

The Climate of the Real: Climate Realism and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Virginia
May, 2019

Fiction which depicts climate change has, for roughly a decade, traveled under the sign of “cli-fi,” a term coined by the journalist, author and activist Dan Bloom (Brady), and a term which a group of prominent environmental humanities scholars and writers have referred to as “the awkward label ‘cli-fi,’” [which] “has emerged as a descriptor” of such fiction (Herold, Farzin, and Gaines 609). There is something essential to the current status of the genre in the perception that the name for it is a little bit off, a touch clunky: there is a correspondence between cli-fi’s phonetic ungainliness and its questionable (or at least questioned) aesthetic relevance. Part of this is the obvious rhyme with sci-fi, and all of the unthinking associations of that genre with potboilers and mediocrity which the rhyme necessarily calls to mind. But there are deeper issues at play in cli-fi’s awkward position, having to do with the nature of what it is required to depict.

Towards the beginning of his nonfiction work on this subject, *The Great Derangement*, the novelist Amitav Ghosh relates having been caught in Delhi during the first tornado to strike that city in “recorded meteorological history” (14); indeed, of witnessing the cone forming. In the aftermath of this wildly improbable occurrence, Ghosh speculated on what he would think, as a reader, if he were to encounter such a scenario in a novel by a contemporary writer, coming to the conclusion that he would disbelieve in the plausibility of the event:

In reflecting on this, I find myself asking, What would I make of such a scene were I to come across it in a novel written by someone else? I suspect that my response would be one of incredulity; I would be inclined to think that the scene was a contrivance of last resort. Surely only a writer whose imaginative resources were utterly depleted would fall back on a situation of such extreme improbability. (Ghosh 16)

Because climate change brings with it an adjustment to a new statistical normal, we find ourselves bearing witness to events which, while they may come to be regarded in the near future as par for the course, seem to us in the present to be wildly aberrant. To take just one example, the UN's World Meteorological Organization pointed out in a 2018 report that the 20 warmest years on record have been in the past 22 years, and that the past four years—2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018—are the four warmest years on record (“2018 set to be fourth hottest year on record: UN”).

The artistic depiction of such aberrations, and the crises they foment, carries with it some of the stigma associated with violations of the audience's willing suspension of disbelief, such as are commonly met with in artistic forms of lesser prestige than “serious literary fiction”:

fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals: the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction. It is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel. (Ghosh 7)

And yet, Ghosh later acknowledges that there are significant exceptions to this rule, prominent among them Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (Ghosh 73). *Flight Behavior* is the story of Dellarobia Turnbow, young mother of two children, Preston and Cordelia Turnbow, trapped, in both a rural Tennessee town where everyone knows everyone else's business, and in a passionless (on her side) marriage to Burley “Cub” Turnbow II. The novel begins with

Dellarobia walking out to the woods on her mother- and father-in-law's property (where she and Cub and the children live); she has arranged a meeting in the woods with a man with whom she has been flirting obsessively in an effort to escape from the draining responsibilities of parenthood and the ennui of her relationship with Cub. When she arrives at the location where they had arranged to meet, a spot overlooking a low valley in the forest, she finds her potential lover absent and the trees draped in an inexplicable, almost otherworldly natural phenomenon which she at first does not know how to interpret: "Trees turned to fire, a burning bush" (Kingsolver 14). Scared, and inspired to re-commit herself to her domestic life in spite of its shortcomings, she flees the scene and flies to her children. Ultimately, she will learn that the curious coloration of the trees was a coating of monarch butterflies, which have come to overwinter in Tennessee rather than in their usual Mexico. As Dellarobia and the reader will learn, they have done so, in all likelihood, because of climate change: their native Mexico is too hot in winter, and Tennessee, heating up proportionately, is just hot enough in winter, to have attracted them (if not yet to accommodate them). The remainder of the novel will deal with the fallout, economic, interpersonal, spiritual, of this consequence of climate change in Dellarobia's life and in the lives of many of the denizens of her native Feathertown.

Kingsolver's text is arguably one of the most literarily significant examples of cli-fi yet written,¹ and as such is an excellent test case for exploring the aesthetic, cultural, and political issues which confront this burgeoning genre. This thesis will center on *Flight Behavior*, and began as an effort to answer a simple question: what makes *Flight Behavior* an acknowledged exception to Ghosh's rule? This is not an evaluative question (i.e. a question of the sort "What

¹ Other contenders for this title, based on the prevalence of references in the research literature to them as exemplary works in the genre, include Margaret Atwood's *MADDADDAM* trilogy (2003-2007), Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010), and Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013)

makes *Flight Behavior* the best, or a singularly good, piece of cli-fi?”), but a descriptive one, which might be more meaningfully paraphrased or restated as “What makes *Flight Behavior* an atypical piece of cli-fi, in which the depiction of climate change sits comfortably alongside the hallmarks of what we are accustomed to regarding as ‘serious literary fiction’?”

My answer was that *Flight Behavior* is an example, perhaps the first, of a new hybrid subgenre of cli-fi, a blend of established literary realism and cli-fi, for which there is perhaps no more straightforward designation than climate realism. I will begin this thesis with an overview of the concept of climate realism, entailing a discussion of its philosophical and historical underpinnings, and of rhetorical modes and subgenres relevant to designating the novel as literary realism. In its climate realist hybridity, *Flight Behavior* goes against the grain of the two genres of which it is the offspring. Literary realism does not typically depict the apocalyptic; cli-fi does not typically dwell with the attentiveness of a Balzac or an Austen on the prices of consumer goods. In cutting across genres in this way, Kingsolver’s text manages to convey to its reader something startling and vital about the way that climate change makes itself felt in intimate and domestic spaces even in the (relatively) prosperous Global North. This discussion (of realism in depictions of climate change) will also entail engagement with ecocritic Timothy Morton’s notion of the “hyperobject” and of climate change as an instance of same. This notion sheds light on what might be said to be a paradox inherent in realist representations of climate change; to wit, how does one “realistically” represent an entity which, at an ontological level, resists comprehension, let alone representation? The resolution of this issue (at least the resolution of this issue arrived at in Kingsolver’s text) will lead the discussion to engagement with the historical (and in particular the nineteenth-century) inflections of “realism,” all of which will foreground the central argument of the thesis, anchored in a series of close readings in the

novel. I will argue that *Flight Behavior*, in its climate realism, breaks new ground for cli-fi and communicates something vital about the phenomenology and collective psychology of climate change response in the Global North. Specifically, *Flight Behavior*'s climate realism is a uniquely accomplished depiction, at the inward level, of our collective refusal to engage with the realities of climate change, a phenomenon that I will refer to as climate denialism (in a highly idiosyncratic sense which I will define when it is introduced). I will conclude by addressing the implications of *Flight Behavior*'s cultural-systemic account of our climate psychology, both for readers and for the future of the genre of cli-fi.

I. Climate Realism

The term “realism,” when it refers to a movement or descriptive categorization in the realm of art and literature, has historically had, like many if not most such terms, infinitely more referents than admit of easy encapsulation or summary. Rather than attempting a rigorous definition of the term as such, I will, keeping in mind Wittgenstein's injunctions to look to use rather than meaning, simply make explicit the senses in which I use it.

Part of my meaning is quite simple and intuitive: by “climate realism” I mean representing climate change in fiction accurately. This is realism in the sense of “a method or an attitude in art and literature—at first an exceptional accuracy of representation, later a commitment to describing real events and showing things as they actually exist” (Williams 199). It is an intuitive, common-sense way of understanding the term “climate realism,” though actually practicing it proves to present a unique set of aesthetic and intellectual challenges.

Superficially, this might seem to be the most common-sense approach to representation imaginable, but is far from an obvious commitment for art. Such a method or attitude is in certain respects like heliocentrism: something which we take for granted, but which, historically speaking, is in many respects a novel development. It looks for all the world as though the sun is a diminutive orb bobbing happily along around us; likewise, the countries of the imagination were populated for a long while by ghosts and trolls. It takes a concerted intellectual and cognitive effort to practice realism of this sort, in the same way that it takes diligent application to progress from visually representing human beings as either stick figures or caricatures to representing them in the manner in which Ingres might.

Realism in this first sense is a hallmark of the canonical novel as it came to be written during the nineteenth-century. This is the photo-realism of a Dostoevsky, who takes the trouble to count out the 730 paces between one Petersburg apartment and another all for the sake of being able to compose a sentence such as the following: “He had not far to go; he even knew how many paces it was from his own door—exactly seven hundred and thirty” (Dostoevsky 3). This is the documentarian’s photo-realism found in Proust (perhaps the swan song of such realism, straddling the form and formalism of the nineteenth century and the experimentation of modernism), who, according to his biographer Edmund White, “would fearlessly travel across the city in search of a detail and would think nothing of waking up a family after midnight in order to quiz the members about an ancient anecdote or to visit the headwaiter at the Ritz in order to go over a piece of time-honored gossip. He wrote literally thousands of letters, many of them to obtain precise information about a certain dress worn in the 1890s or a famous witticism uttered during the Belle Epoque” (133).

This type of realism, the realism of rigorous mimesis with respect to climate change, could mean many different things in many different literary contexts. It would depend on one's focal range, so to speak: how a novelist would depict the climate change equivalent of Dostoevsky's seven-hundred and thirty steps would depend, in large measure, on where and when the novel in question was set. Climate change's consequences will be experienced unevenly across the globe: some ecosystems will be impacted much sooner, and more significantly, than others, sea ice biomes and mountain biomes being among the first and hardest hit, to take just a pair of examples ("Climate Impacts on Ecosystems"). Documenting the physical, landscape-level impacts of climate change in a "realistic" way will be a very different enterprise depending on where and when that documentation takes place.

Flight Behavior constitutes climate realism in this documentarian's sense in several obvious ways: it centers on the sudden relocation of overwintering colonies of monarch butterflies from Mexico to a small Tennessee town, events which, while they have no factual or journalistic basis, Kingsolver was inspired to put at the center of her novel after lengthy consultation with the renowned entomologist and monarch butterfly expert Lincoln P. Brower and his wife Linda Fink (Kingsolver 435). It is also, in its fine details, climatologically realistic in a straightforward journalistic sense: it's set at a time very near the present, in a small town east of the Mississippi River, and it's always raining². Unseasonable and unwieldy winter rains drive through the text, reminding reader and, as Dellarobia's ecological awareness expands over the course of the novel, protagonist that a hotter atmosphere means more ocean water evaporating, and more of that evaporated water dousing the mainland. This is the sort of weather intimately

² The unseasonable rains are almost omnipresent, but for specific passages where the rains are particularly pregnant with meaning see Kingsolver 6, 155, and 171

familiar to residents of the eastern seaboard of late: as I write, in early 2019 after the wettest year on record in the state of Virginia, the novel felt true to my own experience of climate (Holladay “2018: Wettest year on record”).

Much cli-fi would seem to giddily eschew realism of this variety (in particular the cli-fi which sits squarely in the region of overlap of the Venn diagram created by the interplay of the circles labeled “cli-fi” and “sci-fi”). This is cli-fi on the order of the 2004 film *The Day After Tomorrow*, of skyscraper-high storm surge waves and thousand-year droughts. Such cli-fi shades over into the realms of dystopian fiction and disaster porn, and is the sort of literature-of-climate-change which Ghosh has in mind when he asserts that a great deal of work depicting climate change is dismissed out of hand as lacking in intellectual merit.

Yet even such cli-fi may nevertheless be “realistic” in the mimetic sense, because realism in the mimetic sense entails much more than just thorough-going exactitude in writing about the weather in the locales featured in one’s text. It is important to note that this type of realism, at its best, is not a gratuitous fixation on inconsequential minutiae for the sake of a mad ideal of total verisimilitude: Dostoevsky counted out those paces between one Petersburg apartment and another because he wanted to depict a character who would do the same, who was obsessively meditating on a murder and wanted to know every slightest detail about the circumstances within which he would commit it. This over-scrupulous attentiveness to external reality on the part of the novelist was done in service to a sophisticated psychological representation of over-scrupulousness.

In a somewhat parallel way, the impulse towards realistic representation, in the sense of rigorous mimesis, can be met with even in fiction that looks on the surface like the wildest and most speculative sci-fi. An excellent case in point is Paolo Bacigalupi’s novel *The Water Knife*.

The novel, set in a near future American Southwest in which climate change-induced droughts have made water an exceedingly precious resource, is readily identifiable as cli-fi and, to an extent, as dystopian fiction and as sci-fi. It features as its protagonist Angel Velasquez, an assassin and spy in the service of a municipal water authority as large and powerful as any shadowy transnational corporation.

This sounds like a description of the pulpiest of pulp fiction, yet none of these characteristics constitute an argument against the potential “realism” of Bacigalupi’s text. This is especially so in light of the near-certainty on the part of climate scientists that climate change *will* bring about deluges and droughts the likes of which humankind has been accustomed to meet with only in myth and nightmare (indeed, is already doing so, in particular in California and the American Southwest), and the well-documented sociopolitical consequences of such climatological developments and changes. Among those sociopolitical consequences of climate change, there are already narratives not dissimilar to Angel’s:

In a moment of candor, the weapons giant Raytheon explained, “Expanded business opportunities are likely to arise as consumer behavior and needs change in response to climate change.” Those opportunities include not just more demand for the company’s privatized disaster response services but also “demand for its military products and services as security concerns may arise as a result of droughts, floods, and storm events occur as a result of climate change.” This is worth remembering whenever doubts creep in about the urgency of this crisis: the private militias are already mobilizing. (Klein 9)

In light of such candid assessments on the part of private military contractors themselves, Bacigalupi's vision of a hit man taking out interested parties in bitter natural resource disputes comes to seem, there may be no other word for it, realistic. All the more so given that the novel presents its subject matter with a canny undercurrent of metanarrative in the form of a character, Lucy Monroe, who reports on the events of the novel's world in such a way that it provides a kind of running evaluative commentary on the believability of the events taking place:

Angel was pleased that Lucy had gotten even a little bit of his secret world right, but collapse porn was a dime a dozen, really.

The second book, though. That was something else entirely. The second book was deep.

A murder book. A body book.

Lucy hadn't written anything for years after the tearjerker, and she'd changed as writer [sic]. This was Phoenix after everyone stopped giving a damn. This was Phoenix with a murder rate that approached the levels of the Cartel States' births. This was a Phoenix where people just gave up and sold their children. Implosion porn on a whole other level, and as far as Angel could tell, Lucy was up to her neck in it. (Bacigalupi 140)

This novel knows what it's on about, and, as a carefully constructed imagining of the societal consequences of climate change, it is a remarkable accomplishment. It is a very different sort of verisimilitude from that practiced in *Flight Behavior*, but to say so may be to say nothing more than that the reality of climate change is large, uncircumscribable, and by Klein's account, the sociopolitical "weather" may be turning so weird and wild, in a very short time, that

Bacigalupi's text simply represents a realistic account of things in an out-of-the-way societal-political ecosystem. This implies that when one attempts to address issues of how to represent climate change "realistically," doing so solely through a common-sense, correspondence-theory-of-truth conception of realism inevitably invites a breakdown of categories. A consequential and suggestive account of why this should be so has been put forward in Timothy Morton's notion of the hyperobject, one of the more prominent ecocritical-philosophical attempts to get a handle on the ontology of climate change.

The following passage from *Hyperobjects* (the text in which Morton lays out most systematically his notion of the concept) in which he explains a property of hyperobjects which he refers to as "phasing," cuts to the heart of the potential difficulties with representational realism in cli-fi:

Hyperobjects are *phased*: they occupy a high-dimensional *phase space* that makes them impossible to see as a whole on a regular three-dimensional human-scale basis.

We can only see pieces of hyperobjects at a time. The reason why they appear nonlocal and temporally foreshortened is precisely because of this transdimensional quality. We only see pieces of them at once, like a tsunami or a case of radiation sickness. If an apple were to invade a two-dimensional world, first the stick people would see some dots as the bottom of the apple touched their universe, then a rapid succession of shapes that would appear like an expanding and contracting circular blob, diminishing to a tiny circle, possibly a point, and disappearing. (Morton 70)

The charmingly odd apple's-egress-into-the-land-of-the-stick-figures thought experiment by means of which Morton illustrates what it is that he means by referring to hyperobjects as "phased" is rhetoric familiar from popularizations of modern physics and geometry that attempt to describe curved space, or manifolds. In the same way that human beings cannot visually process the entirety of an object which exists in four dimensions, Morton argues that we cannot cognitively process hyperobjects.

This, then, is the crux of the difficulty for Kingsolver, for the practitioner of climate realism: one wants to represent a phenomenon with all of the fidelity and scrupulous exactitude that Dostoevsky brought to bear in conjuring forth his Petersburg, or Proust his Paris, but doing so in the case of climate change is like trying to offer a visually and mathematically exact account of a manifold, of a four dimensional object. Traditional conceptions of realism start to break down.

The primary (and straightforward) means by which Kingsolver addresses this difficulty or resistance is by representing "climate change" metonymically through the monarch butterflies. Unable to get a philosophically exact representational handle on a phenomenon at the scope of climate change, she takes as her figure the overwintering monarchs and uses them to figuratively represent certain qualities of climate change. As a metonymy for climate change as a whole, the monarchs are surprisingly apt with respect to certain aspects of the way that people in the northeastern United States experience it: for many of us, all climate change means truly means at a deep phenomenological level is the occurrence every so often of an essentially benign, mild disruption of the natural order which is nevertheless interpreted as portending apocalypse and is surrounded with an effluvium of intellectual/public-discursive hand wringing. Just so the butterflies in the text. And this is not all that Kingsolver manages to communicate through the

monarchs. They provide her with a narrative occasion to dramatize and offer exposition on a constellated set of issues pertaining to climate change: issues of species loss and declining biodiversity; issues of environmental justice and the class politics of climate change (a central concern for her given her strong ties to regional Appalachian working-class culture); and weighty issues surrounding the religious and societal implications of climate change (the novel is consistently asking what the monarchs portend, for humankind's salvation in realms temporal and spiritual). All of these offspring of the novel's central metonymy bring us to a deeper, and less intuitive, sense of what I have in mind in classifying *Flight Behavior* as climate realism, one bound up in the characteristics of the paradigmatic cases of literary realism.

“Realism” considered as a historically contingent genre is no less vexed a question than it is considered as a general philosophical descriptor of a method, even if trenchant criticism and scholarship has acquitted itself quite well in attempting to give shape to an extraordinarily heterogeneous body of novelistic work which has at one point or another fallen under the umbrella of that term.³ Though Ghosh, in evoking the mainstream of “serious literary fiction” (and asserting that it has little time for climate fiction), employs the terms “realism” and “realist fiction” infrequently, the manner in which he delineates the qualities of said “serious literary fiction” has a great deal in common with the manner in which certain prominent mid-twentieth-century critics and scholars theorized the nineteenth-century realist novel.

³ As an undergraduate, I took a survey course called “Studies in the Nineteenth Century Novel,” the primary texts for which were *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Huck Finn*, *David Copperfield*, *Moby-Dick*, *Middlemarch*, *Bleak House*, *The Red and the Black*, *Cousin Bette*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Anna Karenina*. The professor of the course stated at the outset that he regarded all of these widely disparate texts, separated by significant differences in language, national origin, space, and time, as united by virtue of their status as realist novels.

In his wide-ranging and suggestive *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, George Steiner characterizes most nineteenth-century European prose fiction as speaking principally to “individual reader[s] in the anarchy of private life,” and for this reason having “numerous and determining associations with the middle classes” (19). Similarly, Lionel Trilling, in an intriguing little essay entitled “Manners, Morals, and the Novel,” while arguing that “the novel is born in response to snobbery,” asserts that snobbery is the “peculiar vice of bourgeois democratic societies,” thus implicitly putting the novel forward as the quintessential art form of such societies (209). As such, it is predicated on a very particular worldview and orientation, a certain kind of stark, no-frills bourgeois one which Steiner opposes to the worldview on the table in a Homeric or Virgilian epic (the worldview of a poet addressing an established aristocracy). This leads Steiner at least to use the terms “realist novel” and “nineteenth-century European prose fiction” almost interchangeably.

The dollars-and-cents, minute accounting of the price and quality of consumer-goods realism which Steiner and Trilling read into the nineteenth century is by no means something that they undervalue: Steiner states that the form “was, from the time of Cervantes onward, the mirror which the imagination, in its vein of reason, held up to empirical reality” (19). Similarly, Trilling, in the same essay quoted above, asserted that the novel “is a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always the social world, the material of its analysis being always manners as the indication of the direction of man’s soul” (212).

The canonical nineteenth-century novel, then, was realist in essence for a certain stripe of mid-century critic, and this was theorized or treated rhetorically as an aesthetic peak of no less exalted an eminence than the classical epic. It was realist both in the commonplace documentary sense which I have described, and in a larger sense in being, in the aggregate, the expression of a

view of reality widely shared by the rapidly expanding bourgeois populations of several European nation-states. This view of reality was, in Steiner's formulation, "secular in outlook, rational in method, and social in context" (20). Yet it was also a view of reality charged, full-to-the-brim with meaning, which when once it came into its own was not shy about investing the lives and interiorities of its middle-class characters with an almost mythological significance.

My argument in favor of the designation "climate realism" for *Flight Behavior* is that it is a realist novel not just in the intuitive philosophical sense but in the ways in which works like *Père Goriot* and *Mansfield Park* have been said to constitute a certain, historically-conditioned form of realism. It certainly plants its flag quite firmly in the soil of the "vast kingdom of human psychology perceived through reason and of human behavior in a social context," as Steiner says the archetypal realist novel does (20). And it is colored throughout by thematic and intellectual concerns which intensely preoccupied nineteenth-century realist novelists.

Extraordinarily prominent among these concerns (indeed, constituting a great deal of the "meat" of the text) is the interiority of the protagonist. Inwardness, interiority, subjectivity: such concerns, by whatever name, came increasingly to preoccupy the novelist of the nineteenth-century as opposed to the eighteenth-century writers of texts more meaningfully aligned with the tradition of the romance, in which incident and plot occupied a much more prominent aesthetic position. Emphasis on, thematic interest in, characters and their inward lives have been theorized by, among others, E.M. Forster, to be *the* marks distinguishing the nineteenth-century realist novel from earlier forms of prose fiction (Forster 73).

In *Flight Behavior*, we are given not so much privileged glimpses into as a front row seat on Dellarobia's interiority, where a tumultuous alternation is constantly taking place between pitying gratitude for Cub's decency and bedrock conviction of their unsuitability for each other.

This is the psychological stock-in-trade of the realist novelist. So too are numerous other features of the novel, features which feel more systematically than coincidentally similar to the stuff of nineteenth-century realist novels: its thick description, in the anthropological sense, of southern Appalachian town life; its “family romance” (the fraught and bizarre dynamics at play between Hester, Bear, Cub, and Dellarobia); its orphaned protagonist; and the Hester-Bobby Ogle subplot featuring a character who was forced to give up a child at a young age and then to live in close proximity to that abandoned boy (this is vintage European realist novel material: the entire oeuvre of Dickens springs quite readily to mind).

It is not obvious or necessary that *Flight Behavior* should fit this model. Such realism was much more the dominant mode of the nineteenth than of the twentieth century, to say nothing of the twenty-first. Though it might be argued (with some reason) that figures such as Proust, Lawrence, Woolf, Kafka, and Joyce represented a kind of decadent or late stage of such realism, it is unmistakable that they also represented a departure from it in many respects. While it is beyond the scope of the present inquiry to enter into this matter deeply, it is nevertheless worth noting in passing as a matter of interest that certain developments in contemporary twenty-first century prose fiction seem to signal a recurrence of fiction conceived on this model (*Flight Behavior* being only the one under investigation in the present inquiry).⁴

Flight Behavior is at any rate also recognizably nineteenth-century realist in style. Its very first sentence is set at an intriguingly (and familiarly) universal pitch: “A certain feeling comes from throwing your good life away, and it is one part rapture” (Kingsolver 1). Readers are

⁴ A great deal remains to be said about the affinities between novelists who have at times been categorized under the heading of a “New Sincerity Movement,” such as Zadie Smith and Jonathan Franzen (and even David Foster Wallace in some ways, despite his palpable postmodernism), and their nineteenth-century ancestors.

likely to hear sentences such as “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” and “All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” echoing in their inner ears after a novel begins in this way. The narratologist Mieke Bal employs the term “argumentative” to refer to sentences of this type: “Parts of the text referring to something general are best called argumentative. Argumentative textual passages do not refer to an element (process or object) of the fabula, but to an external topic” (Bal 24). From Austen and Tolstoy’s legendary overtures to Proust’s furious epigram-generating drive, these combinations of conduct-book counsel and psychologist’s insight are resolutely the stuff of high realism.

This sort of pithy, apothegmatic opening sentence, famously employed in Austen and Tolstoy to describe the general contours of male desire and of marital breakdown respectively, is here employed by Kingsolver in a distinctly cli-fi (and climate realist) way. Any reader who has ever experienced a rush of forbidden-fruit pleasure in driving instead of walking, in flying instead of taking the train, in switching on the AC earlier than one had resolved to do, will know the one part rapture feeling of throwing away one’s good (i.e. moral or consistent-principled) life. This is the essence of the second, historically-contingent sense of “climate realism”: a climate realist text might be said to be one which is about “the vast kingdom of human psychology perceived through reason in a social context,” with a specific slant on the psychology and societal dynamics of responding to climate change. *Flight Behavior* operates in this mode, and in doing so it expresses, with unique facility, certain realities of the contemporary experience/phenomenology of climate change in the Global North.

II. *Flight Behavior* and Denialism, Unthinking and Heroic

We have looked to the monumental examples of the canonical realist novel for artistic encapsulations of particular historical and cultural moments, and for insight into certain potentially timeless dimensions of human experience: *War & Peace* for insight on the titular phenomena; Dostoevsky for exalted musing on pathological psychology and grand religious questions; the work of Austen for light shed on courtship and class and the entanglements of the two; the work of Eliot for its philosophically sophisticated moral imagination. Without inviting an evaluative or comparative question about Kingsolver's novel alongside the aforementioned works, *Flight Behavior*, in its climate realism, in its simultaneous engagement with inwardness (in the mode of the nineteenth-century greats) and with climate change, is at the very least similarly occupied with the way that issues of great societal moment play out in individual lives. It expresses the essential psychology and phenomenology of the collective response to climate change on the part of those living in the Global North in the early twenty-first century. This response, the novel might be paraphrased as asserting, is one of denialism.

Or, rather, it might be paraphrased as saying that these responses are ones of denialism, because it seems to me crucial that the novel is not simply diagnostic in character, not simply an account of our collective head-in-sand refusal to reckon with the fact that climate change is taking place. *Flight Behavior* depicts two distinct kinds of psychological denialism, which I will refer to as unthinking denialism and heroic denialism.

It should be understood that when I refer to these kinds of denialism I am using both terms in a rather idiosyncratic (and non-political) sense. They are neither of them the denialism of the out-and-out, foaming-at-the-mouth American Enterprise Institute-bankrolled policy wonk attack dog. The first, unthinking denialism, is the denialism which every human being practices

to greater or lesser degree to get through the day, and which we are collectively practicing as a global civilization with respect to our encroachment on (if not our supersession of) the intrinsic limitations of Earth's biosphere to exercise source and sink functions. As the novel's narrator puts it, "Plenty of people took this way out, looking future damage in the eye and naming it something else" (Kingsolver 1).

The second, heroic denialism, is the resolve to address oneself to a losing battle. It is the sort of inward state which we see represented in soldiers in fictive media with unceasing regularity, the sort of grit which has received one of its more memorable and publicly recognizable theorizations from Atticus Finch: "[Real courage] is when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do" (Lee 112). *Flight Behavior* depicts both kinds of denialism, diagnoses our collective response to climate change as predicated on the former, charts Dellarobia's progress from the former to the latter variety, and endorses the latter.

Unthinking denialism is frequently met with in the canonical realist novel, from Pip's attempts to put the source of his wealth at the back of his mind to Tertius Lydgate's impatient sweeping of his financial concerns under the rug of daily consciousness to Père Goriot's rationalizations of his daughters' coldness towards him. Witness this snippet from a firmly canonical work in the genre (*Mansfield Park*):

It was a gloomy prospect, and all that she could do was to throw a mist over it, and hope that when the mist cleared away, she should see something else. It would hardly be *early* in November, there were generally delays, a bad passage or *something*, that favoring

something which every body who shuts their eyes while they look, or their understandings while they reason, feels the comfort of. (Austen 100)

Maria Bertram is stewing over the imminence of her father's return from Antigua to England, as that return will necessarily be followed swiftly by her marriage to a man whom she does not love or respect. Austen, giving us a peek through free indirect discourse into Maria's inwardness as she contemplates this prospect ("It would hardly be *early* in November, there were generally delays, a bad passage or *something*"), shows us a mind utterly refusing to engage with the reality of the situation.

It is interesting to note in passing that we are currently in the middle of something of a golden age of research into this subject on the part of cognitive and social psychologists, who classify such subject matter under the heading of behavioral economics or, in a term pregnant with meaning for the ecologically-minded, affective forecasting. The general conclusion seemingly reached by many such social scientists concerning affective forecasting (as by their realist novelistic ancestors) is that, by-and-large, human beings are pretty bad at it, committing error after error in their attempts to predict what will make them happy and contribute to their overall well-being. We are poor predictors of our own happiness, and, crucially for *Flight Behavior* and for the psychology of disaster, of our own unhappiness. This has significant rhetorical and aesthetic implications for the depiction of forces with manifestly and monumentally disastrous consequences such as climate change.

Without wishing to engage in histrionic cultural criticism or doom-saying, I will venture the opinion that climate change represents a very credible threat to the maintenance of human civilization in its current form. To speculate thus is actually a relatively circumspect way of

putting the matter: it is not to announce as a certainty or as the most likely outcome the total extinction of the species *Homo sapiens*, nor of human civilization as such (though both are possibilities which are floated not infrequently in discourse concerning climate change). Crop failure on a massive scale, increasingly frequent extreme weather events and the devastation of infrastructure attendant upon them, and sea level rise threatening many of the most geopolitically and economically significant cities on Earth (where global population is increasingly concentrated), all represent, *at minimum*, grave threats to our current ways of doing business. To say as much is not to say all that might be said, but it suffices for the purposes of this inquiry, since refusing to reckon with a situation of such gravity cannot well be categorized as anything other than unthinking denial, in the received psychological sense of that word.

Grave threats to our current ways of doing business are, Lawrence Buell has argued, the stock-in-trade of environmental writing: “Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (Buell 1995 285). Cli-fi might be said to be the expression, in prose fiction, of the master-metaphor of apocalypse. Yet to depict events and realities that represent such grave threats to current ways of doing business is to a certain extent antithetical to the project of realist fiction as it has been practiced historically. Ghosh, in describing the twin births of statistics and the modern novel, engages Franco Moretti as an interlocutor on the form: “Why did fillers [Moretti’s term for palpably non-narrative elements of novels, such as description of physical objects, landscapes, people’s faces, etc.] suddenly become so important? Moretti’s answer is ‘Because they *offer the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life*. Fillers turn the novel into a “calm passion”’” (Ghosh 19). If the novel is predicated on narrative pleasures bound up

with regularity, acting as a calm passion, it may consort ill with depictions of the utter breakdown of the social scene from which it draws its raw materials.

There is; however, a deeper reason for the potential incompatibility between realist novels and the imagination of disaster, and it has centrally to do with the phenomenon of identification. There is perhaps no aesthetic form to which the process of identification is more central than the canonical realist novel. Central to the species of aesthetic pleasure which the form has historically afforded is a process wherein readers notice features of the protagonist's character which happen to find an echo in their own breasts, or notice that the protagonist is embroiled in a situation which they themselves have undergone in one form or another.

Considered in a positive light, such a process is a happy mixture of empathy and large-heartedness on the part of readers, and of talent and psychological insight on the part of novelists, and results in a species of pleasure in which novel readers can feel seen and known, can feel a kind of intimacy with the mind of the novelist who created the character with whom they come to identify. Considered in a negative light, such a process is an impediment to the critical distance requisite for a just appreciation of the work of art under scrutiny, and is, philosophically considered, little better than an aesthetic version of medical students' disease.

Whatever one's evaluative reaction to the process of identification, the point remains that it has been central to the pleasure which readers have historically taken in realist novels. It is centrally involved, too, in our responses to fiction which depicts cataclysmic events such as the ones to which climate change gives rise. Psychoanalytic perspectives are helpful with these concerns; specifically, Freud's work on narrative and on death denial:

the true heroic feeling...: “Nothing can happen to *me!*” In this revealing characteristic of invulnerability...we can immediately recognize His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every day-dream and of every story.” (*Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming* 441)

Climate change puts death on the table, not just for the many individuals (mostly the poor, people of color, and those in the developing world and the Global South) most immediately physically threatened by it, but, incredibly and yet credibly, for human beings considered as a species. To depict climate change justly, real-ly, it feels as though there is a certain necessity to at least invoke these possibilities. Yet fictions (or films) which play around with the death of their protagonist are, by and large, either overtly and insistently self-conscious *avant-garde* metanarrative experiments, or tragedies: such material is kept largely out of the demesne of realist fictions. If, as Freud maintained, we (Our Majesties the Egos) identify with, are the heroes of, every story, and, in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of our own immortality, then this presents a significant narrative problem for climate realism. Responding to a work of realist fiction that featured either the death of its protagonist or massive disaster inflicted on human civilization, we would feel that there had been some sort of category mistake, on the order of a Jane Austen novel that did not end with a marriage.

Flight Behavior depicts a community, and an individual, deeply spiritually affected by a spectacularly visible consequence of climate change. It also depicts that same community and that same individual being materially affected by climate change’s consequences, from the incessant and incessantly alluded-to unseasonable rains besetting Feathertown to the economic and lifestyle consequences of the many individuals and groups that descend upon Feathertown for the butterflies, all with their own skin in the game. Yet it never goes near an out-and-out

depiction of either true climate devastation (what is often dubbed “disaster porn”), or the possibility that climate change might damage or destroy its central character. Its principal engagement with the imagination of disaster is in philosophical dialogues conducted between the characters in which they act out possibly disastrous scenarios, and in its treatment of the fate of the monarchs.

All of which is, surprisingly and yet successfully, part and parcel of the novel’s rich presentation of psychological denialism. It is, interestingly, a narrative which raises the specter of a society on the brink of the imminent disaster of climate change, and is *also* a narrative about a woman, a family, and a community of monarch butterflies on the brink of imminent disaster, an imminent disaster which does not arrive at any point in the text.

This ghostly half-presence of disaster, denied or just out of sight or glimpsed out of the corner of one’s eye, occurs in the novel in a number of ways. For one thing, the novel does this sort of work metaphorically through the climate, the weather and the biosphere, as in this moment from the first chapter in which Dellarobia’s progress along the High Road to perdition is interrupted by a downed tree:

The path became confusing suddenly, blocked with branches. The upper part of a fallen tree lay across it, so immense she had to climb through, stepping between sideways limbs with clammy leaves still attached...She smacked her palms together to shuck off the damp grit and viewed the corpse of the fallen monster. The tree was intact, not cut or broken by wind. What a waste. After maybe centuries of survival it had simply let go of the ground, the wide fist of its root mass ripped up and resting naked above a clay gash in the wooded mountainside. Like herself, it just seemed to have come loose from its station

in life. After so much rain upon rain this was happening all over the county, she'd seen it in the paper, massive trees keeling over in the night to ravage a family's roofline or flatten the car in the drive. (Kingsolver 5)

The straightforwardly realistic consequences of unusually heavy rains are, intriguingly, relayed to Dellarobia (and the reader) through print media, but the novel also puts these consequences before her (and us) more directly in the form of a downed tree blocking her path. There is a powerful inevitability to the drawing of a metaphorical correspondence between Dellarobia in her anxious, anomic longing for release and the tree's uprootedness, a comparison which the text ultimately makes explicit ("Like herself, it just seemed to have come loose from its station in life"). There is also a powerful uncanniness to the figuration: much of the diction gives the impression of an unnerved Dellarobia extricating herself gingerly from a human corpse: she steps "between sideways *limbs* with *clammy* leaves," and (the figuration, again, becoming quite explicit) she views "the *corpse* of the fallen monster." The text presents us with a complex vision of Dellarobia's engagement with the consequences of climate change: it is at once mediated by statistics and reportage (as must, to a certain extent, all of our interactions with an entity so essentially conceptual as climate change), yet it is also as disturbingly intimate as a nightmare in which one looks at one's own corpse.

Such frightfully morbid yet near-miss intimations mark *Flight Behavior* as what the rhetorician Stephen O'Leary terms "comic apocalypticism." Here is ecocritic Greg Garrard repurposing O'Leary's account of comic apocalypticism (as manifest in the work of Saint Augustine):

Augustine's eschatology is therefore comic and non-catastrophic, emphasizing a drawn-out moral struggle going on not between forces of light and darkness but within the faithful themselves. This ethical subtlety, along with an emphasis upon free will, supplies a sounder moral ideology for a church wary of millennial enthusiasms: if the End may or may not be nigh, believers must live in the light of its possibility whilst refraining from relinquishing their worldly duties in a fit of utopian hysteria. (Garrard 96)

The basic distinction here is in the answers which comic and tragic apocalypticism put forward to Faulkner's deprecated modern question: *When will I be blown up?* Tragic apocalypticism says either, in answer to this question, "Imminently," or "You already have been," while comic apocalypticism says "We can't know, so we ought to uphold ourselves morally and try to do what little can be done to stave off The End." This is the attitude instilled in Dellarobia by her beatific vision of the butterflies: something is altered, heightened, portentous, in her everyday existence, and it represents a call to action. As she comes to possess greater and greater clarity on the most likely explanation for the monarchs' presence, and all that it portends, this attitude comes into play on climate issues, as in the following exchange between her and the more tragically-inflected (and named) Dr. Byron:

"It's too late for that. Believe me."

"Don't say that, 'too late.' I hate that. I've got my kids to think about." (Kingsolver 321)

Dellarobia's opposition to defeatism, to quietism, mark the novel's stance as the mode of comic apocalypticism, and Dellarobia's stance as that of heroic denialism. It is also, in Garrard's

language, bound up in the moral ideology of struggle within the faithful: Dellarobia's initial vision of the monarchs, abandonment of her intentions to engage in an extramarital affair, and subsequent moral-intellectual development, culminating in her decision to leave Cub and begin a new life for herself, are at the heart of the novel.

Comic apocalypticism enriches and complicates the ways in which we are compelled to think about the psychological denialism at the heart of *Flight Behavior*: on the one hand, unthinking denialism obviously means the self-destructiveness of willful blindness to the negative consequences of one's actions. On the other hand, heroic denialism means Dellarobia's opposition to defeatism, it means her opposition to cold, detached predictions of ultimate dissolution, an opposition which enables an individual to struggle against overwhelming odds on the off-chance of a statistically anomalous salvation.

This strange dichotomousness is part and parcel of climate change's hyperobjective nature, and indeed, many of the properties of hyperobjects as laid out by Morton read like an itemized account of Dellarobia's experience with the displaced community of monarch butterflies which settles down in her in-laws' stand of forest. Morton describes hyperobjects as "viscous," meaning that they stick to beings that are involved with them, and as "nonlocal," meaning that any locally discernible manifestation of a hyperobject is not itself the hyperobject (Morton 1). The downed tree, and later the monarchs, are obviously not themselves climate change, but consequences of it. And climate change is certainly *viscous* with respect to Dellarobia, personally and spiritually: her beatific vision of the monarchs in the book's first chapter sticks to her as nothing else in her life up to that point has, and changes not just her conduct incidentally on one day, but sets in motion the mainspring of the novel's plot:

For her alone these orange boughs lifted, these long shadows became a brightness rising. It looked like the inside of joy, if a person could see that. A valley of lights, an ethereal wind. It had to mean something.

She could save herself. Herself and her children with their soft cheeks and milky breath who believed in what they had, even if their whole goodness and mercy was a mother distracted out of her mind. It was not too late to undo this mess. Walk down the mountain, pick up those kids. The burning trees were put here to save her. (Kingsolver 15-16)

Over the course of the text, Dellarobia, inspired by her vision of the trees “afame,” will be enabled to sustain and deepen that primary moment of inspiration through initially hesitant and informal involvement with a group of entomologists who come to Feathertown to study the monarchs. She will become more self-confident over the course of the novel, professionally, intellectually, and romantically, even if her increased romantic confidence manifests mostly as the crushing realization that what subsists between the director of the entomologists, Dr. Ovid Byron, and his wife is “Not the precarious risk she’d balanced for years against forbidden fruits, something easily lost in a brittle moment by flying away or jumping a train to ride off on someone else’s steam. She was not about to lose it. She’d never had it” (Kingsolver 398). The vision has stuck to her deeply, impressing upon her what she has never had, but also what she yet stands to lose. Her denialism, as a result of this vision, will evolve from the denialism of denying a problem’s existence to denying that it is too late to do something about it.

Earlier in the novel, her first-phase denialism (that which takes the form of sweeping a problem under the rug) centers intriguingly and suggestively on consumption habits: nicotine

cravings are never far from her consciousness, and even closer to the center of her are the unfulfilled erotic yearnings continually clamoring for her notice which, before the outset of the plot have cathected onto her “telephone man” but which come to crystallize on Dr. Byron.

These issues come to the forefront of her consciousness in the following passage:

The congregation was definitely dividing into pro-Crystal or pro-Brenda factions, and it was hard to guess what might compromise your neutrality. Winnie hadn't seen her, so she could make a clean break if she got out of the toy aisle. Dellarobia grabbed a horribly made plush raccoon that didn't even look like a raccoon, and threw it in her cart because it only cost a dollar. She wanted to punch somebody out. The world made you do this.

(Kingsolver 168)

Dellarobia, bored and irritated with the drama of her small-town social circle, makes an impulse purchase of a poorly made consumer object that she knows full well her children will hardly give the time of day before either destroying it or tiring of it. Her mingled feelings of generalized hostility and frustration with her own passivity in a situation where the only avenue to interpersonal fulfillment is the necessity to buy things not genuinely wanted or needed is a neat encapsulation of something essential about the experience of contemporary consumer culture. All of which occurs as figure against the ground of the looming (and, for Dellarobia, growing) awareness that such patterns of economic activity, unfulfilling in themselves, are increasingly unsustainable and destructive.

Denialism takes on a particularly poignant inflection in the form of Dellarobia's relationship with Cub. Cub's conservatism is a fascinating element of the text: Barbara

Kingsolver is a writer very much rooted in a place: with her family in southwestern Virginia, she maintains a sheep farm very like the one maintained by the Turnbows in the text of *Flight Behavior* (Kingsolver 439). Yet she's also a writer with palpably global concerns: the reach of novels like *Flight Behavior* and *The Poisonwood Bible* is testament to that. As such, the tension between the value system and lifeway represented by Cub, and that towards which Dellarobia is growing over the course of the novel, feels peculiarly close to the heart of her concerns not just as a novelist but as a thinker. Her sardonic, satiric treatment of Feathertown drama and gossip, her skewering of the excesses and eccentricities of small-town life in southern Appalachia, is tempered by a strong sense of identification with this community. It's the old chestnut: "You can't call my family hicks; only *I* can call them hicks," at the level of aesthetic representation. Billy Ray Hatch, a fascinating albeit exceedingly minor character (named but never depicted), serves as a verbal stand-in for these issues: Dellarobia, after having a vulnerable moment in front of the monarchs in which she reflected on her life's trajectory, ostensibly off the record, broadcast on local and then national television, remembers a local news spot on Billy Ray which sent him up for his back country ways, and feels some vestige of identification (Kingsolver 213).

This guilty twinge of solidarity may be all that's left of her affective relationship with Cub. *Flight Behavior* can be said to be many things; at least one thing which it is, and significantly, is the painfully sympathetic story of the dissolution of a marriage. The pivot on which this dissolution turns is as much Dellarobia's longing for intellectual fulfillment as it is her longing for erotic fulfillment. Her intellectual incompatibility with Cub is richly represented in the following exchange:

“Do you know what they’re saying about the butterflies being here? Dr. Byron and them? They said it means something’s really gone wrong.”

“Wrong with what?” Cub asked.

“The whole earth, if you want to know. You wouldn’t believe some of the stuff they said, Cub. It’s like the End of Days. They need some time to figure out what it all means. Don’t you think that’s kind of important?”

“Well, if the butterflies fly off somewhere, the doctor and them can go park their camper behind somebody else’s barn.”

“What if there’s no place else for them to fly away to?” she asked.

“There’s always someplace else to go,” Cub said, in a tone that said he was signing off: Worries like that are not for people like us. We have enough of our own. He wasn’t wrong. (Kingsolver 172)

There’s an unmistakable authorial sympathy with Cub’s perspective in this passage, even if it constitutes unthinking denialism of the more recognizable, Myron Ebell brand. The narrator (or at the very least Dellarobia, free indirect discursively) is countenancing the class animus that prompts the common feeling that environmentalism is a luxury for snooty latte-sipping yuppies who aren’t living paycheck-to-paycheck. This animus is expressed forcefully in the presentation of Leighton Akins, a hopelessly out-of-touch environmental activist who comes to Feathertown to attempt to inspire its residents to live more sustainably (Kingsolver 326-329). Yet Dellarobia, and by extension the text as a whole, refuses ultimate acquiescence to, or identification with, such a perspective: Dellarobia has come to realize that there’s *not*, in fact, always someplace else to go, ecologically speaking, that this denialism is not viable, however ubiquitous it may be.

She's rising from unthinking denialism in her intellectual grappling with the idea of climate change, and it leads her to rise from a similar kind of denialism in her emotional life and relatedness to Cub, to be able to admit to herself "we're not right for each other." Even though the break with Cub is painful to her feelings, the novel concluding with (among other things) Dellarobia leaving Cub and seeking to continue in some form the work she began in Dr. Byron's mobile lab is aligned with her burgeoning climate-conscious sensibilities.

Despite this, Dellarobia certainly comes around to the scientists' point-of-view quite gradually, and, it might be said, incompletely, since, as has already been stated, she never entirely embraces their pessimism, re-conceiving denialism for herself along lines of heroic resolve. These issues are most explicitly addressed and dramatized (as is often the case in *Flight Behavior*) in a conversation, this one taking place between Dellarobia, Ovid, and Ovid's graduate student Pete. As Dellarobia asks questions in the lab concerning the monarchs' typical habitat and behavior, she comes to realize more-or-less for the first time the gravity of the situation for the species. "People resisted hearing the details of a problem, even when it was something personal, like their own cancer. What they wanted was the fix" (Kingsolver 228).

The following exchange is a particularly relevant segment of that conversation:

"The official view of a major demographic," Pete said in an overly tired voice that reminded her weirdly of Crystal, "is that we aren't sure about climate change. It's too confusing. So every environmental impact story has to be made into something else. Set it up if possible, that's what your news people drove out here for. It's what sells."

"For God's sake, man," Ovid nearly shouted, "the damn globe is catching fire, and the islands are drowning. The evidence is staring them in the face." ...

She [Dellarobia] spoke carefully to the room. “I think people are scared to face up to a bad outcome. That’s just human. Like not going to the doctor when you’ve found a lump. If fight or flight is the choice, it’s way easier to fly.”

“Or to sleepwalk,” Ovid said. “As you put it.”

“I was probably selling my own team short.” Defensiveness returned to her in full feather. (Kingsolver 230-231)

The psychological dynamics of these exchanges are fascinating, and point towards one of the key implicit (and more colloquial) senses of the word “realism” identified by Raymond Williams: “‘Let’s be realistic’ probably more often means ‘let us accept the limits of this situation’ (*limits* meaning *hard facts*, often of power or money in their existing and established forms) than ‘let us look at the whole truth of this situation’ (which can allow that an existing **reality** is changeable or is changing)” (Williams 199).

Pete and Ovid represent two distinct varieties of tragic apocalypticism: Pete, the hard-bitten world-weariness which is in practice difficult to distinguish from cynicism and apathy. Ovid represents the prophet’s apocalypticism, the righteous fury of the seer who attempts with the main force of plain rhetoric to draw a sinning populace’s attention to their waywardness. Dellarobia’s apocalypticism, again, is of a more compassionate and, in my judgment therefore ultimately more comprehensive, sort, and readers are encouraged to identify with her perspective on the issue under discussion. Earlier in the same conversation, Dellarobia, having just been made acquainted with the possibility (rather, with the overwhelming likelihood) that the monarchs will go extinct as a result of not surviving a Tennessee winter, implores Ovid and his team to attempt to alert the world to this danger: “‘I don’t know what you’ve seen,’ she said.

‘But it’s out of control. I keep telling them they need to talk to you. I swear, I do. Talk to Dr. Byron, because I’m no expert’” (Kingsolver 229).

We have here then a denialism, in the sense of a personal-philosophical outlook on climate change held by an individual (Dellarobia), which has in it something essential about the best possible collective reaction to the idea of climate change for which we can hope. It is an incipient reckoning, tempered by a certain lack of certitude. It’s blunt enough to get a message across, yet gentle enough to allow for human reactions to the message. Dellarobia is compassionate towards, and understanding of, the psychological blinkers and fetters which make it vanishingly unlikely that the generality of people will respond appropriately to the reality of climate change (“I think people are scared to face up to a bad outcome. That’s just human.”). In essence, she is compassionate towards the unthinking denialism which *Flight Behavior* represents as being at the heart of our responses to climate change. Yet she is also movingly invested in attempting to prompt people to move beyond this. This heroic denialism could be labeled naivete, or it could be labeled moral urgency: in either case, it has much to recommend it.

If the novel is acutely sensitive to, and at times grim in drawing out the implications of, our habits of willful self-deception, it nevertheless places a great deal of implicit faith in the potential for science to address this state of affairs. The ideal of science as a methodical, painstaking, progressive, and collective process of working towards conclusions, by means of which the impediments to truth of individual errors, biases, and above all wishes, can be circumvented, is something in which Dellarobia believes, and she implores Ovid and his graduate students to do more to disseminate the state of the case with respect to both the monarchs and climate change. She doesn’t believe that what they’re telling her they think may well be the end, may well be the end. She denies ultimate negation.

On the subject of ultimate negation, the very end of *Flight Behavior* deserves some extended attention. All of the issues which I have raised in this paper, concerning psychological denialism, unthinking and heroic, in the Global North; the overwhelmingly likely consequences of climate change in the long term; and Dellarobia's refusal to countenance the idea that those consequences are overwhelmingly likely if not certain (which, as I have maintained, can be read as an instance of a more morally admirable kind of psychological denialism), coalesce in its conclusion. Since, as I've stated, the novel does not possess "the imagination of disaster," issues about ultimate dissolution will have to play out in the text not with respect to contemporary civilization but with a richly resonant figuration: the monarchs. The monarchs' fate is left ambiguous, albeit with a leaven of potential hope that is psychologically and narratologically fascinating for the extent to which it is at odds with certain other elements of the narrative.

Here is the narration of Ovid finally packing up to leave Feathertown and the Turnbows' property for good:

In the last two days he'd packed up the lab with the mood of closing a house after a death in the family. Deciding what to keep, what to give away. Survival wasn't possible, he said, given the mortality under all that snow. It would take a crowd of variations and mistakes and resilience, at least a million individuals, he thought, to add up to survival of a species. (Kingsolver 422)

And yet, here is Dellarobia, at the very close of the novel, contemplating a last stray spray of the monarchs:

She was wary of taking her eyes very far from her footing, but now she did that, lifted her sights straight up to watch them passing overhead. Not just a few, but throngs, an airborne zootic force flying out in formation, as if to war. In the middling distance and higher up they all flowed in the same direction, down-mountain, like the flood itself occurring on other levels. The highest ones were faint trails of specks, ellipses. Their numbers astonished her. Maybe a million. The shards of a wrecked generation 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. They would gather on other fields and risk other odds, probably no better or worse than hers. (Kingsolver 433)

The sentence “Maybe a million” in the passage above may as well have been italicized, occurring as it did mere pages after Ovid’s grim prognosis on the fate of the species which constituted his life’s work. What are we to make of this maybe million, in particular since, in the same indirectly relayed exchange in which he estimated that survival for the species would demand at least a million individuals, he is also reported by the narrator to have stated that “survival wasn’t possible”? Much of Ovid and his graduate students’ activities at the monarch site over the course of the novel have consisted of making a most careful count of the monarchs’ numbers. How likely do we think it that Ovid has badly underestimated the monarch population? Furthermore, a reading of the incriminating sentence is possible in which this manner of concluding the novel does not necessarily augur hope for the monarchs, and it would consist in essence of reading the sentence “Maybe a million” as free indirect discourse, as an embedding within third-person narration of an item from Dellarobia’s consciousness. In such a reading, “Maybe a million” is Dellarobia’s thought as she watches in awe the grand remainder of

monarchs making their way away from Feathertown. In such a reading, we are left with an admittedly fine aesthetic impression of the undeniable beauty of a going thing, but with no hope.

Yet such a reading is not all that is present there, and the first possible objection to it is that there were more direct ways for Kingsolver to have expressed her point, had that been her intent (as for example rendering the sentence “Maybe a million, she thought.”). While this does not foreclose on the possibility that the sentence is free indirect discourse after all, it does demonstrate that other readings are possible. In particular, a reading in which the narrator and by extension the novel keep open the possibility that a million monarchs did indeed survive the snow. The potential for such a reading marks the text as comic apocalypticism, as an eschatological vision in which the impending grind of the crisis may yet be averted.

It is true that very few works even of cli-fi conclude with utter human extinction, or with our collective transition from massively materially developed civilization on a global scale to roving bands of hunter-gatherers in a blasted post-apocalyptic waste. In a prominent example of the genre, *Odds Against Tomorrow*, in which a devastating climate disaster strikes New York City, the novel concludes with an imperative similar to the one waiting in the wings of *Flight Behavior*, with intimations of rebuilding and resilience. Even a novel such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (not indisputable cli-fi since the nature of the scene-setting cataclysm which precedes the text is never specified, but perhaps cli-fi adjacent), in many ways one of the bleaker disaster texts ever written, concludes with the novel’s protagonist, an unnamed boy, finding his way to the coast as he and his father had been attempting to do throughout the text and being taken up by an unknown family (a scrap of hope).

The distinction between comic and tragic apocalypticism, then, at least as far as *Flight Behavior* is concerned, may inhere less in whether the text depicts the ultimate eradication of

human beings or the erasure of our material development than in the extent to which hope is offered and to which disaster is depicted. *Flight Behavior* is, considered in these lights, resolutely comic, on the sunnier side of cli-fi. The characters' engagement with a consequence of climate change may have prompted the emotional turmoil of a divorce (or at least a separation), but this is seen as a necessary growing pain. We are left, at the novel's close, with a tantalizing sense that the novel believes in the potential not only for Dellarobia to make a new life for herself, but for us to do so as a country and a species. Do we buy it?

Ecocritic and environmental humanitarian elder statesman Lawrence Buell begins the concluding chapter of one of his books with the following tongue-in-cheek reflection: "I hate conclusions. A good book, essay, course, or lecture should open up its subject, not shut it down. Conclusions are chronically hamstrung by the temptations to reach closure or attempt prophecy in the narrow sense of prediction" (128). Though the register of the reflection is obviously academic rather than aesthetic, it feels just as an observation of narrative as well as of argumentation, which brings us back to the issues of believability-in-cli-fi with which this essay began. Those issues cut both ways: if the conventions of realism naturally make us suspicious of undue apocalypticism, of the extravagantly baleful and of finality and extinction, they likewise incline us to suspiciousness of an overabundance of tidiness. Considering the issue in the case of *Flight Behavior*, one asks whether a reading which gives the monarchs a chance is convincing, believable, effective as a way to close out the novel? In particular given the authority with which Dr. Byron's pronouncements and persona have been invested throughout the text? Is it a feebly tossed-off stab at solace, or a successful solace? Unthinking or heroic denialism?

For me, at least, answering the question is less about evidence-based reasoning and close reading of the text of *Flight Behavior* than it is about the simple yet solemn matter of one's

personal sense of the odds that we'll make it, as a species, as human beings (this reading seems almost inevitable, given that Dr. Byron states that the Feathertown monarchs represent most of their kind, and that their deaths would spell doom for the species as a whole). Speaking for myself, I experience the answer to the question "are we going to make it?" less as a yes or no than as the playing out of a tension. Everything I know about this question intellectually leads me to feel that the outlook is not good, and that a betting woman or man might be well-advised to short our common stock. But whenever I experience such feelings, I reflect that we are *not* betting women and men: we are not spectators. We're involved, and the heroic denialism of a Dellarobia may be the better part of wisdom. Novels like *Flight Behavior* help remind us of that.

III. Coda: *Flight Behavior* and the Future of Cli-Fi

As I mentioned in my early discussion of just exactly what a "realistic" depiction of climate change looks like, climate realism such as that practiced in *Flight Behavior* does not have a monopoly on meaningful literary expressions of some of the realities associated with our contemporary climatological habitus. Dystopian fiction such as *The Water Knife*, and science fiction such as Kim Stanley-Robinson's or Margaret Atwood's, do not have less to teach us about the bizarre or anomalous sides of this hyperobjectively gargantuan phenomenon in which our global civilization is currently enmeshed.

That being said, there are, in my judgment, unmistakable reasons for Amitav Ghosh having singled it out as both a text centrally concerned with climate change, and one that bears the hallmarks of "serious literary fiction." More than this, it is a text that, as I have tried to show over the course of this thesis, makes certain aspects of the contemporary experience of climate change in the Global North uniquely available to a reader's consciousness. While works of

science fiction, dystopian horror, magical realism, and postmodern fragmentation all have their places in a generic panoply of approaches to climate change, climate fiction such as *Flight Behavior* (i.e. climate realism) has unique potential to communicate effectively with readers in the Global North in terms immediately familiar to them. Ecocritic and science fiction scholar Rebecca Evans recently opined that cli-fi is a genre singularly bound up in popular (i.e. political) responses to climate change (Evans 483). Given this, and given that works of climate realism have such unique potential to reach readers in the Global North, they have an important (but by no means privileged) role to play in our ongoing literary and societal response to climate change.

IV. Acknowledgments

This work is dedicated to my father. Nothing comes from my mind or heart but had its genesis in our free-wheeling conversations shared on the W&OD Trail that shaped my way of speaking, thinking, and being. I'd also like to acknowledge my mother, for limitless love and faith in the person I would become; my brother, who is my ideal of what a humanistic scholar ought to be; my uncles Michael and Chris, for ample compensations; Crystal Luo, for the cement; Ross Wilson, Anuraag Sensharma, Jakob Hand, and Kate Highnam, for keeping me sane and, over and above this, for helping preserve my access to hilarity at a time when it was sorely needed; Mary Kuhn, for warmth, for knowing where my project needed to go, and simply for scholarly brilliance; Jerome McGann and Jahan Ramazani, for mentorship; Jamie Scharff, for a worldview; Neil Ardit, for inspiring me with a belief in myself; Eli Ben-Yaacov and Dharna Noor, my goony goons the gooniest; Cara McCann, fair and foul-weather friend; Tucker Kuman, for extraordinary friendship, generosity, Beckettian existential comedy, and for the title of a

work-in-progress, *Sexy Uses of Hats*; Joseph Wei, for sustaining conversations about Steph Curry and Smash, and for being an unexampled housemate; Lloyd Sy, for shoring up my belief in the ability to form new friendships just as august as the oldest ones in one's life; Courtney Watts, for having been my first listener, and much else besides; Andie Waterman and Sam Walker, for that much-needed and little-met-with thing, empathy; Jo Adams, for making me feel at ease in Charlottesville for the first time; Jess Swoboda, for setting an example to aspire to of commitment to our scholarly community, and for teaching me things about teaching; Heidi Siegrist, for setting a sterling example of how to handle our utterly mad existence with good humor, grace, and class, and for wondrous and presence. Finally, I regret not having the space to be able to acknowledge every single individual who deserves acknowledgement here (there are many besides those mentioned), and am of course solely responsible for any and all shortcomings of this work.

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