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ARTICLE

## Radical Homemaking in Contemporary American Environmental Fiction

Kristin J. Jacobson

Stockton University, New Jersey, US

[jacobsok@stockton.edu](mailto:jacobsok@stockton.edu)

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Ursula K. Heise in 'Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies' critiques 'the portrayal of multicultural and sometimes transnational nuclear families as the narrative solution to environmental and political problems' (Heise, 2008: 383). This essay places Heise's critique of the 'ecological family romance' in conversation with three other ecological domestic fictions: T. C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* (2000), Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012). Heise's critique and Shannon Hayes' *Radical Homemakers* (2010) frame my close readings of the novels' interconnected themes of radical homemaking, transnationalism, and environmentalism. My reading of the novels highlights their shared use of marginalized, racially-other characters to develop their entwined romantic and environmental plots (Lalitha in *Freedom*, several minor characters in *A Friend of the Earth*, and Ovid in *Flight Behavior*) and their use of sentimental deaths, especially of key female characters (Lalitha in *Freedom*, Sierra in *A Friend of the Earth*, and Dellarobia's uncertain fate in *Flight Behavior*). By adopting the sentimental, domestic romance plot for ecological aims, the three novels highlight how environmental aims get stymied when cultural and ecological diversity are relegated to the margins. They also suggest that more is gained than lost through their use of ecological allegory. While the fictions do not offer solutions, they do push their readers to confront the Anthropocene's ecological realities and their radical domestic-environmental politics.

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**Keywords:** transnationalism; domestic fiction; Ursula K. Heise; Jonathan Franzen; T. C. Boyle; Barbara Kingsolver

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American domestic fiction often, if not always, exploits a family-nation correlation: the fictional family offers a picture of America in microcosm.<sup>1</sup> The family's

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms domestic fiction and romance interchangeably in this essay to describe contemporary novels with plots that primarily focus on the development of romantic-familial relationships and the process of finding and making home. For a discussion of the key similarities and differences among

representative weight extends beyond the realm of fictional portrayals. Changes, for instance, in family structure are often read as indicative of shifts – for good or bad – in the national character. A 2013 *New York Times* article describes the contemporary ‘typical American family . . . as multilayered and full of surprises’ (Angier, 2013). While literary and cultural texts variously represent and scholars varyingly interpret the correlation between family and nation, the microcosm is generally accepted. As Catherine Morley reminds us in her analysis of domesticity and globalization in the post-9/11 novel, ‘The American state-of-the-nation novel has always taken *e pluribus unum* as its structural mechanism, pinning the story of the evolving nation to the small-scale dramas of individuals and families’ (Morley, 2011: 731). New questions, nevertheless, arise when the fictional family functions as a litmus test for ecological aims as well as national values.

Ursula K. Heise in ‘Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies’ critiques the ‘ecological family romance’ for the ways ‘romance and family can metaphorically substitute . . . solutions’ for wicked problems such as climate change broadly and industrial farming and fossil fuel pollution more specifically (Heise, 2008: 394).<sup>2</sup> Heise grounds her concerns about multicultural ecological family romances in the bad science they represent, criticizing ‘the portrayal of multicultural and sometimes transnational nuclear families as the narrative solution to environmental and political problems’ (Heise, 2008: 383).<sup>3</sup> Heise focuses her analysis on novels that ‘propose by way of narrative closure a highly allegorical multicultural family made up of parents from different cultural and/or national backgrounds and children who

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these and other related genres (sentimental fiction, suburban novel, social novel) in contemporary fiction see the introduction and chapter one in *Neodomestic American Fiction* (Jacobson, 2010).

I also wish to thank the anonymous readers of this essay for their revision suggestions and my university for its support of my research. I presented an early version of this work at the 2014 American Studies Association conference in Los Angeles.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Morley similarly recognizes a push for ‘a deterritorialized, multiculturalist approach to the depiction of community, “otherness,” liminality and the traumatized subject in post-9/11 literary fiction’ (Morley, 2011: 718).

<sup>3</sup> Heise specifically questions the portrayal of homemaking in Ruth Ozeki’s *All Over Creation* (2003) and Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal Dreams* (1990).

sometimes are and sometimes are not genetically related to them' (Heise, 2008: 389).<sup>4</sup> These closing snapshots celebrate diversity—of family heritage and structures as well as ecological diversity and hybridity—that the novels' protagonists struggle to foster: 'The multicultural or transnational family is recuperated as an agent of social resistance and as a synecdoche for a more ecologically sustainable social order even as the insistently domestic framing of such cultural encounters contains and limits their socially transformative power' (Heise, 2008: 394). In order to test further the family's function as ecological synecdoche, this essay puts Ursula K. Heise's concerns about the multicultural 'ecological family romance' as well as her methodology for reading ecological domestic fictions more broadly in conversation with three contemporary climate change novels that conclude, not with multicultural families, but with strikingly white domesticities.

Specifically, I examine the interconnected themes of radical homemaking, transnationalism, and environmentalism in T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* (2000), Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012). Heise's critique and Shannon Hayes's *Radical Homemakers* (2010) frame my close readings, which play close attention to the novels' connected romance and environmental plots as well as their conclusions and closing family and environmental configurations. Hayes's 'four tenets' of radical homemaking, which include 'ecological sustainability, social justice, family, and community,' provide the definition against which domesticity in the novels is defined as radical (Hayes, 2010: 16). All three novels connect their homemaking with Hayes's four tenets as well as explore environmental themes; however, they do not present a uniform picture of white radical homemaking's effects and response to the realities of living in the Anthropocene.

My reading of the novels highlights their shared use of marginalized, racially-other characters to develop their romantic and environmental plots (Lalitha in *Freedom*, several minor characters in *A Friend of the Earth*, and Ovid in *Flight Behavior*)

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<sup>4</sup> Both *All Over Creation* and *Animal Dreams* may be seen as utopian in this respect. Their idealized endings capture a moment characterized by familial and ecological equilibrium.

and their use of sentimental deaths, especially of key female characters (Lalitha in *Freedom*, Sierra in *A Friend of the Earth*, and Dellarobia's uncertain fate in *Flight Behavior*). The conclusions' shared focus on white heterosexual families do not conform to what Heise describes as the 'metaphorical superimpositions of biological and cultural diversity' in contemporary ecological romances (Heise, 2008: 383); however, radical white domesticity's predominance at the novels' conclusions carries its own set of concerns and potential as cultural and ecological allegory. The white families and their home environs in these novels serve as important allegorical micro-ecologies to inspire critique and intervention in the transnational environmental crisis. By adopting the sentimental, domestic romance plot for ecological aims, the three novels highlight how environmental aims get stymied when cultural and ecological diversity are relegated to the margins. They also suggest that more is gained than lost through their use of ecological allegory. While the fictions do not offer solutions, they do push their readers to confront the Anthropocene's ecological realities and their radical domestic-environmental politics.

### **Reading Family as Ecological Allegory**

Notably, my methodology for reading these three novels differs from Heise in one key respect. Heise insightfully points out the scientific flaws and dangers of reading families as allegories for environmental processes and as models of sustainability. Nevertheless, like Spencer Schaffner's 'A Response to Ursula Heise,' I wish 'to question Heise's suggestion that equating biological and cultural diversity is "ultimately not . . . environmentalist"' and expand that consideration to ecological romances that maintain rather than diversify the white heterosexual family (Heise, 2008: 406). While Catherine Morley's essay "'How Do We Write About This?' The Domestic and the Global in the Post-9/11 Novel' focuses on historical rather than scientific facts, her reminders about the writer's role assist in understanding how ecological family romances function, specifically that 'The act of the writer is the construction of fictions, no more and no less' and by constructing fictions the writer necessarily engages in 'a kind of cultural appropriation' (Morley, 2011: 721). While the family may not translate well as scientifically accurate ecological allegory, postequilibrium

ecology resonates with the novels' emotional truths, which may lead to attitudinal and behavioral shifts, despite the imperfect science: 'a sound, unproblematic rhetoric of environmental preservation has not always been as important to environmental writers as rhetoric that persuades and moves people to action' (Schaffner, 2008: 409). As Schaffner begins to suggest, one's perspective on reading the family as ecological allegory changes when interpreted through the lens of econarratology and affective studies.<sup>5</sup>

This approach corresponds well with the theory that sentimental, domestic fiction primarily functions by prompting readers to 'feel right.' Glenn Hendler explains how sentimentalism functions: 'Sympathetic identification works through a logic of equivalence based on affect; any being capable of feeling, regardless of race, age, or any other personal characteristic, can evoke sympathy, especially from a female character (or reader) who has suffered herself' (Hendler, 1991: 688). Likewise, ecological writing aims to have 'tangible effects both on individual readers and on the larger public sphere in which they operate' (Weik von Mossner, 2016: 547). In other words, leading readers to 'feel right' via sentimental modes will, in turn, move readers to environmental feeling and action.

Scholars of both sentimental and environmental fiction also highlight the imperfect ways affect may or may not produce (meaningful) change in its readers. Erin James, for example, explains:

Of course, reading narratives is not a solution to these [environmental] problems in itself. In many ways sensitivity to the subjective experience that storyworlds encode complicates potential solutions by pluralizing our understanding of how people can perceive and engage with the world. Yet the conversations catalyzed by the imaginative inhabitation of storyworlds suggest an ideal respect for comparison, difference, and subjectivity that can challenge the universalizing assumptions that often dominate such issues. (James, 2015: xvi)

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<sup>5</sup> See Alexa Weik von Mossner's chapter 'Environmental Narrative, Embodiment, and Emotion' for an excellent introduction to the fields of econarratology and affect studies (Weik von Mossner, 2016).

Like James, I read narrative's sentimental potential to 'help bridge imaginative gaps' (James, 2015: 3), and I also share an attention to 'the ways in which literary forms can encode environmental meaning' (James, 2015: 29). Thus, my method of reading these novels does not directly refute Heise's reading; however, this methodology does suggest that more may be gained than lost through the blunt force scientifically imperfect familial-ecological allegories inflict on our attitudes toward and understanding of climate change.

Thus, we can begin to see that the novels' genre — both their sentimental roots and status as climate change novels — plays a key role in how they convey their environmental messages. Genre also provides one way to understand key differences and similarities among *Freedom*, *A Friend of the Earth*, and *Flight Behavior*. Sylvia Mayer distinguishes between narratives of anticipation and catastrophe in 'Explorations of the Controversially Real: Risk, the Climate Change Novel, and the Narrative of Anticipation.' *Freedom* is a narrative of anticipation that 'concentrates on the state of anticipation, on the moment of uncertainty in the present when awareness of the risk figures prominently and controversially in a culture, but has not yet led to catastrophe' (Mayer, 2014: 26). *Freedom's* characters suffer and the ecological destruction promised by mountaintop removal far surpasses the nature conserved in Lalitha's bird sanctuary. Nevertheless, the novel's protagonists Walter and Patty reconcile by the conclusion and move to New York without the realization of large-scale ecological or domestic catastrophe. *Flight Behavior*, as Mayer argues in regard to Kingsolver's novel, is also a narrative of anticipation, 'whose major function does not lie in representing total climate change collapse, but in foreshadowing, that is, in anticipating, the danger of a larger, ultimately global catastrophe in the future' (Mayer, 2014: 28).<sup>6</sup> However, depending on how one reads the conclusion, as I discuss in the final section, the novel remains a narrative of anticipation or crosses over into catastrophe.

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<sup>6</sup> *Flight Behavior* may also be usefully described as a *bildungsroman*, where the protagonist's development is directly connected to the unfolding environmental drama (Wagner-Martin, 2014).

By contrast, *A Friend of the Earth* is clearly a narrative of catastrophe because it 'concentrates on the future when a risk scenario has materialized in a catastrophe' (Mayer, 2014: 26). Unlike *Freedom* and *Flight Behavior*, *A Friend of the Earth* is a speculative, post-apocalyptic fiction, imagining a time in the near future. *A Friend of the Earth's* present is 2025 and 2026, years marked by mass extinctions and extreme weather. The narrative shifts between a time period before catastrophe (1989–1997) and years after (2025–2026) or, perhaps more accurately, a period best described as a depiction of the on-going new normal that results from the 'social-environmental crisis . . . [becoming] a way of life' (Buell, 2014: 264). Ty explains in *A Friend of the Earth* that 'people thought the collapse of the biosphere would be the end of everything, but that's not it at all. It's just the opposite—more of everything, more sun, water, wind, dust, mud' (Boyle, 2000: 8). While *Flight Behavior* is set in a realistic present – sometime during Barack Obama's 2009–2017 presidency (Kingsolver, 2013: 107) – the reader is similarly thrust into a world of unusually 'hard rains' (Wagner-Martin, 2014: 189). Much like *A Friend of the Earth*, *Flight Behavior*, as Linda Wagner-Martin points out, 'demands that the reader adjust to this weather' (Wagner-Martin, 2014: 189). In this way, *Flight Behavior* also suggests we are imminently close to the mass extinctions and unrelentingly extreme weather patterns that characterize the years 2025 and 2026 in *A Friend of the Earth*. However, *Flight Behavior* – like *Freedom* – offers a more realistic setting than the futuristic *A Friend of the Earth*. The reader's imaginative adjustment to the novels' settings as well as the threat and reality of mass extinctions builds empathy for the novels' environmental messages. These environmentally damaged or destroyed worlds, moreover, provide the settings for the protagonists' romantic dramas.

Attention to genre reveals how the novels' respective catastrophic and anticipatory settings are not bad science; rather, these ecological family romances 'balance the responsibility to remain true to a scientific view of the world with the desire to give meaning to lives lived in uncertainty' (Jurecic, 2012: 42). Mayer expands on Jurecic's claim: 'it is indispensable to go beyond the knowledge provided by scientific scenarios and statistical, probabilistic risk assessments in order to capture and express facets of the complex, diverse, and controversial reality of living with the risk



of climate change' (Mayer, 2014: 35). Despite generic and setting distinctions, all three novels blur the lines between environmental and domestic politics, converging the romance plots with their environmental messages. Their domestic politics are also all decidedly radical.

### **Radical White Domesticity, Radical White Environmentalism, and Neoliberalism**

Early in *Freedom* both Walter and Patty are described by one neighbor as 'the super-guilty sort of liberals who needed to forgive everybody so their own good fortune could be forgiven; who lacked the courage of their privilege' (Franzen, 2010: 7). These contemporary pioneers — chapter one refers to Patty and Walter as 'pioneers' in a gentrifying St. Paul neighborhood (3) — are committed to radical domesticity's key tenets. For example, their 'pioneering' lifestyle uses 'certain life skills that your own parents had fled to the suburbs specifically to unlearn' (4). The re-learning of such skills connects Walter and Patty to the radical homemaking Hayes describes. They listen to public radio, restore their Victorian home through back-breaking labor, raise children, and became part of the neighborhood. While Patty does not identify as a feminist (94), Walter's environmental work, their community engagement, and their DIY home improvement connect with the 'tomato-canning feminists' Hayes identifies in her preface (Hayes, 2010: 1–6).

At the same time, Walter and Patty's radical homemaking also exposes a neoliberal foundation. In other words, their homemaking represents a 'stripped-down, nonredistributive form of "equality" designed for global consumption during the twenty-first century, and compatible with continued upward redistribution of resources' (Duggan, 2004: xii). For example, the knowledge of what to say 'when a poor person of color accused you of destroying her neighborhood' (Franzen, 2010: 4) is listed among those 'certain life skills' that Patty, 'a resource, a sunny carrier of socio-cultural pollen, an affable bee' provides to her fellow gentrifying white neighbors (5). Walter and Patty's neoliberal homemaking is also revealed in their lack sympathy for working-class whites.

Despite his own hardscrabble upbringing, Walter has no sympathy for the 'two hundred or so families, most of them very poor, who owned houses or trailers on

small or smallish parcels of land within the Warbler Park's proposed boundaries' (294). One man in particular, Coyle Mathis, reminds Walter of his alcoholic father because of 'His stubborn, self-destructive spite' and 'economic irrationality' (295). While Patty enjoyed a more economically stable, but no less unhappy upbringing, she develops a similar distain for their St. Paul conservative white neighbors, the Monaghans, who are comprised of the 'trashy mom,' her 'boneheaded boyfriend,' and 'sneaky' daughter, Connie (150).<sup>7</sup> Patty's distain does not appear until she learns that her son Joey is sleeping with Connie and decides to move in with the neighbors rather than live at home. Walter and Patty's personal, emotional responses get in the way of their otherwise liberal politics. Their inability to empathize results in both becoming blind with rage: Walter lashes out during discussions with Coyle Mathis and with his son Joey, due to his embrace of conservative politics, and Patty resorts to slicing the neighbor's truck tires and drinking to excess. While both Walter and Patty are transformed by their experiences by the novel's conclusion, their domestic reunion, which I discuss in more detail in the final section, is largely a return to the 'pioneering' neoliberal status quo with which the novel began.

*A Friend of the Earth's* homemaking more explicitly links to the late twentieth century's radical environmental movement and to radical homemaking. Hayes points out 'Healing our planet, our hearts and our bodies, bringing peace to our society, finding happiness, social justice and creative fulfillment, all begin by turning our attention first to our homes.' She goes on to describe a 'three-stage path' that will 'cultivate tendrils that reach out and bring society along with us' (Hayes, 2010: 249). Ty appears to follow the three-stage path Hayes describes, which consists of renouncing, reclaiming, and rebuilding (Hayes, 2010: 250). Ty first renounces his 'conventional' domestic life that depends on 'the illusionary happiness of a consumer society' when he becomes involved with Earth Forever! after his first wife's death (Hayes, 2010: 250). Ty recognizes his own 'criminal' behavior, namely that he 'lived in the suburbs in a three-thousand-square-foot house with redwood siding and

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<sup>7</sup> Patty's mother is a lapsed Jew and 'professional Democrat' and her father is a lawyer (Franzen, 2010: 30-1).

oak floors and an oil burner the size of Texas, drove a classic 1966 Mustang for sport and a Jeep Laredo (red, black leather interior) to take me up to the Adirondacks so I could heft my three-hundred-twenty-dollar Eddie Bauer backpack and commune with the squirrels, muskrats and fishers' (Boyle, 2000: 42). He goes on to explain, 'Worse, I accumulated things. . . . I caused approximately two hundred fifty times the damage to the environment of this tattered, bleeding planet as a Bangladeshi or Balinese, and they do their share, believe me. Or did. But I don't want to get into that' (43). Ty recognizes his criminal desires, which are connected to his privileged status as an American, 'saw the light,' and, as a result, becomes a 'friend of the earth' (43) and 'an enemy of the people' (44).

Ty – like Patty – also reclaims 'many of the lost domestic skills,' albeit both do not do so, as Hayes advocates, in order to 'enable their family to live without outside income' (Hayes, 2010: 250). Before the collapse of the biosphere, for example, Ty's radical eco-homemaking activities included turning his suburban swimming pool into a marsh and replanting the acre lot with native plants (Boyle, 2000: 236). This occurs after a stint in jail and during his 'model citizen' period, where 'what he did was throw himself headlong into suburban life, though suburban life was the enemy of everything he hoped to achieve as an environmentalist' (235). When his neighbor Roger worries the pond will 'breed mosquitoes,' Ty responds 'Better than suburban drones' (236). Ty does not tell Roger that he 'had already stocked the pond with mosquito fish' (236). Ty's remark about 'suburban drones' indicates how he, more so than his second wife Andrea as well as Patty and Walter in *Freedom*, resists neoliberalism. For example, he critiques Andrea and Earth Forever! for its increasing corporatization: Andrea now earned 'eighty-five thousand dollars a year as a member of E.F.!s board of directors' (235) and when she cautions Ty that violence is no longer prudent for their cause, he admonishes, 'You sound like some sort of corporate whore. Is that what this is all about – rising to the top of the food chain? Politics? A fat paycheck? Is that what it is?' (238). Yet, even Ty's radical environmentalism – like Walter and Patty's homemaking—is influenced by personal, less altruistic motives.

Ty's monkeywrenching activities aim to disrupt radically the status quo – as well as to achieve personal revenge. Like the characters in *Freedom*, the environmental

activists in *A Friend of the Earth* do not have 'pure' motives. As Joanna Durczak notes, 'Ty's budding dedication to the environment becomes inextricably mixed with his desire for private revenge' (Durczak, 2007: 362). The environmental and romantic plots and politics blur. Where Walter and Lalitha are willing to accept mountaintop removal as a necessary evil for their environmental goals, Ty – at his 'darkest moment' (Boyle, 2000: 217) – almost emptied buckets of tetrodotoxin into Santa Barbara's water supply in order to 'begin evening the score in favor of the animals,' but, in the end, he 'couldn't do it' (218). Ty offers a misanthropic version of what Hayes 'dubbed *Rebuilding*, in which [homemakers] worked to expand their creative energies outward. Their homes had become more sustainable and meaningful places, and now they were applying their talents and skills to bring their communities and society along with them' (Hayes, 2010: 250). For Ty, Walter, and Lalitha, rebuilding seems dependent on destruction. As Morley points out, furthermore, *Freedom* links neo-conservatives and environmentalists via capital (Morley, 2011: 727–28): 'what this reminds us is that liberalism and conservatism, far from being diametrical opposites, have always drawn from the same wellspring' (Morley, 2011: 728). Where Ty critiques the increasing corporatization of the radical environmental movement, Walter and Lalitha embrace capitalism as a tool to further their environmental aims.

A class divide separates the privileged white neoliberal homemaking presented in *Freedom* and critiqued by Ty in *A Friend of the Earth* from the radical homemaking of necessity practiced by the protagonist Dellarobia in *Flight Behavior*. This contrast becomes clear when Dellarobia speaks with activist Leighton Akins. He visits to distribute a sustainability pledge with action items to lower an individual's carbon footprint (Kingsolver, 2013: 311). Many of these items are the type of practices Hayes supports in *Radical Homemakers*: decrease red meat intake, do not buy bottled water, eat out less and when you do, bring your own containers for leftovers, and buy used or nothing at all (Kingsolver, 2013: 327–28). In her conversation with Leighton it soon becomes apparent that Dellarobia's 'ideal,' small carbon footprint is produced out of necessity: her poverty.

The conversation with Leighton recalls an earlier one with the lepidopterist Dr. Ovid Byron, who hails from St. Thomas. In this conversation Dellarobia pushes

Ovid to realize the class divide key to climate change denial. Ovid resists the idea of a 'contest between the peasant class and the gentry,' but later he shares with his wife Dellarobia's theory of the 'territorial divide' (Kingsolver, 2013: 322; 395). Ty in *A Friend of the Earth* also seems to recognize this divide in his remarks about his individual carbon footprint versus a 'Bangladeshi or Balinese' (Boyle, 2000: 43). Juliet, Ovid's wife, agrees with Dellarobia, noting that 'once you're talking identity, you can't just lecture that out of people. The condescension of outsiders won't diminish it. That just galvanizes it' (Kingsolver, 2013: 395). Walter in *Freedom* does, in fact, 'galvanize' such resentment when he tries to work with the poor, working class of Foster Hollow. Ty in *A Friend of the Earth* explains that his contemporaries in 2026 also do not want a lecture about the environment and that they think 'The environment is a bore. And nobody wants to read about it – nobody wants to hear about it.' All 'they want is to know if the weather will ever go back to normal and what Maclivio Pulchris' sex life was like' (Boyle, 2000: 222). At the conclusion of this conversation in *Flight Behavior* Dellarobia realizes that she never truly had a marriage. Ovid and Juliet provide a marriage model as well as scientific and cultural knowledge about the monarch butterflies' flight, plight, and significance, which directly correlate with Dellarobia's lot. Dellarobia's physical traits, especially her hair color, as well as her own 'flight behavior,' connect her to the butterflies. A closer look at the romance plots in all three novels reveals how the novels use the romance plot not to 'lecture' – as Juliet puts it – but to encourage their readers to 'feel right.'

### **Romance Plots and Ecological Allegory in Franzen's *Freedom* and Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth***

Both *Freedom* and *A Friend of the Earth* end with the reconciliation of a previously estranged white couple: in *Freedom*, Walter and Patty Berglund reunite after a period of separation during which they both pursue extramarital relationships; in *A Friend of the Earth*, the biosphere's collapse contributes to Ty O'Shaughnessy Tierwater and Andrea Knowles Cotton Tierwater's reunion. In *Flight Behavior*, an empowering separation for the novel's poor white protagonist is a byproduct of environmental disaster attributed to climate change. At the novel's conclusion, her fate, like that of the butterflies, is uncertain. Thus, while the novels are not strictly speaking women's

fiction, they follow what Rachel Blau DuPlessis identifies as women's fiction's two traditional endings: marriage or death.<sup>8</sup> Due to its distinct conclusion, I will look at *Flight Behavior's* intertwined romance and environmental plots separately. While the primary romance plot in *Freedom* is between Walter and Patty – named so because it frames the novel – the extramarital romantic relationship that develops between the white environmental activist Walter Berglund and his Bengali-American assistant Lalitha plays a key role in interrupting the primary romance plot and in developing *Freedom's* entwined romance and environmental plots.<sup>9</sup>

Walter and Lalitha's relationship initially appears to follow the seemingly simplified course toward a more 'balanced' familial and ecological diversity that Heise describes and critiques. The white, married, and markedly older Walter initially resists the beautiful, twenty-seven-year-old Lalitha because of his love for his wife Patty. Walter describes his marriage in terms of dutiful commitment: 'They'd always been a good couple but an odd couple; nowadays, more and more, they seemed simply ill matched' (Franzen, 2010: 316). Their marriage, in fact, has turned toxic. Walter compares coal-sludge ponds to his marriage's 'long-term toxicity': 'It really was a lot like the deep shit that got stirred up when a married couple fought' (Franzen, 2010: 333). Once he discovers Patty's affair with his best friend Richard, Walter leaves his increasingly polluted marriage for a relationship with Lalitha that brings them both happiness. Nonetheless, Walter initially has insecurities about their December–May, interracial relationship. His preliminary doubts apply and resist simple allegorical

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<sup>8</sup> See Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing beyond the Ending; Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (1985). *Flight Behavior's* limited-third-person narrator (the narrator maintains focus on its female protagonist) and female author most clearly identifies it as women's fiction. *Freedom* shifts third-person narrative (and gendered) perspectives (including Patty's third-person autobiography), and *A Friend of the Earth* primarily focuses on its male protagonist, Ty, shifting between first- and third-person narration. Comparing the novels suggests the benefits of considering the performative nature of gendered genres and plots, especially in twenty-first-century novels that engage domestic and romance plots.

<sup>9</sup> Morley also notes the novel opens and closes with Walter and Patty, told through 'the voice of the neighbourhood': 'Locked within these framing chapters are personal and domestic stories but also, perhaps more interestingly, vignettes of America's "untidy freedom"' (Morley, 2011: 726).

frames that connect his nascent relationship with Lalitha to transnational and ecological realities.

Prior to learning of his wife's affair, Walter characterizes his attraction for Lalitha in imperialist and capitalist terms: he sees himself as 'another overconsuming white American male who felt entitled to more and more and more: [he] saw the romantic imperialism of his falling for someone fresh and Asian, having exhausted domestic supplies' (Franzen, 2010: 318). The description contrasts his marriage's polluted nature with Lalitha's purity. Walter's self-aware mocking of his racialized, commodified attraction also emphasizes supply and demand. His description contrasts, in orientalist terms, an 'exhausted,' but financially robust America with a more pristine, 'fresh' yet economically poorer Asia.

Even the landscape of their environmental work and burgeoning love affair—rural West Virginia — is described in imperial terms as 'the nation's own banana republic, its Congo, its Guyana, its Honduras' (Franzen, 2010: 337). As Jesús Ángel González points out, 'This association with Latin America is also important since it becomes part of the ecological dream pursued by Walter and Lalitha. If Walter has already been described as a 'pioneer,' Lalitha is a true pioneer, a contemporary migrant from India in search of her American Dream' (González, 2015: 23). In this sense, both Walter and Lalitha are representative Americans engaged in the exploitation of rural West Virginia for their own aims and American dreams. Lara Narcisi similarly sees the characters' (neo)colonial 'freedoms' as the novel's 'code for a sense of entitlement, specifically regarding our dominion over every available locale, that may be the motivating factor for all the mistakes [environmental and colonial] we, as a nation, have made' (Narcisi, 2015: 69). While the 'pilgrim' Walter bears neoliberal guilt for his desire, naming its historical and environmental exploitative contexts, Lalitha's status as a new migrant and victim of Walter's imperial desires maintains a guise of innocence. Áine Mahon claims Lalitha—along with Walter's best friend Richard Katz — remain 'safe from Franzen's scrutiny': their 'satellite yet central positioning . . . prompts Franzen to leave their integrity intact' (Mahon, 2014: 93). In truth, Lalitha is an active co-conspirator in Walter's exploits. She pursues him romantically, content to love him even if he is married and does not love her (Franzen, 2010:

309), and she – more so than Walter – facilitates key negotiations (297–98) and provides the most effective spin for their environmental swindle, the Cerulean Mountain Trust (301; 333), and later the ‘Free Space’ summer overpopulation program.

From the start, Walter and Lalitha’s relationship is explicitly presented as problematic because of what it represents allegorically in terms of American imperialism and environmental exploitation. As a result, they arguably offer a less comfortable version of multiculturalism’s promise than the novels Heise critiques in her essay. Layered with Walter’s personal doubts, moreover, is the racism Lalitha and Walter encounter when seen together in rural West Virginia’s coal country. Just as Walter brings the most doubts, he also seems to bear the brunt of the racist attitudes. In the men’s room of a restaurant, for example, a man approaches Walter and comments, ‘Like the dark meat, do you?’. The stranger clarifies, ‘Said I seen what you doing with that nigger girl.’ Walter replies ‘She’s *Asian*’ (Franzen, 2010: 310), emphasizing her cultural whiteness and obliquely referencing her model minority status rather than directly responding to the racial slur. While Walter recognizes that most of the time they never attracted attention, ‘He was forced to the conclusion that what had attracted the young couple’s attention [on this specific night] was the guilt, his own dirty guilt, that had radiated from his booth. They didn’t hate Lalitha, they hated *him*. And he deserved it’ (312). Walter’s white, privileged neoliberal guilt angers the less privileged, working-class poor whites he encounters and with whom he fails to sympathize.

Lalitha, significantly, does not share these problems of either guilt or blame toward the working-class whites in the novel, which is why some readers and critics may distinguish her from Walter and Patty. Lalitha also does not seem troubled by the fact that the Trust will ‘permit coal extraction on nearly a third of it [the land acquired by the Trust], via mountaintop removal. . . . [before] properly managed reclamation efforts’ (211). Where Walter fails, she pointedly succeeds in convincing Coyle Mathis and the other poor white Foster Hollow families to sell their land to the Trust: ‘Walter was struck, in the months that followed, by the fact that it was she, the suburban daughter of an electrical engineer, and not he, the small-town son of an angry drunk, who’d effected the miracle in Foster Hollow’ (297). Walter’s apologetic



white privilege shapes his neoliberal guilt, suggesting he is stuck in an impossible situation: he is attracted to precisely what he knows he has no right or 'freedom' to possess – and, yet, he ultimately pursues her anyway. Lalitha is not troubled by white guilt. Nor does she represent the Other who is closer to nature.

What Lalitha loves about camping and birding is 'how much [Walter] enjoy[s] looking for animals' (490). She loves to see Walter happy and admits to Walter: 'I don't think I really get nature. Not the way you do. To me it seems like such a violent thing. That crow that was eating the sparrow babies, those flycatchers, the raccoon eating those eggs, the hawks killing everything. People talk about the peacefulness of nature, but to me it seems the opposite of peaceful. It's constant killing. It's even worse than human beings' (490). Lalitha recognizes and seemingly fears a violence within nature that in *A Friend of the Earth* explicitly targets humans, as Kerridge points out: 'among the ironies is the way the natural world regularly kills the people who are trying to save it':

Sierra's mother dies of allergic reaction to a wasp sting in Glacier National Park. Sierra falls from her redwood. Maclovio Pulchris, the rock star conservationist, is killed by one of his lions after sudden floods have caused him to take the animals into his own house for shelter, a clownish calamity that means the end of one of the last remaining wildlife sanctuaries. (Kerridge, 2002: 89–90)

In addition to the above examples, Teo – another environmentalist in *A Friend of the Earth* – is killed by a meteorite (Boyle, 2000: 14) and Philip Ratchiss' sister (he owns the cabin where Ty and Andrea eventually live) is mauled by a bear when they are children (129–31); Ratchiss is hit in the head and killed by a California condor, which he had shot (228). While the Ratchiss family deaths highlight human responsibility, Lalitha's remarks and the other sudden and/or violent 'natural' deaths in *A Friend of the Earth* reveal a 'natural world that, if it has any apparent coherence, is perverse and self-defeating rather than just and [solely] self-preserving' (Kerridge, 2002: 91). Likewise, the characters' 'moral chaos' in both *A Friend of the Earth* and *Freedom*

reveal motivations that are informed by survival but are also similarly 'perverse and self-defeating.' These 'perverse' motives link the romance and environmental plots. Where Walter loves the nature that he seems bent on destroying to save, Lalitha's conservation motivations have little-to-nothing to do with protecting nature, especially for future generations, or even enjoying nature; she simply wants to see Walter happy.

While Walter in *Freedom* and Ty, Sierra, and Mac in *A Friend of the Earth* love nature, Lalitha does not do her environmental work for a personal love of nature, which may help explain the logic of her own questionable conservation ethics. The 'Free Space' population control proposal tries to revive unpopular and ethically questionable antigrowth politics and the Cerulean Mountain Trust scheme relies on mountaintop removal to secure a wildlife preserve: 'what is shocking about their dream of preservation is that it involves complete initial destruction' (González, 2015: 24). The rationale for their privately-funded environmental ventures, as Walter says, is that 'it's hopeless to wait for governments to do conservation. The problem with governments is they're elected by majorities that don't give a shit about biodiversity. Whereas billionaires do tend to care. They've got a stake in keeping the planet not entirely fucked, because they and their heirs are going to be the ones with enough money to enjoy the planet' (Franzen, 2010: 212). Walter's pessimistic prediction becomes a twisted reality in *A Friend of the Earth*. The protagonist's benefactor is a super-rich aging pop star, Maclovio Pulchris (aka Mac), committed to 'animals nobody else wants' (Boyle, 2000: 11). Mac's wealth not only allows him to fund a private wildlife sanctuary, but it also allows him the mobility to travel and escape some of climate change's disastrous effects.

Unlike in *Freedom*, though, the Tierwaters shared environmental vision — especially in the beginning — is clearly radical. Ty and Andrea were part of an Earth First!-type organization in the late twentieth-century called Earth Forever! Andrea's later embrace of a profitable corporate environmentalism and Ty's increasingly illegal radical acts contribute to their estrangement. The biosphere's collapse contributes to their reunion. Less than 'pure' motivations also characterize the romantic reunion

between Ty and Andrea and, as highlighted above, their environmental work. Their reunion in the novel's present underscores the intertwined environmental and romance plots. While they have not spoken for twenty years, Ty immediately recognizes Andrea's voice on the phone and is suspicious. Ty considers why Andrea wants to see him again after all these years: 'to run down my debit cards? Fuck with my head? Save the planet?' Andrea explains, 'No, fool . . . For love' (3), which reads as yet another ridiculous motive given the planet's current state.

Ty and Andrea's advanced age also rejiggers the romance plot. Despite the collapse of the biosphere, the possibility of romance maintains allure – even for these septuagenarians. Ty asserts meeting her is proof that he is, indeed, a fool (3). But he is intrigued and perhaps willing to be used if it means he will see her again. Ty's romantic weaknesses counter his misanthropy and match his similarly 'foolish' attachment to the environment. Andrea contacts Ty after all this time to interest him in a money-making scheme to write a book about his deceased eco-activist daughter 'for posterity' (16). When this plan falls apart, they find themselves out of work and homeless. They eventually flee to Ratchiss' dilapidated, abandoned cabin in the now scorching hot Sierra Nevada Mountains, a location where they briefly lived with Ty's daughter Sierra while he was on the lam. Ty and Andrea, members of the 'young-old' (9), end the novel setting up housekeeping again as septuagenarians in 2026. Their reconfigured family at the novel's conclusion includes Petunia, a Patagonian fox rescued from Mac's flooded sanctuary. Ty, who 'wanted to live like Thoreau' (263) gets a cabin in the woods, but one where all the trees are toppled and the most abundant animals in sight are mutant jays.

An important component of the romance-environmental plot in these two novels is their non-reproductive futures. Lalitha is distinguished from Patty in at least two key ways: where Patty has 'an emptiness at [her] center' (Franzen, 2010: 304), Walter describes Lalitha as 'a genuine kindred spirit, a soul mate who wholeheartedly adored him' (316). Lalitha is also a clear opposite of Patty, who is sure about one thing: 'one mistake she hadn't made about herself was wanting to be a mother' (511). Especially significant for Heise's reading of the multiracial or transnational family that often concludes ecological romances is the fact that Lalitha is adamantly against

children. While Walter falters on the issue of children and whether Lalitha should get her 'tubes tied' (307), Lalitha does not want children: this point is nonnegotiable for her. She explains to Walter, 'I'm not like other girls. I'm a freak like you're a freak, just in a different way. ... I'm the girl that doesn't want a baby. That's my mission in the world. That's my message' (492). Her standpoint on children gets traced back to a,

. . . family trip she'd taken back to West Bengal when she was fourteen. She'd been exactly the right age to be not merely saddened and horrified but *disgusted* by the density and suffering and squalor of human life in Calcutta. Her disgust had pushed her, on her return to the States, into vegetarianism and environmental studies, with a focus, in college, on women's issues in developing nations. Although she'd happened to land a good job with the Nature Conservancy after college, her heart — like Walter's own when he was young—had always been in population and sustainability issues. (315)

Lalitha, thus, represents women unlike Patty that do not feel the 'natural' urge to bear children; she resists cultural stereotypes that would connect her with overpopulation, and at the same time she remains culturally othered by the narrative and by Walter. For instance, despite his past and current campaigns for antigrowth, which included inviting a member of the Club of Rome to speak at his college (121) and the present 'rogue' scheme to make 'having babies more of an embarrassment' (217; 221), Walter still 'couldn't stop imagining making Lalitha big with child' (492). Walter's description maintains his (white) privileged productivity — he is the actor while Lalitha is passive.

Sierra, Ty's daughter, is in many ways a kindred character to Lalitha. Even more so than Lalitha, Sierra gives up womanhood's traditional trappings—marriage and family—to become a lone tree-sitter to prevent redwood logging: 'In all, she spent just over three years aloft, above the fray, the birds her companions, as secure in her environment as a snail in its shell or a goby in the smooth, sculpted jacket of its hole' (Boyle, 2000: 261). Her boyfriends and romance plots fall away: 'Sierra gave up everything for an ideal . . . Once she was up in her tree, that was it, her life was over. She never had children, never had a house, a pet, an apartment even, she never

again went shopping, bought something on impulse, watched TV or a movie, never had a friend or a lover' (Boyle, 2000: 222). Unlike Lalitha, Sierra loves and connects with nature. Before she falls from the tree and dies, 'She was one with Artemis [name of the redwood tree], one with the squirrels and chickadees that were her companions' (262). Ty describes her as a 'mad saint,' an 'anchorite,' and a 'martyr' (262); he wants her live a 'normal' life. A week before Sierra dies, Ty buys her a cake 'meant . . . for somebody's wedding' with a 'lonely plastic figurine of a groomless bride set on top. I was trying to tell my daughter something with the forlorn bride: it was time to come down. Time to get on with life. Go to graduate school, get married, have children, take a shower, for Christ's sake' (264). She keeps the figurine but maintains her vigil until she accidentally loses her footing and falls to her death. In this sense, the idealized Sierra seems to conform to the logic of the American sentimental tradition Nancy Armstrong identifies. Like Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Sierra is an "'inalienable possession," a literary figure whose meaning could not be touched by the social-historical environment' (Armstrong, 1994: 13). However, Sierra's death, which was her father's sacrifice, too, did not save the trees. Ty, in fact, admits all his earlier efforts as an activist to be a 'friend of the earth' and all of his sacrifices, including Sierra, have accomplished 'Nothing, ... Absolutely nothing' (Boyle, 2000: 270). The story merges Sierra's aborted life with the (radical) environmental movement's failures and sets up the non-reproductive future presented in the novel's conclusion.

At *A Friend of the Earth's* conclusion, Ty and Andrea — like Walter and Lalitha and the reunited Walter and Patty in *Freedom's* conclusion — do not represent a reproductive future. They are too old. Furthermore, Ty's only child from his first marriage, Sierra, is dead. In *A Friend of the Earth* children do not represent promise or a future on which current environmental or domestic struggles are waged. Margaret Hunt Gram suggests *Freedom* follows a similar logic by connecting human reproduction and population growth with ecological sustainability: 'every reader wants characters to reproduce, and likewise every narrative but a tragic one requires the promise of continual reproduction' (Gram, 2014: 300–01). This logic derives from a paradigm Lee Edelman calls "'reproductive futurism": a heteronormative cognitive pathology by which people and societies seek to suppress their own death drive and

authenticate the existing social order by projecting themselves into an imagined future through the valorization of children and childbearing' (Gram, 2014: 301).<sup>10</sup> Gram argues that *Freedom's* harshest critique and 'substantially less ironized problem' relates to 'growth both economic and demographic – under capitalism' (305). *Freedom's* 'preemptive nostalgia, a longing for something that has not yet quite disappeared' emerges in the tenacity of the migrating birds (312). *A Friend of the Earth* picks up, in this sense, where *Freedom* leaves off, testing the limits of nostalgia in a world 'hopeless and stinking and wasted' (Boyle, 2000: 2) but where a refuge for 'animals nobody else wants' (11) is still possible via an eccentric pop-star investor.

Lalitha's untimely death in a car accident puts an end to their attempts at radical, multicultural homemaking in *Freedom*. While Walter suggests earlier that he bears the brunt of the racism for their relationship, the novel indicates Lalitha's death may be a result of a hate crime. She may have been run off the road by a coal truck or a 4x4, whose driver 'saw a dark-skinned young woman driving a compact Korean-made rental car and veered into her lane or tailgated her or passed her too narrowly or even deliberately forced her off the shoulderless road' (Franzen, 2010: 500). Lalitha pays the ultimate price for being the 'wrong type' of migrant (not white) and for their environmental work corrupted by corporate greed and neoliberal ideals. While her death does not result in an immediate reconciliation between Walter and Patty, it sets the stage for their eventual reunion.

In *A Friend of the Earth* the deaths of the most racially diverse characters and the rare animals, which represented efforts to preserve what biological diversity is left in the world, solidifies Ty and Andrea's reunion. Cultural diversity in *A Friend of the Earth* appears mostly at the margins and, in this sense, appears to be as rare as the biological diversity in 2025: Ty works with the pesticide-damaged Chuy, a man who cannot remember the name of the town where he was born but is 'pretty sure' his country of origin is Guatemala (Boyle, 2000: 38). The cook Fatima and her husband

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<sup>10</sup> Edelman defines reproductive futurism in *No Future* as 'terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations' (Edelman, 2004: 2).

Zulfikar are Pakistani Muslims: Fatima is described as 'invisible' (113) and also as wearing a yashmak (194). Maclovio Pulchris, the eccentric pop star benefactor, reads like a Michael-Jackson-inspired character and is of undetermined race. With the exception of Chuy, all of these characters are killed by the escaped lions, who were brought into the house when flood waters destroyed their pens. This failed attempt on the domestic scale to save wilderness mirrors the larger failure of the environmental movement. Despite being named for flowers, the animals defy domestication and control: 'Boyle's Californian nature of 2025, although evidently depleted and thrown off balance by human destructiveness is a power, not a victim' (Durczak, 2007: 369). As a result of the killing spree, the few remaining animals are either shot or set free. Their deaths set the stage for Ty and Andrea setting up house in Ratchiss' abandoned cabin.

### **Romance Plot and Ecological Allegory in Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior***

Unlike *Freedom* and *A Friend of the Earth*, *Flight Behavior* ends with a promisingly empowering separation for its white protagonist Dellarobia Turnbow rather than a familial reunion. It also hints Dellarobia may not survive a flood and live out her promising new life. In this ecological family romance, love affairs are presented throughout much of the novel as an escape or a trap. Much like the scientists study the monarchs' (mating) behavior, the reader follows Dellarobia's crushes. One way to understand Dellarobia's various infatuations is to see them as a means for her to break out of her stifling routine. Dellarobia understands her illicit desires as an inherent character flaw, an 'insidious weakness in her heart or resolve that would let her fly off and commit to some big nothing, all of her own making' (Kingsolver, 2013: 80). Cub, her husband, offers both safety and an unbearable security that annoys Dellarobia while increasing her guilt (7; 187). An unplanned pregnancy during high school pushes them into a 'shotgun wedding' and Dellarobia off her track to go to college (10). A subsequent miscarriage leaves the couple 'stranded' (10). When her best friend Dovey asks Dellarobia why she stayed in the marriage after the miscarriage, Dellarobia reminds Dovey that her mom was in hospice care, her parents' home was

gone, and her in-laws had already taken a loan out on a house for the newlyweds (193–94). The promise of a ‘little family’ (195) combined with not having a home to return to, meant Dellarobia stayed put and made do, despite less than ideal conditions. Escaping one set of problems trapped her in another. Her ‘fantasies of flight’ offer potential escape routes (419).

The end of Dellarobia’s marriage is a byproduct of environmental disaster and the people and events the disaster brings to Dellarobia’s backyard. At first, though, environmental disaster appears to save Dellarobia’s rocky marriage. The novel opens with Dellarobia climbing the hills near her home for an extra-marital tryst. While she knows she is on a path that will likely destroy her marriage and family, she continues up the hill. However, as she nears her destination, the sight of ‘Trees turned to fire, a burning bush’ brings her back home (14). Her vision turns out to be millions of monarch butterflies. This year, instead of wintering in Mexico, the migrating monarchs land in the hills of Tennessee. Dellarobia’s crush on Dr. Ovid Byron, the scientist who comes to study the monarch butterflies, offers a different paradigm – and escape route – than her previous crushes on local men.

Ovid plays a key role in mentoring Dellarobia, and he does so in ways that show how tall, dark, and handsome men may play roles other than the seducer or savior. Nevertheless, like Lalitha, Ovid represents an external, outside threat to the white family and Feathertown’s way of life. Hester, Dellarobia’s mother-in-law, remarks ‘He looks foreign’ and asks ‘Is he even Christian?’ (131). Dellarobia’s work in the lab, additionally, pushes against community values. She explains to Ovid, ‘They feel like a wife working outside the home is a [negative] reflection on the husband’ (216). Even Dellarobia initially does not like the scientific pessimism and concern expressed by Ovid. She thinks, ‘So how did an outsider just get to come in here and declare the whole event a giant mistake? These people had everything. Education, good looks, boots whose price tag equaled her husband’s last paycheck. Now the butterflies were theirs too’ (149). Dellarobia initially ‘wondered whether any of this was proved. Climate change, she knew to be wary of that’ (147). However, when Cub expresses similar sentiments later in the novel, Dellarobia defends both Ovid and climate



change, saying to her husband, 'Just because he's the outsider, he has no say? Should we not read books, then, or listen to anybody outside this county? Where's that going to leave us?' (257). She tries to explain to her husband that climate change – not a miracle – brought the monarchs to their backyard (260–61). In time, she realizes both the butterflies and her marriage were terrible mistakes.

Because he does not recognize or return Dellarobia's crush, Ovid does not directly break up the marriage. Yet, his presence and the butterflies open new doors for Dellarobia. Where Walter begins *Freedom* with an environmental consciousness, Dellarobia – like Ty – simultaneously develops her consciousness about romantic relationships and the environment because of a series of interactions with Ovid and others. After Ovid arrives Dellarobia's friendship with Dovey remains a key sounding board, but Dovey would rather discuss 'Hair and makeup' (189) than the 'downer' topic of what the butterflies represent (191–92). Ovid shifts Dellarobia's skepticism about climate change and indirectly inspires her to leave her husband. From observing Ovid's marriage, she realizes that 'She was not about to lose it [her marriage]. She'd never had it' (398). This realization marks a turning point in both her environmental and romantic consciousness.

In *Flight Behavior* ethnic, racial, and national diversity play integrative roles in Dellarobia's personal development, which is a direct result of climate change. As a result of the butterflies' changed migration, Dellarobia's small, insular world expands and diversifies: she meets the Reynaldo family, who were displaced due to a massive landslide in Mexico, as well as various national and international scientists, activists, and tourists who have come to study or simply see the butterflies. Dellarobia and her husband have never flown on a plane, but soon they meet people from all over the country and the world in their backyard. Dellarobia's encounter with this larger world ultimately reignites her fire to go to college and to leave her unsatisfactory marriage. While Dellarobia has yet to travel great distances, the botched migration expands and changes the local. As Thomas Peyser writes about white domesticity and globalization in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, 'Globalization is not merely a process by which those traditionally thought of as Other are gradually incorporated into the Same. The transformation [of cultural boundaries] . . . reminds us that this process

does not leave the Same the same' (Peysner, 1996: 259). Significantly, influence does not flow in one direction. Ovid and other characters are changed by their experiences with the residents of Feathertown, especially Dellarobia, just as she is changed by them.

The path on which Dellarobia sets out at the end of the novel retraces the one she takes in the beginning, but with a clear difference in purpose. This journey is not one of her 'fantasies of flight ... but walking away on [her] own two feet' (Kingsolver, 2013: 419). A cold snap means a 'few million butterflies [had] frozen onto the branches beneath a covering of snow. ... Survival wasn't possible' (421). Yet, Dellarobia finds her own wings for flight. Rather than destroying the family, the children moving between their parents' homes is described as migrating. Dellarobia explains to her kindergarten age son, 'you'll migrate. Like the monarchs. Alternation is supposed to make you sturdy. You ... will grow up ready for anything' (426–27). Dellarobia offers hope that her children will be (better) equipped for the world they are inheriting. Whether or not the novel's ending confirms or destroys this hope depends on how one reads Dellarobia's fate as she takes flight up the hill and watches her home float off its foundation.

### **Sentimental Deaths and Conclusions**

All three novels' conclusions provide a markedly different environmental and domestic scene than those portrayed in the novels Heise discusses: they do not present a picture of cultural diversity. The novels' distinct conclusions broaden our understanding of radical homemaking's connection with whiteness and radical domesticity's role within environmental novels self-consciously set in the Anthropocene and within the American environmental movement more broadly. As I have begun to outline, all three novels also incorporate death for sentimental aims, particularly of a beloved young woman, in order to connect domestic and environmental themes and reunite or separate their characters.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Nancy Armstrong's 'Why Daughters Die: The Racial Logic of American Sentimentalism' for a discussion of the role of dead daughters in American sentimental literature. Armstrong 'considers what happened to British sentimentalism when it came to this country' and uncovers the 'simultaneously forged and suppressed . . . link between gender and race' (Armstrong, 1994: 2).

Like much of Franzen's fiction, *Freedom* leaves the reader unsure whether its ending is sentimental or ironic. In *Freedom*, the Nameless Lake property, which in Walden-like fashion provides a location of respite at different points in the novel for Patty, Richard, and Walter, is transformed into a bird sanctuary 'with a picture of the pretty young dark-skinned girl after whom the preserve is named' (Franzen, 2010: 562). Walter's tribute to Lalitha is touching within the context of their short-lived, loving relationship and biting sarcasm when viewed in light of the neoliberal environmental movement in which they participate and profit.

The 'small ceramic sign' with the picture of 'the pretty young dark-skinned girl' memorializes diversity in ways Walter Benn Michaels suggests are key to neoliberalism: 'Liberalism . . . may have needed racism; neoliberalism doesn't – it needs antiracism' (Michaels, 2006: 297–98). Lalitha allows Walter and Patty to be anti-racists and still begrudge, if not outright hate, working-class whites. The sanctuary, situated amid suburban development, recalls Walter's love of nature more so than hers. Remember Lalitha admits to Walter that she does not 'really get nature' (Franzen, 2010: 490). What Lalitha enjoyed about bird watching was seeing Walter happy. Her deadly connection with the bird sanctuary, additionally, does not bode well for cultural or ecological diversity's health. As a character committed to being non-reproductive, Lalitha is honored with a small preserve as her legacy. Like Lalitha's decision to not have children, the land's preservation is important but minuscule in comparison to the problems of habitat decline and the racism that may have contributed to her death.

The eventual reconciliation between Walter and Patty nearly six years after Lalitha's death also presents mixed ecological and domestic messages. The novel's ending is ambivalent about the potential for 'personal and social redemption' (Mahon, 2014: 92). Áine Mahon contends that despite the novel's parody of 'a very particular type of American liberal' the couple still offers 'the possibility of personal and social redemption in the context of a yet-to-be-achieved America' (Mahon, 2014: 92). Jesús Ángel González similarly understands *Freedom's* conclusion as more optimistic than satirical: 'Patty and Walter may fail in their, probably naïve, dreams of gentrification

of their neighborhood and the recovery of pioneering values, but Franzen seems to be giving them credit for trying' (González, 2015: 21). Given Patty and Walter's reconciliation and the memorializing of the 'dark-skinned girl' (Franzen, 2010: 562) without a hint of a more radical redistribution of power and money, I read the novel's ending as a pessimistic tableau highlighting the triumph of the 'freedoms' offered by neoliberalism. Their reestablished marriage and bird sanctuary are only as radical as their neoliberal domestic and ecological politics allow.

Like the small bird sanctuary at *Freedom's* conclusion, *A Friend of the Earth's* conclusion could be read as genuine or as biting sarcasm. Ty's ultimate sacrifice to the environmental movement was largely involuntary and accidental. Ty's daughter from his first marriage, Sierra, dies while attempting to save ancient redwood trees from logging. Ty and Andrea's reunion at the conclusion offers hope that the nature they as well as Sierra sought and repeatedly failed to protect is not gone forever or similarly barren. Patrick D. Murphy understands the ending of *A Friend of the Earth* as a reflection of 'the author's pessimistic assessment of the current state of climate change mitigation. . . . Boyle offers no way out and thus leaves his readers in the same ineffectual position as his hero' (Murphy, 2014: 153). However, Joanna Durczak suggests 'Boyle's dark novel . . . ends on a faintly optimistic note . . . optimistic not about mankind's but about the natural world's future' (Durczak, 2007: 370). Ty does state, after all, that the animals matter more than humanity: 'But the animals, if only we can keep them from extinction until we're gone—they'll adapt, they will, and something new will come up in our place. That's our hope. Our only hope' (Boyle, 2000: 221). Perhaps more so than in *Freedom's* conclusion, *A Friend of the Earth's* ending offers more expansive ground for hope, suggesting that even if we succeed in ruining the biosphere and experience mass extinctions, nature will rebound even if we do not. This radical vision asks readers to shift from an anthropocentric worldview to an ecocentric perspective.

Whether Ty and Andrea survive for the short or long term is unclear due to their age and their extreme living conditions. Nevertheless, when Ty first sees the cabin, he feels 'something approaching optimism, or at least the decline in the gradient

of pessimism' (272). This is despite the fact that a tree has crashed into one side of the house. Perhaps the source of his 'approaching optimism' is the fact that the woods are coming back: 'shoots of the new trees rising up and out of the graveyard of the old, aspens shaking out their leaves with a sound like applause, willows thick along the streambeds' (274). At night they hear owls and coyotes. And, Petunia the Patagonian fox has become domesticated—so much so she is mistaken for a dog by one of their young neighbors.

The novel's final lines relate the fox's domestication to Ty's: ironically, as he and the fox become less wild, the woods are growing wilder. Elisabeth Schäfer-Wünsche reads this scene differently, claiming 'Peace and order are restored to the world. The species are securely named.' She goes on to say, 'But perhaps the concept of the species has lost at least some of its relevance, since there is a problem to this reassuring statement: the perfectly domesticated dog named Petunia has simply forgotten that she was once a ferocious Patagonian fox' (Schäfer-Wünsche, 2005: 416). While the radical environmental movement pushed Andrea and Ty together as well as apart, its ultimate failure and their struggle to come to terms with that fact as well as Sierra's death bring them together again. Like Walter and Patty, Ty and Andrea return to a status quo: yet, their new normal represents a radical adaptation, if not an especially culturally or ecologically diverse one.

More explicitly than *Freedom*, the end of *Flight Behavior* — like *A Friend of the Earth* — connects human and animal behavior.<sup>12</sup> Where the end of the novel domesticates the 'human hyena' Ty (Boyle, 2000: 218), Dellarobia, like the butterflies, leaves home in search of a better environment. Resembling the butterflies, she flew off course and realized she needed to change environments to flourish. As the final chapter's title suggests, she is a 'perfect female,' or 'the lady that can go out and start a new colony by herself' (Kingsolver, 2013: 396). The characters' affinity

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<sup>12</sup> Zoomorphism is not featured in *Freedom* in the same ways it threads throughout *A Friend of the Earth* and *Flight Behavior*. One notable exception to this is when Walter describes his memories of Lalitha as 'breaking up on him the way dead songbirds did in the wild — they were impossibly light to begin with, and as soon as their little hearts stopped beating they were barely more than bits of fluff and hollow bone, easily scattered in the wind — but this only made him more determined to hold on to what little of her he still had' (Franzen, 2010: 555).

with wildlife – a hyena, a (domesticated) Patagonian fox, and monarch butterflies – suggest cross-cultural belonging, simultaneously collapsing and reaffirming the boundary between human and animal. *Flight Behavior's* zoomorphism stresses our interconnected fates; *A Friend of the Earth* uses zoomorphism to suggest humans do not occupy a privileged position in the ecosphere.

For a domestic novel, furthermore, Dellarobia's ending – outside of both marriage and, perhaps, death is key. Marriage and death, after all, are the two traditional endings available for female protagonists in domestic fiction. Linda Wagner-Martin highlights Dellarobia's 'presumed death' at the end of *Flight Behavior* (Wagner-Martin, 2014: 192; 197). The desire to hope and cheer for both Dellarobia's and the monarchs' survival comes from, as Ovid reminds Dellarobia, a reluctance to witness not just death but extinction: 'Not everyone has the stomach to watch an extinction' (Kingsolver, 2013: 319). Furthermore, the 'new earth' (433) that comprises the novel's ending is referenced earlier by Ovid in response to a question Dellarobia asks. Dellarobia wants to know 'where will they [the butterflies] go from here' (325). After a long pause, he responds 'Into a whole new earth. Different from the one that has always supported them. In the manner to which we have all grown accustomed' (325). He clarifies, 'This is not a good thing, Dellarobia, . . . A whole new earth' (325). Where the deaths of her premature child and parents shaped her family's dynamics earlier in her life, here the butterflies' fate are tied to Dellarobia's ability to escape the flood and begin her new life. The ending's most certain element is the start of the 'new earth,' which may – as *A Friend of the Earth* demonstrates and as Ovid warns – be the death of the butterflies and Dellarobia. Yet, both are fighters; the monarchs are described as 'an airborne zootic force, flying out in formation, as if to war' (433). The novel ends with Dellarobia's 'eyes held steady' even as her footing falters. The butterflies' 'odds [are] probably no better or worse than hers' (433). Which ending does the reader desire? The novel's conclusion pushes readers to consider what is required for Dellarobia's and the monarchs' survival.

As Heise points out, conflating human-cultural behaviors and biological systems can be a dangerous and over-simplified metaphor: if it is good news that the three novels do not conflate cultural and biological diversity, is it also good news that the

novels end with radical, albeit homogeneously white heterosexual households? Heise suggests we need to shift from simple metaphors that craft the family as a microcosm of the earth. In this vein, *Freedom* deploys white liberal homemaking and environmentalism to question its self-proclaimed neoliberal radical potential. *A Friend of the Earth* presents Ty's domestication from a human hyena to a human being as a dynamic process that depends more on the environment's fertility than humanity's future. Domestication contrasts with forces at play in the woods, which are becoming wilder. Likewise, rather than connect environmental and cultural (familial) diversity, *Flight Behavior* teases out the conditions needed for any species to not only survive but to thrive in an age of diminishing resources. Such critical zoomorphism applied to the white bodies in these novels plays with the stereotypically pejorative, racist and sexist connotations that dehumanize by emphasizing one's brute animalism.

Readers examining the radical homemaking in these three novels for messages about cultural and ecological diversity will find such diversity largely relegated to the margins. Class status more than race determines environmental impact. As her encounter with an environmental activist reveals, Dellarobia's poverty establishes her family's carbon footprint as among the smallest (Kingsolver, 2013: 326–29). Ty and Andrea squat in an abandoned cabin; Walter and Patty reap the benefits of their financial security and mobility. The characters' whiteness affords them subtle and not so subtle privileges. The Green 2.0 report released in July 2014 entitled *The State of Diversity in the Mainstream Environmental Sector* found 'The current state of racial diversity in environmental organizations is troubling, and lags far behind gender diversity' (Taylor, 2014: 4). Racial and ethnic inclusion remains key, as the Green 2.0 report attests. And, as Heise points out, so too is understanding the complex dynamics that foster sustainable local and global environments. Together the novels' local radical domesticities underscore the limitations of any one individual model. Their shared message, as described in *Flight Behavior*, is that the 'new earth' depicted in these domestic climate change novels is 'A world where you could count on nothing you'd ever known or trusted' (Kingsolver, 2013: 325) but still must 'risk other odds' (Kingsolver, 2013: 433).

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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