

*Romanticising Crisis:
Digital Revolution and Ecological Risk in
Late Postmodern American Fiction*

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Abstract

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This thesis probes how recent experimental American “crisis fictions” from authors including Mark Z. Danielewski, Kathryn Davis, and Evan Dara reformulate transatlantic Romantic literary debates about technological and environmental change. Arguing that such texts extend previously theorised ties between Romanticism and postmodernism, it identifies enduring ties between late-postmodern accounts of crisis and those of Romantic predecessors. Responding to the upheavals of digital revolution and ecological risks, these texts, published between 1995 and 2012, inventively engage several linchpin constructs in transatlantic Romantic writing: chiefly, the imagined supersession of subjective and temporal boundaries; a sense that the natural and non-human world is of crucial importance; and a reliance on idioms of sublimity to suggest the unrepresentability of the aforementioned crises.

Although numerous critics have traced similarities between Romantic and postmodern modes, this thesis considers those resonances as deeper questions of cultural and literary history. It proposes to more carefully historicise the Romantic intellectual heritage in late postmodernism, identifying intermediating moments that inform contemporary accounts of crisis. It unearths how late postmodern technocultural and environmentalist imaginaries were *always already* Romantic. Deeply informed by countercultural, mid-

century American movements and ideas that themselves drew significantly from transatlantic Romanticism, contemporary figurations of upheaval, syncretically figured in mid-century publications such as the *Whole Earth Catalog*, are indebted to both Romantic and neo-Romantic heritages.

This thesis additionally argues that the digital revolution and unprecedented environmental crisis act as pressures on postmodern literary practices from the mid-1990s onward. Digital speeding and a looming sense of ecological risk register as even earlier crises than the terrorist attacks of “9-11”, requiring a recalibration of what the postmodern might mean and do. Crucially, in their preoccupation with embodied realities and environments, including natural ones, the contemporary narratives examined here diverge from the assumption that the natural world bears little importance in postmodern fields of representation.

Finally, many recent literary experiments figure themselves as materially participating in the technological and medial systems they respond to; formal experimentation is, accordingly, another centre of interest. This research examines how select texts deploy formal strategies to “materially instantiate” Romantic ideas, to borrow Katherine Hayles’s term. Although numerous critics have suggested that Romantic discourse permeates digital cultural imaginaries, existing scholarship devotes little attention to how formal experimentation intersects with narrative strategies.

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Introduction

This thesis considers how recent experimental American narratives from authors including Mark Z. Danielewski, Kathryn Davis, Evan Dara, and Jennifer Egan revive transatlantic Romantic¹ literary debates about the effects of technological and environmental change.² I argue that these texts intensify and extend previously theorised ties between Romantic and postmodern literary modes, identifying enduring discursive, narrative, poetic, and formal connections between late-postmodern experimental figurations of such upheavals and those of their Romantic predecessors.³ While other critics have traced similarities between Romantic and postmodern modes of representation, focussing in particular on the treatment of neoliberal capitalist economic and technological forces in the fiction of writers such as Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, William Gibson, and Shelley Jackson, this thesis takes those resonances to raise deeper

¹ In this thesis, “Romanticism” refers broadly to late eighteenth-and nineteenth-century transatlantic literary culture and its attendant social, political and industrial revolutions. Numerous critics have defined Romanticism as a narrative and poetic mode arising out of, and formulated in response to, industrial, sociopolitical, and technological revolutions. See, for example, M.H. Abrams’s *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) and Talmon (1967). I privilege a transatlantic, comparative understanding of Romanticism, considering how the heritage of plural, transatlantic heritages comes to bear on contemporary American texts as well as on mid-twentieth-century cultural imaginaries.

² The postmodern primary texts examined here are markedly experimental. Not always easily categorised as prose or poetry, they feature significant narrative, typographical or layout experimentation, “intermedial” or “multimodal” elements, and/or heterogeneous temporalities. Bray, Gibbons, and McHale broadly describe the project of literary experimentation: “Unfettered improvisation and the rigorous application of rules, accidental composition and hyper-rational design, free invention and obsessively faithful duplication, extreme conceptualism and extreme materiality ... all of these ... are ways of being experimental in literature. The one feature that *all* literary experiments share is their commitment to raising fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself. What is literature, and what could it be? What are its functions, it[s] limitations, its possibilities?” (2012, 1)

³ I borrow the term “late postmodernism” from Jeremy Green, who posits a substantive break between recent American literary postmodernism and earlier waves. For Green, postmodern fiction from the 1990s onward translates an acute sense of crisis in the face of major socioeconomic and technological changes in the late capitalist era: specifically, the advent of the service economy and “new media” ecologies. Describing DeLillo’s fiction, Green notes: “His attention to the information overload of contemporary culture, of the morbid allure of spectacles ... and to pervasive floating anxiety are all aspects of a sensibility [characteristic of many late postmodern writers]” (4).

questions of cultural and literary history.⁴ Tracing how select contemporary texts reformulate Romantic ideas, it does not simply posit parallels between vastly disparate periods; nor does it suggest an abrupt leap from the long nineteenth to the twenty-first century. One of the central contributions of this research is instead to more carefully historicise the Romantic intellectual heritage in late postmodernism, and the intermediating moments along the way that inform contemporary literary accounts of crisis.⁵ I do so by unearthing how late postmodern technocultural and environmentalist imaginaries were *always already* Romantic.⁶ Deeply informed by countercultural, mid-twentieth-century American ideas that themselves drew significantly from transatlantic Romanticism—including holistic ecology and technological design, systems theories and cybernetics, and jeremiad-style warnings of ecosystemic collapse—contemporary literary figurations of technological and ecological upheaval are indebted to both Romantic and neo-Romantic heritages.

Looking to nineteenth-century American Romantic writing in particular as a source of ideological inspiration, the countercultural movements of the mid-century United States peaked in the late 1960s, a moment often identified as proto- or early

⁴ Critics including Patricia Waugh, Edward Larrissy, Fred Botting, Jay Clayton, Richard Coyne, and Alan Liu identify shared discursive and/or formal terrain between Romanticism and postmodernism, particularly noting how both critique Enlightenment ideals of teleological progress and share an interest in constructs of sublimity. For Botting, “[N]ot only is Romanticism (as a particular literary-historical encounter) increasingly recognised in its contemporary recurrence, it also provides a way of thinking that informs discussions of contemporary cultural change” (1999, 100). Jay Clayton argues that “Romanticism and [p]ostmodernism share the distinction of being the two most significant counter-enlightenment discourses produced in the West (2003, 7) and proposes that “Romanticism looms as a dark presence within postmodernism, something like its cultural unconscious (8). He also identifies the Internet era as profoundly Romantic: “[G]urus of Internet culture, genomics, artificial intelligence, robotics, spiritual machines, collective intelligence, and self-organizing lifeforms have revitalized Utopia for the twenty-first century” (212). Also see Waugh 1992 and Liu 2008.

⁵ Larrissy (1999) flags problems of hermeneutics in comparing postmodern and Romantic writing, asking: Do we focus on genetic questions— e.g., *how* did Romanticism come to bear on postmodernism? Conversely, should we instead focus on problems of interpretation? This research in some respects represents an attempt to fuse both approaches.

⁶ The term “technoculture” was coined by Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (1991), and broadly refers to the complex interactions between technological and cultural forces in the digital age. I use the term more or less interchangeably with “information culture” or “digital culture”. However, “technoculture” arguably addresses the broader relationships between information technologies, arts and culture, usefully emphasising cultural production as a component of technological development in the digital age.

postmodern.⁷ As embodied in publications such as the *Whole Earth Catalog*, the mid-century neo-Romantic turn shaped later approaches to two major concerns permeating the experimental crisis fiction examined here.⁸ The first is contemporary technoculture and its enduring fantasy of boundless connectivity fostering new forms of subjectivity.⁹ The second is ecological crisis and risk; the discussion of which is shaped by contemporary environmentalist and ecocritical thought. Systems-theoretical constructs of holism, interconnectivity between human and nonhuman ecologies, and notions of homeostatic balance prevalent in these bodies of thought shape late postmodern accounts of ecological crisis; as does an apocalyptic imagination that pervades dysphoric accounts of ecological collapse, toxic landscapes, and terror at the un-representable spectre of climate change. I turn to the *Whole Earth Catalog* because I understand it as a representative archive of these countercultural ideas and movements. It provides a prismatic framework allowing me, subsequently, to consider how contemporary crisis fiction draws from multiple Romantic and neo-Romantic sources.

Taking place across three periods in American literary and cultural history—the long nineteenth century; the mid-twentieth-century or early postmodern moment; and the late postmodern present—this thesis draws substantial ties among all three, probing how each treats problems of environmental and technological upheaval. It offers a brief cultural-historical survey of the digital cultural imaginaries and environmentalist

⁷ David Harvey notably argues that 1960s American countercultures and their anti-establishment spirit sowed seeds of Postmodernist irony, pastiche, and anti-authoritarian irreverence in literary expression of the period (1990, 38).

⁸ “Crisis fiction” here designates contemporary American fictions deploying familiar Romantic idioms and discourses to address the specific crises of exponential technological development, ecological risks, and their effects on subjectivity; however, the term might be broadly deployed to discuss any text that engages problems of epistemological, social, political, or environmental upheavals.

⁹ If critics such as Clayton identify appreciable parallels between contemporary technoculture and nineteenth-century Romantic culture, he maintains: “nothing leads directly from one time to another. No traditional linear history can plausibly link them in terms of influence, causality, or unbroken development” (9). While I am not arguing for an “unbroken” lineage between Romantic and Transcendentalist ideas of the C-19 and contemporary American technocultural imaginaries, I maintain, contrary to Clayton, that there are concrete and traceable intellectual lineages between these periods and literary traditions. Decrypting these is one of the main objects of Chapter One and of this research more broadly.

philosophies that inform recent literary experiments and precipitate their particular version of the postmodern, unearthing how the former are importantly shaped by transatlantic Romantic constructs. As will become clear, this complex intellectual legacy does not follow straightforward trajectories. The intellectual sources and poetic resonances this thesis proposes to trace are inherently anti-linear and overlaid. They render conventional period distinctions difficult, and require attention to more than one conventionally defined literary historical and cultural period.

The contemporary fiction addressed here was published between 1995 and 2012.¹⁰ It depicts rapidly changing natural and technological ecologies,¹¹ rendering these upheavals in both utopian and dystopian terms while pondering the integrity of human subjectivity in their wake.¹² Texts such as Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006), Davis's *The Walking Tour* (1999), and Dara's *The Lost Scrapbook* (1995), for example, borrow strongly from speculative fiction, offering narratives structured around utopian antinomies.¹³ Multiplying fantasies of boundless subjective states and blissful new forms

¹⁰ Cultural historians such as Charlie Gere identify 1995 as the effective peak year of the digital revolution, when the commercial Internet became widely available to the general public in developed countries. The mid-1990s also saw American mass media embrace discourses of environmental "sustainability" in relation to ecological problems. From this period, there is a more than 100% increase in instances of English-language press articles using the term "sustainability" in reference to environmental problems (*Source*: Lexis Nexis keyword search, July 2012). Ursula Heise, moreover, identifies the 1990s as a time when "climate change ... began to make its way into the cultural imagination" (2008, 206).

¹¹ I privilege the *OED*'s definition of "ecology": "[T]he branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings" (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). Contemporary texts stage the complex intersections and overlaps between human and nonhuman ecologies, whether natural or built. The term "ecological" refers to the branch of ethical and political thought that concerns itself with environmental problems and sustainability.

¹² Scholars including Botting argue that both Romantic and late-twentieth century texts ponder the integrity of the human subject amid myriad pressures and changes, especially technological ones. "The Luddite or technophobic form of reaction to contemporary innovation ... preserving as it does a certain Romantic idea of the human subject, manifests itself in a variety of ways—in appeals to rights, selfhood and community, to newly aged nature, holistic ecology and mysticism" (1999, 100). This thesis explores many of these same themes.

¹³ Jameson discusses "utopian antinomies" as dialectical narrative devices. He asserts that most utopian propositions hold within themselves an anti-utopian flipside, consisting in a Bakhtinian "dialogue or argument between positions which claim the status of the absolute but are willing to descend into the field of struggle of representability and desire in order to win their case and convert their readership ..." (2005, 143). I draw from Jameson's notion that utopian antinomies often figure the crisis of social or technological upheavals, especially as they are underway and discussed in a "utopian enclave". Jameson identifies

of communion, they also stage dystopian accounts of frightening, uncontrollable technological and environmental forces. These late postmodern crisis fictions thus imagine new technologies subsuming individuality, or conversely, show new technological platforms fostering quasi-transcendent communion among spatiotemporally disparate minds. In so doing, they reinvent Transcendentalist idioms of boundless and technologically mediated subjectivity, thus reanimating ideas already pervasive in twentieth-century countercultural forums in the US (see Chapter One). Climate change and a sense of unprecedented environmental risk also centrally preoccupy the recent fiction I consider. Late postmodern ecocritical narratives describe ecological cataclysms and sublime terror in the face of incommensurable natural objects or events. In a more positive vein, they emphasise the inherent interrelationality connecting humans, plants, and animals; and they often implicitly argue for a posthuman and non-anthropocentric relation to the natural world as a means of averting ecological collapse. In evoking posthuman and postnatural concerns, however, the announced end of anthropocentrism, and indeed of the natural as it has classically been understood, variably reads in salutary or destructive terms.¹⁴

Through their accounts of contemporary upheavals, late postmodern crisis fictions innovatively reformulate several linchpin preoccupations in European and American Romanticism.¹⁵ This thesis focuses on the following: the imagined superseding of

“cyberspace” as one contemporary new enclave in which utopian/anti-utopian discourse is highly invested (21).

¹⁴ Much contemporary ecocritical thought argues that ecological sustainability is predicated on shifting to a non-anthropocentric paradigm in which plants, animals, and other non-human entities are considered equally important. See Buell 2005 for a succinct definition of anthropocentrism. In the context of this recent environmental criticism, “posthuman” denotes not a human body that is partially mechanised and somehow “unnatural”, but rather points to a society in which the human subject is no longer considered dominant and central. “Posthumanist” is perhaps a more apposite term, since it suggests a critique of the paradigm of humanism.

¹⁵ In this thesis, “American Romanticism” broadly denotes several US literary movements of the nineteenth century: firstly, the movement generally referred to as “Transcendentalism” arising out of 1830’s New England, whose founding members include Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller. In a secondary sense, the term refers to writers who inherited and reformulated many of the

personal, spatial, and temporal subjective boundaries—and principally through technological mediation; a sense that the natural, nonhuman world is of crucial importance and that environmental risks demand urgent narrative attention; and a reliance on familiar conventions of the Romantic sublime to grapple with technological and natural objects framed as un-representable. However, while strongly informed by these and other transatlantic Romantic conventions, late postmodern crisis fiction often self-reflexively challenges and excoriates these same Romantic ideas, evidencing a resistance to overriding narratives: a quality that has long been associated with the postmodern voice.¹⁶

To offer an example of how late postmodern fictions ambivalently engage familiar Romantic ideas, consider Danielewski's *Revolutions* and its play with American Romantic idioms of a universalising "I". Sam, one of the protagonists of the double-sided, experimental novel boasts: "Everyway's a road by me going" (S61).¹⁷ This phrase poetically and rhetorically assimilates collective experiences—here denoted by the neologism "Everyway"—to an individual, all-encompassing perspective, echoing Emerson's "transparent eyeball" fantasy of an oracular, all-seeing form of individual subjectivity through which "Universal Being" "circulates".¹⁸ Whitman's poetic narrator in "Song of Myself"¹⁹ similarly elides collective and individual subjectivities when he asserts, "In me the caresser of life wherever moving" (1855, 13/226). Danielewski echoes Whitman here at grammatical, prosodic, and rhetorical levels. Both phrases engage an

concerns of Transcendentalism, including Walt Whitman. Thirdly, it concerns American "Gothic" writers such as Edgar Poe, whose work is considered as a predecessor to new accounts of the sublime and uncanny (see Chapter Four).

¹⁶ Lyotard's characterisation of the postmodern mode as incredulous toward "metanarratives" in *The Postmodern Condition* (1986; first published 1979) is an enduring one.

¹⁷ *Revolutions* is divided into two primary narrative threads corresponding to the protagonists, Sam and Hailey, and printed on opposing sides of each page, one upside-down from the other. When citing from the text, I include the initial of the protagonist ("S" or "H"), followed by the page number of the respective narrative thread.

¹⁸ "I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" ("Nature", *Collected Works I*, 10).

¹⁹ Subsequently abbreviated as "Song".

antithetical tension between the pronoun “me” and similar terms of geographic vastness or totality (“everyway” in Danielewski and “wherever” in Whitman), denoting the elision of collective and individual subjectivities. Both also emphasise physical transitivity, with the gerunds “going” and “moving”, respectively. This sense of movement works to emphasise the novel’s expansive spatiality and catalogue-ish quality, figuring the protagonists’ adventures in quasi-epic terms.

As in Whitman, moreover, the iconic and vast American spaces drawn by the text are metonymically associated with the protagonists. Sam and Hailey claim to embody certain US regions, with both asserting, “I am the South” (S121/H121). In “Song”, via a similar process, Whitman’s narrator identifies himself as a kind of ventriloquist for other subjectivities, especially the oppressed or silenced: “Through me many long dumb voices ...” (1855, 24/509); he later asserts “I am the hounded slave ... I wince at the bite of dogs, /... I myself become the wounded person” (33/833; 841). Hailey and Sam, too, claim to witness the totality of American and even global suffering, across 200 years of narrative history.

In “One’s Self I Sing”, appearing in the 1891 edition of *Leaves of Grass*,²⁰ Whitman revisits the antithetical tension between individuality and collectivity developed earlier in “Song”. He calls himself “a simple separate person” while simultaneously claiming to “utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse” (“One’s Self”, 9).²¹ Danielewski’s Sam updates Whitman’s claim: “I’m the euphoria of these Masses” (S154). A similar fantasy pervades mid-twentieth-century countercultural forums such as the *Whole Earth Catalog*, whose utopian ideals of connecting minds across space and time would be widely taken up in Internet-age rhetoric. The 1968 inaugural issue includes

²⁰ Subsequently abbreviated as “*Leaves*”.

²¹ The 1891 edition cited here (Jerome Loving, *ed.*) does not include line numbers for poems. Thus, when citing this edition, I include the poem’s title, followed by the page number and, if applicable, the section number.

excerpts from an essay by experimental musician Philip Glass that paraphrases Marshall McLuhan's protodigital, transcendental proposition: "I believe ... McLuhan's statement that we have through electronic technology produced an extension of our brains to the world formerly outside of us" (1968, 8). All of these texts imagine a quasi-transcendent elision of interiority and exteriority, individual and collective consciousness.

Although Danielewski playfully revisits these familiar Romantic fantasies, *Revolutions* also consistently undercuts the sense that tapping into other minds and speaking in their stead amounts to benign euphoria. The novel offers unrelenting narrative accounts of violence and an implicit critique of the American rhetoric of Manifest Destiny: "I'm / a Yankee Doodledandy. Vanguard. / Surrendering nothing" (S2). If critics such as Wai Chee Dimock identify problematic imperialist tendencies in Transcendentalist fantasies of universalism, *Revolutions* seems acutely attuned to the danger of such rhetoric. Danielewski self-consciously adopts familiar rhetoric around American expansionism and the concept of America as "Nature's Nation"²² while drawing our attention to the harmful effects such ideas have wrought, whether on the land, its native peoples, or other "Others" suffering under the reign of such ideologies.²³ The historical timelines that run alongside the early episodes of Sam's narrative, opening in the middle of the Civil War in 1863, accordingly allude to those violent and exploitative effects. These reference violent events and injustices as variable as fugitive slave laws, various battles with Native American tribes resulting in massacres, and failed strikes among exploited Chinese railway workers on the Pacific Rail (S1-S5). Rather than

²² See Mazel's critique of "Nature's Nation" in Transcendentalist writing.

²³ Dimock (1989) and Newfield (1996) have probed the politics of individualism and the "imperial self" in the work of Emerson and Melville. Whitman's purported embrace of plurality in "Song", meanwhile, holds a less benevolent meaning for Barbara Novak: "Whitman's self-image possessed [an] ... assimilative energy—an energy with a relentless, obsessive, indeed sometimes violent character. His sense of the unity of all things within the persona he had manufactured was a transcendent fiction ... [H]e incarnates [the nation's] geography and natural life and rivers and lakes. But before taking that final transcendent step into eternal nature ... he traverses the various states of the nation in a typical litany in which naming is an act of possession ..." (60-61)

naively replicating familiar Romantic constructs, in other words, late postmodern narratives train a self-reflexive and critical eye on many of these, exploring their darker potentials.

Problematizing the postmodern

Because this thesis characterises contemporary experimental crisis fiction as postmodern, it also raises the fraught question of how to define the postmodern literary mode, or whether to define it at all, since one of its chief characteristics, according to Lyotard and others, is its rejection of overriding metanarratives.²⁴ Is postmodernism best understood as a set of discursive modes or as a historical period? Lyotard and Harvey define it primarily as the former, while Jameson (1991) envisions it as the defining “logic of late market capitalism”. I treat the postmodern as both a literary mode and a synchronic, perpetually self-renewing period, insofar as, to paraphrase Liu, postmodernity is that which constantly responds to the perpetual now-ness of modernity and holds it in critical regard (2008, 13). I simultaneously adopt Jeremy Green’s periodising term, “late postmodernism,” to argue that a more sombre affective quality and attenuated ironic tone in recent experimental fiction might be understood as a mutation: one shaped by an intensifying sense of crisis.

Another thorny question that this research raises is whether the term postmodern is itself largely outmoded. Numerous critics and writers insist that we have either moved beyond postmodernity or that the postmodern has mutated to become in many respects different from earlier waves. This thesis embraces the latter hypothesis. In his re-

²⁴ As Brian McHale humorously notes: “One of the conventions of writing about postmodernism is to acknowledge (or boast?) that nothing about the subject is certain, resolved, or uncontentious—not its provenance, nor its scope, nor what category of ‘thing’ it is (a period? a style? a movement?...) nor its relation to modernism, the date of its presumed onset ... its significance and value, its politics, its degree of complicity with late capitalism, whether or not it has ended yet, whether or not it ever really happened” (2012, 141).

evaluation of Jameson's materialist analysis of postmodernity, Jeffrey Nealon coins the term "post-postmodern" not to envisage the "outright overcoming of postmodernism", but rather an "intensification and mutation within postmodernism" (2012, ix). Describing late capitalist neoliberal economic institutions as "intensifying" postmodernism so as to make it appreciably different from earlier waves, Nealon's "post-postmodernism" is in fact strikingly kin to Green's "late postmodernism": both critics identify the pressures of late capitalism as forging significant mutations within postmodern forms of cultural and/or literary expression.²⁵

Meanwhile, scholars including Irmtraud Huber identify in contemporary American fiction from authors such as David Foster Wallace or Jonathan Safran Foer a decisive break with postmodern irony. These scholars have, frequently, taken cues from Wallace's famed *cri de coeur* against irony and cynicism and his desire for constructive meaning-making in fiction.²⁶ In a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace famously argues: "Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving" (McCaffery 147). However, if Wallace seems to sound the death knells of postmodernity in favour of realism and sincerity, Robert McLaughlin argues otherwise:

²⁵ Robert McLaughlin also uses the term "post-postmodern," but in a different sense: "Inheriting the postmodern fascination with representation, the layers of text, discourse, narrative, and image that construct our experience of the world, these authors seek in general to acknowledge but penetrate through the layers, aiming, perhaps quixotically, to reconnect with something beyond representation, something extralinguistic, something real" (213).

²⁶ Recent studies claiming a move beyond the postmodern in contemporary American fiction include Huber's *Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies* (2014); they also often focus on American "trauma" fiction post-9/11 (see, notably, Kristine Miller's *Transatlantic Literature and Culture after 9/11* (2014)). I choose not to focus on 9/11 as a major theme because many extant studies devote attention to it; and because, aside from a mention in Hailey's historical timeline in *Revolutions*: "8:48 AM, North Tower & / American Airlines 11 / 9:03 AM, South Tower & / United Airlines 175. 9:37 AM, / Pentagon's American Airlines 77. / —Let's roll" (H277), this particular crisis is not an explicit theme in the contemporary texts I focus on.

Wallace is not calling for an impossible return to innocent, non-self-aware language, a rejection of postmodernism, or a retrenching in realism ... Rather, he is saying that the challenge of the post-postmodern author (a term he uses ironically) is to write within the context of self-aware language, irony, and cynicism, acknowledge them, even use them, but then to write through them, to break through the cycle of self-reference, to represent the world constructively, to connect with others. (215)

One might, following McLaughlin, describe the contemporary fiction examined here as Post-postmodern, owing to its emphasis on strong affective states such as fear or vulnerability, as well as to its attention to ethical questions, including environmental ones. I nevertheless prefer the term “late postmodern”. The experimental crisis fiction I consider remains recognisably postmodern in its marked self-reflexivity, its scepticism of totalising discourses, and its anti-teleological stances. I therefore argue, drawing on Nealon and Green, that this body of fiction marks a mutation within the postmodern literary mode rather than a wholesale break or move beyond postmodernity.

This research moreover questions the prevailing theory that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 stand as the primary crisis prompting a shift from the playful language games of early American postmodern narratives to a more affectively sombre and earnest tone. It proposes that digital speeding and escalating ecological threats register as earlier and equally important crises in literary postmodernism from the mid-1990s onward. These defining crises worked to intensify, I suggest, what Clayton calls the “cultural unconscious” of Romanticism within postmodernism (8).²⁷ Such an approach suggests that literary postmodernism, despite its own interest in a synchronic mode of here-and-nowness, might be understood in diachronic and historicised terms as a mode that continues to evolve and mutate. Again, however, in attempting to chart how

²⁷ Arguing along similar lines, and citing Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, Botting questions whether “modernity merely rehashes and reconfigures romanticism’s ‘discoveries’” (1999, 99).

late postmodern crisis fictions intensify postmodernism's Romantic unconscious, this research avoids facile transpositions.

Untiming the Romantic

In attempting to partially historicise the intellectual ties connecting the Romantic, neo-Romantic, and late postmodern literary moments, my objective is to identify which of the ideas common to these disparate periods might have endured and which have appreciably mutated. It is not the purview of this thesis, however, to draw a broad intellectual history of transatlantic Romanticism in American literature. Numerous monographs have already offered broad and excellent surveys of the intellectual history of Romanticism using a transnationalist approach.²⁸ Instead, this thesis focuses primarily on late postmodern crisis fiction, considering how it reformulates transatlantic Romantic ideas and idioms, but through the intermediating filter of mid-century, neo-Romantic countercultural ideas. If this work is a historicising one, however, it clearly does not generally adhere to traditional conceptions of periodicity. It instead considers transatlantic Romanticism as “untimed”, to borrow Emily Apter’s term for describing how we might profitably unseat traditional notions of periodicity in Romantic and nineteenth-century literary studies.²⁹ It treats the Romantic primarily as a set of discourses and poetic conventions that define an intermittently resurfacing and untimed periodicity. This research nevertheless identifies specific moments as markedly neo-Romantic and then attempts to trace connective points between these surge periods in neo-Romantic expression. For Apter, “Nineteenth-century period terms—*post-Enlightenment*, *Romanticism*, *realism*, *decadence*—prove hard to

²⁸ Richard Brantley (1993) and Barbara Packer (2007) have produced excellent intellectual histories of transatlantic Romantic literary movements and their legacies.

²⁹ Apter observes: “[P]eriodization, a venerable mainstay of comparative literature safeguarded by its apparent neutrality, is critically arraigned. One likes to think of period and the dating of literary history more generally as *incontournable*—a standing order of criticism that eschews the kinds of controversy surrounding national literature, genre, canon, or theory” (Apter et al. 2009, 273).

dislodge” (2009, 275). She also advocates for “alternative time signatures grounded in aesthetics and poetics” (*Ibid.*). This research adopts a similar approach: It untimes the Romantic to show how it re-emerges at different historical moments in American literary production in response to similar pressures. For Colleen Glenney Boggs, “[w]e need to think of transatlantic Romanticism as a complicated process that stretches across diverse geographies and temporalities” (222), while Clayton argues that “the various schemes of periodization familiar to most literary scholars and historians of science actually serve to conceal the existence of any relationship between [Romanticism and postmodernism]” (2003, 9). He continues: “Hence it is necessary to work toward a new understanding of cultural parallels in history, one that is as sensitive to disjunction as to recurrence, as careful in delineating gaps, discontinuities, and altered meanings as in making ... comparisons ...” (*Ibid.*). Again, in this thesis, the late postmodern mode is understood as synchronically dynamic: it is part of an evolving stream of “untimed” Romantic ideas in American and transatlantic letters. Nevertheless, it is also historically specific.

The overlay of American and European Romantic heritages permeating late postmodern crisis fiction is equally important to consider when discussing this writing’s historicity. While recognising the inherent difficulty of separating out American and European intellectual and aesthetic traditions, I draw careful distinctions between them, noting that scholars increasingly treat Romanticism in transatlantic and transnationalist terms.³⁰ However, existing studies on the relations between Romanticism and postmodernism have devoted little attention to the question of how American literary postmodernism might be informed by *both* traditions. Indeed, they often overlook

³⁰ Packer is one scholar who traces the intellectual history of American Transcendentalism in distinctively transatlantic terms. She notes that, for Emerson and his Romantic predecessors, “The doctrine of ‘correspondence’, or the belief that each object in the sensible world corresponds to some truth in the moral world, offered hope that nature itself might be a storehouse of meanings more coherent and more universally accessible than Scripture” (48). This idea finds its way into both twentieth- and twenty-first century neo-Romantic literary narratives, as shall be explored later.

American Romantic influences altogether or conflate these with European counterparts.

In-depth investigations into the heritage of both European Romantic and American

Romantic ideas in late postmodern experimental American writing have yet to appear.

Charting the ecocritical postmodern

Given the nineteenth-century-Romantic origins of contemporary environmentalist

thought and nature writing,³¹ late postmodern engagement with problems of

environmental risk, and communion with nonhuman life, arguably underlines an even

stronger rapprochement between Romantic and postmodern literary modes than critics

have previously suggested. If existing studies dedicated explicitly to Romanticism and

postmodernism in American literature focus almost exclusively on the pressures of

neoliberal capitalist experience, threats of terrorism, and burgeoning technological and

media ecologies, none have examined in any depth the spectre of environmental crisis in

the late postmodern literary imagination. A focus on the structures of late capitalism has

tended to emphasise how digital technology significantly disrupts and modifies cognition

and subjectivity, promotes pseudo-transcendent states of consciousness or rhetorical

forms, and forges a sense of profound detachment from the real in postmodern texts.³²

Late postmodern crisis fictions do not precisely break away from this tradition: they

continue to offer both utopian and dystopian accounts of how new technologies shape

cognition and subjectivity. Nevertheless, their strong preoccupation with natural

environments and issues of environmental risk throws into question the assumption that

³¹ See, notably, McKusick's *Green Writing* (2000); McMurry's *Environmental Renaissance* (2003); as well as Buell 1995 and 2005 for discussions of how environmentalist thought is strongly informed by nineteenth-century transatlantic literary culture.

³² Leading theorists of postmodernity such as Jameson, Hassan, Liu, or Baudrillard have all argued along such lines. See Baudrillard 1988, Jameson 1991, and Liu 2008.

the natural world holds little importance in postmodern literary imaginations. Contemporary ecocritical texts markedly diverge from the reigning theoretical presumption that the hyper-reflexive postmodern mode treats the natural world as a pure cultural construct, a figure of nostalgic absence, or as object of ironic distance: “Nature is related to memory not for metaphysical reasons but because it throws up the concept and the image of an older mode of agricultural production that you can repress, dimly remember, or nostalgically recover in moments of danger or vulnerability” (Jameson 1991, 366). Jameson posits in quite explicit terms “the effacement of Nature, and its precapitalist agricultures, from the postmodern” (*Ibid.*)

However, even if they tend to eschew the kinds of sentimentalising or nostalgic accounts of a past, pure Nature that Jameson describes above, many of the late postmodern narratives considered here nevertheless designate the natural, nonhuman world as *crucially* important. They depict it as a concrete and embodied reality even while remaining sceptical of Nature as a neutral term or mimetic mirror. Drawing from literary ecocritics such as Serpil Oppermann, who has argued that postmodern and ecocritical concerns and approaches need not be mutually exclusive, this research builds upon current scholarly efforts to recalibrate or broaden our understanding of what the postmodern literary mode might mean and do.³³ Oppermann’s interest in what she calls postmodern ecocriticism discards previous assumptions about the inherent incompatibility of postmodernism and ecological writing and criticism. Postmodern ecocriticism consists in “a new paradigm in which nature is reanimated, and its agentic capacity is recognized” (Iovino and Oppermann 463). Agency moves in criss-crossed and

³³ See Oppermann 2008 and Iovino and Oppermann 2012. Both announce the advent of a postmodern ecocritical praxis and reconsider how postmodern literary texts approach representations of natural and nonhuman environments. Drawing on Haraway’s concept of “natureculture”, these critics identify profound overlaps and mutual agential forces between natural and built environments, discourse and environment.

overlapping fashion, with discourse understood as acting on environment and vice-versa.³⁴

This research presents examples of late postmodern American writing that cannot, as Barthelme, Barth, or Gaddis's early work might have been, be easily read as treating the natural world exclusively as a matter of discourse, nor as being wholly invested in Baudrillardian-style simulacra and hyperreal experiences. It underlines the possibility, following from Ursula Heise's interpretation of DeLillo's *White Noise* as a toxic narrative, for new ecocritical readings of previous works of postmodern American fiction, underlining that past critical approaches might have overlooked problems of environment already present in this fiction.³⁵ However, it also considers that late postmodern fiction might be more strongly preoccupied than previous waves were with problems of environmental risk and sustainability. While more recent texts largely reject positivist narratives about technological progress and remain sceptical of totalising concepts such as "the natural", this fiction also narratively emphasises degraded natural ecologies, toxicity registered in the human body, biodiversity losses, and other embodied realities. If postmodernism has been traditionally framed as chiefly concerned with simulacra, then late postmodern ecocritical texts challenge such an understanding. Through various narrative and formal strategies, they emphasise the urgency of recognising and responding to profoundly embodied threats, whether these arise from the natural environment or from rapidly developing new technologies; the latter are reframed as embodied after being previously imagined as acorporeal. These texts pose profoundly ethical questions around the human role in environmental crisis, reflexively excoriating

³⁴ By arguing that late postmodern ecological narratives are attentive to "extradiscursive realities", I do not suggest that they frame themselves as mimetic mirrors to some "objective" reality; on the contrary, they continue to frame experience of the world as mediated through discourse and language. Nevertheless, they register environmental problems as urgent, lived realities shaped by political and social forces (such as environmental policies and regulations, zoning laws, etc.).

³⁵ In Heise 2008. See Chapter Three.

anthropocentric or imperialistic grand narratives about the natural, non-human world. In turn, they suggest potentially less harmful ways of representing that world.

To contrast ecocritical postmodern narrative concerns with those more traditionally placed under the “PoMo” umbrella, consider, in a first instance, the following excerpt from William Gaddis’s last novel, *Agapē Agape*. Like other late postmodern texts, Gaddis’s novel, which was completed in 1998, the year of his death, but only published in 2002, interrogates the pressures of technological development on artistic and cultural production. The elderly narrator discusses Walter Benjamin’s reflections on art in the age of mechanical reproduction by imagining a dialogue with Benjamin himself. In one fitfully choppy, lamenting passage, the narrator posits problems of authenticity in the age of neoliberal late capitalism:

Positively Mr. Benjamin, with mechanization, advertising artworks made directly for a market what America’s all about ... Always has been, Mr. Benjamin. Everything becomes an item of commerce and the market names the price. And the price becomes the criterion for everything ... Authenticity’s wiped out when the uniqueness of every reality is overcome by the acceptance of its reproduction, so art is designed for its reproducibility. Give them the choice, Mr. Benjamin, and the mass will always choose the fake ... Authenticity’s wiped out, it’s wiped out Mr. Benjamin ... Choose the fake, Mr. Benjamin. (34-35)

To judge from this short passage, Gaddis’s last novel might at first appear to confirm received accounts of postmodern narrative’s emphasis on inauthenticity. However, this passage also has a Romantic quality about it in its nostalgic, lamenting tone; its assertion that “authenticity’s wiped out when the uniqueness of every reality is overcome by the acceptance of its reproduction”, and its resigned imperative to “choose the fake”. What separates Gaddis’s late postmodern work from earlier experiments from the likes of Barthelme or Barth (and indeed from Gaddis’s own early work) is its lack of any enthusiastic embrace of simulacrum or playful pastiche. At least in this passage, it

mourns alienation from authenticity. Gaddis invokes Romantic rhetoric around the deleterious impact of technology, nostalgically pointing to a time when forces of mechanical reproduction had not yet reduced art to mere copies.

Kathryn Davis's novel *The Walking Tour* stages similar concerns in its depiction of a digital apocalypse that wipes both authorial control and art from the world. Early in the text, we learn that the SnowWrite & RoseRead programme, which has mysteriously triggered a technological and ecological cataclysm, was built around a hive-mind editorial process resembling Wikipedia's:

When Bobby's business took collaboration as its model, insisting that every great idea had its roots in many minds, what it meant was that you couldn't write a single sentence without watching it get tampered with, 'improved', 'perfected'. And of course the minute you ceased to own your own ideas, you could no longer be held responsible for them...[W]hen art went out the window, morality went along with it.
(73)

For the protagonist, Susan, digital writing violently affronts individual expression; the diabolical programme unseats the classical human subject, "morality", and "art". In Davis, the threat of digital culture and its "many minds" recall how Romantics such as William Blake and Mary Shelley framed the increasing mechanisation of life as a dangerous affront to the human subject. I return to this comparison in subsequent chapters.

If a similar sense of technological alienation inhabits Davis's and Gaddis's late postmodern novels, they also differ from each other in at least one crucial way. In addition to staging digital technology as an assault on authorial authenticity and on art, Davis' novel addresses the spectre of ecosystemic collapse and biodiversity loss as urgent problems. Early in the novel, Susan, writing from a post-apocalyptic present, drifts around her childhood home and attempts to revive scenes from her childhood:

Some of the pictures are still there...the...even harder to see hexagons crawling with bees around the kitchen window frames. Of course the actual dogs and bees are gone, though in an early memory...I'm sitting beside one of those windows in a red highchair ... Open wide, my mother's saying, spooning honey into my mouth. The bees made that with thyme, she informs me ... Also I remember the smell coming through the window, a wet fresh smell of melting spring snow, gone forever along with the bees and the dogs and the paintings ... (14-15).

Tour's melancholy portrait of biodiversity loss is framed through nostalgic longing for a golden era and for motherly love. Smells, tastes, and other past sensations are associated with the presence of plants and animals (bees, thyme, honey, the smell of "melting spring snow") that are "gone forever", relegated to an idyllic, antediluvian past. If Davis mourns the effective end of nature as a consequence of human activities, *Tour* nevertheless also frames environmental problems and risks as concrete realities that merit urgent present attention. It poses crucial ethical questions about human-driven environmental changes; and its tale of technological (male) hubris reads as part of a tradition of ecofeminist speculative fiction originating with Shelley's *Frankenstein*.³⁶

Despite their revival of Romanticism's strong narrative and ethical investment in the natural, nonhuman world, late postmodern ecocritical narratives rarely adopt the realist, purportedly mimetic narrative principles of much traditional nature writing. Their experimental narrative depictions of the natural world are inhabited by a sense of the fantastic and even the comical. Furthermore, they read as sceptical of the idea that nature can be separated out from human culture, instead adopting a critical stance close to what Timothy Morton calls "ecology without nature".³⁷ Ecocritical late postmodern texts

³⁶ See, notably, Vicky Lynn Adams, *The Revolt of Nature: Mary Shelley's The Last Man in an Ecofeminist Critical Perspective* (2003).

³⁷ Morton and most contemporary ecocritics argue that the term "Nature" can no longer be understood in uncritical or apolitical terms, underlining that conceptions of the "natural" have been deployed to advance political, colonial or nationalist agendas, or to engage in exclusionary, discriminatory tactics—against women, African Americans, or LGBT people, notably— by rhetorically policing that which is "unnatural". Morton considers how literary culture is taking up ecological and environmentalist questions, but also

theorise the natural and the cultural together and through one another, rejecting traditional dichotomies between these. Furthermore, this recent crop of fiction reflects profound overlaps and intersections between ecological systems and digital systems discourse, a discourse that was itself informed by Romantic ideas and the neo-Romanticism of mid-twentieth-century countercultural thought. These interpenetrating discourses around natural and technological systems will be examined in depth later.³⁸

Resisting genre and pushing the boundaries of print

The experimental crisis fictions I consider here are difficult to classify along traditional generic lines.³⁹ They re-engage the dramatically affective concerns of European and American Romanticism; but they also undercut these with an emphasis on historical and epistemological contingency, self-referentiality, and formal experimentation. Borrowing heavily from science fiction and cyberpunk, and staging themselves as either print responses to digital media or as intermedial textual objects that fuse print with digital textual platforms, these experimental crisis fictions appeared amid a digital revolution and new media ecology that gained momentum in the mid-1990s. As a response to this revolution, and perhaps not dissimilar to how the introduction of inexpensive rotary printing in the early nineteenth-century stimulated textual experiments such as William

exhorts critics to maintain a deconstructionist-style scepticism toward “Nature” as a historically contingent term: “Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration” (2007, 5). Meanwhile, in *Future*, Buell elects the term “environmental criticism” to refer to theories of literature that address both natural and built environments: gone is the “nature writing” of early environmentalist theory. Also see Mazel for a discussion of American literary treatment of “wilderness” and its political uses.

³⁸ Gere (2008) notably discusses how 1960s counterculture was instrumental in theorising “ecological” and technical/digital “systems” together.

³⁹ For Jameson, postmodernism is innately marked by generic heterogeneity. He posits that, in contemporary culture, “the movement from one generic classification to another is radically discontinuous, like switching channels on a cable television set; and indeed it seems appropriate to characterize the strings of items and the compartments of genres of their typologization as so many ‘channels’ into which the new reality is organized” (1991, 373). McHale argues, meanwhile, that with postmodernism former distinctions between science fiction and literary fiction have been significantly eroded or dissolved altogether, even suggesting that sci-fi might be “paradigmatic” to postmodernism (1992, 12).

Morris's Arts and Crafts movement,⁴⁰ many contemporary texts either push the boundaries of print form and layout, or point to innovative and hybrid crossovers between medial platforms.⁴¹ As I address later, moreover, an emphasis on print materiality and on the embodied aspects of digital writing serve as important counterpoints to early digital-age fantasies of disembodiment and virtuality. This is one reason why experimentation with form proves so crucial to this body of late postmodern fiction: it works to assert the importance of embodied experience, and to largely reject the notion that corporeality, materiality, or concrete environments are unimportant to contemporary experience.

More broadly, formal experimentation is a crucial part of what makes late postmodern crisis fiction distinctive, and worth considering as part of a larger scholarly conversation about ties between literary Romanticism and postmodernism. Existing studies comparing these two modes and periods have devoted relatively little attention to form, and none to date have considered the Transcendentalist heritage specifically in relation to recent postmodern formal experimentation. While critics including Botting and Coyne analyse how transatlantic Romantic discourse has permeated digital cultural imaginaries, their studies devote little attention to how experimentation with form, layout, and interactivity might be considered alongside narrative devices to reinforce concepts such as the superseding of spatiotemporal boundaries or "sublime" excess of signification in the digital age. Certain texts deploy narrative and formal experimentation to "materially instantiate" their own Romantic discourse, to borrow Katherine Hayles's term. This research builds upon the important work of scholars such as Hayles and her

⁴⁰ See Drucker and McVarish's discussion of the Arts and Crafts movement as a Romantic medievalist response to the print revolution in *Graphic Design History* (2009 and 2013): "[T]he historical revivals [Morris] encouraged were grounded in the study of decorative and graphic arts from remote and often idealized ages and cultures" (153–154).

⁴¹ *American Literature* recently offered a useful survey of new media ecologies and American literary production: see vol. 85(4) (December 2013).

notion of the “multimodal technotext”⁴² to explore how narrative discourses of spatiotemporal transcendence, the disorientating fragmenting and speeding of experience, or the importance of the natural, nonhuman world are *concretely* figured in texts such as *Revolutions* and Steve Tomasula’s *TOC: A New-Media Novel* (2009).⁴³ These texts in particular suggest intriguing interactions between medial platforms.

Bray, Gibbons, and McHale argue of recent literary experimentation, “The first years of the twenty-first century, like those of the twentieth, have been concerned with the radical possibilities opened up by new technologies” (2012, 4). Experimentation with multimodality offers one example of how late postmodern texts envisage themselves as *participating* in technocultural innovation and change.⁴⁴

Certain texts deploy strategies similar to those used in gaming, demanding that readers physically interact with texts to become hyperconscious actors in the meaning-making process. This “ergodic” textuality, to use Espen Aarseth’s term, is one way that recent American literary experiments formulate themselves as materially participating in emergent technological and medial systems. Aarseth argues that while all textual systems engage readers in creating meaning, ergodic texts do so in more self-consciously material ways (1). Such experimentation, interestingly enough, is not currently restricted to the “high” or avant-garde literary fiction market. Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams’s widely publicised, experimental mystery novel *S.* (2013), with its handwritten-style marginalia, ergodic reading requirements, multiple textual objects (notes, maps, etc.) complementing

⁴² See Hayles 2012 for a discussion of intermedial engagement, spatiality and temporal heterogeneity in *Revolutions*. Hayles argues that the novel reads as a response to inundation of information “by accentuating and expanding the role of spatiality in a literary text. In this sense, it displays the effects of data not only at the diegetic level of the narrative but also in the material form of the print codex itself” (221).

⁴³ Abbreviated hereafter as *TOC*.

⁴⁴ Gibbons defines multimodal literature in the following way: “[A] body of literary texts that feature a multitude of semiotic modes in the communication and progression of their narratives. Such works are composed not only out of words ... they experiment with the possibilities of book form, playing with the graphic dimensions of text, incorporating images, and testing the limits of the book as a physical and tactile object” (2012, 420)

the main narrative, and elaborate colour coding, illustrates how renewed interest in print experimentation is attracting wide mainstream audiences.

While some of the experimental qualities exhibited in contemporary texts appear as emergent, these texts are also clear successors of early postmodernist post-war experiments such as France's OutilPo movement,⁴⁵ or of experimental modernism: James Joyce's play with cyclical temporalities in *Finnegan's Wake* are, for Dirk Van Hulle, a key source text in Danielewski's own in *Revolutions* (129). Italian Futurism and Russian Cubo-Futurism's preoccupation with technology, modern speeding, and mechanisation are additional, and earlier, influences. While acknowledging these important predecessors, rather than repeating the melancholy truism that "everything has already been done" with the codex form, I maintain that many contemporary experiments indeed *do* push existing boundaries of print. By way of example, their intermedial formats (hybridising print and digital platforms), as well as their composition and diffusion on social media platforms such as Twitter, situate their experiments as distinctive artefacts of our particular technocultural moment. Again, these formal qualities are not merely incidental or ornamental: they work both to materially instantiate the neo-Romantic themes and preoccupations that pervade late postmodern crisis fictions; and in many cases emphasise texts as concrete, embodied objects as part of their material and ecological ethos.

⁴⁵ Founded in Paris in 1960 by Francois Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau, the OutilPo group (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*) explored the use of formal constraints and repetitions. "The concept of potential literature is founded on a paradoxical principle: that through the use of a formal constraint the writer's creative energy is liberated. The work which results may be 'complete' in itself, but it will also gesture at all the other work that could be potentially generated using that constraint" (Elkin and Esposito i-ii). Danielewski's *Leaves* and *Revolutions*, as well as British author Stephen Harper's *The Raw Shark Texts*, are examples of recent literary experiments that explore or reinvent OutilPo play with constraint, while exploring the possibilities for extending print through digital practices and platforms.

Transatlantic Romantic legacies

To historically anchor my inquiry into late postmodern figurations of crisis and the legacy of transatlantic Romantic ideas in these, it is crucial to draw salient distinctions between American and European Romanticisms, while identifying how scholars have understood these movements as mutually informing one another.⁴⁶ Rather than viewing Romanticism/s as movements anchored within national literary and linguistic traditions, scholars including Packer and Patrick Keane consider Romantic aesthetics, poetics and discourses through a transnationalist lens (if admittedly one that overwhelmingly focuses on English-language Romanticisms, to the detriment of a multilinguistic and more broadly comparative approach). Uniting Romantic movements, most agree, are their critical approaches to Enlightenment narratives of scientific and teleological progress. Most intellectual historians argue that Romanticism emerges in the context of sociopolitical, industrial, scientific Revolutions and their attendant upheavals. Newman et al. maintain that “a feeling of historical vertigo” unified members of transatlantic romanticism (14). Talmon, similarly identifying the Romantic era as one of disorientating change, writes:

[There were few who did not feel that]...the forces released by...the French and the Industrial [Revolutions]...were driving the world irresistibly onwards upon a course of tremendous changes. Some felt the exalting hope that the wagon of history was being precipitated to a preordained, final station where scientific rationality and social justice would replace irrational tradition... Others were possessed by an apocalyptic dread of chaos and horror. Then there were those who with

⁴⁶ Contrary to accounts of a “parental” relationship between European and American Romanticism (the latter the child who passively inherits the tenets and practices of the former), scholars including Newman et al. point to mutual influences: a more complex picture than the received account in which Coleridgean re-interpretations of Kantian transcendental philosophy are in turn summarily adopted by Emerson and New England Transcendentalists. If Coleridge’s re-interpretive distinction between “The Reason and the Understanding” would indeed have a major impact on Emerson’s own transcendental propositions, “it was just as true that Americans and their radical ideas had acted and continued to act reciprocally on [European writers including] Wordsworth. In short, transatlantic cultural exchange was multidirectional, with writers of all nationalities influencing one another, but that exchange took place within the defining structure of Britain’s imperial and cultural dominance” (Newman et al. 14).

mixed feelings endeavoured to tame the violent forces which had been unleashed. (11)

Talmon identifies here an inherent antinomian spirit in Romanticism: one swinging between “exalting hope” and “apocalyptic dread”. Characterised by utopian speculative élan at the early stages of Revolution, the Romantic voice swings to anti-utopian disillusionment and dread:

Revolution (abortive) and Romanticism—the two salient features of the age—are to a large extent explained by the fact that expectations, intensified by a traumatic experience of break with the past, by far outran the realities of objective change. Hence the proneness of the disappointed to revolt and the romantic quest of the bewildered for personal and collective identity; hence too the tremendous endeavours of philosophers and Utopian dreamers to offer a total and foolproof explanation of social, not to say cosmic, reality, combining diversity with unity, change with continuity. (12)

Romanticism thus emerges in response to (and as part of) profound upheavals or “traumatic experience[s] of break with the past”, and accompanying desires to imagine alternative, utopian spaces. As a transtemporal mode, Romanticism seems inherently related to cognitive and environmental upheavals and attempts to representationally account for these. Like late postmodern crisis fiction and the mid-century imaginaries that inform contemporary texts, nineteenth-century Romanticism is frequently marked by antinomian rhetoric, vacillating between utopian hope and dysphoria.⁴⁷

If fantasies of superseding normative subjective bounds pervade many late postmodern fictions, the Romantic Gothic mode re-emerges in contemporary dysphoric accounts of technological and environmental upheavals, and functions as an important rhetorical counterpoint. Adapting identifiably Gothic idioms and themes—the sublime

⁴⁷ Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* (1879) is perhaps the most recognised nineteenth-century critique of Romantic utopias in the American tradition. Many have read the novel as a scathing farce of the Brook Farm commune in Massachusetts, founded by George and Sophia Ripley in the 1840s, and in which fellow Transcendentalists such as Margaret Fuller briefly participated.

and uncanny, haunted houses, monstrous machines, and unrepresentable, posthuman figures—many contemporary crisis fictions offer anti-progressivist accounts of technological development, and frequently as part of their response to the spectre of environmental upheaval. Transatlantic Romantic writers including Mary Shelley, Coleridge, ETA Hoffmann, Poe, or Hawthorne figure as important sources in contemporary experiments such as Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), a digital-age haunted house story, and Marcus's *Notable American Women* (2002), whose uncanny, un-representable figures evoke the *unheimlich* characters of Gothic tales from Hoffmann or Shelley. As Botting notes, the Gothic mode has a long history as Romantic counterpoint to Enlightenment rationalism: “[G]hosts and spectres kept on returning in Gothic romances, popular dramas and spectacular entertainments” (2008, 7). Botting identifies the uncanny as one Gothic convention that is particularly associated with the upheavals of modernity, calling it an “effect of the physical and ideological disturbances attendant on a move to commercial and industrial economic organization, middle-class society ... and bourgeois individualism” (*Ibid.*). He goes on to argue: “The uncanny, less a return from the past, becomes an effect of a disturbed present, a present affected by massive upheavals and transformations. It is less the reverence for a lost or suppressed human nature (against the artifices of modern culture) and more a product of scientific and technical innovation” (*Ibid.*). Late postmodern iterations of the Gothic read as attempts to come to representational grips with a “disturbed present” (*Ibid.*). Again, such tropes appear, in these profoundly antinomian and often speculative fictions, as the dysphoric flipside of utopianism.

How might one trace meaningful historical differences between American and European Romantic movements? While American Transcendentalism shares European Romanticism's critical regard of Enlightenment ideals, the former's critique emerged in a

profoundly sectarian context. Transcendentalism partially formulated itself as an antiauthoritarian response to the Unitarian church and its failure to break with Lockean empiricism in favour of intuitive Reason.⁴⁸ Buell observes:

Transcendentalism served as an expression of radical discontent within American Unitarianism ... arising from objections to Unitarian epistemology and ... Lockean psychology... Unitarians ... held that God and his laws are apprehended by rational reflection on the natural creation and the revelations of scripture, rather than by direct intuition. To the young Unitarian radicals of the 1820s and 1830s, however, this position ... seemed to cut man off from God. Stimulated by post-Kantian thought, as interpreted chiefly by Goethe, Carlyle, and especially Coleridge, they began about 1830 to contend, with the aid of a distinction adapted from Coleridge, that in addition to his “understanding” or capacity for empirical reasoning man has a higher mental faculty, or “Reason”, which enables him to perceive spiritual truth intuitively. (1973, 4–5)

For Buell and others, Coleridge is an essential link between American and European Romantic schools. Packer notes that Coleridge’s “Aids to Reflection” (1825) “helped to spark the Transcendentalist movement when it was published in an American edition in 1829” (11). Emerson was also strongly attracted to the ideas of Swedish thinker Emanuel Swedenborg, an early influence on Coleridge. “The doctrine of ‘correspondence’, or the belief that each object in the sensible world corresponds to some truth in the moral world, offered hope that nature itself might be a storehouse of meanings more coherent and more universally accessible than Scripture” (Packer 48). As discussed later, neo-Platonic, Romantic theories positing correspondential relationships between forms of nature and art or architecture would influence mid-twentieth century countercultural, neo-Romantic figures including Buckminster Fuller, hailing from a Transcendentalist and Unitarian

⁴⁸ The American Transcendentalists primarily located divinity in encounters with the natural world: a concept inherited from the European writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Keats. They were also heavily influenced by figures such as Madame de Staël, whose writings on German Romanticism, idealism, and Kantian transcendental philosophy in *De L’Allemagne* (1810-1813) were read avidly by Emerson and Margaret Fuller in particular. The influence of Unitarianism and its emphasis on immanent divinity, self-knowledge and transcendental philosophy are some of the key features bringing together the work of such writers, and arguably distinguishing them from non-Transcendentalist American Romantics such as Hawthorne, Poe, or Melville.

family made most famous by his great-aunt, writer and *Dial* editor Margaret Fuller. One might easily consider the Transcendentalists as the young nation's original counterculture. Citing Edward Everett Hale, an early observer of the spirit of revolt coursing through Harvard's Divinity School in the 1820s, Packer describes "the young New Englanders of liberal training rush[ing] into life, certain that the next half-century was to see a complete moral revolution in the world ..." (19). This American Romantic revolt would have important twentieth-century, neo-Romantic successors, including the Beats and technoutopians considered in Chapter One.⁴⁹

The transnationalist approach to American Romantic writing is not merely a matter of current scholarly practice; it is also an important aspect of how many nineteenth-century writers framed their artistic projects. Samantha Harvey underlines Emerson's ambitions for a movement that would have potentially global reach:

Transatlantic Transcendentalism ... embodied several modes of crossing boundaries: geographic, temporal, and metaphysical, crossing over from the sensory to the supersensory world. The belief that the mind could know what lay beyond the five senses was a central tenet of the movement. Emerson described Coleridge as a 'restless human soul bursting the narrow boundaries of antique speculation and mad to know the secrets of that unknown world, on whose brink it is sure it is standing.' (13)

Harvey posits that Transatlantic Transcendentalism evades common periodisations, thus concurring with the methodological approach taken here in untiming the Romantic. While she argues that Transatlantic Transcendentalism extends its influence "through the early decades of the twentieth century", this thesis sees it

⁴⁹ Packer describes how Transcendentalism understood itself in what we would today call "countercultural" terms from its beginnings in Harvard reading groups: "When ... Emerson ... tried to explain the origins of the movement everyone was calling 'transcendentalism', he found himself describing a cluster of discontents. The young people who form 'the party of the Future' are, he admitted, 'stiff, heady, and rebellious' and united only by the ferocity of the rejections: 'They hate tolls, taxes, turnpikes, banks, hierarchies, governors, yea, almost laws'" (1).

enduring throughout the twentieth century and continuing as a legacy in contemporary American writing. It aligns itself with Asselineau's "Transcendentalist constant," his assertion that many of the ideas and poetic idioms of Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Dickinson, or Walt Whitman continue to shape contemporary literary culture.⁵⁰ This is also true, I maintain, of other Romantic influences and modes, including the Gothic.

Distinguishing European and American traditions

Surprisingly absent from existing studies on the heritage of Romanticism in American postmodern literature are attempts to parse out specifically *American* traditions haunting the latter. For scholars including Lawrence Buell, F.O. Matthiessen, and Tony Tanner, American Transcendentalism is not simply a reformulation of European Romantic concerns, but in many respects constitutes a distinctive tradition. For Tanner, problems of spatiality offer one important point of distinction between European and American Romanticisms. Transcendentalist writing emphasises wide, open spaces and attendant fantasies of losing oneself in these, while also achieving an abstracted communion with distant individuals: "In [Thoreau, Whitman, and Emerson] we find a similar 'centrifugal' tendency; a dilation of self, which can become an abandoning of self, into the surrounding vastness" (87). Buell makes similar observations, arguing that American Transcendentalists aimed, contrary to European Romantics, for a largely impersonal, anonymous, and universalising "I" voice: "Their interest quickly shifted ... from phenomena which emphasized personal uniqueness to that which evidenced the divinity or universality of the individual" (1973, 283).

⁵⁰ "Transcendentalism, far from being a dead and irrelevant philosophy confined to the first half of the nineteenth century, is a fertilizing undercurrent, a constant in American literature from Emerson down to our time" (Asselineau 5).

Tanner also identifies important differences between European and American Romantic conceptions of the natural world and human relations with it. Once again, the search for open, boundless space emerges as a particularly American Romantic preoccupation in conceptions of Nature as wildness:

Where the European Romantic, used to the ‘traces of men’, might look forward to an imagined millennium for human society, the American was very aware of increasing depredations of the precious wildness ... His strategy on the whole was to seek out that solitude, those unpeopled landscapes, prescribed by Emerson ... That is why while European Romanticism characteristically looks to the past and to the future, American Romanticism seeks to move out of time altogether, out of time and into some sort of space. For time means history, and history means ‘traces of men’ and society, and society means not only the loss of ‘that wilder image’ but also the spaces it provided and the limitless freedom to sport in air. (99)

Absent from Tanner’s 1968 analysis is how such accounts of American wilderness, and sublime, supposedly empty space, might be a *necessary* fantasy for those American Romantic writers effacing Native American cultures from their accounts of “Nature”. Imagining the United States as a land of “unpeopled landscapes” appears from a current critical vantage as an expedient fantasy. The imperialist thrust underlying such American Romantic idioms of empty, wild space can no longer be overlooked, as David Mazel notes (xviii). Again, if late postmodern American texts such as Danielewski’s *Revolutions* re-engage the ideal of the United States as “Nature’s Nation”, building narrative development around vast, sublime landscapes, these contemporary texts also train a self-reflexive and critical lens on “Nature”, “wilderness”, and the political trappings of such imagined American spaces. As Chapter Three details, they simultaneously embrace and lambast Romantic ideas about the natural world.

Related to the potentially assimilationist quality inherent in constructs of a free-floating, universalising “I” is the fantasy of freeing oneself from spatiotemporal constraints. Tanner’s earlier identification of Transcendentalist idioms of “sporting in air”

is one that would widely pervade digital-age fantasies of disembodied cyberspace, and also marks much late postmodern discourse about technoculture. Interestingly, Tanner identifies another important metaphor in Transcendentalist writing that has uncanny resonance in digital-age narratives: the web or filament. Allowing individuals to float freely in space while remaining connected to others through invisible threads, Tanner identifies this idiom operating in Dickinson (although, puzzlingly, he deploys masculine pronouns in his analysis of the poet):

That ... image of the spider, drawing the filament out of himself alone, weaving his private web, provides an illuminating analogy for the situation, and secretion, of the American writer. His delight (or is it sometimes his desperation?) is to put together his own unique verbal structure; and in this activity, the ingredients which go into the making of each piece of filament are perhaps less important than the fact of the web itself which sustains the writer in the real and imagined spaces of America. (103)

Filament and web metaphors similarly thrive in technocultural imaginaries of disparate individuals achieving connectivity through virtual platforms, while maintaining their solitude and autonomy. Such models of subjectivity, or “lonely togetherness”, as one protagonist in Dara’s *The Lost Scrapbook* phrases it, are ones that arguably have roots in Transcendentalist idioms.

Chapter structure and presentation

Chapter One considers how mid-twentieth century American countercultural notions about technological development, environmental risk, and stewardship inherit nineteenth-century Romantic ideas. It describes countercultural interest in such ideas as neo-Romantic and early postmodern sources that anticipate late-postmodern figurations of environmental and technological crisis. As cultural historians including Fred Turner note, American digital culture and environmentalist movements developed in conceptually

interpenetrative ways; they were also founded on Romantic ideas, particularly those of the American Transcendentalists. To trace the neo-Romantic nature of twentieth-century countercultural movements, the first chapter considers in detail the *Whole Earth Catalog*, which many identify as a print predecessor to the Internet and a seminal archive of modern environmentalist thought. The chapter also describes a resurgent critical and popular interest in Transcendentalist writing in the mid-twentieth century, offering one explanation for why publications like the *Catalog* seem so strongly indebted to Romantic ideology. Close readings of the *Catalog* focus on its fusing of neo-Romantic notions of organicism, appropriate technology, and systems-theoretical ecology, with constructs of boundless connectivity and anti-establishment self-reliance native to American Transcendentalism. The *Catalog* also advances apocalyptic warnings of potential ecological collapse. These ideas strongly inform digital utopianism and contemporary environmentalist ideas and ethical questions from the late-twentieth century onward. While the subsequent chapters of this thesis consider how late postmodern crisis fictions rework, embrace, and excoriate key transatlantic Romantic ideas, this opening chapter primarily offers a cultural-historical account of how and why late postmodern fiction might approach environmental and technological crises in the particular ways that it does.

The second chapter, “Supersession or Subsumption? American Romantic Transcendence in Technoculture”, offers close comparative readings to unearth the discursive and poetic heritage of American Romantic writing in late postmodern fantasies of digital speeding and technologically mediated transcendence. It examines how late postmodern texts reformulate ideas particularly prominent in American Transcendentalist writing as part of their reckoning with technoculture. This chapter examines not only the utopian imagination of the digital age, but a dystopian counter-discourse in current fictional accounts of technocultural experience. It additionally considers how formal,

narrative, and “intermedial” innovation in Danielewski’s *Revolutions*, Dara’s *Scrapbook*, and Tomasula’s *TOC* re-invest the American Romantic vernacular with a sense of contemporary relevance. These texts employ formal experimentation, moreover, to reinforce or “materially instantiate” narrative play with these American Romantic concerns. Revisiting discourses of personal and spatiotemporal transcendence constituent in early fantasies of digital connectivity, *Scrapbook* and *Revolutions* update constructs and poetic devices important in American Romantic writing. They gesture at a poetic elision between terms of individual and collective subjectivity to designate a universalising “I”, and figuratively supersede normative spatiotemporal experiences to reject linear models of time and teleological progress. Responding to the exponential speeding of technoculture, Dara and Danielewski interpret collective (trans)national American experience in the digital age in ambivalent terms. They point to a blissful dissolution of boundaries between subjectivities, but they also stage nightmarish scenarios of individuals subsumed to an imposing whole.

Chapter Two builds on the scholarship of Lloyd Pratt, Katherine Hayles, and Mark Hansen to explore spatiotemporal overlapping as a practice in *Revolutions*, examining how experimental narratives privilege cyclical and synchronous models of temporality over linear ones. I also draw on Alan Liu’s theory of postmodern historiography to understand how heterogeneous models of temporality might emphasise the pluralistic and highly contingent textures of postmodern historical experience. Catherine Morley’s analysis of a “quest for epic” in contemporary American literature and Amy Hungerford’s discussion of how writers invest literature with authority by deploying religious or spiritual language lacking genuine belief are instrumental in understanding how largely secular accounts of transcendence find themselves imbued with mystical rhetoric.

Chapter Three, “The Ecological Turn”, describes how select late postmodern texts revisit Romantic ideas about environmental stewardship and communion, examining the influence of environmentalism and ecocritical thought on late postmodernism. Both environmentalism and ecocritical thought trace their origins to nineteenth-century literature and philosophy, as well as having important mid-twentieth-century sources. I argue that a narrative preoccupation with ecological responsibility, crisis, and risk, as well as a tendency to represent natural and built environments as concrete social realities sets late postmodern ecocritical texts apart from a more familiarly postmodern emphasis on the natural and built environments as discursive constructs. These narratives emphasise the importance of natural landscapes, plants, and animals, thus displaying an anti-anthropocentric sensibility. They do not adhere to Alan Liu’s assertion that in postmodern texts romantic Nature reads as merely “a screen” (2008, 137). The heritage of nineteenth-century ideas around environmental stewardship and communion, notably from Henry David Thoreau, in contemporary environmentalist thought is important in this late-postmodern ecocritical fiction. However, it also considers how contemporary successors to Thoreau are informed by twentieth-century environmentalist ideas such as systems theories (as exemplified in Brand’s *Catalog*); they also narratively grapple with uniquely twentieth- and twenty-first century problems and phenomena such as toxic waste and plastics. Tracing similarities between nineteenth-century and contemporary accounts of environmental crisis and stewardship, the chapter additionally charts mutations in what “nature” means and does in its late postmodern iterations. I draw from the work of Timothy Morton, Lawrence Buell, Ursula Heise, Iovino and Oppermann and other ecocritical theorists to analyse how postmodern deconstructionist approaches have shaped environmental critical thought and literary expression in more recent years. Finally, this chapter considers how ambient ecological anxieties and pervasive

apocalyptic representations of environmental threats in popular culture might be driving the trend toward a strong ecological orientation in late American postmodern writing.

This discussion carries into Chapter Four, “Cli-Fi and Gothic Nightmares: The Postmodern Sublime Reconsidered”, which traces how late postmodern accounts of sublime experience reintroduce the natural world as an object of terrifying or unsettling incommensurability that persists alongside emergent new technologies. I argue that the sublime re-emerges as an important idiom in figuring the pressures and anxieties of climate change; in late postmodern crisis fiction, however, technology also figures as an important object of sublimity. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* and *Revolutions*, Davis’s *Tour*, Marcus’s *Notable American Women*, and Jennifer Egan’s Twitter story “Black Box” (2012) pair sublime experiences of natural environments with similar experiences of (chiefly digital) technology, thus diverging from earlier critical accounts of postmodern sublimity, which focused almost purely on technological objects or monstrous twentieth-century human catastrophes such as the Nazi Holocaust. I argue that select late postmodern fictional treatments of sublimity question what Lyotard, Tabbi, and others have described as the quasi-erasure of the natural sublime from postmodern representation. They instead revive Romanticism’s preoccupation with natural environments and landscape as sites of sublime experience, placing these alongside technological encounters, which they often figure as a threat to the classical humanist subject. Building from the scholarship of Clayton, Botting, and others, this last chapter compares contemporary fiction to nineteenth-century European and American writings by Shelley (both Mary and Percy), Hoffmann, Wordsworth, and Poe, in an attempt to demonstrate how the sublime postmodern in the former texts strongly rehashes Romantic-era debates. These notably adopt Romantic Gothic narrative conventions as

part of their discussion of contemporary cognitive and environmental crisis, and alternate between describing sublime experience in nihilistic and transcendent terms.

Chapter One

Neo-Romantic Intermediation:

Browsing the Whole Earth Catalog

I see God in / the instruments and the mechanisms that / work / reliably...Yes, God is a verb, / the most active, / connoting the vast harmonic /reordering of the universe / from unleashed chaos of energy. / And there is born unheralded / a great natural peace, / not out of exclusive / pseudo-static security / but of out of including, refining, dynamic balancing.... / Therefore it will be an entirely new era / when man finds himself confronted / with direct experience...

—Buckminster Fuller, “No More Secondhand God” (*Whole Earth Catalog*, Fall 1968)

Nature is a mutable cloud which is always and never the same. She casts the same thought into troops of forms, as a poet makes twenty fables with one moral. Through the bruteness and toughness of matter, a subtle spirit bends all things to its own will ... Nature is an endless combination and repetition of a very few laws.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History” (1841)

If you don't mind my asking, I said, as the man peered around an elm trunk...Do you have any idea...where we are?...Certainly, the man said...while inspecting the tree...Certainly...We're right here.

—Evan Dara, *The Lost Scrapbook* (1995)

In the autumn of 1968, the Californian biologist and countercultural entrepreneur Stewart Brand launched an iconoclastic publication that would go on to win the US National Book Award and be identified retrospectively as a seminal document of early American technoculture and contemporary environmentalist thought.⁵¹ Set against a black

⁵¹ The *Catalog* won the award in 1971 for its June issue of the same year, misleadingly titled *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*. It would in fact go on to appear in numerous guises, including as “supplements” and spinoff publications, well into the 1990s. Moreover, in 1993 Brand co-founded *Wired*, the seminal mainstream publication of popular digital culture. See Turner and Kirk for in-depth publication histories of the *Catalog* and for discussions of its legacy in both digital culture and environmentalism in the US.

backdrop, the cover of the 64-page, inaugural *Whole Earth Catalog*⁵² displays NASA's first satellite image of the Earth, framed by the *Catalog*'s title in plain white lettering; its subtitle, "access to tools", appears in lower-case letters. Brand opens this first issue of the oversized catalogue with the following statement:

We are as gods and might as well get used to it. So far, remotely done power and glory—as via government, big business, formal education, church—has succeeded to the point where gross obscure actual gains. In response to this dilemma ... a realm of intimate, personal power is developing—power of the individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested. Tools that aid this process are sought and promoted by the WHOLE EARTH CATALOG. (1968, 2, emphasis in original)

Brand's breezy manifesto would continue to appear in subsequent issues, and heralded the *Catalog* as a countercultural, counter-hegemonic publication par excellence. Rather than referring to the fledgling publication as a collection of documents to be passively perused by a traditional reader, Brand defines it and its eclectic contents in active terms; it is a set of "tools" that will allow individual "users"—rather than mere *readers*—to seize control of their educations and destinies, circumventing the centralised powers of government and corporations to instead pursue a new "realm of intimate, personal power". Readers would indeed contribute actively to the *Catalog*'s contents, submitting reviews and suggestions for interesting books or products to include in the listings. As such, and as Fred Turner and others have noted, the *WEC* appears as a print predecessor to the Internet and to digital crowdsourcing techniques (Turner 9). Propagating twentieth-century ideas and movements as eclectic as cybernetics and systems theories, holistic ecology, hypnotherapy, Eastern mysticism, back-to-the-land nomadism, and techno-utopian Buckminster Fuller's organicist design concepts, the *Catalog* is a rich archive of

⁵² Hereafter abbreviated as "*WEC*" or "*Catalog*".

a particular twentieth-century American counterculture. It is also arguably emblematic of an early postmodern moment in American culture: one actively seeking to question and unseat hegemonic power structures, assumptions, and discourses.

As Andrew Kirk notes, the *Catalog* embraced “good tools” as “alternate paths” that might counter the damages wrought by mass industry and corporate greed.⁵³ In this sense, it promoted an ethos of “self-reliance” remarkably similar to Emerson’s, but one re-contextualised as a rejection of centralised power and the abuse of industrial and technological forces in the twentieth century.⁵⁴ Moreover, the *Catalog* is named after the iconic image of the Whole Earth, and the idea that our planet operates according to universal natural principles that can be intuitively apprehended and applied to any number of fields or problems. In espousing such an ethos of holistic ecology, and in emphasising the development of “appropriate” technologies designed in accordance with organicist principles as potential solutions to environmental problems, the *Catalog* exposes important ties between environmentalist thought and a burgeoning digital technoculture in the US. Often problematizing environmental risks by suggesting that certain technological tools might restore balance to ecological systems, rather than simply continue to disrupt and degrade these, as mainstream, modern industrial activity had done, the *Catalog* illuminates how technological and environmental systems were

⁵³ As its name suggests, the *Catalog* sold, or suggested points of sale for, a variety of books, pamphlets, and “DIY” products related to orienteering, wilderness survival, organic farming, the construction of geodesic domes and tipis, individual power generators, etc. In this sense, it cannot readily be described as anti-consumerist or anti-capitalist. It espouses an “alternative” consumerism encouraging readers to buy and make tools outside of mainstream markets. This DIY ethos is later associated with Silicon Valley entrepreneurship, and the rise of companies such as Apple. Co-founders Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak have frequently been depicted as countercultural geniuses defying corporate tech giants such as IBM. Even after becoming publicly traded, Apple continues to stress their countercultural origins and image, and not un-ironically, since Silicon Valley tech companies are frequently blamed for problems such as rapid gentrification and widening income inequality in Northern California.

⁵⁴ Charlie Gere notes that early theories on cybernetic and ecological systems, popularised in and by countercultural publications including the *WEC*, bore a distinctively utopian quality that imagined new technology and its related industrial activities in benevolent terms; they “rebranding” these following the unprecedented horrors of mechanised war, Cold-War anxiety, and wide-scale industrial pollution: “[C]ounterculture recast multimedia and digital tech as a peaceful, even utopian means to bring people together, taking it away from its militaristic postwar context” (29).

frequently thought together and through each other from the mid-twentieth century onward.⁵⁵ When considered as an artefact, this collage of texts and images from mostly nonfictional sources illuminates the syncretic development of modern environmentalist thought and early technoculture's conceptualisation of "appropriate technologies", both of which would influence the creators of digital systems such as the World Wide Web.⁵⁶ The *Catalog* thus allows us to understand more clearly contemporary literary figurations of ecological and technological upheavals. Simultaneously advancing progressive technology as the utopian key to a new sort of society, issuing jeremiad-like warnings about ecological collapse, and pondering the daunting task of balancing human and nonhuman systems, *WEC* helps to elucidate why late postmodern literary meditations on ecological risks, digital-age speeding, and their effects frequently imagine these contemporary crises in overlapping and antinomian terms.

Twentieth-century ideas such as systems theories and cybernetics permeate Brand's *Catalog*. One might therefore assume that the *WEC* reflects an intellectual culture native or even exclusive to that century. However, this chapter argues that the *Catalog* is, in key respects, also deeply informed by transatlantic literary Romanticism, and especially so by American Transcendentalist idioms and rhetoric. The *WEC* and its eclectic contents reveal a strongly neo-Romantic current infusing the intellectual fabric of American counterculture and to some degree informing systems theoretical approaches in general. Treating the *Catalog*'s painstakingly curated collage of textual excerpts and images as an occasion for close readings, this chapter unearths familiar nineteenth-century ideas that circulated widely in transatlantic Romantic literary texts at the heart of

⁵⁵ Interestingly, from its earliest days the web was described as an "ecology" or "ecosystem" by designers who had absorbed systems-theoretical conceptions of technology. The vocabulary and rhetoric of contemporary environmentalism and of web design/management is therefore often strikingly similar.

⁵⁶ Tim Berners-Lee remarks of his open-source platform: "I designed it for a social effect— to help people work together ... We develop trust across the miles and distrust around the corner" (Berners-Lee and Fischetti 133).

Brand's project. In particular, the *WEC*'s most important and prominent rubric, "Whole Systems", betrays its debt to Romantic and Transcendentalist fantasies of technologically facilitated connections between spatiotemporally distant individuals and places, or of transcending personal and spatiotemporal boundaries; to the notion of a correspondential relationship between natural forms and human constructions such as architecture and technological design; to the sense that universalist forms of mind might inform the aforementioned design principles; to constructs of holism that emphasise visually grasping "whole systems"; to a focus on the natural nonhuman world and debates about human relations with it; to anti-establishment ideas of self-reliance; and, finally, to a deep mistrust of teleological accounts of progress that breeds a recurrent interest in nonlinear models of spatiotemporal experience. While European Romantic writers and thinkers including Immanuel Kant, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth shared these preoccupations, this particular configuration of ideas is especially significant in American Transcendentalist writing. In the *Catalog*, these Romantic and especially Transcendentalist literary heritages inform the ideas of figures including Buckminster Fuller, John Muir, Gregory Bateson, John Cage, and the early-twentieth-century British writer Olaf Stapledon.

This chapter thus considers the *Catalog* as a representative archive highlighting how Romantic ideas fuelled mid-century American countercultural movements and their own approaches to technology, environment, human subjectivity, community, and the relations among these. It compares the *WEC* to nineteenth-century Romantic writings from authors including Coleridge, Emerson, and Thoreau in an attempt to clarify the intellectual and ideological ties connecting the *Catalog* to its nineteenth-century literary predecessors. Many of these same preoccupations and constructs would in turn inform early digital culture and contemporary environmentalist thought. Late postmodern

narratives about ecological and technological change emerge, in this light, as registering multiple, intervening influences and periods. In the complex intellectual heritage roughly mapped by this research, the neo-Romantic countercultural movements of the mid-to-late twentieth century emblematised in the *Catalog* are both an intermediate and an intermediating moment lying between late postmodern crisis narratives and nineteenth-century literary Romanticism.

What sort of work does this chapter *not* propose to do? It is necessary to delineate the bounds of the analysis offered here. This chapter does not claim that the *Catalog* constitutes the only, nor even the central, archive for how American mid-century countercultures inherited Romantic and Transcendentalist ideas, nor how these ideas might subsequently inform late postmodern crisis fictions. It instead treats the *WEC* as a set piece from a particular branch of American mid-century counterculture that helps us to more easily envisage the Romantic legacy and its irregular, untimed trajectories. Furthermore, it offers a starting point, rather than an exhaustive study, for understanding some of the discursive and ideological ties between these disparate periods and movements. It draws selectively from the original *Catalog's* early and late issues to explore some of the key Romantic concepts noted above, describing how these are recontextualised in countercultural imaginaries. It does not, as such, offer a thorough survey of the *Catalog's* content (nor of Brand's derivative publications) and their potential ties to nineteenth-century ideas—although such a venture would no doubt prove useful to both literary scholars and cultural historians.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ How is “counterculture” understood and narrowed here? Citing Doyle and Braunstein, Kirk underlines that “by the early 1970s the term had been reduced to a catchall for all ‘1960s era political, social, or cultural dissent, encompassing any action from smoking pot at a rock concert to offering a cop.’” (ix). While many of the people most involved in the *WEC* disliked the term “counterculture” and did not identify as “hippies”, Brand’s *Catalog* “was clearly a product of the counterculture movement and the vital ‘countercultural mode’ that helped shape American history far beyond fashion, music, drugs, and sex” (*Ibid.*). I follow Kirk and Turner in considering the *WEC* as a publication emblematic of a *specific* branch of mid-twentieth century American counterculture: an elite, educated, primarily white and male, Northern

American Renaissance: Transcendentalist revivals after World War II

Why did American countercultural movements of the mid twentieth-century enthusiastically take up and reformulate many of the ideas and concerns that dominate transatlantic Romantic writing? How can we tease out their complex legacy in late postmodern figurations of digital-age subjectivity, environmental crisis, and ethical concerns?

First, the mid-twentieth century saw a particularly strong revival and canonisation of Transcendentalist writing in the United States. Works such as Emerson's *Essays*, Thoreau's *Walden*, the poetry of Dickinson and Whitman enjoyed renewed popular and scholarly interest. F.O. Matthiessen's seminal monograph, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941) spurred a new generation of scholarly interest in nineteenth-century American literary culture. This new wave of scholarship supplied a core set of idioms and themes through which to understand what Matthiessen exalted as the "American Renaissance": democratic universalism and organicism were two of the most important. Other influential critics such as M.H. Abrams, René Wellek, and Harold Bloom, working in counterpoint to New Criticism's dismissal of Romantic writing and exegetic techniques, were equally influential in generating renewed enthusiasm for nineteenth-century transatlantic Romantic studies.⁵⁸ Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953) and *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), Wellek's *The Concept of Romanticism in Literary Scholarship* (1949), Bloom's *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic*

Californian one informed by the academic intellectualism of Stanford University and the burgeoning tech culture of Silicon Valley.

⁵⁸ New Critics such as T.S. Eliot excoriated Romanticism for sentimentalism and subjectivism, as Eldridge notes: "[U]p until at least the mid-1960s, Romanticism was criticized for sentimentalism ... [and] a second, stronger indictment of Romanticism as subjective evasion has developed ... under the influence of late Marxist theories of the influence of social structures on artistic production ... Thus John Barrell charges that the composure or balance that is represented, he thinks, as the outcome of the isolate imagination's encounter with nature in the typical Romantic poem is an image of human accomplishment that serves not the interests of persons in general, but the sectarian interests of the middle class and of men" (5–7).

Poetry, and other works enduringly influenced scholarly approaches to Romanticism and Transcendentalism well into the twentieth century.

Moreover, in the late 1950s and 1960s, a new generation of non-academic readers also rediscovered the writings of Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau and Dickinson thanks to new inexpensive and portable paperback editions of works such as Whitman's *Leaves*. The Viking Press 1959 edition of *Leaves*, edited and with an Introduction by Malcolm Cowley, claims to faithfully reproduce Whitman's original 1855 version. It also became an informal emblem for the beat and hippie generations.⁵⁹ It was read avidly alongside countercultural twentieth-century works such as Allan Ginsberg's "America" and "Howl", both of which are deeply influenced by Whitman.⁶⁰ In the engraved daguerreotype cover illustration of the author, Whitman's self-consciously lackadaisical pose makes his countercultural appeal apparent.⁶¹ With tilted hat, one hand resting on hip and the other in his pocket, abundant beard, shirt unbuttoned at the collar and shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbow, Whitman could easily pass for a proto-beatnik or hippie. Cowley notes in his Introduction:

[O]ne cannot help feeling that [Whitman] was a predecessor of the beats: he had the beard, the untrimmed hair, and although his costume was different, it must be regarded as the 1860 equivalent of sweatshirt and sandals. Some of his conduct also resembled that of the Beat Generation. He stayed out of the rat race, he avoided the squares...he was 'real gone', he was 'far out'; and he was writing poems in what Lawrence Lipton calls the 'open', free-swinging style that is prized in Beat Generation literature. (Whitman and Cowley 1959, xxix)

⁵⁹ Whitman's poetry is cited and enthusiastically recommended in popular countercultural texts including R.A. Durr's *Poetic Vision and the Psychedelic Experience* (1970) and Ram Dass's (formerly Harvard professor Richard Apter's) *Be Here Now* (1971).

⁶⁰ For Ezra Greenspan, "Ginsberg was arguably the greatest devotee of Whitman among his generation of poets" (92). In "America", Ginsberg directly references Whitman: "What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache self conscious looking at the full moon" ("America", cited in Whitman and Greenspan 92). Greenspan notes: "Whitmanesque characteristics are conspicuous in this poem: long, supple lines that blur the boundary between prose and verse; erotic plays of words and images (and, most particularly, those of a homoerotic nature)—all in service to a passionate search for America" (*Ibid*). Also see John Seery, *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman* (2011).

⁶¹ As Cowley underlines, Whitman had carefully chosen the image for the cover of the original 1855 edition.

In addition to drawing connections between Whitman's freestyle, countercultural idiom and those of the Beat and hippie generations, Cowley's Introduction brought back to public attention the first edition of *Leaves* as the authoritative version and a "buried masterpiece of American writing", suggesting that it constituted the freshest and least-adulterated version of Whitman's best-known work (x). It also offered to a general readership new interpretations of *Leaves* and in particular a new reading of "Song of Myself". Cowley argued that Whitman's poems were related to, if not influenced by, key works of European Romanticism and philosophy, as well as to Eastern mysticism and sacred non-western texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Most of [these sources] he could not have read, because they were not yet written, or not published, or not translated into English. That other list might include the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *Upanishads* ... Blake's prophetic books ... Rimbaud's *Illuminations* ... Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, as well as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* ... "Song of Myself" should be judged, I think, as one of the great inspired (and sometimes insane) prophetic works that have appeared at intervals in the Western world ... But the system of doctrine suggested by the poem is more Eastern than Western, it includes notions like metempsychosis and karma ... (xi-xii)

Amid a strong and growing interest in Buddhist, Hindu, and other non-western spiritual traditions and practices, Cowley's new interpretations of Whitman's poetry, and his connecting of *Leaves* to ideals propagated by the spiritual traditions of the East, contributed toward the nineteenth-century poet being received as a fresh voice who seemed remarkably contemporary and uncannily relevant. Even while admitting that Whitman may not have been exposed to Eastern spiritual texts such as the *Upanishids*,

Cowley claims an almost intuitive affinity between these and the American poet's ideas.⁶²

Other literary critics writing during the late 1960s and early 1970s observed how Romantic and Transcendentalist writing was embraced as part of a strong neo-Romantic élan in the American counterculture. Some even drew cultural-historical ties between nineteenth-century "countercultural" movements and twentieth-century successors. Lawrence Buell identifies salient parallels between the countercultural movements of the midcentury and the reformist, anti-establishment spirit of Transcendentalism:

In its liberal, upper-middle-class origins and its short-lived but colorful exuberance, marked by insistence on personal freedom and spiritual reform, the Transcendentalist [movement] strongly resembles the revolution of sensibility which we have been witnessing among educated young people in our own time. Thoreau may not have been the first hippie, but he is justly cited as a precedent for 'Consciousness III', and unjustly neglected aspects of Transcendentalism ... are now being taken more seriously than they had been for many years. (8)

Writing in 1973, just six years after 1967's Summer of Love, Buell not only identifies resemblances between the "revolution of sensibility" among educated young people of his own moment and the reformist, anti-establishment ethos driving the Transcendentalist one of antebellum New England letters. He also observes important trends in literary reception, noting that Transcendentalist ideas and preoccupations are "being taken more seriously than they had been for many years". In the writings of nineteenth-century Romantics, and especially American Transcendentalists, mid-century counterculture saw many of its own preoccupations mirrored.

The relation between these periods is, however, arguably more complex than one of mere resemblance. It is reasonable to posit that the literary and cultural heritage of

⁶² Cowley was not necessarily correct in assuming that Whitman had not been exposed to key texts of Eastern mysticism, since they were read with interest by some of the New England Transcendentalists who would so greatly influence Whitman. For example, his predecessor Thoreau notes his inspiring reading of the "Bhagvat Geeta" in *Walden* (339).

nineteenth-century Romanticism had in fact quietly informed and shaped these preoccupations from the outset; that Romantic ideas and discourses existed as undercurrents in American popular and literary culture, only to resurge in the neo-Romantic élan that permeated the Beat, hippie, “appropriate technology”, and back-to-the-land movements.

Condensing Romantic ideas into a Catalog

Before probing in broad terms how the *Catalog*'s debates around progressive technologies, new forms of connectivity mediated through these, environmental degradation and balance might illuminate ties between nineteenth-century Romantic writing and late postmodern crisis fiction, I will first point to concrete textual examples to offer initial evidence of such a bridge. The following excerpts are derived from the 1971 “last issue” of the *WEC*'s first iteration and one entry dedicated to early twentieth-century British science fiction writer Olaf Stapledon. The listing includes excerpts from Stapledon's *Star Maker* (1937); it also mentions his earlier novel *Last and First Men* (1930). The Stapledon section appears on the bottom half of a page entitled “Cosmos/Whole Systems”, sharing the page with extracts from photograph-centric publications such as *Andromeda Galaxy*, the *Hubble Atlas of Galaxies*, and satellite images of these interstellar spaces: all fresh arenas for the mid-century utopian imaginary.


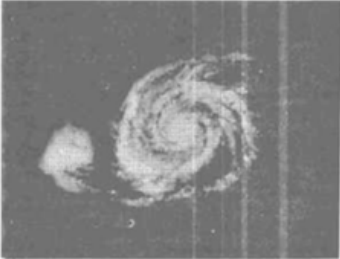
	<p>The Hubble Atlas of Galaxies</p> <p><i>This book is a series of superb photographs which is the definition of Edwin Hubble's classification of galaxies. Galaxies come in a variety of shapes from round blurry ones through the familiar spiral in Andromeda to fantastic blazing pinwheels like M101.</i></p> <p><i>Hubble has lined them up in a sequence according to shape. The meaning of this sequence has not yet been determined. It may indicate a series of stages in the life of one galaxy which progresses from blurred youngsters to majestic spiral or vice versa. More likely vice versa; since the spirals contain hot young blue stars which we know will burn out in a few million years or so, while the blurry ones contain many ancient red giants. It is also possible that the sequence is not an age sequence at all, but merely reflects conditions at that place in the universe when that galaxy was formed.</i></p> <p><i>But besides being a tool for scientists, this book is like a guided tour through our own miraculous universe. When this planet gets you down, leaf through the Atlas and feast your spirit on galaxy after galaxy, as beautiful and varied as snow flakes. Some galaxies are so far away that the graininess of the photograph shows in the blow up. Some photographs show small blurred objects in the background which one suddenly realizes are more galaxies.</i></p> <p><i>[Reviewed by Jenny Despres Suggested by Jordan Belson]</i></p>	<p>The Hubble Atlas of Galaxies Allan Sandage 1961; 50 plates</p> <p>\$10.00 postpaid from: Carnegie Institute of Washington 1530 P Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20005</p> <p>or WHOLE EARTH CATALOG</p> 
<p>Star Maker</p> <p><i>A man's consciousness unwillingly departs his body and his planet. Once in space he accomplishes willed travel in search of Star Maker. His journey takes him into the minds of other planetary beings; a company of these travel together and witness countless civilizations; eventually they participate in a combined consciousness of worlds that in time embraces the stars as well; this leads to galactic and cosmic consciousness and the culminating encounter with Star Maker.</i></p> <p><i>Jordan Belson, who I trust in these matters, asserts that it is a true vision, that Stapledon's whole life pointed at attaining it, and that the book will be used and discussed for centuries. This Dover edition includes an earlier Stapledon story, "Last and First Men".</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">—H.S.B.</p>	<p>The sheer beauty of our planet surprised me. It was a huge pearl, set in spangled ebony. It was naïveté, it was an opal. No, it was far more lovely than any jewel. Its patterned coloring was more subtle, more ethereal. It displayed the delicacy and brilliance, the intricacy and harmony of a live thing. Strange that in my remoteness I seemed to feel, as never before, the vital presence of Earth as of a creature alive but traced and obscurely yearning to wake.</p> <p>•</p> <p>The sport of disembodied flight among the stars must surely be the most exhilarating of all athletic exercises. It was not without danger; but its danger, as we soon discovered, was psychological, not physical. In our bodiless state, collision with celestial objects mattered little. Sometimes, in the early stages of our adventure, we plunged by accident heading into a star. Its interior world, of course, be inconceivably hot, but we experienced merely brilliance.</p> <p>•</p> <p>The psychological dangers of the sport were grave. We soon discovered that disheartening mental fatigue, less, all tended to reduce our powers of enjoyment. More than once we found ourselves immobilized by</p>	<p>"When the cosmos wakes, if ever she does, she will find herself not the single beloved of her maker, but merely a little bubble adrift on the boundless and bottomless ocean of being."</p> <p>•</p> <p>Almost certainly, the star's whole physical behaviour is normally experienced as a blissful, an ecstatic, an ever successful pursuit of formal beauty. This minded world were able to discover through their own most formalistic aesthetic experience. In fact it was through this experience that they first made contact with vaster mind.</p> <p>•</p> <p>We, or rather I, now experienced the slow drift of the galaxies much as a man feels the swing of his own limbs. From my score of viewpoints I observed the great snowstorms of many million galaxies, streaming and circling, and ever withdrawing farther apart from one another with the relentless "expansion" of ages. But though the vastness of space was increasing in relation to the size of galaxies and stars and worlds, to me, with my composites, scattered</p>

Figure 1: The “Star Maker” entry, *WEC* 1971, 5.

In an editorial blurb, Brand summarises *Star Maker*'s plot:

A man's consciousness unwillingly departs his body and his planet. Once in space he accomplishes willed travel in search of Star Maker. His journey takes him into the minds of other planetary beings; a company of these travel together and witness countless civilizations; eventually they participate in a combined consciousness of worlds that in time embraces the stars as well; this leads to galactic and cosmic consciousness and the culminating encounter with Star Maker. (*WEC* 1971, 5)

Featured excerpts from *Star Maker*, as well as Brand's own glossing of the text cited above, tightly condense some of the neo-Romantic and Transcendentalist ideas that permeate the *WEC*. While many of Stapledon's themes—time travel, interstellar voyages, extra-terrestrial beings—draw directly from familiar sci-fi conventions, this particular set of preoccupations also pervade nineteenth-century Romantic writing, and particularly the work of New England Transcendentalists such as Emerson. As Chapter Two explores,

many of these ideas resurge in more recent, late postmodern fictional accounts of technologically mediated communion and non-normative spatiotemporal experiences.

In the following excerpt from Stapledon's book, the protagonist witnesses a "Big Bang" moment in which initial cosmic unity gives way to individual "fragments" of consciousness; as a result, distinctions between individual and collective minds are troublingly "hurled apart", yet each individual shard of consciousness retains a "memory and a longing" for "the single spirit of the whole":

From all the coincident and punctual centres of power, light leapt and blazed. The cosmos exploded, actualizing its potentiality of space and time. The centres of power, like fragments of a bursting bomb, were hurled apart. But each one retained in itself, as a memory and a longing, the single spirit of the whole; and each mirrored in itself aspects of all others throughout all the cosmical space and time (5).

Stapledon's concept of the "single spirit of the whole" infusing individual minds recalls ideals of universal forms and mind widely circulated in nineteenth-century writing. In essays such as "History" (1841), Emerson in particular espouses the notion that universal ideas permeate all civilisations and historical periods. He suggests that "great" men in historically disparate periods tap into this universal, original mind through works of art, philosophy, and architecture. "There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same ... What Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen any man, he can understand. Who hath access to this universal mind, is a party to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent" (*Essays I*, 3).

Imagining a universal mind that each discrete life form "retain[s] in itself", Stapledon also figures individual minds blissfully converging and communing with others in ways that echo nineteenth-century Romantic precedents, and prefigure digital-age fantasies of technologically mediated communion that produces "hive-mind" forms

of knowledge.⁶³ Stapledon's protagonist observes: "Though the pronoun 'I' now applied to us all collectively, the pronoun 'we' also applied to us. In one respect, namely unity of consciousness, we were indeed a single experiencing individual; yet at the same time we were in a very important and delightful manner distinct from one another" (*WEC* 1971, 5). We can compare such a fantasy to Walt Whitman's poetic narrator in "Song of Myself", who claims to tap into and poetically ventriloquize the myriad experiences and minds of disparate individuals through the mediating poetic force of *Leaves* itself: "I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise; ... / One of the Great Nation, the nation of many nations, the smallest the same, and the largest the same ..." (Whitman 1855, 40). This fantasy marks, in turn, late postmodern technocultural narratives that figuratively elide individual and collective experience, as Chapter Two explores in detail. The following passage from Danielewski's *Revolutions*, for example, linguistically confounds the "I" and the "we" in ways similar to both Stapledon and Whitman, notably through the paradoxical deployment of the pronoun "US" and the ambiguous neologism, "allone": "We're allways here. And overcome by / no distances, surrounding, fastening US to / The City ... Just two / for the World. Relying allone on a course / of unity" (Sam 176). It is the paradox of these "just two" somehow representing and experiencing the world "on a course of unity" that poetically and thematically ties Danielewski's ambitious experiment to Transcendentalist writing.

In these aforementioned works, eliding individuality and tapping into other minds requires technological, and frequently *textual*, mediation. For Gillian Silverman, nineteenth-century literary culture was highly preoccupied with book reading and its

⁶³ If Stapledon's conceptualisation of collective mind forged through a divine power might also be related to other spiritual and philosophical traditions, including the Christian ideal of the church as a collective body, I relate it to specifically Transcendentalist idioms of individual consciousness eliding into and complicatedly inhabiting collective counterparts, confounding and troubling "I-ness" and "we-ness" in ways that are quite specific. It is also qualitatively different from chiefly European notions of Romantic individuality, which do not emphasise such an elision so strongly.

capacity to “precipitate fantasies of communion—between reader and author, between reader and character, and . . . between like-minded readers”. This fantasy of accessing, or even losing oneself in, other minds through reading, writing, or other mediated moments of transcendence has roots in nineteenth-century ideas, she argues. Building on the ideas of Henri Bergson, she suggests that American Romantic writers imagined “reading, like love, [as] an activity ‘in which the individuating boundaries that separate subjects . . . are erased” (18). Silverman later compares these nineteenth-century fantasies with digital-age reiterations of it:

Reading has been historically valued . . . precisely for the way it *inhibits* identity and coherent selfhood. The psychic and bodily communion fostered by the practice of reading allows subjects to bask in a sense of fusion or oneness both with others and with the material book itself . . . The Web with its variegated possibilities for ‘linking’ may be capable of creating a similar condition, particularly when the aim of the user is fellowship rather than mere information gathering. I would suggest, then, that to the extent that electronic technologies cater to the desire for sociality, they continue to intensify rather than counteract the age-old work of the book. (151)

In Silverman’s account, the digital-age fantasy of subverting normative selfhood to meld with other minds reformulates nineteenth-century ideas. She relates nineteenth-century American writing’s depictions of individuals connecting across time and space through reading to digital-age figurations of the web as a new medium for transcendent and technologically mediated subjectivity.⁶⁴

The *WEC* exemplifies, then, an intermediating moment in the transmission of such Romantic fantasies of tech-fuelled communion. These fantasies get reiterated and reformulated throughout (post)modernity, enjoying strong popular currency at key

⁶⁴ While Silverman’s conclusion only briefly suggests crossovers between the two periods, it opens a field for further inquiry: it argues that “digital technologies have transformed the physical experience of reading, while sustaining a fantasy of connectedness that is the legacy of [nineteenth century] book practices. Rather than bemoaning [digital culture] for its tendency to destroy the individual, we might see it as a part of longer tradition in which reading was valued precisely for its ability to undo the self, to replace, however briefly, the acquisitive project of identity formation with a vision of the self permeated with and inseparable from its objects” (20-21).

junctures, including the moment of the *WEC*'s publication. In its citation of Stapledon's story, as elsewhere in the *WEC*, fantasies of connecting to other subjectivities through the medium of print recur. As an object of partially crowdsourced knowledge, the conceptual framework and functional qualities of the *Catalog* itself are, moreover, strongly predicated on such an ideal. As Turner notes, the *Catalog*, which many have identified as a print predecessor to the World Wide Web, fostered the ideal of a disembodied, geographically dispersed readership:

[The Catalog] became the home and emblem of a new, geographically distributed community. As they flipped through and wrote in to its several editions, contributors and readers peered across the social and intellectual fences of their home communities ... cobbling together new understandings of the ways in which information and technology might reshape social life ... Readers who wrote in also ... promoted disembodied community as an achievable ideal, and suggested that techno-social systems could serve as sites of ecstatic communion. (72-73)

Turner underlines how the 1960s counterculture that was responsible for the founding fantasies of digital connectivity and communion drew from the American Transcendentalist heritage to imagine new utopian possibilities for connectivity in a dawning technoculture. Indeed, the *WEC*'s design and ethos imagine disparate individuals interested in countercultural ideas coming together to syncretically merge minds in the pages of the *Catalog*. Given that Brand went on to establish *Wired* in the early 1990s, it seems unsurprising that such utopian ideas would become such a ubiquitous part of early internet-age discourse.⁶⁵ However, I will return to consider in

⁶⁵ For Jürgen Habermas and later for Michael Warner, bourgeois modern societies are themselves characterised by private individuals *imagining* themselves as publics, and formed implicitly in a counterposition to reigning political authorities. Habermas defines the bourgeois public sphere in the following terms: “[It] may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations ...” (27). Warner, building on Habermasian theories, argues that intertextual mediation play a central role in the forging of an imagined publicity among individuals: “Publics are essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven not just by citational references but by the incorporation of a reflexive circulatory field in the mode of address and consumption” (16). The *WEC*'s

more detail how the *WEC*, as an “access and evaluation device” designed to connect users across time and space, anticipates the neo-Romantic imaginary of the web.

Excerpts from Stapledon’s story featured in the *WEC* also advance related fantasies of superseding normative spatiotemporal bounds. The protagonist observes: “From my score of viewpoints I observed the great snowstorm of many million galaxies, streaming and circling, and ever withdrawing farther apart from one another with the relentless ‘expansion’ of space”. Disoriented by time travel, he continues: “The cosmos exploded, actualizing its potentiality of space and time” (5). Such an ideal similarly permeates both European Romantic and American Transcendentalist writings.

Wordsworth’s poetic narrator in *The Prelude* describes an epiphanic moment outside of normative spatiotemporality:

Supreme Existence, the surpassing life
Which—to the boundaries of space and time,
Of melancholy space and doleful time,
Superior and incapable of change,
Nor touched by welterings of passion—is,
And hath the name of, God. (*Prelude*, 6, 133-139)

Stapledon’s exploded cosmos and encounter with the “Star Maker” reads as a space-age, sci-fi transposition of Wordsworth’s blissful “surpassing” of “melancholy space and doleful time” through an encounter with “Supreme Existence”. In “The Oversoul”, Emerson describes a similar process by which space and time lose their normative contours in an epiphanic process of spiritual “circumscription”:

The soul circumscribes all things. As I have said, it contradicts all experience. In like manner it abolishes time and space. The influence of

proposed forging of what Warner would call a “counterpublic” through its pages is, in this light, part of a broader shift in publicity under modernity: a modernity that largely formed during the Romantic period. Also see Benedict Anderson and his oft-cited concept of “imagined communities”.

the senses has, in most men, overpowered the mind to that degree, that the walls of time and space have come to look real and insurmountable; and to speak with levity of these limits is, in the world, the sign of insanity. Yet time and space are but inverse measures of the force of the soul. (*Essays I*, 162).

Emerson's mistrust of Lockean empiricism, readable here in the assertion that "the senses in most men overpowered the mind" to make normative models of time and space "look real and insurmountable", is related to the Transcendentalist's rejection of Enlightenment models of linear spatiotemporality and strongly evidenced in other of his essays and writings.⁶⁶ Similar ideas pervade the *WEC*. Cultivating both an identifiably 1960s fascination with the new possibilities offered by space exploration and astronomical research, and a rejection of pure empiricism as an epistemological model, the *Catalog* is filled with speculative fantasies about superseding normative spatiotemporal bounds. Furthermore, both periods' interest in non-normative temporalities can be related to scepticism toward ideals of teleological progress. Kirk notes of countercultural environmentalist movements:

In looking to technology and innovation to solve environmental problems, counterculture environmental advocates tapped into a long tradition of pragmatic environmental thinking going back to Theodore Roosevelt and the wise-use conservation movement ...What differentiated [the former] ... was their rejection of traditional notions of progress. Cultural historian Peter Braunstein has argued that one of the central characteristics of the youth driven counterculture was "a deep ambivalence about teleology ... the notion that ideas, phenomena should be tending toward something ..." (14)

⁶⁶Packer notes that Emerson and other young New England intellectuals, enthusiastic readers of European Romantic writings and interpretations of transcendental philosophy, found in their writings convincing grounds for the refutation of Humean ultra-empiricism, and justification for their believe in invisible, transcendent truths: "The first sign of the trouble that would later be labelled 'Transcendentalism' came with an attack on two fronts: on the philosophy of John Locke and on the educational system at Harvard" (20).

This anti-teleological aspect of midcentury American counterculture has important precedents in Romantic-era counter-Enlightenment discourse.⁶⁷ Furthermore, as I discuss in detail in Chapter Two, late postmodern narratives engage in similar anti-teleological speculation: their circular and heterogeneous accounts of time work as counternarratives to linear counterparts, and often depict characters moving outside of the bounds of normative space and time: “[M]y shoulders / catch continents, my Open palms / detach horizons”, boasts Sam in *Revolutions* (S7). Moreover, contemporary crisis fictions such as *Revolutions* and Dara’s *Scrapbook* advance circular and nonlinear spatiotemporal models as holistic, salutary alternatives to linear ones.⁶⁸

Next, the *WEC*’s preoccupation with astronomy, and with visual forms of cognition, draw from Romantic idioms of holism and epiphanic distance. Brand’s publication advocates for a specifically *visual* means through which to apprehend the Earth: we must witness its various systems from a distanced and holistic vantage in order to understand their interdependence. Stapledon’s vision of an Earth apprehended holistically from space figures as an uncanny precedent to the NASA satellite image that was the *Catalog*’s emblem and eponym throughout its many incarnations over several decades. Furthermore, the notion of sight enabling us to understand “whole systems” is a cornerstone of philosophies of holistic ecology permeating the *WEC* and contemporary environmentalism more generally. It is anticipated in Stapledon’s 1937 story, as in this cited passage: “The sheer beauty of our planet surprised me. It was a huge pearl, set in spangled ebony. It was nacreous, it was an opal. No, it was far more lovely than any jewel. Its patterned colouring was more subtle, more ethereal . . . Strange that in my

⁶⁷ Since the mid-century marks, for many theorists, early postmodernity (see, for example, Harvey), it is not surprising to note this anti-teleological quality in the *WEC* and other countercultural artefacts and texts.

⁶⁸ As I will discuss in more depth in the next chapter, this is arguably what separates them from modernist experiments with cyclical time, which do not necessarily take such strong cues from Romantic and Transcendentalist temporal discourse.

remoteness I seemed to feel, as never before, the vital presence of Earth as of a creature alive but tranced and obscurely yearning to wake” (5). It is not so much a spirit of scientific curiosity or epistemological precision that pervades this science-fiction fantasy of viewing the Earth as a whole system: Stapledon’s opaline phantasmagoria of the planet instead registers as strongly Romantic. It renders the Earth as a breathtaking yet wholly visible and “vital presence” that defies the usual epistemological limitations associated with the sublime, since to appreciate an object as sublime—at least in Kant—is to be unable to fully apprehend it. Here, a kind of inverse sublimity operates: the “nacreous”, jewel-like planet as viewed from space is revealed as an object in its totality, but it is precisely that *holistic* form from which one derives a sense of awe, or sublime power; the moment of witnessing the planet’s immense vital presence is an epiphanic one. Such a vantage allows for the whole to be witnessed; yet it is its “remoteness” that allows for the Earth to be appreciated in all of its splendour and complexity.

Stapledon’s emphasis on witnessing the planet from such a remote vantage can be related to Emerson’s own preoccupation, with the faculty of sight as a means of acquiring a vantage of transcendent and holistic understanding. In “The Over-Soul”, he asserts: “We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul” (*Essays I*, 160). In “Nature”, meanwhile, Emerson imagining being “uplifted into infinite space” to acquire an all-seeing vantage: “I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (*Collected Works I*, 10). With its emblem of the Whole Earth photographed from space denoting a specifically *visual* (and technologically mediated) holistic understanding of the Earth, the *WEC* arguably brings this commonly quoted Emersonian metaphor into the twentieth century. In a similar rhetorical process that equates distance with holistic understanding,

the *Catalog* strongly advocates for a whole systems approach to knowledge. It envisages such an approach as fostering a more syncretic appreciation of human and natural systems and the interrelations between these.

Driving this emphasis on holistic figurations of Earth's complexity is an intense interest in systems theories and a desire to understand better human systems in relation to nonhuman, natural, and technical ones.⁶⁹ The *Catalog*'s investment in a systems-theory approach to knowledge is evident from the inaugural issue. This investment registers first and foremost in the *Catalog*'s complex and eclectic self-presentation, which juxtaposes images and texts in ways that at first appear chaotic or random. However, these juxtapositions are in fact carefully systematised, with listings and images arranged around meticulously devised categories and subcategories. As an informational object, the *Catalog* autoreferentially suggests—or even metonymically stands in for—the systems-theoretical models propagated in its content. The *Catalog* also accords great importance to the rubric Whole Systems, which is its first and its longest section. One page highlights a publication called “General Systems Yearbook”, a theoretical text first introduced and edited by Anatol Rapoport and the Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy in 1956. “By definition General Systems is a mixed bag. Kinds of systems covered in the Yearbook include Biological, Social, Psychological, Games, Linguistic, Political, Cybernetic and Meteorological. *Throughout is the search for common dynamics that transcend them all*” (WEC 1968, 8, emphasis added). In this short excerpt, Brand's rhetoric of transcendence grounds the *Catalog*'s systems-theoretical approach in a neo-

⁶⁹ Chapter Three discusses systems-theoretical approaches in late postmodern ecocritical narratives. Postmodern ecocritical theories are deeply influenced by the social systems theories of sociologist Niklas Luhmann, whose work was built upon Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana's theories of cognitive biology and autopoiesis in natural systems. As McMurry notes of the advent of social systems theories: “General systems theory and the related science of cybernetics once aimed at describing where we stood so that better control could be exercised over what we stood on; complex systems theory tells us that where we stand depends on where we stand, and control over the ground below is illusory or at best temporary” (15).

Romantic ethos.⁷⁰ Indeed, some of the publication's most utopian propositions and iconography can be related to systems-theoretical concepts.

Ursula Heise examines the ideas of Buckminster Fuller and James Lovelock, both figures celebrated by the *WEC*, in her discussion of mid-century systems-theoretical models of holistic ecology and the role of mediating technologies in these. She cites Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis and Fuller's popularising of the Spaceship Earth metaphor as ideas deeply informed by cybernetics and systems theories: "Fuller envisioned Earth as 'an integrally-designed machine which to be persistently successful must be comprehended and serviced in total' and argued that 'up to now we have been mis-using, abusing and polluting this extraordinary chemical energy-interchanging system for successfully regenerating all life aboard our planetary spaceship' ([Fuller] 52)" (Heise 2008, 24). While Heise focuses primarily on the purely scientific aspects of the Spaceship Earth metaphor, relating it to Fuller's systems-theoretical approaches to understanding ecosystemic fragility and homeostatic balance, she nevertheless underlines a markedly utopian quality in the ecological allegories of 1960s and 1970s counterculture:

[W]hat all of these ecological allegories share in common is a sense that the Earth's inhabitants ... are bound together by a global ecosystem whose functioning *transcends* humanmade borders ... Countercultural aspirations toward global peace and the "brotherhood of man" could effortlessly be associated with the image of the Blue Planet and indeed be understood to derive directly from the planet's ecological functioning. *Ecological systems, in this understanding, are naturally balanced, harmonious, and self-regenerating, and much of the utopian energy of the 1960s derived implicitly or explicitly from the inference that sociocultural systems might also return to such a state if they were freed from artificial constraints and distortions.* Whatever the critiques one might want to formulate vis-à-vis this understanding of ecology

⁷⁰As several critics have noted, the ideas of important systems theorists and contemporary ecologists and philosophers including Gregory Bateson are informed by a notion of immanent patterns of mind. For Søren Brier, Bateson's philosophy "place[s] mind as immanent in nature and humans as well as in all living systems ... The underlying immanent pattern and dynamics of the mind is seen as sacred" (251). Bateson's ideas on cybernetics, ecological systems, and the importance of achieving homeostatic balance in natural ecosystems, among others, were enthusiastically received by Brand and arguably permeate the *Catalog's* eclectic and cross-disciplinary treatment of similar topics. See in particular Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972).

and its sociocultural ramifications from the perspective of current cultural theory ... *one cannot underestimate the galvanizing influence such thinking exerted on the burgeoning environmentalist movement ...* (25, emphasis added)

What Heise leaves out of her important observations on the origins of modern environmentalism—its systems-theoretical emphasis on ecological balance and the supersession of spatial and national borders—are its explicit ties to nineteenth-century ideas of holism and balance. The “utopian spirit of the 1960s” that Heise identifies, with its deep investment in ideals of harmony, holism, balance and the “transcend[ence of] human made borders” embodied by the image of the Whole Earth, is significantly informed by transatlantic Romanticism of the long nineteenth century.⁷¹

Furthermore, as ecocritics such as McMurry and McKusick observe, a whole-systems approach to understanding the natural world is already discernible in nineteenth-century writings from Emerson and Thoreau. Although Thoreau’s and Emerson’s depictions of the natural world were beholden to the reigning liberal humanist discourses of their time, with Thoreau “*grounding* self and society in wildness (nature knows best)” and Emerson “proposing a self capable of *transcending* nature and society alike”, McMurry nonetheless identifies in their writing “other, suggestive modes of observing the world” (21). They “rehearse a transformation of culture and nature into systems and environments that moves us from the ontological to the epistemological, from asking ‘What can nature tell us?’ to ‘What can we do to compensate for an economy that observes nature merely as fodder when it is observing it at all?’” (24). Building on these and others critics’ inquiries into the Romantic origins of systems-theoretical approaches

⁷¹ However, Heise does allude elsewhere to nineteenth-century influences in contemporary ecological writing and its “spiritual immersion in place”. Commenting on the criticism of Mitchell Thomashow, she observes: “This mixture of Thoreau, New Age, and Judeo-Buddhist mysticism is obviously light-years away from Thomashow’s earlier systems-theoretical description of the biosphere coming to observe itself ... Thomashow here tries to connect back to an older environmentalist tradition that puts the emphasis on a spiritual immersion in place” (2008, 41).

to ecology, I maintain that the *WEC*'s interest in whole systems is at least partially indebted to ideas already fermenting during the nineteenth century.

Protodigital rhetoric: Self-reliance through tools

I now turn to consider protodigital rhetoric in the *WEC* and the endurance, in our contemporary technoculture, of neo-Romantic fantasies of extended cognition and technologically meditated transcendence. Perusing the opening pages of the *Catalog*'s inaugural 1968 issue, it is immediately clear why it might constitute a seminal archive in the development of American digital culture and its now banal rhetoric of hyperconnectivity or personal "transcendence". In many respects, the inaugural 1968 issue of the *Whole Earth Catalog* semantically resembles an early iteration of the editor-curated web directories popular from the 1990s onwards, and prior to the rise of search engines in the mid-1990s. The issue opens with a table of contents page that anticipates early web directories from the likes of Yahoo or Alta Vista. Organised into eclectic categories such as "Understanding Whole Systems", "Shelter and Land Use", and "Communications", these main categories are populated with what would be called, in web terminology, "links" to feature pages and items such as "Full Earth", "Buckminster Fuller", and "The World From Above" in the first category; and "Space Structures", "Village Technology", or "Organic Gardening" in the second.



Figure 2: Early Yahoo directory (circa April 1997); *WEC* contents page (Fall 1968 issue)

Moreover, unlike a traditional print table of contents or index, these contents, resembling web “links”, are not attributed to page numbers, theoretically encouraging readers to randomly browse the dense catalogue, jumping from one random entry to another rather than turning immediately to the precise topic that might interest them. Such peripatetic reading practices resemble those encouraged by the early public Internet especially. Since the *WEC*'s contents were partially generated through reader suggestions, reflecting a philosophy of shared and user-generated knowledge, the publication can be understood as an early print model for public digital interfaces and information repositories. The publication's interactive, non-linear quality, as well as its complex layout presenting multiple zones of texts and images, marks the *Catalog* as what Aarseth would call a “cybertext” or “ergodic text”. Readers browse the *WEC* using complex self-directed strategies rather than linear ones:

[W]hen you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed. This is very different from the ambiguities of a linear text. (2-3)

If the *WEC* appears as a print incarnation of the kind of ergodic, interactive logic that informs web reading and textual practices, so do some of the more contemporary experimental fictions considered by this research, as Chapter Two addresses in detail.

Brand's iconoclastic manifesto for the *Catalog* provides further clues to what others identify as the publication's protodigital design and semantic logic. By calling the *Catalog*'s eclectic collection of book reviews and philosophical musings an "evaluation and access device", Brand drew from and even helped to map experimental concepts around user-shared knowledge and content creation that would inform the development of the public Internet in the 1990s (*WEC* 1968, 2). Models of usability, share-ability, and universal, democratic access are all espoused, both explicitly in Brand's and others' editorials, and implicitly in the design and formal presentation of the *Catalog*. "With it, the user should know better what is worth getting and where and how to do the getting", Brand states. It might seem curious that a publication overtly defining itself as antiauthoritarian would champion such consumerist aims—listing, finding, sharing, and ultimately, "getting" useful items that might improve individual and collective lives.⁷² However, for Kirk, Brand envisioned a consumerist space existing outside of dominant mass-market capitalist infrastructures and modes of production, one that would favour individual innovation and rugged self-reliance, the sharing and recycling of information and objects, and a re-reading of the objectives of industry that corresponds to an American Western tradition of left-leaning libertarianism (xi). Kirk argues: "Having spent several years traveling the American West, visiting Indian reservations and the network of intentional communities that were springing up all over the region, Brand

⁷² Brand states in the inaugural issue that the *Catalog* was modelled after LL Bean, a clothing and "gear" catalogue espousing ideals of rugged individualism and exploration made popular by groups such as the Sierra Club. This fusing of environmentalism and back-to-the-land self-reliance with consumerism would also inform the *Catalog* (*WEC* 1968, 48).

wanted to come up with an information system that could connect these dispersed like-minded folks” (1). We can relate Brand’s desire to connect geographically dispersed communities of the like-minded to Silverman’s observations around nineteenth-century literary culture and fantasies of melding minds through shared reading practices. In similar fashion, Brand conceived the *Catalog* as a print object that might work as an interactive device, a communal space for the sharing of ideas and DIY techniques among the geographically disparate members of various countercultural communities.

While Kirk attributes *WEC*’s scepticism of institutional and hierarchical power to a tradition of American Western libertarianism that to this day pervades Silicon Valley’s “we can do it better than government can” ethos, New England Transcendentalist ideals of self-reliance are an additional equally important heritage informing the *Catalog*’s antiauthoritarian spirit. It is also the case that the Transcendentalist sense of self-reliance fits more exactly with the *WEC*’s overall conception. In “Self-Reliance”, Emerson praises the quality of non-conformity: “And truly it demands something *godlike* in him who has cast off the common motives of humanity and has ventured to trust himself for a taskmaster. High be his heart, faithful his will, clear his sight, that *he may in good earnest be doctrine, society, law, to himself...*” (*Essays I*, 43, emphasis mine). Emerson’s manifesto of self-reliance, which anticipates Brand’s assertion, “we are as gods and might as well get used to it”, is germane to the “do-it-yourself” ethos behind the *Catalog*. Similarly, Whitman’s poetic narrator in “Song” affirms: “Not I, nor any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself” (1855, 80/1208-1210). The *WEC*’s advocacy for auto-didactic, anti-authoritarian knowledge, forged through individuals aggregating their insights and suggestions, indeed suggests that it is best to travel an independent road; even as the publication’s emphasis on user-shared knowledge anticipates digital crowdsourcing techniques and appears in many respects incompatible

with such radical individualist claims. This tension between radical individualism, on the one hand, and tapping into collective knowledge, on the other, would carry over into digital-age ideals of individuals seeking do-it-yourself solutions from the solitude of their homes, yet looking to crowdsourced knowledge to permit such ostensible self-reliance. YouTube's thousands of videos offering instructions for banal and extraordinary tasks alike offer but one example.

Fuller, Glass, and other technoutopian icons

In addition to the Emersonian ethos of self-reliance clearly operating in Brand's ideal of an "evaluation and access device" fostering independence from hegemonic power structures, another tie between American Transcendentalism and the midcentury countercultures embodied by the *WEC* can be traced to one of the *Catalog*'s most emblematic figures: engineer, neo-futurist architect, and self-styled philosopher Buckminster Fuller. Designer of geodesic domes and the Dymaxion car, Fuller popularised the Spaceship Earth and Grand Designer metaphors during the late 1960s. As the great-nephew of American Transcendentalist and *Dial* co-editor Margaret Fuller, and the grandson of Unitarian minister Arthur Buckminster Fuller, he had direct intellectual and familial ties to nineteenth-century Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. Indeed, according to Turner, Margaret Fuller served as an "intellectual model for the young Buckminster" (55).⁷³ "When I heard that Aunt Margaret said, 'I must start with the

⁷³ An official website dedicated to Fuller notes these influences in an article by Victoria Vesna. Interestingly, she also underlines Buckminster's subsequent influence on digital culture: "Strongly influenced by his great aunt Margaret Fuller ... he considered the machine inseparable from the spiritual principle operating in the universe. Margaret Fuller's transcendentalism was an inspirational force through his lifetime, as was Albert Einstein's theory of relativity and Henry Ford's introduction of automation into the workplace. This triangle of spiritualism, science, sculpture and mechanization is ever-present in his work, and it is reappearing in the emerging field of the digital arts. Fuller influenced and inspired many artists who went on to revolutionize and redefine the idea of art and his complex relation of links to interests, activities and people could easily be likened to one of his geodesic structures consisting of a seemingly endless number [of] links" (Vesna, online)

universe and work down to the parts, I must have an understanding of it', that became a great drive for me', [Buckminster Fuller] recalled. For the Transcendentalists, as later for Fuller himself, the material world could be imagined as a series of corresponding forms, each linked to every other according to invisible but omnipresent principles" (Turner 55).

In the opening preambles of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Margaret Fuller describes her ideal artist as one tapping "divine instincts" to apprehend "pre-existent harmony" that s/he could then "mould ... to forms of life":

Shall we not name with as deep a benediction those who, if not so immediately, or so consciously, in connection with the eternal truth, yet, led and fashioned by a divine instinct, serve no less to develop and interpret the open secret of love passing into life, energy creating for the purpose of happiness; the artist whose hand, drawn by a preexistent harmony to a certain medium, moulds it to forms of life more highly and completely organized than are seen elsewhere ... (*Woman*, online)

Fuller's nephew Buckminster would arguably repurpose the above description of apprehending "eternal truth[s]" in his own treatises articulating the search for ideal forms inherent in nature, then transposed in the creation of appropriate technologies. Turner was the first to describe how thinkers prominently featured in the *WEC*, including Fuller, were influenced by Transcendentalist philosophies of universal natural "patterns" but expanded these to incorporate technological systems:

Fuller, like Emerson, saw the material world as the reflection of an otherwise intangible system of rules. But unlike Emerson and the Transcendentalists, Fuller linked that system of rules not only to the natural world, but also to the world of industry...What humankind required, he came to believe, was an individual who could recognize the universal patterns inherent in nature, design new technologies in accord with both these patterns ... and see that these new technologies were deployed in everyday life. (56)

Building from Turner's observations, I now turn to examine some of Fuller's ideas populating the *WEC*, comparing these to nineteenth-century predecessors who are major

sources for his organicist, and often poetic, musings on the relationship between what Coleridge famously called “The Reason and the Understanding”.⁷⁴

Brand avows in the inaugural 1968 issue that Fuller’s insights “initiated th[e] catalog” (3). Perhaps only surpassed by the image of the Whole Earth as the *WEC*’s unofficial icon, Fuller wrote numerous editorials for the *Catalog* throughout its various incarnations, and his publications were allocated entire pages (and a dedicated category) in successive issues. The first issue dedicates two pages to the work of “Bucky” Fuller, including a prose-poem, “No More Secondhand God”, whose title alone strongly echoes one of the main propositions of American Transcendentalism: direct access to the divine through self-reliance and intuitive faculties.

Buckminster Fuller

The insights of Buckminster Fuller are what initiated this catalog.

Of the four books reviewed here, *Nine Chains to the Moon* is his earliest and most openly metaphysical, *Ideas and Integrities* his most personal, *No More Secondhand God* the most recent, *World Design Science Decade* the most programmatic.

People who beef about Fuller mainly complain about his repetition – the same ideas again and again, it's embarrassing. It is embarrassing, also illuminating, because the same notions take on different uses when re-approached from different angles or with different contexts. Fuller's lectures have a raga quality of rich nonlinear endless improvisation full of convergent surprises.

Some are put off by his language, which makes demands on your head like suddenly discovering an extra engine in your car – if you don't let it drive you faster, it'll drag you. Fuller won't wait. He spent two years silent after illusory language got him in trouble, and he returned to human communication with a redesigned instrument.

With that, empirical curiosity, and New England perseverance Fuller has forged one of the most original personalities and functional intellects of the age.

I see God in the instruments and the mechanisms that work reliably, more reliably than the limited sensory departments of the human mechanism. And God says observe the paradox of man's creative potentials and his destructive tactics. He could have his new world through sufficient love for "all's fair" in love as well as in war

BUCKMINSTER FULLER
IDEAS AND INTEGRITIES
A SPONTANEOUS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DISCLOSURE

AN AUTHENTIC GENIUS OF THE 20TH CENTURY DESCRIBES HIS LIFE, HIS CREATIVE IMAGINATION, AND HIS DESIGN FOR THE WORLD OF THE FUTURE

Ideas and Integrities
Buckminster Fuller
1963; 318 pp.
\$10.00 postpaid

from: Prentice-Hall Inc.
Englewood Cliffs
New Jersey 07631
or
WILEY-INTERSCIENCE
ARTH CATALOG

Nine Chains to the Moon
Buckminster Fuller
1938, 1963; 375 pp.
\$2.45

No More Secondhand God
Buckminster Fuller
1963; 163 pp.
\$2.25 postpaid

both from: Illinois University Press
600 Grand
Carle Illinois 62903
or
WILEY-INTERSCIENCE
ARTH CATALOG

Thinking is a putting-aside, rather than a putting-in discipline, e.g. putting aside the tall grasses in order to isolate the trail into informative viewability. Thinking is FM – frequency modulation-for it results in tuning-out of irrelevancies as a result of definitive resolution of the exclusivity turned-in or accepted feed-back messages; pattern differentiability.
["Omnidirectional Halo" No More Secondhand God]

Common to all such "human" mechanisms – and without which they are imbecile contraptions – is their guidance by a phantom captain.

Standing by the lake on a jump-or-think basis, the very first spontaneous question coming to mind was, "If you put aside everything you've ever been asked to believe and have recourse only to your own

Figure 3: *WEC*, Fall 1968, “Buckminster Fuller” section.

⁷⁴ More generally, the Coleridgean “identification of Reason with Spirit” is a feature pervading the *WEC*: the *Catalog* and its eclectic contents emphasise generating ideas intuitively, through free-association and processes of intuitive and fortuitous selection. Pages devoted to divinatory practices such as the Chinese *I Ching* offer one example. Fuller’s ideas, moreover, meld scientific precision and progressivism with an emphasis on nonlinear thinking, anti-hierarchical models, or the fusion of mechanical and the spiritual. All of these features might be related to Coleridge’s own re-reading of Kantian transcendental philosophy. See Packer, Pace, and Harvey.

The contents of the free-verse poem, meanwhile, allude to notions of organic and universal forms; one that the best designers intuit from the forms of nature.

I see God in
 the instruments and the mechanisms that
 work
 reliably...
 Yes, God is a verb,
 the most active,
 connoting the vast harmonic rendering of the universe
 from unleashed chains of energy
 and there is born unheralded
 a great natural peace,
 not of exclusive
 pseudo-static security
 but out of including, refining, dynamic balancing ...
 Therefore it will be an entirely new era
 when man finds himself confronted
 with direct experience (*WEC* 1968, 3)

The new era of “direct experience” imagined by Fuller is not derived from a purely empiricist and sensory understanding of the world. It is instead grounded in the intuitive grasping of universal, or “interactive” principles, ones not entirely accessible through rationalist and empiricist epistemologies.

Standing by the lake on a jump-or-think basis, the very first spontaneous question coming to mind was, ‘If you put everything aside, everything you’ve ever been asked to believe and have recourse only to your experiences do you have any conviction arising from those experiences which either discards or must assume an a priori greater intellect than the intellect of men? The answer was swift and positive. Experience had clearly demonstrated an a priori anticipatory and only intellectually apprehendable orderliness of interactive principles operating in the universe in which we are born. (*Ibid.*)

For Fuller, having recourse only to our “experiences”, which here seem related to an intuitive faculty rather than to empirical, sensory knowledge, provides “anticipatory” access to the innate principles “operating in the universe”. Self-reliance on one’s own experiences and intuitive apprehension of the world is thus favoured over what one has “been asked to believe” (e.g. received knowledge). Comparing Fuller’s writings to ideas from transatlantic Romantic writers such as Coleridge and Emerson elucidates how Fuller’s idea of a Grand Designer has precedents in Romantic thought and especially in Coleridgean and Emersonian concepts of universal and organic form.

In Emerson’s conception of universal forms adopted from the Coleridgean conceptual marriage between the “Reason and the “Understanding”, great minds intuitively grasp such forms through individual reflection. He argues in “History”: “Every thing the individual sees without him, corresponds to his state of mind, and every thing is in turn intelligible to him, as his onward thinking leads him into the truth to which the fact or series belongs” (*Essays I*, 13-14). Fuller envisages a similar process by which the human mind intuitively seizes upon universal, “eternal transsensorially apprehendable” principles, with the latter awaiting “discovery” in the natural world and in the very fabric of the mind itself. In his speculative essay on human survival into the twenty-first century, “2025, If...”, Fuller asserts:

Minds deal in eternal transsensorially apprehendable, covariant interrelationship principles. We humans were given this capability to function as local-universe problem solvers. We are here to solve evolutionarily occurring unprecedented metaphysical as well as physical problems. We can do so by means of our unique access to the *thus far discovered inventory of eternal principles*. (*CoEvolution Quarterly*, 1975, online, emphasis mine).

Again, Fuller emphasises inventories of eternal principles as keys to human evolution and to problem solving, including the resolution of environmental quandaries. Interestingly, however, Buckminster’s notion of the Grand Designer overrides Coleridge’s distinction

between mechanical and organic form, which is predicated on a distinction between animate and inanimate matter. In one of his lectures on Shakespearean criticism, Coleridge theorised an important distinction between organic and mechanical forms:

The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material ... The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such is the life, such the form. (Coleridge and Foakes 53)

Eschewing such Coleridgean distinctions, Fuller argues that the universal forms of Nature are intuitively apprehended, and can then be transposed into inorganic and/or mechanical forms. In this sense, we might identify Fuller as a protoposthumanist: he rejects, as Katherine Hayles would argue, absolute “demarcations between... cybernetic mechanism and biological organism” (1999, 3).

Fuller’s interest in transposing natural forms onto human-made structures is not strictly a twentieth-century product of cybernetic philosophy, however: such an idea of drawing specific correlative relationships between the forms of the natural world and human-built structures also interested nineteenth-century American Romantics, and especially Emerson. Sounding remarkably naturalcultural, he observes in the 1844 version of “Nature”: “We talk of deviations from natural life, as if artificial life were not also natural” (*Essays II*, 106). In “History”, Emerson argues for a correlative and intuitive affinity between the forms of the natural world and those built by human hands. “The Gothic church plainly originated in a rude adaptation of the forest trees, with all their boughs... In the woods in a winter afternoon one will see as readily the origin of the stained glass window, with which the Gothic cathedrals are all adorned, in the colors of the western sky seen through the bare and crossing branches of the forest” (*Essays I*, 12). In *Emerson’s Nonlinear Nature*, Christopher Windolph asks:

What exactly does Emerson mean by saying that nature is “architectural”, and what exactly are the proportions and perspectives he finds so compelling? How does their geometry help reveal the order of the whole? Such ideas are arrived at through observation, so this study begins to address these questions with the belief that the language of geometry and architecture—that is, of shape and structure, which can be found within a wide variety of Emerson’s [writings] reveals a persistent search for materiality that few who write about his ethics and transcendental spirituality have adequately explained. Architecture is more than just a convenient trope, and Emerson offers us much more than his own personal investment in an idea. (5)⁷⁵

Fuller’s own approach to architectural design, which emphasises universal forms, is remarkably similar to Emerson’s “correspondential” ideals. More specifically, Emerson’s interest in curved and nonlinear shapes is enthusiastically embraced by Fuller, who was well known for his geodesic domes and his advocacy for a return to design principles taking inspiration from the shapes of the natural world. Windolph observes of Emerson:

[T]he knowledge that modern ways of knowing produce, according to Emerson’s continued observation, was inconsistent with the fundamental reality of nature, which is not linear but curved. That is to say, natural processes and natural forms are neither modeled on nor composed of straight lines. As both an epistemological and metaphysical device, the straight line is an abstract human construct that has no natural analogue. (17)

Like Emerson, Fuller harboured a fundamental preference for curvature and for nonlinear models of space and form. His famed geodesic dome is the most obvious example:

Unlike classic domes, Fuller's depends on no heavy vaults or flying buttresses to support it. It is self-sufficient as a butterfly's wing, and as strong as an eggshell. Fuller calls it a geodesic dome because the vertexes of the curved squares and tetrahedrons that form its structure mark the arcs of great circles that are known in geometry as “geodesic.” (*TIME*, “Dymaxion American”, online)

⁷⁵ As Windolph notes, Emerson’s 1833 encounter at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris documents his discovery of the “upheaving principle of life” running through, and connecting, all life forms: “Here the human being is at the center of the correspondential universe, and the natural world radiates out from him like a vast Unconscious; the task of the naturalist is to reverse the process (whatever it was) that alienated these human properties into the foreign shapes that constitute the vast allegory we behold as the universe” (49).

Everywhere present in the *WEC*, from the satellite image of the Whole Earth to Bucky's domes, circular and spherical shapes also abound in late postmodern texts that reject accounts of teleological progress, and which point to the circle as a shape that might foster counter-hegemonic forms of agency and experience.

Transcendent cognitive states: McLuhan, mediums and messages

In addition to the ideal of intuitive, correspondential technologies designed in accordance with universalist principles of form, the *WEC* frequently figures technology as a prosthesis that fosters the transcending of individual cognition and corporeality. Marshall McLuhan is the primary figure behind such ideas about the "extensions of man" that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, and he is a strong presence both in Brand's *Catalog* and in the digital-age *Wired*. Cybernetic theorist Norbert Wiener also looms large in the *Catalog*, marking it with the kind of naturalcultural and posthumanist thinking that would go on to influence theorists such as Haraway and Hayles. The June 1971 issue of *WEC* features an excerpt from Wiener's book, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Society and Cybernetics*: "It is the thesis of this book that society can only be understood through a study of the messages and the communication facilities which belong to it, and that in the future development off these messages and communication facilities, messages between man and machine and between machine and machine, are destined to play an ever-increasing part" (*WEC* 1971, 16). Wiener goes on to argue: "We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves. A pattern is a message, and may be transmitted as a message" (*Ibid*). Observers of digital culture and its effect on cognition, including

contemporary theorists such as Hayles, would later take up this cybernetic concept of human consciousness as pattern.⁷⁶

In June 1995, the year that the public Internet became widely available in the US, an article appeared in Brand's fledgling publication, *Wired*, proclaiming that the Internet, "that great collectivizer of minds," had changed the world: Thanks to the advent of the web, the globe was now "covered with the incandescent glow of consciousness" (Cobb Kreisberg, online). The fantasy of expanding outside of one's individual cognitive shell, extending the brain and consciousness through a new medium, a "great collectivizer of minds", marked early American Internet culture as profoundly neo-Romantic; it reiterated fantasies that pervaded both nineteenth-century writing and mid-twentieth century countercultural forums like the *WEC* (McLuhan's ideas around the "extensions of man" are, for example, enthusiastically embraced in the latter). From the 1990s onward, scholars brought these fantasies of new technologies fostering transcendent states of cognition directly into their theories of nascent forms of textuality, waxing utopian in their analysis of the transcendent possibilities of the digital age and of new hybrid forms arising from the combination of digital and print texts. The novelist and literary critic Carole Maso, for example, in "*Rupture, Verge, and Precipice/Precipice, Verge, and Hurt Not*", calls the potential for such intersections in the digital age "[a] utopia of possibility" and imagines these new forms of literary expression as "[a] place without the usual dichotomies. No phony divisions between mind and body, intelligence and passion, nature and technology, private and public, within and without, male and female" (2000, online). Originally published in 1996, only a year after the Internet became licensed for private use, Maso's utopian tone was perhaps unremarkable. It strongly echoes an excerpt

⁷⁶ Hayles (2012) is overtly informed by McLuhan in its proposition that "[e]mbodiment ... takes the form of extended cognition, in which human agency and thought are enmeshed within larger networks that extend beyond the desktop computer into the environment" (3). For Hayles, the digital age and its attendant effects on cognition constitute "nothing less than a change in worldview" (2012, 2).

from Hayles's monograph on posthumanism: "In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (1999, 3). For Hayles and for others writing during the early years of the web revolution, highly influenced by the cyberutopianism of Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1991), cybernetic and digitally mediated forms of cognition not only bridge gaps between print and emerging forms of media; they also trouble meaningful dichotomies between corporeal and virtual experience.

Crucially, however, neither Maso nor Hayles erase corporeality, materiality, or embodied experience from their accounts of digital-age subjectivity. For instance, Maso predicts that "Print writing will remind us of our love for the physical, for the sensual world. And for the light only a book held in one's hands can give" (*Ibid.*). Nevertheless, the advent of a widespread digital and Internet culture did foster widespread fantasies of being liberated from corporeal constraints and normative experiences, of having one's consciousness liberated from the constraints of the body.

As will be explored in subsequent chapters, it is arguably this fantasy of disembodiment widely propagated in the early digital age that more recent narratives about technocultural subjectivity bring into critical question. Late postmodern crisis fictions suggest that there are risks attached to attempting to sunder mind from body, often emphasising the embodied aspects of technologies, and considering how both subjectivities and environments are impacted by these.

Similar debates emerge even earlier in Brand's *Catalog*. Its fantasies of transcendence fostered through technological extension compete with an urgent sense of the necessity of considering embodied environmental realities such as industrial toxicity, population growth, loss of biodiversity, and the depletion of natural resources.

Environmentalist debates: technophobic conservatism vs. appropriate tech

As cultural historians have argued, Brand's *Catalog* elucidates the complex, and often incompatible, environmentalist philosophies at play in mid-twentieth-century countercultural forums.⁷⁷ I want to focus, at present, on two currents of environmentalist thought permeating the *Catalog*, both of which are informed by Romantic thought. The first is less dominant in the *WEC*; but it represents the mainstream in mid-century American environmentalism. It is a conservationist model focussed on wilderness and stewardship that demarcates the natural world as a largely separate realm, and often veers toward technophobia. The second is a technologically oriented and optimistic blueprint for environmentalist action. It focuses on "appropriate technology" as an approach to solving environmental problems, and is deeply informed by cybernetics and systems theories. These conflicting approaches are discernible in the *WEC*'s earliest issues. On the one hand, there are the idealistic appropriate-technology enthusiasts, including Buckminster Fuller and Stewart Brand himself, who cite the universal forms of Nature as inspiration for ideal technological design practices. On the other hand, a conservationist strain of environmentalist thinking runs through such sections of the early *Catalog* as "Nomadics". Focussing on topics such as wilderness survival and exploration, as well as the depletion of natural resources by industry (e.g. deforestation and pollution) this second current of thought is informed by figures like Sierra Club founder, nature writer, and wilderness explorer John Muir. Muir was himself deeply influenced by Thoreau and nineteenth-century Romantic writings about nature. The conservationist line of environmentalist thought in the *WEC* emphasises issues such as biodiversity,

⁷⁷ These include *WEC* "spinoff" publications such as the *Whole Earth Ecolog*, devoted entirely to environmentalist problems and potential solutions, and *CoEvolution Quarterly*.

deforestation or fossil fuel depletion, but tends to maintain traditional ideas about the wilderness as a space that might be protected from human influences.

These two currents are admittedly not mutually exclusive ways of approaching environmental problems. The more systems-theoretical approaches to ecology championed in the *WEC*, for instance, eschew technophobia and traditional divisions between nature and culture, instead thinking natural and human systems together. However, they also contemplate grim ecological risk scenarios such as biodiversity losses and the toxification of natural systems, continuing the jeremiad tendencies of traditional conservationism. Similarly, advocates of appropriate technology such as Buckminster Fuller are often attentive to such risks, and do not always advance optimistic visions for the future, instead arguing that humans must develop and deploy appropriate technologies to advance their own evolution and avert potential planetary disasters. As will become clear, moreover, from the 1970s onward, boundaries blur between these seemingly polarised approaches to environmental change, as the *WEC*'s environmentalist focus turns increasingly from celebrating the purity of wilderness and advocating for a "return" to it through back to the land movements, to contemplating serious ecological threats such as population explosions and water shortages. In the later incarnations of the *WEC* and its spinoffs, conservationist philosophies emphasising nature as a domain separate from the human one fall out of vogue. Replacing these are more sophisticated systems-theoretical approaches to natural and human ecologies and their interdependence: approaches that envisage natural systems in dynamic terms. The utopianism of the earliest issues also gives way to a more urgent sense of ecological risk; far more space is devoted, in later issues, to complex environmental problems affecting both human and natural, nonhuman ecologies. As such, the *Catalog* constitutes a remarkable record of how countercultural environmentalism moved away from traditional conservationist

models to a scientifically engaged, systems-theoretical approach. The latter strongly informs current ecocritical thought and debates.

Although one might assume that debates between conservationism and the embrace of technological solutions are native to twentieth-century environmental politics, Kirk documents their significant nineteenth-century roots:

Counterculture environmentalism simultaneously encompassed both anti-modernism *and* modernism ... the seemingly neat bipolar world of twentieth-century environmental politics became a messy melange of apparently incongruous philosophies and goals united under the banner of whole systems, cybernetics, and alternative technology. It is important to stress that prior to the rise of the counterculture environmentalists, twentieth-century environmental politics only *appeared* to be neatly bipolar. In fact, the jarring juxtapositions on the pages of *Whole Earth* only exaggerated old and deep tensions in American environmental politics. Henry David Thoreau, for example, was a pencil designer and entrepreneur. John Muir began his life as an inventor locally renowned for his mechanical genius ... All of these men struggled to reconcile their modernist epistemology and technological enthusiasm with their desire to preserve a pristine nature. (15-16)

Kirk unpacks how seminal environmentalist thinkers such as Sierra Club founder John Muir inherited a Thoreauvian ambivalence toward technology, and a tendency to vacillate between ideals of “pure” wilderness and an acknowledgement of how built and natural systems interdependently interact. Consider this passage from Thoreau’s posthumously published third essay in *The Maine Woods* (1864), “The Allegash and East Branch”, which associates the sounds of natural processes and objects with those of industry.

Wild as it was, it was hard for me to get rid of the associations of the settlements. Any steady and monotonous sound, to which I did not distinctly attend, passed for a sound of human industry. The waterfalls which I heard were not without their dams and mills to my imagination, —and several times I found that I had been regarding the steady rushing sound of the wind from over the woods beyond the rivers as that of a train of cars, —the cars at Quebec. Our minds anywhere, when left to themselves, are always thus busily drawing conclusions from false premises. (Thoreau and Cramer 188)

This passage offers a striking comment on how built environments and their effects on cognition and perception were already shaping the way that humans perceive and interact with the natural world. While Thoreau insists that his mind is only imagining the Maine Woods to be less than wild, confusing him with “false premises”, this excerpt reveals an author keenly aware of how industry and technology interpenetrate with natural environments and landscapes even at a sensory level. If this passage initially reads as technophobic, moreover, a subtle fascination with industry looms in Thoreau’s analogies between human-made and natural sounds. The passage first implies that such associations are undesirable: “[I]t was hard for me to get to get rid of the associations of the settlements.” From a tonal and connotative standpoint, however, the analogies drawn between waterfalls, mills and dams, wind and train cars do not read in dysphoric terms. A sense of ambivalence thus marks Thoreau’s descriptions of the blurring between natural and technological processes.

Inheriting the nineteenth-century debates evident in Thoreau’s work, the *WEC* stages similar tensions. Moreover, the same compounding of technophilia and technophobia, conservationism and naturalcultural thinking marks late postmodern fictions about environmental crisis. Just as the *WEC* registers both utopian hopes for a better future fostered by appropriate technologies built in harmony with natural systems, and dysphoric accounts of toxic landscapes, technological threats (especially nuclear), and ecological collapse, late postmodern crisis fictions display a similar speculative and antinomian quality, vacillating between euphoria and dysphoria in their depictions of technological development and its effects on experience and environment. If the mid-twentieth century and its mounting ecological crises, from overpopulation to atomic threats to mass deforestation, constitute one important neo-Romantic “utopian enclave”,

to borrow Jameson's term (2005, 15), the late postmodern moment, responding to a similar but distinctive set of pressures, represents a more recent enclave.

Thoreau, Muir, The Sierra Club, and Deep Ecology

In his 1862 essay "Walking", Thoreau conflates the supposed "new frontier" of the Western United States territories with the "Wild", arguing "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world" (*Civil Disobedience and Other Essays*, 61). If Thoreau often recognised the inevitable overlap between built and natural environments, until recently his work has been received as championing stewardship of wild lands and animals, as well as understood as warning against the disastrous encroachment of civilisation on pure wilderness. Muir was one of the most important late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century figures to take up Thoreau's preservationist call. Numerous historians and literary critics, including Buell, McKusick, and McMurry, identify Muir as one of the ideological founders of modern American environmentalism. For McKusick:

Among the pantheon of American environmental writers, no single figure looms larger than John Muir, an early explorer of the Sierra Nevada in California who became widely known for his books that extolled the pristine beauty of these mountains and passionately advocated their preservation as wilderness for future generations. Muir has sometimes been described as a belated transcendentalist, and his connections with Emerson and Thoreau have been thoroughly examined, but his profound awareness and lifetime study of English Romanticism has not been given adequate attention by historians of the environmental movement. More than simply a popularizer of Romantic ideas, John Muir was engaged ... in a careful close reading and critical response to the work of the Romantic poets. (31)

Noting that Muir was influenced by Thoreau as well as by European Romantic poetry, McKusick underlines Muir's profound impact on environmental activism, wilderness conservation, and twentieth-century American nature writing. Even while the issues of

the *Catalog* examined here do not cite their writings directly, Muir's and Thoreau's legacies inform content dedicated to topics including wilderness survival and exploration.

The “Nomadics” section of the 1968 inaugural issue, for example, includes an entry dedicated to the Sierra Club that shares the page with grainy images of a mountain range and of boat explorers navigating a river amid what appears to be unspoiled nature. The blurb states: “Sierra Club is currently going global in its considerations, publishing gorgeous books on non-US wildernesses, promoting Earth national park, etc.” (*WEC* 1968, 51).

Sierra Club

Sierra Club is currently going global in its considerations, publishing gorgeous books on non-U.S. wildernesses, promoting Earth national park, etc.

We aren't listing their exhibit-format books simply because they aren't strictly tools. They do publish useful specific locale books and if you're a member you get discounts on them. Other services to members include the monthly Sierra Club Bulletin and organized access to local and global wild places plus having a hand in obstructing dumb progress.

\$14.00 first year individual membership; \$9.00 subsequently

\$18.50 first year for husband and wife; \$13.50 subsequently

\$8.50 first year for member 12 to 21; \$3.50 subsequently

Sierra Club
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Figure 4: The “Sierra Club” entry, *WEC* Fall 1968 issue

The Nomadics section also features excerpts from books such as “Survival Arts of the Primitive Paiutes”, which details how an Alaskan Native American tribe “managed its daily survival” in the wild, as well as from Richard Brautigan’s *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), *The Explorers Trademart Log*, and other books dedicated to wilderness

exploration and survival. Throughout this section, a focus on wilderness as a pure space to explore and above all to conserve is evident. These passages also champion a “Nomadic lifestyle”, echoing both Emersonian self-reliance and Thoreauvian ideals of retreating from mainstream society to commune with wilderness—as well as his tendency to Romanticise native cultures and practices as being more profoundly connected to the wild, particularly with his portrait of his Penobscot guide Joe Polis in “Allegash”.

The charm of nomadic life is its freedom from care, its unrestrained liberty of action, and the proud self-reliance of one who is absolutely his own master ... and who cheerfully, in turn, suffers the penalties that Nature visits upon him for every slip of mind or bungling of his hand ... Men working hard in the open, and exposed to the vicissitudes of wilderness life, need a diet rich in protein ... (*WEC* 1968, 47).

If most of the entries in the Nomadics section focus on “men” overcoming the “vicissitudes of wilderness life”, some passages hint at problems of ecological degradation and advocate for conservation. One entry dedicated to a geological survey of worldwide Hot Springs comically warns potential polluters: “this directory fails to mention the plastic ice-water afterlife that awaits those that mess with hot springs” (50). In a more apocalyptic vein, excerpts from survivalist manuals such as “Innovator”, *The Book of Survival*, and *The Survivor Manual* are accompanied by warnings of forthcoming societal collapse, and exhortations to master wilderness survival techniques in order to “drop out” from society.

Back-to-the-land and socialist utopia movements of the late 1960s have a limited but nevertheless noteworthy presence in the early *WEC*, in sections such as “Community” and “Shelter and Land Use”, with entries, for example, that praise the “Indian tipi” as a viable alternative to living in a traditional house: “To live in one involves intimate familiarity with fire, earth, sky, and roundness...you can appreciate the elegant design of a tipi and the completeness of the culture that produced it” (1968, 19). Such midcentury

back-to-the-land movements readily invite comparisons to nineteenth-century Romantic utopian communities such as Brook Farm.

Many twentieth-century “hippie” varieties of these communities espoused neo-Luddite ideals of eschewing modern technology and going back to “old ways”, engaging in ersatz Native American practices. Kirk notes that within the larger conservation and communitarian movements, “[a] growing ambivalence toward technology for many grew into full-fledged technophobia” (26). The *WEC*, however, rarely embraces such technophobia, even in its earliest issues, most frequently embracing small-scale appropriate technologies over large-scale ones: “Although neo-Luddite communitarians were a distinct minority in a culture that still embraced consumerism and technological progress,” Kirk explains, “there was a general questioning of the Progressive faith in the ability to use large-scale technology to control the environment for perpetual economic growth, and communes were focal points for this questioning” (53).

This philosophical divide helps to explain why the *Catalog* increasingly distances itself from the traditional conservationism of groups like the Sierra Club. Although the traditions of wilderness conservationism and jeremiad environmentalist rhetoric would continue to enjoy mainstream appeal in broader environmental activism and in American nature writing, traditional conservationist thinking was relatively short-lived in the *WEC*. Frederick Buell observes:

The nature many sought to defend in the 1970s—the nature they feared society was destroying—appears today to have been more certain as an ideal than a truth. The Right succeeded in caricaturing nature-based philosophies and movements like Deep Ecology and Earth First! as people-hating and extremist. Old environmental standards began to appear to their friends, not just their foes, unworkable and incorrect. (9)

While Buell identifies the 1970s as a time when the Deep Ecology movement⁷⁸ and its conservationist, technophobic tendencies dominated environmentalist thought, the *WEC* diverged from this mainstream view starting with its first issues.

Tech-friendly green

As Kirk notes, “By the early 1970s, the neo-Luddites in the American environmentalist movement had ceded ground to a growing number of appropriate technologists ... [who] recognized the liberating power of decentralized individualistic technology” (30). Stuart Brand’s own environmentalist thinking strongly favoured technological development. He and his contributors most frequently espouse an idealistic environmentalism that embraces a particular version of technological innovation: one centred on small-scale solutions incorporating the organic forms of nature into the design process.⁷⁹ Such solutions would support a whole-systems approach to ecology symbiotically incorporating organic and nonorganic structures, natural and built systems, and foster balance and sustainability. Kirk notes of the appropriate technology movement exemplified in much of the *Catalog*’s environmentalist content:

The key insight of the appropriate technology movement was the idea that individuals working within specific local environments could make everyday choices to use small-scale technology, enabling...a sustainable economy. Appropriate technologists celebrated human ingenuity at a time when environmental advocates tended to draw a clear line between people and nature, with preference given to the latter. Many of the ecological arguments made through the choice of material presented in the catalogs...were so far outside the mainstream of the environmental thought of the day that they were considered heresies. (6)

⁷⁸ Keil et al. define Deep Ecology in the following way: “[A] new paradigm which is necessary to bring about sustainable human habitation of the earth, in parallel or symbiosis with other species, involves rejecting many of the attributes of industrial society and allowing large tracts of wilderness to remain or re-establish themselves” (47).

⁷⁹ While Kirk calls the *WEC*’s dominant environmentalist philosophy “pragmatic”, I argue that it is simultaneously *idealistic* in its frequent focus on universal, unseen design principles and forms, intuitively grasped by the mind and operating throughout the natural world. As such, I maintain that environmentalist discourse in the *WEC* in fact consists in a tense conjuncture of pragmatic and idealistic ideas.

The *Catalog* primarily figures, then, as an alternative to “wilderness-based and technophobic environmentalism” (16). However, Kirk also stresses that *WEC* “was an expression of popular culture advocating something really different from environmentalism—really not an ‘ism’ at all, but a nexus of ideas about nature, New Urbanism, technology, and quality of life that offered a different path toward ecological harmony that tapped into the widespread acceptance of technologically mediated nature recreation, urban preservation, environmental justice, and the search for appropriate technologies to solve problems with modern life” (*Ibid.*). For Brand and technoutopian *WEC* contributors such as Fuller, technological development was an end toward greater ecological harmony and an inevitable part of human evolution. An excerpt from Fuller’s 1969 *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* describes an immanent crisis of exhausted natural resources as a turning point in human evolution:

To begin our position-fixing above Spaceship Earth we must first acknowledge that the abundance of immediately consumable, obviously desirable or utterly essential resources have been sufficient until now to allow us to carry on despite our ignorance. Being eventually exhaustible and spoilable, they have been adequate only up to this crucial moment. This cushion for error of humanity’s survival and growth up to now was apparently provided just as a bird inside of the egg is provided with liquid nutriment to develop it to a certain point. But then by design the nutriment is exhausted at just the time when the chick is large enough to be able to loco mote its own legs. And so the chick pecks at the shell ... (*WEC* 1971, 3)

Buckminster’s allegory of a chick pecking through its shell after “exhausting” its “liquid nutriment” alludes to limited fossil fuels and other natural resources. It also envisages humans as creatures who must seize control of their own destinies and evolution, deploying new technologies to forge a new era of sustainability on Spaceship Earth. He identifies the computer in particular as an object of utopian promise that might usher in

the new era of human harmony and balance: “A new, physically uncompromised, metaphysical initiative of unbiased integrity could unify the world. It could and probably will be provided by the utterly impersonal problem solutions of the computers” (*Ibid.*). In his critique of capitalist industrialisation, Fuller does not berate industry’s search for progress, but rather its disregard for a whole-systems approach that might forge technologies working in harmony with existing natural systems. The computer is imagined as one such “appropriate” technology.

While the “Communities” section of the 1968 issue focuses on utopian communities, it also mostly veers away from the neo-Luddite back-to-the-land movements by openly embracing tech. One entry from *Realist* magazine includes a poem, “All Watched over by Machines of Loving Grace”, that imagines a utopia in which cybernetic machines and natural landscapes exist in perfect harmony.

I like to think... / of a cybernetic forest / filled with pines and electronics / where deer stroll peacefully/past computers / as if they were flowers / with spinning blossoms /...I like to think...of a cybernetic ecology / where we are free of our labors / and joined back to nature ...(41).

The poem is accompanied by a photo of two nude figures standing in what appears to be a spaceship:

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**All Watched over by
Machines of Loving Grace**

I like to think (and
the sooner the better!)
of a cybernetic meadow
where mammals and computers
live together in mutually
programming harmony
like pure water
touching clear sky.

I like to think
(right now, please!)
of a cybernetic forest
filled with pines and electronics
where deer stroll peacefully
past computers
as if they were flowers
with spinning blossoms.

I like to think
(it has to be!)
of a cybernetic ecology
where we are free of our labors
and joined back to nature,
returned to our mammal
brothers and sisters,
and all watched over
by machines of loving grace. The Realist



The Realist

Community 41

OLUTION
...
... is Successful
... Weekend

Figure 5: *WEC* 1968, 41

Here a Romantic return to Nature is facilitated by cybernetic systems functioning in perfect symbiosis with organic ones. This and similar passages reveal how technoutopianism also extended into the early *WEC*'s ecological reflections. For Kirk, "Technology used amorally and un-ecologically created the social and environmental problems of industrial capitalism; therefore, technology used morally and ecologically could create a revolution toward an utopian future" (17). However, it is precisely this earnest utopianism that later iterations of the *WEC* would turn away from, registering a more urgent sense of ecological crisis and bringing increasing scientific precision to its

argumentation about major problems such as biodiversity losses and potential ecosystemic collapse.

The apocalyptic tradition (redux): Narrating ecological risks

The early 1970s saw a significant tonal shift in the *WEC*'s environmentalist rhetoric. Utopian visions of a brave new world of harmony between technology and nature increasingly give way to warnings about profound ecological degradation, biodiversity losses, toxic pollution, nuclear dangers, and the pressures of overpopulation on Earth's fragile systems. Using increasingly sophisticated and scientifically informed models of environmental risk, and systems-theoretical ideas that understand human and nonhuman systems in dynamic and overlapping terms, the *Catalog* and its spinoff publications devote ample space to these problems and to contemplating potential solutions to them. They do so while rejecting traditional understanding of Nature as a realm apart from human concerns, thus adopting increasingly naturalcultural accounts of ecological issues.

This shift came after the publication, many years earlier, of a slew of books issuing dire ecological warnings. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) is perhaps the best known of these. Others included *Population Bomb* by Paul and Annie Elrich and Robert Rudd's *Pesticides and the Living Landscape* (1964). As Heise notes, the Love Canal Crisis of the late 1970s drew increasing attention to the dangers of toxic chemicals, underlining the porous boundaries between human bodies and infrastructures, natural landscapes and resources (2008, 160). This apocalyptic mode in twentieth-century environmentalism is, moreover, part of an extant American tradition. Lawrence Buell notes that the "eco-catastrophic imagination" is an American literary tradition extending to the mid-nineteenth century. "A look at American literary history," he explains, "confirms its persistence through three centuries of American writing" (1995, 296). Buell

cites works such as George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature; or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (1864), which he describes as "the first full-scale diagnosis of impending environmental disaster to be published in the English-speaking world" (301). As Chapter Three and Four explore in detail, the writings of authors including Thoreau, William Blake, and Mary Shelley also inform late postmodern, dysphoric accounts of ecological degradation and toxicity, as well as apocalyptic scenarios of ecosystemic collapse resulting from technological development. Texts including Danielewski's *Revolutions* and Dara's *Scrapbook* are equally influenced by the mid-century nightmares of systemic collapse and toxic landscapes that populate later issues of the *WEC*.

In the first issue of the *Catalog*, a focus on the human impact to wilderness and natural ecologies crops up in the "Land Use" section. The section spotlights *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth*, a book dedicated to problems of natural resource depletion, deforestation, and other issues. The editorial for the book describes it as an extended meditation on how man has changed the physical environment; covering topics such as "origins and decline of woodlands", "harvests of the sea", "sewerage", "ecology of peasant life", and other topics (1968, 20). This entry demonstrates how the *WEC*'s first issue was already steering away from traditional conservationist understandings of ecology, instead acknowledging how human activity shape natural ecologies, and considering topics such as "sewerage" or "peasant life" as ecologies alongside woodland or sea systems.

Biodiversity loss is another strong preoccupation, especially from the early 1970s. The following is an excerpt from Lewis Herber's *Ecology and Revolutionary Thought*:

To sum up the critical message of ecology: If we diminish variety in the natural world, we debase its unity and wholeness. We destroy the forces making for natural harmony and stability, for a lasting equilibrium, and ... we introduce an absolute retrogression in the development of the natural world, eventually rendering the environment unfit for advanced forms of life. To sum up the reconstructive message of ecology: if we

wish to advance the unity and stability of the natural world ... we must conserve and promote variety..." (WEC 1971, 20)

If Herber draws from systems-theoretical models of biology and environment in his argument for the protection of biodiversity, his language is also resolutely Romantic: he envisions the natural world as a system characterised by "unity", "wholeness", "harmony", and "stability": characteristics that are, interestingly, largely at odds with scientific, systems-theoretical descriptions of natural ecologies as dynamic and unpredictable.⁸⁰

Elsewhere in the 1971 issue, warnings of ecosystemic collapse offer a graver and more dysphoric tone, such as in the following passages, all appearing on the same page under the "Energy/Whole Systems" rubric:

The oceans, even if their productivity can be preserved, do not represent a vast unexploited source of energy for support of larger human populations. They are currently being exploited at close to the maximum sustainable rate, and their continued use as a dump of wastes of all kinds makes it questionable whether that rate will be sustained. (8)

The earth's thin film of living matter is sustained by grand-scale cycles of energy and chemical elements. All of these cycles are presently affected by the activities of man. (*Ibid.*)

[In a degraded ecosystem there are] large numbers of individuals but few different species. Under extreme conditions most of the net production may be consumed, leading to starvation of herbivores and accentuating the characteristic fluctuation in populations. (*Ibid.*)

⁸⁰ As Frederick Buell notes: "Pristinity and purity could not in fact be primeval; the biosphere and everything in it has always been evolving and changing, and human-affected changes of landscapes and biota date back certainly to agriculture, and arguably to our early hunter-gatherer existence (Ponting, 1991). Equilibrium also never really existed (Catton, 1982); and continuous biospheric evolution has been driven in fact by disequilibrium, setting it and us firmly on a one-way path through time (Botkin, 1990). Moreover, in the contemporary science of complex systems, disequilibrium has been shown to be a creative force, not just an index of damage and agent of collapse (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984)" (F. Buell 28–29).

These passages appropriate the jeremiad rhetoric of traditional conservationism; but they also posit the interrelationality of human and natural systems. They no longer advance “wilderness conservation” as an exclusive concern. Furthermore, wide-scale industry and technology are again subjects of strong condemnation, but gone is the Luddite dichotomy between technology and nature; instead, large-scale industrial powers are identified as culprits in the environmental crisis, while small-scale, appropriate technologies continue to figure as potential solutions.

In the “Funky Futures”/Whole Systems rubric of 1971, several entries excoriate industrial powers as responsible for environmental degradation and potential collapse; some of these have the ring of conspiracy theories. An entry for *Man’s Impact on the Global Environment* includes a note from Brand: “Most recent, most methodic study so far of the price we’re paying for this spree, and explicit recommendations for tapering off” (*WEC* 1971, 28). The short entry below it advertises a book called “Population Control through Nuclear Pollution”, insinuating a grim conspiracy; while another book explores “Oil and World Power” in relation to environmental degradation (*Ibid*). Clearly, by the 1970s, the *WEC* reflected an environmentalist philosophy that moved beyond the old dichotomies of technophobic conservationism and appropriate technology, instead synthesising many of these concerns and ideas, and responding to a growing sense of urgency around ecosystemic damage.

The complex ecological ideas charted in the *WEC*, including its Romantic sources, would continue to permeate contemporary environmentalist thought and writing into the twentieth and twenty-first century. As Chapter Three explores in depth, nineteenth-century Romantic ideas about environmental change continually resurface as seminal predecessors in many of these ideas, while Chapter Four considers how

apocalyptic and jeremiad rhetoric re-emerges in new, often ecologically focused iterations of the postmodern sublime.

This first chapter will have hopefully provided a cultural-historical framework to periodically refer back to, offering a lens through which to better understand the debates playing out in contemporary crisis fictions and their discussions of digital-age subjectivity and environmental risk. If the *Catalog*'s fantasies of technological development fostering transcendent experiences and environmental balance might appear naively utopian from our present vantage—steeped as we are in digital information overload, fears of mass surveillance, and unprecedented ecological crisis to which the tech industry itself has partially contributed—late postmodern narratives addressing digital-age speeding prove far more ambivalent about the effects of technology. They inherit from midcentury countercultures many similar neo-Romantic idioms and in some cases utopian fantasies in their depictions of digital-age experience; but they also, crucially, ponder the darker sides of technological speeding and its impact on human conceptions of selfhood and community.

Chapter Two

Supersession or Subsumption? American Romantic Transcendence in Technoculture

“See all the Walkman-folk around you...And then...and then shiver...yes, shiver...For you know, finally you know...that all of you...all of you...ensheathed in your Walkmen...have achieved linkage...solidarity and linkage...Know that you are all listening, solitarily, together...pirate-together”—Dara, *The Lost Scrapbook*, 165-166

“Leisurely I lope, stride, my way / beyond wide, victor of all sides. / The obliteration of place” —(Danielewski, *Revolutions/S10*)

“Leave US allone” —(Revolutions/S116)

This chapter turns to probe late postmodern literary accounts of technoculture and its effects on subjectivity and cognition, unearthing the American Romantic heritage in such accounts.⁸¹ It examines how texts from Danielewski, Dara, and Steve Tomasula reconfigure Transcendentalist⁸² idioms of spatiotemporal overcoming to associate technoculture’s qualities of unprecedented speeding and informational multiplicity with boundary-breaking forms of subjectivity; drawing these in highly antinomian, utopian or dystopian terms. Danielewski’s *Revolutions*, Dara’s *Scrapbook*, and Tomasula’s interactive digital narrative *TOC* reformulate Transcendentalist fantasies of surpassing normative subjective and spatiotemporal bounds, updating such concerns in the context of new media ecologies and new forms of technological mediation.⁸³

⁸¹ For a general survey of technoculture in the cultural and literary fields, see Penley and Ross (1991) and Shaw (2008).

⁸² In this chapter, “American Romanticism” refers chiefly to writers working in 1830s New England and most frequently grouped under the umbrella term “Transcendentalist”. I use these terms more or less interchangeably here. Important writers considered here include Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, as well as later American Romantic writers such as Whitman who were heavily influenced by the Transcendentalists and count as important “peripheral figure[s]” (Buell 1973, 7). See the Introduction for a discussion of the movement’s religious, philosophical, and political origins.

Adapting poetic and narrative devices pervading American Romantic writing, including chiasmus, parallelism, and catalogues, contemporary experiments linguistically suspend normative subjectivity; they elide terms of “I” and “we” to suggest a universalising and malleable sense of selfhood.⁸⁴ They also reformulate Romantic and Transcendentalist ideals of cyclical and uneven temporalities, frequently depicting these as liberatory alternatives to the atomising effects of linear, mechanised time. Their staging of heterogeneous temporalities partially registers as antiprogressivist resistance to the logic of late capitalism. This quality recalls Romantic writings of the long nineteenth century, whose own complex temporalities challenge Enlightenment discourses of teleological progress. Paradoxically, however, complex and clashing temporal modes in late postmodern crisis fiction can also be understood as figuring the multiplicity and radical decentring of temporal experience in technoculture itself. In considering these texts’ complex temporalities, I do not claim to fully resolve the paradoxes therein. I instead consider these as an important aspect of late postmodern texts’ discursive decentredness; their resistance to any particular metanarrative.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Sascha Pöhlmann considers how Danielewski’s experimental fiction reformulates Whitmanian concerns and poetic constructs. He argues that “*Only Revolutions*, in form and content, espouses, adapts and expands a Whitmanian politics of radical democracy and individualism ... [the novel] draws on Whitman’s poetry and its major motifs and concerns in order to imagine a “Democracy of Two” that builds on his ideas but modifies them to establish its own democratic duality and thus translates Whitman’s nineteenth-century vision into the twenty-first century” (5-6). The work of this chapter, largely conceived prior to the publication of Pöhlmann’s study, was not initially informed by it; and although both studies offer similar readings of the Whitmanian poetic legacy in *Revolutions*, my own analysis differs in several key ways. First, I specifically frame Danielewski’s politics of democratic individualism around technoculture and its potential as a mediating force in the suspension of normative subjectivity. In both Whitman’s *Leaves* and *Revolutions*, a politics of technological mediation is at work in their democratic project of eliding “I” and “we”. Secondly, I discuss *Revolutions*’ antinomian quality to underline how it often holds such a project and its imperialistic potential in a highly critical light. Finally, I propose to historicise the ties that Pöhlmann and McHale draw between Danielewski and the Whitmanian poetic tradition (see Chapter One).

⁸⁵ In depicting technocultural effects on subjectivity, late postmodern crisis fictions maintain a distinctive “fence-sitting” quality: They exhibit what Lyotard would call “nostalgia for the whole and the one” (1984, 420), but remain sceptical that such holistic understanding is possible. Also see Morley 2009 for a discussion of the “quest for epic” in postmodern American literature. Citing T.S. Eliot’s earlier critique of *Ulysses*, Morley argues: “Grappling with the unstable and chimerical realities of contemporary America, [postmodern authors such as DeLillo and Updike] have deployed the form of the epic novel to give it “shape and structure”(4). At the same time, she observes, these authors stage the incredible heterogeneity and contingent quality of postmodern experience. (*Ibid.*)

In neo-Romantically imagining breakdowns in normative bounds, the texts considered here deploy specifically *American* Romantic literary idioms of selfhood and collective identity, particularly those most strongly associated with the writing of Emerson and Whitman. They figure as late postmodern instances of Asselineau's Transcendentalist constant in American literature, and evident in works from Dos Passos and Hemingway to Ginsberg, Updike, Auster, Dillard, and DeLillo.⁸⁶

However, rather than simply rehashing their Transcendentalist predecessors' utopianism in figuring the collapse of personal, spatial, and/or temporal boundaries, the contemporary fiction considered here instead treats the boundless quality of digital-age experience in equivocal and antinomian terms. While Danielewski, Dara, and Tomasula's meditations on digital-age experience are strongly indebted to Transcendentalist poetic idioms and fantasies, they alternately depict the dizzying multiplicity of technoculture as blissful and nightmarish. They reject the Transcendentalist proposition that eliding the "I" and the "we" yields a wholly blissful experience. Revisiting American Romantic fantasies of boundless subjectivity and technologically mediated, democratic communion, these texts simultaneously explore a dystopian flipside, echoing similar antinomian debates that became commonplace in the wake of the digital revolution.⁸⁷ As posited earlier, digital culture itself, and its mid-twentieth-century countercultural origins, figure as the more immediate sources for contemporary debates on how technoculture might trouble normative subjectivity. However, as Chapter One worked to demonstrate, the

⁸⁶ In the twentieth century, examples include John Dos Passos's trilogy, *U.S.A.* (1938), and Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997)—texts that attempt to paint American experience in broad strokes by collating multiple narrative perspectives.

⁸⁷ Gere describes how digital technology and its exponential speeding has elicited "both euphoria and terror, not least because of the shocking pace at which things happen. One has barely enough time to register one set of events and its possible consequences when another makes it irrelevant" (14-15). He traces how pre-digital technologies such as Hollerith's tabulating machine effectively transformed people into discrete informational units of a larger system, eliciting anxiety about the meaning and status of individual identity: "Within [Hollerith's] system people are made visible as pieces of digital data. They are individuals, but their individuality is rationalized and normalized in a system of signs that also homogenizes them as a mass, and makes them interchangeable and manipulable as data" (42).

heritage of Romantic and Transcendentalist ideas and idioms loom as important source texts in this complex heritage. The influences and resonances we trace here are, accordingly, far from linear: the aim is to trace, in zigzagged motion, the “untimed” legacy of American Romantic ideas in narratives about technocultural experience.

The manner in which late postmodern experimental fiction transposes Transcendentalist ideas also merits further inquiry for how it imaginatively retools specific Transcendentalist poetic and rhetorical devices for the digital age, rather than simply deploying nineteenth-century thematic concerns or referencing the period’s iconic authors. Exemplifying the latter approach, Paul Auster’s 1986 novella, “Ghosts” (the second instalment in his 1987 *The New York Trilogy*) heavily references the almost spectral presence of Transcendentalist writers across several generations, with Thoreau and Whitman thematically “haunting” the story’s nearly interchangeable characters:

Blue comes across a copy of *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. Flipping through the pages, he is surprised to discover that the name of the publisher is Black: ‘Published by the Classics Club by Walter J. Black Inc.’...Blue is momentarily jarred by this coincidence, thinking that perhaps there is some message in it for him...But then...It’s a common enough name...and besides, he knows...that Black’s name is not Walter. (152)

References to Transcendentalist figures abound here, with “Walter Black” potentially alluding to Walt Whitman. Moreover, Auster inflects “Ghosts”’s characters with a sense of malleable, interchangeable selfhood—naming them after colours (Blue, Black, etc.) and drawing depersonalised, universalising figures that can be related to Transcendentalist ideas. While Auster’s text exemplifies how twentieth-century American fiction *thematically* addresses the “ghosts” of the Transcendentalist legacy, the contemporary experimental fiction examined here vehicles American Romantic devices at a more granular level of language.

More specifically, they frequently deploy what I refer to as a poetics of “American I-ness and we-ness”—the rhetorical elision between terms of individual and collective subjectivity, important particularly in the work of Emerson and Whitman, to denote the overcoming of normative subjective boundaries. Late postmodern experiments are also indebted to these writers’ ambition of articulating collective American experience through a lens of radical individuality, or even of subordinating diverse subjectivities to a purportedly all-seeing, oracular “I” voice.⁸⁸ I therefore choose to concentrate on their poetry and essays in comparing nineteenth-century and contemporary accounts of boundary-breaking subjectivity. I consider contemporary texts primarily in relation to Whitman’s *Leaves*, and to certain of Emerson’s 1841 *Essays*, including “Self-Reliance” and “Circles.”⁸⁹ Although other American and European Romantic authors engaged to a degree with the ideas discussed here, the writings of Emerson and Whitman serve as representative source texts because their work is strongly preoccupied with the imagined transcendence of spatial, temporal, and interpersonal boundaries, and, crucially, a correlative objective of taxonomically figuring the multiplicity of American experience in one radically individualist (but paradoxically depersonalised) voice. Furthermore, they were arguably the most important figures in both the theoretical development and subsequent transmission of these idioms of transcendence in American literature and culture—including, as discussed earlier, in the mid-twentieth century countercultural ideas seminal to digital-age imaginaries. For Lawrence Buell, their poetic experiments led “to some interesting and significant first-

⁸⁸ As Lawrence Buell notes, it is these American Romantic writers’ work that most clearly hinges on poetically articulating “the link (and the discrepancy)” between an individual “I” and a purportedly impersonal, “cosmic” counterpart (1973, 271).

⁸⁹ I draw both from the original 1855 edition of *Leaves* and the last edition of 1891, on the premise that doing so allows a greater sense of perspective on how Whitman’s most famous work evolved over 36 years and many strenuous edits.

person strategies, which ... became an integral part of the American literary heritage through *Walden* and *Leaves of Grass*" (1973, 271).

In their efforts to forge a distinctive American literary, cultural, and socio-political tradition, Transcendentalists such as Emerson, Fuller, or Thoreau imagined the act of writing and the medium of the book as one means of achieving that cohesion. They assimilated a Romantic individualist "I" to a purportedly universalist "We" in their ambition of forging a unifying portrait of the American character and, for some, of achieving the manifest destiny of US expansionism.⁹⁰ Simultaneously, as Killingsworth and Walls both note, nineteenth-century American Romantic writing, and particularly Whitman's, is replete with transnationalist intimations.⁹¹ Again, when the poetic narrator in his "Song" declares "This is the common air that bathes the globe" (1855, 41/17), he claims to make *universal*, and not just *American*, sense (Killingsworth and Martin 1992, 40). Danielewski and Dara reiterate the paradoxical American Romantic attempt to both figure a specifically American experience, and to gesture at a transnational, universalising vantage.⁹²

Indeed, key to Transcendentalist ideals is the notion that the "I", a source of immanent knowledge and self-reliant power for Emerson, is capable of moving past its usual strictures to achieve a universalist perspective. As briefly discussed in the Introduction, Buell posits that the American Romantic "I" differs from its European predecessor in its insistence on a universalising construct of subjectivity, to the detriment of the unique self (1973, 283). Tony Tanner argues along similar lines in his 1968 study,

⁹⁰ See, for example, Fresonke (2003) for a discussion of how some Transcendentalist writings advance nationalist concepts of westward expansion.

⁹¹ See Walls's essay on Transcendentalist cosmopolitanism and transnationalist rhetoric in Myerson et al. (2010).

⁹² These texts arguably exemplify what Ursula Heise describes as a tension in postmodern American literature between drawing a "sense of place" and participating in global cosmopolitanism: while focussed on intensely local (e.g. American) problems and concerns, these are simultaneously situated in the context of a global "risk culture" whose bounds and borders are inherently slippery. See Heise 2008.

but focuses on American Romantic writing's preoccupation with the "limitless freedom to sport in air", unbounded from both spatiotemporal and personal constraints (99; see Introduction). It is this universalising "I" floating through seemingly limitless space and time that strongly connects depictions of boundary-breaking subjectivity in technoculture to nineteenth-century Transcendentalist rhetoric.

In their more utopian iterations especially, late postmodern accounts of technocultural subjectivity confound terms of "I-ness" and "we-ness" in ways that strongly echo rhetoric present in Whitman's *Leaves* and Emerson's *Essays*. In "Thoughts on Modern Literature", the latter argues that the "great" poetic voice should lead us to a universalising perspective: "The great always introduce us to facts; small men introduce us always to themselves. The great man, even whilst he relates a private fact personal to him, is really leading us away from him to a universal experience." (*Collected Writings* XII, 314-315).

The original 1855 edition of *Leaves* opens by stating its ambition to holistically enunciate human experience—past, present, and future confounded—through a radically individualised poetic voice. "I speak the pass-word primeval / I give the sign of democracy," the poetic narrator asserts, staging himself as the privileged conduit through which vastly disparate human subjectivities may meet in a singular forum and mode of expression ("Song" 1855, 24/508-509). If such a totalising perspective can be understood as effectively occluding difference, it *claims* to holistically capture plural perspectives, including those of disenfranchised subjects and their "dumb voices", from women to enslaved African-Americans.

For Buell, *Leaves* represents the zenith of earlier Transcendentalist, primarily Emersonian ambitions toward a universalising "I" voice, since Whitman's poetic narrator slips seamlessly between perspectives, "ventriloquizing" the voices of others:

“Myself” in Whitman's poetry becomes, by turns, a demiurge or Oversoul; an epitome of America ... the book or poem itself; and, lastly, you, the reader. As a result, Whitman's speaker comes much closer than the Transcendentalists' to encompassing the whole range of human consciousness ... When it comes to presenting the self in its universal aspects, moreover, Whitman does not merely assert this claim in theory, but has the persona act it out, by imaginatively projecting a series of identities or situations. (1973, 326)

This reverential account of Whitman's success in “encompassing the whole range of human consciousness” is worlds apart from the critical perspectives that reign today, and that frequently focus on the imperialistic aspects of Whitman's famous imperative: “what I assume you shall assume” (“Song” 1855, 1/2). Buell's analysis is nonetheless valuable in that it identifies some of the Transcendentalist ideas reformulated in contemporary experiments: namely, the ambition of collating vastly disparate perspectives into a single forum through linguistic devices, and an emphasis on the text itself as an embodiment of that forum. Whitman attributes a quasi-magical power to language, inheriting both European and American Romantic traditions: the “Word Democratic, the word En-Masse” becomes the mediating force allowing the poet to supersede his own subjectivity and arrive at Emerson's “great” universal “I”.

Again, it is the fantasy of transcendent connectivity, of disparate individuals and communities brought together through new information platforms, and propagated in forums from the *WEC* to *Wired*, that borrow clearly from Emersonian and Whitmanian constructs of an universalising “I”: individual consciousness as largely impersonal, protean, and blissfully unconstrained. This fantasy is again revived in *Revolutions* and *Scrapbook*. In *Revolutions*, when Hailey proclaims “And so everything else around / US allso goes” (H52), confounding the pronomial “us” with the term “United States”, or when one of Dara's intermingling narrative voices, addressing an audience of Walkman-wearers, muses: “dear listener, I am here with a purpose... /...I have penetrated your

fortress for a reason... / Yes: I have smashed your private portcullis..." (80), they take back up Transcendentalist fantasies of superseding the bounds of individuated subjectivity and forging a healing union with other minds. Dara's narrator continues: "[T]hey became... /...the same... / virtually the same... /...with lips and ears... /...working as one... / flowing as one... / harnessed together" (111). Here, minds and bodies meld to form a sort of cooperative consciousness that paradoxically retains individuality; in many respects this passage recalls Stapledon's "Star Maker" story discussed in Chapter One. Individuals join up to become "virtually the same"; but their communion here falls short of total dis-individuation.

Danielewski, Dara, and Tomasula additionally reinvent American Romantic poetic idioms through formal and narrative experimentation. Following an analysis of thematic and poetic constructs, this chapter considers how *Revolutions* and *TOC* in particular employ experimental techniques to reinforce discursive play with American Transcendentalist ideas, materially instantiating⁹³ their own romanticised responses to the digital revolution and demonstrating how ubiquitous nineteenth-century ideas might acquire a sense of contemporary relevance. Attempting to stretch the limits of current textual practices, they also highlight the materiality and the interactive, layered quality of digitality, pointing to rich interactions between print and digital textuality.

Although Liu, Botting, Clayton, and Coyne have probed the heritage of European Romanticism in postmodern literary texts addressing digital-age experience,⁹⁴ focussing on British poets such as Wordsworth or Coleridge, their studies do not consider how

⁹³ I borrow this term from Hayles, who is one of only a handful of scholars to have considered material and formal devices in texts such as *Revolutions* and *TOC*, dedicating her 2012 monograph in part to these same texts. As such, my own consideration of these narratives' treatment of form as "multimodal technotexts" is deeply indebted to her work, and I frequently refer to her own studies of these works in the development of my own argument. As I detail later, however, I diverge from Hayles in identifying a specifically Romantic and Transcendentalist heritage playing out in their treatment of subjectivity, spatialisation and temporality, rather than understanding these devices as unique responses to the multiplicity of information culture and data overload.

⁹⁴ See Liu 2008 and Coyne 1999 in particular.

accounts of digital-age subjectivity transpose American Transcendentalist idioms in particular. Nor do they examine the considerable ties between the American Romantic literary heritage, 1960s countercultural movements, and contemporary literary texts that draw on these multiple movements and periods. This chapter seeks to more clearly define what distinguishes American Romantic fantasies of transcendence from European predecessors. It considers the *particular* heritage of American Romantic transcendence in such narratives, treating it as different from European Romantic counterparts, while acknowledging how European transcendental philosophy and literary culture strongly influenced Transcendentalism.⁹⁵ It furthermore builds upon the work of cultural historians such as Turner and Silverman, who have both suggested consequential intellectual ties between nineteenth-century American literary culture and digital culture.

Revolutions and *Scrapbook* figuratively suspend normative subjectivity to elaborate a universalising selfhood that taps into other minds and supersedes usual spatiotemporal bounds; in so doing, they allude to digital-age hyper-connectivity and malleable, relational experiences of selfhood in technoculture. First, as already described briefly, Danielewski and Dara thematically and linguistically elide the terms “I” and “we” to confound individual and collective experience. In so doing, they propose a quasi-epic portrait of American experience and history that gestures toward the transnational and universal.⁹⁶

Secondly, all three contemporary narratives revive American Romantic constructions of heterogeneous and cyclical time as part of their depiction of digital-age

⁹⁵ The Introduction briefly traces an intellectual history of both of these traditions.

⁹⁶ By “epic” devices or poetic language, I refer to features such as catalogues, allusions or direct references to important historical events, protagonists characterised as possessing semi-supernatural characteristics or powers, the use of poetic figures of speech such as apostrophe and chiasmus, and, often, the parodic imitation of such devices and figures. I draw from Lukács’s conception of the epic novel to inform my discussion of contemporary texts’ ambitions to form a “totalizing” picture of experience or reality, even as that totality is largely unavailable in the (post)modern condition. Lukács considers the novel form as “the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality” (56).

experience, often privileging these models over linear counterparts and offering a critique of teleological progress. Such a critique was already an important feature in the earlier British Romanticism of Mary Shelley, Wordsworth or Coleridge.⁹⁷ These writers' poetic inscription of personal, memorial time into the cycles of nature, and their challenge to Enlightenment models favouring the mechanised time of industrial labour, stand as important Romantic heritages in contemporary accounts of heterogeneous temporalities. However, as I will address in more depth shortly, while the contemporary texts considered here draw from these European heritages, they are more strongly informed by American Romantic conceptions of nonlinear temporality. They revive an emphasis on cyclical and transcendent experiences of time that proves far more impersonal than European Romantic counterparts. In "Circles", Emerson relates his notion of cyclical time to an urge toward self-effacement or forgetting: "The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves" (*Essays I*, 190). To transcend normative temporality is generally to escape the constraints and care of self and memory in both Transcendentalist and late postmodern American accounts of nonlinear time. This transpersonal approach stands in stark contrast to Wordsworth's excavation of personal memory, his nearly Proustian search for lost time, in *The Prelude*.

In offering close comparative readings of nineteenth-century and contemporary literary texts, this chapter builds on Buell's aforementioned study on the Transcendentalist "I" voice. It draws strongly from the work of Hayles, Lloyd Pratt, and Mark Hansen to explore spatiotemporal overlapping or heterogeneity as a narrative and "spatialised" practice in *Revolutions*, and the way Danielewski, Dara, and Tomasula

⁹⁷ For a discussion of cyclical temporalities as resistance to Enlightenment discourse in European Romantic writing, see, notably, Barth's *Romantic Transcendence: Wordsworth, Coleridge and the Religious Imagination* (2003). See Pratt 2010 for an analysis of heterogeneous time in American Antebellum literature.

appear to privilege cyclical and synchronous models of temporality as a way back into holism; as a cure against the “care” of linear time.

Part Two also considers Liu’s theory of postmodern historiography as a method of “contingency” to understand the mechanisms through which *Revolutions* and *Scrapbook* approach historical and collective experience in their complex temporalities, and attempt to draw a taxonomic portrait of American (trans)national experience even as they reject models of linear time. Morley’s identification of a “quest for epic” in American postmodernism, and Hungerford’s assertion that American postmodern writers invest literature with authority by deploying religious language and rhetoric without genuine belief, are also crucial sources. These studies offer important frameworks for envisaging how late postmodern texts use epic or “mystical” language in their depictions of individuals and collectives superseding normative subjective or spatiotemporal boundaries. Such devices, as Hungerford notes, can be deployed for purely rhetorical purposes, to “confer...religious authority upon the literary” (2010, xv). Furthermore, these texts seem correlative in numerous respects to Kasia Boddy’s assertion that contemporary American writers continue to stage ambitiously grandiose, catalogue-style accounts of American history and experience. She argues that investment in the “Great American Novel”, or “GAN”, remains strong even in a postmodern moment that might be assumed to eschew the genre: “The encyclopaedic impulse of the GAN is often attributed to its desire to catalogue the “billion forms” of the nation (Th. Wolfe 93)” (Boddy 2011, online).

Enduring fantasies of radical individuality as constitutive of collectivity remain as politically problematic today as they were in the nineteenth century, since the fantasy of a self that subsumes other subjectivities to a singular voice has potentially imperialistic or assimilationist undertones. Such familiar Transcendentalist fantasies nevertheless re-

emerge as crucial in the contemporary fiction examined here. In their forging of “imagined communities” of Americans, to borrow Benedict Anderson’s term, their purported melding of individual and collective minds through technological mediation, these texts attempt to collate vastly divergent subjectivities into a unified voice.⁹⁸ At the same time, their attention to the deleterious aspects of such fantasies render them highly reflexive postmodern texts that echo more critical perspectives on the Transcendentalist legacy.

Digital connectivity and “feigned” transcendence

While Coyne, Liu, or Clayton do not consider American Transcendentalism as a specific heritage in neo-Romantic, postmodern accounts of digital subjectivity, this chapter is strongly indebted to their work in understanding how Romantic idioms of transcendence resurface in digital culture and literature, and particularly their observation that digital accounts of “transcendence” tend to be largely secular. Liu has written extensively on the rhetoric of transcendental (digital) data in a new media landscape dominated by a “culture of cool”. He sees cyberpunk texts taking up European Romantic concepts of (numinous) transcendence and placing them into the synthetic, secular context of information culture, in what he calls the “neuroromantic imagination”:

[N]euroromantic imagination simulates release. The visionary medium is now mind in direct interface with silicon ... and the function of the synthetic imagination is once more to allow the world—now corporate, multinational, informatic—to feign the otherworldly. (2008, 111)

Citing Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and its depiction of (post)human subjectivities floating freely in cyberspace, Liu describes how conceptions of “unknown modes of being”

⁹⁸ See Anderson (1991). His monograph, first published in 1983, posits that print culture and its capacity to inspire “imagined communities” helped forge modern nationalism.

originating in nineteenth-century Romanticism and the work of writers such as Wordsworth have been transposed into a digital realm where the “ecstatic mind” remains a central theme, but “transcendence” is reduced to mere recursivity; “a go-to routine of the imagination that goes nowhere” (*Ibid.*). We can relate his observations to Hungerford’s assertion that “American [postmodern] writers turn to religion to imagine the purely formal elements of language in transcendent terms...” (xiii).

Liu draws from Baudrillard and Jameson in his analysis of how late capitalistic infrastructures and their disembodied virtualities tend to recycle romantic transcendence to produce a simulacrum of it. Baudrillard maintains that the real has been replaced by a “hyperreal” composed of infinitely reproducible, phantasmagorical “units” and “matrices” in late capitalist society: “In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal: the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere” (Baudrillard and Poster 170). Free-floating, entropic digital spaces similar to Baudrillard’s hyperreal are the object of fantasy and anxiety in the experimental fiction examined here. Such spaces seem to afford either an exuberant sense of boundlessness, or forge atomised, alienated subjectivities.

While Larrissy, Liu, and other critics focus on depictions of boundless subjectivity and hyperreal bliss in genres such as cyberpunk and steampunk, they have only occasionally considered anxieties about atomisation or subsumption in these. This project, by contrast, interrogates how antinomian conventions native to science fiction and to some degree cyberpunk have been taken up by so-called “high” postmodern literary fiction, eroding traditional borders between genres and producing texts whose originality lies in part in their rich intertextual layers and discursively ambivalent quality. Registering both the hopes and anxieties elicited by the digital revolution, the texts

alternately imagine the time-space compression or disembedding experienced in technoculture—a culture associated with exponential speed and seemingly boundless space—in positive or dysphoric terms.⁹⁹ “Plugging in” to technoculture’s unprecedented technological speeding promises both the exhilaration of surpassing individual limitations, and the terrifying subsumption of individuality in an informational hive-mind. Such fantasies and nightmares have been popularised in science and speculative fiction since at least the early twentieth century—re-affirming Jameson’s, Buell’s, and others’ assertions that sci-fi codes have crept into the literary mainstream.¹⁰⁰

Coyne identifies important utopian antinomies in digital-age postmodern narratives, but primarily focuses on the heritage of European Romantic writing. He compares late-twentieth century narratives of “cybernetic rapture” to European Romantic writers including Coleridge.¹⁰¹ However, he also notes anti-utopian interpretations of digital-age experience in these texts:

[T]hese technological narratives also acknowledge the potential for fragmentation within their worlds: uneven access to computer systems, alienation from normal interactions with people and things, an imbalance in priorities, a privileging of objects and issues that are amenable to computer representations, the status quo, problems of surveillance, and delusion—all of which point to alienation among ourselves, from nature, and from our machines (5).

Even as the contemporary fiction examined here reiterates a familiar brand of cyberutopianism, it is also preoccupied with some of the problems Coyne identifies

⁹⁹ I borrow here both from David Harvey’s notion of “time-space compression” as an effect of technological development in the information age (see Harvey 1989) and from Anthony Giddens’s concept of spatiotemporal “disembedding” in modernity.

¹⁰⁰ Popular science fiction from authors including HP Lovecraft (*The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, 1931), Octavia Butler (*Mind of my Mind*, 1977) or Greg Bear (*Blood Music*, 1985) feature hive-mind scenarios, debating the beneficial or detrimental aspects of such collective forms of mind. See Moylan 1986 and Baccolini and Moylan 2003 for extended discussions of utopian and dystopian traditions in sci-fi, and in other literary genres.

¹⁰¹ Writing earlier than Coyne, Stéphane Barron coined the term “Technoromantisme” in a 1991 doctoral thesis subsequently published as an eponymous French-language monograph (2003).

above: notably, alienation as an unintended consequence of unprecedented connectivity, and the profound disembedding of subjectivity in technoculture.

Dara's *Scrapbook*, for example, depicts new technological platforms and their effects in markedly ambivalent terms. In the novel, nameless, atomised voices deplore their effective "non-existence", experiencing profound isolation amid the dominance of a mass media system whose propensity for corporate spin, sensationalism, and outright deception seems absolute. Set in Isaura, Missouri, a fictional town whose livelihood depends on a chemical company that is slowly poisoning the town's groundwater, the community depicted in the novel has eroded; people are seemingly reduced to interchangeable bits of data, recalling Gere's description of Hollerith and the atomising effects of his tabulating machine. It is only through the aggregating of atomised voices in a "scrapbook" that collective meaning and solidarity might be restored.

On one hand, technologies such as the Walkman or digital cameras unite disparate minds in Dara's text; on the other, human subjectivities frequently figure as mechanistic, depersonalised units, comparable to digital bits of information that lack genuine individual agency or value. Consider the following excerpt:

For this broadcast...its every syllable and sigh...is being savored...by every Walkman-wearer in your vicinity...Just think, o listeners, just think of this miracle union...Think and rejoice...Yes, rejoice...For this is the power...the puissance...of pirate communications...It penetrates...then unifies...Smashes...then lashes... (*Scrapbook* 164-165)

In this passage, a burgeoning collective mind, forged through "pirate communications" and a then-new technological platform (the Walkman) allows individuals to experience both total privacy (plugged into a device and headphone-clad) and to foster "solidarity and linkage" in the face of disenfranchisement and isolation. Compare this passage to Whitman's claim of aggregating disparate subjectivities into healing union in the 1891 version of "Song of Myself": "These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and

lands, / they are not original with me, / If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing... / This is the *common air that bathes the globe*" (43/17, emphasis mine). Similar to Dara's Walkman, which fosters a "miracle union", the poetic narrator of "Song" imagines a technological medium—the print poem—as linking subjectivities with a "common air that bathes the globe". Such rhetoric recalls Silverman's observation that nineteenth-century literary culture fostered an ideal of minds connecting across space and time through book reading. Dara's Walkman-union, in this light, appears as a digital-age re-imagining of fantasies that permeated nineteenth-century writing and literary culture. It also echoes mid-twentieth-century countercultural propositions around independent media functioning as subversive, liberatory platforms, operating independently outside of corrupt government or corporate interests.

Elsewhere in *Scrapbook*, however, one of many inchoate narrators is subsumed by an informational matrix that erodes all sense of holistic selfhood: "I see my self...as some kind of irritant, as something that makes flows of culture coagulate, pearl-like, in my consciousness: I am not expressed, but accrued; lopped off from my sources, submerged in received history, I feel myself only as an offputting unknown" (190). Here, the "offputting unknown" suggests mechanistic *output*; this mechanised self is a passive conduit of events passing around and through him; his personhood is not "expressed, but accrued"; rather than possessing individual memory, this self is instead "submerged in received history" and "lopped off from [its] sources", subsumed in a pool of vague collective intelligence. The body itself, while still present—Dara does not describe a Baudrillardian-style hyperreal detached from corporeality—recalls the lonely productivity of a clam making a pearl; it is only an "irritant", producing mental "flows of culture coagulate".

On one hand, new technological systems foster an exultant sense of unity and boundless possibility; on the other, they erode individual integrity and “lop off” individuals from their “sources”. *Scrapbook* exemplifies how experimental crisis fiction transposes ubiquitous Transcendentalist themes and poetic idioms while also interrogating the darker consequences of such supposedly transcendent states.

The ethics of materiality: From the hyperreal to the embodied digital?

The antinomian quality of contemporary accounts of technoculture echoes recent debates in the digital humanities and cultural studies around the potentially harmful aspects of digital technology, especially its potential to erode communities or environments.¹⁰² An emphasis on materiality and formal experimentation in late postmodern texts, moreover, coincides with recent scholarship calling for a return to embodied knowledge and practice, to an emphasis on technology itself as an embodied ecology.¹⁰³ This represents a strong shift away from earlier fantasies of technoculture as disembodied hyperspace—fantasies that arguably reached their peak in the mid- to late-1990s with the advent of the commercial Internet.¹⁰⁴ More recent debates around embodiment and disembodiment in technoculture are important to consider in approaching a late postmodern emphasis on

¹⁰² Many environmental theorists have excoriated IT giants like Apple for using toxic chemicals in the manufacturing of computers and other products, and study the environmental impact of digital technology. See, notably, Elizabeth Grossmann’s *High Tech Trash* (2006).

¹⁰³ As underlined earlier, Oppermann and Iovino are two postmodern theorists calling for an embodied understanding of technological forces.

¹⁰⁴ Charles Ess describes how an early, utopian phase in digital culture was marked by the “insistence on a postmodern, disembodied self engaged in cyberspace, i.e., a Cartesian mind radically sundered from the body.” He goes on to argue: “The emergence of the [web] ... inspired what Maria Bakardjieva characterizes as ‘the early euphoria surrounding everything ‘cyber’ and the effervescent speculations about how the Internet will transform society as we know it’ (2010, 59)” (Ess 106). On the flipside, dystopian narratives warn of individuals becoming isolated in front of computer screens, cut off from communities, environments, or their own bodies. Dreams of a digital hive mind that would represent an unprecedented merging of individuals and cultures were increasingly accompanied by fears that hive-mind forms of knowledge and communication would erode individual integrity and threaten diversity. As a response, discourse around digitality gradually shifted to register “non-dual understandings of the relationship between our offline and online lives” and an accompanying emphasis on embodiment “as crucial to how we know the world and thereby what sorts of selves we are” (*Ibid.*).

form and materiality—especially print materiality, but also on the materiality of *digital* form itself. New renderings of the digital emphasise its material presence and interactivity with both readers’ bodies and other forms of textuality.

As already briefly discussed, *Revolutions*, *Scrapbook*, and *TOC* reinforce thematic fantasies of transcending, or moving beyond, the strictures of self, time and place with formal devices and multimodal, interactive features. These include techniques made familiar by the literary avant-garde of the twentieth century—“High Modernist” stream of consciousness and blurring narrative voices through the absence of pronominal markers in *Scrapbook*, for example—or a more elaborate and cognitively demanding combination of color-coded text, iconographic markers, multiple text zones, and kinetic manipulation in *Revolutions*. Readers are required to physically rotate the latter text at regular intervals, literally performing the transcendent (or recursive?) “only revolutions” constantly iterated at thematic and formal levels.

As a multimodal technotext, extending outside the bounds of print to incorporate web, audio and video components that can be read against or alongside the print version, *Revolutions* also gestures at its own physical “superseding”: it is available in different iterations and platforms, thereby offering varying temporalities and cognitive experiences of reading. Reading the print text of *Revolutions*, for example, implies a different temporal rhythm of reading than listening to audio recordings of the book. Tomasula’s *TOC*, meanwhile, combines video, audio, digital text and still images to offer a multi-textured, intermedial narrative form that, presenting on CD-ROM, does not escape materiality—one that is not unproblematic in this age of rapid obsolescence.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ *TOC*’s format itself points to the material quality of digital media and its problematic ephemerality: the CD-ROM format has already become essentially outmoded, and many computers no longer read this format. My own research has been (humorously) affected by the problem of format obsolescence: after recently installing a new operating system, I was no longer able to run *TOC* on my computer.

The constraints and sensual concreteness of printed matter is, moreover, frequently advanced as a pseudo-mystical way back into something that might be lost in a digitally dominated world, including the comfort of human subjectivity-as-embodied-in-the-world. With its lavish, elaborate design, color-coding, iconographic elements, and complex layout that at times seems a self-conscious *clin d'oeil* to the marginalia of medieval manuscripts, *Revolutions* in particular alludes to pre-modern textual practices, suggesting that there is value in reviving such practices. In some respects, these experimental texts can be read as advocating for an ambitious, materially engaging brand of print textuality; as a remedy to the ephemerality and supposed disembodiment of the digital. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles describes how the “cybernetic posthuman” is imagined as a creature existing outside of the normative constraints of embodiment:

[Th]e posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life ... In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals. (1999, 3)

Writing in 1999, Hayles already recognised the problematic nature of envisaging the posthuman subject, and indeed digitality itself, as disembodied; the thorny issue of how “informational pattern” is privileged over “material instantiation” in technoculture is one of the main crises romantically tackled by late postmodern experiments.

Revolutions engages this debate by figuring the conjunction of informational inundation and temporal complexity in technoculture as concrete, printed matter. As Hayles notes, Danielewski’s novel underlines the materiality of the digital technologies it alludes to (but never discusses directly at a diegetic level). Hayles identifies *Revolutions* as participating in a “topographic turn”: she sees it responding to the informational

overload of technoculture “by accentuating and expanding the role of spatiality in a literary text . . . it displays the effects of data not only at the diegetic level of the narrative but also in the material form of the print codex itself” (2012, 221).

As will be discussed shortly, the novel stages its heterogeneous temporalities not only through linguistic and poetic constructions and its continual drawing of circle-shapes, but through a highly spatialised figuration of time, represented by multiple text zones. In this concrete and clearly spatialised zoning off of text, *Revolutions* juxtaposes diachronic, collective history with the personal space-time of Hailey and Sam, and romantically stages debates around embodied information that have pervaded in digital culture since at least the late 1990s. I will examine the modalities of this experimentation in more detail shortly.

Retooling American Romantic “I-ness and we-ness”

Revolutions and *Scrapbook* linguistically and diegetically transpose American Romantic constructs of “I-ness and we-ness” in their renderings of digital-age subjectivity.

Linguistic devices such as catalogues, chiasmic and parallelistic structures suspend and jumble normative grammatical subjectivity to suggest such a transcendent state—whether sincere or pseudo, numinous or secular.

Dara and Danielewski revisit Whitmanian-style “I-ness and we-ness” with multiple techniques, including the aforementioned ones and stream-of-consciousness narrative devices that radically blur narrative voices and perspectives. Equally key to the construction of a universalising “I” is a notion of relational selfhood, a sense that the self is a fluid matter that can inhabit numerous perspectives, gliding between these as between so many discardable attires. Contemporary technoculture widely propagates such an idea: consider the advent of the online avatar; or the “skins” one can don while inhabiting one

character or another in online gaming.¹⁰⁶ While one might read in this phenomenon the specifically postmodern erosion of an integral, immanent conception of selfhood, such a notion was in fact far from absent in nineteenth-century literary culture. Robert K. Martin suggests of Whitman's protean poetic "I" in "Song":

Exploring the tensions inherent in expressive individualism, the poet found himself...on the very brink of selfhood, the place theorized by the sociologist Erving Goffman and by the deconstructionists, for whom there is no foundational self at all, but, in Bellah's words, "merely a series of social masks that change with each successive situation," an "absolutely empty, unencumbered and improvisational self." (Martin 1992, 43)

Martin's "brink of selfhood" also usefully frames Danielewski and Dara's rendering of individuality. The largely depersonalised protagonists who inhabit *Scrapbook* and *Revolutions* seem more attributable to a relational notion of selfhood, to a construct of individuality built around the inhabiting of various roles and "social masks that change with each successive situation", than to a European Romantic "I" stressing interiority and uniqueness. Hailey and Sam, the twin-like lovers narrating *Revolutions*, lack significant interiority or differentiating features, aside from their symmetrical "green eyes with flecks of gold" and "gold eyes with flecks of green". Rather than highly interiorised Romantic heroes, they read as allegorical figures mutating in tandem with the historical events that flow alongside their individual narratives. Similarly, the barely differentiated, and only occasionally named, protagonists of *Scrapbook* easily flow together in the stream-of-consciousness narrative to forge largely impersonal voices. Like the color-coded characters in Auster's "Ghosts" ("Blue", "Black", etc.), their lonely musings matter less than the way that these intermingle and overlap to create a sense of "solitary togetherness" (*Scrapbook* 165).

¹⁰⁶ Also see Ess for a discussion of "relational selfhood in the digital age".

Whitman may or may not be a conscious source in digital-age renderings of the relational self, but his ideas are clearly kindred to notions of a malleable, protean “I” that reign in technoculture. When he declares “I am large...I contain multitudes” (“Song” 1855, 51/1316), he is not only theorising a multifaceted and multi-layered version of the self, but also one that in many respects lacks any clear foundation, aside from, perhaps, the ability of the poet to observe himself from a detached standpoint. Whitman’s poetic narrator elsewhere maintains that his various experiences and encounters

are not the Me myself ...

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,

Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,

Looks down, is erect, bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,

Looks with its sidecurved head curious what will come next,

Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it. (*Ibid.*, 4/65-70)

Whitman’s “watching and wondering” self only gleans its “Me myself”-ness by detaching from the particularities of everyday experience and feelings. He “looks down” at his own experience, curious and detached. Similarly, in *Revolutions*, Hailey and Sam often assert an impersonal sense of detachment from the forces of history that swirl around them and that they are moving through; they self-reflexively “watch and wonder” at their own experiences: “We are without / edge, continually unwinding, uniting. / Every around retreating before / our Freedom.” (S221-222). Hailey asserts: “I’m too multiple to feel”, echoing Whitmanian celebrations of his own “multitudes” (H9). Like Whitman’s poetic narrator, Danielewski’s protagonists experience “me-myselfness” as something separate from the banal comings and goings of quotidian experience. It is instead a protean lens that can bring into itself multiple perspectives and “filter them out” through a single (or in the case of Hailey and Sam, a dual) voice. Similarly, the pirate radio

broadcaster in *Scrapbook* is a ventriloquizing presence who “smashe[s] [the] private portcullis” of listeners: “...And you are thinking Who *is* this? ... /...What is going *on*?... /...What is he *doing inside my head*?” (79). Like Whitman’s narrator, Dara’s pirate radio broadcaster proposes to stand in for the multitudes and lend them a voice; arguing that the broadcast is “made for a concatenation of heads... / ...Yours... /...Mine...” (82).

Poetic constructions in depth

In *Revolutions* and *Scrapbook*’s technoculture recasting of American Romantic “I-ness” and “we-ness”, bits of experience and memory aggregate in massive pools of data to form a chaotic patchwork of voices that are nonetheless the site of numerous symmetries and mirror effects. Parallelistic structures are especially preponderant in *Revolutions*, as Brian McHale has noted (2011, 156). Furthermore, he calls Danielewski’s play with such structures “Whitmanesque” (152), but stops short of offering detailed comparisons between the contemporary novel and Whitman’s writings. Doing so, however, reveals strikingly similar poetic tactics. In both Whitman and Danielewski, closely juxtaposed pronouns form antithetical poetic constructions that mediate between seemingly paradoxical terms of inwardness and outwardness, individual and collective subjectivity.

Whitman concludes one of his breathless, three-page catalogues in the 1891 version of “Song” by employing antithetical constructions to effectively collapse the polarised relationship between the terms “myself” and “these/them”:

And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
 And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
 And of these one and all I weave the song of myself. (1891, 41-42/15)

Here, a phrase that tightly multiplies chiasmic terms—“*these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them*”—equalises polarised words (emphasised here in italics) to ascribe identical value to each. The antithetical construction suggests a universalist ideal: none of “these” is valued “more or less” than the poetic “I”. Further, the syntactically irregular and wilfully confused line, “As such as it is to be of these more or less I am”, effectively suspends grammatical subjectivity by jumbling word order. The reader is left to parse the “I” from the “these” to determine the precise subject of the clause, but is unable to. The final line in the excerpt, finally, draws together the first two in a declaration of transcendent unity: “And of these one and all I weave the song of myself”.¹⁰⁷ Richard Geldard notes of the poem: “The nation and the human being are one and the same, male/female, native/foreigner, mind/body, past/future, all fused into a raucous, sublime, celebratory present” (240).

Revolutions’s meditation on information-age crises in subjectivity deploys similar devices to Whitman’s to elide, equalise, and confound the terms “I” and “we”, “one” and “all”, and gesture at a universalising picture of (trans)national American experience in a postmodern age that supposedly rejects such totalising pretensions. The novel imagines in poetic and formal terms what present and historical American experiences might look like from a technocultural vantage; one in which information overload and exponential technological development create a sense of profound disarray.¹⁰⁸ The confusion of boundaries between individual and collective forms of subjectivity constitutes a prominent part of that disorientating experience. The novel deploys antithetical

¹⁰⁷ The final version of the poem diverges significantly from the original 1855 edition: “And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to / them, / And such as it is to be of these more or less I am” (15/324-325). The 1891 version breaks up the first line to offer the independent clause “And of these one and all I weave the song of myself”, effectively drawing together “me”, and “these one and all” into a unified whole.

¹⁰⁸ Chapter Four addresses this question in detail as part of its discussion of new figurations of the Romantic sublime. Technoculture is often depicted as an incommensurable, terrifying object; at the same time, in novels such as Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, taxonomic language works to create an aesthetic of dullness or boredom Ngai calls the “stuplime”.

constructions and other devices to effectively elide a poetic “I” perspective with a collective counterpart. Such techniques clearly draw on aforementioned American Romantic efforts to construct a universalising, boundary-breaking “I”.

Danielewski’s novel reformulates that ambition through the seemingly boundless perspectives of its adolescent protagonists. In the first-person, prose-poem narrative threads that follow Hailey and Sam as they traverse 200 years of time, then exceed present history, neologistic misspellings and double-meanings attributed to words including “alone” (spelled throughout as “allone”) and “US” (doubly denoting the pronoun ‘us’ and the United States) render the protagonists’ assertions of radical teen individuality highly ambiguous. We at once understand Hailey and Sam as struggling to preserve their individuality and fragile youth, and as metonymically standing in for collective memory.

Hailey and Sam are plunged in a saturated database of information, embodied primarily through a dense historical timeline that at once threatens to subsume their individuality and imparts on them a quasi-universalist perspective.¹⁰⁹ Their own stories run alongside and frequently allude to the historical timeline stretching from the middle of the Civil War (1863) to 2063, when their adventures end (and begin again, from the flip-side perspective). The protagonists traverse, and stand in for, collective memory from a textual “here-and-now” that shows them superseding individual boundaries and plugging in to a plane of (trans) national collective consciousness: “I will sacrifice nothing. / For there are no countries. / Except me. And there is only / one boundary. Me” (S3).

¹⁰⁹ Beyond its historical timelines, the novel functions as a database in other ways: it incorporates vast catalogues of plants and animals, car models, and geographical locations; furthermore, as Hayles notes, it produces multiple iterations of similar words and phrases she calls “data arrangements”, mostly achieved through a mirror effect between Hailey and Sam’s narratives. “To see how these data arrangements interact with the narrative, consider the typography of the page and page spread ... Technically free verse, the form is tightly constrained through an elaborate set of topographic patterns” (2012, 225).

The novel's massive historical database works against the lovers' struggle to create a space of anarchical freedom away from others. Yet the historical, collective space drawn by the timeline also proves inextricable from the protagonists' individual diegetic threads. In this light, elision between the terms "I" and "we", "US" and "them", "all" and "one" partially serves in constructing *Revolutions*' at-once utopian and dysphoric account of contemporary technoculture. However overwhelming or chaotic, the open-ended timeline, as Hayles has noted, irresistibly draws Hailey, Sam, and the readers into a collective space-time in which individual consciousness seems to melt into a shared pool of ideas and memories (2012, 231).

Revolutions revisits the Whitmanian ambition of poetically figuring "this one and all" in numerous ways. First, the novel's paratextual matter is crucial. The secondary title, "The Democracy of Two Set Out & Chronically Arranged", is displayed prominently alongside the publication information, seeming to both humorously underline the subtitle's oxymoronic literal sense—how can a Democracy possibly be composed of only two people?—and alluding to how Hailey and Sam's experiences metonymically figure collective American (and, to a certain degree, transnational) experience.¹¹⁰ We might even read "the two" as alluding to the binary switching logic of digitality: rather than fully-fledged characters, Hailey and Sam are complementary components of subjectivity that together form a sweeping, if highly contingent, picture of historical experience and memory. Furthermore, the paratextual pages preceding the beginning of both narrative threads announce: "*You were there*". Readers are drawn in as

¹¹⁰ For Pöhlmann, "In constructing the pair of Hailey and Sam as the irreducibly double basis of its narrative, the novel offers an imagination of the individual that always conceives of it in relation to another individual, not as a single subject that must negotiate its role with regard to a larger group. As the subtitle suggests, democracy is still an issue in relation to this duality, only that it is conceived as a "Democracy of Two" from the outset. It is, in a way, the radical implementation of Whitman's own tenets in [*Leaves*] which he calls in a 1872 preface 'in its intentions, the song of a great composite democratic individual, male or female' (1028), only that its great democratic individuals are male and female—but composite nevertheless. It carries out structurally what Whitman hopes to achieve ..." (7)

implicit participants; they are solicited as witnesses of the novel's dizzying and temporally heterogeneous histories. In "Song", Whitman asserts: "I understand the large hearts of heroes, / ...I am the man...I suffered... / *I was there*" (1855, 33/817; 827, emphasis mine). If Whitman claims to tap directly into historical suffering, Danielewski extends such a privilege to his readers. "*You were there*", in this light, is an invitation to weave our own perspectives and histories into the narrative.

As mentioned earlier, "alone" is misspelled "allone" throughout *Revolutions*, as is any word related in homonymic terms to the word "all"—"also" hence becomes "allso", "always" is instead spelled "allways", etc. "HONEY. For US allone", Hailey comments of the substance that proves the exclusive life salve (H152). Sam asserts early in his own thread: "[W]e're allone, / we're unmissed, savage / and loose" (S86). The neologistic term produces a semantic and semiotic ambiguity that recalls the previously cited excerpt from "Song" and its own antithetical play with "this one and all". The device points to a figurative superseding—or transcending—of isolated individual experience into an imagined, if purely linguistic, plane of collective experience.

Considering certain of Whitman's poetic drafts, the parallels appear uncannily strong. In drafts such as the following, which would eventually be published as a poem entitled "After All, Not to Create Only" in 1871, Whitman laboriously plays with the predeterminer "all" in relation to the terms "alone" and "themselves", apparently hesitating between use of the word "all" and "these" in one of the key stanzas. Below is an excerpt from what would eventually become the eighth section of the published poem.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ An editorial note from *The Walt Whitman Archive* online details: "This manuscript was likely written in 1871 after Whitman accepted the invitation from the American Institute to compose and recite a poem at the opening of its fortieth Annual Exhibition in New York City. Whitman read the poem on September 7, 1871, and it was published soon after that in several newspapers and in a small book ... The poem was ultimately titled "Song of the Exposition."

All †These are thine —not for themselves alone
 All †These ^{all-these} are thine—all
 thine
 All tending to a great
 Nationality
 A great individual (1871)¹¹²

Danielewski's own methodical and self-conscious semantic play with a nearly identical group of words and terms, including "all", "alone", "one" and "them", is striking.

However, despite these appreciable Whitmanesque echoes, *Revolutions* is appreciably more sombre in its semantic play between terms of "I-ness and we-ness". Neologisms formed from the word "all" usually appear at moments when Hailey and Sam experience acute fear, loneliness, or grief. In stark contrast to Whitman's ecstatic universalism, his poetic figuration of a "great Nationality" somehow "tending to" a "great individual", the only consistent universal experiences in *Revolutions* might be violence and fear. In one passage, Sam muses:

And I'm allready gogone, their
 only On and On, shooooshing
 beyond these thickets and marsh ...
 —Whirrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!...
 I hurtle free, even if Them allso
 hanker to follow me ... (S33).

In this passage, the terms "allready" and "allso", as well as "only", and "on" (the latter alluding to the word "one") work in antithetical tension to Sam's radical individuality, his claim to "hurtle free", "shooooshing" and "whirring" through space and time. "Them", the collective that pursues Sam and threatens his freedom, is a sinister crowd. Yet Sam is

¹¹² The extract is reproduced here as shown on *The Walt Whitman Archive* page: <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/manuscripts/transcriptions/loc.00387.html>

also *their* “on and on”—a syntagm doubly signifying the irresistible impetus for movement, for the continual flux of history, and the term “one and only”. Sam and the collective are interdependent and inextricable, but the relationship is fraught with violence.

In another passage, Hailey’s anxiety over confronting the world and its violence again turns on the semantic splicing of “all” and “alone”: “Except what now troubles me? / Terribly allone. Heartrendingly / hooked. Out there, my only harm” (H4). Here, the “out there” against which Hailey anxiously compares her “allone-ness” is denoted as antagonistic and dangerous. Nevertheless, a universalising notion inhabits this semantic ambiguity: the term “allone” suggests that when Sam and Hailey experience the suffering of isolation, violence or grief, it is *universally* shared. Individuals stand together in their “alloneness”; collective suffering makes connection *possible* in the first place.

Similarly, the novel’s capitalised and ambiguous pronoun “US” suspends distinctions between individual and collective subjectivity. The reader might commonly understand it to mean both the pronoun “us” and initials for the proper noun, “United States”. Phrases such as “Just US allone” and “Leave US allone” offer a shifting vantage that alternately depicts Hailey and Sam as rebel lovers against the world, or denotes the universality of their experiences, shared by one and all (or, in Danielewski, the “allone”) (S130; S116).

Hayles sees in the novel’s ubiquitous “US” a third term: a community of “globally dispersed readers” (2012, 231), underlining the novel’s transnationalist flirtations. *Revolutions* denotes its protagonists’ adventures across American space and time in terms of an ideal of radical individualism, but also advances itself as an open-ended, boundless textual space, situated both at the edge of history and caught in its maelstrom, whose ambition is to embody and “sing” a messy plurality of experiences and

memories, mimicking a dense (digital) database. While the novel primarily refers to American places, landscapes, and historical events, the historical timelines include references to global conflicts and other major events.

Furthermore, Hailey and Sam describe themselves as exceeding national boundaries (and temporal) borders, chiefly with the aid of the car, that ubiquitous icon of radical American individuality:

[T]hat's me
 and my Baker Imperial:
 free, free, free ...
 all around, lost and never lost.
 By the Potomoc...
 Around Dupont Circle.
 Down Connecticut. B Street.
 Arlington ...
 My model T klunketing on. Capitol
 thrill. I'm Capitol Hill ...
 Higgledly Piggledy.
 So beyond Occident & Orient. (S57)

The car not only allows Hailey and Sam to supersede bounds of time, place, and nationality, rendering them “free, free, free”, and “So beyond Occident & Orient”; it also gives them access to centres of American political power (Arlington, Capitol Hill). “I’m Capitol Hill”, Sam declares, in another Whitmanesque turn. “We’re allways here. / And overcome by / no distances, surrounding, fastening US to / The City, Our Mishishishi and US. Just two / for the World. Relying allone on a course / of unity” (S176).

While the ever-sixteen lovers mostly travel within the US, their adventures also take them to the streets of Paris, London, and other global power centres (S174). The protagonists seem to represent a kind of centripetal historical force—or are at least

perpetual witnesses to these forces. The first time Hailey and Sam take the wheel, they note in mirroring passages: “And so everything else around / US allso goes” (S52-53; H52-53). Here and elsewhere, the pronoun “US” holds a double function. It represents Sam and Hailey *against* the world, standing in for their jealously guarded intimacy as they encounter criminals, “The CREEP”, and other thugs; but it also points to H&S *embodying* the collective they are constantly attempting to outrun. Furthermore, if at first “US” seems to denote the United States, the novel in fact vehicles a decidedly more transnational perspective.

The ambiguous “US” is woven into passages such as the following, juxtaposing and jumbling the sense of the pronouns “US”, “Them”, “her”, and “me”: “So what if somewhere behind / *US* / *Them* shreds & bashes? / Beside *her* I’m terribly free. Sure *Them*’re still after *me*. / Boooooomblastandruin” (S48, emphasis mine). Again, Sam and Hailey see in each other refuge from the dangers of the collective. Moreover, a kind of apocalyptic threat (“Boooooomblast and ruin”, another recurring, set phrase in the text) seems to loom constantly over their carefree coupling. The “out there”, external to the exclusive binomial pair, is clearly menacing and violent.¹¹³ Accordingly, while the novel reads partially as an affirmation of collective experience and communion, Danielewski’s account of the relationship between individuals and collective bodies is often deeply dysphoric and anti-utopian. Hailey and Sam are constantly at risk of being subsumed and abused by a faceless, brutish mob, even as the novel stages a poetic suspension between the constantly iterated, chiastically related terms “US” and “THEM”.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Note, however, that Hailey and Sam also portray themselves as murderously violent, no less so than the menacing mobs and CREEPS that pursue them. Sam declares: “I’m anarchy. Axes / and raids. Find me at morgues and / bloodspattered parades” (S58).

¹¹⁴ Other chiastic constructions seem to be invested in disavowing the utopian “Dream” in all its misguided forms: “Everyone loves / the Dream but I kill it” (S1 and H1). Iterations of this construction, antithetically opposing the “Everyone” to the “I” appear throughout the novel: “Everyone reveres the Dream but I take it” (H54); “Everyone shares the Dream/But I need it” (S108/H108). Hailey and Sam’s needs and desires consistently conflict with those of “Everyone” else, suggesting that utopian dreams of harmonious collectivity are misguided.

Since Sam and Hailey's nearly cartoonish characterisation effectively dilutes the weight of their individual perspectives, their thoughts and feelings become inextricably tied to the "US" forged by the novel's historical catalogues. Readers are promoted to continually ask, "Who exactly is 'US', and who is 'them'?"¹¹⁵ Or, as Hailey remarks in Sam's narrative, "By me who's everybody else / anyway?" (S45), a question echoing Whitman's confounding, earlier-cited assertion, "And such as it is to be of these more or less I am". Such subjective troubling works to detract from Whitman's purported project of "singing" (e.g., descriptively mapping) himself. As Michael Warner notes of Whitman's "Song", positing "the impossibility of selfing" in the poem,

the impossibility of selfing is driven home in the way the line ["What I assume you shall assume"] parrots interpersonal drama while deploying the special discursive conventions of print-mediated publicity. Whitman's poetry ... continually exploits public-sphere-discourse defined by the necessary anonymity and mutual non knowledge of writer and reader, and therefore on the definitional impossibility of intimacy. Assuming what I assume, you have neither an identity together with me, mediated as we are by print, nor apart from me, since neither pronoun attributions nor acts of assuming manage to distinguish us. (284-285)

Warner identifies "attribution problems" in "Song" as an integral mechanism in what he calls "the metadiscursive queerness of the poems"; for Warner, Whitman's "I" and "you", rather than forging distinctive selfhoods, instead work as "a provocation against the ideology of self-characterisation" (285). *Revolutions*'s "US", "THEM", "I", and "You" themselves prove slippery pronomial markers that arguably operate according to a similar "metadiscursive queerness". Ultimately then, Danielewski's "US" term overrides the Romantic "I". As such, the protagonists can be read as standing in for American individualism in *general*, but never in *particular*. They stray in important ways from the

¹¹⁵ Hayles observes: "The referential ambiguity of this slider enables a triple pun that linguistically concatenates the characters, American citizens, and globally dispersed readers, respectively" (2012, 231).

European Romantic “I” of Coleridge’s *Mariner* or Goethe’s sorrowful young Werther, and seem more closely correlated to the American Romantic, universalising self.

While *Revolutions* largely dispenses with the early 1990s fantasy of technoculture creating blissful new forms of connectivity between individuals—Hailey and Sam instead consistently talk of “killing” the “Dream” or the “New Hope” that “everyone” else naively nurtures—the novel nonetheless points to a quasi-universal space and poetic voice in which the “US”—whether denoting the pronoun, the proper noun, or both—is re-invested with a sense of power and importance. Even as it narrates terrible acts and experiences of violence, the novel’s “US” suggests the universality of human suffering, and the fundamental connections between all of US, even in our “aloneness”.

Formal and “spatialised” devices

Since reading *Revolutions* requires engaging with its form and materiality as much as with its complex narrative threads, it is important to consider how the novel formally iterates and reinforces the poetic elision of “I-ness and we-ness”, thereby transposing American Romantic idioms in a material figuration of technocultural experience. For Hayles, *Revolutions* confounds personal and collective experience not only through linguistic and poetic constructions, but also through the spatialised figuration of these terms; these are represented by multiple textual zones. The novel features an elaborate narrative and spatial “topography”, comprising up to eight discrete textual zones of text per two-page spread.

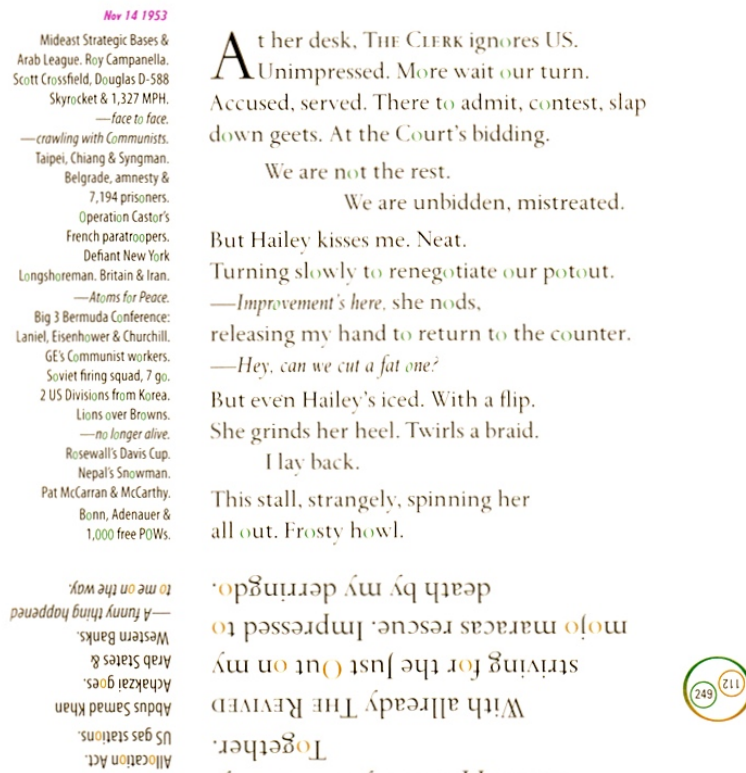


Figure 6: Multiple text zones in *Revolutions* (S249)

This saturated topography, Hayles argues, constructs a “spacetime within whose high dimensionality and complex topology *the personal merges with the mythic in the narratives*, while in the chronologies, the individual merges with the collective, and the national with the transnational” (2012, 231, emphasis added). I maintain, following Hayles’s observations, that Danielewski achieves this narrative “merging” between disparate subjectivities through a complicated intersection of formal, poetic, and diegetic devices. However, since she does not consider how this “merging” of individual and collective voices in Danielewski is indebted to American Romantic predecessors’, I build on her analysis to demonstrate how *Revolutions* transposes nineteenth-century Transcendentalist idioms of I-ness-and-weness in formal terms.

Reading *Revolutions*, the eye is irresistibly drawn to the text’s perpetual symmetries, mirrored words and phrases, and prosodic echoes. Whether or not you follow the octet reading strategy prescribed by the publisher, flipping the book around at

eight-page intervals to steadily alternate between Hailey's and Sam's perspectives, mirror effects are everywhere visible. For example, Sam's page 23 mentions both "a DYING HOPE" and a NEW HOPE, the latter being a paradoxically sinister figure (and iterating yet another important set of utopian antinomies in *Revolutions*): "A NEW HOPE slashes / with clacking jaw. / Flesh of leprous rot. /... NEW HOPE. Dangerous meddler" (S23). On the same page, the reversed-print text of Hailey's narrative begins: "DEAD HOPE. Very dangerous" (H338). Such mirror effects repeat constantly throughout the novel, encouraging attentive readers to simultaneously scan both the rightside-up and upside-down text (or flip the book around). Considered together, the overlapping of linguistic and formal devices in Danielewski's novel produce a dizzying array of perspectives and subjectivities whose borders are significantly troubled, and ultimately contribute to the playful elision between terms of "I" and "we".

Crowdsourcing: Mining the digital hive mind

Of equal importance in understanding Danielewski's account of digital information culture as one capable of aggregating isolated subjectivities into a quasi-transcendent "US" are the crowdsourcing techniques the author used to generate a portion of the novel's content. In amassing material for massive catalogues of data, the author asked participants on his popular online forum to submit lists of historical events they thought important or memorable, as well as examples of plants, animals, and car models.¹¹⁶

These reader submissions were used to populate at least some of the "data" populating both Sam and Hailey's central diegetic narratives and the historical chronologies.

Revolutions thus bears in print form traces of the digital "hive mind". Moreover, content for the linear timelines ends in the year 2006, when the novel was published; the dates,

¹¹⁶ Hosted at <http://forums.markzdanielewski.com>.

however (printed in violet) extend to 2063. Danielewski is reportedly considering the publication of “updated” versions of *Revolutions* in the coming years, ostensibly based in part on new crowdsourcing efforts, to add new data. This lends the novel an open-ended quality not unlike a website or other digital document. In this light, the paratextual message introducing Hailey and Sam’s narrative threads, “*You were there*”, might allude to the open-ended, participatory, and dizzyingly pluralistic quality of technoculture.

These features arguably work to reinforce the novel’s (diegetic and poetic) interest in breaking past the strictures of individual consciousness to form a pluralistic picture of collective consciousness and memory in technoculture. By opening the composition and content of *Revolutions* to include the ideas and choices of readers, Danielewski rejects the tradition of the singly authored novel; instead gesturing at technoculture’s potential for shared knowledge and potentially new generative models for the novel form. This ethos has become banal in the age of Facebook and crowdsourced knowledge platforms including Wikipedia and Galaxy Zoo. What makes *Revolutions*’s crowdsourcing experiment noteworthy and interesting, however, is not only that it brings the digital hive mind to bear on print form, successfully undercutting any facile understanding of boundaries between “electronic” and print textuality. It also constitutes a fresh spin on Emerson and Whitman’s project of achieving a universalising idiom and textual record of collective experience. While Danielewski’s version seems largely removed from religious or metaphysical connotations—his is closer to the utopia of electronic writing imagined by Carole Maso and, earlier, by McLuhan and other 1960s countercultural figures—it nonetheless endeavours to bring readers together in a shared virtual space and lend them a collective voice.

In a recent interview with Bram Gieben, Danielewski explains that he wishes to make his fiction projects increasingly collaborative. Referencing his novel *The Fifty Year*

Sword (first published in 2005),¹¹⁷ he describes the nature of narrative itself, even ostensibly personal ones, as inherently collaborative, collective, and heterogeneous:

It's about how we need to stitch together our own narratives, and how frequently, as we speak, we assume that we are of whole cloth, when in fact, even our speech, the particles of our expressions, are stitched together from a vast array of sources, whether they're teachers, parents, or the legacy of our language (Gieben 2014, online).

Danielewski's assertion that "the particles of our expressions" end up getting "stitched together" into collective pools of knowledge or enunciation, is kin to the ethos of crowdsourced knowledge that notably informed Brand's *Catalog*, the development of the public internet, and the contemporary web culture that embraces such knowledge practices. However, it is not an ethos entirely native to the (post)modern era: as this research attempts to demonstrate, digital culture's ideals of minds communing boundlessly and individuals achieving a universalising vantage have strong precedents in American Romantic literary culture.

"Listening solitarily, together": The Lost Scrapbook

Dara's *Scrapbook* imagines forms of technologically mediated communion in ways that echo nineteenth-century literary culture. It also draws from the digital utopian imaginary that has roots in mid-twentieth century counterculture and forums like Brand's *Catalog*, which transposed nineteenth-century Romantic metaphors of technological communion into protodigital, neo-Romantic counterparts. Resembling a prose poem, *Scrapbook* explores how the unprecedented immediacy, speed, and distanced intimacy of new medial forms might forge unexpected spaces of communion—communion that subverts spatial, corporeal or mental boundaries—while simultaneously pointing to

¹¹⁷ The novel was first released as a limited edition in the Netherlands in 2005 and in the US in 2006; a "trade version" appeared in the US in 2012.

technoculture's potential to atomise, misinform, or disenfranchise. Like *Revolutions*, its discourse of "I-ness" and "we-ness" turns on utopian and dystopian antinomies that cast technocultural experiences in an ambivalent light. The potential erosion of individual subjectivity in the face of subsuming data is one prominent dystopian fantasy advanced by both novels.

Scrapbook imagines a community of isolated, seemingly powerless individuals aggregating their voices to form new types of solidarity in the face of industrial abuse and deception, as Jeremy Green has observed (9). It also shows them resisting the insidious forces of mass media, which uncritically broadcasts corporate propaganda. Green's insightful analysis of *Scrapbook*, however, largely overlooks the crucial role of technology as a mediating force in the aggregation of individual minds into "solitary togetherness". Depicting technological devices and platforms—chiefly, portable digital music players and independent radio—as powerful mediating forces that enable new forms of shared experience and collective empowerment,¹¹⁸ the novel aggregates narrative voices in a bricolage style¹¹⁹ to confound terms of individual and collective subjectivity, revisiting, like *Revolutions*, ubiquitous American Romantic fantasies.¹²⁰

In transposing such American Romantic idioms to address subjectivity in the digital age, Dara juxtaposes the aforementioned beneficial forms of media and technology to mass media platforms such as cable TV news and consumer magazines, denoting the latter as vehicles for corporate spin. In ways similar to how Tim Berners-Lee utopically imagined the web as a democratic space designed to foster cooperation

¹¹⁸ Published in 1995 and set in the late 1980s, the novel was composed as new digital platforms, including CDs and cable TV, were widely disseminated; but Dara ostensibly composed it prior to the Internet revolution of the mid-1990s. Despite the absence of references to networked digital systems like the Internet, *Scrapbook* nonetheless seems profoundly marked by discourses around digitality prevalent in the 1990s.

¹¹⁹ Green describes Dara's narrative style as "an immense collage of voices, a heteroglot and disassembled ... assemblage of speech in various modalities" (190).

¹²⁰ Lawrence Buell argues, referring to Emersonian ideals of the universal "I", that "[t]he Transcendentalist conception of self ... provided a way of talking about the unity-in-diversity of American society" (1973, 330).

between peoples and circumscribed outside of corporate or government interests, Dara distinguishes between media that upholds such interests or resists them; between forms that promote the solely profit-driven perspectives of consumer culture and those that vehicle a diversity of perspectives and realities.

In *Scrapbook*, individuals are rendered “impotent” in the face of mass media and its subsuming presence; one character notes: “resistance has become all but impossible” (233). However, Dara ultimately depicts people achieving that impossible resistance: tapping into a collective mind fostered by “pirate” forms of communication, and thereby achieving new forums of solidarity. This produces a utopian tone “in an era seemingly devoid of utopia” (Green 202). The novel’s epigraph page cites Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*: “O let me teach you how to knit again / This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf, / These broken limbs again into one body”. *Scrapbook* romantically imagines itself as an antidote to the fragmented, “scattering” quality of postmodern subjectivity, revisiting the American Romantic project of forging a “mutual sheaf” (*Scrapbook* 5). This can also be related to Whitman’s *Leaves*—not least because of the mutually employed metaphor of sheaves/leaves of paper accumulating into a universalising voice.

Scrapbook deploys stream-of-consciousness narrative techniques to blur distinctions between interlocutors and narrative perspectives. These intermingling voices, while often recounting experiences of profound isolation and atomisation, ultimately aggregate in a utopian space of collective consciousness. From the opening page, the reader is plunged in an indiscriminate sea of interlocutors and perspectives, and is given little context to situate the speaker or place of action (Green 190). No pronominal markers are used; only emdashes and spacing aid in distinguishing narrative voices:

- I am, yes; certainly;
- So how about the medicine...?

—Listen to me: Yes; I am; *absolutely*...
 —Or law—?
 —Of course;
 —Then forestry; does that—?
 —Immeasurably;
 —And—?...

along with marine acoustics and quantum biography and psychogeology...but what I am not interested in, Ms Clipboard—or Mr. Canker or Mrs. Murrur or Call-me-Carol, all of you—is your questions ... (*Scrapbook* 6)

The “scrapbooking” or bricolage narrative techniques evident here produce a choppy, fragmentary prose style verging on free-verse poetry. Yet Dara uses ellipses to signify flows between subjectivities; individual stories and narrative voices meld and overlap to suggest their interconnectivity. The reader is thus equally drawn into a dense textual matrix of tone and rhythm, of flowing cognitive “systems”. This tension between “choppy” and “flowing” narrative arguably reproduces and alludes to the novel’s predominating metaphors of particles and waves, borrowed from quantum physics and noted by Green. It also potentially draws from systems-theoretical ideas popularised in both scientific and cultural fields from the mid-century onward. I will examine this point in detail shortly.

Pirate-togetherness: merging through media

Throughout Dara’s novel, technology—from Walkmans to digital cameras to the print book itself—serves to connect isolated subjectivities. The first medium to figure prominently in *Scrapbook* is a radio broadcast that intercepts the narrative’s dense patchwork of melancholy, nearly indistinguishable monologues, addressing several residents of Isaura who, until now, experience themselves as powerless, lonely “specks” (*Scrapbook* 10). Communion-in-aloneness is embodied by a group of unwittingly

communing Walkman-wearers, all tapping into the pirate radio broadcast. The anonymous presenter exhorts them to become aware of one another, stressing the “power” and “puissance” of their union:

To bring people together...to share simple pleasures...through the magic of communication...For here, now, it *is* magic...and, for the first time...real communication...For this broadcast...its every syllable and sigh...is being savored...by every Walkman-wearer in your vicinity...Just think, o listeners, just think of this miracle union...Think and rejoice....For this is the power...the puissance...of pirate communications ... (164-165)

The “miracle union”, mediated through a form of “pirate” technology, circumvents and subverts the disenfranchising powers of corporate misinformation and fosters “solidarity and linkage”:

Yes look, o listeners, look at all your Walkman-colleagues...wherever you may be...On the weighing line...on the end of the bus-shelter bench...in the laundromat...See all the Walkman-folk around you...And then...and then shiver...yes, shiver...For you know, finally you know...that all of you...all of you...ensheathed in your Walkmen...have achieved linkage...solidarity and linkage...Know that you are all listening, solitarily, together...pirate-together... (165-166)

Compare Dara’s image of Walkman-wearers “shivering” at the knowledge of their shared, nearly mystical experience, to Whitman’s meditation on sound and music as a way of imagining disparate subjectivities joining together, inspiring in the poetic narrator feelings that seem to approach religious ecstasy:

I hear bravuras of bird, bustle of growing wheat, gossip of flames, ...
 I hear the sound I love, the sound of the human voice,
 I hear all sounds running together, combined, fused, or following ...¹²¹
 I hear the violoncello (’tis the young man’s heart’s complaint,)
 I hear the key’d cornet, it glides quickly in through my ears,

¹²¹ The final version of “Song” significantly amplifies a notion of “fusing” and “coming together” compared to the original 1855 edition, whose line “I hear all sounds as they are tuned to their uses” is replaced by “I hear all sounds running together, combined, fused...” (1855, 26/589; 1891, 51/26)

It shakes mad-sweet pangs through my belly and breast...

I hear the chorus, it is a grand opera ... ("Song" 1891, 51/26)

Both Dara and Whitman deploy a cataloguing style and the frequent repetition of words to emphatically associate the discrete subjects and objects populating these passages, merging these into a harmonious, syncretic whole. Dara's focus on music as the medium for a transcendent yet clearly *embodied* and *personal* connectivity can be compared to Whitman's "orchestra" of human, non-human, and instrumental voices energetically fusing into a shared tonal experience in "Song". While Dara's connective medium here is the Walkman and the broadcast that flows through it, *Leaves* imagines the book *itself* as the unifying medium of transcendent connectivity.

Scrapbook's depiction of the Walkman as a medium of connectivity and communion can be related back to nineteenth-century literary culture's prevalent fantasies of reading as a means of fostering intimacy and connection between individuals, following Silverman's earlier-cited argument. Dara's meditation on media technology and its effects on individual and collective subjectivity reformulates such fantasies for the digital age, although these can hardly be deemed original. They have thrived in forums as diverse as avant-garde art and music—such as in the minimalism of Philip Glass—and digital device marketing, including for Apple's iPod.¹²² Dara's depiction of Walkman-wearers demonstrates how fantasies of tech-fuelled communion regained strong purchase in the early digital age, and have precedence in the neo-Romantic countercultures described at length in Chapter One.

Scrapbook stretches the fantasy to lend it a sense of nearly magical synchronicity.

In one passage, a character is ambling through a shopping centre and accidentally knocks

¹²² In the early twenty-first century, advertisements for the digital MP3 player showed colourful, headphone-clad silhouettes dancing blissfully while listening to iPods; like Dara's Walkman-wearers, they seem to achieve utopian togetherness while maintaining a sense of individuality.

someone over; hearing the music streaming from the other's Walkman, he is stunned to realise that the same song had been playing in the mall:

I immediately heard that the Walkman was playing the same thing...as was on the mall's Muzak track—exactly the same recording, at exactly the same time—*the two were as one*...—In other words, the dosages were identical—*exo had commingled with endo—communion was complete*—...I handed the Walkman back to the guy... and then, gratefully, I was off—happy to be merging back into the crowd...(297, emphasis mine)

Dara stages a fortuitous and quasi-mystical fusion between internal and external experience—in this case auditive. Again, the Walkman bridges the gap between “exo” and “endo”; effectively confounding terms of “I” and “we”, interiority and exteriority, and producing what the narrator describes as a “complete” communion: “the two were as one”. Earlier in the novel, listening to the pirate radio broadcast, one protagonist observes in similar terms: “it became difficult to distinguish between... / ...internalizing... / ...and externalizing... / ...inflow... / ...and outgo...” (110-111). One might compare such passages to Danielewski's internally antithetical neologism, “allone”, as well as to Whitman's line, “[T]hese tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them”. The result is a virtuous feedback loop of communion; an experience that, while not violating the private experience of the Walkman-wearer, shows that intimacy paradoxically opened into a communal forum.

Scraps, “rife with life”

As much as *Scrapbook* highlights new media platforms for the immediacy and speed of their connective potential, it also accords the print book itself special status as a connective technology. For one, Dara implicitly draws the embodied, concrete quality of print as an antidote to the free-floating anxiety and, often, atomisation, of the digital.

Early in the novel, an animator named Nick describes childhood encounters with a scrapbook belonging to his grandfather, underlining that the “book seemed alive” and was “a direct reflection of [his grandfather’s] essence”:

T]he book just seemed...so...rife with life: even to an eight-year-old, all the photos and newsclips and such that he had stuck there, with all their shapes and sizes and configurations, they all seemed to speak of a life that had had so much content, so much real activity, and not just the same old automatic going and getting; it all just seemed to *bristle* (*Scrapbook* 45)

The Scrapbook’s “bristle”, its quality of reflecting “real activity”, is juxtaposed to “the same old automatic going and getting”, which might denote the mechanical exchanges of consumer culture. For Green, the novel’s “Scrapbook ... is a biomorphic embodiment of unofficial communication, the trace of lived history and shared concern, and thus the antitype of the fragmented and atomized communities—the failed communities—of the novel’s present” (203).

Green designates the print scrapbook as the sole mediating force for connectivity and healing in the novel. However, *Scrapbook* in fact presents *multiple* forms of media—print, analogue, *and* digital—as holding potential power to break past alienating subjective states and forge meaningful spaces of collective consciousness and agency. I argue that *Scrapbook’s* utopian imaginary around technology is fundamentally an *intermedial* one, pointing to the interesting new possibilities for connection when people interact with different forms of media, and in turn, with each other through those media. While Danielewski’s *Revolutions* represents a more ambitious experiment in intermediality, *Scrapbook*, existing only in print form, does so on purely discursive and narrative levels.

Dara’s preoccupation with the print scrapbook as a repository of memory and community that productively interacts with new forms of media can be compared to early

digital-age literary experiments such as *Agrippa, A Book of the Dead* (1992), a “decaying” print-digital art book with design by Dennis Ashbaugh and a digitally encrypted poem¹²³ from William Gibson.¹²⁴ The title of both the book and the poem, the latter of which was designed to self-efface after being run a single time on a computer, refers to the brand name of a 1920 Kodak photo album owned by Gibson’s father. Much as *Scrapbook’s* Nick reflects on his grandfather’s scrapbook and its quasi-magical capacity to store and reflect lived experience, to physically embody that experience, Gibson’s poetic narrator muses on the Agrippa album as a totem of memory, loss and the technological mediation of human experience.

I hesitated
before untying the bow
that bound this book together.
A black book:
ALBUMS CA. AGRIPPA
Order Extra Leaves By Letter and Name
A Kodak album of time-burned/black construction paper
The string he tied
Has been unravelled by years
and the dry weather of trunks
Like a lady's shoestring from the First World War
Its metal ferrules eaten by oxygen
Until they resemble cigarette-ash (1-14)

With its crumbling, fragile physicality, *Agrippa’s* print component arguably serves as a “biomorphic embodiment” of the digital poem’s meditation on memory and connection across space and time, to borrow from Green’s description of *Scrapbook*. The “decaying” and self-effacing digital poem underlines the inherent ephemerality of the digital format,

¹²³ Gibson’s poem is presented in the long-defunct floppy disk format, presenting obvious archival challenges. However, since the poem was leaked on a website after an audience member filmed it during a performance, it is now widely available online, undermining the intentions of the authors. See *The Agrippa Files* at the University of California, Santa Barbara: <http://agrippa.english.ucsb.edu/>.

¹²⁴ See my interview with *Agrippa* publisher and co-author Kevin Begos Jr. in Appendix A.

ostensibly contrasting to the embodied weight of the print book. Yet it also underlines the fundamental slipperiness of memory itself, as well as the inevitable decaying of the print component, with its “time-burned / black construction paper.” Rather than upholding print as a reliable, comforting antidote to the ephemerality of the digital, the poem (and *Agrippa* as a whole) instead underlines the common fragility of both forms, and ultimately of memory itself, which depends so greatly on mediating forces.

While *Agrippa* registers a much darker tone when compared to Dara’s utopian vision of the scrapbook and its “rife” power, both texts discuss the creative, combinatory power of different forms of media, commenting on how memory and subjectivity are powerfully shaped by these. Like Danielewski’s multimodal experiments, *Agrippa* and *Scrapbook* engage with the idea that in technoculture, subjectivity and memory gain a dizzying new complexity as they are increasingly mediated through, and shaped by, overlapping technologies.

Particles and waves; utopian and dystopian bodies

As Green first noted, *Scrapbook* deploys metaphors of particles and waveforms borrowed from quantum physics or from digital systems—bits aggregating into a unified picture or sound, for example—to describe a movement in perspective between isolated subjectivities and a collective “hive-mind” form of intelligence. “The novel’s characters and its form both raise a utopian protest in favor of joining up atomized particles and waves, linking particular desires into collective articulation” (Green 202). This desire to escape subjective bounds to merge with others in waveform motion permeates the novel; even in a description of people committing suicide off the Golden Gate Bridge, a curiously utopian tone pervades:

it is a leap...yes: a plunge, a leap...a leap into information...into signification...into increasing the signal-to-noise ratio...drop by drop the leapers seek to become a current, to become like water, a waterfall of man...to go from sundered, suffering flesh to mass and unshameable information...to the realm of hard data: cogent...certifiable...dimension-denying...*meatless*...their unknowing, determined merging...their blind *insistence* on informational meaning ... (236)

By deploying this language of particles and waves, and pointing to the aggregation of quotidian moments of consciousness and the accretion of disparate voices, *Scrapbook* suggests a quasi-transcendent plane of collective mind earlier imagined in Whitman's "Song": what the poet refers to as "the word en masse" (1855, 23/486). However, in *Dara*, the act of merging is bound up in technological systems, in imagining human bodies transmuting into "hard data". The suicides, described as individual "drops", are searching for "informational meaning"; their leap toward death is performed in hopes of becoming "a current ... like water, a waterfall of man": in other words, as an effort to escape the pain of individual consciousness and become part of an aggregate, a pool of data.¹²⁵

The particulate metaphor in *Dara* often also denotes feelings of profound isolation and the erasure of individual importance in the dizzying, fragmentary space of technoculture. One protagonist in the novel relates his experience to that of an electron, experiencing himself as a nearly invisible "speck":

¹²⁵ Since early twentieth-century writers also frequently deploy particle-wave metaphors, and especially atom idioms, to narratively stage new subjectivities in modernity, this particular preoccupation seems primarily inherited from modernism. In the modernist tradition, Woolf's *The Waves* is perhaps the most obvious source; but atoms and particles make appearances in other of her works as well. Laura Marcus notes of *Between the Acts*: "As the narrative breaks up into rhyming, chiming, cacophonous fragments, so this 'reflecting wall', composed not of a single mirroring surface but of shards and bits of mirror, breaks up what it reflects, 'shiver[ing] into splinters the old vision; Smash[ing] to atoms what was whole' (BA109). It mirrors back 'ourselves' in parts and pieces, refusing to totalize the spectators as a unified group" (Marcus 186). For further discussion of modernist iterations of the atom metaphor, see, especially, Whitworth's *Einstein's Wake* (2001).

So now I move about you, civilization, like an electron: amid your clamor and industry, your commonness and shared accords, I am a speck, whirling and circling, negatively charged, with no measurable existence save the statistical, I am everywhere, and therefore nowhere ... (10)

The individual in Dara experiences herself as having “no measurable existence save the statistical”; in other words, they are only as meaningful or important as the system to which they belong. Individual subjectivity and agency is subsumed in a vast informational matrix:

[E]ven my words for articulating my sadness are only an embodiment of the otherness expressing sadness, are *part of its system, this Möbius culture*, and so further confirmation of its dominion; other’s words have even determined the content of my suffering, and what I want, above all, is to find my own means to suffer, to be able to express myself in sadness; this, then, will be my project...to find an absolutely personal mode of sadness. (191, emphasis added)

The protagonist laments that he does not experience his feelings as his own; they are instead assimilated into an elaborate “system” comprised of “other’s words” that predetermine the “content of [his] suffering”. In the contemporary “Möbius culture”, individuals are subordinated to a collective, an impersonal human system, in ways that seem to erode their feeling of meaningful connectivity, rather than fostering a sense of communion. Green maintains: “[T]he cognate particle/wave distinction of quantum theory...provides a trope for the apparently irreducible split between the isolated individual, very often sealed off in inarticulate or silent protest, and the shared desires or concerns of aggregates” (193). I would argue, however, that rather than denoting an absolute divide between individuality and collectivity, the particle-wave metaphor in *Scrapbook* frequently serves to either utopically imagine “I-ness and we-ness” as one and the same, as merging—following the logic of quantum physics which shows that matter can simultaneously exist in particle *and* wave form—or is alternately deployed to depict

the individual submerged in a collective that deprives her of individual agency and expression. In contemporary technoculture, the classical human subject is threatened,¹²⁶ subjected to vast, mechanised systems that determine its content and mode of expression. Dara's description of the individual as an "offputting", deployed as a noun, imagines people as discrete informational bits; "lopped off from [their] sources" and "unknown", both to themselves and others (190). They are, to paraphrase Julia Kristeva, strangers to themselves.¹²⁷

Drawing revolutions: Romantic circles and heterogeneous temporalities

Hailey's my oblivion. For once. And allways.
 Beyond even time's front. Because now
 we are out of time. We are at once. —(*Revolutions*, S320)

A second key way that late postmodern crisis fictions revisit, and in some instances, critique American Romantic idioms of boundless connectivity is by rejecting positivist accounts of linear time and teleological progress. *Revolutions*, *Scrapbook*, and Tomasula's digital narrative *TOC* engage in neo-Romantic meditations on individual and collective time by presenting highly complex narrative temporalities; they also suggest the (re)discovery of space-time models obscured by the current dominance of linear clock time. They frequently subvert linear temporal models to instead valorise cyclical and/or heterogeneous counterparts. This fiction abounds with metaphors of overcoming normative spatiotemporal bounds, even if, again, such "transcendence" is generally bereft

¹²⁶ Chapter Four will return to the problem of technological development and the classical humanist subject; focusing on new literary figurations of the Romantic sublime and "Luddite humanist" discourse.

¹²⁷ Kristeva's *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* (1988) discusses the internalised alienation and feelings of atomisation experienced by immigrants in the context of globalisation.

of genuine religiosity or “belief”.¹²⁸ I posit that these texts reformulate a Romantic emphasis on cyclical and heterogeneous, uneven temporalities to challenge positivist constructs of linear progress, following in the legacy of the early Romantic writings of Mary Shelley, Wordsworth or Coleridge. These writers’ poetic re-inscription of personal, memorial time into the cycles of nature, and their challenge to Enlightenment models favouring the mechanised time of clocks and factories as primary models for human rhythms and experiences, constitute important nineteenth-century discursive heritages. As I will develop shortly, contemporary meditations on time draw from these European poetic heritages, but are more strongly informed by American Romantic, largely depersonalised conceptions of nonlinear temporality.

Contemporary crisis fictions stage counter-linear temporal experiences in two key ways. First, they emphasise circular shapes and cyclical temporalities at diegetic *and* formal levels, nostalgically upholding these as potentially salutary alternatives to linear, diachronic models of time. These neo-Romantic narratives suggest that cyclical models of time might alleviate the atomisation and dysphoric speeding quality of information culture. In a more utopian vein, however, they also suggest that the pluralistic quality of technoculture might itself offer new, liberatory forms of temporality: pockets of resistance away from dominant late capitalist temporal norms. Secondly, the narratives deploy multiple techniques to advance heterogeneous, often competing temporalities of writing and reading, offering highly pluralistic, chaotic, and anti-totalising accounts of historical experience germane to Liu’s “method of contingency” in postmodern historiography; one inherited from Romanticism.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ See Hungerford 2010 and Maltby 2002.

¹²⁹ Central to Liu’s understanding of what he calls the “contingent” method of history, and which he sees anticipated in Wordsworth’s treatment of history and time, are a sense of perpetual “nowness” and an accompanying self-reflexive and critical stance: “[T]he swelling sense of contemporaneity in both periods (Romanticism and postmodernism) was necessarily accompanied by an antithetical historicism criticizing the modern zeitgeist ...” (2008, 7).

Danielewski and Tomasula, moreover, materially instantiate narrative temporal experimentation through elaborate typographical, iconographic, and multimedia devices.¹³⁰ These cognitively arresting formal elements reinforce a diegetic and thematic emphasis on circles and overlaid temporal textures. The texts self-consciously underline how their own complex temporalities interact, clash, or blur. This overlapping of temporal experience, I propose, suggests not only the transgression of normative, linear and mechanised experience of time, but also its superseding or figurative “transcendence”.

While the narrative and formal emphasis on circularity in late postmodern experiments might be exclusively understood as alluding to the recursiveness of digital feedback loops, applying such an interpretation narrowly overlooks the Romantic heritage at play in the rejection of linear, teleological progress. Excepting Pöhlmann’s analysis of “Whitmanian” circular time in *Revolutions*, critics have generally identified temporal experimentation in texts like *Revolutions* as an attempt to contain and constrain the inundating quality of digital-age experience, pointing to predecessors in twentieth-century literary modernism such as Joyce.¹³¹ Such readings do have strong critical purchase in light of the texts’ self-conscious presentation as objects informed by and commenting on technoculture, and the importance of modernism as an intellectual predecessor to postmodern narrative and formal experimentation.¹³² However, these perspectives leave out the intellectual and aesthetic heritage of Romantic narrative

¹³⁰ I unfortunately do not have adequate space here to discuss *TOC*’s multimedial presentation in great detail; see Hayles 2012 for an in-depth discussion of *TOC* as a “multimodal technotext” and its complex temporalities of reading.

¹³¹ Van Hulle reads the cyclical temporalities in *Revolutions* against Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, noting that the circular structure of Danielewski’s experimental novel resembles that of Joyce’s (2011, 123). “[FW’s] circular structure, based on Giambattista Vico’s cyclical view of history, sheds an interesting light on Danielewski’s treatment of time in [*Revolutions*]” (129).

¹³² They are indeed indebted in many respects to experimentation with textual constraints from “OuiLiPo” members such as Georges Perec or Raymond Queneau. As Gere notes, “the aim of OuiLiPo was to develop methods of applying constraints to the production of literature, partially as a reaction to the open-ended freedom of Surrealist literary methodologies” (93-94).

temporalities and their own irregular, complex textures. They overlook a neo-Romantic discourse of spatiotemporal transcendence also working at the heart of *Revolutions* and other late postmodern fictions; ones that especially valorise circular temporalities as holding liberatory potential.

Recent scholarship focusing on broadening our understanding of Romantic temporalities in European and American writing from the long nineteenth century highlights the “uneven”, heterogeneous, and even transgressive way time is treated in this period. Theresa Kelley, analysing historical contingency and the rhetorical function of non-normative temporalities in Mary Shelley’s *Valperga*, adopts Michael Serres’ theories of geological time to probe how his “geographical figure for historical time might be used to convey the role of time in Romanticism as eddying, feathering out, percolating within an uneven substrate rather than productive of a linear chronological development” (Kelley 2008, 625). This quality of unevenness and multiplicity is, of course, also commonplace in literary postmodernism. For Ihab Hassan, postmodern time is nothing less than “polychronic”. Postmodern conceptions of spatiotemporal experiences include “linear, cyclical, sidereal, cybernetic, nostalgic, eschatological, visionary times” all overlapping and untidily smashed together (6). From this standpoint, and as Liu and others have observed, Romanticism and postmodernism might be said to envision temporality and historicity in similar ways.

Lloyd Pratt, meanwhile, challenges the predominant assumption that Antebellum American literary fiction from writers including Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Emerson strove to narratively homogenise, or “purify” American time as a means of drawing national subjects together into a shared arena of temporal experience and progressivist “national destiny”. Instead, he argues, “however much this period’s writing may seem to anticipate a uniform national destiny emerging from the narrowing down of

future possibility that the American ideology of progress envisions, the very same literature articulates at the level of form a modernity defined by not one but several distinct temporal dispositions” (5). Pratt maintains that we should cease to simplistically understand American Antebellum literature as a nationalist project whose objective from a standpoint of narrative temporality is to “purify” and smooth time, and in the service of generating a homogenised American identity. Instead, citing the work of Svetlana Boym, Pratt identifies this body of writing as a “literature of modernity in that it is ‘contradictory, critical, ambivalent, and reflective on the nature of time’” (6; Boym 2001, 22). He thus undermines the conventional reading of American Romantic time along a linear and progressivist axis.¹³³

Building on these important studies, I propose that heterogeneous temporalities and anti-positivist rhetoric in Danielewski, Dara, and Tomasula are strongly indebted to Romanticism’s own “contradictory, critical, ambivalent, and reflective” temporalities (*Ibid*). Like certain American Romantic writings, moreover, these texts seem to both gesture toward a transcendental ambition of textually encompassing national identity, of aggregating collective experience into a shared, singular time, and reveal a competing tendency to reject such homogenisation of temporal experience, instead overlaying multiple and fragmentary experiences of time. Consider the following passage (a dialogue between Sam and Hailey in *Revolutions*):

—[I]t’s allready going.
 —So sad. —Over with so fast.
 —Why does everything go
 that way Except US?

¹³³ In a subsequent chapter, Pratt observes of the American historical romance: “the romance ... articulates at the level of form a non-simultaneous present, one torn by competing temporalities ... The figure of dialect writing, which unexpectedly characterizes this genre, captures precisely its quality of a divided present tense ... The genre traces the copresence of synchronic and diachronic simultaneity” (21-22). Late postmodern fictions such as *Revolutions* present similar temporal tensions.

—Because we're allways at once?
 —Everything and everyone's? (S178)

This excerpt marks the near-midpoint of Sam's narrative (at page 178 of 360) and registers a melancholy sense of decline and of time slipping away: "It's already going"; it's "over with so fast". Diachronic, historical time draws the characters toward their respective endpoints (and eventually, to their deaths, along with the devastation of the natural environment). Sam and Hailey also experience themselves as "allways at once"; the ever-sixteen protagonists inhabit a perpetual here-and-nowness that works both against the historical timeline competing with their own narratives, and seems to resist the decay around them. Yet, they prove just as vulnerable to linear temporal forces, to the ephemeral "gogoin" and "gonegoing" of historical time (S33; H328). The novel is thematically and formally structured around such temporal paradoxes. A note on the text's dual title pages describes the dual narratives as "chronologically arranged". This paratextual *clin d'oeil* reads, retrospectively, as an ironic nod to the historical timelines: while these are indeed "chronologically arranged", the novel's overlaid, clashing temporalities and circle-shapes undermine this purported linearity.

If *Revolutions* is recognisably postmodern in its treatment of historical experience as contingent, chaotic, and polychronic, rejecting any unified experience of temporality, it also registers a sense of nostalgia for cohesive national identity, for a unifying "US". The linear historical timelines lend the otherwise chaotic narrative a sense of temporal anchoring and progression; as discussed earlier, they also assimilate Sam and Hailey's experiences to collective memory. Ultimately, however, the novel's temporal multiplicity undercuts any possibility for a unified sense of time and memory. Dara and Tomasula stage similar tensions between highly pluralistic accounts of time and nostalgia for cohesive historical memory.

Despite these overlaid or “smashed” temporalities which might suggest a lack of preference for any particular temporal model, the texts ultimately advance a neo-Romantic nostalgia for lost or forgotten experiences of time, and tend to uphold cyclical models of temporality as potential antidotes to the violence and “care”, or Heideggerian “Sorge”, of mechanised, linear time.¹³⁴ While it might be tempting to see in such discourse the absolute upholding of cyclical time as a model and antidote to the “care” of linear time—and thus as yet another attempt to purify temporality—the texts’ staging of heterogeneous spatiotemporal experiences can instead be understood as a transgressive contamination of normative temporal models. They offer, as Romantic writings from the long nineteenth century did, arenas of speculative resistance amid what Anthony Giddens has termed the “disembedding” of spatiotemporal experience in modernity. The reading of linear, mechanised time as a separating force in contemporary technoculture resonates with Giddens’s observations on the introduction of clock-time in the industrial age: “[The] invention of the mechanical clock and its distribution to most of the population was key in “separating” time and space”, Giddens argues in *The Consequences of Modernity* (17). He maintains that

The separating of time and space and their formation into standardised, “empty” dimensions cut through the connections between social activity and its “embedding” in the particularities of contexts of presence. Disembedded institutions greatly extend the scope of time-place distanciation and ... depend upon coordination across time and space. This phenomenon serves to *open up manifold possibilities of change by breaking free from the restraints of local habits and practices* (20, emphasis added).

Late postmodern accounts of temporal experiences in technoculture arguably turn on ambivalent responses to modern “disembedding” in ways similar to certain Romantic-era

¹³⁴ I borrow from Jean-Yves Pellegrin’s analysis of *TOC* and his theory that the digital novel advances alternative, nonlinear temporal experiences as antidotes to Heideggerian *Sorge*. “[*Sorge*]...[which] has little to do with ordinary grief or concern ... is a built-in quality of being in time, that is the necessity of being or becoming what it is by fighting against its dissipation into discrete intervals” (181).

writings. On the one hand, both periods register a sense of elation and boundlessness generated by the “manifold possibilities of change” and the “breaking free from ... restraints” represented by modernity and its exponential changes; such “disembedding”, in this case, is potentially liberatory. On the other hand, the alienating potential of clock time, its tendency to atomise and separate space from time, becomes the occasion for narrative temporalities that resist and transgress the forces of mechanised clock-time; or what one character in *Scrapbook* refers to as “killer verticalities” (135). Texts from both periods point to suppressed forms of temporality as alternative models, offering ways to resist hegemonic temporal norms. These paradoxical responses to spatiotemporal distancing are especially registered in the work of Transcendentalist writers such as Emerson; moreover, as discussed in Chapter One, they also permeated neo-Romantic, countercultural forums such as Brand’s *Catalog*. Late postmodern iterations arguably continue this longstanding debate.

Transpersonal time and Transcendentalist “self-forgetting”

While European Romantic legacies are clearly important in late postmodern experiments with heterogeneous temporality, what arguably ties contemporary iterations more strongly to *American* Romantic conceptions of cyclical or uneven time is an emphasis on the transpersonal in both bodies of writing. The poetry of Wordsworth or Coleridge, for example, tends to focus on individual and memorial experiences of time, despite gesturing toward epiphanic moments of accessing collective memory. By contrast, Transcendentalist writing often develops a far more transpersonal understanding of temporal experience. *Revolutions*, *Scrapbook*, and *TOC* resemble Transcendentalist writing in that they rarely depict temporality in highly individuated, memorial terms.

In Emerson's "Circles", cyclical temporal experience hinges primarily on self-forgetting and abjuration, rather than on the highly interiorised and personal experiences described by Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, or by Wordsworth's narrator in *The Prelude*. Let us again consider a passage discussed in Chapter One, this time from a different critical perspective:

Supreme Existence, the surpassing life
Which—to the boundaries of space and time,
Of melancholy space and doleful time,
Superior and incapable of change,
Nor touched by welterings of passion—is,
And hath the name of, God. (*Prelude*, 6, 133-139)

Wordsworth's narrator does not experience a complete suspension of individual subjectivity despite temporarily gaining a transcendent perspective on space and time. Moreover, he temporally situates his own transcendent experiences as part of youthful thinking, noting that "Transcendent peace / And silence did await upon these thoughts / That were a frequent comfort to my youth" (139-141). Even the epiphanic moment is re-moored in personal memory, and to a specific time and place. If Wordsworth revels in the "mind / That feeds upon infinity" (14, 70-71), able to observe from his on-high, transcendent vantage "generations of mankind/ Spread over time, past, present, and to come / Age after age, till Time shall be no more" (*Prelude*, 14, 109-111), the poetic perspective nonetheless shifts back to the "I" perspective of one mind and its youthful memories. In Emersonian accounts of cyclical time, conversely, the central objective is self-forgetting, rather than the charting of personal memory and experience. Emerson concludes "Circles" with the following assertions:

The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire, is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal

memory, and to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle. (*Essays I*, 190)

Emerson advocates for the *renunciation* of personal memory by submitting to the cycles of Nature and to an almost wholly transpersonal sense of time; his model for cyclical experiences of temporality “surprise[s us] out of our propriety”—in other words, draws individuals out of their separate selfhoods—in the act of “draw[ing] a new circle”. This difference, while subtle, illustrates a shift away from European Romantic constructs of subjectivity; as discussed earlier, and following Buell’s analysis, the American Romantic discourse of eliding terms of “I ness” and “we ness” in pursuit of a universalist, transpersonal idiom is one crucial point separating European Romantic and American Transcendentalist traditions and literary legacies. Differences in the treatment of temporality must also be considered as part of these transatlantic distinctions.

Whitman takes up the Emersonian project of transpersonal freedom from spatiotemporal constraints, and the sense that the self—in a universalised, transpersonal sense more than in the radically individual Wordsworthian sense—is continually renewed in natural cycles. In “Song”, Whitman’s poetic narrator observes: “Round and round *we go, all of us*, and ever come back thither, / If nothing lay more develop’d the quahaug* in its callous shell were / enough” (1891, 52/27, emphasis mine). Here, as in Emerson, collective experiences of cyclical time override any individualist reckoning of it; the round-and-round motion of renewal attaches to the “we” rather than to the “I”. In death, too, personal memory and experience is ostensibly erased, leaving behind only the “callous shell” of existence. Moreover, while Whitman tends to maintain an “I” voice throughout *Leaves*, that voice itself purports to inhabit—and indeed encompass—others’ experiences and memories. Similar to Wordsworth’s visionary moment in which he sees “generations of mankind / Spread over time, past, present, and to come”, Whitman assures us that “[t]hese are the thoughts of all men in all ages”. But unlike “Leaves”, *The*

Prelude rarely claims to ventriloquize memories and subjectivities other than the poetic narrator's own.

Narrative circles: thematic elements in *Revolutions*

In *Revolutions*, alternative temporalities, and especially circular models, constitute freeing, and potentially transcendent, refuges away from what Heidegger would refer to as “Sorge”, or “care”. To offer a vastly simplified definition, Sorge denotes the anxiety that accompanies being-in-the-world¹³⁵ (“Dasein”) and anticipating the future; a condition Heidegger explicitly ties to the experience of time. Circular and overlaid temporalities offer spaces to resist the violence, or care, of linear clock time. Pöhlmann observes of the novel:

In its radical circularity, the novel espouses a Whitmanian concept of continuity that fundamentally characterizes its outlook on life, love, community, and its “Democracy of Two”. Whitman asserts in the preface to the first edition of [Leaves]... that “all will come round” (22), and the poetic treatment of this idea ... resonates clearly with the structure and content of [Revolutions] ... [The novel] resists any finality and teleology just like it does not offer origins; it begins and ends always only temporarily ... [I]ts circularity—places life and death within an unbroken cycle in which neither beginning nor end assume the special symbolic positions of origin and finality they are often ascribed to in a linear view. (24)

Pöhlmann's essay relates Danielewski's use of circular temporalities to American Romantic predecessors' and their critique of teleological models of time; however, to call such a tradition strictly “Whitmanian” is to discuss it in overly narrow terms. I argue that it should be related to a broader European and American Romantic tradition, but more specifically to Emersonian ideals of cyclical time and “self-forgetting”: the universalising of individual temporal experience through processes of perpetual renewal. Danielewski's

¹³⁵ See Magda King's *A Guide to Heidegger's Being and Time* (2001) for an extended discussion of how temporality relates to the notion of “care” in Heidegger.

protagonists, as already discussed, are seemingly unconfined by normative temporal experience; their main impetus is to outrun forces of time, space, and mortality. Their diegetic lives traverse 200 years, including future time, and are then “regenerated” by the action of flipping the book around and initiating yet another “revolution”. Their individuality, while in one sense denoted as radical, is ultimately overridden by the turnings-round of time (and of textuality). I will discuss the novel’s formal instantiation of circularity shortly.

In the early sections of the text, an ecstatic language of diving, swirling, and spinning round denotes Hailey and Sam’s breaching of spatiotemporal limitations— an experience as elating as it is disorienting: “I dive, palms a squeeeeeal wide, / *swirling* the World and lifting / the sky, arches uniting / stratocumulous & ground. My smile a frown a smile a frown. / Allways a smile. / *Around and around*” (H39, emphasis mine). Sam, at one point, proclaims himself outside the bounds of normative spatial situatedness, claiming he can achieve “the obliteration of place” (S10). However, the rhetoric of teleological progress also haunts *Revolutions*. The car figures as the primary vehicle used by Hailey and Sam to exceed spatiotemporal bounds. In their ever-changing models of cars, signifying the diachronic passage of time (and arguably the onward march of progressive technology), they imagine the vehicle as a tool for outrunning time:

Back at the Wheel, burning rubber,
 my Pontiac GTO overturns limits
 supersonic. Unlimiting horizons.
 No horizons. Erotic ...
 Anything to festinate freely
 with my Corvette Sting Ray:
 me, me me.
 On the round,
 all around, found and never found. (H56-57)

Despite Hailey's sense of elation in her "swirling" dive, in the seeming boundlessness afforded by car travel, and in the elating breach of linear time denoted by the ubiquitous syntagm "around and around", she and Sam also are prescient of their own vulnerability and mortality. Swarmed by bees, to which Hailey is allergic, the heroine contrasts her imagined ability to "giddily overturn everything" (*Ibid.*) to "[th]e me I terribly fear. / My own stinging vulnerability" (H40).

In spite of their mortality and vulnerability, Hailey and Sam paradoxically inhabit a perpetual narrative here-and-now, expressed succinctly by Sam when he declares "I am the flux. / And all gambols too" (S141). Compare to Whitman: "Through me the afflatus surging and surging...through me the current and index" (1855, 506-507). This synchronous space of here-and-nowness is implicitly (and playfully) extended in paratextual form to readers with the identical, laconic opening phrase already cited earlier in this chapter, "*You were here*".¹³⁶ Time, whether for readers or for protagonists, never follows straight or simple trajectories in *Revolutions*. It is inherently heterogeneous, thematically, formally, and in relation to temporal rhythms of reading. On the one hand, Sam and Hailey occupy a synchronically experienced temporal plane, an "ever-sixteen" state that seems to allow them to outrun the crushing litany of historical events that threatens to close in on them—and doubly represented by the CREEP, a thug who pursues the lovers at every turn, and whose name is printed in the same violent ink as the historical timelines'. On the other hand, however, events in Hailey and Sam's lives are

¹³⁶ Alison Gibbons similarly identifies in the paratextual phrase a nod to the novel's temporally polychromic quality: "The spatio-temporal encoding of 'You were there' is ... both inexact and multiple, returning us to Herman's concept of polychrony. It encapsulates Hailey's experiences with Sam, Sam's experiences with Hailey, and the reader's encounter with the book ... The allways ontologies of [the novel], then, is a perpetual condition in which all spatio-temporal planes congregate and fragment, fuse and digress" ("*You Were There*", 2012, 173).

intimately tied to the linear plane of historical time represented by the diachronic chronologies.

The protagonists' modes of transportation, for example, change as the dates on the timeline move forward, and often in accordance with technological developments listed in it, from horses and carriages to newly rolled out models of cars. In 1863, when Sam's narrative begins, and in the midst of the Civil War, he is driving a horse-drawn cart; the horse quickly dies, rots in front of Sam's eyes, and is eventually replaced with an Oldsmobile Roadster (on the page sharing a timeline dated Nov 4, 1907). In 1908, he is driving a Model T Ford.

Speed forward to 1966 and Hailey is at the wheel of a Shelby Mustang, followed by an Oldsmobile Toronado. The only technology explicitly mentioned in *Revolutions*, the car, trope for American individualism, twentieth-century progress, and personal freedom, acts as a marker of historical and technological diachrony, of time passing, even for the time-defying, "ever-sixteen" protagonists.

However, Danielewski's neo-road novel finally excoriates the very genre it appropriates. At the endpoints of Sam and Hailey's narratives (and as will be explored in Chapter Three) the cars break down in the same instance as the US transforms into a lifeless, apocalyptic wasteland. The very notion of technology-fuelled, diachronic progress is thus effectively turned on its head; the car ultimately becomes a harbinger of ecological ruin and death, including for the two protagonists. Danielewski arguably turns the progressivist ideals of the American Road Novel, the Western, or other classically American genres propagating a notion of linear progress on their heads.

While Sam and Hailey pursue the dream of superseding space-time, they ultimately meet their deaths at the ends of their respective narratives, as vulnerable to the ravaging effects of time as anyone else. But rather than marking an endpoint on a linear

narrative axis, the protagonists' deaths are instead re-inscribed in the cyclical temporalities and cycles of nature (and of the novel's own textual 'revolutions') that Danielewski constantly reiterates, both diegetically and formally. Musing on Hailey's death, Sam declares:

By you, ever-sixteen, this World's preserved...
 By you, this World has everything left to lose.
 And I, your sentry of ice, shall always protect
 what your Joy so dangerously resumes.
 I'll destroy no World
 so long it keeps turning with flurry & gush,
 petals & stems bending and lush,
 and allways our hushes returning anew. (S360)

This passage, repeated nearly verbatim from Hailey's perspective when Sam dies on the cold mountaintop, and forming yet another symmetrical, circular narrative shape, revisits Romantic ideas of regeneration in natural forces. Sam and Hailey may have not outrun death, but they still are re-inscribed outside of the crushing and violent forces of diachronic time; a sense of hopeful renewal and timelessness pervades in Danielewski's "allways our hushes returning anew". The narrative structure of *Revolutions*, and indeed, its title which designates the circle as the "Only" shape of importance, can be related back to Emerson's drawing of circles:

Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens. (*Essays I*, 179)

In *Song*, comparably, Whitman posits a constant circle drawn between life and death.

"Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen", his poetic narrator declares (1855, 44/1160). In the 1891 edition, he muses:

caricatural sage figure. He begins to follow him, led in dizzying circles, and against any sense of progress; he “proceed[s] through entirely random movements...making no markers...taking no mappings” (129). This random, counterprogressive movement produces a sense of dizzying disorientation: “I was not at all convinced...that we had moved at all...That is, if we had made any progress...of any kind...Because the trees all looked different...and, simultaneously, the same ...” (147-8) The protagonist’s unease with suddenly finding himself “off the grid” alongside the forest kneeler highlights the initial discomfort of moving outside normative spatiotemporal bounds. The forest kneeler’s own ease with navigating the forest, and with moving counterprogressively, offers a counterpoint; he has chosen to live circumscribed outside the confines of mechanised, linear time. Pointing to his shelter at the top of a tree, he tells the protagonist that the abode is the only safe place away from “monotheists”, whom he excoriates as “enemies of immanence” and “sires of one-way time”: “They will never penetrate here!, he said...It is one of the great advantages of being *coordinate-free*, he said...before he paced off into another part of the forest ...” (134)

Like Hailey and Sam, who imagine themselves as free from spatiotemporal bounds, Dara’s forest kneeler is “off the grid”, inhabiting what he regards as an immanent spacetime circumscribed outside the violence of modernity and its hierarchical clock-time models:

Axes and hierarchies, that all it [monotheism] assembles!, the man bellowed...Killer verticalities!...Unhealthful alignments of persona and structure...Historically, monothesisism means one thing...*Empire*, he said ... (135-136)

The forest kneeler identifies “verticalities”—arguably denoting linear, progress-driven models of time—with monotheism and hegemonic power structures. Dara’s neo-Romantic narrative implies that the mysterious figure’s zigzagging, directionless, and

circular movements through the forest, as disorienting as they prove, provide a haven from the tyrannies of “one-way time” and access back to a space of “immanence”. Such a transgressive temporal space represents a way for the novel’s disenfranchised, isolated communities to subvert the time of capitalist consumer society and the damaging industrial rhythms of the town’s main employer (and polluter), Ozark. I will examine the novel’s environmentalist thrust, and its status as a toxic narrative, in Chapter Three.

Technology and the “joyful suspension of care”

Scrapbook depicts certain communicative and technological mediums as forging alternative temporal spaces and experiences. It implicitly draws these alternative experiences of time in contrast to the linear time promoted by capitalist consumer culture, and to the mechanised and dehumanising time of manufacturing. Specifically, the radio once again appears as a source of mysterious connectivity and, in some cases, as a release from the constraints of linear time. One character, Nick, laments the decline of radio and its “rich history of communications and exchange”, specifically tying the medium and its multiple, intermingling voices to joyous feelings of reaching outside of time and space. He describes how he and a childhood friend spent hours in the darkness imitating radio presenters, detailing the feelings of timelessness these moments induced:

I would sometimes feel...that I had found timelessness, or at least a taste of it...those were moments of timelessness, when I just felt divorced from time, absolutely released, through our joyful suspension of care, our giddy snipping of the puppet-strings of time ... (54)

Nick explicitly ties feelings of “timelessness” with the “suspension of care”, pointing again to the usefulness of Heidegger’s “Sorge” in understanding *Scrapbook*’s figuration of circular or suspended temporalities as utopian antidotes to linear time. Again, and in ways similar to *Revolutions*, Dara’s novel revisits Romanticism’s imaginings of circular

temporal experiences as something occluded by modernisation and industrialisation. To re-connect with a temporality outside of clock time affords a reprieve from the care of modern subjectivity.

Scrapbook also refers constantly to music and sonic patterns as inspiring or inducing temporally non-normative—and liberating—experiences. For example, the same protagonist and pirate radio broadcaster who later encounters the “forest kneeler” describes a test message, recorded into a Revox tape recorder, as “electronic infinity”, programming the machine “to play [the] message back forever” (97). Moreover, musical variations are accorded a quasi-transcendent quality in *Scrapbook*. Variations figure not simply as feedback loops that strive at nothing aside from their own constant iteration, but are noted for their capacity to transport human subjectivity outside of the bounds of linear time. One of the novel’s myriad characters, David, analyses Beethoven’s obsession with “recycling” the same musical material in his variations:

And it is a riddle...why this Titan would purposefully invert the sustaining Western conception of progress as expansion—why he would challenge our central, Faustian myth of *more*—and turn so self-reflexive, so damn indrawn...trying to generate infinity within a finite area; *it's as if he had turned against the notion of history as progressive and so had set out to deny the workings of linear time ...* (34, emphasis mine)

Dave reads Beethoven’s variations as subverting Western ideals of progress and linear temporal models, and of paradoxically striving towards something approaching the infinite through looping, iterative movements. Crucially, Dave transposes the “infinity” of the musical variation to the realm of digital media, repeatedly filming a single firefly with a digital camcorder to make it appear to be countless numbers of the insect. He praises the release of a consumer HDTV camera that “lets you marry, like, an infinite number of images...it lets you simulate almost unlimited overdubbing” (28-29). Dara’s

text effectively relates nascent digital media platforms and technologies to the variation as a potential way beyond linear, mechanised temporal models; as a striving toward a previously forgotten spacetime resistant to the oppressive rhythms of capitalist consumer culture.

The transcendent quality of variations lies, Dave argues, in the way they “represent excursions towards some kind of higher understanding, repeated graspings-at and circlings-in towards some central truth” (41). However, this search for a kind of transcendence through recursive movement is something that turns out to be not-quite achievable: variations and feedback loops in *Dara* also “illustrate the cliché that the truth remains, ultimately, indeterminable...we never actually get to what we’re after ...” (*Ibid.*). Dave’s analysis of Beethoven neatly summarises how *Dara* and other texts often look nostalgically to Romantic notions of transcendence, valorising the very striving for these epiphanic experiences, while remaining firmly postmodern in their conviction that such states remain elusive. If Liu qualifies cyberpunk’s postmodern, Romantic-inspired accounts of transcendence as a “go-to routine of the imagination that goes nowhere” (2008, 111), describing the “endless loops” of the ecstatic mind as empty striving toward the transcendent object, we can place *Dara*’s description of variations within a similar discursive framework. However, contrary to “traditional” cyberpunk, which freely embraces the replacement of the romantic imagination with what Liu calls “neuroromantic imagination”, and numinous planes with hyperreal realms that simply “feign the otherworldly”, *Scrapbook*, *Revolutions*, and *TOC* register a strong sense of nostalgia for a transcendent term.

TICS, TOCS and “difference engines”

Tomasula’s new media novel *TOC* imagines a disruptive splitting of temporal experience, after a “difference engine” fractures time into contiguous but isolated regimes or “worlds” of time. The creation myth-style tale, a digital narrative resembling a game, depicts a dystopian society of ambiguous relation to our own time or place¹³⁸ in which linear, mechanised time, embodied by a technological Pandora’s box called the “Difference Engine”,¹³⁹ disrupts the temporal experiences on which traditional, ostensibly pre-modern societies have been founded.

As Pellegrin observes, *TOC* denotes cyclical models of temporal experience as holistic and beneficial, contrasting it to linear, mechanised time that has a fracturing effect.¹⁴⁰ It appears to describe a certain incarnation of technoculture in terms of temporal disaggregation and atomization, and a displacement from anterior models of time that are nostalgically looked back to in quasi-mystical terms. However, rather than condemning technology as the source of grief and temporal collapse and advocating against technology altogether, *TOC* points to *itself*, its *own* alternative temporal rhythms and interactivity, as an antidote to the shattering effects of the “difference engine”. Alluding once again to the notion of Sorge, Pellegrin goes so far as to enthusiastically proclaim that *TOC* effectively “releases us to a different approach to temporality that may also provide a cure for care” (2010, 184-185). Central to *TOC*’s discourse on time and technology, then, is a notion that exploring complex modes of temporal experience,

¹³⁸ Ambiguous in that there is no indication whether the world is situated in the past or future in relation to our own historical time.

¹³⁹ The Difference Engine alludes to the eponymous calculating machines of the nineteenth century, of which Charles Babbage’s designs were the most famous. The designs are widely seen as predecessors to modern computers.

¹⁴⁰ “Discontinuous temporality ... is the work of the Difference engine, and the breaches it makes in the hive of time allow alienation to step in; when it applies to human life, difference fosters a feeling of estrangement that impairs the sense of self” (Pellegrin 2010, 180).

mediated through new forms of reading and multimedia browsing, may serve to subvert fractured models of time and their schizophrenic effects on selfhood.

In upholding cyclical temporal models over progressivist counterparts, *TOC* can be compared to how *Scrapbook* depicts linear time as a tool for disenfranchisement, misinformation and corporate greed, and neo-Romantically favours cyclical or uneven experiences of time as subversive antidotes. Also similar to *Dara*, certain technologies inflict temporal dysphoria and atomisation, while others provide a quasi-mystical way out of linear time. Furthermore, *TOC*'s heterogeneous and competing narrative temporalities are comparable to Danielewski's own experiments in *Revolutions*, which I will turn to examine shortly.

TOC's interface is divided into two main navigable paths, "Chronos" and "Logos", that users must choose from when launching the programme. The former path initiates by describing how time became "tyrannical", then, "like a house of cards, time collapsed", destroying civilisation with it (*TOC*, Chronos).¹⁴¹ Those who survive this spatiotemporal cataclysm blame one of their fellow escapees, a goddess-like personage called Ephemera, for the collapse of time. In her grief, she creates an ocean of tears that divides the narrative universe into 21 contiguous but separate temporal regimes accessible by clicking on one of 21 moon-shaped spheres, arranged in a circle over Ephemera's ocean of tears.

Navigating each of these narrative pathways, users/readers encounter various peoples and temporal regimes, including regimes in which there are no words for the past, others in which the future does not exist; and still others in which the concept itself of time is largely absent. One striking example revolves around a minority people called the TIC, described as entirely "timeless" in their native state; they ascribe to a holistic

¹⁴¹ As a digital narrative with neither page numbers nor a navigable "menu" or table of contents, I am obliged to refer only to the two narrative pathways "Chronos" and "Logos".

notion of time in which past, present, and future co-exist. The TICS, moreover, believe “[death] to be the body’s release from the future, leaving past and present...in one another’s grip: a couple” (*TOC*, Chronos). However, this synchronous and holistic conception of temporality is suppressed by the majority in this particular temporal realm, and the TICS are indoctrinated with a notion of linear time in an attempt to assimilate and control them.

Tomasula’s TIC people may allude to the assimilation of Native Americans by colonising Europeans: both groups are forced to adapt the temporal regimes and rhythms of the dominant culture. As readers explore the 20 other narrative threads, they learn that another people, the TOC, prayed to as divinities by the TIC and considered “not people”, inhabit another temporal regime one day behind the TIC. The two previously unified tribes communicate only through specially prescribed rituals and ceremonies; they can never meet or inhabit each other’s respective worlds and temporal regimes as the splitting initiated by the Difference Engine has created an absolute taboo against such interactions. Crossing the line “would invite insanity or even death” (*Ibid.*) In *TOC*, the “collapse” of time and the atomisation and sorrow that results appears to be caused by a technological cataclysm, a mechanising force that divides previously holistic time into isolated regimes. Paradoxically, however, Tomasula’s “media assemblage” novel utopically points to itself and its overlaid and non-normative temporalities as a way back into something verging on the mystical: a forgotten, and unified, time in which such atomization was absent. It serves as an additional example of the paradoxical way that late postmodern crisis fictions describe the effects of technoculture—and the possibilities represented by technology—on spatiotemporal experience.

Circles and fractures: formally reifying heterogeneous time

Temporal experimentation gains an even more complex texture in the narratives considered here when texts materially instantiate their own narrative discourses of temporal heterogeneity. In *Revolutions* and Tomasula's *TOC*, as was briefly discussed earlier, formal, iconographic and layout elements reinforce the novels' diegetic play with overlapping temporalities and the rhetoric of valorising cyclical and "uneven" temporal models over linear counterparts. These includes the constant visual iteration of circular shapes and the requirement that readers physically interact with the texts to draw circular or non-linear patterns of reading.

Readers are required to interact with these narratives like a game, marking them as ergodic. Ergodic texts, also referred to (somewhat confusingly) as "cybertexts", can exist in print form as well as in digital form, and require more than "trivial" cognitive and kinetic reader participation to selectively generate meaning. Aarseth focuses on how experimental contemporary narratives cognitively and kinetically solicit readers in more significant ways than "traditional" modern print texts do. He argues that premodern modes of textuality, including certain medieval manuscripts and ancient texts such as the 3rd century BC Chinese *I Ching*, are themselves "cybertexts", predecessors to forms of textuality thought native to the digital age, including web hypertext. Moreover, he underlines, print can be as cognitively demanding as a digital multimedia novel or game, dispelling the notion that print is necessarily less complex than "new" literary media.

If the game-like quality of these narratives reinforces their status as temporally heterogeneous objects, in that the time of reading and interacting is arguably more variable and self-selected than with "linear" narratives, their intermedial character also contributes to their temporal complexity. As Hayles has already noted of *TOC* and of

other “multimodal technotexts”, such narratives engage readers in temporally uneven “rhythms” of reading and interactivity. They expose readers to varying temporal rhythms as they are prompted to interact with print, web, video, or audio elements. Hayles observes:

TOC ... embodies in its material instantiation the complex temporalities that also constitute the major themes of its narrations. Heterogeneous in form ... *TOC* explores the relation between ... human bodies and the creation and development of networked and programmable machines, with both living and technical beings instantiating and embodying complex temporalities that refuse to be smoothly integrated into a rational and unitary scheme of a clock ticking. (2012, 106)

I propose that *Revolutions* and *TOC* materially instantiate, and *kinetically* involve readers in, their heterogeneous and often neo-Romantic discourses on time. However, unlike Hayles (who offers seminal readings of both texts and their relation to materiality), I specifically connect the formal reification of heterogeneous time in Danielewski and Tomasula to their re-engagement with, and privileging of, Romantic models of time, especially cyclical ones.

Just as it both poetically and formally troubles “I-ness and we-ness”, *Revolutions* stages complex temporalities not only through linguistic and poetic constructions and its continual drawing of circle-shapes, but also through the highly *spatialised* figuration of time represented by multiple text zones; each corresponds to distinctive temporal modes and diegetic space-times. The adventures of Hailey and Sam, printed in opposing directions on the page, symmetrically face one another, but each advance diachronically in historically distanced periods. These compete for space with the historical timelines that “drip” down the centre of each page in both directions. In this concretely spatialised textual zoning, *Revolutions* juxtaposes diachronic, collective history—represented by the timelines—with the personal, synchronic spacetime of Hailey and Sam. Hayles

underlines that *Revolutions*' chronological "ticker-tape", as I call it, both works *against* and *with* the protagonists' individual, synchronically denoted narrative adventures, experienced from their "ever-sixteen" subjective standpoints. This spatialised figuration of heterogeneous time and complex page layout in *Revolutions*, and *TOC*'s rich intermedial interface, offers readers a visual map for multiple and frequently competing narrative temporalities. Moreover, the constant reiteration of circles, ovals and octet patterns at an iconographic and visual level, primarily a feature in *Revolutions* but present in *TOC* to a lesser degree, reinforce the neo-Romantic upholding of cyclical models of temporality over linear, diachronic counterparts.¹⁴²

Even more significant are the literal "acts of revolution" required of readers: the continuous turning around of the book at self-selected intervals to alternate between Hailey and Sam's narratives, which *kinetically* engage readers in the drawing of circles and octet shapes. *TOC*, as Hayles notes, exposes readers to various temporal rhythms when 'browsing' or 'playing' the multimedia novel; "offers a variety of temporal regimes" (2012, 107). It alternates between giving them temporal and physical control of how the narrative unfolds and making them passive receptors to the digital narrative's controlled duration and rhythm—as when watching a film at the cinema). Similarly, since *Revolutions* includes extra-print materials including video and audio (on the dedicated website) and also exists in audio-album format, it offers multiple temporalities of reading.¹⁴³ In both instances, these kinetically demanding features reinforce narrative accounts of overlaid, uneven temporal regimes.

Revolutions is all, or *only*, about circles, spirals, and turnings-round. At formal and iconographic levels, circle and octet shapes are ubiquitous: green and gold page

¹⁴² Hayles notes: "It is not excess alone that determines the text's topographic form but rather the interplay between the force information exerts and the constraints that limit and contain it. Moreover, this interplay takes form not merely as a conceptual spatiality...but as visual shapes materially present on the pages" (2012, 223-224).

¹⁴³ The dedicated website for the novel is at www.onlyrevolutions.com

numbers are printed conjointly in double circles at the right corner of each page, alluding to Hailey and Sam’s symmetrical physical attributes; the former’s “gold eyes with flecks of green” and the latter’s “green eyes with flecks of gold”. The letter “o” is printed throughout the novel in gold or green, corresponding to Hailey and Sam’s respective narratives and alluding to their inversely coloured eyes. Even the carefully constrained number of words per page makes more explicitly *material* the notion of the circle or the revolution: each page comprises 180 words and 36 lines; each double-page spread counts 360 words. On the insides of the novel’s dust jacket, “forbidden” words—those found nowhere in the novel, and in keeping with another set of elaborate Danielewskian constraints—are printed backwards in green or gold to form whirling, circular or octet shapes. Readers are cognitively solicited by these shapes at every turn.



Figure 7: “Forbidden” words form whirling shapes on Sam’s dust jacket page

Furthermore, our reading patterns necessarily draw circles and double-circles, qualifying the text as ergodic: readers kinetically participate in the meaning-making process by helping to create the circular shapes—and, arguably, the novel’s thematic notion of quasi-transcendent circular temporality. Moreover, as Hayles observes, if you follow the publisher’s guidelines and read the novel in blocks of eight pages, then turn the book around and start from the inverse perspective, not only do you draw a figure-eight or the shape of infinity, but a repeated letter chain reading HAILEY AND SAM or SAM and HAILEY is formed from the first letters of each new eight-page spread, “in anagrammatic fashion” (Hayles 2012, 224).

As Joe Bray underlines, the novel engages us in dizzying, looping chains of meaning-making: *Revolution*’s ergodic requirements allow us to adopt seemingly countless reading strategies and, in turn, ever-richer interpretive possibilities (2011, 208). Reaching the end of one narrative thread, with the last line reading “Oh Sam, I could never walk away from you” (or exactly the inverse, from Sam’s perspective), one might feel compelled to stage yet another “revolution” by flipping the book around and renewing the narrative, adapting a different reading pattern and therefore generating a slightly different interpretation or “semiotic sequence”, as Aarseth would call it. In this way, too, we are arguably drawn ourselves into the “forgotten”, Romantic time of circularity.

These elements accrue in a highly self-conscious fashion to materially instantiate the notion of a continuous, literal and figurative Revolution placing the protagonists under the sign of cyclical and synchronic time, as already suggested earlier. Hayles reads the novel’s circles as “encapsulating” Hailey and Sam in a highly constrained textual system, tying the visual iteration of circle, spiral and octet shapes in Danielewski to its status as a novel of “information multiplicity and media assemblages,” and attributes

circle-shapes to a game of constraints designed to “limit and contain” the inundating informational flows of technoculture” (2012, 224). Her interpretation, while discerning, overlooks the heritage of Romanticism and the importance attributed to the circle-shape as a symbol of holism, creative regeneration, or even transcendence through natural cycles. Neo-Romantic, early postmodern iterations of this ideal are notably discernible in the *WEC*’s affinity for spherical shapes as emblems of holism—from Bucky Fuller’s biospheres to the NASA image of the Whole Earth. Late postmodern texts such as Danielewski’s and Dara’s in turn reiterate this Romantic tradition.

Thus, unlike Hayles, I do not identify the predominance of the circle-shape as *merely* a marker of constraint or recursivity. I instead identify these iconographic elements, as well as the “only revolutions” required of the reader at kinetic and cognitive levels, as a crucial aspect of the novel’s re-engagement with Romantic notions of holistic cyclical time. I see the predominance of circle-shapes as materially reiterating a narrative emphasis on the protagonists’ surpassing of spatiotemporal boundaries; and their continual renewal/rebirth in natural (and textual) cycles.

When Sam and Hailey die at the close of their respective narratives and subsequently regenerated by turning the book back around, “[their] hushes returning anew”, one might identify this exclusively as a feature of Danielewski’s game of constraints, as a response to the inundating and overwhelming forces of technoculture (S360). However, what if we additionally read the novel’s idioms of cyclicity in relation to Romantic literary interest in such forms of temporality as subversive resistance to mechanised, industrial time? Such a reading squares with the undeniably Romantic tone at the heart of Hailey and Sam’s perpetual rebirth. It additionally hints at the novel’s revalorisation of the natural, nonhuman world as equally important to the human, a topic addressed in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

The Ecological Turn

This chapter charts what I posit as an ecological turn in late postmodern crisis fictions such as Danielewski's *Revolutions*, Dara's *Scrapbook*, and Kathryn Davis's *The Walking Tour*.¹⁴⁴ It argues that a thematic emphasis on the natural, nonhuman world, and a preoccupation with environmental change and risk in this experimental fiction, indicate their marked engagement with transatlantic Romantic ideas that have pervaded nineteenth- and twentieth-century ecological philosophies and literary narratives.¹⁴⁵ They debate problems of environmental degradation and stewardship, as well as non-anthropocentric approaches and representational models. They also approach natural ecologies as dynamic, fragile, and unpredictable systems.

As others have observed, nineteenth-century protoenvironmentalist writing illuminates current responses to ecological crisis and environmental change. Indeed, when they examine the destructive effects of industrial capitalist activity on human and natural, nonhuman ecologies, late postmodern ecocritical texts revisit enduring transatlantic Romantic concerns. They draw human and nonhuman life as inextricable; and they address the vulnerabilities of both in the face of ecological upheavals. In turn, these texts frequently gesture toward an ethics of literary representation that might

¹⁴⁴ Hereafter abbreviated as *Tour*.

¹⁴⁵ In discussing environmental risk, I borrow from Giddens's notion of "risk culture". Giddens argues that modernity is characterised by a tense negotiation between "trust and risk", and underlines the importance of collective ecological risk: "There are 'environments of risk' that collectively affect large masses of individuals—in some instances, potentially everyone on the face of the earth, as in the case of the risk of ecological disaster or nuclear war ... The experience of security usually rests upon a balance of trust and acceptable risk" (1990, 35-36). My treatment of "risk" is also informed by Ulrich Beck's theory of "world risk society" (1999) and by Heise (2008).

contribute toward redressing the aforementioned problems—an ethos that stresses non-anthropocentric representational approaches.

These contemporary experiments recall the work of nineteenth-century Romantic writers including William Blake, who in poems such as “Jerusalem” and “London” described the effects of early industrialisation as ruinous, apocalyptic, or even “Satanic”. Henry David Thoreau’s ambivalent view of industrialisation, including the construction of the railroad, in *Walden* and other works, stands as an important legacy in contemporary fiction, although the latter additionally registers uniquely twentieth and twenty-first century environmental issues, such as the pervasiveness of plastics and synthetic chemicals and their disruptive effects.¹⁴⁶

While this nineteenth-century Romantic legacy is important in late postmodern figurations of ecological risk, these contemporary texts are also profoundly informed by more specifically twentieth-century environmentalist debates and philosophies such as systems theories, urban environments, and debates around chemical toxicity, the likes of which Chapter One briefly explores in its readings of Brand’s *Catalog*.

The contemporary texts examined in this chapter furthermore complicate the reigning sense of how literary postmodernism treats Nature. According a central narrative place to the natural world, and to problems of human and nonhuman ecologies more broadly, they call into question the familiar defining of the postmodern mode as a purely recursive set of language games that understand nature as only a discursive construct. For Fredric Jameson, nature appears in postmodern texts chiefly as an object of nostalgia in late capitalist societies that have essentially excised humans from the natural (primarily agricultural) world (1991, 366); but the fiction examined here does not neatly accord with such a description. Although they do generally reject totalising accounts of nature and

¹⁴⁶ See Yaeger 2008 for a discussion of “rubbish ecology” in contemporary literary and artistic imaginaries.

“naturalness” more broadly, these narratives nevertheless treat environmental change and crisis as extradiscursive, lived realities requiring urgent attention; furthermore, they draw nonhuman life and landscapes in vibrant and geographically specific strokes in spite of their experimental qualities. Rather than figuring as shadowy, purely figurative objects of nostalgic absence, plants, animals, and landscapes are vivid and often geographically specific presences in this fiction; indeed, they often appear as full-fledged characters. As Buell notes, few critics continue to assume that refusing the premises of mimetic referentiality means to deny the reality and importance of the natural world, or the ethical responsibilities literature might be beholden to in representing it.¹⁴⁷

Drawing from the work of ecocritics such as Oppermann, who maintains that postmodern critical accounts of the natural are not necessarily incompatible with the presence of an ecological ethos, or with attention to the way that environments and discourses intersect, this chapter offers close readings of an ecocritical mode in late postmodern, experimental crisis fiction. While theoretical models for ecocritical postmodernism from Oppermann, Jim Cheney, McMurry, Mazel, Heise, Morton, and others are robust, a study of ecologically oriented, experimental American fiction has yet to appear.¹⁴⁸ This chapter therefore extends the work of the aforementioned critics, who all conceive of an ecocritical literary approach retaining postmodern reflexivity and scepticism toward ecomimesis. It underlines how late postmodern and ecocritical concerns find surprisingly compatible space for critical dialogue in the specific context of this recent American fiction.

¹⁴⁷ Buell complicates his earlier stance in *Environmental Imagination* (1995) on nature writing as mimetic, acknowledging that “Languages are culturally coded symbol systems” and specifying that he does not use the term “mimetic” to mean “exact copy or reflection of something real”. He nevertheless goes on to argue: “[I]t is equally clear that the subject of a text’s representation of its environmental ground matters . . . Language never replicates extratextual landscapes, but it can bend toward or away from them. We can see this in such basic decisions as whether or not to foreground local toponymy, vernacularization, and indigenous names for uniquely native species” (2005, 33).

¹⁴⁸ See, notably, Cheney, “Truth, Knowledge, and the Wild World” (2005), and Max Oelschlaeger (ed.), *Postmodern Environmental Ethics* (1995).

Furthermore, considering how postmodern literature might undergo important shifts (or, from a radically different perspective, be critically re-evaluated and appreciated for its ecological concerns) under the pressures of unprecedented environmental change is especially timely in light of the emergent genre of climate fiction. Diminutively referred to as “cli-fi”, this newly identified genre of speculative fiction specifically focuses on climate change and the risks therein.¹⁴⁹ I maintain that a renewed preoccupation with the natural world in certain late postmodern American texts, as well as their antinomian discursive structures, qualify them as experimental iterations of this burgeoning speculative genre.

Late postmodern ecocritical fiction poses important ethical questions about literature’s role in ecological crisis. It broadly interrogates, as Romantic predecessors such as Thoreau did, the ethics of literary environmentalism. What are the stakes involved in representing the natural world, and what are its trappings? Are such trappings even avoidable? In such a debate, literary Romanticism and its own representational practices stand as both a legacy and a crutch, since romanticising Nature can lead us dubiously away from confronting the complexity of environmental risks, and from recognising how human activities shape even the farthest reaches of the earth, drawing into question the idea itself of wilderness. McMurry argues: “The nineteenth century drew up the blueprint for our environmental house of cards, the twentieth century built the structure, and the twenty-first century will tear it down and rebuild it properly. Or it will not. In any case, revisiting some of this project’s early observers will, I believe, repay the effort” (2003, 17). Late postmodern ecocritical fiction takes up both the nineteenth century “house of cards” and the neo-romantic environmental philosophies of the twentieth to offer an inherently self-reflexive and deconstructive approach to

¹⁴⁹ Collections such as *Welcome to the Greenhouse: New Science Fiction on Climate Change* (Van Gelder, ed., 2011), underline growing interest in critically approaching “cli-fi” as a specific sub-genre. Also see Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, “Cli-Fi: Birth of a Genre” (2013, online) and Canavan.

environment and ecological crisis. It draws on nineteenth-century environmentalist legacies while also considering what needs to be torn down and rebuilt. Confronting and unseating what Nature means figures as part of those efforts.

Echoing debates that have become commonplace in ecocritical and environmentalist writing, and in some respects similar to the environmentalist philosophies dominating mid-century countercultural forums like the *WEC*, these texts most often eschew rigid divisions between nature and culture in their depictions of ecological communion and environmental risks. They instead critique sentimentalising or imperialistic grand narratives about Nature that have, for many, compounded and accelerated the existing crisis.¹⁵⁰ Late postmodern ecocritical texts simultaneously draw from many of the ideas and concerns of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Romantic writing, while also ironically critiquing its potentially harmful discourses, from the imperialistic drive of Manifest Destiny to sentimentalised accounts of wild or pastoral landscapes that occlude the destructive impact of human activities, as well as denying our delicate interdependence with natural ecologies. They underline a need to rethink and recalibrate our relationship to the natural, nonhuman world. In so doing, these texts gesture toward Morton's "ecology without nature": a need to consider human and nonhuman environments and systems as crucially important, while also remaining highly sceptical of Nature with a capital "N".

To offer one example, *Revolutions* opens by parodying the American rhetoric of westward expansion, drawing the natural world as an inexhaustible resource to dominate and exploit. In one early passage, Sam imagines himself as a "Yankee Doodledandy"

¹⁵⁰ Frederick Buell argues: "Previous (i.e. modern) assumptions of the foundational separation of humans and nature now appear not as true, but as constructions of a particular cultural period—one in which cultural denial of embeddedness in nature helped create all the environmental woes that now so clearly mar both our world and us." (2010, 28)

who magisterially asserts his dominion over the animals that surround him, ready to conquer the West and all its spoils:

Turning around a **Foal** wobbles
 over with soft nose:
 —You're impressive.
 I pick him up. **Coyotes** add:
 —You impress everyone.
 Approval unanimous. I'm
 a Yankee Doodledandy. Vanguard.
 Surrendering nothing. But April
 does. This land is my land. Treats me
 reverentially... (*Revolutions*, S2)

Sam believes that the plants and animals “treat [him] reverentially”, their own interests wholly subordinated to human ones, while Sam “surrender[s] nothing”. However, while Sam and Hailey begin their respective narratives by imagining themselves as invincible and living independently of the natural systems they move through, they end up victims of the very imperialist discourse they initially embrace. They come to reckon with their own vulnerability and interdependence with the natural world.

Davis's *Tour* similarly critiques the Romantic nostalgia exhibited by tourists wishing to return to “pure” landscapes, offering a scathing critique of Wordsworthian nostalgia for the ruins of the past, for a prior, more noble Nature, that it simultaneously deploys to full effect in its depictions of an ill-fated Tour through Welsh mountains and seascapes. Comparing landscaping styles between Wordsworth's time and the time of her parents, the narrator, Susan, observes:

Both periods *romanticized* ruin, even though their stories varied; what they agreed on was that something valuable, something infinitely desirable, had been locked away in the past where it would remain out of reach forever. Of course you only *romanticize* ruin when you don't have to live with it (42, emphasis mine).

Susan ironically lambasts how she, her parents, and their associates indulge in a misguided turn to the past as a source of purity, as a “golden era” when Nature was as it should be. As Paul Hamilton suggests, the postmodern romantic literary mode is marked by self-reflexivity and scepticism, and Davis’s novel represents an apt example (Hamilton 14). *Tour* and other texts train that reflexivity and scepticism on the problem of nature.

Rather than relegating the natural world to a purely discursive realm or treating it as a mere cultural construct, such critical approaches to traditional discourses about Nature instead contribute towards a self-reflexive ecological ethos at the heart of these novels. As an ecologically oriented postmodern novel, *Tour* appears both deconstructive and reconstructive: deconstructive in that it critiques how Nature has been problematically Romanticised and thus misapprehended; reconstructive in its narrative emphasis on ethical problems such as biodiversity loss and the responsibility of human activity in altering natural environments. All of the contemporary texts examined in this chapter present similar dynamics.

The legacy of nineteenth-century environmental writing

While contemporary renderings of ecological crisis remain appreciably different from nineteenth-century predecessors’, notably due to the former’s preoccupation with climate change or the pervasiveness of plastics, upon close examination nineteenth-century writings appear less distant from current perspectives than previously imagined. As critics such as Francois Specq and McMurry have observed, close comparative readings of Thoreau and other Romantic writers show that while they may not have displayed the kind of intensively self-reflexive “naturalcultural” thinking that marks postmodern

hermeneutic approaches, nineteenth-century writings nevertheless sometimes blur boundaries between natural and built environments, for example.

Writers such as Thoreau, Blake, Coleridge, and Mary Shelley formulated their own ideas about the natural world and human relations to these in response to the early Industrial Revolution and its unprecedented environmental and economic changes, writing as mills, smokestacks, urban sprawl, and trains had begun to radically transform not only economic systems of labour and commerce, but also rapidly alter human and natural environments and the perceived relationships between these. Romantic calls for a renewed focus on the natural world and a narrative preoccupation with cataloguing and revering nonhuman life can only be properly framed in relation to such rapid industrialisation and environmental upheaval. When Thoreau comments, in a *Journal* entry dated 23 March, 1856, on the changing Walden woods and the marks made by human activity, he anticipates Bill McKibben's lamenting the "end of nature" in his book of the same name (2003; first published 1989), or Margaret Ronda's recent discussion of "melancholy at the end of the anthropocene".¹⁵¹ Thoreau writes:

I spend a considerable portion of my time observing the habits of the wild animals my brute neighbors—By their various movements & migrations they fetch the year about to me ... But when I consider that the nobler animals have been exterminated here—the cougar—panther—lynx--wolverine wolf—bear the beaver, the turkeymoosedeer^&c &c—I cannot but feel as if I lived in a tamed &, as it were, emasculated country. The whole civilized country is to some extent turned into a city. Many & I am that citizen whom I pity. ^of those animal migrations & other phenomena by which the Indians marked the season--are no longer to be observed. (*Journal*, Manuscript 20, 422).¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ For Ronda, "There is, in fact, an emergent literature of this 'end of nature' paradigm, engaged in these new modes of thinking—negative, indebted, elegiac—necessitated by global ecological crisis: the field of ecopoetics ... This literary mode, largely unexplored by critics of contemporary literature, can be characterized by a strong distinction from nature-poetry approaches that tend to frame 'the environmental imagination', in Lawrence Buell's ... terms, as not only a restorative treatment for the 'environmental unconscious', but as leading directly to ethical, transformative action." (2013, online)

¹⁵² I cite here an unedited transcript from Thoreau's *Journal* manuscripts, available at <http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings_journals.html> and edited by Elizabeth Witherell. Spelling and syntactic irregularities are reproduced from the transcription.

Just as Thoreau offers a melancholy account of how his beloved Massachusetts wilderness is being refashioned under the influence of urban and industrial development, yielding the extinction of “nobler” animal and plant species such as cougars and bears and what he deems an “emasculated country”, postmodern ecocritical texts also ponder the end of nature: in other words, the end of *wildness*; the near-absence of environments that remain untouched by human activity. The latter place the natural, nonhuman world into the centre of the representational field, and flag up the risks represented by industry, new technology, and more particularly the deleterious effects of twentieth-and twentieth-century matter such as synthetic chemicals. These experimental texts eschew the realist aesthetics and narrative styles of traditional nature writing, but take up its diegetic and ethical concerns. Consider the following passages from *Revolutions*, which mark the novel as a toxic narrative:¹⁵³

My Speedwell MC snorting steam.
 Air smoldering. Roiled. It's me.
 Gasoline. And oil. Fuel for this
 drive. Spooning up HONEY.
 Fuel for the fuel ...
 I'm No Man's Land.
 Turpinite.
 Chloroacetane. (S66)

There. Feer. THE CREEP allmost
 swallowing me up ...
 Sleazy breezy amidst Lithium-6.
 But THE CREEP's sexy...
 —Come with me now...
 Except blundering across Poplar
 Creek, heedless of Mercury & PCBs,

¹⁵³ In this research, “toxic narrative” refers to a fictional scenario in which both human and natural environments are penetrated by chemicals or other harmful substances; the plot of these narratives revolves around the adverse effects of such substances to human or nonhuman health, and the feelings these inspire.

past broken tanks of Uranyl Nitrate,
 Sam barrels back,
 gleefully farting. (H67-68).

Describing the “smoldering air” created by gas and oil burning, Sam compares the petrol fuel to the couple’s life salve (honey), the latter of which is an implicit culprit in the novel’s environmental apocalypse. Synthetic chemicals also penetrate the novel’s catalogues of plants and animals, figuring the incursion of human-made products on the natural environment and the indelible marks these leave: the “Poplar Creek” that Sam blunders across is infiltrated by “Mercury &PcBs” and “Uranyl Nitrate”—dangers Sam is “heedless of”. If the natural world still teems in the novel’s earlier passages, by the time Hailey’s narrative begins (in 1968), industrial development has accelerated and permanently marked natural environments with chemical derivatives and petrochemical products, blurring lines between natural and built environments.

One might compare the tone of *Revolutions*’ toxic passages to similar ones in Ginsberg’s “Howl”, an example of mid-twentieth-century countercultural meditations on toxicity in the late capitalist era. Ginsberg’s dystopian urban beast, “Moloch”, similarly recalls Blake’s own dreaded “Albion” in “Jerusalem”. The body of the beast, as in Blake, is machinery and capitalist greed:

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! ... Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb! ... Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities! Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! ... Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! (“Howl”, II/8-9)

Another monstrous figure tied to late capitalist violence is THE CREEP, a character in *Revolutions* whose name figures in the same violet font as the historical timelines. THE CREEP metonymically figures not only the violence of historical time, but also that of

twentieth-century technological development, especially the military-industrial complex: “THE CREEP’s miles of / Viet Cong and Carpet Bombs. / Conquest’s necessary” (H69). The presence of dangerous synthetic chemicals in the passages above is implicitly related to uniquely twentieth-century atrocities: evoking, perhaps, the US Armed Forces’s use of Agent Orange on Vietnamese civilians. The violence of industrial development figures in *Revolutions* as one that touches both human and nonhuman life.

These examples demonstrate that postmodern literary texts can, and do, assume an ethical stake in environmental problems, even while eschewing claims of ecomimesis. They explore how literary texts might not only comment on environmental changes and the need for humans to modify their relationship with the nonhuman world, but actively participate in modifying representational and behavioural approaches to the natural world that would minimise degradation and lead to more sustainable interactions between human and nonhuman systems.

Postmodern ecocriticism: theoretical models

Until recently, it was widely assumed that nature writing, as a legacy of Romanticism and its supposedly naïve referentiality, must be incompatible with postmodernist representational models.¹⁵⁴ If the former subscribed to an ecomimetic notion of literary representation, one in which writing mirrors an objective, external referent called nature, then postmodernism would only reckon with the natural world as narrative invention or cultural construct. However, recent scholarship in the ecocritical field dispenses with the longstanding assumption that postmodern and ecological writing and criticism are inherently incompatible. In her recent manifesto arguing for “postmodern ecocriticism”, otherwise referred to as “material ecocriticism”, Oppermann argues that it is fallacious to

¹⁵⁴ For Oppermann, “ecocritical opinion ... views most postmodern writing as marked by environmental blindness” (2008, 244).

think of postmodernism as a mode that assumes discourse as having unilateral agency vis à vis the natural and/or embodied world; she designates both natural and built environments as having their own agential capacities.¹⁵⁵ Discourse acts on environment, and vice-versa. Material conditions, including climate change, natural disasters, and changes in human environments (e.g. urban planning) can qualitatively affect and alter our understanding of and representational models for the world, just as it is now widely admitted that our discourses *about* nature are far from anodyne or neutral. Oppermann claims to reinvest the postmodern mode with a consideration for embodied realities and situated knowledges,¹⁵⁶ and these are in turn understood as shaped by discourse:

This new postmodernism legitimizes nature even as it challenges and subverts its traditional discourses. Deriving its ideological grounding from ecological thought and its concepts from the scientific fields, this kind of postmodernism is both interrogative and affirmative. (2008, 244)

Oppermann delineates a postmodern mode that “challenges and subverts” traditional discourses around “nature” while legitimising the natural world as an important site of narrative intervention. Her proposed alliance between postmodernism and environmentalism is not, of course, entirely new. As Lawrence Buell notes, ecocritics such as Dominic Head have argued that there is “ground for dialogue between ‘the broader Green movement’ and postmodern theory with respect to a comparable

¹⁵⁵ Envisaging the “agency” of the nonhuman world is a difficult and rhetorically fraught task. One concrete potential example is the September 2014 event in which some 35,000 walrus in northern Alaska thronged on the shore of an island near Port Lay to escape receding sea ice. Aerial photographs taken by scientific surveyors quickly went viral on the web, and the event was interpreted by many as an example of animals expressing concrete distress and fighting to adapt amid dramatic warming in the Arctic. See Bennett (2010).

¹⁵⁶ Feminist and ecofeminist theories of “situated knowledges” from Haraway and others strongly inform Iovino and Oppermann’s concepts. See, notably, Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” (in Haraway 1991). In an ecological context, we can adopt Heise’s simple definition of situated knowledge as “the intimate acquaintance with local nature and history that develops with sustained interest in one’s immediate surroundings” (2008, 11).

‘deprivileging of the human spirit’” (Buell 2005, 10).¹⁵⁷ However, Oppermann and Iovino’s postmodern ecocriticism suggests a strong, rather than a tentative, alliance between the two critical and literary fields. For this reason, I adopt their term to discuss postmodern ecocritical renderings of natural and built environments, and the complex relationships between these, in contemporary fiction. I also apply Oppermann’s definition of postmodern ecocritical writing as simultaneously “interrogative and affirmative”.

The emphasis on embodied knowledge practices and realities more generally-- whether in the guise of natural or built environments, human or nonhuman ecologies-- lies at the heart of what constitutes not only an ecological turn, but also a material and posthuman turn in late postmodern literary expression. In “Theorizing Material Ecocriticism”, Iovino maintains that “[m]aterial ecocriticism is an indispensable part of the larger project of postmodern materialism that provides the original impetus for embodied knowledge practices” (Iovino and Oppermann 23). She continues:

The old conceptions of matter as stable, inert, and passive physical substance, and of the human agent as a separate observer always in control, are being replaced here by the new posthumanist models that effectively theorize matter’s inherent vitality... Examining how matter and meaning, bodies and texts, perception and experience intra-act with cultural productions and social systems, material ecocriticism becomes important as a heuristic model of postmodern materialism. (23-24)

In ways similar to Jane Bennett’s ecocriticism, which posits a political ecology of “vibrant matter”, Iovino and Oppermann point to a reanimation, or “re-enchantment” of the natural world in literary critical praxis and to new postmodern heuristic models for approaching texts, drawing from key ideas in social systems theory to claim that one can trace how “matter and meaning, bodies and texts” intersect in literary representations of

¹⁵⁷ Also see McMurry. Writing earlier than Oppermann, he argues, “[I]f nature is always ideological, it is not *only* ideology. As the material limits of the world assert themselves in the form of global warming, we are reminded that nature does not dissolve into discourse” (2003, 45, emphasis mine).

environment. Moreover, they use the term “posthuman” not to designate human bodies inseparable from technological forces (as in the cyborg fantasy) but a worldview and representational model that is resolutely non-anthropocentric.

If these critics describe these concepts as new ones, many of the ideas permeating Iovino and Oppermann’s postmodern ecocritical and materialist theory bear a strong relation with postcolonial and ecofeminist theoretical models from critics such as Spivak. These fields have long been interested in problems of agency and ecology, drawing from poststructuralist theory to do so. Spivak’s 1994 essay “Responsibility”, for instance, borrows the Derridean term to excoriate the World Bank’s project of creating flood drains in Bangladesh, a project Spivak associates with ecological imperialism; a way of suppressing the subaltern agencies at work in the floodwaters; the local ecologies and forms of agrarian practices they generated (Spivak 54). A more nuanced claim might be to assert that mainstream occidental deconstructionist and postmodern theory has not easily admitted the kinds of narrative potential and agential power inherent in environments, but that ecofeminist and postcolonial theorists have been attentive to such ideas for decades.

Postmodern ecocritical theories also have nineteenth-century precedents. For McMurry, for example, American environmentalism is particularly indebted to Thoreau and Emerson.

Thoreau, who claimed that “in Wildness is the preservation of the world” (NH 112) is the forebear of the radical line of American nature-thought, the conviction that the nonhuman world ought to be accorded standing, and that naked anthropocentrism will lead only to our doom ... (2008, 17-18)

McMurry argues, however, that while Thoreau has generally been understood as a radical ecologist promoting a fully biocentric ethos in which nonhuman concerns are equally important to human ones, and while Emerson has been received as a conservationist for

whom long-term human concerns are most important, their concerns dovetail in the sense that “both the radical and reformist strains symbolized by these two thinkers share the basic goal of reconciling competing *human* interests and perspectives—economic, aesthetic, political, and so on—through physical and intellectual fusion with nature, a bringing together of body, brains, and earth into productive harmony” (18). For McMurry, even Thoreau’s desire to experience the natural world from the vantage of an animal or “bury himself up to the neck in the actual earth” (*Ibid.*) was fuelled by “competing human interests”.

Thoreau’s fervent search for wildness and Emerson’s sentimental accounts of the spiritual purity and perfection of Nature, as well as the latter’s insistence that the nonhuman world must be subordinated to the human one, are approaches that postmodern ecocritical texts hold in sceptical regard. Nevertheless, American Romantic predecessors are clearly important in considering current literary depictions of the natural, nonhuman world.

Systems theories approaches and the “right to opacity”

Informed by both nineteenth-century Romantic legacies and by mid-century environmentalist ideas, postmodern ecocritical texts tend to stage the natural world as a dynamic system that, unable to “speak”, cannot be assigned any definitive truth claims. In many instances, late postmodern ecocritical writing refrains from claiming to “know”, or “claim”, nonhuman life in any objective or totalising way, forming an integral part of the non-anthropocentric ethos they gesture toward.

Taxonomic or colonising representational approaches to the natural, nonhuman world give way to narrative devices that draw plants, animals, or environments more broadly in decentred, heterogeneous, and at times wilfully opaque terms. Unlike

traditional conservationist narratives, which figure nonhuman life and wilderness as unchanging counterpoints to the ills of civilisation, plants, animals, and landscapes no longer figure as immutable; nor as pure spaces that can be easily demarcated from human ones. The implication is that genuine respect for nonhuman life may lay not in sentimentalising or “responsible steward” accounts of pristine wilderness in need of protection—a paternalistic approach that considers the nonhuman realm as a precious, static commodity to cordon off from human interests—but in recognising the partial unpredictability and inaccessibility of the natural world from our vantage in a human social system, even as biodiversity losses and other forms of degradation remain important concerns. However, while these texts draw the natural world in unpredictable and contingent terms, thus resisting a totalising approach, they nevertheless tend to adopt a “whole systems” vantage, such as the one embodied in Brand’s *Catalog*. They figure the complex interactions and dependencies between human and nonhuman systems; neither is cordoned off from the other.

McMurry maintains that any attempts to separate these out will inevitably fail. In describing the distinctions between human social and communications systems and the environments from which they seek to delineate boundaries, he underlines that the former have built-in limitations and blind spots:

[W]e use communications to observe the environment, to create connectivity between system elements, and to maintain boundaries between systems and environments. The particular communication regimes that various systems have evolved to foster and remember become their sole models of knowing. And there is much about the world that they have never learned how to know. In effect, it is communication’s silent, unknowable Other that remains environment for all of our various systems, unobserved and unspoken. One could say that the environmental problem is at bottom a failure to communicate about something that cannot communicate for itself. (24)

In recognising that “there is much about the world that [we] have never learned to know”, and in identifying the environmental crisis in part as a failure of our social systems to reckon with the environment as our “unknowable Other”, late postmodern ecocritical perspectives might productively be related to what Martiniquan poet and critic Édouard Glissant has called the “right to opacity”: the right to *not* be wholly or definitively understood. I borrow here from Glissant and his assertion, in *Poétique de la relation* (1997) and elsewhere, that individuals and peoples perceived as “other”—and especially colonised peoples of colour—possess *le droit a l’opacité* (the right to opacity) in a postcolonial context of historical subjugation and racialised violence. For Glissant, to try to *comprehend* something (*comprendre* in French, which includes the radical “prendre”, *to take*) involves an effort to name it, linguistically or otherwise: to subjugate it by appropriating it as one’s own. Glissant argues for a particular kind of solidarity with those individuals who register as “other” or “opaque”: a form of relationality that allows for interaction and admiration, while renouncing a need to cognitively or figuratively grasp (*comprendre*) the other through language: “I am thus able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity to him. To feel in solidarity with him...it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to ‘make’ him in my image” (193).

Elizabeth De Loughrey argues that Glissant’s postcolonial theories (as well as Spivak’s) have inherent environmentalist implications:

For Spivak and Glissant, opacity, alterity, and *not knowing* are vital methods of thinking the planet. Both are careful to pose a mode of planet-thought that attempts to avoid the epistemological and ontological violence of colonization, militarization, and the structural adjustments of liberalism. (327)

Since Glissant and Spivak's postcolonial critiques of capitalism and the history of empire's racial violence draw intricate (and inextricable) connections between peoples and their land, unearthing how colonialism subjugates and exploits people and natural environments simultaneously, I would argue that Glissant's right to opacity might be additionally conceived of as a right extended to nonhuman life.¹⁵⁸

In so doing, I do not wish to suggest facile comparisons between human rights and problems of historical racial violence and the ethics of nonhuman personhood: to do so would be highly problematic. For one, the problem of agency looms large: to have a right implies possessing the agency to exert it. How to extend rights to nonhuman life when their agency is so very different from our own, and their communication systems worlds apart from ours? Moreover, if humans accord rights to nonhuman life, how does such a gesture depart from paternalistic models that envisage humans occupying a "steward" role vis à vis animals and plants? Such questions are all currently being debated in fields including law and environmental ethics; in particular, the question of animal personhood is one that is increasingly being taken seriously.¹⁵⁹

Just as these remain open debates in contemporary environmental ethics, literary interrogations in this direction also appear less as predetermined solutions to environmental ills than as gestures in a different direction, as attempts to move toward non-totalising ways of representing the natural world. As such, the nonhuman world is appreciated as a dynamic and highly complex system with which we share a fragile interdependence. We strive to better appreciate the natural world's complexity, as well as

¹⁵⁸ Such a theoretical extension is supported by how Caribbean literature has long identified landscapes and natural life as integral to the notion of *la créolité*. Glissant himself identifies *le paysage* (landscapes) as *personnages* (characters/persons) in *Poétique de la relation* (1990). Meanwhile, Derek Walcott's poem "The Sea is History" suggests that the scars of colonial violence and of the slave trade are inscribed in the seas and the landscapes in which these violences occurred.

¹⁵⁹ Animal ethics is a growing and interdisciplinary field bringing together research in biology, philosophy, law, and other disciplines. Important players include The Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics (UK), and its *Journal of Animal Ethics*.

its balance or imbalance, using “whole systems” approaches, while recognising that our communication and representational systems will always fall short of entirely understanding. Moreover, to not understand totally is crucial to forging a new kind of “relation” to nonhuman life. Rather than claiming paternalistic stewardship over systems in “significant otherness” to us (Haraway), we acknowledge the natural, nonhuman world’s “right to opacity” (Glissant).

Nineteenth-century writers such as Thoreau might be considered as “early adopters” of such a representational ethos. For Specq, Thoreau’s *Journal* reveals the “juxtaposition and reprise of discrete elements” which succeeds in disorienting readers; he calls such a technique a “powerful assault on all fixed standpoints” (Specq et al. 224). Specq asserts that Thoreau resisted the defining, cataloguing representation of nature normative in botany: “Thoreau’s central concern is not to appropriate the world through either conceptualization or productive activity but, on the contrary, to endlessly postpone the day of completion: his is a perfect antitotalizing stance” (227-228). In similar fashion, Glissant’s ideas around the right to opacity can be productively engaged when considering how late postmodern, ecocritical texts often portray the natural world as impenetrable and disorienting, as in this passage from Dara’s *Scrapbook*, which shows one of the novel’s protagonists feeling wildly disoriented in a forest:

I have been forsaken, left hamstrung, in a deciduous abyss...surrounded by endless densities of trees...in every direction...*If* direction still meant anything...For, at that point, in the forest...direction was something that could only make tenuous claims to existence...For all there was...for me...was undifferentiation...trees and undifferentiation...with a lump of anxiety in its midst...In other words...for me...the forest had a direction in...but not a direction out...an everywhere-center...and a nowhere-circumference ... (153-155)

Here, “densities of trees” and the protagonist’s overwhelming sense of “undifferentiation” suggests the inverse of a transparent rendering of the natural world or

a rational cognitive grasp of it: the protagonist's spatial and temporal disorientation hinges on his lack of understanding of how to navigate the forest, how to differentiate (in a taxonomic sense) its living contents. If the colonial *conquistadores* conquered the so-called "New World" with the aid of compasses, maps, knowledge of botany, and other tools designed to assert control over the landscapes (and peoples) they intended to subjugate, Dara's lost protagonist makes no such attempts to grasp, define, or differentiate objects in the forest. As discussed in Chapter Two, *Scrapbook's* depiction of the errant walker and his encounter with the "forest kneeler" suggests the healing potential of a turn away from the linear, clock-time of capitalist consumer society and a way back into a kind of immanence; in a parallel sense, the "nowhere circumference", "undifferentiation", or indeed the opacity of the "deciduous abyss" described above is connoted in largely positive terms in the novel's larger plot. The disorienting experience registers as a revelatory alternative to the capitalist dictates of consumption and exploitation practiced by Ozark and other corporate powers: powers that approach the natural world as an object to better *understand* in order to better *exploit*.

Even while late postmodern ecocritical texts generally eschew totalising representations of the natural world, instead offering more contingent perspectives, they nonetheless employ some classic strategies of pathetic fallacy, including anthropomorphism and sentimentalised descriptions of retreats to nature, as part of their discussion of human and nonhuman relations. However, for Thomas Pughe, who identifies in Thoreau's writing what Mark Bekoff had earlier theorised as self-reflexive tropes of "critical anthropomorphism", such strategies can support an ecological narrative ethos, rather than necessarily re-inscribe humanness as central and therefore counteract

that ethos.¹⁶⁰ I will discuss some of the modalities of critical anthropomorphic tropes later in the chapter.

The environmental preoccupations evident in late postmodern ecocritical narratives have already marked twentieth-century American fiction and non-fiction, from Carson's *Silent Spring* to Annie Dillard's neotranscendentalist nature writing, which many have seen as featuring some postmodern qualities.¹⁶¹ Numerous concerns marking the current fiction examined here, furthermore, have a long tradition in popular genres such as science fiction, especially ecofeminist sci-fi from authors such as Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler.¹⁶² Lawrence Buell notes: "For half a century science fiction has taken a keen, if not consistent interest in ecology, in planetary endangerment, in environmental ethics, in humankind's relation to the nonhuman world" (2005, 56).

In many respects, the postmodern literary mode might prove a "natural" fit with non-anthropocentric representational techniques. Literary postmodernism's decentred quality, its resistance to *grands recits*, and its insistence on the inherent artificiality of popular discourses about Nature furnish the very critical frameworks and paradigms through which ecocritical ideas have been formulated. Further, as previously flagged, postcolonial and ecofeminist critical theories have long deployed poststructuralist concepts to address issues of environmental justice in particular. From the current

¹⁶⁰ In such renderings, the human and nonhuman world interact in what Haraway has called "significant-otherness to each other" (2003, 32). Pughe, glossing Haraway, notes: "In the 'naturecultural' world we inhabit, Haraway argues, humans and animals are always each other's 'companion species', or, put differently, they are coconstitutive ([Haraway] 32). Anthropomorphic tropes, then, may figure, even epitomize, our inevitably intermingled and interdependent relations with animals. Tropes of personhood, Haraway claims, are 'necessary to keep the humans alert to the fact that someone is at home' in ... animals" (Pughe 256).

¹⁶¹ See, notably, Hardack, "'A Woman Need Not Be Sincere'": Annie Dillard's Fictional Autobiographies and the Gender Politics of American Transcendentalism" (2008). Dillard is also included among a "new" canon of American nature writers, moreover, in Garrard 2004.

¹⁶² In works such as the *Lilith's Brood* trilogy (1987-2000), Butler stages themes including environmental apocalypse, posthuman cognition and relations with extra-terrestrial intelligent life, human dependence on ecosystemic health, and bioengineering. She also frames such questions around problems of race; a topic that an extended version of this research would seek to address.

vantage, we might even assert that ecocriticism has always already been postmodern, and postmodernism has always already been ecocritical.

Figuring environmental degradation and risk

Environmental risk and degradation are central, rather than peripheral, to narrative development in *Revolutions*, *Scrapbook*, and *Tour*. These texts depict natural and urban landscapes toxified by cars and chemical spills; stage terrifying losses in biodiversity; and ponder the dangers and terrors of human-made climate change. They draw these crises, moreover, in vividly dramatic and often realistic, rather than abstracted, terms, and in ways that are generally geographically specific. *Revolutions* refers to regionally endemic plant and animal species; while *Scrapbook* describes toxified groundwater and landscapes in a specific American Midwestern community. It is difficult, therefore, to claim that these postmodern texts' renderings of environmental crisis are reducible to shadowy figures of nostalgia for an absent referent called Nature, or to linguistic games that bear no relation to extradiscursive embodied problems. Ecocritical postmodern narratives show human and natural, nonhuman ecologies, discourses and environments mutually interacting with one another. Furthermore, they ethically interrogate human responsibility for the ecological crisis by issuing scathing critiques of imperialistic or sentimental accounts of "Nature" that have pervaded Western culture and thought, suggesting that such discourses have been instrumental in creating and exacerbating current crises. In these narratives, reflexivity partially serves to excoriate harmful human discourses about the natural world, while also gesturing toward non-totalising narrative approaches that might prove less complicit in ecological degradation.

In narratively interrogating environmental problems and ethics, ecocritical postmodern novels place a strong emphasis on the delicate interdependence between the

human and natural, nonhuman world, attending to the fragile vulnerabilities of both. They underline how human interests and wellbeing are inextricable from the health and wellbeing of natural systems. Late postmodern representations of the natural world tend to show this world closely intersecting with human and built infrastructures; they offer, then, “naturalcultural” accounts of ecological crises and ethical questions. In this sense, they draw from mid-twentieth-century environmental philosophies that tend to consider human and natural, nonhuman ecologies in markedly overlapping terms, understanding them as complex systems that can not be easily separated out. If the natural world remains the ultimate, unspeaking Other to our human communications and representational systems, we nevertheless cannot neatly delineate where society ends and nature begins.

Ecocritical and ecofeminist theorists have often implied that such a naturalcultural approach to environmental problems is a strictly modern or postmodern phenomenon. Haraway, for example, declares a new era of posthuman subjectivity in her “Cyborg Manifesto”. While we must account for the tremendous influence of mid-twentieth-century environmentalist philosophies in these naturalcultural approaches, a growing body of critics have argued that nineteenth-century Romantic representations of environment had already frequently blurred the boundaries between human and nonhuman, built and natural environments. If Blake and Thoreau, for example, were both fierce critics of the potentially deleterious effects of industrialisation on human and nonhuman environments, and if they cleaved to ideals of a pure Nature unspoiled by human development, they also, at times, anticipated current ecocritical approaches in their renderings of natural and built environments overlapping. Consider Blake’s rendering of London and other English cities, “darkened” by the fires and “satanic mills” of industry in “Jerusalem”:

The banks of the Thames are clouded! the ancient porches
of Albion are
Darken'd! they are drawn thro' unbounded space, scatter'd/ upon/
The Void in incoher(er)ent despair: Cambridge & Oxford &
London
Are driven among the starry Wheels, rent away and/ dissipated
In Chasms & Abysses of sorrow, enlarg'd without dimension, /terrible.
Albion's mountains run with blood, the cries of war & of
tumult
Resound into the unbounded night, every Human perfection
Of mountain & river & city are small & wither'd & darken'd.
("Jerusalem", 5/lines 1-8)

When considered as a critique of industrialisation, this passage shows Blake treating both natural and built environments as objects of "Human perfection", rather than figuratively cordoning off the wilderness from cities. In this excerpt, "mountain & river & city" are all "small & wither'd & darken'd". In Blake's rendering, industrialisation poisons both natural and built environments, penetrating and "darkening" them equally.

If Thoreau's work, meanwhile, seems strongly invested in the supposed purity of the wilderness—including the Maine Woods, which were in reality heavily marked by logging trails and signs of other intensive industrial activity—his work is nevertheless replete with depictions of built and natural landscapes intersecting.¹⁶³ In "Allegash", Thoreau charts the incursion of industry into the formerly pristine woods, and bemoans an attendant loss of biodiversity. The following passage describes the degradation of the forest ecosystem by logging:

We ... entered another swamp, at a necessarily slow pace, where the walking was worse than ever, not only on account of the water, but the fallen timber ... The fallen trees were so numerous, that for long distances the route was through a succession of small yards ... In many

¹⁶³ As James A Papa maintains, "Thoreau ... felt a need to believe the Maine Woods a wilder place than it actually was, ... [he] fails to realize that the 'wilderness' he seeks had already disappeared"... (1999, 226–227).

places the canoe would have run if it had not been for the fallen timber. Again it would be more open, but equally wet, too wet for trees to grow, and no place to sit down. It was a mossy swamp, which it required the long legs of a moose to traverse, and it is very likely that we scared some of them in our transit, though we saw none. It was ready to echo the growl of a bear, the howl of a wolf, or the scream of a panther; but when you get fairly into the middle of one of these grim forests, you are surprised to find that the larger inhabitants are not at home commonly, but have left only a puny red squirrel to bark at you. (Thoreau and Cramer 203)

This portrait of degradation and biodiversity loss prefigure similar preoccupations in twentieth-century environmentalist writing, and also permeate the late postmodern novels examined here. “[I]n one of [the] grim forests” of the Maine Woods Thoreau had previously deemed purely wild, fallen trees obstruct and visibly alter the river ecosystem; the canoe can no longer pass in what is now a “mossy swamp”. Furthermore, Thoreau laments that the “puny red squirrel”, an animal the author takes delight in in pastoral contexts such as *Walden*, is the only creature he and his travel companions encounter as they traipse through the log-laden terrain, where previously one might have encountered “the howl of a wolf, or the scream of a panther”. Thoreau vividly charts the human alterations of this particular ecosystem, minutely observing changes in habitat and biodiversity, demonstrating that he was a keen observer of how human and nonhuman systems overlap and intersect. While he might have wished, as Papa maintains, to “believe the Maine Woods a wilder place than it actually was”, his observations nevertheless betray a complex awareness of the messy boundaries between built and natural environments in nineteenth-century New England. The contemporary novels considered here likewise interrogate the porous interactions between these. They do so by considering environmental risks as a complex web or network of intersecting vulnerabilities: one that is often tremendously difficult to navigate or understand. Because of this, I argue that *Tour*, *Revolutions*, and *Scrapbook* all qualify as toxic narratives. However, unlike nineteenth-century predecessors, they narratively grapple

with the pervasiveness of uniquely late capitalist substances and their deleterious effects on ecologies, such as synthetic chemicals, plastics and other forms of industrial detritus, as well as carbon emissions.¹⁶⁴

Postmodern ecocritical risk narratives: toxicity and porosity

For Ursula Heise, writing about toxic narratives and their instrumental place in contemporary literary meditations on “risk society”, “Chemical pollution is ... a central issue for American environmentalism, at the same time that it functions as a crucial trope by means of which [narrative] explore[s] the porous boundaries between body and environment, public and domestic space, and harmful and beneficial technologies” (2008, 161). Heise is one of the first critics to identify a postmodern version of the toxic narrative, noting that Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985) qualifies as one. Heise focuses on DeLillo’s depictions of the effects of a freight train spilling a toxic gas, Nyodene D, on the fictional town of Blacksmith. Heise departs significantly from earlier ecocritical dismissals of DeLillo’s toxic narrative as a mere set of postmodern language games, part of DeLillo’s meditations on postmodern experience as so intensively mediated as to be reduced to mere simulacrum: “The abundance of Baudrillardesque scenes...[in DeLillo] has led many critics to interpret *White Noise* as a narrative showcase of the postmodern culture of the simulacrum, a novel in which simulation systematically takes precedence over whatever might be left of the real” (4). Heise argues against such a reductive reading of *White Noise*’s toxic narrative, pointing to multiple examples of the novel’s realist emphasis on environmental risk. She maintains that while the novel functions as a satire

¹⁶⁴ Yaeger, discussing what she calls “trash ecology”, argues that detritus has become an aesthetic value in postmodern figurations of environment; she claims, moreover, that detritus has replaced “Nature” as an aesthetic ideal: “In a world where nature is dominated, polluted, pocketed, eco-touristed, warming, melting, bleaching, dissipating, and fleeing toward the poles—detritus is both its curse and its alternative. Trash is the becoming natural of culture, what culture, eating nature, tries to cast away. In the midst of simulacra, it is also a substance in which we can encounter decay and mortality.” (338)

on a mass media-dominated society unable to draw the line between the real and the hyperreal, this does not preclude DeLillo realistically engaging with environmental risks:

[T]he “airborne toxic event” at the center of the plot is by no means an exceptional type of event, but simply one that is (or appears to be) much larger in magnitude than other hazards in the Gladneys’ universe, where environmental risks ranging from the trivial to the deadly surround the average citizen. DeLillo’s novel ... is not so much about an ordinary family’s encounter with one exceptionally dangerous technological accident as about the portrayal of life in a [“risk society”] (165).

Heise implies that postmodern representations of risk society are as much about the reality of the risks themselves as they are about how these are interpreted and mediated. In showing how, “in the context of a risk-theoretical approach to narrative ... the destabilization of distinctions between the real and the nonreal can itself serve specific realist objectives”, Heise offers a useful critical framework for approaching postmodern literary accounts of environmental risk (169). I build on her analysis of DeLillo in my consideration of *Scrapbook*, *Revolutions*, and *Tour* as postmodern ecocritical risk narratives. Dara’s novel in particular depicts the labyrinthine postmodern risk society as one in which human and nonhuman ecosystems are closely coimbricated; however, complex local and global forces such as capitalist interests or mass media and their “spin” work against an appreciation of environmental risks and vulnerabilities. In this sense, following Heise, late postmodern novels treat environmental degradation and risk through a formal and narrative framework that significantly troubles the real and the nonreal, and mingles parody with narrative realism.

Assessing environmental risk: mediated misinformation in Scrapbook

Dara's *Scrapbook* invites comparison to DeLillo's own postmodern experiment with toxic narrative. Both texts deploy multiple perspectives and montage-style narrative techniques to figure individuals and communities grappling to understand complex environmental risks in an age of global capitalism, and amid powerful corporate mediating forces that obfuscate damages wrought on human health and the environment. Much like *White Noise*, which focuses on a chemical company and its efforts to underplay the harmful effects of the toxic gas they have released into the environment, *Scrapbook's* plot centres around the chemical company Ozark and its poisoning of groundwater in the small Missourian city of Isaura. Also like DeLillo's novel, which comments on the disenfranchising power of mass media and the "white noise" it creates, blinding communities to environmental risks, *Scrapbook* parodically comments on the confusion generated by both rumour mills and corporate "spin". It shows mass media colluding to protect corporate interests, and to the detriment of public and environmental health.

Dara deploys collage-style dialogue that renders various narrative perspectives on the unfolding environmental crisis clashing and commingling; this works to formally figure the difficulties encountered by residents as they attempt to assess environmental and personal risks. Corporate communications constantly intercept Isaura residents' strained efforts to glean the truth behind Ozark's dumping of toxic chemicals; contradictory mass media reports add additional perspectives to compound the sense that the risks at hand are virtually indecipherable. Such dialogic techniques render a highly confusing risk society in which individuals and communities struggle to measure the

potential environmental and health risks surrounding them, and to weigh the reliability of various sources of information.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the intermingling and only vaguely differentiated voices that populate *Scrapbook* read as atomised individuals who have lost their sense of agency and connectivity, both to each other and to the local environment. Their “lonely togetherness” only finds a means of expression through their aggregation into a scrapbook of voices, figured by the novel itself. By forming networks of communication resistant to corporate and mass media, through channels including the “pirate” radio and word-of-mouth communication, Isaura residents manage to break through the misinformation disseminated by Ozark and reconnect with environmental realities, as well as with the resistant truths of their own embodied, corporeal experiences.

Scrapbook depicts the residents of Isaura gradually reckoning with a terrifying toxic spill. The company responsible for the spill, Ozark, is initially presented as a trustworthy source of economic security and livelihood for the citizens of Isaura. It is viewed as a responsible steward of the community and environment that provides jobs and vital infrastructures. One protagonist comments: “[T]hey take care of things and look out for their people’s benefit; Mother Ozark is how people put it around here...I have a guardian, a protectress...if there’s a problem...I’m sure the company will take care of it ...” (333). Economic codependency, and faith in corporate good intentions, blinds residents to the very real dangers lurking below their own lawns and fields, and leads them to underestimate the risks presented by Ozark’s chemicals:

They have a ballpark out in the back of Ozark Park that they let people use; some of our scout troops have their picnics there; because we know that whatever happens, they’re going to take care of it: of *course* it’ll be taken care of, removed and clean...I still shop and drive my car and water my lawn same as always, don’t see anything wrong at all ... (335)

In its allusions to water, lawns, and parks as potentially toxic sites, this passage foregrounds the anxieties that mount in the community as rumours spread of dangerous groundwater contamination: tactics of self-reassurance reign as one resident attempts to brush away the rumours and convince himself that he “do[esn’t] see anything wrong at all”. However, Isaura’s residents are not depicted as purely naive. *Scrapbook* instead shows individuals measuring and weighing environmental risks as a kind of everyday gamble of late capitalist life. While the workers at the chemical plant are aware of occupational hazards, and consider them a normal part of their job description, they consistently underestimate these and trust the safety measures implemented by Ozark. One Ozark employee opines: “[T]here is some risk in whatever you do...but you’ve got to accept it; in this field, risk comes with the territory; it’s what you’re paid for” (336).

These low-grade anxieties and murmurs of potential risks gradually mount to panic when evidence pours in of groundwater contamination by a cocktail of toxic chemicals. The Isaura community, led by a woman named Mona who unsuccessfully demands that the State Health department intervene to independently test the groundwater, grows increasingly aware that the environmental hazards circulating in their soil and water might be much more dangerous than believed (355). As a consequence, many residents cease to regard Ozark as trustworthy, and competing sources of information enter local awareness. One woman encounters an article in *Vogue* magazine that pinpoints one of the chemicals manufactured (and dumped) by Ozark as a carcinogen: “now they say that methyl chloride is a carcinogen, that it causes cancer... just the sound of the word brings a clutching to my chest... : it is now understood that something present and constant may kill every member of my family ...” (352-353). Here, “methyl chloride” denotes underestimated danger, a term that has been potentially misrepresented by Ozark and other media companies, including the local *Republican and*

Chronicle newspaper. The woman gains terrifying awareness that the chemical might in reality represent something much more dangerous, or potentially fatal, for herself and her family.

However, in the collage-style dialogue that ensues, her fears are instantly negated by counteracting voices and perspectives: “—But even so, what is the likelihood of that...how many people are ever really hit with [cancer]; one in a million?...just think of those numbers—think of them realistically, objectively...Oh, no, no, nonsense ... I’ve lived here my whole life and I don’t have cancer” (353-354). In late capitalist risk society, one is prescient of potential risks; but individuals struggle to draw meaningful conclusions from scientific data or statistical analysis of these.

Moreover, corporate public relations officials intervene to aggressively protect company interests. Ozark steps up efforts to dissimulate the dangers of the spill as Isaura residents become more prescient of potential dangers. The company continually discounts or underplays these dangers, leading to an even more confused and conflicting pool of information. In one long passage from *Scrapbook*, a town hall meeting is underway to address the spill. Company officials immediately offer an arsenal of statistics and intended measures to protect the community from future risk while significantly downplaying the present hazards. In the following passages, an Isaura resident attending the town hall relates the content of the spokesperson’s speech:

—And then Fobel explained how Ozark had already pledged...100 million dollars...toward cleaning up and preventing...any and all conditions that might give rise to community concern...

—And how Ozark was going to create what I think he called a subterranean migration barrier, to keep any and all groundwater from leaving the area of the tank farm...

—[They had set] an ultimate goal of reducing emissions of methylene chloride by a full 80 percent within five years...

—And I heard a woman behind me say: Oh, thank God—...

—Yes...today our message is stronger than ever, I heard him say: environmental responsibility is a fundamental Ozark value...

—At Ozark, we are determined to be counted among the good stewards of the Earth, I heard him say... (373-375)

This passage and its collage-style dialogue points to the insidious dangers of greenwashing. In late capitalist risk society, these passages suggest, powerful corporate interests can obfuscate environmental damage and risks wrought by their activities simply by deploying catchphrases that describe the company as “good stewards of the Earth”. In the face of such greenwashing, and the confusing statistics that often accompany such discourse, residents of Isaura once again find it difficult to discern “spin” from environmental realities. Meanwhile, mass media outlets, supposedly independent scientists and heads of competing chemical companies corroborate Ozark’s conclusions and greenwashing, adding to the sense that risks cannot be easily assessed: “And I saw they had this article with a specialist, a guy named McCarston, who’s independent of Ozark, and he said that the level of fear and the reaction to the methylene chloride was simply unwarranted...” (357)

In the face of corporate spin, direct word-of-mouth communication between the residents of Isaura proves one of the only reliable sources of information concerning the chemical spill.¹⁶⁵ Despite constant interventions from Ozark underplaying the dangers, victims of the toxic spill rely partially on community gossip to pierce through the “white noise” generated by corporate and mass media, to form their own conclusions. In the following excerpt, one of the novel’s many narrators comments on rumours circulating over a recovered document from Ozark proving their knowledge of environmental hazards:

¹⁶⁵ The other source of information denoted as reliable is the pirate radio exhorting its listeners to tune in, working in direct resistance to the corporate and mass media forces which strip the citizens of Isaura of their agency (See Chapter Two).

—And now I hear that Lois Riggs has found something, that she's found some sort of document or something, and it says that Ozark has known about the chemicals since 1973

—I mean, they're supposed to have known about all three of them, the methyl chloride and the acetone and the methanol—

—*Since 1973*, I heard; she says that...they were found in the soil and in the groundwater under building 329 in Ozark Park...

—In other words, they've known perfectly well *for eight years* and they still haven't done anything about them...(373)

In the above passage, the repeated propositions “I hear that...” and “I heard” point to gossip and hearsay as a valuable mode of resistance against corporate forces. Word-of-mouth exchanges between Isaura residents effectively counteract Ozark's claimed commitment to safety: the discovery of a company document reveals efforts to dissimulate the risks presented by several chemicals manufactured at the plant, and found in the groundwater. If media corporations cannot be trusted to do more than slavishly repeat the content of Ozark's press-release promises to be good environmental stewards, residents must initiate their own investigative efforts.

In addition to word-of-mouth-communication, the body itself serves as a crucial point of resistance and source of counter-information. The diseases that begin to manifest as *signs* in the bodies of Isaura residents, from cancer to skin rashes, tie them inextricably to their environment. Human health is directly correlated to environmental health; human bodies appear as *porous* and vulnerable objects. As in the following example, the narrators of the novel begin to heed the signs of toxic damage written on and in their own bodies, in spite of constant bombardment by corporate campaigns negating all such risks:

—...I mean, I'm sitting on the table in [the doctor's] office stripped down to my underwear and the rash is all over the insides of my arms and legs, and it's all on the tops of my feet, and I even have pustules in my damn *ears*—and he says I need psychiatric treatment!;...I just look at him and say Doctor,...look at me—

—When you get right down to it, you'd be hard-pressed to find any group of people who care as much about the environmental and

economic well-being of Isaura as the people at Ozark (Advertisement)
... (364)

Here and elsewhere in the novel, Dara intersperses the reflections of Isaura residents with copy from corporate advertisements, juxtaposing them in dialogic fashion to figure the considerable difficulty of determining risk amid such spin. However, the body's own intelligence as a porous entity connected to environmental realities begins to assert itself as valid as the novel progresses. As in other toxic narratives, *Scrapbook* negatively connects the human and nonhuman world by focusing on the ravages of chemical contamination and the porosity of human and nonhuman environments—i.e. the vulnerability of both in the face of toxic substances.¹⁶⁶ Such porosity and vulnerability serve as a political catalyst and awakens the community to environmental realities that are damaging both their natural resources and their own bodies. These provide information that counteracts the reassurances issued by Ozark and the news sources that corroborate their spin.

Ultimately, as a postmodern toxic narrative, *Scrapbook* points to environmental risks as real even as it shows members of contemporary risk society struggling to parse conflicting sources of information to arrive at meaningful conclusions about those risks. It paints environmental dangers as real, and depicts the inherently porous boundaries between human and nonhuman environments and bodies. Furthermore, by parodying corporate greenwashing, the novel draws meaningful distinctions between politically driven discourses about environmental stewardship and the actual practices of industry. As discussed later, Dara also includes nonhuman life as an important subject in the environmental degradation wrought by Ozark, advocating for the personhood of nonhuman life.

¹⁶⁶ See Iovino and Oppermann 2012 for a discussion of human and nonhuman environments and bodies as “porous”, and the definition of a literary aesthetics of porosity in material ecocritical models.

Only Revolutions: *Database biodiversity (and its loss)*

Revolutions most immediately reads as a daunting meta-meditation on reading and textuality itself, a postmodern experiment combining elaborate linguistic games and formal devices to constantly refer back to itself and the octet-shaped “only revolutions” that it draws (See Chapter Two). However, such a (valid) interpretation does not preclude a parallel, or even complementary, ecocritical reading of the novel. With its overt emphasis on themes of environmental degradation, climate change, and biodiversity losses, *Revolutions* also depicts human and nonhuman protagonists as interdependent and at times inextricable. In this sense, the novel is very much about language and textuality, but this does not prevent it from also being concerned with the extradiscursive realities of environmental degradation and climate change. In a postmodern ecocritical framework imagined by Oppermann, Heise, and others, the two need no longer be considered mutually exclusive.

The novel’s environmentalist ethos is most explicitly readable in the teeming chorus of plants and animals who appear full of vitality and health as Hailey and Sam’s respective narratives open, then begin to wither and die as the novel progresses, suggesting not only the changing of the seasons and cyclical cycles of birth and death, but human-made environmental degradation and sinister climate changes leading to ecosystemic collapse. Further, Danielewski deploys formal devices, including typography, to designate nonhuman life as vitally important, materially reinforcing ecological narrative development in the novel. Throughout *Revolutions*, names of plant and animal species are emphatically capitalised and highlighted either in bold type, to signify their health in the earlier episodes, or in a faded grey type, signifying their extinction or near-extinction.

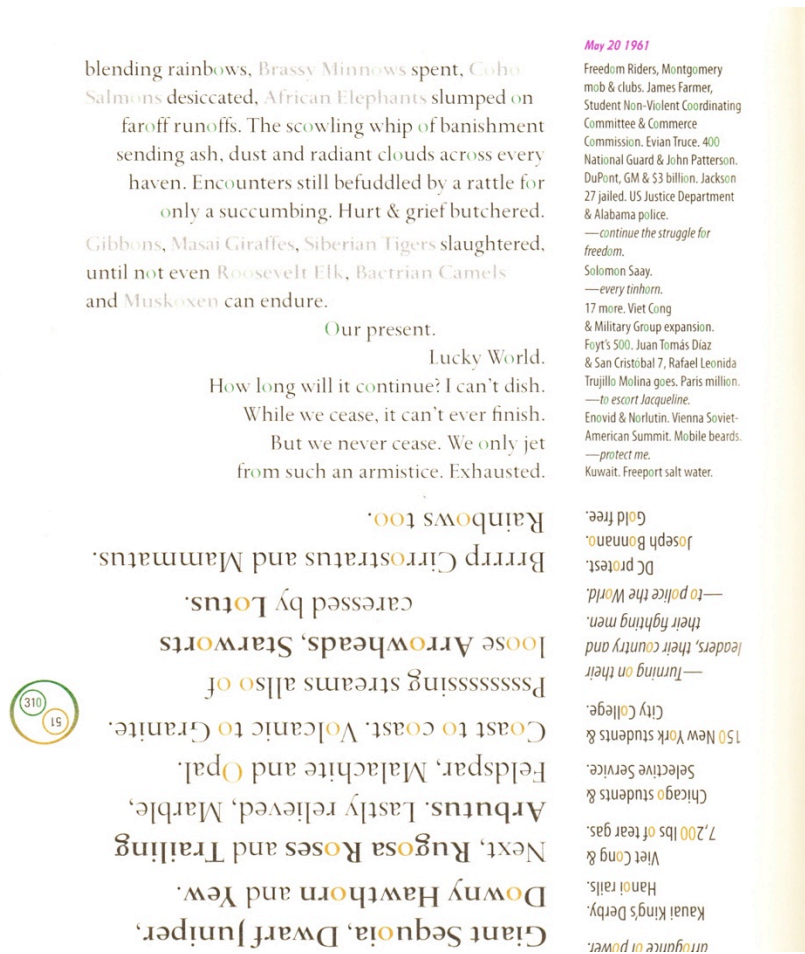


Figure 8: Materially figuring animals and plants in *Revolutions*, S310/H51

Further, the plants and animals cited in the novel correspond to precise ecosystems and geographical locations, thereby suggesting their importance over other objects/subjects, and arguably tying American identity to its nonhuman life forms and landscapes even more so than it does to human inhabitants. As the narrative progresses, the bold type used to designate plants and animals gradually fades, coinciding with both the novel's staging of ecosystemic collapse, and with Hailey and Sam's own loss of vital forces and eventual deaths. *Revolutions* thus points to the crucial interdependence of the human-and non-human world, and ultimately to a non-anthropocentric ethos: humans cannot occupy the centre of the representational field when their own lives are so dependent on plants and

animals. Moreover, the word “Human” also figures in bolded and capitalised type, eradicating traditional ontological divisions between human and nonhuman life.

Environmental degradation permeates the narrative diegesis of *Revolutions*. Hailey and Sam’s quest for eternal youth ultimately fails, and their fates are ultimately tied to that of the natural environment. Encounters with dramatic American landscapes take on a heightened and horrifying quality in the latter sections of both Hailey and Sam’s narratives, following the exact midpoint (S180/H180), when autumn arrives and plants and animals begin to show signs of distress, then die off en masse. However, the devastation is not simply caused by a seasonal change; it reflects a climatic shift created in part by human activity. The car itself, a source of the lovers’ jubilant freedoms, is held responsible for pollution and therefore some of the devastating environmental degradation and climatic changes:

Passing lane. Fast lane. One way...
 On we bounce, tricked on fumes.
 Krumped out for horizons of willowy plumes
 From every snort our exhaust pipes broom.
 Kinnikinnik Dogwoods dead on the road. (H283)

In this passage, the “fumes”, “plumes”, and “snort” of “exhaust pipes” are associated with the death of the *Kinnikinnik Dogwoods* that lay on the road. Later, as a full-blown environmental disaster is underway, the novel figures the collapse of road infrastructures, turning the text from jubilant road novel to apocalyptic narrative: “Hailey’s Chevrolet Impala goes too. / And the travellers are long gone. / Traffic undone. / Leaving US allone on deserted lanes sliding by / barren Rest Stops & Momentary Dumps. / And I’m afraid” (Sam 302/303). Hailey and Sam’s rush to speed onward in ever-changing models of cars, attempting to outrun both time and to leave behind the grim signs of death around them, registers as a critique of American individualism, industrialism, and positivism. Part of

Danielewski's environmentalist ethos, indeed, lies in the way that he parodies the kinds of ideologies that might be responsible for environmental devastation.

Revolutions' opening sequence ironically parrots nationalistic versions of Romantic Nature and of hegemonic approaches to the natural world. Early in the narrative, Sam and Hailey take an imperialistic and domineering approach to the plants and animals they constantly interact with, but they are warned/implored to renounce such an attitude:¹⁶⁷

So what if **Silky Lupine**,
Holly and Woodland Stars flutter:
—*Mercy*....
Because allways all around me
The World rebegins. (H34)

The confident belief in inexhaustible natural resources drives Hailey to disregard pleas for "Mercy" from the chorus of plant life surrounding her; she assumes the world's capacity for perpetual renewal: "Allways all around me / The World rebegins." Dirk Van Hulle notes: "In many ways, [*Revolutions*] can be read as a criticism of indifference, not so much the indifference of Uncle Sam/the US towards the world around it, but, in more general terms, the indifference of 'US' human beings towards the environment and the species surrounding us. Danielewski's stress on biodiversity (even typographically, using bold type face for the different kinds of flora and fauna) implies an increased awareness of mankind's modest place within evolution as a whole ..." (134). In the following passage, Sam personifies the indifference and domineering attitude described by Van Hulle:

This land is my land ... My force earning

¹⁶⁷ Sam's narrative thread is populated with animals and insects, while Hailey's is populated with plants. Furthermore, Sam begins his adventure with a Horse who is later brutally killed; Hailey with a Tree that gets chopped down.

thirickity **Field Cricket** legs ...
 —*You're our end, Cougars* perrfel.
 By my hand **Fire Ants** &
Badgers feud. Glaciers move ...
 I'm a new horror upon the earth
 releasing floods, sluicing rapids.
 No big deal.
 Me. (S2)

Sam describes himself in deified terms, proudly claiming to be a “new horror upon the earth”, imagining that he has powers to “releas[e] floods” and “sluic[e] rapids” and declaring the land as his own alone, while omitting the famed American anthem’s second line, “This land is *your* land”. Hailey echoes Sam’s imperious stance in her own respective narrative:

I'm a new terror upon the land
 releasing runoffs, tumbling
 torrents. No sweat.
 Me.
 Top of this peak, my greetings
 crash down upon powdery cliffs
 releasing rivers shhlick beneath
 whirls of murderous smaze.
 By plateaus of national hurt. (H2-3)

These early passages hint at the dangers inherent in such attitudes. Both protagonists proclaim themselves “a new terror” or “horror upon the earth”, potentially alluding to the deleterious environmental effects of early industrialisation (again, Sam’s historical timeline begins in 1863), and late capitalism (Hailey’s timeline begins in 1963). Similarly, while Sam argues that the animals populating his narrative thread treat him “reverentially”, cougars warn him: “*You're our end*”. The damage seems destined to affect humans as well: the “murderous smaze” and “plateaus of national hurt” Hailey

My hand falls. I'll eat no HONEY...
 Because my World's urgings over earth's want
 pours from this mortal work. All any
 esteem and need, from meadow, weed,
 burrow and brook, slow amber of every bee ... (S353)

Here, Sam finally acknowledges the strong interdependence between human and nonhuman life: all of the former's "Esteem and need" are generated from "meadow, weed, burrow and brook". Sam acknowledges that without honey, he "retreat[s]", and only through it does he "succeed" (survive). He decides, moreover, to relinquish his life by not consuming Hailey's small reserve of honey, choosing suicide in his anguish over Hailey's death.

Amid stark environmental cataclysm and the spectre of death, Sam and Hailey's narratives nevertheless end on a note of hope for preservation and renewal of life: "By you, ever-sixteen, this world's preserved / this World's reserved" (H390/S390). The implication is that Hailey and Sam are inextricably connected to the natural (and textual) systems and cycles denoted in the "only revolutions" continually drawn by the narrative. The world is "preserved" or "reserved" "by You", which designates not only Hailey or Sam, but perhaps the "transnational community of readers", to borrow from and extend Hayles' analysis of Danielewski's use of "US" in the novel.

Are we to understand that it is only in recognising our interdependence with the natural world that it can be restored and preserved? Such an understanding of interdependence may even be coded in one of the text's repeated phrases that plays on the novel's title. When Sam says of Hailey, "Without her I am Only Revolutions of ruin" (S347), we might read in this line a mere cliché of Romantic love. However, since the protagonists cannot be diegetically separated out from the dynamic ecosystems in which they roam and with which they interact, "her" might be read in an additional sense to

designate the human and natural, nonhuman systems on which they depend. Just as the term “US” in Danielewski’s novel may be understood to signify not only Hailey and Sam’s tightly guarded couple, but also the United States, and perhaps even a “transnational community of readers” (Hayles 2012, 231), here the phrase “Without her I am Only Revolutions of ruin” might more than exclusive Romantic love. It may also point to human interconnectedness with the natural world. Although *Revolutions* does suggest perpetual cycles of death and rebirth, it is the *entire* natural and historical system represented in the novel that regenerates *along with* the protagonists. They are not, in the end, inscribed outside of those systems.

While Danielewski’s linguistic gymnastics are too replete with semantic double- and triple senses to argue for any one interpretation—we might equally read in the phrase “By you, ever-sixteen, the world’s preserved” an anthropocentric assertion that reinscribes human interests at the narrative centre, or a mere nod to the perpetual textual cycles of the novel itself—the text’s strong thematic focus on nonhuman life and its staging of a terrifying environmental cataclysm suggests that to read the novel exclusively as a textual game would be reductive.

The Walking Tour: *Replaying (and critiquing) Romantic nostalgia for Nature*

Davis’s *Tour* is an improbable environmentalist novel. Like Danielewski’s novel, or DeLillo’s *White Noise*, it might easily be dismissed as a typically postmodern text that discusses Nature and environmental risks, but seems to do so as a pretext for engaging in ironic language games. The protagonist of *Tour*, Susan, narrates from a dystopian present in which a computer programme run amok has supplanted Nature, a term which seems as much to denote the classical humanist subject and the right to individual artistic expression as it does natural ecosystems. The unleashing of the digital technology

humorously named “SnowWrite & RoseRead” leads to a mysterious “fall of mist” that profoundly and disastrously alters the world, and above all, eliminates “art” from it. The novel does, in many instances, appear to conflate “Nature” with human rhetorical constructs, arguably reproducing reigning anthropocentric perspectives on the natural world. Since in Davis, Nature in part means “authorship”, “individuality” or “artistic expression”, it seems fitting to remember Liu’s caveat that Romantic Nature functions as merely a “screen” onto which we project any number of constructs (2008, 137).

However, while *Tour* presents a less overtly ecological thrust than do *Revolutions* and *Scrapbook*, and while it, not unproblematically, treats some human technologies as “natural” and others, notably digital technology, as “unnatural”, at its heart it is preoccupied with environmental degradation and change.¹⁶⁹ In its depictions of technological and ecological risks and the ways these complicatedly overlap, *Tour* emerges as a late postmodern crisis narrative that shows human wellbeing as inextricably connected to that of the natural world. It warns of the dangers of human-made climate and ecosystem changes through apocalyptic narrative devices already familiar in ecologically oriented science fiction. The dangerous computer programme triggering the Event unleashes a digital virus that not only eliminates authorial rights and destroys “art”, but also inexplicably leads to the decimation of many species of plants and animals, and irreversibly alters the climate.

Furthermore, the walking tour of the Gower coastlines of Wales and its rugged, daunting landscapes is tied to the digital “fall of mist” unleashed by the computer programme, but the causal connections between these events are never elucidated. While the protagonists find themselves enmeshed in a complex web of environmental and technological risks, at no point is the causal chain of events leading to the “Event” made

¹⁶⁹ Chapter Four deals more specifically with the problem of technology in *Tour* and discusses the Gothic preoccupation with the “unnatural” operating in Davis’ depictions of the technological sublime.

clear. As such, Davis's novel perhaps more tightly illustrates than others examined here how anxieties about ecological crisis and technological change—in this case, the digital revolution—and the latter's potential impact on environments and subjectivity often collide and intersect in postmodern ecocritical texts. It also shows how, like *White Noise* and *Scrapbook*, *Tour* qualifies as a meditation on the often unreadable matrices of risk in (post)modern life: both texts stage the troubled lines between the real and the virtual in the mediation of such risks.

Tour is permeated by nostalgic accounts of a quasi-Edenic past filled with teeming natural life: a golden era that Susan also associates with the security of her dead mother's love and the warmth of family life: "The glowing pond, the humming bee boxes, the thrillingly insane smell of heliotrope. Out on what my mother called the piazza, in the good old summertime" (7). If *Tour's* environmentalist ethos seems less apparent than Danielewski's and Dara's, the novel's preoccupation with the loss of biodiversity nevertheless marks it as an ecological narrative: in the post-apocalyptic world that Susan describes, numerous animal and plant species have gone extinct, from alpine flowers (41), to the heliotrope, to bees and domestic dogs. Bees in particular denote loss, since Susan's mother, Carole Riddingham, was a beekeeper who regularly rendered the creatures in her enigmatic paintings; moreover, Susan's fantasies of a lost and idyllic past are persistently imagined as being filled with bees. Part Three opens with a reference to Yeats: "Come into the world again, wild bees, wild bees!" (Davis 193). It is interesting to note, furthermore, how honey appears in *Tour*, as in *Revolutions*, as a potent symbol not only of nourishment and vitality—Hailey and Sam's jars of honey can be related to Susan's motherly nourishment with thyme honey—but as a trope

designating the delicate interdependence between human and nonhuman life. Without bees and honey, both novels suggest, human vitality is threatened.¹⁷⁰

Susan's present-day world is not entirely lacking in plant and animal life, but the life that now thrives is abject and parasitic, consisting mostly in weeds and flies: "I made my way along a barely visible stone pathway through *what had once been the herb garden*, weaving between the big flannelly plants that grow here now, dusty plant towers crawling with the latest in flies, wingless and tirelessly buzzing" (54, emphasis mine). Just as Thoreau laments the absence of moose, wolves, bears or cougars in the previously teeming wilderness of the Maine Woods, noting how logging and other industrial activities have left only "puny red squirrels", *Tour's* grim post-apocalyptic landscapes, with their "flannelly" plants and "wingless flies", are placed in melancholy juxtaposition to the once-vibrant herb garden, and to the verdant, if sublimely daunting, Welsh landscapes of the narrative past. Susan's melancholy and inertia seem to be mirrored by the "dusty", listless, implicitly *lesser* life forms of a world that has lost much of its biodiversity.

However, while the novel clearly registers earnest nostalgia for a lost time of natural wonders, it also, as discussed earlier, reflexively rejects such nostalgia, arguing that each generation looks back to a supposedly pure past in which Nature reigned. Susan describes the walking tour around mythical Wales and its beautiful and terrifying landscapes in both sublime and ironic terms: on one hand, the landscapes are inexplicably linked to the apocalyptic "fall of mist" that will forever change the world; on the other, Susan depicts the tour itself as Romantic nostalgia bordering on kitsch: the desire to revisit or relive mythical Wales seems part of a theme-park search for meaning and

¹⁷⁰ Interestingly, ecologists studying biodiversity and colony collapse disorder would corroborate such a perspective.

tradition in a postmodern world that offers little of either, and where late consumer capitalism has found an efficient but hollow way to bank on nostalgia.

Headquartered in a charmingly restored inn on the banks of a tributary of the Wye called the Black Brook, the tour was managed by Brenda Fluellen, who mixed elements of Giraldu, Arthurian legend, Wordsworth, and the *Mabinogion* to create for her guests her very own brand of New Age Romantic Welsh Nationalism. (22)

Here, the narrator equates fantasies of restoring connections with supposedly pure Welsh landscapes with absurd pastiche. Brenda Fluellen's "charmingly restored inn" on the Black Brook and her self-styled "New Age Romantic Welsh Nationalism" read as hollow attempts to return to a supposedly pure and pastoral (premodern) time that was not yet marred by the complexity and risks of (post)modern life. But, as Susan notes, such Romantic nostalgia was equally practiced by the likes of Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey" (42). Susan observes Wordsworth's own medievalist romanticising of the ruins of the Abbey to show that each successive generation incorrectly looks to the past as a time of so-called purity. Such Romantic nostalgia is thus rendered useless, since there is no pure time, nor landscape, for that matter.

If we read *Tour* as a risk narrative, the implication is that such Romantic nostalgia does little to prevent, correct, or anticipate present environmental risks: on the contrary, it might even make you *more* vulnerable to them. Like DeLillo's Nyodene D gas cloud, the unleashing of SnowWrite & RoseRead and the apocalyptic "Event" that follows arise without warning and fail to be causally understood by those victimised by it; the walkers' lack of awareness of the risks—environmental, natural, and technological—that surround them ultimately lead to their deaths or near-deaths, and to devastating environmental damage. As ecocritics such as Morton would suggest, nostalgic accounts of Nature or wilderness might serve to empirically distance us further from natural environments, and to blind us to ecological risks.

Ecological degradation and climatic disruption not only figure in *Tour* as consequences of a past cataclysm; they also register as continued threats. Toward the novel's close, another apocalyptic event is looming. Vibrant colours and light are infused back into landscapes that had been sapped of their colour, but a foreboding quality remains:

I can see bursts of color from time to time between the stalks. Yellow, blue, red, the primary colors by which all things are made ... [But] ... [I]t isn't noon. The swells at the base of the cloud are starting to change shape, becoming thick and bulbous and opaque, like the yellow substance in the lava lamp. A break in the atmosphere ... (246; 248)

If we follow Matthew Taylor's assertion that "ecophobia", or the fear of being subsumed or destroyed by natural forces, can produce a negative but productive environmentalism that does more to tackle ecological crisis than "ecophilia" does, then the fear that pervades this passage might contribute to *Tour's* implicitly ecological ethos. The ecophobic tone of this passage, evidenced in Susan's realisation that the bursts of colours she observes are not the product of the sun's noon light, but of a series of restless clouds causing a "break in the atmosphere", might further reinforce *Tour's* ecocritical preoccupations. Here, fear and dread in relation to natural forces and an emphasis on human degradation and disruption of the ecosystem arguably work productively to render the natural world vitally important. This is a feature described in more detail in Chapter Four.

Toward postmodern non-anthropocentrism

This chapter has thus far described how late postmodern ecocritical narratives stage ecological crisis by depicting environmental risks as affecting human and natural, nonhuman life and ecologies in porous and inextricable terms. Furthermore, they lambast

potentially deleterious discourses about Nature, but such a critical stance arguably reinforces their environmentalist ethos, rather than detracting from it. To borrow from Oppermann, they “reanimate nature” as having a distinctive agency in our discourse, and then consider how discourses *about* nature might affect environments in beneficial or deleterious ways. They arguably illustrate material ecocritical practices in narrative by

turn[ing] our attention toward issues of embodiment and corporeality, and the agency of the nonhuman (animals, machines, environments)—and perhaps most importantly, to posthumanist concerns of things outside of human control and language, like other organisms ... that co-constitute our existence. (Iovino and Oppermann 2012, 468)

One might object that such strategies of exposition and criticism do little to complicate the postmodern literary mode being understood in negative terms as purely deconstructive: in this light, critical accounts of Romantic or imperialistic Nature might simply be seen as yet another terrain in which poststructuralist-style deconstruction is doing predictable work. That the novels considered here narratively figure ecological crisis, or excoriate harmful narrative accounts about Nature, does not necessarily prove a pragmatic ethical investment in working toward potential solutions.

However, pointing to their *constructive* qualities, and building on the work of Oppermann, Jim Cheney, and others who have identified a reconstructive or “affirmative” postmodern mode, I want to maintain that late postmodern ecocritical texts do ethically engage with problems of environmental crisis, often gesturing toward literary strategies that might aid in redressing these problems.¹⁷¹ Such a shift against anthropocentrism promotes representational and narrative strategies that designate natural life and ecologies as equally important to human counterparts, and that accord a kind of personhood to the former. *Revolutions* and *Scrapbook* are examples of late postmodern

¹⁷¹ As Oppermann notes: “Cheney...convincingly argues that the new reconstructive postmodernism ‘makes use of certain notions current in contemporary environmentalism’ (87). He calls it a ‘transformed postmodernism,’ which... will ‘have a transformative effect on environmental ethics’ (87)” (2008, 244).

texts that advance non-anthropocentric and “critical anthropocentric” narrative strategies and aesthetics; they gesture toward an ethos of representation that no longer places human interests at the absolute diegetic centre. In addition, the natural world figures as both radically other from, and inextricably connected to, the nonhuman world; as such, it stands in what Glissant might call opaque relation to us. An aesthetics of opacity thus frequently marks late postmodern ecocritical texts: rather than attempting to clearly define and scientifically catalogue objects in the natural world; to attempt to objectively understand it and clearly delineate it from human systems and concerns, such texts instead wilfully blur those contours, depicting the natural world as partially inaccessible, even as human concerns are inextricable from it. They figure the natural world as being in *significant otherness* to human systems, to again deploy Haraway’s term.

Glissant argues for the observation of difference in a valorising sense, while resisting a temptation to conflate or “reduc[e] [differing subjects] to each other]” (194). Adapting Glissant’s notion of opaque relationality—while remaining attentive to the potential trappings of comparing the human right to opacity to one for the natural world, notably by differentiating between types and degrees of agency—allows us to consider how decentred, disorienting depictions of the natural world might contribute toward an environmentalist and non-anthropocentric literary ethos. These eschew taxonomic logic and focus on the interrelationality between humans and nonhuman persons, all the while respecting their inherent differences.

Thoreau’s non-human “neighbours”: a crucial source

Before examining how Dara and Danielewski advance non-anthropocentric representational strategies in their respective novels, and discussing how Glissant’s “right” to opacity and systems theoretical approaches to ecology might together provide a

useful framework for describing some of the representational strategies offered by late postmodern ecocritical texts, it is first necessary to again consider Thoreau's writing as a predecessor in contemporary literary figurations of plant and animal personhood. His work, more than perhaps any other nineteenth-century writer's, gestured toward a sense of personhood for animals, and in some cases plants. Moreover, his writings continue to figure as central sources in current ecocritical debates on literary non-anthropocentrism and critical anthropomorphism.¹⁷²

Thoreau's laboriously composed *Walden* (first published in 1854) is an important starting point. Critics have tended to see in Thoreau's seven drafts a progressively deepening understanding of, and commitment to representing, the natural world, with later drafts showing a far more profound biocentric or non-anthropocentric perspective than earlier ones.¹⁷³ Lawrence Buell has argued that the drafts tend to reveal Thoreau's intensifying interest in making the nonhuman world central in his discussions of the local ecologies of the Walden pond, and in complicating his portrayals of the natural world to give them a sense of scientific exactitude; but he also notes that human concerns become increasingly relegated to the periphery: "Appearances of self-contradiction notwithstanding, the development of Thoreau's thinking about nature [across the *Walden* drafts] seems pretty clearly to move along a path from homocentrism to biocentrism" (1995, 138-139).

However, the first draft of *Walden* (version "A"), composed around 1847 and including corrections in Thoreau's hand, offers evidence that the author was already working at this earliest stage of corrections to intensify his representation of animals as possessing a distinctive personhood. In this draft, Thoreau's corrections work to

¹⁷² See Specq et al. for discussions of Thoreau's non-anthropocentric or "critical anthropomorphic" narrative perspectives as techniques; as well as L. Buell 1995 and 2005.

¹⁷³ Originals and facsimiles of the seven drafts, composed between 1846-1847 and 1854, are held at the Huntington Library in California (HM 924). This chapter compares version "A", circa 1847, to the first print edition of *Walden*.

emphasise the author's conviction that animals possess a strong capacity for thought, emotions, and even for communicative gestures and speech. In the following passage from the first draft of "Winter Animals", Thoreau renders his discussion of the whimsical squirrel who visits his abode and "wastefully" grazes on corncobs more dramatic, and lends the squirrel a more defined sense of personhood, by laboriously replacing the neutral possessive pronoun "its" with the masculine counterpart, "his".¹⁷⁴

And then suddenly, before you could say Jack Robinson ~~it~~ he would be in the top of a young pitch-pine—winding up ~~its~~ his clock—and chiding all imaginary spectators—~~and~~ soliloquizing & talking to ^{all} the universe ~~and itself~~ ^{at the same time}—for no reason that I could ever detect, or ~~itself~~—he himself was aware of, I suspect. At length ~~it~~—he reached the corn—and selecting a suitable ear, would frisk about in the same uncertain trigonometrical way to the topmost stick on my woodpile, before my window, ^{where he} ~~looking~~ looked me in the face—and there sit for hours— nibbling at first voraciously ear after ear and throwing the half-naked cobs about wastefully—^{til}¹⁷⁵ at length ~~it~~ he grew ^{more} dainty ^{still} and played with ~~its~~ his food—tasting only the inside of the kernel—and the ear which was well balanced over the stick by one paw slipped from ~~its~~ his careless grasp, and fell on the ground—when ~~it~~—he would look over at it ^{with ludicrous} uncertainty—as¹⁷⁶ if suspecting that it had life—with a mind not made up, whether to get it again, or a new one, or be off; ^{now thinking of corn, then listening to hear what was in the wind}.

And so the little impudent fellow would waste many an ear in a forenoon—till at last seizing some longer—& plumper—one—considerably bigger than ~~itself~~ himself—and skillfully balancing it—~~it~~ he would set out with it to the woods....A singularly frivolous and whimsical fellow—and so he would get off to where he lived. (HM 924 "A", 223-227)

In this earliest draft of *Walden*, the "frivolous" and "whimsical" squirrel's animated and cartoonish quality is emphatically heightened by Thoreau's initial corrections, which, though only details, emphasise the creature as a fully-fledged individual.

¹⁷⁴ The following transcription is my own. I reproduce Thoreau's corrections (with strikethroughs) and additions (indicated by the (^) sign followed by the added text in brackets).

¹⁷⁵ The word 'wastefully' does not appear in the published first edition.

¹⁷⁶ The published first edition extended the anthropomorphic description even further, reading "he would look over at it with a ludicrous expression of uncertainty" (Thoreau and Krutch 322).

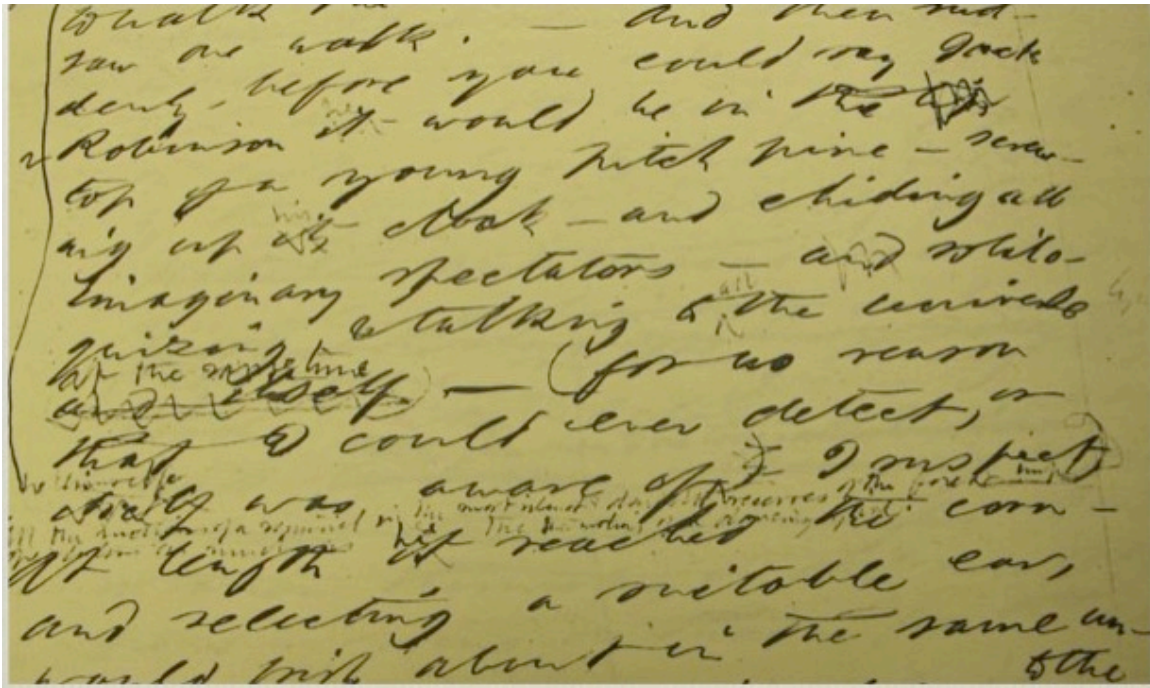


Figure 9: A page from HM 924, "A" (Huntington Library; photo by the author)

Making the squirrel a “he” rather than an “it” arguably contributes to an increased sense of personhood.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, some of the other qualifiers that Thoreau adds contribute toward the squirrel’s portrait as a fleshed-out, nonhuman person: he does not only demonstrate uncertainty, but “ludicrous” uncertainty; the additions show him “thinking” about corn, or “listening to hear what was in the wind”; furthermore, the addition of the adverb “wastefully” denotes the squirrel as possessing the flaw of profligacy: one shared by humans. For Thoreau, even animals can exhibit “character flaws”. Rather than portraying them as pristine creatures existing outside of the moral quandaries of the human world, Thoreau instead shows animals to possess some of the same foibles. For the author of *Walden*, animals, too, can be wasteful, garrulous, frivolous, or uncertain creatures.

¹⁷⁷ Interestingly, however, the published version of *Walden* alternates indiscriminately between use of ‘it’, ‘he’, and ‘she’ in its descriptions of animals—pointing to a lack of consistency in Thoreau’s self-consciousness about such a grammatical distinction.

While one might object that Thoreau's corrections implicitly draw the squirrel in comparison to human persons by attributing so-called human characteristics to the former, thereby simply repeating anthropomorphic fallacies that stretch to the Antiquity, I maintain that Thoreau's careful corrections might instead work to lend the animal a more closely developed sense of "squirrel-ness". We are not, arguably, invited to understand Thoreau's portrait as an allegory of *human* profligacy and wastefulness, but simply as an extremely detailed account of a *squirrel*; one that attempts to guess at his inner workings—even if this does draw inevitable comparisons to *human* thoughts and feelings. Rather than serving to didactically illustrate some moral principle in relation to human life, as in classic texts such as the *Fables* of Aesop or La Fontaine, anthropomorphised depictions of animals in Thoreau instead work to construct animals as kinds of persons in their own right, or draws them as "nonhuman persons", as Pughe argues.¹⁷⁸

Such passages show Thoreau developing the seminal technique of what Mark Bekoff refers to as "critical anthropomorphism".¹⁷⁹ For Pughe, drawing on Bekoff, critical anthropocentric tropes, instead of merely projecting human qualities onto animals and thus diminishing the latter's distinctiveness, or "policing the divisions between humans and animals", are potentially subversive in that they blur the boundaries between the human and nonhuman world and affirm the equal value of the latter (249-250). Critical anthropomorphism "questions its very quality as a trope" (254). Owing to this self-reflexive quality, it arguably works in a complementary way to postmodern texts that

¹⁷⁸ Pughe draws from the ideas of Vinciane Despret and her theories of nonhuman persons. Pughe notes of Thoreau's loon and the pond game in *Walden*: "Thoreau describes the man and the animal as partners in a game whose rules they have laid down together and that they both respect. The game is a way of inviting the human player to think like a loon ('to divine his thought in mine') ... Playing with the loon ... personalizes it ... transforms it into a 'nonhuman person' [to use Vinciane Despret's term, 'devenir personne autre qu'humaine']" (257).

¹⁷⁹ See, notably, Bekoff, Colin, et al, *The Cognitive Animal: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives on Animal Cognition* (2002).

critique reigning assumptions about the natural world. Thoreau's nineteenth-century narratives about animals and plants are clearly seminal predecessors. Pughe notes that in Thoreau's writing,

Man seems to him to be only one element within a whole. If humans have just this or that nonhuman animal as neighbor, it follows that they, too, have their allotted place in the larger order of things, an order one could then call bio-rather than anthropocentric. In Thoreau's neighborhood, "all the actors are not human," as Donna Haraway might say. (251)

Such critical anthropomorphic tropes rhetorically encourage readers to recognise in animals a genuine personhood, to see in the minute details of animal behaviour vital and specific forms of intelligence that do not simply reflect ours, but differ in crucial ways from humans', all the while being relatable to it. In discussing his nonhuman "neighbours" in *Walden*, Thoreau's critical anthropomorphic portraits serve not to make *animals* seem more like *us*, but precisely the inverse: to underline that human animals are part of a wider ecosystem, and to suggest that we are closer to nonhuman animals than classical humanism generally admits. These techniques end up troubling the normative demarcations between human and nonhuman. Danielewski's exaggerated portraits of plants and animals in *Revolutions* arguably produce a similar rhetorical effect.

Revolutions and the nonhuman chorus

Danielewski's novel deploys a comical variety of critical anthropomorphism to attribute the nonhuman world a sense of crucial importance, while paradoxically rendering it in cartoonish ways. As was previously discussed, plants and animals appear in an emphatically bold font early in the novel; one that progressively fades to designate ecosystemic ill-health and decimation. In addition to this device, animals and plants native to the US are constantly interacting with Hailey and Sam, in the fashion of the

classical Greek chorus: cheering them on, murmuring in fear at their actions, chiding them, or warning of imminent dangers (mostly from humans).

—*Pick up,*

brrronk aerial **Ravens**.

But I pick up nothing.

Not even speed ...

—*Pick up,*

gatutter **Fleas & Ticks**.

And I pick it all up.

Especially me ...

—Never leave her [Hailey],

mitter **Deer Mice**.

—*Allone,*

moan **Fireflies & Antelopes**.

I go on, allone, by curving paths

and sloping passes.

By lolling **Shorthorned Lizards**.

Follow after her

below the cackle of **Brant Geese**

following baleful lakes.

All I pass begging my stay...

I just keep rolling through.

And come upon

TWO BOYS,

Paddleballing on a hillside,

who yelp and reverse with her

approach. Such is their abhorrence.

Their immediate disdain. (*Revolutions*, S10-12)

That animals including flies, fleas, and ticks are attributed narrative voices in this long passage might be seen as contributing toward an absurdist and anti-realist tone; one that works against a genuinely ecological ethos. Danielewski's caricatural depictions of animals (and elsewhere, plants) advising or admonishing Hailey and Sam might be understood to follow in the tradition of classical anthropomorphism: nonhuman

characters act as a peripheral chorus designed to reflect and echo the actions and feelings of the central (human) characters. However, on closer consideration, this anthropomorphic treatment of plants and animals works to subvert the traditionally peripheral role of the nonhuman world in literary narrative to scenic backdrop or rhetorical, metonymic mirror of the human world.

Danielewski uses homonymic language to describe the voices of animal protagonists in this passage, thereby designating their otherness to Hailey and Sam, and their distinctive personhood. They do not archetypally represent human characters; they instead stand as important characters in their own right. While they do speak in human language, they do not do so exclusively: they also “brronk”, “gatutter”, “mitter”, or “loll”. These homonymic descriptions of animal calls recall many instances in Thoreau, such as his descriptions, in the earliest draft of *Walden*, of geese assembling around the pond in the winter: “I was startled by the clank of geese flying low over the woods—like weary travellers late getting in from Southern Lakes, and ‘indulging’ at last in unrestrained complaint and mutual consolations” (HM924 “A”, 482). Here Thoreau deploys a simile to relate the geese to “weary travelers” and anthropomorphically attributes seemingly human emotions and qualities to them (“unrestrained complaint”; “mutual consolations”), yet his insistence on their “clank” sounds as they land, then later fly off for Canada “with a regular clank clank from their [commander]”, ultimately emphasises their “goosehood”. In attributing animals their own particular voices, they acquire a distinctive personhood in both Thoreau and Danielewski.

Further, the animals populating *Revolutions* do not merely comment on or echo human actions or feelings; they also frequently express their own feelings and thoughts, both vocally and “gesturally”. “**Tamarack Pines** sway scared” (H1), “**American**

Wigeons laugh ... fippantly” (S14);¹⁸⁰ Sam’s **Horse**, whipped to death by a “SPITEFUL SPINSTER”, emits a “frightened whinny”, pleading “—*O, over here. Release me. Please*”; he emits “*Neighing laments*” under the “*whip afflictions*” (S 26). Like Thoreau’s animal “neighbours”, the nonhuman protagonists who populate Danielewski’s novel are capable of fear, amusement, pain, and other complex emotions, but these affective qualities are not mere metonyms for human suffering: they work to develop plants and animals as “nonhuman persons”.¹⁸¹ If plants and animals do initially appear as a traditional chorus in the novel, such an anthropocentric perspective is eventually challenged. Nonhuman voices emerge as important additional perspectives that often counter and contradict Hailey and Sam’s own; they often, for example, warn the arrogant human protagonists against a foolhardy sense of invulnerability:

Spurge & Cohosh feersick. **Parsnip**

too. Not me. Can’t feersick me.

I’m all. The all safe ...

But **Saskatoon**

Serviceberries still escape:

—*Run away you dingbat.* (H27)

Not only are plants and animals just as diegetically important in *Revolutions* as humans are; they are also consistently depicted as (mostly peaceful) counterpoints to violent humans, and as victims of that violence. Another intriguing element in the long passage cited above, and elsewhere in *Revolutions*, is how the novel uses formal devices to juxtapose human protagonists to anthropomorphised animals and plants. While the animals in the above excerpt appear in bold, the TWO BOYS who approach at the end

¹⁸⁰ Spelling irregularity reproduced from the text.

¹⁸¹ As many ecocritics have observed, children’s literature has long deployed anthropomorphic tropes to render animals as nonhuman persons. American author E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* (1952), narrating the adventures of a farm pig who realises with prescient horror that he is to be slaughtered, only to be rescued by an empathetic spider, is a popular example.

are *not* bolded, but instead denoted in all caps. These juxtaposed formal elements, which emphasise human and nonhuman life in different ways, suggest that animals and plants are equally important to human protagonists, but stand in “significant otherness” to them. Further, like all of the human protagonists in the novel (including Hailey and Sam), the TWO BOYS are depicted as rapacious characters who pose threats to the safety of both human and nonhuman life: they “yelp and reverse with [Hailey’s] /approach./Such is their abhorrence./ Their immediate disdain”. Follows a catalogue of marauding and imperialistic human characters, all of whom Hailey fends off: “NINE EXPLORERS”, “EIGHTEEN TRAPPERS”; “TWENTY RANCHERS”; THIRTY SIX PROSPECTORS”, etc. (S12-13). Hailey is eventually surrounded by a “Mob [who]. Waving Steel Quoits, / “spits on her, arcs of / offal & clay” (S14).

In Danielewski’s dystopian account of human violence and the damage it wreaks on all kinds of life, humans are singled out for their rapacious desire to know and conquer the land (hence the emphasis on TRAPPERS, RANCHERS, PROSPECTORS, etc.). These colonising approaches to the natural world ultimately lead to ecosystemic collapse. As the environmental cataclysm unfolds, devastation to animal and plant life is denoted as equal to Hailey and Sam’s, and serves as more than mere apocalyptic backdrop to the human protagonists’ own terror: the collapse of animal and plant life is instead a major diegetic event. “Sad Crocuses go” (H255); “Wild Orchids shatter” (H259); “Thistle Butterflies slide...And Elisa Skimmers can’t survive” (S254).

If Hailey and Sam initially believe they can dominate the natural world, as the narrative progresses it becomes evident that ecological balance is both delicate and wholly unpredictable. By the time the young protagonists begin to come to terms with the impact of human activity on the natural world, ecosystemic collapse is already underway. *Revolutions* ultimately figures the natural, nonhuman world as a dynamic,

delicate system that cannot (and should not) be conquered, nor assumed to be an inexhaustible “resource” serving exclusively human needs. It echoes the jeremiad-like warnings of mid-century environmentalist thought, which focussed strongly on ecosystemic balance or tipping points, such as in this excerpt from Brand’s *WEC*:

The principle of ecology...should keep us aware that our lives depend upon other lives and upon processes and energies in an inter-locking system which, though we can destroy it completely, we can neither fully understand nor fully control...And our great dangerousness is that, locked in our selfish and myopic economics, we have been willing to change or destroy far beyond our power to understand. We are not humble enough or reverent enough.” (*WEC* 1971, 25)

This passage from the *WEC* emphasises the risks of treating the natural world as something that can be fully controlled. In staging the dangers of treating natural resources as inexhaustible *things* at the exclusive service of humans, and by according nonhuman life a distinctive sense of personhood through the narrative and formal devices described earlier, Danielewski’s novel gestures toward a different kind of *relation* between human and nonhuman life forms: one that recognises, and respects, the inherent differences between these, and the trappings of attempting to “reduc[e] [differing subjects] to each other” (Glissant 194). In this sense, *Revolutions* draws human and nonhuman life in “significant otherness” to each other; suggesting that while these are co-dependent and mutually vulnerable, they are also markedly different. The novel implies that respecting the dynamic, unpredictable, and complex workings of natural systems, and their inherent differences, is crucial to the wellbeing of all forms of life, including human.

Scrapbook: *Rights for the voiceless nonhuman*

If *Scrapbook* initially reads as a toxic narrative focussing primarily on environmental risks such as chemical pollution and consequences to human health, certain passages in

the novel underline how Ozark's toxic spill also wreaks havoc on nonhuman life, thereby gesturing toward a non-anthropocentric approach. If animals and plants do not figure as prominently as they do in *Revolutions*, Dara's novel vividly debates their status as potential persons and victims, and suggests non-hegemonic ways of relating to the natural world.

One key excerpt depicts an Isaura resident, Carole, arguing that a tree suffering from the ambient groundwater poisoning should be allowed to sue the chemical company alongside human plaintiffs, in a case humorously referred to "OAK VS OZARK" by local newspapers (449). The narrator relating the episode initially deems the woman's advocacy for animal personhood absurd and counterproductive:

—I'm sure it will do more harm than good, I think—...to use a stunt to make is fucking ridiculous— I mean, what is this shit with a tree—...I mean, who the fuck cares about her tree?— It's just a tree. (452-453)

However, in line with *Scrapbook's* argumentative, dialogic style, the advocate's voice rings through in a long passage in which she argues that extending personhood to nonhuman life is a debate "at the frontier of modern legal thinking" (450):

—[W]hy shouldn't trees or brooks have legal rights—

—Why shouldn't natural objects be accorded protections just by virtue of their existence, I heard her say—

—It's an idea that's been around for at least 15 years...none of this is new; just because trees and forests don't have a voice, that they can't speak, it doesn't mean that we should be able to do anything we want to them, and that there shouldn't be mechanisms for them to obtain legal redress for crimes or offenses committed against them. (450)

Not only does Carole suggest that "trees and forests" have the right to personhood in spite of their inability to speak; she also situates her critique of their industrial exploitation in a historical discussion of human and civil rights. She goes on to compare

the natural world's subjugation and status as a "thing" to the plight of certain groups who were historically denied rights:

—Remember, in the past...even certain *people* were deemed not to have some fundamental rights...

—And for the people of those times, to confer rights on such subordinate entities also seemed ludicrous, and unthinkable, ... precisely because until a rightless thing receives its rights, we cannot perceive it except as a *thing*—as something to be used and controlled by the persons who already hold rights ... (451)

The tree-rights advocate exposes how objectification has justified exploitation. In her reckoning, it was once considered radical to grant certain human persons rights, since they were falsely regarded as things; nonhuman life, she argues, suffers under the same false premise. While she acknowledges differences between human rights and those that might be extended to trees—noting that the latter creature cannot speak (and therefore actively *exert* whatever rights are granted to them)—she rejects the notion that this precludes plants and animals from being accorded a kind of personhood; or the justice system from treating their exploitation as a crime.

Although the tree appears as the only nonhuman "plaintiff" against Ozark, trees and forests figure as important protagonists of sorts earlier in the novel; these systematically figure in opaque terms, as things difficult to grasp and differentiate; as systems difficult to understand using rational faculties. As described earlier, an errant walker is led through dense, "undifferentiated" woods by the forest kneeler, a hermetic figure revisiting the romantic "wood dweller" archetype popularised by European and American Romantic writers including Wordsworth and Thoreau.¹⁸² He also evokes the "off-the-grid" neo-Romantic ideals of 1960s and 1970s American counterculture, with its rejection of mainstream culture and emphasis on self-reliant, live-off-the-land values (see

¹⁸² "Tintern Abbey" notably refers to the virtues of "vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods" ("Tintern" 20).

Chapter One). Dara's forest kneeler, who inhabits a treetop (132) leads the curious walker through profoundly disorienting landscapes; through "deep" woods, "copses" and "verdure" (117).

[T]he man turned and walked into the forest...And as he diminished into the misty distance...he said...without turning around...You can come along...So I followed him...I bumped from my spot and followed him...That's what I did...For what else was I to do? (122-123)

Like Dante's Virgil, leading the former deeper into the "dark wood" in the first Canto of *Inferno*, the forest kneeler initiates the walker to a kind of parallel and counterhegemonic space-time (as Chapter Two explores). Similarly, the forest and its life forms are denoted in opaque and counter-rational terms; as amorphous, hard-to-describe systems that disrupt the protagonist's usual ability to differentiate and name. He continually repeats the question "what else was I to do?" suggesting a sense of helplessness and passivity. His sense of disorientation, moreover, revolves around not being able to properly differentiate among the "million sprouting multitude":

I realized that I was unsure...utterly unsure...if the trees I was then inspecting...were new to me...or if they were among the million-sprouting multitude we had already canvassed...In other words, I was not at all convinced...that we had moved at all...That is, if we had made any progress...of any kind...Because the trees all looked different...and, simultaneously, the same ... (147-8)

The anti-progressive tour through the forest has no apparent aims, and is informed neither by an ethos of marking nor of mapping: the forest kneeler's exploration evidences "manifestly no method or pattern to it at all" (129). "In fact, the man was proceeding through entirely random movements...making no markers...taking no mappings" (*Ibid*). He does not try to *comprendre* the forest, in Glissant's colonising sense of appropriating it to his own ends or preconceptions. Again, the forest kneeler and his counterlinear, antitotalising approach to the natural world appears as a strong counterpoint to the one

taken by corporations such as Ozark, with its market-driven disregard for the environmental impact of its chemicals. *Scrapbook* implicitly blames such attitudes for profoundly harming communities and environments; from this vantage, the episode with the forest kneeler suggests an alternative model for approaching not only temporal experience, but also for rethinking our ethical positioning toward the natural world, as well as our reigning epistemologies.

If acknowledging the natural world as an object of “opacity” or partial “unknowability” might readily be compared to traditional notions of sublimity, the next chapter more specifically explores identifiably Romantic tropes of the sublime and the uncanny, centring around feelings of horror and paralysis, in late postmodern accounts of incommensurable natural and technological objects. While “opacity” might be conceived as part of an ecological ethos stressing the rights and personhood of nonhuman life, the tropes of sublimity examined in the final chapter are qualitatively different, and I therefore treat them separately. The latter draw strongly from Gothic Romantic debates around naturalness and unnaturalness, monstrosity, terror, and horror, as well as revisiting Romantic debates between nihilistic and transcendent accounts of sublime experience.

Chapter Four

“Cli-Fi” and Gothic Nightmares: The Postmodern Sublime Reconsidered

stranded among heavy boulders, stacked
with sharp ice, under skies already breaking twice ...
Until, at last, back on my feet.
Chimes! Chime! Chimes!
Flakes finally
of falling snow.
Thuuuuuuuuuuuuunder...
—Danielewski, *Revolutions*, S324-325

What came over people that they'd let other people fool around with
their words, their sentences, their ideas, their dreams? ...Maybe it really
was a fall of mist.
—Davis, *Tour*, 73

This final chapter explores how recent experimental crisis fiction markedly re-engages with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates around sublimity. It argues that a strong reliance on identifiably Romantic idioms of the sublime and the uncanny further evidences the profound intellectual heritage of Romantic ideas in late postmodern figurations of environmental and technological crisis.¹⁸³ Crucially, in their emphasis on both natural environments and technological forces as objects of terrifying, anxiety-inducing cognitive unrepresentability, narratives including Danielewski's *Revolutions* and earlier *House of Leaves* (2000), Davis's *Tour*, Egan's "Black Box" (2012), and

¹⁸³ I treat idioms of the uncanny, which generally arise in discussions of technological upheavals and their effects on human subjectivity, as closely related to (or even a subordinate discourse of) the sublime. The former, following Freud's discussion in "*Das Unheimliche*" (The Uncanny), is also concerned with unrepresentability and epistemological limits; especially with figures or experiences that appear liminal or indeterminate (e.g. Is this a natural or supernatural experience? Is that figure human, or an automaton?) See Freud and McLintock 2003.

Marcus's *Notable American Women* (2002)¹⁸⁴ invite a critical recalibration of the postmodern sublime, from both discursive and aesthetic standpoints. These narratives frequently diverge sharply from how critics including Jameson, Lyotard, Tabbi, and Maltby have theorised sublime experiences and aesthetics in postmodern art and literature, and particularly their assumption that natural environments and landscapes are largely absent from postmodern accounts of the incommensurable.

These existing accounts of the postmodern sublime—while still crucial for understanding how contemporary texts representationally grapple with technological speeding under late capitalism—often overlook certain Romantic intellectual legacies at work in late postmodern literary iterations of the sublime. They maintain that postmodern texts significantly break with Romantic predecessors of the long nineteenth century by occluding Nature from the representational field, where it had been the prime object of sublimity in Romantic writing. However, this chapter unveils how late postmodern crisis fiction shares with Romanticism interest in both environmental and technological upheavals and the sublime feelings these inspire.¹⁸⁵ In particular, the looming threat of climate change and other environmental upheavals, as well as the structural and social upheavals of the digital revolution, register as defining crises lying too far beyond normative epistemological bounds to adequately represent; these crises are, once again, figured in messily overlapping terms. Especially in light of the growing epistemological pressures of climate change in contemporary literary imagination, the postmodern sublime can no longer, I contend, be understood as exclusively concerned with the incommensurable quality of late capitalist economic or technological infrastructures such

¹⁸⁴ Subsequently abbreviated as *Revolutions*, *House*, *Tour*, “Black”, and *Women*, respectively.

¹⁸⁵ I privilege a simplified definition of the sublime, drawing from Kant and Burke's late eighteenth-century theories: in the texts of interest to me, sublime feeling figures as a kind of ambivalent, dynamic vertigo in the face of an object which cannot be wholly signified or accounted for by the mind. See the following section of this chapter for a more in-depth discussion of the legacy of Kant and Burke in postmodern sublimity.

as global markets or digital databases, or with unthinkable human tragedies such as the Nazi Holocaust.¹⁸⁶ The digital revolution continues to dysphorically figure as an event whose processes and materiality cannot be wholly grasped, producing sublime and uncanny feelings and often, associated with monstrosity or unnaturalness. Meanwhile, in many texts the natural world and processes of environmental change or disruption loom as equally overwhelming, and largely unrepresentable, existential threats.

Furthermore, rather than figuring natural and technological objects in consistently interpenetrating, easily blurred terms, thereby respecting what are thought to be postmodern conventions,¹⁸⁷ these recent texts tensely juxtapose representations of sublime natural environments or objects with technological counterparts, much as Romantic predecessors did. Davis's novel interrogates the potential dangers of both, echoing European Romantic literary accounts of the incommensurable in works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Der Sandmann" (1816). If Danielewski's *House* diegetically engages with the topic of digital technology and its incommensurable quality by figuring a House with a constantly-expanding hallway, *Revolutions* primarily figures the unrepresentable quality of digital-age information culture through its oversaturated, taxonomic presentation (as was discussed in Chapter Two).¹⁸⁸ The latter novel is compositionally informed by a notion of the digital sublime,

¹⁸⁶ For Jameson, "The technology of contemporary society is ... mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new de-centred global network of the third stage of capital itself ... It is in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that, in my opinion, the postmodern sublime can *alone* be theorized" (1991, 37-38, emphasis mine).

¹⁸⁷ Such an assumption has prevailed in critical discussions of postmodern sublimity and its supposed de-emphasis on natural objects in favor of technological counterparts. Drawing from theorists including Jameson and his notion of a "hysterical sublime" proper to late capitalism, and indebted to Haraway's natureculture, Joseph Tabbi asserts that writers such as Thomas Pynchon "carr[ied] on both the romantic tradition of the sublime and the naturalist ambition of social and scientific realism, but in a postmodern culture that no longer respects romantic oppositions between mind and machine, organic nature and human construction, metaphorical communication and the technological transfer of information" (1995, 1).

¹⁸⁸ The first novel's representation of an unsettling House with a room that mysteriously expands, the incommensurable terror that it inspires, and impossible efforts to capture the growing House on video, strikingly reworks Gothic sublime codes for the digital age. *House* differs from *Revolutions*, however—and

but *diegetically* centres on encounters with Romantic-style sublime natural environments, placing these at the center of the representational field.¹⁸⁹

The particular fusion of themes such as uncanny technologies, people, or places, terrifying encounters with the natural world, mortality, and premonitory events in this fiction aggregates into a recognisably Romantic sublime mode drawing from Gothic codes.¹⁹⁰ This chapter considers how Gothic conventions narratively vehicle accounts of sublime and uncanny experiences in contemporary crisis fiction, and function as additional dysphoric, anti-utopian counternarratives to the fantasies of technocultural transcendence or communion with nature discussed earlier. As such, they constitute an important component of the antinomian debates about technological and environmental change these texts engage in. They also relate back, albeit not in immediately apparent ways, to the apocalyptic environmentalist rhetoric and jeremiad-style warnings of collapse that marked Brand's *Catalog* in its latter years. Specifically, debates revolving around natural and unnatural events, human or inhuman figures, paralysing and terrifying objects, operate as neo-Gothic responses to a "Nature" that appears increasingly impinged on by technological (and human) forces. Crucially, however, this incursion of the technological on the natural is not the seamless or readily accepted one imagined by most theorists of the postmodern sublime. It is instead a highly uneasy one, marked, often, by fear and terror.

Technology is, moreover, not the only object of fear and paralysis in this neo-Gothic fiction. Climate change often looms as an *unnatural* threat brought on by humans altering the natural world through technological "progress" gone amok. Speculative

remains perhaps more aligned with "traditional" notions of postmodern themes—in that natural landscapes are mostly absent in the former.

¹⁸⁹ Hayles observes of *Revolutions*: "[N]owhere present within the narrative diegesis, digital technologies are everywhere apparent when we consider the writing-down system as a whole" (2012, 236).

¹⁹⁰ See the Introduction for a more in-depth discussion of my use of the Gothic, and for critical perspectives on the Gothic in postmodern literature and culture.

fiction addressing climate change addresses the Mephistophelian price one might end up paying for these alterations. The process of global climate change is, moreover, not something that can be wholly grasped, particularly since it has no real precedents in human history. Essayist and environmental activist Rebecca Solnit observes:

Some things are so big you don't see them, or you don't want to think about them, or you almost can't think about them. Climate change is one of those things. It's impossible to see the whole, because it's everything. It's not just a seven-story-tall black wave about to engulf your town, it's a complete system thrashing out of control...It's not only bigger than everything else, it's bigger than everything else put together. (2013, online)

Solnit deploys familiar rhetoric of sublimity in asserting that we are paralysed by climate change because it lies outside the bounds of what we can comfortably imagine. The novels considered here register a comparable sense of cognitive overload and panic in discussing environmental changes. They notably revisit codified Romantic sublime landscapes to address a growing sense of vulnerability in the face of ecological disruptions—ones intimately connected to technological development. Consider the following passage from Davis's *Tour*:

[T]he yellow light that seemed to be the sun is really the base of a cloud, a huge, restless cloud that can't stop rippling, gold and gray and green and silver, no longer bowl-like but aqueous and billowing like the open sea, with who knows what's hiding inside (247).

This passage depicts a post-apocalyptic shift in climate after a diabolical computer programme mysteriously alters both the natural world and human institutions (notably authorial property). The climate has undergone sinister changes that render it, in a sense, *unnatural*: the light of the sun is “really” a fitfully “rippling”, “restless” cloud that seems to be hiding something monstrous behind it. A technological apocalypse overlays the natural one, and these prove impossible to separate out. However, where Tabbi and other theorists of the PoMo sublime argue that postmodern culture no longer draws lines

between the natural and the technological, *Tour* and other crisis fictions examined here uneasily draw the blurring boundaries between these. Rather than figuring this incursion of the technological and human on the natural as an easy, seamless one, these texts are permeated with trepidation. Debates about what constitutes the “natural” and the “unnatural”—and the shifting politics of these terms amid rapid technological development—are part of a long Romantic tradition; Gothic narratives in particular share similar interests.

As briefly discussed in the last chapter, might the terror associated with certain conventions of the Romantic sublime underline, and even work to reinforce, an environmentalist ethos at the heart of certain late postmodern narratives? Again, Taylor argues that “ecophobia” might signal a more engaged, action-oriented version of environmental writing than “ecophilia” does. In his analysis of Poe’s short story, “The Colloquy of Monos and Una”, he argues:

Like love, fear can be an experience of vulnerability, and we can imagine a fear that would remain suspended in the apprehension of this vulnerability, unable to vanquish its object because unable to regard it as either fully self or fully other; we can imagine, in other words, a fear that would recognize the self’s integration into its environment without the ability to overcome it, that takes ecological systematicity and the attendant loss of individual subjectivity literally, thereby precluding reactionary, destructive attempts at mastery. Rather than reinscribing a defensive dualism between one’s self and one’s context, such a fear would be the inhabitation of a radically uncertain openness to the world. And if this echoes the sublime, then it refuses sublimity’s conventional reconsolidation of the subject after its unsettling encounter with radical otherness. (362)

Taylor delineates an ecologically constructive natural sublime with some precedence in the Gothic American writing of Poe: one that understands human life as being inextricably incorporated into the natural environment, prompting meaningful action in the face of ecological threats, and rejecting traditional sublimity’s “conventional reconsolidating of the subject”. Lawrence Buell has, similarly, argued that narrative

attention to biotic interdependence and ecosystemic danger may contribute toward an anti-anthropocentric literary ethos (1995, 304). I propose that late postmodern depictions of anxiety and terror in the face of uncontrollable natural forces partially contribute toward the ecological ethos of certain texts. In depicting human vulnerability to the natural world, they once again designate the latter as vitally important.

However, if the fiction examined here partially subscribes to Taylor's ecological imperative of submission to annihilating natural forces, they simultaneously resist such an urge to submission, and in so doing reformulate yet another important debate coursing through Romantic texts of the long nineteenth century: one between nihilistic and transcendent interpretations of the sublime. In vacillating between these two accounts of sublimity, they address fears of annihilation (by natural or technological events) and end up proposing, much as Romantic writers including Coleridge did, a way of overcoming the threat *itself* of being overcome. As Jack Voller and Will Slocombe note, such debates played out in competing accounts of sublimity from Kant and Burke, Coleridge or Poe. Drawing on the aforementioned critics' work, I argue that Davis and Danielewski's novels in particular echo Romantic writing in problematising sublime experience around transcendent and nihilistic terms. *Revolutions* and *Tour* betray a yearning for transcendence in the face of nihilistic despair, often depicting encounters with the natural world—the same one that inspires terror—in nostalgic ways, even as they ultimately identify opportunities for transcendence in semiotic or artistic processes, rather than in metaphysical encounters with nature. Their version of sublime transcendence ends up looking, as discussed earlier, quite postmodern in its secularity; nonetheless, their sense of *nostalgia* for holistic meaning sets them apart from Liu's "feigned", "recursive" version of postmodern transcendence (2008, 111).

In addressing the spectre of climate change and environmental collapse, the late postmodern fictions considered here arguably continue what Buell identifies as the “ecocatastrophic” tradition in American literature (1995, 296), and participate in what scholars from a range of fields refer to as the “apocalyptic imagination” in various cultural forms.¹⁹¹ They also, as previously discussed, appear as experimental branches in the emergent “cli-fi” genre. Discussing the late work of Margaret Atwood as “ecological science fiction”, Gerry Canavan revisits Fredric Jameson’s observation that it is easier to envisage the end of history itself than it is to imagine capitalism’s demise; arguing that current iterations of literary apocalypse in the “cli-fi” genre “function ... today as the postmodern version of Jameson’s called-for ‘radical break,’ which is ‘the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system’ (*Archaeologies* 231–32)” (Canavan 139). He continues:

The apocalypse is the only thing in our time that seems to have the capacity to shake the foundations of the system and “jumpstart” a history that now seems completely moribund—the only power left that could still create a renewed, free space in which another kind of life might be possible. Apocalypse (especially eco-apocalypse) is increasingly the frame we use for imagining an end to capitalism, precisely because (after the “end of history”) we can’t imagine any other possible way for it to end. And in a way this is eerily appropriate; the increasingly dire predictions of ecological science warn us that “the end of the world” and “the end of capitalism” may in fact describe the same event ... (*Ibid.*)

This chapter identifies in many late postmodern, experimental crisis fictions a strong investment in this eco-apocalyptic imagination, showing the same antinomian spirit as the one that Caravan underlines in Atwood’s ecological sci-fi. It accordingly argues for a

¹⁹¹ See, notably, Skrimshire 2010 for discussions of how the apocalyptic imagination has gained new urgency as climate change registers as the defining crisis of our time. Frederick Buell offers a survey of such imagination in cultural and literary forums. Buell identifies in apocalyptic environmental American literature of the 1960s and 1970s the incorporation and revision of several features of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic tradition, both embracing and modifying these: “sudden rupture with the past, presentation of a revelation, narration of a world-end and dramatization of a last judgment” (15). However, for Buell, apocalyptic imagination has shifted to no longer mark a “sudden rupture”; instead, it has become a “way of life”: “To fully understand these changes ... we need not to discard but reinvent apocalypse” (30).

critical reconsideration of the postmodern sublime in light of this shift. Such a recalibration appears especially timely in light of the recent rapprochement between environmental criticism and postmodern theoretical frameworks, as already discussed in the previous chapter.

Margaret Ronda discusses how contemporary eco-poetical works acknowledge ecological crisis not only in an observational sense, but interrogate what literature can *do* about it, posing crucial questions of agency:

Resisting a perspective of innocence or ethical outrage that would suggest an observational, distanced vantage, these works emphasize ecological interrelationality and complicity in environmental destruction, and often explore collective feelings of vulnerability, hopelessness, and dread (2013, online).

An emphasis on dread and vulnerability in Juliana Spahr's poetry highlights, echoing Solnit's observations, how environmental crisis registers as incommensurable. Even while Ronda ponders how we might mourn the "end of nature" at the close of the anthropocene, she also emphasises how Spahr's contemporary poetry grapples with fears of ecological collapse and re-affirms the interdependence between human and nonhuman ecologies. The fiction examined in this chapter shares these concerns, following similar trends in popular cultural forums.¹⁹²

Romantic sublime conventions appear as a clear heritage in Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* and Davis's *The Walking Tour* through natural landscapes that deploy codified, chiefly nineteenth-century landscapes featuring sublime physical features—from snowy, desolate mountains to "unsettling" woods—and accompany these with discourse around individual and collective memory, mortality, shock, or loss that evokes Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, or, as I later argue, sublime pathos in Poe's "The Bells"

¹⁹² One example is Lars Von Trier's 2011 film, "Melancholia". In this arthouse apocalypse, a rogue planet falls out of orbit and begins a collision course toward Earth. In the film's final scene, the protagonists watch in dazed terror and incomprehension as a hypnotising azure body overtakes the horizon.

(1849). Romantic Nature as a troubling or even horrific site of sublime feeling emerges as an important element in contemporary depictions of vulnerable encounters with the natural world, and/or climactic changes.

Technology and technological processes are additional objects of sublime and uncanny experiences in Davis's *Tour*, Danielewski's *Leaves*, Marcus's *Women*, and Jennifer Egan's experimental Twitter story, "Black Box". However, their version of the technological sublime is qualitatively different from the one depicted in texts such as Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). Gibson's novel, so often cited as the seminal voice of cyberpunk and the postmodern tech sublime, depicts disembodied travels through hyperreality, a space not only entirely divorced from the "natural", but that also does not figure as "unnatural". The experimental novels examined here, and Davis's novel in particular, construct the technological sublime in tense conversation with a natural counterpart, looking back to nineteenth-century writers such as Mary Shelley writing amid the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution, and addressing anxieties around technological development and its potential threats to classical human subjectivity. As Botting notes, technophobic responses to cyberculture echo Romantic-era Luddite discourse.¹⁹³

Sublimity From Kant to Lyotard

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century constructs of sublimity have endured in literary and critical imaginations through the twentieth century and into the present; but it has most frequently been assumed that modernity (and postmodernity) reformulated these ideas so entirely as to mark an almost complete rupture from Romantic predecessors. Lyotard, Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, and, more recently, Joseph Tabbi, adapt eighteenth-century

¹⁹³ See Botting's essay in Larrissy 2010.

theories of the sublime from Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke to discuss the dizzying aesthetic and discursive decentredness of postmodern literature, visual art, and, in the case of Tabbi, technoculture and its specific forms of production.¹⁹⁴ As already discussed, they identify in modernist and postmodernist iterations of the sublime a clear break from the Kantian and Burkean focus on natural objects.

Kant and Burke both predicate sublime experience on encounters with incommensurable natural objects that inspire awe, terror, or the transcendent insurgence of reason over otherwise crippling fear or emotion. Burke's theory emphasises awe and terror: "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature ... is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (41). Sublime feeling for Burke, combining pain and delight, is primarily excited by encounters with rugged landscapes, extreme conditions of weather, or vast natural and man-made objects such as mountains or temples.

In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant critiques Burke's analysis as "merely empirical exposition" (106) and argues that sublime feeling cannot be situated in any one "sensuous form", including those found in the natural world, but is instead contained in a complex and transcendent mental process wherein the faculty of reason overrides the mind's fear or confusion at its own inability to adequately "present" something to itself (76). While Burke and Kant famously disagree as to whether to situate sublimity in natural objects or landscapes or in the mind's complex *response* to these, both maintain that the vast majority of man-made objects or structures fail to inspire true sublime feeling. The natural world clearly reigns as the object par excellence of sublimity.

Conversely, for Lyotard and others attempting to describe how sublimity has mutated amid the major social, technological and philosophical upheavals of

¹⁹⁴ See Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings* (1764) and his later and more fully developed theory of sublimity in *Critique of Judgement* (1790); and Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756).

(post)modernity, the natural world is no longer very important. Instead, sublime experience centres around troubling, overwhelming, and unrepresentable encounters with technology—including encounters with one's own technologically manipulated, posthuman body; or in contemplating unthinkable, human-perpetrated horrors such as the Shoah. As previously discussed, Jameson's "hysterical sublime" identifies the incommensurable structures of late capital as the "only" possible source for the postmodern sublime. For Lyotard, meanwhile, sublimity is primarily located in processes of language itself, showing its "unpresentable" face negatively as absence.

In "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?", Lyotard draws on Kantian theories of sublimity to consider "allusions to the unpresentable" in avant-garde painting, modernist and postmodernist literature as symptomatic of the fragmentary and "slackened" notion of reality from modernity onward. Attempting to define the difference between modernist and postmodernist iterations of sublimity, Lyotard compares Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927) to Joyce's work (presumably *Ulysses*, published in 1922):

The work of Proust and that of Joyce both allude to something which does not allow itself to be made present. Allusion ... is perhaps a form of expression indispensable to the works which belong to an aesthetic of the sublime. In Proust, what is being eluded as the price to pay for this allusion is the identity of consciousness, a victim to the excess of time (au trop de temps). But in Joyce, it is the identity of writing which is the victim of an excess of the book (au trop de livre) or of literature. ("Answering the Question", 419)

Whereas Proust alludes to a sublime "excess of time" at the level of content, but conserves a nearly traditional style at the formal level, Joyce's prose points to the sublime "excess of the book" or of language itself. Joyce's prose foregoes what Lyotard calls the "nostalgic longing" for a holistic reality by "allow[ing] the unpresentable to become perceptible in his writing itself, in the signifier" (419). For Lyotard, one feature of the

postmodern sublime is to reject all *nostalgia* for the notion of a holistic and stable reality—and by corollary, one might argue, for the *natural* in general. Patricia Waugh notes:

Central to ... Lyotard's postmodern sublime ... is a resistance to the notion of a correspondence between concept and the real, because the attempt to materialise such a correspondence produces Terror. Authentic art is that which refuses the nostalgia of correspondence by showing it to be a provisional fiction or by showing that the ground of the "real" is itself aesthetic. (80)

Lyotard's reading also implies that the postmodern sublime tends to "give up" on the epistemological concerns of the Kantian sublime—on what can be known, and to what extent—since the question becomes moot in the absence of a holistic reality, or "out-there", to grasp.

Tabbi, a theorist of American new media and "cognitive" fictions, takes Lyotard's excision of the natural world from the sublime a step further. He argues that the fiction of certain postmodern American authors, including Mailer and Pynchon, displaces the object of sublimity from the natural world (whose very existence is now put into doubt) (1995, x) to science and technology, in "a postmodern culture that no longer respects romantic oppositions between mind and machine, organic nature and human construction, metaphorical communication and technological transfer of information" (1). Drawing from Jameson, Tabbi situates the sublime object of *technology* in linguistic and semantic oversignification: signification so liminal to discourse that meaning is "overwhelmed" (17). Exponential technological developments have exceeded our capacity to adequately represent them; postmodern American literature has become, subsequently, permeated with discussions of tech's unrepresentable quality.

These texts, Tabbi maintains, may reproduce Romantic literature's preoccupation with narratively figuring that which ultimately proves unrepresentable; but they also

break with Romantic predecessors by subverting or even “transcending” the division between the natural and the technological imagined in nineteenth-century constructs of sublimity. Tabbi does not just envisage a “blurring” between the natural and the technological sublime-- a blurring that is indeed evident, and addressed, in the late postmodern fiction considered here. He also implies that the natural world and its processes have simply been occluded, or made obsolete, by technological counterparts in postmodern accounts of sublimity. Paul Maltby has argued much the same, maintaining that the sublime is a historically contingent concept that has undergone significant mutations from the Romantic to the postmodern moment:

A postmodernizing of the sublime has shifted the focus from the Enlightenment's and Romanticism's mingled wonder and dread before the immense forces of nature to anxious intimations of the overarching presence of massive technological power or the malign influence of worldwide conspiracies or the oppressive totality of the capitalist world system. (1996, 271)¹⁹⁵

Robert Wilson, in his study on the sublime in contemporary American poetry, charts a remarkably similar shift from objects of the natural world to primarily urban and technological ones:

[T]he vocabulary of the sublime in American poetry—as an intuition of indeterminate boundlessness—has migrated from configurations of natural power and symbolic immensity (as in Bryant, Emerson, Frost...) to ones recentered in technological power, mass mediation, and urban energy (Hart Crane, Williams, O' Hara, Oppen, Ashbery, AI, Rich, Bob Perelman). The conversion scene of the postmodern American poet ... is likely to occur not in Peacham, Vermont nor the petunia-ridden enclave of *The New Yorker* poem, but “under the Pyramid” of the

¹⁹⁵ Interestingly, Maltby tackles the problem of an embodied Romantic sublime, and even natural environments as objects of awe and terror, in an earlier essay discussing the “romantic metaphysics” of DeLillo. Maltby notes that the “toxic cloud” figuring so prominently in *White Noise*, as well as scenes depicting lightning-filled, threatening skies, might be understood as “DeLillo's endeavor to affirm the integrity and spiritual energy of the psyche in the face of (what the novel suggests is) late capitalism's disposition to disperse or thin out the self ... In short, we might say that sublimity is invoked to recuperate psychic wholeness” (1996, 271). Nevertheless, Maltby identifies this as an anomaly: “Evidently, DeLillo's awestruck subjects contradict the postmodern norm” (*Ibid.*). I would instead argue that DeLillo's figuring of sublime terror in the face of environmental threats (including man-made pollution), offers early evidence that the postmodern sublime has been too narrowly defined.

TransAmerica Building ... or drifting within the cybernetic forests and high-finance transactions of Wall Street. Or the postmodern sublime can occur ... in worrying, mind-quelling forces released in Los Alamos and Hiroshima, the Apollo 11 moonlanding, nuclear winter, or...explorations of black holes and the ozone layer on Mars. (200-201)

Wilson does concede that in postmodernity, phenomena like pollution and man-made ecological risks can elicit what he refers to as the “panic sublime” (1991); but nevertheless tends largely to remove the natural world and its unpredictable systems from his accounts of the contemporary incommensurable.

If it is impossible to dispute Maltby’s assertion that the sublime is a historically contingent concept, his and others’ claim for a radical break between Romantic and postmodern notions of sublimity is challenged by the recent crisis fictions examined here. These texts appropriate and reinvent Romantic literary constructions of sublime encounters with nature and/or technology, but generally without one term radically superseding or effacing the other. This observation suggests two hypotheses: Either late literary postmodernism is itself evolving (under the pressures of climate change, perhaps?) to strongly re-engage with Romantic debates, or critics have essentially overlooked the endurance of these debates—including the persistence of the natural sublime—in even earlier waves of postmodern art and literature.

Existing critical accounts of postmodern sublimity may have also offered an incomplete account of the complex intellectual legacy of the Romantic sublime, leading them to declare an overly exaggerated break from this tradition. For one, they have essentially overlooked how certain nineteenth-century Romantic texts, from Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to Hoffmann’s “*Der Sandmann*”, often figured both natural and technological objects as potential sites of sublimity, staging a figurative “transfer” between one to the other as a source itself for fear and terror. While these nineteenth-century predecessors represent this shifting ground of sublimity from nature to

technology differently than contemporary American counterparts do, the complex effects of such a transfer lend these Romantic narratives and early speculative fictions a marked ambiguity that anticipates the decentred quality of the postmodern mode.

Lytard or Tabbi's accounts of the linguistic and technological sublime in postmodern expression also do not leave much room for narratives that appropriate, with varying degrees of irony or earnestness, identifiably Romantic narrative conventions and discourses: these include Wordsworthian-style sublime landscapes and an accompanying rhetoric around the fallibility of human memory, or the "Luddite humanism" of *Frankenstein*, which warns against the dangers of unbridled technological forces,¹⁹⁶ or the uncanny, Gothic *frisson* produced by the automaton Olimpia in Hoffmann, and noted by Freud. Experimental crisis fiction's combined interest in technology *and* natural environments as potential loci for sublime experience, and their tendency to stage identifiably Romantic debates between these terms, suggests that Romantic constructs of sublime and uncanny experiences have remarkably endured in American popular culture and literature. So, too, have the Gothic narrative conventions that work to vehicle these. Late postmodern textual engagements with Romantic sublime ideas seem to revive, if in distinctively contemporary ways, the nineteenth-century debates that had been pronounced antediluvian.

¹⁹⁶Botting discusses how "Luddite humanism" in Romanticism has carried over to the postmodern mode and "provides a way of thinking that informs discussions of contemporary cultural change" in the form of a dystopian discourse which "recoils in horror from the encroachment of the machine on what is seen as human and natural" (2010, 100).

Sublime natural landscapes and ecological terror

Revolutions and *Tour* are examples of late postmodern crisis fictions that revisit Romantic conventions around the natural sublime in remarkably codified ways.¹⁹⁷ They stage encounters with iconically Romantic landscapes, from snowy, treacherous mountains to unsettling woods and vast American deserts. They discursively tie these landscapes to meditations on human memory, mortality, loss, shock, or terror—and the cognitive unrepresentability of such experiences—in ways that recall the Wordsworthian poetic narrator’s encounters with natural landscapes in “Tintern Abbey” (1798), or the icy, desolate Alpine and Antarctic scenes in *Frankenstein*. In both contemporary novels, natural landscapes figure both as objects of unrepresentable beauty and as troubling or horrific sites of sublime feeling. Furthermore, as was already explored in the previous chapter, ecological collapse and the human destruction of plant and animal life figure strongly in both texts, and contribute toward a tone of sublime terror. Ecophobia, moreover, figures more strongly in these texts than ecophilia does. If we follow Taylor’s reasoning, this contributes toward a negative environmentalist ethos that nonetheless poses crucial ethical and agential questions (see Chapter Three).

While Davis and Danielewski seemingly engage in earnest ways with Romantic conventions of sublimity, intimating a genuine preoccupation with the natural world and environmental degradation, they nonetheless bring postmodern scepticism and decentered-ness to bear on their treatment of the natural sublime. Their introduction of irony, intertextual references, unreliable narrators, opaque diegesis, or their decidedly self-conscious construction of Nature in textual terms, contribute to their noncommittal quality.

¹⁹⁷ I borrow partially from Slocombe’s definition of the Romantic natural sublime, described as a Kantian-Burkean synthesis between “man’s innate ability to feel sublimity (internal and Kantian) through commune, often solitary, with nature (external and Burkean)” (44).

Davis's *Tour* engages Romantic natural sublime conventions primarily through Wordsworthian-style landscapes that alternately inspire vague anxiety and dread. The object of sublime, unnamable *dis-ease* is subsequently displaced from Welsh landscapes to the diabolic computer programme that unleashes an inexplicable "fall of mist", destroying authorial property and simultaneously degrading natural environments. The post-apocalypse, in narrator Susan's account, has led primarily to a profound sense of boredom and restless anxiety, but also to a kind of paralytic terror centred around the insufficiency of memory itself. Reflecting back on the events of the fateful Welsh walking tour and ensuing apocalypse, Susan grapples to reconstitute the incommensurable "Event", but is unable to do so. The narrator frames her longing for a supposedly idyllic past with her parents through direct intertextual references to "Tintern Abbey", medieval French poet François Villon's "*Ballade des dames du temps jadis*" (1466), and *The Mabinogion*, a series of eleven early medieval and pre-Christian Welsh tales translated and popularised in English during the nineteenth century. All are texts that, in various ways, lament lost time and the stubborn insufficiency of memory, doubling the narrator's frustrated grappling with memory and grief over a lost childhood, civilisation, and the frightening upheaval of the natural. All three of these emerge as objects of sublimity in the novel. Paradoxically, as was discussed in Chapter Three, Susan also issues a scathing indictment on such nostalgia: at each temporal level of narration, she ironically critiques how she, her parents and their associates successively indulge in a misguided turn to the past (and to Nature) in search of meaning. The narrator thus depicts the fateful tour around mythical Wales and its beautiful and terrifying landscapes in sublime terms, but ironic commentary on the Romantic commercialisation of the landscapes undercuts this effect, to some degree.

For Susan, the attack on individual authorship (and agency) by a crowdsourced writing programme is even more disturbing than the ecological destruction it wreaks. The novel seemingly denotes artistic and authorial control as the very foundation of civilisation, or even of “Nature” itself. While the novel does end up confounding natural and technological sublime objects, making the causal chain of apocalyptic events impossible to determine, the blurring between these is not the seamless or euphoric one described by previous theories of the postmodern sublime.¹⁹⁸ It is, rather, a fraught and ambivalent one, charged with fears around the dangers of technological development.

In Wordsworth’s shadow?

Tour borrows from Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” both codified sublime landscapes and the poem’s emphasis on the failure to wholly grasp one’s former self and experiences.

The novel’s title itself references the poem: “Wordsworth’s lines were composed ‘during a Tour’, after all. ‘More like a man flying from something that he dreads, than one who sought the thing he loved...’” (Davis 21).¹⁹⁹ Moreover, the narrator notes that her parents were more attuned to Nature than citizens of the post-apocalyptic society who have lost all sense of temporality and the seasons. She mediates this shift through Wordsworth:

[T]hey paid attention to Nature, though not so much as their parents and their parents’ parents had. (“How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee, O sylvan Wye!”) They paid attention to it ... to make sure it wouldn’t get a jump on them when they were looking somewhere else. (11)

The final line of this excerpt, premonitory of the looming cataclysm, hints at the natural world’s sinister and threatening aspect; the sense that natural forces might existentially threaten or “get a jump on” the human subject. Descriptions of Romantic sublime landscapes—from dark woods to winding cliffside paths—further develop this

¹⁹⁸ See Chapter Three for a consideration of how this absence of causality relates to “risk” culture.

¹⁹⁹ The passage cites “Tintern Abbey”, lines 70-72.

premonitory, Gothic tone. They first appear in a dream recounted by Ruth, who anticipates the “unpresentable” events and dangers of the forthcoming Welsh walking tour through a vision of the landscape:

A steep narrow road climbed steadily higher and higher, bordered on one side by tall dark hedges, dripping wet, swooning away on the other to a darkly raging brook. ... A signpost pointing to the direction we were headed said FISH INN (fission? am I anticipating an explosion of some kind?) ... The road leveled off before forking in three directions. The right fork dipped to cross a stone bridge, then vanished into a moss-draped and unwholesome wood. (24)

Davis borrows from Wordsworthian lexical patterns in striking ways. Ruth’s descriptions of the veering, unsettling landscape echo Wordsworth’s, where “woods and copses lose themselves” and “steep woods and lofty cliffs” overwhelm the senses and emotions (“Tintern Abbey” 12; 158). The passage builds a sense of dizzy disorientation (“swooning away”, “dipped”) and invokes jerky, sudden movement, reproducing Wordsworth’s own “dizzy rapture”.²⁰⁰ It is constructed in such a way that the reader’s perspective is constantly “swinging” and in movement.

Later in the novel, “danger” and “beauty” in the natural world are explicitly linked in Burkean sublime terms: “[T]he Gower peninsula had been officially designated an area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, but didn’t that usually spell danger? *Outstanding* beauty was rarely safe, after all: no sweeping vistas without vertiginous drops, no wind-scoured coasts without extremes of weather” (236). Elsewhere, too, Welsh landscapes inspire a subtle sense of dread and vulnerability: “Off to the left heavy black clouds were rolling in fast; the ridge seemed razor-thin, the land draped over it as insubstantial as gauze and plummeting straight to the valley floor ...” (64). A sense of vulnerability,

²⁰⁰ My analysis draws partially on Nicholas Royle’s theories of “veering” in modern and postmodern texts and their potential relation to the sublime, as discussed during a talk given on 19 October, 2011 at the English Faculty, Oxford University, and entitled “Veering: a Theory of the Novel”. A book, *Veering: A Theory of Literature*, was subsequently published by Edinburgh University Press (2011). Kant’s description of the sublime as a “movement” of the mind seems to inform Royle’s concept of “veering”.

precariousness, and dramatic movement permeates this passage; driven by syntagms such as “rolling in fast” and “plummeting in straight” and language suggesting physically threatening physical phenomena (black clouds; razor-thin ridge).

The dread associated with such vertiginous natural settings is subsequently displaced to post-apocalyptic landscapes of ambiguous location following the tech-fuelled cataclysm. The novel turns to address the dangers of human-made climate and ecosystemic changes through apocalyptic natural imagery. Twisted, muted, and oddly sinister landscapes dominate the post-Event world. While the narrative fails to directly draw detail the dramatic cataclysm triggering a sinister “fall of mist”, it explicitly and implicitly blames technological forces and pollution; the central culprit is the SnowWrite & RoseRead computer programme. Cloud-laden, unrepresentable landscapes of the post-apocalypse inspire strong anxiety:

At some point every day the sun actually rises, dragged from under the horizon by a net of clouds and then left there to seep through the sky’s spongy grayness in a halfhearted version of morning... Though there hasn’t been a gale in weeks, everything feels foggy and close and still, like being stuck inside a giant’s mouth ... (51)

The sun-obscuring, suffocating clouds in this passage elicit a sinister sublimity. “[A]s I felt the endless shadows deepen around me, accompanied by that tightening of the air which heralds the approach of what we used to call *noon*, I had a sudden and overpowering memory of brightness” (94). Sublime brightness of the past juxtaposes to the laden and poisonous air of the present; morning itself is no longer what it once was, signalling profound climatic shifts. If the post-apocalyptic natural landscapes in *Tour* are less a source of horror than subtle dread, they highlight climate change as something that cannot be adequately represented or grasped; as something that confounds and paralyses (following Solnit’s earlier description).

Risks of ecological degradation and disturbance not only figure in *Tour* as consequences of a past cataclysm, but as continued threats inspiring trepidation and a sense of vulnerability. Toward the novel's close, another apocalyptic even seems to be looming; vibrant colors and light are infused back into landscapes that had been sapped of their color, but a foreboding tone persists: "[T]he yellow light that seemed to be the sun is really the base of a cloud, a huge, restless cloud that can't stop rippling, gold and gray and green and silver, no longer bowl-like but aqueous and billowing like the open sea, with who knows what's hiding inside" (247). The fear that pervades this passage, evidenced in the comparison of the billowing cloud to the open sea and the sense of existential dread (what's hiding inside?) might be read as reinforcing *Tour's* implicitly environmentalist cautionary tale. Here, sublime fear and dread toward natural forces and an emphasis on human degradation and disruption of the ecosystem arguably work to render the natural world vitally important, even if Davis largely eschews realism.

From the nihilistic to the transcendent...and back

Davis's narrative not only revisits codified Romantic sublime landscapes; it also swings between an essentially nihilistic epistemological framework in which knowledge and meaning are elusive, and one in which scraps or artefacts of memory assemble to culminate in transcendent moments of reconciliation. Davis's novel and others considered here tensely juxtapose nihilistic or transcendent interpretations of sublimity; this feature can also be traced to debates originating in Romanticism of the long nineteenth century. In both periods, texts alternately denote sublime experience as a horrific confrontation with an abysmal absence of meaning and divinity, or as keys to a mysterious, primarily semiotic or artistic, process for transcending the pain of impermanence or death.

Nihilistic accounts of the sublime have tended to dominate critical theories of postmodern literature. Lyotard's aforementioned analysis of Joyce points to a linguistic sublime whose characteristic feature is absence; Žižek, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, leans on Hegel's own reading of Kant and the former's assertion that "the spirit is a bone" to strip the Kantian sublime of its transcendental proposition.²⁰¹ However, has the assertion by some critics of a nihilistic sublime dominating in postmodernity been overstated? Slocombe suggests as much. He argues that while nihilism and the sublime are usually read as incompatible tendencies in postmodern texts, one essentially cancelling out the other, they should instead be understood as "two sides of the same coin", since the construction of both modes of discourse arose as a response to the Enlightenment and its profound social catalysts. He asserts that "nihilism is actually a temporally-displaced formulation of the sublime" (25) and re-reads Romantic-era constructions of sublimity to show that modernism and postmodernism inherited nihilistic accounts of sublimity from Romantic predecessors, rather than radically departing from the Romantic mode in its focus on abysmal spaces.²⁰² This observation may serve to historically situate the obvious presence of nihilistic (sublime) discourse in select contemporary experimental texts, but it does not account for how a transcendental sublime appears to compete with the nihilistic tendency in contemporary crisis fiction.²⁰³

²⁰¹ "The status of the Sublime object is no longer an (empirical) object indicating through its very inadequacy the dimension of a Thing-in-itself (Idea) but an object which occupies the place, replaces, fills out the empty place of the Thing as a void, as the pure Nothing of absolute negativity—the Sublime is an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing" (234).

²⁰² Iain Boyd Whyte has made similar claims (Hoffmann and Whyte 11).

²⁰³ I follow Žižek in defining "nihilistic" as a discourse of absence or nothingness: this may appear as a sense that experience lacks meaning, or suggest an absence of the divine. As Slocombe has noted, this need not necessarily be connoted in a negative sense—we need only look to Nietzsche, existentialist philosophers of the twentieth century, and their positive interpretation of the lack of absolute meaning in human experience: it presents a possibility for self-creation. "Transcendental" discourse may or may not refer to a numinous or divine plane of experience in postmodern literature; it often appears in the experimental novels of interest to this research as a kind of jump to a different level of consciousness through linguistic, semantic, technological or artistic processes, similar to a process described by Tabbi (2002, 84).

For numerous critics, transcendental and nihilistic conceptions of the sublime are closely interrelated, and often operate dialectically in literary texts. Voller argues that Romantic writers including Coleridge, Wordsworth and the Shelleys rejected Gothic, nihilistic notions of sublimity (primarily drawn from Burke) in favour of a transcendental alternative adapted from Kantian ideas, and infused with Judeo-Christian rhetoric. For Voller, key Romantic writers rejected Burke's conception of sublimity as primarily related to paralysed terror and vulnerability. Instead, uncanny or sublime encounters with supernatural figures (such as those depicted in Coleridge's 1798 "Rime of the Ancient Mariner") serve as a narrative and existential catalyst toward a transcendent sublime. "Supernatural images and language continued not as ciphers of emptiness and despair but became instead the language of interior exploration or of a quasi-animistic transcendence" (Voller 91). Joseph de Mul, meanwhile, argues that Postmodernist art and philosophy have at their core the continuance of Romantic "desire", which paradoxically expresses itself as Romantic irony since it comments on the gap between a desire for transcendence and its un-achievability. He discusses how Romantic irony, adopting a studied (and self-reflexive) distance from fears of annihilation, works to counteract nihilism (10).

Following from the observations of Slocombe, Voller and De Mul, I argue that Davis and Danielewski's novels in particular problematize sublime experience around transcendent and nihilistic terms in ways that reiterate Romantic debates, potentially reviving a discourse of Romantic transcendence that must be distinguished from the euphoric, technophilic, Baudrillardian transcendence dominating Gibson's *Neuromancer* or Samuel Delany's *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984). If the latter seem lacking in nostalgia for the numinous and the natural, *Revolutions* and *Tour* betray a yearning for a transcendent term in the face of nihilistic despair and nostalgically point to

epiphanic encounters with nature, even as they ultimately attribute the possibility for transcendence in semiotic or artistic processes, rather than in divine contact. Their version of sublime transcendence, then, ends up looking very postmodern in its secularity; nevertheless, their nostalgia for the numinous and the natural arguably sets these postmodern narratives apart from cyberpunk accounts of techno-transcendence.

Voids and gaps permeate Davis' *Tour*. Susan is continually confronted by what she perceives as an unbridgeable chasm in understanding, the inability to draw meaning from events, or as an unbearable feeling of boredom and emptiness both in the post-apocalyptic present and in the past. Referring to her mother's "*horror vacui*" (3)—which might doubly signify Carole's aesthetic preferences and her fear of existential emptiness—Susan concludes "it's hard not to understand why, since God knows there's comfort to be had in endlessly filling the *intolerable void* with familiar objects, though anything will do, anything at all ..." (15, emphasis mine). To re-invoke the Hegelian proposition, Susan seems to conclude, like her mother had, that "the spirit is a bone".

Tour also echoes Wordsworth's "Tintern" by underlining memory's insufficiency in grasping or accurately representing the past. This frustrated nostalgia itself constitutes a potentially nihilistic sublime space, since it arises from a gap between cognitive efforts to grasp something (in this case, a memory) and the failure of the mind to accurately, fully represent an object to itself. The narrator in "Tintern" thus describes strained efforts to recapture past feelings: "And now, with gleams of half-extinguish'd though[t,] / With many recognitions dim and faint/And somewhat of a sad perplexity, / The picture of the mind revives again ..." (58-61), but later concludes that the enterprise is a failure: "I cannot paint / What then I was" (75-76).

In Davis's novel, the narrator is perpetually struggling to reconstitute a lost, vibrant world through the medium of scraps and archives: paintings left behind by her

celebrated artist mother Carole Ridingham; poems and letters, photos, and transcripts from the trial which followed the unnameable apocalyptic “Event”. However, the narrator comes up against not only the fundamental insufficiency and unreliability of memory, but also the notion that the archival scraps she relies on to probe and understand the past provide only a distorted mosaic.

Some of the pictures are still there, like the ghostly white wolfhound
(Gretchen? Minnie?) on the pantry door, or the by now even harder to
see hexagons crawling with bees around the kitchen window frames ...
The snows of yesteryear—where are they now, oh where oh where?
(14-15)

Just as the narrator of “Tintern Abbey” laments the irretrievability of past selves, *Tour* paints the sharp grief elicited from relics and remains: those ghostly traces of a past life or world which can never be sufficient or reliable vectors of memory. Susan’s frustrated grappling with archival scraps, furthermore, suggests a kind of postmodern sublime aesthetic focused on *cultural detritus*, on the archive or scrap and our current incapacity to assemble the illusion of holistic culture or experience. This is a tradition grounded in strong modernist and Romantic precedents.²⁰⁴

The natural world and its inexplicable alterations following the “Event” are inextricably bound up in Susan’s attempts to draw meaning from the gathering of scraps of evidence; her strained efforts to sequentially reconstitute the “fall of mist” as she pores over court transcripts from what proves a Kafka-esque trial.

When I try reading the court transcript ... I feel naïve and spirited and
curious ... Then I look out the window. Then I try to see all the way to
the end of a driveway no longer white with snow but overgrown with

²⁰⁴ Recent American postmodern writing exploring an aesthetics of “the scrap”, and also evident in Dara’s *Scrapbook*, Danielewski’s *House* (which I will discuss shortly) and the experimental artbook/encrypted digital poem *Agrippa* (both discussed in Chapter Two) are informed not only on Romantic reflections such as Wordsworth’s, but also on modernist works such as Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922): “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (430). What relates the contemporary fiction discussed here to Romantic accounts are their depiction of such scraps accumulating to hedge against isolation, emptiness, or meaninglessness.

gray vegetation and I feel my curiosity transformed from girlish vice to *unspeakable horror*, which is what it becomes when you sound the depths of another living soul *merely in order to locate something there* to justify your own position ... (20, emphasis added)

Here the protagonist struggles to draw a sense of coherence and meaning from the transcripts, to identify the causal chain of events leading to the apocalyptic “fall of mist” brought on by the computer programme, but causality stubbornly eludes. Like one of Kafka’s protagonists, attempting to penetrate the Castle, perhaps, Susan is consistently denied entry: in this case, to causal understanding of the past. The failure of the mind to present to itself a holistic account of events seems to produce a moment of sublime terror. Susan is trying to “locate something there” within the transcript to make sense of the present, but there is simply “no *there* there”. Would-be commune with Nature provides here only a sense of numb and vaguely terrifying emptiness: looking out the window and observing the overgrown grey vegetation, the epistemological chasm between past and present becomes clear.

While a sense of nihilistic dread seems to pervade *Tour*’s treatment of sublime experience, especially as relates to climatic and environmental cataclysms, the narrator also hints at the possibility of transcendence and renewal. This possibility for overcoming the pain of loss comes not through encounters with Romantic Nature, which remains a site of dread and danger, but, as Jeremy Green has noted, through the salvific power of art and its seeming capacity to maintain human connections even in the face of loss and death (118).

Near the end of the novel, a new apocalyptic event threatens and the eerily posthuman, ambiguously gendered “Monkey” ushers Susan to a bomb shelter. Inside, Susan is stunned to find the dank room filled with what appear to be a cache of her dead mother’s paintings. Since several of the paintings depict events from the ill-fated walking tour during which Carole Ridingham plunged to her death, there is a strong implication

that Monkey is in fact the creator of the paintings, having mysteriously summoned the artist's memory and transcending his own dull, "grey" state of being in the process. This discovery produces in Susan another moment of seemingly sublime awe, but now framed in transcendent terms.

One painting shows Carole Ridingham poised at the tip of a windy promontory, holding hands with "Uncle" Coleman "like children preparing to jump into the water", and overlooking a sea "which is itself a deep mysterious emerald green...with who knows what at the bottom, maybe Neptune's face, or the artist's, because clearly *something's* doing its best to rise to the surface" (257-258). This excerpt once again exploits sublime natural imagery, but in contrast to previous scenes evoking uneasy, empty anxiety, Susan seems to locate, in this encounter with the painting, a renewed sense of connection to her dead mother. She moves beyond the emptiness in what reads like a moment of transcendent reckoning.

As evoked earlier, the scrap and its potential as a sublime object—memory reeling at its own inability to reconcile or reconstitute itself—lies at the heart of *Tour's* postmodern (yet Wordsworthian) meditation on time and loss. Yet in the final scenes of the novel, thanks to the apparently redeeming force of art and to Monkey's quasi-miraculous efforts, Susan overcomes the emptiness she had previously felt and reattributes some sense of meaning to her own life, and to her parents': "My mother's sensibility recognized and honored adored even, yet transfigured. Which is the only way the dead come back to us in *this* world ... As meanwhile, the artist's face continues to rise toward me, gray-eyed, Delphic" (259).

Transfiguration through artistic or semiotic processes, then, is the sole way to restore meaning to an otherwise groundless and empty existence in Davis's narrative; the only potential means of overcoming what is elsewhere admitted as a fundamental

emptiness. Yet, just as the utopian dreams of superseding normative subjective bounds explored in Chapter Two prove largely secular, Davis' drawing of the transcendent sublime is equally lacking in a numinous or mystical term. We might identify, building from Green's interpretation, a postmodern iteration of the transcendent sublime focused on the redeeming power of language or art; too, Hungerford's emphasis on the rhetoric of secular transcendence in postmodern writing again bears mention. Just as the Romantics resisted nihilistic interpretations of sublimity by emphasising the transcendent power of poetry, reason or natural cycles, Davis's novel underlines a similar final resistance to the nihilistic sublime, even as it heavily marks the narrative.

Sublime American landscapes in Revolutions

Despite its dauntingly complex formal presentation and opaque poetic language, at the basic level of plot Danielewski's *Revolutions* reads as a postmodern American road novel preoccupied with the spectre of ecological collapse. As part of that central thematic concern, it re-engages Romantic sublime codes and debates to emphasise not only the vulnerability and fear of human subjects in the face of natural forces, but also the crucial interdependence of the human-and non-human world. Like *Tour*, moreover, Danielewski's novel blurs nihilistic and transcendent depictions of sublime experience. In *Revolutions*, the natural sublime re-emerges in ways that clearly look back to both European and American Romantic depictions of terrifying or overwhelming landscapes. The young antiheroes' jubilant joyride across American history is punctuated with moments of sublime awe, terror, grief, and finally, the possibility of transcendence through the renewal of natural (and textual) cycles.

Similar to *Tour's* play with premonitory Gothic narrative conventions, early passages in *Revolutions* offer descriptions of typically sublime landscapes, associating these with premonitions of dangers to come:

Lost to
 misty glens drifting down by
 stoped hills wet with slipping nets
 of loosened dew...
 Over the way the strangest looming.
Boooooooomblast and ruin.
 Gathering sooooooon. (S27)

In this early passage, iconically sublime natural features (“misty glens”; “loosened dew”) foreground a mysterious, cataclysmic event “looming” from “over the way”:

“*Boooooomblast and ruin / Gathering soooooon*”. This passage remarkably echoes *Tours'* early descriptions of sublime Welsh landscapes and their ineffably sinister quality. The tone here, too, is resolutely Gothic: the additional “o” letters in the words “boom” and “soon” evoke howling wind, or the eerie, dramatic pronouncement of a curse. The novel follows the structure of Gothic narratives with this early premonition of awful events to come.

Encounters with dramatic landscapes take on a horrifying and heightened sublime quality in the latter sections of both Hailey and Sam's narratives, when autumn arrives and plants and animals begin to die off en masse. While the decimation is initially tied to a simple seasonal change: “Autumn's here / Displeasing US. / And **American Sables** go” (S302), the text hints at human-made climate change that is unusually devastating:

Brassy Minnows spent, **Coho**
Salmons desiccated, **African Elephants** slumped on
 faroff runoffs. The scowling whip of banishment
 sending ash, dust and radiant clouds across every
 haven ...
Gibbons, Masai Giraffes, Siberian Tigers slaughtered,

until not even **Roosevelt Elk**, **Bactrian Camels**
and **Muskoxen** can endure. (S310)

In this passage, “ash, dust, and radiant clouds” suggest profound climatic disruption or even nuclear cataclysm; they are “sent across every haven” and the product of a “scowling whip of banishment”, producing a heightened tone of terror, desolation, and vulnerability. The cited animals do not merely go into hibernation; they are “dessicated”, “slaughtered”, and “spent”. Even the beloved American roads begin splitting apart, signalling the apocalyptic breakdown not only of natural environments, but of built infrastructures: “Roads loosening, escalating, coming apart, / gumming US with sand and ice enslaved rock” (S312). A genuine environmental apocalypse seems afoot, and the lovers are forced to abandon their car. Danielewski’s novel clearly participates in the ecocatastrophic tradition.

Deprived of their sole technological buffer, Hailey and Sam find themselves, as they did at the beginning of their narratives, at the foot of “The Mountain”: but where it was a lush peak promising adventure and filled with teeming life, it is now a stark, icy landscape and a site of natural devastation. In its latter guise, The Mountain is iconically sublime, evoking, notably, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s Mont Blanc in the eponymous poem of 1817:

Mont Blanc appears, still, snowy, and serene,
Its subject mountains their unearthly forms
Pile around it—ice and rock—broad chasms between
Of frozen waves, unfathomable deeps
Blue as the overhanging Heaven, that spread
And wind among the accumulated steeps ...
(*Complete Poetry*, “Mont Blanc”, 62-67)

Danielewski's Mountain looms in equally sublime, and physically threatening, terms: "We reach the top where cottony air threatens / blizzards ... I cartwheel off, finding too quick / the vertical precipice ... a jagged drop/ slick with ice" (H321). The protagonists undertake a final confrontation with indifferent, dangerous natural forces, and with their own mortality: "Undertaking paths / by petrified **Primrose** ... / Hiking over **Soft Elm** charred, dead, / up these cold grades, towards our sumiblity" (H315). The amusing neologism, "sumiblity", underlines the author's self-conscious play with Romantic sublime codes and rhetoric.

This rhetoric follows a distinct progression in the latter sections of Hailey and Sam's respective narratives, reaching a crescendo with one character observing the other's deaths, and finally witnessing a transcendent rebirth. In both narratives, the encounter with the stark, icy mountain landscape first provokes only a sense of vague anxiety: "*—Let'S move on*, he grins uneasily. / And uneasily I move after him/ towards cries of compacting ice, a higher razing of / our weather's colder grind. / Could's now turning / upon the vagueness of our climb" (H319). This initial sense of anxiety as Sam and Hailey approach the Mountain is followed by a fleeting moment of dizzy glee, momentarily revisiting the fantasies of surpassing normative bounds explored earlier: "We reach the top where wild winds threaten / sleet. Hailey's allready going, yippling, carefree. / Cartwheeling this skywrapped flat, / while I lay back, just laugh ... / *—Whoooooopeeeee!*" (S321).

Sam and Hailey's jubilant disregard for the danger represented by the Mountain comes to an abrupt halt when one of the pair is stung by a bee and tumbles down the mountainside, and the other disappears. Dizzy giddiness gives way to dizzy vulnerability:

Tumbling down unable to cry, reach
out, leap beyond my own unstoppable loss ...

What a tale their terror tells
 Of Despair!
 How they clang, and clash, and roar! What a horror they outpour
 On the bosom of the palpitating air!
 Yet the ear it fully knows,
 By the twanging,
 And the clanging,
 How the danger ebbs and flows ...
 How the danger sinks and swells,
 By the sinking or the swelling in the anger of the bells—
 Of the bells—
 Of the bells, bells, bells, bells ... (51-60; 64-67)

In *Revolutions*, and echoing Poe, the incantatory repetition of the word “chimes” denotes the passing of both time and the seasons, and marks Sam and Hailey’s confrontation with mortality. The clamorous incursion of chimes (and thunder) denotes a sublime state of shock and disorientation; in both Poe and Danielewski, similarly, time is an object of sublime terror: in Danielewski, the icy, “strange meadow” through which Hailey and Sam move is “already hung with the passings of forever”. Sublime experience is here tied to nihilistic emptiness, to blank awe at the incomprehensibility of loss. At this stage, too, the historical timeline has run out: “the jig is up” for Hailey and Sam. As suggested earlier, the novel offers competing interpretations of sublimity, seeming to veer between nihilistic and transcendent representations of sublime affective states. Nihilistic pathos and grief reaches a fever pitch when Hailey finds Sam dead (and the inverse in Sam’s narrative).

I shake him. Sob. Beat his rigid chest. Parting
 those lips, driving down my breath upon
 his strange freeze. And allways prompting How?
 Here? To me so near
 without even a cause.
 Impossibly gone. Just still. Dead.

To where I'm already gonegoing ...
 My breath
 pounding. Allone. Too left. Now. Here. Only. (H328)

Sam's death is absurd: it has happened "without even a cause"; he is "impossibly gone". Images of the corpse lying amid barren, icy landscapes also contribute to the nihilistic tone: "Hands a claw of icicles curving / down to the Mountain of World. / Even his hair joins the surrounding freeze. / Struck, claimed, needlessly seized" (H339). This nihilistic depiction of sublime feelings in the face of death shifts, suddenly, when Hailey (and Sam) find their grief turning to violent rage, imagining themselves as vengeful, deity-like forces that annihilate everything in their path.

Here's how my anguish frees.
 Destroy everyone of course. Because I'm unwanted
 and unsafe. And I'll take tears away with torments & rape,
 killings & feers not even the dead will escape ...
 I'm the coming of every holocaust. Turning no lost. (S347-348)

Now embodying the sublime destructive (and regenerative) forces of nature they proved so vulnerable to, Hailey and Sam's brush with death and meaninglessness finds a channel for transcendence in the natural regeneration of plants and animals, and also in textual regeneration. As already discussed in Chapter Two in relation to Danielewski's cyclical temporalities, the reader performs a literal "revolution" and the cycle regenerates itself. The synchronic system of meaning of the book itself is synonymous, in Danielewski, with the natural cycles that it represents: Text and Nature read here as one and the same. Hailey's narrative ends with the following promise:

I'll destroy no World
 so long it keeps turning with scurry & blush,
 fledgling & charms beaded with dews,

and allways our rushes returning renewed ... (H360)

Just as cyclical temporalities in Danielewski vehicle anti-progressivist, postmodern (and secular) ideals of superseding normative spatiotemporal bounds, the novel's sublime rhetoric also ultimately favours a transcendent interpretation of sublimity, exemplified in the final line: "allways our rushes returning renewed". Sublime experience is initially predicated on emptiness and absurdity, but veers from such a nihilistic interpretation to denote in the cycles of nature and in textuality itself the possibility of overcoming death. While such an interpretation might be seen to ultimately diminish the novel's ecological thrust, suggesting the eternally self-renewing capacities of the natural world (no matter its degradation), the privileging of a transcendent interpretation of sublimity shows *Revolutions* re-engaging important Romantic-era debates.

From the natural to the technological sublime: Frankenstein redux?

I now turn to consider how late postmodern treatments of the technological sublime might incorporate Romantic conventions of "Luddite humanism". Doing so further complicates and challenges reigning critical accounts of a postmodern tech sublime that no longer draws distinctions between "natural" and "unnatural" objects or experiences. Since eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romantic debates around sublimity also frequently hinged on discussions of nascent technologies and their potentially deleterious effects, the complex tension contemporary texts develop between sublimity in the natural world and in "uncanny" encounters with technology arguably constitutes another reformulation of Romantic discourse, rather than being entirely native to modernist and postmodernist discussions of the incommensurable. Tabbi observes that ambivalent

representations of technology in postmodern iterations of sublimity have precedents in early twentieth-century writing, citing Henry Adams's *Education*:

A simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from technology, a complex pleasure derived from the pain of representational insufficiency, has paradoxically produced ... a technological sublime that may be located, conceptually and temporally, between Henry Adams's *Education* and Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto". (1995, 1)

Tabbi's description of a technological sublime defined by a "simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from technology" arguably has even earlier, nineteenth-century precedents. Romantic texts including *Frankenstein* and Hoffmann's "Der Sandmann", whose diegetic development both turn on a narrative shift in focus from natural to technological objects as sites of sublime terror. Like these seminal modern speculative fictions, certain late postmodern literary texts read as dystopian cautionary tales against the dangers of technology when not properly harnessed, and warn against disrupting a so-called "natural order". In its meditations on the horrific or uncanny quality of digitality, Davis's *Tour*, Marcus's *Women*, and Danielewski's *House* all revisit, in various ways, the "Luddite humanism" of the Romantic tech sublime. Botting defines its ambivalent quality this way:

[O]n the one hand, what might be called Luddite humanism recoils in horror from the encroachment of the machine on what is seen as human and natural; on the other, scientific humanism celebrates new technologies as the materialisation of powers previously only imagined Romantically. (100)

Just as Tabbi posits a conflicting "repulsion" and "attraction" to technology in the postmodern sublime mode, Botting traces the technological sublime's dialectical battle between "technophobia" and "scientific humanism" back to Romantic-era problematising of new technologies and their impact on human subjectivity. This is a debate that proves remarkably enduring in several recent experimental crisis fictions, including in *Tour*.

Davis's indictment of hubristic male desires to control and alter the natural world through technological forces resonates strongly with Shelley's seminal narrative, but as Botting notes, the nineteenth-century writer's accounts of science and technology across the editions of *Frankenstein* were remarkably ambiguous, and in many respects, I maintain, less dichotomous in nature than Davis's.²⁰⁶

Luddite nightmares in Tour

Davis's reformulation of Romantic debates proves especially complex in its development of a technological sublime that is at once drawn in opposition to "natural" forces, and shown to be inexplicably bound up in it. Susan blames the apocalyptic "Event" primarily on her father and business partners' activation of the SnowWrite & RoseRead program; the unleashing of the programme at once leads to environmental catastrophe, and subverts intellectual property—the underpinnings of all that is "natural" and "right". The hubristic unleashing of new technology—by two white men, incidentally—triggers the aforementioned "falling of mist" and the advent of a post-apocalyptic, posthuman society linked to the computer programme through unexplained, and largely virtual, processes. As in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, natural sublime landscapes in *Tour* are narratively juxtaposed to the shock and terror produced by an abusive unleashing of technology and

²⁰⁶ In analysing the first and second editions of *Frankenstein*, Clayton argues that Shelley's own attitudes toward scientific discovery were highly complex, consisting neither in pure rejection of science nor in a facile distinction between Enlightenment rationality and Nature. "When Shelley takes aim at Frankenstein's research, she criticizes the excesses of an overwrought sensibility, not natural philosophy itself. The craving for immortality, the hubris of trying to rival God, a foolish regard for alchemy... these passions afflict other possessed souls in nineteenth-century literature, from Faust and Cain to Melville's Ahab, and are hardly confined to mad scientists. Shelley's purpose in intensifying her rhetoric in the 1831 version is not to amplify the critique of science but to lay bare the dangers of Romantic egotism ... Unlike most of her prominent male contemporaries, she did not phrase her objections to Enlightenment science in Romantic terms ... At the same time, she did not use her resistance to aspects of Romanticism as an excuse for a conservative return to prior values ... " (2003, 129-130)

the consequences that follow.²⁰⁷ *Tour* echoes Shelley's proto-ecofeminist critique of hubristic overreach in the domain of technological development.²⁰⁸ The novel, furthermore, reformulates constructs of sublimity from Wordsworth and other Romantics to figure not only the incommensurable quality of ecological or technological disasters, but also the slippery fabric of human memory, and specifically matrilineally transmitted memory. I argue that Davis' focus on matrilineal memory works partially to valorise so-called "feminine" values against masculine ones, the latter of which are implicitly blamed for ecological devastation and deleterious modifications to human subjectivity.

A focus on horror and monstrosity reigns in Davis' account of technocultural dysphoria.²⁰⁹ Ruth, the wife of one of the Frankensteinian inventors, is the first to have her authorial authority stripped by the diabolical Snow Write & RoseRead programme as she types in her computer journal.

She'd been wildly typing, completely filling her sea blue screen with a white block of words exactly like the white scrim of wake she imagined filling the bay behind the boat, when suddenly the wake began receding and her words began to disappear, a line at a time ... as all the while new lines of text were pouring in, ALAS ALMIGHTY GOD WOE IS ME replacing *where are your people from*. (153)

²⁰⁷ In Davis, technological revolution is drawn in apocalyptic terms, echoing Botting's observations: "Informational and post-industrial revolutions are presented in monstrously apocalyptic tones to exhume spectral memories of fuller times and evoke residual resistances on the part of human ghosts. Both forms of Romantic recurrence participate in an experience of the sublime. The difference is that the experience is negative for the technophobes and positive for those Frankensteinian scientists attempting to realise their all-too human dreams. (Frankenstein, of course, endlessly reappears in accounts of new computer and biotechnologies)" (100).

²⁰⁸ Adams re-reads Shelley as a proto-ecofeminist, in works including *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, the latter of which some identify as an early climate-change narrative. For the purposes of this discussion, I borrow Gaard et al.'s definition of ecofeminism: "Ecofeminism is a practical movement for social change arising out of the struggles of women to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. These struggles are waged against the "maldevelopment" and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations, and globalization" (2).

²⁰⁹ Unlike *Scrapbook*, which also ponders the deleterious effects of new technologies on human subjectivity, Davis's novel frequently depicts technoculture as an object of sublime terror, a monstrous, unnatural force, rather than merely an atomising one; its resolutely Gothic tone distinguishes it from the dysphoric narratives of Dara or Tomasula discussed earlier. These related but subtly distinctive discourses are treated separately in this thesis in order to more clearly parse out specific Romantic idioms and narrative conventions, although these clearly overlap in many respects.

Ruth's sublime encounter with the SnowWrite & RoseRead programme suggests a textual and diegetic apocalypse; an incursion of uncontrollable technological forces on the human subject and her (natural?) right to individual expression: in other words, to decide on her own "narrative". Stunned by her uncanny encounter with the program, Ruth struggles to regain control over the text; it becomes clear, however, that *she* has been overtaken by *it*.

STOP IT! She typed, but the cursor refused to obey, merely leaping around madly before disappearing altogether. The man's cloak turned white, the screen went blank ... ALAS ALMIGHTY GOD WOE IS ME, followed by the three options, and the three small pictures. What have you done with my book? Ruth sobbed. (154)

Evoking *Frankenstein* and other Romantic tales in which technological forces assume an uncontrollable and terrifying autonomy, SnowWrite & RoseRead is a virus that infects not only the realm of authorship, but also the natural world and the status of the human by introducing a subsuming, hive-mind style subjectivity, effectively destroying individual agency. Furthermore, as explored earlier, the program's unleashing also mysteriously alters the natural world to disastrous effect, but the novel offers no causal connections between the techno and eco-apocalypses it simultaneously depicts.

Luddite anxieties peak, evoking Dr Frankenstein's first encounter with his creature, when Susan first describes "Monkey": "I felt like I was being stared at by a statue. By the Charioteer of Delphi, its face of stone made stonier still by the presence of its pale glass eyes" (77). Monkey, like Frankenstein's monster, inspires uncanny, sublime feelings on account of his liminal status, hovering between the classically human and the posthuman.

[H]e wrapped his long gray arms around his chest and fixed me with a stare. I felt like I was being stared at by a statue. By the Charioteer of Delphi, its face of stone made stonier still by the presence of its pale

glass eyes. We might as well go back down, the statue said, and its eyes blinked. (77)

Monkey, referred to as an “it” in certain instances, registers as less than human; his statue-like bearing and “stare” inspire a subtle sense of uncanny terror in Susan. His ambiguously gendered presentation, furthermore, contributes to his status as a posthuman subject, as a quasi-cyborg, but Susan does not share Haraway’s elation at binary breakdowns: “Definitely a young man, though he acts like gender’s the same as property, subject to infinite reversal” (73). Monkey is essentially *unrepresentable*, much like the mysterious collision of natural and technological cataclysm that destroys civilisation.

“Strag” culture, moreover, as a posthuman by-product of SnowWrite & RoseRead, is so hyper-connected to the digital and removed from the natural world that Monkey and others seem incapable of interacting with natural environments in normative ways. When first appearing at Susan’s house, Monkey recounts his surprise at “finding” the ocean; telling Susan that “it tried to ‘get’ him” when he fell asleep beside it. He responds with confusion when she asks “You mean the tide came in?” underlining his profound disconnection from the natural world and its processes (75). We also learn that Strag culture celebrates the “abolishment” of individual expression and identity by the SW&RR programme, whereas Susan laments it: “Nowadays, [Monkey] said, things were so much better. Nothing could change you, because ‘you’ was all one thing” (76). In *Tour*, the “hive-mind” ethos embodied by digital culture unseats individuality. Monkey interprets this subjective upheaval in utopian terms, while Susan understands it as destroying individual agency, and by proxy the “natural” and the “human”.

Since the natural and technological apocalypses drawn in *Tour* narratively play out in such conflated terms, making it impossible to separate them out, one might be tempted to ask whether Davis’ novel truly draws meaningful distinctions between the

natural and the technological object, and thereby remains germane to reigning critical descriptions of the postmodern sublime. I would argue otherwise. The mysterious transference from awe-inspiring and dangerous Welsh natural landscapes and the “fall of mist” that unleashes the digitally fuelled apocalypse consistently reads as an event inspiring sublime terror. It is more closely attributable to the melancholy ambiguity, and anxiety, of *Frankenstein* than to the hallucinatory sublime of cyberpunk, with its depictions of figures inhabiting a wholly synthetic hyperreality bearing no nostalgia for a natural term, nor anxiety toward synthetic forces. In tone as much as in thematic content, Davis’s novel reformulates Romantic-era anxieties around technology and its incursion on both the “natural” and the “human”.

Notable American Women: *An uncanny gender dystopia*

The sublime horror inspired by new technological forces, and the latter’s potential to disrupt a purported “natural order” in social relations, are also central themes in Ben Marcus’s *Notable American Women*. Inversely to *Tour*, which depicts men abusing technological prowess and thereby disrupting the natural order, Marcus’s novel imagines a matriarchal coup facilitated by unrepresentable digital *and* natural processes, forging a terrifying posthuman society. Part experimental gender dystopia, part farcical reflection on language, embodiment, authorship, and virtuality in digital culture, *Women* depicts a female cult called the Silentists who overthrow patriarchal institutions through bizarre linguistic and technological regimes—including ones requiring total silence and stillness.

If the novel is replete with disturbing imagery drawn directly from Gothic conventions, it also reads as highly satirical, presenting itself as an anti-utopia from the outset. The epigraph, likely an ironic jab at the utopian optimism of Whitman’s *Leaves*, cites an excerpt from the nineteenth-century poet’s “Poems of Remembrance for a Young

Boy or Girl”: “I say an unnumbered new race of hardy and well-defined women are to spread through all These States” (“Poem of Remembrance”, 16). As if aiming to turn Whitman’s utopian, proto-feminist élan firmly onto its head: “I say a girl fit for These States must be free, capable, dauntless, just the same as a boy”, (17) Marcus’s novel subsequently presents a dysphoric fantasy imagining what might happen when female demagogues and incommensurable forces of nature and technology co-conspire to overthrow the patriarchal order.

Set in present-day Ohio, the highly self-referential narrative centres around the protagonist Ben Marcus—who may or may not be the author himself—recounting his terrifying, emasculating ordeals at the hands of the female cult (including his own mother), and led by the decidedly uncanny figurehead Jane Dark.²¹⁰ Ben Marcus’s first-person narrative thread is framed by letters from the protagonist’s mother and father, in a seeming nod to the Gothic epistolary novel and its emphasis on unreliable narrators and discordant perspectives.²¹¹

Women revisits the tradition of Luddite Romantic dystopias and their emphasis on what can go wrong when utopian ideologies are translated into social realities, especially when technological manipulation is involved. Sublime experiences with technology emerge with grotesque bodies that are technologically and linguistically manipulated, and that therefore exceed all capacity for representation. The tradition of the uncanny sublime, with nineteenth-century precedents in *Frankenstein* or “The Sandman”, is reiterated in this genre-defying text’s portrayal of the Silentists and their un-

²¹⁰ Since “The Silentists” carry out their revolution in Ohio in the 1960s and 1970s, we may read the novel in part as a parody of some of the significant feminist movements that sprung up in Ohio during the same decades, including radical feminist communities such as “Dayton Women’s Liberation”. See, for example, Judith Ezekiel’s *Feminism in the Heartland* (2002). In its focus on “women’s language”, the novel might also be commenting on feminist theories of language such as those elaborated during the 1980s by Catherine MacKinnon or Dale Spender (*Man-Made Language*, 1980), and positing that women must aim to create a language of their own to free themselves from patriarchy.

²¹¹ *Frankenstein*, Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), and Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) are only a few examples of nineteenth-century Gothic novels presented in this style.

representable, grotesque, not-quite-human bodies, “softened” and weakened in part through major restrictions on vocalisation and movement.

Similar to *Revolutions*, the strange events documented in *Women* acquire temporal context through catalogues of “Dates” interspersed throughout the novel, and presented interstitially with the narrator’s first-person accounts. The first of these is entitled “The Ohio Heartless” and opens in 1825 with “the first documented instance of the Female Jesus” in England, who “manifests” in a seven-year old girl and summons birds to form a protective circle around her.²¹² We learn that the birds are the original source of the “linguistic wind”: they ostensibly provide fuelling power for the technologies that Silentists will later develop and use to subjugate men with a new “female” language:

When her father attempts to rescue her, the birds are able to beat out a rudimentary language of ricocheted wind to command his own hand against him, and he dies, a suicide ... This form of barrier comes to be known as ‘Jesus Wind’. It will be used against men...to neutralize their language at the End of Sound protest in 1974. (81)

Marcus plays with traditional sublime affects and codes here: first, with the uncanny characterisation of the young “Female Jesus”—is she superhuman, or does she possess supernatural powers? —as well as drawing on images of powerful natural elements capable of eliciting sublime awe or terror (embodied by the eerie, Hitchcockian formation of birds and the fatal wind they produce). Moreover, *Women*, like Davis’s *Tour*, depicts a “transfer” of sorts from sublime experiences with natural objects to technological counterparts. If the Silentists’ subjugating language apparently has a “natural” source—a young girl possessed with a power to summon birds to her and use their wingbeats to generate ‘wind—this power is later mediated through a mysterious industrial “entity” or

²¹²Jane Dark is later known as “The Female Jesus”: once again playing on the notion that in Silentist society, personalities are worn and discarded like video game “skins” or avatars.

“deity” called Thompson, which colludes with Jane Dark in producing various technologies and devices to mould bodies (and tongues) with female language.

Marcus employs a digital and web-inspired lexicon in imagining a posthuman society. In his uncanny depictions of automaton-like women and shadowy leaders whose “flickering” presence alludes to digital technology, Marcus offers his own representation of encounters with the tech sublime, drawing on Romantic, Luddite discourse and adding a twist of anti-feminist rhetoric (whether earnest or self-reflexively parodic). Thus, the natural and the tech sublime co-exist and mingle in Marcus, but uneasily so; too, an emphasis on Gothic terror in the novel implicitly stages narrative debates between the natural, unnatural, and even the supernatural.

Disrupting the Name-of-the-Father

In a scenario that effectively inverts the Lacanian notion of the “Name-of-the-Father” and thus the Symbolic Order that the psychoanalyst sees as crucial to a normative signifying relationship to language,²¹³ Ben Marcus the Father has been locked underground and deprived of his privileges of (masculine) communication and authority. The Mother, Jane Marcus, a Silentist who collaborates with Jane Dark in subduing and abusing her son with female language and bodily manipulation, elaborately mimics motherly affection with grotesque, horrifying gestures that place her in the realm of the uncanny and disassociate her from “natural” feminine tenderness. The sinister cult leader Jane Dark, her slightly fleshier double Jane Marcus, and other Silentists are portrayed in *Women* as near-automatons or dolls: eerily posthuman creatures whose matriarchal, language and technology-based revolution has disrupted the psychosocial foundations of society. These are implicitly anchored in normative gender roles.

²¹³ See Lacan’s *Ecrits* (1966).

This discursive framework presented in *Women* seemingly alludes to Lacan's Symbolic Order: in the toppling of the Name-of-the-Father and the implicitly unnatural dominance of "feminine" language, the Silentist society's signifying processes are marked as abnormal and disquietingly, sublimely *inhuman*. In Lacanian terms, the Silentist society is effectively psychotic, in the strict sense of perpetuating a ruptured and non-normative relationship to language. If the classical humanist subject is traditionally male, Marcus's novel seems, in decidedly anti-feminist fashion, to suggest that making that subject *female* is inherently dangerous and *unnatural*.

Echoing Davis's *Tour*, digital technology is the subject of anti-utopian critique and sublime anxiety in *Women*. While the Silentists' unrepresentable technological processes are less explicitly affiliated with the digital than those of *Tour*'s Strag society, *Women*'s repeated allusions to web culture and language denote digitality as an affront to individual expression, consciousness and embodiment—replacing these with a totalitarian "hive mind" consciousness and post-human corporeality denoted in sublime terms. The novel is replete with terminology relating to digital networks and data: In Silentist society, people and behaviours are mysteriously regulated by "system requirements" (46), "source code[s]" (70), or "frequency" (45). The narrator Ben Marcus describes how his existence has been shaped by an industrial "scheme" orchestrated by Jane Dark, who herself begins only as a shadowy "construct" rather than as a person:

My life has been lived under the strategic nourishment of the Thompson Food Scheme, a female eating system (FEAST) devised by an early Jane Dark deity construct named Thompson, who later become an actual person, though not a good one. (65)

Dark's name is fitting, since her corporeality seems closer to negative space or shadow than to flesh; she is drawn throughout as not-quite-human: "Dark's shadow blotted the wall in pristine geometries, smooth globs of shade *too perfect-looking to fall from a real*

person” (105, emphasis mine). Earlier, we learn that Dark, who has appeared in “1.0” and “2.0” versions, “can neither speak nor be spoken to, a deprivation of language that causes her hands to wither” (85). Her inability to produce proper “linguistic” vocalisations accentuates her uncanniness: elsewhere in the novel, she makes sounds resembling “hissing” or wind; her lack of capacity to vocalise normatively distances her from normative understandings of the human.

A recent iteration in a long Gothic literary tradition, Jane Dark figures as a digital-age re-imagining of nineteenth-century Gothic figures such as the sinister Coppelius and his Double, Spalanzani, in Hoffmann’s “Sandman”: their eerie liminality and “shadowy” presence mark them as uncanny. Early in Hoffman’s novella, Nathanael is disturbed by the strange hissing emitted from between Coppelius’s teeth (89); later, the protagonist notes Spalanzani’s spectral presence, in terms quite similar to Ben’s description of the shadowy Jane Dark: “[His] steps sounded hollow, and his figure, surrounded by flickering shadows, had an uncanny, ghostly appearance” (110).

Echoing Hoffmann’s meditation on technology and its uncanny capacity to lead astray the senses and their empirical grasp of the world—in this case, the inability to accurately distinguish between the human and its mechanical double—the technological sublime in *Women* operates in the *unheimliche* gap of epistemological and ontological uncertainty. Is Jane Dark human, or has she been engineered into something unspeakably, terrifyingly *other*? Is Ben Marcus’s Mother a “real” mother, or has she been technologically manipulated to become, in effect, a grotesque automaton, merely performing motherly affection? Ben Marcus the narrator describes his relationship with his mother in terms of such hollow mimicry:

[B]owing her head toward mine as if she might embrace me, then *miming* a series of quick dry kisses in the windless vicinity of my cheeks, chewing at the air, her mouth pinched into a pale wrinkle, no

color in her face at all. *If I moved to meet her, to feel solid contact with her kiss, she shied just away from my gesture, always keeping a smooth column of air between us, a no man's land that no one could enter.* (107, emphasis mine)

Sublime, technologically manipulated bodies in Marcus inhabit a “no man’s land that no one can enter”, an empty and shadowy space that is entirely unlike normative corporeality (and again, one that echoes the nihilistic sublime in its emphasis on empty spaces). The familial relationships that underpin and support the normative symbolic order and the classical humanist subject are reduced to horrific pantomime. Developing the persistent theme of dolls, doubles, and automatons, uncanny horror grows more acute when Jane Marcus performs her motherly duties on a mannequin resembling Ben Marcus: “She pressed its head into her bosom. Her face was plastered into a smile, stretched so wide it could have been a grimace of pain” (162). The wide, unsettling grimace marking someone as uncanny or even supernaturally monstrous, still so prevalent in the codes of contemporary Gothic horror, denotes the uncanny artificiality of the mother-son relationship in *Women*.

While men seem to suffer the most from bodily and linguistic subjugation in Silentist society—they are systematically raped, left to atrophy, and deprived of “masculine” linguistic authority—young women’s bodies are also subject to violent modifications. Bodies are treated as malleable and interchangeable commodities in the dystopian Silentist society: comparable to industrial prototypes, or to the “skins” that players of video games may adopt, modify or discard to endow their avatars. People often come in “models” and “versions” (1.0 or 2.0, likening bodies to computer operating systems or programmes); each model is endowed with distinctive personality features and linguistic capabilities or constraints. Moreover, the “stillness” regime imposed by Jane Dark renders girls’ bodies nearly lifeless, so that they, too, resemble dolls or automatons:

The stillness rehearsals of the girls had made them unfit for simple movement. They were too good at doing nothing, and now their bodies were soft and pudgy, with skin spilled slowly over the air, a bright red mouth bubbling somewhere in it, some dull hair dashed over the top. (108)

Again, Hoffmann's Gothic tale constructs uncanny bodies and doll-like figures using similar conventions. Nathanael's friend Sigmund describes the strange Olympia as a 'dummy' and a "wax doll" (111). Sigmund observes of the woman we later learn to be an automaton:

Her gait is curiously measured, as though her every movement were produced by some mechanism like clockwork. She plays and sings with the disagreeably perfect, soulless timing of a machine ... Olympia gave us a very weird feeling ... we felt that she was only pretending to be a living being, and that there was something very strange about her. (*Ibid.*)

Like "The Sandman" and its focus on the body as a new terrain for "weird feeling[s]", of the technological sublime and its uncanny effects, Marcus's *Women* stages a narrative universe in which people (and women in particular) come in standardised models: "Tinas" and "Erins" and "Patricias" are, rather than individuals in the classical humanist sense, merely operating systems equipped with standardised features, and accompanied by user's manuals describing these characteristics.

The Erin is a key girl in many American houses. It is often misnamed Julie, Joanne, or Samantha, and sometimes it is clothed as a man. As a man, it is still beautiful ... persons that see it are eager to palm the spot where the woman parts would be, to sweep and pan their hands over the heat of the man that is hiding her ... (142)

"The Erin" is a prototype human rather than a genuine person: identified by an object pronoun, easily exchanged with other "girls" or even facilely "dressed" in drag. In the gender dystopia of Silenist society, bodies are not only standardised and interchangeable, but are also *worryingly* queered and intersexed. The classical humanist (male) subject is

essentially destroyed by the Silenist revolution, replacing “real” individuals with cyborg-like models or prototypes that are only notionally people. Their ambiguous gendering is only one of many symptoms indicating that they have strayed from “normative” subjectivity.

If we read Marcus’s novel partially as a response to digital culture’s “pressures toward dematerialization” (Hayles 1999, 30), we might understand the borderline posthuman, sublime bodies in these texts in terms of corporeal “flickering” or inherent randomness and instability. Hayles argues that digital technologies effectuate an “epistemic shift” away from the Derridean metaphysical framework of presence/absence to one of pattern/randomness:

[I]nformation technologies create what I will call flickering signifiers, characterized by their tendency toward unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, and dispersions. Flickering signifiers signal an important shift in the plate tectonics of language ... Even narratives without this focus can hardly avoid the rippling effects of informatics, however, for the changing modes of signification affect the codes as well as the subjects of representation. (30)

Jane Dark’s shadowy, unsettling corporeality is less easily defined in terms of presence and absence and seems to better correspond to Hayles’s notion of digital “flickering”:

She patted at herself while lunging, creating a complication of limbs I could not decode or even watch without feeling nauseous. The shadow she made on the wall looked like a house, slowly dismantling. It seemed to have very little to do with her body—the lines were too delicate and numerous, the shadow too intricate, but it moved exactly as her limbs did, swelling and shrinking as she changed her position in front of the window. (*Women* 111)

Here, Jane Dark’s shadow—the trace for her entirely unrepresentable, sublime corporeality—resembles the “flickering” of digital immateriality described by Hayles. Where do bodies stand, and what do they now mean, in a digital culture that no longer substantiates or supports traditional notions of corporeality?

In *Women's* Silentist society, which severely restricts language and vocalisation, experience necessarily grossly exceeds all capacity to represent it: hence, estrangement from normative language and technological manipulation of the body combine to produce a sense of sublime terror and uncanny narrative effects. While *Women* might just as easily be read as a farcical postmodern joke about language and the contemporary collapse in distinctions between signs and signifiers; or shifting, malleable notions of what exactly constitutes the “real”, Marcus’s novel nonetheless borrows from the Romantic Gothic narrative certain narrative conventions. Chief among these is the dysphoric rendering of new technology and its capacity to distort or even entirely disrupt the meaning of terms such as “human”, “body”, and “voice”.

Jennifer Egan’s “Black Box” (2012), serially published in discrete blocks of 140 characters (maximum) on the social media platform Twitter,²¹⁴ also explores themes of posthuman subjectivity and technologically modified bodies, drawing from Gothic uncanny codes in ways similar to Marcus. The story is told from the perspective of an unnamed character issuing a set of laconic, mechanical instructions to an American female spy, one of many “beauties” infiltrating a criminal cell in the South of France.²¹⁵ The spy is on a mission to obtain secrets from one of the crime cell’s members, her “Designated Mate”; her instructor gives her detailed commands on how to behave in an ideally feminine and docile manner so as not to arouse suspicions. So far, the story reads as an acerbic feminist speculative narrative commenting on the performative nature of femininity and the confining nature of gender roles; as well, perhaps, as a dystopian account of American foreign policy and will to power in an unspecified future. The

²¹⁴ The story initially appeared in the May 2012 print edition of *The New Yorker*, with text divided among 47 square blocks delineated by solid black lines. The print version of the story is cited here, with citations referring to box numbers 1 through 47.

²¹⁵ While Egan has stated in numerous interviews that the story’s main protagonist is meant to be Lulu, a character from her 2011 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, no explicit mention is made of this connection in “Black Box”.

theme of technologically manipulated bodies is one that has permeated science and speculative fiction from its origins. However, what makes Egan's experimental speculative narrative particularly interesting in the context of this research is her subtle use of Romantic sublime and uncanny codes.

The main "beauty's" body is embedded with mechanical and synthetic features, including recording equipment, data storage, and vital monitoring systems; she is ostensibly a cyborg. "Your physical person is our Black Box; without it, we have no record of what has happened on your mission", the unnamed narrator tells the heroine" (Box 38). Readers—at least those who have not read interviews with Egan discussing Beauty's previous appearance as Lulu in *Goon Squad*—are left unable to determine whether the protagonist is simply a human being whose body has been technologically augmented to render her a cyborg, or whether she is, in fact, an entirely synthetic robot or perhaps even a human clone: she remains an uncanny and unrepresentable figure, similar to Hoffmann's Olympia, the Strag boy in Davis's *Tour*, or Marcus's Jane Dark.

Your Field Instructions, stored in a chip
beneath your hairline, will serve as both a
mission log and a guide for others
undertaking this work.

Pressing your left thumb (if right-handed)
against your left middle fingertip begins
recording ...

When your mission is complete, you may
view the results of the download before
Adding your Field instructions to your
Mission File.

Where stray or personal thoughts have
intruded, you may delete them. (Box 15)

The female spy's mind is entirely assimilated to and incorporated with (digital) storage devices, making it difficult to assess whether she is human, machine, or something in-between. Furthermore, having no narrative voice of her own, the spy is available to us only through the drone-like, mechanical instructions issued in the second-person narration; these aggregate to suggest that while the "beauty" is indeed capable of emotions such as love and fear, these emotions are equally suspect to specific protocols: "This more profound isolation may register, at first, as paralysis. / If it soothes you to lie back in the dirt, then lie back" (Box 28). Like *Women's Silentists*, emotions and behaviours are the subject of strict regulatory protocols; the body and its gestures are also a site of elaborate ritual and manipulation. Egan's emphasis on technologically manipulated, liminal bodies shares with Marcus an additional interest in the potentially grotesque power of gestures; and in their ability to produce uncanny effects:

The Roar must be accompanied by facial
contortions and frenetic body movements
Suggesting a feral, unhinged state. (Box 38)

A smile is like a shield; it freezes your face
into a mask of muscle you can hide
behind. (Box 41)

Evoking Marcus's earlier-cited image of Jane Dark's wide, grotesque smile mimicking motherly love, an emphasis here on highly gestural, performative affect renders the "beauty" highly uncanny, and even horrifying. While Egan's story might be read as advancing a feminist critique of the objectification of female corporeality; or perhaps as an excoriation of the psychological and physical violence of misogyny, her speculative tale shares common ground with Marcus's. Are the story's mechanistic, laconic instructions in fact an elaborate set of programming, a data set that gives the spy an

illusion of being a cohesive personality, and indeed even a person? The story never offers a definitive answer, drawing the text in subtle relation to the Gothic uncanny, even in the absence of haunted houses, ghosts, or other spectral figures. The technological sublime in Egan is, then, one situated in and through uncanny corporeality.

Natural sublime imagery also occasionally appears in Egan's story, adding a sense of dramatic affect to an otherwise emotionally flat second-person narrative, and drawing a natural term in juxtaposition to a technological one. The moon, sea, and stars in particular are drawn in ways that echo Romantic natural sublime conventions:

A bright moon can astonish, no matter
how many times you have seen it....

If your Personal Calming Source is the
moon, be grateful that it is dark and that
The moon is especially bright. (Box 20)

At night, far from shore, stars pulse with a
strength that is impossible to conceive of
In the proximity of light.

Your whereabouts will never be a mystery;
You will be visible at all times as a dot of
light on the screens of those watching
Over you. (Box 22)

In the passages above, the moon and stars appear as sources of incommensurable pleasure and mystery: the bright moon "can astonish", irrespective of the number of times one views it; stars "pulse with a strength that is impossible to conceive of". In Egan's story, populated by posthuman figures whose bodies are entirely assimilated to digital technologies, the natural realm is, remarkably perhaps, still present; its immeasurable

quality still registers as a source of awe. This is not a cyber-realm entirely divorced from the natural world.

Furthermore, light generated by the natural bodies of the moon and stars are ambiguously juxtaposed to points of light on a screen generated by the surveillance technology tracking the spy. Such a juxtaposition might, on one hand, suggest a conflation of the natural and technological sublime object; a conflation that would seem to vindicate the premise that postmodern versions of the sublime easily blur these terms or no longer distinguish between them at all. On the other hand, however, the juxtaposition of the moon and stars to the “dot of light on the screens” might instead be understood as sharply contrasting the mystery of natural sublime objects to the horrors of technological surveillance and manipulation: whereas the former’s dimensions are “impossible to conceive of”, the spy is told that her “whereabouts will never be a mystery”. Sublimity turns, here, from the macrocosmic pleasure of pondering far-off, incommensurable bodies to the tightly constrained, microscopic space of a computer screen inhabited with points of artificial light, and the loss of personal autonomy represented by surveillance. From this standpoint, the passage might be understood to reproduce the Romantic Luddite humanist tradition of regarding technological development with a mingled sense of dread and scientific curiosity, and contrasting it to a natural sublime counterpart. Egan’s ambiguous tale does not invite straightforward interpretations of any kind; but it presents another example of late postmodern experimental writing that inventively juxtaposes the natural and the tech sublime.

House of Leaves: Spatial disruptions and the digital sublime

In Danielewski’s debut novel *House of Leaves*, a digital-age reformulation of the *unheimlich* is almost comically literalised in the tale of a spontaneously expanding house,

whose interior measurements do not match the exterior ones by an initial discrepancy of three-quarters of an inch. Discovering that physical and spatial laws have been radically disrupted and no longer hold up within the unwieldy walls of the strange House—capitalised and printed in hyperlink-blue throughout the novel, leading many critics to assume that it stands in, in metonymic fashion, for digital space—the inhabitants are seized by a sense a sense of sublime incomprehension that gradually escalates into terror and madness.²¹⁶ In many ways a playfully postmodern adaptation of the nineteenth-century haunted house narrative,²¹⁷ *House* appropriates the Gothic sublime mode and several key narrative conventions around terrifying interior spaces, exemplified in tales such as Poe’s 1839 “Fall of the House of Usher”.²¹⁸

However, in Danielewski’s novel, and as Mark Hansen and other critics have suggested, the unsettling experience of the *unheimlich* is tied not to a hesitation between natural or supernatural interpretations of the uncanny event;²¹⁹ but to the sudden appearance—or indeed, *invasion*—of non-normative space and its incommensurable processes. *House* reads partly as an elaborate meditation on the unrepresentable nature of digital media and our inability to mimetically capture reality in the digital age, to grasp any object in holistic terms. Despite extensive efforts to document the House and its yawning “ten minute hallway” with (analogue) video by the photojournalist Navidson, it refuses to be captured, measured, or wholly accounted for. Mark Hansen argues: “The fictional house can and must be understood as a figure for the digital: it challenges

²¹⁶ Hansen notes: “The blue ink of the word “house” in the work’s title transforms this keyword into something like a portal to information located elsewhere, both within and beyond the novel’s frame” (2004, 598). In the novel, the word “house” might be understood to stand in for the digital other, or the print novel’s un-representable outside.

²¹⁷ In the tradition of Borges’s 1962 collection of short stories *Labyrinths*, for example.

²¹⁸ In an interview with *The New York Times*, Danielewski ties *House* to the Gothic haunted house tradition: “Discovering dark energy in a home and being willing to explore it is a noble goal. You may discover a darkness in your own mind, and it’s not so easy to flee. Are you going to outrace it or are you going to try to deal with it?” (Kurutz 2012)

²¹⁹ See Todorov’s analysis of Poe’s tale in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970).

techniques of orthographic recording and, by evading capture in any form, reveals the digital to be a force resistant to orthothesis as such, to be the very force of fiction itself” (2004, 610-611).

In *House*, the failure of technology to accurately represent reality is a persistent and melancholy theme. The perpetually shifting physicality of the house—easily relatable to digital space—promises only epistemological dead ends. “The Navidson Record”, a (fictional) account of a (fictional) documentary revolving around the uncanny Virginia house on Ash Lane, thus describes Will Navidson’s filmic efforts as a complete failure: “[I]n lieu of a schematic, the film offers instead a schismatic rendering of empty rooms, long hallways, and dead ends, perpetually promising but forever eluding the finality of an immutable layout” (*House* 109).²²⁰

The technological sublime in Danielewski is therefore initially predicated on a notion of (analogue) technology’s resounding failure to capture a shifting reality in the face of new technological processes. Digital space eludes all presentation, or rendering in an “immutable layout”. *House* adapts the Romantic Luddite tradition of depicting sublime encounters with new technology in terms of engulfment, terror, and disorientation. It marks digitality in particular as a potential threat to how we understand and interact with our environment (and thus our own subjectivity). The house’s gaping, constantly shifting hallways and corridors, which can be neither mimetically captured nor linguistically represented and leave no empirical traces, mark digitality as fundamentally empty; a kind of nihilistic sublime space that profoundly troubles traditional subjectivity and textuality.

²²⁰ *House* is a metanarrative in extremis: “The Navidson Record” is in fact an unpublished print manuscript about a fictional documentary film, written by a late, blind recluse named Zampano and discovered by tattoo artist and drifter Johnny Truant. Truant describes his descent into madness following the reading of the uncanny narrative of the “house on Ash Lane”. This labyrinthine narrative structure seems to double that of the fictional House.

Responding to this new media ecology, the experimental print novel might be understood as an embodied object resistant to the nihilistic quality of the digital. At times virtually un-readable in its self-referential glossing, innumerable references to literary and popular culture, tedious and parodic footnoting, and experimental layout, *House* seemingly presents itself as an antidote to this encroachment by digital space. It points to the former's tangible materiality and taxonomic density as a counterpoint to the uncanny un-traceability of the house—or to the digital. For Hansen, *House* and its emphasis on print materiality—specifically, its ability to “imitate” analogue recording technology and the reliable traces it leaves behind—formulates itself as a response to the digital that ends up underlining and reinforcing a notion of print's supremacy: “Even as it reconfigures the novel from storytelling vehicle to interface onto a virtually limitless universe of information, the thematisation of mediation serves first and foremost to foreground the paradoxical privilege enjoyed by print in today's new media ecology” (2004, 611). If *House* was initially hailed by many as a “digital” novel because of its self-conscious meditation on digital technology, it perhaps more easily qualifies as a text that imagines itself as a force of resistance to digitality's unrepresentable, ephemeral textures, and, finally, as an assertion of print's supremacy.

“There's nothing there...”

House's co-optation of the Romantic technological sublime manifests itself early in the novel with the foreboding presentation of a strange, recognisably Gothic House. The “Navidson Record” section opens with direct references to Milton's *Paradise Lost* and to the foreboding sign posted at the “entrance” to Dante's *Inferno*: “*Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate*” (*House* 4). The doomed photojournalist Navidson echoes the Dantean warning to “abandon hope” in early (metafictional) video footage: “[A]ll this, don't take

it as anything but *this*. And if one day you find yourself passing by the house, don't stop, don't slow down, just keep going. There's *nothing there*. Beware" (4, emphasis mine).

What marks the strange house as unsettling and potentially capable of inspiring sublime feeling is its fundamental emptiness, its "nothing-there"-ness. Beyond these foreboding preambles, the house is consistently described in nihilistic terms. Midway through "The Navidson Record", the text stretches out over several pages to imitate the uncanny lengthening of (empty) space in the house's labyrinthine, corridors, and describing the eye's inability to grasp the *nihil* of that space: "The dark line where the / eye persists in seeing /something that was never there / [To] begin with" (202-205; slashes indicate page breaks).

A discourse of nihilistic sublimity subsequently resurfaces in descriptions of media and its failure to present reality in mimetic and stable terms; hence, the end of "The Navidson Record" notes: "The film runs out here / leaving nothing else behind but an unremarkable / white / screen" (307-311). Formal devices reinforce the emphasis on blank space. Interspersed over several pages, this single line of text is interrupted by a blank page and followed by a solid black dot resembling a film changeover cue, marking the end of the "sequence".²²¹ This unnerving textual imitation of white noise at the end of Zampano's imagined documentary reiterates Danielewski's engagement with the Burkean sublime; its emphasis on the mind's paralytic, horrified inability to come to terms with an object.

"A goddamn spatial rape"

The breaching of physical laws is a theme that permeates "The Navidson Record", with uncanny and irregular experiences of echoes being one major manifestation of sublime

²²¹ See Van Hulle's analysis (2011) of Danielewski's imitation of film technology in *Revolutions*; the "changeover cue" is but one example of how print seems to mimic the temporal logic of analogue technology in both novels.

experience in the strange Virginian abode. Navidson's engineer friend Billy Weston describes the House's shape-shifting halls and corridors as "a goddamn spatial rape" (55). For one, the House subverts normative laws of physics by producing abnormal echoes—ones that make objects or people sound further away or closer than they are, or that seem unusually shortened: "At one point she walks up to the threshold and lets out a little yelp, but the cry just flattens and dies in the narrow corridor ... As the dead bolt glances the strike plate, the resulting click creates an unexpected and very unwelcome echo" (61).

Eventually, however, the "ten-minute hallway" ceases to produce any echo at all, leaving behind no empirical trace and subsequently marked as even more unpresentable: "During 'Exploration #4 [Navidson] even asks aloud, 'How the fuck did I end up here?' The house responds with a resounding silence. No divine attention. Not even an amaurotic guide" (21).

This disturbing absence of echoes is explicitly associated with the digital and contrasted to the analogue and its comforting "traces" in a passage that refers to the eponymous Grecian goddess: "[Her] repetitions are far from digital, much closer to analog. Echo colors the world with faint traces of sorrow (The Narcissus myth) or accusation (The Pan myth) never present in the original" (41). The spatial anomaly represented by the house (the digital) has become radically other: "[W]here there is no Echo there is no description of space of love. There is only silence" (50). The House's constantly expanding hallways and corridors, suggesting digital technology and its departure from "comforting traces", from the naturalistic echo, is designated as radically empty; a nihilistic sublime space devoid of "love". If "divinity seems defined by echo" (46), a space producing no echoes, or only abnormal ones, reveals an absolute absence of such divinity, of a potential something *beyond*. In its resounding silence and emptiness, it holds zero potential for a transcendent term; in this sense, sublime experience in *House*

can be related to the Burkean construct of nihilistic sublime experience explored so frequently in Gothic narratives. Benjamin's "aura" of authenticity attributed to traditional artworks and the sense that mediums like film are interpreted, in the age of mechanical reproduction, as lacking that aura, also appears as an important twentieth-century source; but ironically—and perhaps humorously—it is now *analogue* technology (including film) that *House* attributes a kind of aura to, designating digital technology as the *new* disruptive, empty force.²²²

One uncanny and terrifying sound disrupts the overwhelming emptiness and silence of the House, however: a growl emerges from the "ten minute hallway" and seems to draw closer over the course of Navidson's explorations, menacingly encroaching on him and his cohort of explorers. Various theories are presented to explain the sinister growling—Navidson at first believes it is the sound produced "when the house alters its internal layout" (95)—but the monstrous growl remains as indecipherable and impossible to capture or define as the space itself; it becomes yet another ineffable object of sublime terror.

At first inspiring a mere sense of unease, just as the house's extraneous three-quarters of an inch does at the outset, the growling sound eventually terrifies Navidson and his cohorts. As the sound seems to grow closer, strange perforations appear in their equipment, and objects simply disappear. "Upon seeing the torn marker and their lost water, [Holloway] seems to transfigure the eerie sound into an utterance made by some definitive creature, thus providing him with something concrete to pursue" (123-124).

²²² Benjamin discusses how new forms such as film provoke anxiety due to the sense of emptiness they inspire: their lack of perceived "aura" renders them outside the normative bounds of representation and corporeal appreciation. He imagines the internal feelings of someone watching a film: "With a vague sense of discomfort he feels incredible emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence ..." (231). Perhaps in a self-conscious nod to Benjamin (not unlike Gaddis's in *Agapē*), the House as a space that leaves no traces seems to paint digitality in similar terms.

Elsewhere, the Gothic trope of a monstrous but unrepresentable presence—yet another convention ubiquitously deployed in horror and suspense films—is used to full effect. In “footage” that evokes the shaky, hand-held camera-fuelled pathos of cult “mockumentary” horror films like “The Blair Witch Project” (1999), Holloway reports being lost, out of food and water, and is terrified by this presence: “There’s something here. It’s following me. No, it’s stalking me . . . It’s waiting, waiting for something. I don’t know what . . . I’m not alone” (5). The horror later culminates when Jed and Wax collapse in a corner of the expanding house, both on the verge of death.

[Jed] tells the camera he will go no further, even though the growl seems to be closing in around them. In the final shot, Jed focuses the camera on the door. Something is on the other side, hammering against it, over and over again. Whatever comes for those who are never seen again has come from him, and Jed can do nothing but focus the camera on the hinges as the door slowly begins to give way. (151)

In this passage, *House* fulfils the usual prescriptions of the Gothic horror tale, culminating with the camera focusing on the door and its hinges slowly giving way to an unspeakable, terrifying “it” on the opposite side. But the potential horror is partially flattened or counteracted by self-consciousness: a footnote from Johnny Truant that corrects the grammar of the second sentence, reading “Typo. Should read ‘for’” (151). While *House* overtly plays with Gothic conventions, it also undercuts its own horror-story credentials through self-conscious interruptions and corrective footnotes. As a result, the novel counteracts and flattens any potential effects of pathos or nihilistic terror by introducing academic-style self-referentiality.

From the sublime...to the “stuplime”?

Zampano’s narrative voice has the (parodied) ring of a literary critic’s, and from the outset, before we are even able to ourselves ascribe genre conventions to the text, we are

supplied with an elaborate critical vocabulary through which to frame the “documentary” described in “The Navidson Record”: “If finally catalogued as a gothic tale, contemporary urban folkmyth, or merely a ghost story, as some have called it, the documentary will ... slip the limits of any one of those genres” (3). Early in the novel, Zampano glosses Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* and the German analytic philosopher’s analysis of anxiety and the uncanny. “What took place amounts to a strange spatial violation which has already been described in a number of ways...most of all uncanny. In German the word ‘uncanny’ is ‘unheimlich’ which Heidegger in his book *Sein und Zeit* thought worthy of some consideration” (24). Johnny Truant in turn performs his own glossing of Zampano’s reading (25). These overlapping glossings of Heidegger’s uncanny and other critical texts all but cancel out any uncanny “feelings” or effects generated by the story of the house. The novel ends up staging an interesting and arguably innovative form of tension between the powerful affective mode of sublime terror or intimations of mental transcendence excited by encounters with sublime objects, and the “dulling and irritating iterability” that Sianne Ngai refers to as the “stuplime” mode in postmodern texts.

In *Ugly Feelings*, and pointing to massive, catalogue-like works such as Stein’s *The Making of Americans* (1925), Ngai argues that “astonishing” twentieth-century fictional narratives featuring taxonomic, exhaustive descriptions, agrammatical and non-normative syntactic features, and iterative repetitions are not best characterised as belonging to a sublime aesthetic tradition, but should rather be understood as part of a twentieth-century mutation she calls the stuplime. Rather than eliciting feelings of transcendent awe or nihilistic terror, affects characteristic of the “traditional” sublime, the stuplime can be described as a combined aesthetic effect of stupor, fatigue, and boredom, and fills in for “certain limitations in classic theories of the sublime that prevent it from

adequately accounting for the experience of boredom increasingly intertwined with contemporary experiences of aesthetic awe” (8). In contrast to Lyotard and other theorists of a postmodern sublime, who do not describe affective states of boredom or stupor as part of their account of incommensurable, contemporary experiences with art, technology, or language, Ngai contrasts “contemporary versions of the Kantian sublime” and their emphasis on “an experience of being astonished and overwhelmed by a vast and intimidating object” (*Ibid.*) to the “thick” or “muddy” effect of high modernist works from Stein or Beckett. While Ngai sees such a “stuplime” mode as fundamentally incompatible with the dramatic affective qualities of the Romantic sublime and its emphasis on terror and/or feelings of mental and spiritual transcendence, novels such as *House* arguably display competing and mutually confounding effects of sublime *and* stuplime aesthetics and discourse, yielding an interesting combined mode that may help us to better understand how late literary postmodernism takes back up the Romantic interest in strong affective states such as the sublime, but rarely seem to wholeheartedly subscribe to them. They instead dull or counteract them in a process that seems tied up in postmodern irony. A competing stuplime aesthetic mode complicates and seems to work against its sublime counterpart, dulling it and occasionally arguing against it in parodic fashion. The combined mode, finally, seems anchored in the postmodern voice, not only due to the narratives’ exhausted and exhausting self-referentiality, but in their refusal to “stick” to any one mood or mode, their resistance to any specific metanarrative.²²³

Multiple narrative threads work at extreme and often comical cross-purposes in *House*. Navidson’s warning instructs us to disregard the loud academic chatter and self-referential background noise intercepting and interrupting the Gothic “haunted house”

²²³ We can also understand the stuplime mode in these novels as part of (print) textual response to an overwhelming and continuous influx of data in the digital age. Ngai discusses how the “stuplime” mode often seems tied to technological processes or artificial systems, as opposed to being associated with “natural” encounters (36).

narrative, and to instead “take” the story in earnest, while the academic footnotes, interrupting narrative by Johnny Truant, or spatial and typographical experimentation constantly pulls us away from the “straight” Gothic story of the house on Ash Lane.²²⁴ *House* maintains a firmly postmodern narrative aesthetic and structure; its neo-Romantic representations of sublime experiences with technology are persistently complicated and even “dulled” by this structure.

Progressing through the labyrinthine novel, a sense of informational “overload”, narrative and formal disorganisation heightens. The main narrative development of “The Navidson Record” and the tale of the family's horrific encounters with the House are crowded out and sharply interrupted by contiguous text blocks. Taxonomic lists running down the side of the page or enclosed in mirroring “window panels” lined in blue, rambling footnotes barred with strike-throughs in red, or the parallel narrative voice of Johnny Truant all serve to obstruct and interrupt the diegetic progression of the Navidson Record story; they also “drag us down” into the text’s dense linguistic and formal elements.

A diegetic focus on the accumulation of scraps to try to address or fill the fundamental *nihil* of the House (and by corollary, of digital space) is formally and materially embodied in *House*’s encroaching lists and catalogues. Around page 119, the heretofore rather linear narrative presentation is “disrupted” by lists running along the left-hand side of the page and presented in “mirroring” square windows with identical text printed backwards on the overleaf page crowding out the main narrative.

²²⁴ However, Truant’s own descent into madness and fear of a monstrous presence encroaching on him echoes the terror of the explorers in “The Navidson Record.”

might be exemplified by the Temple of Jupiter, Diocletian's palace at Spalato, the gateway to the market at Miletus, Algeria's Timgad with its Arch of Trajan, apartment housing in Ostia, Trajan's Market in Rome, also in Rome, the Baths of Diocletian, the Basilica of Maxentius, Baths of Caracalla, the Temple of Venus, near the Golden House of Nero, Hadrian's Mausoleum, the Mausoleum of Caecilia Metella on the Via Appia, the Canopus of Hadrian's villa, the interior of the Pantheon, Hadrian's villa at Tivoli, or the Piazza d'Oro with peristyle court, and pavilions, or the Flavian Palace, the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii, plan of the Villa Jovis at Capri, Arch of Tiberius at Orange, France, Trajan's column in Rome, the Imperial Forum, Temple of Mars Ultor, Forum Augustum, Forum of Nerva, the Forum Romanum with the arch of Septimius Severus, the Arch of Titus and the Temple of Castor and Pollux, or in Spain the aqueduct at Segovia, or back in Rome the theatre of Marcellus, the Colosseum, the sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia, Praeneste with its axonometric reconstruction, the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, the Forum Boarium

Perhaps¹⁶⁵

perhaps whether split paver or red blunose
 or wall studs, firestopbing or braces not
 evidence of floor joists and joists or
 ledgers, bridging, girders, double plate,
 gaps, studs, ceiling joists, rafters, king
 posts, studs, side posts, ridge beams, collar
 ties, gusses, turning strips, or bed mounding
 (at least the stairs offer some detail): riser,
 treads, two large metal posts, one at the top
 and one at the bottom, capped and con-
 nected with a single curved baluster sup-
 ported by counters (balusters) though
 among other things no wallpaper, veneer,
 plaster, Baldwin locks, any sign of glass,

here

is as good a place
 any to consider some
 the ghosts haunti
The Navidson Reco
 And since more than
 handful of people ha
 pointed out similarit

Figure 10: “Stuplime” effects in *House*, 165

The appearance of these lists coincides with the narrator’s meditation on the overwhelming vacuity of the House’s extra rooms and hallways. Referring to Holloway’s futile search for evidence of an “outside” to the abysmal space, the narrator comments:

This desire for exteriority is no doubt further amplified by the utter blankness found within. Nothing there provides a reason to linger. In part because not one object, let alone fixture or other manner of finish work has ever been discovered there. (119)

The lists embody what the narrator describes as Holloway’s “desire for exteriority” and points *negatively* to the “objects, fixtures”, and architectural styles that the House’s expanding extra space does *not* include or embody. The “mirror” text boxes, bordered in the same blue fonts the font used for the House, echoes the main narrative’s emphasis on what the abysmal interiors lack:

Not only are there no hot-air registers, return air vents, or radiators, cast iron or other, or cooling systems—condenser, reheat coils, heating convector, damper, concentrator, dilute solution, heat exchanger, absorber ... double-wall duct, and Loloss™ Tee ... (119)

Carried over several pages in the same blue-bordered boxes, the catalogue of housing implements, fittings, and architectural styles operates as an inverted mirror of the House's nihilistic character; it might be considered a formal expression of *horror vacui*.

Beginning on page 120, new database-like lists name architectural movements and famous buildings and structures on the left side of the page; architects throughout history on the right (the latter printed upside-down and in italics). The taxonomic and droning tone of the lists effectively stamps out the narrative suspense and sublime horror developed around Holloway's "Exploration #4" of the House. We are instead drawn down into the page's materiality and the iterative, dull rhythm of the lists; a sense of stupor and boredom may arise when considering whether to read all of the entries in the catalogues, or to scan them. Sublime and stuplime affective and aesthetic modes thus tensely intertwine and compete, and rhythms of reading shift accordingly.

The rambling lists seem self-enclosed and finite: a feature Ngai ties to the stuplime mode, contrasting it to the supposedly infinite quality of the sublime. There are, after all, only so many notable architects, world buildings or housing features to include in the lists; on the other, their rote "spewing off" of information associates them with digital databases, perpetually growing and updating, in the image of the House and its own unstable layout:

Of course rooms, corridors, and the occasional spiral staircase are themselves subject to patterns of arrangement ... However, considering the constant shifts, the seemingly endless redefinition of route ... describes a layout in no way reminiscent of any modern floorplans let alone historical experiments in design. (120)

The House's constantly shifting, unrepresentable layout seems to speak to digital technology's own ephemeral and perpetually changing stores of data: their "seemingly endless redefinition of route" confounds and stupefies, but also inspires a sense of unease

and sublime feeling toward a system that seems too boundless to cognitively grasp as a whole. Finally, though, *House* is an example of a late postmodern novel that brings together both sublime *and* stuplime modes to create simultaneous effects of horror and boredom, Gothic pathos and dulling iterativity.

From caves to digital chasms: the natural to the tech sublime

Unlike *Revolutions*, in which Hailey and Sam's encounters with "The Mountain" and other natural landscapes marks an intense re-engagement with Romantic literary depictions of the natural sublime and its dangers, *House* seems to more closely match Tabbi's description of a postmodern sublime mode focused mostly on encounters with incommensurable technology: in this case, digital technology. However, allusions to the Romantic, natural sublime are far from absent in Danielewski's earlier novel. In a process somewhat similar to Davis's in *Tour*, *House* "transfers" or transposes experiences of the sublime from encounters with natural landscapes to encounters with constructed or technological spaces, drawing explicit analogies between these. When Navidson and his team discover an enormous spiral staircase measuring "over two hundred feet in diameter" (85) has formed in one of the house's new rooms, the narrator compares their awe at the incommensurability of the place to the sublime disbelief experienced by American cavers in Mexico's Sierra Madre Oriental.

One of the cavers described his experience. "I was suspended in a giant dome with thousands of birds circling in small groups near the vague blackcloth of the far walls. Moving slowly down the rope, I had the feeling that I was descending into an illusion and would soon become part of it as the distances became unrelatable and entirely unreal." (85-86)

The "unrelatable and entirely unreal" distances of the Mexican caves are directly compared to those of the House's own incommensurable dimensions. Similarly, "The

Navidson Record” later compares the explorers of the Ash Lane House and their ordeals to those experienced by seventeenth-century English navigator Hudson and his sublime encounters with Arctic landscapes: “This labyrinth of blue ice drifting in water cold enough to kill a man in a couple of minutes tested and finally outstripped the resolve of Hudson’s crew...Unlike Hudson, Holloway went willingly into that labyrinth” (136-137).

Such comparisons between encounters with natural and wholly unnatural—or even supernatural—landscapes effectively blur demarcations between these. However, while one might infer that *House* neatly matches the description of a postmodern sublime mode that no longer respects distinctions between the natural and the technological, Danielewski’s neo-Gothic focus on horrifying or uncanny objects marking a rupture with normative reality and subjectivity nevertheless suggests an implicit debate around *naturalness*. The House at Ash Lane marks an eerie, liminal space that cannot be properly accounted for, that seems to betray natural physical laws and hover between the natural and the supernatural; it therefore elicits strong anxiety. The hallway simultaneously figures as a quasi-organic extension of the house’s “body” or of the occupants’ minds; at the same time, it advances the digital as an uncanny and threatening space that eludes all “accurate” medial representation. In this sense, the novel’s focus on the digital realm as a new potential object of sublime horror revisits the Romantic Luddite tradition of drawing new technological forces as potential threats to classical humanist subjectivity: again, *House* describes the digital as a threat to both “divinity” and “love”. As a result, even if the text does confound natural and technological objects of sublimity to more closely concur with reigning theories of the postmodern sublime, *House* does not wholly abandon debates around the natural. Instead, it addresses new stages of technological development as threatening to extant standards of normative spatial and subjective experiences: in this case, analogue technologies register as “natural”, while digitality

does not: the latter figures as an aberrance. This arguably works to complicate, and challenge, the notion of a postmodern sublime that takes no interest in drawing lines between the natural and unnatural.

Conclusion

This research has attempted to unearth how, and why, a specific set of recent American experimental texts romanticise the dual upheavals of digital revolution and unprecedented ecological risk. It sought to understand why this late postmodern crisis fiction addresses these defining contemporary upheavals in antinomian and confounded terms, drawing from recognisably Romantic preoccupations, poetic idioms, discursive and formal strategies to do so. Intervening in a vibrant scholarly field probing the ties between postmodern and Romantic literary modes, it attempted to more clearly historicise such ties. While major studies comparing postmodernism and Romanticism have identified significant parallels between the concerns and according literary strategies of the long nineteenth century and those of the late capitalist era, this research deployed methods of cultural history to trace more concrete intellectual lineages between Romantic and postmodern literary strategies, and especially between New England Transcendentalism and late postmodern American fiction.

Drawing from Apter et al.'s "critical arraignment" of nineteenth-century literary historicism, this research identified an "untimed" Romantic legacy in late postmodern American crisis fiction, and sought to unearth how this fiction is complicatedly informed by multiple Romantic and neo-Romantic discourses and poetic constructs. It worked to demonstrate how late postmodern fictional accounts of upheaval are indebted not only to transatlantic literary writings of the long nineteenth century; but also to twentieth-century, neo-Romantic countercultural ideas.

Several enduring Romantic preoccupations and idioms, including personal and spatiotemporal boundary-breaking; the sublime and the uncanny; and the natural world as a site of great importance and risk, might best be considered as unbounded from traditional periodisation. This thesis identified those particular preoccupations and idioms as strong undercurrents in American literary imagination throughout modernity and postmodernity, periodically resurging in specific neo-Romantic iterations. From this standpoint, late postmodern crisis fictions appear as one such iteration. They emerge as expressions of “late-flowering” Romanticism (Waugh 3), further undergirding the “cultural unconscious” of Romantic ideology in postmodernity (Clayton 8).

However, rather than maintaining that late postmodern crisis fictions are reminiscent of Romantic writings primarily because their contemporary accounts of exponential changes and attendant cognitive effects are appreciably parallel to those registered in writing of the long nineteenth century, this thesis identified a mediating set of mid-twentieth century intellectual sources; ones that serve to historically link these periods’ respective treatment of technological and environmental crisis in more than parallelistic terms. Taking cues from cultural historians including Turner and Kirk, I identified discourses around technological and environmental change burgeoning in American countercultural forums such as Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog* as themselves profoundly informed by Romantic and Transcendentalist writing. I argued that these mid-century neo-Romantic movements, additionally designated as “early postmodern” owing to their effusion during the late 1960s, serve as important sources in contemporary American digital-age imaginaries and accounts of environmental change.

In treating the late postmodern writings of Danielewski, Dara, and others as “crisis fiction”, moreover, this thesis questioned the reigning critical assumption that “9/11” constitutes the primary crisis driving mutations in the postmodern literary voice. If

many studies pinpoint 9/11 as the central traumatic event prompting a new wave of fiction from the likes of Safran Foer and Franzen, registering more sombre thematic preoccupations and a more “earnest” affective quality, this research identified the mid-1990s as an even earlier period of significant upheaval. This idea was informed by Green’s theory of late postmodernism and his identification of late capitalist infrastructures such as new media ecologies as important pressures on postmodern representative concerns and strategies; but it additionally considered problems of environmental risk—ones that Green’s important study does not take up in depth.

Observing that most theorists of postmodernity understand Nature as an object of alienation or nostalgia (c.f. Jameson 1991; Lyotard 1984; Tabbi 1995) in the postmodern literary imagination, this research additionally focused on how many late postmodern crisis fictions bring the natural world back to the centre of the representational field. In addition to figuring the digital revolution as a crisis of representation, epistemology, and subjectivity, problems such as climate change, biodiversity losses, and toxic landscapes emerge in late postmodern fiction as concrete, urgent realities; these texts pose significant ethical questions about the relationship between humans and the natural, nonhuman world, and gesture toward non-anthropocentric representational strategies. The question of an ecological turn in late postmodern fiction was framed not only in relation to nineteenth-century protoenvironmentalist writing from Thoreau and others, but also to mid-twentieth century countercultural accounts of environmental stewardship and ecological balance.

Finally, this research sought to more clearly discern the specific heritage of American Romantic writing in late postmodern accounts of technological, cognitive, and environmental change. Existing studies on literary Romanticism and postmodernism either do not explicitly address American Romantic traditions at all, or largely conflate

these with European Romantic counterparts. Assuming a transatlantic approach and recognising the difficulties in attempting to separate out traditions that mutually informed and interpenetrated one another, I nevertheless sought to describe what makes the American Romantic and Transcendentalist heritage in late postmodern crisis fiction distinctive.

Attempting such a sprawling cross-period study required some firm methodological constraints. First, this thesis considered contemporary American “crisis fiction” published between 1995 and 2012; this was motivated by critics such as Gere and Heise identifying the mid-1990s as a period in which the digital revolution and climate change began to loom large in popular imagination. Secondly, this research did not propose to draw a thorough, nor a “balanced” account of Romantic intellectual history from the late nineteenth century to the present. Such a scope is beyond the remit of a doctoral thesis; it would prove impossible to accord equal attention to texts from vastly different periods without offering scant analysis of each. The late postmodern moment thus remained the primary focal point throughout most of the thesis; other periods and writings were engaged to excavate how enduring Romantic ideas and formal strategies are innovatively reconfigured in contemporary American fiction.

Moreover, an exclusive focus on experimental contemporary fiction was motivated by a lack of scholarship probing questions of form in postmodern reiterations of Romantic ideas and materialities. Existing studies devoted to the question of Romantic currents in postmodern writing devote little attention to how experimental formal devices might work in tandem with narrative counterparts to materially figure or instantiate Romantic ideas. Since this research sought to trace not only how contemporary fiction revisits Romantic concerns and idioms, but qualitatively updates these to render them

specific to their historical moment, it considered formal experimentation as an important aspect of late postmodern play with Romantic ideas.

Main findings

The thesis opened by considering the *Whole Earth Catalog* as a syncretic set piece of twentieth-century, neo-Romantic countercultural ideas. The *Catalog* offers a cultural-historical framework illuminating how late postmodern accounts of digital-age subjectivity and environmental risks draw not only from nineteenth-century Romantic sources, but also from neo-Romantic cultural imaginaries around technological development, ecological risk and sustainability. Constituting an occasion for close readings as much as it does an important artefact of American cultural history, the *Catalog* was considered as a neo-Romantic archive originating in a particular branch of counterculture; one that reformulated key discourses and ideals with origins in transatlantic Romantic, but especially Transcendentalist, literature and philosophy—from fantasies of superseding personal and spatiotemporal bounds, especially through technological mediums and “extensions”; to correspondential theories of organic form, Emersonian ideals of anti-authoritarian self-reliance, and, finally, urgent warnings of environmental ruin and collapse.

Chapter One additionally unearthed how countercultural enthusiasm for nineteenth-century American Romantic writing, informing the work of figures such as Ginsberg and borne in part of new scholarly accounts of the “American Renaissance” from Matthiessen or Cowley, offers further evidence for why countercultural movements of the mid-century resonate so strongly with Romantic predecessors. Late postmodern crisis fictions arguably take up Romantic and Transcendentalist concerns, idioms, and strategies through the intermediating moment of the mid-twentieth century: a moment

that framed Romanticism and Transcendentalism in new ways, proffering critical vocabularies and received ways of understanding eighteenth-and-nineteenth century literary culture that endure, in many respects, to this day.

If cultural historians including Turner and Kirk have already discussed the *Catalog's* legacy as both a seminal document in technocultural and environmentalist thought and tracing many of the *WEC's* ideas to Romantic intellectual sources, Chapter One treated this document as an artefact of literary history. Through close readings of the *Catalog*, it demonstrated how it might be understood as a representative source text in contemporary fictional accounts of digital-age subjectivities and ecological risks, as well as decrypting what relates ideas pervading the *WEC* to transatlantic Romantic writing from Emerson, Coleridge, Thoreau, or Blake. Focussing on systems-theoretical models of knowledge, the chapter also underlined how digital culture and contemporary environmentalist thought developed in overlapping ways; this provided a framing device for considering, in subsequent chapters, how late postmodern fictional accounts of natural and technological upheavals tend to confound these.

Several limitations nonetheless emerge. First, the *WEC* cannot be said to represent the only significant twentieth-century countercultural source for technocultural and environmentalist imaginaries. A longer study might consider in detail the writings of Beat writers such as Ginsberg or Burroughs, New Journalism from the likes of Wolfe, and other, literary accounts of upheavals to subjectivity and environment that might inform late postmodern accounts of crisis. Furthermore, an “apples and oranges” problem emerges in attempting to compare a nonfiction document such as the *WEC* to literary texts of other periods: one that presents obvious limitations. Nevertheless, close readings of the *Catalog* serve as a framing device for discerning multiple, overlaid, and “untimed” Romantic sources in late postmodern fiction.

Chapter Two unearthed how late postmodern fantasies of digital speeding and technologically mediated transcendence draw from enduring American Romantic, Transcendentalist idioms, as well as from the proto-digital imaginaries discussed in Chapter One. It offered close readings of texts from Danielewski, Dara, and others to probe how these reformulate American Romantic constructs in discussing and staging—in deeply antinomian terms—new experiences of subjectivity in technoculture. Formal, narrative, and “intermedial” innovation in these texts show late postmodern experimental fiction concretely participating in the new media ecologies they respond to. Formal experimentation materially instantiates narrative play with constructs such as spatiotemporal transcendence, heterogeneous time, and contingent, anti-teleological accounts of history.

Reading late postmodern accounts of boundless, mediated connectivity alongside Romantic and Transcendentalist predecessors revealed how Danielewski and Dara’s texts engage with American Romantic idioms of universal selfhood and suspended subjectivity not only at thematic levels, but also at granular levels of language. Longstanding American Romantic idioms of “I-ness and we-ness” permeate late postmodern texts; but these were likely more directly inherited from early digital-cultural imaginaries. Similarly, heterogeneous models of time, and particularly circular models of time, appear as salutary and anti-teleological alternatives to linearity in these texts, reiterating similar transatlantic Romantic rhetoric.

In addition to offering linguistic analysis of the idioms tying digital-age re-imaginings of selfhood, community, and temporal experience to American Romantic predecessors’, and demonstrating how this heritage is complicatedly informed by mid-century countercultural ideas, this chapter probed how American Romantic heritages in particular inform contemporary accounts of technocultural experience. If Coyne, Liu, and

others have decrypted the heritage of Romanticism in literary depictions of digital-age experience, no extant studies attempt to parse American and European sources in technocultural imaginaries.

Chapter Two additionally unveiled how late postmodern accounts of technoculture both take back up Romantic fantasies of boundless subjectivity, and interrogate the darker meanings or effects behind such fantasies. Utopian and dystopian accounts of technocultural subjectivity in contemporary texts reflect both the antinomian rhetorical strategies of Romanticism, but also the deep self-reflexivity, and resistance to totalising discourses, of postmodernism. For example, while Pöhlmann and McHale identify Whitmanian “democratic” impulses in Danielewski’s *Revolutions*, this research diverges from their analysis by considering how late postmodern technocultural narratives simultaneously embrace and excoriate the rhetoric of universal selfhood; or how they narrate the potentially subsuming or imperialistic quality of a self that elides other subjectivities to it.

Chapter Three offered close readings of late postmodern ecocritical texts to show how their engagement with problems of ecological risk and degradation, toxic environments, and the porous borders between human and nonhuman ecologies, as well as their figuring of these problems as concrete and embodied realities, work to challenge the assumption that postmodernism is unconcerned with concrete problems of environment. This strong emphasis on the natural world and on human ethical relations with it suggests an even more intensive postmodern engagement with Romantic ideas than has generally been suggested. Late postmodern experiments issue profound ethical interrogations into human relations with the natural, nonhuman world; but they simultaneously lambast or parody reigning discourses about Nature. This shows them to

be inheritors of Romantic predecessors like Thoreau, but simultaneously and firmly postmodern in their self-reflexive treatment of the natural.

This chapter identified Thoreau as a major source in late postmodern experimentation with non-anthropocentric narrative techniques; the New England writer also stands as an early and influential observer of the porous boundaries between natural and built environments, human and nonhuman ecologies. It also delineated, however, how late postmodern ecocritical narratives remain specific to their historical moment: they are strongly informed by systems theoretical models of ecology that have their origins in mid-century environmentalism, and are additionally preoccupied by concerns such as chemical toxicity, the pervasiveness of plastics, or the military-industrial complex—preoccupations mostly native to the twentieth century onward.

In arguing that late postmodern ecocritical fiction represents a burgeoning new field of inquiry, and perhaps represents an experimental branch of the new genre known as climate fiction, this chapter offered concrete readings of a body of recent writing that has received scant critical attention, even if Oppermann, Cheney, Heise, and others have offered important critical frameworks for an ecocritical postmodern literary mode. It contributed to this vibrant new field by discussing how the distinctively experimental fiction of Danielewski, Davis, or Dara materially and thematically engages with problems of environment, and takes up concerns of traditional “nature writing” while eschewing its claims of mimetic referentiality. It also argued that in many senses, postmodernism has always been ecocritical, and ecocriticism has always already been postmodern, citing the postcolonial theories of Spivak and Glissant as evidence that the “reanimation of matter” posited by critics such as Oppermann, Iovino, and Bennett was previously theorised in fields such as postcolonial studies.

Chapter Four, finally, challenged reigning critical accounts of the postmodern sublime in considering contemporary representations of the incommensurable, both as relates to natural and to technological objects. Rather than staging a sublime that, to paraphrase Tabbi or Maltby, all but eliminates the natural world from the representational field, late postmodern crisis fiction frequently revives the Romantic focus on the natural world as an object of sublime anxiety or terror, and addresses climate change as a new source for such feelings. They moreover inherit from mid-twentieth century countercultural environmentalism jeremiad-like rhetoric of ecological collapse and imbalance. These recent accounts of the sublime diverge from previous critical descriptions of a postmodern sublime focussing almost exclusively on technological objects or unthinkable twentieth-century human tragedies such as the Holocaust. Furthermore, many late postmodern narratives remarkably re-engage Romantic Luddite ambivalence toward technology (Botting). They designate technoculture and its unrepresentable processes as a site of uncanny experiences, and often stage new technologies as objects of monstrosity, echoing nineteenth-century Gothic conventions. However, rather than seamlessly confounding natural and technological objects of sublimity, as postmodern texts purportedly do, these texts instead tensely juxtapose them. Gothic debates around aberrance from a “natural order”—spatial, social, or otherwise—prove enduring ones, even when such a debate centres solely on technological shifts. Finally, new fictional accounts of sublimity frequently hybridise traditional constructs of the sublime and features of Ngai’s *stuplime*, adhering neatly to neither. This points to an innovative narrative mode in late postmodern writing: one that might form the subject of another study.

The main contribution of this final chapter was to bring the problem of climate change and ecological crisis more broadly to bear on the question of postmodern

iterations of sublimity, arguing that the deep crisis of representation represented by climate change is one that needs to be integrated into our critical understanding of the sublime. It also underlined how “ecophobia” can reinforce the ecological thrust of late postmodern ecocritical fiction, building from Taylor’s work, and underlined how debates between transcendent and nihilistic accounts of sublimity in Romantic writing, unveiled by Slocombe and Voller, re-emerges strikingly intact in late postmodern writing.

Nevertheless, a question might arise as to whether “sublimity”, like “postmodernism”, has itself outworn its pertinence as a field of critical inquiry. James Elkins suggests as much:

Poor sublime: relic of other centuries, perennially misused as an attractive way to express the power of art, kept afloat by academics interested in other people’s ideas, used ... as a covertly religious term, to permit academics to speak about religion while remaining appropriately secular. (88)

Charles Altieri echoes Elkins’s sense of exasperation at what he sees as a practice of largely empty “dazzling” among critics who invoke the sublime (257). It indeed seems evident that we cannot treat the rhetoric of sublimity as static or as something that has been simply inherited from Romanticism. We might indeed need more precise terms to better grapple with the complex heritage of the sublime, from Longinus to Lyotard; the work of Ngai and others represents a step toward such increased precision. Nevertheless, Elkins’s assertion that the sublime is merely a “relic of other centuries” does not square with the remarkable endurance of idioms of the incommensurable in current fiction and popular imagination, especially as relates to climate change and the “ecocatastrophic” imagination. Amid dizzyingly complex environmental and technological risks, the sublime has perhaps never seemed *more* relevant, in some respects.

Overall, the results of this research suggest, following Apter et al., that in many key ways Romanticism has never receded in American literature, instead deeply informing some of the reigning literary modes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The historicist directions suggested by this thesis arguably solidify Clayton's proposition around the "Romantic unconscious of postmodernity"; but they offer more concrete intellectual evidence for why that unconscious persists so strongly. Further work in a similar direction might offer a more substantive account of how Romantic and Transcendentalist experimentation with materiality and form—from the likes of William Morris, William Blake, or Whitman—might inform current formal practices. It might also more extensively incorporate contemporary digital and non-print texts to consider how new technocultural literary forms and practices diverge from, or productively reformulate, material practices and cultures of the long nineteenth century. Despite early digital-age predictions that either print would die off in favour of digital textualities; or that the latter was a mere fad that would quickly lose momentum, the richly intermedial and multimodal experiments populating our current media ecologies suggest that both forecasts were misguided. As such, far more work is required in this area; and the problem of the Romantic and Transcendentalist heritage in current print and digital literary cultures is one that particularly invites further inquiry.

Appendix A: An Interview with Kevin Begos, Jr (excerpts)²²⁵

Last autumn, the Bodleian Library's Special Collections Department faced an intriguing dilemma when it acquired a rare copy of *Agrippa, a Book of the Dead*, a hybrid print-digital work featuring a digitally encrypted poem by William Gibson that can only be read once before the data destroys itself. With artwork from noted American artist Dennis Ashbaugh, and referencing everything from genetic code to the Gutenberg Bible and Kodak scrapbook nostalgia, the book's digital element was designed to self-efface after a single "transmission". Chris Fletcher, head curator at the Special Collections, asked, "Do we conserve the book and vandalise the poem, or read the poem and lose the book?"

This Schrödinger's cat-style problem is exactly what publisher Kevin Begos, Jr envisioned when he, Ashbaugh, and Gibson conceived the project in the late 1980s, a time when prophecies of digital formats supplanting print were just beginning to stir. The Bodleian is still grappling with the question of what to do with the archive and has yet to stage any happenings around the book's self-effacing poem. But the acquisition of the *Agrippa* archive has generated justifiable excitement: after years of being virtually forgotten, the book has seen a major revival of interest thanks, notably, to an extensive digital online project, launched by the University of California, Santa Barbara. And scholars are starting to recognise that the book is much more than the gimmick mainstream media painted it to be when it was printed.

²²⁵ I conducted this interview with Begos Jr in March 2012; it was published in *The Oxonian Review* in April 2012.

I [the author of this thesis] caught up with *Agrippa*'s publisher Kevin Begos ... to talk about why he chose to entrust the archive to the Bodleian, cultural memory in the digital age, and how critics have too often failed to approach *Agrippa* in a holistic way, with Gibson's celebrity largely occluding interest in the book as a cross-genre, intensively collaborative work of literature and art. While press coverage [has generally painted] Gibson as the book's main author, Begos and Ashbaugh were the project's initial and primary architects—with some help from French poet Stéphane Mallarmé and Maurice Blanchot. Now that the archive is deposited at the Bodleian, Begos told me, he hopes scholars will approach and play with *Agrippa* in the way he and his co-authors intended: as a work of art and literature which stages complex intersections between genres and form, and attempts to articulate how meaning and memory are constantly evolving.

Could you talk a bit about the genesis of your ideas? Who were your influences in the art and bookmaking realms, and what led you to undertake [this] project?

For me it started out as a very conscious attempt to integrate several things that I'd either been working on for years or seen other people working on who were close to me, in particular artists who were also bookmakers, or who made books works of art. Richard Minsky gave me my first bookbinding lessons around 1981. He's the founder of the Center for Book Arts in New York. Then I worked with Clifton Meador and Philip Zimmerman, and they were at the centre of a whole group of artist bookmakers. We had a printing company and we'd often print for artists and poets and do all sorts of experimental books. That was from roughly 1981 to '85. And I was the odd guy out because I was from the literary tradition. I had a small book publishing company right out of college and mostly published poetry and fiction.

In some cases I printed books by these artists—I guess the best known of them is Keith Smith. If you look under the Library of Congress, one acquisition they're very proud of is a book that's all strung together like a cat's cradle. I didn't publish that but I was influenced by Keith, and all these people who were pushing the boundaries of the book in the early 1980s.

But to me there was always one flaw: most people were completely uninterested in the story. To me, the story, whether it's traditional or more *avant-garde*, is important. I wanted to do a project in which both the narrative and the artwork are important. I didn't want to do something in which the artwork was just a sort of appendage to the bookmaking.

At your presentation in November, you described the content of *Agrippa* as “a meditation on memory and how we come to grips with that memory.” Can you expound on this? Do you think we come to grips with cultural and personal memory differently than previous generations did? Is there something even more delicate and ephemeral about memory in the digital age?

I think the main point to make here is that the project evolved in stages. I had the original idea for the self-destructing computer disk but there wasn't even a story attached to it at that point. Dennis Ashbaugh asked me to come up with an idea for him and Gibson. One point that some of the [new media] critics have missed—even some of the really good ones like Matt Kirschenbaum and Alan Liu—is that it was really almost a never-ending stage of evolution. Eventually there was Gibson and Ashbaugh being friends but they didn't know what to do together. Originally we thought it would be a short story by Gibson. Then he wrote the poem, and there was the title, and Ashbaugh had the idea for

images which mutate [and self-efface with disappearing ink]. And those images weren't quite technically possible; then there was the idea for the transmission, but the transmission was hacked by a video team, and [the poem] migrated out to the web. So it's been an ongoing [work.] I don't think it's ever been completely finished.

What does it mean for you to have these archives and this copy of *Agrippa* at the Bodleian? What motivated your choice to hand the archives over to Oxford? Were there other interested curators?

Over the last year and a half, I found the Bodleian to be very committed intellectually to the concept and in all sorts of ways. So it just seemed like the best home for it in terms of the tradition of bookmaking and literature, but also the attention they were devoting to it.

When Matt Kirschenbaum and Alan Liu first saw copies, they were fascinated and started asking all sorts of questions. And *The Agrippa Files* team [at UC Santa Barbara] started asking all sorts of questions, and I was really impressed by the interest they had in various parts of the project and the way *The Agrippa Files* recreated various parts of Ashbaugh's disappearing image, the way he intended to pull it off. So that's the last five or six years—I started to think that maybe a few copies do need to be made more available to scholars.

That was also part of my decision to give it to the Bodleian—I wanted it to be safe and respected, but also prominent enough that it wouldn't just be buried off in some obscure corner. But I think that'll give people the opportunity [to interact with it]. The Bodleian's at the forefront of making things available digitally. Maybe in five or ten years. I think

Gibson will always be the focus, but hopefully this makes the project more available for study.

What sort of decision do you think that the curators at the Bodleian will make in terms of what to do with the copy of *Agrippa*? I know that was a kind of humorous point of discussion at the presentation you gave at Oxford's Pitt Rivers museum in November.

I'm just glad that they're having that debate. I think whatever they do or don't do will be interesting. The only thing I'd say is that institutions in America around the publication 20 years ago really weren't able to "get" the concept. Some of them thought that they'd be granted some special exemption and wouldn't have the disk that destroyed itself or the disappearing images. The Bodleian seems more engaged with the artistic and curatorial questions around those issues, and is actually discussing them. Ironically, there really aren't many US institutions that have collected the book.

I think many people might argue that much of the true narrative experimentation is taking place in the games realm. The experimentation people thought would be happening with books is going on more in gaming.

I think that's completely true. That's where the real developments are taking place and legitimate breakthroughs in terms of how people interact with artwork and with each other. They've built platforms that will evolve.

Yet in a digital age, there's this huge concern—because of the way technology is developing so exponentially and the ways that formats change so abruptly—that data is dangerously ephemeral. I'm wondering, in terms of the prediction that print

was in danger of disappearing, which was current when the book was first conceived, has your idea about what *Agrippa's* legacy might mean changed?

I was certain there was going to be a decline in print. But even Gibson had written in his books about a future age in which hand-made objects would still be the most incredibly valued things. Even if computer networks got incredibly powerful and able to re-create reality, an actual hand-made object, whether it was a book or a sculpture or piece of jewellery, would still be incredibly special. So I think we're moving toward that with books that you've seen in print recently—coffee table books, or books that are just beautiful objects with good content too. Books that are just content—textbooks and some straightforward novels—are moving much more toward being exclusively digital. All I really knew 20 years ago was that we were at a turning point.

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