

Element Focused Inquiry: Air and Water in American Literature

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

Element focused inquiry, in dialogue with environmental-crisis literature, proposes a theory and a methodology to explore human-elemental becomings, particularly pertaining to air and water. EFI is mobilized to acquire insight into the entwined nature of human beings and elemental others, and to foster understanding of the implications of these relations as they concern what it is to be human. Material imagination figures centrally in EFI and is considered alongside the potential for elements to form assemblages with human bodies, to move people to act, to shape events and the way narratives are structured. My dissertation draws on three American environmental-crisis novels from the late 20th to early 21st century, embracing the ways literary fiction always already figures a relation to the world—via the incorporation and mobilization of processes and practices of human-elemental becomings, environmental influence and crisis, and paradigms reflecting what are often unexamined aspects of human-elemental assemblages. The introduction offers an account of how the theory and methodology evolved from my observations and experience. Chapter one takes a traditional approach to positioning the theory within the evolving body of work on contemporary materialism, eco-materialism, and elemental ecocriticism. Chapter two focuses on the role of air in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, suggesting that air is not only at the centre of this uncanny novel and key events, but also at the centre of Jack's imagination, perceptions, actions, narratives, and body. Chapter three looks at Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, exploring how water acts on the characters' memory, language, and movement. Chapter four examines Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour*, grappling with the slow violence of environmental collapse, watery memories, elemental entanglements, and religious influences. The conclusion considers the question of what we are as human-elemental becomings and what that means for future inquiries.

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Dedication

For my Grampie, Kenneth R. Gilbert; my Great-Uncle, Craig Mills; my Mom, Kathryn Doyle;
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Introduction

I grew up in Nova Scotia, in a small coal mining town at the upper end of the Appalachians, as well as in a small coastal community on the Northumberland Strait. Element focused inquiry (EFI) evolved primarily out of my early sense of place and my experience thereof. It is bound up with how I identify with being of Irish descent; my point of view; my cultural context; the occupations of my parents and grandparents: coal miners, prison guards, homemakers, military personnel, and teachers; and growing up in a specific place and time, with specific elemental influences that stood out to me. The method is meant to be adaptive, and individuals applying it will, inherently, be working with their respective identities and experiences of place. Further, even the cultural category of what constitutes an element will vary accordingly, as it should. EFI is a theory and method for exploring human-elemental entanglements. My theory is that elemental influence goes beyond life support, or posing a threat to life, and that it plays a critical role in shaping mind and body, actions and events, and how we end up conceptualizing our place in the world through continued attention to elemental influence. My method involves close reading and adopts a curatorial, cumulative approach to gathering analogical examples¹ of elemental influence from the novels I have selected. To begin with, this involves noting primary characters' perceptions of elemental others. Next, I identify the joining of peripheral characters and elemental others through an unexpected centralization of voice. Then, evidence of elemental influence in events is collected to showcase the agency or quasi-agency of elemental others. Finally, I explore the shifts in narratives that follow such events that

¹ I am looking at analogical examples as a means of moving from adjacency to adjacency, accumulating meaning in and across contexts over time. Moments of insight and singularity, as Agamben notes, have a core sameness despite their differences. “The paradigm is defined by a third and paradoxical type of movement, which goes from the particular to the particular” via accumulated singularities and adjacencies (Agamben 18-19).

centralize the elements and signal a decided change in human-elemental becomings.² These instances are singularities. They stand apart from the rest of the story in a way that makes the influence of the elements more familiar to the reader and the characters. These singularities, as they accumulate, point to paradigms that identify and clarify specific aspects of the element or of human-elemental becomings.

EFI is in conversation with emerging work on elemental ecocriticism, object oriented ontologies (in particular, Morton's concept of hyperobjects), phenomenology, contemporary materialism, and the psychoanalysis of the elements as conceived by Gaston Bachelard. EFI extends the current reach of elemental ecocriticism by moving away from ancient, medieval, and early modern relationships with the elements to explore contemporary imaginings. Additionally, by offering an analogical method, EFI cultivates a continued conversation with the elements across environments and over time. Attentiveness that is slow and constant garners insights that would be overlooked otherwise. By situating the analogical method as a means to identify paradigms of elemental influence, EFI strategically avoids relying on the sublime as a transformative process and instead looks to cumulative, curatorial ways in which the characters are attuned to their influential element(s), mirroring the process of identifying paradigms.

While induction proceeds from the particular to the universal and deduction from the universal to the particular, the paradigm is defined by a third and paradoxical type of movement, which goes from the particular to the particular. (Agamben 18-19)

² I am using the term "becomings" here to signal the crossings, assemblages, and undosings that happen across bodies in time and space as they engage with elemental others, as well as the impact that this has on mind and thought, body and actions.

Finally, we live in a fragile moment. We and our planet are experiencing the effects of climate change, and many are experiencing climate chaos. Turning to literature to reflect potential relations with elemental others, we use stories to bridge our perceptions, as well as to articulate, experience, and become in response to these others. Extraordinary stories offer a way to conceptualize humanness in exceptional circumstances. Experiencing the ever-accelerating consequences of climate chaos means we need to think about the self in more holistic and embedded terms. I think that EFI offers a well-considered method for doing this.

Before I dive more deeply into the theory and method I am putting forward in the next chapter and the way EFI extends or contributes to these conversations, I would like to describe a few experiences that signpost my own elemental entanglements and becomings, and which have informed my understanding of elemental influence. These are not the most sublime encounters I have had with air and water; rather, they are singularities that tap into the slight surprise of becoming in relation to elemental otherness and the self. In terms of becoming, one of its aspects concerns insight and a change occurring in the self via elemental assemblages. These moments signal acquired attentiveness to the more than human, whereby a natural inclination to trace air and water through human-elemental entanglements became fine-tuned.

My awareness of the world around me begins with my mom. In every place we lived, if possible, my mom planted trees. Not one or two trees—many! She always made a point of rescuing trees from the roadside where they would otherwise be mowed down. She had berry patches and little gardens (still does), and I got to help. The connection between fostering my growth and growing lovely things to enliven the land and feed ourselves was clear and invaluable to me. She always let my sisters and I explore, and we were always encouraged to help. Those little gardens (and those of my Uncle and my Gramp) were where a lifelong love of

growing things and growing connections started. I paid attention. I noticed all of the care. It stayed with me. To this day, a wealth of knowledge, of which I am predominantly unaware, crops up unexpectedly whenever a friend or family member asks me how to do something for their gardens or houseplants. Placing your hands in the earth is perfect for starting to grow as a person. I love growing things. I like witnessing the will to life that flora and fauna relentlessly pursue. Enough light, enough water, and healthy, busy soil, and things grow like magic. Being open to growth and life unfurling unexpectedly made space for me to love the air and the water with a freedom that people lack without sure footing and a sense of how things begin.

As a child, I spent a lot of time with my great uncle, Craig. We would go for walks nearly every morning up Claremont towards the “fishy ditch.” In late spring/early summer, we would go and each pick a lady slipper bouquet (taking care not to disturb the ones showing seed pods). We would make little birchbark canoes and set them adrift in the stream, tracing the water’s currents as we munched on our morning rations of bear paw cookies, wild chives, and other surprises. My uncle moved at my pace, for my sake. He did not talk a lot. He mostly liked to listen, and he would take me exploring the woodsy hills and the little footpaths near the road—feeding my endless curiosity and gifting me the space to tune in to the world around me. I had time, space, and a place to do that. I noticed the clouds. I took note of the sky when Uncle would say it was going to rain. I absorbed his understanding of things. He influenced my life deeply. I was and am tuned in to the world around me in ways that I can trace back directly to days spent with my Uncle just outside of town. Returning to the little stream on the Claremont hillside years ago, it was unsettling to see that the stream had narrowed to a creek. It struck me and pulled all of those early moments into the present in an acute and deeply uncomfortable way. I did not expect it to be different, but the dramatic shift felt painful and personal. I would not be able to

take my little one fishing there. The creek was so clogged with silt that it barely moved, and I cannot see fish being able to survive that. Having my memory of the place juxtaposed with its present state further situated my sense of belonging and entanglement with water.

While Uncle and I had explored the two to three square kilometers of my childhood home-world, I lived next door to my Nan and Gramp when I was a little bit older. I spent any time I could with my Gramp. He showed me how things grow, took notice of things in a different way, and answered my questions. He minded the weather, took care of things that needed attention in a way that I would love to emulate, and walked nearly every day. Gramp was a coal miner and then a prison guard once the mines closed, after the bump. He was one of a dozen or so who survived being buried underground in 1956. When I was around 22, I flew home from Newfoundland, where I was living at the time, and I went to visit Nan and Gramp. We went for a drive down to Parrsboro and out to Partridge Island. Gramp was not young, but he approached that hill and hiked it with me like it was nothing. When we got down from the hill, we strolled along the far side beach until we realized that we had miscalculated the tides for our return. We raced along, jumping ever higher “ditches” until we scrambled up the rocky beach towards the car. It stands out to me in a way that is difficult to quantify, and the moment likely seems inconsequential, but it left an impression. We laughed heartily the entire jog back to the car, but the reality was that the tide was racing in, and we had had no choice. Towards the end of our jog, we moved quicker because a 40-foot tide change does not wait for you to take a leisurely stroll along the flats to above the high-water mark. Being aware of the environment is important when you live near water, and even the most tuned-in person can be caught out in an unexpected change from time to time. I had always felt a sort of kinship with the air and water, but I was reminded, as I had been countless times before, that that connection, while real enough, was only

informed by what I knew to date. It did not account for everything or even most things. Only the experiences I attended to.

Swimming in a small cove of the Northumberland Strait, on which we had a cottage, late in the day with my Dad, my sister, and my Uncle, I saw the edge of the horizon darken behind the cottage. Not long after, there was a rainbow just west of us, and then the hail, thunder, and lightning were on us before we could even take them in. If I were able to quantify the things I sensed changing quickly enough to be able to read them, then we would not have been diving underwater to avoid the hail raining down on us. The air went still, you could hear the crickets humming from well out in the water, the smell of the air changed, and then there was the dark horizon and a rainbow. Today, I would be able to make sense of those signs. At the time, I did not have the experience or the knowledge to understand what was unfolding around us. I was part of the event, but I was unable to process it then. The two adults I was with learned about a different environment altogether growing up. It does not matter how many signs there are if you cannot put things together to make meaning, and meaning in the environment is generated in conversation with the elements, constructed over time through attentiveness. These are two critical components of EFI: human-elemental becomings evolve through events, perception, and assemblages, and meaning-making in human-elemental becomings is constructed cumulatively through a series of singularities like these.

Singularities require that an access point have something of the familiar about it and something utterly distinct. I have always liked flying. I like being up in the air. My friends, Tera and Matt, took me flying years ago. I had been in big commercial planes and small planes from living in the middle of nowhere, and I had been in gliders too, but I had not flown in a Cessna and certainly not with my friend as the pilot. Before we went up, Matt checked the weather,

calculating how much time we had if we wanted to land before storm clouds took over the skies. It was a thing of beauty—both the clouds and that kind of certainty and precision. I knew a storm was coming, but Matt knew as a pilot and someone with a different means of measuring the sky: that level of precision escapes me. I am still amazed by that day. The flight itself was wonderful, but it was the clouds rolling up the Bay and into the Debert airport that has lived longest in my mind. I have a picture of the moment just after we landed. Just a quick shot looking back on the tarmac with the bright yellow planes and the dark rolling clouds. What I felt was not exactly awe but appreciation. Gratitude, maybe. Not necessarily for the flight, Matt, or the storm, but for some happening transpiring between them.

My appreciation of air is both innate and learned. I have always paid attention to the sky and the quality of the air. I could be 50 km inland and offer a fair guess about what the ocean is like on any given day (direction and quality of the waves) because it is there on the wind. My sisters and I would make a game of it on the way to the cottage. The air has influenced my way of seeing things, my way of thinking, my breath and my body, and the stories that catch my attention and prompt a deeper attentiveness to air and the environment more broadly. I am very aware of air, and it has come to my attention that this is not the case for everyone. I have noticed, however, that everyone has their own home-world—a location where they are more certain of their place and the world around them—whether that is in downtown Toronto or at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. I have developed a theory about how we are enmeshed and entangled with air (and water) and how we come to these relations.

My little one, Ronan, was born in Ontario. A lot of her young life has been urban and suburban. When we brought her out east as a six-month-old, she took note of the wind. She was not averse to it, but she noticed it and expressed uncertainty. When we brought her home again

this summer, she indicated that the wind is big here—too big. I reveled in the wind as a child, but Ronan is not overly fond of it. By the end of our visit, there was a significant shift in her approach to the wind and, for that matter, the water as well. While she is still a little tentative of a strong wind, she developed a cautious love of the ocean. Even once it was too cold to swim, she wanted to be in it or near it, or at least to touch it and retreat. She has always loved water, but the size of the ocean and its depth initially left her uncertain. Now, she is eager for warmer weather and an opportunity to swim at the beach again. I think that we come to understand ourselves and become in proximity to these elemental others and human-elemental others. Ronan is bolder in a lot of ways now. Some of that is related to age, but it is also thanks to the thrill of having taken risks and gained experiences in the ocean and in a new place.

When I was a little older than my daughter, I learned, definitively, that you cannot breathe underwater. I was a child playing at the beach with my dad and my sister. My sister and I were wearing inflatables around our waists. Dad was flipping us over his back and, somehow, I ended up upside down with my head underwater. I quickly realized that I could not right myself. I saw the shimmering, filtered sunlight on the sandbars beneath me, and a small crab racing along and reaching up to snap. I remember thinking that I could not breathe underwater. It was peaceful, kind of quiet, strange, and beautiful. I do not recall the exact details of what unfolded next because I was quite young, but I know that my sister, Angie, pointed out my plight almost immediately, and that my dad helped me right away. This was a fleeting moment, but the impression it made on me has stayed with me, vividly, my entire life. It punctured my sense of self and my way of seeing things—it was a singularity in my young life. Before that moment, I was not entirely convinced that breathing underwater was impossible or that I could not do it. Afterwards, I saw everything a little differently. I could sketch the crab, the light, and I would

know the temperature of the water to this day if I encountered it again. It was not a frightening experience, nor was it particularly dramatic, but it drove home the point that while I loved being in the water, it is not home. While I love living beside the water, what I project onto it is my own view: friendly or adversarial. While I love sitting along the shoreline and casting my mind out over the waves, the ocean remains, in many ways, inscrutable. I have sat at the edge of understanding water my entire life. I am as comfortable as a person can be in or on the water. I have no great fear of it (though I respect it), and as a result, I accumulated some sort of insight into water (particularly the ocean) that I would not have gained living elsewhere. Existing alongside elemental otherness for the majority of my life, in a state of attentiveness, has shaped my mind, my body, and my actions in ways that are obvious and yet challenging to articulate.

Living in Newfoundland for a number of years introduced me to a different kind of ocean. I only swam there once and it was, retrospectively, a poor choice. One day that stands out to me saw us gathering fish during a capelin roll in Torbay. It was probably July, and the little silver fish were so plentiful that wading into the six-degree water felt extra ridiculous. However, we wanted to gather enough capelin to dry some for later, so we got out buckets and scooped them up close to shore. The water was pins-and-needles cold. I could see the many currents swirling not far from where we stood. This was a beautiful sunny day, and it looked as though you could have walked along those silver shimmering fish forever, but the water here was different. I had seen storms hit the coast and spent many days in Middle Cove watching the waves thunder in. I had seen whale pods drift along near Signal Hill on my morning run, but I had never really stopped to consider that the water here was genuinely different than the water where I grew up in Nova Scotia. The word that came to mind on that sunny July day (warm for Newfoundland) was “unforgiving.” It was the word I had been searching for from day one while

living in Newfoundland. Unforgiving. Terribly beautiful and unforgiving. A misstep here seemed unlikely to be recoverable. I am not saying that catching capelin was dangerous; it was not—just cold. In the quiet space of that July day, I had room to reflect. What I realized was that this water would not have afforded me the same things that home had given me. I would have been made differently.

When I am home, a measured glance at the sky and a few moments outside, and I can take a fair guess at the weather for that day and the next. Growing up in the Maritimes meant having access to wide open spaces and a big, uninterrupted sky, as well as never being very far from the ocean. At a fundamental level, this influenced what I notice and value. Minding the sky is important not just as a means of knowing what is coming but for grounding the self in where one is from, where one is presently, what one is, how and why, and where one might be going. This earned connection is the clearest starting point for EFI.

Meaning in the environment is generated in conversation with the elements, and it is constructed over time. Human beings are enmeshed and entangled with air and water, and this can be traced through layered perceptions—through embodied knowledge, witnessing and participating in events, and creating artefacts that reflect our understanding of and our longing for connection with elemental others. Each of the stories I have shared highlights profound moments in my experience of the world in an attempt to demonstrate the subtle shifts in awareness and thinking that evolve out of connections with and attentiveness to elemental others. In the paraphrased words of N. Scott Momaday from *The Names*, speaking to his own experiences, “I was not the same on the other side of these moments.”

My approach to elemental entanglement and awareness is grounded in attentiveness, embracing memory and loss, and the cumulative experience of elemental otherness, and, at the

same time, the distance felt in approaching difference. While I approach elemental otherness with a will to understand it, the threshold for these experiences is arrived at via ever-cumulating shifts in attentiveness that evolve out of sitting alongside difference. Striving to recognize and understand elemental others is a process of becoming, whereby one is shaped by elemental otherness through recognizing aspects of elemental difference and human-elemental entanglement. The goal is to be situated somewhere between difference and entanglement. Much of the elemental escapes human attention. However, approaching air and water as influences on perception, events, assemblages, and stories makes room for the meaning-making tendency to help situate human-elemental becomings while offering greater insight into the nature of air and water.

What is EFI? It is a method for engaging with the most prevalent aspects of our respective environments, suggesting what to attend to and how human-elemental entanglements work. It is a theory about why paying such attention matters and how human-elemental becomings can be traced and centralized in order to develop a more profound sense of place and a more accurate understanding of self in relationship to elemental others. Ultimately, EFI proposes that human beings are shaped by the dominant elements in our respective environments. This work focuses specifically on air and water, as these are the dominant elements of my earliest memories. As such, air and water are the elements that I am most at home with. I turn to literature as a rhetorical artefact to provide a space for reflection and insight into elemental otherness and difference. Artefacts do two things that I think are important, valuable, and, perhaps, irreplaceable in terms of helping this theory to function. First, literature offers a way into the experience of the elements and insight into how they enrich us and offer wisdom regarding one's own potential to engage in human-elemental understandings and

relationships. Second, artefacts have the benefit of existing amongst people, elements, and thoughts as points of collision that provide access to human-elemental becomings.

It was Gaston Bachelard's work on material imagination, including *Air and Dreams* in particular, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, in conversation with my own ideas and experiences, that provided me with the beginnings of the methodology that I offer as part of EFI. Giorgio Agamben's work on artefacts and paradigms (as well as singularities and adjacencies) provides a rationale for lifting out elemental details from texts in a way that may not initially appear substantial. However, taken as a set of attributes and conditions, these details contribute to an understanding of what people think about their relations with elemental others (while implying that the more singularities and adjacencies of a kind that can be traced, the more they point to an attribute of the human-elemental dynamic). This also leads to reading the text with a different focus and newfound insight. Finally, Jane Bennett's articulation of attentiveness as it pertains to recognizing objects or beings that look back (otherness) helped expand my ideas about sitting alongside difference to acquire an intuitive (and, by turns, symbolic) comprehension of otherness, which I concurrently position outside and within human becomings, bodies, and events.

From my earliest years. I have been attentive to the air and to water (particularly as atmospheric influence and in terms of rain, rivers, and oceans). Elemental influence has always been a formative part of my understanding of myself and the world. The countless days I spent outdoors with my great uncle and my Gramp contributed to an understanding of the world that is layered and storied. My memories of those days are sometimes sharper than at other times, but the cumulative effect of time spent with air and water, and with attuned guides, has had a critical influence on my developing sense of home and self, my becomings, and the role of the more-

than-human world in shaping events in my life. The more I considered this, the more the idea grew. I wanted a way to combine the intuitive process of knowing or recognizing with a studied means of approaching elemental others. To do this, I created a framework for lifting the elemental out from artefacts to ultimately help us redirect attention to the elemental world.

Chapter 1: EFI: Theory and Method

My theory is that elements, like air and water, influence imagination, perception, and events, while also entering into human-elemental assemblages and entanglements. Further, I hope to demonstrate that elemental influence, entanglements, and assemblages can be traced through novels. I call my method and theory Element Focused Inquiry (EFI). The method draws from and builds on the work of Giorgio Agamben, Gaston Bachelard, and Jane Bennett to trace elemental others in meaningful ways across three novels. My method adopts a curatorial and cumulative approach to identifying elemental influence by moving first to trace the perception process. I do this by highlighting how the elemental comes into focus for characters in these texts, identifying moments where characters pay attention to air or water in meaningful ways. While such moments occur in texts, they also occur in daily life. Next, I highlight instances where peripherally situated characters and their elementally influenced voices amplify the human and the elemental in combination. I do this by attending to where the margins of the novel speak to the centre, while also attentive to what the context is for this process. So, by identifying parts of the novels where peripheral figures are given a voice that mimics or amplifies elemental characteristics, identifying the degree of elemental influence or noted presence in the context where this happens, and analyzing what is ultimately communicated, I describe the vocal aspect of human-elemental assemblages. I try to determine whether or not elemental influence is at work and, if so, how it is read. Then, I trace the path of elemental agency or quasi-agency in events and the resulting stories about the human and elemental and how the elemental is situated following events. This is easily identified if the reader is looking for elemental influence. For example, the Airborne Toxic Event in *White Noise*, unsurprisingly, centralizes air. This process does not necessarily embrace a chronological reading of the text but an analogical one, where the

reader is permitted to move spatially across time to access deeper connections to elemental difference. There are examples, however, where the chronological ordering of the text facilitates this same understanding. *White Noise* is an example of a text in which the chronological order works spatially and temporally. Using a layered approach helps to accrue an understanding of otherness that is almost familiar without collapsing this difference into a sublime transformation of the self, because, of course, the self is, in reality, always already an unfolding otherness. As a result of the intuitive recognition of our own extreme difference, the uncanny is frequently observed and can be used as a rhetorical wedge to open up a critical space for further examining the influence of the elemental. I will elaborate on both my theory and my method, situating the theoretical concepts I draw on and explaining how I use these ideas to conduct my analysis.

My biggest environmental influences have always been air (in all of its forms) and water (primarily via the ocean). Where I grew up shaped me and has influenced my imagination and perceptive tendencies. Bachelard's psychoanalysis of the elements offered me a way into thinking about elemental influence and imagination.³ EFI is thematically organized along the lines of perception, material influence (in the forms of silent speech and events), and assemblage states, as well as via a shift in perspective that is cultivated by sitting alongside material

³ Formal and material imagination, as defined by Bachelard, sit in opposition to each other. Bachelard describes formal imagination as the way that the reader has been taught to identify meaning symbolically. In contrast, Bachelard suggests that material imagination is grounded in a child's earliest experience with their environment. The dominant element in the environment becomes a driving force in material imagination, which is present throughout an individual's life (to a greater or lesser degree), and that particular element always influences the way things are perceived and imagined. These imaginings are unique and, in many ways, singular. As far as Bachelard is concerned, the imagination and material influence can be traced in the written word (specifically, in poetry). These ideas are consistent across a number of his texts, including *Air and Dreams*, *Water and Dreams*, *A Psychoanalysis of Fire*, *Earth and Reveries of Will*, *Intuition of the Instant*, and *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*. There is no single reference for these ideas.

otherness. Accumulating and curating examples from novels of air and water's agency or quasi-agency is central to this methodology. By tracing paradigms and singularities, as well as minutia in the novels, I hope to offer a strategy that yields a better understanding of human relations with elemental others and an expanded concept of humanness, while entertaining what it is to be air or water. EFI is also, at its heart, an exploration of the space between phenomenon and thing. This project is intended to be a generative touchpoint for adopting and adapting the analysis of human-elemental becomings.

While these ideas are accessible, their inspirations are complex. EFI requires a certain degree of enlivened engagement, which is explored in Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, where Bennett argues for attunement to the objects/beings/things of the world as quasi-agents. The perceptual equipment (predominantly vision) is given a groundwork in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as by a host of contemporary materialists and elemental ecocritics who work within materialism and engage in phenomenological considerations (including Serpil Opperman, Serenella Ioviono, Karen Barad, Jeffery Cohen, and Lowell Duckert). *Elemental Ecocriticism*, which contains work from Opperman, Ioviono, Cohen, and Duckert, offers an approach to entanglements with elemental others through the exploration of stories from the medieval and early modern periods. This collection explores these stories to better understand the cultural and perceptive equipment at work at different points in time, as well as to suggest meaningful ways to imagine the elements in the present. As Opperman and Ioviono write,

Putting together imagined and real elements, their stories and *logoi* as they appear in medieval and early modern authors and environments, *Elemental Ecocriticism* aims to reanimate elemental thinking, encouraging us to “think about *thinking* with” (Duckert) the elements. (314)

More than anything, these thinkers have opened up a conversation about the elements that I hope to contribute to. Further, my work sits alongside Cohen and Duckert's exploration of how the idea that "the world is ours to ruin or save" offers "two expressions of the same hubris" in an effort to examine "the cross-ontological alliances by which ecosystems thrive, change, commingle, create" (5). Additionally, their call to consider "earth, air, fire, and water, alone and in their promiscuous combinations" on a "humanly knowable scale while extending an irresistible invitation to inhuman realms" (6-7) creates room for local and global, material and ethereal considerations of elemental entanglements that I find compelling and creative. Karen Barad's work on material feminism has also helped to provide ways of thinking about agency that do not presuppose it to be a condition requiring will. As Barad suggests, "Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfiguring of the world" (135). Human-elemental becomings are both agential and quasi-agential reconfigurings of the world. Additionally, she resists notions of exteriority or interiority in ways that are useful for thinking through human-elemental becomings.

On an agential realist account, it is once again possible to acknowledge nature, the body and materiality in the fullness of their becoming without resorting to the optics of transparency or opacity, the geometries of absolute exteriority or interiority, and the theorization of the human as either pure cause or pure effect while at the same time remaining resolutely accountable for the role "we" play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming. (Barad 130)

This resistance to either/or thinking helps position the human-elemental being as "part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity," (145) taking into account "the fact that we are a part of that

nature [or element] that we seek to understand” (146). Collapsing interior and exterior, other and human, while still holding space for those distinctions is part of any work that parses human-other assemblages, and, in this case, it is very much a part of the process of engaging with human-elemental becomings.

EFI explores the pull of absent-presences like air, earth, fire, and water on the structuring of human-elemental becomings. It proposes that human beings are informed by, directed by, traced by, and co-constructed through our relationships with elemental others, though the space that the elements occupy is often negative. Disasters and other element-enlivened narratives provide insight into how relationships between humans and elemental others unfold. In *White Noise*, *The Road*, and *Flight Behavior*, the nature of human-elemental entanglements is on display. As will become apparent in examining the selected novels, air and water come to the forefront of human relations and considerations in disaster scenarios, weather events, the movement and acquisition of material goods, and deaths. Yet, elemental influence is equally extensive in the co-construction of human thoughts, actions, and narratives, which is the focus of my exploration.

The theorists and works I have drawn from to inspire and inform the ideas involved in EFI offer numerous ways to approach elemental others. Agamben’s work, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, outlines the process of identifying and highlighting singularities and paradigms. For EFI, the process of identifying singularities is important to being able to trace the influence of elemental others on characters and plot(s) throughout each novel, attending to the singularities without leaping over them. Agamben notes that “a paradigm is a form of knowledge that is neither inductive nor deductive but analogical. It moves from singularity to singularity” (31). While Agamben is primarily concerned with art as the medium for tracing paradigms,

analogous processes also offer generative ways of exploring elemental otherness within novels and beyond. Singularities are specific instances of unique collisions and assemblages that present aspects of the familiar as access points of intelligibility and that resist collapsing into the commonplace of an everyday moment, thought, or experience. Singularities stand out of time, place, and event in a nuanced but clear way. Agamben states that “the paradigmatic relation does not merely occur between sensible objects or between these objects and a general rule; it occurs instead between a singularity (which thus becomes a paradigm) and its exposition (its intelligibility)” (23). Tracing singularity to singularity opens up paradigmatic relations that expose aspects of otherness that would otherwise escape notice and understanding.

Moving from singularity to singularity is also a means to position agency as less closely aligned with will. Agency, as Barad has articulated, “is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfiguring of the world” (135), distancing agency from will. Stacey Alaimo elaborates on how elements and agency function in various contributions to *Elemental Ecocriticism*, noting in her reflection essay that there is a focus on “inter-action, co-constitution, and the pervasive material agencies that cut across and reconfigure ostensibly separate objects and beings” (478), relocating agency or quasi-agency across bodies. Identifying singularities allows the reader to potentially adopt a practice of noting and deciphering paradigms, as well as allowing for engagements with internalized and externalized otherness in a reconsidered “reconfiguring of the world.” Initially, the starting points for this methodology include close reading and intuitively identifying those aspects of experience that are out of time and out of place, those that are familiar but distinct, and which point to air and water’s influence.

Singularities are moments in which otherness becomes vibrant. For example, during the ATE in *White Noise*, air becomes centralized and takes on a significance that is rarely part of

day-to-day life. This moment highlights aspects of how air is, or might be, and how it is perceived. Noted singularities, from various moments within and across the novels, can be used to determine whether or not there is a paradigm at play.⁴ Paradigms articulate a rule that is not evident until the paradigm is identified (Agamben 18-22). An example of a paradigm that emerges in the text is air's deathly inclinations or, at least, its role in deathly outcomes (for example, the directionality of the wind and its chemical constituents coming into contact with human beings during the ATE). A paradigm, as I am using the term, offers insight into the nature of the observed or into the tendency in observation whereby a human experience of otherness is suggested to be unique to our assembled human-elemental selves.⁵ Barad notes "'we' are not

⁴ Agamben posits that we must begin to engage with others through analogies as a series of contiguous singularities that assist in establishing a more subtle and complex impression of these others we seek to know. Agamben calls this series of noted experiences a paradigm.

Paradigms obey not the logic of the metaphorical transfer of meaning but the analogical logic of the example...the paradigm is a singular case that is isolated from its context only insofar as, by exhibiting its own singularity, it makes intelligible a new ensemble, whose homogeneity it itself constitutes. That is to say, to give an example is a complex act which supposes that the term functioning as a paradigm is deactivated from its normal use, not in order to be moved into another context but, on the contrary, to present the canon—the rule—of that use, which can not be shown in any other way. (Agamben 18)

Agamben writes that Plato's articulation of the paradigm, the series of singularities aligned with analogical thinking, involves "an eternity, which is found in something other and separated [...] in another entity, [it] is judged correctly and recognized as the same" (23). In other words, in this model of inquiry, air and water may present in many different scenarios and capacities, exhibiting recognizable traits, and, as such, can be recognized as themselves in variation. It is the work of this analysis, through a cumulative process, to point to the connections between thought, phenomenon, and thing.

⁵ Further, Agamben indicates "that a paradigm entails a movement that goes from singularity to singularity and, without ever leaving singularity, transforms every singular case into an *exemplar* of a general rule that can never be stated a priori" (22). I am using this conceptualization to suggest that, in identifying element influence, we arrive at a series of exemplars, instances where the elements are revealed (at least in their relationship to the human) through their entanglements. Thus, a paradigm is struck that allows our understanding to grow and change in relation to elemental otherness and the self in assemblage.

outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at a particular place *in* the world; rather we are part *of* the world in its ongoing intra-actions” (145). This is important to how adjacencies function as disruptions of agency and position (temporal and spatial) in relation to human-elemental becomings. Adjacencies are moments that sit together and harbour connections that might be spatially or temporally bound, but which cannot be boiled down to a continuum and for which a temporal or spatial crossing is either disrupted or unclear. Often these moments of assemblage point to singularities and, ultimately, paradigms, places where the character or rule of the elemental in relation to human understanding becomes significantly clearer.

Tracing singularities and expressions of material and dynamic imagination through ever-evolving and dissolving assemblages involves paying attention to vibrant matter; collapsing and expanding adjacencies, singularities, and paradigms; exposing material and dynamic imagination; pursuing a process that draws attention; and cultivating attentiveness to the nature of absent-present elements. These absent presences reside in, alongside, and against human others, where there is a necessary push against formal imagination and an attempt to better understand and embrace the elemental other and the perpetually becoming self through active attention to adjacencies and instances of assemblage.⁶ To do this, I suggest that we examine paradigms generated by the human and elemental in order to enrich our understanding of both. By engaging with the complexities of difference to create a distinct way of knowing, we can hope to develop a more advanced mode of thinking, of engaging with and understanding the

⁶ Assemblage is being used here to denote bodies that come together in unequal power to create new forms of being. There is a constant process of becoming and un-becoming taking place. Both Bennett and Deleuze and Guattari speak to this idea. Deleuze and Guattari write about the concept of assemblages in *A Thousand Plateaus* and Bennett adopts and modifies their use of the term in both *The Enchantment of Modern Life* and *Vibrant Matter*. Alaimo has developed trans-corporeality (grounded in the body, toxicity, and the political) to speak to a similar form of awareness and becoming.

unfamiliar. While we are not engaging with the elements directly but, rather, representations of the elements, the transition from experience to language is always a distancing of the real. Further, because these texts are fictional, they offer a way into imagining the elements and our relations that is already alive to suspended disbelief and imaginative possibilities, and which could, in turn, shine a light on our everyday assemblage states and becomings. Additionally, identifying a method for tracing elemental influence in textual artefacts creates space to apply the same kind of method to daily life. The method is portable and whether the text is a novel, a building, the self, or the world, it can offer a point of access for grappling with elemental others as entangled beings and extreme forms of otherness.

The noted instances of elements exhibiting agency and characteristics in the examined narratives present insights into particular combinations of elemental influence and otherness that vary in degree and context. An essential aspect of engaging with singularities and paradigms lies in the rejection of the “either-or” scenario that is assumed to exist when resolving the universal and the particular. The paradigm disrupts and calls into question binary thinking that produces distance between the self and others. Applying this concept of the paradigm helps to push analysis beyond a series of examples and eschews that surety for more complicated and arguably

cumulative “vectorial intensities.”⁷ This is Agamben’s analogical third. He writes, “the aporia may be resolved only if we understand that a paradigm implies the total abandonment of the particular-general couple as the model of logical inference” (Agamben 21). The possibility of an enriched and broader sense of dynamic community requires a high level of attentiveness that is, by nature, resistant to formal resolutions. Dynamic community is vital for expanding our understanding of elemental otherness, as it requires embracing and being attentive to the unfamiliar that is familiar.

The paradigms and singularities evident in *White Noise*, *The Road*, and *Flight Behavior* trace elements in ways that offer insight into their beings or natures, individually and in combination. It is a state of elemental becoming, shaping, and working with, against, or adjacent to human others that provides insights into the nature of elemental others and the nature of the self in human-elemental becomings. Through connection, adjacency, and assemblage, rules of being and becoming human and elemental enter into conversation with each other in accessible ways.

⁷ Agamben writes:

Only from the point of view of dichotomy can analogy (or paradigm) appear a *terbium comparationis*. The analogical third is attested here above all through the misidentification and neutralization of the first two, which now become indiscernible. The third is this indiscernibility, and if one tries to grasp it by means of bivalent caesurae, one necessarily runs up against an undecidable. It is thus impossible to clearly separate an example’s paradigmatic character—its standing for all cases—from the fact that it is one case among others. As in a magnetic field, we are dealing not with extensive and scalable magnitudes but with vectorial intensities. (20)

I suggest that by tracing singularities that share air or water in particular happenings across texts, a clearer sense of air or water emerges. Often, air and water are relegated to the background, where their role in a given vector is minimized, but when accounted for throughout and across texts, these intensities are amplified.

Human-elemental relationships are deeply entangled, as elemental influence is often at the heart of the imaginative process (i.e., material imagination). Bachelard created a unique series of philosophical inquiries into a concept he called “material imagination” by examining the work of elementally influenced poets. This project requires giving considerable attention to the imaginative process and the relationship between the perceiving self and the perceived, through the senses broadly and artefacts specifically. Throughout *Air and Dreams*, *Water and Dreams*, *Poetic Reverie*, *Intuition of the Instant*, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, and parts of *Earth and Reveries of Will*, Bachelard offers a path into the ineffable. He has conducted studies of poetry and poets to examine the trace of elemental influence on the imaginations of poets and their respective works. For Bachelard, the poet’s proximity to an oneiric state in order to access material imagination is both required and assumed. Bachelard sees the elements as influencing the imaginations of poets and their poems. I see elemental influence as still more pervasive: influencing the body, events, imagination, agency, and creation. That said, Bachelard’s poignant insights regarding elemental traces in poetry offer a starting point for articulating, and rendering intelligible, elemental influence in other artefacts.

Bachelard offers particularly valuable concepts that constitute the heart of this inquiry and that avoid turning the environment into background noise by placing elements at the core of our perceptive process.⁸ Bachelard places material imagination at the centre of the individual. He suggests that the development of the individual’s imagination is part of a dialogic process of

⁸ More recent efforts to centralize elements and their potential are examined in *Elemental Ecocriticism*. This volume is edited by Jeffery Cohen and Lowell Duckert. While it focuses primarily on analyzing medieval and early modern works, the various ways it offers for thinking with elements, and the reflection essays in particular, are useful for positioning this project in that developing conversation and for considering various approaches to elemental others.

becoming held between the individual and the element that dominates the landscape of one's childhood.

Bachelard sees the imagination of the individual as developing in response to time spent in an environment that is predominantly informed by a single element. He suggests that the time we spend in communication with the elemental has a fundamental impact on how we interpret our experiences and, in particular, how we communicate our perceived realities. Bachelard writes, that “if man lives his images and words sincerely, he receives from them a unique ontological benefit. The imagination given temporality by the word [... is] the humanizing faculty par excellence” (*AD* 12). The imagination, as defined by Bachelard, is a series of instances derived from immediate perceptions that are deconstructed and articulated, noticeably, through the injection of novelty. Bachelard suggests that this happens in poetry. I propose that the same is true of the novel, and that this concept can be further employed to move beyond a poet or a novelist's exploration of their respective elemental imaginings in a text, to recognize that material imagination is also at the core of human becomings (thoughts, actions, and creative endeavours). A natural extension of this analysis involves recognizing the self as part of a continually shifting assemblage that includes these elements. To grow and become in an environment is, in some ways, to be part of that environment—not merely to emulate it. The transformative experience of creating in response to material imagination is grounded in a conversation with the elements that is sustained from childhood through to the end of one's life. As I suggest in my introduction, stories and nuanced everyday experiences become narratives both about the individual perceiver and about the agency of the elemental.

What does it mean to be part of an assemblage and the voiced perceiver? How do elements destabilize the human centre? Bennett's *The Enchantment of Modern Life* and *Vibrant*

Matter offer key ideas for approaching otherness and the self. Bennett tries to destabilize the anthropocentric narrative that often overrides any consideration for the things that look back. Bennet's work on vibrant matter is also essential to this exploration. Bennett uses the term "vibrant matter" to speak to enlivening the material things and others that exist around and within the self, with the aim of noting "conative bodies that strive to enhance their power of activity by forming alliances with other bodies" (x). Like Bennett, I think this is a valuable form of thinking because it allows for greater engagement with the more-than-human world.⁹ Her work positions attentiveness as the process whereby we connect with the world around us in surprising and unexpected ways (through what Agamben would suggest are paradigms and what Deleuze and Guattari would frame as assemblages). Bennett writes that "what is needed is a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body" (*VM* xiv). Attentiveness to nonhuman forces is analogous to Bachelard's articulation of poetic reverie and its attending articulation through imagination, as well as

⁹ David Abram uses the term "more-than-human" throughout his work, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. He tends to favour the term "the sensory world," but he uses these terms interchangeably. His notion of the more-than-human is grounded in the beliefs of several of the world's aboriginal peoples. He suggests that "humans are tuned for relationship" (ix). He draws on phenomenological inquiries about how we perceive the world, what we account for, and what we filter out. His premise is simply that "we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human" (ix). Abram uses the term to suggest a community that extends beyond the human that we are hardwired to participate in. He is also attempting, like Bennett, to displace terms that position humanity at the core of all narratives. This may appear somewhat futile, but one of the arguments for speaking for/with the more-than-human world comes from Abram's reading of Merleau-Ponty's later works. Abram notes, in his chapter "The Flesh of Language", that Merleau-Ponty, in his work *The Visible and the Invisible*, affirms "that it is first the sensuous, perceptual world that is relational and weblike in character, and hence that the organic, interconnected structure of any language is an extension or echo of the deeply interconnected matrix of sensorial reality itself" (Abram 84). A number of the issues that arise in phenomenological approaches to ecocriticism are grounded in this very debate: how does language both reveal and conceal the world we perceive and what can we do to destabilize our perceptions of both ourselves and the more-than-human world through language?

Agamben's intuitive method. Each theorist is looking to establish a connection with otherness that is grounded, inevitably, in the perceiving self being in conversation with the internal and external worlds.

Bennett's focus on fortuitous assemblages and anticipatory readiness established by being predisposed to noting "thing-power" (5) sits meaningfully alongside Bachelard's realization of poetic reverie and imagination. Positioning these theories together creates room for thinking about the intricacies of connection and where the boundaries of the body and the active constitution of the perceiving self unfold. The possibility of connection is, once again, grounded in the perceiving self and the imaginative process that is possible in light of the individual's attention to the environment. However, connection is also actively engaged in through the agency of the "other" that looks back, as Bennett would say. The other plays many roles that involve looking back, including: pushing back against perception, playing the role of an agent within events, inspiring the perceiver to recognize the interconnected nature of experiences, examining what it means to be a self in conversation with unfolding others, and entering a state of becoming with others.

Assemblages, in the work of Deleuze and Guattari as well as Bennett, concern composite bodies, transversal thinking, and perceiving selves. Drawing on these thinkers in this way helps us to position the self in respect to elemental others while more accurately countering "the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought" (Bennett xvi). This is echoed by Barad:

It is once again possible to acknowledge nature, the body and materiality in the fullness of their becoming without resorting to the optics of transparency or opacity, the geometries of absolute exteriority or interiority, and the theorization of the human as either pure cause or pure effect while

at the same time remaining resolutely accountable for the role “we” play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming. (Barad 130)

Situating the self in this role includes a “contestation of the unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve” (121). Placing self and material others into a variety of entanglements shifts dynamics that exclude non-human beings as agents in events and becomings. By drawing on the works of Bachelard and Agamben, it is easier to examine the traces of elemental others laid out in stories that reflect actual and possible experiences while recognizing the role that more-than-human participants play as agents within the everyday, which Bennett so aptly explores.

In Guattari’s *Three Ecologies*, he explains transversal thinking as part of a process of heterogenesis, which he defines as “continuous re-singularization” (45). He argues for the application of the following tools to facilitate transversal thinking: the articulation of “a nascent subjectivity, a constantly mutating socius, [and] an environment in the process of being reinvented” (45). By destabilizing accepted, socially constructed, subjective norms, as well as altering ways of thinking to make space for unexpected collisions of objects, others, and ideas through the process of re-singularization (leading to the possibility of transversal thinking), Guattari makes room for a creative economy designed to allow “individuals [... to be] both more united and increasingly different” (45). I use the term transversal thinking as a point of departure to access unexpected instances of elemental influence, assemblages, events, and narratives. Transversal thinking is, by design, multivalent, and it simultaneously crosses areas of consideration in order “to counter the pervasive atmosphere of dullness and passivity” (45) exacted by the “deathly repetition” of a limited number of “existential refrains” (34).

Bennett's work focuses on the connections that are enlivened by our awareness of others, with the hope of creating a more extended sense of community designed to establish an ethics of care and commitment to the more-than-human world that is both within the human body and outside of it. Bennett argues that others are agents in events whether we recognize them or not, but these others become points of connection between humans and the more-than-human world through an attentiveness to our environment that Bennett argues can be cultivated and which, she indicates, must be cultivated in order to combat our destructive relationship with the planet (ix). I argue that the significance of actively centralizing air, earth, water, and fire, seeing the impact of otherness within the self as assemblage, and acknowledging human becomings as they develop in concert with elemental agents should facilitate a more nuanced interaction with the broader world and a better understanding of the "self" within it. The crux of this is that by recognizing the extent of our humanness as extending beyond the boundaries of our individual or collective bodies, we may find a way to extend care outward and embrace our assemblage states.

The term "assemblage," as I am using it, is derived from the work of Deleuze and Guattari in *Ten Thousand Plateaus* and Bennett in *Vibrant Matter*. Bennett unpacks the term as indicating diverse things that come together and function but which have "uneven topographies because some of the points at which the various effects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface" (Bennett, *VM* 24). Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Bennett, speak to the collisions between human and non-human bodies, including "some very active and powerful non-humans: electrons, trees, wind, fire, electromagnetic fields" (Bennett, *VM* 24). Bennett suggests that the "image of affective bodies forming assemblages" highlights "some of the limitations in human-centered theories of action" while also investigating "some of the practical implications [...] of a theory of action and

responsibility that crosses the human-nonhuman divide” (24). For this project, being aware that there is crossover between the human and the non-human at the level of assemblage is essential for approaching relationships between the human and elemental assemblages in *White Noise*, *The Road*, and *Flight Behavior*.

Additionally, EFI shares similarities with Object Oriented Ontologies (OOO). First, there is the shared assertion that human-centred modes of inquiry are limited. EFI takes human-elemental assemblages as the access point for broadening proximity to otherness and connection with elemental otherness in particular. Second, EFI shares similarities with Timothy Morton’s characterization of hyperobjects, in that elements are also interobjective and nonlocal. In other words, elements in assemblage with other objects become apparent in the context of things like events (which is part of EFI) and they do not have a singular locality (which is inherently true due to the nature of elements). While OOO tries to neutralize human privilege and places things as equal, though often with unique positionalities and subjectivities, EFI is more invested in digging into the speculative possibilities of elemental otherness in instances of singularities or paradigms by exploring elemental entanglements as human-elemental assemblages.

EFI pursues questions about what humans are and how elements influence perception, actions, and events. This method loosens the boundaries around ideas about subjectivity and the body, but the experience of elemental otherness is processed through the human. EFI also shares with OOO an interest in what it means to be embedded in the broader becoming of the human/more-than-human world. EFI attempts to account for the understanding of otherness that evolves from attentive presence and cumulative experience. It is very much grounded in what it means to be human in conversation with extreme elemental otherness, and it accounts for the assemblage states that constitute the human-elemental subject. Attention to this particular way of

being in the world makes space for more lucid and unexpected insights/speculations regarding what it might mean to be air or water, but EFI is more fully invested in what we are as humans within human-elemental assemblages and how elemental influence, and our awareness of it, might shift human-elemental assemblages towards a broader framework of embeddedness and accountability. The differences between EFI and OOO lie in their pathways and goals. EFI accounts for degrees of entanglement and assemblage that constitute the human-elemental assemblage. Ideas about agency, process, and perceived and perceiver are challenged, and concepts of the self become murky enough that considerations of otherness become centralized and necessary. Cumulative experience with otherness is foundational to EFI's approach to understanding elemental difference. It seems likely that a decentralized means of exploring what it is to be a human-elemental assemblage might precipitate a different view of self and otherness so that taken-for-granted values, purposes, and events might be reconsidered under an expanded ethics of care.

In addition to concerns with how theoretical underpinnings connect and inform EFI, the novel itself is an important component of this application. As Amitav Ghosh suggests in *The Great Derangement*, the novel has always been a bourgeois form. More importantly, Ghosh suggests that the novel, as we know it today, is about occluding and sidestepping the types of genuine disruption and recognition that happen with environmental others in daily life. He indicates that the novel reinforces the status quo (that the place for the fantastic exists elsewhere in time, including in science fiction and fantasy). While the premise seems accurate, I would like to complicate this by suggesting that the relationships that humans have with elemental others (air, water, earth, and fire) are so pervasive and invasive that they rupture the continuity posed by the novel's form. The elements seep into novels because it is impossible to avoid their reach.

While the form of the novel might make the issues surrounding climate change difficult to entertain and introduce, as Ghosh so deftly articulates, the realities that amplify our entanglements as part of nature and, specifically, the reality of elemental relationships in the lives of characters and, perhaps, novelists emerge in the selected texts. Consider, for example, *White Noise*. The elemental, overwhelming, ever-present absence of air in the novel requires consideration even if it is overlooked outside of the ATE (and only explored peripherally in that regard). In *White Noise*, air refuses arbitrary national boundaries, the boundaries of the self, the structuring of events within geopolitical domains, and the imaginative influence of these intangibles made tangible in perception, elemental entanglements/assemblages (or silent speech),¹⁰ events, and stories. I began this project by tracing air as an influence in *White Noise*. Soon, air was not just an influence, air was at the centre of the text (driving the primary character, influencing perception and actions, structuring events, and destabilizing language and narrative). Air enters the text as a quasi-agent because it is impossible to ignore one of the most fundamental human influences and relations: elements and elemental others. The things that shape what it is to be human find their way into artefacts through material imaginings, bodily processes, events, and narration.

My engagement with the texts that appear in this dissertation remains revelatory for me. Discovering various ways to imagine relationships with air and water as absent presences has been surprising and insightful (and these methods continue to evolve). This work offers insight

¹⁰ This is a concept that I have developed regarding how elements are voiced through elemental-human hybrids. I use the term “silent speech,” which appears in Bachelard’s work on air, along with the terms “speaking reed” and “sound chamber.” These concepts are focused on “word bearing air” in relation to poetry in Bachelard’s work. I use speaking reeds to denote negotiated elemental voices and sound chambers for those who speak the things that remain ineffable in elemental others.

into our often-overlooked relationships with air and water from a humanities perspective that allows for the exploration of socio-cultural influences, as well as how the elements shape the body and mind, beyond providing life support. It also supports creative thought experiments that ask: What is air? What is water? What are we? By taking a careful inventory of the self, coupled with recognition of the media of our existence and their influence on imagination, perception, body, and events, these questions may lead to new and unanticipated answers.

The point of this experimental analysis is to amplify what is already part of human becomings yet predominantly unobserved or unattended to—the elemental relations that direct, define, and puncture everyday life. The violence done to reality through the repetitions of forms and ways of thinking makes literature an ideal form to use to inquire about elemental others and existent relations. While Ghosh rightly points out that few authors in mainstream fiction (not science fiction nor fantasy) are writing about the climate, there are several who purposefully set out to do so (McCarthy with *The Road* and Kingsolver with *Flight Behavior*, for example). Also, there are several who arrive at their elemental relations without seeming to aim to (i.e., DeLillo with *White Noise*).

EFI is multifaceted, attentive to the margins and minutia of stories, and it works with analogous ways of identifying otherness, by noting the elements in relation to perception, entanglement/silent speech/assemblage, the role they play in directing and structuring events, and, finally, their representation in stories. Demonstrating this process involves focusing on how elements are perceived and how that perception evolves over the course of each novel. By selecting instances where elements resist acts of formal imagination and tracing minor shifts in perception throughout the novels, I hope to demonstrate how attentiveness manifests awareness and complicity in complex elemental engagements. Next, I examine instances of porous

boundaries between characters and the elements. By demonstrating how elemental others infiltrate bodies to access voices and power, in a way that is recognizable to human characters, I hope to demonstrate that even in a form resistant to the types of interventions elements engage in (i.e., novels), elements are nonetheless imagined to influence and co-direct human becomings. Thereafter, I present examples of how elements erupt into stories and redirect events, charting unexpected outcomes and interventions that reflect back imagined daily life in slightly disrupted ways. Finally, there are occasionally shifts in a narrative that convey the movement of elemental others from the periphery to the centre of the story and the thoughts, actions, and bodies of characters. By tracing the movement of elemental others through stories, I hope to show how the elements become recognizable through this process. To be clear, my goal is to have the reader recognize that being in the world means being of the world. As Barad writes, “our epistemology must take into account the fact that we are a part of that nature that we seek to understand” (146). The idea that we are beings influenced by our respective environments seems indisputable. At a bare minimum, the media we move in and on shape perceptual equipment and attune minds.

Connecting to the elements is part of a sensory experience. It is part of a mental construct, part of a daily becoming, part of the agent-bodies constructing events—the material influences co-constructing the mental landscape. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, human beings are permeable bodies in constant flux: forming, deforming, and reforming. Each subject is a multitude of colliding bodies with permeable boundaries. This theory suggests that air and water act as agents unfolding and becoming alongside, within, and beyond each other. Though it is simple enough to note agential others in passing, there are exchanges that force our recognition of singularities in a way that is more open to transversal and latitudinal experiences of the self and agency within the more-than-human community, including the elemental specifically.

White Noise, *The Road*, and *Flight Behavior* offer a series of stories that magnify elemental influences, agency, and conversation, ranging from everyday disaster to apocalyptic events. In each case, highlighting the constant shaping, reshaping, and co-construction of the individual and the event informed by the elements is at the heart of what EFI hopes to offer: an apparatus for tracing elemental influence and examining what we might learn from it, and a theoretical framework for approaching this extreme form of otherness. Additionally, EFI may allow people to better appreciate their often-overlooked connection to, and embeddedness within, the more-than-human world. Before COVID-19, it seemed that the elements were becoming increasingly abstract, but with the advent of COVID-19 and the impact of air on our day-to-day lives and health, our attention has shifted in ways that bring air into the centre of this event. Being at the mercy of the elements and each other can be unnerving, but it is also an opportunity to embrace a destabilizing of long-held fantasies of human power and supremacy in favour of more lateral ways of becoming. This contribution is in favour of avoiding a post-apocalyptic narrative of the world where we are more at the mercy of the elements than ever before. One piece of this puzzle lies in centralizing existing elemental influence and entanglements to accelerate a humbling of the human, in favour of right relations with the more-than-human world.

Chapter 2: White Noise: Aerial Influence and the Uncanny

White Noise, by Don DeLillo, was published in January 1985. It follows the life and observations of the main character, Jack Gladney, in the context of family, university life, environmental disaster, and the fallout thereafter. The novel is situated by critics as part of an evolving canon of environmental literature, and it has been studied for what it has to say about postmodern narrative, culture, consumerism and waste, the environment, as well as the uncanny relation of the Airborne Toxic Event (ATE) to the December 1984 Union Carbide Chemical Spill in Bhopal, India. This chapter will expand the growing conversation around elemental ecocriticism, and it will pursue an understanding of the uncanny in relation to silent speech and how a novel might mobilize the surreal realities of environmental disaster in order to enliven the reader to both text and world while exploring their entangled nature.

While previous explorations of *White Noise* have examined consumerism, waste, weather, postmodernism, and host of other topics, elemental influences, and air's influence in particular, have been left unexamined. *Elemental Ecocriticism* has focused largely on texts from the medieval period as well as ancient philosophy, and this work adds to that conversation by dealing with contemporary writing, engaging with a variety of theoretical tools, and positioning reading as a mental apparatus for exploring the human-elemental becomings of the present moment. Air's influence is worth examining in order to explore what it is to be human, but air is also worth analyzing as a phenomenon with agency in the novel. Although air is rarely contemplated in day-to-day life (unless toxins are present or another immediately life-altering aspect of its composition is at hand), human-elemental entanglements are ubiquitous and extend well beyond life support (as DeLillo's novel so aptly explores). Air is the medium we live in. It influences thoughts, perceptions, actions, events, and embodied forms of being and becoming.

Air is more than the process element of breath. Tracing an example of air's influence and the author's intuitive understanding thereof provides insight into existing and under-explored human-elemental narratives and relations. DeLillo taps into what is a primary aspect of becoming human in response, conviviality, and struggle with air as a supra-natural element that is the dominant media of human life in a way that is accessible, traceable, and attuned. The second premise of this study assumes that a certain fluidity exists between author-text-reader-world. The assumption is that this fluidity is desirable and intuitive, and that, therefore, exploring a novel to further demonstrate and develop an understanding of what it is to dwell and become in this media is both critical and possible. Third, it is assumed that generatively and creatively engaging with paradigms and singularities, through an analogical process of tracing Jack's becoming by way of what he follows, as well as what draws his attention, thoughts, and actions, is a reasonable analytical approach for a phenomenological process. Finally, this work is premised on the notion that there is potential to extend this inquiry beyond the technical analysis of text and novels into a type of mental equipment for material engagement with absent elemental presences.¹¹

To explore the novel using an elemental focus, I have developed a process for tracing elemental agency and human-elemental becomings. When I initially read *White Noise*, I was attentive to other aspects of the novel. More recently, as I read the novel through the lens of

¹¹ I use the term "absent presences" or, in this case, "absent elemental presences" to refer to the elements that surround, support, direct, assemble with, and become entangled with the body in significant ways but which are not often observed or processed as lively, vibrant agents.

ecolonging,¹² I began to notice air's role in the plot, which directed my thinking to air's influence in the text and more broadly. My initial focus was the ATE as I started considering the material possibilities of air. However, with further reading and reflection (regarding this text and others), my reading of the novel took on a new focus, shifting into a recognition of patterns of influence and entanglement that ultimately helped shape EFI. I separated these ideas into air's elemental influence on perception, associations with madness, voicelessness and silent speech (elementally influenced voice), and what it might mean to have an elementally attuned/influenced mind. Next, I looked at the way air not only shapes and directs the ATE but the ways air's power registers in the body once it is toxic. During and following the ATE, there is a major shift in Jack's character that is marked by the disruptive influence of air on his body, his anticipated reality, and his identity. Finally, I explored a series of aerial transitions for Jack Gladney, from perception through to assemblage states with air. Each of these components offered a way for me to trace less obvious aerial influences in human becomings and undoings: imaginatively, influentially, eventfully, and in assemblage states. These instances, which might appear minor at times, become cumulatively weighted over the course of the novel.

Aerial Attunement and Shifting Perception

This chapter explores a number of surprising paradigms that are present in the novel *White Noise*. First, air and death share imaginative space. This was completely unanticipated, and if it had only occurred in *White Noise* briefly it could be easily dismissed. However, it shows

¹² This is a concept that I was developing early in my studies. In brief, I suggested that some artefacts act as pharmakons, both recognizing and triggering a longing to be more fully embedded in first nature as an imaginative space that is othered and separate. After longing for an imagined return or the occurrence of an actual return, the thing itself neutralizes and represses the need for connection, creating a state of suspended desire and connection.

up throughout this novel and in other novels and artefacts that centralize elemental others as well. Throughout the novel, tableaux of decline, decay, and death sit alongside air's playful presence. Additionally, the main character, Jack, is resistant to air's influence, and this is bound up with his fear of death. Air is frequently associated with death, and the fear of death and its comic manifestations pervade the novel. While causality is not something I can confidently demonstrate, the connection/association between air and death is something I present throughout this analysis. A second paradigm exists in the contrast explored between the timelessness and forcefulness of air and Jack's physicality and lack of significant influence. A third paradigm examined in the first part of this chapter concerns air's transformative, collaborative, and invasive potential. It can become a part of human imagination, bodies, becomings, silent speech, events, and more. Notably, air's influence extends well beyond the material background of the textual landscape. The last point of inquiry in this chapter is in regards to the primacy of material imagination. I argue that Jack's way of navigating the world through air's extreme otherness readies him to recognize his part in a constantly mutating series of physical and imaginative assemblages with air.

Air is the medium we dwell in, and it moves within our watery, bacteria-laden self-habitats. Air is at the centre of the novel, and it is at the centre of Jack Gladney's world. In this part of the chapter, I will focus on Gladney's attunement to air and air's resistance to Jack's attempts at formal imaginings.¹³ I will trace the movement in Jack's perceptive process from formal to material imagination. This tracing is important because the concept of following or

¹³ According to Bachelard, formal imagination is a shared set of meanings and symbols that are distant from the objects or experiences they represent but which people recognize as communicating specific meanings. For example, red roses signalling love: there is nothing inherent to roses, the colour red, or love that bind these things together, but there they sit nonetheless.

pursuing a process of reckoning and attunement is part of what it is to become.¹⁴ In this case, Jack is becoming a human-elemental assemblage. Giving attention to specific aspects of otherness around and within Jack's body changes how he engages with the world and slowly uncovers material iterations of an attentiveness to air and its influence.

In the early parts of the novel, Jack's engagement with air is limited; however, as the novel unfolds, his initial foray into a relationship with air constructs the bridge between perception, attunement, and becoming. Jack's first instances of engaging with air in the novel are presented as attentiveness to air in terms of the connection drawn between the wind, the fall season, and the decomposition of the human and arboreal. DeLillo presents air's movement and human interactions in response to air's influence:

Leaves came tumbling and scraping down the pitched roofs. There were periods in every day when a stiff wind blew, baring the trees further, and retired men appeared in the backyards, on the small lawns out front, carrying rakes with curved teeth. Black bags were arrayed at the curbstone in lopsided rows. (53)

Each instance in this short passage calls attention to the material imagination's role in engaging with the more-than-human world. Jack traces air from amongst the various stimuli that define his experience. He centralizes it by assigning it agency in the process. Inherent in these seasonal, elemental, and human transitions is the desire to be remembered and the melancholy of a present tense saturated with longing and mourning. The retired men and the trees are on the same entropic journey, and both are moved by air. Matthew Packer aptly points to Jack's focus on the

¹⁴ See Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* for a more fulsome exploration of following and becoming beyond Bachelard's mention of imagination as an act of becoming.

minutiae of daily life in his discussion about the sacred and mimesis in *White Noise*, particularly as it relates to shared public events. However, it is perhaps Jack's engagement with air's actions as a type of coinciding sacred violence (much like the connection Packer draws between violence and the sacred) that directs Jack's attention to the minutiae of events and daily life "in the same measure" (656).

Jennifer Ladino follows a similar line of thinking in *Reclaiming Nostalgia* when she writes, "*White Noise* encourages active participation by its readers and advocates an engaged, thoughtful approach to daily life" (171). She also touches on the destabilization of the natural and nonnatural, suggesting that Jack is experiencing homesickness for a "eulogized and ever present" nature (170). It is this "eulogized and ever present" nature that draws Jack to the graveyard, the space where the sacred and the ever-present sit together. Jack experiences nostalgia for what never was in the graveyard and reckons with what is, as it pertains to air at the centre of his becomings and air's bridging of embodied and perceived experiences. While the form of the novel itself is partially about exploring the everyday,¹⁵ I suggest that Jack's ability to linger over his family's surface interactions and assign profound meaning to everyday instances is part of a deeper mimetic act in response and attunement to air's influence, where Jack's

¹⁵ As Franco Moretti notes, "the novel exists... as a *culture of everyday life*. Far from devaluing it, the novel organizes and 'refines' this form of existence, making it ever more alive and interesting" (35). While Jack's investment in the everyday is part of what novels do generally, his focus on the surface of things is also a mimetic act that explores his entanglements with air.

actions mirror air's drift over the surface of things.¹⁶ Jack's observations of human and seasonal decline are bound up with his fear of death and insignificance. He ponders the possibility of "forgetfulness [having gotten] into the air and water," suggesting that it has "entered the food chain" (DeLillo 52). Air is situated as a carrier and influencer of qualities of mind that can be noted and reimagined by perceiving bodies. By taking the first steps towards an integrated experience of self and environment, and perhaps by mirroring air's processes (concerning both the sacredness of the everyday and eventually its violent and deathly inclinations), Jack attempts to access a different sort of eternity.

Jack frequently directs his attention to the movement of air over the surface of things. Additionally, air plays a role in terms of Jack's quality of mind. He is drawn to sparse landscapes as they offer atmospheric opportunities for contemplation. In the graveyard, Jack seeks "painterly peace" (DeLillo 97). This is, perhaps, what a person anticipates in a graveyard: atmosphere and somberness. What matters most in the graveyard is that Jack expects and wants a certain presentation of place (formal imagination) yet is greeted with another experience

¹⁶ Moretti notes that the Bildungsroman, which *White Noise* is an example of (as both A. Wiese and S. Scholliers explore), "tells us that a life is meaningful if the internal interconnections of individual temporality ('the plot of all life') imply at the same time an opening up to the outside, an ever wider and thicker network of external relationships with 'human things'" (18). This network of things is evident in *White Noise*, as the character moves towards a different type of self-development and "integration" that is marked by "complementary and convergent trajectories, and at their point of encounter and equilibrium lies that full and double epiphany of meaning that is 'maturity'" (19). Jack becomes a developed character in his entanglements with human things, but the trajectory of his becoming that I trace here concerns his relationship with air, which takes on a trajectory similar to that outlined by Moretti. Jack comes to "exist for [himself], because [he] willingly agreed to be determined from without" by air while recognizing how this has shaped his inner world (21).

(aerial influence).¹⁷ The perceptual entanglements of formal and material imagination (or aerial influence) point to the complexity of thinking with and through air, bridging the gap between what Jack wishes to see, what is there, and what that means as part of a human-elemental assemblage. The environmentally-expressed entropy in human order and perception is not an aggressive act but an integrative one. Jack's imagined Romantic landscape is punctured by the wind whipping up the snow, causing him to bundle himself away from the cold while attempting to straighten the flags hanging about the headstones.

[Jack] stood there, listening. The wind blew snow from the branches.
Snow blew out of the woods in eddies and sweeping gusts. [Jack] raised
[his] collar, put [his] gloves back on. When the air was still again, [he]
walked among the stones, trying to read the names and dates, adjusting
the flags to make them swing free. Then [he] stood and listened. (DeLillo 97-98)

The graveyard remains a graveyard, but the bodies of individuals are reabsorbed and erased, and the wind and its movement are dominant. The names are rendered unreadable on the stones, and the bodies "are... in the ground, of course, asleep and crumbling" (DeLillo 98). It is worth noting that even in the dank business of unbecoming, Jack sees the opportunity to introduce air into the subterranean world to "crumble" the dead. Imagining decomposition at its terminal stage suggests a commitment to an aerial-material imagination by bypassing every other conceivable

¹⁷ While Bachelard's definition of "formal imagination" suggests that one might anticipate a particular type of feeling or experience in the context of a symbolic space like a graveyard, his articulation of "material imagination" indicates that the individual must encounter the place and forms as they are (provided they are influenced by the dominant element of a given environment). Material imagination is fostered through ongoing contact with specific elements, and continued contact leads to some form of deeper insight and connection between humans and elements. What happens here is an expression of Jack's aerial influence and, thus, his inability to remain resistant to elemental influence.

state of decay in order to arrive at dust. As Elaine Martucci notes in *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo*, “through the narrative voice of Gladney, DeLillo demonstrates that the changes we have made to the landscape [...] do not and never can remove nature’s significance from our consciousness” (80). So, while Jack attempts to suffuse the space with meaning by writing over it with perceptual expectations, the reality of the contrast between human interventions in nature and nature’s timeline (specifically that of air) far precedes and supersedes the human and, further, it disrupts the desire to eulogize ever-present nature.

The same connections between perception and environment, phenomenon and thing, are at the heart of Bennett’s argument for attunement to the minutiae of everyday life as a process of recognizing vibrancy and broadening the community of care. Bennett’s use of the term “attunement” bears similarities to Bachelard’s focus on our earliest environment(s) as a source material for imagination and the foundation of one’s perceptual equipment. Jack notices atmosphere because he is predisposed to notice it, presumably based on a childhood environment where air is dominant. He pays undue attention to the flags because the air moves them and because there is an unspoken contest being waged between the human and the elemental. What galls Jack is that there is quite literally nowhere to go but down. While Jack’s attention to reality is rendered through air, and though he continues to engage with small objects that trace air’s movement, the more significant shift is in Jack’s perceptual process. The situation that unfolds in the graveyard challenges the value of formal imaginings. Jack is left to reckon with inadequate perceptual processes, as an individual can only ever really see what has already been seen within the confines of formal imaginings. However, Jack comes into himself more fully by embracing his attunement to air and grappling with the wind.

The important element in these examples is Jack's frustration with air's resistance to aligning with premeditated images of atmospheric "painterly peace" and, additionally, how air forces not only a reconsideration of its atmospheric potential or its influence on quality of mind but also a physical response. The transition that Jack undergoes is from observing subject to reticent subject to the air. He is being awakened to an "unthought known" (Morton 4), and this makes him aware of a "passageway between the elemental and the causal" (280). What Morton describes here is how the elemental functions similarly to a god in that it "mediates between one thing and another thing" (280), disrupting anticipated spatial and temporal dynamics rather like Agamben's paradigm. Morton positions the schism between phenomenon and thing as lying at the heart of modernity, indicating that "what modernity marginalizes as indigenous superstition returns as a weird Celtic twilight around the edges, a spectral glow" (280). In short, the temptation to ignore the elemental is cached in imagining that modernity exists (and that the unknown is known) and that we have somehow skirted the ineffable and addressed the connection between phenomenon and thing. This matters for a few reasons: first, the elemental does work that is overlooked and which extends well beyond thematized presentations in text (though that in itself is valuable and points to the enduring influence of elemental beingness on collective imaginings—as it occurs in *White Noise* and elsewhere); second, there is an underlying supposition that agency and sentience are mutually presenting; and, finally, moving in elemental matter and engaging with a particular elemental influence may well be an "unthought known," but the entanglements that arise when narrating human-elemental others occur in the slippage between phenomenon and thing. Elementality and influence are centralized and conceptualized in this inquiry through artefacts that centralize absent presences or "unthought knowns" that are essential to how we think, perceive, articulate, act, and become in assemblage with the

elemental. In artefacts, air's absent presence is traceable and translatable—the thetic divide has already been breached, but some excavating is required. *White Noise* has helped me to think through the process of elemental trace, revealing unanticipated aspects of aerial influence and human-elemental becomings. This leads me to the next area of inquiry as it pertains to voice and air's influence. Perception functions initially as a trace on the surface of things that draws Jack's attention to reckon with formal and material imaginings, to a perceptual process that involves a physical response. The second part of this chapter explores the uncanny as it pertains to aerially influenced speech, and it processes some generative work around aerial assemblages at the periphery of human communities.

Sound Chambers and Speaking Reeds

This section of the chapter looks at crossings/assemblages as part of human-elemental becomings. This is achieved through an examination of voice and its symptomatic entanglements with air and peripheral subjectivities throughout the novel. In *White Noise*, imagining air is a means of engaging with extreme otherness. Jack is attentive to the air and the qualities that he associates with it. Here, I examine relational structures that bridge and connect human and aerial forms, particularly focusing on the conflation of peripherality, otherness, and air through voice (i.e., silent speech).

Silent speech is significant in understanding air's complexity. It centralizes and gives voice to isolated, peripheral, and unheard individuals and human-elemental assemblages. Bachelard suggests that silent speech is “poetic breath... a wonderful control of word-bearing air” (AD 239). Bachelard uses “silent speech” to refer to the poet's process: generating ideas and images in poetry informed by material imagination. I use “silent speech” to describe two

categories of elementally influenced communicators: sound chambers and speaking reeds (240). A term that I have adapted from Bachelard's *Air and Dreams*, "sound chamber" describes how otherness is conceived of in ways comparable to how elementality is conceived of in terms of human-elemental assemblages existing outside of symbolic language. Sound chambers point to the paradigm of air's communicative, prophetic, deathly quality, through peripheral figures brought into focus in extraordinary circumstances in *White Noise* (the ATE, insane asylum fire, nuns tending attempted murderers). Another Bachelardian term that I use, a "speaking reed" means a person that something or someone else appears to speak through. Speaking reeds are entangled with, attuned to, and at times animated by air. In *White Noise*, speaking reeds move from the margin to the centre of the novel through Jack's attunement to aerial traits.

In each instance of silent speech, whether encapsulated in the metaphor of the sound chamber or the speaking reed, there is an associated characteristic of prophecy and a connection with the dead and dying. There are many examples of this in *White Noise*, including the fire sirens luring the unsuspecting traveller into the storm when they begin wailing, announcing the drift of toxic chemicals that drives people from their homes and, at times, into the cloud of deadly chemicals itself (DeLillo 119). The sirens become a channel, articulating the air and directing the movement of individuals (19). Wilder's keening similarly seems to bring animality, prophecy, and place together. His cries seem to intuit the coming ATE and preemptively mourn the outcome (75-79). Yet another example of silent speech is presented in the madwoman on fire, whose enflamed body and surreal silence centralize air, madness, and voice in a way that prefigures other mad female figures in the novel (239). While the madwoman articulates no audible sounds, her assemblage state communicates something about the arbitrary isolation of madness and performs the body as animated by some deeper otherness where withstanding the

heat and pain of fire is possible.¹⁸ Another example of silent speech is when the nuns channel words that denote a faith they do not have, for a world that needs holy fools (317). They offer up prayers to a celestial god (an aerial god) so that those who do not have faith can physically place faith and madness together in these peripheral figures.¹⁹ Another example of silent speech is when Jack channels a “voice from the void,” conjuring up an intuitive series of insights into Hitler, the nature of reality, and the source of voice during his lecture with Murray (26), suggesting that the voice from the void is outside the human. By situating the source as elsewhere, Jack’s aerial influences are more fully highlighted. Each instance of a voiceless other expressing itself offers insight into disrupted states of deathly repetition by chiseling away at shared certainties and securities or, to use Guattari’s term, perceived “pseudo-eternity” (*TE* 34). Perceived pseudo-eternity is a mechanism that sidelines the recognition of mortality by buying into a limited number of existential refrains. Silent speech disrupts these refrains by bringing in

¹⁸ This framework for madness is reminiscent of Foucault’s work on the subject in *Madness and Civilization*:

Animality, in fact, protected the lunatic from whatever might be fragile, precarious, or sickly in man. The animal solidity of madness, and that density it borrows from the blind world of beasts, inured the madman to hunger, heat, cold, pain. It was common knowledge until the end of the eighteenth century that the insane could support the miseries of existence indefinitely. There was no need to protect them; they had no need to be covered or warmed. (74)

The suggestion is that there is an extreme difference between the woman and Jack. She is inaudible and othered, and Jack is a witness to this menagerie of animality and elemental entanglement.

¹⁹ As Foucault notes, “Christian unreason was relegated by Christians themselves into the margins of a reason that had become identical with the wisdom of God incarnate” (79). In *White Noise*, the *glory of madness* is on full display in the embodiment of ethereal, celestial divinity in the nuns. Foucault goes on to say, in *Madness and Civilization*, that after

Port-Royal, men would have to wait two centuries—until Dostoevsky and Nietzsche—for Christ to regain the glory of his madness, for scandal to recover its power as revelation, for unreason to cease being merely the public shame of reason. (79)

The nuns and their “madness” occupy a specific social space that allows others to have their non-belief and their holy reason.

unexpected utterances and the voices of assemblages that are often relegated to the margins. Understanding air and silent speech through various assemblages and singularities necessitates destabilizing existing perceptions and expectations. In *White Noise*, analogies of voicelessness, in the context of air's broader paradigm, are often articulated by uncanny others.

As Bennett writes, "To become is not to achieve a final state of being; it is to give more of a chance to that which rumbles in you, but you are not" (*EML* 26). This conceptualization of becoming helps frame what is happening to Jack in his relationship with air in *White Noise*. These human-elemental interlopers at the edges of human understanding and community function as speaking reeds and sound chambers, highlighting the paradigms of voiced aerial influence or entanglement. The singularities that follow further contribute to the emerging paradigm of air as deathly and resistant. The relationship between air and the peripheral characters in the novel is part of a sustained and evolving conversation that becomes a point of aerial access and insight for the community in the context of extreme events.

Jack's German language instructor, Howard Dunlop, is a peripheral character brought into the community of the text by being a speaking reed and channeling the aerial attributes that Jack attends to. Dunlop tells Jack that he used to feel disconnected from people, and he notes that it was the weather that changed things for him by giving him a voice. Dunlop indicates that it "was as though a message was being transmitted from the weather satellite through that young [weather man] and then to me in my canvas chair" (DeLillo 55). Dunlop eases himself into a new understanding of the world through weather. He turns "to meteorology for comfort" (55). He begins to find a way to talk to other people. He pursued his interest in weather because it "was something [Dunlop had] been looking for [his entire life] (55)." Through weather, he attains "a sense of peace and security" (55). As Marita Sturken notes in her analysis of *White Noise*,

“weather is the site of a production of knowledge that functions as a means to erase political agency and to substitute the activity of witnessing in its place” (187). By talking about the weather and identifying weather as a shared experience, Dunlop distances himself from his potential proclivities and agency, coming closer to something all-encompassing: an aerial-other witness “keeping the forces of the unpredictable at bay” (189) through meteorology. Weather is a point of shared experience and a community-building phenomenon. In this instance, it gives Dunlop a voice that others can choose to acknowledge while witnessing aerial qualities, thus diminishing his unsavoury characteristics.

As Murray and Jack note, Dunlop is alien and obscene: “[Dunlop] looks like a man who finds dead bodies erotic” (DeLillo 238). This is all the explanation that is offered for Dunlop’s “grim lascivious” nature that has placed him outside the community (238). His potential propensities aside, it is his unsettled and unsettling nature that connects him to atmospheric variations and narratives. Atmospheric variation, density, and the movement of the air are primary interests for Dunlop and Jack as well. Dunlop tells Jack how he sees the weather: “Dew, frost and fog. Snow flurries. The jet stream. I believe there is a grandeur in the jet stream” (55). There are similarities between Dunlop’s reflection on the weather and Jack’s regard for Attila the Hun and the night sky of the fifth century—“clear and uncontaminated, bright-banded with shimmering worlds” (100). Their respective environmental enchantments are differently directed but still connected to aerial material imagination. For Jack, the focus is romantic and he draws on formal imagination to make sense of the current state of the world. Jack does not need to replace his agency with witnessing, as he finds his voice through a more common process.

Jack’s process is designed to remove layers of invisible toxins from sight while simultaneously scaffolding the possibility of a meaningful life that encompasses more of the

more-than-human. For Dunlop, the weather is about revelation and connection. Jack's concern with environmental toxicity is not relevant to Dunlop, yet they both share an investment in aerial imagination, and they both connect with otherness by recognizing atmospheric traits (or projecting and conceptualizing them). Meteorology allows Dunlop to relay sensory data in a way that is common and devoid of offensive content—it obscures him as an individual and magnifies his commonalities. In doing so, Dunlop becomes an absent presence: he bridges air, interpretations of the weather, and the human. By cloaking his conversation in shared, everyday particulars, Dunlop becomes an airy assemblage—a speaking reed. He allows information about meteorology to flow through him: “‘Nice day.’ ‘Looks like rain.’ ‘Hot enough for you?’” (55). Dunlop enthusiastically conveys to Jack their point of shared experience: “Everyone notices the weather. First thing on rising, you go to the window, look at the weather. You do it, I do it” (55). As Sturken points out: “weather fascinates precisely because it appears to be a stable phenomenon of history” (162). Dunlop becomes a member of the broader community via people's ubiquitous interest in the weather as a national pastime. At the same time, he displays several traits that he shares with air: he has deathly inclinations, is virtually invisible, and is rarely noticed.

Hitler is another German character haunting Jack specifically and *White Noise* more broadly. The German people and the German language (emptied of meaning) are sources of fascination and evocations of power for Jack. He seeks the power to conquer death through his affiliation with Hitler, in his desire to speak German, and through his progeny (Heinrich and Wilder). Jack's desire to eclipse death is bound up with the aerial qualities of voices from out of nothingness that hail him. One such voice belongs to Hitler. The term “speaking reed” applies to Hitler, and there is evidence that it applies to Jack when speaking on the subject of Hitler. When

he begins to digress during a lecture, he finds himself contemplating the content of his address. He announces during his lecture that all plots move deathward (26). Thereafter, he is left to wonder “is this true? Why did I say it? What does it mean?” (26). Jack’s attention to and fascination with the possibility of human channels for aerial influence (or emptiness) is played out again when he and Murray begin their lecture on Elvis and Hitler. Jack says:

Hitler called himself the lonely wanderer out of nothingness.... spoke to people in endless monologues, free-associating, as if the language came from some vastness beyond the world and he was simply the medium of revelation. (DeLillo 72)

Jack sees Hitler as a void that channels otherness and sound. The vast emptiness of his imagined afterlife and Hitler’s speech source are airy, further connecting air and its influence to deathly interpretations while also offering space for shared observations between what is airy and what constitutes extreme otherness.

Further, there are parallels between Hitler and Howard Dunlop. Dunlop finds a voice through the weather, and Hitler pulls language out of the air. Like Dunlop, Hitler is emptied and identified by his fetishized voice: “Crowds came to be hypnotized by the voice, the party anthems, the torchlight parades” (73). Dunlop is associated with his perceived interest in dead bodies. Hitler assembled crowds “in the name of death. They were there to attend the dead, recitations of the names of the dead” (DeLillo 73). Hitler and Dunlop occupy a peripheral space represented by the speaking reed in *White Noise*. Hitler also provides a voice for Jack—expanding the reach and spectrum of the speaking reed. A speaking reed, thus far, has been presented as a person who echoes aerial traits or whom otherness speaks through. However, for Jack, Hitler is a type of otherness—a power from beyond the grave, further expanding the

variations on the speaking reed to include voices from the past, informed by nothingness, as aerial sources. In *White Noise*, the voiceless other is associated with the act of prophecy in much the same way that meteorological predictions frame perceptions. Jack conveniently overlooks his knowledge of Hitler's voice coming out of nothingness and his fear of life after death as nothing but white noise—sound forever. As Mark Osteen points out in *American Magic and Dread*, this suspended state of sound bears a strong resemblance to “the gap between lives, during which one hears a roar ‘like a thousand thunders’” (170) as described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Jack has cobbled together some form of identity around death and his fear of it. He is an unwitting member of those death cults that followed Hitler and fed on his speeches, but for reasons connected to and complicated by Jack's aerial nature, Jack continues to draw on Hitler's voice as a power source.

Heinrich, Jack's son, participates in silent speech and prophecies. Heinrich's fascination with the dead and dying is a well-established aspect of his character: he is ready to photograph the Treadwells' bodies dragged from the river (DeLillo 59), he hovers around his friend Orest until Orest gives up on his dream to step into a cage with a number of deadly snakes (298), and he finds his voice when his incidental status in the community is disrupted by the presence of chemical death in the air during the ATE (130). The focus on airborne chemicals and the air mass from Canada give him a chance to be heard: he sings out “with prophetic disclosure” and “he was talking about the airborne toxic event in a technical way” that commanded respect (130). Through his ability to “relish” the “unseemly... and [morbidly] delight in the very sound” of the words “Nyodene Derivative,” Heinrich is eventually centralized and heard by a fearful crowd (130). His prophetic inclinations and his interest in capturing, mediating, and presenting death are brought to fruition in the larger community when he begins to find his voice in the toxic

narrative he unfolds. Air's central role in the event helps him find his voice and enter the community (not unlike Dunlop or *White Noise's* version of Hitler). He was in a position to focus the unfocused influence of air in the narrative, channeling it. Heinrich shifts from being a "gloomy and fugitive boy" to someone at the centre of an event, co-constructing it, providing a narrative for himself and others "in the name of mischance, dread, and random disaster" (131).

Jack's attention to aerial qualities brings aurally influenced individuals into focus throughout the novel. The association of peripheral figures with their symbolic or prophetic preoccupations is further established through the voice of Wilder. His ululation remains outside of understanding. Wilder's "animal complaint" is a prophecy about what is about to happen (DeLillo 75). He travels through difficult and sublime realms to convey a message that no one fully comprehends. Because his message is part of the semiotic field,²⁰ it remains ineffable, and so, it is not a narrative that Jack readily recognizes. It is also not necessarily a narrative meant for Jack. If ululation is a lament akin to song, then perhaps Wilder's voice is elevated to the divine and bypasses the human to connect with the animal.²¹ His act of mourning is profound and remains outside of the interpretive abilities of those around him.

Throughout the novel, Wilder remains at the intersection of the human and the animal. He is a voice crying out in the wilderness. He becomes a medium for information in the air that is not interpretable or even notable to those wielding symbolic language. Wilder creates a bridge between the human, the animal, and the air. In trying to cope with an unfathomable other and hail an appropriate listener (Dolar 66-67), he becomes a point of access to the ineffable otherness

²⁰ See Kristeva's "The System and the Speaking Subject."

²¹ Dolar explores this in *A Voice and Nothing More* (99-100) in relation to the feminine voice and the feminine connection to animality in ancient philosophy, in terms of music and its intended audiences (the gods and the animals).

of the world and also a point of collapse. Mladen Dolar uses the example of the first scream and the relationship between mother and child to position the voice as the original mirror stage. The dynamic between the hailed listener (the mother) and the emotion beyond meaning given voice by the child also serves to highlight the first functions of voice, to separate voice from meaning, and to reconnect them (66-67). I am pointing to some of Dolar's ideas here to suggest that Wilder's cries are, to a degree, understood by his mother, and that there is a desire to understand, but, more importantly, that Wilder, the most meditative and present character in the text, is experiencing the first scream with the earth as mother. He is trying to cope with his separateness, which has been brought into focus by the coming event. Presumably, because he is an interstitial being, he can access things that are beyond the everyday. Wilder is what Bennett would refer to as a crossing: "Crossings bear some resemblance to the wonderful, unlikely possibilities called miracles" (Bennett, *EML* 28). It is the spiritual component of Bennett's concept, coupled with its suggested mobility as a marker, that makes it so useful in framing Wilder's human-animal-elemental state (marked by his transcendent movement into sublime realms, his voice channeling a beyond, and his atmospheric sensitivities). His family's perception of him after his prolonged crying further reinforces his interstitial status. Wilder thinks, perceives, and articulates, and though he has a voice, he remains outside of language and understanding—he is a voice: a sound chamber communicating those things and beings that are ineffable.

Jack finds himself awash in Wilder's ancient dirge. As Karen Weeks points out in her work on *White Noise*, this is Jack's "immersion in the prelinguistic world of human sound" (286). Wilder's cries allow Jack to connect with him beyond language. Jack is being hailed, once again, by otherness. Wilder was "crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched [Jack] with its depth and richness... ancient... impressive for its resolute monotony" (DeLillo 78). Even

Jack becomes engrossed and susceptible to the communicative qualities of the cry when “a curious shift developed in [Jack’s] thinking. [He finds] that [he] did not necessarily want [Wilder] to stop” (78). Wilder is capable of mystical things, and his meditative qualities are unparalleled in the novel. His ability to devoutly watch the pot of boiling water on the stovetop is a prime example of his ability to access the transcendent in daily life (212). Jack eventually intuits the nature of Wilder’s crying and associates him with a prophet back from a pilgrimage to a vast and unknown place. For Jack, everything that escapes immediate understanding is from a vast otherness that he places elsewhere, and, in a sense, the chorographic field is exactly that. He conjures up a connection between Wilder’s inner travels and Hitler and his violent rhetoric through the language used to describe the sources of their respective communications. Jack suggests that there is meaning in the wailing that escapes his understanding: He wonders if Wilder “had disappeared inside this wailing noise and if [he, Jack,] could join him in his lost and suspended place” where they “might together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility” (78)—a thetic break and an entrance into symbolic language.

When Babette takes Wilder to the doctor, she senses that Wilder is tuned into something: “there’s some kind of disturbance in the air” (DeLillo 77). She is the first to symbolically articulate the disturbance on the horizon and in the air. She intuits the significance of the aerial disturbance and gives it a voice as a speaking reed. Women, children, and interstitial others intuit and convey the ineffable in *White Noise*. They are frequently othered and often speak to air’s extreme difference. Jack sees Babette as less than fully human. He says: “This is the whole point of Babette. She’s a joyous person. She doesn’t succumb to gloom or self-pity” (191). Her emotional and intellectual abilities are consistently hemmed in by Jack, even though Babette resists this. From Jack’s perspective, Babette bridges the animal and the human. When she

articulates her fear of death, she juxtaposes animals and their conceptual abilities with her own to counter Jack's narrative: "Animals fear many things... but their brains aren't sophisticated enough to accommodate this particular state of mind" (195). She draws this distinction so that Jack can acknowledge her as human. Babette thinks and senses the world simultaneously. She recognizes Jack's position and speaks to the unspoken insinuations, simultaneously resisting and reinforcing her status as an interstitial, human-animal other. Intuition and the ineffable are frequently associated with the feminine and beings that exist in part (or in full) outside of the symbolic order, like Wilder. The ability to translate the ineffable into the symbolic and remain connected to both modes of existence could as easily be perceived as one of the hallmarks of a fully realized being: generative and connected rather than stunted (which is a typical, though questionable, conflation with animality to begin with).

Jack frequently works to render the unintelligible intelligible: when speaking to Heinrich about the distinction between mediation and the sensory information readily available in the immediate environment (DeLillo 22-24), when trying to learn to speak German with Howard Dunlop (55), when attempting to come to terms with the reality of Babette in juxtaposition with his perception/fantasy (191). It is through Wilder's connection with Jack that Wilder's voice could potentially become lucid, but it is in Wilder's entrance into profound otherness and the void speaking through him that he is most fully articulated. It is at this point that he most readily holds Jack's attention and simultaneously becomes a voice. Wilder is "the bearer of what cannot be expressed by words... expression vs meaning, expression beyond meaning, expression which is more than meaning, yet expression which functions only in tension with meaning—it needs a signifier as the limit to transcend and to reveal its beyond" (Dolar 70). The voice itself becomes present and, in being a voice, it comes to channel some larger experience of beingness than

language can convey. When Wilder concludes his lament, he returns as one who had been off “wandering in some remote and holy place... where things are said... which we in our ordinary toil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder we hold in reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions” (79). In the aftermath of the ATE, Wilder’s cry becomes contextually comprehensible; he has his signifier. His voice is a bridge between the void (the place Jack imagines him having travelled to and returned from), otherness, and the human. He senses the weather and gives voice to an ineffable series of unfortunate, but transformative, assemblages that occur during the ATE and remain thereafter. In voicing this expression beyond meaning, his voice becomes a point of collapse in the aftermath of the event. The right listener is not hailed, and, as such, the wail remains inscrutable within the experience; both Wilder and air are rendered ineffable.

The events that occur the night that the insane asylum burns down offer additional insight into silent speech and the intersection of the human, animal, and air. The residents of the asylum are consistently unheard, and the ideal listener is not hailed. In the middle of the fire, they are rendered visible and temporarily seen. The “woman in a fiery nightgown [walking] across the lawn” can communicate in this scenario because everything is so surreal that she makes sense. She is wrapped in fire and silence. As Dolar notes, “complete silence is immediately uncanny, it is like death” (32). Dolar sets the scream as the first voice. It is associated with life, while silence is associated with death. Although some might argue that ambient noise is still noise, I will suggest that it is adjacent to silence. The woman’s extreme silence and otherness decontextualize her, and while the smell ultimately breaks up the gathering, the abject spill of silent madness into the community and the humanness of death and dying is deeply uncomfortable. “She brought a

silence to” herself (DeLillo 239), and in a suspended moment of shock and pageantry, she is visible.²² She can create a bridge between her reality and Jack’s.

The woman’s peripheral position and her function as a bridge between adjacent communities is highlighted further in the interaction between herself, the fire captain, the fire, and the burning air: The fire captain “hurried toward her, then circled out slightly, disconcerted, as if she were not the person... he had expected to meet here” (DeLillo 239-40); it is as if she were not a person at all, but a spectre of the real. Silent speech moves her into the centre of an event in a community setting that she would never normally enter. Silence becomes a void that expands outward and envelops the viewer in such a way that witnessing is no longer possible. The woman on fire centralizes a series of aerial adjacencies: voicelessness, madness, and peripherality. She is a sound chamber. The unexpected nature of the event temporarily draws the margins to the centre of the narrative and the community, while unheard figures resist meaning-making, and so they remain at the edge of things, echoing back the void at the centre of the novel—a low-level death hum. As noted above, Jack states that “all plots tend to move deathward” (26), and textual or actual characters and people all move towards the inevitable.

The night the insane asylum burns down contains many of the same components as the ATE: air, chemicals, movement from the centre of town to the outskirts, and elements of the spectacle. Repetitions of these types of events, with minor variations, suggests that there is potential to recognize a paradigm as it evolves from these specific assemblages in their emerging

²² Part of the shock of her silence is her animality. As Foucault notes in *Madness and Civilization* (74), this is partially why the fireman circles her and does not immediately respond to her as a person on fire. She is set apart, animal, and other. Yet, over the course of the encounter, she transitions from being animalistic to exhibiting Christ-like madness, becoming an object of compassion and respect (DeLillo 81). She channels an aerial otherness that is similar to divinity in this moment, embodying a transition that is otherworldly and also deeply of the body (where the endpoint of the experience is clear from the acrid smell of burning flesh) (241).

singularities, bringing Jack and the others “closer to the secret of [their] own eventual [ends]” (241). The crowd came to see death, but the air and airborne chemicals force spectators to recognize the reality of the situation, as opposed to its ceremony. The combination of death, disaster, prophecy, silent speech, bodies, and air is reiterated throughout the novel, and it is an essential aspect of one of several emerging paradigms that presents entanglements of the air and the human through silent speech. Silent speech, throughout the novel, is associated with the marginal, the semiotic space outside of language, and the deathly nature of prophetic discourse.

The nuns in Germantown are another example of peripheral female characters who speak with air and who also occupy a space of confinement and extreme otherness, much like the mad woman on fire (DeLillo 239). In Germantown, after Jack’s failed murder attempt, there is a heightened surrealness about the situation. Yet, there are aspects of performance and spectacle in the hospital and among the nuns who run it that make otherness commonplace and comforting.

More nuns arrived, rustling, ancient, speaking German to each other....

The original nun approached Mink to remove the gun from his hand. I watched her toss it in a desk drawer that held about ten other handguns and half a dozen knives. There was a picture on the wall of Jack Kennedy holding hands with Pope John XXIII in heaven. (DeLillo 316)

The number of guns accumulating in the desk drawer and the nonchalance applied to the situation amplify the surreal nature of this scene. The hospital is outside Blacksmith; the nuns are outside of the community, and, according to the nuns, the belief system that the nuns participate in is itself beyond belief. Each of these elements helps construct the nuns as speaking reeds—outside and communicating with something beyond, aerial others performing some form of ritualized poetic breath.

When Jack asks the nun for the church's current stance on the nature of heaven, he enters into a theological conversation that he is not prepared to hear or understand. The nun begins by speaking English, but she is saying things outside of what Jack anticipates and beyond Jack's framework for understanding her. She is part of a "tiny minority. To embody old things, old beliefs. The devil, the angels, heaven, hell. If [the nuns] did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse" (DeLillo 318), according to the nun speaking to Jack. These nuns perform the "strange practices woven around madness... which glorify and at the same time discipline it, reduce it to animality while making it teach the lesson of the Redemption [putting] madness in a strange position with regard to unreason as a whole" (Foucault 82). Madness, "treated in a special manner, manifested in its singularity as if, though belonging to unreason, it nonetheless traversed that domain by a movement peculiar to itself, ceaselessly referring from itself to its most paradoxical extreme" (Foucault 83). The nuns are confined, in a sense, but they are also communicating the air, the beliefs of and about a celestial god. Jack is mortified. He is more appalled by what the nun has said about her beliefs than by what he has done to Willy Mink, and the irony of his distorted moral compass is lost on him entirely. The nun points out the absurdity of their conversation, further highlighting her own clarity of thought and, ultimately, her profound insight into the nature of reality: "You would come in from the street dragging a body by the foot and talk about angels who live in the sky" (320). Although she is consistently the voice of reason, because she is female (other), she speaks to a sky god (either elevated or insane), and because she is a nun living at the edge of Germantown (marginal), Jack refuses to acknowledge her voice. Jack *cannot* hear her; he is not interested in what she believes but only in what she represents (319). The nun tells Jack that:

We are your lunatics. We surrender our lives to make your non belief possible.... There is no truth without fools. We are your fools, your madwomen, rising at dawn to pray, lighting candles, asking statues for good health, long life. (319)

For Jack, the nuns speak for an invisible world filled with aerial beings, once again channeling the void. Her utterances channel a divine connection. When Jack breaks the agreement established through a collectively designated illusion, in the middle of a hellish hospital scene, he is left to talk to the lunatics and madwomen who act as aerial intermediaries—it becomes personal and their status as speaking reeds collapses.

When the nun switches, vehemently, back to German, she knows that Jack cannot follow her. Once again, the ineffable voice out of nothingness is the mystery that Jack is willing to hear. Even though the nun is communicating clearly, Jack is comforted by the intensified distance between them when she speaks German.

She spoke again, at some length, pressing her face toward [Jack's], the words growing harsher, wetter, more guttural. Her eyes showed a terrible delight in [his] incomprehension. She was spraying [him] with German. A storm of words. She grew more animated as the speech went on... (DeLillo 320)

Once she becomes less reasonable and more emotional (elemental and incomprehensible, in the context of the novel), practicing divine communication, she is silenced and othered. As an assemblage of the human and the celestial, the nun is hollowed out and emptied of power: a speaking reed “taunting [him] with scornful prayer” (320). The comfort he originally sought in nonsensical words and catechisms is now available to him through a transition into the German

language. Instead of understanding the meaning of the words she conveyed, riddled with disdain and violence, Jack “found it beautiful” and, importantly, ineffectual (320).

Finally, there is the hidden voice awakened by the ATE. Once it becomes clear that the ATE had, indeed, become an event that could not be distanced or denied, the “sonic monster” is awakened by the air (DeLillo 118). It is the air raid sirens that ultimately convince Jack that they have to flee their neighbourhood. As Dolar notes, “The impersonal voice, the mechanically produced voice (answering machines, computer voices, and so on) always has a touch of the uncanny” (51). The uncanny in this instance simultaneously signals its inhumanness and deathliness, while pointing to the deeply personal and deeply human dance that is happening with life-sustaining, yet toxic, air. The sirens broadcast the message that their lives are in danger, and it is the uncanny nature of this voice that moves Jack to act (Heinrich had been trying to save them all along, but because he is a speaking reed articulating air’s potential, Jack cannot quite hear him yet). The sound of the sirens co-constructs a narrative that Jack cannot overlook, partially because of that twofold movement between the uncanny voice and deathly repetition, and the deeply personal voices of Heinrich and the rest of his family. Initially, the family ignores these harbingers of doom, “avoiding each other’s eyes as a way of denying that something unusual was going on,” but they are eventually “negatively affected and shaken” by the unexpected proximity of the sound and the sirens’ message (118). The sirens screech: “Evacuate all places of residence. Cloud of deadly chemicals, cloud of deadly chemicals” (119). The sirens prompt the family and others to move towards the evacuation stations.

Further, the sirens highlight the movement of people and call to mind a history of forced migration due to both climatic events and social collapse:

...sirens started up. The trudging people did not quicken their pace, did not look down at us or into the night sky for some sign of the wind-driven cloud. They just kept moving across the bridge... They seemed to be part of some ancient destiny, connected in doom and ruin to a whole history of people trekking across wasted landscapes. (DeLillo 122)

Jack makes sense of the situation by providing a narrative that is historically familiar, juxtaposing the images of migrating families with the night sky, the wind, the snow, the event-driving cloud, and the voice of the sirens. Each aerial image, articulated in the cadence of the sirens screaming “cloud of deadly chemicals,” necessitates recognition of the role of the natural in the movement of the social. The sirens voice the movement of the air and the driving force of the chemical-infused weather, amplifying how air’s message—conveying death and toxicity — is an uncanny breach of the personal, the family unit, and a shared commitment to pseudo-eternity (Guattari), which ultimately distances the more-than-human.

The influences of airborne otherness and voiced assemblages are frequently felt throughout the ATE. In *White Noise*, air is the primary carrier of information and death, and by way of the ATE, air is visible. The “frosty air” is pierced by the sound of “sirens, voices calling through bullhorns, a layer of radio static causing small warps” (DeLillo 116), and distortions punctuating reality while Jack experiences this surreal event. Much like the sirens of older odysseys, causing confusion and announcing, while simultaneously veiling, impending death and doom, in this ocean of contaminated air, “men in respirator masks” flounder in “the luminous haze, carrying death-measuring instruments,” while their presence is announced on, in, and through the air (116). More importantly, this is voiced by an uncanny, powerful other. The migration of people in the face of unprecedented events is made even more storied and surreal by

those on-scene who “transport... casualties” and the peregrination of those at the mercy of the air. Their trek into the unknown is marked by “red beams of light” shone “into the darkness” to track their movement (116), the breakdown of the personal, and the centralized voice of the uncanny siren. Authorities try to perforate the smoke with helicopter searchlights, further illuminating the “scenic white floods” of chemical-laden air that frame the unfolding event (116). Air is the source of the siren’s voice and awakening, and it shapes the event.

Sound chambers are human-elemental assemblages that exist at the periphery of community and which are often unheard and under-voiced. Wilder, the nuns, and the madwoman are all examples of sound chambers. Even though the nuns are capable of being understood, they are outside the community, pushed to the edge by the need of others to believe in believers. Jack is unable to hear them when they do not perform the role that he has in his mind for them. Circumstance, attunement of the listener to aerial otherness, and intuition allow sound chambers to be recognized and understood. Wilder becomes intelligible following the ATE and Jack’s internalization of air as a mass. The madwoman communicates clearly after the chemical smell carried on the air forces the crowd to recognize themselves in the tragicomedy unfolding before them—the air once again reminds everyone that they are death-bound. Moreover, the nuns remain mystical, wrapped in unintelligible German, which makes perfect sense in the carnivalesque presentation of death and dying in the hospital. Sound chambers in *White Noise* point to the paradigm of air’s communicative, prophetic, deathly quality, through peripheral figures brought into focus in extraordinary circumstances. Reading for these aurally influenced voices further highlights aspects of the novel that have remained unexamined, advancing a deeper understanding of human-elemental entanglements and what it means to become while under aerial influence. Each instance that is highlighted in this section is punctuated by Jack’s

inability to engage with these aerially influenced others in a way that makes meaning, but with the advent of the ATE, things shift. When air becomes embodied and Jack internalizes aerial influence, he entertains voices from outside the centre.

The Sky Takes on Content: Air Writes the Airborne Toxic Event

During the ATE, “the sky takes on content,” and Jack becomes subject to the weather (DeLillo 324). His experiences of power, class, and identity are troubled by the movement of the air and the varying levels of human-chemical ingenuity that wreak havoc on his anticipated reality, his identity, and his body. The impact of air is internalized and becomes transformative after Nyodene Derivative enters Jack’s lungs during the ATE (127). The toxic spill becomes the ATE with the addition of the air mass from Canada (117). Immediately preceding the ATE, air is described as a mass. During the airborne event, air acts as a quasi-agent or agent that disrupts and distributes toxicity, a political agent obfuscating class, an other against which thoughts form, and an uncanny point of revulsion and compulsion in the face of environmental disaster. These iterations of air bring Jack more fully into his body and its many entanglements while highlighting the myriad ways in which aerial influence amplifies absurd, yet familiar, aspects of everyday objects, tethering characters to the unheimlich nature of an unstable environment (i.e., home) at the cost of recognizing and reviving a sense of embodied becoming.

The ATE reinforces the impossibility of directing the air or the weather as part of a critique of imagined human control over the environment and attempts to control it, while further emphasizing change and uncertainty as interventionist yet natural states of being. The consistency of unstable boundaries is one of air’s emerging paradigms, based on air’s disruptive agency, which is traced through the movement of people and things. Air’s influence highlights

instability: at the heart of identity, in the body, and in the environment itself. Throughout the novel, Jack finds himself invaded and transformed by air—physically, socially, and psychologically. Jack’s entanglements with air are singularities pointing to boundaries as sites of engagement, collapse, and reconfiguration.

Deleuze’s concept of the event, as spatially and temporally bound collisions of unexpected things in an entangled state of becoming, illuminates air’s role throughout the ATE. Air’s resistance to easy relations holds with Agamben’s analogical third (i.e., the paradigm), pointing to states of differentiation and becoming—instances where context is flattened and a form of aesthetic arrest or transformation takes place. Air’s agency, or quasi-agency, is presented in events throughout DeLillo’s work, including in *Underworld* and *Libra*. *Underworld*’s aerial aspirations appear in desert nuclear tests, for example, while in the nexus of *Libra*’s displaced agency “there are forces in the air that compel men to act. Call it history or necessity or anything you like” (DeLillo 68). In *White Noise*, air is the forgotten centre of the novel and the centre of the ATE. While critics frequently explore the ATE in *White Noise*, they gloss over the role of air. Air unsettles geographical, physical, social, and intellectual boundaries in *White Noise*. The role of the weather in the toxic chemical spill disturbs distinctions that Jack perceives as valid and identity-defining. The ATE is an event that would have been unremarkable and localized, but it is enlarged and directed by an ominous air mass. As Sturken demonstrates, in her work on weather and desire, “controlling the weather also takes the form of measuring its activity, defining its source, and naming it. Within nationalist discourses, the weather is most often defined as coming from elsewhere” (164). It disrupts and reinforces boundaries at once. At a national level, the issue comes from outside of the country, and at the local level, class becomes the remaining site of erasure. The agency of the event is displaced onto the place that air moves

across before arriving in Blacksmith. In this instance, the air is “coming down from Canada,” and by conceptualizing it like this, it is not air that is the aggressor or the agent, but the country. To Jack’s mind, not only is the weather nationally sourced, but it also does not impact the middle class like it does the poor. As Jack notes, “The important thing is location. It’s there, we’re here”—in other words, these things happen elsewhere to poor people, not to middle-class professors in quiet towns (DeLillo 117). When Heinrich reiterates that there is “a large air mass... moving down from Canada” (117), he suggests that what was a spill is about to become mobilized, and that it being over there is no guarantee that disaster will not eventually reach over here.

The ATE is the aerial spectacle at the heart of the novel. The event begins commonly enough: a punctured train car spills a chemical substance into the environment. Things become eventful when an air mass from Canada becomes laden with the spilled chemicals and transports the toxins to Blacksmith. From this moment forward, boundaries between the human and the environment, between social classes, and across geographic spaces begin to dissolve. Air is a recognized force from the first few minutes following the toxic spill. As is clear from Heinrich and Jack’s conversation, Jack cannot acknowledge the pressing nature of the event because that would require him to quickly and readily adapt his view of reality to the immediate circumstances and because it requires an internalized, unsettling acknowledgement of air’s influence. At this point in the novel, Jack’s conversation with air is just beginning to press beyond the surface of things. When air and Nyodene D. enter his body, a shift happens. But at this moment, Jack responds to Heinrich’s insistence on the significance of the ATE and sees his position as unassailable. Heinrich asks, “What if [the chemical spill] blows this way?” (DeLillo 111). Jack responds, “It won’t” (111). Nevertheless, Heinrich presses him to acknowledge the

uncertainty that is inherent in the event itself as a result of air's movement. Heinrich acts as an aerial intermediary, pushing at the limitations of Jack's perceptive abilities and devotion to formal imagination, saying, "Just this one time" (111), while Jack responds with, "It won't. Why should it?" (112). His inability to acknowledge air's agency is part of his blindness to air's influence on him, even though he is attuned to air and his attention is often drawn to it.

As Bennett suggests throughout her works *Vibrant Matter* and *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, it is through attunement that the world becomes vibrant (or enchanted). Individuals gain access to ineffable moments via material things (or, in this case, through aerial singularities and paradigms). When Heinrich indicates that the authorities have closed part of the interstate, Jack responds that it is "a way to facilitate movement of service vehicles and such. Any number of reasons that have nothing to do with wind or wind direction" (112). Jack's acute awareness of air's influence, coupled with his willingness to repress and resist air's power over the community, reinforces how he has experienced air up to this point in time: as an element in the landscape against which he tries to project formal imaginings, to resist, to narrate experience, and to think alongside. Yet, at this point, air has become the driving force and direction in this event, and he has yet to adapt. Before the ATE, Jack comforts and empowers himself by occupying the privileged position of an observer witnessing the elements and intervening in things where he can. He imagines himself as in control even when that is not the case. By fostering an illusion of control, he clings to his desire to overcome death or, at least, distances himself from it, and he comforts himself by providing a series of frameworks for the event itself that render its elemental potential, its quasi- (or actual) agency, unthinkable.

The ATE concentrates the disruptive, powerful nature of air while emphasizing its significance in the construction of events. DeLillo presents technological interventions in

complex disasters alongside a series of instances that demonstrate the degree of non-human agency in events. Bennett argues that we need to attend to the world around us because “in the knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself” (VM 13). The ATE brings this into sharp relief. Connecting environmental and individual actions to human health is a likely way to recognize embeddedness. It requires complex human interventions to quell the evolving event, and, to Jack’s chagrin, the degree of pollution already adrift during the event becomes a more focused and conscious consideration for everyone who is exposed to it or who witnesses the resultant sunsets. The timeline for the event is difficult to determine because “fire and explosions [are] not the inherent dangers here. This death [will] penetrate, seep into the genes, show itself in bodies not yet born” (DeLillo 116). The consequences of this event will be revealed long into the future, calling attention to the actions that have led to it and connections between past, present, and future actions and their outcomes, as well as the intricate relationship between people and the environment.

The pervasive toxicity in contemporary life is temporarily aloft, expanding the influence of the ATE over a large geographical area and, as Jack notes, across time (DeLillo 116), while resisting pre-existing paradigms of computable data and medical terms (140-41). The ATE is the epitome of the shared particular. As Matthew Packer notes, “everywhere in *White Noise* are crises that are significant because they are... public, collectively experienced, and therefore binding” (7). Events necessitate collective recognition and response. The shared and binding nature of the ATE has air at its centre, and air is both a unifying and a divisive element. Richard Devetak argues, in his analysis of *White Noise*, that “narrative plays a vital role in sifting and organizing the material and immaterial elements of any event into a plot enabling onlookers and participants alike to make sense of it” (795). Narrativizing makes the event shareable, and air

enters the event as an agent, placing the environment within a framework that allows for genuine engagement and recognition. The ATE is what brings air into the centre of the narrative.

In addition to being at the centre of the narrative, air lies at the centre of Jack's fear of death. While I suggest throughout my analysis that air influences Jack's actions and thoughts frequently in *White Noise*, a fear of death is the influence he identifies and names. It is, in some ways, the symptom before the void. When Babbette and Jack talk about death throughout the text, air is the directing force that brings death, literally and metaphorically, into Jack's body. A black pulsating mass of chemical death in the body, impenetrable and ineffable but active and activating nonetheless. While death is the feared thing that they can grasp, just beyond the fear of death is that of being suspended forever in a consciously registered sound:

“What if death is nothing but sound?”

“Electrical noise.”

“You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful.”

“Uniform, white.” (DeLillo 198)

Jack wishes for a romanticized end to his life, a place in the past that lacks toxicity and is not subject to the construction of electrical sonic pulses (DeLillo 100). As Dana Phillips notes in *Reading the Earth*, “Despite the prefabricated setting of *White Noise*... an earlier, more natural and more pastoral landscape figures throughout the novel as an absent presence” that the characters are intuitively aware of (237). Jack imagines Attila the Hun's “attendants cutting off their hair... disfiguring their faces... as the camera pulls back... and pans across the night sky of the fifth century A.D., clear and uncontaminated, bright-banded with shimmering worlds” (DeLillo 100). The sustaining nature of air and its ability to exceed the parameters of human lifetimes goes without saying, but the way that air is noted, even as an absent presence, is

through its intervention in human events and its becoming part of Jack as a human-aerial-toxin assemblage.²³ The ATE allows air to stand out from other beings and things in the environment, and it makes air a focus in a way that would take much longer to notice under other circumstances.

To deal with the magnitude of the ATE and the otherness of air, the uncanny element of magical influence also figures throughout the novel. As Mark Osteen notes, Jack and others frequently turn to “forms of magic—quasi-religious rituals, pseudo-divine authorities [and] miraculous transformations” as a means of quelling existential dread (1), but also in order to engage with the enormity of aerial otherness and environmental collapse. Air breaks down imaginary boundaries between the middle class and the poor (DeLillo 119), between the river and the town (271), and between the community and the chemicals that people have created (324). These instances rely on the fact that the wind is self-directed, that environmental destruction is often caused by humans, and that the role that humans play can potentially change. As Bennett notes, “the capacity of things [including the elemental] not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). Jeffery Jerome Cohen aptly suggests in his work *Elemental Materialism* that “the elements are as restless as the human imagination.... They ceaselessly embrace to compose new things and in that process disclose surprising worlds,

²³ In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that an assemblage is about the being in flux, suggesting the various connections that are always already at work (within the body and in relation to exterior bodies as well). Here, I am speaking about forms of content (exchanges between bodies—human and nonhuman). This concept has clear affinities with Alaimo’s transcorporeality: the fluid entanglement and reconstitution of physical bodies by toxic currents, for example. For my purposes, an intersection of Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage and the political element of transcorporeality that Alaimo offers, is ideal.

challenging narratives” about identity and the body that are always already entangled with quasi-agents and elemental others.

Additionally, air renders the ATE a political event. It disrupts the insular nature of the middle class and forces an evacuation that levels the perceived class structure, placing people and air into conversations that would not happen otherwise (DeLillo 135-37). It also invades Jack’s body by depositing Nyodene D. in his lungs. Alaimo states, in “Transcorporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Place of Nature,” that “the traffic in toxins may, in fact, render it nearly impossible for humans to imagine that their own health and welfare is disconnected from that of the rest of the planet” (260). This is what ultimately causes Jack to abandon his notion of middle-class protection from environmental disaster and, on a larger scale, what has characters questioning what is happening on cosmic and scientific levels. They are engaging with reality in exceptional ways. As Sturken suggests, “apocalyptic narratives of natural disaster and the weather function as a means of eliding politics and class” (186). Jack originally indicates that he is “a college professor... the head of a department,” that he does not see himself “fleeing an airborne toxic event. That’s for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the county, where the fish hatcheries are” (DeLillo 117). He notes that “society is set up in such a way that it’s the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters” (114), and, anecdotally and actually, this is often true.

As Rob Nixon explains in *Slow Violence*, environmental violence is foisted upon the poor. It is systemic, as DeLillo points out via Jack. There is “a violence that occurs gradually, and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2) because it is a fundamental part of a larger system. Further, Nixon argues that this invisible violence is predicated on a

system that places the poor in the most vulnerable areas, exposing them to more environmental toxins and greater damage from environmental events (2). It is particularly true for those events triggered by human contributions to the climate crisis, the geopolitical distribution of toxins, and social inequities (2). The ATE thwarts any collective pretence of a class-conscious disaster. The ATE reduces some of the distance between the middle class and the poor, though exposure to this event is still far more extreme for people who walk to safety versus those who drive (DeLillo 122). The direction of the air mass determines the scale of the disaster, the movement of people, and the degree of its impact on individuals within the context of the event and beyond. Air impacts Blacksmith's socio-economic divides, and these classes are taken apart and thrown back together in unexpected and entangled ways (particularly at the emergency centres). Exploring social structures during the ATE demonstrates the reach of the environment (air, in this case) and undermines perceptions about stability and perceived distances between people and between people and the environment.

Elise Martucci suggests, in *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fictions of Don DeLillo*, that Jack “demonstrates an almost hopeless search for a stable identity in the white noise of contemporary society” (75). While this appears accurate, Jack's search for a stable identity is also enmeshed with his search for an exit from nature without death. Air and death are connected in his imaginings and in air's agency during the ATE and elsewhere in *White Noise* (this is one of air's paradigms: it is deathly, all encompassing, and unpredictable). His attention and resistance to aerial influence and his fear of death, along with his newly recognized assemblage status, shape his burgeoning identity, which is noted as an absence, “a star-shaped hole at the center.... Death has entered.... A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods” (DeLillo 141-42). Jack's effort to move beyond the

parameters of contemporary society, in order to constitute his identity with the weather, atmospheric events, and the air, is significant for gaining insight into aerial-material imagination and the air through its human-elemental becoming.

It is ultimately toxic air that allows Jack to imagine himself as a member of the more-than-human community and to drop some of the pretence that sets him apart at the university, while out in the broader community he is regarded as a “harmless sort of fellow” (DeLillo 83). Once he learns that he has very little control over what has or will constitute the self in the face of an event, his priorities are reconfigured, along with his bodily constitution—it is no longer as important that he hold on to a particular presentation of the self. The ATE is a singular disruption of reality to the extent that it becomes a critical point of reference accessed through decontextualized myths. DeLillo consistently returns to metaphors, both celestial and atmospheric, to bridge Jack’s experience and his understanding thereof. His newfound status as an assemblage presents as a nebulous mass via the blinking stars of the SIMUVAC computer (140-41). He turns to celestial descriptors to interpret the situation. He draws on things beyond earthly experiences, conveying the scene through a lunar landscape: “the men in Mylex suits move with a lunar caution... they move across a swale of moon dust, bulky and wobbling” (116). This imagery suggests a need to suspend belief in the here and now, the grounded and earthly, in favour of narratives best suited to atmospheric and otherworldly circumstances. The voice of the siren and the metaphorical reach of outer space, the mythical and extraordinary, help to make sense of these events and allow Jack to begin to understand his assembled self, particularly as it pertains to air. He turns to the vacuum of space and the depths of the ocean to find the level of contrast needed to grapple with air. Environmental toxicity is no longer an invisible threat to be faced at some undetermined future date. The ATE is present and will continue to unfold in the

sky, across the earth, and in the bodies of those caught in the drift of aerial effluent. It is during the ATE that Jack recognizes he is at the mercy of an unpredictable and uncontrollable “cloud of deadly chemicals” (119).

In *White Noise*, air is an essential part of each assemblage. Air frames experience, offering Jack a way to understand himself and a way for interstitial others to find their respective voices. For Jack, moving from thoughtful considerations of air to embodied experience during the ATE is essential to his development and his awareness of his status within an assemblage. His centralized experience of otherness highlights the instability at the heart of identity and the relationship between the self and the broader community of being. While several critics (Alworth, Osteen, Varsa, Weeks) have pointed to a transformative process grounded in Jack’s fear of death and the material weight of objects that becomes part of his focus while following the ATE, the real change is arguably his becoming an aware and embodied assemblage. Without the event and the inherent pressure that it places on mortal considerations, coupled with air’s ability to move into and over bodies, positing toxins and directing the event, Jack would remain predominantly a witness to himself and his embeddedness in the more-than-human world, instead of an agent. His human-elemental becoming has always already been in process, but his attunement to it offers a point of access to transformation beyond that permitted by an awareness of cultural detritus and its deathly weight, as he reckons with his mortality, coupled with his aerial entanglements and becomings.

Jack’s becoming during this event is one of the overt assemblages in the novel. It acts as an exemplar of human-elemental becomings pointing to an aerial paradigm: assemblage states become apparent in the context of events. In becoming a part of an active assemblage, Jack’s internalized aerial expression functions as one of the most engaging singularities in *White*

Noise, explicating air and its paradigms by calling “into question the dichotomous opposition between the particular and the universal which we are used to seeing as a singularity irreducible to any of the dichotomy’s two terms” (Agamben 19). By negating the dichotomies that reinforce the distance between self and other, body and nature, or body and environment, a more proximate understanding of the elements that co-create bodies/selves becomes possible.

Following the ATE, Jack is simultaneously most fully in and of his body. Jack comes to recognize that the boundaries of his body have been breached, will be breached, and are always in a state of entangled becoming, resulting in a tepid engagement with his materiality and his process of becoming/unbecoming. Jack is a reluctant participant in his assemblages and becomings. He is forced into an assemblage state and must come to an understanding of what he is. Jack is having his Thoreauvian Ktaadn moment, and, in this moment, he asks one of the questions that Thoreau, ecstatic, might well ask: what am I? Whether on the summit of Ktaadn or confronting the supernatural aspects of advanced technology and SIMUVAC stars, the questions surrounding and the uncanny reality of being in and of a body are certainly about “standing in awe of the body.... This matter to which [one is] bound” (Thoreau 79). The body’s elemental entanglements are about the sudden process of becoming through unbecoming, which is precipitated by aerial interventions (Ktaadn is not the only place where the transcendental sublime is witnessed): “the solid earth! The actual world! the common sense! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?” (Thoreau 79). What are we? Inevitably, the uncanny aspects of *White Noise* offer a means to answer this question or to turn away from it altogether with the uncomfortable question of one’s assemblage status left unexamined. Jack is now carrying evidence of his status as an assemblage and his body’s mortality—always already there, but

suddenly presented in these moments of collapse and contact. Once again, the air becomes the vehicle for mortal reckonings and bodily awareness.

During the ATE and after, air is internalized as a mass; it acts as a quasi-agent in tandem with Jack and in the broader context of the event. Air's influence becomes clearer as Jack's attunement to air's entanglements becomes evident. By moving to the centre of the narrative through the event, air is narrativized, allowing it to be seen and heard in a way that is recognizable. The way to engage with the enormity of elemental difference is to reach towards narratives of magic, death, and the extraterrestrial. This allows for the framing of everyday aerial influence despite its being so large that it either collapses into invisibility or dwarfs the reality of the world in crisis by pulling on exceptional and, typically, inaccessible narratives. Air as quasi-agent is elevated to the level of myth during the ATE.

Air also reinforces the impossibility of human control over the environment and the uncertainty of boundaries (physical, psychological, and social). Breaking down existing forms of becoming in favour of more complex and aerially attentive modes of being further points to the complicated assemblages of human-elemental becoming that Jack exhibits throughout the course of the novel and which the reader might trace in their own narratives and experiences.

Finally, while the novel is about air and its influence, entanglements, assemblages, and voice, it is also about the uncanny points of revulsion and compulsion that render elemental others visible at the centre of environmental disasters. This further highlights the *unheimlich* nature of a destabilized and destabilizing environment, pointing to the necessity of working towards dynamic relations with and readings of elemental others, assemblage states, self, and events, in favour of situating the human and the elemental in relation and in conversation.

Chapter 3: The Road: Super Saturation and Watery Words

Memory figures largely in *The Road*. Water is frequently both the bearer and the centre of the unnamed male protagonist's memories. The landscape is rife with the shadows of all the things that once lived there: crows (McCarthy 132-34), trout (11), and birch trees (11-12). The reconstruction of the old world within a world that is dead and dying offers a way to read the environment and construct reality that is in line with a type of temporally-transmuted material imagination that water carries forward. In *The Road*, water dominates the landscape, and, in turn, it is present in memory, the collapse of language and storytelling, and the movements of the man and the boy. Water is the imaginative media that they move through, and it is the media they are most often imperilled and embraced by. *The Road* is about water. While some post-apocalyptic fiction has focused on environmental collapse broadly, *The Road* embraces the ambivalence of water and its sub-linguistic influences. In the novel, the human movement towards water is about seeking out salvation, return, and source. I examine water's influence on perception, migration, and memory (as a framework, a point of material access, and a temporal cache). Drawing on the work of Bachelard to think through the elemental influence on imagination and expanding it to comprehend water's all-encompassing and central position in *The Road*, I highlight water's elemental influence and the unique ways in which *The Road* delves into the human-elemental entanglements expressed via water in McCarthy's work and, more broadly, in contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction. As Terence McSweeney notes in his analysis, "it is to the elements of water and fire that the man and the boy's humanity is inextricably linked" (49). This connection will be further developed in this chapter.

One of the most disturbing aspects of *The Road* is the vast, flat, desolate sky described therein. It is the dominant element in a decimated landscape—oppressive, grey, and frighteningly

empty. The grey sky is, ultimately, watery. It shifts our view of the air as an all-encompassing natural environment for breathing and being as humans. It is a reminder that the air has changed, that this air is heavy, that it paints currents in the sky, and that it is a media innately alien to terrestrials. As Nels Christensen states,

The man and the boy never have the luxury of not thinking about the weather.... Scarcely a page passes without tellings of the sky. Rain starts then stops. Gray snow falls. The darkness of the sky.... Far from merely an aspect of setting, the weather acts as an oppressively omnipresent character. (Christensen 198-99)

It is weather's constant presence and the influence it wields that garner the attention of the man and boy in an otherwise monotonous landscape. Considering the sparse sensory information that the landscape offers, more fundamental influences come to the forefront (water, in this case). The associations that the man has with minding the weather are also relevant. Weather is a way into the community and morality (such as it may be) of the past: this is something the man remembers and wants to pass down, but which would mean nothing to the boy. According to Christensen, "the instinct to look toward [the sky] becomes something more akin to nostalgia than agrarian pragmatism" (199), yet it is also about conjuring what it is to be human in response to the environment. Thinking about weather in the context of elemental influence and perception is also important here. The man is accessing the weather in this way because he is attuned to water, and he navigates the road to seek out opportunities for transcendence via water, as well as safety at the edge of the sea. Beyond weather's transmutative abilities and the opportunity it presents to conjure the past in the present, weather-minding in this instance is part of the painful cycle of bare life (Agamben) in the context of *The Road*. It demonstrates the movement between

nature and culture, man and otherness, in a way that demonstrates what it means to “carry the fire” or not.²⁴

The grey sky is saturated. The rain, snow, and dampness on the road are tangible. Water becomes a significant marker of moving forward each day in *The Road*: crossing water, drinking water, noting its presence. As Ben De Bruyn aptly notes, “the main storyline deals with the attempt of the protagonists to leave the cold inland country and reach the potentially more hospitable coastline” (776). While he suggests that it is a strange place to turn to, it is not only about reaching the physical coast, but, rather, it is about returning to the edge of memory and the collapse of the past, present, and future in the medium of water. In *The Road*, water is everywhere, and each transition is marked by it (temporally and physically). As much as the novel is about the man and the boy traversing a wasted landscape, the bigger, more essential story is about the human-elemental entanglements and becomings that direct the man and the boy, providing access to other ways of being, situating water and human relations at the centre of the narrative.

The man and the boy frequently look out over the devastated landscape. They are often driven to seek shelter from the rain. While doing so, they often converse about what was, what is, and what might be. The boy frequently focuses on the possible. While something may not be here, maybe it could be somewhere else. For instance, the absence of birds is notable in *The Road*, and the man sees this absence through the past, while the boy sees the absence as a possible presence in the future. In their absence, the birds become part of the environment: imagined and integrated. There are a few separate conversations about birds and their ability to

²⁴ The term “carry the fire” comes up frequently throughout *The Road*, and I am not referencing a single instance but a concept that guides the main characters throughout the novel.

course the sky, to cut over the land, and to move towards the sun (McCarthy 132-34). A striking example of the present and the possible, articulated via the absent presence²⁵ of aerial others, is found in the man and the boy's conversation about distance and flight. When the man mentions that it might take them a while to reach the ocean by road, but that they are not far "as the crow flies," this sparks the boy's imagination (132).

When the boy thinks of birds, it is in contrast to himself and concerns freedom and a different sort of life. "Birds dont have to follow roads" (McCarthy 132). His reverie evolves into considering the possibility that birds continue to exist elsewhere on the planet. The boy expresses fond hopes of a living world potentially existing that he, himself, has never experienced (132). Finally, inquiring into birds and their presence or absence offers the boy a potential escape because it continues the possibility of life: maybe the birds flew to other planets, such as "to Mars or someplace" (132). "If you were a crow could you fly up high enough to see the sun" (134)? There is a clear connection established between the man, the boy, and the crows: what is, what could be, and what once was. These same possibilities are present in each interaction with water. Navigating these competing realities is a challenge for the man and for the boy to some extent as well. Unasked questions might include: What would it mean to pierce the grey saturated atmosphere and stand in the sunlight? How long would they need to carry the fire to do that? Can they course these saturated air currents and survive?

Outside of the temporal parameters influencing the man's ability to navigate this watery world, there is also the connection with fire and air forged through language and stories. The father and son frequently confirm that they are the good guys because they carry the fire, which

²⁵ An absent presence, in the context of this reading, is an elemental other (air or water) that influences human characters frequently and directly, but which remains largely overlooked as a vibrant part of human assemblages.

is the same thing that birds carry, according to Bachelard's theory of material imagination (*AD* 29). Birds are hybrid aerial-fiery forms, and this is why it is especially poignant to associate them with people who were once able to stand in the sun. The boy's expressed longing to fly as a crow does is less about flight and more about "an instinct for lightness" (*AD* 29), even in the dark and in darkened forms. It is about being lifted out of the familiar and being offered something remarkable—a dynamized moment, fusing air and fire, life and death. In *Air and Dreams*, the bird is a dynamic entity piercing the sky and disrupting reverie (164), but in a blighted world, the bird piercing the sky is about injecting fire and lightness into a dead and dying world. Injecting light into the darkness calls attention to the world above, offers distraction from the moment the man and boy exist in, and provides fleeting insight into the boy's imagination and what amounts to childhood longing on the road. Navigating the novel's nuances via Bachelard provides an opportunity to trace the combined elemental images and influences in the context of an any space whatsoever, signalling a return to and departure from sacred water.

The absence of airborne animals is notable, as is the presence of air and water's punishing, violent atmospheric attendants: thunder and lightning, as well as the cold, constant rain. The absence of animal life is significant and signals an end in process, and the consistent pressure of the omnipresent storms, the drizzle, and the fouled air is a crushing promise of lost tomorrows juxtaposed with the man's memories. When the man thinks back to the early years on the road, he recalls that "once... he'd wakened in a barren wood and lay listening to flocks of migratory birds overhead in that bitter dark. Their half muted cranking miles above where they circled the earth... He never heard them again" (McCarthy 45). However, the boy either does not remember this or dismisses it and continues to seek space for potential and possibility. His

actions and the ideas and questions he proffers pursue life on the road, at the ocean, or in some imaginary elsewhere.

The air itself is dense and hangs in a fashion that seems to hold the past in the present (McCarthy 78). However, it is also disturbed and unbalanced in the face of environmental devastation, so that the air itself registers as an ashy, filthy thing that clogs the clothes covering their faces and destroys the lungs of the man. Air becomes something altogether different on the road, as it is no longer the most common terrestrial media but an amplified otherness that is both needed and destructive. It is insidious and deathly (much like air during the ATE in *White Noise* or, evidently, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic). Air's extreme otherness stands in contrast to the ongoing argument that the man seems to wage with his god. They are driven by the “secular winds” in “howling clouds of ash” to seek “shelter where they [can]” (149). Moreover, shelter is a rarity on the road. Everything healthy and pure appears to become decayed and corrupted, except for the boy. The man aims to protect the boy as he tries to carry both worlds. The man has to carry the sorrow of what has been lost with little hope for what could be, while continually influenced by an aerial-hydrous imagination and attempting to fan the tiny flame of hope in the boy’s heart.

While the atmosphere’s oppressive nature informs everything that can be seen in *The Road*, air and its dynamic assemblage with water disrupt any semblance of order and facilitate the general state of entropy. Air and water are in constant conversation in their dynamic-elemental assemblages and evolve with the complex, cataclysmic event that has led to the natural world being in this barren state. Air and water become something other through the event by colliding with human artifacts and human beings. The mark of human destruction is an uncomfortable adjacency sitting alongside elemental agencies in an eerie unfolding, and while

this bears similarities in form to that of *White Noise* or *Flight Behaviour* (in the next chapter), it is unique in *The Road*. The event has already happened and everything afterwards is in response to that critical moment that marks the end of the known world. Interestingly, the road is barren and simultaneously populated with memories of material others (birds, for example) in a way that already situates an expanded community of elemental and animal others that *White Noise* never arrives at and which *Flight Behaviour* is built upon. The significance of bringing life into the end of things marks water's nature and its ability to slip experience across time and situate it spatially. The event, as much as anything before it, shapes the man's perception. He sees the world as it was, in a suspended state of melancholy, saturated with what he imagined it would have been. He is able to see the world through his entanglements with water. The world he was living in with his wife before the boy was born had entirely different outcomes that affected his expectations of reality. The present world that he lives in now is consistently filtered through memories. The event reformed every preceding moment as well as all of those that followed.

As much as the atmosphere marks what is, water tends to dominate the imagination of the father and the son: the novel charts a search for maternal water (sacred water), but what these survivors find is a more unforgiving and infertile expression of hydrous nature prefigured by the mother's exit from the narrative. Water frequently refuses to provide a haven in response to the transformed environment. The rain is unrelenting, the water is icy cold, and everything is polluted and sterile.

The boundedness of the narrative and the direction of the characters, moving south towards water, culminates in the discovery of a shipwreck at the ocean's edge. They have reached the edge where human and hydra meet only to discover more destruction and further remnants of human ingenuity—this is *The Road's* graveyard. This graveyard, interred by air and

bounded by water, marks the end of the search for rebirth, for salvation, for tomorrow. It marks and bounds all endings in the novel. It did so long before the father and son reached the ocean. Maternal water no longer exists in this world, but water is still acting on the father and son in profound ways. The watery influence on the man is not the same as that encountered in *Flight Behaviour*, which is deathly and memory laden, but also maternal. In *The Road*, what was seen as a potential place of abundance and rebirth becomes a place to receive the dead and dying.

As much as the water at the edge of the ocean marks the distance they can travel and denotes the limits of immediate possibilities, there are many moments when water is transcendent in the novel. Water still functions in a supportive capacity in domestic settings, even though it is entangled with decay and what could have been. Consider the moment when the man inspects the house and discovers a tank of filtered water: “He lay there a long time lifting up the water to his mouth a palmful at a time. Nothing in his memory anywhere of anything so good” (McCarthy 103). Excavating layers of decay to arrive at water that is pure and sweet transforms the present tense experience of water into something supportive and joyful that offers a point of access to the past. Unearthing water and revealing purity in quality or intention is consistent with many interactions with water throughout the novel. Even though the hydrous landscape is one of the greatest threats to their survival, it also acts as one of their greatest sources of joy. Water is associated with joy in a number of singularities throughout the novel, pointing to a paradigm of the same nature. When the man and the boy cross over water or near it, they frequently transcend the reality of the moment in order to find some sense of joy and belonging.

Entering or crossing water functions as a transition across time or a simultaneous passage out of and into the present. When the man sees signs that they are near water, he often informs

the boy ahead of their arrival. His senses are influenced by past experiences that allow him to assess the environment and predict the presence of water. He is attuned to water. Water disrupts the rules surrounding how to travel the road, as well as the man and boy's proximity to each other. When they come across a creek "the boy set off down the road.... Elbows out, flapping along in his outsized tennis shoes. [The man] stopped and stood watching, biting his lip" (169). Bodies of water function as sites of temporal collision where an iteration of the past becomes the present, making space for joy and melancholy. This moment is an exception to their experience as opposed to the norm it would have been in another world. Exceptional moments in and around water are part of the man's past, and water is, thus, what allows the man to share some of the old world with his son. These aquatic moments are also singularities that offer insight into the nature of water. Bachelard's thinking about water as a source of memory and timelessness is particularly useful in thinking through these human-elemental entanglements. Bachelard draws on Paul Claudel's suggestion that "water is the gaze of the earth, its instrument for looking through time" (*WD* 31).

Another of water's paradigms involves potential, whether for life, joy, or solace. Water is a place to cast a line to access a different experience. The man and boy seek solace from the hardships of the road at a waterfall and the ocean. Even the water-adjacent places where they camp provide emotional succour. The man sees water as a haven; however, there are moments where that notion is so in the past, yet still in the present, that water is more ambiguous. When the man camps by the river, it is not because it is safe but because "he thought it would cheer the boy up" (McCarthy 158-59). Water consistently alters the man's perceptions and resulting actions throughout the text. He is frequently moved to think and proceed differently when near or in water. Water transports the man from a state of melancholy to being faintly hopeful, from

present to past-present, and from giving up to persevering. Water also offers an outlet for emotional experiences and physical challenges that allow the man and the boy to more deeply feel the life that their bodies still hold. Water makes room for possibilities that are impossible elsewhere on the road. The potential for things to be different near the ocean is promising in a way that other “possibilities” the boy longs for are not. The boy asks, “Is it blue?” The man responds with, “The sea? I don't know. It used to be” (153). The fact that the man does not automatically dismiss the possibility is telling. He leaves room for hope when it comes to the ocean, to water, because water influences the man’s memory and emotions.

Throughout the novel, singularities point to the emerging paradigm of water as a chronotope caching possible futures while conjuring space in the present for the imagined trajectories of the past. It is also the element that fosters emotional release and family bonding (for example, when the man teaches the boy how to swim near the base of the waterfall). A Charon complex is also evident. The ferryman is present in these moments between the boy and the man, when they move through or over water, creating another type of path for the man and the boy, as well as the reader. The hydrously attuned reader might well begin to think about water as a place of returns and exits. The Charon imagery is also about maternal and sacred water in particular. In the novel, water is in a state of collapse, but it still functions as the site of imaginative return. Bachelard indicates that hydrous imaginations identify these crossings with Charon imagery, and on the road water is complicated: it offers support, ferries the dead and dying, and transports lost souls across time through memory. Water is both omnipresent and centralized in rivers, creeks, cataracts, and oceans. Water punctures cyclical time and the nature of life on the road, offering a passage across time that extends what it is to be a human-elemental becoming in the here and now.

The man's hydrous imagination influences how he reimagines his lost world. It informs everything that the man does and how he engages with the world around him, as well as how he tries to construct the world for the boy. *The Road*, from beginning to end, is a journey towards and through water. The event that begins the end of the world and starts the beginning of their life on the road marks a point of cognitive restructuring for the man. In the initial seconds following the blast, he turns to water. He fills the tub and tries to embrace the last of the sacred things the world will hold: his son, his wife, and water. What becomes clear in the course of the narrative is that maternal water, in particular, is in a state of extreme decline, and the ocean reflects this, having become a receptacle for the dead and dying instead of a place of rebirth and origin.

Silent Speech and the Voiced Otherness of *The Road*

Silent speech figures in *The Road* in the voiceless water fae that appear in the man's dreams and the collapse of the environment, as well as in the prophetic voices of the mother, Ely, and the boy. Silent speech is how the elements (in this case, water) influence the communication of others, and it once again positions water at the centre of the novel, further highlighting its entanglements with human others. It can be identified in *The Road* through the exemplars of prophetic speech, broken language, and the exchanges that become part of the man's mental equipment, bridging past and present on the road, as well as the deep, unfathomable quality of the voices influenced by and attuned to water. To investigate water's voice, I draw on Bachelard's *Water and Dreams* to gain greater insight into water's traces in literature, expanding his conceptualizations to go beyond considerations of material imagination and to highlight water's influence on actions, memory, and movement.

Apart from the family unit on the road, few characters in the novel are given a voice. Ely, a man they encounter, is a significant source of prophecy and silent speech. His source of prophetic speech is drawn from the dying, watery environment. In the context of the road, drawing from some deeper source of mourning and understanding of this dark reality is particularly resonant. He is somehow able to pierce through the grey sludge and atmospheric deluge to offer insight into the reality of the world beyond immediate experience, much like his namesake, Elijah, who prophesied drought and eventually brought rain at God's word (1 Kings 17-19), he is working with the water of the world. Ely, like other sources of elemental prophecy, is imbued with a timelessness and otherness that allows him to cross established boundaries in the text. He conveys the depths of environmental decline and occupies a prophetic space that situates him as a bridge between the old world and the new. The deconstructed nature of time in his speech, coupled with his speech's prophetic, dream-like quality, elide him with water. When the man asks, "How long have you been on the road?" Ely responds, "I was always on the road. You cant stay in one place" (McCarthy 142). There is something resonant and profound about this: being adrift in the wilderness and staying still for fear of death are clearly similar to the Biblical Elijah's time spent in the Kerith Ravine and Zarephath while escaping the wrath of Ahab due to Elijah's prophesied drought (1 Kings 17-19). It is doubtful that Ely was always on the road, but the person calling himself Ely was. It seems unlikely that anyone could be what they were or might have been in a time and place like this. All pasts seem possible here. He tells the man, "I knew this was coming.... This or something like it. I always believed in it" (142). Ely's watery intuition forces the man out of his reveries about past experiences and drags him forward into the weight and absurdity of the present moment. When the man asks Ely, since he knew this was coming, if he got ready for it, Ely reasonably responds, "What would you do?"

(142). How does one prepare for such an unravelling of the real? For the end of the world? What would be the point? Ely's ability to speak as a prophet is akin to Wilder's ability to prophesize in *White Noise*. The difference is that one is a sound chamber (Wilder) and one is a speaking reed (Ely), but Ely's speech is all the more powerful in a space where language is falling away. Each word appears to be a divine act in the face of language's collapse, environmental devastation, and the end of humanity. Words take on weight, bear a prophetic and dream-like influence, and the clear connection between humanity and the Earth is made vibrant. Without a healthy planet, people cannot thrive or embody the best traits of human beings. Elementally influenced speech, silent speech, takes on an ambiguous quality when water is the primary influence, speaking directly to what it means to be adrift in a destroyed world.

Ely clearly and cleverly absolves the man of the palpable guilt underlying the questions that the latter poses. Ely makes it clear that tomorrow was never certain and that existing without anyone else in the known universe may be too much to bear. He conveys to the man that preparing for something like this is a possible impossibility because "you wouldn't know if you wanted to [prepare for it] or not" (McCarthy 142). The suggestion is that if you were the last one left you might not wish that you "would die" but you "might wish that [you] had died.... Or you might wish you'd never been born" (142). This approach to the current situation takes on a position somewhere between the one the man's wife held and that of the man himself. Ely is speaking from a place of social experience and environmental influence, as well as from the Biblical story of Elijah, right down to wishing to die in the wilderness (1 Kings 19). Ely sees the world collapsing around him, and he brings elements of water's influence and elements of Biblical prophecy into the present in an attempt to create his reality in the absence of a place to belong. He is not trying to convince himself that anything other than the end of everything is

taking place, much like *The Road's* other watery prophets of the present. He brings the reality of the saturated environment and the human beings existing within it into the reality of language and narrative through a few seemingly profound insights. His statements contain the contradictions and temporal spillage of water. Ely offers what might be the very crux of what it means to straddle life and death when life becomes untenable: "Nobody wants to be here and nobody wants to leave" (143).

As a prophet of this dying environment, Ely also disabuses the man of a last lingering notion that there is a god. Throughout the novel, the man intermittently rages at a god he hopes is there to hold to account. However, Ely (surely a nod to the prophet Elijah in one of his iterations) is there to announce that "there is no God... There is no God and we are his prophets" (McCarthy 143). This is a significant conversation in the novel. The man's order of things relies on the existence of a god who should be destroyed; an ocean, and the notion that heading there might lead to some form of salvation; and a child whose beauty and hope mark him as alien in a hostile world. As Terence McSweeney notes, "the boy is firmly established within the broadly realistic framework of the narrative as some sort of quasi-messianic figure who may or may not be divine," and he "comes to represent what little hope there is left for the future" (52). When the man returns to this conversation and tries to renegotiate the terms of god's absence by offering the child as a god, Ely "shakes his head. I'm past all that now. Have been for years. Where men cant live gods fare no better. You'll see. It's better to be alone" (McCarthy 145). This is sage advice: the world cannot support people or gods. He even offers a bridge back to the reality of the situation they share by offering that "to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true. Things will be better when everybody's gone" (145). The fact that gods are the subject of conversation makes intuitive sense, but it is difficult to reconcile

otherwise. In this rotten, barren place, a complete absence of life seems ideal. Ely's speech has the tone of prophecy. Ely's speech is watery, deep, and, at times, indiscernible. In the context of water's decline alongside the unraveling of humanity, silent speech, while frequently obscure, is resonant with the world as it is in *The Road*.

It is notable that Ely, although nearly blind, can see the fire that the boy and the man carry. He speaks about the actual fire, but he follows this closely with a comment about the boy, suggesting that the connection between the physical, the narrative, and the elemental is not lost on him. The fire itself is a kindness, the actions of the boy are a kindness, and both of these things are out of step with this decimated place. Ely says, "I've not seen a fire in a long time, that's all. I live like an animal.... When I saw that boy I thought that I had died [...] I didn't know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didn't know that would happen" (McCarthy 145). Ely sees through the situation's nuances and notes the fire that they carry, both literally and figuratively. The boy and the fire exist as equally unlikely from Ely's perspective. He adjusts his expectations of reality in response.

Interestingly enough, this man who is virtually blind, who roams the road at a languid pace, who knew the beginning of the end of the world was imminent and is rarely heard from, is also the same being who brings language back into some semblance of its former state. The conversations are elevated. In a way, it is the strangeness of the situation and the strangeness of speaking to this elemental other that results in a return to queries that suggest a former social order, which is deepened by the iteration of the Prophet Elijah that Ely seems to present. Memory and water's influence support this shift. The ability to converse marks a moment of hope and uncertainty in the text, both for the man and Ely. It is also a moment in which the boy feels encouraged to continue pursuing the fire—against experience, against circumstance, against

hope. Ely is the first source of intuitive, hydrous influence that the man has encountered since his wife left.

When the mother exits the narrative, her actions and her story continue to inform the man's actions. With the mother's absence, the connection between freedom, safety, and water remains a guiding but invisible presence. She becomes part of the wateriness of the world, absorbed in memory and a recollection of what it was to be human. The woman had the agency to end her life, but the man sees the promise of the ocean's boundary as offering the possibility of a different kind of elsewhere. Unlike the man, the woman believed death was the only way out. Ely thinks the same but lacks the motivation to end his own life. He says, "when we're all gone at last then there'll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too" (McCarthy 145-146). Like the mother, Ely thinks that "things will be better when everybody's gone" (145). The wife and Ely resist the urge to see anything other than the future's likely possibilities under the grey, ash-filled, rain-drenched skies, and they speak to what the waterways try to convey to the man and the boy repeatedly: everything is dead or dying.

The wife speaks about the logic of dreams. Dreams are always already watery (intuitive and temporally unstable), and it is in dreams that the man consistently returns to her. She says that "they say women dream of danger to those in their care and men dream of danger to themselves. But I dont dream at all" (McCarthy 48). The wife/mother embodies the state of water in the novel: insightful, intuitive, cold, and dead. Water offers a continued challenge to the man and boy's existence, while at the same time offering temporary refuge and release. When the mother exits the narrative, water becomes a stand-in. It holds memory. As Bachelard notes, "to love the infinite universe is to give a material meaning... to the infinity of love for a mother.... As soon as anyone loves a reality with all his soul, then this reality is itself a soul and

a memory” (116). The mother/wife complicates the idea of “the one who never abandons” (116) and follows the trajectory of environmental certainties and water: present and absent. The rivers, waterfalls, and creeks are not an end in and of themselves, and they do not offer a way to make sense of things but, rather, a way out. For the man and the boy, the mother’s appearance in their dreams offers another way out and a refusal to abandon what it is to carry sacred water and, while it may seem contradictory, life. Removing the possibility of procreating and resisting a repopulating narrative in the context of the road is inherently a commitment to sacred water and life. Imagining a way forward in this environment is more about committing to a myth of progress than it is about life. Resisting the continuance of new life under these circumstances becomes a marker of morality.

The last source of silent speech in the text is the boy. He is an outsider on the road. Although the man ruminates on the boy’s nature as distinct from his own, and the man considers how he, himself, must appear to the boy as a remnant of a bygone world, it is the boy who is a voice of elemental otherness in the story. It is as if the nurturing aspect of air and the emotional clarity of water have decided to persevere in some form through the child. Despite being born into a dying world, he is morally upright, intuitive, predominantly outside of language, deeply in touch with emotional experience, and wholly captivated by water. The boy comes alive at each opportunity to enter water and be transported elsewhere. He also speaks most profoundly without uttering a word, a characteristic of water observed by Bachelard (*WD*) and others. An example of this is when the boy’s father carves him a small flute out of a piece of cane by the roadside.

The boy took it wordlessly. After a while he fell back and after a while the man could hear him playing. A formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its

ruin.... The man thought he seemed some sad and solitary changeling child announcing the arrival of a traveling spectacle in shire and village who does not know that behind him the players have all been carried off by wolves. (McCarthy 66)

The child is alone in a vast and depopulated any-space-whatever, in the Deleuzian sense, as he knows no other place or way of being. He does not fall back on memories of the past. Rather, he fashions for himself a sound and a voice that is of this chronotope: formless and watery. The boy's nature is generous, open, and helpful despite his circumstances. He is also deep (intuitive, thoughtful, and influenced by water), which is amplified further in his actions.

Water has a few distinct modes that clarify its various paradigms whereby we gain insight into how humans and the elemental relate via silent speech. Elemental imaginings have a profound impact on the man, and this is another instance where water is communicative. When the man contemplates his place in the world, it is often with regards to what was or the beings that enter his dreams. When the man thinks about what he is, it concerns how the boy sees him. When he dreams of aliens, he positions their foreignness alongside his own. The man is from a world that the boy has never known and longs for a past that the boy has never had. As a result, he can perceive himself as an outsider in the eyes of his son; however, in reality, it is his son who is truly other. When the man dreams of being "visited... by creatures of a kind he'd never seen before," it is notable that these are also beings that do not speak (McCarthy 129), yet they convey messages about time and its passing through silent speech. They occupy another aspect of the watery din that characters in the novel speak through. These watery visitors, voiceless others who are ambivalent presences, bear a message, nonetheless, and the man, who senses hydrous influence, can intuit this much: these beings are messengers capable of prophesying

what will happen from one moment to the next, and perhaps their greatest communicative act is signalling that there is a moment that will follow the dream.

The man becomes acutely aware of the intangible things that surround him through this entangled vision of the boy and the aliens (or, perhaps, korrigans²⁶). They are products of his mind and the life and thoughts of his child that he cannot quite approach. In starting to move towards that realization, he also moves toward his emotions, towards an active acceptance of the state of the world and the earth. The man notes that “all that was left was the feeling of [the dream]” (McCarthy 130), and in looking at his son in his waking moments, he feels profound loss: “he [can]not construct for the child’s pleasure the world he’d lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he” (129-130).

Moreover, this loss is all the more profound because it is also the loss of innocence that the son is experiencing and the loss of a world that could have been home. It is also an awareness on the part of the father and the son that they both, at times, “wished it to be over” (130). The man approaches water tentatively. He never engages with water on the level of speaking with or for it, but he senses the connections between the people around him and hydrous imagination. The sources of watery speech that enter his dreams, music, and conversation help to guide him through the world he is in. The watery nature of speech concerns how elements influence the individual but also how the health of water and the health of the human community are entwined.

For the man, a significant part of engaging with voiceless others is accessing the divine, unlike Jack’s reliance on a world organized by myth to makes sense of the elemental in *White Noise*. One difference between these two narratives lies in the man’s sincere embrace of the

²⁶ Korrigans are water fae that can divine the future from one moment to the next. They appear near water and are associated with a number of attributes, both positive and negative. These “aliens” seem to be an older type of elemental being like Korrigans.

former material world, in contrast with Jack's ambivalent movement even in his own body. This is one of the marked differences between air and water as well. While air might lift things up and inward, water's embrace is both heavy and temporally mobile. The man seeks insight and prophecy through the elemental others he engages with: Ely, his wife, his son, and the beings that occupy his dreams. His memories of the bygone world are nostalgic and tinged with the hand of the divine, while his interpretation of the present is that god has fled the earth. Ely, the man's wife, and his son all resist his interpretations of them and their respective realities.

Ely is *The Road's* prophet. He is a dynamic being who moves between the heard and unheard, the seen and unseen. Ely is a speaking reed, and hydrous influence speaks through him. Ely bridges the reality of the environment and the human beings within it, but he moves beyond wordlessness and embraces language and narrative, providing the man and boy with novel access to prophecy derived from elemental influence and given shape by older narratives.²⁷ Ely speaks things that seem true. He stumbles through language or lets it tumble out of him, saying things like: "There is no God and we are his prophets" (McCarthy 143) or "Where men cant live gods fare no better" (145). He acts as a bridge between the bygone world and the new. He is also a bridge between the symbolic and the semiotic, the human and the elemental. His type of elemental prophecy is unique to *The Road* but resonates with paradigms established across various narratives in this dissertation, including elementally influenced silent speech shaped via interstitial others.

²⁷ While the Biblical Elijah prophesies drought and sways the people of Israel away from idolatry (1 Kings 17-19), Ely is a prophet in different circumstances, adrift in the wilderness, witnessing small miracles (like the existence of the child and the comfort of a fire), and caught up in the ever-present dance with death and water. The similarities between these prophets are abundant, but their sources of power and prophetic speech are, arguably, quite different.

The wife, the boy, and the aliens in the man's dreams are all prophets of the present and future world. The boy even funnels aspects of his speech into the music he makes via the reed that the man carved for him. The boy speaks most clearly when interpreted by the man who intuits the boy's sense of things through his voice, music, and actions. The formlessness of the music he makes speaks to his place in the world and the formless nature of things as they are: "the man could hear him playing. A formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin" (McCarthy 66). As Dolar suggests in his work on voice, music was meant for the gods or animals and is conveyed by feminine beings (100), which may be partly why it seems formless to the man. The music is of the road. The boy is, thus, similar to *White Noise's* Wilder. He speaks in a way that few can really hear. However, his insight into reality is as profound as that of the man, Ely, the wife/mother, or the creatures appearing in the man's dreams. The players are being "carried off by wolves," and, contrary to what the man believes, the boy knows it. Wilder knew the ATE was coming. Ely knew the end of the world was coming before it began. The mother saw no space for the feminine, for the sacred, for life. Death was a promise that could be fulfilled. Each prophet speaks to the man in a way that he has trouble reconciling with his sense of either how things ought to be or how they are. He struggles to process the reality of the world, though that is his primary responsibility and what the elementally influenced others guide him to do repeatedly.

The final example of voiced otherness involves the silent creatures that appear in the man's dreams. In a world suffused with watery images, journeys, and visions, the world of dreams and the world of water overlap. These water creatures bear a message, channeling what can happen from one moment to the next like korriganes. The man conflates the aliens and the boy (McCarthy 130). The lost connection with the aliens is an amplification of his loosening

connection with his son. He is mourning his own passing and what lies ahead for his son. This type of mourning and voiced otherness is expressed via watery interactions and amplifications.

The Beginning of the End: Events and Aftermath

The perspective of the walker is radically different from that of the boat man as it is from that of the stander on the bank. Walking, you have not merely entered the water, you have entered the course of the stream. You are experiencing not the stream alone nor the land alone, but the contending of the two by which each has been shaped. You are encountering by touch as well as by sight the water of the river and the obstacles it makes its way through or over or under or around. You have put your body into it like a gauge to measure the variations of its depth and the changes of its flow.

—Wendell Berry, *The Unforeseen Wilderness*

In *The Road*, water seeps across boundaries and into significant events, puncturing everyday life on the road. The entire narrative is about the characters' movement towards water following a cataclysmic event. The birth of the son begins in water. The first step in any disaster, including precipitating events, is to collect water for survival. The few moments of happiness in the text revolve around a can of Coca-Cola (McCarthy 19, 125), the rare comfort of a cup of coffee (122), a warm bath (124), and swimming in the river to experience the water's movement and plunge into the icy awareness of being alive (32-33). Water is also the driving force in the novel: the sky is blackened, the rain falls constantly, and the atmospheric attendants of thunder and lightning, rain and snow, drive the man and the boy further into the earth: under the leaves (51), under the blankets (126), under the ground (116-131). They frequently marshal themselves into the ground for safety and rest. The father is steadily decomposing, while at the same time he tries to offer up his strength, his protection, his knowledge, and his place in the world to support

and sustain the son's survival. The father and son find refuge in earthy places that are barren and damp, and the dampness is an unmerciful foe. The devastated environment's most immediate claim on human life is the wet, damp cold of a sunless sky and the pressure to keep moving or be claimed by either the earth or the cannibals.

A significant movement out of the rain and into the ground occurs when the father and son find an underground bunker (McCarthy 116-131). When father and son go underground, it is a welcome respite from the rain, the thunder and lightning, the cannibals, and the oppressive grey sky. They have light, food, and a warm place to sleep. It is transformational. In the bunker, the man and boy are safe. It is here that they are allowed to re-enter a type of social structure that might temporarily transcend the collapsing environment, a "tiny paradise trembling in the orange light from the heater" (126). They eat at a table, sleep without animal alertness, and bathe. The most notable aspect of this moment is how temporary it is. The boy asks, "How long can we stay here Papa?" and the father answers "Not long... maybe one more day. Two" (125). They can stay there only briefly, as any greater amount of time in that place could result in their deaths, or worse.

Each moment of happiness exists in a delicate balance with the simultaneous moment of its passing. Melancholy saturates the entire novel, and the emotional colouring of the story is traced in water that bookends the man and boy's rare experiences of joy. The immortality of the elements underscores the temporality of human beings. If we consider Bachelard's analysis of water and the hydrous imagination in relation to the "hero," it is as though the father and the son have been actively working against air's current, pushing into the margins delineated by water, and descending into the temporary safety afforded by the earth. An additional layer in the elemental narrative involves a constantly impending flood that never quite materializes.

At the centre of *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy lies an event that resists naming. It is a great, persistent, absent-present flood connecting creek to river, cataract to pool, sodden home to rusting train. The land and the people are enveloped by water. The story, while about a man and his son surviving in a post-apocalyptic world, is also about water's influence and, in particular, a saturated world. As Sturken notes in *Desiring the Weather*, "weather has long been understood as the primary symptom of nature, the way that nature speaks to its occupants" (163), and nature, in *The Road*, resists clearly engaging with attuned others. Communication seems to be happening through water as a medium, with meaning posing a challenge to understanding in this context.

The Road is haunted by a flood that never coalesces. Each step toward the ocean and a potential elsewhere traces a longing for divine or supra-natural intervention that could destroy the echo of lingering life. Even on the road itself, talc blowing in the wind is figured as "squid ink uncoiling along a sea floor" (McCarthy 152-53). Water is central to the most evocative moments that the man and boy experience. Water is amongst the last remnants of hope and, simultaneously, the greatest elemental adversary that the man and boy face. From plunging cataracts to the great dead sea, the omnipresent drizzle, and the cold grey air, the imbrication of floods and flooding suffuses the landscape. The most powerful form of hydrous intervention refuses to fully form and intervene in the unravelling of life on the road, and its notable absence is an elegy to the dead and dying earth. In the novel, the flood happens, but it is a slow, steady occurrence where the flood waters rise in bodies (sodden clothing, memories of cholera deaths juxtaposed with the man's daily waking [180]) and dank dwellings, dissolving the imprint of human life and saturating the earth. If the Biblical flood was God's way of cleansing the Earth to make a fresh start with humanity, then the slow, steady, ever-present flood of *The Road* is about exacting a toll and the undoing of gods and men. In figuring water in this way, it is possible to

gain greater insight into water as an absent-present elemental other that shapes minds, actions, and becomings on the road. As Bachelard so aptly notes, “imagination is a becoming” (*WD* 103), and in following water one becomes a hydrously-attuned human-elemental assemblage.

Staying warm and dry is nearly impossible on the road, while the alternative is a death sentence. The ever-encroaching entropy cast over the remaining forms of humanity hangs in the balance with the constant threat of rain. Rain, in *The Road*, does not function as it would in a healthy hydrological system. Rain is equated with threat because of a host of absences: trees, ground cover, and soil, for example. Beyond these absences, there is a lack of fauna to help direct water’s course in rivers and streams. Rain, on the road, means being cold and wet, and becoming cold and wet without shelter means illness and, potentially, death. The counterbalance to this experience is attempting to dry off by lighting a fire, which involves a level of risk as well. Refusing to participate in the act of meaning-making offered by flooding is one of water’s clear forms of resistance, and it is one of the most chilling aspects of this post-apocalyptic world. It is the connection between grey skies and the saturated land that resonates with some deeper, older fears about pernicious gods, capricious nature, and human frailty in the face of extraordinary elemental forces, including water in particular. Water is speaking to a time beyond the human. The absent-present flood has left behind a non-existent society, destroyed dwellings, halted and decomposing modes of transportation, and vulnerable human beings clinging to water as a source of hope—whether for a merciful ending or a new beginning on the boundary of the sea, where both wishes involve a desire to return.

The absent flood is an expression of an ambivalent environment resisting human narratives of decline and protracting the business of death and dying. The absent-present flood raises the question, when would a human, divine, or supra-natural intervention have been

possible? The novel positions itself between the moment the reader exists in and a future environmental collapse in a stark and realistic way. Additionally, by positioning a hydrous child at the centre of the narrative, the reader is left to grapple with the terror of placing children in this devastating reality in a way that is not often the case in post-apocalyptic fiction. It echoes humanity's greatest fear in the face of climate change: that we are responsible for our impact on life on this planet, and we will experience that responsibility directly.

Each significant transition in the novel is bounded by water: the transition from the heavy sky and the cold rain to the bunker, the moment when the mother becomes part of a narrative with room for her (i.e., her suicide by slitting her wrists), the opportunity to swim the river, the arrival at the edge of the sea. Each of these boundaries marks and directs the path of the father and son, and this makes sense, as water is the site of memory and holds the remnants of the sacred. The mother tells the man where she will go and what she will do, and she asks him to recommit to ending their son's life if it seems as though he will be taken by the cannibals (McCarthy 48-49). By choosing to exit the narrative, the mother significantly alters the direction of the story and resists carrying the sacred into a place that has no room for it or her. By pursuing oblivion and refusing a survivalist narrative, the mother also refuses to participate in the most brutal relics of patriarchy while embracing the watery narrative of memory that will be left behind. Water is both maternal and cold in this world.

The father attempts to construct the sacred within the immediate environment when the opportunity presents itself. When the father and son arrive at the base of a waterfall, the father first checks to see if the river is being watched, and then they swim. It is, presumably, the first time that the son has had the opportunity to swim (McCarthy 33). The man passes on something sacred from his own experience to the boy. This is a profound, exceptional moment in an

otherwise dark existence—a singularity and an event. Swimming in the last remnant of the living world marks their tenuous continued existence as implausible yet hopeful. The river is distinctly different from the place they were residing in moments before. It offers them food that continues to exist in a decaying world and which is nourishing and delicious by any standard: morels (34). And yet, the river and the morels are still a mixture of life and decay. Bachelard writes that “running water is destined to slow down, to become heavy. All living water is on the point of dying” (47), and this is true in this novel. Moving water is about slipping away, dissolving, and dying, according to Bachelard (47), but there seems to be a stronger desire to dissolve than to slip away or die (the will required for the other two options is beyond what can be mustered on the road). The river offers two kinds of sustenance: challenge coupled with a reinforced will to live, and food. Importantly, the challenge is joyful. Fear is not the dominant expression of being alive at this moment. This moment is about memory and potential. Bachelard sees water as “the transitory element” and suggests that a being attuned to water is “a being in flux” even though it “always flows, always falls, and always ends in horizontal death” (6). The fact that joy can be found here on the road is also an amplification of the pain of this existence: “the pain of water is infinite” (6). Finally, when they arrive at the edge of the sea, they arrive at a desolate ocean. However, it is also a confluence of memory. “The same memory flows from all fountains,” and at the edge of the sea, salt water awaiting, containing traces of itself deposited over millennia, the ocean before them is the holder of all secrets (8).

At the edge of the sea, lodged on the strand, they discover a small human intervention in the seascape: a wrecked boat. The concern, on some level, is that the disaster may have been global, and the boat, Pájaro de Esperanza, lends weight to that possibility by being from Tenerife, in the Canary Islands. Yet, the boat also marks a point of departure, not physical but

cognitive. It speaks to the possibility of elsewhere. Bachelard ponders what it means to course the ocean, concluding that “no utility could justify the immense risk of setting out over water... powerful interests have to be present... visionary interests. These are the interests about which one dreams... mythical interests” (74). This boat is a site of hope and despair at once. Wrecked at the edge of the sea, long since abandoned, yet it crossed the ocean, and it speaks to courage against all odds. Bachelard notes that “the first sailor was the first living man who was as courageous as a dead one” (74). Setting out on water is not about the certainty of return but about the possibility and experience of intense otherness. People drawn to water, like the man, like myself and many others, pursue difference, a mythical connection with something beyond the human. When the man boards the boat, he finds artifacts from an older world, one in which objects had purpose and meaning beyond the basics of survival: brass work, toilet and sink, manuals and papers, black leather valise, bloated books, sunglasses, and a sextant (180-92). The ocean secures material memory both above and below the waterline, offering father and son a reminder of an alternative to their current existence, though not a physical means of escape. The end of the novel is not particularly hopeful, but the suspended boat reads as a possibility of something else existing beyond the boundary offered by the sea. It is their hope, their bird where other birds have long since flown. The boat is a potential elsewhere (Pájaro de Esperanza: bird of hope). They may not be able to pursue life beyond the edge of the sea, and they may never really know if there is anything else out there, but it is possible that they are not alone in a desolate and devastated world. The ocean is more than a boundary. It is potential and memory as rendered in the boat caught between the strand and the sea. The boat is a suspended intersection of the past and present, of what is above and below the water—what is seen and what is intuited. This

material presentation of intuited becoming contributes to a deeper understanding of water in *The Road*.

Carrying the Fire: Stories, Maps, and Memories

Hope and the sacred are often presented as the same. They point to singularities in the story that highlight the son as a sacred being. He is the primary source for hope. In *The Road*'s profoundly polluted and untenable landscape, the boy is not only carrying the fire, but he also carries the potential and purity of water, and the lightness of air. He is still able to imagine an elsewhere (even if it requires an interplanetary reach) and to embrace rare moments of joy. Terence McSweeney takes "carrying the fire" to mean "the concept of remaining moral in a society where morality has eroded.... Although what *carrying the fire* means is never explicitly explained, it becomes a reason for them to continue living" (52). Carrying the fire also refers to a tradition that the man has internalized for himself and the boy on the road. According to Barbara Bennett,

Most reviewers have generally agreed that the "fire" is hope, spiritual belief, or truth, but a closer understanding of Celtic tradition reveals what McCarthy more likely meant. In the Celtic culture, the hearth fire was the center of family activity, providing warmth, light, and food for the family.

As Bennett suggests, carrying the fire is also about storytelling. The hearth on the road is carried in actions and in words. The man gifts what is left of humanity to his son in stories. Carrying the fire is something people who have been set adrift in the world understand intuitively. It is a tie, through language and the wateriness of memory, to the people before one's self, the person one is and will become, and those who come after. As McCarthy writes, "I think maybe they are

watching.... They are watching for a thing that even death cannot undo” (McCarthy 177). The depth of storytelling’s potential and its absolute necessity make the boy’s aphasia even more troubling yet somehow appropriate. The boy moves through the currents of the world, feeling before speaking. He knows what carrying the fire means, but he struggles to articulate it. It is the difference between being submerged in the experience (semiotic and watery) and being distanced from it (symbolically). As De Bruyn suggests, “when the world is devastated, not only man but language itself becomes a fragile animal” (783). One could add, when the environment becomes the most proximate otherness with which to co-construct the world, the fragility of the post-apocalyptic environment and the human pulls the fragility of language and humanness to the point of “bare life” (Agamben *HS*) without the potential for “good life” (or any real community-oriented practice).

The boy’s embodiment of water and his awareness of carrying the fire suggest precisely the sort of transmutative power that Bachelard speaks to when he explores dynamic imagination. Dynamic imagination is marked by instances when several elements influence the perceptive outcomes of an experience. These collisions make way for transversal thinking, altering prescriptive outcomes in unlikely ways. Water’s influence on the boy’s behaviour, imagination, and direction also marks singularities in the text that point to broader elemental paradigms. By being able to imagine birds in the sky, interplanetary escape, and life beyond the horizon, he develops the capacity to see the man who arrives at the edge of the sea, following his father’s death, as potentially safe. The boy is set apart and completely otherworldly; he is someone surrounded by light: naive and graceful. The boy is even contemplated, in passing, as divine. It is the suggestion of the divine, in combination with the child’s elementally influenced and formed self, that stands out as another singularity. It is, of course, not the first time that a child is

presented as divine in literature or elsewhere, but in this environment, it is almost an assault. The child is divine insofar as he is elevated into that role by the man. The boy's innocence, kindness, and resilience become divine traits in this environment where violence is the key to survival. It is a violation of the existing reality. It is also why hope has some small haven in this narrative, for both the boy and the environment.

In addition to carrying the fire through stories, the man and boy carry a different sort of commitment to a former community through their map. They move forward following a map that has been laid out showing a past series of roads, towns, and highways, but also communities and bodies of water that store memories of what community means. This is also a form of carrying the fire and following water, and so a form of becoming elementally entangled. They are carrying a representation of what it means to be in community and have agreed upon boundaries that dictate where one is and what one is in the world. Maps, as Benedict Anderson points out in *Imagined Communities*, are foundational for constructing communities where not everyone will meet but everyone will share agreed-upon narratives that include other people and places in a larger structuring of self within community and nation. The map is an instrument and a complicated relic of an older time that they wield to propel themselves to the edge of the sea. Community is a lingering memory. As De Bruyn notes, "even more disturbingly, the entire spatial and temporal make-up of the world is undone. Maps no longer enable the father and son to position themselves in the world" (782), though the map reinforces a moral compass and does, arguably, help them find their way forward physically as well. It occupies an interstitial place between the topography of the land, the roads as they are and as they were, and the collapse of language and, importantly, of community. At the same time, the map points to water's influence, guidance, mnemonic qualities, and its pull on the man and boy's imaginations and becomings.

Water is the absent presence that marks the story's beginning and ending. It is noted and present at each and every significant event, but it escapes the notice of the main characters as a primary influence or presence. It is the dominant element at the birth of the son, it dominates the landscape and lifeworlds of the man and boy, and the arrival at the edge of the sea and the father's passing mark the end of a particular way of being in the world. The man is always suspended between the past and the present, unable to project a future beyond his hopes for the boy. Water acts as a bridge between worlds and an uncertain but hopeful haven for the boy's future. One paradigm that emerges in this text helps to construct an aspect of water's beingness. Water is a body against and within which we rise above conditions and circumstances and conquer fears, to thrive and grow, or it is a body within which we drown and die. It is a flourishing mass of life and a graveyard of all temporal things. Water balances its ability to give and take life. It is not humans' everyday media, but it is a beingness that is longed for, carried as us, against us and for us, supporting us and sweeping us under and away with the changing tides and swift currents. As Cohen writes in *Elemental Ecocriticism*, there are moments when our air and oceans are in flux: "the ladder of nature jumbles its rungs, rescaling itself: life lived on the ground becomes life within the depths of someone else's ocean floor" (116). While there are no longer others to people this place, the memory of otherness is cached in the water-laden world and comes alive in response to atmospheric influence and bodies of water.

When Bachelard writes about existing in an active exchange with water, he is thinking about the contest engaged in by a swimmer. In *The Road*, the contest is broader. It is about swimming, about striving with the body's will against the water and the exhilaration in finding that the body can emerge from this other environment unscathed and invigorated, even joyful. Water enlivens the senses. The "low thunder" of the waterfall, the mist, the smell, and "the cold

coming off of it” mark water as alluring and worthy of respect for both the boy and the man (McCarthy 32). For the boy, the water and the waterfall are scary (34). For the man, they represent possibility and memory. According to De Bruyn, “rivers are the natural setting for moments of insight and vision, for epiphanies about the relationship between man and nature” (786). De Bruyn goes on to say that “rivers as well as life and memory grind to a halt” in the “novel’s denatured landscape” (786). The river is also the place where the man can pass down the kind of knowledge that is usually gained in childhood and remains useful throughout life: he takes the opportunity to try to help the boy swim (McCarthy 33). Moreover, helping the boy swim is one of the most poignant parts of the story. It is a painful reminder of how precious these moments are and how difficult it is to find them in such a damaged world. The man and boy are swimmers in every sense. They swim in the dense inhospitable air, against the currents of the world, and in the memories of everything that has been lost or never was. Swimming at the base of the waterfall is one of the moments in the story where the man and the boy actively embody carrying the fire. I take the phrase to mean carrying what it was/is to be human through a wasted world. They are carrying light in the darkness.

Carrying the fire functions in a number of different ways. When the man shares stories with the boy, upholds moral guidelines, picks up skills and language, then he and the boy are carrying the fire.

He told the boy stories. Old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them until the boy was asleep in his blankets and then he stoked the fire and lay down warm and full and listened to the low thunder of the falls beyond them in that dark and threadbare wood. (McCarthy 35)

The stories the man shares often evoke the order of the old world, and the reveries he experiences often include water: being near it, on it, or in it. Being near water frequently prompts moments of carrying the fire and all that it entails. Water is the most significant elemental influence on the man's imagination, and it has the greatest influence on his actions. His dreams, stories, and memories are access points for his emotions, and all of these share water as influence, repository, and trigger.

As much as *The Road* is an exploration of post-apocalyptic existence, it also explores hydrous others and their stories. The man needs to retain his memories and stories in order to remain a person. On their walk towards the ocean, he uses stories to shape shadows of the world. The world has become inexplicable and stories are all the more critical because protecting the boy (and the crushing beauty of the boy's trust and innocence) would be impossible without narratives from the world before the road. In the face of chaos and the weariness of the everyday struggle to survive, stories become a lifeline—an opportunity to carry the fire, to take little scraps of time and space and transport them into a different world. In much the same way that Jack Gladney required a world of mythology and legend to help him navigate the extraordinary ATE, the man needs to return to the world that was in order to survive what is and what may come to be. For the boy, these stories function as a mythology. By reaching into the past and the dreams rendered from the ashes of his former and current life, the man does the most human thing he can: he creates a space for his family to survive within. He processes the world as it is, escaping into the reality offered by dreams, memories, and stories that informed his behaviour before the end of everything he knew. Now, stories act as talismans to ward off the possibility of sinking into the perverse behaviour that the road rewards. Carrying the fire, or bearing stories of

the past that define what it is to be morally upright, creates a foundation for a future community, offering a way to continue to be human and to begin to engage elemental others.

Memories in *The Road* tend to be conjured in the presence of water and when the man most keenly feels the absence of what he had wished for his son's present and future. A prime example of elemental experience informing what was and what is lies in the best day of the man's childhood: "the day to shape days upon" (McCarthy 11). Elemental influence via water is presented in memories as a key component of the experience and as a bridge between past and present. One of the man's richest and most powerful memories is a simple one framed by moving over water. It is also about water itself. It helps to inform and direct their current journey:

He sat in the back of the rowboat trailing his hand in the cold wake while his uncle bent to the oars.... He turned to take a sight on the far shore, cradling the oarhandles... The shore was lined with birchtrees that stood bone pale against the dark of the evergreens beyond. The edge of the lake a riprap of twisted stumps, gray and weathered, the windfall trees of a hurricane years past. The trees themselves had long been sawed for firewood and carried away. (11)

The memory is poignant. The nostalgia and the pain of loss are so profound that it makes all of the little details cherished pieces of a broader story of the self. The details of the memory include objects that seem representative of that time, his uncle, and the place—they are of a piece. Each element fits together into a quiet, profound memory of acceptance, belonging, and normalcy suspended and supported by water. Water reflects the uncle and the man while holding them—suspended in and across time (during the hurricane, wood gathering, and on the road). It is a

place for nostalgia and memories—emotive and formative. It is also one of the moments in the man’s past that points to harmonious relations with the more-than-human world. Gathering windfall trees is distinct from forestry. Here, water amplifies the complicated process of becoming in relation to community and place, and in terms of the moral landscape that the man is left to navigate. In his life before the road, the man made different commitments to the environment, whereas on the road, the connection with the otherness of the elements is complicated by the cumulative death of everything.

Another important aspect of his memory of “the day to shape days upon” is what appears normal for the man and, in contrast, for the boy. The boy is a small child in a shattered world. His sense of normalcy is utterly distinct from that of the man. Water is not nostalgic for the boy (though most of the boy’s important, transformative moments are watery). The man can share stories with the boy but the “tales... were suspect. [The man] could not construct for the child’s pleasure the world he’d lost without constructing the loss as well” (129-30). Some of the most beautiful aspects of that day would have been ordinary: “A dead perch lolling belly up in the clear water. Yellow leaves... the warm painted boards... the anchor... a lard can poured with concrete with an eyebolt in the center” (11). Each of these things does not amount to much on its own, but in the context in which it is recalled, it is the equivalent of evoking another world entirely: fish, yellow leaves, warmth, kin. This memory is enveloped by water that suspends that moment in time, frames it, and pulls it into the present through its presence, offering insight into the simple nature of the world before the road and who the man was with his family, to his uncle in particular, and in relation to place. “The day to shape days upon” is an elegy for a lost world.

The return across the lake at twilight is not a cause for concern in the way it is on the road, as “lights [were] coming on along the shore. A radio somewhere” (12). It is a further

expression of a bygone world, an enveloping experience of community and connection steeped in watery simplicity and complicity. This memory is of “the perfect day of his childhood” (12), and in the telling, similar stories from a reader’s life may well arise alongside it, particularly if one’s defining memories are inherently watery. Gathering firewood with his uncle is a memory that helps the man to carry the fire on the road. It shapes him in profound and unexpected ways. It may well have been that day with his uncle that sent him toward the ocean seeking refuge when they set out on the road.

People are informed by their kinship and place well beyond the human and beyond a town or city. Kinship extends to the elemental. Water shapes the man’s mind and his experience of every place from childhood forward. The consistent barrage of environmental information and the calm, peaceful quiet can be easily juxtaposed with the absence of fall trees, the absence of peace, the absence of community, and the absence of benevolent or neutral water. His memory of his uncle rowing back across the water to a shoreline dotted with lights where a radio station plays sits in stark contrast with the danger that a light in the darkness represents in their current context—these are different types of fire. On the road, he wakes and...

it was still dark but the rain had stopped. A smoky light out there in the valley. He rose and walked out along the ridge. A haze of fire that stretched for miles. He squatted and watched it. He could smell the smoke. He wet his finger and held it to the wind. When he rose and turned to go back the tarp was lit from within where the boy had wakened. Sited there in the darkness the frail blue shape of it looked like the pitch of some last venture at the edge of the world. Something all but unaccountable.

And so it was. (McCarthy 41)

Fire, on the road, means different things. Light in the man's childhood meant safety, guidance, community, and home, but on the road, fires are lit by blood cults, lightning strikes, or the flickering flame in the saturated wood that keeps the man and the boy alive. By conjuring the perfect day of his childhood, the man carries forward some of the key aspects of this remembrance: the practicalities, the community, and the place. At the same time, he also conjures the profound distance between his lived experience and the lived experience of the boy. In their current situation, every aspect of "the day to shape days upon" and every material item included in the list of forms would exist in a completely altered context with an entirely different meaning. Yet, water pulls aspects of the past into the present, allowing the man to carry on and care for the boy when it appears all hope is lost. It is possible that the man gives the boy a day to shape days upon at the waterfall, pulling the past into the present and sharing a piece of the previous world with his son.

The boy and the man often find themselves discussing the possibility of life existing somewhere else. The boy is always hoping for a story that offers another world, something beyond what is, and though the man is quite sure that there is nothing left, he holds onto faint hope that the coast will offer some respite in the form of a community other than that of the blood cults and marauding cannibals. The man recalls a time when things were different, when life was teeming in the air and water:

In that long ago somewhere very near this place he'd watched a falcon
fall down the long blue wall of the mountain and break with the keel of its
breastbone the midmost from a flight of cranes and take it to the river
below all gangly and wrecked and trailing its loose and blowsy plumage in
the still autumn air. (McCarthy 17)

This memory and that of the man and his uncle take place in autumn, when the moment and the memory of it are always already unfolding together, bound in the suspended quality of light and the distinct density of water. Among all of the memories that the man could select, it is that of a beautiful, disjointed death that compels him. A falcon soaring into a sedge of cranes and plucking one from its midst is the memory of choice: it highlights the fragility of their existence and provides a memory for juxtaposing this place current and past. It also portrays the beauty and allure of death. The story also presents a swift death and trails off before the falcon devours the body of the crane. A swift, beautiful end in autumn is compelling. The man's version of elsewhere is a poignant image of a beautiful, disjointed death raining down from the air and returning to the water, in and of the past.

The man sifts the world through his past. Looking out at the road, he sees “the fireblackened boulders like the shapes of bears on the starkly wooded slopes” (McCarthy 25): the world as it is and the world as it was. When he looks into the swirling water below, he thinks back to when “he'd watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath” (25), seeing their bodies “reflecting back the sun deep in the darkness like a flash of knives in a cave” (35). When the boy asks about crows and birds more generally, the man thinks about the early years of living on the road when life began its slow decline, and he calls to mind the cacophony of migratory birds above (45). All of these memories bring the living forms only so far into the present. Each reminiscence ends with the memory being punctured by the absence of birds, fish, and trees in the present. When he looks to the sky, it is “out of old habit but there [is] nothing to see” (87); nonetheless, it is the sky that he looks to all the same. It is through memories, stories, and dreams that he breaks up the crushing monotony, vigilance, and grief of their current existence. It is ultimately this same gesture that infuses the

end of the narrative with some fragment of hope as well. When the stranger the boy meets at the shore looks to the sky, we can surmise (or at least hope) that he is “one of the good guys.” This gesture is a way of carrying the past into the present, of signalling, at least in part, a counterclaim to the stranger’s previous allegiances (as a former member of a blood cult). This is one of the ways that they carry the fire. As Nels Christensen points out: “By turning his face to the sky, the stranger allies himself with the ‘old habits’ of the boy’s father.... The description of the stranger facing the sky... emphatically mimics the man's own gesture” (201). As Christensen further notes, “humans have lost the ability to read the weather signs, not because they necessarily no longer have the will or skills to do so, but because the weather no longer speaks its old language” (193). The weather, water and air together, no longer uses the same signifying system, which is mirrored in the collapse of social and linguistic structures amongst the people on the road. When the man looks to the sky, it is about turning his face to the past and willing aspects of it into the present through ingrained behaviour, exhibiting bodily memory, as opposed to gathering information relevant to their circumstances. Weather minding is, in ways, about tracing water’s influence and movement in and on the air.

Another insightful memory that the man pulls forward is of being amongst “rough men” burning snakes (McCarthy 159). This memory sits in contrast to the memory of the man and his uncle. These two memories together encompass the struggle that the man faces on the road. They suggest the struggle for morality and community, survival and what it means to carry the fire, and what it was like to be the boy’s age. He notes that evil and its image are quite distant from each other and that pursuing the image of evil creates unnecessary and unfortunate suffering. The man recalls “standing at the edge of a winter field among rough men” (McCarthy 159). He was around the boy’s age, and he stood watching while “they opened up the rocky hillside...

[exposing] a great bolus of serpents.... gathered there for a common warmth” (159). The experience is of another world. On the road, evil is not something you have to symbolize—evil is the rule. Survival and morality are in a constant battle because the man and the boy choose to carry the fire.

The boy’s experience of the world is distant from what the man’s was at his age, yet there are aspects of their respective experiences that are similar. The elemental influences are strangely consistent: “cold hard light,” a burning hillside, and the silent struggles and deaths of numerous animals (McCarthy 159). The man recounts that the men burned the snakes alive, “having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be” (159). The similarities between the boy and the man are carved out here. They are both compassionate and caring towards others. The man, as a child, felt disturbed by the behaviour of the men torturing and killing the snakes, in much the same way that the boy is disturbed when they do not immediately share food with the man struck by lightning on the road (42-43). The bare landscape and winter’s sparseness suggest an aerial influence once again, where death and the sunset (or lack thereof) are linked: “they disbanded in silence in the winter dusk each with his own thoughts to go home to their suppers” (159). The mundane nature of dealing with “images of evil as they conceived it to be” is amplified by the final detail of the memory, where the men set out for their supper (159). No matter what happens on the road, the daily goals remain the same: carry the fire, eat, sleep, avoid cannibals, survive, and remain as morally upright as possible while being adrift in the wilderness. Unlike wilderness narratives in which a human sets out to acquire moral clarity, the harm to the landscape creates a context that does not allow for this kind of resolution. The grey of the landscape is internalized as moral ambiguity. The man is trying to find his way

forward in a world of rough men without becoming one himself. The struggle is something that the man carries from his childhood and passes on to his son.

While the man is on a complex Charon's journey, the boy swims in the currents of the world. The boy desires an elsewhere; he wants to see birds in the sky, but he focuses on not eating other humans and playing otherworldly music while offering their scarce and hard-won food to strangers. He is of this world and out of step with its inhabitants (who are all from elsewhere, the past). It is the man's dream about prescient aliens that helps him to understand the boy (129). The man realizes "that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect" (129). Each of them is alien to the other. The boy is of the world and water. He is one of the few who is not a refugee in this world—he just is. All others are aliens swimming in a damaged atmosphere that was not meant for them. The man's main means of survival in this dead and dying world is to access dreams that help him to see the invisible truths and influences around him and to temporarily escape the horrifying present. On the road, dreams and dreaming seem like magic conjured through the hydrous environment and resting places near water. The man frequently conjures the dead as well, and water is where these vivid ghosts are cached.

When the man and the boy visit the man's childhood home, the space is permeated with everyday memories that seem distant on the road. The house is being slowly claimed by water, while the man is claimed by his hydrous imagination and the alien nature of his former life via the stories unfolding materially in his childhood home. The man tells the boy that "on cold winter nights when the electricity was out in a storm we would sit at the fire here, me and my sisters, doing our homework" (McCarthy 22). That phrase alone would be alien to the boy, but as the boy watches him move through the house, he senses "shapes claiming him he could not see"

(22). Similarly, the house is being pulled back into the past by the elemental influences at work on its decay. The man and boy move through the house, finding “floors buckled from the rainwater... small cones of damp plaster... wooden lathes of the ceiling exposed” and “raw cold daylight” falling “through from the roof” (23). A visit to the family home would not usually be like this—it may be joyful or grim, depending on its former occupants, but taking his child on an entropic journey into an alien past is not what the father would have likely wished for. However, these are the shapes and memories that he has to connect one world to the next.

The final example showing the man and boy’s disparate worlds is encapsulated in the visit to the decaying train. The man “made train noises and diesel horn noises but he wasn’t sure what these might mean to the boy” (McCarthy 152). Simple things like “homework” or an old train and its sounds further show the differences between their worlds. As the man notes, “if they saw different worlds what they knew was the same. That the train would sit there slowly decomposing for all eternity and that no train would ever run again” (152). The train gives way under the steady pressure of the rain, and it speaks to the removal of human agency in an environment where air and water have been so damaged that life has predominantly ceased to exist. The stories re-write the central narrative as elemental.

Memories and stories are the sole inheritance and protection that the man has to offer as the boy faces an ominous future. When the man recalls “the day to shape days upon,” it is both an act of remembrance of who he was and whom he could have anticipated becoming, but it is also a requiem for everything they have lost and the absent future his son cannot mourn. It is a dispossession of a human inheritance that could have connected the boy to the human and more-than-human communities in a world informed by more than fear and the likelihood of a loathsome future, and it is conveyed on and near the water. The memories that the man draws on

often concern what it means to carry the fire. He creates a space for these memories in the midst of such a morbid existence because it is the last refuge he can offer his son, and it is all the more alien for the comforts that these memories suggest. The man is creating a world of water and words in a collapsing ecosystem and lexicon. He is adding the pieces of his life that are worthy of salvaging to the boy's arsenal of stories in the hope that it will keep him alive and able to carry the fire when the man is gone. Stories are an inheritance and a source of strength. The man's memories are suffused with hydrous influence and the complexities of relationships in a world that no longer honours what it is to be human. The boy is given an insurmountable task, and yet the man has no choice but to give him these stories to help carry him along to the ocean and beyond.

The man tries to find a way forward for himself and the boy without compromising their commitment to carrying the fire. The man carries the two memories from his childhood (gathering fallen wood with his uncle and the burning snakes in the winter hillside) into his daily life on the road. They present two significant and shaping moments from the man's life. How does he remain morally upright when everything around him is falling apart? How will he keep his son alive without becoming truly evil himself? On the road, evil is everywhere. It becomes the background in a way that the environment could but does not.

It is through memories and stories that the man constructs the distance between his reality and that of the boy. The boy knows that he could never really understand the world his father left behind, and the man is his only link to the past. It is his relationship with his father that helps him move in the world following his father's passing. While the former world is conjured through the cyclical nature of life on the road and the stories that the father shares, an alternative is ever-present. The boy does not experience nostalgia except when he considers being with his mother,

and this is a point of commonality between the man and the boy's respective imaginations. One version of elsewhere that they each embrace in their own way is non-being. The man's version involves a swift death and dissolving into the currents of the watery world of memory (he recalls the falcon killing the crane). The boy just wants to disappear with his mother. The man sees the possibility of elsewhere on the coast, and the boy holds out hope for another type of world altogether, while he holds out hope for the possibility of a life on the coast, the child also contemplates outer space and being dead with his mother. As noted previously, *The Road* is about the movement towards water following a cataclysmic event. The boy and the man use water as a means to connect to the world before and after the event. Water becomes a source for emotional connection, for sharing experiences, for memories, and for loss. Water carries all of these things, along with hope. The formlessness of water echoes the formlessness of the new world, and the man and the boy find comfort in it. Water's formlessness and connection to collapsing language is another singularity among the human-hydrous entanglements in this novel.

Hope and sacredness are entangled on the road. There are several singularities in the novel that suggest that the boy is a sacred being. The boy is a hydrous figure, and he is the primary source for hope. In the devastated world of *The Road*, the boy can imagine an elsewhere (even if it is interplanetary), he resurrects the joy embodied in childhood (no matter how grim), and he creates music. The boy's embrace of the elements (air and water) and his awareness of carrying the fire imbue him with precisely the sort of transformative power that Bachelard speaks to when he untangles dynamic imagination. Being under-voiced is another aspect of hydrous otherness. The boy has the words his father gives him, and perhaps that is always the way things are, but on the road, it is more complex. He is entering a fractured symbolic system. While

symbolic language orders a social world and provides a means of interacting with community, what does it do here? A great deal has been made of the collapse of language, but what is the purpose of the language that is inherited if it is not a means of extending the past into an unforeseeable future? The man imagines that his forebears are watching and see him pass on what he can via story. “I think maybe they are watching... They are watching for a thing that even death cannot undo and if they do not see it they will turn away from us and they will not come back” (McCarthy 177). Being abandoned by one’s ancestors would be bleak indeed, especially in post-apocalyptic times. The boy carries the fire. He speaks the words he has to form the world, and the world, in many ways, is his father.

Chapter 4: *Flight Behaviour*: Flood. Flight. Fire.

In *Flight Behaviour*, domesticity, poverty, and the monarch butterfly's potential extinction are centrally figured. The novel follows the life of Dellarobia Turnbow over the course of several months and explores the intersection of climate, class, gender, and, I will argue, water's elemental influence. Dellarobia's life as an impoverished, undereducated, intelligent homemaker takes an abrupt turn upon encountering a kaleidoscope of butterflies that have unexpectedly come to winter on Turnbow mountain. With the butterflies come existential reckonings and possibilities that were previously out of reach. New opportunities arise specifically through the arrival of lepidopterologist Dr. Ovid Byron, which begins Dellarobia's process of transformation via access to education as well as employment.

Throughout the novel, when other characters turn to God to make sense of the world, Dellarobia thinks with a different set of equipment that includes the weather, memories of lost loved ones, and watery narratives that shape the world in monstrous forms. *Flight Behaviour* is, arguably, a novel that is as much about personal trauma and response as it is about the trauma visited upon the monarch butterfly population and the less than ideal circumstances they must survive in. Water figures frequently in moments when trauma is remembered and also acts as an external trigger of memory (much like in *The Road*). As Bachelard suggests, "the same memory flows from all fountains" (8), which I interpret as: water is the elemental other we return to in order to recall the self across time, and water collects memory and experience. In this chapter, I examine water's influence on perception, memory, voice, and event. Drawing on Bachelard's work on material imagination, Dolar's exploration of voice, and Agamben's conception of singularities and paradigms, I explore the human-elemental entanglements happening in the landscape of slow violence exerted on people, place, and monarch butterflies in *Flight*

Behaviour.

Dellarobia frequently turns to the elemental to process her reality (emotions, thoughts, and experiences), and she does this by placing water at the centre of her perceptual framework through analogies, metaphors, and singularities that highlight water's influence on her perception in uncommon ways. As Bachelard suggests, "the individual is not the sum of his common impressions but of his unusual ones. Thus, familiar mysteries are created in us which are expressed in rare symbols" (7). Dellarobia's elemental entanglements primarily involve water, as is evidenced in her verbal expressions, thoughts, and impressions, as well as the images, analogies, and metaphors she accesses. Most pages in the novel mention water, in some form, at least once. Water is, according to Bachelard, a place of memory (8, 116), and in *Flight Behaviour* it is an element of return, trauma, and becoming. Each time Dellarobia arrives at the butterflies on the mountain, she changes through contact with and in relation to the species, and the shifting elemental influence of water acts as a choreographic field of becoming and erasure at once. Water holds memory and is a place of return and emergence. By following the butterflies and tracing their complex systems, Dellarobia sheds some of her previous self (ideas and expectations), gaining strength through becoming in the midst of adversity.

Bachelard posits that dreams precede "contemplation. Before becoming a conscious sight, every landscape is an oneiric experience" (WD 4). For Dellarobia, this is what unfolds when she first encounters the monarch butterflies. Water's elemental influence, grounded in localized experience, coupled with the unprecedented arrival of the butterflies and their minute and tenuous existence, creates a scale effect that is productive for approaching climate crisis narratives and moving from the local to the global (Bartosch 10). The scale effect potentially supports the extrapolation of large-scale collapse from small-scale examples, as the reader is

given a different means through which to engage with the impact of climate chaos and situate the human within it. Roman Bartosch suggests that the scale effect is a rhetorical wedge that can be used to enter into a meaningful reading of climate chaos and its real-world unfolding. Whereas *The Road* was an exercise in vast, apocalyptic emptiness, *Flight Behaviour* situates climate chaos and elemental influence within the current moment and domestic experience. Here, the monarch butterfly's collapse is an important reminder that there is no escape plan, and, as Ghosh aptly notes in his work *The Great Derangement*, this is exactly what contemporary climate fiction must strive to do—situate the catastrophe in the here and now and do the imaginative work of helping the reader engage with climate realities from a variety of perspectives.

In *Flight Behaviour*, Dellarobia is on a course of self-discovery similar to Jack's transformation in *White Noise* and the experience of the man and the boy in *The Road*. In each of these novels, the elements are centralized, entering the centre of the story in meaningful ways. Watching the beginning of the end of things from the point of view of a rural, Tennessean, under-educated, poverty-stricken mother contributes a novel perspective to the elemental entanglements explored in this thesis. It is a point of view and privileging that several critics have suggested is a necessary addition to climate change narratives and environmental justice movements.²⁸ Climate crisis rhetoric tends to be wielded by privileged individuals and groups, yet, as of now, climate chaos disproportionately impacts the poor. As Bartosch notes, linking “‘large-scale’ problems with the plight and perceptive frames of the rural disenfranchised” is one of the novel's most productive choices (10). Looking at this narrative through EFI, with

²⁸ See Padilla Carroll's work on new domesticity, Kristin Jacobson's examination of radical homemaking, Heather Houser's work on knowledge and the commons, as well as Alexandra Nikoleris, Johannes Stipple, and Paul Tenngart's argument for the importance of relatable protagonists in terms of creating close and personal readings of climate futures.

particular attention given to the influence of water, extends the conversation around what it means to be human and how our elemental entanglements might move us closer to self and planetary preservation. Dellarobia moves through the world in a way that can be deeply disorienting to readers unfamiliar with water's influence, trauma, or the social experience of the rural disenfranchised. Water is frequently the elemental other that Dellarobia uses to frame reality, and it is her connection with water that places it at the centre of the text. Dellarobia is an unanticipated, underrepresented, underestimated, and frequently unvoiced individual who readers may relate to as their own narratives around climate change evolve.

Seeing Scarlet: Impossible Fires and Submerged Monsters

The transformation that Dellarobia undertakes in response to the monarch colony in her backyard is far greater than Jack's response to chemical fallout and infidelity in *White Noise* (though there are similarities) and has more in common with the man in *The Road*'s presumed transformation due to living through the end of the world. In *White Noise*, the focus is on the protagonist's survival, but in *The Road* and *Flight Behaviour*, survival is primarily about children, economics, and planetary destruction. Dellarobia has three children, two of whom are living, and she has brought them into a world where fragile things are dying. She draws a connection between the plight of the butterflies, her own plight, and that of her children (Kingsolver 157). By pushing beyond all of the social structures that she was previously hemmed in by, she makes space for change (intellectual, social, physical, and environmental) as a way to access broader possibilities for her own humanity. Her transformation is filtered through water's influence on her imagination and memories, and the gradual falling away of the restrictions that have impacted her life choices.

Initially, Dellarobia encounters the monarchs on the mountain as holy fire but without fire's primary characteristics (Kingsolver 11). She perceives the butterflies in front of her, but she cannot see them. She does not have a framework (or glasses, for that matter) that allows her to accurately identify what is there (11). The monarch butterflies are so far outside of her life experience that she draws on religious ideas, language, and imagery to process what appears to be supernatural (13-14). Dellarobia sees what she has been taught to see in the unexpected, much like Jack's reliance on mythology in *White Noise*. In *Flight Behaviour*, coping with the unexpected warrants drawing on the divine; in this case, believing that she is seeing a burning bush (13-14). The monarchs are viewed through an attempt at perceiving the divine, at entering a state of chosenness that Dellarobia ultimately rejects in the context of Biblical becoming. Yet, the layers of Biblical referencing appear to be presented in order to be dismantled in the complicated context of resisting Biblical narratives in favour of a direct connection with the elements. The butterflies are, in fact, harbingers of climate catastrophe, planetary decline, and failing systems. This is ultimately the narrative that Dellarobia embraces and that ends up setting her free of Feathertown, allowing her to become an environmentally aware, morally-engaged scientist.²⁹ What makes this encounter so striking is Dellarobia's ultimate resistance to taking up a morality that is not of her choosing and her committing to a path of uncertainty and scientific inquiry.

For Dellarobia, the world of the unexplainable and ineffable is the world of gods (Kingsolver 11) and monsters (5). Dellarobia's monsters are watery, deathly, murky forms of memory and imagination that populate her experience while fostering anxieties about the future. She turns her mind to the divine to see the butterflies because it is the prescribed perceptual

²⁹ The burning bush of the Bible echos in the *burning* forest of monarchs.

equipment of her community, and articulating the elemental unfolding of watery fires in the air requires something outside the self (not unlike Jack's turn toward mythology in *White Noise* or the man's desire to share stories about heroes in *The Road*). As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, in uncommon, elementally influenced situations, narratives must be equal to the disruption of everyday life, and dealing with the elemental in any direct way requires the distancing effect of extraordinary stories. In Feathertown, Tennessee, where Dellarobia lives, religion is an education that has been offered freely to the poor, and the outsized series of narratives it offers helps people to navigate the world. However, for Dellarobia, these narratives don't hold honest weight (14). When she comes across the windfall tree on her way up Turnbow mountain, she sees "the corpse of a fallen monster" (5) rotted at the roots by a phenomenal amount of rain. Looking at the tree and seeing a saturated monster whose hold on the earth has come undone is an example of her hydrously influenced imagination. She sees the course of water where her community may well situate the hand of God. As Morton notes in *Elemental Materialism*, the elements occupy that kind of space: "magic... or some kind of occasionalism in which a third thing (such as a god) mediates between one thing and another thing—is what the agency of the elemental can mean" (280). That Dellarobia, in a deeply religious community, turns to water, speaks to her status as a human-elemental being, but also about the depth of her difference. While her community sees god as celestial, Dellarobia sees god as still and watery (Kingsolver 351).

The perceptual, narrative framework that Dellarobia has at hand is filtered through water: monsters, depth, and memory. She also notes the actual circumstances of the tree's demise, indicating that "after so much rain upon rain this was happening all over the county.... The ground took water until it was nothing but soft sponge, and the trees fell out of it" (Kingsolver

5). On their own, these articulations of the reality of the fallen tree mean very little, but there are a few things happening here that are insightful. The first is that Dellarobia exhibits a local knowledge of environmental relationships based on observation, making her attuned to the more-than-human community of Feathertown in ways that are unique and important. Second, an overabundance of rain does not usually create a fitting space for monsters, but when the common worldview is dominated by a vapid talk radio host, Johnny Midgeon; a no-heller, Pastor Bobby; and Hester Turnbow, who uses the Bible as a weapon, it is preferable to dwell at the periphery of perception and embrace the soft sponginess of unstable ground, witchiness, gods, monsters, and water. Finally, monsters generally appear in order to be overcome, but when Dellarobia recognizes the agency of water, the question becomes whose or what's quest is unfolding, and the answer is perhaps that a hydrous human-elemental entanglement lies at the heart of this narrative. Importantly, there is the reality of the rain and a certain kind of death that resonates with hydrously influenced others (Bachelard 46). For Dellarobia, her losses are many, but the only other monster in the text is her stillborn child, whom she never got to hold or see: "a monster.... [with] strange fine hair all over its body that was red like hers" (10).³⁰ Her child is adrift in memory, and water and memory are entwined. Seeing things that have let go of life brings Dellarobia back to her lost child. In suggesting the monstrous nature of the tree, bloated and fallen, Dellarobia is speaking to "familiar mysteries... expressed in rare symbols" (Bachelard 7). Embracing these fallen monsters and situating the self alongside them is part of Dellarobia's becoming in relation to water and the environment more broadly. There is an elision

³⁰ Like many things in the novel, this experience is also tied to the butterflies, which represent the souls of children to Josephine and her community in Mexico. This loss is also connected to water and the memories of lost loved ones who might be all together somewhere caring for her child in ways that Dellarobia could not.

of tree and human, located on unsteady and saturated ground, that reinforces the tenuousness of her purchase on the present, past, and future, as well as the shakiness of the ground beneath her feet.

Dellarobia's initial experience with the butterflies is a kind of reckoning. She sees the butterflies as fire, her hair as fiery, and herself as the unworthy mother of a lost child. Even in the presence of what appears to be fire, she follows water's trace. Dellarobia bears similarities to other watery heroines, including her mother-in-law, named Hester, and Hester Prynne. The similarities between these three characters are notable, and similarities also exist between Feathertown's ideological structure and the smallness of Hester Prynne's community in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Each woman is pushed to the periphery by their sexuality, their abject and watery nature, and the inherent threat this powerful combination poses to the androcentric communities they inhabit. Hester Prynne resides just below the surface readings of Dellarobia and Hester Turnbow, and her watery, abject nature is similar to that of Hester and Dellarobia. Additionally, the contempt for women in *Flight Behaviour* is mainly about fearing their reproductive power, sexuality, and persuasive potential. The connection between being punished for giving life (or intending to) is tied to the earth-destroying fantasies that flourish in Feathertown and which underpin the economics of adultery and patriarchy in both novels (*The Scarlet Letter* and *Flight Behaviour*).

In *Flight Behaviour*, memory's watery nature tethers associations to material things and words in ways that are unexpected and resonant, like the school bus that becomes an unlikely Charon symbol (89). The school bus bridges life and death on the unsteady ground the Turnbow family inhabits. It provides an escape: "a golden cruise ship in its broad, square majesty... [rescuing Dellarobia from a] desert island" (89). In addition to the unusual entanglements with

water in the text, it is hinted at several times throughout the novel that in Feathertown, Tennessee, it is still possible to view Dellarobia's red hair, sharp mind, and pre-term birth of her first child as witchy. The historical and mythical elision of women and otherness, water, and witchcraft is longstanding (within the text and beyond). In *Flight Behaviour*, water, monstrosity, abject bodies, and the feminine are about lateral power, fecundity, fertility, voice, and imagination. Dellarobia, with her odd name, intelligence, and impoverished circumstances, cobbles together a world that makes sense in the face of monstrous and unexplainable loss (loss of hopes, dreams, parents, and child). The series of deaths (father, mother, stillborn child) is slippery in terms of how they all mingle and connect with Dellarobia's experiences of weather and everyday life. Her connection to these deaths further renders her an outsider in the community, amplifying her suspect and uncomfortable interstitial status (3). Dellarobia's memories of her father, her mother, and her stillborn child are all tied to watery imagery and experience.

Watery influence flows through Dellarobia's experiences as frequently as changes in the weather. She comes upon the butterflies unable to really see or take them in, recognizing the butterflies, the land, and the water saturating it as "strange [kinds] of entangling[s]" between herself, her actions, and her perception of "nonhuman actor[s] or active presence[s]," where she is left to engage "in a decidedly unequal *agon*" (Buell 264-65). Dellarobia's struggle is familiar. In much the same way that Jack Gladney, in *White Noise*, comes to a deeper understanding of air, and the man in *The Road* follows his past by mapping a path towards water, death, and community, Dellarobia awakens to the instability of the climate through the monarch butterflies (viewed as a lake of fire). In turning her attention to the instability of the environment, she also takes the outside and processes her internal world through this new becoming. She explores her

broken matriarchal line, local knowledge, and kin through Hester, grafting her children to a viable branch of the family tree. Together, these factors offer far greater motivation for personal change and action than the instability in her marriage, which is the earliest driver of her actions in the narrative, where her reforging of a matriarchal line and push to gain an education mark her resistance to and acknowledgement of patriarchal power and poverty. All of this evolves out of contact with and curiosity about the monarch butterflies and what they bring into her life. Their presence shapes her in unexpected ways. With a helping hand from another outsider (Dr. Ovid Byron), Dellarobia gains a scientific perspective that would be unattainable in Feathertown without the unforeseen arrival of the butterflies, a perspective that is essential for her life beyond it.

Dellarobia's first encounter with the butterflies is remarkable and surreal. She has purposefully left her glasses at home and, as such, she is without the one science-sourced filter in her life that would grant her some clarity: "without her glasses it took some doing to get a bead on the thing" (Kingsolver 11). The "out-of-place brashness" of the orange butterfly "on a rainy day," "drifting in the blank air above the folded terrain," is characterized by wonder and awe coupled with some underlying insights about the nature of the topography, flora, and fauna in that area (11). Things that are out of place and striking are often the starting point for a romantic version of the sublime that transforms the viewer. Here, the butterflies shift and become what Dellarobia, devoid of faith, perceives as holy fire: "flame now appeared to lift from individual treetops in showers of orange sparks, exploding the way a pine log does in a campfire when it's poked... with no comprehension, she watched" (14). This moment marks the beginning of a gradual transformation. It is not that Dellarobia is incapable of understanding the world around her, it is that the world she lives in does not provide her with the experience or knowledge that

she needs to process this reality: “everything that came next was nonsensical” (9). Dellarobia “watched the flake of bright color waver up the hollow” (11), and as she came around to the “open side of the slope... she slammed on her brakes; here something was wrong. Or just strange” (13). Dellarobia does not jump immediately to the sublime experience of super-sensory transformation. She skips it.

Dellarobia pauses to question the scene before her on the mountain, and her resistance to sublime transformation, in favour, instead, of slow awakening, is generative and critical to her ability to become scientifically engaged in the world and to resist the narratives of power and control that structure her community. Here, I am suggesting that while the moment could easily supersede the sensory process of any perceiver, while Dellarobia has the narrative of the burning bush near-at-hand, while the moment is a critical moral one, she resists a contextually natural resolution and attempts to process this moment through a systemic, sensory assessment. It is, nonetheless, entangled with all of the other possibilities of that moment, but she suspends these possibilities and reckons with herself on an ongoing basis to make space for a different kind of miracle. It is partially because of her watery influences that she resists that sublime movement beyond the moment. She maintains her connection with the world near to hand. Resisting transcendence and teetering on the edge of transformation, her engagement with the more-than-human is an act of becoming. Dellarobia looks out over the valley. What she sees is “unreal,” and, importantly, “puzzling” (13), suggesting that while she initially made space for the miraculous influence of a patriarchal god’s hand intervening in her life choices, she eases into the profoundness of the experience as it is while embracing the fragile miracle of displaced life, with which she is quite familiar.

The entire mountainside forest was loaded with “bristly things,” “droopy and bulbous,” “hazy,” “speckled and scaly” (Kingsolver 13). Dellarobia’s first glance offers a vision of monstrous, watery, drowned forms: “nearly all the forest she could see from here, from valley to ridge, looked altered and pale, the beige of dead leaves,” but “that wasn’t foliage” (13). Dellarobia grasps the abundance of forms before her and translates it into something thinkable—something watery. Dellarobia sees:

Brightness of a new intensity [moving] up the valley in a rippling wave, like the disturbed surface of a lake. Every bough glowed with an orange blaze. “Jesus God,” she said again. No words came to her that seemed sane. Trees turned to fire, a burning bush. Moses came to mind.

(Kingsolver 13-14)

She sees fire and water together, and that is what dynamic imagination looks like. She traces the fecundity of the trees drooping with “speckled and scaly” (watery) things and then envisions the rippling wave, the burning bush, and Moses among the reeds. Her mind pieces together a cold fire, and she does this through her kinship with water.

On her way up the mountain, Dellarobia is already thinking about the consequences of her potential actions. She sees the flames around her, drawn from reality but constructed in the mind: “The sparks spiralled upward in swirls like funnel clouds. Twisters of brightness against gray sky... lifted high and sailed out undirected above the dark forest” (14). In this saturated forest, she is starting to note the quality of the air and the swirling patterns of sparks (i.e., butterflies). She does not hear the sounds of a forest fire—“if that’s what it was, [it] would roar”—nor does she smell the smoke (14). The forest, in her estimation, is far too wet to burn, and “the air above remained cold and clear” (14). She approaches this vision with curiosity. To

process what she sees, she draws on her other senses, settling on a version of what is, in fact, in front of her—filtered through water, memories, monsters, gods, and local knowledge, not unlike how the man in *The Road* processes the present through memories of his past near water or how Jack turns to mythology and Atilla the Hun to deal with air's powerful influence during the ATE. The tendency to draw on miraculous narratives when encountering the elemental is one of the common findings of EFI across texts. Dellarobia's watery way of filtering the world is at an impasse. "She stopped breathing for a second and closed her eyes to listen, but heard nothing. Only a faint patter like rain on leaves" (14). She sees fire, as "her eyes when opened could only tell her, *Fire,*" and hears rain (14). It is, in fact, a damp fecundity assaulting her senses. "It was the same everywhere, every tree aglow" (14) and wet at once. She is filtering her experience through water's influence and her community's belief system.

Dellarobia is a fluid character transformed in profound ways over the course of the novel through elemental influence and becoming with the butterflies themselves: watery beings flying *pillar to post*, trying to survive with no escape plan. Dellarobia changes her vision of the world and ultimately herself and the course of her life by the novel's close. The suggestion is that shifting environments and unstable, saturated ground might mean the end for both her and the butterflies. Water's influence makes space for her to see the miraculous: "Unearthly beauty had appeared to her, a vision of glory to stop her in the road. For her alone these orange boughs lifted, these long shadows became a brightness rising. It looked like the inside of joy" (15). The trees are not burning, but the air is brought into focus: "a valley of lights, an ethereal wind" (16). This moment, much like the ATE for Jack in *White Noise*, or the moments at the waterfall and when finding the shipwrecked boat at the edge of the sea for the man in *The Road*, embrace the

human propensity to ascribe meaning. For Dellarobia, it “had to mean something” (16) when “*burning coals of fire [go] up and down among the living creatures*” (14).

When facing the expanse of the elemental and its varied entanglements and influences, meaning-making falls short and the individual will turn to myths (*WN*), heroes (*TR*), and religious imagery (*FB*) to gain purchase on the new, unsteady ground of becoming an aware elemental-human assemblage. The non-burning fire on the mountain amplifies the wind, “a small shift between cloud and sun altered the daylight” (13), “the mountain exploded with light” (14): these instances highlight water’s consistent presence in Dellarobia’s perceptions. For example, she traces “brightness of a new intensity [moving] up the valley in a rippling wave, like the disturbed surface of a lake” (14) or “a lake of fire, something far more fierce and wondrous than either of those elements alone” (17). Dellarobia describes the nature of dynamic imagination and the coming together of her watery elemental influences with fire and air. She witnesses “the impossible” (17). It is a starting point, indicating what might be done to hold space for the butterflies and for herself in a world that values neither. From this moment forward, “nothing had changed except every conscious minute and a strange fire in her dreams” (50).

Initially, Dellarobia sees the “burning trees” as though they were “put there to save her” (Kingsolver 17), but she does not really think God would “conjure signs and wonders” on her account (17). She does not see herself as special, and perhaps that is part of the point. In this way, she is much like the man in *The Road*. As Richard Walsh notes in his work on McCarthy, “in a landscape of loss... new biblical stories about those who are neither chosen nor special” open up new ways of dealing with apocalyptic experience (1), and this is as true of the man as it is of Dellarobia. Her presence and the message that she attempts to receive is contingent on her chance proximity to the butterflies and her internal elemental influence. She is already working

between a community vision of the world and a personal one that is at odds with her community, and this moment acts as a wedge between these two worlds, opening up new possibilities for the material influence of water. Dellarobia sees the moment on the mountain as being sparked by her “hellish obsession” and imagines that it “would require a burning bush” to stop her in that moment (Kingsolver 17), yet she questions if her significance would warrant that level of intervention. In order to make sense of the experience, Dellarobia tells herself that this was a moment of “fighting fire with fire” (17). Further, while religious influences, particularly in Kingsolver’s work, can be read as adding depth and greater insight, situating the elemental as an ambivalent and god-like influence directs the reading into a different type of generative discourse that centralizes elemental others and how the environment shapes the mind.

From the moment on the mountaintop forward, Dellarobia is unsettled. Unsettling seems to be a crucial part of human-elemental becomings, as is evident in *White Noise* and *The Road* as well. Her trip up the mountain was marked by watery forms, and even fire and air are filtered through water’s primary influence, as well as through watery religious references. Like Moses, delivered from the reeds and spoken to by fire, “she’d come home rattled and impatient with the pettiness of people’s everyday affairs” (22). Like Jack following the ATE in *White Noise*, Dellarobia “felt herself flung from complacency... walking away from that vale of fire feeling powerful and bereft” (23). Her shift in perspective is profound. She offers up the loss of her stillborn child for comparison when describing the change that occurred in her after witnessing the mountain on “fire”: “It was worse even than years ago when the stillborn baby sent her home with complicated injuries she could not mention” (23). Dellarobia adopts new perspectives to move within the androcentric, religious world of Feathertown, Tennessee, until she literally has to move on. When Dellarobia breaks with her current reality, it is with the help of imaginary

rivulets of water, which she uses to work through her failing marriage and to figure out how to move forward: “dividing the river of her desperation into rivulets until some of them seemed navigable” (385).

Voice, Grace, and Water

The periphery is where hydrously influenced others find their voice, as has been noted in previous chapters. In *Flight Behaviour*, voice is elementally influenced and it frequently acts as a break from the expected trajectory of a character or event. Voice in *Flight Behaviour* shares similarities with how voice works in *White Noise* and *The Road*: as a way for the human-elemental other to shift power lines, to become in relation to the elemental, and to move the elemental to the centre of the novel, such that its influence is notable. In *White Noise*, voice is primarily notable in terms of peripheral figures speaking back to the centre. In *The Road*, voice is influenced by water (as it is in *Flight Behaviour*). The man and the boy both access water’s extreme otherness and translate its influence into language, memory, music, and story. This section of the chapter explores voice in the saturated environment of Feathertown via Dellarobia’s attunement to water. *Flight Behaviour* explores elementally influenced otherness, a shifting locus of power, and individual agency alongside water’s influence on the narrative. The difference between elementally influenced voice in *Flight Behaviour* versus in *White Noise* and *The Road* lies in its various mediations of elemental otherness and how it offers the means to follow water’s path.

In *Flight Behaviour*, water is centralized through weather; Dellarobia’s emotions; memory; its impact on the land, flora, and fauna; and through the arrival of the monarch butterflies. In each of these examples, certain types of thinking and voice become important, but

in this exploration of voice, the focus will be on how the butterflies mediate water's influence and two key interactions with the butterflies that provide Dellarobia with access to unexpected power and potential. Dellarobia is *Flight Behaviour*'s watery heroine. She navigates the margins of Feathertown, family, education, poverty, and wealth. The role of voice, the feminine, and the elemental are bound to identity, perception, agency, and events (both domestic and global). Acknowledging environmental decline, beyond the uncommon weather, would require Dellarobia to engage with an entirely different worldview, which is heralded by the monarchs but which does not fully arrive until she begins to find her voice, much like Jack's experience during the ATE or the man's shift in perception pre- to post-apocalypse in *The Road*. In *Flight Behaviour*, the shift happens alongside a decentralization of androcentric power, fueled by Dellarobia's growing recognition of her own intelligence and Hester's local knowledge. As Bennett argues in *Vibrant Matter* and *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, it is enchantment with otherness—in this case, water—that can extend the self's ability to attend to the broader world in meaningful ways and, I argue, enter into a state of human-elemental assemblage.

The butterflies, while voiceless, speak in “complicated systems” of the collapsing environment, but they also provide Dellarobia with a point of access to power. By calling attention to the shifting environment and the new types of power that come into play in Feathertown's insular system, Dellarobia awakens to her own voice and potential. At the same time, the butterflies and their entanglements with Dellarobia in collective imaginings makes space for her to be heard and seen by others, albeit not in the way she might like.

When Dellarobia encounters the butterflies for the first time, she is rendered nearly speechless. When she sees the orange flames enveloping the mountainside, her language takes on an empty quality. It is in this space between being alive, witnessing the mountain on fire, and

being aware that lingering may result in an untimely end that closes the gap between living and dying, where the chorographic field of experience and language is central. This is much like Jack's incantatory language on his way to Willy Mink's to commit murder. Empty words are used as place holders for the unsettling of everyday experience and expectations. "'Jesus,' [Dellarobia] said" (Kingsolver 14). She put "her voice in the world because nothing else present made sense" (14). "No words came to her that seemed sane" (14), suggesting the extraordinary nature of the moment, where language cannot help but fall short. Her voice and her words trouble the surface but cannot plumb the depths of experience. Dellarobia interprets the monarchs as both fiery and watery. She sees "a lake of fire" (17). She draws on religious references to interpret the state of the mountain as fiery and watery at once. This further situates Dellarobia as hydrously influenced. When she speaks, it is to fill the space with sound, with a word that can hold the impression of reality in order for her to plumb the depths of that impression later. Dellarobia is transformed by the impression of a watery fire, and her voice acts as a rupture to signal the significance of the event without any real quantification thereof.

When Dellarobia returns to the mountain with the adult members of her family in tow, she "receives grace" (Kingsolver 57). This moment is precipitated by "shadows rolling like pebbles along the floor of a fast stream. The illusion of current knocked [Dellarobia] off balance" (Kingsolver 57). Dellarobia sees the moment as watery and warm: "a flood of fire, the warmth they had craved so long" (57). The surprise of the multitude of butterflies, her clear-sightedness in the face of the miracle combined with the impression of winged hydrous-beings, results in a breach of expectations and social circumstances:

She felt her breathing rupture again into laughter or sobbing in her chest, sharp, vocal exhalations she couldn't contain. The sounds coming out of

her veered toward craziness.... “Lord Almighty, the girl is receiving grace,”
said Hester, and Dellarobia could not contradict her. (57)

Dellarobia is moved by the wonder of the thing without reaching for narratives that are larger than life. The voice she finds in this moment is distinct from her first encounter with the butterflies, where her access to religious language was the only thing she could think of to process the phenomena before her. Here, her voice is all there is. It points to the overwhelming nature of the experience and to the limits of language in the face of something so phenomenal: a doubly mediated iteration of an elementally influenced self. Dellarobia is alive to the elemental influence of water through the roost of butterflies. She finds her voice and becomes a point of channeled elemental notice via their presence. During this second encounter with the butterflies, her voice is elevated and disruptive. She channels the miraculousness of the event beyond what everyday language is capable of describing and beyond the religious. It is the shock of the actual that floors Dellarobia. “A million times nothing weighed nothing” (53), and yet, the damp pressure of the flame-coloured butterflies pushes the trees to their breaking point.

As Dolar indicates, “what defines the voice as special among the infinite array of acoustic phenomena is its inner relationship with meaning” (34). Yet on the mountainside during her second arrival at the butterflies, meaning collapses and Dellarobia’s voice channels something larger than herself, exemplifying the speaking reed in this instance.³¹ When one is a hydrously influenced speaking reed, “voice is something which points toward meaning, it is as if there is an arrow in it which raises the expectation of meaning, the voice is an opening toward meaning” (Dolar 34). The opening towards meaning in this moment is simultaneously one that points

³¹ Here, I employ a term I use in previous chapters that draws on Bachelard’s language, where I position the elemental as being channeled through the voices of individuals with elementally influenced imaginations.

towards the saturated land and the potential for water to unmoor the earth, and one that points toward the startling revelation of the monarch roost. The monarch roost is itself a point of departure and disrupts channels of power at work in the family, the larger community, and the religious ordering of Feathertown. Dellarobia receiving grace means that new considerations are in order, and nearly as surprising to the family that “god” might speak through her (female, small, generally unworthy and unreligious) is the discovery of a new species’ arrival and evidence of climate chaos playing out on their mountainside.

The moment of grace becomes a turning point. From this point forward, things become destabilized and Dellarobia becomes a more centralized and notorious figure. While she is already an outsider, she also becomes the voice of the butterflies, which Feathertown’s residents are wary of but interested in. The butterflies also precipitate the arrival of Ovid Byron. Ovid Byron brings education, employment, money, scientific knowledge and perspective, and potential change into Dellarobia’s world. Like his namesake, Ovid is involved in the transformation or metamorphosis of those he encounters. Each of these elements supplies Dellarobia with new lines to tap into as she seeks power and depth. She is able to advance her education and start the journey towards being a scientist with Ovid Byron’s support and the butterflies’ presence. While Ovid Byron is not able to save the butterflies, he does offer Dellarobia a lifeline that allows her to eventually migrate from Feathertown and begin building a mental ecology (Guattari 36) so she can measure the world and weigh things out using a different language to quantify the miraculous and explore the elemental. So, while he may not be a saviour, he may be a prophetic figure, and he is certainly a guide. Typically, Dellarobia has seen the world through a series of watery memories, metaphors, and analogies, but now, she might dehydrate a butterfly to understand its complicated systems. She needs to read water in new ways

and experience it using different language. As Agamben notes, “the search for the voice in language, this is what is called thought,” and as Dolar notes in response, tracing the voice is “the search for what exceeds language and meaning” (29). Voice, when hydrously influenced, is often in the category of the ineffable. Dellarobia experiences voice through the elemental influence of water in the weather, memories, as filtered through the bodies and movement of the butterflies, and also through the mediated forms of the Internet and television news media. But her voice, her rendering of the world, is also about the tension between external realities and thinking and, in thinking, becoming. This is coupled with the complexity of elemental fluidity and aspects of the voice that escape the limits of thought.

Dellarobia’s voice is tinged with notoriety through the media storm that emerges from the interview she gives on the mountain, and at the same time she is once again rendered voiceless: a caesura. On the news and online, she is presented as an abject, sexualized body tied to the fecundity of the butterflies. Her watery impression of things situates her as a body in flux, and words flow from her without the level of circumspection required to survive mediation in the interview she gives. When she says in the interview that she was going to throw it all away, she drifts back to the first moment she encountered the butterflies on the mountain.

Dellarobia... could see the butterflies. Just like the first time, it felt like a dream to see that cold fire rising.... The end of the world, as good a guess as any. She slowly exhaled. “My life, I guess. I couldn’t live it anymore. I wanted out. So I came up here by myself, ready to throw everything away. And I saw this. This stopped me...” (Kingsolver 208-9)

Dellarobia does not stop to consider the tenor of her words or how they might be interpreted by the people who will ultimately see her interview. She is speaking to the moment and the memory

of her first experience, which was surreal enough to render any concerns about being misinterpreted secondary. Here, Dellarobia speaks her way into understanding the context of her current becoming, following her voice like the arrow pointing back to thought. She also traces a new hydrous being (the monarch butterfly) and perceives the past in the present through a different set of terms. Via the interview, more people will hear her than ever before, and yet the context of her becoming in relation to the butterflies makes her always already abject, spilling out to fill the unvoiced otherness of the butterflies' fecundity and the chaos it suggests. Her image and voice are mediated to shape a narrative that is salacious and vapid. She is robbed of voice and thought, in order to be used as a tool to give audiences what they are imagined to want. Her media interview and resulting meme is another way that Dellarobia's agency is occluded and her status as an abject watery body is exploited by porous boundaries (expressed in terms of sexuality, gender, language, and hydrous narratives).

The other media at work here is water. When Dellarobia speaks to the reporter, she speaks herself into the moment and into being, influenced by the butterflies and the immediate past, as well as the layers of loss and longing she moves through. She is becoming outside of the context of family and motherhood, entering a different extra-social construct. Dellarobia does not censure herself because the moment she is in and the moment when she first encountered the butterflies are entangled in watery, memory-laden ways. Her voice acts as the tether binding her past to her present. She speaks for a listener, but she also uses her voice to recall herself to herself, to make herself in this moment. It is a project of self-awakening insofar as she reaches towards a level just beneath the surface of being, where memory, time, water, and voice are all entangled. This process of skirting the strand of what is and what was, while also bridging and simultaneously creating worlds (for herself and others), is an act of becoming and erasure.

Dellarobia creates a world unto herself as she is seen and shaped and interpreted by the reporter and her audience. Once again, Dellarobia's voice is a bridge between the watery world of the mountainside and her own internal reality, and it is also a point of becoming and erasure, an arrow pointing back to thought from a subject who ought not to be thinking, according to her community. Dellarobia's voice is similar to Babette's voice in *White Noise*. Both of these characters are situated between the animal and the spiritual, making it difficult for them to be heard in a way that precipitates material influence and breaks through pre-existing ways of thinking and speaking in their respective contexts.

Another way in which Dellarobia is voiced is through the adoption of scientific discourse as a toolkit for navigating her world. She explores the limits of the butterflies and the limits of the self. When she talks to Hester about pollution, it involves a negotiation of what she now knows, what Hester might be willing to hear, and her own elemental inclinations. She bridges worlds (religious and scientific, poor and privileged, elemental and human). When she tries to share what she is learning in the lab with Hester, she has to float at the surface of her knowledge.

Dellarobia considered possible answers. There was no easy way to talk about the known world unraveling into fire and flood. She came up with a reliable word. "Pollution," she said. "You pollute the sky long enough, and it turns bad on you."

"Stands to reason," Hester said. (Kingsolver 337)

Working with Ovid and his team of young researchers, she considers a host of terms, ideas, and material equipment for navigating sensory and experiential engagements with the butterflies: "Taxonomy, evolution of migratory behavior, the effect of parasitic tachinid flies, the energetics of flight. Population dynamics, genetic drift" (122). This language and knowledge belong to

Ovid and his students, but to Dellarobia it is all new. He is bringing a new reality into focus via language and the drive to chart this new development in the butterflies' existence. Dellarobia develops a new voice, a new bridge over the ineffable aspects of the material world, to connect with her mother-in-law who has expert local knowledge of the environment. It is ultimately Hester whom Dellarobia turns to for local knowledge about anything that could be flowering in late February: "Hepatica and skunk cabbage and harbinger of spring and maybe cutler toothwort, was her astonishing answer" (312). While Dellarobia cannot adequately convey the information that they work with in the lab, she is better able to bridge her understanding of things and Hester's than the scientists can (and Hester's knowledge fills a gap in the scientists' expert knowledge). Each side needs Dellarobia to translate information across the various divides between them. Reflecting on this and the roles of voice and identity, Dellarobia says: "There were two worlds here, behaving as if their own was all that mattered. With such reluctance to converse, one with the other. Practically without a common language" (152). Dellarobia moves between worlds and speaks across these divisions. Being able to move between communities is another of Dellarobia's fluid, elemental traits, and it is something that also marks the man and the boy (both human-elemental assemblages) in *The Road*, while it is absent from *White Noise*, where the characters are directed and influenced by air.

Another under-voiced outsider elided with the butterflies in the community of Feathertown is Ovid Byron. He is brilliant, and if scientific knowledge was valued when it comes to climate chaos, he would be at the centre of conversations around the butterflies roosting in Feathertown (Kingsolver 229). However, he is overlooked in favour of the media's desire to exploit Dellarobia's image and connection to the butterflies (214). Ovid Byron's name is also a means of situating a deeper access to the butterflies as transformed and transforming bodies (in

reference to Ovid's *Metamorphosis*) but from the perspective of a person witnessing the other end of the epic, where the world descends into disorder. Ovid frames the reality of the moment in language that may not be poetic but which captures the voice of a host of scientists and engaged citizens who are pointing to climate chaos, both present and future. In this way, embodying his last name, though as a voice for this moment in time as opposed to the time of the Romantics. When Byron finally has an opportunity to speak to the centre of power in the text, he does his best to bridge the distance between his knowledge and that of the intended viewer, unsuccessfully. The reporter asks him questions designed to curtail any real discussion about climate chaos, but he pushes back repeatedly, gaining power and silence in equal measure (364-370, 374, 393). Dovey, Dellarobia's best friend, manages to capture the exchange and post it on social media, but the audience for the message is self-selecting and always-already tuned in. Ovid finds a voice in this instance through his association with the butterflies and with Dellarobia, but the frustration he experiences in trying to tune the reporter to the proper channel is obvious and indicative of the distance that each side must travel to understand the other: "People shut out the other side. It cuts both ways" (323).

Dellarobia's voice is influenced by water. Her memories, experiences, and perceptions are frequently filtered through watery impressions. On the mountainside, when she encounters the Monarch butterflies for the first and second times, Dellarobia's voice comes out in two similar yet distinct forms. The first instance involves an expression of formal imaginings, influenced by water and framed by religious imagery. In this instance, voice offers a place holder for the experience in process. It is a means of channeling awe without collapsing into the sublime. Dellarobia sees the butterflies as a lake of fire but refuses to fully embrace her perception as reality. She places the potential for the divine in the mix because the end of the

world is as likely as anything else in this encounter. Here, her voice guides her back to her senses and helps her unmoor her feet to move away from what her brain tells her is a fire.

The second time Dellarobia arrives at the butterflies is with her in-laws and husband in tow. She is astounded by the fecundity, the bulbous forms, the weight of these tiny beings bringing trees to their breaking point. She is also moving between this moment and the first instance of seeing the butterflies, swept along with the impression of being in a current. The immeasurable nature of the experience causes her to use voice as a pure expression of the incapacity to situate the self in the ineffable. It is the use of voice in a chorographic context of shifting becomings that Hester interprets as Dellarobia receiving grace. Voice acts as a tether between the self and the present moment, and it is once again an extension of water's influence and water's form in the butterflies.

Dellarobia experiences the mediation of water through the butterflies, but she also experiences the mediation of voice through television and online media. Living through an interview aired out of context and a meme that photoshops her head onto what is presumably "The Birth of Venus" by Botticelli, she both gains and loses agency and identity in the context of her community. She is congratulated for appearing on television, accused of peddling sex, presented as suicidal, and also rendered as a naked, abject goddess. The language that seems to spill from her, in her effort to become in response to the past and present, renders her both fragile and powerful, but not a fully present person, more like an impression that ideas can be layered onto.

Finally, Ovid Byron unexpectedly finds a voice through Dellarobia. When the reporter, Tina Ultner, comes to accost Dellarobia once again, Dellarobia brings her to Ovid Byron, who also speaks for the more-than-human and for everyone, really, but the reporter is indifferent to

his message. He is ultimately heard and silenced simultaneously. While it is unclear whether or not Ovid is as influenced by water as Dellarobia is, he is clearly committed to understanding otherness in a discourse that is grounded in science. In Feathertown, Ovid needs a speaker like Dellarobia, influenced by water and understanding both sides, to be a bridge.

Fire and Flood

This chapter has explored perspective and voice in relation to water's influence. This section examines the cumulative construction of events, water's quasi-agency, and the narratives that generate meaning for hydrous-human subjects in the novel. The events that I focus on here are the flood at the end of the novel, the landslide in Mexico, and the breakup of Dellarobia's marriage. While Dellarobia's first and second encounters with the butterflies occupied previous considerations in this chapter, this section explores how narratives come to structure events in process as expressions of water's quasi-agency and influence.

There are a number of singularities and events in the novel, but the event I want to focus on appears at the end of the story. Dellarobia finds herself seeking higher ground as the steady rain that had been accumulating from late fall through to the new year finally begins to pour "over the tops of her boots" (430). She had been navigating "river[s] of butterflies" (150) and "rivulets" of separation (385), but finally the flood itself arrives (430). While the butterflies brought her, at the beginning of the novel, to a point where she was "seeing straight through to the back of herself, in solitude" (15), during the flood she immediately recognizes the very real possibility of her own end. She sees the "tall weed stalks... waving like skeletal arms" (430), and she understands that "the current [pulls] in a way she [knows] to be dangerous" (430), and yet, her response is unique to those who are influenced by water. The solitude of the first butterfly

encounter is echoed here. She has a phone that can be used to call for help, but who does one call “in the event of something like this” (430)?

In the midst of the deluge, she scrambles to a hummock and finds herself at the pasture’s summit: “a tiny island nation of one. She was completely surrounded here by moving water. She turned to face south.... An ocean, stippled and roiling in waves over submerged rock and rill, rising as she watched” (430). Moments before, she was caring for her home and awaiting the return of the school bus; now, she is adrift in this unprecedented event. Her transition, swift and fluid, situates her in “the reckless thrill of being at sea” (430). Yet, who chooses to be at sea? Only a person who is truly cornered, according to Dellarobia’s logic, would “strike out for probable disaster at the edge of the known world. Insofar as a person could understand that, she did” (430). This same logic is echoed in Bachelard’s work on water: “the first sailor was the first living man who was as courageous as a dead one” (74). Dellarobia is no stranger to feeling cornered. Between the skeletal tall weeds and the risk she weighs in the field as the water rushes past her, there is another harbinger of death in the form of the crows flying “one by one into the bare trees... adding their warnings to the drear sounds of this day. Gone, gone, they rasped. Here was a dead world learning to speak in dissonant, unbearable sounds” (430). The dead world is part of the hydrous imagination. Dellarobia can hear the “dead world speak” because it is water she is following. As Bachelard notes, hydrously influenced imaginations are also those invested in a particular kind of end (64). Considering Dellarobia’s watery monsters, associations with her stillborn child, watery memories of her deceased parents, and her fascination with water itself, it is evident that she is always already “back[ing] slowly into the violent current to find a better place” (Kingsolver 431).

As Dellarobia scrambles for higher ground, she looks toward her house, “her home’s particular geography erased” (Kingsolver 431). She sees the house begin to be washed away, along with her car (431-32), which has started an eastward migration. At this point, Dellarobia stops to consider the hyacinths she planted: “snub green leaf bundles had looked to her like the beaks of turtles rising from an underworld” (432). Hyacinths are associated with death, like their namesake.³² “Death is the universal hydra for the imagination marked by water” (Bachelard 64), and when Dellarobia sees the first signs of spring as also a sign of death, it suggests that she recognizes the perilous nature of the event and, further, that she sees her past and present actions as entangled with water. Death and water sit together across a number of instances in the text, constituting an adjacency that becomes clearer in moments like this. Reading death into signs of spring is one of the clearest signs of water’s influence on material imagination.

Further, her attention to reflection is also a form of tuning-in to transience and death. After she “lifted her sights straight up to watch [the butterflies] passing overhead,” she quickly shifts her focus to the water rushing around and past her (Kingsolver 433). This is out of necessity, but it is also about following water’s course. “In the middling distance and higher up [the butterflies] all flowed in the same direction, down mountain, like the flood itself occurring on other levels” (433). She is observing the butterflies but also herself. She sees that the monarchs are “the shards of a wrecked generation [that] had rested alive like a heartbeat in trees, snow-covered, charged with resistance. Now the sun blinked open on a long impossible time, and here was the exodus” (433). This is also her potential exodus. Minimally, it marks her move from Feathertown, but it may also be her demise playing out alongside the collapse of the monarch butterfly population.

³² Like the god, Hyacinth, who was accidentally killed by Apollo.

The sky was too bright and the ground so unreliable, she couldn't look up for very long. Instead her eyes held steady on the fire bursts of wings reflected across water, a merging of flame and flood. Above the lake of the world, flanked by white mountains, they flew out to a new earth.

(Kingsolver 433)

To circle back briefly to Edgar Allan Poe, his landscapes and points of reference, here, we are focusing on the profound draw to water: the Hericlitean death, “a death which bears us afar with the current and like a current” (Bachelard 68-69). This is also true of Dellarobia's experience of living a hydrously influenced life. As Bachelard notes in his chapter on deep water, Poe's work circles back to a “fundamental dream, a reverie that constantly returns to the dying mother” (46). This is a moment of return for Dellarobia as well. She notes that she could not help her children through this (Kingsolver 431). She lets go of her moorings and walks the edge of a return to both the great mother (water), and her own mother, while stepping outside of the role of mother herself.

As Bachelard notes, “to contemplate water is to slip away, dissolve, and die” (47). Water reflects the sky through dreams and “comes to signify that most distant of homes, a celestial one” (48), which comes up more than once throughout the novel. Dellarobia's and Poe's reveries of their deceased mothers are both tied to water: “Death, for Poe, is what is human. A life is described through death.... his landscape is likewise shaped by this fundamental dream, a reverie that constantly returns to the dying mother” (46). Dellarobia's fusion of water with monarch butterflies is a further amplification of the ways in which water and celestial, ethereal otherness are bound together. As Bachelard notes, “water is the *element* which remembers the dead” (56), and “for Poe *beauty is a cause of death*. That is the story common to women, valleys, and water”

(62). As Bachelard contends, for Poe, “beauty is a cause of death” (62). Dellarobia is beautiful, she often recalls watery memories of her lost parents and child, and she is drawn away from her life several times throughout the novel. She conjures up the lost mother and the lost lover together. At the close of the novel, she seems to be about to follow the path of house and valley below, with “water [drawing] the entire countryside along toward its own destiny” (61). Whether or not this flood will cause Dellarobia’s death is unclear, but it is evident that Dellarobia is invested in death entwined with water. According to Bachelard, this is a hallmark of a hydrous imagination (63).

Further ties to water and death sit at the periphery of Dellarobia’s experience and prefigure the flood. The landslide in Mexico that happened prior to the novel’s beginning and which brought Josephina’s family, as well as the monarchs, to Feathertown centralizes water, destruction and unstable ground, death, and escape in the monarch butterflies’ flight away from Mexico to Tennessee. Bachelard notes that “running water is water destined to slow down, to become heavy. All living water is on the point of dying” (47). When engaging with dynamic imagination, “things are not what they are, but what they are becoming. They become in images just what they become in reverie... To contemplate water is to slip away, dissolve, and die” (47). The landslide in Mexico is an important event because it sets everything in motion, and it further highlights the connections between water and the butterflies, water and death, and death and beauty, creating space for a clear paradigm to emerge. This tangle of connections emphasizes how water works as a central element in events throughout the novel, further situating it at the centre of human-elemental becomings in *Flight Behaviour*.

Dellarobia first meets Lupe, Reynaldo, and Josephina when they arrive at her door. They are drawn there because Preston’s teacher has mentioned the butterflies in school, indicating that

Preston's mom, Dellarobia, was the person who first discovered them. Over the course of their conversation, Dellarobia listens to Josefina describe the unravelling of her family's world and the precipitous events leading to the arrival of the monarch butterflies in Feathertown. Once again, water and death are linked via circumstance but also in form. When Dellarobia asks about their home, Josefina says, "No more. It's gone" (Kingsolver 101). This is reminiscent of Poe's "The Raven," as the use of "no more" is a close stand-in for "nevermore." "It's gone" (101), coupled with the black crows croaking "Gone. Gone" at the novel's close (430), strengthens the connection to Poe and his raven, and to watery, maternal death. Poe's heavy water and emphasis on young, beautiful, dead women as his muses creates a connection between a poet deeply influenced by water and death and the novel's primary character. This connection matters in relation to the trajectory of events and Dellarobia's becoming in relation to water and its deathly influences. In tracing water, she also traces a particular becoming that is always already bound up with death and dying, memory, loss, and beauty in ways that are specific to watery elemental influence. To further connect the newly found butterfly roost with death and disaster is unsettling but completely aligned with what Dellarobia normally notices and pursues. Returning to her first moments seeing the butterflies, she sees a lake of fire, but also fungus and monsters (subliminal, hydrous elements).

When Josefina and her family share the rest of the story, Josefina says:

"Everything is gone!" [she] cried, in obvious distress. "The water was coming and the mud was coming on everything.... *Un diluvio.*"

"A flood?" Dellarobia asked gently. She thought of the landslide in Great Lick.... the whole valley filled with boulders and mud and splintered trees.

She made a downward tumbling motion with her hands. “A landslide?”

(Kingsolver 101)

The movement of the earth under the influence of water is significant. There are at least two landslides and one flood in the novel. Each instance reinforces the instability of perceived stability, creating space for a different understanding of the elemental in relation to human becomings and expectations.

Josefina further links the butterflies and death, water being the element that remembers the dead (Bachelard 56), as she speaks to how the butterflies are entwined with loss, death, and cultural imaginings.

Josefina nodded. “In Mexico people say they are children.... Something that comes out of children when they die.” “When a baby dies, the thing that goes out.” She placed both hands on her chest, thumbs linked, and lifted them fluttering like a pair of wings. “It flies away from the body.” Suddenly Dellarobia understood. “The soul.”

The child nodded thoughtfully, and for a long time they both gazed up into the cathedral of suspended lives. After a while Josefina said, “So many.” (Kingsolver 359)

This belief ties the butterflies more closely to death, perilous life, and memory and loss, but it also creates an additional connection between Dellarobia, her stillborn child, and the butterflies themselves. Imagining a celestial elsewhere through these watery bodies is a further reflection of her own longing to break away and be somewhere else, perhaps amongst the dead. Dellarobia’s memories are often triggered by water, and she is taken off guard by memories of her stillborn child (192), of things her mother would say (283), and of her father (194). She finds it “hard to

resist the idea of her parents together in some other sphere, maybe rocking the grand baby that never got loved in this one” (185), and these memories slide together during emotional moments in ways that are intuitive and watery, placing water at the centre of events and Dellarobia’s subjectivity.

Another significant and unexpected coming together of water, relations, agency, and subjectivities is in regards to Dellarobia’s relationship with Cub, her husband. I want to explore the breakdown of her marriage as it pertains to the centralization of water and its influence on the human-hydrous becomings of Dellarobia. While this might seem like a strange choice for an event that centralizes water, the example offers insight into the depth of influence that water has on Dellarobia’s thinking. Arguably, it is water’s influence that sets her on her path to being attentive to the butterflies and all of the transformations that she undergoes in response.

Following a heart-to-heart in which Dellarobia admits to being in love with Ovid Byron, and after a conversation with Cub weeks prior that involved him telling Dellarobia about a mutual female friend, Crystal, visiting whenever Dellarobia was working, the couple begins to end things. “He’d said good night as if they were friends parting ways, then rolled to his side and slept the sleep of a mountain range” (Kingsolver 385), solid and untroubled. Dellarobia, however, spends the night lying awake in bed and trying to figure out how to keep her world together while her home life is falling apart. “At moments she felt light and untethered, the same glimpse of release she’d had many times before” (385). Dellarobia is the current that moves the family along, while Cub is often an obstruction, unmoved by the challenges of daily life. Dellarobia imagines deep, dark water while staring at the “black air, dividing the river of her desperation into rivulets” (385) that become nearly navigable. Even in the deeply personal dissolution of her marriage, she situates herself in water. The juxtaposition of mountain ranges

and rivers is appropriate and speaks to a deeper distance between these characters. Further, it reinforces the connection between Dellarobia and water, instability, the abject body, and the desperation that always already surrounds her connection to water and death.

When Dellarobia breaks the news to Preston, her son, the images used are once again watery: “a small world melting” (Kingsolver 423). Knowing she is about to shatter his reality alongside her own, she turns to trace the path of water running downhill: “all the snowy little hummocks with meltwater flowing through them, a miniature river in a forest of white, conical, snow-covered weeds” (423). This movement between family and environment, and the logical extension to melting polar ice caps and rising waters, is part of what the novel does so well. The moves are fluid and understandable, engaging the reader in intuitively arriving at a better understanding of how water is situated within the self, events, and the environment.

Conclusion: There is No Escape Plan

The message throughout *Flight Behaviour* is consistent: this is our planet. There is no escape plan. As the novel aptly notes, things are already falling apart. This imparts the message that the time for immediate, significant action to address climate chaos is now. The other message is that the conversation must be extended to a broader community than those currently engaged. The complications of poverty, the quasi-agency of water and its influence, the voices of feminized subjects are all necessary additions to broaden perspectives and have the conversations that are required. Dellarobia exemplifies what it might mean to speak for a broader community, crossing divides between groups of people and also between people and the elemental.

Throughout the novel, water figures as an elemental influence, in addition to being a quasi-agent within events. Dellarobia tries to reconcile the limits of her current reality with the

broader reach of climate chaos and the future her children will face (Kingsolver 278). She has a variety of ways in which she materially engages with the idea. On encountering the butterfly potholder, Dellarobia sees that someone “had taken the trouble to get this exactly right” (Kingsolver 175). Dellarobia “pictured a real person, a small woman in a blue paper hairnet seated at a sewing machine.... Scrolling out a message.... *Get me out of here.* And what if there was no other place?” (175). When she sees the potholder, which she imagines was made by someone on the other side of the world, she sees herself and her own desire to “get out of here.” Reckoning with the reality of planetary limits falls into the category of “man against Nature,” and, as she indicates, “[o]f all the possible conflicts, that was the one that was hopeless. Even a slim education had taught her this much: Man loses” (245). This, coupled with the knowledge that the planet’s current trajectory is moving towards limited or non-existent human life, and that there is no escape plan, which is tied to the intimate and inescapable pain of having brought children into the world whom one is ill-equipped to protect from monstrous conditions and loss, centres the crisis in a way that promotes empathy, is intuitive, and situates the crisis at the personal level, while simultaneously reaching outwards to human-elemental entanglements and responsibilities.

The two strongest voices for otherness are those of Dellarobia and Ovid Byron. For Dr. Ovid Byron, the focus remains on the butterflies, in the same way that Dellarobia’s focus is on her children, as they are amongst his loved ones. He asks the same questions and ponders the same inescapable outcomes. ““Where will [the monarchs] go from here.... Finally Ovid said, ‘Into a whole new earth. Different from the one that has always supported them. In the manner to which we have all grown accustomed’” (Kingsolver 325). Present throughout the novel is a recognition of the extreme change that we and the butterflies may or may not be able to adapt to

and survive. When Dellarobia tries to bridge the gap between her and her mother-in-law's understandings of climate chaos, she uses words like "pollution," and when she tries to make sense of the butterflies and give the world meaning, during her initial encounter, she draws on language like "Jesus, god!" Later, picturing god as both watery and at rest while monitoring the butterflies as a fledgling scientist, she explains: "God does not move at all. God sits still, perfectly at rest, the silver dollar at the bottom of the well, the question" (351). Even in the process of reimagining the unfolding of the future and the stability (or lack thereof) of planetary systems, Dellarobia finds a way to construct a watery god, whereas most in her community are looking to the skies, seeking divine intervention in a variety of innocuous forms.

Further, the evident intertextual references in the novel work to deepen watery perception and centrality. Throughout *Flight Behaviour*, Kingsolver references other writers and characters to further construct the world of Dellarobia's imagination, perception, and experience. Interestingly, Kingsolver also draws on hydrous others (e.g., Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Poe's poetic water worlds, and biblical figures like Moses) to advance the depth of Dellarobia's flooded landscape and elementally influenced perception and voice. References to the biblical flood are not lost here. Some form of intervention is required to circumvent complete climate collapse, but as the novel suggests, that intervention will need to be human, not divine. As Dellarobia suggests, god is surrounded by water and, still, god is the question (Kingsolver 351), the coin at the bottom of the well as all else swirls around it. As I have previously mentioned, uncommon, elementally influenced situations require narratives equal to the undoing of daily life. Exploring elementality directly is always already fraught. Elemental narratives necessitate the use of extraordinary stories.

Conclusions: What Are We?

EFI is a generalizable interpretative method and a theory about elemental influence and human-elemental becomings. It asks a simple question: What are we? It turns out that we are both more and less than I initially imagined, and air and water are complicated companions on this journey of becoming aware of human-elemental entanglements.

Humans are more influenced by the elements and embedded in the environment than one might think, as well as being less autonomous. Human-elemental becomings include the ways that elements influence, direct, and act upon humans, in addition to amplifying events such that the human part of the assemblage is stretched to contain a more fulsome understanding of the otherness that supports, invades, surrounds, and is a part of us. The boundaries of the body are loose. Connections and entanglements with elemental others are present, with or without human awareness. Imagining what it might be like to be this otherness is an interesting and a valuable exercise; sitting alongside otherness and tracing entanglements is an act of both imaginative and bodily becoming (Bachelard, *WD* 103). In the act of attending to elemental others, we become more fully aware of ourselves as human-elemental assemblages. In the act of sustained attention and proximity to otherness, the distance between perception and thing is shortened, and a better understanding of the self and elemental influence is developed. To be able to enter the space between difference and entanglement, to navigate between the human and the elemental, is the goal. It is a goal that is always already in process, if not awareness. This method offers a means for approaching awareness of our human-elemental entanglements and becomings.

Human-elemental becomings include altered imagination, perception, voice, agency, and events, but there are also observable aspects of human-elemental becomings that signal elemental attentiveness in the everyday. There are instances where air and water inspire mimesis;

from Jack's aerial influence being translated into superficially glancing over the surface of his life and that of his family, to the man's hydrous entanglements dissolving language, to Dellarobia's watery memories and deep emotions. In addition to mimesis in human-elemental entanglements, there is also the chaos of crumbling perceptions, human systems, and the environmental instability that is present in each novel, contributing to the *Umheimlich* nature of environmental volatility in these novels. This unsettling is generative. The tendency would be to read these situations and the elements within them as aggressors at worst or neutral at best. However, these instances or circumstances of environmentally-expressed entropy in human order and perception can be read as integrative. It pulls the human back into the larger web of more-than-human life that we are always already a part of but which human beings attend to most fully in transitory states.

Being subject to these influences is not something that should necessarily be managed or rejected, but rather, a tangible sense of one's entangled relationships can become more obvious. The novels themselves, in combination with EFI, do some of this work for the reader. They offer the reader an opportunity to be pulled back into the larger web of connection. With the advent of COVID-19, the elements have become a daily consideration for most people. Life suddenly revolves around air or, we are suddenly more aware of this being the case. Air is at the forefront of most people's minds. Its impact on daily life makes it so. Since air exists at the centre of the pandemic and centralizes the looseness of bodily boundaries, it highlights the limits of human authority in the more-than-human world, giving us greater access to lateral becomings, expanding our connections and community of being

One of the most surprising things about exploring air and water in the context of these novels that grapple with environmental disasters and climate crisis is that both air and water have

deathly tendencies. I did not anticipated this and as I continued developing my understanding of the elemental and the texts, it became undeniable. The characters see these elements as powerful forces that carry toxins into the body, wear the body down into the earth, and wipe away human interventions in the landscape in floods (omnipresent in *The Road* and sudden and anticipated in *Flight Behaviour*). Air, water, and death share imaginative space. One of the reasons that this is the case in these texts is because air and water are, indeed, both a support and a threat. The elements also function as capricious gods of a sort. Morton points to this in his articulation of the “unthought known” (HO 4), knitting together the elemental and the causal (EE 280). The elements disrupt spatial and temporal dynamics from a human perspective, in a way that is similar to Agamben’s articulation of the paradigm. This is bound up with modern tendencies to overlook the elemental, creating a greater distance between phenomenon, agency, and thought. This is grounded on an assumption about the mutual presentation of agency, sentience, action, and outcome, which does not apply to elemental influence and otherness. The entanglements of human-elemental others are most alive between the phenomenon and the self. Recognizing the movement of the human-elemental dance is about making meaning, and that is impossible to do if one cannot recognize the signs. This is part of what EFI offers, a means to recognize the signs.

Elements, time, and the human sit together. When Bachelard draws on Paul Claudel’s suggestion that “water is the gaze of the earth, its instrument for looking through time” (WD 31), he is pointing to the obvious measures that can be applied to water as a geologic force and, simultaneously, to the more evocative nature of water as an eye. Water is consistently shown to be the place of memory (symbolically and materially). It is also a place of suspension and divergence, as it is not an amenable media for humans to live in, though it is the perfect media to cast the mind towards, within, and beneath in order to feel out the depths of what it is to be

human, what it might mean to be water, and also what the human attends to in contact with and attention to elemental others. The differences are marked, but the nuanced entanglements and the pull between element and thought deserves attention. In both *The Road* and *Flight Behaviour*, water is entangled with ideas about memory and about time. It functions as an arrow pointing towards the past and the future, while deftly surrendering the present as a temporally layered experience of human-elemental life.

Disasters and other element-enlivened instances highlight how human-elemental entanglements evolve. This dissertation uses EFI to look at narratives focused on environmental events, climate crisis, and climate collapse. For characters to approach the elemental in these narratives, they require extraordinary stories focused on myths, heroes, and religious imagery. Yet, there are still other ways to encounter the elements, other contexts and other narratives that could function equally as well for this methodology. When I was originally considering elemental influence, it was in the context of urban architecture. This was about exploring materials, porous space, and boundaries as it pertains to human, elemental, and material iterations of human-elemental entanglements in architectural forms. I was particularly interested in memorials and geographical boundaries as they are occluded or amplified by architectural structures. EFI still strikes me as a viable way to explore human-elemental entanglements in these spaces. The same concepts apply.

Additionally, EFI might well be extended to trace the individual or combined elements in these environments in order to move beyond collapsed influence and explore how these signifying spaces attune the individual to the elemental and the self as it is constructed in response to the environment, as well as how these spaces are encoded to welcome or deny access to individual bodies and influences. Another area for potential exploration relates to the climate

crisis. When applying EFI more directly to climate crisis scenarios, experiences, and narratives, it can highlight the uneven impact and social (in)justice that pertains to class, race, gender, ability, and sexuality. An example of what this might look like is presented in *Flight Behaviour*, where class is explored in terms of how the climate crisis disproportionately impacts the poor in the novel. There is an element of reader-response inherent in this method and theory about human-elemental entanglements, it is not only about what the reader brings to the text and how they might connect to this content in narrative, but further, how the narratives themselves might push the reader to trace their respective entanglements regardless of the barriers (real or imagined) that make the elements seem distant in daily life.

EFI, in conversation with each of the novels, has provided nuanced and valuable insights into the nature of human-elemental others, and elements in the context of events, as well as in less dramatic circumstances. Aspects of the uncanny are part of elemental reckonings in *White Noise* in particular, and in *The Road*, and *Flight Behaviour*, as well. In these novels, the main characters have to reconcile expectations and reality in ways that layer the present in complicated longings that are both unsettled and unsettling. The nature of the elemental is tied to the uncanny and unstable environment in each novel. Human interventions in planetary systems figure largely and act as a return of the repressed on some level. When toxic chemicals are adrift during the ATE in *White Noise*, it is impossible to witness or participate in the event without also recognizing the role of the human and the elemental, and the complications this entails. In *The Road*, the *Unheimlich* is figured as the watery memories of loss and longing populating the environment and coming to mind unexpectedly as the man and boy journey towards the sea. This creates a sense of disjointedness and familiarity at once that presents as a deeper and more ineffable sense of loss cached in both human memory and the elements, in particular in water in

The Road. Finally, in *Flight Behaviour* the uncanny is about the collapse of divides between domestic and public, human and environment, beauty and monstrosity, and the way in which these distinctions dissolve in the face of slight variations in the environment signalling broader issues in the health of planetary systems. Recognizing the elements is also about resituating and calibrating the self in response. This process is disturbing as well as integrative.

Further, the novels explore voicelessness and voice as it pertains to agency, humanness, and the elemental. The commonalities in *White Noise* and *The Road* are to do with the human role as prophets of the elemental. In *Flight Behaviour* the elemental speaks through voiceless others like the monarchs, but also through Dellarobia. The merging of human, elemental, and animal agencies is an interesting point of departure for additional analysis. Elemental mimesis is also present across texts, moving beyond figuration of elemental others to more functional expressions of elemental influence, from Jack's untethered, aerial approach to life; to the man's watery intuitions and awakened memories in the presence of bodies of water; to Dellarobia's desire to be seen and not devoured much like the aerial/hydrous monarchs.

Finally, these novels speak to varying levels of climate chaos and collapse. From the local, to the transcontinental, to the global, the chaos unfolding is cached in scale and attempting to comprehend elemental otherness and influence. Working through the events in the novels, drawing connections between human actions and elemental influences, it is hard to imagine where we are right now on a scale that ranges from potential-for-change and intervention to the post-apocalyptic horrors of *The Road*. I believe that we reside in a moment where our decisions still matter and examining the larger systems and influences that we are part of is an important contribution of EFI. Examining elemental others as part of larger systems of human becoming and planetary processes is part of the way these novels speak to each other.

This methodology is primarily concerned with artefacts, although there is potential to see elemental influence in the self and others, as well as in events (as COVID-19 has shown) through this curatorial, cumulative process. EFI is an apt way to explore obligations to and relations with the more-than-human, textually and personally. Tracing elemental influence in architecture, language, art, fashion, and politics seems entirely possible, worthy, and compelling. It makes a great deal of sense to strive to be more experimental in our inquiries, interdisciplinary collaborations, and reach as we are facing the very real perils of climate chaos. Considering elemental influence and reckoning with a broader consideration of humanness (human-elemental becomings) is both valid and necessary. Perhaps a loosening of the boundaries of the body might precipitate a breakdown of destructive fantasies of limitless progress and limitless objects, and a reconceptualization of wealth and the value of power. Perhaps the time has come for this.

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