

Women Navigating the Climate Catastrophe: Challenging Anthropocentrism in Selected Fiction

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Summary

This article explores how two authors represent female characters who engage with the impending climate catastrophe by exposing and challenging anthropocentrism, albeit in very different ways. The selected novels, *Weather* by Jenny Offill, and *The Last Migration* by Charlotte McConaghy, were published in 2020 and 2021 respectively. Both novels were met with significant critical acclaim and both announce their central authorial impetuses in their titles. Offill's main character, Lizzie, lives a life of middle class privilege with her husband and young son in New York while McConaghy's protagonist, Franny, has lost her husband and child and scrapes a living as she moves between Ireland, Australia and Greenland. I use a theoretical framework that can broadly be described as feminist ecocriticism as a lens for my analysis and I mobilise conceptual interventions by scholars working in a range of fields related to climate change and critical animal studies. I will explore how the female characters in my selected novels navigate the impending climate catastrophe and I will argue that scholars can gain insight into their experiences by paying close attention to how the authors challenge anthropocentrism in their representations of these experiences. In order to work towards staunching the damage human beings are doing to the natural world, we need to build interactions that honour, respect and affirm the lives of all inhabitants with whom we share the earth. The relationships I investigate in this article mostly fall far short of these goals and these failures can be traced back to the stubborn insistence or, at times, unquestioned assumption, that human beings have greater value than the rest of the world we inhabit. This inability to relate meaningfully and empathetically to the rest of the natural world allows humans to wreak the havoc that has resulted in the contemporary climate crisis. I will illustrate that the glimmers of hope that the texts do offer can be found in the instances where the human characters at least attempt respectful interactions with their nonhuman counterparts in ways that honour and affirm the value of their animal lives.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek hoe twee outeurs vroulike karakters uitbeeld wat op verskillende maniere met die dreigende klimaatkrisis omgaan, deur antroposentrisme te onthul en te betwis, al is dit op uiteenlopende maniere. Die gekose romans, *Weather* deur Jenny Offill, en *The Last Migration* deur Charlotte McConaghy, is onderskeidelik in 2020 en 2021 gepubliseer. Beide romans is met beduidende kritiese toejuiging begroet, en albei kondig hul sentrale oukatoriële dryfkrag in hul titels aan. Offill se

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hoofkarakter, Lizzie, lei 'n middelklas- bevoorregte lewe saam met haar man en jong seun in New York. Daarteenoor het McConaghy se protagonis, Franny, haar man en kind verloor en kan net-net aan die lewe bly terwyl sy tussen Ierland, Australië en Groenland rondtrek. Ek gebruik 'n teoretiese raamwerk wat breedweg as feministiese ekokritiek beskryf kan word, as 'n lens vir my ontleding en ek mobiliseer konseptuele intervensies deur vakkundiges werksaam in 'n verskeidenheid vakrigtings wat met klimaatsverandering en kritiese dierestudie verband hou. Ek ondersoek hoe die vroulike karakters in my gekose romans die dreigende klimaatkatastrofe bestuur en ek voer aan dat vakkundiges insig in hul ervarings kan kry deur fyn op te let hoe die outeurs antroposentrisme betwis in hul uitbeeldings van hierdie ervarings. In 'n poging om die skade wat die mens aan die sigbare wêreld aanrig te stuit, moet ons bou aan interaksie waardeur die lewens van alle bewoners waarmee ons die aarde deel, geëer, gerespekteer en bekragtig word. Die verhoudings wat ons in hierdie artikel ondersoek, skiet meestal ver te kort van hierdie doelwitte, en sodanige mislukkings kan teruggevoer word tot die hardkoppige aandrang of, met tye, onbetwiste veronderstelling, dat mense groter waarde het as die res van die wêreld wat ons bewoon. Hierdie onvermoë om betekenisvol en met empatie by die res van die sigbare wêreld aansluiting te vind, laat mense verwoesting saai soos dié wat tot die huidige klimaatskrisis gelei het. Ek sal illustreer dat die sprankies van hoop wat die tekste wel laat deurskemer, gevind kan word in die gevalle waar die menslike karakters ten minste probeer om respekvolle interaksie met hul niemense eweknieë te hê, op maniere wat die waarde van hul dierelewens eer en bevestig.

According to Zhiwa Woodbury (2019: 1), “[t]he disarmingly innocuous term ‘climate change’ expresses a psychosocial defence mechanism that prompts us to recoil when we consider the implications of climate science”. Like Woodbury, I agree that the phrase “climate change” is woefully inadequate as we grapple with ways of talking about “this deepening existential crisis” (Woodbury 2019: 1). Woodbury explains that, when we really think about the concept, climate change implies a “pervasive, continual assault on the global biosphere” and she argues that this is an “assault [that] threatens mass extinction and overwhelms our emotional capacity” (2019: 1). She then goes further to suggest that, when one considers the current context through a theoretical rubric of traumatology, “climate trauma” might be a more apt descriptor. For Woodbury (2019: 1), “[c]limate Trauma provides the missing narrative explaining our dissociated unresponsiveness to the climate crisis and suggests an alternative approach to effecting the kind of fundamental societal change needed to remedy our collective dissociation”. While the characters in my selected texts are neither completely unresponsive nor disassociated, there are indications of both these states, and I thus find her suggestion to be a useful conceptual tool in the analysis that follows. As my article title suggests, my terminological choices focus on signalling the urgency of what we, as both a species and as a planet, are facing.¹ This article explores how two authors

1. There are a number of choices that can all emphasise the fact that we have moved a considerable way beyond a situation that can adequately be captured by the phrase “climate change”. In addition to the, admittedly emotive, “climate apocalypse”, other possibilities include “climate catastrophe” and

represent female² characters who engage with the impending climate catastrophe by exposing and challenging anthropocentrism, albeit in very different ways. The selected novels, *Weather* by Jenny Offill, and *The Last Migration* by Charlotte McConaghy, were published in 2020 and 2021 respectively. Both novels were met with significant critical acclaim and both announce their central authorial impetuses in their titles. Offill's main character, Lizzie, lives a life of middle class privilege with her husband and

“climate crisis”. Each of these phrases have been deployed and problematised by scholars working in a variety of disciplines and, like with any academic terminological choice, each one carries advantages and disadvantages. Although I use different phrases at various points in the article, I do so with awareness of the implications of each. The term “apocalypse” carries very specific biblical connotations (for a useful article about climate change and apocalyptic faith, see Skrimshire, 2014). For the purposes of this article, I will be using the strictly secular definition of apocalypse which, according to the Cambridge Dictionary is “a very serious event resulting in great destruction and change”. Even without the biblical connotations, this remains a loaded concept. David Levy and André Spicer (2013: 664), for instance, note that some activists regard the use of such an emotive word as a useful mobilisation strategy while others insist that it is a “counterproductive strategy”. This latter view is mostly based on arguments that “apocalypticism is politically disabling” as it necessitates “a dreary politics of self-sacrifice and self-denial” (Katz 1995: 277). Others reject apocalyptic imageries because they find it “too extreme for the public policy world to absorb” (Wynne 2010: 293). Scholars who use the terms “catastrophe” and “crisis” to refer to the current climate precarity, seek to emphasise the seriousness of the situation without inducing paralysis in the face of an overwhelming problem. John Barkdull and Paul G. Harris (2014: 119) argue that “[w]e are currently facing an environmental crisis which will require radical global economic, social, and political change”. They further explain that “[g]lobal climate change is said to portend consequences so dire that failure to act quickly to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and prepare societies to adapt to climate disruption invites global catastrophe, potentially even human extinction” (Barkdull & Harris 2014: 119).

2. Both these selected texts contain male characters who are also forced to engage with the realities of the impending climate catastrophe. Although the authors focus on the experiences of the male characters to different degrees (Niall is a much more fully fleshed out character who engages meaningfully with the environment in *The Last Migration* while Henry and Ben remain mostly peripheral characters in *Weather*), the primary protagonists in both novels are women. All experiences are gendered and I would thus argue that women and men would necessarily meet the challenges of this particular historical moment differently. An exploration of these gendered differences are, however, beyond the scope of this article. My title was simply informed by Offill and McConaghy's authorial decisions to foreground Lizzie and Franny's narratives.

young son in New York while McConaghy's protagonist, Franny, has lost her husband and child and scrapes a living as she moves between Ireland, Australia and Greenland. These novels fall broadly into the newly emerged, and increasingly relevant, literary genre of climate change fiction or, as it has become known, cli-fi. The term was coined by Dan Bloom (2016) who makes the following argument:

For me, the best of cli-fi does two things: it delivers a powerful and emotional story and it pushes the reader to wake up to the existential threat that man-made global warming poses to future generations. So good cli-fi is both a great read and a call to action, either direct or indirect. If it doesn't wake us up, it's just escapist entertainment. I am not interested anymore in escapism.

As I will demonstrate in the rest of this article, Offill and McConaghy's novels align clearly with Bloom's understanding of climate change fiction. When reading these two novels, there can be no doubt that we are confronted with an existential threat that has been caused by humans and that urgent action is imperative.

My initial theoretical definitions are drawn from a text by the South African scholar, Grace Musila, entitled *Voices of Liberation: Wangari Maathai's Registers of Freedom* (2020). Wangari Maathai was a Kenyan scholar and environmental activist whose work was recognised with a Nobel Prize in 2004. In one of the essays in Musila's edited collection, Ogaga Okuyade (2020: 196) recognises the extent to which eco-criticism "has become a buzzword" but also notes that the term "deals with an anxiety that is real and frustrating: it draws attention to the visible disappearance of the nonhuman world". In her introduction to the collection, Musila (2020: 68) provides another useful definition that will be deployed in my analysis when she explains that "[e]cofeminism approaches environmental conservation, rehabilitation and sustainable use with deliberate attention to women's struggles to sustain themselves and their families in environments degraded by patriarchal global capitalism". Musila importantly highlights two things in this section of her introduction. First, that, despite her ecofeminist approach, "Maathai's thought and activism are at the same time vigilant against the tendency to conflate women and nature" because she was acutely aware that "historically, sexist prejudice has found succor in associating women with nature, and therefore limiting their humanity and locking them into assumed inferiority" (Musila 2020: 68-69). Second, any consideration of the destruction of the environment that fails to pay serious attention to the roles of patriarchy and global capitalism will inevitably be a fatally compromised exercise (Musila 2020). Musila (2020: 11) refers to Maathai's emphasis on the need for a "healthy relationship between people and the environment", one that is "life-affirming" and should be "honoured and respected". This article will explore how the female characters in my selected novels navigate the impending climate catastrophe and I will argue that scholars can gain

insight into their experiences by paying close attention to how the authors challenge anthropocentrism in their representations of these experiences. I will demonstrate that the relationships mostly fall far short of the goals of honour, respect and an affirmation of life and that these failures can be traced back to the stubborn insistence or, at times, unquestioned assumption, that human beings have greater value than the rest of the world we inhabit. Conversely, the glimmers of hope that the texts offer can be found in the instances where the human characters at least attempt respectful interactions with their nonhuman counterparts in ways that honour and affirm the value of their animal lives.

In her provocatively titled text *Veganism, Sex and Politics: Tales of Danger and Pleasure*, C. Lou Hamilton (2019: 4) simply defines anthropocentrism as “the worldview that promotes human beings and our interests as the centre of the universe”.³ Helen Kopnina et al. (2018: 15) note that, “[a]lthough anthropocentrism has many meanings, at its core it involves the planetary-scale subordination of nonhuman organisms that denies they have value in their own right”. Like Musila’s focus on the pernicious impact of capitalism above, Hamilton cannot separate her understanding of the “current planetary crisis” from a “growing consciousness about the enormous costs of global capitalism and anthropocentrism” (2019: 4). Hamilton draws heavily on the work of the ecofeminist Val Plumwood and, for Hamilton, the great value of Plumwood’s work lies in a “particular kind of ecofeminism” that is based on a fundamental “critique of dualistic thinking, the Western philosophical tradition that divides the world into a series of hierarchical binary oppositions: reason/nature, man/woman, human/animal, human/nature, European/Other and so on” (Hamilton 2019: 51). Lisa Kemmerer (2011: 12) explains that dualism is both “untenable” and “central to interlocking oppressions”. Oppressive power structures are maintained by actively fostering division and alienation between those who occupy dominant and those who occupy devalued positions in dualistic hierarchies. According to Kemmerer (2011: 12), simplistic dualisms “impede our ability to relate to the world around us”. This inability to relate meaningfully and empathetically to the rest of the natural world allows humans to wreak the havoc that has resulted in the

3. Anthropocentrism is itself a contested term. For a useful overview of academic critiques of the concept, see Kopnina et al (2018). Like Kopnina et al. (2018: 115), I am in broad agreement with some of these contestations while continuing to find “anthropocentrism” a concept that can usefully be deployed in scholarly analysis. For instance, they argue that, “[a]lthough anthropocentrism might be too imprecise a term to describe conditions that range from destruction of wilderness to abuse of farm animals, we can hardly come up with the alternatively broad and meaningful term. There are of course sub-categories of meaning that are markedly anthropocentric. The terms ‘industrocentrism’, ‘human chauvinism’ and ‘speciesism’ are key examples, though they are less known outside academic discourse” (Kopnina et al. 2018: 115).

contemporary climate crisis. While the focus of this article will be the critique of the binaries of human/animal and human/nature that are the most obvious elements of an anthropocentric engagement with the world, it will become increasingly clear that all the rest of them are contributory to the current death spiral we are facing. Once we start untangling the threads of the human/animal and human/nature binaries, the larger system cannot but start unravelling too. This article will depart from a simple but radical assumption that ecofeminist animals rights activists hold, namely that “[e]ach individual matters and each individual is worthy of moral consideration” (Park 2011: 85). When analysing the selected texts, I will demonstrate how this assumption, or its absence, shapes the ways in which characters engage with the animals they encounter and how these modes of engagement reflect the extent to which they operate according to an anthropocentric worldview.

In both novels, the authors signal their intention of targeting the human as the main culprit at the very outset. Offill (2020) accomplishes this by opening her novel with the following epigraph:

Notes from a town meeting in Milford, Connecticut, 1640:

Voted, that the earth is the Lord’s
and the fullness thereof; voted,
that the earth is given to the Saints;
voted, that we are the Saints.

In this brief paratextual manoeuvre, she achieves a number of things. First, through her inclusion of the date of 1640, she suggests just how long humans have had domination of the earth and its natural resources. Over the course of the rest of the novel, it will strike the reader how much time we have had to correct what we have managed to get so spectacularly wrong. Second, she establishes a sense of ownership by using the possessive with the subject of the Lord. Third, she implicates religion in the establishment of anthropocentrism. Fourth, she highlights the stunning audacity and delusions of human grandeur through the claim of sainthood. Fifth, through the repetition of the word “voted” she implicates the much-vaunted system of democracy. Sixth, with the passive voice in the phrase “that the earth is given”, she obscures the agent of this arrangement (because, really, there is none) and thereby suggests the arbitrary nature of the human’s primacy in the human/animal and human/nature hierarchies. Lastly, through the formulation, the circularity of the “logic” is brought into stark relief for the reader.

From this epigraph, Offill proceeds to introduce us to a number of peripheral and mostly nameless characters that Lizzie encounters as she goes about her daily life and her job at a library. In two pages of brief, deceptively innocuous paragraphs, Offill evokes an overwhelming atmosphere of futility, uncertainty, anxiety, financial angst and some explicit critiques of capitalism. In her attempt to theorise an alternative to anthropocentrism through the construction of an African ecofeminist environmentalism, Munamoto

Chemhuru (2019: 259) identifies capitalism and patriarchy as two ideological frameworks that could be “detrimental to sound and non-anthropocentric environmental ethical thinking”. She argues that, without a radically new understanding of our relation to the natural world and the ways in which capitalism has become a normalised mode of being, “human beings will continue to think that traditional anthropocentric cultural and power structures that support the philosophies of dominion, exploitation and inequality are correct” (Chemhuru 2019: 259). These first characters that Offill introduces seem to have no conception that there is anything wrong with their ways of life and, more importantly, that no alternatives to their sense of angst and futility are possible. Before she makes any further direct references to the climate, she thus sets the stage by introducing a number of emotions that are commonly associated with the overwhelming sense of despair people experience when we try to face the damage that we have done to the planet. There is a woman who refers to a stage that she cannot pinpoint with any greater certainty than saying that “she is in the second to last, she thinks” (Offill 2020: 3) and a “doomed” academic who “has been working on his dissertation for eleven years” about a philosopher Lizzie has “never heard of” (3). While the academic admits that this topic of his research might be “minor”, he repeatedly offers the following insistence to Lizzie who does not care one way or the other: “He is minor, but instrumental, he told me. Minor but instrumental!” (3). The academic’s wife responds to his eleven years of work by leaving a note on the fridge that simply asks “*Is what you are doing right now making money?*” (3) [Italics in original]. In the next paragraph, the characters embody financial hardship and anxiety with one man in “a shabby suit” and a “girl whose nails are bitten to the quick [who] stops by after lunch and leaves with a purse full of toilet paper” (3). The financial focus of contemporary life is again reiterated on the next page when Lizzie’s husband tells her “I wish you were a real shrink” because then they would “be rich” (4). The scene Offill sets here is one of characters fiddling while their world is burning around them.

After a quick chat with a woman who sells some type of “whirling things” at the side of the road, the reader encounters the first non-human animal⁴ in

4. I am using the concept of the “non-human animal” here to emphasise the porousness of the constructed boundary between the human and the animal. Although this is a conscious and strategic terminological choice, I am aware that it is itself a fundamentally flawed one. The phrase “non-human animal” continues to position “human” as the discursive and epistemological norm and implies that everything else is a deviation from that norm. Offill uses the character of Lizzie’s son, Eli, to signal her own awareness of this conceptual obfuscation in a scene where the child questions a restaurant sign that reads “No Animals” by asking “But we are animals, right?” (35). Lizzie dismisses the question by telling him not to be “a stickler”. Eli is raising a point that goes to the heart of why the artificial boundaries in the human/animal and

the form of a cat and, in the same paragraph, an explicitly anthropocentric worldview starts to emerge. Lizzie has the following exchange with Mohan, who runs the local bodega: “I admire his new cat, but he tells me it just wandered in. He will keep it though because his wife no longer loves him” (4). It is in the paragraphs with the woman selling her wares and in the one with Mohan that Lizzie uses characters’ names for the first time and a close, critical reading reveals that both these paragraphs offer more insights into the novel’s larger thematic concerns than a cursory glance might suggest. It is significant that the woman who sells the “whirling things” are offering consumer objects that seems to have no value, or at least none that Lizzie can decipher. Yet they are made at the cost of natural resources and sold to reveal the essentially meaningless way in which capitalism ravages the earth to produce products that no one needs or really wants. The woman tells Lizzie that “[s]ometimes when the students are really stoned, they’ll buy them” (4). Lizzie herself buys one for her son, whose name she reveals to be Eli. She then goes on to reiterate her complicity in the broader structures of the anthropocentric marginalisation of the natural world by joining Mohan in using a language of ownership and objectification in their exchange about the cat, without any indication that she recognises it as a “fellow creature” with sentience. My use of the phrase “fellow creature” here is informed by the title of Christine Korsgaard’s text *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals* (2018) in which she offers a sustained, philosophical and deeply convincing “attack on the argument that the lives of more cognitively sophisticated animals matter more than the lives of less cognitively sophisticated ones” (74). She argues that,

if the way we treat the other animals is grounded in the view that the other animals exist in relation to our own human needs and interests, if we act as if

human/nature dualisms are untenable: “Humans are animals – mammals, primates – and humans are part of nature” (Kemmerer 2011: 12). Other scholars choose to use the concept of the animal for their own strategic purposes, as Lynda Birke et al. (2004) explain: “The word ‘animal’ carries many layers of meanings, and can certainly include humans (as in the biological classification of the animal kingdom). However, we chose to follow common colloquial use of ‘animal’ as not human, precisely to explore the issues raised by cultural separation of non-human animals from humans – particularly in science. Note that ‘animal’ here is profoundly homogenising, as though each kind of animal is the same, instead of profoundly different. They are only the same in the effect of the word ‘animal’ as counterpoint to ‘human’ – itself not a straight-forward term”. For the purposes of this article, I am using the terms “animal” and “non-human animal” interchangeably in order to signal all of the points raised above. Where possible, I specify the particular kind of animal to avoid unnecessary homogenisation that glosses over the profound differences between, for instance, a domesticated dog and an Arctic tern.

the animals were put into the world for *our* use, it is a failure of our rationality, and with it our humanity, on both of these fronts (Korsgaard 2018: 52) [Italics in original].

In the opening sections of the novel, Offill positions Lizzie as a character who unthinkingly fails in the terms Korsgaard sets out above. In the rest of the article, I will demonstrate that, while Lizzie's failures remain fairly consistent throughout the text, we cannot continue to read them as unthinking. Whether this makes them all the worse could become a point for further consideration but that is beyond the scope of this article. I regard this as central to Offill's authorial strategy: she is presenting the reader with a character who knows better and has the resources to do better yet she chooses to make no more than a few performative and, ultimately, meaningless gestures to non-anthropocentric environmentally responsible action.

In *The Last Migration* (2021), Franny never has the luxury of either being unaware of the destruction of the animals and the rest of the natural world, or of unthinkingly being complicit in that annihilation. The novel opens with these two short, stark sentences: "The animals are dying. Soon we will be alone here" (McConaghy 2021: 3). The first animals Franny describes have no hint of the objectified nature of Mohan's cat and there is nothing aimless or inferior in their representation. The novel's first full paragraph depicts how Franny's husband introduced her to a "colony of storm petrels" which he had "found" (3). The terminological choice of "found" rather than the more conventional and more problematic "discovered" in relation to a scientist's encounter with a rare animal is significant here and it sets the tone for the respectful treatment of animals throughout the narrative. Franny recalls: "The night he took me there, I didn't know they were some of the last of their kind. I only knew they were fierce in their night caves and bold as they dived through moonlit waters. We stayed a night with them, and in those few hours we were able to pretend we were the same, as wild and free" (3). Franny and her husband regarded themselves as guests of these birds and the hierarchy she describes places higher value on the usually denigrated term in the human/animal binary as their wild freedom is something that she can only aspire to and pretend to embody. In the next paragraph she explicitly says that we have moved way beyond "warnings of dark futures" to a place where "mass extinctions" are happening "now, right now" and in ways "we could see and feel" (3). For Franny, there is no doubt that humans have been the killers of these creatures and she thinks back to a time when birds enabled her to be the best of herself as "it was birds who gave birth to a fiercer [her]" (3).

Franny's conceptual challenges to the anthropocentric valorisation of the human over all else directly shape the way she treats animals. In this way, McConaghy encourages the reader to imagine how thinking and talking about non-human animals and the rest of the natural world, shape our actions and interactions with them. In the next section of the novel, Franny attaches a tracker to an Arctic tern as she plans to follow it on its last migration to

Antarctica. Although this action is, of course, in itself problematic as she utilises an animal to serve her own needs, she does so in a way that is infused with an exquisite tenderness and shamed cognisance of exactly what she is doing. Once she has touched the bird, all reservations become meaningless as she knows that “it’s too late now, you have touched her, branded her, pressed your human self upon her. What a hateful thing” (4). Franny is driven to do what she knows to be violent because she is on a suicide mission. After the death of her husband, to whom she still writes letters, she is determined to find a ship that will allow her to make the voyage from Greenland to Antarctica so that her last migration can coincide with that of the birds. The climate catastrophe has reached a stage where she knows that there will not be any more of these birds to make this journey again and she plans on killing herself when she gets there. It seems to be fitting that she makes this journey via the ocean as she notes that “the rhythms of the sea’s tides are the only things we humans have not yet destroyed” (15). In the rest of the novel, Franny’s memories of her husband, Niall, and her conversations with the captain that eventually accommodates her, Ennis Malone, reveal her awareness of the unsustainability of the violence that people exert on the rest of the natural world.

While Franny’s despair leads her to choose death, Lizzie navigates her relationship with the environment and her increasing awareness of its problematic nature, with wry humour and an ultimate choice of life and hope. These are options that are simply no longer accessible to Franny. Lizzie uses her humour to look away from human complicity in the climate apocalypse but her reflections reveal her knowing. The first example of Lizzie’s rather cynical use of humour as an avoidance technique emerges in a conversation with her brother, Henry. Henry is a recovering addict and he recalls an incident from his Narcotics Anonymous meeting as follows: “A woman stood up and started ranting about antidepressants. What upset her most was that people were not disposing of them properly. They tested worms in the city sewers and found they contained high concentrations of Paxil and Prozac” (Offill 2020: 5-6). Offill introduces this nameless woman’s view as one that is positioned at the social fringe by locating her at a NA meeting and describing her articulation of this view as a rant. In the next paragraph, however, she provides the reader with the consequences of this human carelessness in a way that makes one wonder whether proper disposal of pharmaceuticals that have been created for human use really is such an unreasonable expectation. Offill (2020: 6) notes that “[w]hen birds ate these worms, they stayed closer to home, made more elaborate nests, but appeared unmotivated to mate”. The knock-on effect of birds eating these worms and then being less likely to reproduce has obvious and far-reaching ecological consequences. Although there is no direct cause and effect explanation that accounts for the extinction of any particular species in their novels, both Offill and McConaghy offer texts that deal, albeit in different ways, with the

destruction of bird species due to human actions and the larger devastation that is caused by this at an environmental level. Yet Lizzie shrugs it off by jokingly responding to Henry's stories with some clichés about the so-called positive impact of anti-depressants on humans: "But were they [the birds that ate the Prozac containing worms] happier? Did they get more done in a day?" (6). The anthropocentrism of these questions is clear. Although she is obviously joking, she frames the impact on the natural world in distinctly human-centred terms. The notion of getting more done in a day as an ultimate good thinly disguises the capitalist impulse behind this goal while happiness can be read as a social construction that has become another commodity available to be bought and sold in global capitalist markets. While Lizzie's cynically humorous response closes off (at least at this point in the novel) further discussion and critique of human complicity in the climate apocalypse, it does signal her awareness of what is happening.

As Franny's respectful way of talking about the natural world reflects her interactions with animals, similar alignments emerge between Lizzie's dismissive articulation of the threats confronting the environment, and how she treats the animals in her world. I refer to Franny's *interaction* with animals and to Lizzie's *treatment* of them. These are deliberate terminological choices as Franny's interactions signal some sense of collaboration and a challenge to anthropocentrism (problematic and compromised as these may be) while Lizzie positions herself as the subject who treats animals as mere objects. After admiring Mohan's cat and trivialising the nameless woman's concerns about worms and birds, Lizzie next mentions an animal in a description of her young son, Eli, at play. Eli is playing a "3-D procedurally generated world" game that, according to Lizzie's husband, is educational. As part of this game, the children build a world in which they "fill the rooms with minerals that they have mined with pickaxes they have made. They assemble green fields and raise chickens to eat" (Offill 2020: 10-11). This is offered as a progressive game that challenges the industrial, capitalist removal between people and the products they use and consume. Eli is presumably learning how to foster a closer sense of connection with "minerals" if he has to mine them himself and with "green fields" if he has to assemble them. The game, however, does nothing to disrupt the construction of the human as the active subject that shapes the "passive"⁵ natural world according to his will. I would argue that

5. The construction of nature as passive is a familiar strategy that justifies the masculinised violence humanity has wreaked on it and it is a construction that has long been challenged by ecofeminist theorists. Miriam Kammer (2018: 467), for instance, refers to the possibility of "transform[ing] 'passive' nature space into a staging ground for action, undoing constructions of the natural world as exploitable material and re-casting nature as agential, feminist space". The construction of nature as passive has consequences for, as Charlotte Perrelet (2019: 2) explains, "[s]eeing other beings in the natural world as passive or inert objects affects the way we perceive and interact with

this game is representative of the type of virtue signalling and performative environmental awareness that allow people to think they are addressing the problem while actually not doing anything other than making them feel good about themselves even as the destruction of the environment continues unabated. The fuzzy feelings of doing good and raising a conscious little consumer really break down, however, when one reads how Eli views the virtual chickens he has raised. He gleefully yells that he “killed one” (11) and the extent of Lizzie’s comment on this is that “[i]t’s fun to watch them play” (10). A few pages further, Offill (2020: 16) offers a glimpse into Lizzie’s daily life that allows us to understand why this part of the game would not bother her much:

Funny how people will lecture you about anything these days. This one on the library steps is going on and on about my ham sandwich. “Pigs are more trainable than dogs! Cows understand cause and effect!” Who asked you anyway? I think, but I leave and eat it at my desk.

Once again, we see Lizzie using similar strategies as earlier that allow her to ignore the objections of the environmental activists. The person remains nameless as he or she is described as “[t]his one” while the idea of the rant is implied by saying that the activist “is going on and on”. Franny identifies as a vegetarian throughout *The Last Migration* and she notes that this information tends to be “met with a great deal of suspicion” (McConaghy 2021: 37).

While an academic discussion of the ethics of eating animals is beyond the scope of this article, it is significant that Offill repeatedly returns to the issue and allows Lizzie’s views on it to evolve over the course of the text. In Offill’s representations, she demonstrates the dynamics of animals as the “absent referent” (Adams 1990: 52-53) while simultaneously revealing their insistent presence. In Jessica Holmes’s (2020: 239) engagement with Carol Adams’s groundbreaking *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, she explains how comprehensively animals are rendered absent as a referent as they “are made absent literally (through death), definitionally (through terminology), and metaphorically (through imaginative repurposing)”. The reader sees these dynamics as Eli literally absents the chickens by killing them and Lizzie definitionally absents them by referring to the pig flesh she is eating as ham. Yet, in the same paragraph, she does recognise the link between her sandwich and the pigs from which the ham originates. It is significant that, even for the

them”. It sets the stage for objectification and exploitation. Diego Orihuela Ibañez (2019) links this way of seeing nature directly to environmental destruction. He articulates this as follows: “The ongoing ecological crisis demands a set of new theoretical approaches towards what is that thing ‘out there’ that we call Nature since the romantic paradigm only gives away a passive and contemplative image that serves to [facilitate] economic exploitation and aesthetical consumerism” (Ibanez 2019: 1).

activists, the main arguments against using animals for food remain distinctly anthropocentric. They seem to be arguing that animals should be treated better not because they have value and rights as fellow sentient creatures, but for the extent to which they approximate characteristics that humans have and deem important, such as trainability and understanding relational causality. While this may well be an effective way of appealing to the sympathy of humans, without a more fundamental challenge to anthropocentrism, it does little to alter the power structures that render animals (and the larger natural world) vulnerable to harm in the first place.

In the next section of Offill's novel, the reader comes to see Lizzie's cynicism as a protective type of survival strategy. She reflects on her feelings when she drops Eli off at school as follows: "I'm not allowed to think about how big this school is or how small he is. I've made that mistake after other drop-offs. I should be used to it by now, but sometimes I get spooked all over again" (8). The examples in the novel of Lizzie engaging more humanely with animals also relate to Eli and, ultimately, she redefines her ethics of eating them in direct relation to Eli's potential future on a planet under threat. The family dog mauls a baby bunny and she describes how they try to save the creature in the same section that we see Eli being afraid of a "mouse skull" (19). Lizzie's first thought is that she and her husband "are secretly killing them [the mice]" (19) and her relief when she finds out that this is not the case is about helping to calm her son down. Lizzie becomes increasingly concerned about the fact that "the scientists are in a state of barely suppressed panic about the latest data coming in" (76) about the rate of climate change and she reflects on "the best ways to prepare ... children for the coming chaos" (93). Lizzie's main concern is about what she could do to get Eli ready but she does not like the answer she is offered: "It would be good if he had some skills. And of course, no children" (189). By the last few pages of the novel, Lizzie explains that she believes that "[y]ou can have a child It will never know the taste of meat" (196). Although Lizzie's understandings change greatly over the course of the novel, one could argue that these changes are not radical in any way. The more she sees, the more she knows that the climate catastrophe is coming and that current ways of living are simply unsustainable. It remains, however, very much about her and finding a way to believe that Eli will be able to have some kind of life on a planet that is dying.

In *The Last Migration* the reader is exposed to a much more radical decentring of the human as the characters negotiate their way amidst the climate catastrophe. By the last chapter, Franny recalls an experience with Niall that echoes Lizzie and her husband's encounter with the injured bunny. A brief comparison reveals the differences in the ways they approach vulnerable creatures. In Franny and Niall's case, they find an abandoned crow's egg. Franny's first instinct is to pick it up and return it to the nest but Niall stops her with an explanation that leads to the following exchange:

If you touch it, the mother bird will smell you on it, and reject it.
So we just ... leave it here? Won't it die?
He nods. Still. The less we touch it, the better. All our touching does it destroy.
I take his hand gently. We could look after it. Hatch it ourselves and set it free.
It would learn our faces
I smile. How lovely (252).

Niall remains unconvinced but Franny lets “him see [her] own certainty, [wants to] let him see perhaps a hint of how we don't always have to be poison, a plague on the world, of how we can nurture it, too, and slowly something shifts in his eyes” (252). The ellipses, short sentences, questions and use of words like “perhaps” and “could” all signal how lightly and tentatively Franny treads here. She is willing to learn from Niall but she is not prepared to give way to the helpless dependency that has come to characterise his approach to the environment. She seeks a way of helping without harming and she understands just how challenging that could be in a world where we have done so much damage that all our further efforts are already compromised. Her suggestion is to nurture the creature in a collaborative way that will allow it somehow to know them but the aim remains to set it free. The plan she comes up with genuinely seeks to help without exerting ownership and control. The extent to which Franny's approach requires a very different way of thinking about humans and our place in the world, becomes all the more obvious when we compare this section with Lizzie's approach to the bunny. Lizzie describes it in terms of a guiding narrative that positions the human as saviour as she and her husband “are trying to save it” by putting it in a “box lined with a soft cloth” (19). This is all done on their terms and there is no indication that they stop for even a moment to consider any of their actions from the bunny's point of view. The fact that it was their dog who injured the bunny in the first place means that they have set the scene for this harm to be done.⁶ Yet, they remain profoundly disconnected from all of it as they go into human saviour mode. The extent of their disconnection from animals is so profound that they are unable even to see that the bunny is dead: “We try to put it back in the garden but it has already died” (19). The complete unwillingness or inability to consider the point of view of anything other than the human results in an estrangement

6. A discussion of the ethics of keeping dogs and cats as domestic “pets” (or, the more politically correct term, “animal companions”) is beyond the scope of this article. It is, however, another way in which humans use animals for our own interests and, although we may regard it as very far removed from the violent cruelty of the industrial animal farming complex, it is by no means unproblematic nor is the removal as far as we may like to convince ourselves. For a useful overview of some of the considerations at play here, see *Pets and People: The Ethics of Our Relationships with Companion Animals*, edited by Christine Overall (2017).

between human beings and the natural worlds we inhabit and it is this ontological alienation that facilitates the destruction of the planet we all share. Regarding the human as the only point of view that matters lies at the heart of anthropocentrism. A close critical reading of both Franny and Lizzie's experiences signals to the reader how dangerous unexamined and unchallenged anthropocentric assumptions can be.

Franny and Lizzie navigate their way through this dying late capitalist landscape with various levels of self-reflection about their own roles and agency in the larger processes surrounding them. Although Lizzie mostly tries to push through her growing sense of dread, she is by no means unaware of either the severity of the problem or of its causes. At various points in the novel, Offill includes boxes of text that interrupt the main narrative. These text boxes are in a question and answer format and they offer insight into Lizzie's thoughts. One of Lizzie's former lecturers, Sylvia, now hosts a podcast and Lizzie has a part-time job answering email queries that listeners direct to Sylvia. Her descriptions of Sylvia's lectures and podcasts as well as selected text boxes reveal how the novel positions anthropocentrism and capitalism as two of the central challenges to the survival of the planet. Sylvia tells her audiences that there "is no higher or lower" and that "[e]verything is equally evolved" (46). She explains that "the only reason we think humans are the height of evolution is that we have chosen to privilege certain things over others" (46) and, despite some hostile audience reactions, "Sylvia stands firm on her idea that humans are nothing particularly special" (47). The false hierarchy that positions human as superior to and as necessarily in conflict with animals is questioned in various subtle ways throughout the novel, even as it seems to the reader that Lizzie is playing catchup on this steep learning curve. The title of one of the episodes on Sylvia's podcast is "The Center Cannot Hold" and Lizzie describes it as a talk about "the invisible horsemen galloping towards us" (10). Yet, the novel suggests, the harbingers of the impending climate apocalypse have actually revealed themselves to us quite clearly and one of them takes the form of capitalism. Offill (45) places the following in a text box for added emphasis:

Q: What is the philosophy of late capitalism?

A: Two hikers see a hungry bear on the trail ahead of them. One of them takes out his running shoes and puts them on. "You can't outrun a bear", the other whispers. "I just have to outrun you", he says.

The danger is not the bear but the other human. Lizzie recounts another reality of capitalist society from a "report [that] came out saying that the world's eight richest men have the same wealth as half of humanity combined" (98). The unsustainability of capitalism and its relentless destruction of the earth also repeatedly emerge in *The Last Migration*. Franny asks one of the fishermen with whom she is travelling "Why don't any of you seem to care about what you're doing?" (81). His answers reveal that they are driven by the

capitalist compulsion to earn a living when he tells her “[c]ourse we care”. It used to be such a good way to make money “And it’s not us, you know, global warming’s killing the fish” (81). Franny refuses to let him get away with this avoidance of his own responsibility by asking: “Aside from also fishing to excess and contaminating the water with toxins, who do you think caused global warming?” (81). Franny ultimately lets go of the conversation because she realises that she is “just as human and just as responsible as he is ...” (81). Later in the novel Franny recalls one of Niall’s lectures where he makes the link between the killing of our “fellow creatures” and rampant capitalism explicit: “They [the animals] are being violently and indiscriminately slaughtered by our indifference. It has been decided by our leaders that economic growth is more important. That the extinction crisis is an acceptable trade for their greed” (167).

Both novels end with some degree of hope. In Franny’s case, she demonstrates a keen awareness that we are much too far gone for words so she asserts the following: “I won’t promise you anything. I’ve given up on promises. I’ll just show you” (254). Franny’s words are echoed by those of the Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg, in her latest statement at the 2021 Davos Economic Forum meeting where she says: “For me hope comes from action not just words. For me, hope is telling it like it is. No matter how difficult or uncomfortable that may be” (Thunberg 2021). Franny aborts her long-planned drowning suicide because she is unable to abandon the radical responsibility she feels for the few creatures that are left. She says, “[w]e are not here alone, not yet. They haven’t all gone and so there isn’t time for me to drown” (254). She sets aside her debilitating grief for her dead husband and child because “[t]here are things yet to be done” (254). The way forward, for Franny, lies in the doing as she makes it clear that the only real hope is action. The novel thus ends with her decentring her human needs in favour of doing whatever she can to help the last few animals that have survived human destruction. In the final paragraph of *Weather*, the reader sees how far Lizzie has come in terms of understanding the importance of a more meaningful and respectful engagement with animals and the natural world that she inhabits as the novel ends as follows: “The dog twitches her paws softly against the bed. Dreams of running, of other animals. I wake to the sound of gunshots. Walnuts on the roof, Ben says. The core delusion is that I am here and you are there” (201). For the first time, she stops to consider the inner world of the animal with whom she shares her home as she thinks about what his dreams might entail. The inclusion of the dog and the walnut tree in the sentence that precedes what she calls the “core delusion” of separation, seems to suggest that she is including these nonhuman lifeforms in the solution to the climate crisis. While this is certainly a step in the right direction in terms of rethinking anthropocentrism, Lizzie and her need to cope remain firmly centred to the end. This final paragraph starts with the information that her dentist gave her a mouth guard “so [she] won’t grind [her] teeth in [her] sleep” (201). The main action

she is taking thus seems to be about protecting her teeth against her anxiety. In the novel's final paratextual manoeuvre, Offill again displays her keen awareness, both of the crisis we are facing and of the cost of "dithering and despair", which is a phrase that neatly sums up the character of Lizzie. On the page after the novel ends, Offill offers the following website, alone on the page and without commentary: <www.obligatorynoteofhope.com>. While it would require an article entirely dedicated to this website, for the purposes of this conclusion, it is worth noting that, at the top of the website, a chicken is prominently displayed and that is what first catches the eye as the site opens. As one clicks through the different tabs, an animal appears on each page and each page ends with another link titled "How to get involved". While Offill might offer us a character that centres the needs of the human and of hope, the author is by no means unaware of the cost of anthropocentrism or of the danger of hope without action. I end this article with the words of Vanessa Nakate⁷ (2021, a young Ugandan climate activist who urges us to "treat the climate crisis like a crisis" and to realise that "[w]e need drastic action now". Nakate's statements reveal both the urgency and the centrality of the nonhuman world in any meaningful way forward: "We don't have any time left We need to recognize the importance of our ecosystems, including our forests and oceans, as they are vital for our existence".

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7. Nakate was at the center of a race controversy in January 2020 when she was deliberately cropped out of a photograph of a group of young female, otherwise white, climate activists at the 2020 World Economic Forum. The resulting discussions revealed the extent to which Africa and African voices have been marginalized in climate crisis debates. In response to the photograph, Nakate tweeted: "You didn't just erase a photo. You erased a continent". For a discussion of these dynamics in an article titled "African Climate Activism, Media and the Denial of Racism: The Tacit Silencing of Vanessa Nakate", see Daniella Rafaely and Brendon Barnes (2020).

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