

Research Article

[This is the Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* on 20th December 2024 (available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2024.2441254>)]

Ecofeminist drought and slow ecological grief in Fabienne Bayet-Charlton's *Watershed*

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Abstract: This article analyses temporalities of drought and grief in an understudied millennial Australian novel: Fabienne Bayet-Charlton's *Watershed*. *Watershed* depicts a young white farming couple in rural Victoria battling a fierce drought while coping with prolonged grief over the death of their ten-year-old son. I contend that the layering of drought and grief in the text—both figured as slow forms of crisis—proffer slow temporalities that deal with both the small and large scales of space and time which constitute anthropogenic climate change. Using hydrocritical, postcolonial, and ecofeminist approaches, I show how the text articulates a politicised multiscalar yet embodied perspective which demonstrates the insights that a specifically freshwater approach to the blue humanities can bring to theorisations of environmental time and narrative strategy during planetary crisis.

Keywords: Ecofeminism; blue humanities; climate change fiction; Australian eco-fiction; hydrofiction; postcolonial ecocriticism

This article analyses temporalities of drought and grief in an understudied millennial Australian novel: Fabienne Bayet-Charlton's *Watershed*. The novel was published in 2005 by IAD Press which exclusively publishes work by Indigenous Australian authors or works about Indigenous Australian culture. Hosted by a small publisher, the text is difficult and expensive to obtain outside of Australia. Yet, *Watershed* presents complex ideas about ecology, embodiment, and grief which merit ecocritical attention.

Watershed depicts a young white farming couple in rural Victoria battling a fierce drought while coping with prolonged grief over the death of their ten-year-old son. I contend that the layering of drought and grief in the text—both figured as slow forms of crisis—proffer slow temporalities that deal with both the small and large scales of space and time which constitute anthropogenic climate change. Using insights from water-oriented ecocriticism, or hydrocriticism, I show how the freshwater and grief focus of the text draws forth the human body and its emotions, which links the large and abstract scales of drought with the more accessible scale of the individual body in a non-simplistic way. This simultaneously represents two separate claims that are often made about contemporary climate fiction, or 'cli-fi'. The first is that fiction can be a way to make anthropogenic climate crisis immediate, embodied, and personal (Bracke 2019, 280; Gaard 2016, 186). The second is that fiction—as a capacious and malleable narrative form—can represent (or address the inability to represent) the large-scale histories, politico-economic forces, spatialities, temporalities, and cohort of actors which make up anthropogenic climate change (Nuttall 2020, 257; Deckard 2019, 112; Boast 2020, 4; DeLoughry 2020, 2). In the context of anthropogenic planetary collapse, these individual and collective scales do not always cohere harmoniously, and *Watershed* is an example of a text which stages the embodied violence—in the form of debilitating grief—emerging from such scalar tensions. *Watershed* illuminates how freshwater—as a fundamental biological resource—is particularly conducive to such an

embodied yet multiscalar perspective and temporality. *Watershed* also illuminates how fiction provides a vital forum for the articulation of such complex water-inspired temporalities.

Watershed grounds its slow temporalities in an anti-colonial and ecofeminist critique. Using environmental history and postcolonial ecocritical and ecofeminist theory, I will show how the layering of drought and grief in the text link the ecological crisis of drought with the emotional crisis of grief in ways that draw attention to the underlying settler colonial and gendered human/nature and mind/body dualisms which are shown to lie beneath the depicted drought crisis. The embodied and multiscalar perspective presented by the novel does not just frame the crisis, but rather it diagnoses and politicises it. Such a politicised notion of embodiment will demonstrate the insights that a specifically freshwater approach to the blue humanities can bring to theorisations of environmental time and the novel form during planetary crisis.

Drought and grief in *Watershed*

The narrative of *Watershed* is set in a fictional town, Sturtspond, in the Mallee region, Victoria, at the end of the twentieth century. It portrays a wealthy white farming couple, Eve and Marconi Beunetti, dealing with the ongoing grief over the death of their ten-year-old son, David, approximately two years before the start of the plot. David drowned in the Murray River while swimming recreationally. Eve is particularly affected by the death of her son, and she develops depression and alcoholism: ‘Eve found the bottles after David’ (Bayet-Charlton 2005, 50). Her husband, Marconi, is also deeply affected by the death of his son, and he starts to spend more time out on his farm tending to his irrigation machinery as a way to avoid dealing with his emotions: ‘Marconi turns on the pump when he feels melancholy’

(37). During the plot of the novel, the Mallee region is experiencing a long drought: ‘The land lies utterly denuded. Any surviving stubble has simply been stripped from the plains... Singed by the never-ending drought’ (21). The slow ecological crisis of drought mirrors the slow emotional process of grief.

The drought is a very material presence. Descriptions of the dying Murray River and the hot, punishing sun are suggestively tied to histories of settler colonial and capitalist mismanagement of the arid Australian ecology. For example, there is a reference to a part of the Murray River designated as an ‘evaporation zone’ because it was sacrificed and its waters subject to unregulated extraction by agricultural irrigators (including the central Beunetti family) (Bayet-Charlton 2005, 41). There is also mention of the pollution of groundwater sources through nuclear waste dumping (113). Recurring imagery of trees on the riverbank function as haunting motifs of the damage done by aggressive hydroengineering: ‘Starved of fresh water and strangulated by salt, their skeletons line the riverbank like a graveyard’ (40). Exposed skeletons of the local Indigenous Ngarrindjeri people also attest to the cultural and ecological violence of settler colonialism; due to the dry conditions along the Murray River, human skeletons are ‘exposed by the wind in the sand dunes. Bones found by stumbling tourists going for a leak’ (186). The fact that it is the drought itself which exposes the bones suggests that the destruction of the environment is indelibly tied to the dispossession of Indigenous people along the Murray.

The grief in *Watershed* is not just the personal grief of the Buenettis, but also a more collective sense of ecological grief (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018, 275), which refers to grief at the loss of ecosystems and species, including as a result of anthropogenic climate change. Ecological grief can pertain to physical losses (either immediate or cumulative), cultural or epistemological losses, or the apprehension of future losses (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018, 275; Pihkala 2024, 6). The text responds to and represents the particularly severe Millennium

drought in southeastern Australia (lasting from approximately the mid-1990s to the late-2000s, depending the region) which sparked intense ecological grief and anxieties about future climate change droughts (Jones 2017, 20; Steffen 2015, i). This awareness is represented in *Watershed* by the side character, Jasmine, a young environmentalist who challenges the Australian government on nuclear waste pollution which she sees as fundamentally interconnected with the drought and having the potential to pollute the groundwater sources of the entire country (Bayet-Charlton 2005, 114).

The novel subtly portrays the depicted ecological grief as distinctly white or settler colonial. It calls to mind Derek Gladwin's distinction that contemporary forms of ecological grief are disproportionately caused by unjust spatial practices from socio-political forces such as colonialism and capitalism (2017, 5). This distinction emerges through the viewpoints of two Indigenous (likely Ngarrindjeri) side characters who are friends of the Buenettis: Ace and his son, Winston. Ace is Indigenous to the Mallee region and deeply values his ancestral connection to his homeland. Ace spends his time fishing and sailing in the Murray River, telling the creation stories of his culture, volunteering at the local Indigenous community centre, and imparting his generational knowledge on his son. Ace shares knowledge about the Murray which reveals the ignorance of those who currently manage it. For example, when the human bones turn up in the dried-up river, Ace explains to the authorities that they are traditional Ngarrindjeri graves, yet the bodies are taken for forensic analysis, an act which Ace pronounces as 'grave robbing' (Bayet-Charlton 2005, 186). Winston continues his father's practices and knowledge. He feels an attraction for Jasmine on account of her passion for the environment, yet he critiques her lack of ancestral and experiential knowledge of the Murray. When Jasmine gets caught in a current in a part of the river pronounced as 'dead' (132), Winston asserts: 'Feel that? It's not dead. That's my country. It's not dead enough to pull you down. Understand?' (132). Through this critique, Winston highlights a settler

colonial view underpinning both irrigation and environmentalism which sees water as ‘dead’ according to a linear logic which denies water’s cyclicity, history, and complexity. Winston indicates the need for alternative human-nature relations that are more attuned to the nuances and agency of the Murray when he tells Jasmine: ‘You need to learn to swim properly. That’s all’ (133).

Ace and Winston are intentionally underdeveloped characters, critically representing the marginalisation of Indigenous people and culture in Australia, but also positioning these characters as foils to the central Buenettis. Like David, Winston is an expert swimmer, and his nickname ‘Win’ suggests he enjoys a victory over water that David does not. This victory takes the form of a beneficial, ancestral connection with the River Murray which underpins mutual acts of care between Winston and the river; Winston stewards the river and generates cultural knowledge about it, and the river provides Winston with a sense of place and a space for recreational swimming and fishing. Though the text gives examples of ecological and cultural losses in relation to the Murray which could underlie feelings of ecological grief for Indigenous characters, neither Ace nor Winston display such feelings. In fact, they are noticeably cheerful compared to the anguished Buenettis. This suggests that they are on a different timeline of ecological catastrophe and grief than the Buenettis, reflecting Kyle P. Whyte’s argument that Indigenous climate fiction often portrays Indigenous people as having already experienced various forms of ecological apocalypse (for example species loss, cultural disruption, or economic devastation) due to colonialism (2018, 226). While Whyte is mainly drawing from his knowledge of North American Indigenous cultures, his argument certainly also applies in the context of longstanding settler colonial ecological devastation in Australia and the Mallee region (Potter and Magner 2018, 3; Araluen Corr 2018, 488; Leane 2017, 243; Gammage 2011, 311). As Whyte writes: ‘Indigenous persons see our current situation as already having been through a crisis that is ongoing’ and thus ‘do not always

approach the climate crisis as an impending future to be dreaded' (2018, 227). Ace and Winston are already familiar with ecological grief, whereas for the Buenettis it is portrayed as a new development.

Thinking with drought

The text makes an ecocritical connection between the emotional process of grief and the ecological process of drought. Both can be said to be forms of slow crisis that are difficult to think with and through because they lack drama and a sense of progress. As Rob Nixon argues, ecocritics need to attend to 'slow violence' (2011, 2): long and protracted crises whose effects are dispersed across space and time. Nixon argues that 'slow violence' is difficult to represent because it defies the typical fragmented ways we understand crises as demarcated events with (i) clear beginnings and end points, (ii) contained geographical settings, and (iii) identifiable actors (3). Drought crises are quite conducive for thinking with slow violence because drought is a slow, cumulative catastrophe, and one that most often manifests for humans as daily drudgery and despair. Historian Rebecca Jones dubs Australian drought the 'slow catastrophe', experienced by many farming families 'not as isolated events but as life-long trials' (2017, 12). Yet, Jones shows how many farming families have long been adapting inventively to its demands, through economic resources, social networks of care, or local knowledge (379). Of course, Indigenous peoples have historically adapted even more productively to recurring cycles of Australian drought and rain over millennia through practices such as controlled burning or nomadic lifestyles (Jones 2017, 16; Gammage 2011, 1). Contemporary anthropogenic droughts demonstrate long and conflicting timeframes and temporalities of climate crisis and adaptation (for example between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians). They help us to conceive of climate crisis, but also adaptation and

action, as small, ordinary actions or events which can accumulate over time. In the context of activism, droughts can help to conceptualise a temporality of what decolonial feminist Françoise Vergès calls ‘revolution as daily work’, wherein colonial and patriarchal oppression manifests primarily in people’s daily lives on an ongoing basis and is most often resisted on those fronts over the course of generations ([2019] 2021, 5).

When appearing in the form of a crisis, droughts can generate profound ecological grief on personal and collective levels. Indigenous peoples and farmers from drought-stricken regions, such as those of southeastern Australia, are at the forefront of ecological grief due to their ‘close living and working relationships with landscapes significantly affected by, and at risk from, climate change’ (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018, 276). When ecological grief emerges from processes of ‘slow violence’, it is often complex and prolonged (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018, 277; Jones 2017, 12; Pihkala 2024, 22). Losses of environmental knowledge can lead to a loss of identity, such as when Indigenous Elders lose confidence in their ability to give guidance about travel routes or weather conditions, or farmers lose confidence in their understandings of seasonal rhythms of weather (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018, 277). Such losses pertain to cultural knowledge gained over generations or millennia, and can lead to feelings of anger, desperation, and helplessness, but also guilt about somehow failing to steward the environment (278). Grief over expected future losses can be particularly complex and ambiguous (278). Jones finds that a primary emotional response to drought is uncertainty, caused by the ambivalent and incremental character of drought (2018, 15). Because of drought’s long-term nature, this can lead to ‘obsessive and potentially disabling worry, and uncertainty about what constitutes an appropriate level of long-term worry’ (19).

Drought may function as a narrative strategy to portray and address ‘slow violence’. To understand this, we can engage water-oriented subfields of ecocriticism, often known under terms such as hydrocriticism or the blue humanities. When considering water as a

biological or economic resource, hydrocriticism tends to emphasise literature's capacity to illuminate connections between water and social (in)justice. Building on studies of oil-oriented fiction, or petrofiction, Hannah Boast proposes the genre of 'hydrofiction' (2020, 3) to describe cultural and literary texts which enable insight into the social and cultural processes which produce and are produced by water as a resource. Focusing on Israeli and Palestinian literature, Boast shows how such processes include large-scale hydroengineering, settler colonialism, and capitalist production and privatisation, which often aim to discursively and materially 'conquer' water and racialised and gendered human others (3). Matthew S. Henry takes a justice-oriented approach to contemporary North American literature and water politics, analysing what he calls 'hydronarratives': literary and cultural products that 'amplify silenced environmental epistemologies, story frequently erased histories of exclusion and violence, and chart a transition to a more just, equitable world' (2023, 6). These hydrocritics argue that unjust dynamics of power between humans and water resources provoke literary responses and aesthetics attuned to the *socio-political* (mis)management of water, rather than water as a purely ecological or abstract concept. Such aesthetics are often characterised by inharmonious or problematised forms of movement, flow, cyclicity, overwhelm, gothic and macabre elements, and corporeal thirst (Boast 2020, 24; Deckard 2019; 113).

This article draws from and expands this hydrocritical work to consider how temporalities, corporeal aesthetics, and narrative strategies of drought—such as those articulated in *Watershed*—emerge from and provide insight into unjust relations of power. To do so, it is necessary to juxtapose hydrocriticism of water scarcity with that of its counterpart: flood. After all, cycles of drought are frequently intertwined with cycles of flood, especially when flooding compromises potable water sources, or follows prolonged periods of drought. Both floods and droughts can be short- or long-term, yet Sarah Nuttall's work on the long-

term flood illuminates important narrative strategies and temporalities for our age of global climate crisis. Nuttall posits a notion of ‘pluvial time’ (2020, 255). Pluvial is an earth sciences term that refers to flooding brought about by rain. Nuttall makes the interesting observation that pluvial rain has a time and narrative form that is oceanic and what she calls ‘generally wet’ (355). As a kind of oceanic force, the temporalities it solicits are nonlinear, and she describes them as more akin to suffusion—a case of something gradually spreading through and over—and infusion—a case of being soaked in liquid. The materiality and temporality of pluvial rain is not about the sudden appearance or disappearance of water, but rather the experience of what Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha call ‘ubiquitous wetness’ (qtd in Nuttall 2020, 455). Such temporalities challenge the anthropocentric traditions of the novel form, instigating formal strategies more attuned to socially- and politically-mediated forces of climate and ecology (Nuttall 2020, 457).

Yet, we can imagine ‘drought time’ as a counterpart to ‘pluvial time’, constituting a ‘ubiquitous dryness’ instead of wetness. I would argue that ‘drought time’ brings scales and temporalities of the human body into play in a stronger way, because in the absence of water, the needs of the corporeal body are highlighted. As many blue humanities scholars often point out, we in the West take water for granted until it is absent (Boast 2020, 23). Catastrophes like drought often highlight the many ways in which humans are dependent on water for their bodies, their societies, their cultures, and their economies. Moreover, as Sharae Deckard has argued, water crises reveal larger politico-ecological figurations of ‘hydro-dependency’ (2021, 136), which describes cultural logics of addiction underlying capitalist or colonial regimes of water extraction, development, or destruction which are ‘fundamentally undemocratic, inequitable and non-renewable’ (136-7). Hydrofictions about water as a biological resource must ‘negotiate the formal challenges to representation presented by the sheer banality or ordinariness of such infrastructures as the pipeline or meter

or tap' (137). Taking away water in a narrative can be a way to highlight the human body, as well as typically hidden realms like infrastructures, urban planning, trade and transport networks, social customs, and economic structures. As Deckard's work further suggests, hydrofictions addressing contemporary anthropogenic ecological crisis at the societal scale often do so through corporeal aesthetics in the form of 'well-worn tropes of pathologised addiction' (138). Combining this with Nixon's notion of 'slow violence', we can consider how anthropogenic 'drought time' may frequently occur in (and shape) fiction as unspectacular, everyday experiences of corporeal and economic crises. Because of the significance of water to the human body, thinking with drought can also be a way to combine longer and larger scales of space and time with the shorter and smaller scales of the human body and bodily processes.

Linking ecological and bodily scales

In *Watershed*, 'slow violence' is evoked through a portrayal of delayed progress and slow healing in relation to drought and grief. Drought is stunting material growth in the setting: 'Brittle rocks fracture and spit heat where the soil once bathed' (Bayet-Charlton 2005, 20). Eve and Marconi's emotional pain also dominates the narrative and resists easy healing; halfway through the narrative, for example, Eve looks at the Murray River and thinks: 'Maybe I'll wake up dead. She wills herself to pass out in the water. Remembers David swimming, growing, his nuddy bottom, dimpled in the sun, filling out his sunsuit bathers' (108). Later, we are told: 'Eve wants to screech like the women in black robes, needs to, but she just feels useless, hopeless' (136). Eve's grief leads her to have an affair with her husband's brother, who feels shame and guilt about Eve's pain: 'after all, there's his increasing discomfort with her growing dependency on him, her lack of healing, the way her

grieving refuses to ease. As far as he is concerned, Eve is growing as intractable as the drought' (75). In *Watershed*, drought and grief draw attention to the narrative and emotional difficulties attending 'slow violence'.

The evocation of 'slow violence' is a way of linking human/nature dualisms to mind/body dualisms. In his grief, Marconi throws himself deeper into his farm work, developing a desire to pump the Murray River dry in order to beat the drought through technological means. Victorio tells Marconi: 'Draining the river is never gonna work. You can dredge it from one end to the other, you know, Marconi. It'll never give him up' (Bayet-Charlton 2005, 158). Marconi doesn't believe that draining the river will literally revive his son, but he finds a 'comforting monotony' in irrigation machinery which helps him deal with his grief (159), as well as his feeling that he has failed to 'realise his father's promise' in terms of making the farm profitable (50). The drought, as well as the longstanding aridity of the region, is in part a reason for Marconi's economic and emotional struggles. Marconi's inability to deal with his emotions, however, is displaced onto a hierarchical, mechanistic view of nature as something to be dominated by human and technological forces: 'Marconi Beunetti believes irrigation fits a pattern, and works well against the heat that punctures the landscape. Irrigation draws the power from the river into the hands of the blockers...' (39). Marconi's emotional repression is portrayed in how he decides to ignore Eve's drinking and infidelity despite the fact that it upsets him that they have grown apart: 'So Marconi would often wander around the scalds that had seared the paddocks with hopeless bitterness. What else could he do?' (55). In this way, Marconi represents the ecofeminist contention that human/nature dualisms often cross over with mind/body dualisms, which see emotions as something to be suppressed by rationality (Plumwood [1993] 2003, 4; Mies and Shiva [1993] 2014, 20; Alaimo 2010, 2). This ecofeminist insight has much importance for understanding

ecological grief as itself hampered by mind/body dualisms which may inhibit the healthy processing of emotions.

Eve and Marconi's mental and emotional turmoil comprises the main action of the novel, conveying grief as a protracted and regressive process which is shaped by and shapes the ecological despoliation of the Murray River. To understand this, we can use Stacy Alaimo's influential notion of 'trans-corporeality' which describes the 'interconnections, interchanges, and transits' between human bodies and nonhuman materials (2010, 2). Attuning to 'trans-corporeality' enables ethical deliberation on how the body is vulnerable to and complicit in intersecting networks of biology, climate, politics, and economics (2). In *Watershed*, 'trans-corporeality' is portrayed through Eve's grief-induced drinking. In one episode soon after David's death, Eve vomits from alcohol: 'Purple specks splashed over the tiles, the force of her stomach spattering the cream walls' (Bayet-Charlton 2005, 51). Later, we are told:

The wine is part of Eve now. Loosening her from the sun-baked strictures of politeness. All she does know is that she craves her own son with the very pores of her skin, the stretch of her body, the aching of her breasts, the yearning and sucking moisture of her womb. (136)

The term 'sun-baked' links Eve's body to the drought-stricken landscape of the setting—a drought in which the Buenettis are implicated through Marconi's (and his father's) irrigation. A toxic 'trans-corporeality' between Eve and the Murray River is suggested by her addiction to alcohol—specifically the wine produced on the family farm using irrigated Murray water. Eve's drinking is continually described in a corporeal fashion. For example:

Alcohol flushes through Eve's veins, inside her muscles. It melts away all the tight stiffness that remains. She feels her body sinking into the ribbed upholstery. Her flesh swinging from bones. The blood thudding slower but louder inside her flickering eyelids, her dry tongue. (137)

Again, Eve's 'dry tongue' links her with the landscape. An association between 'the dry indifference of Eve' and the landscape is ubiquitous throughout the text (and upon which I elaborate more in the next section) (173). Considering the text's explicit critique of colonial hydroengineering, I argue that this conspicuous 'trans-corporeal' imagery is an ecofeminist narrative technique to diagnose human/nature and mind/body dualisms as underlying *and linking* the depicted crises of drought and grief. This is also indicated in how the dry landscape is frequently figured in corporeal terms which links it to the Buenettis. For example, in another episode, the polluted Murray is described as 'faecal water' (76), connecting its physical pollution by human excrement with the way in which Eve experiences the unwanted return of bodily fluids. Evoking the way Eve craves David with 'the very pores of her skin' (136), and later descriptions of her 'thirsty skin' (62), the dry landscape is described 'as if someone had taken a giant glob of hot wax and ripped the vegetation right from the pores of the earth' (21). This 'trans-corporeality' conveys that ecological grief is not just a response to environmental catastrophe but is a material extension of such an environmental crisis. If, as ecofeminist Astrida Neimanis contends, we are all 'bodies of water' (2017, 2), then any tears of ecological grief (suppressed or otherwise) are on a continuum with the exploitation of water.

Reinforcing the sense of delayed action and progress typically evident in crises of long-term or complex drought and grief, the plot is slow moving, focusing on description and the thoughts and feelings of characters rather than action. Some form of resolution to both grief and drought occurs at the end of the narrative, when rain finally arrives and the couple

express their grief and pain to each other and physically embrace (Bayet-Charlton 2005, 232-238). This evinces the need to express, rather than suppress, difficult emotions, and thus validates the previously denied agency of emotions and the physical body. Part of this resolution also stems from the emotional purging and sense of nourishing ‘trans-coporeal’ connection with the land that Eve experiences when she participates in a naked raindance with other women in the local community (214-218). Yet, this resolution is transient and ambiguous; the emotional healing of Eve and Marconi and the water security of the region is left open under the final section entitled ‘We’ll see’ (242). The text conveys that the process of attending to dualistic attitudes will be as protracted and ongoing as the crises they generate.

Gendered drought and grief

In *Watershed*, David’s death disturbs a previously benign relationship between this family and the river; both Eve and David had been champion swimmers, and the family farm had been lucrative because of irrigation. The opening episode foregrounds this unsettling shift. It viscerally depicts David’s drowning and conveys that he mistakenly thinks he will touch the sides of the riverbank in a moment of ‘victory’ and ‘triumph’ as a ‘champion’ (Bayet-Charlton 2005, 3). Water is portrayed as ‘*The sucking and pushing of the womb*’ which gives David a false sense of security that: ‘*It is the river, my soft, warm safe mother. It is the river*’ (1; 3). The figuration of the river as a mother (maintained throughout the text) triggers a confusion that it can be dangerous: ‘*Why then would this boy be struggling, as if a baby, through the cool rushing waters?*’ (1). Yet, the omniscient narrator warns that ‘*Such is the realm of the water. It cradles yet suffocates. Warms and cools us. Sustains, nurtures and kills*

us' (1). From the outset, the text constructs an unsettled atmosphere which draws attention to how the gendering of water as a mother falsely renders it as a permanently nourishing, life-giving force. In doing so, it evokes Plumwood's argument that:

Reason in the western tradition has been constructed as the privileged domain of the master, who has conceived nature as wife or subordinate other encompassing and representing the sphere of materiality, subsistence and the feminine which the master has split off and constructed as beneath him. ([1993] 2003, 4)

In *Watershed*, David's (and the Buenetti family's more broadly) inability to conquer water suggests a critique of how the conceptualisation of the Murray River as a mother falsely constructs it as a static, manipulable force inferior to the (male) human. In invoking the figure of the child, *Watershed* invokes a common archetype of climate fiction to explore questions of futurity and intergenerational responsibility (Johns-Putra 2019, 4). Yet, in depicting a gendered body of water which suddenly does *not* assume naturalised views of mothers as caregivers, *Watershed* exhibits how cli-fi texts often critique 'the anthropocentric and politically conservative stereotypes to do with gender, sexual orientation, race, and economic privilege' (7) which can underpin the trope of the child as a signifier of environmental futures.

Gendered logics also exacerbate grief in the text. Eve believes she has failed a natural law of motherhood by failing to protect her child: "I should've been there, I know. I'm a bad mother. I'm useless'" (Bayet-Charlton 2005, 237). *Watershed* uses water to tie Eve in a haunting way to her dead son, especially when she swims: 'She will feel David's feet splashing just before her, the wake from his ten year old body swirling around her head...' (7-8). Here, a seemingly essential link between mothers and water turns malign, for David's memory torments Eve and worsens her depression: 'If he had survived me, why didn't he

survive the river?’ (136). Eve repeatedly tries to commit suicide by drowning, but is thwarted by the river itself:

Eve can feel the pull of the river drawing her towards the centre, but she struggles against the natural snags and dams created by the grey bones of the dead river gums. They seem to trap her within the cupping shallows of the bird sanctuary. As much as she drinks, it’s never enough to drown herself in the river. (107)

Eve is locked in a distressing connection with the water, feeling a natural pull towards it but an inability to exercise her agency toward it. As Plumwood argues, even when Western culture genders nature as a mother, it is the figure of the father who ‘guides its subsequent development in ways which continue to deny and devalue the maternal role’ ([1993] 2003, 3). In this image in *Watershed*, ‘the grey bones of the dead river gums’ evoke the recurring Ngarrindjeri bones and indict settler colonial violence in Eve’s predicament. This reflects how ecological and patriarchal exploitation frequently overlap with colonial and racial exploitation in discursive and material ways (Plumwood [1993] 2003, 80; Mies and Shiva, [1993] 2014, 4; Duckworth 2022, 58). Like women, Indigenous people have historically been likened to nature under the colonial regime and rendered passive and subordinate to the male coloniser on that basis (Plumwood [1993] 2003, 80; Duckworth 2022, 58). This has been more extreme for Indigenous women (Duckworth 2022, 58).

Such a gendered lens on human-nature relations is fitting for the novel’s setting in rural Victoria. Writing of deserts in both the United States and Australian, ecocritic Tom Lynch has argued that settler colonialism uses gendered practices and discourses to materially and conceptually empty the land of life and people before it can proceed to reorganise it (2014, 378). Lynch has uncovered the significant role of settler women in constructing the desert as simultaneously empty of ecological and human life and ready to be developed by

settlers; gendered work such as the planting of gardens, though seemingly innocent, bolstered the settler project by conveying that the local flora and fauna was deficient, and that the landscape was *improved* and made familiar through European-style gardening, all of which naturalised European landscape ideals (384). Gardening brought gendered European-derived notions of fertility, order, and balance to the desert, which furthered settler alienation from the naturally arid and unpredictable ecology and legitimated ecological damage through unsustainable land and water development (394). Lynch's work can be used to posit that gender norms contributed to the pathologising of drought and natural aridity as abhorrent, which drew from and likely contributed to the pathologising of women who didn't carry out social reproduction work such as mothering and caring.

The significance of the gendering of water as female in Australia can be explored further through arguments such as those of the water scholar Veronica Strang, who claims that water's biological and biopolitical value imparts it with particular symbolic value for conveying human triumph over nature (2013, 164). In other words, Strang argues that feats of human control over water, exemplified in structures like dams and irrigation infrastructures, have a particular ability to reinforce human/nature binaries. This is because dominating water registers as dominating biology and the very conditions of life. As Strang also argues, this tying of water to the human/nature binary has historically been enhanced by gendered mind/body dualisms which see the body in particular as something to be dominated by masculine and patriarchal forces (2014, 89). Considering the importance of water to Australia's arid ecology and landscape, we can understand how water may be a particular target for patriarchal views of nature in Australia.

We can combine Lynch and Strang's insights with that of Emily Potter's and Bridget Magner's (2018), who initiate an ecocritical literary history of the Mallee region where *Watershed* is set. As Potter and Magner argue, because of its aridity and resistance to easy

agricultural and technological manipulation, the Mallee has an ‘ambivalent presence within the colonial mind: a place of endeavour and hope, but also collapse, darkness, and despair’ (3). Potter and Magner have elucidated how, from the 1830s, European settlers initially saw the Mallee region as lifeless, yet many settlers developed optimism that with technology and irrigation it could be a potential site for ‘productive expanse’ (3). Across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, these hopes were consistently dashed by irregular rain and water insecurity (3). The Mallee thus ‘remains a region strongly associated with the archetypal experience of “battling” the land, and not always winning’ (3). Potter’s and Magner’s work highlights how the Mallee region has a long history of irrigation *failure*. Furthermore, this is not just a once-off failure, but a continual one, constituting an ongoing and protracted “battle” with the land. The ‘slow violence’ of drought and grief in *Watershed* thus compound with the slow temporalities of masculinist settler colonial failure embedded in the Mallee region.

The settler colonial project would attempt to ‘overcome’ or obscure the slow crises (and slow ecologies) of drought through aggressive hydroengineering. Historian Michael Cathcart coins the phrase ‘water dreaming’ to describe how British colonisers sought to make the Australian deserts ‘bloom’ and resemble the green and fertile vistas of England (2010, introduction).¹ This was not mere homesickness, but a complicated and intergenerational project of economically and culturally colonising the continent. As Cathcart writes: ‘The colonists had the values, aesthetics, and aspirations of a culture that was steeped in water. If they were to become Australian, they had to learn how to prosper in an entirely new climate’ (ch. 3). Cathcart’s monograph shows how the strategy of settlers, and later post-independence white Australians, involved harnessing water through technologically-intensive means and

¹ The Kindle eBook edition of Cathcart’s text used to inform this article does not contain page numbers or stable location numbers, so I am using chapter numbers.

transforming the dry landscape in order to generate abundant and *permanent* water sources. As political ecological scholars such as Jamie Linton (2010) would argue, such a desire to secure permanent water renders it a static entity—similar to Eve and the Murray River in *Watershed*—divorced from its agency, local specificity, and complexity in the hydrological cycle (8).

Generations of Australian settlers used hydroengineering methods such as drilling, pumping, piping, irrigating, recycling, and damming to makeover Australia in the hydrological style of England, decimating soil and surface waters and displacing and dispossessing Indigenous people in the process (Cathcart 2010, introduction; Morgan 2015, 3). For example, Cathcart traces how early British colonies in Sydney had, by the mid-nineteenth century, depleted three significant water sources—the Tank Stream, the Lachlan Swamps, and the Botany Swamps—establishing a fateful pattern whereby Australian settlers, for at least two hundred years, would extract ‘as if there was always more water, further out’ and thus exploit and misunderstand the dry continent (Cathcart 2010, ch. 3). Colonial ‘water dreaming’ operated according to a human/nature binary which saw water as an empty resource to be conquered by technology (ch. 3). It also had gender dimensions, figuring water as a feminine substance which, under Victorian ideals of femininity and motherhood, should lend its reproductive forces freely and abundantly to capitalist production (Lynch 2014, 394). ‘Water dreaming’ not only furthered a sense of white settler belonging, but it rendered the land more economically productive (in the short-term) and allowed the imposition of British-style farming methods (Cathcart 2010, ch. 3). Such farming methods required a reliable and permanent supply of water, which was at odds with Australia’s erratic ecology prone to floods and droughts.

In opposition to such fragmented notions of ecology, *Watershed* embraces the long-term temporalities of drought, arid ecology, and failure. Moreover, it does so for ecofeminist

aims, invoking history, the agency of water, and slower models of progress to widen our perception of the origins of and solutions for crises. In the first instance, it suggests that the slow temporality of drought and water insecurity of this region undermines the gendered human/nature dualisms that figure the land as something separate for (male) humanity to ‘battle’ in one-off, demarcated events with clear winners and losers. Its slow-moving plot and attention to prolonged ecological grief problematises national narratives of progress and instead serves them up for consideration and critique.

Conclusion

Watershed engages the colonial and patriarchal politics of freshwater to explore how humans experience ‘slow violence’ in differentiated ways across broader socio-ecological and smaller embodied scales. In doing so the text offers a coping strategy for ecological crisis and grief which involves accepting the slow temporalities of responses. Rather than rushing towards technological ‘solutions’ to planetary environmental catastrophe, *Watershed* dwells in the difficult emotions of such a catastrophe. This gives the reader a space to process such emotions, reinforced by the lengthy time it typically takes to read and contemplate a novel. In giving such attention to ‘trans-corporeality’ and material emotions, the text also validates bodily and emotional responses to anthropogenic climate change. Though rarely appearing on lists of ecological or climate change fiction, *Watershed* articulates a complex anti-colonial and ecofeminist critique which has much to say about pressing questions of temporality, hydrology, embodiment, and grief during our age of climate crisis.

It is water’s significance to the human body that inspires *Watershed*’s politics. This is because it sees the life-giving and corporeal value of water as vehicles for the gendering and

subordination of nature. Yet, *Watershed* problematises the subordination of water by mobilising its biological value to convey ‘slow violence’. Additionally, by thinking through the politicised human body, the text provides a politicised yet accessible scale for thinking through large, abstract crises like drought and climate change. This illuminates a pathway where hydrocriticism and the blue humanities can contribute to knowledge on environmental time and narrative strategy in the Anthropocene. Freshwater gets us thinking about our bodies—our basic bodily needs, our senses, and our means of procreation. Because freshwater draws out the human body, it can provide an embodied approach—whether politicised or otherwise—to doing the necessary work of engaging longer, slower timeframes of contemporary ecological crises.

Acknowledgements: The bulk of the research for this article was carried out during my PhD at the Discipline of English, University of Galway. I would like to thank my PhD supervisor, Professor Lionel Pilkington, as well as colleagues and mentors at Galway (including Dr Nessa Cronin and Professor Patrick Lonergan) for reading early versions of this work and for their ongoing support. The article was further developed at University College Dublin, and thanks to mentors and colleagues there. Thanks to the attendees of the panel session where I first presented this work at the ASLE-UKI Biennial Conference at Northumbria University, 2022. Finally, I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewer of this article.

Declaration of interest statement: I declare no potential conflict of interest.

Funding details: This research was funded by a Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship (GOIPG/2020/617) and a Galway Doctoral Scholarship.

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