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Experiencing Time with Trees and Swans: Understanding Climate Change through Two Contemporary Novels

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Abstract – This article explores the role played by two works of contemporary literature in navigating the climate crisis. It seeks to emphasise the value of creative responses to climate change in aiding transformative conceptualisations of nature and the environment. This will be explored primarily through an analysis of the alternative temporal structures created through trees in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) and swans in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013). I will consider the implications of the changing environment on literary framings of time and narrative. This discussion is informed largely by Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of 'species thinking', alongside Amitav Ghosh's and Timothy Clark's more explicit criticisms of the contemporary novel's representation of climate change. In response to these theories and criticisms, the timeframe of trees offered in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* is explored as an example of multi-scalar thinking. Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* on the other hand provides continuous tension between anthropocentric and ecocentric conceptions of time that more explicitly query what is lost when time is conceived in purely human terms. Both novels guide the reader to think through time in an ecologically informed way, imbuing the reader with a greater sense of urgency towards climate change.

Keywords: climate change, contemporary novel, time, ecocentrism

Introduction

Contemporary literature can help to foster alternative conceptualisations of the environment. Calls by scholars such as Esther Turnhout to ‘creatively rethink what it means to do environmental knowledge’ (368) are being answered in the social sciences through the suggested move towards ontological pluralism. This position recognises both the existence and the limitations of the various perceptual frames through which the Earth can be understood and experienced (Nightingale). Mike Hulme similarly argues for a shift from the epistemologically constrictive pursuit of answers to the embrace of a broader conceptual horizon. This is achieved by ‘adding layers of meaning to our experience and understanding of reality’ (334): a process known as ‘knowledge thickening’ (336). In doing so, the scientifically defined boundaries of environmental knowledge are transformed into a more fluid set of responses. Hulme suggests that the humanities play a particular role in this process, for they ‘frequently pose normative questions that, rather than being resolved, can only be better or more deeply understood’ (334). This results in the generation of introspective ‘self-knowledge’ (332) which in turn can motivate climate action.

This article extends this logic to the arts themselves by exploring the contemporary novels of Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* (2018) and Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* (2013) as examples of creative responses to environmental knowledge production. First, this paper will define Dipesh Chakrabarty’s notion of ‘species thinking’ (‘Four Theses’ 213) in order to identify the forms of epistemological disruption introduced by the climate crisis. Then, it will outline literary criticisms that view the genre of the novel as being in opposition to this thinking, before exploring more expansive perceptions of contemporary literature and climate fiction. With time adopted as the primary theme, this paper will discuss and offer analyses of the two novels, revealing their ability to adopt a temporal mode that engages the reader in a mode of ‘species thinking’ (Chakrabarty, ‘Four Theses’ 213). Powers’ use of an arboreal temporality engages with a form of scaling that integrates anthropocentric temporalities into a broader chronology. Wright, on the other hand, depicts the competing nature of anthropocentric and ‘multispecies’ (Rose 136) temporalities. In doing so,

she reiterates the importance of ecologically informed approaches to time and the Aboriginal cosmologies that support such thinking. Ultimately, these arguments and readings speak to the importance of using the contemporary novel, and contemporary literature more broadly, as a tool for comprehending our times of environmental change. The two texts explored here, particularly *The Overstory*, are not overtly preoccupied with detailing the events of climate change. Rather, by adopting ecologically scaled modes of time, and by situating the reader in these temporalities through the act of reading, the two texts query and conceptually undermine the dominance of short-sighted, anthropocentric thinking. In doing so, the texts can be read as oppositional to the very forms of thinking and sense-making that facilitate the creation of anthropogenic global warming. By engaging the reader in a form of ‘species thinking’ (Chakrabarty, ‘Four Theses’ 213) as they navigate the text, both novels make a significant contribution to ‘thickening’ (Hulme 336) the knowledge of climate change.

Species Thinking: Re-evaluating Chronology

Creating a nuanced temporal understanding of climate change is no simple act. The nature of this perceptual change is explored by Dipesh Chakrabarty, who argues that the assumption of ‘a certain continuity of human experience’ throughout past, present and future imaginings is disrupted by the current climate crisis in the ‘collapsing of human and geological chronologies’ (Chakrabarty, ‘Four Theses’ 210). Making sense of this change, Chakrabarty argues, calls for ‘species thinking’ (213). Species thinking ‘requires us to both zoom into the details of intra-human justice – otherwise we do not see the suffering of many humans – and to zoom out of that history, or else we do not see the suffering of other species’ (Chakrabarty, ‘Whose Anthropocene?’ 111). Thus, it asks us ‘to mix together the immiscible chronologies of capital and species history’ (Chakrabarty, ‘Four Theses’ 220). This process involves the intentional destabilisation of anthropocentric conceptions of time, encouraging a dual approach that simultaneously recognises the present moment and that beyond it.

Anthropocentrism and the Contemporary Novel

However, multiple critics have identified anthropocentrism as a prevalent feature of the novel, making it a particular challenge for novels to incorporate the alternative chronologies outlined by Chakrabarty. Robert Macfarlane highlights how the discreet and incremental nature of climate change leaves the writer with questions of ‘how to dramatise aggregating detail’ and ‘how to plot slow change’. This idea of gradual change is explored more politically by Rob Nixon, who emphasises that in order to ‘confront [the] slow violence’ (10) of climate change and other environmental sources of harm, it is required ‘that we attempt to give symbolic shape and plot to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time’ (10). Applied to contemporary literature, the ‘dispersed’ (10) nature of threats invites authors to reconsider anthropocentrically scaled timeframes. Instead, writers must devise ways of drawing attention to events that are ‘low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects’ (Nixon 10).

Amitav Ghosh and Timothy Clark suggest that such a temporal criterion is antithetical to the novel genre. Their criticisms should be prefaced by a reminder that the novel genre is vast, and a rejection of it in all its varying forms appears stifling. Nonetheless, for Ghosh, examinations of the novel are grounded in a stringent understanding of form. Novels exist in ‘discontinuities of time’ (59) and must be ‘actualised within a certain time horizon’ (59); the corollary of this is that the temporal uncertainty within discussions of climate change becomes hard for such fiction to depict. For Timothy Clark, it is the ‘anthropocentric delusion’ present in the ‘still-dominant conventions of plotting, characterisation and setting in the novel’ that prevent it from being an appropriate literary form for climate change (*Ecocriticism* 164-65). Both Ghosh and Clark argue that the realist tendencies of some types of novel create a form of ‘concealment’ (Ghosh 12), favouring the ‘intelligible and coherent world at the personal scale, centred on individual agency’ (Clark, *Ecocriticism* 165). Although novels written in this way are able to depict the experience of the human, they often fail to capture greater global changes. Clark extends this issue of the ‘personal scale’ to the very way in which we read and criticise literature. ‘[The] professionally familiar circle of cultural representations, ideas, ideals and

prejudices' found in literary criticism needs to be opened up to a global, long-term scale that explores 'physical cause and effect, or the environmental costs of an infrastructure' and incorporates 'questions that involve non-human agency' ('Scale' 164). Clark suggests reading through three scales – the personal, the national, and the global – as a way of 'creatively deranging the text through embedding it in multiple and even contradictory frames at the same time' (163).

These criticisms largely rest on a perceived resistance between the novel genre and an expansive view beyond the human. Stef Craps and Rick Crownshaw suggest that the exclusion of climate change fiction from what some people consider to be "'serious" modern literature' (1) gave fuel to this critique. Texts that engage more explicitly with the troubles of time and nonhuman phenomena have not been properly considered in the critical discussions outlined above. The following sections of this paper explore two novels that engage with these themes: *The Overstory*, which implements an arboreal timeframe through trees, and *The Swan Book*, which looks at time from the perspective of swans and Aboriginal cosmologies. These texts offer examples of climate fiction that engage with climate change more as a mode of reading than as a series of events to be detailed. By exploring the temporal structures adopted in each text, this paper will offer insight into how these modes of reading and, indeed, 'species thinking' (Chakrabarty, 'Four Theses' 213) are generated, and how contemporary literature can be utilised as a site of environmental knowledge 'thickening' (Hulme 336).

Exploring Tree Time in *The Overstory*

This section offers a brief reading of Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) to provide an example of multi-scalar time in the contemporary novel. Powers adopts a structure that rests on interconnected narratives which give rise to temporal scaling. However, a more subtle form of connection, the literary technique of the list, takes this temporal scaling one step further. By utilising lists, *The Overstory* encourages a mode of reading that is able to scale out to the global and into the personal through the intermediary timeframe offered by the trees of the book. In doing so,

future events are integrated into a timescale that affords them a greater sense of urgency, encouraging readers to recognise a strengthened connection between present and future climates.

In terms of structure, Powers produces an alternative timeframe by adopting a chronology that is concurrently vast and intimate. From the moment Jørgen Hoel plants the first of his chestnut trees, the text's sense of time shifts to align with both human and arboreal growth: 'In four more years, the Hoels have three children and the hint of a chestnut grove' (7). However, once the children and the tree have reached a certain level of maturity, the tree's sense of time slows in relation to the children. John Hoel reaches adulthood, starts a family, and industrialises the farm, but for 'the last remaining chestnut, all this happens in a couple of new fissures, an inch of added rings' (9). Human time and tree time run first in parallel, but then are opposed to one another. This is seen most clearly when the Hoels take on the project of photographing the great tree on a monthly basis, contrasting the continuity within the printed photos with the changing emotional contexts in which they were taken. In fact, '[t]he photos hide everything', for the human timescale is always 'to Frank Jr.'s back, each time he opens the lens' (16). The events suppressed behind each frame begin to overflow their confines: 'The hushed-up incest, the lingering alcoholism, a daughter's elopement with the high school English teacher. The cancers (breast, colon, lung), the heart disease, [...] the car death of a cousin's child on prom night' (16). The anaphoric 'the' sentence formulation grants specificity to each event in Frank Jr.'s life, even when details are rendered abstract on the arboreal timeline. Thus, in *The Overstory*, as Umberto Eco suggests in *The Infinity of Lists*, '[t]he list becomes a way of reshuffling the world' (105). Powers' list here reshuffles the world within a new temporal order and brings events into alignment with increased rapidity. The use of brackets also creates an embedded list, mirroring the tree-rings which become a temporal reference point for the book as a whole. The events which the family experienced are not effaced, but the centrality of the human experience in the timeline is reconsidered. Read in relation to Clark's 'derangement of scale' ('Scale' 158), Powers' punctuation opens the text up to readings at different scales which coexist and interact. Clark suggests that the third global scale, while highlighting the 'hidden costs of

lower scale thinking', also has a 'tendency to register a person primarily as a physical thing' (163). In doing so, the global scale can be 'almost too brutally removed from the daily interpersonal ethics, hopes and struggles that it ironizes' (163). However, the contents of Powers' list can be seen to retain a sense of the 'hopes and struggles' of life whilst operating at a larger scale. Thus, Powers' use of tree time invites, rather than resists, a multi-scalar reading. By situating human perception in a space that is able to represent simultaneously the personal and the arboreal, *The Overstory* re-contextualises the 'personal scale' (Clark, 'Scale' 157) of the novel within a broader globalised setting.

Early in the text it is detailed that a whole generation's lifetime exists in the space of time it takes for the tree to grow into 'early middle age' (16), and it is this logic that will shape the reader's experience for the rest of the novel. The reader, like Adam, is guided to think in tree time; he says, 'Seventy plus seventy is nothing. A black willow plus a wild cherry.' (471). Powers' adoption of a new timescale creates a perceptual mode through which the reader is encouraged to think with ecologically informed meaning – meanwhile, keeping the details of the human experience mostly intact. In an online interview, Powers extends this logic to the very way in which 'we might just be able to save ourselves' from continued climate change, arguing that we can only achieve this 'by coming home to the world's influence and living in its seasons, not our own' (Hamner). Thinking in an arboreal timeframe has practical power; it encourages the reader to assign greater weight to future events, as they are no longer perceived as an abstract possibility. Instead, a heightened tangibility is integrated into an understanding of future climate change. This conceptual shift is needed especially from much of the Global North, whose experiences of climate change are currently less extreme; yet geographically and historically these populations account for the majority of CO2 emissions (Friedlingstein et al.). *The Overstory* encourages the reader to imagine what might be gained by thinking through the temporality of a different species and to refuse the flawed short-sightedness of anthropocentric thinking.

Swans and Ecocentric Temporalities in *The Swan Book*

Where Powers allows for a scaling in and out in the reading of his text, Alexis Wright in *The Swan Book* (2013) presents the complications that can occur when alternative modes of temporal sense-making interact. The intergenerational memory stored in the ancient tree of the novel, along with the cyclical and regenerative time signalled by the motifs of swans, creates an interactive ‘multispecies’ (Rose 136) temporality that connects the human protagonist, Oblivia Ethelyne, with nature. These ecologically-informed temporalities are impinged upon by the anthropocentric forces of the novel. Wright uses competing temporal systems to disrupt the power of anthropocentric epistemologies and ultimately to create a moment of ‘arrest’ (Johns-Putra, ‘Climate and History’ 259) that allows both the reader and Oblivia to break free from the short-sightedness embodied in such thinking. This enacts ‘species thinking’ (Chakrabarty, ‘Four Theses’, 213) as the reader is guided to retrospectively assess the narrative through an ecological lens of regeneration.

The Swan Book follows Oblivia’s story. First, Oblivia is found mute and in a tree by the climate refugee, Bella Donna. Then she is taken from her home, the swamp, by the president of Australia, Warren Finch. Finally, she makes her return home, guided by swans. The text was written in the context of political interventions in 2007, which saw the introduction of the Australian Army into numerous Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory (Johns-Putra, ‘The Rest is Silence’), and it is set in a future imagining of a world engulfed in climate change. In Wright’s own words, Oblivia represents ‘the lives of Aboriginal people living at the front line of oppression and dispossession’ (Wright, ‘Inward Migration’). Wright adopts a climatologically destructive world as a backdrop, in which ‘climate change wars’ (20) have already ravaged most nations and left ‘countless stateless millions of sea gypsies looking for somewhere to live’ (20). Oblivia is forced to navigate these terrains of uncertainty when Warren Finch, a ‘self-proclaimed Indigenous hero’ (254), takes her as his promised wife and destroys her home.

Warren and Oblivia’s unhappy union allows their respective modes of temporal sense-making to coexist in the structure of the novel. Adeline

Johns-Putra recognises the continuous tension between the ecocentric (Oblivia) and the anthropocentric (Warren and other characters) that pervades much of the text. However, while this tension is evident, the distinction may be incongruent with many Aboriginal conceptions of human–nature relationships, which regard humans and nature as more interconnected than Johns-Putra’s framing allows for. Her reading can be nuanced by Deborah Bird Rose’s notion of ‘multispecies time’ (136) to draw these interactions out further. For instance, Johns-Putra identifies Oblivia’s muteness with an ‘alternative, ecocentric reality’, whereas the articulated voices of other characters in the text represent ‘what is conventionally accepted as “reality” in anthropocentric and Eurocentric terms’ (‘The Rest is Silence’ 35). Johns-Putra also points out that her muteness is created by a ‘rupture in time’ (34) caused by Oblivia’s rape, forcing her to hide in a sacred eucalyptus tree and subsequently be connected to ‘primordial memory’ (*The Swan Book* 6). This conception of time where the past, present, and future mutually coexist is a central tenet to many of the different epistemologies of Aboriginal populations (Nicholls). Thus, the tree grants Oblivia a sacred connection to a time that exists beyond the present, and which has been forcibly eroded in the rest of her community. From this perspective, Johns-Putra argues, Oblivia’s muteness embodies an ecocentric temporality, as well as ‘reality’ (‘The Rest is Silence’ 35). However, *The Swan Book*’s interaction with time goes beyond binary distinctions. Deborah Bird Rose explains that in Aboriginal cosmologies ‘the web of life can be understood as the complex interactions of sequence and synchrony, as these patterns play out across the lives of individuals, species, country, climate, and years’ (129). These come together to form ‘embodied knots of multispecies time’ (136) that reveal the transtemporal interactions between organisms that constitute an individual in the present. Oblivia’s connection to ecocentric notions of time represents a synchrony between species, rather than a rejection of the human. This queries ecocentric-anthropocentric dualism and instead speaks to an entwined system of ‘connectivity and responsibility’ (138) in which actions and temporalities are influential and dependent.

These ‘knots’ (136) are made visible in Oblivia’s relationship with the tree from which she emerges. Some people from the swamp say ‘that she

was really the tree itself; she had become the tree's knowledge; or, possibly she was related to the tree through Law, and the tree took her away from her people' (83). Originally, the tree was seen as the physical embodiment of the 'reciprocal bond of responsibility' between the swamp people and their ancestors, a mutuality which 'held all times together' (69). However, once the Army destroys the tree, Oblivia becomes the final physical connection to the site at which 'the stories of the swamp were [previously] stored' (69).

Despite the tree's absence, Oblivia continues to be connected to the ancient stories: 'the Law that stretched back to the beginning of time' (97). Her transtemporality is also guided by the swans with which her movements are deeply intertwined. The birds represent the natural rhythms of ecocentric time. Moreover, they are imbued with a culturally constructed history of 'swan artistry': references to swan-related poetry, opera, and literature that create what Ben Holgate calls a 'global swan mythology', which is utilised to 'attract a transnational audience' (640). However, when interpreted as a reference to time, this swan mythology centralises a history of swan-oriented storytelling, emphasising the swan's ability to carry 'away the past, present and future on its webbed feet' (*The Swan Book* 24). That said, this centralising process appears incomplete. The stories about the swans, no matter how numerous, can never be fully articulated by the humans in the novel, for 'nobody in the North remembered the stories in the oldest Law scriptures of these big wetland birds' (58).

Climate change has displaced the swans, and regimes of oppression have prevented the passing down of their Law to the swamp people. Recognition that 'Swans had Law too' (58) articulates an absence in the human understanding of the swans, whilst affirming the birds' continued agency in retaining their laws. In one of her essays, Wright explains that Aboriginal people 'say that the land is a living system of harmonious laws for the safekeeping of country and understand that these laws need to stay strong, because once they are broken so, too, is the harmony' ('Inward Migration'). She writes, moreover: 'We are taught resilience through the stories of regeneration that have ensured the survival of our culture—a culture that has always remained central in our sovereignty of mind. This sense of sovereignty and self-governance is embedded in our spirit and

drives our awareness and insistence that all times are important, and no time is resolved.’ Thus, this moment of dislocation between the swans’ laws and the swamp people’s remembrance of them signals a significant threat and disruption to the swamp people’s own resilience and sovereignty. Regenerative connections are explicitly oppressed by the Army whose destruction of the sacred tree, pollution of the swamp people’s land, and silencing of the people’s cultural stories and laws amalgamates into sheer toxicity. This disrupts the harmony of the swamp people’s coexistence with the land and instead creates an atmosphere of fear: ‘They accused the swans of looking right into their souls and stealing traditional culture’ (61). However, the connection between Oblivia and the swans – ‘The swan could not take its eyes away from the little girl far down on the red earth’ (16) – suggests she will remain rooted in multispecies time and be able to return home in the final pages of the novel. She maintains closeness to ecocentric and sacred notions of time and return to country; and ‘the stories of regeneration’ (Wright, ‘Inward Migration’) which the swans come to signify are essential to protecting this bond to her heritage.

Manmade Time

The multispecies temporality expressed through Oblivia and the swans appears in stark contrast to the manmade time of Warren Finch. Warren, an Indigenous man, is figured as a site of ideological dispute as he becomes the vessel for colonial rhetoric, rendering him an ‘assimilated other’ (Johns-Putra, ‘The Rest is Silence’ 36). This is expressed through the development of a hierarchical anthropocentrism. Once a boy dancing with the brologas birds, an adult Warren becomes ‘far more excited about how the world danced for him from way up high [...]. The Warren Finch dance.’ (109). The shift from communal dancing to individualist dancing is mirrored in his conceptualisation of time. In contrast to Oblivia’s connection to intergenerational and non-human temporalities, Warren’s sense of time is firmly embedded in the manmade. His watch appears repeatedly as a reference point in much of his action, particularly when he is forcing the swamp people to search for his future wife. He attempts to manipulate time through his technology by ‘checking his watch to quicken the thinking

in the room' (129). His obsession with immediacy and the speed that the watch signifies overpowers any other conception of moving through time; even when he tells himself to 'Go slow Warren' (142), he is unable to stop himself from 'simultaneously checking the time on his watch' (142-3). Warren's timekeeping highlights his especial connection to the present. As a young boy, he was unable to 'understand that his dreams belonged to the future' (99), which nearly cost him his life as he pursued a swan he recognised from his sleep and almost drowns. As he ages, however, this obsession with the present becomes a far more insidious force. While the Army destroys the sacred tree for fear of its intergenerational connections, Warren decimates the swamp people's entire land in an act of retaliation against his own past. He extracts Oblivia from the swamp, choosing her as 'the last real link to a world he had severed' and 'the attachment he had planned to keep' (169). Warren decides, however, that there is 'no time' (207) for places like the swamp, and destroys the land in a way that mirrors the tree's explosive end.

Disrupting ecocentric time

The destruction of the tree and the swamp enacts a temporal erasure, which is a recurring theme throughout *The Swan Book*. Intergenerational memory and traditions of the swamp people are repeatedly under attack as the novel unfurls. The paradoxical nature of Oblivia's name – at once an identifier of herself as a person (Olivia) and a signifier of effacement (oblivate) – speaks also to the instability surrounding recognition and remembering events. Such instability can be seen when Oblivia is removed from her home by Warren, which disrupts Oblivia's unity with, and memory of, ecocentric time: 'Already she felt the swans becoming disconnected from her' (143). Indeed, the meanings of Warren's forename – a piece of enclosed land for breeding rabbits; or a dense and confusing connection of streets – mark him as a figure that attempts to impose anthropocentric control over nature and is capable of making Oblivia literally and figuratively lost. This is seen in the disruption that accumulates as Oblivia is surrounded by the manmade environment of the city. Here, technology becomes invasive. Warren's mobile phone, for example, 'rang

like an alarm bell interrupting her thoughts, to dominate the past, to insist the future be heard' (206).

It is the television, however, that becomes the most explicit site of temporal splitting. Oblivia comes to recognise herself on the screen when watching a televised alternative version of herself and Warren. At first, she is unable to 'understand how she kept seeing glimpses of herself' (227) and reaches the conclusion that 'Warren Finch was stealing parts of her life for his own purposes' (229). This version of Oblivia is 'the wife he wanted her to learn to be', something which 'was forcing the girl to go mad' (229) to begin with; but eventually, this wife becomes an ideal that Oblivia craves euphorically – a disruptive force. While walking with the owls and swans on 'a pilgrimage' (236), Oblivia 'would again feel an excitable urge exploding in her stomach, to rush back to the apartment in double-quick time before dawn, for she was always hoping to become the television wife, to see herself greatly loved' (237). The 'double-quick' pace places emphasis on the present and on immediacy, aligning her with Warren's human obsessions. This desire to view herself as the 'television wife' signifies an embodied anthropocentrism: Oblivia turns her attention to the projected vision of herself rather than the world around her. In doing so, she abandons the natural seasonality and ecocentrism which had guided her intuitively to this point.

From the human to the global scale

The modern city which eats into Oblivia's memory almost eclipses her, until the sight of swans 'in numbers so vast they blocked the moonlight' suddenly causes her to awaken: 'When had her swans bred? Where had time gone? How many seasons of swans' breeding had passed by and she had not noticed? How long had she lived in the city? [...] Now she knew there had been many seasons of swan-egg cradling and cygnets reared which signalled above all else, that she had spent more time in the city than she had ever expected.' (243). This sudden reintegration into the cyclical seasons of swan breeding allows her to break free from the continual 'here and now' (242) that the city embodies. When read in light of Clark's scalar logic and Chakrabarty's dual chronologies, this moment can be considered

a zooming out to a global/‘species’ timeframe (Chakrabarty, ‘Four Theses’ 213). Johns-Putra, building on the work of Clark, Chakrabarty, and others, outlines the importance of a moment of ‘arrest’ that prompts the reader into ‘an awareness of the myriad connections that constitute species history’ (Johns-Putra, ‘Climate and History’ 259). This moment of arrest marks a ‘critical interruption’ whereby: ‘the reader is called upon to see how certain events, figures, symbols, or even objects come together in a way that is both relevant to [the reader] now and revelatory of something outside [the present moment]’ (Johns-Putra 260). Oblivia’s awakening can be read as an example of one such moment: both Oblivia and the reader are drawn into a mutual arrest where they suddenly re-acknowledge the ecological temporality that exists within the narrative. The city is the stage for anthropocentric realism, which Oblivia and the reader can only be ‘shocked [...] out of’ (Johns-Putra 258) by this sudden epistemological interruption.

Thus, unlike *The Overstory*, which integrates an arboreal temporality into its structure, *The Swan Book* explicitly treats the difficulties that arise when characters and readers attempt to think through multiple temporalities and at multiple scales: notably, the frequent messiness and tension that occur when different timeframes and scales interact, as identified by Clark and Chakrabarty. Wright in *The Swan Book* offers a creative way of thinking through these complications. In terms of knowledge ‘thickening’ (Hulme, 336), this work overtly examines moments of incompatibility between coexisting temporalities and what is lost when one temporality is subsumed into the other. Moreover, the reader’s assumption that the narrative is complete and generally guided by Oblivia is brought into question: within the city, the reader accepts Oblivia’s understanding of the swans as whole, before the moment it is suddenly revealed that Oblivia’s knowledge of them is partial and detached. Although swans are present in much of the city narrative, their real actions are inaccurately depicted until the ‘freak of nature’ (243) occurs. It is only after this moment of shock that both the reader and Oblivia become aware of the ecocentric reality that has been existing silently, and continually, throughout the novel, removed from its human participants. The swans continue to breed and regenerate, unlike Oblivia and the other anthropocentric characters that remain entrapped in the present moment. This scene points to the notion of time being cyclical,

whereby actions are interlinked and in reciprocal relation, and it reiterates the importance of this awareness of time for building Oblivia's own experience of self. By regaining synchrony with the swans and by 'read[ing] the country now as they do' (293), Oblivia can move away from the city and return home to her traditional land.

Conclusion

Both *The Overstory* and *The Swan Book* offer ways of reading the world that impart some insight on how one might approach the 'untidy times' (*The Swan Book* 97) of climate change. The importance of the arboreal in Powers' structure and timeframe affords a more robust reading of the text; it can be approached from multiple scales – human to global – and still possess clarity and coherence. This is ultimately achieved by decentering the human and instead recognising the other temporal realities which coexist on our planet. In this expanded temporal horizon, climate change and other environmental realities looming decades in the future seem far more tangible than when anthropocentrically imagined. In *The Swan Book*, the difference between immediacy and intertemporality is explored more overtly. Oblivia and the swamp people have their intergenerational and ecocentric modes of perception threatened by the markers of the present: Warren Finch and the Army. However, by the end of the novel, Oblivia has returned to the swamp and continues to exist on her traditional land with the swans. Thus, *The Swan Book* exposes the limits of the anthropocentric epistemologies that seek to disrupt Aboriginal sovereignty within and outside of the text. It does so by displaying the resilience of 'multispecies time' (Rose 136) as a means of regeneration in a climatologically altered world.

Both novels offer a conceptualisation of time that extends beyond anthropocentrism, opening the reader up to an understanding of 'species history' (Chakrabarty 220) that emphasises our place within nature. By engaging with temporal structures in such a way, the novels foster a mode of reading which works against the forces that produce climate change. These imaginative explorations of ecological thinking help to cultivate within the reader a 'self-knowledge' (Hulme 332) that encourages critical

reflection on the boundaries of human experience and on that which exists beyond. In our era of devastating climate change, ecological thinking needs to be harnessed for global action. The two novels productively explore how this transformation in perception might be brought about, and give merit to the potentially influential role of literature and the arts in conversations on climate change.

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