Stratified Nature in Women's Writing

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Past, Present, and Future

Edited by

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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INTRODUCTION

MARIE HENDRY

The many ways humans viscerally interact with the planet's ecosystem can be seen throughout the study of literature. Within literary history is often the discourse between human and nature; however, literature by people who identify as women offers a unique perspective on the ways humans interact with their environment. As Selma Lagerloff, the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, describes in her first novel, *Gösta Berling's Saga* (1891):

> If the things of the world can love, if earth and water can distinguish between friends and enemies, then I would gladly win their love. I would wish that the earth did not feel my steps to be a heavy burden, and that it forgave that for me it was hurt by plough and harrow, and that it would willingly open its arms to receive me when I die. I would wish that the water, whose shining mirror I break with my oar, had the same patience with me as a mother with an eager child who clambers on her knees without a thought to the silk dress donned for the great occasion. I would be friends with the clear air that trembles over the blue mountains, and with the shining, glittering sun and the beautiful stars, for it often seems to me that dead things feel and suffer with the living—the gulf between us is not so wide as we imagine. What portion of the world is there that has not taken part in life's circle?[1]

As Lagerloff shows, nature and the person are interwoven, as this collection connects the nature and expressions of the self.

Stratified Nature: Rethinking Women's Writing in the Anthropocene is a diverse collection that showcases women's writing from around the globe from different time periods. The collection illustrates the many ways the Anthropocene can be approached while studying women's nature writing. Each essay reflects a different approach to the works and develops a larger concept of the Anthropocene through critical interpretation. In compiling the essays, the major focus was the Anthropocene as a whole, as is seen in

[1] Lagerlöf, Selma. *Gösta Berling's Saga.* Edited by Greta Anderson, Iowa City, Iowa. Penfield Press, 1997, 269.

the first chapters by Jim Coby and Teresa Fitzpatrick. Their discussions on the Anthropocene, and the works they focus on, help drive the rest of the collection's ethos where critical interpretations of international pieces and the Anthropocene help develop the concepts in the text. These interpretations range from discussions on Willa Cather's works by Arush Pande and Laura Holder in their respective chapters, to more modern works such as Wendy Whelan-Stewart's approach to breastfeeding in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015) and Hatice Bay's discussion of Imbolo Mbue's 2021 work *How Beautiful We Were*.

Each of the following chapters approaches women's nature writing and the Anthropocene in unique and challenging ways, showing the importance of studying how women-identifying literature approaches the ever-changing concept of the Anthropocene.

CHAPTER ONE

LIFE AFTER DEATH IN LYDIA MILLET'S *A CHILDREN'S BIBLE*

JIM COBY

In his provocative 2016 study *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh lamented that he found a relative dearth of fiction addressing climate change when compared to fiction exploring other issues of our time. He writes, "That climate change casts a much smaller shadow with the landscape of literary fiction than it does even in the public arena is not hard to establish."[1] A persuasive starting point, but Ghosh quickly slips into the trappings of championing one genre over another by offering "the mere mention of the subject [of climate change] is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction."[2] Although Ghosh exhausts few resources exploring whether or not he personally believes science fiction a capable vehicle for carrying conversations about climate change, he clearly suggests that the general public and academic readership of such texts relegate science fiction works to a lower rung of fiction, one that need not be taken seriously nor even encountered. Ignoring issues with generic demarcations, what we can intuit from Ghosh's complaint is that more authors need to take seriously, even direly, the increasingly uneasy climate landscape which scientists expect us to encounter. Encouragingly, in the few years since Ghosh published his inchoate argument, a wellspring of popular, literary fiction addressing the topics of climate change and the Anthropocene has emerged. Indeed, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, an assistant professor of social sciences, recently explained to *The Grist*, "I think we're close to the point where

[1] Ghosh, Amitav, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, (U of Chicago P, 2016), 7
[2] Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, 7

literature that doesn't include climate change, in some way, shape, or form, just isn't reflecting the reality that we inhabit."[3]

But addressing climate change in fiction can be exceptionally challenging. Aside from the concerns that Ghosh raises, the temporality of the subject also presents thorny problems. Climate change rarely provides moments of immediacy. Undoubtedly, we can point to hurricanes of unprecedented strength making landfall far earlier or later than the traditional season; we can observe blizzards affecting even the deepest portions of the American Deep South; we see (and breathe) the now ubiquitous summer wildfires ravaging throughout California, Washington, and Oregon, and whose attendant smoke affects air quality across the continent. But moments like this pale in comparison to the long term, more minute changes that will be experienced only tangentially by those living today but will instead be the inheritance for the generations following our own. The question, then, of how to grapple with a subject as immense and perilous as climate change is one that has plagued scholars in recent years. "What," wonders Adam Trexler, "tropes are necessary to comprehend climate change or to articulate the possible futures faced by humanity? How can a global process, spanning millennia, be made comprehensible to human imagination, with its limited sense of place and time?"[4] As if speaking directly to the complexities inherent to Trexler's inquiries, recent scholarship suggests that not only do we need to wrestle with ideas or narrative, but we perhaps need to reevaluate the very language we use to understand climate change. For example, Timothy Morton seeks to make comprehensible the vast temporalities at the heart of Trexler's second question in his scholarship addressing *hyperobjects*. In *Being Ecological*, Morton defines the concept of a hyperobject as any "entity that is massively distributed in space and time in such a way that you obviously can only access small slices of it *at a time*, and in such a way that obviously transcends merely human access modes and scales" (italics in original).[5] If we're in fact dealing with one of the most remarkable, capacious, affecting, and overwhelming subjects that humankind (or any other *kind* for that matter) has ever confronted, then it makes sense we should engage with equally capacious, overwhelming, and influential texts as a means of helping us to make sense of what existence may feasibly look like in the near and far future. As Morton rightly notes,

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[3] Yoder, Kate, "With the world on fire, climate fiction no longer looks like fantasy," *The Grist*, (20 Oct. 2020), https://grist.org/climate/with-the-world-on-fire-climate-fiction-no-longer-looks-like-fantasy/.

[4] Trexler, Adam, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, (U of Virginia P, 2015), 5

[5] Morton, Timothy, *Being Ecological*, (Pelican, 2018), 125

however, such visions prove elusive, in that we tend to only be able to visualize small parts of the greater whole, and so visualizing the sweeping scope of climate change through fiction becomes a Herculean, but necessary endeavor. Enter Lydia Millet.

In the tumultuous spring of 2020, Lydia Millet, a writer and longtime employee at the Center for Biological Diversity, published her novel, *A Children's Bible* to near unanimous acclaim, with reviewers, such as Ron Charles of *The Washington Post*, championing the work as a "blistering classic," a phrase that, as we shall see shortly, evokes Millet's deep entanglements with antiquity, the contemporary, and futurity. The novel initially concerns a reunion between several middle-aged friends in a rented coastal house in some imagined New England coastal community and its attendant debaucherous, drunken consequences. These escapades all occur under the watchful and sardonic eyes of their disgusted teenage children. Things devolve quickly, however, as a hurricane of unheralded proportions devastates the home and its surrounding environs. In the midst of these environmental collapses, the children emerge as the more capable, caring, and resilient in dealing with the myriad calamities, both environmental and manmade, that descend upon the families. And so, what begins as a satire of fifty-somethings desperately attempting to recapture their youth mutates into "an indictment of a generation's failure to deal with climate change" ("Talking About").[6]

Speaking on the *New York Times' Book Review* Podcast, critic Emily Aiken notes that alongside its more blatant environmental arguments, the novel is "populated with allusions to the Bible [...] cleverly interpolated into the plot." ("Talking About").[7] Once readers begin to notice Millet's patterns and allusions, the novel opens itself to countless re-readings, with each exposing new and ever more complicated references to stories from the Old and New Testaments. Throughout the novel, readers witness a Moses figure floating on a life raft, a bush with flowers so bright they almost look aflame, and three wise hikers who emerge from the Appalachian Trail just in time to witness a birth in a barn, among countless others. While Emily Aiken explores a few of these allusions, she offers no entry point for the allusions' meaning, coyly suggesting, "I'll leave it up to you, Millet's readers, to decide what she's up to here, but she's not a religious writer or an irreligious

[6] "Talking About the 10 Best Books of 2020," *The Book Review* (The New York Times, 27 Nov. 2020), https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/27/books/review/podcast-10-best-books-2020.html.

[7] "Talking About the 10 Best Books of 2020"

writer."[8] And such is the aim of this paper - to figure out what Millet is "up to," and to explore the allusions - Biblical and otherwise - present in Millet's novel to better grasp how antiquity, the present, and speculative futures combine a compelling and heart-wrenching exploration of familial relations and the inevitability of climate catastrophe.

Over the course of this novel, Millet explores various modes of storytelling and addressing climate change as a way of confronting the overwhelming and, in many ways, the incomprehensibility of such a gargantuan temporality as that in which climate change resides. One of the ways Millet approaches this subject is by having her younger characters critique, often viciously, the in/actions of their parents and other older people that surround them. The novel's narrator, Evie, reveals early on that the children have made a game of distancing themselves from their elders. "Hiding our parentage was a leisurely pursuit," she remarks, "but one we took seriously."[9] Throughout the novel, younger characters perform every action within their power to obfuscate their relationships to the parents, and even develop an awards system to commend those who most successfully hide their lineage, a game that initially reeks of ageism and teenage angst. Evie's comments about parents' dancing as a "sad spectacle" in which "they flopped, blasting their old time music"[10] do little to elicit sympathy toward the children, and, indeed, instinctively garner some degree of pity toward the parents. But Evie's comments are no simple malice; they do not reflect a reactionary and shallow distaste for the adults merely because they are adults. Instead, Evie and her cadre's response to their parents' actions emerge from the younger people's awareness of the imminent dangers of climate change and their parents' unwillingness or ineptitude to attempt to resolve any sort of issue, to do *anything* beyond maintaining a stagnant and obstinate "attitude: business as usual."[11]

An early scene at a nightly dinner, the only event where the older people require that their progeny join them, sharply reveals Evie's, and by extension her peers', attitudes toward the parents' treatments of climate crisis. Millet writes, the parents "sat us down and talked about nothing. They aimed their conversation like a dull gray beam. It hit us and lulled us into a stupor. What they said was so boring it filled us with frustration, and after more minutes, rage."[12] Millet here astutely comments on the narcotic quality of the parents' speech. The conversations, with all of their inanity and

[8] "Talking About the 10 Best Books of 2020"
[9] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, (Norton, 2020), 5.
[10] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 5.
[11] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 28.
[12] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 4.

pointlessness, engender first a type of soporific or numbing quality; the children, like their parents, find respite in conversations that avoid contentious or incendiary issues. In essence, the parents embody a pernicious and fatal mindset that plagues much of the global population. As Michael A. Smyer writes in *Scientific American*, "We're not in climate change denial; we are in avoidance."[13] Much like the alcohol that dulls the parents' sense of impropriety, refusal to engage in difficult discussions allows the parents to not only believe themselves upstanding global citizens, but also to abscond any sort of individual responsibility. As Evie will later reveal, "The parents insisted on denial as a tactic. Not a science denial exactly - they were liberals. It was more denial of reality."[14] Maintaining the status-quo becomes the modus operandi for the parents, and the bane of existence for the children. Evie's language quickly changes, however, and the anaesthetic banality of the parents' conversation gives rise to a type of righteous fury. The aforementioned rage spills over into Evie furiously questioning, "Didn't they know there were urgent subjects? Questions that needed to be asked?"[15] Evie and her compatriots willingness and desire to engage with more pressing matters leads to a steadfast avoidance from the parents. "If one of us said something serious, they dismissed it," Millet writes.[16] So while parents' corporealities undoubtedly upset the taut, svelte young people, it is more their parents' willful avoidance of seismic, global problems, and their concomitant poverty of imagination in theorizing and proposing solutions to those problems, that so upsets their children. This conflict is further exacerbated by the young people's awareness that they will be the ones to receive the first brunt of the climate crisis, not their parents.

Shortly after the group of young people decide to abandon the summer home in favor of finding a beachfront camping spot for the evening, Evie contemplates that she will be the one responsible for revealing to Jack, her younger brother, that their lives will be appreciably more difficult due to climate change. She explains, "We knew who was responsible, of course: it had been a done deal before we were born."[17] In this comment, Evie reveals an awareness of the reality she will be forced to confront, as well as the temporality of the problem. If, as Morton and Ghosh complained, climate

[13] Smyer, Michael A., "How Can We Avoid Climate Avoidance?" *Scientific American*, (7 Sept. 2018), https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/how-can-we-avoid-climate-avoidance/.
[14] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 28.
[15] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 4.
[16] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 4.
[17] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 27.

change becomes difficult to conceptualize because of the sheer scale of the problem, then Millet attempts to ameliorate the issue by having a young character cognizant of the scope of climate change, as well as her transitional position within it - that she will face some of the detriment, but not necessarily the worst of it. In short, Evie is able and willing to conceptualize difficult truths and scenarios that the adults of the novel consciously avoid. And it is this failure of the imaginative capacity that Millet takes aim at throughout the rest of her novel. By consciously stylizing her text in a way that homages other genres and texts, she proposes new ways of understanding our current climate crises, and ways of employing texts of the past to understand the climate of the future. One of the pressing concerns in Millet's text is what sort of ecologies await future generations. Morose on its surface, the concern actually proves quite life-affirming. As Samuel Scheffler proposes, "Although we know that humanity won't exist forever, most of us take it for granted that the human race will survive, at least for a while, after we ourselves are gone."[18] This assumption, Scheffler believes, provides us with a sense of stability and a degree of comfort when considering our own inevitable deaths, because "However self-interested or narcissistic we may be, our capacity to find purpose and value in our lives depends on what we expect to happen to others after our deaths."[19] Which is to say, knowing that we leave behind residues of our existences, ideally through art and the lessons which can be drawn from that art, provides an implicit sense of relief against the tides of horror awaiting one confronting death.

Millet's novel begins auspiciously enough, with the whimsical line "Once we lived in a summer country."[20] That the narrative takes place in a "summer country" strikes readers as endearing and perhaps engenders nostalgia for those never-ending August (and august) days of youth. Millet, however, promptly and deftly undermines any sort of comfort that might be drawn from the locale or time frame. That the fecundity and plenty suggested by the summer accompany the past tense of "lived" highlights nothing so much as the innate bygoneness of the world Millet images and the inability to return to such a place. Furthermore, beginning her sentence and story with the single word "once" evokes the notion that what we will be encountering mirrors the "once upon a time" world of fairy tales. Which

[18] Scheffler, Samuel, "The Importance of the Afterlife. Seriously," *Modern Ethics in 77 Arguments: A Stone Reader*, edited by Peter Catapano and Simon Critchley, (Liveright, 2017), 415.
[19] Scheffler, Samuel, "The Importance of the Afterlife. Seriously," *Modern Ethics in 77 Arguments: A Stone Reader*, 417
[20] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 1.

is to say, what initially reads as a lighthearted romp through the pastoral mode is revealed to be a lie. The falsity of the premise, much like the idea that climate change can be reversed with only minor changes to our consumerist lifestyles, signals a type of make-believe and delusional understanding of the world that, seemingly, best suits children. The children populating Millet's novel, however, are anything but naive. Indeed, their understanding of their Anthropogenic existence is far more complex than that of the adults in the novel.

These early indications of Millet's and her characters' environmental consciousnesses and their imaginative renderings and understandings of the world they inhabit provides readers with an essential starting point for understanding this work. Beyond its acknowledgement of the text and its setting as inherently a work of artifice, it as well signals the types of fairy tales, mythologies, and oral traditions which lay the bricks of the novel's foundation. Which is to say, Millet very knowingly positions her novel as a modern retelling of tropes from earlier environmental texts as a means of at once addressing environmental concerns that are immediate and new, while appreciating that threat and fear undergird the motivation for countless texts of moral instruction and suasion. A second example of this engagement occurs more obliquely, but nonetheless significantly when her young characters meet a group of wealthy teens camping on the same beach. Irritated by their parents' escapades, the children sail out to a local sandbar to camp for a few days when Evie notices "unwelcome colonists … beached upon our shores."[21] The group witnesses as several teens, walking "billdboard[s] for Abercrombie and Fitch,"[22] invade their privacy leaving their "situation rankled."[23] Evie notices too that their seemingly bucolic scene becomes marred by the falsities represented by the teens: "a majestic yacht in cream and gold"[24] brings them to shore, as opposed to the more retrograde canoes used by Evie's group, and "even their marshmallow sticks were manufactured - we saw them holding metal skewers over a fire."[25] Given Evie and her cohort's environmental awareness and concern, she begins to wonder if the teens somehow remain oblivious to their impending struggle, but this concern becomes moot when Evie hears the teens discuss the various compounds and fallout shelters their parents have secured for the upcoming climate crisis. In short, Evie acknowledges "the parents were

[21] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 24.
[22] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 26.
[23] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 25.
[24] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 23.
[25] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 26.

their insurance policy."[26] Through this scene, Millet critiques the false notion that money will help secure a future free from the effects of climate change. The wealthy teens, essentially more economically nimble versions of the novel's heroes, represent the mindset that money wealth will insulate them from the fallout which will leave so much of the human world destitute and bordering on extinction. But finances, of course, are insufficient for securing a livable future devoid of chaos and strife in a time of ecological devastation; no carbon tax will mitigate the damage already set in motion. And as Timothy Morton reminds us in *The Ecological Thought*, "Ecology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is always coexistence. No man is an island."[27] What the rich teens and their parents fail to realize is their concatenation with every entity - living and non-living - that they encounter and how those entanglements affect both them and others. Millet positions the yachters as foils to the young group's more nuanced version of ecological awareness, but in the scene that follows the two groups' encounter, Millet challenges us to confront the way we dismiss and reject those with whom fundamentally disagree on environmental principles.

After returning from the camping expedition, Evie encounters one of her friends, David, "who'd been notably absent" from the excitement of the afternoon, "sitting on the floor in the corner. With a bottle beside him."[28] Evie chides David for drinking after having consumed so much alcohol at the yacht the previous evening, only to learn that David "stayed sober. Thought [he'd] have to monkey-wrench."[29] Millet here introduces yet another entanglement with an earlier form of environmental protection and activism, another means of grappling with ecological instability: that of eco-terrorism. Laurence Buell explains that "'ecoterrorism' and its cognates form a cluster of related neologisms … coined it would seem almost simultaneously from the right - in order to stigmatize radical activists."[30] Although the label itself reeks of politicization and attempts to categorize activists involved in "carefully targeted sabotage"[31] as reckless and overly violent, the neologism has stuck and has been used to classify the actions of characters in numerous pieces of environmental literature, most significantly in Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. While there are certainly still instances of eco-sabotage, the terms, ideas, and actions behind them have largely fallen to the wayside following their cultural apex in the 1990s.

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[26] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 32.
[27] Morton, Timothy, *Being Ecological*, (Pelican, 2018), 4.
[28] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 55.
[29] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 55.
[30] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 156.
[31] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 157.

As such, to participate in eco-sabotage is to engage with a form of environmental activism that is somewhat antiquated. And for the young character, David, who installs a virus on the yacht's navigation system, the employment of this method proves morally destructive. "Those yacht parents are the worst," David admonishes, "*Those* are the people who ate the planet."[32] Ultimately, David regrets his actions and participation in an ostensibly ecoterorristic plot. Like many of the critics of eco-sabotage and ecoterrorism, David himself in his engagement with "anti-humanistic paradigms of environmental value,"[33] namely that the planet would operate more healthily in the absence of the wealthy yacht-sailing sea-farers. Indeed, of his potential actions, he explains, "I was thinking of a puncture in the fuel tank first. But you know. Gas in the ocean, killing fish. I didn't want to sink to their level. So, I just coded a little virus into the nav system." [34] Ostensibly, David's actions prevent any significant environmental damage because his targeted system doesn't directly engage with natural environs. But David miscalculates. He neglects Barry Commoner's first law of ecology: "everything is related to everything else,"[35] and that serving as the catalyst for the yachters' deaths, while potentially providing a brief moment of schadenfreude, would finally prove to be a pyrrhic victory, in that at only at the expense of David's moral bearings does he find pleasure in eliminating the wealthy sea-farers. In his admonishment of his own actions, David becomes aware that eco-terrorist plots only serve limited good; eco-sabotage may eliminate one minor threat, but that the sweep of climate change is too great, the actions already in motion, and the cards are stacked against him. While eco-terrorism served for Edward Abbey in the mid-twentieth century, the tactics employed by the fictional Monkey Wrench Gang fail Evie and her cohort because they provide only temporary solutions, no long-term plan. As such, it becomes clear that the best course of action is not to attempt to counter the forthcoming environmental tumult, but rather to locate new forms of coexistence with an increasingly trepidatious landscape, and that the way to look forward will be to focus on a text of antiquity, and to engage the lessons taught from generations and civilizations that have undergone their own seismic changes. As Roy Scranton argues, "We must inculcate ruminative frequencies in the human animal by teaching slowness, attention to detail, argumentative rigor, careful reading, and meditative reflection. We must keep our communion

[32] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 54.
[33] Buell, Laurence, "What is Called Ecoterrorism," *Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism*, (no. 16, vol. 1, 2008), 163.
[34] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 54.
[35] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 29.

with the dead, for they are us, as we are the dead of future generations."[36] The most notable of the ur-texts with which Millet engages is, as the title of her work makes obvious, the Holy Bible. By populating her novel with allusion and explicit references to stories and scenes from the Bible, Millet performs an act which both is and isn't parochial. She first answers Scranton's call by allowing her characters to engage with texts of antiquity as a means of understanding and responding to climate crisis. Beyond that, she includes allusions to a wide array of Biblical narratives from both the Old and New Testaments. As a result, she is able to present a sweeping account of climate change, and one that escapes the trappings of a myopic rendering of climate crisis as a singular event; in essence, she manages to encapsulate the entirety of the hyperobject.

To understand precisely what is at stake in Millet's rendering of the gospel according to climate change, we should first note the sands upon which we foolish men built our homes. We exist now in a geological epoch described as the Anthropocene. This descriptor was first introduced by Paul Crutzen in 2000 to describe "the massive impact by the human species, from the industrial era onward, on our planet's life systems, an impact that, as his term suggests, is geomorphic, equal in force and in long-term implications to a major geological event."[37] If the prospect of humankind's industrial detritus is causing a, quite literal, seismic shift in how various ecologies and environs respond to humankind, we're only making the problem worse. Indeed, some theorists refuse to place such an early entry point (the industrial revolution) to the Anthropocene because recent years have only seen our impacts become exponentially more deleterious. For the characters in Millet's novels, siblings Evie and Jack specifically, the Bible provides a catalyst for understanding and taking charge against the paralytic fear which climate crisis might engender. Early in the novel, an anonymous parent gives Jack, Evie's younger brother and a child with a preternatural gift for textual exegesis, a book entitled *A Child's Bible: Stories from the Old and New Testaments*. The gift strikes Evie as odd given that "for [their] parents religious education wasn't a priority."[38] Nevertheless, Jack immediately begins reading and projecting his own life onto the text. Recounting his reading, Jack explains that the Creation Story "had a talking snake and a lady who really liked fruit."[39] Significantly, he bridges the worlds between

[36] Scranton, Roy, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections On the End of a Civilization*, (City Lights Books, 2015), 109.
[37] Nixon, Rob, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Harvard UP, 2011), 12.
[38] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 43.
[39] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 44.

the text and his own. As Evie notes, the female protagonist "had my name!"[40] In connecting the two worlds, Jack highlights the maneuver for which Scranton so fiercely advocates, finding means of understanding change and climate crisis through examination and rumination on how characters in texts of antiquity have confronted those challenges. Millet further emphasizes this idea when, asked what Jack ultimately believes the story of Adam and Eve to *mean*, he explains, "If you have a nice garden to live in, then you should never leave it."[41] With this, Jack, the novel's youngest character, issues an epiphany evincing a degree of incontrovertible rationality so far beyond the parents' capacity for understanding that he quickly reveals himself to be some degree of prophet, and his interpretations of the Bible become the foundations for understandings of how the young people should react to the various climate crises that emerge.

Allusions to the Bible serve not as a moralizing center, but rather as bedrock for understanding the use of narrative to make sense of traumatic changes. In an attempt to highlight the range of forthcoming climate catastrophes, Millet populates her book with floods, hurricanes, heatwaves, plagues, forced migration, and all other manner of environmental and human threats. Throughout all of it, Jack remains enamored with extrapolating meaning from his Bible. As wind batters the vacation home and a torrential downpour causes banks to overflow and a "toxic soup"[42] of gasoline, pesticides, and various detritus to emerge in the yard, Jack and his companion, Shel, evince agitation and worry, with Jack eventually pleading, "We have to save the animals. Like Noah did."[43] The pair eventually make their camp on a platform in a tree roughly covered by a tarp where they house their menagerie: "There were two doves, a robin, and a small brown bird in a homemade-looking mesh deal. There was a murky terrarium Jack said held crayfish, toads, and a salamander. There were plastic food containers with holes poked in the top, full of silty water and minnows, and a big, fat fish in a cooking pot."[44] As more and more of their ilk flee from their parents' debauchery in the house, the platform earns the name of "Ark."[45] In Millet's most blatant appropriation of Biblical narrative, the story of Noah and the Ark allows Jack to find a sense of purpose and meaning during the midst of an otherwise paralyzing event. Moreover, his actions genuinely benefit others in his immediate orbit: he saves aquatic

[40] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 44.
[41] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 44.
[42] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 72.
[43] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 70.
[44] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 73.
[45] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 77.

creatures from toxic sludge, provides shelter from hail to the birds, and creates a den of respite and safety for all of the other children displaced from the vacation home. In short, Jack applies the principal actions of the Bible story, providing safety to others, free from dogmatism or fundamentalist interpretation. He understands and enacts the story at its most base level, thereby highlighting the utility of engaging with the text during a time of duress.

Aside from embodying Christian typology, Jack also draws meaning from the idea of a Holy Trinity. As Jack notes midway through the novel, "They say God in the book," but "God's a code word … They say God but they mean *nature.*"[46] Upon receiving pushback from his peers, Jack wryly replies, "It's a story … Things are *symbols.*"[47] Jack's ability to reason both the literal instructions for a type of upright survivalism, as well as his understanding that he's engaging with a deeply metaphorical text underscore precisely the usefulness of such a text - that it serves both a pragmatic and metaphysical purpose. As humanity enters increasingly turbulent and uncertain times, an ability to think critically, creatively, and capaciously will undoubtedly prove a necessity. At the novel's conclusion, his sister Evie explains, "I think you solved it, Jack. [...] Jesus was science. Knowing stuff. Right? And the Holy Ghost was all the things that people make. [...] So maybe art is the Holy Ghost."[48] Which is to say, artistic pursuits become an integral component of grappling with trauma and tumult.

In his treatise on art and climate collapse, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, Roy Scranton declares, "In order to adapt to this strange new world, we're going to need more than scientific reports and military policy. We're going to need new ideas. We're going to need new myths and new stories."[49] Most significant in his argument is the call for new "myths," as he believes that to make sense of inevitable environmental devastation, we must look to texts that have stood the test of time (he particularly champions *The Epic of Gilgamesh*) as a conduit to produce art which addresses the eternal subjects of survival and death. "We must suspend our attachment to the continual press of the present," he argues, "by keeping alive the past, cultivating the info-garden of the archives, reading, interpreting, sorting, nurturing, and, most important, reworking our stock of remembrance."[50]

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[46] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 87.
[47] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 87.
[48] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 224.
[49] Scranton, Roy, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*, 19.
[50] Scranton, Roy, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections On the End of a Civilization*, 108.

Scranton believes that humankind can take solace in knowing that *something* will continue beyond their own understanding of time, and the proof we have of this is literatures of antiquity addressing traumas and helping us situate our current existence within those archetypal stories. Millet herself, then, engages with this practice in consciously situating Biblical parallels and allusions within her own narrative.

The Bible, and its parallel narratives to Millet's, serves as a way of grappling with past traumas and finding some degree of comfort by knowing that a future will exist. As Scranton encourages readers to find instruction and comfort in works of antiquity, so too does Millet. With the Bible serving as a type of ur-text, she spins a narrative that engages with both the broader brush strokes of Biblical narrative, while also modernizing the tales to frame them within the context of climate change. The core tenet of the Bible, redemption vis a vis Christ's death and resurrection, becomes less about immortal life, but more about the promise of life after death proposed by Samuel Scheffler earlier in this essay. Through the novel's continued emphasis on the sins and illnesses of the parents parallels the focus on the children, who become a simulacrum for exploring how newer generations grapple with the ecological sins of older generations. Scranton echoes this sentiment, writing,

> Humanity can survive the demise of fossil-fuel civilization and it can survive whatever despotism or barbarism will arise in its ruins. We may even be able to survive in a greenhouse world. … If being human is to mean anything at all in the Anthropocene, if we are going to refuse to let ourselves sink into the futility of life without memory, then we must not lose our few thousand years of hard-won knowledge, accumulated at great cost and against great odds. We must not abandon the memory of the dead.[51]

Millet's engagement with Biblical allusions unearths the memory of the dead for which Scranton so furiously argues. The lessons taught within the Bible remind us of the countless civilizations that have arisen and fallen before us. They remind us of the innumerable apocalypses that preceded our own. And they remind us that throughout humankind has remained. To be sure, such a conceit is not an optimistic one - civilization as we understand it cannot and will not continue. Sustainability is a misnomer; there is no "sustaining" humankind's rapacious lust for resources and its refusal to acknowledge its ever-growing damage to the planet. Nonetheless, something, some*one* will continue to exist, but existence will be hard and guides, be

[51] Scranton, Roy, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections On the End of a Civilization*, 108-109.

they geographical or spiritual, will be needed. Millet, through her marriage of the Bible and a contemporary climate novel, creates a parable that provides a light for seeing through darkness ahead.

Simon Estok writes that, "reflecting an increasing public awareness of radical weather events, an increasing degradation of ecosystems, and an accelerated mining of the Earth's non-renewable resources, 'Climate Change Fiction' [...] has flourished."[52] And yet, Estok worries that literary interest does not equate to actionable events. "How is it possible," he wonders, "that both increased awareness among lay people and radical exposure of environmental issues in media can be presented at the very moment in history when there are what seem to be exponential increases in assaults on the environment?"[53] About midway through the novel, Evie questions Jack about his seeming obsession with the Bible. As he pores over its pages, Evie questions him, "What are you doing?" To which he responds, "Decoding."[54] As Scranton suggests might be the case, Jack here locates a sense of comfort in his study of texts of antiquity and in finding stories within the pages of his children's Bible applicable to his own plight. Significantly, through his prolific exegesis, he also locates a significant theme in contemporary environmental study - the necessity of art as a means of contending with and forcing understanding of the effects of climate change. Gayle Clemans explains that creative endeavors are crucial in grappling with climate change because "art can reach us emotionally, intellectually and even physiologically. Highly personal, sensory experiences with art can serve as portals into abstract or difficult topics."[55] In this novel, Millet performs the difficult work of creating a visceral piece of art with tangible and heart-wrenching examples of both the physical and psychological toil of failure to appreciably prepare for climate change. As the children in the novel find solace in their interpretations and reenactments of Biblical scenes, engagements with modes of eco-confrontation, and a dismemberment of pastoral and fairytale tropes, Millet provides lenses through which readers might potentially imagine a future beyond imagining. That is, the characters in the novel present readers with ways in which texts and artistic pursuits can help us think through uncertainty with creativity.

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[52] Estok, Simon C., "Ecomedia and Ecophobia," *Neohelicon*, (vol. 43, issue 1, 2016), 129.
[53] Estok, Simon C., "Ecomedia and Ecophobia," 129.
[54] Millet, Lydia, *A Children's Bible*, 120.
[55] Clemans, Gayle, "Can Art Help Fight Climate Change? These 4 Seattle-Area Artists Think So," The Seattle Times, (18 Sept. 2019), https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/visual-arts/can-art-make-a-difference-in-the-fight-against-climate-change-these-4-seattle-area-artists-think-so/.

Terry Eagleton recently insisted, "By reminding us of our mortality, [literature] can foster in us the virtue of humility. This is a precious accomplishment, since much of our moral trouble springs from the unconscious assumption that we will live forever."[56] And this is precisely the charge which Millet accepts with *A Children's Bible*. In highlighting the intertextuality between her own work and others, specifically the Holy Bible, Millet reifies the ways in which literature can help us understand and make sense of climate catastrophe, how we can remain our most human in inhuman circumstances, and how humanity might live forever.

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[56] Eagleton, Terry, *How to Read Literature*, (Yale UP, 2013), 48.

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CHAPTER TWO

WISTERIA:
A FEMALE ECOGOTHIC METAPHOR IN AMERICAN FICTION THROUGH THE AGES

TERESA FITZPATRICK

Women and nature have been intrinsically linked in Western culture, literature, and the Anglo-American popular imagination, "each denigrated with reference to the other" from pastoral, through Romanticism to contemporary fiction, with both "gender" and "nature" presented in literature as social constructs reflecting patriarchal concepts of what they *should* be like.[1] Although feminist theory has attempted to separate the gendered dualist constructs of woman/nature, female corporeality continues to be "strongly associated with nature in Western thought."[2] In nineteenth-century English and French literature, the garden is conceived as a domestic space wherein female gender roles are pedagogically formed within a patriarchal construct.[3] Victorians perceived the garden as an extension of the house, providing an arena for younger females to develop nurturing skills using flowers and plants as surrogate children, redolent of their gender roles as housewife and mother. Moreover, the literary Victorian garden was often depicted as a "coming-of-age" training ground where appropriate adult relationships between genders were forged.[4] Alongside the house, then, the garden has inevitably been designated a female domestic space

[1] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 26.
[2] Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 5.
[3] Celine Grasser, "Good Girls versus Blooming Maidens: The Building of Female Middle- and Upper-Class Identities in the Garden, England and France, 1820-1870", in *Secret Gardens, Satanic Mills: Placing Girls in European History, 1750-1960*, edited by Mary Jo Maynes, Birgitte Soland & Christina Benninghaus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 131-146.
[4] Grasser, "Good Girls versus Blooming Maidens", 131-146.

within which patriarchal constructs of both gender and nature are depicted as orderly, controlled, and passive.

"In Victorian imaginative literature, women are frequently presented in the company of flowers," Michael Waters notes, "to heighten their femininity."[5] However, as Female Gothic theories have demonstrated, "Victorian representations of women tend to polar extremes," rendering females as symbols of either "domestic happiness or unnatural monsters."[6] Transgressive women were often associated with monstrous nature. Those women who failed to conform to patriarchal constructs were aligned with wild and uncontrollable nature, while colonial encounters with indigenous females were often described as exotic jungle flowers. This dichotomous perspective of idealised/vilified woman and cultivated/wild nature in the male imagination persists well into the twentieth century, conflating female corporeality and monstrous nature in Gothic texts, and where illicit sexual interactions take place within the formalised garden setting as a way of highlighting female transgressions. Linked with the home, "[t]he very demarcation of green space as enclosed and duly ordered garden," William Hughes explains, "bespeaks a restrictive domestication,"[7] which seen through a Gothic lens, denotes house and garden as a confining female space. One of the frequent visual markers of the confining boundaries of female spaces in fiction is the wisteria – a plant that covers doorways, house fronts and porches. Yet, despite extensive criticism on nature and femininity, there is little research available on the literary significance of wisteria as a gendered metaphor. Using Charlotte Perkins Gilman's ghost story, "The Giant Wistaria" (1891) and Donna A. Leahey's eco-horror story, "The Wisteria" (2014), this paper demonstrates the persistent use of wisteria as an ecogothic metaphor, not just as an indicator of the female domestic space but one that is consistently often a challenging signifier of domestic abuse in Anglo-American fiction and a metaphor that women writers use to haunt the male imagination.

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[5] Michael Waters, *The Garden in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1988), 135.

[6] Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 121.

[7] William Hughes, 'Foreword: On the Gothic nature of gardens', in *EcoGothic Gardens in the Long Nineteenth Century: Phantoms, Fantasy and Uncanny Flowers*, edited by Sue Edney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), xiv-xvii.

Wisteria

A popular climbing plant, with a profusion of pale purple, clustered blossoms that resemble bunches of grapes, this familiar vine was introduced into Western gardens from East Asia during the nineteenth century – an era when exotic plant acquisition provided an indicator of wealth – as a decorative ornamental for porches and trellises. Although young plants often appear quite delicate and require support if they are to be admired in full bloom, established and mature wisteria vines harden and eventually destroy supporting structures.[8] Hardly surprising then, that wisteria has often been associated with patriarchal anxieties about the impact of female independence and with feminist writing. The sinuous vines of plants like wisteria are often equated with transgressive female figures in Judeo-Christian patriarchal culture of the West, evoking images of Eden and Eve's transgression at the behest of the snake in the Tree. Moreover, the wisteria's amazing floral displays and strangling growth offer an ambiguity that reflects the dichotomous attitudes to women within Western cultural tradition. The plant's transgressive imagery is further enhanced by its poisonous seed and anti-clockwise growth that equate it in the male imagination with the *femme fatale* - a Gothic figure that allows for a gendered reading. The trope of the *femme fatale* emerges, according to Rebecca Stott, "from a phallocentric point of view" as the dark, chaotic, irrational, wild side of femininity.[9] French for "deadly woman," the *femme fatale* has long been a figure in literature of wicked seductress and sexual enchantress, who narcissistically manipulates the men around her for her own rewards; a monstrous Other within the dichotomous perspective of idealised/vilified woman in the male imagination. This image of woman as bacchante was used by men "to justify restricting women's rights even further" while women writers employed the *femme fatale* character as a revolutionary figure to serve their own interests "as liberation from the constraints of domesticity."[10] It is my argument that wisteria, both beautiful but poisonous, is associated with this "predatory female" who is often presented as "alluring and deadly,"[11] pointing towards the *femme fatale* figure that "has been used to criticize powerful women" persistently

[8] Royal Horticultural Society website:
https://www.rhs.org.uk/search?query=wisteria.
[9] Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (Basingstoke and London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1992), 38.
[10] Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 41.
[11] Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale,* 49.

throughout history, "haunt[ing] Western imagination, materializing whenever male authority feels threatened by female agency."[12] Furthermore, in the hands of female writers, the wisteria demonstrates a vegetal agency that challenges and responds to male violence in the face of female independence.

Encompassing such contradictory attributes offers the wisteria as a plant metaphor within fiction that suggests non-conforming female characters within the phallocentric imagination. In Robert M. Coates's psychological crime thriller, *Wisteria Cottage* (1948), for example, Coates's protagonist, having insinuated himself into the company of a mother and her daughters, becomes increasingly unstable after he accompanies them to a seaside holiday cottage, and they do not adhere to his intended plans. Their eventual brutal murders by the protagonist in response to what he perceives as their transgressions, is subtly indicated, I suggest, in the novel's title through the reference to wisteria. Similarly, Marc Cherry's fictional setting for his 2004-2012 mystery-drama television series, *Desperate Housewives*, is "Wisteria Lane," with the plant reference here again indicative of the transgressions of the idealised suburban female figure, as the suicide/murder of one of their female neighbours sparks the uncovering of domestic abuse, adultery, homicide, and cover-ups in the families along the street. This dark reality hidden behind the façade of suburban perfection, with the manicured lawns and white-picket fences is what Bernice M. Murphy refers to as the Suburban Gothic – a liminal space that is neither city nor rural and epitomizes the 1950s conflict with American conformist ideals.[13] For Murphy, Wisteria Lane depicts "the suburban locale as a place of quiet desperation and festering secrets which, once revealed, are rapidly replaced by yet more darkly enthralling secrets" that must be also be concealed.[14] The wisteria's ambiguous nature – at once impressively floral but highly destructive – positions this plant as a gothic metaphor for women who do not conform to patriarchal expectations and signals the (often violent) oppression such independent behaviour invites within a patriarchal context.

Female writers employ the wisteria's contradictory attributes as a feminist champion for escape from patriarchal domesticity, oppression, and abuse. India Holton, for example, draws on the wisteria's *femme fatale* imagery in her fantasy-romance, *Dangerous Damsels* series, *The Wisteria*

[12] Elizabeth Johnston, 'The Original 'Nasty Woman'', *The Atlantic*, 6 November 2016 [accessed: 12 January 2021].
[13] Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
[14] Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 168.