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Glocal Epiphanies in Contemporary Literature: Material Elements, Narrative Strategies

1 Introduction

> Consider the snow globe. Consider the mind that invented those miniature storms, the factory worker who turned sheets of plastic into white flakes of snow, the hand that drew the plan for the miniature Severn City with its church steeple and city hall, the assembly-line worker who watched the globe glide past on a conveyer belt somewhere in China. Consider the white gloves on the hands of the woman who inserted the snow globes into boxes, to be packed into larger boxes, crates, shipping containers. Consider the card games played belowdecks in the evenings on the ship carrying the containers across the ocean. (Mandel 2014, 255)

In a postapocalyptic world, even a snow globe has an interesting story to tell. Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven*, from which this passage is lifted, revolves around a global catastrophe, a pandemic, that causes the collapse of society as we know it in the West. The snow globe is on display at a self-described "Museum of Civilization," where it serves as a reminder of planetary forces that are no more: the forces of capitalism and global trade. The scene inside the globe is an idealised version of Severn City, the fictional North American city whose ruined airport hosts the makeshift museum. This kitschy object thus offers a figuration of its local surroundings, despite having been designed and crafted on another continent. The snow globe is local in another sense: it is a human-scale object that can be directly manipulated. Yet, by asking us repeatedly to "consider" this humble object's history, the narrator helps us connect its materiality to the complexity and scale of the global supply chain.

The physical globe in Mandel's novel hints at a globalised reality destabilised by a catastrophic pandemic – an idea that certainly sounds eerily familiar in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the relationship between the physical globe and the global turns out to be a rather complex one: the artefact is a *product* of globalisation and recalls the physical form of the Earth, yet the object's self-contained nature clashes with the fragility of the historical and economic processes

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that made its existence possible. Globalisation is anything but simple or sealed off from other factors, as the catastrophe at the centre of *Station Eleven* demonstrates. Thus, this passage illustrates the conceptual tensions of what I call in this article a "glocal epiphany" in a narrative context: it surveys the material history of a physical object (from an assembly-line somewhere in China to North America) in order to bring local and global scales into a dialogue. This gesture creates the conditions for an "epiphany" – that is, a revelation of interscalar connection that highlights continuities and discontinuities between local experiences and global phenomena.[1] Materiality – a concept foregrounded by current debates in the environmental humanities (Alaimo 2010; Iovino and Oppermann 2014) – thus bridges the gap between local and global realities, even as it highlights their mutual irreducibility. Materiality is a broad notion that refers to the physical makeup of things, the textures of the nonhuman world (such as the weather and the land), as well as the physicality of animate bodies.

This chapter explores a strand of contemporary fiction that strategically positions materiality at the intersection of local and global scales. This strand includes *Station Eleven* and numerous other novels and short story collections that engage with planetary catastrophes (including, but not limited to, those related to climate change). My discussion reflects broader assumptions within the field of narrative theory, and (more specifically) within current scholarship on the interplay of narrative form and environmental issues – the approach inaugurated by Erin James (2015) under the heading of "econarratology." Therefore, I situate my case studies as instances of fictional narrative that participate in a specific Western narrative practice (the literary novel). My contention is that, as contemporary literature probes the tension between the human scale and planetary processes that transcend the world of everyday experience, narrative forms that have become entrenched within the novelistic tradition come under pressure. The foregrounding of material objects, or of the materiality of the human body, accompanies this rethinking of both narrative forms and novelistic conventions.[2]

In the next section, I expand on some of the theoretical issues brought into view by my discussion of Mandel's passage, particularly the difficulties involved in imagining the global and how material objects may disclose perspectives that

1 The term "epiphany" was first used in a literary context by James Joyce. See Langbaum (1983).

2 Because my contribution is primarily grounded in narrative theory, I will not be able to do justice to the significant body of work that has explored similar questions about literary form and global scales from the perspective of novel theory (see, e.g., Marshall 2015). Nevertheless, I hope my discussion in the following section will at least go some way towards bridging this gap between theorizations of narrative and the novel.

bring together local and global scales *without fully integrating them*. Indeed, the "glocal" as I understand it in this chapter is not a seamless fusion of local and global concerns but rather a platform for uneasy and problematic coexistence between scalar levels. After unpacking these theoretical issues, I turn to two contemporary novels in English that use materiality to disclose glocal perspectives: Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004). I tackle these narratives in this order because, as we will see, Mitchell's engagement with materiality is more layered than Ozeki's. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, the narrative progression is tied to the physical circulation of a diary, which brings together two characters on either side of the Pacific. In *Cloud Atlas*, it is a material mark on the body, a birthmark, that evokes a mysterious connection between six characters who are spread out in both space and time. In another epiphanic emergence of materiality, these six characters are linked to the climate through a recurring comparison with wandering clouds.

2 Thinking with the Global: Discontinuities and Nonlinearity

My point of departure is an insight emerging from recent discussions in the environmental humanities. The current climate crisis presents human societies with an existential challenge that is profoundly different from previous environmental threats, such as the widespread use of pesticides denounced by Rachel Carson in her seminal *Silent Spring* (1962). While atmospheric or water pollution can be addressed at a local or regional level, climate change is an irreducibly global phenomenon: a long history of greenhouse gas emissions in the Global North can cause flooding in Bangladesh, or wildfires in Australia, or a drought in California. Put otherwise, while the catastrophic manifestations of climate change can be pinpointed at a local level, no local intervention can prevent the rise of sea levels or average temperatures, because these are planetary phenomena – that is, they are complexly distributed in space and time. A global problem can only be successfully addressed on a global scale, with solutions that match the complexity of the crisis.[3]

There are issues with this reference to the planetary or global scale, though, as scholars in the environmental humanities have been quick to point out. First,

3 I refer to Dale Jamieson's *Reason in a Dark Time* (2014) for a wide-ranging discussion of the challenges the climate crisis raises for our collective meaning-making.

highlighting the abstract, global nature of climate change carries a significant risk: it diverts attention from the historical responsibilities that are bound up with the climate crisis – responsibilities that originate in the Western world, and more specifically in colonial exploitation, the industrial revolution, and the advent of capitalism. As Eileen Crist (2013) notes, the bland language of "human impact on the climate," which is widespread in scientific publications, elides major differences between the Global North and the developing world. Such differences have to do with history, patterns of consumption, but also exposure to the consequences of climate change: despite being historically accountable for a vast percentage of greenhouse gas emissions, developed countries are also the *least* vulnerable to climate-change related devastation, for infrastructural and economic reasons. On closer inspection, the concept of the global thus starts breaking down, revealing discrepancies and asymmetries that complicate a straightforward understanding of the climate crisis. Recall the passage from Mandel's novel and how it contrasts the simple, self-enclosed form of the snow globe and the long, meandering history of its production: if we consider historical differences and moral responsibilities, the global starts looking more like a complex and highly differentiated system and less like a closed and stable form.

Another thinker active in the environmental humanities, Timothy Clark, takes this problematization of the global even further in *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (2015). Clark distances himself from environmental thinkers such as David Abram (1997), who see embodied experience as a springboard for ecological insight. For Clark, this focus on sensory experience goes hand in hand with the traditional emphasis on place of the environmental movement in the United States, because place (as opposed to the more abstract notion of space) is something that speaks to the senses directly.[4] Clark writes: "The personal scale of the human body and of its immediate inherence in things . . . underlies the localist programmes of much environmentalist thinking" (2015, 38). But this "personal scale" can only go so far, Clark argues, because it cannot fully embrace or encompass the global dimension of the climate crisis. Put otherwise, the human body and the sensory knowledge it provides cannot be "scaled up" to planetary realities. In a sense, this disconnect is a very common experience: because climate change is so vast, our individual actions – grounded in bodily experience – are bound to irrelevance. Surely, my decision to drive to work every day (instead of cycling or taking the train) is "causing" climate change in some sense of the word: but this thought spreads the notion of causation so thin that the link between my

4 For more on the localist nature of environmental thinking in North America and the need to rethink the global, see Ursula Heise's influential *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008).

embodied practice and the global crisis appears trivial at best. Clark's account centres on this kind of discontinuity between the personal (or local) and the global (or planetary): "To contemplate the sight of the whole Earth is to think the disjunction between individual perception and global reality" (2015, 36). If the global is a totality, that totality remains out of imaginative reach; instead, the global becomes thinkable through the tensions and disruptions that define our relationship with it. In effect, Clark's discussion of the global expands on the argument, advanced by Crist and others, that problematizes the idea of an undifferentiated "global impact" of humankind. If that argument underscores a significant discontinuity between developed and developing nations, Clark sees discontinuities, in the plural, as shaping our understanding of the global as an unimaginable totality.

In another contribution to the debate on scale in the environmental humanities, Derek Woods (2014) develops a "scale critique" that is remarkably convergent with Clark's discussion. Woods focuses on what he calls "scale variance": "the observation and the operation of systems are subject to different constraints at different scales due to real discontinuities" (2014, 133). Scale cannot be thought of as a spatial continuum similar to the smooth zooming in and out made possible by digital maps such as Google Maps. On the contrary, as we move across scales (from the personal to the regional to the global) we encounter a number of gaps and discontinuities that reflect the complexity of the systems we are traversing.

Indeed, complexity is a key word here, and not just in the loose sense of the term. Scalar discontinuities (or "scale variance") suggest that the global is a complex system in the specialised sense of complex systems theory: it exhibits nonlinear or "self-organising" behaviour – that is, its outcome is not completely determined by the initial setup of the system.[5] Perhaps the most concrete manifestation of this nonlinearity of the climate crisis is the way in which it destabilises scientific prediction: given the staggering number of human and nonhuman factors involved in the climate crisis, it becomes impossible for science to decide between optimistic and worst-case scenarios about the future (see Cooper 2010). Local catastrophes (for instance, the wildfires in Australia in early 2020) can emerge from a plurality of material processes that are distributed in space and time. This is, incidentally, why scientists who talk about the link between climate change and local disasters have to use the language of probability: "human-induced climate change increased the risk of the weather conditions that drove the fires [in Australia] by at least 30%," reads an article on the *Nature* website

5 For an application of this idea of complexity to narrative theory, see Pier (2017) and Grishakova and Poulaki (2019).

(Phillips 2020). The causal link between the global scale and a regional disaster is not deterministic but probabilistic – a sure sign that we are dealing with a complex, nonlinear phenomenon. Nonlinearity and discontinuity are intimately related: it is because global warming emerges nonlinearly from patterns of extraction, industrial production, and consumption that we experience a gap between human-scale reality and climate change as a scientific abstraction.

A number of scholars have raised doubts about the Western novel's ability to capture these dimensions of the climate crisis. Perhaps most influentially, Amitav Ghosh has argued in *The Great Derangement* (2016) that climate change, because of its deeply discontinuous and nonlinear nature, resists the concept of probability that is at the heart of the modern Western novel. As noted by Ursula Heise (2019) among others, Ghosh's discussion problematically ignores novelistic work that draws inspiration from genres such as weird, speculative, or fantasy fiction, which deal with the "improbable" and may offer a productive way forward for contemporary literature's engagement with climate change.[6] Nevertheless, one important idea that emerges from this body of work on the contemporary novel is that the genre cannot confront the scale and ramifications of climate change without a significant rethinking of its conventions. Here is where broader considerations on the theory of narrative may prove useful. Building on current work in narratology (including James's econarratology) shows how the resources of narrative form may help the contemporary novel move beyond the impasse highlighted by Ghosh.

A particularly promising narrative strategy in this regard is nonlinearity. As I argue in my case studies, nonlinearity is a narrative form that matches the nonlinearity of climate change itself and is well suited to capture its spatiotemporal discontinuities. In many Western narrative practices (including the novel), the form of narrative closely tracks a character's (typically, the protagonist's) desires and intentions. Quest stories or the "hero's journey" (Campbell 1949) are a straightforward example of how narrative progression privileges the link between the protagonist's mental states and their overt actions: the story is triggered by the character's desire to achieve a certain goal (which can be material or psychological) and ends when the ramifications of that desire have been fully charted out, up to a point of closure (which can be more or less complete and satisfying, of course).[7] This structure, as I suggest more extensively in *Narrating the Mesh* (2021, Ch. 2), is fundamentally teleological and therefore linear, and the narratives of Western modernity – including, again, the novel – are strongly attracted to this

6 Equally relevant in this context is Fredric Jameson's discussion in *Antinomies of Realism* (2015), which also contains a genre-focused close reading of *Cloud Atlas*. For more on literary genre and the climate crisis, see Trexler (2015) and LeMenager (2017).

7 For a narratological argument along these lines, see Ryan (1991).

linear model. Nevertheless, narrative linearity can be challenged in multiple ways: by loosening the link between chronology and human psychology (for instance, when coincidence is foregrounded), or by introducing parallel story lines and sets of characters who do not converge in the plot. David Bordwell (2008, Ch. 7) discusses this possibility under the rubric of "network narrative"; similarly, Alexander Beecroft (2016) sees "entrelacement" (a multistrand plot) as a trope active in fiction engaging with the globalised world. This multilinear narrative set-up expands the novel's confrontation with global realities such as climate change: it puts pressure on the genre's bias towards individual protagonists and also disrupts the teleological nature of the progression, loosening the link between novelistic narrative and human psychology.

One means of achieving nonlinearity and challenging teleology that seems particularly promising in this context is the foregrounding of materiality – because materiality straddles the divide between human embodiment and inanimate things ("matter"). Recall the snow globe in *Station Eleven*: while calling for human-scale, embodied interaction, the material history and appearance of this object bring into focus tensions across global processes and shift the emphasis away from human consciousness and intentionality. The foregrounding of materiality can thus offer what I call a "glocal epiphany" – an idea to which I turn in the next section.

3 Materiality and the Glocal

The concept of materiality is the focus of various strands of contemporary thinking, particularly New Materialism (Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010) and Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-network theory. Materiality should be distinguished from a conventional Western understanding of matter as passive and inert: material things beckon, they attract us not merely as an object of anthropocentric desire but as quasi-agents capable of shaping human practices and cultures. Waste is a particularly fitting example: discarded things change the environment in which human societies live, sometimes dramatically, as with radioactive materials and other pollutants. The extension of agency to nonhuman materiality is not unproblematic, as Andreas Malm (2018, Ch. 3) points out, because it risks sidelining the way in which human action is always bound up with moral accountability: extending agency to the nonhuman is, from this perspective, a convenient way of sweeping under the rug the urgency of human, political action in times of climate crisis. Nevertheless, the connection drawn by New Materialism between agency and materiality should be understood primarily as a provocation, a conceptual

wager aimed at destabilising an anthropocentric conception of things as insensate matter available for human usage. The material world has its own efficacy, and ascribing agency to it – if only metaphorically and strategically – is a means of realising that the fate of human communities is imbricated with processes beyond direct human control.

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that a focus on material things in narrative doesn't necessarily support a New Materialist agenda. In fact, inanimate objects can and often do reflect anthropocentric ideologies. In Annie Carey's Victorian *Autobiographies* (1870) – a didactic book for a young audience – we encounter a lump of coal that remarks: "It is my great desire and constant tendency to unite with my friend oxygen, . . . while by so doing I can in any way benefit your race" (1870, 101).[8] It is hard to think of a more resonant endorsement of a fossil fuel-based culture than a lump of coal looking forward to becoming fuel for the "benefit" of the human species! The anthropomorphism of Carey's nonhuman *Autobiographies* does *not* support an understanding of materiality as "vibrant" – to borrow Bennett's (2010) felicitous term – but rather reinforces notions of human mastery over passive matter. Carey's narrative is no exception: while material objects abound in Western literature – from the Holy Grail of Arthurian romance to the consumer goods of contemporary fiction – they are mostly a projection screen for human affects and meanings. Their participation in human networks of intersubjectivity and value (including economic value) is foregrounded at the expense of their materiality. There are instances in which narrative can deploy material things to decenter human mastery, however. This is the focus of my discussion in this chapter: material elements that circulate in narrative and in doing so disclose the complexity of humanity's entanglement with the nonhuman world – the entanglement that Timothy Morton (2010) refers to as the human-nonhuman "mesh."

My approach has a great deal in common with the "material ecocriticism" advocated by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2014), which revolves around literature's imagination of materiality. As mentioned above, one of the most commonly voiced objections against material ecocriticism (and New Materialism more generally) is that their extension of agency to the nonhuman tends to collapse differences between human subjects and nonhuman realities, thus potentially downplaying ethical and political shortcomings that sit squarely within the human domain (see Malm 2018; Vermeulen 2020). The climate crisis, as we have seen, is the result of historical processes that originate in Western colonialism and capitalism: doesn't insisting on the concept of materiality paper over these historical

8 For analysis and discussion of Carey's text, see Bernaerts et al. (2014, 83–88).

responsibilities? The question brings us back to the significance of scale in thinking about human-nonhuman entanglement. On the scale of human interactions but also of political decision-making, it is certainly important to retain the distinction between human agency and subjectivity and nonhuman objects – be it the plastic we carelessly discard into the environment or the coal we extract from the earth. But as soon as one shifts the scale to, say, the millions of years during which coal developed from ancient organisms, matter does begin to appear as dynamic and "vibrant." Likewise, in the spatial domain, reconstructing an object's supply chain (as Mandel does in the snow globe passage) reveals how the physical geography of our planet places significant constraints on human production and consumption. Thinking about these vast spatio-temporal scale does not cancel out our ethical responsibilities, but it places them in a broader context and allows us to better appreciate the stakes of the crisis human societies are facing. In other words, highlighting the efficacy of matter is not an end in itself, but only a move in a long game of decentering anthropocentric assumptions – a game whose ultimate goal is to better come to grips with human-nonhuman entanglement, including our ethical responsibilities vis-à-vis material environments and their nonhuman inhabitants.

There are, as Clark and Woods highlight, significant discontinuities between these scales of reality, and these discontinuities matter in ethical terms, too. The concept of materiality is well positioned to probe these discontinuities, because of how it can work across scales. After all, the human body itself is material. Physical things afford direct, human-scale interaction; they are accessible to the senses. Yet their impact can ripple across scales, just as the plastic bag I used for grocery shopping today will vastly outlive me, or – to move from the macro to the micro – end up in the fish I eat, in the form of microplastic particles.[9] Literary narrative is well suited to foster this imagination of material things – or our own body – as hovering between scalar levels.[10] When this imagination is achieved, readers are afforded a "glocal epiphany" – that is, unique insight into the convergence between local and global scales of reality, but also into the tensions and gaps that separate them.

9 Morton has coined a useful term for these objects that exist across scales: he calls them "hyperobjects," adding that "these materials confound our limited, fixated, self-oriented frameworks" (2010, 19).

10 As observed by one of this chapter's anonymous readers, materiality was already an important concern in Viktor Shklovsky's (1965) seminal account of defamiliarization as a key effect of literature. I won't be able to pursue this line of argument in the present chapter due to space limitations, but it is certainly a worthwhile perspective.

The term "glocal" originates in business jargon and entered scholarly discussions in the 1990s, largely thanks to Roland Robertson's work in sociology (see, e.g., Robertson 1994). The term serves as a conceptual means of integrating the opposite impulses of localism and globalisation (see Roudometof 2016). The glocal is not to be understood – at least in the context of this chapter – as a seamless blend; on the contrary, the two narratives I will discuss over the next sections are as interested in integrating spatiotemporal scales as in exploring their areas of disjunction and divergence. Further, this clash of global and local processes is anchored to material elements that travel, physically or symbolically, in the narrative and expose the limits of an understanding of reality grounded exclusively in the human scale. These elements – a diary, in *A Tale for the Time Being*, and birthmarks and the "cloud atlas" analogy in Mitchell's novel – provide glocal epiphanies through their material appearance and metaphorical vagaries. Before turning to these case studies, it bears repeating that both glocal epiphanies and the foregrounding of nonhuman materiality are possibilities for narrative, and they can be deployed jointly (as in the texts I discuss below). However, not all narratives that revolve around material things aspire to question anthropocentric assumptions – indeed, in many cases (as in Carey's *Autobiographies*), they serve to reinforce such assumptions.

4 "The Climate Changes in Her Own Body": Entangled Lives in *A Tale for the Time Being*

A cursory glance at the table of contents of Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* reveals a long list of chapters monotonously titled "Nao" and "Ruth," in alternating order. Nao and Ruth are the two protagonists of the novel: the former is a Japanese teenager struggling with social isolation and bullying, the latter a writer living a secluded life on Vancouver Island, off the coast of British Columbia. Ruth is clearly an autobiographically inspired figure, who shares first name, profession, and domicile with the novel's author (who divides her time between British Columbia and the United States). Via the two protagonists, the novel stages an intercultural encounter between Japan and North America that also reflects the author's Japanese heritage. Buddhist notions of time and selfhood – particularly through the works of the Zen philosopher Dōgen – play an important role in connecting Nao and Ruth. However, their encounter is never realised in the novel's plot – that is, the two protagonists never meet in actuality. Instead, it is a material object that brings them together: Nao's diary washes up on a beach on Vancouver Island, where Ruth picks it up by chance. As "Ruth" and "Nao" chapters take turns in the

course of the novel's four parts, the reader is thus offered alternating insight into the teenager's struggles and the fictional writer's responses to them.

The beginning of the first "Ruth" chapter is of particular significance because of how it frames the diary's discovery vis-à-vis rampant plastic pollution in the Pacific Ocean. This is the chapter's beginning:

> A tiny sparkle caught Ruth's eye, a small glint of refracted sunlight angling out from beneath a massive tangle of drying bull kelp, which the sea had heaved up onto the sand at full tide. She mistook it for the sheen of a dying jellyfish and almost walked right by it. The beaches were overrun with jellyfish these days, the monstrous red stinging kind that looked like wounds along the shoreline.
>
> But something made her stop. She leaned over and nudged the heap of kelp with the toe of her sneaker then poked it with a stick. Untangling the whiplike fronds, she dislodged enough to see that what glistened underneath was not a dying sea jelly, but something plastic, a bag. Not surprising. The ocean was full of plastic. She dug a bit more, until she could lift the bag up by its corner. It was heavier than she expected, a scarred plastic freezer bag, encrusted with barnacles that spread across its surface like a rash. (Ozeki 2013, 8)

The bag, Ruth soon finds out, contains Nao's diary – the first part of which the reader has read in the novel's opening chapter. This object is explicitly linked to the accumulation of plastic in the Earth's oceans. This is a global phenomenon that emerges, complexly, from patterns of human production and consumption. The proliferation of jellyfish hints at a disruption of the ocean's ecosystem possibly caused by global warming or other anthropogenic interventions (although this is not spelled out by the text). Moreover, the plastic bag is physically enclosed by "whiplike fronds" of kelp – a powerful image of human-nonhuman entanglement or "enmeshment," to use again Morton's terminology. Ruth initially mistakes it for a jellyfish, which suggests the impossibility of drawing a sharp line between natural and man-made entities in times of environmental crisis. The confusion is further underlined by Ozeki's similes, which ascribe human, bodily qualities to nonhuman animals and objects: the jellyfish "looked like wounds," the barnacles are scattered "like a rash" on the bag's surface. This metaphorical traffic destabilises everyday notions of embodiment, blurring the boundary between human corporeality and the materiality of the nonhuman world.[11] Metaphorical language thus brings together a more-than-human, planetary phenomenon caused by human activity (plastic pollution) and the intimacy of human embodiment – more specifically, a diseased, damaged body. Yet Ozeki's style does not

11 In Caracciolo (2021, Ch. 6), which is based on collaborative work with Andrei Ionescu and Ruben Fransoo, I discuss the role of metaphorical language in channelling human-nonhuman enmeshment.

completely collapse the differentiation between things and bodies, the personal/local scale of this encounter with the diary and the global dimension of environmental devastation: the gap between these scalar levels is uneasily bridged by the similes, but it cannot be completely eliminated.

As the novel progresses, Nao's diary comes to signify another large-scale, planetary phenomenon in addition to plastic pollution: Ruth speculates, plausibly, that it may have been swept up by the catastrophic tsunami that hit northern Japan in 2011 and dragged by oceanic currents (or "gyres") all the way to the Canadian island. The diary is thus doubly linked to the planetary, even if remains tied to the human body, and primarily to the body of its fictional reader, Ruth: "The diary once again felt warm in her hands, which she knew had less to do with any spooky quality in the book and everything to do with the climate changes in her own body" (2013, 37). The phrase "climate changes" cannot be coincidental here: the climate – a large-scale phenomenon per excellence – is internalised and presented as a bodily affect that connects Ruth and Nao, despite their spatial and cultural distance. Indeed, throughout the novel, the body continues to mediate between the physical diary – with its material history – and the global scale. Through her long-distance dialogue with Nao, Ruth comes close to developing what Daisy Hildyard (2017) would call a "second body" – an extension of our bodily self that reflects the way in which planetary phenomena are impacted by human activities (for instance, the plastic pollution foregrounded by Ozeki's novel).

In the encounter between scales, a sense of discontinuity comes to the fore, emphasised by the physical separation between Ruth and Nao. The discontinuity also ties in with a gap in knowledge: even as this particular diary was recovered and turned into a "tale" by Ruth, so much else is lost as individual human histories are affected by planetary phenomena. This point is perhaps best illustrated by Ruth's meditation on mediatized images depicting the devastation wrought by the tsunami:

> The tidal wave, observed, collapses into tiny particles, each one containing a story:
> – a mobile phone, ringing deep inside a mountain of sludge and debris;
> – a ring of soldiers, bowing to a body they've flagged;
> – a medical worker clad in full radiation hazmat, wanding a bare-faced baby who is squirming in his mother's arms;
> – a line of toddlers, waiting quietly for their turn to be tested.
>
> These images, a minuscule few representing the inconceivable many, eddy and grow old, degrading with each orbit around the gyre, slowly breaking down into razor-sharp fragments and brightly colored shards. Like plastic confetti, they're drawn into the gyre's becalmed centre, the garbage patch of history and time. The gyre's memory is all the stuff that we've forgotten. (Ozeki 2013, 114)

Typographically and symbolically, the enumeration of images disrupts the progression of Ruth's narrative by evoking *other* stories that could have been told about the tsunami in addition to Nao's. The diary found by Ruth is only a fragment from the vast debris produced by environmental devastation – a devastation, as the novel reminds us, caused jointly by the nonhuman agency of the tsunami and by human recklessness, because houses and even a nuclear plant (the one in Fukushima) had been built where they shouldn't have.[12] The diary connects the local and the planetary, then, but in doing so it also highlights the magnitude of the impact of man-made materiality on the planet. With its list of easily forgotten mediatic images, the passage evokes the shortcomings of human memory compared to the metaphorical "memory" of the ocean, in which nothing material is lost.[13] Despite bridging Ruth, Nao, and more-than-human scales, the diary also reveals the fault lines between these levels, as well as the ethical and epistemic failures of human societies and governments that are complicit in environmental disasters such as plastic pollution or the consequences of the 2011 tsunami.

The diary represents, then, what I call a glocal epiphany: an uneasy emergence of global phenomena (in this case, environmental threats) on the local scale that is favoured by narrative representation. The emergence is uneasy because it doesn't work towards a perfect blending of the local and the global but rather discloses significant tensions and gaps – perhaps most dramatically in *A Tale for the Time Being*, the fact that Ruth (and the book's readers) never find out whether Nao survived the tsunami or not. Just as discontinuities come to the fore in this scalar encounter, so does an impression of nonlinearity. Let us not forget that the novel stages Ruth's and Nao's lives as materially and narratively intertwined: instead of presenting Nao's diary and then Ruth's responses to it sequentially, Ozeki decides to shift back and forth between them in a way that suggests interpersonal and emotional connection even if the two characters never meet in reality. Narrative linearity, as I argued above, tends to derive from the centrality of a protagonist's desires and intentions, which drive the progression of the story. Here, however, it is the peculiar dialogue *in absentia* between two protagonists that takes centre stage. This dialogue is not directly coupled with the characters' intentions, because it is explicitly framed as a

12 See this passage: "In towns up and down the coast of Japan, stone markers were found on hillsides, engraved with ancient warnings: Do not build your homes below this point! Some of the warning stones were more than six centuries old. A few had been shifted by the tsunami, but most had remained safely out of its reach" (Ozeki 2013, 114).

13 "Ocean memory" is a metaphor actually in use in oceanography, where it refers to the long-term impact of past climatological events (see, e.g., Old and Haines 2006).

coincidence, a chance encounter determined by the circulation of a material object – the diary – across the Pacific Ocean.[14] Further complicating the linearity of the novel, the rotation of "Ruth" and "Nao" chapters gives rise to a sense of dance-like circularity in the form of the narrative, which echoes the circularity of oceanic "gyres" (or currents) themselves – a point explicitly thematized by the novel.[15] The nonlinear relationship between local and global scales in times of climate crisis is thus effectively captured by the way in which Ozeki's plot weaves together two storylines that affect each other only through the mediation of a physical object and its material history. This narrative structure also contributes to the glocal epiphany at the heart of *A Tale for the Time Being*.

5 "Birthmarks an' Comets'n'all": Rethinking Human-Nonhuman Relations in *Cloud Atlas*

If Ozeki's novel disrupts linearity by intertwining two lives, David Mitchell paints on a much broader canvas in *Cloud Atlas*. The novel contains six autonomous story lines arranged in a Russian doll-like scheme: the first story is interrupted in mid-sentence on page 39 of my edition, with the second half of that story closing the novel; the second story continues in the novel's penultimate chapter, the third in the third-to-last, and so on. Only the sixth story is presented without interruptions, in the novel's sixth and "central" chapter. These stories span multiple centuries, from the 19th century of the first and last chapters ("The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing") to the futuristic setting of chapters 5–7 ("An Orison of Sonmi-45") and 6 ("Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After"). Mitchell's style deftly adapts to the historical periods covered by the novel by mimicking various genres, including the travelogue of the "Pacific Journal," the Künstlerroman, the thriller, and science fiction. Likewise, the spatial setting changes with each chapter, covering a significant portion of the globe, from New Zealand to San Francisco, from Europe to East Asia. The global reach of the novel is accompanied by a meditation on the violence inflicted by Western civilization on both the nonhuman world and Indigenous peoples. This commentary is perhaps most evident in the first storyline, with its focus on colonial relations in the Pacific, and in the sixth story ("Sloosha's Crossin'"), which is set on the Big Island

14 In Caracciolo (2020), I call this type of narrative structure "object-oriented plotting."
15 See Caracciolo (2021, Ch. 1) for more on nonlinear forms in narrative, including loop-like circularity.

of Hawaii after technological modernity has fallen under the weight of environmental exploitation: "Old Uns tripped their own Fall" (2004, 272), we read in this section, where the unconventional spelling and grammar reflect a possible future evolution of the English language.

The juxtaposition of multiple story lines puts pressure on narrative linearity by making it difficult (but certainly not impossible) for the reader to keep track of the various characters' goals and situations, especially when a story resumes hundreds of pages later. Yet the nonlinearity of Mitchell's novel runs much deeper, and has to do with the specific way in which the stories are interlinked. The diegetic justification for this sequence of stories is that, in each chapter, the protagonist encounters a manuscript containing the previous chapter, or sometimes its audiovisual adaptation: for instance, the narrator of "Letters from Zedelghem" (the book's second chapter, set in Belgium in 1931) "[comes] across a curious dismembered volume" (2004, 64), which turns out to be the "Pacific Journal" of the first chapter. What is peculiar about this sequence is that, as Heather Hicks points out, the various texts discovered by the characters "have little effect on the action" (2016, 74). Put otherwise, neither the discovery of these manuscripts nor the act of reading them have a significant influence on each protagonist's predicament. The texts encountered by the characters merely function as cross-references, grounding the book's overall structure – and therefore increasing the reader's awareness of Mitchell's narrative technique – without contributing to the novel's plotting. Recall the point I made above about the link between linearity and the protagonist's goals and intentions, which tend to steer narrative progression (or the temporal-causal dynamic of plot): in *Cloud Atlas* we have a network of protagonists, but the linkage between them remains extremely loose insofar as the points of convergence – the references to previous chapters – never help the characters achieve their goals.[16] The nonlinearity evoked by Mitchell's novel thus points to the breakdown of human intentionality as the structuring principle behind narrative progression: the overall Russian doll-like form of *Cloud Atlas* is *not* meaningfully grounded in the characters' mental states.

As human intentionality ceases to be the plot's guiding principle, the stories of *Cloud Atlas* are brought together by the suggestion of a mysterious connection between the six protagonists. This connection is materially inscribed on their bodies: all of them have a comet-shaped birthmark on the shoulder blade. This

16 David Bordwell (2008, Ch. 7) discusses under the rubric of "network narratives" films that deploy a network of characters connected by coincidence rather than strict causation. I would argue that *Cloud Atlas* constitutes a particularly radical instance of network narrative.

detail, which is often mentioned in passing in the novel and never fully explained, evokes notions of reincarnation or metempsychosis: all the protagonists, living in different places and at different times, may possibly host the same soul. This is made explicit by one of the characters in the postapocalyptic "Sloosha's Crossin'" episode, in which we read that Zachry "b'liefed Meronym the Prescient was his presh b'loved Sonmi, yay, he 'sisted it, he said he knowed it all by birthmarks an' comets'n'all" (2004, 309) – Meronym and Sonmi being the protagonists of "Sloosha's Crossin'" and "An Orison of Sonmi-45," respectively. It is, of course, not a coincidence that the birthmark is shaped like a comet, because it points to the intervention of nonhuman (in this case, cosmic) forces in human history. The same is true for the other material element connecting the six characters and their story lines: the titular metaphor of a "cloud atlas," which emerges frequently and compares Mitchell's protagonists to the materiality of the weather (drifting clouds). In "Letters from Zedelghem" (chapters 2 and 10), *Cloud Atlas Sextet* is the title of a polyphonic piece where "each solo [in the first part] is interrupted by its successor: in the second [part], each interruption is recontinued, in order" (2004, 445) – an apt description of the novel's structure. In "Sloosha's Crossin'," the artistic vision of the sextet turns into a sense of supernatural connection between human subjectivity and the nonhuman world: "Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an' tho' a cloud's shape nor hue nor size don't stay the same, it's still a cloud an' so is a soul . . . . Only Sonmi the east an' the west an' the compass an' the atlas, yay, only the atlas o' clouds" (2004, 308). The nonlinear structure of *Cloud Atlas* is thus based on mysterious resonances between human bodies and nonhuman materiality (the comet and the clouds). Such resonances bring together the six protagonists while uncoupling the narrative progression from an overarching human intentionality.

It is important to keep in mind that the protagonists are distributed in space and time: the birthmarks and the "cloud atlas" metaphor serve as glocal epiphanies, bridging the characters' bodies – and their individual story lines – with the planetary scale. If *A Tale for the Time Being* uses a single material object, Nao's diary, to bring together two characters on either side of the Pacific, *Cloud Atlas* deploys a multiplicity of stylistic and diegetic cues to suggest material convergence between the planetary and local scales and embodied experience.[17] This emergence of planetary connections across the story lines also discloses conceptual tensions and epistemic gaps. Most straightforwardly, the exact nature of the

17 This approach also draws attention to the materiality of the book, *Cloud Atlas*, readers are holding in their hands. In fact, Astrid Bracke's (2018, Ch. 1) ecocritical reading of *Cloud Atlas* brings out its metafictional dimension – how its material presentation offers metacommentary on the novel as the Western narrative genre par excellence.

characters' linkage is never spelled out: as the most distinctly fantastical element of the novel, the relationships between the protagonists' "souls" remains uncertain throughout, even as the whole narrative structure hinges on it.

Also significant is that the supernatural connectedness of this "atlas of souls" is meant to oppose another kind of connectedness: namely, the economic integratedness of a globalised world, which – as Mitchell's chapters highlight repeatedly – depends on capitalist greed and Western colonialist practices. "In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction" (2004, 508), we read on the novel's last page. These stakes are brought out clearly by the postapocalyptic setting of "Sloosha's Crossin'," in which human communities have barely survived an existential crisis brought about by the West's destructiveness. In different ways, the six protagonists work against "selfishness" in their individual story lines, embracing sympathy for the dispossessed and resisting oppression at the hands of the ruling class. The characters' supernatural bond thus serves as an alternative to the ruinous integration of capitalism, which may appear to connect economically but actually creates unbridgeable rifts between those in power and disenfranchised communities. By appealing to prescientific ideas of reincarnation, Mitchell's glocal epiphanies offer what Hubert Zapf calls "imaginative counter-discourse" (2001, 93): they envisage an alternative way of thinking about human intersubjectivity as well as human-nonhuman relations, one that rejects – through its appeal to the fantastic and the supernatural – the devastation wrought by capitalism. Thus, even as they bridge the gap between the individual and the planetary, these glocal epiphanies do not sideline human ethical responsibilities in the name of an undifferentiated concept of "materiality"; on the contrary, Mitchell's narrative strategies deploy the materiality (of bodies and of nonhuman entities, such as the comet and the clouds) to reveal the colonial violence inherent in the capitalist system. As these tensions and gaps emerge, the nonlinearity of this *Cloud Atlas* destabilises faith in linear ideas of progress and economic growth, which are shown to lead straight to societal collapse.

6 Conclusion

My discussion of scale in this chapter has brought into view two concepts that can help us come to grips with the relationship between planetary and local phenomena: discontinuity and nonlinearity. As Clark and Woods have shown in the field of ecocriticism, going from the scale of human bodies in interaction to the scale of vast planetary events does not involve a smooth conceptual progression but rather a number of divides and tensions that make the global difficult to imagine or

experience as a totality. The global, in this sense, is profoundly different from the self-contained snow globe from which this chapter took its cue. The ruptures in our thinking of the global are an offshoot of its nonlinearity, a concept that denotes the way in which a dynamic system adapts to changing conditions. In short, nonlinearity entails that the planetary scale is more than the sum of its parts. Throughout this chapter, climate change has served as my main example of a planetary phenomenon that arises nonlinearly from physical processes (greenhouse gas emissions leading to global warming, etc.), socio-economic biases, and cultural factors in, especially, the Global North. Not only does climate change crisscross binary distinctions between "natural" and anthropogenic processes, but it is a phenomenon that perhaps more than any other highlights the disjunctions between everyday life and the cultural imagination of the globe (where "cultural imagination" includes, but is not limited to, scientific models of the climate crisis).

While the discontinuities and nonlinearity of the global elude everyday experience, literary narrative is uniquely capable of implementing strategies that make these concepts tangible. Crucially, as I have argued in *Narrating the Mesh* (2021), this operation involves a foregrounding of formal devices, such as nonlinear plotting, that break with the conventions of Western narrative genres – particularly the novelistic bias towards an individual protagonist and teleological progression. My main focus here has been on how literary fiction can provide "glocal epiphanies," which function as concrete sites for the evocation of the planetary scale within the fabric of characters' local, embodied experiences. The glocal doesn't involve a seamless integration of scales but rather the foregrounding of tensions that can be extremely productive for narrative and for readers' interpretive meaning-making. In both my examples of glocal epiphanies, Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* and Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, the epiphany is tied to a focus on materiality. The former novel follows the physical circulation of an object (a diary) that unites the two main characters despite their geographical and cultural distance. In *Cloud Atlas*, six story lines are brought together by two material elements, the first of which is thematic, the second stylistic: a shared mark on the protagonists' bodies – the comet-shaped birthmark – and the parallel between meteorological phenomena (the clouds) and their seemingly incorporeal souls. Ozeki's and Mitchell's works are here representative of a larger category of "Anthropocene fictions" (Trexler 2015) that deploy materiality to disrupt binaries between human and natural processes and channel the scale of the ecological crisis.

Materiality has been extensively theorised in New Materialism and related nonhuman-oriented philosophies. However, the New Materialist extension of agency to the nonhuman has been criticised for diverting attention from meaningful political action. Andreas Malm reasons: "If matter has agency in new materialism, then, it is because everything and anything can be said to have it" (2018, 44).

For Malm, the New Materialist notion of agency is so vague that it fails to capture the way in which human action – unlike inanimate processes such as rising sea levels – always implies ethical accountability. Without entering the philosophical debate directly, the literary narratives I have explored in this chapter demonstrate that the interest in materiality need not elide distinctions between human responsibility and the workings of nonhuman things and processes. In both glocal epiphanies, the shortcomings of political decision-making and the Western imagination of the nonhuman remain well-delineated. Indeed, the clash of local and planetary scales draws attention to the failure of short-term thinking (e.g., building homes in areas exposed to tsunamis, in Ozeki's Japan) and Western notions of linear technological progress (particularly in the postapocalyptic chapter of Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*). In both novels, the critique of linear concepts is enacted by the multilinear and decentralised form of the plot – a strategy that holds particular promise vis-à-vis literary engagements with the climate crisis and with planetary processes more generally.

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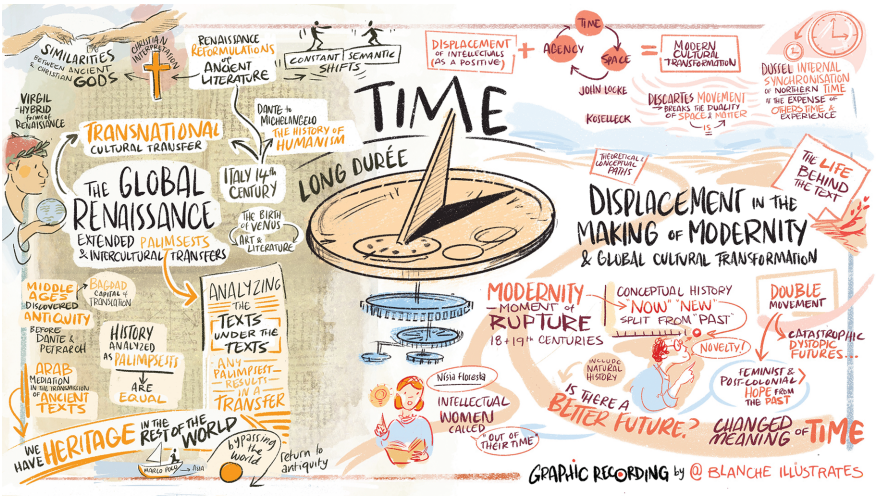
TIME
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TRANSNATIONAL CULTURAL TRANSFER
VIRGIL = HYBRID FIGURE OF RENAISSANCE
SIMILARITIES BETWEEN ANCIENT & CHRISTIAN GODS
CHRISTIAN REINTERPRETATION
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DANTE to MICHELANGELO THE HISTORY OF HUMANISM
ITALY 14th CENTURY
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MIDDLE AGES DISCOVERED ANTIQUITY BEFORE DANTE & PETRARCH
RADICAL CHANGE IN TRANSLATION
HISTORY ANALYZED AS PALIMPSESTS
ARE EQUAL
ARAB MEDIATION IN THE TRANSMISSION OF ANCIENT TEXTS
ANALYZING THE TEXTS UNDER THE TEXTS
ANY PALIMPSEST RESULTS IN A TRANSFER
WE HAVE HERITAGE IN THE REST OF THE WORLD
BYPASSING THE WORLD
RETURN to ANTIQUITY
DISPLACEMENT OF INTELLECTUALS (AS A POSITIVE)
+
TIME
AGENCY
SPACE
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MODERN CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION
JOHN LOCKE
KOSELLECK
DESCARTES MOVEMENT BREAKS THE DUALITY OF SPACE & MATTER
IS
DUBBEL INTERNAL SYNCHRONISATION OF NORTHERN TIME AT THE EXPENSE OF OBJECTIVE TIME & EXPERIENCE
THEORETICAL / CONCEPTUAL PATHS
THE LIFE BEHIND THE TEXT
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