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Coming Back Down to Earth: The Novel and the Human Condition in the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT

Has the novel got what it takes to capture the human condition in the Anthropocene? Reading Martin MacInnes' *In Ascension* (2023) as an exemplary Anthropocene novel, I argue that the fixation of many prominent critics on the subject of climate change alone has hampered a more comprehensive appraisal of Anthropocene fiction. Drawing on work by Stacy Alaimo, Hannah Arendt and David Chandler, and deploying Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality as a strategy for problematising the alleged Anthropocene split of humanist man into *homo* and *anthropos*, I link MacInnes' formal innovation to his adaptation of long-established existential tropes and world-making paradigms, such as "the body", "the human condition" and "hope". The aim is to examine the impact the Anthropocene is having on our understanding and experience of the human, and to defend the novel form's ongoing preoccupation with individual psychobiography as enabling our comprehension of the human within a new multi-scalar configuration of more-than-human meaning-making borrowed from earth system science.

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Has the novel got what it takes to capture the human condition in the Anthropocene? How can it continue to fulfil—and potentially recalibrate and renew—its commitment to an accurate representation of human life in the contemporary when the latter now appears increasingly at once amplified and compressed within a geological configuration of more-than-human meaning-making borrowed from earth system science?¹ According to Pieter Vermeulen, "one of the most frequently voiced ideas about literature and the Anthropocene is that the ebbing rhythms and moderate scales of realistic fiction are fatally out of sync with the new realities of the Anthropocene".² Vermeulen cites Amitav Ghosh who posits that "serious fiction"³ cannot ever hope to deploy realism's

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¹For an overview of the manifold ways in which the concept of the Anthropocene has been defined, defended, critiqued, and rejected specifically in a Humanities context, please refer to Horn and Bergthaller's *The Anthropocene* (2020), Vermeulen's *Literature and the Anthropocene* (2020) and Chakrabarty's *The Climate of History* (2021), each of which provides an excellent introduction. Notably, as Timothy Clark explains, "unlike a precise, strictly geological term, [the Anthropocene's] very ambiguity and contentiousness is part of its catalytic intellectual work" (*Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 28).

²Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene*, 61.

³Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 82.

suspension of disbelief to accommodate what in *Hyperobjects* (2013) Timothy Morton describes as the new era's unprecedented scale "in time and space relative to humans". The Anthropocene eludes both our cognitive and representational grasp as its "primordial reality [remains] withdrawn from humans".⁴ According to Ghosh, "within the mansion of serious fiction, no one will speak of how the continents were created; nor will they refer to the passage of thousands of years".⁵ At the same time, like any other hyperobject according to Morton, the Anthropocene "seem[s] to force something on us, something that affects some core ideas of what it means to exist, what Earth is",⁶ and thus it continues to exude a literary allure that appears at once urgent and intractable.

In terms reminiscent of Morton's, Timothy Clark likens the Anthropocene to "a threshold at which art and literature touch limits to the human psyche and imagination",⁷ which leads him to conclude that the Anthropocene might ultimately prove "antipathetic to narrative as a basic mode of sense-making".⁸ Clark's view resonates with that of German historian of science Zoltán Boldizsár Simon who asks that we "explore the extent to which the Anthropocene renders storytelling impossible". "Probing the boundaries of storytelling would", in Simon's view, "be the most instrumental precisely in finding out what kinds of Anthropocene narratives are still possible to tell".⁹ Simon portrays the Anthropocene as "a suddenly erupting game-changer event",¹⁰ quintessentially novel and without parallel, which explodes the neat teleology of human historiography by "threaten[ing] to put an end to the human subject of entangled stories" altogether.¹¹ Although Simon's analysis remains confined to scientific and socio-historical narratives, his conclusion makes a useful caveat for literary practice as well. As far as Simon is concerned, "the politics of storytelling" is bound to result in a "domestication of novelty"¹²; put differently, it is very tempting, yet ultimately counter-productive, to treat the Anthropocene representationally the same as any other socio-historical event, phenomenon, or object of study. Simon concludes that our best option might be to respect the Anthropocene's imperviousness to neat narrative encapsulation lest we delude ourselves into believing that we can imagine the unimaginable, think the unthinkable, and as a result hope to sustain the unsustainable.

In the following I shall read Martin MacInnes' Booker Prize-longlisted *In Ascension* (2023)¹³ as an Anthropocene novel whose primary focus is, untypically, neither climate change nor an impending apocalypse culminating in human extinction, even though the world does end, or—to be somewhat more precise—looks like it might possibly be ending, in the novel's final coda. I say "untypically" because ever since the publication of Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions* (2015) there has been a tendency to conflate the Anthropocene novel with what is more aptly termed "climate fiction" or *cli-fi*, that is, "novels about anthropogenic global warming".¹⁴ Eclipsing all other issues

⁴Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1 and 15.

⁵Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 82.

⁶Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 15.

⁷Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 176.

⁸Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism*, 83.

⁹Simon, "The Limits of Anthropocene Narratives," 188.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 193.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 192.

¹²*Ibid.*, 194.

¹³All subsequent page references to this title are included in the text.

¹⁴Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 6.

that might conceivably be of concern to the contemporary novel, “the central question of *Anthropocene Fictions* is how climate change and all its things have changed the capacities of recent literature”.¹⁵ Thus neatly shrink-wrapped in conceptual terms, the most pressing imperative becomes what the Anthropocene novel *must do* to fulfil its ethical obligations as an activist awareness-raising tool in the battle against climate change. Given that, according to Clark in *The Value of Ecocriticism*, “the novel as a genre tends overwhelmingly to focus on stories of individual growth or dramas of consciousness, crises of identity or of relationship, etc.”, it is bound to be found lacking in this respect. Pilloried for engaging, seemingly incorrigibly, in self-involved navel-gazing, the novel appears unfit for purpose as it cannot effectively address “more direct economic and ideological issues, and demands for direct collective action”.¹⁶

In this article I shall firmly reject such an instrumentalist approach. I also intend to contest Trexler’s notion that in the Anthropocene the literary novel’s preoccupation with the intimately human is little more than an idle distraction, indicative of a very poor misconstrual of “how the world works ... how fiction works”.¹⁷ According to Trexler, in order to earn its keep, the novel must understand not only that “climate change is upon us” but, more importantly, that right now *the climate crisis is all there is* and therefore, all-consumingly, “our emissions *are us*”.¹⁸ Similar to Ghosh, Trexler and Clark, too, dismiss the novel in its ecologically unreconstructed form—that is, any contemporary novel averse to making climate change its core *raison d’être*. Such novels are seen as marred by “anthropocentric delusion” and incapacitated by “still-dominant conventions of plotting, characterization and setting” from properly engaging in environmental thinking and action.¹⁹ As Simon’s analysis across the disciplines attests, staunch activist commitment is widely seen as the most pressing imperative for any type of Anthropocene storytelling: “Whereas scientific Anthropocene narratives demand pre-emptive action in facing an existential risk, the narratives of the humanities and social sciences typically demand social justice and entail proactive social engagement”.²⁰

By contrast, climate change is not a core theme in *In Ascension* even though the novel does open rather ominously (“I was born in the lowest part of the country, 22 feet beneath the sea” [3]) and the beginning of the penultimate section likewise draws our attention to the human impacts of climate change in the most sobering terms: “Four decades into the century the country has 200 active coal plants. Both her sons have asthma ... Senility rises exponentially ... life is lived increasingly indoors. Sometimes, from her twenty-third-storey apartment, visibility barely reaches 15 feet” (419). Part *bildungsroman*, part family saga, alternating between first-person sci-fi adventure and the more pedestrian third-person realism of “serious fiction”, we view most of the novel’s action through the individualised lens of prodigious scientist Dr Leigh-Ann Hasenbosch, a Dutch marine ecologist whose late (violently abusive) father worked for Rotterdam’s regional water board, tasked with “understanding, predicting, negotiating and dispersing the water that would otherwise flood the wider Rotterdam region, an area containing

¹⁵Ibid., 13.

¹⁶Clark, *Value of Ecocriticism*, 103.

¹⁷Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 13.

¹⁸Ibid., 5.

¹⁹Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 191.

²⁰Simon, “Limits of Anthropocene Narratives,” 187.

more than 2 million people” (12–13). The peculiar appeal of *In Ascension* resides in the way MacInnes manages to reconcile his fascination with the ecomodernist hubris of increasingly AI-led science, ranging from flood management to space exploration, with a sustained examination of Leigh’s psychological scarring, a legacy of childhood trauma, which has stunted her emotional growth while also (not insignificantly) fuelling her ascent to world-class scientist status. The novel negotiates vast spatiotemporal scales, transporting us from the Azores and the remote island of Ascension to the outermost regions of the Oort Cloud, which is the virtually infinite icy emptiness that envelopes our solar system. The novel’s vision zooms seamlessly from a focus on earthly life’s microbial beginnings at the bottom of thermal deep-sea vents to human space travel and the promise of imminent extraterrestrial encounter.

As I shall demonstrate in the following, *In Ascension* successfully mobilises the novel’s traditional repertoire of realist tropes to embark on an exploration of the hyperobject that is the Anthropocene, concentrating in particular on how the new planetary *zeitgeist*, or “structure of feeling”, impacts on our understanding and experience of the human. In other words, I am keen to defend the novel form’s ongoing preoccupation with individual psychobiography, as well as its enduring anthropocentrism, as vital to advancing our comprehension of the human within the Anthropocene’s new multi-scalar configuration of more-than-human meaning-making. Leigh serves as the novel’s hypersensitive conduit and central fulcrum. She incorporates our one and only portal to accessing and comprehending life at large as well as our human condition within it. There is doubtless a strong element of “disjunctiveness” at play in the novel, “a being-overwhelmed by contexts in which the human perceiver is deeply implicated but cannot hope to command or sometimes even to comprehend”,²¹ which is how Clark (inspired by Morton) describes the predicament of creative understanding in the Anthropocene. Yet first and foremost Leigh must be acknowledged as both an embodiment of the human condition in the Anthropocene and precisely the kind of protagonist one would expect to find in “serious fiction”, even though she is a twenty-first-century heroine with some pretty amazing characteristics and qualifications. An ambitious world-class scientist, intrepid deep-sea diver and endurance-trained astronaut, Leigh is an explorer and pioneer whose quest amounts to nothing less than getting to the bottom of the universe in order to discover the origin and meaning of life.

Over the following three sections, this article will draw on the work of Stacy Alaimo, Hannah Arendt, and David Chandler respectively to demonstrate how MacInnes’ experimentation with the limits of the realist novel is linked to his adaptation of long-established existential tropes and world-making paradigms, such as “the body”, “the human condition” and “hope”. Throughout my investigation, Alaimo’s concept of trans-corporeality is assigned a central strategic role insofar as it helps to illuminate MacInnes’ effort at repositioning the human in a time of epochal change and also sheds light on his handling of the alleged Anthropocene split of humanist man into *homo* and *anthropos*.

²¹Clark, *Ecocriticism*, 184.

Trans-Corporeality

From the outset, MacInnes endows Leigh with a preternatural perspicacity that identifies her from an early age as a paragon of the Anthropocene. It is through the lens of Leigh's embodied experience that MacInnes proceeds to engage with what Horn and Bergthaller see as the "three fundamental difficulties which an aesthetics of the Anthropocene must tackle: (1) latency, the withdrawal from perceptibility and representability; (2) entanglement, a new awareness of coexistence and immanence; and (3) scale, the clash of incompatible orders of magnitude".²² Newly equipped with a microscope, eleven-year-old Leigh's introspection quickly blooms into an intimately entangled and richly multi-scalar vision of life: "I got better at looking", Leigh notes, "expanding the world by diminishing it, peering down into the smallest crevices. Digging deeper and deeper into the micro-scale brought out unimagined receptacles of time and space" (31). Self-exploration becomes indistinguishable from world-exploration. Instead of reinscribing the securely enclosed self-composure of traditional subjectivity, Leigh's experiments blur the distinction between observer and object of study as her investigation leads her to confront "the composite cells of my own body" (31). At the same time, contemporary life manifests to her not simply as the most recent instantiation within a standard past-present-future continuum; rather, it appears constitutive of an inherently much more convoluted state of affairs sustained by perpetual temporal instability and disruption. According to one of Leigh's interlocutors, "it's a mistake to think of our origins, of all life's origins, as belonging only to the past. It's still there" (64). Put differently, evolutionary time is not linear at all; it does not pass. Rather, it is all-encompassing and immersive to an extent that must make it appear quasi-atemporal to our human perception. Following a similarly paradoxical logic, it should not come as too much of a surprise that it is only in the littlest things, under the microscope, that the outsize magnitude of life fully reveals itself.

While on a solitary doctoral research trip to the Azores, Leigh arrives at the realisation that life can never be lived fully upfront, that our experience of it must of necessity remain veiled, latent, and existentially oblique; otherwise, everyday life as we know it might cease to function altogether. "If we saw what was really there, we would never move", she reflects. "It was around us, between us, on the edge of us and inside us. It coated our bodies and we released waves of it when we breathed and spoke. It was in every skin cell and in the eyelashes that fluttered when we dreamed" (32).²³ This insight goes back to a childhood epiphany that occurs to her while swimming on her own in the Nieuwe Maas where "as if from nowhere I realised, suddenly, with appreciation, that absolutely everything around me was alive":

There was no gap separating my body from the living world. I was pressed against a teeming immensity, every cubic millimetre of water densely filled with living stuff. These organisms were so small I couldn't see them, but somehow I felt their presence, their fraternity, all around me. I didn't look through the water *towards* life, I looked directly *into* water-life,

²²Ibid., 102.

²³The same repressive mechanism designed to filter one's perception and experience of life applies on board the spaceship later on in the novel: "You realise you're hanging in this intermediate darkness, transported in a small vehicle surrounded by the closest thing possible to infinity. But it's dangerous, you can't sustain the thought, you have to function, so you close it down, you ignore the porthole and the wonder, you take water from the filter and strap yourself back in" (330–1).

a vast patchwork supporting my body, streaming into my nostrils, my ears, the small breaks and crevices in my skin, swirling through my hair and entering the same eyes that observed it ... I saw a completely different world, a place of significance and complexity, an almost infinite number of independent organisms among which I floated like a net, scooping up untold creatures with every minor shift and undulation of my body. (28)

Swimming in a remote mountain lake in the Azores, Leigh has another such “trans-corporeal” experience, and it is then that she resolves to spend the rest of her life “in close contact ... with the stuff of the world” (34). This will be her credo going forward, not just as a scientist but, more fundamentally, as a living thing at once human and creaturely. “Trans-corporeality” strikes me as a very fitting concept for encapsulating Leigh’s being in the world. Advanced by material feminist Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures* (2010), the term not only comprehends “the human [as] always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” but moreover expresses the notion that “the material world becomes the very substance of the self”.²⁴ In other words, there is no rift or dividing line between humans and their environment. Trans-corporeality implies “a recognition not just that everything is interconnected but that humans are the very stuff of the material, emergent world”.²⁵ Accordingly, the orientation of the human always derives first and foremost from its bodily nature. The human is entirely of this world; it is not separate from nature, not even just simply immersed in it. Rather, the human is wholly caught up in and transfused by life and world. Nature, no matter how we conceive of it, can never be exterior to us, let alone alien: we unfold from within nature to the same extent that nature unfolds from within us. One finds precisely the same deep-materialist thinking at work in the influential philosophy of eco-phenomenologist David Abram. In Abram’s view, “we can perceive things at all only because we ourselves are entirely a part of the sensible world that we perceive”; indeed, “we might as well say that we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself through us”.²⁶ The latter statement sounds like a particularly pertinent digest of Leigh’s outlook on both her life and science. Following one of her diving adventures, she similarly conflates the perspectives of self and world as she notes: “I looked into the water with eyes that were born there, several billion years before” (93).

Fond of wild-swimming on her own, Leigh recurrently finds herself exposed to life manifesting as trans-corporeality. Her immersions in water as a child and student are complemented by a third formative experience when she joins the diving team of an expedition ship investigating a newly discovered hydrothermal vent in the South Atlantic. The scientific aspects of the undertaking are funded by a big corporation keen to exploit the seabed for rare metals. However, no sooner does the ship’s radar suggest

²⁴Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2 and 3.

²⁵Ibid., 20. There is unfortunately no room here to explore at length the manifold synergies that exist between trans-corporeality and the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa’s increasingly influential concept of “resonance”, which underpins his theorising on how modern humanity can (re-)establish life-enhancing relationships with the world. The most significant difference between trans-corporeality and resonance is that the former comes naturally to the human and must indeed be seen as an inalienable fact of humanity’s being in the world. By contrast, albeit envisaged in physical terms as two entities stimulating each other to vibrate in their own unmistakable frequencies, resonance depends on the cultivation of a particular sensibility or inclination towards the world. Alaimo would most likely find Rosa’s suggestion incomprehensible that “the history of modernity is in no small part defined by the concern ... that we are slowly losing our sense of the corporeality of our existence” (*Resonance*, 38) because how could we ever lose what inalienably defines us?

²⁶Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 68.

that—unbelievably—this new vent must be “three times the depth of the Mariana Trench” (68) than the atmosphere on board turns markedly anxious and “weird” in a way that is strongly reminiscent of Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014). Importantly, what distinguishes MacInnes’ novel from VanderMeer’s Anthropocene classic is that on confrontation with an inexplicable phenomenon, which some might be inclined to describe in terms of Morton’s hyperobjects, *In Ascension* resists a representational shift from realism to science fiction (or whatever genre label appears most appropriate to VanderMeer’s innovative style). What happens in MacInnes’ novel remains incontestably of this world. The setting is not some otherworldly cordoned-off Area X, potentially contaminated from outer space and now mysteriously proliferating a hallucinatory plethora of infectious mutations; it is unmistakably our ocean where *earthly* life began and continues. As Leigh protests when she hears someone mention the idea of panspermia, life is “already rich and strange—we don’t need to say it arrived seeded on a meteor to make it more so” (72).

MacInnes portrays the Atlantic as a vast primordial territory of literally unfathomable depths, populated by rudimentary archaean lifeforms that, as Leigh explains, are “drawn to inhospitable regions—Antarctic ice-sheets, the salt plains of Chile and Eritrea” (50–1). It seems the existence of these proto-creaturely lifeforms could not conceivably be any more remote, forbidding, or unfamiliar to us. Yet, as Leigh reveals, “their most exotic site of all, arguably, is in our stomachs” (51). Rather than finding ourselves cut off from certain primaeval manifestations of life by mutual estrangement, exacerbated by the chasm of temporal incommensurability that divides deep time from human history, we are always already vitally constituted by an element of congenital affinity with them. The boundaries between the intimate and seemingly inimical are existentially blurred. Finding ourselves “colonised by strange creatures building biosedimentary structures on the seafloor” (51) should feel acutely alienating and indeed dehumanising, yet the paradoxical truth is that we would not be human without them. Whatever is constitutive of the world in whatever form of existence is also constitutive of the human, including what is “unknown”, or “appear[s] to be resisting us” (77). Articulated in Leigh’s own words, “the cell is basically an ocean capsule”, which means that “you could describe us as both people, and as mobile assemblages of ocean” (64).

In Ascension adopts trans-corporeality as both a core theme and a key representational strategy for tackling some of the main aesthetic challenges of the Anthropocene. By doing so, MacInnes’ novel plays havoc with humanist conceptions of the self that have traditionally underpinned the realist novel’s capacity to envision and execute both plot and character. As Alaimo observes, “understanding the substance of one’s self as interconnected with the wider environment marks a profound shift in subjectivity”.²⁷ Perceiving herself at one point as “a cloud of insects, pressed into roughly human form”, Leigh explains that “each of the insects has its single living purpose, its vitality . . . I am grateful to them, and *I am them*” (86, my italics). Leigh relishes her aquatic epiphanies not only because they catalyse a lifelong passion for science but also because they afford her “an escape, a flight from autobiography” (51), in particular her childhood trauma of growing up with a violent father. On the one hand, then, the human self in MacInnes’ novel positively welcomes the dispersal of its individuality into the world at large: Leigh is drawn to

²⁷ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 20.

the ocean because, as she sees it, it is home to “the body before it was cast” (64). On the other, there is considerable scalar slippage in the opposite direction as well as the world shrinks into a mere prop for the intimately personal, and science is revealed to be little more than an aid in Leigh’s individual quest for curative closure. “Maybe what I thought was an objective and impersonal interest in the origin and development of cellular life was in fact something smaller”, Leigh contemplates, “rather than investigating the origins of life, I was merely and regrettably pursuing my own individual history” (92). Anthropocene novelists have the representation of all life and world on their hands, but they can only tackle this challenge if they manage to combine it somehow with the comparatively straightforward task of imagining and managing individual character. Realism must inevitably struggle with trans-corporeality which not only radically decentres the self but fundamentally destabilises it as a tangible actuality. Symptomatically, while getting dressed after a swim, Leigh feels that “I was only now inhabiting a personality, that until I entered these pre-set shapes I was diaphanous, and this form did not necessarily match up with who, or what, I was” (29). On zooming in, the self appears as a multiplicity of constitutive beings, a loose assemblage rather than a self-contained whole. Seen in this light, according to Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller, the human is expressly “not a clearly delimited individual, but a ‘holobiont’: it constitutes a complete ecosystem hosting a multitude of other species ... on which it depends for its survival”.²⁸ On zooming out, by contrast, the self comes to represent precisely one such constitutive species within the world at large, albeit not necessarily one whose flourishing is indispensable for the survival of a larger ecosystem.

One particular debate that has preoccupied Anthropocene scholarship since its inception is the question of who or what exactly is the human that gives the Anthropocene its name. Picking up on the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty’s realisation that “the figure of the human ha[s] doubled ... over the course of my lifetime”,²⁹ John Parham elaborates on this splitting of the human into *homo* and *anthropos* by describing *homo* as “the rational individual of humanism, [who] acts purposefully, socially, with a sense of justice” and *anthropos* as “the human as *species*, [which] acts blindly, from self-interest and with often ruinous cumulative force”.³⁰ *Anthropos*—“this other human” as Chakrabarty calls it—is a newly emergent configuration that confounds modernity’s traditional handle on the human by introducing into the equation “an impersonal and unconscious geophysical force, the consequence of collective human activity”.³¹ But what repercussions might ensue from this new duality for the representation of the human in the realist novel? *In Ascension* never once wavers from telling the story of Leigh, be it directly or indirectly, and both as an individual and as a scientist, Leigh incorporates *homo*. Indeed, the novel cannot let go of her as such lest it lose its course and unravel. Horn and Bergthaller interpret the interplay between *homo* and *anthropos*, which manifests as “the combination of an immense power with a frightening loss of control”, as fundamental to understanding “the paradoxical quality of human agency in the Anthropocene”.³² As we shall see, by portraying his heroine as psychologically damaged yet full

²⁸Horn and Bergthaller, *The Anthropocene*, 124.

²⁹Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, 3.

³⁰Parham, *Cambridge Companion to Literature*, 2.

³¹Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, 3.

³²Horn and Bergthaller, *The Anthropocene*, 8.

of honourable intentions, as fiercely ambitious yet in her service to human progress as an astronaut also remarkably self-effacing, MacInnes utilises Leigh's trans-corporeal sensibility not only to negotiate the ongoing tension between *homo* and *anthropos*, but also to embed *homo* fully within her earthly environment while tethering wayward *anthropos*, too, inescapably to the planet.

In Ascension is interested in exploring the human condition in the Anthropocene. The novel attempts to envisage the full life-course of the human from its origin to its destination—from home to hope. According to MacInnes, humanity's journey from one to the other is profoundly influenced by our trans-corporeal composition. Following her dive in the Atlantic, Leigh suffers a bout of incapacitating nausea mixed with a strong desire to go back into the water. But is it in fact she herself, Leigh wonders, who feels compelled to return, or rather “these organisms inside us ... extremophile archaea in our lower gut, kin to the species more than 10 kilometres below us” (102)?

The Human Condition

In MacInnes' novel *anthropos* emerges as the key hyperobject of the Anthropocene. The corollary of *homo*'s diversification into something hyper-human that eludes representational capture while stickily engulfing us everywhere and manifesting increasingly as the most likely candidate to eventually swallow us up whole, *anthropos* is a man-made horror. *Anthropos* is shorthand for that Anthropocene agency which is not “a property of the human ... but rather an effect of the interplay between technologies, geophysical forces, and biological organisms, both human and non-human”.³³ Describing *anthropos* in terms of a force we have unleashed upon ourselves and that now “impinges on us from outside”, Bergthaller refers to it as “a debasement of our species rather than an apotheosis ... not an ‘I’ but a monstrous *it*”.³⁴ As already indicated, unlike other contemporary novels, *In Ascension* resists responding to the Anthropocene as “a rubric that has ... increasingly come to cluster concerns over the human impact on the planet”.³⁵ Instead, MacInnes' novel is far more interested in exploring the reverse, that is, how the Anthropocene, and the planetary ascent of *anthropos* in particular, impacts upon humanity. The ascension of *anthropos* coincides with what Simon describes in terms of an “epochal event”, marked in the novel by a major scientific breakthrough that promises to revolutionise space travel by enabling humanity to finally escape from our confinement within our native solar system: “NASA engineers had made a radical breakthrough in propulsion technology. There were rumours that spacecraft could achieve more than 10,000 times their previous velocity” (40). Drawing on Simon's definition, it seems apt to liken this discovery to “a hyper-historical event that brings about a ‘new reality’ [resulting in] the most momentous transformative changes that extend beyond the limits of human experience”.³⁶ Leigh, who is pursuing her doctoral research in the Azores when the news on the breakthrough first goes live, feels that “something unnameable had changed” (36) and “something new was taking place right now” (38). She remains as yet unaware, however, that this discovery will

³³Ibid., 151.

³⁴Bergthaller, “Humans,” 213.

³⁵Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene*, 8.

³⁶Simon, *The Epochal Event*, 114.

irrevocably impact on herself as a future employee of the Institute for Coordinated Research in Space (ICORS), with the story of her life and work henceforth increasingly resembling science fiction.

Under the aegis of *anthropos*, which has become a global juggernaut pursuing its own ill-omened corporate dynamic, the technological breakthrough promises to launch humanity into the universe and by doing so not only complete what Eileen Crist has called “the human enterprise”³⁷ but also somehow to liberate us from ourselves. If MacInnes’ novel does have a message, then it hinges on our understanding of the role the discovery plays within MacInnes’ invocation of the Great Filter theory, first advanced by American economist Robin Hanson in the late 1990s. This theory is the focus of a late-night telephone conversation between Leigh and her mentor Amy (178–81). If life is not only likely but common in the universe, then why do we seem entirely alone? Either, one of the crucial developmental stages that have enabled life to evolve on Earth is so extremely unlikely that we are indeed “the only ones”, or an evolutionary development still ahead of us is proving even more extremely unlikely than abiogenesis itself. Put differently, humanity has reached a stage where we are ready to disseminate into space (which presents itself as the next frontier in our evolution), but something is holding us back, presumably the same something that has also stopped other intelligent life in the universe from going further, consigning them, too, to invisibility and oblivion. This “great filter” need not be of a biological nature; it could refer to a technological feat that we seem unable to master, and as a result of that failure our civilisation is bound either to stagnate and wither, or to self-combust.³⁸ As Leigh concludes, “rather than being the single example of post-filter life, Earth could be one of an infinite number of pre-filter planets ... [and] the filter is embedded in an innovation that enables *distant* exploration” (180). Accordingly, the Anthropocene vision of the human in *In Ascension* is of a species that will exploit all the resources at its disposal, *hoping* that in the end there is always somewhere else to go. Modernity has repeatedly witnessed human growth escalate and then temporarily restore sustainability by disseminating its excess populations. In the Anthropocene, humanity is about to hit finitude as the planet is reaching its limits and the vast inhospitable void of the universe blocks our future advancement. In Amy’s words, “we’ve reached space, but we haven’t explored it. We’re still locked inside our solar system” (180). This explains the worldwide excitement at the news of the breakthrough discovery, which momentarily restores humanity’s eco-modernist faith in our ability to beat ourselves at our own game.

MacInnes shrewdly exposes technophilic ecomodernism’s hubris by presenting “the *revelations* that led to the propulsion breakthrough” (198, my italics) not in realist-scientific terms as “the result of quietly accumulating research” (140) but as a magical sci-fi dream conjured under the mesmerising influence of an anomalous asteroid that is believed to share a message from another world before disappearing again without trace. MacInnes names this asteroid “Datura” after a member of the notoriously toxic

³⁷Crist, “On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature,” 137.

³⁸As Avi Loeb grimly observes in *Extraterrestrial*, civilizations have a tendency to “wink in and out of existence” (131). The Great Filter theory has such enormous pertinence because “the moment when a civilization reaches our stage of technological advancement—the window where it can signal its existence to the rest of the universe and begin to send craft to other stars—is also the moment when its technological maturity becomes sufficient for its own destruction, whether through climate change or nuclear, biological, or chemical wars” (124).

nightshade family. Among some indigenous peoples of the Americas, *Datura* has traditionally been used in shamanistic rituals as a (potentially lethal) psychoactive substance administered to induce spiritual out-of-body experiences. MacInnes' reference to *Datura* leaves his readership in little doubt about the quintessentially oneiric and make-believe quality of the space mission that follows, thus enabling the insertion of this episode without jeopardising the novel's overall realist verisimilitude. We learn that apparently three separate engineering teams arrived at the same discovery more or less simultaneously after "suffer[ing] mild illness [and] spen[ding] around a week in high fever, wrestling vivid dreams" (141). Eventually it is disclosed to us in no uncertain terms that "there was now general agreement that the thrust design was an alien technology transmitted through *Datura*" (218). MacInnes appears to be going out of his way to ensure his sci-fi venture does not detract in any way from the realist integrity of his novel. However, as a quick glance at current cutting-edge research in astronomy and astrophysics suggests, such overly cautious safeguarding could in fact prove acutely counterproductive insofar as it seriously diminishes our capacity to embrace the Anthropocene's full range of newly emergent realities. Certainly it is worth noting that at the same time as he expresses grave concern that "narratives that violate the laws of physics and encourage a fascination with 'improbables' get in the way of not only science but our own progress",³⁹ renowned Harvard astronomer Avi Loeb makes a compelling case for acknowledging the reality of encountering interstellar communication devices dispatched from other worlds as they travel through our solar system. Unlike the realist novelist, then, Loeb the scientist would not categorically rule out and dismiss the possibility of extraterrestrial communication as an embarrassing flight of fancy. In *Extraterrestrial*, where Loeb unpacks in minute detail the transitory appearance in October 2017 of an asteroid-like interstellar object named Oumuamua (after the Hawaiian word for "scout"), he argues passionately for incorporating such objects (ultimately not so very dissimilar from *Datura*) solidly within the inquisitive scope of science's strictly realist worldview.

With regard to its space travel elements, MacInnes' novel reads like it might have been inspired directly by Hannah Arendt's preface to *The Human Condition* (1958). Arendt famously invokes the 1957 launch of Sputnik, Earth's first artificial satellite and at the time the unrivalled flagship of the Soviet space programme, as "*the* event, second in importance to no other".⁴⁰ The international response to the Sputnik launch mirrors the worldwide thrill that ripples through *In Ascension* when the news of the breakthrough discovery is announced. Citing a newspaper headline of the time, Arendt draws attention to "the immediate reaction ... [which] was relief about the first 'step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth'", which she links to an earlier promise made by Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857–1935), the founding father of Russian rocket science, who famously declared that "Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever".⁴¹ The Sputnik launch marks a truly epochal event in the great post-World War II acceleration in technological progress, which is now also widely accepted as the starting point of the Anthropocene. Importantly, Arendt pinpoints the launch and its reception also as the

³⁹Loeb, *Extraterrestrial*, 47.

⁴⁰Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1 (my italics).

⁴¹Ibid.

moment when the concept of the human undergoes diversification, as earthbound *homo* (“men in so far as they live and move and act in this world”) becomes overshadowed and is quite literally left behind by the increasingly self-perpetuating principle of space-conquering *anthropos* (“man in the singular”).⁴² Reminding us of “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world”, Arendt marvels in horror at the abstraction of *anthropos* as “this future man ... possessed by a rebellion against human existence ... which he wishes to exchange ... for something he has made himself”.⁴³ “The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition”, Arendt asserts, “and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort”.⁴⁴ Like Arendt, *In Ascension* too reasserts our planet as *homo*’s only home and viable future, irrespective of how persuasive and alluring “the human artifice of the world”⁴⁵ erected and mobilised by *anthropos* becomes. Seen through an Arendtian lens, all the novel’s excursion into space ultimately unveils is the tragedy of “earth-bound creatures” fancying themselves as “dwellers of the universe”.⁴⁶

The *Proscenium* space mission of *In Ascension* is portrayed as a make-believe venture of pure escapism from earthly reality, its very name denoting a staged set-up, framing human action as that of one poor, self-deluded player who—mesmerised by *Datura*—deems himself in correspondence with an unknown extraterrestrial power. Whereas Leigh explains that “we were responding to ... a directive, an instruction, and in accepting the request we were completing the first ever act of two-way extraterrestrial communication” (232–3), the only message ever actually received by humanity from outer space is “a nine-digit number repeated 3,042 times” (209) emitted by *Voyager 2*, a man-made interstellar probe which, following almost fifty years adrift in space, ought perhaps to surprise no one by having become a bit of a broken record. In space, the human is shown to be out on a limb as the crew quickly display symptoms of “Earth-loss” (352). To be fair, so does the reader as there seems to be increasingly less story to tell. The further from home and deeper into space we travel, the more the novel loses momentum and yields to “the silence that surrounds us, the un-meaning of deep space. Terrifying, endless directionless plane. It wasn’t possible to domesticate and cultivate this non-place” (336). It is almost like the customary exotic athleticism of science fiction had prematurely exhausted itself and the novel was now about to come apart by succumbing to zero gravity. Out of touch with Earth, travelling beyond the confines of our solar system, human progress becomes impossible to measure and record as it no longer unfolds linearly or indeed in any intelligible spatiotemporal terms. The driving force behind this space mission, which we may want to term *anthropos*, so consequential and powerful on Earth, begins to lose its definition at the same time as the anxiety-ridden realist drama of “our petty and manageable concerns” (369) returns, leaving Leigh shocked to find “such clear evidence of psychology [including her own] taking precedence over everything else” (337). While “cruising towards the heliopause at close to maximum velocity, 9,000 miles per second, 4.7 percent light speed, partly light ourselves”

⁴²*Ibid.*, 4.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 7 and 2–3.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 3.

(397), Leigh feels compelled to confide in her two crewmates about her troubled childhood, prompting the cosmic and the intimately personal to coalesce in a starkly incongruous amalgamation of scales. But Leigh's autobiographical digression in a context of such unprecedented singularity also aids the novel in saving itself from the void, signalling clearly what in the end matters to *homo*. The sci-fi section concludes with a delirious vision of Leigh's father assaulting her, lifting her up and throwing her through the air in a rage, and it is this traumatic, now quasi-mythical childhood memory (rather than the tragic technological disaster of a moribund spaceship marooned in outer space) that becomes somehow where Leigh finds herself at that very moment in time.

While the first four sections of *In Ascension* track Leigh's development from introvert battered child to world-class scientist and space pioneer, section 5, which is set largely on the South Atlantic island of Ascension, zooms in on the life of Leigh's younger sister Helena, who for the past ten years has been battling the elusive corporate power of ICORS to shed light on the exact circumstances of her sister's unexplained disappearance in outer space. Unlike Leigh, Helena is "a realist" (24), always "seeing to the practicalities" (21). As Leigh explains at the very beginning of the novel, "Helena didn't engage with my excess" (21), adding that my sister has "a considered sense of perspective, which I find completely alien" (26). The life of Helena's young family is firmly ensconced within 2040s earthly reality where the climate crisis has worsened, but perhaps unsurprisingly is yet to elicit any concerted geopolitical response. Helena is portrayed as a representative of earthbound *homo* living her life at the mercy of a disembodied *anthropos* whose ominous ascension appears unstoppable: notably, while ICORS has abandoned long-distance space travel, its main business is now the extraction of rare minerals from closer-to-home asteroids. By contrast, working as a cartographer in Indonesia, Helena's "priority is the land as experienced by the people who live there"; in her view, "it's too easy to become addicted to the aerial view" (449). The sisters inhabit very different worlds, one easily representable in realist terms, the other necessitating recourse to trauma and science fiction.⁴⁷

As much as the "Ascension" section could simply be read as an alternative or complementary perspective on the human condition in the Anthropocene, it also provides welcome relief from the insufferable narrative claustrophobia on board the spaceship in section 4 where, unmoored from its planetary centre of gravity, the human story slackens and comes apart. It is in section 5 that the novel comes back down to Earth and starts to re-engage with the realist business of earthbound meaning-making. It is by now very clear that the much-vaunted technological breakthrough has failed to usher in a glorious new age for humanity as in terms of environmental despoliation the Anthropocene continues to run its lamentable course. Helena travels to Ascension on being informed that the island is the place Leigh and her fellow astronauts would have been taken to recuperate following their return from space. Importantly, Helena's trip also brings MacInnes' novel into close contact with the robinsonade origins of the realist novel. One of the many dead-end tip-offs regarding Leigh's fate that Helena has received over the years is of particular interest in this context. "A Russian vessel ... with an unlikely name—the *James and Mary*" is reported to have picked up her sister after finding her floating

⁴⁷ Helena notably fails to corroborate Leigh's account of her child abuse: "She didn't remember any of this [...] So Geert occasionally slapped them lightly. This was just what fathers did back then. It certainly hadn't been excessive, not as she remembers it" (439).

in the sea “flat on a piece of driftwood” (426–7). However, as Helena informs us, the *James and Mary* was “a ghost. All trace of it was gone. More likely ... it had never existed” (428). In actual fact, the ship did exist, albeit three hundred years prior to the events under narration here, and at the time it was sailing under a British flag. When it stops by Ascension in 1726, its crew discover the remnants of a castaway’s tent and in it a diary by one Leendert Hasenbosch (1695–1725), formerly a bookkeeper on a Dutch East India Company ship, who had been marooned and left to die on Ascension in 1725 following accusations of sodomy. Back at home, Hasenbosch’s diary causes a sensation, reminiscent of the success of another early eighteenth-century publication, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), widely regarded as the first realist novel in English. By naming his heroine Leigh-Anne Hasenbosch after Ascension’s most famous castaway,⁴⁸ MacInnes establishes a deliberate link between his own Anthropocene space robinsonade and the very beginnings of the realist tradition. Yet another such link transpires when Helena discovers the place where the astronauts would have been given temporary lodgings, which turns out to be no modern spaceport apartment but “a nineteenth-century cottage” (475), quaint in its anachronistic simplicity, a Victorian time capsule from a bygone realist age, complete with dusty wooden furniture, neatly made beds and woolen sweaters, as well as “a bookcase and a wine rack” (477).

But MacInnes pulls us also in the opposite direction by radically defamiliarising the island which from Helena’s strictly realist point of view looks entirely otherworldly: “This couldn’t be a real place. It seemed radically incomplete, created in a cursory manner, drawn by a child’s hand in primary colours” (454). Life itself is shown to blur the genre boundaries between realism and science fiction as, to Helena, both this remote island and Leigh’s space mission, as well as in the end human existence itself, appear as “scarcely credible, outrageous pieces of fiction”:

Ascension showed her, more than anything else, that her sister’s inclusion in the *Proscenium* mission was no more unlikely, no more demanding of suspended disbelief, than her birth was The original science-fiction story—the impossible adventure full of wonder and awe—was merely the existence of the species, all the moments she and her sister and their family and every other living person had shared. (455)

In Ascension pulls out all the stops to demonstrate that if its aim is genuinely to provide a true-to-life representation of the human condition in the Anthropocene, then “serious fiction” must cease to operate as a cosmophobic safeguard against the multi-scalar realities of deep time and space. In this light, Helena’s parting observation on the self-enclosed realist bubble of community life in Ascension becomes emblematic of our own petrified existence on a fundamentally inhospitable and indifferent rock of a planet, which remains the one and only home we have got. In Ascension “time on a human level doesn’t exist”, Helena concludes, “merely this antic geology, which forces people back inside their homes, their white prefab blocks, drinking sugar-tea and making light conversation and hiding from the terrifying rock as much as from the blinding sun” (469).

⁴⁸MacInnes gives the name of Leigh’s elder nephew (Helena’s son) as “Leendert”, further cementing the link with the historical castaway.

Hope

In Ascension features a final sixth section, “Oceana”, which oddly is not included in the novel’s table of contents. Following Leigh’s demise in section 4 and Helena’s farewell to Ascension at the end of section 5, this coda, composed of just eight pages, is effectively MacInnes’ third attempt at closure. MacInnes provides us with a distinctly different, firmly off-the-record sort of ending that at once is, and yet can never fully be, an integral part of the realist novel, possibly instantiating Simon’s conviction that “we can tell stories *in* the Anthropocene and such stories may be novel kinds. What I think we cannot tell are stories *about* the Anthropocene”.⁴⁹ According to Simon, whereas “we can tell entangled and truly transdisciplinary stories of how the current condition came about ... such stories do not permit a better understanding of ... the Anthropocene predicament itself”.⁵⁰ Simon expresses grave concern not only over narrative’s likely failure at the task of capturing “the radical novelty of the Anthropocene condition” but even more so over narrative’s inbuilt “domesticating function”.⁵¹ Designed to aid humanity in our efforts at downscaling the world to our own size and level so we can inhabit it comfortably and make it our own, narrative is pre-programmed to neatly encapsulate even the most unimaginable, elusive, and ultimately unrepresentable phenomena, “smooth [ing] novelty into larger processes we are already familiar with, so that it no longer appears as a shock, a rupture, and unprecedented”.⁵²

Seen in this light, “Oceana” opens into a final vision that resists domestication-by-narrative as it transports us entirely beyond realism’s reach. The ending that is imagined here cannot ultimately be framed or told, be it in terms of either hope or despair, the possibility of a human afterlife in a post-Anthropocene epoch, or its resolute negation. At first it seems as though in “Oceana” Leigh appears momentarily resurrected only to perish yet again; however, the final vision of Leigh’s apparent survival and homecoming enables in fact a multitude of divergent readings. It could “somehow, impossibly” (489) be factual, but she drowned and her body was never retrieved, or its retrieval was hushed up by ICORS, her employer. Alternatively, the coda could be an echo of Leigh’s earlier moribund delirium on board the spaceship where she “dream[s] of a water-planet, a sphere covered by a single all-encompassing ocean” (407), materialising on the final descent as “our home, our ocean planet ... a drowned globe, continents submerged, everything and everyone under” (490).⁵³ To compound matters, it remains unclear at which point in Earth’s history Leigh is presumed to be returning. Time after high-velocity space travel can be seriously out of joint, possibly by more than two billion years, either way, we are told (404). Are we witnessing, then, the desolation of a post-Anthropocene planet, with any possible geological record of human existence irretrievably wiped out, or is this Earth before life began, life that, in this instance, might ironically turn out to find

⁴⁹Simon, “Anthropocene Narratives,” 187–8.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 188.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 188 and 195.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 195.

⁵³Leigh’s “inundated planet [which is] everything, everyone, all of the living and all of the dead” (489) triggers an additional slew of interpretations by invoking Stanislaw Lem’s classic vision of an all-ocean planet in *Solaris* (1970). Is it either “a primitive formation—a sort of gigantic entity, a fluid cell, unique and monstrous”, “an organic structure, extraordinarily evolved”, or—perhaps most ominous in regard to “Oceana”—“a deviant neoplasm, the product of the bodies of former inhabitants of the planet, whom it had devoured, swallowed up, dissolving and blending the residue into this unchanging, self-propagating form, supercellular in structure” (Lem, *Solaris*, 18 and 25)?

its origin in the genetically modified algae that Leigh brings back with her from outer space? Is Leigh envisioned as a new Eve? The coda is littered with recurrences of the acronym EVA (referring to Leigh's 'extravehicular activity' suit), the ubiquity of which might hint at Leigh's potential future role as this posthuman planet's new oceanic *ur*-mother. Most definitively, Earth's anthropocentric inscription as a human planet is wholly erased as the focus of life shifts back from solid rock to all-enveloping sea, giving short shrift to the obsession of much Anthropocene scholarship with the question of humanity's post-extinction legacy in the form of a neatly retrievable geological record.

Leigh's return to Earth could also quite simply be interpreted as being in accord with the regular cycles of nature. As the novel notes, many animals are compelled to return to the place they were born (96–7 and 486). More importantly, however, her return aligns with Leigh's trans-corporeal sense of belonging which pervades the entire novel and could also see her through to this particular ending. Her description of life as "objects creating themselves in a frenzy of feeling, striving not to end, briefly distinct from what surrounds them before coming apart again, back into disparate chemicals" (90) finds apothecic fulfilment in her own eventual dissolution within the oceanic sea with which the novel concludes:

In this last moment the water is no longer lifeless but life-filled, and I'm glad, at the end, to be a part of this, intermediate in this, glad that everything I've seen and done, everything I've felt will be continuous in this, generative and fertile in this flux, cycles of transformation, not ending but beginning, beginning again, as it always was and will be, new worlds in transformation, new eternities, new life, new—(496)

Far from conveying a sense of dread and annihilation, this final scene is marked by a complete absence of despair; indeed, Leigh's acceptance of her own finitude appears almost euphoric. To her, trans-corporeally thinking, coming apart is equivalent to becoming a part again, echoing Alaimo's view that the envisioning of a genuinely post-human environmental ethics must allow for both at the same time "the emergence as well as the unravelling of the human".⁵⁴ From the debris of the propulsive technological progress that she was briefly seduced into mistaking for the way forward and that confounded and confined her, she now finds herself reborn into the sea, "the site where I first discovered hope" (96). "Oceana" concludes with "the capsule split[ting], opening onto the edge of outside, the edge of everything, everything beyond, wrenching open a hatch onto the outer world" (496). Leigh's world ends in hope as a homecoming, not with a triumphant image of *anthropos* "in ascension" but a humble reminder of *homo*'s archaic descent and earthbound belonging. MacInnes' final vision, then, could be seen to resonate with Morton's ecological imperative that we must "unground the human by forcing it back onto the ground".⁵⁵ MacInnes' submerged Earth must not be seen, at least not primarily, as emblematic of catastrophic climate change, which would involve continuing to look at everything through a limited anthropocentric lens. Resisting domestication-by-narrative "Oceana" confronts us with a radically planetary perspective "to which humans are incidental", as advanced by Chakrabarty.⁵⁶ However, unlike in Chakrabarty's view, in MacInnes' novel Leigh's home planet is

⁵⁴Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 3.

⁵⁵Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 18.

⁵⁶Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, 67.

by no means “indifferent” to her. It will always welcome her back, in whatever incarnation, teleologically oriented or not, because in the end, this is not just a return, but a trans-corporeal reunion.

David Chandler has recently subjected the question of hope in the Anthropocene to rigorous scrutiny, and it is intriguing to see how MacInnes appears at once to concur and significantly deviate from Chandler’s concept of “nihilist hope”,⁵⁷ which he defines in terms of “the affirmative politics of the Anthropocene [that] insist upon the end of hope and acceptance that there can be ‘no happy ending’”.⁵⁸ According to Chandler, hope as it is understood in the modernist tradition, as “a categorical imperative to believe that there is reason in the world, enabling the possibility of progress to a better world”, is “reaching exhaustion under the aegis of the Anthropocene”.⁵⁹ In Chandler’s view, modernity’s resolute disavowal that the human could ever conceivably terminate, combined with its hopeful projection of the human into any future scheme of things-to-come, continues to inform (and mar) the bulk of critical theory in the Anthropocene. He contrasts this with a much more radically posthuman school of Anthropocene thought, referenced by Clark as “inhumanism”,⁶⁰ that does not “seek to return the human to the world, to ‘re-enchant’ the world after modernity’s passing”, presenting Earth instead as “more alien to us, more inaccessible and stranger than we could have imagined”.⁶¹ Claire Colebrook’s recent analysis of postapocalyptic American cinema is conducted from such an inhumanist point of view. What Colebrook finds in her corpus of texts is a never-ending series of unrelentingly hopeful reassertions of human sustainability and survival, leading her to conclude that humanity, especially in its white US American incarnation, has become quite simply “too big to fail”.⁶² The message is that against all the odds “somehow humanity will survive, and it will do so because humanity is nothing other than the capacity to emerge heroically from destruction, all the stronger for knowing its unquestionable value”.⁶³ Put differently, apocalypse is evoked only to make humanity great again in the wake of its own destruction. As Colebrook puts it, “rather than seeing the prehistory of planetary destruction as a vote of no confidence, Anthropocene discourse has depicted the wake of wreckage as an imperative to be born anew”.⁶⁴ Hope, which in this light is reduced to little more than a deeply reactionary, zombified expression of “species parochialism”,⁶⁵ can never die, ironically precluding any genuine progress, which would need to be predicated upon a complete break with the ways we have become accustomed to living.

“Oceana” can hardly be mistaken for a happy ending; indeed, as already explained, one might be inclined to argue that it qualifies as no ending at all since it falls outside the frame of the novel. Be this as it may, Leigh is most definitely not “returned to a world of meaning”⁶⁶ as “Oceana” does extinguish all hope of *anthropos* or *homo* continuing.

⁵⁷Chandler, “The Politics of the Unseen.”

⁵⁸Chandler, “The Death of Hope,” 696.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 695.

⁶⁰Clark, *Value*, 135.

⁶¹Chandler, “Death of Hope,” 697.

⁶²Colebrook, *Who Would You Kill to Save the World*, 23.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 7–8.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 144.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁶Chandler, “Death,” 699.

Humanity is brought back down to Earth where its “problem” is resolved by trans-corporeal dissolution, and in this respect, it might indeed be seen to fulfil the demands of Anthropocene inhumanism that the human be entirely “expunged”.⁶⁷ However, MacInnes’ apparent endorsement of nihilism stops right there. The novel’s trans-corporeal outlook, which reaches a point of final apotheosis in the coda, actively militates against “seeking to push or enlarge the rift between the human and the world” and hence vehemently rejects the inhumanist notion that “the world is not and never was there for us, so there can be ... no basis for hope”.⁶⁸ The extinction of the human that occurs in the coda is pictured within the scenario of an exuberant return and trans-corporeal homecoming and hence ought not to be mistaken for something apocalyptic or otherwise wholly undesirable. In MacInnes’ final vision “home” coalesces with “hope” into something intimately familiar and welcoming, something more-than-human or quite simply *something more* in the sense of everything which “is made of the same stuff” (266).

The single-minded preoccupation of much Anthropocene criticism and theory with the hyperobject of climate change has stood in the way of a more comprehensive appraisal of the literary complexity, ingenuity, and thematic diversity of the Anthropocene novel, as well as its *enduringly productive* anthropocentrism. There is also a widespread hermeneutic fallacy to examine the aesthetic challenge posed by the Anthropocene purely with reference to formal experimentation rather than reading such innovation always in close interplay with efforts at adapting and “making new” long-established existential tropes and world-making paradigms, such as—for example—“the body”, “the human condition” and “hope”. Such a critical outlook appears prone to “domesticating” Anthropocene fiction without registering its actual epochal novelty. Little is gained, in my view, from itemising a catalogue of allegedly innovative strategies to pinpoint the distinctiveness of Anthropocene writing, including “a de-centred, multi-layered web of narrative”, “interwoven plotlines”, incorporation of “a wide variety of literary genres”, “narrative excavation”, “literary collage”, and so forth,⁶⁹ all of which we have encountered before in other types of fiction. The contemporary novel deserves to be encountered on its own terms as a form newly under reconstruction, showing at work the creative practice of an emergent Anthropocene avantgarde of writers who, like MacInnes, attempt to identify, reposition, and mobilise the human in a world of unprecedented epochal change.

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⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., 702.

⁶⁹Horn and Bergthaller, *The Anthropocene*, 109.

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