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The Novel, Recycled: On Tom Comitta's *The Nature Book* (2023)

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This essay offers an introduction to the work of Tom Comitta and a reading of their 2023 novel, *The Nature Book*, a citational fiction composed entirely of nature descriptions copied from other novels. The essay situates Comitta's experiment in citation in relation to a preoccupation with remediation and appropriation in the work of a number of conceptual writers. With reference to the postcritical and anthropocenic turns in literary studies, the essay then explores how Comitta's work speaks to contemporary debates in the academy about method, particularly as these debates have engaged questions of ecology. It argues that *The Nature Book* represents an aesthetic departure from much contemporary environmental fiction and an experiment in how the novel form might be remade to speak to and of our moment of climate crisis.

There's nothing original in Tom Comitta's *The Nature Book* (2023). As the author – if that's the right word to describe Comitta's relation to the text – acknowledges in its preface, the novel 'contains no words of my own' (2023a: ix). Rather, it consists entirely of descriptions of the natural world Comitta has gathered from 'over three hundred novels' (2023a: ix), from *Persuasion* (1817) to *White Noise* (1984), and then 'collaged into a single narrative' (Comitta 2023b). There are no human characters; instead, the 'animals, landforms, and weather patterns that have buttressed human drama since the beginning of the novel form' take centre stage (Comitta n.d.-a). In his study of character, *The One vs. The Many* (2003), Alex Woloch analyses the 'distribution of attention' in classic realist narrative, describing how major and minor characters 'jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe', creating what he calls a 'character-system' (2003: 15, 13). In *The Nature Book*, our attention is drawn instead to the ecosystems that typically sustain and underwrite a novel's portrayal of such networks of social relation, as 'background is brought to the fore' (Comitta n.d.-a).[1] We realise, reading Comitta's text, how often descriptions of the natural world mark moments of narrative transition in a novel, interludes in the action, resting places between main events. One source of inspiration for Comitta's project was Mark Twain's prefatory note to *The American Claimant* (1892), in which Twain informs his readers that 'No weather will be found in this book', because 'Nothing breaks up an author's progress like having to stop every few pages to fuss-up the weather' (1892/2002: 459).[2] *The Nature Book* is an extended fussing-up of the weather, Comitta exploring how one might forestall conventional narrative progress by experimenting with forms of what Timothy Morton calls 'ambience' and 'suspension' (2007: 34, 44). Without the usual plotlines of human development and relation to keep things moving along, the novel instead leaves readers to dwell in something like what Wai Chee Dimock and others have termed the 'deep time' (2008) of the planet. It's hard to avoid ecological metaphors when describing how the book moves and feels: its pace is glacial, its slow accrual of textural detail alluvial.

And yet, if the novel is *sans* humans, it is not straightforwardly posthuman, for every literary fragment Comitta pieces together inevitably bears a trace of us. Indeed, Comitta describes *The Nature Book* as 'both a narrative and an archive of how we think and write about nature' (2023a: 275), a kind of distant-reading of how the novel has (mis)represented and (mis)construed our interrelation with the nonhuman world. The human is an absent presence in the novel, mirroring Comitta's own ambiguous status as its author. *The Nature Book* may be said to ultimately endorse Morton's argument, in *Ecology without Nature* (2007), that the very idea of 'nature' 'ironically impedes a proper

[1] In her review of the novel, Madeleine Crum (2023) writes that 'Comitta has created something a lot like an ecosystem'.

[2] Comitta cites Twain's novel in Comitta (2020b).

relation with the Earth and its life-forms' (2). At the same time, the novel also manifests an anthropocenic understanding of the 'entanglement of the Earth system and social systems' (Menely and Taylor 2017: 4), of ecology and people. A foundational move made in the anthropocenic turn has been to try, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, to collapse the 'age-old humanist distinction between human history and natural history' (2009: 201). By recycling the ways in which 'nature' has been constituted in and by the novel, Comitta suggests how the history of the novel might be both implicated in the perpetuation of this conceptual division, and yet at the same time a resource for thinking through how the very different scales of human and natural history might be imagined together. Recasting the labour of authorship as more akin to editing than invention – more like curation than creation – Comitta sifts the archive of the novel and discovers, paradoxically, the material from which it might be remade for our current moment of ecological crisis.

In what follows, I situate *The Nature Book* in relation to a series of aesthetic contexts and to recent debates about method in the humanities. I begin by turning to a strain of early twenty-first-century avant-garde poetics often called conceptual writing. I show that *The Nature Book*, as well as some of Comitta's earlier writing, shares with this work an interest in forms of textual appropriation and citation as a means of problematising ideas of authorial labour and originality, and of querying what it means to write in a technologically-mediated age of textual superabundance and data excess. I then suggest how Comitta's novel speaks in unusual and generative ways to disciplinary debates within the humanities about method, particularly as these debates have engaged questions of ecology. Whether framed as an anthropocenic turn, or as the emergence of a 'new cultural geology' (McGurl 2011), work in this broad field has examined how the climate crisis might inflect the modes of critique and inquiry practiced in the humanities. Drawing on work from the earth sciences and sociology, and sometimes informed by a new materialist or posthumanist 'flat ontology', this scholarship has sought to reconsider the scale, depth, and temporal span of critique, often in ways that dovetail with work from the postcritical turn in literary studies. Described by Comitta as 'oscillating between narrative and data analysis' (2018a), I suggest that *The Nature Book* performs a kind of 'weak' critique of its own status as nature writing, in a way that chimes with the 'modest' ambitions of postcritique, while also gesturing to the possibility of a reimagined relation not just to the natural world, but also to literary history.[3]

I: Unoriginals

Marjorie Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius* (2010) is perhaps the best known of a clutch of critical works to have appeared in the last couple of decades analysing contemporary poetry's

[3] See Saint-Amour (2018); Williams (2015).

interest in various forms of textual citation and remediation.[4] Perloff argues that in twenty-first-century avant-garde poetics, '*inventio* is giving way to appropriation, elaborate constraint [...] and reliance on intertextuality' (2010: 11). Rather than pitch for originality, contemporary poets are more interested in the possibilities of 'citation and constraint, intertext and intermedia' (2010: 12). In *Make It the Same* (2019), Jacob Edmond similarly describes the emergence of an 'iterative poetics' over the past quarter century preoccupied with the 'selection and rearrangement of texts [...] copied from elsewhere' (2019: 2). These aesthetic tendencies are evident in the conceptual works of poets such as Kenneth Goldsmith, Tan Lin, Vanessa Place, Craig Dworkin, and Caroline Bergvall, among others.[5]

In a sense, there's nothing new in contemporary poetry's taste for appropriation, as both Perloff and Edmond acknowledge. Rather, it can be understood as an extension and intensification of 'the citational strategies of modernism' (Edmond 2019: 14), with its often multilingual play of allusion and quotation. Perloff also makes the case for concrete poetry, with its emphasis on the materiality of language, as an important antecedent, together with the work of the Oulipo group, with its emphasis on proceduralism and constraint, while other critics point to literary collage.[6] Contemporary poetry's aesthetic experiments are clearly anticipated in visual art, too – not only in what Hal Foster (2004) identifies as the 'archival impulse' in twenty-first century installation art, but in a longer tradition, stretching back to Duchamp's ready-mades, of an interest in constraint, repetition, and the recontextualization of found objects. Indeed, avant-garde poetry's debt to this tradition is signalled by Goldsmith himself in his 2007 manifesto, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing' – a playful plagiarizing of Sol LeWitt's 1967 manifesto, 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art'.

And yet there is something distinctive about the contemporary avant-garde's turn to citation and remediation. Conceptual writing positions itself in response to the 'unprecedented textual abundance' (Stephens 2015: 34) of the Internet age. New technologies and digital infrastructures of data storage, management, and sharing have made new kinds of textual work possible by reshaping our relationship to texts themselves, the argument goes. 'Faced with an unprecedented amount of available text, the problem is not needing to write more of it', Goldsmith suggests; 'instead, we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists' (2011: 1). Writers should think of themselves more like 'programmers' (2011: 4), tasked with 'the shaping, organization, and dissemination of information' (Stephens 2015: 2). Rather than create texts, writers

[4] See also Boon (2010); Goldsmith (2011); Reed (2013); Stephens (2015); Marczewska (2018); Edmond (2019).

[5] See Dworkin and Goldsmith (2011).

[6] See Perloff (2010: 50–75, 79–86). On collage, see Cran (2014).

now copy, collect, curate, edit, and archive them. Such a shift in the role of the writer blurs cultural production and consumption, conceptual writing perpetuating the logic of what's been called the 'prosumption' economy.[7] This blurring has implications for intellectual property and copyright law, but also, more broadly, for how we think about artistic labour and value, and what we imagine the role of poet or author to include or require.[8] Such debates are not new, of course; but they have become newly urgent in our moment of technological transition defined by filesharing, streaming, data collection, and now generative AI. In such a moment a writer's claims on a text are increasingly tenuous. 'If you don't want it copied', Goldsmith warns, 'don't put it online' (2011: 10).

Many projects of conceptual writing are 'epic' in scale, Goldsmith writes, 'mirroring the gargantuan scale of textuality on the Internet' (2011: 4). This applies to much of his own work, including *Day* (2003), 'an appropriation of the complete text of a day's copy of the *New York Times* published as a nine-hundred-page book', and to that of his sometime collaborator, Craig Dworkin, whose *Parse* (2008) consists of the poet's parsing of 'an entire nineteenth-century book on grammar according to its own methods, even down to the book's index' (Goldsmith 2011: 3). Such projects combine what Perloff calls 'the language of the library and the database' (2010: 122), or display a kind 'database logic' (2002: 218), to borrow Lev Manovich's phrase. As Brian Reed summarises, this kind of work often involves 'repetitive labor, the manipulation of large texts and data sets, and a shift from localized attention to sound and wordplay toward experimentation with language at higher orders of organization' (2013: 45). They are drawn to, and draw from, inventories, catalogues, and indexes, such that the texts themselves becomes repositories of information made strange by strategies of remediation and *detournement*.[9]

As in conceptual art, in conceptual writing it often appears that 'the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work' (Jaeger 2009: 45). Put another way, it's sometimes difficult to tell whether these texts are meant to be 'read', in any conventional meaning of the word. Perloff and others certainly give it a good go, subjecting Goldsmith and his contemporaries to the rigours of orthodox close reading. But it's perhaps worth taking seriously Goldsmith's claim that he aspires for his writing to be 'unreadable' and as 'boring' as possible, and then to wonder what kinds of critique or aesthetic response such work might require or provoke.[10] If we've for a long time tended to valorise the 'intensity' of aesthetic experience, Goldsmith and others seem curious about what

[7] See Edmond (2019: 154–159).

[8] In regard to Goldsmith's work, see Goldsmith (2020). For a recent general history, see Bellos and Montagu (2024).

[9] On *detournement*, see Goldsmith (2011: 35–40).

[10] See Goldsmith (n.d.). See also Duffy (2016).

other affective registers art might play with or call up.[11] Their writing is attuned to 'the low-pulse aesthetic of the interesting' (Edmond 2019: 165), perhaps best exemplified in Tan Lin's project of 'ambient poetics', which imagines poetry as something like an 'atmospheric condition', or mood music (Scappettone 2009: 63). Lin wants his work to 'integrate more with your ambient environment', to fit in with 'the chronology of things you're doing while you're reading' (Lin 2010b).

What are the politics of this aesthetics of boredom? For Lee Konstantinou, the only thing 'new' about the work of Goldsmith, Lin, and others is the 'evacuation [...] of any social, political, or cultural agitation' (2017: 91) from their writing, its happy accommodation with consumerism. By contrast, Reed argues that conceptual writing resists 'complicity' with 'contemporary corporate culture' by 'strategically embracing anachronism and obsolescence' (2013: xiv) – not least in the way these digitally-saturated texts are often published in 'analog' form, that is, as books. Jeffrey Nealon similarly finds an oppositional valence to Goldsmith's interest in 'banality', arguing that his 'anti-hermeneutic gesture seems radically different from the mainstream modernist or postmodernist critique of meaning; rather than trying to reenchant [...] artistic hermeneutics, Goldsmith's work seems to want to abandon it altogether' (2013: 120). In her reading of Lin's 'ambient textuality', meanwhile, Jennifer Scappettone suggests that while the poet's 'absorptive reading environments aim to dampen the shocks associated with both modernist fractures and postmodern counter-absorptive verse' by 'releas[ing] the reader [...] into a state of distraction', they ultimately produce 'a more disquieting condition' (2009: 63). 'Unlike the anodyne atmospheres of aromatherapy and Muzak' – other kinds of 'ambience' available in the culture – Lin's poetry 'works up a climate that engrosses, then discomposes', Scappettone writes, in ways that are by turn 'immersing and alarming' (2009: 66).

II: Supercuts and Postcritique

Both the aesthetics of conceptual writing and the debates about its politics are important to understanding Comitta's project in *The Nature Book* and its origins. Before writing fiction, Comitta started out as, in their own words, 'the kind of poet who [...] read the entirety of a Yahoo message board verbatim to a small crowd', and who 'valued writing that directly engaged with problems of language' (2023c). Even as they moved away from poetry, their work continued to take up similar preoccupations in a similarly avant-garde vein: in *0* (2013), for example, a collation of 'all round counters found in Unicode typefaces' (Comitta n.d-b)., described by the artist Kota Ezawa as 'writing as

[11] I have in mind here Nicholas Gaskill's forthcoming work on aesthetic intensity.

[a] form of data knitting'; or in a series of 'night novels' – that is, novels written in a single night – Comitta composed between 2012–14 and later collected in *First Thought Worst Thought* (2015).[12] Among these is a translation of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* (1869) copied and pasted from the Internet and reset, as a single continuous paragraph, in Comic Sans – a project Comitta describes as a 'kind of readymade' (2023d).

While these early works bear some of the hallmarks of conceptual writing – an interest in found texts, remediation, translation, digital technologies, practices of 'non-reading' – Comitta's distinctive style begins to emerge more sharply in *Airport Novella* (2017). This was the first of their 'literary supercuts' – Comitta's term for a collaged or citational text 'made entirely or almost entirely of found language' (Comitta 2020b).[13] Marked by a 'radical rejection of originality', literary supercuts 'turn writing into a kind of editorial or archival labor' (2020b), Comitta writes. In the case of *Airport Novella*, the archive is popular fiction, of the sort you'd find in Departures. Comitta gathers together examples of four gestures – 'nodding, shrugging, odd looks, and gasps' – that they 'found to be ubiquitous' (Comitta n.d.-b) in this kind of novel, with a chapter devoted to each gesture.[14] 'More assembled than created' (Comitta 2018a), *Airport Novella* suggests how the literary supercut can perform a kind of metacommentary on the language of which it is composed, drawing from a large corpus, or 'data set', to analyse the common features of a genre or form. Comitta experiments with this method again in 'First Impressions', a 2018 series of short fictions composed entirely of first lines of short stories published in the *New Yorker* over a twenty year period. 'I wanted to examine the production of prestige fiction as well as the editorial character of the *New Yorker* fiction section', Comitta explains, 'its idiosyncrasies, biases, and imaginative limits' (2018b). What the piece reveals is not only the *New Yorker*'s predilection for a certain kind of opening sentence, but also a certain kind of perspective and subject: Comitta found that they could piece together a fairly coherent account of a 'white man's story', but 'only a fragment of a woman's' (2018b).

In interviews, Comitta cites other recent examples of 'entirely sampled/non-inventive novels' (Comitta 2018a). Among them: Joseph Kosuth's *Purloined*, begun in the 1960s and published in 2000, 'composed entirely of single pages from more than a hundred different novels of various genres', with each page 'photocopied directly from its original source, thus resulting in a variety of typefaces and layouts' (Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011: 331); and *The Best American Book of the 20th Century* (2014) by the

[12] The Ezawa quote appears on the book's publisher's website (Anon n.d.).

[13] *Airport Novella* was Comitta's first published supercut; they had been working on *The Nature Book* as early as 2012.

[14] The results are often very funny. A digital version of the full text, published by Troll Thread, is available via Comitta's website.

artistic collective, Société Réaliste, comprising 'one thousand sentences from best-seller novels' (Comitta 2018a) arranged according to various Oulipian constraints. Yet while 'both books are great ideas', says Comitta, 'they're basically unreadable'. This isn't a criticism because, 'like a lot of Conceptual Poetry, reading isn't the main idea'; but Comitta suggests that in their own work they are less interested in the effects of fragmentation and juxtaposition, which have long been a feature of collage work and cut-ups, than in the possibilities of 'really smooth collage, with no big jump cuts' (Comitta 2018a), resulting in a readable narrative. Closer to Comitta's idea of the literary supercut in this regard is the slightly earlier work of Sally Alatalo. In *A Rearranged Affair* (1996), Alatalo (writing as Anita M-28) interpolates pages from a variety of dimestore romance paperbacks, re-collating them so as to keep to sequential pagination: 'although the narration obviously jars from page to page, the formulaic trajectory of the genre is retained' (Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011: 331).[15] Closer still to Comitta's work is Doug Houston's *Vast: An Unoriginal Novel* (1994), published under the name of 'Moore Lande'. As the title and author pseudonym suggest, *Vast* is a supercut Western novel, with each appropriated sentence footnoted and arranged into a continuous narrative, with lines 'aggregated into microthematic constellations' (Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011: 331).

The work of Alatalo and Houston have in common with Comitta's supercuts an interest in how practices of textual collation, arrangement, and citation can reveal a genre's conventions. But, as their commentary on 'First Impressions' suggests, Comitta is also interested in how these practices might reveal what is occluded from a particular text, publication, or genre – not only how certain stories are repeatedly told, but how certain other stories are repeatedly left untold. Part of the metacommentary that the supercut performs might therefore be to reveal what is absent from its source texts. In this, Comitta's project shares some of the imperatives of long-standing approaches to literary study – primarily Marxist and/or postcolonial in perspective – that seek to show how a literary work, or a canon, is formed around the exclusion of certain groups of people or ideas and the ambiguation of certain large-scale socio-political forces and orders, like imperialism and capitalism. Such approaches might be called forms of 'strong critique', interpretative modes 'whose primary aim is to expose the ruses of ideology' (Saint-Amour 2018: 439) operating in a text. And yet, at the same time, Comitta's citational method seems to speak to recent work within the 'postcritical turn' in literary studies that has sought to articulate 'modes of reading that attend to texts rather than plumb their depths' (Best and Marcus 2009: 1–2).[16] Rather than achieve mastery over a text, postcritical reading aims for a more 'modest' form of engagement,

[15] Comitta cites Alatalo's work: see Comitta (2023e).

[16] On the postcritical turn, see Anker and Felski (2017).

aspiring to nothing more than a 'surface reading' or 'thin description' of a work.[17] Some postcritical modes call for the 'closest proximity and affective attunement' (English and Love 2023: 20) to their object of study, while others – especially those affiliated with literary sociology and digital humanities approaches – 'distance themselves from texts and from practices of close reading altogether' (Love 2010: 373). Most try to occupy 'a paradoxical space of minimal critical agency' (Best and Marcus 2009: 17), in contrast to 'the portrait of the critic as heroic demystifier of ideology' (Saint-Amour 2018: 439) familiar from critique's heyday.

Comitta's citational method – in which conventional forms of artistic 'invention' or 'originality' are relinquished in favor of less vaunted kinds of authorial labour, like copying, compiling, and editing – chimes with the 'new modesty' of much of this critical work. And Comitta, too, tries to occupy something like a position of minimal authorial agency in relation to their work. 'One of the things I'm interested in as a writer of collage fiction is how much the writing is guided by the source material itself' (2018a), Comitta observes in an interview, while in the commentary to 'First Impressions' they note how some sections of the piece 'almost wrote themselves' (2018b). Meanwhile, in their use of large datasets of source material – whether airport novels, *New Yorker* short stories, or, as we'll see in the next section, nature descriptions – Comitta's work also echoes that of Franco Moretti and other critics pursuing the possibilities of distant reading, often utilizing digital technologies, where distance from texts affords 'a sharper sense of their overall interconnection' (Moretti 2005: 1), even as Comitta remains committed to working with texts at the level of sentence, as 'First Impressions' suggests. But more speculatively, we might also say that Comitta shows us that citation – with what Perloff calls 'its dialectic of removal and graft, disjunction and conjunction, its interpenetration of origin and destruction' (2010: 17) – might afford critics a new kind of handle on texts, one the combines the deconstructive gesture of 'strong critique' with the 'reparative' gesture of postcritque; or, to put it another way, that unmakes and remakes a text at the same time.[18]

III: The Nature of the Novel

Comitta expands upon these preoccupations in *The Nature Book*, their most ambitious literary supercut to date. The text comprises descriptions of the natural world sourced from over three hundred novels, dating from the mid-eighteenth century to the present, and chosen in part for their canonicity and cultural significance.[19] Comitta

[17] On the 'new modesty' of postcritque, see Williams (2015); on 'thin description', see Love (2013).

[18] On reparative reading, see Sedgwick (2003).

[19] Comitta provides a full list of sources in the back of the book.

compiled and arranged these descriptions according to various Oulipian constraints, outlined in the novel's afterword ('A nature description ends where a human form or human-made object begins'; 'No words of my own may be added anywhere in the novel' [Comitta 2023a: 276]). Comitta then sorted this collection of nature descriptions into 'macropatterns' (the four seasons, oceans, deserts, mountains) and within them a set of 'micropatterns' (specific animals, particular times of day), recalling Houston's compositional method in *Vast*. They did much of this work by hand, printing their trove of nature descriptions gathered from digitised texts, and then cutting them up, grouping them, and arranging them into sentences and finally a coherent narrative by taping them together onto the walls of their studio (See **Figure 1**). While this method was unusual – one fellow-writer, seeing the photographs, below, of Comitta's workspace, commented that 'they seem one ball of red twine away from a lunatic conspiracy theorist's basement' (Comitta 2018a) – the move from digital archive to material text resembles that made by other conceptual writers; as Goldsmith observes, 'while this new writing has an electronic glint in its eyes, its results are distinctly *analog*' (2011: 4. Emphasis original). Such an emphasis on materiality is also of course appropriate for a text that is itself an experiment in textual recycling.

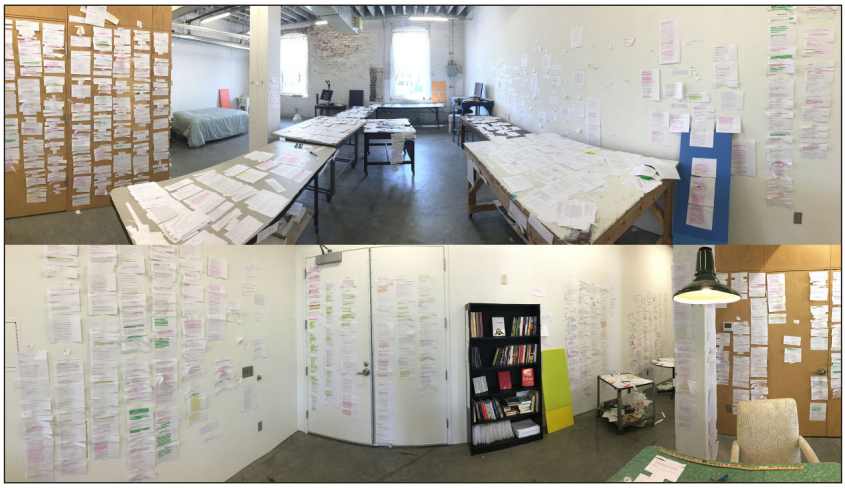

Figure 1: Phot credit: Tom Comitta. Source: https://www.tomcomitta.com/the-nature-book.

In common with Comitta's earlier experiments in literary supercuts, *The Nature Book* reveals, and implicitly critiques, certain recurring features and patterns in its source material. An 'archive of how we think and write about nature' (Comitta 2023a: 275), we discover reading Comitta's text how the novel has often used descriptions of the natural world to mark temporal and narrative transitions, how it tends to anthropomorphise

nature, and how various writers have reached for similar images in describing certain landscapes ('I found at least five books that described the jungle as a cathedral' [2018a], Comitta notes). But Comitta's project in *The Nature Book* is also a departure from their earlier supercuts. In excising the presence of the human as far as possible, they interrogate whether the novel form has the potential to accommodate other kinds of life, exploring how the novel might be repurposed were we to be left out of the story.[20] That is to say, *The Nature Book* isn't only an 'archive' of what the novel is and has been, but an attempt to imagine what it could be, and in this way the text is not derivative of its source materials in quite the way that Comitta's earlier supercuts were, but rather an attempt to reconceive the very possibilities of the novel form. At the same time, whilst part of the project of the text is to reveal they ways in which it is impossible to imagine the natural world without us in it – that the very idea of 'nature' is fundamentally and irrevocably anthropocentric, as Morton suggests – the novel is also a genuine attempt at this paradoxical task.

As such, the novel may be said to be marked by the 'larger anthropocenic imagination' (Marshall 2015: 523) of our current moment. The Anthropocene attempts to define the historical period in which humans have come to rival 'some of the great forces of Nature in [our] impact on the functioning of the Earth system' (Steffen et al. 2011: 843, quoted in Menely and Taylor 2017: 2), and proposes that there is 'a form of temporality that can be understood as a mediation of the surface of the globe by the human species' (Marshall 2015: 523). Thinking with the Anthropocene means trying to imagine the very different scales of human and geological time as one, or at least as 'incommensurate yet deeply entangled' (Martin 2017: 126). Such a historical perspective at once focalises and decentres humans' role in the drama of the world. As Mark McGurl puts it, thinking about the impact of our species on the planet within 'the bizarrely humiliating length of geological time [...] exacerbates and magnifies the dilemma of human agency' (2011: 380, 383). Benjamin Morgan similarly suggests that 'the Anthropocene aspires to name a new scale of human agency' while at the same time asking us to 'resituate historical consciousness in relation to an expanded scale of geological time'. 'The question of how one might reconcile or move between vastly divergent scales', Morgan goes on, 'is a central matter of concern' (2017: 132).

Literary studies is among those disciplines reckoning with the implications of the Anthropocene paradigm. This is evident in the resurgent scholarly interest in world literature, work often characterized by an attention to 'flows, trajectories, and systems that go beyond national borders and human time scales' (Menely and Taylor 2017:

[20] A different but perhaps comparable creative response to the canonical novel is what Jeremy Rosen identifies as the genre of 'minor-character elaboration' (Rosen 2016).

11). An example is Wai Chee Dimock's effort to imagine American literature 'restored to a *longue durée*, a scale enlargement along the temporal axis that also enlarges its spatial compass' (2008: 4), and her attempt to work with 'a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional [...] binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric' (3). Equally, the Anthropocene's emphasis on scalar complexity tallies with digital humanities approaches that attempt to employ quantitative methods to read literary history 'at scale', while the work of 'new materialist and posthumanists has sought to establish reading methods [that] resituate humans [...] in a broader constellation of beings' (Menely and Taylor 2017: 11). Much of this work has something of the flavour of postcritque, debates about which emerged around the same time as the Anthropocene gained traction as a concept in the humanities: put another way, literary critics began to query what sorts of changes they were effecting in the world by the practice of interpreting texts at the same time as the Anthropocene queried and reframed our species' agency in the Earth system.[21]

The history of the novel runs roughly parallel with one common periodisation of the Anthropocene, which dates its inception to the late eighteenth century and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.[22] We tend of course to think of the novel as instantiating what Benedict Anderson called the 'empty, homogenous' (2006: 26) time of the nation, rather than the deep or geological time of the planet. Departing from the novel's usual regime of what Mikhail Bakhtin called 'national-historical time' (1986), *The Nature Book* experiments with how the novel might instead represent and mediate the complex temporal order of the Anthropocene. Formally, the novel's patchworking of nature descriptions from novels of the past three centuries offers something like the 'longue durée' history of the form described by Dimock, a recursive history 'with many loops of relations', stretching outward and backward to the original contexts of the novel's source material. The shape and scale of this history will depend in part upon the reader's own personal reading history. Recognising a phrase from Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (1901), I'm reminded of that novel's portrayal of a Californian labour dispute over the expansion of the railroad across tenant farmers' fields; a few paragraphs later, I recognise a description of a sunset as 'unbearably beautiful' (Comitta 2023a: 6) as taken from DeLillo's *White Noise*, where the unusually vivid sunsets are described as 'tinged with dread' and are caused by 'the airborne toxic event' (DeLillo 1984/2002: 170) that hangs over the narrative.[23] In both instances, recognition of the source material brings

[21] My thinking here is prompted by Hollingshead (2024).

[22] See Crutzen and Stoermer (2000/2013).

[23] Sunsets in the novel also begin to lengthen: 'Sunsets used to last five minutes', a character observes, 'now they last an hour' (DeLillo 1984/2002: 170).

back into *The Nature Book* not only the context of the original novel, but, more generally, the human presence that Comitta has so carefully excised from the narrative, and with it the attendant histories of our relation with the environment – in my examples, among other things, a history of capitalist industrial expansion intersecting with unionized agricultural labour, and a history of nuclear anxiety. Another reader will recognize a different set of citations, and bring to the novel a different set of associations, and so the novel's temporal order will move and shift differently again. But part of the text's effect of *detournment* is also achieved in moments when as readers we might half-remember or half-recognise such allusions to classic novels we may have read long ago. In extracts from *The Nature Book* published prior to the novel's release, Comitta sometimes included full footnotes, revealing the sources of all citations (echoing Houston's practice in *Vast*); in their decision to remove these from the final text, Comitta allowed for a different, less critical kind of immersion in the novel's history.[24]

Typically, nature descriptions mark narrative segues or interludes in a novel, or act as frames to human drama. By interweaving such passages and phrases, *The Nature Book* focuses our attention on the very process of transition itself, evoking a narrative temporality of 'limitless cycle, endless change' (Comitta 2023a: 272), to quote Comitta quoting a James Michener novel, in which transition is always unfolding yet forever deferred:

> Several times that night the wind began to change slightly for the better, but it did no good. At one point the rain had let up, and it seemed likely that the weather would 'milden', until the wind came back with triple fury, thunder split the air, and lightning bursts illuminated the churning tempest. Another time, the wind had dropped and the rain turned soft, but the thunder crashed nearer and louder. Now the wind grew strong and hard, now dropped, now stung with rain, now not. It moved and sported like this for ever [...].
>
> Real change appeared sometime after midnight. The wind shifted [....] (Comitta 2023a: 28)

The passage is by turns anticipatory and oddly static, with an incantatory quality that is at once reminiscent of some of its source material – for example, the opening of *The*

[24] See, for example, Comitta (2020a). *The Nature Book* does, however, contain occasional footnotes of a different variety. Rather than provide details of sources, these footnotes contain additional citational material which seems in some way to comment on the main text, while often also breaking both its narrative flow and synthesis of different narrative styles, thereby reminding readers of the artifice of what Comitta calls *The Nature Book*'s 'really smooth collage'. I'm grateful to one of the journal's anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to this.

Grapes of Wrath (1939) – and yet all its own. 'Real change' is occurring, perhaps, but not at the pace to which the novel is accustomed; rather, narrative movement is slowed so as to be barely recognisable. The chapter after that in which the above passage appears begins, 'Next day the land was the same, the sky was same' (Comitta 2023a: 30), undercutting any sense of narrative progress. As one reviewer noted, '"events" in *The Nature Book* have a kind of stuttering quality to them – when something happens, it often happens multiple times in quick succession' (Quinn 2024), or else happens so gradually that it no longer resembles an event at all.

The concept of deep time, with its flows and loops of relation, only get us so far in thinking about the novel's temporal strangeness. At times the effect is one of narrative suspension, of 'whole days suspended in air' (Comitta 2023a: 8), to quote Comitta quoting Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855). In his account of ecopoetics, Timothy Morton describes how a passage of 'vivid description' – such as in ekphrasis – 'slows down or suspends narrative time', linking this to the idea of 'musical suspension, where one layer of sound changes more slowly than another layer', and in which 'stasis becomes audible' (2007: 44); the effect, he writes, is of being 'always near the resolution but never quite making it' (2007: 45). Morton's work builds on Jonathan Crary's discussion of 'the state of being suspended' as 'a looking or listening so rapt that is an exemption from ordinary conditions, that it becomes a suspended temporality, a hovering out of time' (2000: 10). Crary's account of suspension forms part of his broader history of the idea of attention, which he describes as 'the possibility of a fixation, of holding something in wonder or contemplation, in which the attentive subject is both immobile and ungrounded', a 'kind of perception or regard for something that can be both an absorption *and* an absence of deferral' (2000: 10. Emphasis original).

Crary argues that 'it is possible to see one crucial aspect of modernity as an ongoing crisis in attentiveness, in which the changing configurations of capitalism continually push attention and distraction to new limits and thresholds' (2000: 14). This crisis of attention has become more widely debated and, many would argue, more acute since Crary made his comments nearly a quarter century ago.[25] As Rob Nixon notes, we now live in 'a digital world that threatens to "infowhelm" us into a state of perpetual distraction' (2011: 12). The pace and scale of this 'informational flood' mirrors the 'high-speed planetary modifications' of the half-century or so – what Nixon calls 'the hurtling changes of the Great Acceleration', referring to the period since the mid-twentieth century which saw a dramatic surge in humans' (2011: 12) impact on the Earth system. 'In an age of degraded attention spans', Nixon continues, 'it becomes

[25] See Burnett and Smith (2023).

doubly difficult yet increasingly urgent that we focus on the toll exacted, over time, by the slow violence of ecological degradation' (2011: 13), and harder to grasp what Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor refer to as 'the Anthropocene's paradoxical alignment of [...] political urgency and deep time' (2017: 12).

The Nature Book's experiments in extended narrative suspension evoke the unsettled temporal order of the Anthropocene, its blend of immediacy and belatedness, insistence and deferral. But while the novel thus attunes us to the 'slow violence' of ecological damage, the risk of paying too close attention, as Crary's description perhaps suggests, is of becoming 'ungrounded' from the contemporary, of floating free from the coordinates of one's historical moment; indeed, in places *The Nature Book* has a certain timeless quality to it, an historical depthlessness. The loss of a sense of the contemporary is in fact a hazard of the Anthropocene's expanded temporal imagination more generally. As Theodore Martin asks, 'Set against the unimaginable unfurling of deep time, how can the apparent solidity of our present moment not—like a greenhouse gas—melt into air?' (2017: 126). And yet *The Nature Book* insistently calls us back to attend to the contemporary, from its opening invocation of 'an operatic present, a pure present' (Comitta 2023a: 3), to its closing passage:

> The past had vanished and become nothing; the future was uncertain. As the night-shades fell, the past refused to come back, as it did in dreams, to be remade. The thin, dark line of the sea or land disappeared. The wind dropped and light vanished. There was nothing to be seen. There was no sound. All that was left was the ceaselessly shrinking fragment of time called 'now'. (Comitta 2023a: 273)

This insistence on 'now' brings me to the concept of ambience, touched on earlier in my reference to Tan Lin's work, and discussed by Morton in his account of ecopoetics. For Morton, 'ambience is a poetic enactment of a state of nondual awareness that collapses the subject-object division, upon which depends the aggressive territorialization that precipitates ecological destruction' (2002: 52). 'Corrupted forms' of ambience pervade the culture, offering a 'soothing panacea for capitalist and technocratic alienation'; his examples range from 'New Age relaxation composition' to pseudo-public 'communitarian spaces' (2002: 52). But at its most utopian, ambient poetics 'offer a sort of gate into another dimension, a dimension that turns out to be none other than the *nowness* that is far more radically "here" than any concept of "here", such as nation, race, gender'. A way of 'shocking the egotism that separates human being and its life world', ambient poetics is central, for Morton, to the project of raising 'ecological consciousness' (2002: 54). And behind Morton's conception of ambient

poetics is a commitment to 'the idea that the aesthetic dimension can, in some sense, show us how to live' (2002: 56).

We saw that in her reading of Tan Lin's ambient poetics, Jennifer Scappettone complicates somewhat Morton's account of ambience as either 'corrupted' or utopian. Rather, she suggests that Lin's work is 'decidedly postutopian' in its 'objectives and effects' (2009: 68). In creating a 'boring linguistic climate', he does not 'naively mime the designs of ambient music' and 'consumer atmospherics', but instead offers a critique of the 'dampening of sociohistorical conditions effected' (2009: 64, 66) by such degraded and commercialized forms of ambience. In an online work from 2006, for example, Lin notes down everything he reads in a year, 'from fiction to eBay listings to ticket stubs [...] recording as well where each item was read [...] for how long, and how thoroughly or superficially (scanned, skimmed, read/underlined)' (Scappetone 2009: 67). Lin intended for the work to be a record of 'fragmentary reading practices, really the [...] *after-effects* of reading', redefining the memoir as 'a genre of forgetfulness' (Lin 2006, quoted in Scappetone 2009: 67). As Scappettone comments, such a work 'begs the question of its reception. What are we meant to *do* with these dregs of our cultivated inattention, effluvia of reading's decay?' (2009: 67. Emphasis in original). In this way, Lin shows himself to be 'alert' to how his work 'deliver[s] us into, and out of, the purchasable lull and narcissistic presentism of ambiance [...] [T]hese texts countervail such lull with the weather of where and when we are' (Scappetone 2009: 66). Lin's work also returns us to a sense of 'nowness', in other words, but one whose 'climate', to use Scappettone's word, may already be beyond repair, or beyond our capacity for attention. Such an aesthetics doesn't 'show us how to live', to recalls Morton's phrase, but only asks us to query (or despair at) the conditions of our distraction, in keeping with the pessimism of much recent philosophical work on what is the adequate or necessary response to climate catastrophe.[26]

The affective register and indeed the politics of Comitta's project are, I think, subtly different from Lin's, and indeed from that of much of the conceptual writing discussed so far. We get a sense of this if we return to *The Nature Book*'s ending, quoted above. Comitta here draws extensively on the closing pages of Anna Kavan's 1967 dystopia, *Ice*. In the original Kavan writes, 'the past had vanished and become nothing; the future was the inconceivable nothingness of annihilation' (1967: 153); in Comitta's version, the future is simply 'uncertain'. If Kavan's apocalypticism still hovers over Comitta's ending, their reworking of their source material also keeps open the future as an horizon

[26] For a similar argument in relation to Knausgaard, see Lerner (2014). Examples of recent philosophical works on the climate crisis engaging with pessimism include: Pettman and Thacker (2024); Thacker (2015).

of possibility. And implicit here is Comitta's idea – belief, really – that literature, and the novel form in particular, might be a place from which to start imagining this uncertain future. This gestures to an obvious but crucial difference between Comitta's work and that of some of the other conceptual writers discussed above. For Goldsmith et al., part of the legacy of conceptual art is the allure of 'the spectacle of the mundane reframed as literature' (Goldsmith 2011: 4). As such, while some of their work involves the remediation of literary texts, they are more often drawn to more quotidian kinds of writing and 'non-print forms of reading' (Lin 2010a) – the more boring, the better, for it is after all the banality of their work, its abandonment of hermeneutics, that signals its avant-garde credentials and affiliation, according to critics like Nealon and Reed. By contrast, Comitta's source material is the novel, and especially the canonical Anglo-American novel, and their relation to this canon is, I have suggested, not straightforwardly one of critique, or at least not 'strong' critique. If nature descriptions are the bits of these novels we tend to skim, or to read distractedly, then Comitta asks us to attend to these descriptions afresh, and to do so slowly, such that we are struck not by their banality, nor only by their problematic anthropocentrism, but by their beauty – an old-fashioned idea, an interest in which might be said to distinguish the novel from much recent 'Anthropocene social fiction' and 'cli-fi'.[27] *The Nature Book* at once reveals the ways in which the novel has constructed nature, while at the same time suggesting that the history of the novel might be an archive with which to reimagine our relationship to the environment, and to reorientate ourselves in the world. And the latter, we might recall, has always been what the novel is about, and for.

[27] On 'Anthropocene social fiction' and 'cli-fi', see LeMenager (2017) and (2024). On the contemporary novel's thematic engagement with climate change more generally, see Trexler (2015).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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