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Humanity and Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Imagination in the Work of M. R. Carey and Lauren James

Trang Thu Dang, Nottingham Trent University, UK, trang.dang@ntu.ac.uk

This article examines two contemporary post-apocalyptic novels, M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014) and Lauren James's *The Quiet at the End of the World* (2019). It considers how these texts respond to the questions of what it means to be human as they explore a humanity before, during, and after the apocalypse. This article also investigates the extent to which Carey and James effectively challenge the anthropocentric viewpoint that places humanity over and above the ecosphere. To do so, it draws on a number of critiques of the Anthropocene, in particular the collection of essays *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017), edited by Heather Swanson et al., *Death of the Posthuman* (2014) by Claire Colebrook, and *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (2013) by Timothy Morton. This article brings attention to how Carey's and James's novels engage with, and contribute to, the existing cultural debate about the division and entanglement of humans and nonhumans. It argues that they indeed problematise the long-held boundary between these entities, exposing their vulnerability and (inter)dependency. Yet in asserting that certain human legacy needs saving, they also call for a return of the same problematic humanity that brings about the decimation of many human and nonhuman lifeforms.



Unpredictable extreme weather events, wildfires, melting ice caps, rising sea levels, increased ocean acidity, droughts, Ebola, Covid-19—these are some of the signs of climate change brought about by human overexploitation of the Earth's ecosystems. Yet, this is not to frame the planet as a passive victim and to attach full sovereignty to the human species. The ecological events mentioned above are evidence of a planetary agency. In many parts of the Global South, they have caused the erasure and displacement of both humans and nonhumans in search of refuge from the destruction of their homes. The impacts of the climate breakdown are so vast and detrimental to current and future generations of lifeforms that the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Report signals 'code red for humanity' (McGrath 2021). The warning is loud and clear: the human race must acknowledge the unpredictable and powerful forces of nonhumans and learn to coexist non-violently with them if it is to mitigate the consequences of anthropogenic climate change.

In response to this, many twenty-first-century post-apocalyptic novels are significantly preoccupied with catastrophic imaginings such as ecological collapse, global pandemics, nuclear holocausts, resource depletion, cybernetic revolt, and zombies. These texts are concerned with the after-effects and ramifications of these apocalyptic circumstances and how the protagonist(s) navigate their pitfalls. In the process, contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction explores fundamental questions about humanity, more specifically, about what it means to be human. The result of this exploration lies at the heart of this article. It explores what M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014) and Lauren James's *The Quiet at the End of the World* (2019) reveal about the socio-biological components of the human as these books investigate the future of humanity after the apocalypse.¹

Carey depicts a world where most of humankind is eradicated due to a fungal infection and the infected, referred to as 'hungries,' feed on the flesh of healthy human beings. James imagines a humanity that becomes mysteriously infertile and what is then left of it are two humans pampered by a group of humanoid robots. Both Carey's and James's novels employ the tropes of post-apocalyptic fiction, the arrival

¹ As well as being associated with the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction, M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* and Lauren James's *The Quiet at the End of the World* are young adult texts. Together with many other young adult novels such as *Snowflake, AZ* (2019) by Marcus Sedgwick and *Ship Breaker* (2010) by Paolo Bacigalupi, Carey and James explore the questions of how their adolescent characters navigate a post-apocalyptic and dystopian world, focusing on their experiences, agencies, and self-reflection as they come to find their place within it. As such, these texts recognise the power of the younger generation in terms of what they can do to mitigate the ecological breakdown, and have the potential to raise awareness of the ecological crisis and how to coexist differently with nonhuman others among young adult readers. However, I decide not to consider *The Girl with All the Gifts* and *The Quiet at the End of the World* through the lens of young adult fiction due to limited space and the large scope that this article already sets out to cover.

of an apocalyptic event and its post-apocalyptic impact, to speculate about the human experience of these catastrophes and imagine new ways of dealing with them and their consequences. These tropes are common in post-apocalyptic novels and have recently been seen with new eyes by academic scholarship such as Astrid Bracke's *Climate Crisis and the 21st-Century British Novel* (2017) and Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (2015). Bracke and Trexler share the view that the post-apocalyptic narrative is 'ill-suited to contemporary climate crisis' because it 'reduces complex issues to "monocausal crises"' (Bracke 2017: 24). Producing maximum fear, unrealistic catastrophes, and escapism, it also fails to create a meaningful connection between readers and the current environmental destruction (Bracke 2017: 25; Trexler 2015: 79, 115). Yet I argue that, in projecting unforeseen disasters and imagining how humans and nonhumans respond to them, post-apocalyptic narratives can accentuate and amplify the socio-ecological enmeshment between these beings. They illuminate ways in which humans view themselves and other entities differently in the face of post-disasters, ultimately pushing for a change in ecological perspectives. I, therefore, focus on *The Girl with All the Gifts* and *The Quiet at the End of the World* as case studies for this article.

Another reason that underpins this choice of texts is the fact that these novels adopt post-apocalyptic tropes in both familiar and new ways. Many zombie novels, such as Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) and Max Brook's *World War Z* (2006), incite horror through zombie outbreaks and their brutality. *The Girl with All the Gifts* is not a horror story. It revolves around the complex and entangled make-up of hungries and their intimate relationship with other characters, human and nonhuman. In the same vein, *The Quiet at the End of the World* is unlike other post-apocalyptic texts such as Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009) and Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* (1993), as instead of portraying a humanity carving out life among the wreckage, it does the opposite. Following the infertility crisis, its human characters live in a clean, fulfilling, and highly technologised environment, begging the question of what this difference can reveal about the socio-biological conditions of contemporary humans. Given that these texts are also lesser known than, and not as well studied as, contemporary award-winning texts such as Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2013), this article wants to bring Carey's and James's novels into the focus of critical analysis. I consider their engagement with, and contribution to, the ongoing cultural discourse about the separation of, and connection between, the human and the nonhuman amidst the current ecological crisis.

At the same time, this article does not intend to overvalorise post-apocalyptic narratives in general and the two said texts in particular. Another perspective that I am

particularly interested in concerns Claire Colebrook's comment on the post-apocalyptic genre. Examining various films and literature such as Scott Derrickson's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008), Oliver Hirschbiegel's *The Invasion* (2007), and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), she observes that such texts inform humanity of its unworthiness of life on Earth due to its violence and destruction against itself and nonhuman others. In the place of this 'worthless, violent, historical and life-denying' humanity, these texts project 'the proper (futural) humanity' that delays the annihilation of the human species (Colebrook 2014: 199). Colebrook (2014) concludes that this common motif in post-apocalyptic narratives is less concerned with the critique of what we have come to consider as life and the justification for its continuation, than with 'how we might survive' (200–201). Their interest lies in the recovery and renewal of life as it is, thus folding the Earth's surface around the ultimate celebration of human redemption. Adding *Station Eleven* and the *MaddAddam* trilogy to the collection, I agree that catastrophe scenarios often draw attention to human resilience in the face of ecological disasters, showing that despite its decimation, humanity—or some form of it—still emerges from ruin and starts anew. Colebrook asks us to be more critical of the kind of life we want to continue and to consider other kinds of life worthy of saving. Her argument functions as an anchor for this article, as it takes into account those problematic portrayals and examines the extent to which *The Girl with All the Gifts* and *The Quiet at the End of the World* effectively challenge the anthropocentric viewpoint that places humans at the centre of the biosphere. It investigates what sort of life comes out of, and survives, the apocalyptic events and the socio-ecological implications of it in these two texts.

In what follows, I will lay out some of the critical discussion on the Anthropocene that is important to this article, shedding light on how this epoch triggers greater consciousness of the entanglement between humans and nonhumans, their vulnerability, and their (inter)dependency. This outline serves as a theoretical framework for analysing *The Girl with All the Gifts* and *The Quiet at the End of the World*, how they blur the boundary between humans and nonhumans and dethrone human civilisation. Whether these depictions are productive in decentring humanity is the subject of the last section in this article.

Anthropocene Anthropocentric?

The term 'Anthropocene,' popularised by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000, denotes a geological epoch in which humanity as a collective species has adversely impacted the Earth, changed its geography, and altered its climate through rampant resource extraction and other forms of exploitation. In so doing, it has caused massive biodiversity loss, many extinction events, and global heating. Although the changes

that it points to are alarming, the term ‘Anthropocene’ has attracted criticism across a range of disciplines since its emergence.

One of the major concerns among the scholarly debates that Jeremy Davis (2016) identifies, and one that is particularly pertinent to this article is the implication that the concept of the Anthropocene is anthropocentric (7). Eileen Crist (2016), for example, claims that it positions humans as powerful agents who are able to subordinate nonhumans to their will, and as such, reinforces ‘human specialness’ and ‘human dominion’ rather than challenging them (17, 25). After all, the Anthropocene foregrounds the *Anthropos* which, considered in the abstract, reduces humans to ‘an undifferentiated mass’ (Davis 2016: 7). In disregarding patterns of inequality, hierarchy, and privilege across the globe, it is insensitive to the subtleties of, and disparities between, cultures and histories. In other words, as Jason Moore (2016) points out, the Anthropocene erases the long history of racism, colonialism, and imperialism as it lays the blame for a changing climate across humanity. There have, therefore, been suggestions to replace the term ‘Anthropocene’ with alternatives such as ‘Capitalocene’ to pinpoint capitalism as the agent of climate change, and ‘Plantationocene’ to put colonialism, capitalism, and persisting racial hierarchies at the centre of socio-ecological issues (Moore 2016: 6; Haraway 2016: 37).

Taking these concerns and suggestions into consideration, Davis (2016) argues that the term ‘Anthropocene’ does not bear anthropocentric connotations (7). For although humanity has decimated Earth’s ecosystems, natural forces do not succumb to human will and take place only with human permission. Rather, as Marcia Bjornerud (2018) points out, ‘[t]he great irony of the Anthropocene is that our outsized effects on the planet have in fact put Nature firmly back in charge’ (158). Furthermore, Davis (2016) comments that the concept of the Anthropocene does not attribute the dramatic transformation of the Earth to all human beings, but shows how many are facing unprecedented climate events due to the action of a few of them (7). Indeed, the 2019 Australian bushfires, the 2021 Turkish wildfires, the bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef, and rising sea levels in the Mekong Delta—among other catastrophic events—have put many humans and nonhumans at fatal risk, and have wiped out their dwellings in countless cases, turning them into climate refugees. In these circumstances, it cannot be said that victims of anthropogenic climate change exert power over the planet, or that their suffering is silenced by the mere proposal of the Anthropocene.

This term marks a drastic shift in the way in which the Earth reacts to human activity. Far from perpetuating the anthropocentric worldview, I argue that it draws greater attention to, and opens up important conversations about, the place of humanity in the biosphere and its intrinsic interconnectedness with nonhumans. The

Anthropocene is a provocation, a spur to rethink human and nonhuman fragility and a call upon responsible action from all humans. One example of this is Indigenous scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) generously sharing Indigenous wisdom and knowledge of protecting and nurturing the land by exploring its reciprocal relationship with humans. Kimmerer's perspective is helpful for disrupting the dominant and traditional Western insistence on the enduring split between humans and nonhumans, demonstrating instead a possibility of their harmonious coexistence. Other examples that strive towards the same goal and that illustrate how the concept of the Anthropocene has directly helped generate fruitful discussions on these matters are contained in the collection of essays *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017), edited by Heather Swanson et al., and Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015). Such critical material allows deep reflection upon, and foregrounds, the web of life and the wonders and terrors of an unexpected epoch.

In this sense, if the Anthropocene enables such examination to emerge, the post-apocalyptic moments in *The Girl with All the Gifts* and *The Quiet at the End of the World* are no different. Examining these texts through the lens of the critical discourse surrounding the Anthropocene and its different and thought-provoking ways of tackling and coping with the climate crisis, I will explore the implications of the novels' apocalyptic events and their aftermath in the following sections. The purpose is to bring to the fore how they create productive discussion about the relationship between humans and nonhumans that is part of the fundamental question about the socio-biological condition of the human.

(Inter)Relation

In *The Girl with All the Gifts*, there are hungries but also child hungries whom Carey (2014) describes as 'the second generation' where 'the fungus is spread evenly throughout the brain' but does not 'feed on the brain. It gets its nourishment only when the host eats' (316). As such, child hungries retain their mental and emotional capacities and only lose control when they smell human scent. Yet the fact that they infect healthy humans just as first-generation hungries do means that they are 'monsters' to the few surviving uninfected humans (Carey 2014). Swanson et al. (2017) write that '[m]onsters are useful figures with which to think the Anthropocene,' because one of its features is exposing 'the wonders of symbiosis' that many humans have ignored by commodifying and privatising natural resources (2). Seen in light of this comment, Carey's depiction of child hungries as monsters refuses easy categorisation.

Dr Caroline Caldwell, a scientist in charge of finding a cure for the disease by experimenting on child hungries and seeing them as nothing more than exploitable test subjects, affirms that they 'aren't human; they're hungries. High-functioning hungries' (Carey 2014: 48). She adds that this makes them 'very much more dangerous than the animalistic variety [she] usually encounter[s]' (Carey 2014: 48). Miss Helen Justineau, whose duty is to provide Caldwell with psychological evaluations of these hybrid children through teaching them, has a different view. Developing affection for them, she makes clear to Melanie, the protagonist and a child hungry, the difference between her and first-generation hungries: 'you're not a hungry, because you can still think, and they can't' (Carey 2014: 207). Caldwell and Justineau's contrasting ways of perceiving the hybrid children put them in between the human and the nonhuman. Child hungries are both hungries and not hungries, not only because, for Justineau, they 'think' and 'talk,' but also because they look human and contain 'recognisably human limbs and organs' (Carey 2014: 45). Based on this, these hybrid children are simultaneously human and not human, since their tissue cultures 'spawn lumpy cloudscapes of grey fungal matter' (Carey 2014: 45). These points are confirmed when Justineau comes too closely into contact with Melanie, triggering her hunger for human flesh. As Melanie's mouth is 'filled with thick saliva' and her jaws 'start to churn of their own accord,' that is, as 'the child turn[s] into the monster, right before her eyes,' Justineau understands that 'both are real' (Carey 2014: 58, 61). Melanie is a human child and a monstrous hungry, and this portrayal, born out of the apocalyptic event in *The Girl with All the Gifts*, encourages a thoughtful reflection upon the make-up of the human itself.

In the 2014 documentary series 'Your Inner Fish,' Neil Shubin traces many fascinatingly deep connections between human anatomy and that of fish, reptiles, and other nonhuman animals, emphasising that humans are not exclusively human. As Tsing (2015) further affirms, containing ninety percent of bacteria in their cells, humans are more nonhuman than human from a numerical point of view (142). The monster-depiction of Melanie and of child hungries at large in *The Girl with All the Gifts* exposes flaws in categorical thinking—the way in which our system of thought forces us, to some extent, to think in terms of categories even though beings are not fully categorisable. Carey demonstrates that the classification of humans and nonhumans is arbitrary and cannot fully account for the relationship between different forms of existence. Moreover, because to be human is to contain nonhuman elements, to be directly related to them; the human is porous and fragile, which explains why the widespread fungal infection is possible in the first place. Caldwell discovers that once people are contaminated by the pathogen, 'the threads of the fungus penetrate the

tissue of the brain,' 'mimicking the brain's own neurotransmitters' and destroying the human self (Carey 2014: 76). If the human really is separate from the nonhuman as the dualism between nature and culture would have it, it would be impossible for the fungus to invade the human body and its inner cells. Likewise, we would have been immune to bacteria and viruses like SARS, Ebola, and Covid-19. But since the post-apocalyptic aftermath in the novel and reality show that we are incomplete and unavoidably open to disease and infection, a different concept for thinking the relationship between humans and nonhumans is needed.

This is further highlighted in the collapse of the various partitions that the human survivors in *The Girl with All the Gifts* build to hold hungries at bay. The few remaining uninfected humans and the authorities live in the heavily guarded area called Beacon, and those aiding Caldwell in her search for a cure for the infection are stationed in Hotel Echo, a fortified military base. Inside this place, there are prison cells where child hungries sleep, and chains and muzzles to render them respectively immobile and unable to attack uninfected humans. What we have here is a physical structure of boundaries within boundaries, established to segregate the safe from the unsafe, the civilised from the barbaric, and essentially, the human from the nonhuman. However, these structures are unsustainable. Eventually, Hotel Echo is overrun by hungries and junkers, who are human survivors turned hostile, as well as cannibal scavengers, and Beacon is implied to have long gone. The destruction of these human refuges symbolically emphasises that the border between what is human and what is not human can easily crumble, if it is not bound to fail anyway because the human and the nonhuman are deeply and essentially intertwined.

This intertwinement is also an underlying theme in *The Quiet at the End of the World*, serving as a catalyst for the novel's primary focus on, and exploration of, the relationship between humans and technology that will be discussed in this section. James begins her novel with a phone call between Maya Waverley and the ambulance service about her mother's unstoppable nosebleed, and with the service's operator hanging up on her, for this person, too, starts having an uncontrollable nosebleed. It turns out that the nosebleed, which soon becomes widespread just like the pathogen in *The Girl with All the Gifts*, is a symptom of a virus of unknown origin. If Swanson et al. see figures of monsters as signifying the wonders of symbiosis, in the 2020 STRP Festival that centres around the socio-biological implications of Covid-19, Timothy Morton (2020) titles their essay 'Thank Virus for Symbiosis.' In another context, they remark that viruses show us the porosity of lifeforms, how these lifeforms 'are made of other lifeforms' (Morton 2013: 29). The mention of the unidentifiable virus in James's text, then, calls attention to the symbiotic relationship between the human and the nonhuman.

Experiencing a nosebleed herself, Maya shares on her social media that one day, she cannot ‘stop showering and showering, trying to get the virus off [her]’: ‘I know that’s not how it works, but it helps’ (James 2019: 53). Yet this admission contradicts what she puts immediately after: I ‘scrub at my face until it feels tender, gargle mouthfuls of soap, and spit it out in the drain. I still feel infected, like the virus is all over me’ (James 2019: 53). Maya’s attempt to separate her (the human) from the virus (the nonhuman) fails because such a separation is impossible. As discussed above, humans are constituted by a host of bacteria and nonhuman DNA without which they cannot survive. Maya cannot wash off the nonhuman that is ‘all over [her],’ because it is part of her, in other words, it is what makes her human. Like any other lifeform, she is perforated and vulnerable to disease and infection because she is directly connected to beings and elements that are not uniquely hers.

While both Carey and James interrogate the boundary between humans and nonhumans, the latter goes a step further by challenging the dichotomy between the organic and the technical. Upon worldwide viral infection, humanity in James’s novel becomes sterile and, in response, software developers build an app called Babygrow that allows users to create virtual babies. A few months on, a computer programmer ‘designed and built a doll of his Babygrow son,’ bringing him out from the app ‘into the family for real’ (James 2019: 200). This product, being enhanced to grow like a human through ‘software updates’ and ‘body kits’ and to process complex artificial intelligence so that it can appear even ‘more human,’ lies at the crossroads between the biological and the mechanical (James 2019: 212, 244). In the novel, the British government treats Babygrow in the same way that it treats biological babies, providing the former with the National Health Service (NHS) ‘healthcare’ and student loans, for example (James 2019: 303). However, decrying romantic relationships between Babygrow and biological humans, a British media outlet argues that the former are ‘robots’—they ‘might mimic humans, but that’s all they are—a copy’ (James 2019: 294). In Morton’s analysis of the Sorites paradox, which involves the question of what composes a heap, they observe that, as ‘[o]ne grain of sand doesn’t constitute a heap; neither do two; nor do three; and so on,’ the line between where the heap starts and where it ends is ambiguous and arbitrary (Morton 2013: 29). In view of this observation, the ways British people in James’s text perceive Babygrow—which are similar to Caldwell and Justineau’s contrasting viewpoints about child hungries in Carey’s novel—reveal the arbitrariness of their differentiation between the biological and the mechanical. Babygrow are seen as humans when they serve as biological humans’ children, tackling the crisis of sterility, but are not acknowledged as such when romantic relationships are considered. Problematising the random nature of the distinction between the

human and the nonhuman, James shows that like child hungries, Babygrows are simultaneously human and robotic, and any attempt to reduce them to one category or the other is bound to backfire.

The novel further stresses the inseparability of the organic and the technical by demonstrating that biological humans contain both human and technical elements, as do Babygrows. This is most clearly evidenced in the plot twist where two biological human protagonists, Lowrie and Shen, learn that they are surrounded and, in fact, created and raised by a small community of Babygrows. As a cure for human infertility is never found, humanity 'has been extinct for three hundred years,' during which Babygrows either shut themselves down or stay conscious to find ways to bring humans back (James 2019: 300-301). The latter, developing technology to grow human clones in artificial wombs using the limited human DNA samples available, produce Lowrie and Shen, 'the fifth generation of test subjects' (James 2019: 300). In her formulation of the process of 'becoming-machine,' Rosi Braidotti (2013) writes:

[It] bears a privileged bond with multiple others and merges with one's technologically mediated planetary environment. The merger of the human with the technological results in a new transversal compound, [...] a generalised ecology, also known as eco-sophy, which aims at crossing transversally the multiple layers of the subject, from interiority to exteriority and everything in between. (92)

For Braidotti (2013), this technologically mediated process tears asunder the division between 'humans and technological circuits,' displaying 'biotechnologically mediated relations as foundational for the constitution of the subject' (67). Incorporating technology into everyday life, the human body does not end with their skin but extends to include the technical. That it would have been impossible for Lowrie and Shen to have been born and to survive without Babygrows and their care illustrates the permeable boundary between machine and organism, technical and organic. Overridden by their intimate entanglements, terms like 'biological population,' 'robots,' and 'Babygrow generation,' which appear frequently in the novel and which signal an attempt at differentiation between the organic and the inorganic, becomes redundant (James 2019: 304).

(Inter)Dependency

The Girl with All the Gifts and *The Quiet at the End of the World* present us with two completely different outcomes for their apocalyptic events: the former leads to humans having to shield themselves from hungries, whereas the latter leads to humans having robots raise and care for them. However, in their different ways, both novels point

not only to humanity's inherent connection with, but also to its dependence upon, nonhumans.

Colebrook (2016) observes that '[w]e are accustomed to thinking of humans, having emerged from the primordial darkness, as independent entities living and acting on a separate physical world' (94-95). With advanced technology such as air conditioning, electric blankets, and washing machines that save many humans from the inconveniences of nonhuman worlds, the latter no longer seems so red in tooth and claw. The link between the human and the nonhuman is severed; the latter treated as a backdrop to the former's lives. Challenging this long-held belief, Carey puts the nonhuman in the foreground, relegating the human into a position of insignificance and powerlessness and, in doing so, showing that when the nonhuman goes wrong (at least from a human perspective), the result can be disastrous and fatal to humankind.

As the fungal infection sweeps across the globe and causes 'the Breakdown,' which is understood in the novel as the downfall of human civilisation, *The Girl with All the Gifts* is littered with images of 'a landscape of decay' (Carey 2014: 128). There are 'ruined cars,' 'abandoned vehicles,' '[o]ld tech, computers and machine tools and comms hardware that hasn't been touched since the Breakdown,' and 'shopfronts broken into and ransacked by looters of a bygone era' (Carey 2014: 145, 210, 64, 154). Reflecting on the environmental damage in the Anthropocene epoch, Swanson et al. (2017) comment that '[e]very landscape is haunted by past ways of life,' of 'human and nonhuman histories' (2, 4). Considering the images of ruins above, the landscape of London in *The Girl with All the Gifts* is haunted by the remnants of a once thriving and highly technological humanity now lost to the invasion of a type of fungus. This nonhuman ceases to be a benign background upon which humans act and execute their lives; as it infiltrates the human body and destroys its sensory and mental faculties, *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis* puts humanity at risk of extinction. If in the primary world, most of humankind brings about the extinction of many nonhuman species by way of overexploitation of habitats and extraction of resources, this role of dominance is reversed in Carey's novel, challenging the anthropocentric viewpoint whereby the human stands powerfully at the centre of the biosphere. Like the socio-political implications of extreme weather events or of Covid-19, the fungal infection in the novel makes us realise that our relatively stable lives and societies are based on the smooth functioning of the nonhuman around us. The survival of the human is dependent upon the nonhuman, but probably not the other way around.

This argument is similarly explored in *The Quiet at the End of the World*, as the novel offers snippets of the aftermath of the mysterious viral disease that renders humanity infertile. In the same way that the pathogen in *The Girl with All the Gifts* turns London

into a ‘landscape of decay,’ the crisis of infertility in James’s text puts London in a state of ruin after humanity goes almost extinct and abandons its infrastructures. From Lowrie’s aerial view as she flies to Wales for replacement kits to save her Babygrow parents, she notices ‘the decay’ and how ‘[e]very street is a wreck of collapsed buildings’ (James 2019: 238). This image of dilapidation is juxtaposed with Lowrie’s reflection on how carefully the Babygrowns have maintained the streets of central London to keep her and Shen from the depressing knowledge of its wreckage and a human race that is vanishing: ‘Our houses are a small museum to the past. The life we live, full of pristine, gilded furniture and endless recreational facilities, has all been kept in the middle of a lost ruin’ (James 2019: 239). This juxtaposition exposes, on the one hand, what a virus—a microscopic nonhuman—can do to a humanity and its so-called civilisation, and on the other, how it is the nonhuman, the Babygrowns, that help ensure the continuation of that humanity. Placed next to decay and ruin, the ideal socio-ecological condition in which Lowrie and Shen get to live after the disaster is a statement and a reminder that the seeming benignity of nonhumans cannot be taken for granted. In both pictures, *The Quiet at the End of the World*, like *The Girl with All the Gifts*, draws nonhumans and their power into its central focus, and in the process, they showcase humans’ inescapable reliance on entities that are more-than-human, for better or worse.

The Return of the (Non)Human

In combination with the depiction of the collapse of human civilisation, Carey’s and James’s articulation of humanity’s dependence upon nonhumans seems to dramatise, in turn, the dethronement of the human and triumph of the nonhuman. Both novels paint a picture of a world where wildlife and vegetation take over habitats that were once used and dominated by humans. Through the eyes of Melanie in Carey’s novel who gets to see the world outside of her classroom and (prison) cell for the first time, we witness ‘fields on all sides [...] overgrown with weeds to the grown-ups’ shoulder height, whatever crops they were once planted with swallowed up long ago’ and ‘where the fields meet the road, there are ragged hedges or crumbling walls’ (Carey 2014: 128). Likewise, Lowrie in James’s novel—as she flies over London—notices how ‘the old agricultural fields are now meadows and forests, full of wildlife,’ the ‘patchwork pattern of hedges between fields is still visible, overgrown but clinging on,’ and the houses ‘are overwhelmed with green: nettles and brambles and elder trees growing out of rooftops’ (James 2019: 239, 238). Depicting nonhumans as growing and thriving on now ruined human places, these parallel descriptions of the landscapes of London in both novels symbolically and literally show a humanity succumbing to the nonhuman, indeed decentring the human place in the ecosphere.

Such descriptions also suggest that, left to their own devices—that is, without human interference—and given time, nonhumans will recover and thrive. This idea is further illustrated when Melanie effectively eradicates the human race by setting fire to a fungus wall that contains ‘[p]ods full of seeds,’ triggering the spread of their spores (Carey 2014: 332). She reflects that because the existence of surviving humans and junkers would only bring detriment to hungries and child hungries, what she has done ‘is better’: ‘[e]verybody turns into a hungry all at once’ and child hungries will be ‘the *next* people. The ones who make everything okay again’ (Carey 2014: 332). In her essay on *The Girl with All the Gifts*, Maria Quigley (2021) describes Melanie’s action as challenging the assumption that humanity’s survival is for the greater good and as proposing ‘an alternative view of a future without human beings at its centre’ (122).

With human beings removed from Earth and a hybrid form of humans and nonhumans taking over, Quigley’s reading is unavoidable. Nevertheless, it is problematic on two grounds. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer (2013) mentions how ‘[n]early every one of [her] two hundred students said confidently that humans and nature are a bad mix’ (14). Their inability to imagine beneficial relations between their species and others makes Kimmerer wonder how we can ‘begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like’ (Kimmerer 2013: 14). She stresses that ‘human beings are part of the system, a vital part’ (Kimmerer 2013: 14). In projecting the idea of the coexistence between humans and nonhumans as negative, Carey only redraws a wedge between them. The other problem is that the novel does not actually create a ‘drastically alternative view of the future,’ as Quigley remarks. Witnessing human survivors and ‘the junker people’ killing each other and the hungries, including child hungries, Melanie concludes that if this continues, ‘nobody will be left to make a new world’ and ‘in the end the world will be empty’ (Carey 2014: 332). This conclusion begs questions about the existence of plants, nonhuman animals, and nonhuman entities like rocks and soil in forming and occupying Earth’s ecosystems. In other words, it relegates the nonhuman to a backdrop for human life and even denies their being and important constitution in world-building.

Melanie’s conclusion feeds into her belief that child hungries are neither ‘the old kind of people’ nor ‘hungries,’ but ‘different,’ so her kind, as mentioned above, should become ‘the *next* people [...] who make everything okay again.’ On the one hand, this belief evokes a heroic narrative whereby the Earth cannot function and will be desolate without child hungries being the protagonists, the saviours. It thus hierarchises existence, confirming the importance of these hybrid children and subordinating other entities to them. On the other, Melanie’s belief exposes the human–nonhuman binary thinking that she seemingly inherits from the human survivors, especially Justineau

whom she admires so much. Earlier, this article described how Justineau separates hungries from child hungries by way of associating the latter with intelligence—the ability to ‘think’—and the former with non-intelligence. Morton (2018) argues that it is reductive and anthropocentric to differentiate between what is intelligent and non-intelligent, imaginative and mechanical: ‘we are hamstrung as to determining whether humans are executions of algorithms or not’ (61). Humans migrate and expand their territories across Earth’s surface. *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis* spreads and colonises, displaying complex behaviour and communication that thwarts Caroline’s attempt to stop it, and threatening to remove humanity. *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis* is incredibly clever. But in following Justineau’s footsteps, Melanie discriminates hungries from child hungries, reinforcing the humanistic viewpoint whereby humans are ‘the measure of all things’ (Braidotti 2013: 28). Given that *The Girl with All the Gifts* ends with Justineau teaching Melanie and other child hungries human language and knowledge, Melanie’s vision of ‘the next people’ and their mission to ‘make everything okay again’ is dangerously similar to that of ‘the old kind of people’ who think in binary terms and believe in human superiority.

These problematic lines of narratives—the ideas that the Earth is better off without humanity yet this humanity, or at least, its anthropocentric legacy still returns and retains itself—run even deeper in *The Quiet at the End of the World*. In a sentence that echoes Melanie, Lowrie reflects that ‘[i]f anything, the near-extinction of humanity has improved the world. Without billions creating carbon emissions, the Earth is healthier and cleaner than ever’ (James 2019: 239). This reflection prompts Lowrie to suggest that ‘maybe we should just accept that our time has come. *Homo sapiens* have reached the end of our branch in the genealogical family tree. [...] This might be for the best, after all’ (James 2019: 239–240). Like Melanie, Lowrie sees no possibility of humans forming supportive and caring relationships with nonhumans: if the Earth is to prosper, there must be no humanity. Not only is this thinking unproductive in tackling the issues of climate change, since humans will not suddenly disappear from Earth, but it also ostracises humans from the ecological picture, deepening the already existing boundary between them and nonhumans.

However, despite this acceptance of human extinction, anthropocentrism is flung back into full view when Lowrie, at the end of the novel, states that she ‘can’t see the point of [keeping London going] if it was all going to end whatever [they] did’ (James 2019: 317–318). If scholars writing on the Anthropocene do everything to chide teleological thinking for defining the worth of nonhumans according to which they are purposeful *for* humans, James brings it back (Barad 2007; Clark 2015; Harris et al. 2018). Like Melanie, Lowrie holds this vision of the world by which, without some

forms of humans being preserved, it will become purposeless and empty, as though the overgrown landscapes of London, as mentioned above, are just some kinds of accidents whose purpose has not yet been realised.

To offer life meaning, Lowrie reveals to Shen that the answer lies in ‘[t]he Babygrows. [...] The future of humanity isn’t biological. It’s robotic’ (James 2019: 319). Although this proposal might seem, at first sight, to indicate a position of de-anthropocentrism, it is far from it. When Lowrie asks ‘[w]hat if the Babygrows are the next stage of evolution?’ and Shen replies, ‘[a]pes, humans, robots,’ ‘[e]ach step more advanced than the last,’ and this ‘makes a strange kind of sense,’ Lowrie rejoices in his inference (James 2019: 319). This conversation calls to mind what Paul Harris et al. (2018) call the ‘Big History narrative,’ which they describe as ‘a biocentric teleological tale of emergence and ascending complexity that culminates in a cosmic anthropic vision of human beings as the universe becoming conscious of itself’ (4). Although this is not strictly a ‘biocentric teleological tale,’ Shen’s inference is a technocentric teleological one that culminates in an anthropic vision of human beings as the technological becoming the most advanced ‘species’ in the evolutionary ladder. Babygrows do not replace humans at all; as a symbol of human intelligence and rationality, they are ‘the next generation of humans,’ as Lowrie puts it, and the extension of human superiority (James 2019: 320). Despite Lowrie mentioning change and adaptation as she proposes her ‘grand’ idea, it hardly seems to be change and adaptation when she advocates for a return of the human as more sophisticated and ‘evolved’ than ever.

This is further demonstrated by the fact that Babygrows are literal products of all that constitutes humanity. James (2019) writes:

Before the last human died, all of the brainpower on the planet was dedicated to creating human personality software—through the Babygrows. [...] Humans did find a way to carry on their species. [...] They made the Babygrows to pass on their niche, their way of thinking: the essence of their species. [...] Whatever humans are, at our essence, [the Babygrows] are it. (319–321)

James fails to challenge what Colebrook criticises about the contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction, which is advocating for the eventual sustaining of human life ‘as it is already formed, already politicised, and already organised,’ criticism that is not the same as promoting the complete erasure of the human. Coupled with Lowrie’s emphatic statement as articulated to the Babygrows, ‘nothing stops the endless march of progress,’ the novel appears to push for a horrifyingly anthropocentric vision of a world where, slightly similar to *The Girl with All the Gifts*’s ending, humanity comes

back in a technologically advanced form only to live on as it did before—exploiting others for its own survival (James 2019: 331). In fact, as much as Lowrie’s and Shen’s existence and the fulfilling and healthy environment in which they grow up are evidence of human reliance on nonhumans, that these are created by Babygrows, the ‘essence’ of humanity, also already portrays this anthropocentric vision.

If Carey’s reintroduction of the arbitrary line between intelligence and non-intelligence shows humans to be the standard against which all things are measured, James’s underpinning of the hierarchy among humans and nonhumans accentuates both this human exploitation and humanistic measurement. Lowrie shares with Shen that Babygrows ‘aren’t some temporary solution, designed to keep people happy while fertility is fixed’ (James 2019: 317). In a gathering with them at the end of the novel, Lowrie makes clear to Babygrows that they ‘have just as much right be alive as humans did,’ such that they ‘can be parents too’ (James 2019: 328). Morton argues that this rights language is problematic in that it is normative. As they explain, ‘some beings can have rights to the extent that others do not. Rights language cancels itself out or leads to marginal cases that we humans are once again obliged to police’ (Morton 2018: 151). As virtuous as Lowrie’s proposal sounds, it only grants the right to reproduction to some and leaves out others, elevating humans to the position of arbiter. In addition to Babygrows, there are ‘hard-working armies of bots’ created by previous generations of humans to ‘restor[e] the planet’s ecosystem after it was left in a wreck of rising seas and nuclear waste’ (James 2019: 239). After these generations have gone, the bots keep London clean for Lowrie, Shen, and Babygrows. Their existence and duty in this community raise the question of whether, if Babygrows ‘aren’t some temporary solution’ for humanity’s infertility, they are ‘some [permanent] solution’ for the ecological mess produced by humans. Since James at no point addresses this issue but only valorises these bots’ faithful service to humans and Babygrows, a hierarchy is established. Both are robots, yet Babygrows are on a higher social level than the cleaning bots. This may explain why Lowrie does not discuss at all whether these bots can have their own children, like Babygrows do. In the same way that the language of animal rights often protects those similar to humans and ignores others, it seems that only Babygrows who, as Lowrie stresses, are the essence of the human, get to live on (Oliver 2009: 25).

Carey and James both utilise the post-apocalyptic genre, depicting catastrophic events to pose fundamental questions about the socio-biological constitution of the human. Unlike other post-apocalyptic novels that often elicit fear and horror, *The Girl with All the Gifts* and *The Quiet at the End of the World* focus on exploring the impacts of disease

and infection upon humans and their societies, that is the infiltration of bacteria and viruses into the human body and infrastructure. They emphasise the permeable boundary between humans and nonhumans and expose the former's dependence upon the latter. In portraying nonhuman invasion into spaces once occupied and dominated by humans, and eventual nonhuman annihilation of human civilisation, Carey and James also ask what would become of humanity in the face of the formidable power of the nonhuman. To this end, the authors unfortunately adopt classic post-apocalyptic tropes—the erasure of the human and the survival of some form of anthropocentric humanity—that then jeopardise their critique of anthropocentrism. As Carey and James make the point that humans and nonhumans cannot simultaneously be part of the ecological picture because the former are only harmful to the latter, they strengthen the deep-seated dichotomy between these entities. They further depict the anthropocentric viewpoint and legacy as either being inherited (as in *The Girl with All the Gifts*) or as having to be retained (as in *The Quiet at the End of the World*) by the generation that succeeds humans. In so doing, they advocate for a return of what Morton (2013) would call 'a new and improved version' of the same troubled humanity, with many thriving on the life and blood of others (164). If the Earth is to prosper, it is not that humans must disappear. It is that they must forego their humanistic way of life and work on building a caring and attentive relationship with nonhumans without whom they cannot survive.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Philip Leonard, Dr Amy Rushton, and Dr Daniel Cordle, for their insightful and valuable feedback on the first draft of this article. I am also grateful for the constructive and generous feedback from my reviewers and editor.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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