

The Space of Genre in the New Green Novel

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Since the late 1980s, a new variety of English-language political fiction has developed – the green novel. Organized around tropes of crisis and decay, the new green novel gives generic form to the pervasive sense of urgency attached to environmental problems in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is easily distinguished from neighboring forms, such as the fiction of urban crisis, by its treatment of Romantic and dystopian elements. These predecessor styles appear in transposed form in the new green novel, and the genre coheres around a stable set of motifs that update central ideas from the predecessors. In its most common version, the green novel expresses a critique of liberal individualist approaches to planetary problems, but in a few key works this critical tendency deepens into a more collective and affirmative mapping project.

To identify the generic qualities of the new green novel we need to recognize the explanatory force of genre itself. This concept has, after all, been under attack since the heyday of poststructuralism when Jacques Derrida (1980) and Maurice Blanchot (1986) famously assaulted it. There is no pure genre and therefore no faithful subject of the law of genre, Derrida and Blanchot argued. To this well-known critique of genre as a *principle*, Tzvetan Todorov offers a useful rejoinder. Countering Blanchot in particular, in “The origin of genres,” Todorov (1976) understands genre as the codification of human discourse – that is, as a more or less complex sequence of *processes* performed on a discursive germ or kernel. Todorov enumerates these operations and risks a claim about the initial speech act that serves as the kernel for particular genres. For Todorov’s speech-act theory of genre, purity does not define genres, so generic hybridity does not disintegrate a genre. Todorov readily recognizes that “a new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres,” in addition to having variable social functions (1976: 161). From this perspective, the key to successful genre analysis lies in a combination of analytic rigor and speculative boldness. In Todorov’s work, these result in a number of productive schemata; his analysis abounds with concrete and precise accounts of a range of operations – such as the assertion that a new genre will either invert, displace, or extend its predecessor as it elaborates on its founding speech act. In other words, Todorov’s approach to genre invites consideration of the mutability of literary forms alongside speculation about their ideological effects for social subjects. The latter concern is crucial. “A society chooses and codifies the acts that correspond most closely to its ideology,” Todorov writes; “this is why the existence of certain genres in a society and their absence in another reveal a central ideology, and enable us to establish it with considerable certainty” (1976: 164). By exposing the ideological commitments of a particular society, genre analysis provides insight into aesthetic and social history simultaneously.

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The following effort to define the emerging genre of the green novel draws on Todorov's methods. A brief account of this new form's relationship to its generic predecessors precedes a detailed description of the core operations of a group of novels devoted to environmental problems. These genre-defining motifs derive from a speech act – the eco-lament – shared by a body of well-received novels that participate in several literary traditions. Selected from among the dozens of green works collected by authors such as Thomas J. Lyon (2001), Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt (2010), these works articulate concerns expressed in the literature of several nations, and they address a diverse array of ecosystems. Since the goal is to identify the parameters of an infrequently recognized "heuristic genre," only positively reviewed fiction by established authors writing in English about explicitly ecological subjects has been included; works participating in clearly defined "institutional genres" (e.g., science fiction, thrillers, horror novels), as well as memoirs, essays, and tracts, have all been excluded (Wegner 2014). While a different selection of core texts might have slightly affected the emphasis given to individual genre elements, the patterns that emerge from this group are pervasive enough to suggest that the core argument does not rest on these instances alone. This pervasiveness is explained by Todorov's thesis about the ideological work of genre. The ideological consistency required by social structures regulates genre norms, lending them the feel of inevitability even very shortly after their origination. These repeated norms are not invented by individual authors but instead express social imperatives. Nonetheless, the ideological effects of these patterns do show some variability. As the concluding section demonstrates, individual works reveal tensions within the spatial consciousness of the new green novel, as some works shift the dominant tendency away from elegiac description and toward a collective project of future-oriented mapping.

Origins of the new green novel

This distinctive contemporary genre arises at the intersection of the Anglophone political novel and literary nature writing, adapting conventions from both forms. From the political novel, it borrows a preoccupation with collective actors and the limitations of public action. These features organize ecological writing in the utopian subgenre of the political novel in particular – especially works such as Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1976). Outlining a detailed program for social renewal via recycling and "romantic collectivism" in the near future, Callenbach's work uses the classic utopian device of an unrepresented revolutionary rupture from everyday life in the reader's present (Bramwell 1994: 73). In the new green novel, by contrast, the collectivist concern survives, but deep anxiety about the likelihood of a rupture with the present displaces Callenbach's utopian enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, from Romantic nature writing, the new green novel derives a holistic spatial consciousness, a satirical eye, and a special treatment of the exploration narrative. These well-established features of nature writing characterize many essayistic memoirs inspired by Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) – from Edward Abbey's *Desert solitaire* (1968) and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) to Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge* (2000). Typically devoted to intense first-person observation of a single site from which a critique of socially dominant practices is launched alongside a sense of personal release into a more cosmic dimension, Romantic nature writing perpetuates a devotional

practice grounded in faith in the ecosystem's inherent ability to regenerate itself. In the post-climate change world described so devastatingly by Bill McKibben (2006) and others, this confidence has become difficult to sustain. Consequently, the new green novel pulls Romantic narrative conventions of the personal quest into a more dystopian universe, shifting the values they express from an essentially spiritual framework to a more wide-ranging materialist satire.

The primary processes of the green novel are familiar enough that critics of the form have already suggested directions in which it might develop. Dana Phillips (2003) made a case for a more postmodernist literature of nature, a style open to exploring the complex epistemological questions that bedevil scientific knowledge of nature. Ursula Heise (2008) has called for an environmental writing that still more radically transforms the American sense of place in particular into an epic sense of planet and resists conflation of natural and social history. Rob Nixon (2011) advocates a strain of green fiction that counters the rapid turnover of the news cycle with a more politically and structurally minded attention to "slow violence" in the environment. Rarely have any of these agendas been fully adopted, however. Instead, existing versions of the new green novel follow critics in reformulating the concerns of predecessors such as Callenbach (1977) and Thoreau, but they tend to do so by making the local scene more symbolic and satiric, rather than questioning the epistemological certainty of their narratives, expanding their scale, or slowing the pace.

These symbolic and satiric tendencies are abundantly evident in recent fiction by Graham Swift (1983), Lionel Shriver (2009), T.C. Boyle (2000; 2011; 2012), Suzanne Matson (2007), Susan Elderkin (2003), Karen Russell (2011), Helon Habila (2011), Indra Sinha (2007), Ian MacEwan (2010), Joy Williams (2000), Lydia Millet (2008) and others. The most central and frequently repeated features of this group of green fictions appear in Table 1.

Features of the new green novel

No single item on this table is entirely unprecedented in literary history or logically necessary to the genre. Genre, after all, does not consist of a set of rules or a checklist of traits. Instead, it is defined by a cluster of interdependent features that emerge through a set of narrative processes or operations. Independently examining each of the generic features that result from these processes allows us to demonstrate its relation to its predecessor and companion genres before we begin an analysis of its ideological function.

Table 1. Features of the new green novel.

<i>Hero</i>	Cranky, ill, thwarted
<i>Plot</i>	Intellectual exploration, travel into the archive
<i>Setting</i>	Toxic Eden and the underworld
<i>Companions</i>	Charismatic megafauna and sexy nurse
<i>Antagonist</i>	Scary nature goddess and masculine principles of industry
<i>Climax</i>	Horrific confrontation with coupling of nature and industry
<i>Closure</i>	Paradoxical defeat

1. Hero: *cranky, ill, failed activist*

Continuing the legacy of Thoreau, whose foundational writings on nature are thoroughly saturated by curmudgeonly satire, contemporary authors such as Shriver, Elderkin, MacEwan and Sinha (not to mention the prolific Boyle) have consistently developed heroes who live apart from their human peers largely by design. Although sometimes protagonists such as Sinha's Animal comment on the folly of their peers, rarely does this genre provide contemporary versions of Thoreau's pointed aphorisms on fashion, property, or spiritual life. More frequently, the target of the fractious hero's satirical wit is the paltriness of collective action designed to prevent damage. Sinha's hero Animal gripes at the pseudo-democratic process of middle-class idealists in the wake of Union Carbide's contamination of the city of Bhopal. Shriver dissects the logical consequences of positions taken by First World population experts, describing said experts' conspiratorial plans for drastic population reduction as well as the failure of that kind of fantasy. Meanwhile, Elderkin's more magical realist narrative casts a grim eye on economic development and eco-tourism in the Australian outback, describing both from the vantage point of crabby and lethargic aboriginal spirit-voices.

Rather than turning their animus outwards, these crotchety heroes begin from a position of compromised entanglement with the green positions that they satirize; they are always partially self-corrosive. A host of illnesses, both physical and mental, makes this complicity concrete. Habila's novel about the oil industry in Nigeria, for example, uses a heroic journalist's alcoholism as a figure for energy addiction; Boyle's Tyrone Tierwater has creaky joints that associate his advanced age with that of the social systems he decries; and Graham Swift's narrator explores his family's history of madness, retardation and alcoholism in the phlegmatic English fens. These maladies do not simply miniaturize environmental damage in the metaphorical fashion to which Susan Sontag objects in her important essay on the literature of cancer and AIDS. Instead, human illness becomes in the new green novel the signal that the hero is metonymically linked to an environment that is also in crisis. The heroes of the new green novel renounce the Romantics' temporary respite in nature, electing instead to permanently inhabit an environment that offers no avenues of retreat or hope of cure.

2. Plot: *quest to explore, know place more deeply*

In another maneuver reminiscent of Thoreau's *Walden*, the new green novel borrows liberally from quest and exploration narratives while also ironizing that form's exoticizing tendencies. Agreeing with Thoreau that the swiftest traveler goes afoot, its heroes adapt exploration motifs to intensive examination of the local scene. This almost reflexive localism ensures the quests organizing the new green novel are mainly intellectual adventures. MacEwan's *Solar* (2010), for example, ridicules the notion that a Scandinavian junket is necessary to deepen his scientific hero's knowledge of climate change, while some of Boyle's historical fiction probes the various land management conflicts occurring on a tiny island chain in the Santa Barbara Channel. Similarly, Swift's historian-hero in *Waterland* (1983) describes to his students the surprisingly scandalous backstory of the draining of the English fens and the rise of a distinctive brewery culture, while Russell (2011) undertakes a similarly archaeological excavation of the federal mismanagement of the Florida Keys. Each of these narratives describes the protagonist's intensive research into situations predating the novel's

present; these archival plots make time travel the essence of exploration in a world of closed frontiers. Conflict and its resolution thus arise in moments when the flow of information is impeded or eased. The physical hardships of the hero and his primary companions recede behind the scenes the hero so attentively observes. Even Lydia Millet's *How the dead dream* (2008), which closes with a dangerous trek through a tropical forest, resolves in the hero's renunciation of his drive to know his environment; the calm radiated by a mysterious mammal companion supersedes the hero's mortal dread, even though both creatures are shadowed by the threat of extinction.

In neither crisis nor resolution, however, does the Thoreauvian model (or Callenbach's later variation on the plan) inspire the new green novel. While *Walden* climaxes in the ecstatic revelations of the sliding bank and the mystical experience of holistic identification with the scene this provides the narrator, these late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century fictions typically diminish the role of the narrating consciousness as the novel proceeds, so that physical place itself rises closer to the foreground in dramatic vistas of fire (Sinha), swamp grass (Russell), flood (Swift), or storms (Millet). Even a novel, such as Shriver's *Game control* (2009), that deviates most fully from the exploration plot (turning instead to the logic of conspiracy for its narrative principle) still incorporates arguably gratuitous travel elements – moving its protagonists around contemporary Kenya from deep-sea diving on the coast to mountainous colonial outposts, desert salt lakes, and various gated communities and slums of Nairobi. The narrative frame of exploration endures, even though the scale and dimension of travel change in the new green novel.

3. Setting: *Toxic Eden and exhilarating underworld*

In addition to displacing exploration to the archive and concretizing the hero's social critique in illness, authors of twenty-first-century green fiction typically employ a symbolic treatment of setting, favoring quasi-allegorical changes of scene over didactic explanation. Though usually beginning in decaying built environments (contaminated cities, impoverished ranches, obsolete villages, old-fashioned tourist attractions, and the like), their narratives send heroes on a quest for an imagined Eden that quickly reveals itself to be full of toxic horrors. Toxicity itself is a dominant concern (Buell 1998). Russell's alligator-wrestling protagonist in *Swamplandia!* (2011), for example, heads out into the magical Everglades in a boat in search of her missing sister, while Boyle's eco-activist and his wife spend a month in the wild entirely naked in an effort to publicize their anti-logging cause. Similarly, Habila's journalist renews himself in a coastal island commune subject to attack, and Sinha's Animal runs from the burning city to the green forest where he has hallucinatory visions of exotic flowers before recovering. These symbolic Edens are not origin points, nor do they provide safe refuge. In each case, Eden is a far more perilous, uncomfortable, and besieged middle point on the hero's uneasy journey.

Redrawn as a contaminated, hybrid space, Eden becomes a passage to the underworld. It is not the garden from which innocents are expelled; the time for innocence has long since elapsed in these post-Romantic fictions. This Eden is swallowed up into an increasingly gothic underworld, and this motif is not difficult to discern. Russell's alligator park, for example, faces stiff competition from a Disneyesque "World of Darkness" theme park in which whole families slide down the tongue of fiery demons. Sinha's Animal reflects innumerable times on the transformation of his city into a living hell, while his Christian

mother-figure worries about the imminent “Apokalis” and a Muslim brother-figure carries him across burning coals during the festival of Muharram. Elderkin’s Australian hero descends into mines and on his emergence completes a terrifyingly botched indigenous circumcision ritual. Leaving these underworld scenes of torture and humiliation does not restore the traditional balance of seasons or prompt wistful abandonment scenes. No persimmon ties beautiful Persephone to her husband in Hades in contemporary eco-fiction; instead, the underworld swells to absorb the living world, making Eden a parcel within its expanding, corrosive sprawl.

These underworlds turn out, after all, to be inhabitable, even companionable – although aesthetically suspect, crammed with microwaved pizza, excess phlegm, and painful scars. Accommodation to these inglorious underworlds requires the governing tone of these eco-fictions to be gothic-flavored satire rather than full-blown apocalyptic terror, as was more common in environmentally themed science fiction of the 1950s (such as Nevil Shute’s post-nuclear bomb narrative, *On the beach*, 1957). The mission of contemporary green fiction is not to forestall an apocalyptic future but rather to probe ways of sustaining life in our already damaged scene. Here, these works most closely heed Rob Nixon’s call to give greater attention to the everyday and “slow” horrors environmental contamination has already created. We are already post-apocalyptic, these narratives of quotidian crisis suggest, if only we look hard enough at where we are.

4. Companions: *Single charismatic megafauna, sexy nurse*

To render the scene as well as the pace of the post-apocalyptic underworld endurable, the green novel turns toward intense emotional relationships that promise renewal. In this sense, the green novel arguably partakes of the “new sincerity” more commonly associated with 1990s-era personal narratives of affective self-discovery (Kelly 2011). This effort to resolve material problems by emotional means is, of course, a convention of the modern post-chivalric romance – with its characteristic swerve from investigation of self in an abstract space to attachment to an object of desire who reflects an image of the achieved self back to the subject and launches a new genealogy (Bakhtin 1981). However, in the new green novel this romantic procedure does not so much resolve the narrative’s central conflict as shift its register.

The hero’s first source of romantic communion is typically a single endangered specimen of one of those species that conservationists call “charismatic megafauna.” Like the panda or the grey wolf, charismatic megafauna are those adorable large mammals (preferably fuzzy) whose image enlists the sympathies of the public in projects designed to restore or manage an ecosystem as a whole (Leader-Williams & Dublin 2000). The use of charismatic megafauna, in other words, is a green advertising ploy, a self-conscious bit of sentimentalism in which one indulges for presumably noble purposes. Its mostly unsatirized presence in the new green novel, then, is not entirely surprising. Although Boyle takes the most skeptical look at this practice, switching out the predictable lion companion in *Friend of the earth* (2000) for the tougher case of the Norwegian rat in *When the killing’s done* (2011), a novel that directly addresses the attempted elimination of invasive species, most of these green novels comfortably attach their heroes to a single large mammal species who functions simultaneously as a totem and as a canary in the coal mine, testing the air of the underworld for the inevitable toxins. Russell’s heroine, for instance, has a uniquely mutated red alligator secreted about her person; Elderkin’s boy-wonder is fascinated by kangaroos and mourns the

accidental death of a single animal for decades. Swift's novel makes the eel its unlikely (but tasty) animal icon, and even Shriver's eccentric protagonist develops his theories about human population control largely on the basis of his emotional attachment to elephants. The most mega of the megafauna, the elephant is (like other animal companions in these not fully realist fictions) mute and yet intimately tied to the human protagonist's psyche. The animal companion functions almost too literally as a mirror, reflecting the human dilemma in a contaminated world without advancing toward a resolution. This tendency is succinctly summarized in Millet's *How the dead dream*, when the hero discovers himself co-sleeping with an unknown mammal – "not a jaguar, not an ocelot or a margay, nothing feline and sly – more likely a young tapir or a paca, large, stout, snouty and ground-dwelling" (2008: 240) – in the novel's final revelatory pages.

To achieve resolution, though, the cranky, ill heroes typically must redirect their energies away from the animal and accept the healing offered by the truly amazing abundance of sexy nurses in the green novel. Elderkin's novel introduces Cecily, a robustly erotic Aborigine who brings the protagonist back to health and aids his escape from the confines of an Alice Springs hospital in the frame narrative. The plot of Sinha's *Animal's people* (2003) turns on the arrival and activities of an American doctor clad in jeans so tight they remind the lascivious narrator of "blue skin." Shriver's *Game control* (2009) initially seems to be "healing" its female reproductive rights worker by giving her a stylish makeover and revealing her sexual side, but soon the direction of healing reverses, and Eleanor becomes the sexy nurse to the increasingly mad Calvin's patient. Habila's protagonist connects with a nurse serving the community on which he stumbles. Millet's hero is plagued by would-be Florence Nightingales before later gravitating toward an emotionally strong paraplegic in a wheelchair.

The figure of the female nurse/healer whose sexual availability restores the suffering male hero to full (or at least fuller) powers in a damaged world perhaps offers homage to Callenbach, whose *Ecotopia* (1977) includes erotic massage in its account of the holistic medicine of the future. But, more immediately, this figure results from a) the figuring of ecological crisis in the body of the protagonist and, b) the genre's habit of personalizing and individualizing problems relating to action. The green novel's swerve toward erotic love allows its readers to imagine a provisional and localized resolution to a collective, even planetary problem. To the extent that the green novel invests in eros as a solution to ecos, it embraces the sensibility of liberal globalism expressed in many geopolitical fictions (Irr 2013). That is, when the sexy nurse (a classic Proppian "donor," similar to the fairy godmother in Cinderella tales) heals all wounds and by extension renders the contaminated environment inhabitable again, then we recognize that the governing fantasy of the green novel is that the ethical actions of healthy individuals adequately compensate for environmental damage. To the extent that the sexy nurse and erotic healing more generally fail to resolve the narrative, we discover resistance to that model.

The sexy nurse wish-fulfillment scenario is so entrenched in the genre that it has already been ironized. Russell's *Swamplandia!* parodies this tendency to make the erotic relationship salvational in two subplots. Her young heroine has two siblings – the older of whom (a boy) is linked by the media to a young woman whom he rescues from drowning in a World of Darkness swimming pool. After a sexual encounter, this boy learns the would-be victim has orchestrated the whole event; his lifeguard ministrations then appear far less genuinely heroic than the less-publicized rescue of his own sister in a later scene. This middle child has herself been lured by fantasies of romantic union with a ghost to run off

into the swamp. Ultimately suicidal in character, this ridiculous vision of erotic salvation finally cedes ground to the more affirmative restoration of the multi-generational oddball family. The resistance to the trope of sexual healing exemplified in Russell's *Swamplandia!* underlines the persistence of this figure as well as its limitations as a prospect for collective action in a damaged world.

5. Antagonist: *Distant masculine principle of industry*

The use of heterosexual healing as a figure for political commitment or conversion follows, presumably, from the quite conventional gendering of nature as female and industrial civilization as a masculine principle that typifies this emerging genre. From Swift's *Waterland* in 1983 to Russell's 2010 *Swamplandia!*, this pattern of gendering has remained consistent. Swift makes the male Atkinsons the engine of industrial development in the Fens, while on the periphery of masculine industry he locates Martha, a witchy abortionist whose pre-modern knowledge of the reproductive cycle aligns her not only with the mysterious genesis of eels but also with the watery disobedience of the fens themselves. Similarly, in Russell's novel, the hyper-capitalist World of Darkness theme park is managed by resentful male nerds, and the heroine's father and brother are the only family members who retain some hope for profiting from this scene; by contrast, the women of Russell's clan remain committed to the family's more traditional and nature-oriented life on the Keys. That environment also houses another swamp witch named Mama Weeds. "She looked like a woman," the teen narrator observes, "but I wouldn't be fooled. I saw my mother's dress hanging off her, and I knew this creature was a thief, a monster" (Russell 2011: 288). Mama Weed's quasi-feminine monstrosity derives from her scandalous annexation of the benevolent maternal role, and in this manner, in this novel as in so many others, an intense encounter with a horrifically mutated mother nature overpowers the emotional effects of the dismal masculine industries that actually initiate the horror. Throughout the genre, numerous sublime vortices (water holes, drowning, psychotic episodes and hallucinations) provide indirect figures for this horrific maternal/paternal inversion. These swirling abysses typically appear at the emotional climax of the green novel.

6. Closure: *Thwarted or paradoxical direct action*

The terrifying confrontation between maternal nature and paternal industry in the green novel invokes an adolescent aversion to directly envisioning the copulation of one's parents. As the sexy nurse motif reminds us, this aversion sits comfortably with an embrace of the adolescent's own, purportedly more appealing libido. This swerve to a forestalled sexual union in the future replaces the possibility of achieving closure through secure knowledge of the way masculine industry distorted a feminine nature in the past. However, the union rarely arrives on time, and its belatedness ensures that eco-fiction feels more satiric than romantic. Moments of the protagonist's possible erotic satisfaction are delayed, while the narrative closes with thwarted actions or paradoxical effects. Matson's *The tree-sitter* (2007) offers the clearest example of this trend. Its story concerns eco-anarchist anti-logging initiatives that backfire, killing allies and disrupting collective action. The same tendency appears when Boyle's noblest idealist, the teenage Sierra, falls to her death from her tree-sit, or Shriver's would-be mass assassin is duped by his own colleagues into spreading an inactive virus. The

protagonists of the green novel rarely achieve any of their political goals, nor do they fully comprehend the toxic Edens they inhabit. After exposure to the brutal (often vaginal) horrors of nature's underworld, these novels tend to offer retreats to provisionally safer locations, rather than sweeping vistas or secure new homes, as they wind down.

The final pages of the new green novel shift toward meta-fiction and the appearance of a symbol signaling an on-going and unresolved process: ticking clocks, spinning potters wheels, foxes masquerading as dogs, a solitary man walking off into the desert, and so on. The narrator's relation to these ominous figures makes it clear that a more dramatic story than the one just provided remains to be told. "This world is painted on wild dark metal," Matthiessen's narrator concludes (2008: 892); "if she'd gone outside she would have seen the smoke twist out of the chimney, reaching as high as it could go till the wind flattened it and drove it out to sea," remarks Boyle's observer in *San Miguel* (2012: 367); while Matson's *Tree-Sitter* closes with the protagonist sleeping and "someone [rising] to inherit the day we left undone" (2007: 246). In their final images, these novels reflect on the incompleteness of the knowledge of the environment gained on the narrator's quest. They leave readers with an aftertaste of lament and anxious urgency, but on the whole the need to address the conditions creating these sensations remains felt rather than explained.

Most commonly, new green novels make the politics of representation their project – suggesting, in the usual circular manner of writers writing about writing, that more stories are necessary to raise consciousness of environmental problems. The genre rarely initiates reflection on the inadequacies to date of that approach as a political tactic or as a literary task. In this regard, the genre tends toward ideological fatalism, depicting an ill and emotionally stunted protagonist who is satirically incapable of facing the crisis of which he is also a result.

Nonetheless, a few competing tendencies do occasionally arise. Shifting attention away from the narrating human consciousness and toward the vibrating setting or scene (always a crucial element of environmental writing) reveals some important spatial motifs. These may not result in a coherent political program, but they do remind us that the genre, like any genre, perhaps, is animated by a social problem rather than a single overdetermined ideological solution. These spatial motifs, in other words, keep a more collective political vision in circulation precisely because it provides a necessary counterpoint and interlocutor to the often fatalist positions adopted in other versions of the green novel.

Boyle, Oates, and Ghosh

The spatial imaginary of eco-fiction sometimes allows proto-political attitudes at odds with liberal globalism to emerge. Formally, these appear in the narratives as alternatives to the conventional bird's-eye views of a static landscape and variations on the "voice of God" narratorial commentary that often accompanies them. In plots often dominated by other concerns, these features of the spatial imaginary of contemporary eco-fictions invoke a collective subject that engages in new forms of interactive, politicized, and collaborative mapping.

This pattern is most obvious in Boyle's lively satire, *Friend of the earth* (2000). In this novel, Boyle explores the hopelessly paradoxical and ineffectual efforts of an eco-activist group very similar to Earth First! The noble idealism of tree-sitters like Julia "Butterfly" Hill, as well as the top-secret sabotage undertaken by the main character (whose backstory is strongly reminiscent of the Earth

Liberation Front's Daniel McGowan), and the more official and public Greenpeace-like initiatives of spokespeople all fail in this novel to stave off major changes to Earth's weather patterns and the concomitant collapse of much of the food system. Alternating between passages set in the activist 1980s and the halfway-to-hell conditions of 2025, Boyle underscores the futility of all of these actions through apparently inevitable changes in the setting.

Initially, the narration of scene appears conventional. Opening passages reveal a narrator ensconced in his 2025 position as zookeeper to the eccentric, super-wealthy pop star Macvolio Pulchris (whose frequently mentioned "eel- whip" hairstyle recalls the 1980s-era coiffure of Michael Jackson). Although the novel begins on the ground and in the mud, Boyle's narrator is soon positioned via a quick zoom-out: "I occupy a two-room guesthouse on the far verge of the estate, just under the walls of Rancho Seco, the gated community to the east of us" (Boyle 2000: 6). Similar situating passages appear in Boyle's other California novels, some of which even include the traditional map as endpaper and suggest the stable point of view of spatial mastery associated with an exploration motif. At least one critic has commented on the conventional spatial associations Boyle has cultivated – northward movement, for instance, representing an escape from soiled multicultural urbanism and retreat to white-bread local purity (Schäfer-Wünsche 2005).

However, the apparently secure spatial meaning of such passages quickly erodes. Boyle seems fascinated by sites, such as Jackson/Pulchris's inaccessible ranch, that convey hyper-specificity alongside willfully confused anonymity throughout the novel. The sites of tree-sits described in the novel can also be mapped in a very general way onto EF! actions launched in the Siskiyou National Forest, but like the ranch the specific locations of preserved trees are – even within the novel – left intentionally obscure. The activists hike in only at night and cover their tracks by slipping "sweatsocks over their hiking boots" (134). Far from being solidly rooted to the ground, then the symbolic tree from which angelic Sierra (the narrator's daughter) falls to her death becomes Ent-like, traveling throughout the forest to nearly any potential location. Uprooted trees are also crucial to the discoveries the narrator and his ex-wife make when they return to another willfully obscured location, the African-themed safe house in the Oregon mountains where they had earlier hidden out during a period of legal insecurity. Returning to this cabin, they must chainsaw their way through toppled timber first in order to get to the door, because the climate-change-induced melting of permafrost has so destabilized the ground. These disputed trees are not secure landmarks; they are dangerously mobile, signaling the unsteadiness of the ground itself in the near future of the Anthropocene.

Boyle's interest in a morphing landscape is also installed in the design of the novel. His futuristic scenes take place at a halfway point where it rains far too often and his characters suffer from the mucosa, a highly unpleasant rhinovirus that gives them all a perpetual cold. The swirling shapes of rain clouds, together with the ceaseless circulation of phlegm, make Boyle's 2025 mobile and viscerally unsettling. The hero attempts to stop the flow – e.g., by converting his suburban lawn into a wildlife refuge favored by migratory birds, bombing electricity towers, or preserving ultra-endangered mammals – but he is unsuccessful. Boyle allows no return to a primordial Eden; too many physically challenging processes of change are already underway. When nature itself is understood as anthropogenetic and dynamic, preservationist efforts simply slow the rate of change without altering its basic structure. Instead, one must engage in its processes and "go with the flow" rather than viewing it statically from above,

as it were. Boyle's satiric sensibility thus drives him toward innumerable doorway scenes emphasizing spatial rupture – e.g., a lion bursting out of the dumb-waiter, a government agent intruding on domestic bliss, Sierra awakening on her tree-sit platform to fight off a menacing climber, and so on. These are not turning points in the plot, so much as they are repeated figurations at the social level of the mutability crisis occurring in the natural scene.

In her 2004 novel *The Falls*, by contrast, Joyce Carol Oates also develops figures of spatial transformation, although within the constraints of a realist historical novel. Oates' narrative begins in the nationally symbolic and exaggerated sublime setting of Niagara Falls when a newly married fossil hunter throws himself into the falls in hopes of quenching his sexual despair. The geologic layers in which the fossils reside provide the first of several maps of the deep structure of the site. The next day, the fossil-hunter's widow begins obsessively "retrace[ing] the route" he took, passing by the colorfully named sites to arrive finally at "the Devil Whirlpool... a gyre of Hell" (2004: 76). This contrast between the apparently fixed geologic substructure and the tormented surface of the water reiterates the social mapping undertaken by the novel. Initially it appears quite fixed and hierarchical; a family manor, for instance, is described authoritatively through conventional literary mapping of fixed social and geographic spaces. "The Burnaby house," Oates write, "on six acres of prime riverfront property, was a smaller replica of an English country estate in Surrey, built of dark-pink limestone on a knoll overlooking the Chippewa Channel (facing Ontario, Canada) of the Niagara River" (2004: 89). The abundance of place names and the proliferating details about the number and kind of materials as well as the spatial orientation of key sites continue to accumulate in the early portions of the novel, suggesting a readily mappable and fully known universe. In contrast, the psychic meaning of the river and the canal are much less secure. In one of many scenes establishing this pattern, the widow's second husband contemplates the doom-laden rapids in another dangerous area known simply as "*the Deadline*. Dirk drank scotch, and considered what this might mean" (2004: 95).

Oates' family group returns repeatedly to study the ominous falls, but the disruptive significance of this liquid environment only becomes fully evident when the social map is affected. In an omniscient interlude, Oates disrupts focalized reflections of "the fantastical mist-shrouded Gorge" (2004: 166) with a more discordant vision of industrial development. The family travels inland to discover "familiar sights ... becoming unrecognizable, torn up and jumbled like a Tinkertoy earthquake. ... raw earth was becoming cement. Trees were toppled, sawed into pieces and hauled away. Giant cranes and bulldozers were everywhere" (2004: 166). The wealthy family at the center of the novel had no prior vision of this "no-man's-land, claimed for factories, warehouses, employee parking lots" and initially sees in it only the shocking possibility of profiting from this disruptive building project. Ultimately, only the father, Dirk, fully connects this world to his own, developing a connection with an erotic healer consumed by the "pollution of a neighborhood, of earth, soil, water" at Love Canal. This interpersonal link prompts him to remap his environment. In his "big luxurious boat of a car," the father feels himself quite conventionally to be "like Charon's barge crossing the Styx" and "descending into the underworld" (2004: 219), but his hell is not the psychosexual torment of his wife's first husband; it is instead the social hell of realizing that he now inhabits two cities. The "gleaming tourist-city on the Niagara River" has a poisoned industrial twin: "The one was beauty and the terror of beauty; the other, mere expediency and man-made

ugliness” (2004: 219). Only when Dirk can begin to map on the surface of the earth and in his social life the passageways linking these two cities – rather than letting the underworld consume the entire scene – can he or others fully inhabit this environment.

Within Oates’ novel, the labor of data collection is performed by the twin cities’ most vulnerable residents. They assemble a catalogue of illnesses (punctuated by “miscarriages ... and miscarriages. And miscarriages”) and pinpoint the locations of clusters of cancer and other ailments (2004: 232). Access to this map of horrors is restricted by the courts, willfully ignored by the widow as long as humanly possible, and melodramatically lost with the death of her second husband. The last third of the novel veers away from mapping, exploring Oates’ signature themes of downward mobility and bereavement. Only the concluding scene (a long overdue funeral service) renews this theme with its suggestion of a community unified by the memorial project. Here, the turn toward geologic time introduced in the opening passages returns, and the sublimely spectacular tourist landscape is reclaimed through admission of its entanglement with industrial contamination.

To arrive at this sober resolution with all its traces of the green novel’s fatalist lament, Oates had to manipulate the history and – more to the point – the scene of her novel. She is dealing with facts on record and told interviewers she aimed to be essentially faithful to the legal history of Love Canal (BookBrowse). However, having initially conceived of *The Falls* as a novel focused on the redemption of the father, she exaggerated the lawyer/patriarch’s initiative in the court proceedings somewhat, embroiling him in a host of imagined ethical and erotic complications. Oates also modified distances; perhaps to keep locations of her characters intentionally hazy, she sets many reflective scenes drifting on a boat. The fatherly lawyer floats, anxious and volatile himself. His unanchored sensibility undercuts the authority of the realist assertion following shortly thereafter that Love Canal is a mere “twelve miles” from his family home (2004: 228). Socially mobile, too, he wishes to remain behind the scenes so he will not be perceived as a class traitor by other members of his old boy network, and this uneasy desire for mobility fights with his need for a new kind of fixity and certainty in his social mapping. The novel introduces this spatial conflict in its most clearly invented passages, retaining a kind of uneasiness in its own mournful hope that a new map of cross-class relations can be drawn. Oates then closes the novel by invoking the notion that a community of mourners will serve as the ideal mappers of geologic space in the future. In “Prospect Park, close by the Niagara Gorge, the air is fresh as if charged with electricity. You want to live: you want to live forever,” the memorial attendees reflect (2004: 481). However, the intense social anxiety associated with this Romantic revival makes its realization uncertain.

Perhaps for this reason, Amitav Ghosh largely resists the transcendent reunion trope. Like *The Falls*, his *The Hungry Tide* (also 2004) tackles community knowledge and management of a natural environment endangered by human activity. Set in the Sundarbans, a massive tidal mangrove forest located in the delta shared by Bangladesh and Bengal, Ghosh’s novel narrates the migration into the area by refugees (and their flight following a state massacre) as well as the fortunes of quasi-socialist utopian communities on the islands. Readers enter into this scene from the double points of view of a middle-aged, world-weary Bombay businessman and an American scientist with Bengali parents. These two cosmopolitan guides to the scene approach a local community they only partially understand. Ghosh introduces the possibility of erotic bonds smoothing entry into

the local community, as Kanai (the businessman) reflects on the fascination for a local girl he developed during an extended visit to the islands during his adolescence. Similarly, Piya (the scientist) becomes acutely self-conscious of her physical proximity to Fokir, an island fisherman married to a kinswoman of the object of Kanai's youthful desire.

Despite the convenient death of the local woman, however, Ghosh's plot does not turn on the consummation of erotic bonds that fold the cosmopolitan wanderers into the island community. He resists the most conventional displacement of the green novel. Instead, at the novel's action climax, Fokir and Piya lash themselves tightly to a tree in order to ride out an unexpected cyclone, but the scene of protracted physical intimacy becomes a tragic sacrifice rather than an erotic union. "Their bodies were so close, so finely merged that [Piya] could feel the impact of everything hitting [Fokir]," Ghosh writes, "she could sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed upon her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life had not; it had fused them together and made them one" (2004: 390). Fokir has of course died in this barrage, and Piya absorbs his life force and knowledge into her own project, returning to the islands in the coda to begin a scientific project designed to support the inhabitants.

In place of an erotic union, Ghosh provides a map. Fokir had been assisting Piya in her effort to track the migrations of a type of dolphin known to frequent the Indian Ocean. She wants to study their movements and uses a GPS tool to gather data for her study; Fokir becomes an invaluable guide, steering her directly to areas where the dolphins can be observed. Piya asks herself "how could he have known that they would run into a group of Orcaella, right then and right in that place?" (2004: 113) before later coming to appreciate the value of folklore (especially stories of Bon Bibi, another dangerous maternal goddess) as a guide to natural processes. Piya's dawning appreciation for indigenous knowledge of the environment culminates in a sense of bittersweet triumph when she realizes that Fokir's wisdom did not die with him in the cyclone but in fact had been preserved in the navigation device she used to record the movements of the dolphins. Although her written notes were lost as well, Fokir's sacrifice preserved "one map [that] represents decades of work and volumes of knowledge" (2004: 398).

As in Oates' model, then, Ghosh's synthetic map – joining the collection work of locals to the scientific synthesis provided by elite visitors – is conceived as a memorial. Piya's research project is to be named after Fokir. She, like Kanai, the businessman, comes to see herself as at home in the tidal zone, adding to the geological mythology dreamt up by Kanai's idealistic uncle decades before – a dream of a map revealing that the entire delta is fed by an underground extension of the Ganges. In a clearly politically charged vision, all the novel's protagonists rejoin a more cosmic, international mapping project in the novel's final pages, but the difference is that they do so without forging a single community. As numerous commentators on the novel have noted, Ghosh imagines a new relation of solidarity between techno-cosmopolitans and dispossessed refugees as the necessary complement to shifting from "a shift from a *perception* of a landscape as a *scene* or a setting to an *experience* of it as an *environment*" (Nayar 2010: 91).

The Hungry Tide's familiar turn toward memorializing should not lead us to confuse the project it advances with Oates' or Boyle's – or, beyond them, the most conventional green fiction's. Ghosh's novel differs significantly from Oates'. For Oates, portions of the human population are endangered while the

deep structure of the earth is known and endures, but for Ghosh the map itself is at risk of being lost alongside the people. The possibility of losing the map and the fusion of indigenous knowledge and techno-savvy data collection that produced it lies at the heart of his novel. This loss is not presented as equal in weight to historical massacres and the associated scenes of social devastation, but it does approximate the quite active possibility of losing knowledge of and access to utopian ideals, such as those of the Scottish philanthropist who influenced the settlement of the region.

In Ghosh's novel, in other words, maps – especially those of underwater trenches, like those where the dolphins hide during storms – require collaborative data collection and updated tools for preservation, circulation, and use. His narrative suggests that the representational tools themselves need to be revolutionized, alongside the persons who contribute to them. Ghosh takes the changeable, crisis-ridden nature of Boyle's fictional universe and couples it with the attention to new social relations of information-gathering we observed in Oates' novel in order to create a narrative that generates for its imaginary resolution of this on-going problem an image of future collective map-making. His novel does not end on a note of Thoreauvian isolation – waiting out the Dark Ages in a cozy cabin, like Boyle's hero. Nor does he claim too easy a foothold in the heavily compromised tradition of the sublime, like Oates. Instead, Ghosh's novel turns toward an implied audience (whether that audience consists of non-resident Indians, internationally mobile trading clans, Anglophone greens, or migrants everywhere?) that is imagined as capable of action, if not exactly equipped for immediate rescue missions.

Of course, there is some irony involved in Ghosh's deployment of a conventional middle-class realism as a literary style in which to articulate content advocating new representational strategies, and the largely ethical appeal to solidarity is similarly an ideal rather than a practice. More generally, one certainly might question whether writing any sort of fiction, no matter what the story or style, makes a consequential intervention into climate change. Nonetheless, this essay has been less interested in evaluating the ideological work performed by Ghosh's or any other individual author's particular vision than in identifying the syntax of an emerging genre of the political novel and marking its commitments. With Ghosh, Oates, and Boyle, despite their differences in tone, style, subject, and political point of view, we find an important piece of the social dialogue around environmental issues expressed. In their shift toward problems of collective survival, memorialization, and mapping these authors deepen the genre of the green novel. They complement fatalistic visions of a toxic underworld with a subdued alternative – one that restores some forms of collective intellectual labor to the narrative and provides objects of affection that are not exclusively colored by despair, anxiety, or satiric horror. This dialogue within the genre of the green novel is crucial to recognize if we follow Todorov in understanding genre as a codification of socially necessary ideologies. If the green novel retains some space for alternate forms of resolution to environmental crisis, perhaps this signals a lingering social openness to initiatives that take collective responsibility for preventing a total environmental collapse.

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