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Graham Huggan is Chair of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Literatures in the School of English, University of Leeds, UK. Much of his work over the last decade has been at the intersection of postcolonial and environmental studies, and he is currently working on a book on Australian literature and climate change. His latest publications are the single-edited *Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies* (OUP 2013) and the monograph *Nature's Saviours: Celebrity Conservationists in the Television Age* (Routledge/Earthscan 2013).

## **Australian Literature, Risk, and the Global Climate Challenge**

### **FIRE AND WATER**

Envision two scenarios, the one real the other imagined, both played out in Australia's southeast regions. In the imagined one, taken from George Turner's post-apocalyptic story "The Fittest," the year is 2035 and parts of Melbourne are under water. The embattled city is divided into two camps, the Swill and the Sweet, who make up nine tenths and one tenth of the population, respectively. The Swill live in run-down tenement blocks in the low-lying southern and western areas of the city, which are at the mercy of rising sea levels caused by the catastrophic melting of the ice caps. The Sweet look down on the Swill, both literally and metaphorically, from their privileged vantage on the higher levels. The Swill, meanwhile, are left to fend for themselves in a daily and brutal struggle for survival: jobless, hungry, they are little more than predatory animals, a racially stigmatized underclass equivalent to Asia's barbarian hordes (Maxwell 20-21; Morgan). In the real one, the year is 2013 and parts of Tasmania have been transformed into an inferno. A devastating heatwave covering most of the southern and eastern parts of Australia has caused wildfires to spread, with its largest offshore island bearing the brunt of it. There are few deaths, but hundreds of people are

displaced and irreparable damage is done to thousands of hectares of land and property. Media commentators return to that most obdurate if readily reversible of clichés, Australia as un/lucky country, linking the sins of commission (the perils of boom-and-bust economics) to those of omission (the price paid for ecological neglect).<sup>1</sup> Spoiling as always for a fight, the British environmental campaigner George Monbiot sanctimoniously reminds his antipodean cousins that they burn twice as much carbon as his own countrymen, and that the history of Australia, framed as a “land of opportunity in which progress is limited only by the rate at which natural resources can be extracted,” doubles as a cautionary tale of what happens when “climate change clashes with a story of great cultural power.” Lest the moral of the story be unclear, Monbiot flourishingly underscores it: “Australia’s new weather,” he says, “demands a new politics, a politics capable of responding to an existential threat.”

Not all of the hyperbole comes from elsewhere, nor is all of it unmerited. Tim Flannery in *The Weather Makers* (2005), one of a whole host of popular scientific books over the last decade or so seeking to explain the circumstances and consequences of global warming to the liberal-minded lay reader, wastes few chances to put in a bad word for his native Australia, flipping at times bewilderingly between victim arguments—“Taking a broad view, it is difficult to find two nations that have been more severely disadvantaged by climate change than the US and Australia” (140)—and their perpetrator counterparts—“America and Australia were created on the frontier, and the citizens of both nations hold deep beliefs about the benefits of endless growth and expansion” (237). In similar vein, Australia’s energy lobbies share tactics with some of their hugely powerful American equivalents; and if, post-Rudd, Australia has belatedly committed itself to the broad tenets of the Kyoto Protocol, it remains quick, as does the U.S., to bully smaller nations whose latest sovereign demands are perceived to be a poor fit with its continuing national concerns (287-88).

Flannery is right, up to a point, and his neo-Orwellian presentiments of an emerging world “carbon dictatorship” (290) certainly offer an interesting aside to Ross Garnaut’s 2007 and 2011 government reviews, which almost dutifully invoke the nationalist mantra of “Australian fairness” (i.e. the contribution of a national “fair share” to the global mitigation stakes) even as they insist on maintaining Australia’s competitive advantage in an unevenly developed world (Garnaut xx). My larger point is that the contemporary discourse of climate change—manifested most obviously in mass media representations of global warming—tends to be *inflationary* even given the staggering immensity of its scale, its potentially devastating impact, and its legitimate claim to historical uniqueness. “What makes global warming unique in the four billion year history of the planet,” asserts the geophysicist R.T. Pierrehumbert, “is that its causative agents—humans—are sentient” (2). The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty goes further still, claiming that the fact that “humans are [now] a force of nature in the geological sense” (207) calls for a radical kind of “species thinking” which, while not necessarily overriding social and political differences, marks “a new, universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of danger that is climate change” (221). Paradoxically, this universal narrative of concern can be used to disguise, or even openly promote, particularist interests. Thus, while climate change politics clearly operates on a global scale, it is frequently driven by national considerations—by nationalist resentments as well, such as those exercised by Americans vis-à-vis their “polluting” Chinese counterparts, whose environmentally unfriendly image ironically recasts the fear of economic supersession in the previously disowned language of ecological threat (Ziser and Sze).

The most obvious rhetorical manoeuvre associated with this inflationary tendency is *apocalypticism*. Global warming, specifically, and climate change more generally have frequently been captured, greenhouse-style, in the suffocating language of “environmental apocalypticism” (L. Buell 280), which has proved over time to be a highly effective if not

always an aesthetically satisfying medium for communicating high ecological risk in a globalized world (Heise 141).<sup>2</sup> Climate change novels are a case in point, tending to perform a number of readily identifiable moves in keeping with the conventions of genre fiction (Trexler and Johns-Putra 188). A 2010 web log initiated by the Australian novelist James Bradley seemingly despairs of the same question it asks: is it possible to write good fiction about climate change?<sup>3</sup> Most of the responses are as predictable as the fiction. Ian McEwan's *Solar* is picked on, with some justification, as a misfiring satirical take on the bad "issues novel," but there seems to be little consensus on what a good one might look like, while the dialogue is not helped by a deadening prescriptivism that sees the social realist novel as locked into the values of bourgeois individualism, the apocalyptic novel as duty-bound to explore the "inexorable planetary disaster [that is currently unfolding] around us," and speculative fiction as mapping formulaic routes to alternative futures that are already embedded within the present—a nod, this last, to Fredric Jameson's view of utopia, not as the "representation of radical alternatives [but] simply the imperative to imagine them" (Jameson, cited in Trexler and Johns-Putra 191).

Even the Great Australian Novel enters the fray, usually the sign of a conversation going nowhere. There are redeeming moments, though, notably the contributions of Kerryn Goldsworthy. The problem of climate change fiction, Goldsworthy suggests, is primarily one of scale—what to do "when confronted by an issue as large and as systemic as climate change"—but this problem may be addressed by seeing the novel as a multi-scalar exploration of the variegated "effects of social and environmental change on ordinary people's lives." This insightful comment suggests that a good climate change novel—whatever the evaluation might mean—need neither be extraordinary in scope nor experimental in method; it also implies that Bradley's earlier comment to the effect that "the things the social realist novel is good at—characters, interiority, social context—are

hopelessly inadequate when it comes to climate change” is itself an inadequate view of the considerable capacities of the social realist novel, both to adapt to the conditions in which it is produced and to provide some kind of imaginative access to the circumstances under which those conditions might be materially transformed. Finally, it conjures up the possibility that a good climate change novel may not be “about” climate change at all, or at least about the deliberate attempt to thematize its main issues; rather, it may take place within the general *context* of climate change, a context marked by a high degree of uncertainty and contingency, and by a strong ethical awareness of the issues at stake in the social staging of risk in a globally interconnected world (Beck, *World* 10).

In what follows, I make the case for Australian climate change fiction in terms of the general post-millennial consciousness of “dwelling in crisis” (F. Buell 274): Frederick Buell’s resonant phrase, parsed more recently by the ecocritic Ursula Heise as “living with an awareness of certain limits in the exploitation of nature have already been exceeded, that past warnings were not heeded, and that slowly evolving risk scenarios surround them on a daily basis” (Heise 141-42). Heise uses Buell’s work—and I will in turn use hers—to distinguish between an “*apocalyptic* perspective” in which “utter destruction lies ahead but can be averted and replaced by an alternative future society,” and a “*risk* perspective” in which “crises are already underway all around, and while their consequences can be mitigated, a future without their impact has become impossible to envision” (142; emphasis added). Heise stresses, as does Buell, that apocalyptic and risk perspectives are by no means mutually exclusive: “Apocalyptic scenarios,” she says, “are and remain a particular narrativization of risk perceptions, [while] analyses of risk [...] sometimes include [futuristic] panoramas of large-scale upheaval or disaster [as in] some forecasts of the consequences of current global warming trends” (142).

Despite these similarities, apocalyptic and risk perspectives raise different sets of aesthetic as well as ethical questions, with the latter more likely to “emphasize indeterminacy, uncertainty, and the possibility of a variety of [crisis] outcomes,” while the former “may continue to uphold, implicitly or explicitly, ideals of naturally self-regenerating ecosystems and holistic communities in harmony with their surroundings as a countermodel to the visions of [environmental] exploitation and devastation they describe” (Heise 142). All of this suggests generic possibilities for the climate change novel other than those prescribed by dominant apocalyptic and pastoral imaginaries. *Risk* is the key category of “dwelling in crisis” narratives in which risk scenarios menacingly gather and emergent crises—local, regional, national, global, cosmic—fan out across a variety of temporal and spatial sites. Two such narratives, both Australian based, are Kate Grenville’s *The Idea of Perfection* (1999) and Tim Winton’s *Breath* (2008), and I will shortly turn to these to show how they combine risk perspectives with the conventional techniques of the social realist novel in order to illustrate some of the ethical dilemmas opened up by today’s era of accelerated climate change. I make no apologies here for restricting my analysis to just two texts or for focusing on fictional examples when perhaps—in Australia at least—poetry is the dominant genre for reflections on climate and weather (see, for example, the wide-ranging work of John Kinsella and Mark Tredinnick). There are plenty of other possible contenders, although many of these fall, as does Turner’s aforementioned work, into the “apocalyptic” category that still remains normative for literary approaches to climate change (Morgan). Nor do *The Idea of Perfection* and *Breath* have a “representative” function, if this were possible in the first place; indeed, my argument here is that they are, precisely, *unrepresentative* in the sense that their oblique approach implicitly challenges the expectations many readers might have about how literature engages with phenomena of the size and intensity of climate change. Above all, and to repeat, I am interested in how these two novels work as contemporary *risk narratives*; to

that end, I first consider risk itself, and then two other elements—the “aesthetics of contingency” (Gabrys and Yusoff 17) and “scale effects” (T. Clark 135)—which, in my current thinking, might provisionally be seen as underpinning the contemporary aesthetics of global climate change.

## **RISKY BUSINESS**

The foremost theoretician of risk today is the late German sociologist Ulrich Beck, whose multi-faceted work on risk spans two decades, including such minor classics as *Risk Society* (1992), *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995), and, more recently, *World at Risk* (2009). During this period, Beck’s theories of risk evolved in close coordination with his thinking on modernity, and any detailed attempt to engage with his work should proceed from his primary recognition of risk as a constitutive element of the modern world. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on *World at Risk*, since this contains his most up-to-date thinking on the global climate challenge. This challenge turns out, for Beck, to be as much semantically based as practically oriented. Unsurprisingly, Beck defines climate change in terms of risk: “something which threatens to become a reality, a future projected into the present, an anticipation bearing all the hallmarks of uncertainty, whose aim is to change present actions, specifically those of governments and managers, and ultimately of all human beings throughout the world” (85). Beck sees climate change, like other global risks, as a *definitional* problem in so far as risk itself is a “perceptual and cognitive schema in accordance with which a society mobilizes itself when it is confronted with the openness, uncertainties and obstructions of a self-created future and is no longer defined by religion, tradition or the superior power of nature” (4). Who defines risk, and for what purposes, is thus of crucial importance to Beck, as is the allocation of risk to particular individuals and groups, whose ascribed vulnerability can easily become an opportunity to impose corrective

forms of technocratic management and social control. Climate change, however, is a planetary phenomenon the large-scale effects of which outreach individuals' and individual governments' attempts to address it, and which offers a further reminder—like the other global risks it encompasses—of “the failure of nation-states in the globalized world” (63). This is not a recipe for fatalism; rather, it reiterates the urgent need for “transnational interdependencies” (66) and broad cooperative principles, which, operating together, might form the backbone of a “compulsory cosmopolitanism” through which “risk communities” collaborate to ward off common global and planetary threats (188).

Climate change offers an *opportunity*, on the one hand, in accordance with Beck's general description of risk society as an anxiety-driven catalyst for the refashioning of global risks into “realistic utopias for an endangered world” (64). But on the other it is a *conundrum*, not least because it is a particularly abstract form of global risk which, resting on sometimes abstruse “scientific models and calculations,” is extremely difficult “to prove or refute on the basis of everyday experience,” however cogently it is presented to us and however patiently explained (71). For this reason, Beck sees climate change as unsuitable for staging in the mass media because it is effectively decoupled from everyday experience, depending instead on “the successful proselytizing of people to adopt a particular expert conception” (72). The verb “proselytize” is well advised in so far as Beck sees climate change as a kind of secular faith, replete with believers, converts, and non-believers—also radical secularist believers who reject the zealotry of climate-change evangelists, whose self-appointed task is to help others realize the need to save the world (72). Whether climate change is believed in or not depends, for Beck, on the success of the various social “stagings” (his term) through which its dangers are made visible to us (72; 12-13). (Like other global risks, it is discursively manufactured—not that this reduces its material presence as a significant physical threat.)

This suggests that the capacity to *imagine* climate change as risk—as the social staging of “a world that does not yet exist”—is crucially important (Beck, *World 9*; Yusoff and Gabrys, “Climate Change” 516-17). As Beck’s wording implies, this imagination is primarily projective. It is only through the “staged anticipation” of world risks that the future catastrophe they portend can become meaningfully present to us, thereby opening the door to preventive action (10-11). In this sense, though Beck does not directly say it, climate change lends itself to a *futural aesthetics*. As Emily Brady puts it in a different context, climate change is a “severely time-lagged phenomenon” (553) whose aesthetic effects, situated in “narratives that look backwards and forwards in time,” “only occur in times and places beyond the immediate perception of current appreciators” (557). This also raises formidable *ethical* questions. As Brady asserts, climate change whips up a “perfect moral storm” (Gardiner) in so far as the

dispersion of causes and effects makes it difficult to pin down responsibility and address issues of climate justice. There is a fragmentation of agency, with emissions originating in individuals, institutions and industry across different parts of the globe at different times. Who exactly is responsible and what do we owe people in distant places? How far back do we reach in terms of responsibility for CO2 emissions? (553)<sup>4</sup>

These essentially unresolved questions indicate a further component of climate change poetics, namely its *radical contingency*. Climate change, according to the geographers Jennifer Gabrys and Kathryn Yusoff, partakes of an “aesthetics of contingency” (17) in which different aesthetic practices collide and intersect in the continual (because eternally refashioned) process of world making. These practices, they argue in keeping with the work of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, are assimilated to a “distribution of the

sensible” (Rancière’s terms) in which aesthetic practice is dialectically attached to the material and affective environments in which it operates, thereby enabling new practices and patterns to emerge from this creative conjunction of symbolic and material worlds (“Arts” 17). This relational understanding allows, like the “distribution of the sensible” itself, for an intuitive apprehension of “the worlds we hold in common, [of] how these worlds are possible, and [of] the possibility for new worlds to appear” (17). It also opens up alternative possibilities for political engagement that avoid the pitfalls of the propagandistic or programmatic. “The dream of a suitably political work of art,” says Rancière, is “in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle. It is the dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations” (63; also cited in Gabrys and Yusoff “Arts” 17).

Although Gabrys and Yusoff do not spell it out, this anti-programmatic view of the symbiotic relationship between aesthetics and politics is highly relevant to an envisioning of the world (or, perhaps better, multiply related worlds) created by the shifting patterns of global climate change; it also gestures towards the possibility of fashioning alternative worlds in which normative perceptions of the see-able, the sayable, and the thinkable are creatively perturbed. Climate change, in this last sense, operates as “an imponderable agency,” the world-making *capacity* of which is abundantly evident but the actual *nature* of which appears beyond human powers to comprehend (T. Clark 134). The apparent incomprehensibility of climate change owes to its immense scale and scope, which dwarfs individual or collective attempts to control and manage it; but it also implies—in Timothy Clark’s poststructuralist vocabulary—a “deconstructive agency of the earth [which is made manifest in a variety of] so-called *scale effects*” (135; emphasis added). Scale effects, as Clark explains, may just as easily trivialize individual and collective human endeavor as magnify its importance. In fact,

in the context of global climate change, scale effects continually disrupt the relationship between the trivial and the important: as Clark puts it, “ways of travelling to work, gardening, etc. all become significant or not depending on the contingency of how many others have done, are doing or will do them, anywhere on earth, implicating acts of seeming irrelevance in incalculable impacts” (236).

One conclusion that might be drawn from this, though not explicitly drawn by Clark, is that artistic attempts to represent the radical contingencies of climate change are likely to be relational and multi-scalar. Another—and Clark is more forthcoming this time—is that they may also be likely to question, either directly or indirectly, some of the place-based credos that inform conventional modes of environmental writing: “nature,” “habitat,” and, not least, “environment” itself. Clark pulls no punches here, launching into an astonishing attack on environmental writing’s academic wing, ecocriticism, which he charges not only with practicing a studied avoidance of the issues surrounding climate change, but also with pursuing a “symbolic cultural politics” that naively imagines that the ecological awareness to be gained from affirming experiences of the wild, or their representations in literature, might “somehow [be] sufficient to produce an ecologically viable world” (141). This caricature of an entire field seems to me to be uncalled for, though Clark later softens the blow by suggesting that such individual experiences may “often be valuable and desirable” even if they continue to be marked by an “inadequacy of scope in relation to [the] national and global contexts whose practices so overwhelmingly negate them” (142).

There is a worrying trend here, namely the tendency of some climate change theorists to assume that climate change marks “the closure or exhaustion of [a certain kind of pseudo-liberationist] environmental politics embedded in the modernist, liberal tradition,” a tradition covertly bound to the choice model of consumer democracy it ostensibly contests (T. Clark 146-47). My worry is not so much that the charge is false—it is certainly sweeping—but

rather that it turns climate change into the one cause that supersedes the others. This is not to deny that climate change is one of the most pressing environmental issues of our times but, as Eileen Crist convincingly argues, “while the dangers of climate change are real [...] there are even greater dangers in representing it as the most urgent problem we face” (33). Framing climate change in this way, Crist suggests, deserves to be challenged on two fronts: first, “it encourages the restriction of proposed solutions to the technical realm by powerfully insinuating that the approaches [most needed] are those that directly address the problem”; and, second, “it detracts attention from the planet’s ecological predicament as a whole, by virtue of claiming the limelight for the one issue that trumps all the [rest]” (33).

Clark would probably agree with Crist’s assessment. However, in this particular essay, at least, he allows his poststructuralist sympathies to dictate, to the extent that climate change itself metamorphoses into a kind of superordinate thought experiment—a “monstrous cultural/political/economic, philosophical/ethical and scientific hybrid,” he calls it, “in which the phrase [‘climate change’] works as a condensed cipher for the destabilisation of such previously decisive dyads as nature/culture, science/politics, fact/value,” and in which the phenomenon’s global-cum-planetary scale, which oscillates bewilderingly between the trivial and the catastrophic, “compels us to think and act as if already citizens of a world polity, even as it undermines the credibility of any such thing” (137). Clark’s formulation strikes me as a different kind of apocalyptic thinking, always looking for opportunities to name, and thereby confirm the exhaustion of, the now definitively outmoded methods and philosophies it seeks energetically to unsettle and replace. Climate change, Clark typically suggests, “marks a moment at which a historical epoch is discerned as such, in its *closure*, rendering its intellectual structures both newly perceptible and philosophically exhausted. The epoch whose closure is at issue is that in which the finitude of the earth was ignored, discounted or forgotten” (133; emphasis in the original).

Clark clearly has a point, though, when he says that one of the main difficulties of confronting climate change is that “there is no simple or unitary object *directly* to confront or delimit, let alone to ‘fix’ as such. There is no ‘it’, only a kind of dissolve into innumerable issues” (145; emphasis in the original). This fundamental lack of definition poses obvious problems for politics, but also for literature and literary criticism. Multidisciplinary approaches seem to be required in so far as the “issue is one that refuses to stay put, dispersing as soon as you look at it into multiple questions, disciplines and topics, most of them outside the sphere of literary studies, others outside the humanities altogether, and many of them only counting as ‘environmental’ at all through various hypothetical contextual and scale effects” (T. Clark 145). Here, Clark runs the risk of underestimating the valuable contribution of literature and literary studies to such composite disciplines as ecological humanities, where (in Australia at least, for various institutional reasons) literature has not been given the attention it deserves.<sup>5</sup> Considerable difficulties still exist for the literary domain, for, “like other processes of global systemic transformation, climate change poses a [major] challenge for narrative and lyrical forms that have conventionally focused above all on individuals, families, or nations, since it requires the articulation of connections between events at vastly different scales” (Heise 205-6; also cited in T. Clark 144). But to reiterate my earlier point, literature is often conspicuously *good* at moving across different scales, while the best literary criticism is adept at picking out literature’s different semantic levels. To illustrate my point, I now turn to Grenville’s *The Idea of Perfection* and Winton’s *Breath*, both of which I read as multi-scalar crisis narratives that operate indirectly, but decisively, in the multiple contemporary contexts of global climate change.

## ATMOSPHERES

Although the Sydney-based writer Kate Grenville has spoken out on more than one occasion about the need to confront a warming world, and about the consciousness-shifting role of art in facilitating that confrontation, her fiction seems on the face of it to be an unlikely place to turn for contemporary literary insights into global climate change. Her ethical concerns are more usually understood, instead, as being oriented toward the popular reworking of male-dominated histories, especially though not exclusively in an Australian national context; toward the critical re-examination of the gender and national stereotypes embedded within such histories; and toward the imaginative excavation of buried elements within them, the demonstrably painful but potentially regenerative unearthing of previously hidden versions of individual and collective pasts.

Grenville's Orange prize-winning 1999 novel *The Idea of Perfection* is no exception. Set in a flyblown NSW country town that now lives on nostalgic visions of its own past, the novel is most often read as a gently satirical take on stereotypical Australian "bush" values, recuperating the ordinary heroisms of publicly unacknowledged people even as it challenges the conformist pressures—the performative standards of "perfection"—to which they are routinely subjected in their private lives. A deft comedy of manners in which "the protagonists become aware of themselves as characters, speaking words as if from a script" (Kossew 156), *The Idea of Perfection* is also a self-reflexive text that sees the writing process in terms of the imaginative assemblage of structured elements, combining—in conscious mimicry of the vocational pursuits of its two main characters, Douglas Cheeseman and Harley Savage—the improvisational qualities of the amateur quilter (Harley) with the more scientific outlook of the professional civil engineer (Douglas).

Lévi-Strauss's celebrated distinction between the engineer and the *bricoleur* comes to mind here. The engineer embodies the "purity" of scientific thought; the *bricoleur* represents its "impure" mythical counterpart. But as Martin Roberts suggests,

Lévi-Strauss's opposition between mythical and scientific thought, the *ingénieur* [engineer] and the *bricoleur*, proves on closer examination to be a mirage: [for] in reality, the notion of a pure, abstract scientific thought is itself a myth. [...] It would seem that all thought is mythical or *sauvage* [savage] in the sense that Lévi-Strauss defines [it], as practising a form of intellectual *bricolage*. The collapse of the *bricoleur/ingénieur* opposition, however, paradoxically only increases the relevance of Lévi-Strauss's notion of *bricolage* by extending it to all forms of intellectual activity.

(11)

This extension has relevance, I would suggest, to an ecological reading of the novel in which nature is ultimately seen, neither as a set of raw materials to be worked on (the standard resourcist view) nor as an illustrative backdrop for human action (the default mode of anthropocentrism), but rather as part of a vast interconnected web in which different physical and chemical elements—pertaining both to human and other-than-human, and also implicitly challenging the boundaries between the human and the other-than-human—act upon and modify one another according to the broad improvisational principles of mythical thought. This web corresponds to the manifestly imperfect world of non-equilibrium ecology: a world, informed by the contingencies of chaos theory, in which both organic and inorganic forms continually modify one another and matter is "recognised as having the ability to 'express' itself in complex and creative ways, within [interlocking] systems comprised of surprising and endlessly reforming flows of molecular events" (Potter 4).

At the center of this world is the rickety wooden bridge that Douglas has been sent from Sydney to knock down, the local Shire Council having decided that it is now officially beyond repair and constitutes a danger to the public, although protesting locals, Harley eventually among them, point to its continuing attractiveness—and, in a similarly sagging economy, its potential tourist value—as a regional heritage site (60). Douglas's remit is to monitor the dismantling of the bridge, thereby removing it as a source of risk, and to supervise the construction of a new one, which—suitably reinforced—will be safer and more sustainable than, though not as aesthetically appealing as, the one it will have replaced. The old bridge, however, as Douglas discovers, is stronger than it looks; and, evolving over time into an integral part of the ground on which it stands, it has taken on its own ambient life:

Under the bridge it was cool and dank, full of rich organic smells. [...]

There was a quiet secretive feel under here, crouching on the strip of damp sand. [...] Pale bands and twists of light reflected upwards from the water, stippling and shimmering over the dark timbers, making a secret upside-down world. [...] As he watched, a leaf twirled down out of the trees. It floated under the bridge where the water went black, and he waited for it to come out into the light on the other side. [...] He looked at the uprights, each one a whole tree trunk. Even after a hundred years shreds of bark still clung to them in places, and you could still see the knobs where branches had been roughly lopped off. It was not so much a bridge made of timber as a bridge made of trees. (65-66)

It is worth comparing this passage to a later one when Harley—the daughter of a famous landscape artist—makes a rough sketch of the so-called Bent Bridge, which she is visiting for the first time:

She stood with her shoes sinking slowly in the damp sand, looking up into the

underbelly of the bridge. [...] It was all coarse and clumsy, but as well as the subtle textures of the grain, the shapes fitted together in a satisfying way, and there was what they called at the Museum [in Sydney, where she works] an *interplay* between the light and the shadow that drew the eye back to look again and again. [...] She got a notebook and pencil out of her pocket and stood drawing squares and long rectangles that interlinked and interlocked, glancing between her page and the pencil. [...] When she had filled a page she turned over and started again. She spent a long time getting the angles right where one rectangle came in and locked into another. It looked so simple as to be not worth a second glance, but drawing it showed how complicated it really was. [...] When she had covered the third page she felt she had the shapes right, and started to shade the squares and rectangles with her pencil. *Light, dark, light, dark.* It was in no way a realistic drawing of the way the bridge looked, but it was what it might look like if you reduced it to its essence: simple squares and rectangles, simple lights and darks, arranged in a way that was not as simple as it seemed. (82-83; emphasis in the original)

In the two parallel scenes, the bridge is both an ecological subject in its own right and part of a broader phenomenal pattern in which the lines are blurred between perceiver and perceived and the environment dissolves into a shimmering display of ambient light. “Atmosphere” is perhaps the term that comes closest to describing what Grenville is attempting to capture here. In creating an “atmosphere” around the bridge, Grenville blends the phenomenological idea of *landscape* as “an ensemble of natural atmospheric facts embraced and expressed by a sensitive being” (Knebusch 245) with that of *climate* as the intuitive apprehension of a larger reality that involves the “opening [up of] an atmospheric relation to the world” (Knebusch 247).<sup>6</sup>

This brings me to the question of climate change in the novel. Knebusch's work is again useful here. "From a phenomenological point of view," he says, it seems preferable to "speak about climate and its modifications, fluctuations and changes rather than [about] *climate change*. Indeed, generally speaking we do not experience climate change (in its scientific, political and theological sense), but we acknowledge changes, modifications and fluctuations of climate. The notion of climate change is not a notion [that] belongs to our sphere of experience. It is a concept" (250; emphasis in the original). Knebusch's is a helpful distinction, but it is perhaps of limited use in so far as climate hardly fluctuates in Grenville's novel—it is experienced first and foremost as weather, and the weather changes very little in the text. From our first introduction to it, the town of Karakarook, NSW is caught in a seemingly interminable drought; captured in profile, its straggling houses reach feebly up to a "huge pale sky, bleached with the heat," while its main drag, "wide and empty as an airport runway, [lies] stunned under the afternoon sun" (1). Later in the novel, Harley sets out for a dip at a local swimming hole:

The day had become a *scorcher*, with an angry little dry wind that burst out of nowhere, funnelling along with the valley, whipping her along so that she could feel the back of her skirt snapping against her calves. Every gust was like a blow. The ground along the road was littered with switches of leaves ripped off and flung down. Birds were frantic, darting and wheeling low in the sky, blasted by a gust, then dropping into a hole of stillness. [...] The sky had a strange bruised look to it, and things seemed to have gone a funny colour. Somewhere away in the National Park there was a bushfire [...] and even so far away it was having an effect on the sky above Karakarook. Shadows were not right. Everything was very sharp and small, like things looked at through someone else's glasses. (340; emphasis in the original)

It is a risky day for a walk (and, as it later turns out, a swim) for someone like Harley, whom we have previously been told has a heart condition, and whose volatile temperament and oversized body are always likely to betray her, either endangering others or risking the possibility of further damaging herself.<sup>7</sup> Risks multiply in the heat like flies; the greatest of these is total meltdown. As Douglas muses at one point, tongue only half in cheek: “Taking the long view, the whole business of the Bent Bridge was unimportant. Taking a long enough view, the whole idea of bridges was meaningless. The sun would decay and explode at some point in the future, and no one would ever again have to worry about anything” (328-29).

While this apocalyptic scenario is not systematically explored in the text, its presence arguably shadows it, reminding us that the novel operates in terms of a constellation of crises, each inextricably entangled in the others, and collectively presenting the imaginative possibility of a wide variety of scale effects. Most of these crises are at the level of identity (individual, familial, national, etc.), but others—as the previous example suggests—are at the level of the species; and while the novel presents no *direct* evidence of anthropogenic climate change, it *indirectly* suggests that human actions over time have collectively helped to produce a situation of high risk whose combined social and ecological effects are now registered at a number of different levels, far exceeding what appear at first sight to be the experientially limited, excruciatingly provincial stages on which its quotidian human dramas are played out.

*The Idea of Perfection* may thus be read, for all its surface charm, as a “dark ecological” text (Morton, *Ecology* 181), densely inhabited by risk and shot through with memories of violence. The novel offers no obvious ways out of this destructive scenario other than cooperation and working compromise (the bridge is eventually saved, although not in its original form, while tensions within the community are provisionally alleviated and dysfunctional relationships temporarily patched up). However, behind this patchwork model

of community life, more quilt than bridge, an improvised pattern emerges for the ongoing negotiation of risk that is “at least as dependent on innumerable daily acts of endurance, compassion and making-do as it is on moments of [breakthrough] and high drama” (N. Clark 50). For Nigel Clark, such acts are needed more than ever in the contemporary context of radical instability characterized by global climate change—a context in which the increasing possibility of facing “extreme conditions condemn[s] us and other creatures to experimentation and improvisation [as much as it confronts us] with the need for precaution and self-restraint” (49).

If there is a lesson contained in *The Idea of Perfection*, a novel refreshingly free from the evangelical moralism of some of the more apocalyptic strains of climate change fiction, it is probably this need for improvisation. Meanwhile, as Clark also suggests, if one of the consequences of recent patterns of climate change has been to give us further proof of the *vulnerability* of our bodies, another has been to indicate the link between that vulnerability and the *volatility* of earth processes which reinforce “the porosity of human bodies to other living things” (N. Clark 47). Clark’s broad ecological view is implicitly endorsed in Grenville’s novel, even if it generally steers clear of some of radical ecology’s more extreme implications, e.g. that there are no categorical differences between human and other species, that interiority and exteriority are little more than “metaphysical illusions” (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 39), and that “thinking big”—the eco-philosopher Timothy Morton’s prerequisite for ecological awareness—simultaneously involves “facing [up to] the meaninglessness and disorienting openness of [...] ecological thought” (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 31). *The Idea of Perfection* is certainly not a *radical* work, either in content or form, but—as I hope to have suggested here—it is one that resonates with at least some of the recent thinking of major climate change theorists and ecological thinkers who, in rushing to dismiss more conventional forms of (place-based) environmentalism and their (realist)

representational strategies, arguably overlook the productive alliance between local and global forms of ecological consciousness that is facilitated by literature's imaginative capacity to move freely across different scales and levels of action and thought.

### **BREATHING EXERCISES**

Scarcely more radical—at least in outward form—is Western Australian writer Tim Winton's 2008 novel *Breath*, a realist work that stages the “existential experimentalism” of risk (Beck, *World 5*) across a full range from asinine pre-adolescent pranks to dubious adult sexual experiments to pathologically death-challenging existential confrontations where “risk is to be found at the limits of life itself” (Kelly). Set in and around the fictional southwest Australian mill town of Sawyer, a place “so drab and fixed [it was] embarrassing” (Winton *Breath* 39), the action recalls the exploits of middle-aged paramedic Bruce Pike (Pikelet), who, after witnessing the accidental death of a teenage boy who had been experimenting with self-asphyxiation, is precipitated back into his own troubled adolescence, reliving experiences he once shared with his daredevil friend Ivan Loon (Loonie) and their hippy-ish older companion Bill Sanderson (Sando), risk accomplices and surfing buddies who enter a brash world of masculine adventure epitomized in the exhilarating experience of “hurtling along beneath a thousand tons of whitewater, rag-dolling across the reef with your lungs near to bursting. [It was] a war zone out there on the bommies and we styled ourselves as comrades-under-fire” (116). Here as elsewhere, Winton's vertiginous language moves, at appropriately high speed, between the alternative registers of spontaneous celebration and recovered irony, so that at one moment the “risk culture” apparently being championed in the text is held up as life-affirming and extraordinary but, at the next, as just the latest irresponsible attempt to up the ante in a routinely “dangerized” world (Lianos and Douglas).<sup>8</sup> (More ironically still, the radical pretensions of Sando, a self-styled guru figure who

solemnly instructs the boys on how to “face down their own fears” and make “bargains with God,” thereby disclosing humanity’s “higher side” (133), are shown up for what they are: the narcissistic impulses of an under-challenged post-Vietnam generation looking for ethically acceptable ways of legitimating its obsession with itself (Thomas.)

For all its full-blooded engagement with risk, *Breath* pushes the very boundaries of what might realistically count as climate change literature. There are no references to climate change in the text, and its late twentieth-century context predates today’s unmistakably post-millennial rhetoric of ruinously rising tides and catastrophically melting ice caps. (Not that Winton is unaware of, or uninterested in, the perils of climate change, which plays a cameo role in two of his most recent works, the plays *Rising Water* (2011) and *Signs of Life* (2012); features in some of his earlier novels, especially *Dirt Music* (2001); and has prompted him over time to numerous media statements on the need to take an environmentally protective stance.) Notwithstanding, *Breath* is as good an example as any in Winton’s large body of work of what it means to “dwell in crisis” at a time of full-blown ecological emergency in which risks of all kinds—and all degrees of magnitude, proliferation, and intensity—register within and across a dizzying variety of spatial and temporal sites.

Morton’s gloss on Beck captures the disorienting amplitude of vision this emergency entails, which has been further expanded by new technologies:

[W]e’re now aware of risks on global and micro scales. [...] The more risk we know about, the more risk spreads. Risk becomes democratized, and democracy becomes about managing risk. Ulrich Beck calls it a “risk society”: how our increasing awareness of risk in all dimensions (across space, within our bodies, over time) changes our awareness of how we coexist. [...] Along with the sense of tremendous power and voyeuristic, sadistic fantasies of being able to see everything (on Google Earth, YouTube,

and so on) goes a sense of perilous vulnerability. (*Ecological Thought* 25)

As Morton implies, an expanded awareness of risk does not necessarily reduce the likelihood of taking risks; indeed, it is much more likely to increase it. In the novel, the motives for taking risks are not always clear, while the consequences of having taken them are equally uncertain. Risk taking seems, on one level, to be primarily about the competitive testing of physical limits, while on another it expands into a narcissistic form of existential grandstanding, an initially idealistic but eventually compulsive—even pathological—desire to transcend the normative categories of existence and to open up the possibility of an alternative, somehow more authentic, sense of self (V. Brady; Thomas).

Risk is linked in some cases to fantasized myths and rituals of masculine prowess (Winton, *Breath* 133), in others to maverick survivalism in the partly imagined (though not wholly imaginary) context of the global nuclear threat (*Breath* 143). Risk is thus as much about imagining alternative worlds as it is about living with the stresses and uncertainties of this one; and it is not so much about “facing down one’s fears” as about continuing to hide the fear that one may be far less capable of living in this world than one imagines—and far less capable of exerting control over the physical and emotional conditions governing one’s own and others’ existence than one thinks. Risk is the *breath* of life—the powerfully generative means by which “excitement, meaning and purpose [can be injected] into life worlds that, for Pikelet and Loonie, are dominated by the [...] institutionalised ordinariness of family, school and work” (Kelly) in the dull coastal town they live in. And risk is also a random series of scarcely controllable *breathing exercises* in which the life-shaping potentialities of human beings are constrained and circumscribed by the biological rhythms they are ultimately powerless to stop. The narrator reflects wryly on this:

More than once [...] I’ve wondered whether the life-threatening high jinks that Loonie and I and Sando and Eva [Sando’s American wife, with whom Pikelet

has a brief and tumultuous affair] got up to in the years of my adolescence were anything more than a rebellion against the monotony of drawing breath. It's easy for an old man to look back and see the obvious, how wasted youth and health and safety are on the young who spurn such things, to be dismayed by the risks you took, but as a youth you do sense that life renders you powerless by dragging you back to it, breath upon breath upon breath in an endless capitulation to biological routine, and that the human will to control is as much about asserting power over your own body as exercising it on others. (*Breath* 45)

Risk is also housed in the elements we breathe (air) and that we ourselves are largely composed of (water). In *Breath*—as so often in Winton's work—it is the *sea* that is the medium *par excellence* of risk, described elsewhere as “just as ready to claim as it is to offer,” and as a watery “profusion of depths and mysteries,” incompletely explored and understood (Winton, *Land's Edge* 94, 39). As in Cousteau (to whom Winton regularly pays homage in his work), the sea is at once a source of life and a site of death, a wholly indifferent planetary element that we risk turning into “the playground of our hedonism” at our peril, and that we would do well to acknowledge as being immeasurably more powerful than ourselves (*Land's Edge* 40). *Breath* is full of passages that confirm the destructive power of the sea, not least Pikelet's recurring dream in which he sees himself, hurled like a projectile into the rocks after a surfing accident, sinking to his death while his lungs “turn to sponge and the ocean inside me flickers with cruel light” (139). Earlier in the novel, Pikelet imagines the sea, not just as a threat to himself but as an earth-shattering force; frightened by his mother's bed-time stories about the Blitz, he turns on the radio at breakfast, “half expecting to hear the news that whole slabs of the district had been lost to the sea—fences, roads, forest and pasture—all chewed off like so much cake” (9).

Passages like these are more redolent of the sensate immediacy—the vengeful sublime—of Lawrence Buell’s “environmental apocalypticism” (280) than they are of the much more intractable futurities attached to global warming. As I hope to have shown in this essay, climate—whether changing or not—can be difficult to visualize since, perhaps particularly in the case of global warming, it tends to be abstracted from the more readily identifiable phenomenological patterns within which weather can be experientially registered *as it happens* in any given place at any given time.<sup>9</sup> “When weather becomes climate [in this way]—when it enters the realm of science and history—it can no longer be a stage set” (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 28); a different aesthetic, potentially reaching out to infinity, would appear to be required for which there are no obvious literary models to hand. There are no obvious models, perhaps, but there are still some surprisingly conventional literary ways of illustrating the scale effects currently being produced by global warming, and of suggesting—without falling into a limiting form of moral prescriptivism—the ethical responsibilities that come with increased awareness of the possible consequences of climate change. My dual contention here has been that risk narratives including *Breath* and *The Idea of Perfection* may prove just as useful as their apocalyptic counterparts in drawing attention to the issues and problems surrounding global warming—and that these issues and problems are contained within a wider “dark ecological” imaginary that literature, both in Australia and elsewhere, has it well within its powers to represent.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The "lucky country" trope is usually associated with the Australian cultural critic Donald Horne's 1964 book of the same name, though Horne himself—understandably exasperated by the abuses to which it has been put—has done much since to disown it, notably in his follow-up book *Death of the Lucky Country* (1976), which refutes its association with, e.g., Australian climate and natural resources while reiterating its ironic intent. There is no sign, though, of a let-up in both positive and negative uses of the trope, within and outside Australia. Recent examples include Warner, who suggests that the current Australian boom cycle, driven by strong Asian demand for the natural resources that fuel economic growth, may soon be coming to an end and, with it, the "Australian dollar's new found status as the Swiss franc of the southern hemisphere." "Time is [fast] running out," says Warner, "for the 'lucky country,'" which may have weathered the financial crash of 2008 with its economy

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more or less unscathed, but which now clearly suffers from many of the “illnesses that have afflicted Europe and America, with an overvalued housing market, a bloated banking sector, high levels of household debt, and a burgeoning current account deficit.” “Unluckiness” is also regularly attributed to Australia’s notoriously fickle climate, which—in one anonymous post in the *Rational Pessimist*—is seen as running the significant risk of turning malevolent in the not too distant future. “A young Australian today,” the post suggests, “has a significant probability of seeing his or her country’s climate move from benign to hostile,” while current global warming trends, locally experienced, have the potential if they are left unchecked to shake the foundations of Australian society itself. Assessments such as this tend to collapse the differences between luck, by definition an arbitrary category, and risk, which generally implies a certain degree of agency or intentionality; for further reflections on risk, see section 2 of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> It might be helpful here to clarify the difference between global warming and climate change, which are sometimes assumed in the media to be interchangeable with one another. As I have recently argued elsewhere, *global warming* refers to “a rising temperature trend associated with pressure generated on the Earth’s atmosphere by a build-up of greenhouse gases, whereas *climate change*—the most obvious contemporary manifestation of which is global warming—involves a variety of both visible and invisible effects” (Huggan and Tiffin 95). These effects—changing rainfall patterns, the expansion and contraction of ice sheets, variations in sea level, etc.—are responses to what the climatologist Mark Maslin calls “internal and external forcing mechanisms” (15). External forcing mechanisms, such as variations in the Earth’s orbits around the sun, may be seen as part of the natural cycles of climate change, themselves capable of producing extreme variations of climate, while internal forcing mechanisms include human-induced “variations in the carbon dioxide of the atmosphere modulating the greenhouse effect” (Maslin 15). The ratio of external to internal

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forcing mechanisms affecting climate change is uncertain, though climatology is far from being the inexact science, subject to the further forcing mechanisms of ideology, that climate change skeptics in the media and elsewhere like to imagine (for extreme Australian examples, see Plimer and Bolt). For the purposes of this essay, it will be assumed that “anthropogenic climate change—the processes by which human beings have become ‘weather makers’ (Flannery), acquiring the collective capacity to transform global climate—is beyond reasonable doubt, though the historical timeframe for this acquisition, as well as the timing and degree of its anticipated effects, remain uncertain” (Huggan and Tiffin 2015: 95; see also Litfin, Crist).

<sup>3</sup> Another informative web log is that initiated by the ANU literary/cultural scholar Tom Ford. See also the influential work of the Monash-based ecocritic Kate Rigby.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Brady for sharing earlier versions of her work with me.

<sup>5</sup> In a widely cited piece in the *Australian Humanities Review*, the ANU environmental historian Tom Griffiths argues that “Australia has a real competitive edge in the ecological humanities,” which he attributes to “our New World mentality and predicament, our history as a modern settler society with a long, strong indigenous history, our inheritance of a confrontingly different and unique ecology, [and] our inhabitation of an island continent that is also a nation.” Griffiths lists the component disciplines: philosophy, art history, ecocriticism, environmental history. Literature, perhaps unsurprisingly, is missing from the list. There is no space here to go into all the reasons why this is so; suffice to say that literature and literary studies—including Australian literature/literary studies—are being squeezed out at many of the nation’s universities even as moves are afoot to reconcile sciences and humanities in the pursuit of common intellectual, social, and political goals.

<sup>6</sup> “Atmosphere” has other connotations in the text (and elsewhere in Grenville’s *oeuvre*, which is routinely praised for its “atmospheric” qualities). One connotation is that of an

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individually or collectively experienced sensation of awkwardness—an artificially maintained propriety that contains within it the presentiment of danger. “Atmospheres” of this kind hang heavy in the air, freighted with the risk of imminent wrongdoing. Examples in the novel include exploratory encounters between two members of the novel’s comic support cast, the fretting housewife Felicity Porcelline and the lecherous butcher Alfred Chang—first premonitions of what will later become an affair—and between the lead actors Douglas Cheeseman and Harley Savage, who are inexorably drawn to one another but persistently discouraged by their mutual awareness of their physical plainness, their conspicuous lack of social graces, and their lingering memories of romantic mishaps—some of them with catastrophic consequences—in the past.

<sup>7</sup> Harley narrowly escapes drowning after suffering what appears to be a mild repeat of an earlier heart attack. The incident, one of the novel’s numerous semi-ironic plays on the contradictions embedded within Australian pastoral, also offers a classic “recognition scene” in which Harley realizes that she can no longer hide from the world—or from herself—for fear of the damage she might inflict on others, and that her only “crime,” past and present, is to have no confidence in herself (353).

<sup>8</sup> Drawing on the work of the anthropologists Michael Lianos and Mary Douglas, Luis Vivanco suggests that the line between risky behavior and normality is now increasingly blurred and that the experimental engagement with risk has become a legitimate “interpretive framework for social interaction” in an inherently “dangerized” world (9). As my reading of the novel shows, *Breath* does not necessarily reject this view, although it examines some of its negative consequences.

<sup>9</sup> See Flannery’s useful distinction between *climate* as an aggregate system, “the sum of all weathers over a certain period, [either] for a certain region or for the planet as a whole,” and *weather*, which is “what we experience every day” (20).