position, and, in some kinds of cultic group, even sex. (Turner, 1979: 38)

The way in which Hall depicts the women of the commune, discounting their dominant leader, is a palpable illustration of social liminality at work. For example, once released from the dogbox, Sister is introduced to the other women who are eating as a group in the mess hall, a transitional moment in the text that is rooted in the symbolic conditions of ritual and acceptance. Sister observes "women of all ages, some with grey in their hair, some with long

braids, and others with eccentrically cropped styles” (*TCA* 93). Hall presents the Carhullan women in an emancipated state of existence, free from the control and oppression of male authority. The group also embody a collective and ‘tribal’ presence in this scene:

Some had overalls that seemed extreme and invented, tribal almost. Others had panels and shapes shaved into their heads. They wore straps of leather around their wrists and upper arms, and stone pendants: their smocks and shirts were cut down, resewn. (*TCA* 93)

Andrea Ruthven compares the Carhullan women with the Amazonian warrior, a Greek mythological female “figure of dissent, evolved from the refusal to submit to the typical role of women” (2015: 286). Drawing on Lorna Hardwick (1990), Ruthven explains:

the Amazons are, according to Hardwick, the ‘image of a war-like society of women, living on the borders of the known world.’ It is their dual position as war-like and outsiders which enables them to act autonomously. [...]. And yet, their separateness comes not from any inherent otherness but rather from dissent. [...]. They live on the margins because they choose not to form part of the centre and yet their attributes are ‘man-like’ and a ‘match for men’ but they are not men. (2015: 286)

The Carhullan women exemplify a tribal or warrior-like community, with their shaved and patterned heads, leather clothing, and altogether ‘masculine’ exteriors. They are living beyond their stereotypes, reshaping and recreating their collective image through dissent and resistance in the face of expected social roles of emphasised femininity.

Hall presents the transitional phase of Sister’s passage through her acceptance into the tribal structure:

[T]hey picked up their knives and began knocking the handles on the tabletop, quietly at first, then louder. [...]. It was not until the first of them left the table, came forward and took hold of my neck and kissed my mouth [...] that I began to understand what was happening. [...]. It was the sign of acceptance I had been waiting for. It was applause. (*TCA* 93/4)

The mess hall in which this ritualistic performance of acceptance takes place amounts to what Hein Viljoen refers to as “sacred space” (2007: 194). Viljoen explains that sacred spaces are locations of liminality in which “humans have had particularly strong encounters with God or the forces of nature”, or where “humans have encountered the transcendental” (Viljoen, 2007: 193), expounding that it is the practice of communal ritual that “maintains and reinforces their sacred status” (Viljoen, 2007: 194). Sister is granted entry into the sacred space that signifies liminality of Carhullan, an entry that consequently characterises the dissolution of

her previous identity: “I knew then that I was nothing; that I was void to the core. To get here I had committed a kind of suicide. My old life was over. I was now an unmade person” (*TCA* 94). Viljoen further suggests that “the liminal stage” of the sacred space “is a kind of symbolic death, marked by metaphors like dying, going underground or under water or into eclipse” (2007: 194). As such, Sister can be seen to be performing a symbolic death or ‘suicide’ from within the liminal and sacred space of the mess hall.

Elsewhere in the text, the women are depicted through Sister’s narration as having completely abandoned their social status at Carhullan, reinforcing Turner’s suggestion that a community of neophytes can often be reduced to a position free from social definition, that “They are symbolically either sexless or bisexual and may be regarded as a kind of human *prima materia* – as undifferentiated raw material” (Turner, 1979: 37). Sister explains:

in the candlelight the women looked gaunt and sculpted, their eyes shadowed. They did not look like girls, middle aged or older women. They seemed to be sexless, whittled back to muscle by toil and base nourishment, creatures who bore no sense of category, no dress code other than the one they chose. Their differences in age dissolved against their bones. (*TCA* 118/19)

The women are portrayed by Hall as existing beyond the confined definitions through which women are often restricted, and by which Sister was herself controlled during her life at Rith. Here, the women have become re-fashioned, like sculptures, re-created in their own image rather than from within the heteronormative structure dominated exclusively by men. The women have been collectively returned to a symbolic state of ‘base nourishment’, supporting Turner’s definition of the neophyte as ‘human *prima materia*’. Moreover, Hall foregrounds a community based on relative autonomy amongst and between the neophyte women, illustrated in these passages through their experimentation with appearance, an emphatic demonstration of nonconformity. Significantly, experimentation is further portrayed through the sexual act, principally evidenced in Sister’s same-sex relationship with another woman, a pivotal marker of her existence within the liminal period.

While the farm is closed off to men, the women are not entirely devoid of male figures in their lives. Some of the women even have relationships with men who like the women themselves have chosen to live outside the system as Unofficials. However, as Hall herself explains, Carhullan is a “community [that] favours gay relationships” (Lowen, 2007). During the liminal process of transition, Sister forms a sexual attachment to one of the Carhullan women, Shutri, encapsulating what Beech explains constitutes one of the vital conditions of

the liminal subject: “initial dis-identification is followed by a phase of experimentation in which a person tries out different forms of temporary attachment to group, organizational or personal identities” (2010: 5). Sister’s initial sexual encounter with Shutri reflects a certain abandonment of her previous sexual state of being, confirming a level of enjoyment and self-fulfilment that was lacking prior to her arrival at Carhullan: “The air blew around us, coldly on our legs and waists, and the sensation of it cooling the glaze where our hands moved was more erotic than anything I had ever felt” (*TCA* 5). The liminality of Carhullan is therefore linked to Sister’s transitional development and her sexual experimentation.

Furthermore, in the liminal period, as in the detachment phase, Sister is met by a feeling of elation and a renewed sense of connection to the natural world. Here, this is related to her sexual experimentation: “My mind felt clearer and more focused than it had in months. I could see the details of the moor as we walked over it, the sprigs of heather and the pavements of limestone” (*TCA* 144). In this way, Hall utilises the liminal space of Carhullan for the purpose of imagining female emancipation from patriarchal control, and a renewed connection between human and environment. However, in accordance with the temporary nature of liminality, “that liminality needs to end somehow”, as Thomassen makes clear (2009: 18), Hall recognises that this space of emancipation is destined to fail. The neophyte always remains subject to the authority of the elder, in this case Jackie, and it is through Jackie’s masculinised authority and desire to tip the scales in favour of female authority through violence that Hall presents the final stage of the liminal process of transition.

According to Turner, the neophyte performance of passivity in relation to their dominant elders, “which is increased by submission to ordeal”, realises “the process whereby they are ground down to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to cope with their new station in life” (1979: 38). In Hall’s novel, Jackie has built a liminal space in which she is able to dissolve the essence of emphasised femininity in order to construct an army that can resist patriarchal dominance through violence, evidenced through Sister’s reconstructed identity in the latter stages of the novel. As part of the preparation process for the upcoming war between the women of Carhullan and the Authority of Rith, Sister is placed back into the dog-box for a second time in anticipation of the probable interrogation and torture she is expected to receive at the hands of the Authority. However, in contrast to the earlier example, Sister enters the box voluntarily: “Jackie had said she would not put me back in the dog-box

unless I agreed to it, and a year after the captivity, I did” (*TCA* 185). Sister epitomises the passive neophyte who submits to the dominance of the elder, and in the weeks following her release from the torture chamber, her identity has become entirely altered from that which was depicted at the start of the novel:

I looked in the mirror and saw the change in my body, the metamorphosis that had occurred [...]. I was leaner, had lost weight and gained muscle – there were lattices along my arms and back. [...]. It was the anatomy of a fanatic. [...]. I liked what I saw in the mirror and I was shocked by it. [...]. Her face resembled the one I had sloughed off when I came to Carhullan, but it was newer, stronger. She was my anima.” (*TCA* 204)

Here, Sister has completed the transitional process from one state to a new and reconstructed state altogether, an identity that is presented by Hall through a typically masculinised body. As with the other Carhullan women, Sister’s physical appearance has become altered, sculpted and redefined. Her previous state has been ‘sloughed off’ and supplanted, thus bringing to an end Sister’s existence as a liminal creature, or neophyte. Observing her renewed identity in the mirror, her fanatic-like anatomy, Sister experiences a monumental moment of recognition, an aspect of the liminal process which Beech identifies as the “process of dawning”, or the realisation “that things are different typically in response to a ‘confounded expectation or a turning point’, which leads to a ‘heightened noticing’ of a new meaning” (2010: 5).⁵ Sister clarifies that “she had made a soldier out of me” (*TCA* 163) as she identifies her newly consummated state as an indoctrinated subject whose presence is defined by Jackie’s fundamentalist ideals.

It becomes clear that Jackie has created an army of resistance fighters that might challenge and ultimately assume the dominant position within the gendered hierarchical structure; as Robinson suggests: “Jackie embraces concepts such as ‘history’ and ‘war’ usurping their patriarchal associations” (2013: 205). Jackie’s intent, her “deconstruction of gender” (Robinson, 204) through torture, physical brutality and military training regimes, is to reverse the order of gender as it exists within the social structure, as Jackie herself clarifies:

‘It’s all about the body and sexuality for us,’ [...]. ‘We are controlled through those things; [...]. We endorse the manmade competition between ourselves that disunites us, stripping us of our true

⁵ Quotation includes reference to Strauss A (1996) *Mirrors and Masks: The Search for Identity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers. pp. 94-95.

ability. We don't believe we can govern better, and until we believe this, we never will. It's time for a new society.' (TCA 51)

Jackie's belief is that in order to challenge the social structure that ensures male dominance over female oppression, women must physically embody masculinity, as Ruthven submits: "[t]o do so they must first alter their very anatomy, constructing themselves in the image of what they hope to achieve" (2015: 293). A prime example of Jackie's extremist leadership arrives when she murders Chloe and her husband Martin for refusing to go along with her plans. Sister recalls that Chloe "had never approved of the transformation of Carhullan, or the strong-arm tactics being employed" (TCA 198). Robinson argues that Jackie's fundamentalist attitude and her decision to punish non-conformity illustrate the interconnected structures of fundamentalism and utopian belief, as Jackie's pursuit and "desire to remodel gender in order to change society" is rooted in the ideological rectitude of her fundamentalist agenda (2013: 207/8). Sister becomes a symbol of Jackie's reversed ideological system of gender. The same-sex relationship that Sister has with Shutri is abandoned, as Sister assumes a dominant role in her sexual encounters with Callum: "When Callum and I fucked, it was without restraint, it was base and raw, and I left marks on him" (TCA 203). Once again, Hall demonstrates that Sister has come through the transitional period, that was undoubtedly marked by her sexual experimentation with Shutri, and returned to a fixed, heteronormative state, one in which she takes on an entirely redefined and dominant 'station' over the passive male character of Callum.

While *The Carhullan Army* grants the possibility of social change through liminality, Hall recognises the inevitable end of liminality and, by extension, the inevitable failure of Carhullan's attempts to supplant gender hegemony. The fundamentalist efforts of Jackie Nixon to overturn the social structure defined by gender hegemony through violence and the embodiment of masculine traits secures this eventual failure, a suggestion supported in Ruthven's analysis, that "[t]he goal, for Jackie and for the women, is to eradicate any part of them that might feel, and become so monstrous that they can keep free themselves from their 'social shackles.'" (2015: 289). Sister explicates that "[w]e knew she was deconstructing the old versions of our sex, and that her ruthlessness was adopted because those constructs were built to endure. She broke down the walls that kept us contained" (TCA 187). From her status as an indoctrinated subject in Jackie's army, Sister is blind to the problematic consequences of Jackie's endeavour.

The essentialist system of gender difference that confines women to the position of subordination is replaced by merely another system of confinement still bound by masculine authority, as Ruthven confirms: “The consequence is that while they may be ‘free’ to attack patriarchy, they further enslave themselves to violence and eliminate any possibility of existing outside of the role of the dissident” (289). In other words, by embodying masculinity, and by attacking the patriarchal society of Rith with violence, they condemn themselves to an alternative yet no less restrictive regime, which, as discussed earlier, only works to reinforce masculine dominance over female oppression. However, there is evidence to suggest that Sister is very much aware of this eventual failure: “Carhullan”, she declares, “was not perfect. If it had once been close to it, running to a high level of courtesy and enlightenment, a society that celebrated female strength and tolerance, the balance had now tipped back. [...] I knew we were as guilty of failure and disunity as any other human society” (*TCA* 178). This suggests that it is in the liminal space, prior to the moment that the balance is tipped, in which social improvement becomes possible, and it is through Hall’s articulation of silence and ambiguity beyond the narrative in which Hall conveys the continuation of liminality, and the novel’s only true moment of hope.

The novel’s concluding paragraphs reveal that the attack on Rith by the Carhullan women ended in failure. Sister is captured by the Authority, and Jackie Nixon is killed, “cut apart”, along with the majority of the other women (*TCA* 206). It is made clear at the start of the novel that the narrative of the text is not told by Sister first-hand, but is a collection of archive records, consisting of the ‘Statement of female prisoner detained under section 4 (b) of the Insurgency Prevention (Unrestricted Powers) Act’ (*TCA* 1). The majority of the novel comes in the form of full statements, or files of *complete recovery*. However, as the narrative nears its end, some of the data has been lost, and various aspects of Sister’s “confession” (*TCA* 207) remain undisclosed, including the attack on Rith, which Hall opts to leave out of the narrative entirely. All that the reader is told is that the attack lasted “for fifty-three days”, during which the women took control of the town (*TCA* 207). We are left with no indication as to what may have occurred following the statement made by Sister, including whether or not she is released or killed. Nor does Hall provide any evidence as to whether or not the global crisis has been overcome or who is now in control. Essentially, we are reading from a position of complete ignorance, beyond the narrative, and outside history, space and time. Thus, the end of the novel amounts to a collection of absences.

The Carhullan Army undoubtedly follows in the footsteps of Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Both novels are concerned with female oppression at the hands of future patriarchal societies, and both of the central characters, Offred and Sister, perform acts of resistance in their respective journeys. While Sister resists the Authority of Rith by physically removing herself from it and subsequently attacking it through violence, Offred resists the silence placed on her by the government of Gilead, as Stein makes clear: "Offred's storytelling violates the rules of Gilead, for handmaids are supposed to not only be speechless but invisible as well" (1992: 270/1). Likewise, Hall draws on Atwood's novel and the theme of pregnancy as a means of patriarchal control, the use of the contraceptive coil echoing Atwood's portrayal of women who are "identified only by their biological function, child-bearing" (Stein, 1992: 271). Perhaps the closest marker of Atwood's influence on Hall's novel, however, is Hall's decision to tell Sister's story through recovered archive files. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's narrative is similarly received as a collection of archive transcripts, recorded by Offred because of the restrictions placed on women that prevent them from writing things down (Stein, 1992: 273). The transcripts of Atwood's novel compel the reader into an understanding of Offred's tale from the perspective of a male transcriber, professor and archivist, James Darcey Pieixoto, who "both resurrects and reinterprets" the tapes (Stein, 1992: 273). Concerning Atwood's ending, Stein clarifies:

The scholar's project is to find out if the tapes are authentic: did Offred really exist? If so, who was she? His next question is: what happened to her after the tape ends? Most of Pieixoto's questions remained unanswered: thus, the irony of his final words, 'Are there any questions?' He suggests alternative versions of her life after Gilead [...]. Thus, without closure, the ending of Offred's story continues to be deferred, untold. (1992: 273)

Both novels concern the limitations of storytelling, and the limitations of language more broadly, and both place female subjectivity at the centre of these questions. The truth of Offred's story remains subject to male interpretation, and Sister is unable to escape the dominance of masculinity. Moreover, the ambiguity that delineates Atwood's ending and Offred's story is undeniably mirrored and utilised in *The Carhullan Army*.

In Atwood's novel, it is clear that Gilead has indeed fallen, and that some form of progressive culture has been restored. In contrast, Hall withholds the past and the future from the reader entirely. Not only do we learn nothing of Sister's fate, we equally learn nothing about what happens next for Carhullan, Rith, or the global world, or for that matter from where or when we are reading. Hall also writes out the fifty-three days of the attack on Rith

from the narrative, and all that is left is an absent space once the novel ends. As she is being interrogated, Sister declares: “You will not find out who I am. I have no status. No one does” (*TCA* 207). Her lack of status extends to the status of Hall’s imagined world, and as such, it is in the ambiguity of the narrative’s end, its leftover mark of absence, that Hall’s novel leaves the reader within the liminal space once more.

...

California and *The Carhullan Army* are contemporary examples of ‘feminist dystopia’ that interrogate the workings of gender in society. In their novels, Lepucki and Hall critique the way in which inequalities between men and women continue to structure and shape the contemporary world. Lepucki’s apocalypse works to deconstruct the contemporary world in order to reveal how gender functions to structure Western culture. Frida’s journey in *California* is governed by the transition from oblivion to realisation, as she comes to understand her subordinate status within a hierarchical system that favours men over women. Conversely, Sister’s experience in *The Carhullan Army* is presented as a journey from subordination to dominance, via the space of liminality. In her novel, Hall imagines a challenge to the social order through violence and resistance, and yet, simultaneously reveals that the hierarchical system of gender in which women remain subordinate to men cannot be so easily overturned. By exploring contemporary culture from post-traumatological, retrospective aftermaths, Hall and Lepucki interrogate the relationship between anxieties of gender and the apocalyptic imagination in the twenty-first century.

Part 2: After

‘bludgeoned out of shape’: Medieval Apocalypse and the Utopian Impulse in Jim Crace’s *The Pesthouse* and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*

The catastrophic aftermaths of Jim Crace’s *The Pesthouse* and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* are portrayed in mythological, medieval settings. As such, they are rather unusual examples of apocalyptic fiction. In *The Pesthouse*, Crace’s apocalypse takes the form of a temporal reversal, and while the events of the novel do appear to occur in the future of the contemporary world, his fictional environment is at the same time marked by a return to a pre-modern state. Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* draws specifically on the period of the Middle Ages, and takes place in a post-Arthurian Britain. The world of Crace’s novel has been engulfed by a plague known as the ‘flux’, and the narrative follows the character of Margaret, who having contracted the disease, a pestilence that resembles the Bubonic Plague of medieval Europe, travels from her home of Ferrytown to the coast in search of redemption and salvation. In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro fashions a world in which history has been removed from the minds of the novel’s inhabitants, leaving the country in a state of historical amnesia. The novel tells the story of Axl and his wife Beatrice, an elderly couple who set out on a quest in search of their lost son, whom they barely remember.

The journeys presented in these works are directed by the utopian impulse, or the journey from the “dark and depressing reality of dystopia” (Gordin, et. al., 2010: 2), to “imaginary worlds, free from the difficulties that beset us in reality” (Levitas, 1990: 1). Crace’s novel illustrates the collapse of Western culture, and provides an apocalyptic break from the relentless desire for progress that epitomises the contemporary epoch. Ishiguro’s novel, conversely, concerns the experience of memory loss in a catastrophic aftermath. While *The Buried Giant* is not in the strictest sense of the term an apocalyptic text, Ishiguro presents an apocalypse of sorts, which takes the form of a psychological rupture. This chapter explores the ways in which Crace and Ishiguro complicate the utopian impulse by which their narratives are governed, exposing the illusory nature of utopian thinking. Crace and Ishiguro consider the present world from historical epochs that complicate boundaries of genre and time. Importantly, however, Crace and Ishiguro work to interrogate the nature of our desire

for utopia in an age of crisis, and ask us to consider alternative ways of approaching the future. In essence, they expose utopia as an illusion, therefore confronting our desire for utopia as problematic.

The trope of the journey that typifies both narratives, the movement towards the coast undertaken by Margaret in *The Pesthouse* and the quest to slay the She-dragon Querig carried out by Axl and Beatrice in *The Buried Giant*, is, in each novel, a journey directed by the utopian impulse. Moreover, these journeys are marked by the process of catastrophic recovery. Margaret's journey in *The Pesthouse* is not only the physical movement from Ferrytown to the coast, but a voyage of recovery from her condition as a plagued victim. In *The Buried Giant*, Axl and Beatrice believe that the dragon's death will not only allow them to reconnect with their lost son, but that it will result in the recovery from the historical condition of amnesia that has afflicted the country. Utopia is often thought to be the place *beyond* dystopia, taking the arbitrary and abstract form of its spatial or temporal antithesis. Each narrative is centred on the movement from a location, space or situation that might be thought of as dystopian to an improved location or place of salvation. This implies that the journeys undertaken by Margaret in *The Pesthouse* and Axl and Beatrice in *The Buried Giant* function in accordance with the movement from dystopia to utopia.

Jill Dolan explains that what often restricts utopian thinking, and indeed any degree of social improvement that might arise from within dystopian conditions in the present, is the belief that utopia "point[s] to the future, to imaginative territories that map themselves over the real" (2001: 457). Dolan makes clear that "The utopia for which I yearn takes place now, in the interstices of present interactions, in glancing moments of possibly better ways to be together as human beings" (2001: 457). Gordin et. al. posit something similar, suggesting that "utopias are not to be seen as referring to an imagined place at some future time; instead, we are interested in how the historian can use variants of utopian thinking and action to explore the specificity of a time and a place" (2010: 4). The difficulty that comes with contemplating utopia not as a future environment or as a prospective temporal condition but as a condition or conditions, 'variants', of contemporary reality is that in so doing there must be at the same time the recognition that utopia is embedded within dystopian realities or 'variants' in the present. Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley and Gyon Prakash confirm: "Every utopia always comes with its implied dystopia – whether the dystopia of the status quo, which the utopia is

engineered to address, or a dystopia found in the way this specific utopia corrupts itself' (2010: 2). In this sense, utopia is not in fact located in the future, but a central element of contemporaneity that must be analysed in conjunction with its dystopian opposite.

For Dolan, "utopia can be imagined or experienced affectively, through feelings, in small, incremental moments" (2001: 460). Dolan's affirmation here leads to an understanding of utopia as in some way tied up in dystopian reality, as 'moments' that collide and coalesce with dystopian settings, a viewpoint supported by Gordin et. al., who further extrapolate:

by considering utopia and dystopia as linked phenomena, we are able to consider just how ideas, desires, constraints, and effects interact simultaneously. Utopia, dystopia, chaos: these are not just ways of imagining the future (or the past) but can also be understood as concrete practices through which historically situated actors seek to reimagine their present and transform it into a plausible future. (2010: 2)

By contemplating utopia in this way, not in opposition to dystopia but the co-existence of the two, it becomes possible to confront the utopian impulse, which as Ruth Levitas has previously stated, is "both unnecessary and unverifiable", and more importantly, "bound up with essentialist definitions of human needs and human nature, which are themselves deeply problematic" (1990: 181). Entwined together, utopia and dystopia become "categories" through which we can "begin to tease apart conditions of possibility" (Gordin, et. al., 2010: 6). This chapter concerns Crace and Ishiguro's medieval worlds, and argues that these novels confront the very notion of the utopian impulse. The journey trope envisaged in both novels signifies attempts to achieve utopia by traversing dystopian settings in search of redemption. At the same time, *The Pesthouse* and *The Buried Giant* reveal the problematic nature of the utopian myth, and their apocalyptic worlds fail to give way to the space of utopia.

Medieval Worlds

In *The Pesthouse*, Crace depicts the journey of Margaret, a citizen of Ferrytown who is placed in quarantine having contracted the 'flux'. Following her recovery, and accompanied by a stranger named Franklin, Margaret travels across the deteriorating landscape of Crace's post-apocalyptic America. Over the course of this journey, Margaret and Franklin become pseudo-parents to the child Bella, and the novel follows this newly formed family to the coast in search of salvation.

The events that occur in *The Pesthouse*, Crace's ninth novel, take place in a "mythical world", as Sameerah Mahmood suggests (2016: 105), and yet, Crace's use and treatment of myth in this novel is far from exclusive within the context of his literary composition. The landscapes, settings and communities of the vast majority of Crace's fictional works have come to be known as "Craceland" (Mahmood, 2016: 105), a term devised by Adam Begley to describe the other-worldly universe of Crace's fiction, in which Crace blurs the boundaries between "folklores, legends, fables and myths" (Begley, 2002: 229). Concerning Crace's fictional realm of Craceland, Begley explains:

His fiction is full of meticulous lies that sound like sober scientific fact, and routine facts dressed up in fairy-tale costume. He's brilliant at exploiting the tension between the highly specific and the generic, between an historical moment and timelessness, between an imagined topography and the invented landscape's familiar features, which feel as real as your back yard. (2002: 228-9)

Importantly, Crace's use of myth and folklore does not completely remove the reader from the real world. Instead, as Tew confirms, "In terms of details or co-ordinates each of Crace's narratives remains familiar and relevant territorially for the contemporary reader because of a sense of shared emotional and material references concerning everyday living" (2006: 31). The novels that effectively make up Craceland, as Tew suggests, are shaped by various and habitually paradoxical "inclinations and themes", including:

the narrative neo-Darwinian impulse in humankind; mythic and parabolic understandings and symbols that persist despite modernity; belief and the self; death and love; the problematic dialectic of the individual within communities; urban realities countering bucolic or pastoral myths; and humankind's place within the greater evolutionary scheme of nature. (2006: xii)

The contrast between the mythic and the era of modernity is particularly apparent in *The Pesthouse*. Likewise, *The Pesthouse* portrays a significant turn or *re-turn* to the pastoral. Crace, in conversation with Begley, confirms that his intent in Craceland "is to dislocate the issues of the real world and place them elsewhere" (Begley, 2002: 229). Essentially, it is in the spatial and temporal elusiveness of Crace's writings – its *elsewhere-ness* – that Craceland can be found. Crace's authorial strategy of confusing the boundaries between myth and reality whilst clearly establishing a central connection between his mythical world and that of the reader's present is likewise taken up by Kazuo Ishiguro in *The Buried Giant*.

The Buried Giant is in no small part a fantasy novel, influenced by the mythology of the Arthurian legend. Concurrently, Ishiguro's employment of fantasy in *The Buried Giant*

coincides with the explicit continuation of themes and subject matters that have become synonymous with Ishiguro's literary oeuvre. The novel depicts a post-Arthurian Britain that has been concealed beneath a mist, causing its citizens to forget the past. The narrative follows Axl and Beatrice, who, having lost their son at some point in the past, come to the decision to set off on a journey to find him. Throughout their journey, Axl and Margaret find themselves members of a fellowship of companions who travel together in search of the she-dragon Querig, whose breath is the cause of the country's collective amnesia. It is believed that slaying the dragon will result in the clearance of the mist and the subsequent retrieval of lost memories.

The novel reflects upon the ways in which the varying and interconnected thematic issues of memory and loss structure the creation of the self, which, as Wojciech Drąg explains, is of paramount importance in the works of Kazuo Ishiguro:

To say that Kazuo Ishiguro is a writer of memory and loss is, I believe, neither a reductive comment, nor an overstatement. Although his fiction is far from monothematic, the themes of remembering and accommodating loss find a way to creep into each of his novels. Even if seemingly absent or merely faintly present on the surface, they invariably make up the emotional core of the narrative. (2014: 1)

The Buried Giant can easily be added to the list of novels discussed in Drąg's extensive consideration of the themes of memory and loss that exemplify Ishiguro's works. Likewise, and as with much of Ishiguro's fiction, the novel is an illustration of anthropological fears relating to death, mortality and ageing. Like the worlds that make up Craceland, Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* unsettles the boundaries between myth and reality, something to which Ishiguro has himself alluded: "Will readers follow me into this? Will they understand what I'm trying to do, or will they be prejudiced against the surface elements? Are they going to say this is fantasy?" (Hodson, 2016: 45). Ishiguro's statement here, whilst the subject of some criticism regard his apparently disparaging views concerning the genre of fantasy fiction, is nevertheless a clear indication of the novel's amalgamation of myth, fantasy and reality.⁶

When it comes to genre, both Crace's *The Pesthouse* and Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* are difficult to classify, as both authors set out to resist generic classification. In his creation of Craceland, Crace defies fixed locations of spatial and temporal poles. Likewise, and in

⁶ In his analysis of the novel's reception, Richard J. Hodson explains that Ishiguro's comment sparked a debate between Ishiguro and Ursula K. Le Guin, in which Le Guin took issue with "the 'insulting [...] thoughtless prejudice' against fantasy that lay behind Ishiguro's questions".

keeping with the majority of his novels, Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* is, as Richard J. Hodson suggests, "a novel that is simultaneously difficult to categorise, and that invites attempts at categorisation" (2016: 49). Like Ishiguro's earlier novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005), *The Buried Giant* considers timeless questions concerning the human condition but asks those questions in an alternate universe, thus echoing Crace's narrative strategy in his imaginative formulation of Craceland. However, despite their refusal of genre, one of the ways in which a proposed classification of both *The Pesthouse* and *The Buried Giant* can be hypothesised is through a consideration of their 'medieval' settings. The 'medieval' period that Crace and Ishiguro draw upon is of course itself a period of history that continues to refuse direct reference points to reality.

The Middle Ages are a complex, multifaceted period of history that remains subject to interpretation, debate and speculation. In a chronological sense, as Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz make clear, we might think of medieval culture as "the cultural productions (art, literature, music, architecture, treaties, memoirs, etc.) produced from the fall of the Roman Empire (476) to the fall of Constantinople (1453)" (2014: 2). The period of the Middle Ages, however, continues to be refashioned over time through incessant re-interpretations of its various guises, as the narratives of medievalism are subject to ever-evolving practices of revision, storytelling and mythmaking, "an ongoing process of recreating, reinventing, and re-enacting medieval culture in postmedieval times" (Emery & Utz, 2014: 2). Miri Rubin argues that the very "concept of an 'age' fails to capture the fact that we are dealing with a vast territory over a long period in constant transformation" (2014: 1), and as Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl argue, medievalism can be understood through a number of historical approaches, and at the same time, it is a period that refuses categorisation:

Complementary to Eco's "Ten Little Middle Ages," medievalisms may be organized in a somewhat simpler fashion by chronology (medievalisms of the various centuries), by influence (e.g., Shakespeare's medievalism, or that of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood), and by the media (e.g., literary, cinematic, or video-game medievalisms), yet in each instance, the medievalism under scrutiny will expand beyond any core definition [...]. (Pugh and Weisl, 2013: 3)⁷

⁷ Pugh's and Weisl's contention that medievalism must be understood as multiple and therefore can only be discussed in terms of its plurality is taken from the suggestion made by Kathleen Davis Nadia Altschul that "Medievalism [...] can only be considered to be plural" (cited in Pugh and Weisl, 2013: 3).

Pugh and Weisl further contend not only that medievalism refuses any one particular classification, but also that it is forever constructed through the embroilment of fact and fiction:

What emerges is a recognition that reimaginings of the Middle Ages are essentially fantasies built upon fantasies, for many medievalisms draw more firmly from medieval ideas about fictionality than they do from medieval history. A distinguishing feature of much medievalism, its anachronism, must be seen as both authentically medieval and as fantastic, for many medieval narratives revel in their own constructions of the past and the present. (2013: 3-4)

The plurality of medievalism and its continued exposure to the blurred boundaries of reality, myth and fantasy is confirmed in the distinct representations of the Middle Ages fashioned by Crace and Ishiguro respectively. In *The Pesthouse*, Crace draws attention to the problems associated with historicising medievalism as a period in his creation of a world that is resistant to temporal and spatial categorisation, and Ishiguro specifically utilises in his narrative well known and established medieval tropes that are both mythical and fantastic, exposing the artificiality of the period. Simultaneously, the narratives of *The Pesthouse* and *The Buried Giant* provide a sense of historical authenticity in that they are influenced directly by historical moments that are engrained within our post-medieval consciousness.

Points or periods of historical reality govern the narratives of each novel. *The Pesthouse* is undeniably concerned with one of the most notable features that underscores the period, the Black Death, the deadly plague that according to Ole J. Benedictow swept across Europe between 1346-1353 (2004: xi). The characters in *The Buried Giant*, on the other hand, as will be clarified, live out their lives sometime between the years 500-865 AD. The novel is heavily marked by actual events such as the Roman occupation of England and the Briton-Saxon conflict that followed, as made clear in the novel early on: “we were here not much beyond the Iron Age” (*TBG* 3). Concurrently, the factual circumstances on which the novels are to an extent based are presented alongside mythologies applicable to the period of the Middle Ages.

The unification of historical fact and fiction is consistent with the concept of historiographic metafiction, a term Linda Hutcheon has used to describe the period of postmodernism. Hutcheon explains:

The term postmodernism, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past.

In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it “historiographic metafiction.” (Hutcheon, 1989: 3)

The Pesthouse and *The Buried Giant* are examples of historiographic metafiction insofar as Crace and Ishiguro combine fact with fiction in their recreations of the past. They echo the historical period of the Middle Ages, and their narratives are (especially in the case of *The Buried Giant*) metafictional. In this sense, these texts might be thought of as contemporary examples of neomedievalism. According to Carol Robinson and Pamela Clements, neomedievalist texts utilise the historical period of the Middle Ages but without concern for historical accuracy and without any intentional edification. Instead, they posit, medievalist texts are concerned predominantly with their own acts of literary reproduction and recreation. This, they explain, places neomedievalist texts in direct opposition to “more traditional fantasy works” (2009: 62). “The difference”, they suggest, “is a degree of self-awareness and self-reflexivity”, which can lead to the distortion of historical interpretation (2009: 62). Otherwise put, the neomedievalist text is conscious of its own artificiality as a document of historical inaccuracy that fuses together historical fact with fiction, and which places value in its own inauthenticity rather than in the realm of historical truth.

There is, as Pugh and Weisl suggest, a distinction to be seen between the two concepts of medievalism and neomedievalism, the former amounting to the textual recreation of the past through historical accuracy, with the latter consisting of textual devices that draw attention to inadequacies when it comes to historical re-enactment. However, Pugh and Weisl argue, in conflict with Robinson and Clements, that neomedievalism is not necessarily a process of historiography that is altogether historically inaccurate. Even in cases of postmodern texts that return to the Middle Ages, such as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (which they give as their example), there is an apparent concern for historical reality in the process of storytelling: “the Pythons used medieval texts and ideas as direct sources for their ideas. Indeed, one could argue that the Knights Who Say ‘Ni,’ despite the brash ridiculousness of this plotline, encourage viewers to consider the linguistic confusion coincident with the Great Vowel Shift between 1350 and 1500” (2013: 4). The same can be said of Crace’s *The Pesthouse* and Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*. Crace’s novel actively draws upon the European plague of the medieval period in order to inform his post-apocalyptic world, and Ishiguro’s plot is influenced specifically by the Briton-Saxon conflict (that preceded the arrival of the Vikings on British shores). Pugh and Weisl make clear:

What is more interesting in the study of medievalisms, then, is not whether a particular treatment, trope, or text should be prefixed with *neo* before its *medievalism*, but how and why the artists looking back to the Middle Ages create this particular past, in whichever historical, semi-historical, or magical incarnation they desire. (2013: 4)

Crace and Ishiguro look back to the Middle Ages, doing so whilst blurring the boundaries of genre and by vacillating between the two realms of the authentic and the inauthentic, and this chapter is particularly concerned with both how and why Crace and Ishiguro have turned their attention to medievalism in the construction of their post-apocalyptic settings.

The worlds fashioned by Crace and Ishiguro are governed by irrepressible forces of collective anxiety. Crace's medieval society in *The Pesthouse* is under the constant and seemingly perpetual threat of pestilence, or as it is referred to in the novel, 'the flux'. The landscape of *The Buried Giant*, conversely, is covered by a widespread "mist of forgetfulness" (*TBG* 48) that has caused the populace of Ishiguro's post-Arthurian Britain to suffer from collective amnesia. In his depiction of the flux, Crace draws on one of the defining cultural anxieties through which the period of the Middle Ages has come to be known, namely, the Black Death. A clear comparison can be drawn between Crace's *The Pesthouse* and Albert Camus' *The Plague* (*La Peste*) (1947). Camus' existentialist novel portrays a widespread pestilence that hits the Algerian town of Oran. Camus' epidemic arrives in much the same way as that of the European Black Death, with the spread of the plague caused by an influx of diseased rats that subsequently infect the town's populace, resulting in its quarantine. In his recent appraisal of *The Plague*, Ed Vulliamy explains that the origins of Camus' plague are rooted in the historical occurrence of a plague-like event, namely the cholera outbreak in Oran in 1849 (*The Guardian*, 2015). Likewise, as Vulliamy suggests, Camus' plague has also been read as a metaphor for the rise of Nazi Germany under Hitler, as he makes clear: "It is generally agreed that the pestilence he describes signifies the Third Reich" (*The Guardian*, 2015).

For Vulliamy, while *The Plague* served at the time of its publication as an allegory for the global situation between the Allies and Germany, Camus' novel can nevertheless be understood within a more contemporary context, as an allegory for a world of 'turbo-capitalism' "a world of materialism so repugnant it has become a plague" (*The Guardian*, 2015). Vulliamy claims: "Nowadays, I think, *La Peste* can tell the story of a different kind of plague: that of a destructive, hyper-materialist, turbo-capitalism [...]. Our society is absurd, and Camus' novel examines – among many other things, and for all its moralising – our

relationship to the absurdity of modern existence” (*The Guardian*, 2015). Vulliamy’s observation of Camus’ novel, as an almost prophetic allegory for twentieth-century modernity, and for the relentless and unremitting desire for progress, is one that can likewise be applied to Crace’s portrayal of pestilence in *The Pesthouse*.

The plague depicted by Crace extends beyond Craceland to a more contemporary illustration of cultural concerns and fears relating to “irreversible progress”, modernity and globalisation (Tew, 2006: 195). The most evident way in which Crace confronts global modernity in the novel is through the symbolic imagery of metal, which comes to signify the past world of the twenty-first century, long-since forgotten, an issue to which this discussion will return. Furthermore, Crace’s pestilence, evidenced in his portrayal of ‘the flux’, comes to serve as a fictional representation of perpetual crisis in contemporary culture.

Ishiguro’s plague is of a different kind to that presented by Crace in *The Pesthouse*. In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro’s all-encompassing mist that covers the landscape has caused the inhabitants of Ishiguro’s Britain to experience a collective loss of memory. Unbeknownst to the protagonists of Ishiguro’s medieval world, a rupture of some kind has resulted in a cultural-wide disconnection from history. As suggested, the themes of memory and loss are central to Ishiguro’s fiction more broadly, and the mist that has consumed the world of *The Buried Giant* illustrates Ishiguro’s most recent conceptualisation of the relationship between memory and history. According to Deyan Guo, the majority of Ishiguro’s novels “are set against the backdrop of World War II, particularly the atomic bombing in Nagasaki, the postwar decline of the British empire, and Japan’s invasion of China” (2012: 2508). “These historical scenarios”, Guo makes clear, “provide Ishiguro with a context to explore the emotional and psychological trauma the war has inflicted on the protagonists, thus reminding the contemporary reader of the significance of remembering the past” (2010: 2508). In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro moves further back in time, drawing on myth, fantasy and the historical period of the Middle Ages in order to explore in his novel the experience of collective suffering in response to an overwhelming sense of loss. As with his previous novels, such as *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *The Remains of the Day* (1989), and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), which, as Guo argues, utilise the war-torn period between “the 1910s” and “the 1950s” (2010: 2508), Ishiguro likewise constructs in *The Buried Giant* a landscape of post-war destruction. At the same time, the mist presented by Ishiguro in *The Buried Giant* can also be understood as a fictional manifestation of global anxiety in the twenty-first-century world.

The Pesthouse

Jim Crace's apocalyptic portrayal occurs on multiple levels of representation. Crace brings the world of the twenty-first century to an end with an event that ruptures the fabric of time and space. Crace reverses time from the contemporary world of the reader's present to a world that resembles medieval Europe. However, Crace concurrently manipulates the spatial coordinates of reality by placing the events of his novel in a setting that "used to be America" (*TP* 7). Speaking prior to the publication of his novel, Crace explained: "If you're going to return humankind, or western humanity at least, to a medieval existence, how mischievous would it be to give it to America which has never had a medieval past" (Lawless, 2005). In giving to America a medieval past that it never had, one that is set in the future, Crace creates an apocalyptic aftermath that is both temporally and spatially impossible, therefore engaging with Berger's understanding of the paradox of apocalyptic representation, as discussed in the introduction.

Crace's use of the term mischievous to describe the novel's temporal and spatial setting is in-keeping with the catastrophic event that occurs at the start of the novel. The landslide presented in the novel's opening pages might be thought of as the apocalyptic moment that has led to the post-apocalyptic aftermath. However, Crace complicates his apocalypse in his portrayal of this catastrophic event, which arrives in the novel as an almighty earthquake:

The landslide hit the deepest side of the lake and, therefore, took some moments to reach the bottom, ten man heights from the surface, and then took some moments more for the avalanche of stone, earth, swarf and ancient buried scrap to show how heavy it was and squeeze the life out of the gas rich sediments, the volatile silt and compacted weeds, the soda pockets, which had settled on the bed through centuries and were now ready – almost eager – for this catalyst. (*TP* 2)

The earthquake is presented to the reader as the apocalyptic moment that ends one world and brings an entirely new world into existence. However, as Diletta De Cristofaro asserts, the landslide is not the apocalypse, but rather, an "icon of the Event", which Crace uses in place of the apocalypse in order to expose the impossibility of representing the end of the world (2013: 70). De Cristofaro makes clear: "It is clearly revealing that a text which does not represent the apocalypse, should feature a disaster, as if the author is trying to address the representational limits concerning the Event by focussing on a different but still highly destructive catastrophe" (2013: 70). The earthquake, then, is not the apocalyptic moment that has led to Crace's medieval world. Crace instead withholds the event from the pages of the

text, and the inhabitants of *The Pesthouse* exist in a time long after the true apocalypse has occurred. This is evidenced in Margaret's observation that "It was fascinating, if disturbing, to stand now among the bludgeoned stones and rusting cadavers trying to imagine what America had been all those grandpas ago" (*TP* 119). Thus, Crace presents his apocalypse as an 'icon' of the event in order to confront the logic of apocalyptic representation. While the catastrophic event is not the apocalyptic moment that has led to Crace's reversal, it does provide for the reader an illustration of contemporary rupture.

Synchronously, Crace's landslip appears to signify a temporal reversal from the contemporary world. The literal image of the earth being overturned during the earthquake reveals the reappearance of the compressed landscape, the sediments of the earth's crust, which have accumulated over decades, centuries and even millennia. The avalanche opens up in the earth the 'stone, earth, swarf, and ancient buried scrap' of the earth's historical expansion, therefore functioning as a symbolic representation of Crace's temporal regression and reversal. In this moment, Crace's earth is palpably 'slipping' backwards in time, ushering in his post-apocalyptic yet medieval world. On a purely symbolic level, the novel's earthquake evokes the end of the world, and Crace replaces it through the process of temporal reversal with a medieval society that is paradoxically set during an unspecified time in the future, "perhaps 500, perhaps 1,000 years hence", as Justin Cartwright contends (*The Guardian*, 2007). Following the arrival of Crace's landslide, the narrative gives way to the novel's representation of 'the flux', which plagues Crace's post-apocalyptic society and ultimately marks the start of the journey undertaken by Margaret.

According to Faye Marie Getz, the cause of the Black Death in medieval times was attributed to a range of influences: "it could be interpreted", Getz argues, "as a medical event, an astrological misfortune, or a sign of God's displeasure – and these interpretations could be offered all at the same time and without contradiction" (1991: 270). Likewise, the plague was often interpreted as "at once both natural and supernatural", as Getz continues: "natural in that it arose from natural causes: corrupt air, earthquakes, or malign planetary conjunctions; and supernatural, in that it was God's awful remedy for sinful behaviour" (1991: 273). This appears to account for Crace's use of an earthquake to represent his apocalypse. Importantly, though, Crace illustrates through his portrayal of pestilence the superstitious nature of medieval society. Knowledge in Crace's post-apocalyptic world is marked by, as Caroline Edwards suggests, "superstition and the rumour-mongering of fabricated storytelling narratives" (2009: 777), much in the same way that knowledge was habitually directed during

the medieval period by the “superstitious predilection for the pseudoscience of astrology” (Getz, 1991: 272). The superstitious understanding of the plague is demonstrated on one such occasion in the novel, as Franklin contemplates: “Diseases depart the body through the soles of the feet. That’s why – when pigeons were so plentiful and decent meat was served at every meal – the people of his parents’ generation had strapped a living pigeon to a sick child’s feet” (TP 53). Franklin’s thoughts are indicative of the way in which rumour and superstition largely swayed understanding and knowledge in the medieval age, including interpretations and explanations of the Black Death.

The way in which Crace fashions his society is clearly a mirroring of the effect of the plague upon communities during the Middle Ages. Throughout the novel, Crace draws on a number of pivotal markers relating to the social impact of the Black Death, evidencing the reality of communal response during the period. Getz, drawing on the 1348 work *Decameron* by Italian poet Boccaccio – a collection of short stories heavily influenced by the effects of the bubonic plague – explains that during this time, “Proper burial customs were not observed: ‘People cared no more for dead men than we care for dead goats’” (1991: 268-9).⁸ Crace directly represents in his plague-ridden society the abandonment of the burial ceremony, evidenced in Margaret’s articulations concerning the valueless nature of ceremonial ritual in Ferrytown, a place where there “could be no funerals” (TP 73). Margaret, attempting to speak “the simple words of the burial lament to herself” over the corpse of her dead cat, realises that “All of the rhyme words – *done, alone, fade, gone, bone, shade* – seemed to fall like dead weights from her mouth” (TP 73). Margaret fails to find meaning and solace in Crace’s plagued environment, as she subsequently ponders: “whenever she’s sung or recited them before, at neighbourhood funerals, the lament had always been comforting and measured and perfectly succinct” (TP 73). The plague functions here as one of the clear signifiers of Crace’s apocalypse, producing a before and after effect. In this way, the sense of the apocalypse that has brought about Crace’s medieval world is repeated once more in the world of the novel through the plague. Otherwise put, the importance of the apocalypse that returns the twenty-first century to a medieval existence does in fact give way to a secondary apocalypse that takes the form of Crace’s pestilence.

⁸ *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio*, trans. Richard Aldington (New York: Dell, 1930), p.35. See also Also S. Bernardo, “The Plague as key to Meaning in Boccaccio’s ‘Decameron,’” in *The Black Death: The Impact of the Fourteenth Century Plague*, ed. Daniel Williman (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 13, 1982), pp. 38-64.

Getz further explains, again with reference to *Decameron*, that the effects of the plague were portrayed as both corporeal and social:

According to Boccaccio, the disease ‘began in men and women with certain swellings in the groin or under the armpit. . . . all over the body. Soon after this the symptoms changed and black or purple spots appeared on the arms or thighs. . . . Very few people recovered; most people died within about three days of the appearance of swellings.’ As a result of the plague, he continued, people behaved like animals. ‘Brother abandoned brother, . . . and very often the wife her husband. What is even worse and nearly incredible is that the fathers and mothers refused to see and tend their children, as if they had not been theirs.’ (1991: 268)

In *The Pesthouse*, Crace specifically engages with the symptomatic effects of the plague in the corporeal sense, namely through the characterisation of Margaret, as will be discussed, but also in the sense of social detachment. For instance, on her journey to the coast, Margaret’s brief excursion with the Bose family leads her to contemplate that “the ties of every family in the land were already hanging loose” (*TP* 174). Margaret observes at one stage the Boses making love, and reflects upon the strangeness of this during such uncertain and horrific times:

Margaret hadn’t thought the Boses could be lovers. Lovers as well as partners. Lovers as well as grandparents. It wasn’t just their age and frailty [...] it was also the current shape of their life. Their son was missing, all their wealth had been taken from them, their lives were draped with fear, anxiety and grief, their bodies were exhausted by the walk, they had not truly eaten for a month – yet they still had the will to kiss. (*TP* 140-1)

The Boses are the grandparents of the child that Margaret, who assumes the role of a pseudo-mother, comes to ‘adopt’. The Boses’ apparent disregard for the loss of their son, to which Margaret here infers, is repeated in their relinquishment of Bella to Margaret’s care: “Let little Bella spend the night with you. She’s better off with you” (*TP* 139-40). As Margaret and Bella become separated from the Bose family, Margaret reflects: “the grandparents had made their own decisions – good ones possibly – and they had willingly abandoned Bella or, at the very least, relinquished her” (*TP* 174). Concerning her adoption of Bella from the Bose family, Margaret asserts: “They would have shed tears. They would have argued about what to do. But, in the end, they must have felt little choice but to protect themselves and press on with their journey [...]. They were not to blame. Hard times make stones of us all” (*TP* 175). The novel’s illustration of Bella’s separation from her family is a deliberate effort on Crace’s

part to present the effects of the plague upon social structures, including that of the family sphere.

The physical effects of the plague, its corporeal quality, are portrayed primarily through the characterisation of Margaret. It is in Margaret's contraction of the 'flux' – a designation that strikingly reinforces Crace's portrayal of apocalyptic limbo – her quarantined status at the pesthouse and her ultimate recovery, that Crace foregrounds *and* confronts the apocalyptic tone on which his novel begins. Margaret's categorisation as a 'plagued' victim demonstrates Crace's engagement with the duality of plague; his recognition that pestilence is a marker of both death and life. The unknown event that fashions Crace's post-apocalyptic yet medieval world is echoed in the description of Margaret's plagued body:

Her grandfather, as any parent would, had condemned her coppery tresses to the flames as soon as he had suspected that she was suffering with the flux. She'd vomited all day, she'd had diarrhea, she'd shivered like a snow fly but was hot and feverish to the touch, she'd coughed as dryly as a jay, there were rashes on her face and arms, her neck was rigid and painful, and the onset of her problems had been cruelly swift, though not as swift as the news of her illness, which had raced around the houses as fast as sound. (*TP* 19)

The progression of the narrative pivots on Margaret's journey, not only on her physical voyage to the coast, but on her journey of corporeal recovery from pestilence and suffering. Here, Crace foregrounds Margaret's position within the novel as a plagued victim, introducing the theme of suffering, a state of existence that Margaret must somehow overcome. Notably, her plagued status is not unlike the liminal state that exemplifies Sister's existence in *The Carhullan Army*, as discussed in the previous chapter. According to Elena Gomel, "apocalyptic fictions typically linger on pain and suffering" and through her physical deterioration at the start of the novel, Margaret resembles what Gomel refers to as the "apocalyptic body" (2000: 405). Gomel argues that the apocalyptic body "is a suffering body, a text written in the script of stigmata, scars, wounds, and sores" (2000: 405), and adds that "Any apocalypse strikes the body politic like a disease, progressing from the first symptoms of a large-scale disaster through the crisis of tribulation to the recovery of the millennium" (2000: 405). As such, in her contraction of the plague, Margaret becomes in the text a symbolic representation of Crace's apocalypse, in the same way that Crace's earthquake functions as an 'icon of the Event', following De Cristofaro's terminology. Just as the world is altered through the disaster of an unspeakable apocalypse, so too is Margaret's body

altered through her contraction of pestilence, and in her appearance as a plagued victim, Margaret becomes yet another symbol of Crace's apocalyptic rupture.

As a plagued victim, Margaret's physical appearance becomes transformed: "Her grandpa – repeating what he's already done too recently for his son, her father – had shaved her skull, removing all the ginger drama from her head with a shell razor" (TP 20). The removal of her hair is a fundamental marker of her status as a plagued individual who must be recognised as such by the community of Ferrytown:

Her grandpa [...] called the closest women in the family, two sisters and her ma, to take off Margaret's body hair, snapping it out to the roots [...] from her eyebrows and, most painfully, her lashes; from her nostrils even; from her lightly ochered forearms and her legs; elsewhere, the hidden hair [...]. Everybody in the land must know what shaven baldness signified. (TP 20)

Margaret's body is stripped down completely, mimicking the apocalypse that strips the contemporary world bare in order to start over. Margaret's plagued body becomes itself an apocalyptic narrative, one that is driven by its contagious potential, demonstrated here as the 'news of her illness' sweeps 'around the houses as fast as sound'. Margaret personifies the "narrative of contagion", and her plagued body "is manipulated within the overall plot of apocalyptic millennialism" therefore functioning as "the most characteristic modality of apocalyptic corporeality" (Gomel, 2000: 406).

Following her contraction of the flux, Margaret is placed in quarantine at the pesthouse, which, as Crace makes clear in an interview for *The Paris Review* (2003), was based on a building constructed at St. Helens on the Isles of Scilly, used to house sufferers of plague and other similar conditions in the eighteenth century who were "quarantined and left to die" (De Cristofaro, 2013: 77). This location signifies the novel's simultaneous and paradoxical themes of life and death:

She'd have to go up to that little boulder Pesthouse above the valley for ten days or so, unattended and unvisited, to see if she recovered or was lost. There was no choice but to be hard-hearted [...] if the victim was a Ferrytowner, the Pesthouse was the only option. (TP 21)

There is a clear parallel to be drawn here between Margaret's isolation and exile at the pesthouse and the story of Jesus in Crace's earlier novel *Quarantine* (1997), which is itself a novel motivated by the intertwined themes of life and death, as well as portrayals of illness and resurrection, as Begley makes clear: "*Quarantine* begins and ends with incomplete death. Musa, left for dead in the first chapter, recovers miraculously from his fever, casually,

accidentally resurrected by Jesus” (2002: 232). Crace continues this thematic portrayal of ‘incomplete death’ through Margaret’s spatial occupation at the pesthouse. Faced with the likely prospect of death, “that self-same flux that must have hidden like a demon in their house since Pa had died” (*TP* 20), her future is bleak, and yet, concurrently governed by the prospect of hopefulness and survival.

Gomel clarifies that pestilence is a unique illustration of the apocalypse when compared with other such representations of “millenarian ideologies” (2000: 406):

On the one hand, it may be appropriated to the standard plot of apocalyptic purification as a singular atrocious technique of separating the damned from the saved [...]. On the other hand, the experience of the pandemic undermines the giddy hopefulness of Endism. Since everybody is a potential victim, the line between the pure and the impure can never be drawn with any precision. Instead of delivering the climactic moment of the Last Judgement, pestilence lingers on, generating a limbo of common suffering [...]. The end is indefinitely postponed and the disease becomes a metaphor for the process of living. (Gomel, 2000: 406-7)

Like Schrödinger's cat, Margaret is placed into a space of pure uncertainty, ‘unattended and unvisited’ with her future literally hanging in the balance *between* life and death. In this moment of limbo, Margaret can be understood to be both alive and dead simultaneously. As a victim of the flux, she becomes an emblem of apocalyptic finality and at the same time a symbol of utopian possibility.

In his analysis of Crace’s novel, written prior to its publication through scraps of the unpublished manuscript and personal correspondence with Crace, Tew focuses on the novel’s reversal of the myth of progress. Tew argues that by “Responding to ecological, ideological and other uncertainties, Crace uses a futuristic context” in order to contest “notions of manifest destiny by reversing modernity’s myth of irreversible progress” (2006: 194-5). Tew suggests that in *The Pesthouse*, the machine of progress has stopped, and “the planet’s beacon of hi-tech modernity” is replaced by Crace’s medieval world (2006: 193). This collapse of modernity is presented in the novel as Margaret and Franklin look upon a decaying factory from a previous age, with “Collapsed and devastated wheels and iron machines, too large for human hands” and which “had no purpose now other than to age” (*TP* 118). Tew makes clear that in “reversing American culture”, Crace “deconstructs its essence” (2006: 197). With this in mind, Crace synchronously deconstructs the essence of the utopian impulse on which Western progress is maintained. Fredric Jameson posits that utopia is what lies at the very

crux of Western humanity's ideological approach to the future, and which epitomises modernity. Jameson suggests:

What is utopian is then identified with the now-traditional and much criticized bourgeois idea of progress, and thus implicitly with teleology as such, with the grand narrative and the master plan, with the idea of a better future, a future not only dependent on our own will to bring it into being but also somehow inscribed in the very nature of things, waiting to be set free, lying in the deeper possibilities and potentialities of being, from which at length and with luck it might emerge. (2010: 21-2)

Crace's novel becomes a critique of the utopian dream of endless and 'irreversible progress' that has largely governed the development of Western humanity since the beginnings of the industrial revolution, further supported by Crace himself, who states: "What I'm interested in is to learn the nature of our 21st century existence by taking it away. By taking away those things that define the 21st century: science, technology, the abandonment of belief, etc." (Lawless, 2005). The world that Crace's apocalypse overturns is that of life as we understand and experience it today. As Edwards posits, the novel is "peeling back the structural underpinnings of the twenty-first century" (2009: 778). *The Pesthouse*, on one level at least, amounts to a reversal of the notion that freedom accompanies the American dream of progress. The road upon which Margaret and Franklin, along with the rest of the inhabitants of Crace's medieval society travel, is known as the 'Dreaming Highway', a symbol of the American Dream that becomes in the novel nothing more than an ideological myth; a utopian project. At the same time, Crace refuses to abandon the ideology of utopian progress altogether. Instead, the novel becomes a space from which the ideology of progress can be transformed and reimagined.

According to René Girard, "the plague is both the disease and the cure" (1974: 849). This contradiction of terms is effectively what governs the journey trope of Crace's novel. It is a paradox presented through Franklin's description of Margaret as he sees her for the first time: "Franklin saw the bald, round head of someone very sick and beautiful" (*TP* 31). Her sickly and yet beautiful appearance extends to the tension that Crace builds into the journey, a tension that notably underscores the rest of the journey narrative. Crace intertwines the feeling of purgatory or limbo that defines Margaret's corporeal body once she becomes a victim of the flux with the physical journey towards the coast undertaken by the inhabitants of his mythical world, who suffer from "emigration fever", which "was burning them up and driving them on. This was one of those clarifying points of their migrations (during which

‘the Push of Here’ and ‘the Pull of There’ had been equally persuasive)” (*TP* 83). The ‘Push of Here’ and ‘Pull of There’ effectively typifies Margaret’s road to recovery. Crace’s pestilence may be the primary source of apocalyptic finality and the symbol of the dystopian conditions that characterise the novel’s environment, and yet, it equally functions as the gateway to redemption.

Over the course of the journey, having been separated from Franklin, who is kidnapped by a gang of marauders, Margaret and her adopted child Bella find respite at the Ark. Named for its obvious connotations of redemption and salvation in the wake of the apocalypse, the Ark is likewise a device used by Crace in his critique of contemporary Western culture. There is little trace of the reader’s present within the pages of the novel, except of course for metal, which Crace utilises as a signifier for the past world (our world) long-since forgotten. Metal exists in the text as an icon from which Crace’s readership are able to draw a link between what Tew describes as the “profoundly atavistically estranged” world of the novel and that of their own (2006: 196). Metal is a source of great anxiety, “The cause of weaponry and avarice” (*TP* 197), and perceived by Crace’s inhabitants with disdain, fear and suspicion, and no more so than by those who make up the society of the Ark. Upon their arrival, Margaret and Bella, along with a queue of travellers hoping to gain entry, are searched for any metallic objects, which are not permitted on the Ark:

‘Nothing metal, nothing metal,’ one of them was commanding, walking up and down the line, repeating his instructions and devotions to every group. ‘Remove all metal from your hair, no antique combs, no knives at all, no silverware, no ear or finger rings, no pans. Metal is the Devil’s work [...]. In here we are, like air and water, without which none of us can live, the enemies of metal. Check your pockets. Shake out all your rust. Remove your shoes. Unlace your bags.’ (*TP* 184).

The society of the Ark is under the authority of the Finger Baptists, otherwise known as the Helpless Gentlemen. The Baptists perceive themselves as in some way divine and therefore reject all things that require physical touch, refusing to use their hands in any way: “The hands do Devil’s work [...]. [N]ot only fighting and stealing [...] but also art, craft, cooking, working, and the age-old and best forgotten practices of technology for which all metal was the chilling evidence” (*TP* 192-3). As De Cristofaro makes clear: “The Helpless Gentlemen’s aversion to metal and technology appears to suggest a lingering fear of the long forgotten causes of the apocalypse and the resistance to the ideology of progress, which most probably led to the Event in the first place” (2013: 73). Metal is viewed by the Baptists as in some way

evil or supernatural in accordance with the superstitious culture of Crace's society, and understood to be the "the cause of greed and war" (*TP* 184), which came about as a result of a pre-apocalyptic desire for endless progress.

The rejection of metal at the Ark evidences the utopianism behind the Baptists' ideology, whereby they had "set their minds and bodies against the country's ferrous history" (*TP* 193). Moreover, life at the Ark is likewise a rejection of the ideology of capitalism. Hard work is rewarded with food tokens; as Margaret is told: "'We have devised a circle of effort and reward'" (*TP* 188). The philosophy of the Baptists' utopian system constitutes an act of overturning the foundations of capitalism and progress. As metal is removed from the refugees attempting to gain entry to the Ark, it is announced: "We put metal back into the soil. We bury it [...]. That's restitution" (*TP* 186). This process encapsulates the Baptists' attempts to restore the earth to its existence prior to the mining of metal in the previous age. Once again, Crace represents a process of reversal here, echoing the overturning of the earth during the cataclysmic event at the start of the novel, and Margaret observes the utopian sense of renewal in their efforts: "Nothing grew in metal, but any soil was natural and sanctified." (*TP* 187). The utopian portrayal of community at the Ark, alongside the desire to bring about the renewal of nature through the rejection of metal, is what leads to Margaret's new-found sense of hopefulness, as made clear in the narrative: "In some respects, Margaret had never been happier" (*TP* 198).

It soon becomes clear to Margaret, however, that life at the Ark is not what it seems. The equality portrayed in the 'circle of effort and reward' is intertwined with the hierarchical conditions on which life at the Ark is structured. The Baptists or the Helpless Gentleman who "took their seats at the higher table" (*TP* 191) reside at the top of the system, and are fed, washed and groomed by 'devotees' who on occasion "had the honor of serving these men in their private quarters" (*TP* 196). Indoctrinated into the system, Margaret is at one stage asked by one of the Baptists to "attend to an intolerable itch" (*TP* 197); the Helpless Gentleman's "series of commands – 'Higher', 'Lower'" symbolising the Ark's hierarchical system (*TP* 196). The Ark serves to reveal the problematic nature of utopian ideology, evidenced in Margaret's utterance that "It was as if the winter in the Ark had enriched her and robbed her at the same time" (*TP* 200). The rejection of metal, and therefore the rejection of progress that underscores the ideology of the Ark's society thus comes under scrutiny as Crace illustrates the notion that an outright rejection of progress is not necessarily the road to utopia.

Following an attack on the Ark committed by marauders, Margaret and Bella are reunited with Franklin, and their journey towards the coast continues. Their desire to reach the coast exemplifies the human journey to reach utopia. It is not long after her stay at the Ark that Margaret, Franklin and Bella make it to what Margaret believes to be the gateway to the “Promised Land” (*TP* 167), as she reflects:

They’d reached the coast. And they had reached it together. And it was almost spring. All they had to do was find an early boat and set sail for that better place, a place she could not even name but where there would be . . . no, she could not say what there would be. But she was clear, in her imagination, about what they *wouldn’t* find across the sea [...]. They wouldn’t have to battle for their meals. They wouldn’t have to travel everyday [...]. Tomorrow she would break down all the barriers. (*TP* 234-5)

The coast signifies the desired end point of their journey, and functions in the text as a symbol of hope and redemption in Crace’s regressed America. Margaret believes at this moment in the concept of ‘that better place’, an imagined realm where the dystopian realities of the present would become a thing of the past, as she contemplates: “She had little doubt now that her problems – their problems – were largely behind her” (*TP* 234). She is unable to conceptualise or envisage the better place, and yet it exists in her mind as the location of an improved way of life and of social transformation. The seasons have turned to spring, reflecting the romantic notion of earthly renewal and the end of the plague narrative. Essentially, the better place is the utopia that is promised.

Furthermore, Crace establishes a sense of renewal through the family dynamic of the three characters, Margaret, Bella and Franklin, who had reached the coast ‘together’. All three protagonists have experienced familial loss either through pestilence or through abandonment, and they have found familial renewal through each other. Caroline Edwards refers to Crace’s family structure as a “microtopia” (2009: 775), a miniature, utopian community that exists within the wider domain of the novel’s dystopian landscape of pestilence and famine. Edwards makes clear that “Crace’s triadic logic of community represented by Margaret/Franklin/Bella thus enacts a crucial structural move towards reconstituting social affiliations at a minor level in modern literary utopias” (2009: 776). This microtopia offers up to the reader the promise of anthropological salvation in the wake of the apocalypse, the renewal of community and, through the character of Bella, Margaret’s “priceless talisman” (*TP* 169), hope for the future. However, in the novel’s final stages, following their arrival at the coast, Crace problematizes the very concept of the utopian

promise that underscores the apocalypse as a narrative of redemption. Ultimately, the coast does not serve as a gateway to the Promised Land. Instead, as Franklin observes, it is “an obstacle and not a route to liberty” (*TP* 249).

Having arrived at the coast, Margaret, leaving Bella in the care of Franklin, embarks on a short excursion in search of a ship that will take the family across the ocean. During this expedition, Margaret comes across a small community of women known as the Sisterhood. First believing the group to be the wives of fishermen, “left alone for the day while their husbands and sons went out among the furrows of the sea” (*TP* 255), Margaret soon learns that “They were, instead, abandoned wives” (*TP* 255). Margaret is cautioned by one of the members of the Sisterhood against her optimistic belief that hope lies across the sea:

‘You’d best be warned, sweetheart,’ one of the older women – Joanie – explained. ‘Or you’ll be sorely disappointed when you reach the anchorage. Best turn around right now and go back to your husband and your kid. Save yourself the misery’. (*TP* 255)

Margaret is informed by Joanie that, like her, “these women had been emigrants. Two seasons before they had all made the journey eastward – ‘full of hope’ – to the coast and the ocean passage” (*TP* 255). However, once they reached the ships, they became separated from their husbands “‘Because we’re neither men nor girls’” (*TP* 256). It is revealed to Margaret that upon arrival, these women were thought to be unfit for the new world:

‘That’s all they’re taking on the boats and has been for more than a year [...]. ‘That’s pretty girls, for one, girls who haven’t got a husband or a child, girls that they can marry on the other side, or sell. Families that have the valuables to bribe themselves some berths, is two. Men that are fit enough to put to labouring, or men with skills. That’s three and that’s all, as far as I can tell’. (*TP* 257)

Their hopeful journey to the coast, and the utopian impulse that drove them along the Dreaming Highway to it, is what has led them to their new-found existence as “whores”, abandoned by their husbands, as Joanie explains: “And now we’re castaways and jetsam” (*TP* 256). The story told to Margaret by the Sisterhood is confirmed once she reaches the ships. The only people permitted passage are “families that were visibly wealthy” (*TP* 267), as well as “young men and men with bags and tools” (*TP* 267), alongside “Pretty girls” who “were being flirted with and told how much richer, cleaner and handsomer the men were on the far side of the ocean” (*TP* 267). The promise of redemption and of a better world is what has led Margaret to this point, a journey that has been made in the belief in a better future. However,

the utopian impulse proves to be nothing more than an illusion: “It was the same old story that Margaret had heard from Joanie: mother and son, wife and husband divided” (*TP* 269). While the ships may well accept Franklin, who would be put to work, Margaret, “A woman with a child and nothing to her name [...] would never be accepted on these boats. There had to be another dream” (*TP* 269).

Having come to the realisation that the coast and the ships will not provide the family with salvation from the regressed world that America has become, with its burning pestilence and gangs of marauders, as well as the persistent threat of rape and kidnap, Margaret, Franklin and Bella find themselves caught within a state of complete flux, thus mirroring the disease that has engulfed the populace of Crace’s post-apocalyptic world, as Margaret avows: “‘We can’t stay here,’ [...]. ‘We can’t go onward. And we can’t go back.’” (*TP* 277). Unable to move forward, and fearful of the dangerous world behind them, their existence is bound by a state of anxiety. However, as with her confinement in the pesthouse earlier in the novel, in which Margaret existed in limbo between life and death, their state of flux here grants the opportunity for transformation, and they attempt to retrace their steps and begin again. The triadic family unit take the risk of returning “homeward bound” (*TP* 279) across America, refusing to stay in-flux.

Their journey home, in contrast to that which drove them to the coast, is undertaken not with a belief in the utopian promise, of the dream that a better life awaits them in some unforeseen land. Instead, the homeward journey demonstrates their rejection of the utopian impulse. This is exemplified in Margaret’s decision not to walk back along the Dreaming Highway: “Whatever happened, she decided, they would not make the same mistake as on the journey eastward, by following the Highway” (*TP* 279), and the novel’s note of optimism in its concluding pages is found in this very rejection. Rather than offering a narrative of redemption through the pursuit of the utopian myth, Crace presents an alternative worldview that resembles what Margaret Atwood has termed ‘Ustopia’.

According to Atwood, “Ustopia is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite – because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other” (*The Guardian*, 2011). Atwood describes Ustopia as both a “state of mind” and a “literary landscape”, explaining that they are “not-exactly places [...] anywhere but nowhere, and [that they] are both mappable locations and states of mind” (2011). Katarina Labudova argues that “Atwood hybridized utopia and dystopia, and presents them

as “two sides of the same coin” (2013: 154), to use Sicher’s phrase, rather than distinct poles, thereby challenging the traditional reading of utopia and dystopia as distinct genres and exposing the impossibility of such purist categorization” (2013: 28). In regards to Atwood’s *Maddaddam* trilogy, which Atwood herself regards as an Ustopian representation, Labudova further postulates: “Atwood’s imperfect Paradise creates a dynamic interaction between the actual world with its destructive tendencies and the fictional future, allowing for alternatives and multiplicity of perspective without imposing a perfect, fixed and rigid utopian society” (2013: 28-9).

In the concluding section of *The Pesthouse*, the utopian impulse that has guided Margaret along her journey becomes supplanted by the realisation of the intertwined concepts of utopia and dystopia. Fredric Jameson contends that “the representational utopia” usually takes the form of an idyllic or pastoralized return from the “frenzied anxieties of the social world, a glimpse into a place of stillness and of transfigured human nature” (2010: 25). However, as Jameson further makes clear, utopia can be “as modest or as ambitious” as required, and that “it can range from a whole social revolution, on a national or even a world scale, all the way down to the design of the uniquely utopian space of a building or a garden” (2010: 25). Essentially, utopia need not arrive in the form of a completely transformed environment. Echoing Atwood’s formulation of Ustopia, Jameson suggests:

These utopian spaces are thus totalities, whatever their scale; they are symbolic of a world transformed, and as such they must posit limits, boundaries between the utopian and the nonutopian. It is with these limits and with the enclave structure that the serious critique of utopia will begin. (2010: 25)

The Pesthouse is indeed a world transformed. However, rather than representing a world entirely devoid of nonutopian or dystopian realities, Crace foregrounds at the end of his narrative the coexistence of the two.

Finding themselves back at the location in which Margaret’s journey began – the pesthouse – Margaret gains a renewed sense of perspective, evidenced as she looks upon the picturesque landscape: “She could see clearly once again – the western woods, the western hills, the distances. Spring had advanced itself” (*TP* 309). Her new perspective signals an abandonment of the utopian myth that drove them eastwards to the coast in search of the Promised Land, and the recognition that social transformation might be found down an alternate path, revealed in the novel’s final sentence: “Going Westward, they go free” (*TP*

309). The change of direction at the end of the novel is not to be taken literally. Instead, it signifies an alternative way of pursuing progress. Ultimately, Crace conveys in the novel's conclusion the true meaning behind his apocalypse. His novel does not ask us to reject the concept of progress, as it was rejected in the Baptists' ideology at the Ark. This, as became clear, offered no solution to the travails of the present. Rather, his novel asks us to reconsider our approach to progress in contemporary Western society, to progress in the right way.

The Buried Giant

As suggested, Ishiguro's representation of the apocalypse in *The Buried Giant* arrives in the form of a psychological rupture that results in the loss of memory. The inhabitants of Ishiguro's Britain suffer from cultural amnesia, with both individual and cultural history having been cut off from the present as a result of the mist. It is assumed by some of the novel's characters that Britain's cultural forgetting has occurred because "God himself had forgotten much from our pasts, events far distant, events of the same day" (*TBG* 70), or indeed that "God is angry" for something that has occurred in the past (*TBG* 83). It soon becomes clear, however, that the country's collective condition of amnesia stems from a spell placed on the She-dragon Querig by Merlin under the orders of King Arthur, as Father Jonas tells Beatrice: "It's Querig's breath which fills this land and robs us of memories" (*TBG* 168). Merlin's spell caused the dragon's breath to cover the land and conceal from the populace the historical atrocities committed by Arthur during the Briton-Saxon conflict, in which he authorised the "genocidal act" of "slaughtering Saxon children", as Carmen-Veronica Borbely clarifies, "with a view to preventing an entire generation of enemy soldiers from contesting his dominion over the island" (2016: 30). There is then a moment of rupture that has occurred prior to the events that unfold in the narrative, creating a temporal divide, a before and after, not only originating in the conflict itself, but in the act of genocide.

Traces of the pre-apocalyptic world prior to the arrival of the mist that has consumed the landscape remain, and yet for the most part, history has been removed from the collective consciousness. Ishiguro's removal of history is not the result of duration, however, but of intervention. The historical atrocities committed by King Arthur are buried beneath the dragon's mist, leaving the novel's society in a post-traumatic state of existence. His fictional world suffers from the traumatic events of the Briton-Saxon conflict, and their failure to

grasp a history that has been removed resembles the disruptive power of trauma as a source of historical detachment.

Additionally, historical loss is presented on the individual level of experience. In the novel, the journey undertaken by Axl and Beatrice, the elderly couple on which the narrative is focussed, can be defined by an attempt to reclaim their personal history that has been lost, as Masami Usui confirms: “Their quest to find their lost son embodies their quest for their lost selves and lost memories” (2016: 2548). Axl and Beatrice begin their journey from a location of historical absence, a location in which their identities have been severely disrupted. The community in which they live has been consumed by the mist, thus demonstrating not only the novel’s portrayal of cultural amnesia, but also the impact that cultural amnesia has had on the individuals of Ishiguro’s medieval world. Their journey therefore comes to signify the collective process of overcoming the experience of amnesia, a journey that promises redemption from historical detachment. As such, the Briton-Saxon conflict is presented as intertwined with the individual experience of memory loss.

Historical detachment, or the amnesiac state in which the country exists, constitutes Ishiguro’s dystopian environment, and the journey undertaken by Axl and Beatrice marks an attempt to reverse the dystopian conditions, therefore constituting a journey guided by the utopian impulse. Utopia, Axl and Beatrice believe, will occur with the slaying of the She-dragon Querig, whose death will remove the mist of forgetfulness and reconnect Ishiguro’s society with its lost history, as Beatrice states: “If Querig falls, the mist will begin to clear” (*TBG* 279). The narrative of the journey can therefore also be understood as an attempt to reinstate the ‘real’ that has been denied through historical loss. Dominick LaCapra argues that responses to loss are likely to take the form of “utopian politics in the quest of a new totality of fully unified community” (1999: 698). The journey narrative thus constitutes a desire for a ‘new totality’, an ideal world in both the collective and familial spheres of experience. Historical recovery is the desired end-point that promises salvation (as with the coast in *The Pesthouse*) and redemption from Ishiguro’s dystopia. However, Ishiguro complicates the utopian impulse in *The Buried Giant*. The death of the dragon, the removal of social amnesia and the ability to remember the past fail to deliver the inhabitants of Ishiguro’s world to a utopian state of existence.

Jan Assmann, whose contributions to memory studies are extensive and well documented, has discussed the way in which cultural memory is created. According to Assmann, “Memory

is the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood (identity), both on the personal and on the collective level” (2008: 109). Importantly, the community or the group is created through the interaction and communicative practices of individuals, who share memories and therefore construct a cultural memory of the past, as Assmann makes clear: “Memory enables us to live in groups and communities, and living in groups and communities enables us to build memories” (2008: 109). Assmann’s explanation of the relationship between individual and cultural memory, and of the way in which cultural memory is maintained and/or disrupted, is useful when thinking about Ishiguro’s representation of cultural amnesia.

The narrative of *The Buried Giant* is told for the most part from the perspective of Axl, and it is through Axl’s characterisation and experiences that Ishiguro establishes the principal subject-matter of amnesia. The connection between memory and identity is presented in the novel from the outset in the portrayal of a small settlement to which Axl and Beatrice belong, one of many warren-like communities of this post-Roman society: “In one such area of a vast bog, in the shadow of some jagged hills, lived an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice. Perhaps these were not their full names, but for ease, this is how we will refer to them” (*TBG* 4). Axl and Beatrice live on the “outer fringes” (*TBG* 5) of a small warren, “at the periphery of the community” (*TBG* 7). The physical presence of the mist, revealed later to be the cause of amnesia in the novel, is observed by Axl, who “wondered how thick the mist would be that morning” (*TBG* 7). At this moment, Axl contemplates: “Had they always lived like this, just the two of them [...]. Or had things once been quite different?” (*TBG* 7). The narrative development in the novel’s opening chapter, mimicking the physical atmosphere of the novel’s setting, is fractional and uncertain, as Ishiguro introduces the existence of Axl and Beatrice with an emphasis on the partial and incomplete nature and status of their lives. Their warren-like home is in perpetual darkness, under the ‘shadow’ of the hill-side, a sentiment reverberated in the ambiguity of Axl’s utterance surrounding their past and their history.

The incomplete information concerning their ‘full names’ echoes the introduction of Kathy H. in *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro’s earlier novel, in which the subject of incompleteness, contextualised in the portrayal of the human body, is at the core of the narrative. Concerning *Never Let Me Go*, Shameem Black contends that the identities of Ishiguro’s human clones, the Hailsham students on which the novel is focused, are shaped and defined through an ideological process of *telling* and *not telling*, a “rhetorical technique” that structures their

lives through the use of incomplete information (2009: 792). This narrative approach is likewise used to influence the reader's interpretation and experience of reading *Never Let Me Go*, as Black explains:

Our condition as readers exactly mirrors the education of the students themselves: “‘you’ve been told and not told,’” a subversive teacher tells her students in a failed attempt to shake them out of complacency. “‘You’ve been told, but none of you really understand’” (*Never* 81). The same could be said of the readers of the novel, who return to the first few pages and wonder how they could have missed the sinister significance of such words as “donor” and “carer.” (2009: 792)

Ishiguro's ‘rhetorical technique’ of both *telling* and *not telling* the students about the reality of their condition (which is likewise the strategy Ishiguro uses to influence how the reader interprets the narrative) is similarly displayed in the opening of *The Buried Giant*. The condition of amnesia as it is felt and experienced by Axl is simulated in the narrative's structure, which moves back and forth between *telling* and *not telling*.

In his novel, Ishiguro emphasises the rhetoric of incompleteness through the conflicting and symbolic imagery of lightness and darkness. For example, describing the community in the first village that Axl and Beatrice visit on their quest, the couple perceive the way in which light and dark are set in contrast to one another: “people would stride from the darkness around him to join the crowd while others hurried away from the fire, only to return a moment later. The blaze illuminated some faces sharply, while leaving others in shadow” (*TBG* 56). This sentiment is repeated on another occasion as Axl looks upon the face of the warrior Master Wistan, who “was standing there quite calmly, to the left of the fire, one side of his figure illuminated, the other in shadow” (*TBG* 71). Through the use of the contrasting imagery of lightness and darkness, Ishiguro instils in *The Buried Giant* a symbolic illustration of the workings of amnesia as it is felt and experienced by his fictional society. The duality rendered though the conflicting appearance of lightness and darkness exemplifies the way in which the history and the past have become metaphysical locations of incompleteness. Like the clones in *Never Let Me Go*, whose lives are directed by incomplete information – as they are *told and not told* – the inhabitants of Ishiguro's Middle-Age Britain exist in the present with incomplete memories of their lives prior to the appearance of the mist. The experience of amnesia is presented in the novel through the elderly couple's partial memories of their own past, which subsequently extends to the cultural loss of history in Ishiguro's medieval civilisation.

Ishiguro carefully constructs his opening chapter in such a way that not only reveals the couple's amnesiac existence in a village defined by historical forgetting, but also causes the reader to experience the sensation of memory distortion for themselves. The central focus of the chapter is to introduce the theme of the journey, and yet, this theme is withheld from the reader for as long as possible, indicative of the struggle of the amnesiac. Axl's thought process during this episode circulates around "an idea" of great importance (*TBG 5*). However, because of the mist, Axl is unable to maintain his grip on the idea long enough for it to become foregrounded in his mind, and subsequently therefore in the mind of the reader. The 'idea' is first presented in Axl's momentary recollection of a moment from his past:

Perhaps there had been a time when they had lived closer to the fire; a time when they had children. In fact, it was just such an idea that would drift into Axl's mind as he lay in his bed during the empty hours before dawn, his wife soundly asleep beside him, and then a sense of some unnamed loss would gnaw at his heart, preventing him from returning to sleep. (*TBG 5*)

The couple's isolation is reinforced in the community's refusal to allow Axl and Beatrice to own a candle in their chamber, as Beatrice states: "it's our candle they've taken, and now I can hardly see your outline" (*TBG 9*). Equally, they are not permitted to live near the warren's communal fire, reinforcing their ever-increasing disconnection from the past. Their physical distance from the fire illustrates their dwindling connection to their own history.

The image that 'drifts into Axl's mind', his visualisation of a 'time when they had children', ignites in Axl the idea of the journey, that he and Beatrice must venture out, away from the community and the darkness of the warren, in search of their lost son. Axl is well aware of the inability of his own mind to stay connected to his idea: "He was tempted to wake his wife. For part of him felt sure that if, at this moment, she were awake and talking to him, whatever last barriers remained between him and his decision would finally crumble" (*TBG 6*). In spite of his recognition of the fallibility of his memory, the narrative persistently diverges from Axl's idea, effectively working to draw the reader's attention away from the issue at hand, thus echoing Axl's failure to stay connected to his 'decision'.

As Axl attempts to focus his attention on "the idea of their journey" (*TBG 13*), his mind turns instead to a "a steady run of such puzzling episodes" (*TBG 10*) that clearly evidence the experience of amnesia within the community:

To take an instance, one that had bothered Axl for some time: He was sure that not long ago, there had been in their midst a woman with long red hair – a woman regarded as crucial to their village.

Whenever anyone injured themselves or fell sick, it had been this red-haired woman, so skilled at healing, who was immediately sent for. (*TBG 8*)

The general malaise of amnesia is reflected in the fact that the rest of the community, including Axl's wife Beatrice, are unable to recall the existence of the red-haired woman: "One of them had even paused in an effort to remember, but had ended by shaking his head" (*TBG 8*). The narrative quickly moves onto Axl's memory concerning the little girl, Marta, who had gone missing: "after a while, fragments began to piece themselves together in his mind, of the missing Marta, of the danger, of how not long ago everyone had been searching for her. But already these recollections were growing confused" (*TBG 11*). Upon Marta's return, "anticipating the relief and joy her re-appearance would cause", Axl soon comes to realise that the village had forgotten her disappearance altogether (*TBG 12*). The narrative continues to follow, from Axl's point of view, a collection or collage of fragmented memories and events. The narrator reflects upon the appearance of a "stranger in dark rags", whom the community take to be a witch who has in some way cast a spell on the village (*TBG 13*), and of an altercation between Beatrice and some of the villagers concerning her acquirement of a candle. During these 'puzzling episodes', the theme of the journey is continuously delayed. The narrative weaves in and around these memories, reflecting Axl's failed attempts to maintain his focus on the idea of the journey which he and Beatrice have clearly discussed on several occasions, as Axl confirms to his wife: "We talked before, princess, about a journey we might make" (*TBG 26*).

Axl's failure to maintain his focus on the idea of the journey, of the decision to abandon the village and seek out their son, is also echoed in Ishiguro's description of the warren inhabited by the community. The warren resembles the intricacies of the mind, and movement through the "passageways" that were "in complete darkness" is indicative of the difficulties in retrieving lost memories (*TBG 6*):

Many of the 'doorways' within the warren were simple archways to mark the threshold to a chamber [...]. Axl and Beatrice's room, however, being too far from any fire had something we might recognise as an actual door; a large wooden frame criss-crossed with small branches, vines and thistles which someone going in and out would each time have to lift to one side [...]. He had often returned to find his wife pulling off withered pieces from the construct and replacing them with fresh cuttings she had gathered during the day. (*TBG 6*)

Buried underground, the warren resembles what Assmann refers to as "the unconscious depths of the human psyche" (2008: 109). The environment of the warren is an all-

encompassing space of confinement, a chamber of darkness where movement is obstructed. The inhabitants of the warren must overcome a network of intricate and ‘criss-crossed’ barriers, of ‘branches, vines and thistles’ that denote the mind’s complex and convoluted web of information. In order to move from one space to another within the warren, the residents must toil through the undergrowth, physically forcing their way through the barriers and branches, and Beatrice’s efforts to replace the old ‘withered pieces’ with ‘fresh cuttings’ reflects the continuous struggle to make new memories in a world governed by perpetual memory loss.

Ishiguro’s post-apocalyptic aftermath takes the form of a landscape plagued by historical forgetting. The warren functions in the novel as a clear illustration of the wider society of Ishiguro’s medieval Britain, consumed and entirely overwhelmed by a sense of cultural forgetting. Eventually, the idea that Axl has been circling around takes hold in the foreground of Ishiguro’s narrative as Axl and Beatrice come to remember the reason behind their desired departure from the warren, as Beatrice declares: “There’s a journey we must go on, and no more delay” (*TBG* 19). It is this moment of remembrance that allows Axl and Beatrice to begin their journey. As such, the journey comes to represent the passage from historical loss towards cultural remembrance, or the journey from a dystopian state of existence to an idealised place of utopian salvation.

Throughout the novel, the loss of memory is central to individual and social experience, and the journey narrative portrayed in Axl’s and Beatrice’s movement across the landscape is heavily influenced by the dual process of remembering and forgetting. Just as Margaret is caught in a situation of flux in Crace’s novel, so too must Axl and Beatrice fluctuate between two locations: remembering and forgetting. Once they abandon the warren and set out on their journey, the state of amnesia slowly begins to dwindle as fragments of memory begin to piece themselves together. For instance, as Axl and Beatrice find themselves in the ruins of a war-torn villa speaking with a man who calls himself the ferryman, Axl’s loss of memory is reduced somewhat, as he informs his wife: ““When the man speaks of wars and burning houses, it’s almost as if something comes back to me. From the days before I knew you, it must be.”” (*TBG* 45). Axl’s vague recollections, that grow progressively stronger as the journey develops, are triggered by images and objects that he comes across. In this instance, the ruins of the villa and the discussion of war conjure in Axl repressed moments from his past. Ruins of buildings are of course themselves decayed physical evidence of the past. They

represent a previous world and convey segments of a story, and the past is reconstructed through what remains. The villa, as the narrator makes clear:

must have been splendid enough in the Roman days, but now only a small section was standing. Once magnificent floors lay exposed to the elements, disfigured by stagnant puddles, weeds and grass sprouting through faded tiles. The remains of walls, in places barely ankle high, revealed the old layout of the rooms. (*TBG* 36)

It becomes clear over the course of the text that Axl was a key figure during the war between the Britons and the Saxons, who “attempted to forge a peace agreement”, as Borbely confirms (2016: 30). The ruins are emblematic of war, and so Axl’s forgotten past is intertwined with his experience of violence and war prior to the arrival of the mist. The narrator’s description of the ruins foregrounds a temporal divide between the past and the present, and the disfigured remains stir in Axl something from his past that has been lost.

According to Assmann, memory is not something that we have, but rather something that is created through our relationship with objects and ‘things’: “Our memory, which we possess as beings equipped with a human mind, exists only in constant interaction not only with other human memories but also with ‘things,’ outward symbols” (2008: 111). He explains:

Things do not ‘have’ a memory of their own, but they remind us, may trigger our memory, because they carry memories which we have invested into them, things such as dishes, feasts, rites, images, stories and other texts, landscapes, and other “lieux de mémoire.” On the social level, with respect to groups and societies, the role of external symbols becomes even more important, because groups which, of course, do not ‘have’ a memory tend to ‘make’ themselves one by means of things meant as reminders (A. Assmann). (2008: 111)

Cultural memory amounts to the “reembodiment” of the past through object “preservation”, including “monuments, libraries, archives, and other mnemonic institutions” (2008: 111). “This”, Assmann confirms, “is what we call cultural memory” (2008: 111). Alongside the preservation of the past through objects and ‘things’, Assmann further suggests that memory is also communicative: “it lives in everyday interaction and communication [...]. [T]here are frames, ‘communicative genres,’ traditions of communication and thematization and, above all, the affective ties that bind together families, groups, and generations” (2008: 111). It is through the maintenance of these “social bonds and frames” that memory receives its “durability”: “A change of frames brings about forgetting” (2008: 111).

In the context of *The Buried Giant*, the change of frame is marked by the Briton-Saxon conflict on the collective level, and the loss of Axl and Beatrice's son on the level of the individual. These are historical moments that signal the arrival of Ishiguro's apocalypse and bring into existence an aftermath of sorts. However, as Axl looks upon the ruins of the villa, an outward symbol of the past, and as he interacts with the ferryman who speaks of "days of war" (*TBG* 45), his memories are triggered and he is provided with a glimpse of a past that has been lost. Again, however, and in keeping with Ishiguro's strategy of telling and not telling, Axl's memories are only ever brief, momentary occurrences and he is unable to maintain his connection to his own history.

Ishiguro repeats his portrayal of Axl's fleeting recollections as the novel develops. During their journey, Axl and Beatrice find themselves in the company of two knights named Wistan and Sir Gawain who become their travelling companions for much of the novel. Interaction with these knights and his perception of objects triggers Axl's connection to his past, as the following passage makes clear:

Now at last, as he listened to Wistan and the old knight talk, a fragmentary memory came to him. It was not much, but it nevertheless brought him relief to have something to hold and examine. He remembered standing inside a large tent, a large one of the sort an army will erect near a battlefield. It was night, and there was a heavy candle flickering, and the wind outside making the tent's walls suck and billow. There were others in the tent with him. Several others, perhaps, but he could not remember their faces. (*TBG* 120)

Ishiguro noticeably describes Axl's memory here as a tangible object that he can 'hold and examine'. This interaction he witnesses between Gawain and Wistan triggers a concrete moment of realisation that temporarily removes the veil of the mist. Moreover, the image of the candle that was presented earlier in the narrative is given an additional layer of significance here. During their time at the warren, the light of the candle was for Axl and Beatrice unavailable. In this memory, however, as Axl reconnects to his personal experiences during the war, the object of the candle clearly symbolises the fact that Axl is able to visualise a coherent memory. He is unable to visualise the faces of those around him, but he is able to remember that "he was angry about something" (*TBG* 120), again, reinforcing Ishiguro's narrative strategy of providing the reader with incomplete information.

Through the characterisation of Axl, as well as through his portrayal of the warren at the start of the novel, Ishiguro establishes the condition of amnesia felt by the populace of his medieval world. However, the issues of historical amnesia that provide the principal

motivation for Axl's and Beatrice's journey eventually give way to the novel's true concern, which is the complexities of remembrance, and the problems associated with the act of remembering as a process of recovery. The quest to slay the dragon is made with the explicit intention of removing the mist that has disconnected Ishiguro's medieval society from its own history. However, the deed of killing the dragon comes with its own set of problems. Speaking with Sean Matthews whilst writing *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro insinuates that the crux of the novel pivots on the pitfalls of remembrance:

I have often written about individuals who struggle with their past and their conscience, but now I wanted to write a novel about how people – not just individuals – but communities and countries remember and forget their own history. There are perhaps times when a nation should forget and when you can cover things up, and leave things unresolved because it would stir up all kinds of trouble. (2009: 118-19)

The Buried Giant represents the complexities of remembrance, doing so on both the level of the individual and that of the collective. Whilst the mist has placed the country into a state of all-encompassing amnesia, it has concurrently worked to conceal from the country the atrocities of war that occurred during the Briton-Saxon conflicts, bringing about a peaceful, albeit oblivious, society. As Borbely posits, the dragon “patrols the fluid boundary between memory and oblivion” (2016 25). Furthermore, the mist has worked to withhold from Axl and Beatrice the truth behind the loss of their son and his eventual death. It is through the dragon's eventual demise that Ishiguro challenges the utopian impulse by which the journey is predicated.

Prior to its appearance in the novel, the dragon's presence is commanding and something to be feared. However, once Ishiguro's characters discover Querig's motionless body lying in a pit in the landscape, the anticipated, heroic battle between 'knight' and 'beast' fails to arrive. “As for the dragon”, the narrator explains, “it was hardly clear at first she was alive” (*TBG* 310). The dragon is described as a “corpse”, and as a “worm-like reptile accustomed to water that had mistakenly come aground and was in the process of dehydrating” (*TBG* 310). Rather than a monstrous animal that poses the fellowship any real sense of danger, Querig “was instead a yellowing white, reminiscent of the underside of certain fish” (*TBG* 310). Axl looks upon the creature and “could see only one eye, which was hooded in the manner of a turtle's, and which opened and closed lethargically according to some internal rhythm” (*TBG* 310). Ishiguro's portrayal of the dragon as obscure and unthreatening presents the reader with an anti-climactic moment that dispels any sense that redemption will accompany its death.

The two Knights, Wistan and Sir Gawain, who have travelled with Axl and Beatrice throughout the novel, represent the two sides of the Anglo-Saxon conflict. For the Saxon Wistan, the dragon must be killed so that the realities of war, those responsible for it, and the lives of those lost can be remembered, as he makes plain: “‘What kind of God is it, sir, wishes wrongs to go forgotten and unpunished?’” (*TBG* 311). Sir Gawain, the Briton charged with defending the dragon and keeping in place a culture of amnesia, argues that in forgetting the horrors of war, the Anglo-Saxon society has been living peacefully together, as he counters: “Look how we live now, sir! Old foes as cousins, village by village” (*TBG* 311).

In his portrayal of Sir Gawain, Ishiguro draws on the chivalric hero of the same name from such texts as ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’, a fourteenth-century poem of unknown authorship, and Sir Thomas Malory’s fifteenth-century text, *Le Morte d’Arthur*. The character of Sir Gawain adds to the novel’s mythological and Arthurian context. While the rest of the characters in *The Buried Giant* are subject to historical forgetting, Sir Gawain appears to remain partly immune to the mist, and it is during two chapters devoted entirely to his personal reveries that we are told of his role in the events that have led to the collective condition of amnesia. Through these chapters, Ishiguro reinforces the themes of both memory and remembrance in the novel’s catastrophe-marred landscape. The reveries serve as a narrative strategy that foregrounds the complexities of the memorial process. They work to remove the reader from the journey narrative, inviting us into the intricate and convoluted web of memory and history, during which Sir Gawain recalls the day the mist consumed the country, or in other words, Ishiguro’s moment of apocalyptic rupture.

We learn that Sir Gawain, along with four other knights of King Arthur’s court, escorted Merlin to the land where the she-dragon Querig roamed so that he could cast his spell on her and steal from the country its ability to remember the atrocities committed during the Briton-Saxon conflict, in which innocents “were killed by our hands, even the smallest babes” (*TBG* 231). Sir Gawain’s reveries function in the text to provide the reader with access to the horrors of the past that have been removed from the collective memory of Ishiguro’s post-Arthurian Britain. Significantly, in drawing on a character of Arthurian legend who notably belongs to a poem devoid of both “authorship and date” (Miller, 2015: 59), Ishiguro directly captures the problematic and limited correlation between memory and history.

Through the battle of the two knights, in which the dragon is killed and the mist removed, Ishiguro’s novel becomes an interrogation into the process and complexities of memory and

remembrance as a process of renewal. In this sense, the novel is not dissimilar to Andreas Huyssen's discussion of the museum, in which he states that "The battle against the museum has been an enduring trope of modernist culture" (1995: 13). Huyssen argues:

It has stood in the dead eye of the storm of progress serving as a catalyst for the articulation of tradition and nation, heritage and canon, and has provided the master maps for the construction of cultural legitimacy in both a national and universal sense. In its disciplinary archives and collections, it helped define the identity of Western civilization by drawing external and internal boundaries that relied as much on exclusions and marginalizations as it did on positive codifications. At the same time, the modern museum has always been attacked as a symptom of cultural ossification by all those speaking in the name of life and cultural renewal against the dead weight of the past. (1995:13)

Huyssen points out both the importance of the museum and the archive when it comes to maintaining cultural identity and traditions, specifically in the aftermath of a cultural trauma, but also the drawbacks associated with memorialisation. Namely, in the act of remembrance history becomes itself a constructed space, told from the perspective of those who perform memorialisation. As Usui argues, history is "constructed outside the untold stories, the forgotten memories, and the buried history" (2016: 2549). In *The Buried Giant*, Usui makes clear, "Ishiguro criticizes what the buried history portrays" (2016: 2549). Otherwise put, once the dragon's mist is removed, that which has been lost through collective amnesia resurfaces. As a result, the utopian impulse that has led the characters to the dragon in the hope of salvation is denied.

The battle that occurs between Wistan and Gawain symbolises the argument for and against the process of memorialisation, not only on the collective level, but on the level of the individual as represented in the personal history of Axl and Beatrice. In the context of Ishiguro's medieval society, the process of remembering the past has the potential to resurrect past wrongs and bring about future conflict. Likewise, whilst Axl's and Beatrice's bond is a loving one, concerns over their past and what might be laid bare should the mist be removed continue to surface, as Beatrice at one stage states: "'Axl, tell me. If the She-dragon's really slain, and the mist starts to clear. Axl, do you ever fear what will then be revealed to us?'" (*TBG* 270). A similar question is posed by Axl in regards to the future relationship between the Britons and the Saxons once the dragon is killed: "who knows what old hatreds will loosen the land now?" (*TBG* 323). Following Wistan's victory over Sir Gawain, and the subsequent death of the dragon, it is revealed that the removal of the mist from the landscape

will not lead to renewal, but that past horrors will only be repeated, as confirmed in Wistan's announcement to Axl: "My king sent me to destroy this she-dragon not simply to build a monument to kin slain long ago. You began to see, sir, this dragon died to make way for the coming conquest" (*TBG* 323). In the dragon's death, then, Ishiguro challenges the utopian impulse that has governed the journey narrative undertaken by Axl and Beatrice throughout the duration of the narrative.

In the novel's final chapter, told directly from the perspective of a boatman, Ishiguro's challenge to the utopian impulse is confirmed. The removal of the mist and the return of lost memories fails to deliver salvation to the country, and as we learn, it fails to reunite Axl and Beatrice with their son. Their conversation with the boatman marks the end of their journey, not only their quest to find their lost son, but their journey through life. In the character of the boatman Ishiguro draws on the figure of the *Charon* from Greek mythology, who ferries the dead to the underworld of Hades. In order for Axl and Beatrice to cross the river together, they must first prove "a bond of love unusually strong" (*TBG* 334). However, with the mist now removed, it becomes clear that the reason behind their son's disappearance was the result of a rift that existed between them, and the cause of Axl's anger in the tent during his flashback is revealed, as Axl explains: "For it's true there was a moment she was unfaithful to me" (*TBG* 339). This revelation, which caused their son to leave and led to his eventual death, "taken by the plague that swept the country" (*TBG* 339), marks the true giant buried in the novel.

...

In *The Pesthouse* and *The Buried Giant*, Crace and Ishiguro respectively present narrative journeys that are motivated by the desire for utopia. However, they subsequently confront the utopian impulse, thereby revealing the illusion of utopia and the problematic nature of considering the future in utopian terms. In this sense, they are novels that challenge the desire for utopia in the twenty-first century. We are often compelled by the utopian impulse in reality, or by the desire to progress to an ideal state of existence, a compulsion that is no doubt informed by the anxieties and often dystopian conditions that demarcate contemporary life. *The Pesthouse* and *The Buried Giant* challenge this desire and ask us to re-think the way in which we approach the future.

The Experience of Apocalyptic Displacement in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From*

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From* are contemporary works that represent the journey of the migrant in the aftermath of a catastrophic event. McCarthy's novel, a post-apocalyptic portrayal of desolation and despair, tells the story of a father and son, known in the text only as the man and the boy, who strive to stay alive in the most arduous of circumstances. The inhabitants of McCarthy's barren world live as exiles in a landscape covered by skies of ash and dust. Similarly, Hunter's debut novel envisions the experience of an unnamed mother, who is also the novel's narrator, and her new-born son, Z, as they, along with the rest of the populace, flee an unprecedented and devastating flood that consumes the city of London.

Concerning McCarthy's novel, Paul Sheehan explains that "The man and the boy, and everyone else in *The Road* are refugees, seeking asylum from the earth itself, vainly pitting themselves against the dead shell that is the depleted biosphere" (2012: 94). In the same collection of essays, Mark Steven confirms the migrant status of the man and the boy, who embody the "transient and anonymous figure of the refugee" (2012: 68). McCarthy's unknown narrator clarifies: "In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing [...]. Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland (*TR* 28). In Hunter's novel, the narrator looks out over the landscape and reflects on the large-scale movement of migrants who attempt to escape the rising water levels:

I can see people by the roadside, walking in groups.
Like mass hitchhiking with no lifts. Some have children
balanced on their shoulders. Some are limping. (*TEWSF* 34)

The depiction of the refugee as presented by McCarthy and Hunter serves as a metaphor for contemporary displacement, an experience that for some has come to be one of the chief characteristics of the human condition in the twenty-first century. Rufus Cook, for example,

explains that it was the figure of the migrant at the turn of the millennium that provide[d] “the most useful metaphor for coping with the confusions and contradictions characteristic of the postmodern world” (2000: 227). As a result of “modern technological change” and “problems of cultural discontinuity” (2000: 227), Cook, drawing on Wendell Berry (1983: 58), continues, we became like migrants, “displaced ‘from where [we] belong by history, culture, deeds, association, and affection’” (2000: 227). In the twenty-first century, there is little evidence to suggest that Cook’s argument is no longer relevant. Technology, globalisation and the proliferation of capitalism continue to influence experiences of displacement and cultural discontinuity. Crucially, it is important to recognise that the figure of the migrant in Cook’s discussion is not to be mistaken for the literal experience of the migrant or the refugee.

The distinction between the literal and the metaphoric is explained in Rosi Braidotti’s conception of the nomadic subject, as cited by Sara Ahmed in her discussion of migration and estrangement (1999). Braidotti posits:

Though the image of ‘nomadic subjects’ is inspired by the experience of peoples or cultures that are literally nomadic, the nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour . . . It is the subversion of conventions that define the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling. (Braidotti, 1994: 5)

“By separating her understanding of nomadism from those that are literally nomadic”, Ahmed confirms, “Braidotti translates the literal into the metaphoric, such that the nomads come to perform a particular kind of theoretical work, to represent something other than themselves” (1999: 334). Calling on the thoughts of theorist Iain Chambers (1994: 2), Ahmed explicates that “migration becomes a way of interrogating, not only the different social relations produced by the histories of the displacement of peoples, but the very nature of identity itself [...]. The migrant, like the exile and the nomad, crosses borders and breaks barriers of thought and experience” (1999: 332). The figure of the migrant, as presented by McCarthy and Hunter, can be understood as both literal and metaphoric. Their migrant figures are literal manifestations of the displaced refugee in the aftermath of catastrophe, and at the same time, presented as metaphors for the cultural sensibility of displacement such as that described by Cook. As a result, these novels allow for an interpretation of contemporary concerns relating to displacement in the modern world. McCarthy and Hunter draw on the theme of displacement from situations of catastrophic aftermath, looking back to the present from post-traumatological, retrospective locations. In so doing, they illustrate displacement as

one of the core characteristics that contribute to the experience of anxiety in the twenty-first century.

Displacement is one of the defining traits through which the experience of the refugee can be understood, and as anthropologist Frances Pine elaborates, “migration” is “a process that is both future orientated and (nearly always) backward looking. In other words, by its very nature it involves the migrant in different temporalities of past, present, and future and different spaces of home and elsewhere” (2014: 98-99). Displacement, as with the narrative of the apocalypse, is the experience of temporal and spatial separation from that which might be considered familiar, such as home and regular or normal time. Migration scholar Cathrine Brun elucidates that protracted displacement “represents the experience of being forced to stay away from the place called home over many years” (2015: 21), and that “discussions of time in protracted displacement often circle around the past or the future”, leading to the “feeling of being out of sync with time” (2015: 23). On a thematic level, displacement is produced through McCarthy’s apocalypse and Hunter’s ecological disaster. Following the only information that we are ever given of McCarthy’s apocalyptic event, “A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (*TR* 54), the man and the boy live out their lives in a displaced state of existence. Equally, Hunter’s pregnant narrator becomes displaced from house and home following the floods: “I am thirty-eight weeks when they tell us we will have to move. That we are within the Gulp Zone” (*TEWSF* 4). In both novels, the reason behind the apocalyptic event remains largely unclear and never truly explained.

The cause of *The Road*’s apocalyptic event has been discussed and debated at length by McCarthy scholars since the novel’s publication, with a number of plausible explanations posited. As Oliver James Brearey remarks: critics have “used the novel’s keywords to suggest different possible causes of the cataclysm” (2012: 335-6):

Carl James Grindley argues that the decimated landscape, the altered weather patterns, and the father’s illness ‘suggest that the world is gripped by something similar to a nuclear winter’ (11). In contrast, Dana Phillips claims ‘the impact of a massive meteor and not the detonation of multiple warheads’ (117) could have caused the cataclysm. (2012: 335-6)

It has also been suggested that McCarthy’s aftermath has come about as a result of climate change, evidenced in George Monbiot’s declaration that *The Road* is “the most important environmental book ever written” (*The Guardian* 2007). While any one of these suggestions could be correct, it seems that McCarthy’s apocalyptic event is less to do with the cause than

it is to do with what comes next. Inger-Anne Søvting refers to McCarthy's apocalypse as "an undramatic event, almost a non-event", suggesting that "Since the situation has no clear cause there is no one and nothing to blame for it, and also nothing to be done about it" (2013: 707/708). The value of McCarthy's novel, therefore, lies not in the event, or who is responsible for it, but what is left in its wake, and the reader must, as Shelly L. Rambo suggests, bear "witness to what remains" (2008: 115).

Hunter's apocalypse is similarly ambiguous. There is a strong relationship between Hunter's catastrophe and contemporary fears surrounding ecological degradation, as the narrator's assertion concerning the flooding would suggest: "I am thirty-two weeks pregnant when they announce it: the water is rising faster than they thought. It is creeping faster. A calculation error. A badly plotted movie, sensors out at sea" (*TEWSF* 3). However, the cause of the flooding – whether it is a natural occurrence or an event engineered by humanity – is never revealed. Coinciding with the publication of her novel, Hunter wrote on the subject of anthropogenic climate change for *The Times Literary Supplement* (2017), in which she details the strength of fiction to be able to grasp the complexities of our ecological concerns, particularly during an age of climate-change denial: "Novels can encompass millennia", Hunter states, "make imaginative leaps and conjure the impossible. They are, in many senses, the ideal form for a culture trying to get to grips with a new kind of change, and a new image of ourselves, which it may be easier, or more convenient, to ignore".

With this in mind, it could be suggested that Hunter's floods are the result of humanity's influence over the natural world in the Anthropocene. At the same time, though, and following in the footsteps of McCarthy, Hunter seems to be far more invested in what remains in the aftermath of the disaster than she is in the cause of it, something Hunter does indeed allude to in her explanation of dystopian fiction:

They can be a warning of what is to come, but they can also pose crucial questions: how would we react in these scenarios – and what does that reaction tell us about ourselves? When the worst happens, what is left? How does life go on? (*The Times Literary Supplement*, 2017)

Both Hunter and McCarthy deliberately remove the apocalyptic cause in order to reflect on what is left, and to pose those crucial questions to the reader, doing so through representations of apocalyptic displacement.

Narratives of Displacement

One of the ways in which McCarthy and Hunter usher in the experience of displacement is through a temporal halt, or an apocalyptic break with linearity. As such, the first section of this chapter will explore the ways in which McCarthy and Hunter construct their respective narratives through representations of temporal displacement. This will be followed by a discussion of spatial displacement, specifically in relation to the concept of the home. During experiences of displacement, the relationship between an individual's subjectivity and their notion of home is reshaped, and so this section will explore in detail McCarthy's and Hunter's illustration of their protagonists' spatial disconnection from the fixed and secure location of the home. Temporal and spatial disconnection is ultimately what leads to the experience of uncertainty during displacement, an issue that will be the central point of discussion in the chapter's final section. This section explores the relationship between hope and resistance as a process through which the characters of these novels confront their displaced condition.

In *The Road*, "The clocks stopped at 1:17" (*TR* 54). This has been assumed by many to be a reference to 'Revelation 1:17', or as it is otherwise known, 'The Apocalypse of John', which, as Carl James Grindley avows, "introduces Christ's theophany to John the Divine" (2008: 12). McCarthy's world-ending event concerns the suspension or complete discontinuity of time altogether, as Skrimshire explains: "Apocalypse is temporal catastrophe: a disruption of our desire for chronos, time we possess and can control" (2011: 10). The inhabitants of McCarthy's aftermath are temporally displaced, existing in a world where the very meaning of time has been removed. The man, for example, "thought the month was October but he wasn't sure. He hadn't kept a calendar for years" (*TR* 2). Importantly, McCarthy's temporal 'shattering', as Julian Murphet terms it (2012: 117), is not a temporal reversal such as that presented by Jim Crace in *The Pesthouse*, whereby time is inverted, or reversed. Instead, McCarthy's apocalypse typifies a temporal end, in which time has come to a complete stop. As the narrator at one stage reflects: "no train would ever run again" (*TR* 192), a moment that signals the end of modern progress in the novel. In McCarthy's impossible aftermath, in which the remainders of life continue on "borrowed time" and in a "borrowed world" (*TR* 138), the man and the boy exist as displaced subjects, no longer bound to the flowing of chronological time. Essentially, the man and the boy belong to the impossible space *after*

time, therefore reinforcing the paradoxical nature of representing the impossible space of the post-apocalyptic narrative.

For the most part, McCarthy avoids describing his fictional world as an apocalyptic aftermath. Only once does he call upon the term (*TR* 165). Instead, he refers specifically to the fact that time has come to an end, as the man announces: “There is no later. This is later” (*TR* 56). This sense of temporal shattering confronts the promise of movement that the novel’s title entails. According to Andrew Tate, “Mobility is foregrounded in McCarthy’s emblematic title”, and yet it is constantly deferred and disrupted (2017: 91). Drawing on De Cristofaro (2015: 55), Tate explains that while the narrative serves as a “chronotope for the flowing of time”, of the passage from beginning to end, “the teleological sense of an ending” is withheld through a monotonous narration, which functions to produce a “cyclical repetition of almost identical events” (2017: 91). McCarthy complicates movement by fashioning a narrative plagued by repetition and reiteration, as argued by Ashley Kunsu, who suggests that McCarthy utilises a “fractured narrative structure”, the “proliferation of sentence fragments, and brief, repetitive dialogue” (2011: 68). Most notably, McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic atmosphere is produced through the repetition of the colour ‘gray’ which McCarthy frequently uses to describe the novel’s setting, and which, as Chris Danta makes clear, “occurs 81 times in this short novel” (2012: 9).

Stylistically, as Andrew Hoberek suggests: “*The Road* is surprisingly committed to an unremitting affect of exhaustion” a sentiment that mirrors the exhausted state of the man and the boy (2011: 486), and as Peter Boxall elucidates, the novel is devoid of “any forward momentum, any future orientation [...]. Where the idea of a road offers the prospect of direction, the road has thickened, coagulated, like the cold oleaginous sea that breaks leadenly on the novel’s grey shore” (2013: 220). At the same time, however, although the man and the boy belong to a world that no longer functions along a chronological axis, movement is nevertheless presented in their slow, arduous journey towards the coast. The man and the boy are refugees, unstuck from time, whose only hope of survival is to continue on down the road, emphasised through the man’s repeated assertions: “We have to keep moving. We have to keep heading south” (*TR* 43); “We’re going to keep going down the road” (*TR* 92). Brun contends that “Even during protracted situations of displacement [...] movement continues to take place” (*Active Waiting*, 2015: 22). Although the man and the boy belong to a world of apocalyptic displacement, the novel is still governed by their continuous, albeit onerous, journey. McCarthy constructs a narrative built on the tension between

temporal dislocation and perpetual movement, a tension that stresses the experience of the refugee in situations of protracted displacement.

Hunter, like McCarthy, depicts an apocalyptic break with time. The “unprecedented flood” is reported on the news on the “14th June, one o’clock” (*TEWST* 8). As with McCarthy’s narrative, Hunter establishes from the outset a feeling of narrative tension and unease when it comes to time and movement, evidenced first and foremost in her contradictory title. We cannot start from an end, if we assume that the end is the end, and the end is somewhere that we cannot have arrived at if we are about to start or begin. The phrase itself, ‘The End We Start From’, is borrowed from ‘Little Gidding’ of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, placed by Hunter at the start of the novel as an epigraph:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

(T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*)

Terry Fairchild observes that the strength of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* is to be found in its temporal philosophy, “supported by an underlying, spiritual absolute, a level of life where the two extremes of time and timeless are indistinguishable” (1999: 52). The concept of time, Fairchild suggests, is a clear expression of “the human condition – the constant reminder that our days are numbered” a visible motif expressed in Eliot’s work (1999: 53). However, Eliot’s stance on time is conflicted, as the mortality of time is met by an opposing pole of timelessness, reinforcing the “mind-challenging paradox that Eliot relished” (Fairchild, 1999: 80). Fairchild suggests:

Read with greatest profundity, the *Four Quartets* present the triumph of life over time [...]. Eliot moves forward in a continuous ebb and flow of time and eternity until he reaches the end of the poem, which is its true beginning, life lived forever in the timeless, no longer touched by the binding influence of time. (1990: 53-54)

Eliot’s strategy is echoed in Hunter’s narrative structure, which flows between two poles, beginning and endings, simultaneously. Hunter’s catastrophic apocalypse is interwoven in the narrative with the birth of her narrator’s child, Z. Early on, the narrator exclaims, “The moment of birth looms ahead of me like the loss of my virginity did, as death does. The inevitable, tucked and waiting out there somewhere” (*TEWSF* 3). The two experiences of

death and birth, of beginnings and endings, form the basis of Hunter's narrative and of her narrator's experience during displacement.

Hunter's structure reveals an engagement with the experience of temporal disruption during prolonged periods of migration and displacement, in which an individual's perspective of time is chronically altered. Hunter's narrative reflects the narrator's difficulty in maintaining a temporal perspective, as the narrator at one stage suggests: "Days are thin now, stretched so much that time pours through them" (*TEWSF* 31). The novel is made up of small, fragmented paragraphs, much like McCarthy's novel, and in some instances, just a couple of words. Likewise, it contains gaps in the story, indicative of temporal loss during post-traumatic situations, an aspect of the text to which this discussion will return.

Hunter's narrative structure replicates the timelessness of her narrator's post-catastrophic existence. Just as the father in McCarthy's *The Road* negotiates a post-apocalyptic landscape devoid of time, Hunter's narrator traverses an aftermath in which her perception of time and of life more broadly has become dramatically reconfigured. The narrator's physical sensation of being "barely intact" (*TEWSF*, 9) parallels the temporal structure of the novel, built from fragments and scraps that make up the narrator's displaced perspective. The narrator makes clear that "time" is "sliding now, losing form, turning one day into the next" (*TEWSF*, 61). As with *The Road*, Hunter's catastrophe has shattered time, leaving a trace of remaining fragments in its wake. In contrast to McCarthy's novel, Hunter's narrative does not convey arduous movement. Instead, the pace of her novel is swift, deliberately foregrounding an anxious state of urgency, whereby "non-stopping appears to be the first side effect" of her apocalypse (*TEWSF* 11).

The man in *The Road* enters into a temporally displaced state of existence following McCarthy's apocalypse, revealed in the novel through his distorted point of view that moves back and forth between two temporal locations. The man negotiates the present and the past as he returns to his lost world through dreams, reveries, flashbacks and nightmares. In one such example, the man recalls a particularly happy day from his youth, when he and his uncle visited a lake near his uncle's farm. The man describes this as "the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon" (*TR* 12). However, his experience of temporal displacement is predominantly shaped by both the apocalyptic event and the loss of his wife, who committed suicide prior to the events of the novel. The man's journey along the road is wrought by his post-traumatic existence in the aftermath of his wife's suicide. Her

death and the apocalyptic event are for the man closely linked, and his experience of displacement occurs as a result of both monumental events. His distorted visualisation of time is therefore rooted in the experience of trauma and loss, and in McCarthy's aftermath, he is repeatedly haunted by the ghost of his dead wife:

In his dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. Her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white. She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell. (*TR* 17)

The description of his wife in this dream resembles his vision of the creature in the novel's opening pages, "Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in the shadow on the rocks behind it" (*TR* 2). If the creature symbolises what Murphet refers to as the "Beast of the Apocalypse" (2012: 109), so too does the memory of the man's wife, as McCarthy amalgamates the apocalyptic creature with the man's ghostly bride through images of carved, pale and translucent bone.

The apocalypse and his wife's suicide ominously influence the man's displaced experience. His return to the past through dreams and flashbacks evidences his experience of temporal disruption, as his past continues to intrude upon his present, disrupting his progression along the road. The apocalyptic event, along with the loss of his wife, forces the man into a position of post-traumatic displacement, in which he experiences symptoms of trauma, namely through the process of what Sigmund Freud referred to as 'Uncanny repetition'. Aris Mousoutzanis explains:

Uncanny repetition [...] was discussed by Freud as a posttraumatic symptom, as in cases of traumatized patients who, after having been through 'an experience whose affective colouring was excessively powerful', had recurring nightmares of the traumatic event, which were seen by Freud as a result of a 'fixation to the moment of the traumatic accident', whereby the patients 'have not finished with the traumatic situation.' (2009: 132)⁹

Although the man is unable to conceptualise the event that has led to this world, he is repeatedly drawn through the process of uncanny repetition to images and memories of his wife. His temporal perception in McCarthy's aftermath is informed by the duality of his wife's death and the apocalyptic event, placing him squarely in a displaced state of existence. Vedat Sar and Erdinc Ozturk suggest that when an individual experiences a traumatic event,

⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Fixation to Traumas', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVI, trans. James Strachey, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1963), 274, 275.

“Normal time perception is replaced by “traumatic time perception” during the trauma process” (2006: 13), whereby the subject’s perception of time becomes “distorted”, and their “sense of time is lost” (2006: 16). McCarthy conveys this sense of lost time and timelessness through the man’s failure to keep hold of time. The man’s perception of time is severely altered in McCarthy’s world, and his comprehension of time and reality remains subject to ‘traumatic time perception’.

Importantly, the man’s experience of reality as temporal loss does not extend to the boy’s perception of reality in McCarthy’s aftermath, due to the fact that the boy was born after the apocalyptic moment. Instead, the boy’s experience of the world is defined specifically by lack: lack of knowledge and a lack of memories. As such, the boy is not subject to the same sense of temporal displacement as the man, for he has not been displaced from the past at all. The boy’s lack of knowledge is illustrated through his repeated questioning of terms and phrases used by the man: “Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory” (TR 55). As they look at the map that the man carries, for example, the man draws his finger along “the black lines” and explains that these lines are “The state roads”, to which the boy asks, “Why are they the state roads?” (TR 43). Elsewhere, the man, needing to fetch wood for the fire, says to the boy, “I’ll be in the neighbourhood”, a phrase that the boy cannot understand: “Where’s the neighbourhood?” (TR 100). Moreover, the man later explains that they are “about two hundred miles from the coast. As the crow flies” (TR 166). The boy questions the use of the man’s terminology: “As the crow flies?” (TR 166). His quizzical search for an unknown history establishes a temporal difference between himself and the man, marking out the two characters as separated by the apocalyptic rupture, which has thrown them into two distinct temporalities of understanding and existence. The man’s existence in the world is always subject to past memories and his understanding of the world as it once was. The boy, conversely, perceives the world without the past in mind, a trait that leads the man to think of him sometimes as “an alien”, or “A being from a planet that no longer existed” (TR 163). The man and the boy, therefore, exist together but in two separate temporalities: the before and the after.

Hunter, like McCarthy, illustrates the impact that a catastrophic event can have on an individual’s experience of time, and how it can affect, alter, and disrupt their perception of reality. In contrast to McCarthy’s novel, which describes the man’s experience, the majority of the events that occur in *The End We Start From* are told *as* they occur in the present tense, as Hunter simulates the direct experience of temporal detachment as it is felt *during*

displacement. Told in this way, Hunter's portrayal of an apocalyptic flood grants a level of immediacy not envisaged by McCarthy in *The Road*. The novel's opening line demonstrates Hunter's narrative contemporaneity: "I am hours from giving birth, from the event I thought would never happen to me, and R has gone up the mountain" (*TEWSF* 1). Here, Hunter foreshadows the events to come, in which the narrator's husband remains for the most part an absent figure. Equally, the following line prefigures his eventual return that occurs in the novel's conclusion: "When I text him, he sends his friend S to look after me, and starts down the mountain" (*TEWSF*, 1). As will be explained in due course, Hunter continues to illustrate the experience of the displaced subject by confronting linearity with conflicting images, such as that envisaged here in R's movements up, and then down the mountain.

Throughout the novel, the narrator struggles to maintain her focus on the events that are happening around her: "The phrases spill out, unstoppable. Deckchairs, document, pressure, response" (*TEWSF* 7). Hunter depicts her apocalyptic breakdown in a similar fashion, illustrating the narrator's chaotic and disordered interpretation of the calamitous events as they unfold: "Words float up the stairs like so many childhood letter magnets. Endgame, civilization, catastrophe, humanitarian" (*TEWSF* 12). Hunter demonstrates how an individual's perspective becomes obscured during periods of displacement, as her narrator takes on an existence 'out of sync' with time. The narrator envisages a similar sensation of temporal loss to that felt by the man in *The Road*. She reflects: "I try to feel the solitary date beneath me, try to make the day and the month and the year mean something" (*TEWSF* 45). The text conjures up the impression that time is being lost beneath the waves of the flood.

The narrator's knowledge of the catastrophic events is presented primarily through an intangible visualisation of information conveyed through her television screen:

The news rushes past downstairs like a flow of traffic.
Even our flat back there underwater doesn't make it
real.

Z is real, with his tiny cat skull and sweet-smelling crap.
The news is rushing by. It is easy to ignore. (*TEWSF* 12)

In this passage, Hunter draws upon the spirit of the apocalypse as it is expressed and divulged in contemporary Western culture, particularly on the news and in the media, echoing Liz Jensen's depiction of the relationship between the media and the narrative of apocalypse in *The Rapture*, as discussed in chapter one. Hunter critiques the message of apocalyptic fear,

intoned by twenty-first-century media in the digital age. Importantly, however, the narrator's description of the events on television draws attention to the velocity of time as it is felt by people in displaced circumstances. Cindy Horst and Katarzyna Grabska make clear that during displacement, "people have to deal with changes and challenges that occur at rapid speed" (2015: 2). This passage encapsulates the narrator's abstract perspective, in which she sees the world now as a 'flow of traffic' that 'rushes past', echoing the impact that the fragmented, narrative structure has upon the reader. The narrator's visual perception resonates with Brun's suggestion that "For many refugees and IDPs [Internally Displaced Persons], both the routinized everyday time and the abstract future time may lack content" (2015: 23), a formulation evidenced in the narrator's fragmented perspective. This lack of content is reinforced in the narrator's utterance: "R's words move in and out of focus" (*TEWSF* 32). The narrator's perception continues to weave in and out of focus throughout, evincing her detached perspective in the aftermath of the floods.

The displaced subjectivity of the narrator, like the father in *The Road*, whose present reality is influenced in no small part by the traumatic episode of his wife's death, is epitomised in the novel through textual moments of absence and gaps in the story. The most notable absence in the novel is the narrator's husband, R, who disappears during their journey north. R's disappearance, however, is not the only moment of familial loss experienced by the narrator. Hunter represents the narrator's experience of social disruption early on following the loss of R's parents. Prior to their journey to a refugee camp, the narrator, her husband and Z spend a number of weeks at the home of R's parents, G and N. During this time, R, his mother G and his father N make several excursions in search of food and supplies, which "takes hours, due to all the queues and shortages and fights" (*TEWSF* 13). G is the first to disappear:

R and N climb slowly out. There is no G. They come
into the house like soldiers, like fading people from an old photo.

No G. (*TEWSF* 15)

Hunter does not reveal to the reader the circumstances behind G's disappearance. Instead, this episode is reduced to a single sentence in the text: "Pandemonium, N tries, syllables spilling onto the table" (*TEWSF* 16). This representation of linguistic loss is repeated slightly later in the novel after N's disappearance: "Here are some of R's words for what happened: tussle, squabble, slaughter" (*TEWSF* 38). As with her apocalyptic flooding, Hunter

accentuates the instability of language when it comes to re-telling a traumatic event. The events surrounding the loss, and presumed deaths, of G and N, are overwhelming to the extent that they cannot be fathomed, recreated in language, or adequately described. At the same time, Hunter is mindful that a traumatic event can leave a psychological trace, as demonstrated in the aftermath of G's disappearance in which she takes on an absent presence: "G is nowhere, and the kitchen is full of her, her face shining out from the kettle, the shape of her waist wrapped around jars" (*TEWSF* 16). The loss of G and N, and later in the novel, the narrator's separation from R informs the narrator's experience of familial detachment, their disappearances signifying gaps in the narrator's story.

Throughout the novel, the narrator recognises that her ability to testify to the events that are occurring around her is failing, as she at one stage clarifies: "I am losing the story. I am forgetting" (*TEWSF* 80). Her failure to cling on to the various events that unfold throughout her journey exemplifies the narrator's temporal detachment, and makes clear that her narrative is subject to a similar sense of traumatic time perception to that of the man in *The Road*. The traumatic events of G's and N's presumed deaths (that cannot be recalled), her separation from R, all placed alongside the incomprehensible event of Hunter's apocalyptic catastrophe, fundamentally alter the narrator's temporal experience, supporting Judith Greenberg's suggestion that "Trauma defies a linear conception of one's relation to experience and memory; it hovers outside of one particular moment, reassembling or confusing the boundaries of time" (1998: 320). Hunter's disjointed narrative structure represents the experience of temporal displacement, whereby the narrator's temporal boundaries become obscured and her perception of reality dramatically obstructed.

As discussed, the displaced individual (the refugee, the migrant, or the nomad) is temporally displaced because s/he undergoes an experience of temporal shattering. However, displacement is also governed by the physical separation from the space of the home. The experience of the displaced individual can be observed in terms of their relationship to place, an issue directly addressed by McCarthy and Hunter. The man and the boy belong to *no place*, just as they belong to *no time* in the aftermath of the apocalypse. Likewise, Hunter's narrator negotiates the flooded country by constantly moving from place to place in search of safety.

As well as her discussion of temporality in displacement, Cathrine Brun has explored, alongside Anita Fábos, the significance of the concept of ‘home’ in relation to the figure of the refugee. Brun and Fábos make clear that “*Home* and *place* are complex and interrelated notions, to which the experience of “forced migration” adds an additional layer to the puzzle of belonging and identity” (2015: 6). Drawing on the thoughts of Hazel Easthope, Brun and Fábos explain:

A place encompasses physical, social, economic, and cultural realities: a home in this understanding is a particularly significant kind of place with which, and within which, we experience strong social and emotional attachments. (2015: 6)

McCarthy’s and Hunter’s protagonists embody the existence of forced migrants, removed from their homes following catastrophe. Because of this, *The Road* and *The End We Start From* are representations of identity and belonging during displaced situations. We read their narratives as a continual journey, from one place to the next, as their characters migrate toward a desired destination, even though they are unclear about what that destination is.

The novels compare to what Sara Ahmed refers to as “narrative[s] of leaving home”, a narrative that “produces too many homes and hence no Home” (1999: 330). Ahmed expounds that within such a “narrative journey”, the migrant is fashioned through their relationship with space but one that is “not-quite” the space of home (1999: 331). Furthermore, “In such a space, the subject has a destination, an itinerary, indeed a future, but in having such a destination, has not yet arrived” (Ahmed, 1999: 331). This can be said of the characters in *The Road* and *The End We Start From*, who are always in transit, always on the move.

While experiences of trauma and displacement are comparable when it comes to the impact that both can have on a person’s temporal perspective, the way in which they function differs somewhat in terms of how that individual exists in relation to space and place. In cases of trauma, space is often an enclosed, claustrophobic entity through which the identity of the traumatised individual is established, as Pramrod K. Nayer argues:

Most [trauma] narratives open with spaces of suffering – the home, the family, the asylum or the remand house, where space is described through an affective rhetoric of captivity. In the case of survivors of childhood sexual abuse, the individual finds herself trapped inside the ‘safety’ of the home and family. (2010: 7)

By contrast, the displaced individual experiences ‘place’ outside of the home, and their experiences are governed primarily by the feeling of homelessness. For those living under

displaced circumstances, identity is organised by mobility, by the continual movement from one place to the next. Paradoxically, the experience of an individual's displacement from home is psychologically bound to the idea and memory of home. Globalisation scholar Jennie Germann Molz makes clear that narratives of mobility continue to be orientated by the concept of home, securing identity to an impossible location. "Home", Germann Molz suggests, "is always an absent presence in narratives of travel and mobility" (2008: 326). In other words, even when removed from a place that might be considered by an individual to be home, 'home' for the displaced individual never truly disappears. The subjectivity of displacement is therefore sustained by the feeling of duality, between home and homelessness, concurrently. Those in displacement "find themselves living their daily lives at the increasingly complicated intersection between home and mobility" (Germann Molz, 2008: 326). Home for the displaced individual is effectively a location of spatial multiplicity, as the lives of the displaced are continuously structured by the process of being on the move.

Throughout McCarthy's novel, the man and the boy inhabit a number of spatial locations that function as temporary shelters, such as abandoned houses and farms. Just as the road offers the prospect of movement, these locations offer the prospect of safety, and perhaps even the return to some semblance of a normal life. At these various spaces, the man attempts to perform 'normality', as demonstrated in their arrival at a deserted house: "He sat by a gray window in the gray light in an abandoned house in the late afternoon and read old newspapers while the boy slept. The curious news. The quaint concerns" (*TR* 28). Later in the novel, the man and the boy find momentary salvation as they stumble across a bunker, presumably built and stocked prior to the apocalyptic event, containing enough food to last for months: "Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water" (*TR* 146). During this episode, McCarthy provides the reader with what is perhaps the most optimistic moment in the entire novel through an interaction between the man and the boy:

Come down. Come down and see.

He stood the lamp on the step and went up and took the boy by the hand. Come on, he said. It's all right.

What did you find?

I found everything. Everything. Wait till you see. He led him down the stairs and picked up the bottle and held the flame aloft. Can you see? He said. Can you see?

What is all this stuff, Papa?

It's food. Can you read it?

Pears. That says pears.

Yes. Yes it does. Oh yes it does. (TR 147)

On the verge of starvation and “ready to die” (TR 152), the bunker brings the man and the boy back from the brink of death, offering them a reminder of “the richness of a vanished world” (TR 147).

Many readings of the novel have commented on the meaning behind the man and the boy's journey in *The Road*, often reflecting on their travails as a philosophical search for truth in a largely barren landscape, with scholars such as Carol Juge referring to the novel as a “quest that leads them south, on a path from innocence and ignorance to experience and knowledge” (2009: 16). The man's declaration that they have found ‘everything’ is a clear articulation of such a quest. The end of this passage echoes the conclusive words uttered by Molly Bloom in her soliloquy at the end of Joyce's *Ulysses*: “yes I said yes I will Yes” (1968: 933). Joyce, as Henderson suggests, once referred to the word ‘yes’ as “the most positive word in the human language” (1989: 522), a note of optimism that brings his largely pessimistic novel to an end. The man's reiteration of the word ‘yes’ similarly confronts the pessimism of McCarthy's horrific environment. Nevertheless, his optimism does not last, nor is the man able to maintain his performance of what Linda Woodson refers to as ‘domestic ritual’. Woodson suggests that the man “makes attempts at domestic ritual [by] setting a table in the bunker” (2008: 92). During their time at the bunker, the man constructs a domestic space in an attempt to recreate a homely environment for the boy:

He dragged a footlocker across the floor between the bunks and covered it with a towel and set out the plates and cups and plastic utensils. He set out a bowl of biscuits covered with a handtowel and a plate of butter and a can of condensed milk. (TR 153)

In contrast to Molly Bloom's positive dénouement, however, *The Road* does not end here. Although the bunker offers them refuge, they know that they will not be able to stay forever, as the man contemplates: “Anyone could see the hatch lying in the yard and they would know

at once what it was” (TR 152). The bunker only amounts to a temporary sanctuary, and the man recognises that “He could not construct for the child’s pleasure the world he’d lost without constructing that loss as well” (TR 163). As they leave the bunker, the man looks back: “The faintly lit hatchway lay in the dark of the yard like a grave yawning at judgment day in some old apocalyptic painting” (TR 165). The function of the bunker in the novel is an emphatic demonstration on McCarthy’s part of the experience of spatial displacement. It serves as both a home *and* the impossibility of ‘home’, and a reminder to the man of their situation as migrants displaced from the normalised and domestic space of the home, as the man reflects: “Even now some part of him wished they’d never found this refuge. Some part of him always wished it to be over” (TR 163). The man recognises here that the homeliness of the bunker can only ever be a temporary solution to their homelessness, their occupancy of an on-going state of “limbo” between home and homelessness.¹⁰

This state of limbo that epitomises spatial displacement in *The Road* is likewise illustrated in the narrator’s experience in *The End We Start From*. In the early stages of Hunter’s novel, the narrator moves from place to place. Having been removed from her home, the narrator lives in the hospital while she gives birth to Z, before moving to the home of R’s parents. Following the loss of G and N, she lives in a refugee camp prior to her journey north. Through the narrator’s experience and reflections, Hunter encapsulates the displaced condition of the refugee, as demonstrated in the narrator’s following pronouncement:

So much of life these days is spent feeling that we are
on a ship. After the hospital ship, the in-law ship,
and the tiny cabin that has become our world. (TEWSF 14)

As with McCarthy’s novel, Hunter’s narrative is highly Biblical, and the metaphor of the ship is undoubtedly related to the Biblical myth of Noah’s Ark. As will be explained in section three of this chapter, Hunter calls upon many creation myths throughout her novel, reinforcing her thematic illustration of beginnings and endings. This brief passage, however, demonstrates the displaced status of the migrant, existing between spatial locations and belonging to a world in which the concept of home has become dramatically redefined. The image of life as being lived on a ship, or a series of ships, as opposed to a static and fixed

¹⁰ In ‘Making Homes in Limbo: A Conceptual Framework’, Brun and Fábos makes clear that limbo is a term used in ‘migrant policy literature’, citing UNHCR, “Protracted Refugee Situations: The Search for Practical Solutions,” in *The State of the World’s Refugees: Human Displacement in the New Millennium*, ed. Nada Merheb and Sean Loughna (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 106.

space such as that which might be considered to be a home, underpins the narrator's condition of forced displacement and her sense of loss of autonomy and control. Following the apocalyptic flooding, which is notably utilised in this portrayal of the narrator's psychological existence – the *feeling* of being on a ship – the narrator's status has been altered and her sense of autonomy removed. Otherwise put, she has become powerless to the novel's textual waves.

Homeless studies expert Cameron Parsell explains that “The idea of control is central to many conceptualisations of home. People feel at home when they have control, or can at least exercise a degree of control, over a space” (2012: 160). Parsell notes the relationship between home and autonomy, insinuating that it is the concept of home that grants an individual the sensation of power when it comes to the organisation of their daily lives:

Control over a space is important to people's understanding of what it means to be at home, because this control over a space also means the ability to take or exercise some control over one's life. People feel at home when they can exercise a degree of autonomy over their lives [...]. Home as control is perhaps best thought about as a physical place—a place required to realise a desired or expected way of living. (2012: 160)

In her expulsion from house and home, the narrator experiences a loss of autonomy. Her experience of life is now one in which ‘homeless-ness’ is her dominant condition, as she later affirms:

Home is another word that has lost itself. I try to make
it into something, to wrap its sounds around a shape.
All I get is the opening of my mouth and its closing,
the way my lips press together at the end. Home. (*TEWSF* 98)

The narrator's loss of autonomy is clearly on show in this passage through her linguistic failure. Her relationship with the concept of home has broken down, and language becomes increasingly weakened in Hunter's aftermath. The narrator's attempt to ‘wrap’ the sound of home ‘around a shape’ noticeably parallels her attempts throughout the novel to relay her experiences to the reader. The fragmented narrative structure and persistent moments of incompleteness and gaps reveal her inability to control the situation, or to put it into words.

Throughout the novel, her identity is shaped by what Roger Zetter and Camillo Boano refer to as the “homelessness and placelessness of displacement” (2009: 207). Hunter's portrayal of the narrator's life as the psychological experience of being on a ship is remarkably echoed

in the depiction of the man and the boy who live out their lives by travelling in a shopping cart. In *The Road*, McCarthy emphasises the homelessness of the man and the boy, who sleep under a tarpaulin and carry their essentials in knapsacks. “Mostly”, the man “worried about their shoes. That and food. Always food” (*TR* 16). It is the shopping cart, however, that crucially establishes their sense of homelessness, and their existence as post-apocalyptic wanderers, as Jay Ellis reflects in his analysis of the novel: “Whom do you see on the streets out there, pushing a shopping cart? The homeless.” (2008: 32). The shopping cart is the closest thing that the man and boy ever have to a home, as Woodson explains: “Like a home, the shopping cart holds their clothing, their blankets, their food and water, the binoculars, the maps, the boy’s toys, and, at least in the beginning, some books” (2008: 89). At the same time, however, the cart serves only to remind the man of the previous world that has been lost, the world of consumption and abundance, symbolising the “materialism and consumerism of contemporary society” (Woodson, 2008: 89). Woodson confirms that “the shopping cart is stripped of that referent” (2008: 89), and so while the cart does have a home-like function, it fails to provide the man and the boy with the psychological and emotional signature that a home can provide, functioning in the text only to reinforce the severity of their plight.

Hunter foregrounds the narrator’s displaced migrant status in a more explicit way than McCarthy does in his depiction of the man and the boy in *The Road*. For instance, during her journey, the narrator finds herself living in a refugee camp. Through Hunter’s portrayal of the narrator’s existence within this spatial location, the author portrays what Brun terms the condition of “protracted uncertainty” during displacement (2015: 33).

They [displaced persons] live with a status that is not supposed to last, often in dwellings that are temporary: they do not know how long they will stay, when they will move on, and what will happen when the causes of the displacement change. (*Active Waiting*, 2015: 33).

The refugee camp in Hunter’s novel is a spatial location that reinforces the narrator’s protracted state of uncertainty, and in which the ambiguity surrounding her future is well and truly conveyed. One of the central conditions that defines the experience of protracted uncertainty is, as Brun makes clear, the act of waiting. The displaced individual is forced into locations in which their most tangible form of existence is to wait, and this is notably presented in the narrator’s time at the camp. Describing the camp, the narrator explains:

[...] Shelter 26, with its camp beds and cot. Its blankets and smells of wet dog and grass. Three meals served, day after day after day.

[...]

There are rules and rotas and porridge daily: very Scottish. There is even a baby and toddler group, held in shelter 4 every Wednesday. I have not known the day of the week for ages, but here it is displayed outside the catering tent every morning.” (*TEWSF* 43/45)

The narrator’s description here represents the monotonous experience of life for migrants or refugees in displaced situations, and also the cramped living conditions in which they often find themselves. “One feature of everyday life” for the migrant, as Brun explains, “is the queuing” (2015: 30). For those placed into refugee camps or “collective centers”, space is scarce and in short supply, their lives fixed by the physical act of having to wait: “Thus, in their everyday time, people are waiting – waiting for water, waiting to use the bathroom” (Brun, 2015: 30). Waiting becomes, for the narrator, a pivotal marker of her condition in the novel: “We live on tinned food”, she explains, “and we wait” (*TEWSF* 23). Notably, Hunter portrays the narrator’s loss of time once more, her daily life structured by a strict temporal routine over which she has no control.

As made clear, Hunter’s narrator experiences a loss of autonomy and control during her displacement, and it is the space of the refugee camp, the space specifically created to ‘home’ migrants, that epitomises this feeling of loss. The space does not belong to the narrator, and so her power within that space is diminished. Her life at the refugee camp is one bound by the experience of protracted uncertainty as she has no control over time or space, or indeed over her own future.

The narrator’s loss of autonomy is powerfully conveyed following her journey northwards. At the checkpoint (presumably at the border between England and Scotland) the narrator is stripped and searched, a moment in which the speed of her narration is visibly affected:

They force us out of the car babies will make us safe doesn’t seem true they are rough with us and they search us they make us stake our clothes off. (*TEWSF* 64)

This short passage describes an extremely traumatising event that is experienced by the narrator, one that she is unable to divulge in anything other than a single word utterance. The narrator struggles to adequately cope with this moment, and as she makes clear, she wants to retell it as quickly as she can; to “Get it over with” (*TEWSF* 64). Her loss of control and her experience of temporality is evidenced in this textual moment. In this sense, the novel is expressly critical of the way in which refugees are dealt with and perceived in contemporary culture. Concerning the reality of forced migration, Natalie J. Grove and Anthony B. Zwi contend that refugees can often be ‘othered’ by authorities who take control of the movement of individuals across borders. They argue that through a “process of securitisation”, refugees are ‘painted’ as “invaders” and therefore are deserving of “extreme measures of containment” (2005: 1934). They add that in cases of forced migration, “The person or group being ‘othered’ experiences this as a process of marginalisation, disempowerment and social exclusion” (2005: 1933). The narrator’s status is visibly reduced at the checkpoint, the forced removal of her clothes a tangible image of disempowerment and dehumanisation.

The man in *The Road* and Hunter’s narrator are individuals who have been thrown into situations of forced displacement. Their experiences are tailored by temporal and spatial dispossession and their distorted perception of time and lack of connection to the physical space of home are central to their displaced conditions. Moreover, their separation from time and space has a dramatic impact on their respective notions of the future. During displacement, as will now be discussed, the future of both the man and the narrator becomes subject to an overwhelming condition of uncertainty.

Uncertainty During Displacement

Horst and Grabska make clear that although future uncertainty is “a fact of life in any situation”, for the displaced, uncertainty is particularly “heightened” (2015: 5). They contend that uncertainty is intensified due to the impact of the traumatic event or events that have led to displacement in the first place. For the displaced individual, life is influenced by “imperfect knowledge”, an inability to keep up with events as they unfold, and also by the complete loss of authority in making decisions concerning their own future:

Accounts of imperfect knowledge, confusing rumours, highly unpredictable events that unfold quickly, and a sense of lack of control over personal circumstances while faced with violence, death, and abrupt changes [...] are all common in the life histories of refugees and IDPs. (2015: 5)

Uncertainty can be understood as the governing factor of the refugee experience. In his discussion of migrancy and the concept of return, Michael Tannenbaum observes that movement during migration is primarily dictated by “an intense longing for contact with one’s previous world” (2007: 148). McCarthy and Hunter replicate this sensation of a longing for the past and the sheer indeterminacy surrounding the possibility of being able to return. Reflecting on real cases of migrants who are held in detention centres, Sarah Turnbull explains that “detention may last for significant lengths of time. Many detainees report being ‘stuck’, in ‘limbo’, as if detention was some sort of purgatory in which they were forced, against their will, to wait” (2015: 69).

McCarthy’s engagement with the uncertainty of being in limbo arrives in *The Road* through the opposing sentiments of optimism and pessimism. In his analysis of McCarthy’s novel, Alan Noble explains how readings of *The Road* have often been directed by two central tenets, namely, the man’s on-going journey between hope on the one hand, and outright ‘fatalism’ on the other:

Readers of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* face a challenging thematic and philosophical balancing act: if they acknowledge the novel’s weightiness, they must reckon with its stark, unrelenting fatalism and its profound and yet complex hope for a better future [...]. At the heart of McCarthy’s novel resides a paradox, irrationality, or at the very least a tremendous complexity. (2011: 93)

McCarthy establishes this balancing act with a relatively simplistic opposition: the battle between the ‘good guys’ and the ‘bad guys’. Throughout the novel, the man and the boy are constantly referred to as ‘the good guys’, who must avoid at all costs coming into contact with ‘the bad guys’, people who have turned to a life of cannibalism and inexorable acts of horror. However, beneath this simplicity lies a far more complicated issue. Throughout the novel, the man is caught between the two standpoints of optimism and pessimism, an existential fissure that relates to his displaced condition as a refugee. In order for the man to deliver the boy to a place of salvation, “appointed to do that by God” (*TR* 80), he must avoid succumbing to the fatalism that took the life of his wife.

His wife’s decision to take her own life might be construed as an act of abandonment and weakness. However, in the face of such overwhelming adversity, her suicide is entirely reasonable, as she explains in one of the man’s flashbacks:

I’m speaking the truth. Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll

rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us
and you won't face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen.
But I can't. (*TR* 58)

The mother's suicide is not only an acceptable decision, but also the only feasible option in what has become an utterly "meaningless" existence (*TR* 58), that will in all likelihood lead only to the brutal and horrific death of all three. Her decision is made all the more acceptable in the novel's present when the man and the boy witness the "charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit" (*TR* 212), a reminder to the man of what will happen to the boy should they be captured. During his conversation with his wife concerning her decision to commit suicide, as Noble makes clear, the man acknowledges the rationale behind her actions, that "There was no argument" (*TR* 60) through which he could challenge her logic (2011: 99). Noble argues that "McCarthy allows the wife to make the most rational and ethical argument, such that the man must concede the validity of her reasoning. It is unethical for him to keep his son alive under these conditions" (2011: 99).

Importantly, however, her suicide is an act that reveals her refusal to belong to an in-between state of existence, or limbo, whereby the uncertain movement between optimism and pessimism would always shape her journey. The wife declares: "We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film [...] As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all of my heart (*TR* 57/ 59). The wife chooses nothingness over uncertainty here. By contrast, in his decision to go on living, the man binds himself to the on-going journey of the migrant. The demanding and gruelling physicality of the man's journey is mirrored by his relentless oscillation between the contradictory modes of optimism and pessimism. His struggle is, in other words, determined by both an acknowledgment of the sheer fatalism that constitutes their existence and a hopeful longing for a better world in which the boy might live on. This tension is at the heart of the perpetual spirit of uncertainty on which McCarthy fashions his novel.

Alongside her portrayal of the narrator's physical experience of displacement, Hunter foregrounds the narrator's displaced perspective in the narrative itself, which continuously illustrates her condition of protracted uncertainty through moments of paradox. For example, during a flashback episode, the narrator recalls:

When R asked me to marry him we were at the centre
of the earth. The guide took us to a line on the ground.

He showed us how water ran down a funnel in one direction on one side of the line, and in the opposite direction on the other. (*TEWSF* 35)

The opposing directions of water flow in this image serve as a metaphor in the novel for the narrator's fluctuating state of existence as a refugee, repeated throughout the text through contradictory images that illuminate for the reader her displaced perspective, specifically in regards to her illusory visions of R: "As for me, I see R in a vessel on the ocean, and then I don't see" (*TEWSF* 85); "Carried by the waves, he is coming towards us. He is moving away" (*TEWSF* 91). Brun suggests that displacement "indicates a state of 'in-betweenness', a state of being attached to several places while simultaneously struggling to establish the right to a place" (2015: 21), and Hunter draws attention to the narrator's in-between state, caught-in-flux and 'at the centre' between two opposing movements.

Drawing on the thoughts of Angelika Bammer, Brun posits that "Displacement has been described as a 'split and double existence' – stretched across the multiple ruptures between 'here' and 'there'" (Bammer 1994: xii)" (2015: 21). Hunter structures the narrator's 'split' existence through contrasting and paradoxical images of movement. As the narrator reflects, "The years stretched forward or back, it isn't clear" (*TEWSF* 41), once again underscoring her sense of temporal displacement. This strategy continues to reflect the narrator's displaced perspective throughout the novel, as demonstrated on an occasion where the narrator observes her child breathing:

The gasping latch, and his breathing slows in the dark. The world inflates and deflates with him, a giant bellows.

Out: to the hills that surround our squared camp.
To the border. To whatever is left.

In: past the dampening tent. Past each bulked mound
around us, each collection of breath. (*TEWSF* 48)

This passage merges the characterisation of Z with the apocalyptic events of the novel, an important aspect of the text that will be discussed in further detail in due course. It is plain to see here how Hunter establishes a direct correlation between the experience of displacement – of duality and contradiction – with the apocalyptic structure of her novel.

The characters in McCarthy's and Hunter's texts exist in what might be thought of as a temporal and spatial location of purgatory, or limbo, a location from which they constantly strive to escape. Pine argues that migration can be understood as an experience of precarity, "through which people must then try to navigate their way in daily practice" (2014: 103). In this sense, the journey becomes one defined by the desire to transcend displacement in a precarious and uncertain landscape. The novel fluctuates between beginnings and endings, mirroring the narrator's experience of displacement. The narrator's oscillating perspective between contradictory poles epitomises the theme of uncertainty that delineates both the narrator's existence as a refugee and the condition of displacement in the contemporary world more broadly. Hunter utilises opposing images in order to portray the narrator as being stuck within an in-between state, a state in which her sense of progression is dramatically impeded. As a result, her future remains ambiguous and uncertain, relating to Horst and Grabska's suggestion that "the protracted uncertainty of being in between, both in a temporal and spatial sense, also comes with a fundamental lack of knowledge about one's situation and a profound sense of unpredictability about the future" (2015: 6). Unable to envisage how her future, or her son's will turn out, the narrator's identity is reduced to an inescapable, psychological state of wavering hesitancy.

Despite the severity of the man's situation in *The Road*, and the impact that displacement has had upon him, the protagonist confronts his displaced condition throughout his journey. For instance, the man takes on a hopeful characteristic or trait that can be identified by his struggle against the onerous conditions of McCarthy's environment. In the early pages of the novel, the man takes out a pair of binoculars and looks out over the torched and obliterated landscape:

He studied what he could see. The segments of road down there among the dead trees. Looking for anything of colour. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke. He lowered the glasses and pulled down the cotton mask from his face and wiped his nose on the back of his wrist and then glassed the country again. Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land. He knew only that the child was his warrant. (*TR* 3)

Through the binoculars, the man bears witness in this passage to the end of the world. The landscape is fractured, exemplified by the segmented road. This is not a scene that is returning to life but one that is petering out altogether. These are the last days of the world, and yet, the man's existence in this scene is not without purpose. The child is enough to grant

meaning to the man's displaced existence in a temporally collapsed world, and as the man later declares "the boy was all that stood between him and death" (*TR* 29).

Looking back to Alan Noble's discussion of *The Road*, the central tension that characterises McCarthy's novel is brought into being through McCarthy's nihilistic aftermath set against the father's capacity for what Noble refers to as 'absurd hopefulness' in the face of such anarchism (2011: 94). For Noble, the man's continued reluctance to give up is maintained by an absurd capacity for hope, which is subsequently portrayed through the man's on-going faith in God to deliver the boy to salvation:

Through his characters McCarthy gives us a vision of absurd faith, and in so doing suggests that regardless of how horrific our situation might be, we can act in faith and resist the siren call of nihilistic suicide or cannibalism; we can choose to have hope in a good God, in goodness itself, although such a hope is irrational by 'human calculation.' (2011: 108)

The man's absurdist logic, his capacity to defy the odds that are set heavily against their survival, delivers him to the end of the road. However, Noble does not go so far as to differentiate between what he means by hope and faith. Clearly, hope and faith are interconnected concepts, and portrayed throughout the novel as such, and the man's relationship with God is pivotal when it comes to the boy's survival. At the same time, in suggesting that the man's hopefulness is dependent on his trust and faith that God will deliver the boy to salvation Noble dismisses the man's agency and resilience in the face of uncertainty.

From an anthropological perspective, Kleist and Jansen make clear that in contemporary discussions of hopefulness, "The emphasis on resilience is rarely linked directly to hope" (2016: 384). They explain, however, that both resilience and hopefulness are invested in locating the potential for change during uncertainty. As such, it is worth considering resilience and hope as intertwined concepts (2016: 384). Viewing the character of McCarthy's protagonist in terms of his resistance to uncertainty sheds some light on the hopeful elements of McCarthy's bleak prose. *The Road* is often discussed as having a hopeful ending (in spite of its glaring horror and pessimism) specifically in terms of the boy's entry into a new family following the death of his father. However, the concept of hope as it is depicted in the novel tends to be taken for granted without much explanation given as to how it functions and what it can reveal when it comes to character interpretation. By focusing on McCarthy's novel in terms of its demarcation of hopeful resistance, it is possible to see that

the characterisation of the man in *The Road* is more complex than a reading of his faith in God might suggest.

Kleist and Jansen confirm that “resilience is more linked to enduring and perhaps even embracing situations of uncertainty, to a valuation of ‘individual responsibility, adaptability and preparedness’ (Joseph 2013, 40)” and they add that “resilience-orientated approaches [to hope] emphasize individual responsibility for realizing the good life (or just coping) in spite of challenges” (2016: 383). The man does not place the responsibility for the boy solely in the hands of God through faith, but rather takes action through hopeful resistance in the face of adversity. In this way, the man actively hopes against all odds, believing in the possibility that he, and not God, can transform the boy’s situation. The man in *The Road* is defiant even during situations in which salvation and redemption are mercilessly unlikely, and it is through this act of defiance that the novel envisions the possibility of social transformation. In the end, however, the man is unable to emancipate himself from McCarthy’s uncertain world, simply because he is unable to shed his previous world-view. He does not himself have the capacity for transformation.

The task of overcoming their displaced condition is not only gruelling but an overwhelming and largely hopeless experience. However, the man, through a strategy of hopeful survival, challenges the bleakness of their situation. For example, it is repeatedly stated throughout *The Road* that the man and the boy are ‘carrying the fire’:

He woke in the night and lay listening. He couldn’t remember where he was. The thought made him smile. Where are we he said.

What is it, Papa?

Nothing. We’re okay. Go to sleep.

We’re going to be okay, aren’t we Papa?

Yes. We are.

And nothing bad is going to happen to us.

That’s right.

Because we’re carrying the fire.

Yes. Because we’re carrying the fire. (TR 87)

The phrase ‘carrying the fire’ becomes for the man and the boy a way of controlling, or at least confronting, their displacement during uncertainty. In its repeated assertions, ‘carrying the fire’ comes to stand for an active sense of resistance to the horrific and uncertain conditions of McCarthy’s aftermath. Their continual use of this phrase has been discussed at

length by McCarthy scholars, most notably in relation to the novel's symbolic exemplification of "goodness in an otherwise illucid world" (Danta, 2012: 20). Others have explained the mythological connection between the man and the boy's carrying of the fire and the Greek figure of Prometheus, who "stole fire from Zeus and gave it to humanity" (Wielenberg, 2010: 4). Wielenberg explains that "As punishment for the theft, Prometheus is tied to a rock. Each day, a giant eagle eats his liver. But Prometheus does not die. Instead, his liver re-grows and is eaten again the following day" (2010: 4-5). Because Prometheus carried the fire to humanity", Wielenberg continues, "his days are filled with suffering. This is not unlike the situation of the man and the child" (2010: 4-5).

The image of the man and the boy carrying the fire is the principal way that McCarthy signifies the moral difference between the good guys and the bad guys in *The Road*. They are the good guys because they do not resort to cannibalism, as evidenced in the following conversation between the man and the boy:

We wouldn't ever eat anybody, would we?
No, Of course not.
Even if we were starving?
We're starving now.
You said we werent.
I said we werent dying. I didnt say we weren't starving.
But we wouldn't.
No. We wouldn't.
No matter what.
No. No matter what.
Because we're the good guys.
Yes.
And we're carrying the fire.
And we're carrying the fire. Yes. Okay. (TR 136)

Their choice not to submit to the act of eating other people, even in the midst of starvation, is a process by which McCarthy structures a distinct opposition between good and evil, as Hannah Stark clarifies: the act of not eating humans is "related to the ethical code that the man and the boy live by, according to which the biggest taboo – the thing that separates them from the 'bad guys' – is cannibalism" (2013: 75). The man and the boy live by a code of ethics from which they refuse to deviate. Carrying the fire and actively avoiding cannibalism is indicative of their resistance to their post-apocalyptic reality, a strategy that allows them to

remain on the same path without succumbing to what Paul Sutton refers to as “fatalistic disenchantment” (2015: 38).

In his discussion on the concept of hopefulness, Sutton explains how hope, in the context of ‘utopianism’, “is capable of transforming the disabling paralysis of despair and disenchantment into discontent which is a catalyst for individual and social change” (2015: 44). According to Zygmunt Bauman (2012), to whom Sutton refers, the concept of fate “is something we can do little about” (2015: 38). However, Sutton contends that fatalistic disenchantment can be countered through the process of utopian hope or the “utopian impulse” (2015: 45). Hope in the context of Sutton’s discussion is not simply the act of having faith that social transformation will occur, a form of hoping that might be considered to be merely the act of having “‘false hope’, an overconfident probability akin to wishful thinking and liable to lead to frustration, disappointment and despair” (Webb, 2007: 73). Instead, hope in Sutton’s terminology is an active engagement with present realities, and the continual process of teaching younger generations. Sutton defines this process as a “pedagogy of critical hope” (2015: 43). Drawing on the work of David Halpin, Sutton suggests that hopefulness and teaching are congruent practices:

Teaching entails working with what is present in learners in the hope that some change, some improvement in knowledge and understanding may be realised. Halpin (2013: 14) defines hope as ‘a way of living prospectively in and engaging purposefully with the past and the present’. (2015: 43)

“Being hopeful though”, Sutton confirms, “is not without its dangers (Halpin 2003). It entails critical reflection on current realities. This creates discontent with the present and the desire for change” (44). In order for the man to lead the boy to salvation in a fatalistic, disenchanted world, or at least to a better place than the one in which he currently resides, he must actively teach the boy how to live, based on his own understanding of the past and the present, hoping that the boy might realise in the future an ‘improvement in knowledge’ and be the catalyst for social change.

Carrying the fire, then, is not merely an act of blind faith that God will lead the boy to salvation, but instead, a life lesson, repeatedly told to the boy in anticipation that social change might arise through him at some stage in the future. It is a linguistic strategy of resistance that the man calls upon in order to combat the ‘disabling paralysis of despair’ that epitomises McCarthy’s aftermath. In a world where knowledge has crumbled, portrayed

through an image of scorched books “in the charred ruins of a library” (*TR* 199), the man is the boy’s only access to the past, and carrying fire becomes a symbol of knowledge and a focal point of survival through hopeful resistance during uncertainty.

As the man and the boy journey towards the coast, they do encounter other people; other strangers on the road. The way in which the man deals with these encounters is largely based on his understanding of the previous world, and his understanding of the world of the novel’s present. The man’s strategy for survival is to avoid coming into contact with other people at all costs, not only due to the belief that they might be ‘the bad guys’, but that they might in some way be of detriment to the boy’s chances of survival in general. The man’s world-view is structured by a complete lack of trust (or faith) in others, and he is unable to conceptualise any prospect of community. The first man that they encounter has been struck by lightning:

He was burntlooking as the country, his clothing
scorched and black. One of his eyes was burnt shut and his
hair was but a nitty wig of ash upon his blackened skull

[...]

The boy kept looking back. Papa? he whispered.

What is wrong with the man?

He has been struck by lightning. (*TR* 51)

While the boy desires to help and feed the man, asking “Cant we help him? Papa?” (*TR* 51), the man is unable to see the traveller as anything other than a threat to their own survival: “No. We cant help him. There’s nothing to be done for him [...]. We cant share what we have or we’ll die too” (*TR* 51/53). Elsewhere, they encounter a half-blind old man, starving and alone, who refers to himself as Ely, a character that “resembles the Old Testament prophet Elijah”, who “predicted a drought (1 Kings 17:1)” (Wielenberg, 2010: 2). Once again, the boy desires to help the weary traveller, and convinces the man to offer him food and a place by the fire, and once more, the man demonstrates his reluctance to help strangers: “You should thank him you know, the man said. I wouldnt have given you anything” (*TR* 184).

Likewise, towards the end of the novel, having arrived at the coast and set up a small camp, the man and the boy encounter a thief, who, while the man is exploring the contents of a shipwrecked boat, steals from the boy all of their possessions. The man desires revenge, and having caught up with the man and retrieved their belongings from him at gunpoint, forces him to strip naked. Other than his capacity to steal, the thief poses no other immediate threat

to the man and the boy. The thief begs for mercy and tells the boy's father: "I'm hungry, man. You'd have done the same" (*TR* 275). The man, unable to forgive the thief, leaves him on the road with no possessions or food: "I'm going to leave you the way you left us" (*TR* 276). Following this moment, the man and the boy argue about the man's actions:

What do you want to do?

Just help him, Papa. Just help him.

The man looked back up the road.

He was just hungry, Papa. He was going to die.

He's going to die anyway.

He's so scared Papa.

The man squatted and looked at him. I'm scared, he said. Do you understand? I'm scared. (*TR* 277)

During these encounters, the man reveals an absence of trust, and his fear of strangers is "under the circumstances", as Wielenberg suggests, "justified" (2010: 6). The man's strategy for survival comes in the form of avoidance, and an assumption that all strangers are in some way a threat to their existence, as Arielle Zibrak contends in her interpretation of the novel: "All other people are insistently looked upon as agents of death, when they might be seen as avenues for survival or cultural reunification" (2012: 108). An avoidance of others becomes the man's strategy of resistance, which he attempts to impart onto the boy throughout the novel. For instance, the boy at one stage sees another boy, "about his age" (*TR* 88), hiding in the backyard of a house in which they have taken refuge. The boy attempts to convince the man to look for the child, but once again, the man demonstrates his complete fear and distrust of others:

What are you doing? He hissed. What are you doing?

There's a little boy, Papa. There's a little boy.

There's no little boy. What are you doing?

Yes there is. I saw him.

I told you to stay put. Didn't I tell you? Now we've got to go. Come on. (*TR* 88-89)

The man attempts to pass on to the boy his own beliefs and fears regarding other people, believing this to be the only strategy for survival. He is unable to imagine the possibility that other people might in some way be of help to them, and as such, demonstrates his refusal to

tolerate their existence, so much so that he is unable to accept the existence of the child that his son notices.

The way in which the man responds to the various encounters that occur throughout the novel demonstrates his own world-view as being altogether different from that of the boy, and it is in the final throes of the text that the boy's world-view, and his capacity to bring about social transformation, is truly established. Following the man's death in the novel's final pages, it becomes clear that the man and the boy were not as isolated on the road as the man believed them to be:

He stayed three days and then he walked out to the road
and he looked down the road and he looked back the way
they had come. Someone was coming. He started to turn
and go back into the woods but he didn't. He just stood
in the road and he waited, the pistol in his hand. (TR 301)

In this moment, the boy rejects the world-view placed upon him by the man, and instead, decides to commit himself to an alternative way of seeing the world. The boy's decision not to turn and go back into the woods is a moment of epiphany through which McCarthy introduces the possibility of social change. The boy is confronted by the stranger, who may or may not be one of the bad guys, and who offers the boy the opportunity to join up with his family, who may or may not exist:

Look, he said. You got two choices
here. There was some discussion about whether to even
come after you at all. You can stay here with your Papa and
die or you can go with me. If you stay you need to keep out
of the road. I dont know how you made it this far. But you
should go with me. You'll be all right.
How do I know you're one of the good guys?
You dont. You'll have to take a shot. (TR 303)

Up to this point, the boy's journey has been informed by his father's world-view, the accumulation of his understanding of the world of before and his knowledge of the world as it currently is. The man's perspective and his lack of trust in others stem from the anxieties that epitomised the world of the pre-apocalypse. The man's fears represent the fear that drives the traumatological age in the contemporary world, and his strategy of resistance to the post-

apocalyptic aftermath, whilst tailored through hopefulness and the utopian belief in social transformation through the boy's survival, is never likely to bring about its arrival.

Conversely, having been brought up in the aftermath, free from the beliefs, anxieties and disorders of the previous world, the boy has the capacity to transcend his father's world-view, and his choice to go with the stranger, to 'take a shot', reveals the boy to be a vessel of future possibility. The boy's ultimate survival is never disclosed. It is implied that he does go on to live for some time following the death of the man, as we are granted a glimpse of his life with the new family. The boy's survival, however, is not important. Instead, the importance of the text lies in the boy's ability to embrace uncertainty, the unforeseeable nature of his displaced condition in McCarthy's aftermath. On his deathbed, the man concedes that social transformation was never going to be possible through him, but only ever through his son, as he says to the boy: "You're the best guy. You always were" (*TR* 298).

The narrator's experience of displacement in *The End We Start From*, as discussed, is presented primarily through Hunter's use of a fragmented narrative structure which consists of textual absences and the narrator's incomplete thoughts. The narrator's perception of reality is disordered and her ability to recall or narrate the events of the narrative is continuously disrupted. In spite of this, there is a definitive sequence of events that occur throughout the novel that reflect the narrator's refusal to allow herself to be overcome by the trauma of her displaced condition. Hunter maintains a cohesive, chronological narrative through the amalgamation of Z's developmental "milestones" (*TEWSF* 52) and "italicized interludes based on various creation myths" and religious texts (Jordan, *The Guardian* 2017). The narrator follows Z's journey and his progress from one milestone to the next, a sequence that allows her to maintain her grip on what is becoming an increasingly chaotic situation following the floods:

Z lifts his head, a heroic effort (32); Z develops a cold. His very first illness (38); Z has learnt to hold things (43); He flips off the bed and onto the floor, crushing his triumph under a wall of crying (52); the new white glint in his mouth, the waiting mound that has finally pushed through. A tooth (75); Then there are flowers poking up in the garden, and Z is crawling (82); Z's new passion, which he pursues as faithfully as anyone has ever pursued anything, is to put his arms on the chairs and pull his whole self to standing. (108)

Z's developmental progress throughout the novel mirrors the appearance of several mythological stories that effectively follow the earth along its path from beginning to end, and eventually, its rebirth. Initially, we are told of how the world came into being: "*At first there was only the sea, only the sky. From the sky came a rock, which dropped into the sea. A thick slime covered the rock, and from this slime grew words*" (TEWSF 2). As the novel progresses, an apocalyptic pattern begins to emerge through Hunter's use of creation myths.

We are told of an apocalyptic flood, when "*In the ancient times the ocean rose until it covered everything in sight. It covered the trees and the beasts and even the mountains, and ice drifted over their tops*" (TEWSF 17), a myth that itself echoes the apocalypse of Hunter's novel. Hunter continues to draw upon images of apocalyptic flooding and climatological cataclysm through her use of mythological segments:

In the first light of dawn, a black cloud grew from the sea. They saw the shape of the storm coming towards them, taking up the whole of the sky (20); The water rose and rose, and they could not recognise each other in the torrent, in the endless rain from above (23); A dove was sent to see if the water had left the face of the land, but she found no place for her foot (30); After six days and nights of fire, the sea returned to liquid, the earth lying silent beneath the water. (95)

These apocalyptic, mythological segments – presented alongside the progress made by Z throughout the text – give shape to Hunter's distorted and often incorporeal narrative. Z's milestones in particular serve as a navigational compass for the narrator, helping to alleviate to some extent her disconnection from reality, and anchor herself amidst the textual waves that are spiriting her along. Z provides the narrator with focus and structure in the structureless realm of displacement, preventing her from succumbing to the overwhelming nature of her displaced situation.

Essentially, just as the boy in *The Road* gives to the man meaning in the meaninglessness that is McCarthy's aftermath, so too does Z provide Hunter's narrator with order, stability, and a reason to carry on, as the narrator makes clear: "He has given me a purpose" (TEWSF 8). In the midst of the catastrophic floods, and yet, concomitantly, in the aftermath of Z's birth, the narrator expresses: "I feel that I could, all things considered, conquer the world" (TEWSF 8). The narrator's unlikely strength is found in her capacity for transformation, and in her refusal to accept her displaced condition and her uncertain existence. She is able to embrace her situation rather than allowing it to consume her, but going a step further than the man in *The Road*, is able to alter her perspective, or world-view. The narrator's journey does

not end once she reaches the coast. Rather, the narrator chooses to alter her direction and return south, thus resisting her displaced condition and therefore revealing that her identity is not unchanging and fixed, but dynamic and fluid. In this way, Hunter's narrator is able to challenge her displaced status, refusing to be ideologically restricted and bound to the uncertainty of displacement.¹¹ Hunter utilises the figure of the migrant to challenge the conception of displacement. The narrator defies her displaced status by moving against its current, and in so doing, reclaims her lost sense of agency and learns to live with uncertainty without being restricted by it.

Where the man in *The Road* is fearful of strangers, fearing all others to be a threat to the boy's survival, Hunter's narrator is entirely open to the concept of community. During her time at the refugee camp, the narrator becomes part of a community of mothers, who, like her, are raising their children in the catastrophic aftermath alone:

I go and sit with them. They are husbandless. They are the milk drippers, the exhausted ones, with hair streaked with grey and rips in the knees of their jeans.

Z bares his gums and waves a teaspoon around. This is the extremity of his social aptitude.

O, a woman with a large, kind-looking nose, is almost hit by the spoon. She doesn't mind.

How old is he? she asks, and this is how it begins. (*TEWSF* 49-50)

The significant aspect of her time at the camp, and the majority of her time during displacement more broadly, is predicated on the absence of her husband. All of the women, including herself, are separated and living as single mothers during displacement. Hunter represents the displaced figure as an isolated mother with the explicit intention of highlighting the reality of the experience of displacement.

Rita Manchanda, for instance, explains that the figure of displacement is typically the single mother: "The contemporary image of the forcibly displaced, the refugee and the internally

¹¹ Cathrine Brun suggests that those who enter into situations of displacement, such as refugees or migrants, tend to be categorised and fixed, and in turn, their sense of autonomy is reduced or even removed: "by understanding people as living in protracted refugee and displacement situations, we risk fixing them to particular locations, such as camps or collective centers: people are being reduced to the dehistoricized humanitarian category of refugees or IDPs. Regardless of how their lives change and the context in which they find themselves, people are represented and understood as living in limbo, passive in their longing for the past and consequently devoid of agency." (*Active Waiting*, 2015: 22)

displaced, fleeing life and livelihood-threatening situations, is a woman usually with small children clinging to her” (2004: 4179).¹² Manchanda contends that the way that those in authoritative positions such as the “International State System” (2004: 4179) perceive female refugees and migrants of forced displacement maintains the powerless status of women in displaced situations. As Manchanda continues: “The woman refugee/ IDP represents the epitome of the marginalisation and disenfranchisement of the dislocated”, and “Her identity and individuality are collapsed into the homogenous category of the ‘victim’ [...] devoid of agency, unable and incapable of representing herself” (2004: 4179). Hunter’s narrative, and the way in which the author structures the novel through fragmentation and detached paragraphs, exemplifies the narrator’s struggle against her assigned status as a refugee in displacement. However, as the novel develops, the narrator moves towards regaining her lost sense of agency, which in turn leads to the possibility for social transformation.

She becomes a symbol of displacement but one that challenges the way in which the single mother is used as a symbol of victimhood, lacking in agency. During her time at the refugee camp, for example, the narrator establishes an emotional attachment with one of the other single mothers, O: “I find O reassuring, with her hook nose, her round hips [...]. They are envied, those hips, and somehow hopeful: a sign of the past among us” (*TEWSF* 48). O becomes for the narrator a symbol of hopefulness, and a gateway through which she is able to reconceptualise her past life prior to the floods. It is not only her physical body, however, that draws the narrator to this character, but O’s capacity for resolve:

O has ideas too, not just hips, and she pours them into my ear when it gets dark.

This is what I sensed in her: plan-making, strategy. It makes her blood like syrup, slow with all the thoughts.

She is like R in this way. I lace my fingers in hers (*TEWSF* 59)

The transition from the narrator’s physical appearance to her contemplations of O’s independent and resolute disposition emphasises Hunter’s challenge to the image of displaced women as objects without agency. O represents Hunter’s conceptualisation of the autonomous nature of female identity during displacement, her behaviour stirring in the narrator her own capacity for resistance and the possibility for the reclamation of agency.

¹² Manchada, at the time of writing (2004), makes clear that women make up 80 percent of the forcibly displaced.

In opposition to the way in which the man in *The Road* commits himself to a strategy of alienation and avoidance when it comes to encountering strangers, Hunter's narrator embraces interaction:

We talk through it. We pass our stories like spare change.

O used to be an English teacher in Surrey. She was separated from her partner quickly, in the first few weeks. She has nearly always been a single mother.

I tell her about R, whose eyes have arrived in Z's head.

I tell her how we met, how quickly we fell into bed.

I find myself wanting to give her details. (*TEWSF* 61)

The mutuality of their respective situations establishes for the two mothers an experience of familiarity, resulting in the creation of social connection between them, which in turn leads to a loving relationship borne out of their uncertain and displaced conditions: "I can love O all I want, with her swinging-arm walks on the beach and our babies perched on her hips. One each" (*TEWSF* 76). The man in *The Road* is unable to trust the presence of strangers, while the narrator in Hunter's novel is able to form an affectionate and trustful bond with them, as she at one stage reflects: "O and I have started knowing each other's thoughts" (*TEWSF* 66). Her interaction with others during Hunter's crisis demonstrates not the dissolution of identity and community, but the revitalisation of agency and social connection. Her temporal and spatial disconnection from society through displacement becomes for the narrator a realm in which she is able to reformulate and rebuild her lost sense of self. In essence, displacement becomes a "space of interaction" and "a meeting ground for agency and structure" (Bisht, 2009: 304).

The relationship that the narrator establishes with O also extends to her interaction with several other characters in Hunter's novel, resulting in the creation of a micro-community of travellers. On her journey north, the narrator meets two young men, D and L, and whilst she experiences an initial feeling of mistrust and apprehension concerning these strangers, her capacity for social connection soon shines through:

We stop for the night at an empty house. We all sleep in one room without even thinking about it.

We do not want to explore, to look through the drawers
of someone who has fled.

We do not want to imagine the fleeing, or the reasons
why.

In twenty-four hours, I have started to love D and L.
They sleep deeply. (*TEWSF* 65)

The narrator finds comfort in the company of other people, contrasting heavily with the man in *The Road* who only ever views others as a threat. The image that Hunter constructs here, of a group of strangers all sleeping in the same room during a time of crisis, is a commanding scene that demonstrates a sentiment of hopefulness that opposes the homelessness of their situation. The narrator's connection to the physicality of the space of this empty house is entirely absent. Instead, the 'hominess' of this space comes from the social gathering itself, reflecting the narrator's shifting perspective when it comes to her own relationship with space. The narrator's journey becomes marked by her developmental understanding of community. In a flashback to the days when she was pregnant, the narrator recalls seeking out the comfort of others on the Internet:

After the eighth cycle of hope and weeping into R's
silent chest, I went online. I needed my people,
the other ones. I found them in forums with purple font
on a pink background. (*TEWSF* 53)

In Hunter's aftermath, the digital world of social interaction has become replaced by the physical presence of human connection, as the narrator reflects: "We felt fifty people shift around us, the reality of human smells we kept hidden for so long" (*TEWSF* 72). As her journey through the flooded world progresses, so too does her connection with strangers: "Soon I love F, the gentle drape of her sleeve from her arm, the way she leans across to spoon stew onto my plate. I love the long children too, with their breezy forgetting" (*TEWSF* 76). To this extent, the novel becomes a critique of our deteriorating relationship with the concept of community and social interaction in the contemporary world, which in part appears to form the basis of the man's world-view in *The Road*.

Hunter's removal of an online, digital environment allows the return of genuine human connections and the re-establishment of love, community and social contact, as portrayed in Hunter's symbolic depiction of a return to an old way of life: "There is no electricity, but

there is the old magic – wood and wick and spark, flames of all sizes” (*TEWSF* 79). Purpose and meaning for the narrator arises in her return to an essentialist and basic existence: “It is enough for us to be intact”, the narrator grasps, “To have all of our limbs. To be conscious. To still have milk in our breasts” (*TEWSF* 60). Even though the world of Hunter’s apocalypse has thrown the narrator into chaos and displacement, she is not without direction. In fact, with the previous world behind her, “The stars seem to mean something now. They are maps” (*TEWSF* 71). Ultimately, it is the narrator’s capacity for love and community that gives her the means to journey on, in spite of her uncertain existence as a displaced subject, and which subsequently allows for renewal to take place.

Having reached the north of the continent, the narrator, along with the rest of her companions, boards a ship and journeys to an island off the coast of Scotland. Once at the island, the group of migrants inhabit a building that is initially presented as a place of safety for the travelling party: “The house was built for this, for the highest sea and strongest winds the world can make. From its windows, all you can see is miles and miles of it. The shimmering green-grey-blue terror. Orange in the evening, then gone” (*TEWSF* 74). Here, they are no longer in danger from the catastrophic flooding: “It is safe, H repeats” (*TEWSF* 73). Nevertheless, while the island offers the prospect of salvation from the floods, it is conversely a place in which the refugees become isolated. The ‘green-grey-blue terror’ of the ocean that surrounds them keeps them in a position of stasis, cut off from the rest of the world, as the narrator makes clear: “We have arrived at the non-happening” (*TEWSF* 79). In essence, they have become invisible, a characteristic that defines the status placed upon migrants in situations of protracted displacement through governmental practices, as Hyndman and Giles suggest: “Refugees in long-term limbo are stuck within a shrinking humanitarian space, many without access to livelihoods, mobility and the protection of citizenship” (2011: 366). The island can be seen as a location that exists outside of time and space. “The beach”, as the narrator makes clear, “is the in-between place”, a “world between worlds” (*TEWSF* 96). This location typifies the space of the novel as a whole, a spatial and temporal realm of absence. At the same time, however, the island becomes a location from which renewal becomes possible, and through which the narrator is able to re-establish her lost sense of agency.

The apocalyptic journeys undertaken by both the man in *The Road* and the narrator in *The End We Start From* lead each character in the direction of the coast. The coast represents the end-point of “the quest narrative” that “pushes the story forward” (Horner & Zlosnik, 2014:

66). However, where this destination is for the man in *The Road* a marker of his own death, the coast in Hunter's novel becomes a place of renewal and resurrection. During her time on the island, the narrator one day decides to walk into the ocean:

I take my clothes off and walk into the sea. I
leave O with Z and C, with her eyes on my bare back.

I put my hand over my belly, on my breasts, light for
once, drifting in the water like anemones.

When I come out, I am tingling. The cold doesn't leave.
It has taken root. (TEWSF 81)

As the narrator steps into the water, she performs a kind of symbolic or spiritual death, similar to that experienced by the man in *The Road*. Unlike the man, the narrator comes out of the sea reborn and 'tingling'. In this instant, the narrator has reached the end of the road – the end of her apocalyptic journey, or quest – and come out the other side with a renewed understanding of her own existence.

Following this moment, the narrator's perspective is fundamentally altered, as she no longer feels restricted by her existence as a displaced subject. Instead, the narrator experiences a moment of epiphany that mirrors the boy's flash of inspiration at the end of *The Road*, whereby he entrusts his future to the stranger. "The idea came from nowhere" she declares. "For weeks it was not there, and then it was everywhere" (TEWSF 92). Rather than submitting to her condition as a displaced subject, the narrator's epiphany arrives in her refusal to be carried by the waves of forced displacement. She makes the decision to journey back, to move against the narrative of migration that has led her to this point: "I'll take the boat myself [...]. I see my hands on the rigging, letting the sails out into knots of wind like sheets. I can see it, and this means it is possible" (TEWSF 93-4). In this instant, the narrator assumes the figure of an autonomous entity, one who is able to imagine for herself and her son an alternative future from that which is governed by their displacement as refugees in crisis. Sociologist Claudia Tazreiter posits:

Emerging from crisis, the potential for renewal is envisioned as a form of revelation — a transition or transformation from one form to another. Emergence in this sense is a renewal — or a radical newness in imagining futures not from crisis but despite crisis politics. (2013: 130)

The narrator's perception and understanding of her own identity has evolved through revelation. Her new-found perspective grants her the capacity to imagine an alternative

existence and an alternate future from that which has been placed upon her through forced displacement. The narrator is able to live with the uncertainty of crisis that delineates her existence as a displaced subject, a process of transformation that is concurrently reflected in the novel's final sections, whereby she is reunited with R once more, and where the world is itself beginning to start over.

As the narrator moves back to London, to the place where the novel begins, she notices "that people are moving more slowly than before, as though the air means something to them again" (TEWSF 99), a moment of cultural rebirth mirrored in one of the final interludes: "*The earth will rise up from the deep one day, from the surface of the waves. Every land will be empty, and covered in morning dew*" (TEWSF 100). The world to which the narrator returns is far from optimistic. London has become something of a dystopian space, subject to fear and uncertainty: "the streets are not so much reclaimed as holding their breath" (TEWSF 105). The city is a "destroyed place" (TEWSF 104), and now a location of cultural precarity, of resettlement waiting lists (TEWSF 107), armed police with machine guns (TEWSF 108), and "after-plan" leaflets that warn survivors, "Do not hope too much" (TEWSF 124). Moreover, Hunter withholds the expected sense of a utopian ending through her portrayal of the narrator's reunion with R.

Throughout the novel, the narrator has been for the most part a passive observer of her own situation, waiting for a return to her previous life to become possible. She has also been waiting to be reunited with R, whose absence has been central to her experience of displacement. The narrative has been leading up to their reunion, with R existing as a constant presence in the text in spite of his disappearance. Prior to receiving news that R is alive, she reflects: "I surprise myself – even now, I still move to tell R, my head turning to the empty space" (TEWSF 109). As the novel draws to a close, the narrator witnesses in the media the glamorous reunions of families and loved ones coming back together: "Reunions came from television. From sparkling screens, edging backwards at the press of a button. Purple, maybe. Glittery, textured" (TEWSF 119). However, the reunion with her husband does not prove to be the moment of salvation or the sense of an ending that she anticipates. Instead, R is found in "Medical Shelter 73A" (TEWSF 118), suffering with extensive wounds, the origins of which are not revealed: "The difference between happy and not-happy is a jerk of his cheek, something like a twitch" (TEWSF 122). Later, there is evidence to suggest that R has suffered severe head injuries: "R is in our room, picking things up one by one and dropping them again" (TEWSF 126). The duality of R's expression, between 'happy and not-

happy' is indicative of Hunter's textual and thematic oscillation between paradoxical poles of representation that represent the narrator's existence as a displaced individual, characterising the continued sensibility of uncertainty of the novel's concluding pages.

Upon discovering her husband in hospital, it becomes clear to the narrator that her reunion with R will not bring the anxieties and travails that have structured her experiences throughout the novel to an end. The sense of crisis that has shaped her displacement is unlikely to dissipate with the reality of her husband's condition and the on-going realities of the socio-cultural landscape. Nevertheless, she has come to the realisation that her identity is no longer bound to her displaced situation or to her passive status as a female migrant. Rather, the narrator transcends this state of existence altogether, as clarified in the following passage:

R will be able to leave soon, the nurses tell me. The key is the afterplan, they keep saying.

I leap on that, but it seems that the afterplan is me.

I am what they have been waiting for. (*TEWSF* 121)

In this moment, Hunter's narrator no longer exists as a refugee devoid of agency, but as an autonomous figure who will bring her husband back from the brink of death. In essence, the narrator becomes her husband's saviour. She is no longer waiting for things to change, but becomes herself a catalyst for future possibility. Her declaration, that she 'is what they have been waiting for', is emblematic of her transformed identity.

Hope at the End?

Cormac McCarthy and Megan Hunter bring their novels to an end in largely opposing ways. In the case of McCarthy's text, the unknown narrator describes a scene of natural splendour from a past world:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand, polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming.

Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back.
Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they
lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (TR 307)

In this final passage, which is itself displaced from the rest of the narrative, McCarthy describes the elegiac bereavement of the natural world, lamenting “what is lost, what we may already be losing now” (Ellis, 2008: 35). In McCarthy’s world, it seems that the damage, in whatever form it might have arrived, has already been done. The ambiguity envisaged in this passage, notably culminating in the novel’s final word ‘mystery’, echoes the question mark that hangs over the reader’s interpretation of the boy’s future now that he has joined up with the family at the end of the text. It is unlikely, in the bleak and horrific landscape that is McCarthy’s world, that the boy will survive, and yet, McCarthy withholds from the reader a definitive conclusion regarding the aftermath of the boy’s encounter with the stranger. For Rune Graulund, “What remains amidst all this indecisiveness, however, is a strong core of hope and it is on this bedrock that McCarthy makes his final stand” (2010: 76). McCarthy leaves the fate of both his world and the fate of the boy entirely in the hands of the reader, but his final message is that “Wherever one decides to put one’s stake [...] *The Road* expresses a passionate hope that *hope itself* matters (Graulund, 2010: 76). But what is meant by hope in the context of McCarthy’s uncertain ending?

As discussed, through an illustration of the displaced experience of the refugee, McCarthy appears to point to the need for hopeful resistance to the concerns and anxieties of the present, and at the same time, an embrace of the unknown, of that which is always uncertain: the future. The novel, then, can be likened to what Paul W. Pruyser refers to as “the *eschatological* attitude and the essence of hoping”, whereby reality is taken as unfinished because it is in process, or as some believers would say, an activity of God who continues to create” (1986: 130). Pruyser suggests “there is novelty in the making. There are “things to come”. There is much for us to discover and there are always new experiences to be had” (1986: 130). In his final image, McCarthy provides his reader with a map, or a maze, not unlike the map that the man himself carries, “a twisted matrix of routes in red and black” (TR 90), a map of the world in its becoming.

Unlike McCarthy’s mournful representation of a lost world at the end of his novel, Hunter turns to an image of optimism and renewal at the last, doing so through Z’s final milestone:

He grapples around our knees for a few minutes, feels his way over to the idea of his parents.

Then, he lets go.

His body stands on its two points. He puts his hands up for balance.

He lifts a leg and – impossible, impossible – he takes a step. (*TEWSF* 127)

Hunter, as suggested, draws upon various creation myths throughout her novel, myths of apocalyptic flooding and earthly renewal, segments that coincide with Z's progressive moments of development. According to Penelope Farmer, cited by Hunter in her acknowledgements as the source for her mythological interludes, the creation myths of the Babylonian, Biblical and Greek traditions convey "that basic and clearly universal human longing [...] to get rid of an unsatisfying past and start all over again" (1978: 45). With this in mind, Hunter's representation of the refugee figure during displacement can be thought of as an imaginative and contemporary re-working of the mythological flood that has, as Farmer suggests, "surfaced from every corner of the world" traversing both history and culture (1978: 45). At the same time, Hunter has clearly shown in her novel that she is mindful of the dangers of allowing stories to influence the human journey. Throughout her travels, Hunter's protagonist must overcome the narrative of her own displacement, her assigned status as a displaced individual. She must reclaim her lost sense of agency and directly confront the apocalyptic nature of her uncertain existence, rather than allowing it to consume her just as the flood consumes Hunter's world. The narrator must swim against the current in order to deliver her son to salvation. Hunter utilises the figure of the refugee to influence an active sense of resistance to uncertainty in the contemporary world. In imagining the end of the world, Hunter creates a space from which we can ourselves imagine alternative ways of living in uncertainty without succumbing to it, and the novel's end is, perhaps, where we might start from.

Conclusion

While the apocalypse spells the end of the world, or the end of a specific way of life, or a certain way of thinking, as made clear in the introduction, it is also a critical process through which we can begin to tease apart the conditions of contemporary reality. This is not to say that the strength of apocalypse lies in its revelatory qualities or in its utopian promise of redemption. Narratives of the apocalypse provide us with a unique, temporal perspective, grant us the opportunity to reconsider our direction as a species, and ask us to contemplate how we might move forward in time. As such, authors of the apocalypse often portray the end of the world as a journey; as Tate suggests, the “future imagined by post-catastrophic narratives [...] is frequently defined by an enforced, continual motion” (2017: 83). The emphasis on movement in apocalyptic fiction works to instil within us the importance of considering *how* we might journey towards the future. In this way, apocalyptic fiction is also directed by hope and possibility.

The purpose of this thesis has been to provide an in-depth analysis of apocalyptic works that are informed by cultural anxieties in early twenty-first-century culture. The novels discussed here set out to represent cultural anxiety. However, and perhaps more importantly, they function as narratives of recovery, which work through our collective sense of uncertainty in times of crisis, doing so from speculative, post-catastrophic landscapes and settings. It has been argued that recent apocalyptic novels, evidenced in the assortment of texts discussed throughout this thesis, take on what has been referred to here as a post-traumatological perspective of imaginative retrospect. These novels look back to the present from retrospective locations in which our contemporary anxieties concerning the future have been realised. By imagining the world as if it has come to an end, or is coming to an end, they actively address the anxieties of the twenty-first century, and engage with them from locations of aftermath. Otherwise put, these texts signify a literary process of working through the apocalypse of the present.

The topic under consideration in chapter one was that of climate change, or climate change as an apocalyptic, environmental threat. Maggie Gee’s *The Flood* and Liz Jensen’s *The Rapture* are contemporary examples of climate-change fiction, otherwise known as cli-fi. It was suggested in this chapter that *The Flood* and *The Rapture* embody the opposing poles of what Amsler terms the ‘crisis narrative’. In accordance with Amsler’s definition, it was made

clear that while Jensen utilises a rhetoric of fear in her eco-thriller novel in order to convey the realities of climate change, Gee's *The Flood* represents fears relating to climate change through a narrative discourse of ambiguity. Jensen portrays the theme of climate change in the foreground of her novel, which contrasts sharply with Gee's representation of ecological degradation as an underlying anxiety. Throughout this chapter, it was argued that climate change is interconnected with a variety of economic and socio-political concerns, demonstrating that climate change, as a cultural anxiety, is a complex and multifaceted issue in the contemporary world. This chapter also explained how *The Rapture* and *The Flood* are novels that comment on our failure in Western society to engage with and respond to the proliferating impacts of climate change. *The Flood* and *The Rapture* reveal the importance of engagement with the crisis of climate change, and through an analysis of both novels, this chapter reflected upon the importance and strength of cli-fi as a literary approach that is able to comprehend and come to terms with the uncertainties of climate change as a global crisis.

Chapter two explored two contemporary novels that convey issues of gender in their apocalyptic landscapes. The environments presented by Edan Lepucki in *California* and Sarah Hall in *The Carhullan Army*, as made clear through a close-reading of both texts, are governed by hierarchical structures of gender. This chapter explored Hall's and Lepucki's use of the apocalyptic narrative space, which, it was suggested, is employed by both authors for the purpose of confronting the continued existence of gender disparity in twenty-first-century Western culture. An analysis of *California* revealed Lepucki's portrayal of inequalities of gender, illustrated in the journey of her main protagonist, Frida, who, throughout the narrative, comes to realise the reality of her subordinate state of existence as a woman in relation to men. Lepucki's novel presents gender as a social construct, and the notion that society is itself structured by divisions and performances of gender. Conversely, Hall's narrative illustrates a challenge to the structures of gender division. The journey of Hall's chief protagonist, Sister, as she moves through the space of liminality, signifies in the world of the text a challenge to the patriarchal system by which the society of Hall's apocalyptic society is structured. *California* and *The Carhullan Army* are contemporary examples of the feminist dystopia. They function as critiques of the present world, designed as it is through the on-going existence of gender disparity. Hall and Lepucki explore gender through the narrative frame of the apocalypse, exposing the need to comprehend the role that gender plays in the construction of contemporary society.

Chapter three discussed two examples of apocalyptic writing that, in contrast to the vast majority of apocalyptic fiction, look not to the future but to the past in their reflections on the anxieties of contemporary culture. Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* draw heavily on the medieval period, and depict post-catastrophic societies in the aftermath of an event that has completely transformed their respective, textual worlds. In *The Pesthouse*, Crace complicates the temporality of the apocalypse by setting his post-apocalyptic novel in 'Craceland', the author's otherworldly universe. Although Ishiguro's novel is not explicitly an apocalyptic text, it is a novel centred on the existence of a post-apocalyptic society. *The Buried Giant* conveys a post-traumatic nation that suffers from collective amnesia, and is therefore entirely detached from its own history. The focal point of this chapter concerned Crace's and Ishiguro's representation of the utopian impulse, which structures the journey trope of both texts. The utopian impulse, the desire to progress from a dystopian reality to a utopian state of existence is ultimately withheld in both *The Pesthouse* and *The Buried Giant*. In this way, they are novels that expose the illusory nature of utopian thinking.

The final chapter explored the figure of the refugee, as presented by Cormac McCarthy in *The Road* and Megan Hunter in *The End We Start From*. This chapter reflected upon the experiences of the characters in both texts, who become displaced from both time and space in the aftermath of a catastrophic moment. In *The Road*, McCarthy's primary protagonists, named only as 'the man' and 'the boy', move from place to place as homeless figures in search of food and shelter. Hunter's *The End We Start From* follows the journey of an unnamed mother, who, having recently given birth, becomes displaced from house and home as a result of calamitous flooding. As with the man and the boy in *The Road*, Hunter's narrator must continuously move from one place to another. These apocalyptic narratives display the experiences of the displaced subject, be that the nomad, the refugee or the migrant. They illustrate the condition of living in times of complete uncertainty and at the same time are survival narratives. McCarthy and Hunter, respectively, fashion narratives that reveal the ways in which the uncertainty of displacement might be contested through strategies of survival.

The twenty-first-century world, as the proliferation of apocalyptic fiction in recent years indicates, is governed by continuous fears concerning the future, not only the future of humanity, but also of the planet on which we reside. Anxiety, it seems, is the sign of our times, and the apocalyptic novel is the narrative through which the story of contemporaneity

is currently being told. This thesis has explored a selection of texts that draw on the uncertain times in which we live in order to work through them, and they do so by imagining that an apocalyptic disaster has already occurred. This thesis can be understood as an introductory approach to the study of the post-traumatological narrative, from which an assessment of the wider literary movement of working through the anxieties of the twenty-first century can now be undertaken.

This thesis has been an investigation into the workings of contemporary culture as much as it has been an analysis of the contemporary apocalyptic novel. Although this discussion has focused specifically on the subject of the apocalypse, it has also been an analysis of contemporary Western society, therefore revealing the importance of genre fiction as a vessel through which questions surrounding the very concept of contemporaneity can be raised, and perhaps, answered. We might then think of the apocalyptic novel, as well as genre fiction in general, as a politically focused narrative discourse that provides a sociological analysis of the contemporary world. With this in mind, further research concerning the study of genre fiction seems not only valuable, but necessary. At the start of this discussion, a number of texts from other areas of genre fiction were introduced as examples that set out to pose critical interpretations of the present. Areas such as posthumanism, the rise of the twenty-first-century zombie narrative, and the popular genre of Young Adult Fiction are topics that have had to be excluded from this thesis. However, these areas, it can be argued, are themselves narratives defined by post-traumatological perspectives, that look back to the present from locations of retrospect.

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