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“Complicit Concealments”: Developing ecological consciousness in Sally Abbott’s *Closing Down* (2017) and Briohny Doyle’s *Echolalia* (2021)

Abstract:

This article explores the challenges faced by climate fiction writers who address human responses to climate change, emphasising the need to expose the underlying political and economic mechanisms of the climate crisis. It builds on the critique offered by theorists Adam Trexler, Timothy Clark, Mark Fisher and Amitav Ghosh, highlighting the risk of climate fiction novels becoming “complicit concealments” if they fail to focus on the principle drivers of the carbon economy – overconsumption, economic growth and market-based thinking. We analyse a growing trend in Australian climate fiction, where connections between neoliberal capitalism and climate change are becoming major themes. Novels like Sally Abbott’s *Closing Down* (2010) and Briohny Doyle’s *Echolalia* (2021) represent characters’ relations to society and the economy and try to capture the complex realities of climate change. Based on this analysis, we propose the concept of “ecological consciousness” as a potential narrative strategy for writers, building on the Marxist concept of class consciousness, which extends awareness beyond traditional class dynamics to encompass the interconnectedness of humans with the environment. The article concludes by emphasising the strength and versatility of this approach, showcasing its potential for providing a holistic perspective on societal and environmental dynamics in climate fiction.

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Keywords: Climate fiction, Neoliberal capitalism, Sally Abbott, Briohny Doyle, Ecological consciousness

Introduction

For the last five decades, a global movement of novelists and literary critics has been examining the human response to rising temperatures, extreme weather events, sea level rise, and ecological disruptions caused by carbon emissions (see Trexler, 2015; McFarland, 2020; Clark, 2015). Novels addressing climate change issues are broad in genre but bound by intention and have been dubbed “climate fiction” or “cli-fi” by climate activist Dan Bloom (2013). However, as theorists like Adam Trexler (2015), Timothy Clark (2015), Mark Fisher (2009) and Amitav Ghosh (2017) have pointed out, the nature of such vast environmental changes poses challenges for traditional novelists. Many of the books in this category are little more than “modes of concealment that prevent people from recognising the realities of their plight” (Ghosh, p. 11). These critics argue that the deep-seated reluctance of fiction writers to confront the cultural and economic drivers of climate change is leading many novels to feel like mere “disaster stories set in the future” – thus marginalising the real effects climate change has on “the recent past, and, most significantly, the present” (Ghosh, p. 72). Without a focus on the principle drivers of the carbon economy – corporate profit seeking, consumerism and overconsumption, and overexploitation of resources – climate fiction novels risk becoming, to paraphrase Ghosh, complicit concealments (pp. 10–11).

This critique by theorists like Fisher, Clark and Ghosh reveals the challenge faced by climate fiction writers today: how do we expose the underlying political and economic mechanisms of climate change through fiction? What strategies can authors employ to make the vast, complex processes behind climate change more manageable in the novel format? This article investigates a growing trend in Australian climate fiction where the connections between neoliberal capitalism and climate change are becoming major themes. In novels such as Sally Abbott’s *Closing Down* (2017) and Briohny Doyle’s *Echolalia* (2021), we find detailed representations of characters’ relations to society and economy, or what György Lukács (1923) called, “totality”; the interconnected social elements, including economic structures, political institutions and cultural expressions that shape everyone. Building on the Marxist concept of class consciousness, we describe a narrative progression that we call “ecological consciousness” as one potential strategy for Australian writers to engage with the underlying political and economic factors that are driving the climate crisis. We show how depicting a character’s growing awareness of underlying factors is a technique that authors are using to overcome some of the challenges posed by the Anthropocene.

Representing climate change in fiction

Navigating the terrain of climate fiction today poses an unprecedented challenge for writers. To do so, they must confront the limitations of traditional narrative structures that struggle in the face of enormous imaginative demands inherent in portraying the scale of the catastrophe (Trexler, 2015). Coming-of-age stories fail when random natural disasters and economic collapse doom the character’s ability to become an independent adult; suspense falters when there is no clear antagonist, or when the protagonist participates in carbon-producing actions; and literary fiction merges into science fiction or satire. As Trexler said, “the narrative

difficulties of the Anthropocene threaten to rupture the defining features of the genre” (Trexler, pp. 13–14). Even the concept of the Anthropocene itself challenges the novel’s focus on a protagonist who overcomes conflict and resolves a personal crisis. Clark (2015) suggests that a “particular human scale is inherent to the intelligibility of the Earth around us”, meaning that our personal observations of the world tend to override the scientific evidence of global change since our “normal scales of space and time must be understood as contingent projections of a biology which may be relatively inexorable” (p. 30). This leads to a “disjunction between individual perception and global reality” in which our limited, contingent human biology can often fail to grasp the vast scales at which the global climate operates (p. 36). In other words, the sheer scale of the catastrophe makes it difficult for writers to portray in relation to the day-to-day experiences of their protagonists in fiction.

But an even more pressing issue has emerged in climate literature; the problem of what Ghosh (2017) calls the “Great Derangement”, or the failure of artists to interrogate the culture of complicity around climate change. He believes that the questions confronting:

writers and artists today are not just those of the politics of the carbon economy; many of them have to do also with our own practices and the ways in which they make us complicit in the concealments of the broader culture. (pp. 10–11)

Several factors, including the vast scale of the Anthropocene and the cultural hegemony of market-based thinking, present a “challenge not only to the arts and humanities, but also to our common-sense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture in general” (p. 9). Ultimately, Ghosh believes that most climate fiction stories function as “modes of concealment” that fail to confront the true causes of the catastrophe (p. 11) and that these “failures will have to be counted as an aspect of the broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis” (p. 8).

What are the true causes of the catastrophe? The “grievances”, as Alessio Terzi (2022) points out, fall into two main categories; firstly, that “capitalism seems to work for the few, not the many” which results in a “concentration of wealth and power”; and secondly, that capitalism as a “system powered by fossil fuels”, pushes the global community towards “climate disaster” (p. 1). This nexus of economic and social issues has been called “anthropogenic ecological overshoot” which can be defined as the “human consumption of natural resources at rates faster than they can be replenished, and entropic waste production in excess of the Earth’s assimilative and processing capacity” (Merz et al., 2023, p. 2). The growth fetish embedded in our economic assumptions is driven by a market which is portrayed by corporate interests as a detached, disengaged and rational mechanism. Just as Fisher (2009) argues, McChesney (1998) makes the key point that neoliberalism is not just an economic system, but an ideology that embeds market-based thinking:

[i]ndeed, any activity that might interfere with corporate domination of society is automatically suspect because it would interfere with the workings of the free market,

which is advanced as the only rational, fair, and democratic allocator of goods and services. (pp. 7–8)

But when we look to the market for rational solutions to the problem of the overshoot, we find instead that “capitalism has no solution to the ecological crisis, no way to put the brakes on collapse, because its only answer to every problem is more of the same growth that’s killing us” (Smith, 2022, p. 162). Naomi Klein (2014) famously saw this as the “central ideological battle of our time” – the choice between whether we “plan and manage our societies to reflect our goals and values” or abandon control of the global community to the “magic of the market” (p. 53).

But while many question the potential for market-based solutions to the crisis, perhaps even more concerning is the political paralysis that seems to be part and parcel of neoliberal economics. The lack of meaningful action on climate change, accompanied by ever-louder warnings about the necessity for immediate action from bodies such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), suggests that “there is an existential gap between what can be done to confront economic and environmental challenges ... and what culture and power determine is reasonable and proper for society to do” (Pelling et al., 2011, p. 1). It leaves many in the global community, especially the young, with a “feeling that the social contract – with its implicit promise of ever-increasing socioeconomic gains over previous generations – has been broken” (Terzi, p. 8). This paralysis is producing frustration and forcing people to consider whether to “transcend the capitalist world system” in favour of a “revolutionary eco-socialist shift” that would instead privilege “social justice and parity, deep democracy, environmental sustainability, and a safe climate” (Baer, 2021, p. 3).

If the anthropogenic ecological overshoot, charged by a market-based need for growth, is the fundamental driver of climate change, then what available means do writers have to examine this perspective in fiction? How do they explore political and economic change through characterisation and plot? We identify two key texts – Sally Abbott’s *Closing Down* and Briohny Doyle’s *Echolalia* – that are intent on depicting the alienation and hopelessness experienced by the subject in the neoliberal and ecological present. Abbott’s *Closing Down* examines how consumer culture and capitalist ideology creates a false consciousness in the middle classes, while in contrast Doyle’s *Echolalia* reveals the way personal suffering is frequently connected to political and economic frameworks. Our investigation into how these writers utilise a technique we call ecological consciousness offers a study on how our current economic reality can be integrated into climate fiction and demonstrates the strength and versatility of this approach for novelists.

Ecological consciousness and neoliberal totality

The concept of ecological consciousness builds on the Marxist concept of class consciousness by extending the awareness of societal structures and struggles beyond traditional class dynamics to encompass the interconnectedness of humans with our environment. While class consciousness in Marxism involves an understanding of one’s position within the social class

hierarchy and the potential for collective action against oppressive systems (see Glasser & Walker, 2007; Dal Maso, 2021), ecological consciousness broadens this awareness to include the impact of human activities on the natural world and the reciprocal relationship between society and the environment. Lukács's concept of "totality" is closely related to the concepts of both class consciousness and ecological consciousness. In his seminal 1923 text, *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács emphasised the interconnected and dynamic nature of social reality, advocating for an understanding of society as a totality in which various elements, including economic structures, political institutions and cultural expressions, are interrelated. He argues that the commodification of social relations leads to a false consciousness, where individuals are alienated from their own social reality as social interactions, relationships and human labour are transformed into commodities with exchange values in the market. In other words, he understood totality as "a form of consciousness produced in the very life practices of capitalist society" (Eyerman, 1981, p. 49). Genuine class consciousness requires an awareness of this "reifying" effect as it works to reduce social relations to mere economic transactions. In recent years, writers have begun depicting a narrative progression that explores a character's evolving awareness of not only commodified social relations such as those described by Lukács, but also their awareness and understanding of how anthropogenic ecological overshoot – driven by market economics – creates an unprecedented existential threat to humanity.

Our analysis finds that protagonists in both novels begin in a state of false consciousness, unable to think beyond the limits of the neoliberal imaginary and unaware of the scale of the climate catastrophe. As the stories progress, the protagonists are forced to confront climate change, often through shocking or violent events that recast how they see the world, until they reach a moment of insight – or ecological consciousness – where the scale and complexity of the problem becomes visible to them. We see ecological consciousness as a specific strategy employed by writers to narrate a character's slowly unfolding awareness of how climate change reveals "the fantasy structure on which capitalist realism depends" – or the dangerous "presupposition that resources are infinite" and that "any problem can be solved by the market" (Fisher, 2005, p. 24). This approach takes in Fisher's proposal that a potential "strategy" for writers that may yield results is to aid readers in seeing through the "fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality" by invoking "the underlying realities that capitalism presents to us" – the evidence that "capitalism is in fact primed to destroy the entire human environment" (p. 24). Fisher calls this condition "capitalist realism", a term that captures our artistic passivity towards market economics and the way it "seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable" (p. 14), leaving "all social and political possibility" to be "seemingly bound up in the economic status quo" (Shonkwiler & La Berge, 2014, p. 2). In these novels, the protagonists are experiencing political apathy and resignation, lost in the false consciousness Fisher describes, until the events of the novel challenge this mindset by emphasising the interconnectedness of economic, social and environmental realms.

Echolalia and the moment of transformation

Briohny Doyle's novel *Echolalia* employs this strategy to excellent effect. The protagonist, Emma, lives a comfortable life in a palatial house in the small town of Shorehaven with her husband Robert Cormac, a wealthy property developer. When her son Robbie is born with a condition called Fragile X (which is analogous to autism), Emma's life begins to unravel as she feels more and more burdened by factors beyond her control: the requirements for her to be a model wife, the demands of raising her children and the trauma she carries from her teen years. Along with this, there is an incessant heat that dries the lake in front of her house, the receding level of which, we are told, is a "sundial tracking her own malaise" (ch 2, para 1). The lake exists as a stark symbol of the encroaching heat and aridity that grows more deadly each year. Doyle refers to it at regular intervals, using its decline to map the progress of the climate catastrophe across the novel's generational time span. The narrative is split into two timelines simply called "Before" and "After", that recount the events leading up to the moment when Emma murders her son, and the aftermath of the act many years later as Emma is recovering from postnatal depression. Through these dual perspectives, Doyle captures the overarching factors behind Emma's despondency and her eventual desperation.

Emma's declining mental health is repeatedly linked to her awareness that she, like the environment, is a resource used for generating profit. There is a lingering question in the novel around whether Emma's only purpose is to produce children for her husband. She reflects on her position in the family and how she is perceived by her husband Robert and mother-in-law Patricia when she wonders:

to what extent was she herself a worker, tending to investments? To what extent was she an investor, her stock in the form of her new name, her work, her womb? And later, had she and at least one of her children become a toxic asset? (ch 4, para 86)

Doyle employs the language of industrial agriculture to describe Emma and define her place in the family, naturalising her economic subjectivity, and this framework provides a powerful tool for generating irony and exposing the ideological formations at work in the Cormac family home. When her mother-in-law Patricia buys a foal and explains that she "brought her to breed", we can't be certain exactly which "her" she's referring to – Emma or the foal (ch10, para 213). Later, Emma's friend Shane tells her: "don't kid yourself, you're only here to feed the baby. You're a piece of equipment. And like any harvester or ditch witch, you'll be written off if you keep fucking up" (ch 24, section 2, para 42). The reifying effects of the neoliberal imaginary are captured in these moments as the abstract concept of the return on investment becomes a lived experience for Emma, poisoning the relationships she shares with the Cormacs.

Doyle is meticulous in her portrayal of how this blinkered ideological position defines the everyday lives of the Cormacs. For instance, Patricia and Bob, who are Emma's parents-in-law and the owners of the Shorehaven fortune, seem to be alienated by the same patriarchal capitalist processes they enforce. One afternoon while watching TV and insulting "leftist politicians", Patricia comments on the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard:

look at this poor woman. A house she hardly lives in. No husband. No kids. A kitchen with no food. I mean, how can a person who can't even imagine what life is really about make decisions for anyone else? (ch 8, para 101).

We understand from these comments the kinds of values that shape Patricia's societal perceptions – values which she also forces onto Emma. Yet, Patricia finds herself in constant turmoil about her own values. After lying to investors about a property development on the edge of the dried lakebed where an “unfathomably wet winter had turned the lake into a bog, and the construction pit into a collapsed pond”, she finds her resolve for chasing profits begins to waver and she takes a break to sob “mutely in the toilet stall” (ch 14, para 42). As part of Doyle's project to make visible the economic and political matters at hand, she frequently contrasts Patricia's displays of self-pity with moments that remind us of her callousness, such as when she complains about the closing down of a slaughterhouse due to animal cruelty: “people wanted jobs, they wanted strong economies, but they didn't want the truth of industry anymore” (ch 10, para 39). Again, Doyle intends for us to read this ironically: the “truth” of these corporate interests and the vast environmental degradation and suffering they cause is precisely what the novel is exposing.

This exemplifies a key feature of the novel: the way neoliberal totality is brought down to a human level and made relevant to the lives of its characters. Emma experiences these forces as a type of psychic trauma. With her mental health further deteriorating to the point of breakdown, she plans to rid herself of her baby, Robbie, by abandoning him inside Westlake Shopping Centre. In choosing this space of consumerist valorisation – a site heavily influenced “by relations of capital and consumer culture” which inevitably “invokes concern” about “the impact ... places like it are having on culture and community” (Tyndall, 2010, pp. 133–4) – Doyle exposes the connections between Emma's suffering and the larger ideological framework in which she operates. Emma notes that the centre is “neglected and shabby” and “marked only by the coming and going of franchises, a kind of global weather” (ch 15, para 40). The “gestural chaos of shop dummies” with their “white hands twisted at unnatural angles” seems to reflect the agony that Emma is experiencing as she wills herself to abandon Robbie and escape her life with the Cormacs (ch 15, para 45). Frequently, at moments of pain for these characters, we're reminded of “the relationship between accumulation and representation in the present” (Shonkwiler & La Berge, p. 7) as these forces become visible to the reader. This is not the type of complicit concealment described by Ghosh and Fisher, but instead a detailed depiction of a growing ecological consciousness that links the crisis to its roots in economics and makes visible the underlying reality through these fractures in the ideological field.

Emma's symbolic moment of transformation arrives when she reaches a point of emotional collapse and abandons Robbie beside the lakebed one night after a party. The hopelessness of her situation calls to mind Roy Scranton's insightful commentary on climate fiction and how it often explores humanity learning “to die” because “it is too late to imagine effective responses to the challenge of living in the Anthropocene” (quoted in Xausa, 2021, p. 105). In contrast to most apocalyptic fiction where, as McFarland (2020) observes, “in a climate changed future” children offer “the promise of species survival and social rebirth (p. 12), we

find the death of Robbie in *Echolalia* to be a point of radical change for Emma as she comes to understand that “nothing could continue as before” (ch 24, section 2, para 81). Robbie’s death is instead a rebirth or renewal for Emma, and we are told that it was “this knowledge that allowed her to survive” (ch 24, section 2, para 81). She leaves behind the Cormac house and her remaining children, Arthur and Clem. It is the ultimate rejection of the patriarchal capitalist values embodied by the Cormacs.

While in the “Before” sections of the novel, we find Emma in a materially comfortable life, existing in a state of malaise and unable to see beyond the ideological limits imposed on her, this posture of naivety falls away entirely in the “After” sections. Here, we learn that Emma has grown into full ecological consciousness and sees the connections between her family, the climate crisis and the neoliberal imaginary. This is demonstrated through Emma’s relationship with her now-adult daughter, Clem, who has become a celebrated artist. While holding an exhibition in Shorehaven Gallery, Clem tells us: “[e]ach image depicts a place from which something was taken, rendering the scenes partial and scarred. The violence isn’t obvious. You can only see it by training your eye” (ch 25, para 8). The violence Clem refers to here is both violence done to the environment around Shorehaven, which features in her art, and the violence Emma both suffered and inflicted, which is implied by Clem’s choice of imagery – the location beside the lake where baby Robbie’s body was found. Again, the novel reinforces the idea that environmental issues, such as climate change, are not isolated from societal structures but are deeply entwined with the same economic, political and cultural systems that brought Emma to murder her son in desperation to escape her life with the Cormacs.

Emma’s new ecological awareness is apparent in her interactions with Clem. While watching from afar, Emma notices on the place card by the frame, “Pat Cormac’s name,” and a guest nearby comments: “she’s the artist’s grandmother, you know?” (ch 25, para section 2, para 3). When Emma observes the painting herself, she wonders how people are unable to see its point:

Clem is asking her, and all of them – the family and the people who fill the gallery – to look at these things that have been done and cannot be undone or redeemed but must be witnessed and reckoned with. (ch 25, section 2, para 6)

This passage contains another slippage in referential certainty as we consider which acts Emma believes “must be witnessed and reckoned with” – her own acts of violence, the profit-seeking predations of the Cormacs, or the environmental destruction in Shorehaven? As is frequently the case in *Echolalia*, Doyle uses these moments to remind us that the problems are intertwined and cannot be separated. There is no simple or orderly conclusion to their story. When Clem confronts her mother, seeking answers about why she murdered Robbie, Doyle gestures towards the overarching economic factors that caused the novel’s events: “wouldn’t it make more sense if there was an untold story? a puppet master, a plot. A loving mother. A good home ... Look under the bed to find the monster” (ch 24, section 2, para 59). The monster here is the dualism promoted by the Cormacs – the idea of a fundamental human exceptionalism that situates humans as separate from their ecology. Emma has clearly come to reject this.

The intricate interplay between the personal, the systemic and the environmental in *Echolalia* unfolds with striking clarity. Through the character of Emma, Doyle navigates the complexities of false consciousness, creating a narrative that exposes the commodification of social relations and its profound impact on individuals within the Cormac family. Emma's journey from a state of malaise to a profound ecological consciousness is a poignant exploration of the novel's central theme: the reifying effects of the neoliberal imaginary. The Cormac family, ensnared in the ideological constructs they enforce, grapple with alienation, self-pity and the harsh realities of profit-seeking, while Emma's symbolic act of killing her son becomes a powerful statement on the entanglement of personal suffering and the larger neoliberal framework. As the characters reckon with the intertwined nature of their problems, the novel resists a simple or orderly conclusion, mirroring the complexity of the issues it addresses. Instead, *Echolalia* asks readers to recognise the urgent need for a collective awakening to the violence of the Anthropocene.

***Closing Down* and middle class false consciousness**

If *Echolalia* prompts us to consider the ways in which the personal and the systemic intertwine, then Sally Abbott's novel *Closing Down* presents us with a much starker picture of the corrosion of the social imagination and the connections between consumption and the Anthropocene. Like Doyle, Abbott depicts characters who are grappling with the consequences of economic forces and the personal impacts these structures have. Both writers employ irony and satire to highlight the absurdities and contradictions within the systems their characters occupy and resist. Both utilise symbolism and metaphor to convey thematic coherence. Both share a reluctance to provide clear solutions or alternatives within the narrative, instead emphasising the challenges of envisioning change beyond the confines of dominant ideologies. Bushfires, droughts and ecological disasters become integral elements that shape the characters' experiences and decisions. However, while Emma's ecological consciousness in *Echolalia* is closely tied to understanding her own reified social relations, emphasising personal introspection and realisation, Abbott's characters slowly come to perceive the perverse logic underpinning the systems of neoliberal totality and instead find solace in each other and in community. These differences contribute to the unique qualities of each novel, offering distinct perspectives on the intersection of personal experiences, economic ideology, and environmental crises in the context of climate fiction.

Closing Down follows two protagonists, Clare McDonald and Roberto Adam, as they negotiate life in near-future Australia under the shadow of a collapsing economy and a global migration crisis caused by the climate catastrophe that has plunged large parts of the country into permanent drought. Hundreds of towns around rural Australia are "closing down" in a government-led process to relocate the population to parts of the country that are still safe to inhabit. In Myamba, a small town badly affected by the disaster, Clare embarks on night-time walks revealing glimpses of ordinary lives and signs of social fragmentation; such as empty, vandalised houses and people walking away from abandoned towns. On the other side of the world in Geneva, we meet Roberto, a journalist who writes about the atrocities committed against climate refugees in Africa and Europe while his fiancé Ella monitors the flow of

refugees around the world. The characters' attempts to confront injustice become increasingly futile, reflecting a bleak vision of a world in crisis. But the narrative emphasises the transformative power of community in the face of a broken world, exploring how to respond without succumbing to the broken society's anestetising nature, posing questions about collective responsibility and the possibility of personal change through community engagement.

The early scenes in the novel focus on establishing the apocalyptic environmental changes happening in Australia and around the world. We learn from Clare that Myamba is an "Inclusion Zone Town" (p. 8) where people from parts of the country rendered uninhabitable by drought and bushfires can apply to be relocated and that regular convoys of "large trucks coming into town from the north" (p. 15) pass through as they bring internally displaced people inside the inclusion zone. Clare witnesses other people acting in defiance of the policy and heading towards the exclusion zone, their "the silhouettes trekking silently north" (p. 15). As part of the process of closing down, Clare has been assigned to a workgroup tasked with dismantling uninhabitable towns. This work causes her to reflect on the climate catastrophe, imagining it as a "mighty unseen hand redesigning the country", a vision of destruction that leaves her with an "unutterable sadness" as she continues her work as a "gravedigger, silently helping to prepare for the inevitable and heart-breaking final end of endings" (p. 44). In these early chapters, Abbott effectively conveys the impact the disaster is having on Clare in a time when the possibility of mitigation has passed and the world is dealing with the tragic aftermath of ecological overshoot.

Importantly, Abbott also begins embedding Clare within a social and economic landscape influenced by factors such as consumerism, overconsumption and resource exploitation. The Myamba Maxi Store, the local supermarket where townspeople congregate to escape the 46 degree temperatures outside, becomes a site of resistance to overconsumption and wealth inequality. Clare encounters a group of protestors from "Educators for Food Democracy" staging a sit-in at the supermarket, chaining themselves to shelving in the aisles and passing out pamphlets that offer "graphic descriptions of hundreds of ten-year-old girls burning to death" in a warehouse fire somewhere in "Greater China" after they had "worked weeks, months of fifteen-hour shifts sealing up boxes of cereals and dry biscuits for the careless glazed-eyed shoppers in towns like Myamba" (p. 34). This encounter leaves Clare unsettled. Returning home, she reads the pamphlets slowly, "trying to understand what she should eat, or could afford to eat, if making a tuna casserole took the world a step further to shutdown" (p. 33). Abbott is careful to develop a sense of how Clare experiences the world from inside a social and economic totality. The contradictions, inequalities and alienation that arise from neoliberalism, particularly those contributing to climate change, are ever-present in Clare's view of the world.

So, while Clare's ecological consciousness is already quite developed when we meet her in the novel, by contrast, Abbot's other protagonist, Roberto, seems to initially resist any introspection or change in behaviour prompted by the "final end of endings" the world is going through. Clare's point of view encompasses both the immediate environmental crises and some

of the underlying factors contributing to the larger climate catastrophe – a depiction that, we argue, avoids the kind of complicit concealment Ghosh described. But even though Roberto is engaged with the refugee crisis brought on by the catastrophe, writing articles and appearing on television shows to discuss it, he also exhibits a lack of awareness or a disregard for the ethical implications of global economic structures, and prioritises personal desires and convenience over environmental and ethical considerations. As the novel progresses, Abbott develops a detailed depiction of the false consciousness experienced by Roberto, who is not part of the capitalist elite, but who nevertheless aspires to a lifestyle that aligns with capitalist values, including consumption patterns that contribute to environmental degradation.

Roberto's false consciousness is captured in two key moments in the novel. Both come during the same scene in which, taking a trip to Nairobi, Roberto and Ella stop at a restaurant for a meal. The waiter offers them an outrageously priced bottle of wine for \$400, prompting a comedic exchange:

[Roberto] smiled and shrugged. "We'll have two," he said. "Two bottles."
 "Then have three for the price of two?" The waiter's voice had become loud and harsh.
 "Why not? Four for the price of three? A one-night-only offer. Treat yourself and the lady, sir."
 Robbie thought of the child outside the hotel with the beggar, and the sagging nappy, and the guard's boot against the child's thin ribs. (p. 116)

Roberto keenly feels the hypocrisy of his position, which Abbott takes care to reveal by juxtaposing his overt consumption against the earlier scene with a begging child beaten by a security guard. He justifies the cost of the wine to himself by reminding us that it was "ridiculous, but everything was ridiculous" (p. 116). It illustrates the conundrum facing members of the middle class like Roberto, shaped by societal norms and consumer culture, and adopting values and behaviours that contradict their own long-term interests and the wellbeing of the planet. The ethical implications of consumption in a system that encourages detachment from the social and environmental consequences of human action becomes a central theme in the novel.

But Abbott continues to build on this scene, furthering the idea of a middle class held hostage by consumer culture and examining the tension between individual desires and the collective need for sustainable practices. While waiting for his meal, Roberto notices that the birds outside are made of plastic and that the sounds of wind and of birds are coming from speakers. He asks the gardener why this is the case and receives this explanation:

people who come to eat their lunch and dinner on our verandah see trees and flowers and birds and smell water and hear it on leaves and this makes them very happy. And even people who can be bothered to come down into the garden and find out that everything is plastic, they can still see something that is perfect, despite what it is. You, sir, may find that foolish, but for most people these days it is more than enough. In fact, it is preferable. Plastic is forever. (pp. 121–2)

There's a deliberate irony here that Roberto also understands: the customers in the restaurant find happiness in an illusion of a natural world presented by the plastic garden. The intended comparison between the plastic garden and the desolate, abandoned landscapes that Clare moves through is apparent. The restaurant scene becomes a pivotal moment for Roberto's character as these insights seem to make him more and more aware that he is participating in a system that prioritises consumption and convenience over environmental and social wellbeing. It is a deeply uncomfortable realisation for Roberto, a man who is committed to exposing the injustice and cruelty of the refugee system, but a realisation that he is not yet prepared to act on. His reticence reflects what Fisher (and similarly Clark) said about the corrosion of social imagination: that "it isn't just that neoliberalism is preferable to other political programs; it's that nothing else is now even conceivable" (quoted in Shonkwiler & La Berge, p. 28). He cannot yet conceive of another way to live.

However, Abbott takes a similar approach to Doyle when examining the lives of her characters. As we saw with Emma in *Echolalia*, Roberto also experiences a moment of violence that puts him on a path towards ecological consciousness in a complex and dialectical transformation of his values. On a trip home to Australia, Roberto is involved in a car accident that leaves him hospitalised for many weeks after his leg is amputated. During his stay in hospital, he regularly meets with Clare who is now living with his grandmother, Granna Adams, on the family property in Myamba. These encounters remind him that people "who managed to smile or laugh, no matter what outrageous hand life dealt out to them, people who knew how to just keep going, no matter what" are the essential element of a good life (p. 261). After spending time with Clare and coming to understand her grounded, low-impact lifestyle, he seems to re-evaluate what he considers to be meaningful and decides: "I am here. I am alive. I am glad" (p. 261). Clare buys him a dog as a present, which fulfils a longing he has held for many years, and it seems to prompt a shift in his thinking. Recognising shared interests with others in similar social positions, especially the working class, fosters a sense of solidarity; one key element to escaping false consciousness as individuals gain a clear understanding of their true class interests. When a bushfire sweeps through Myamba, Roberto plays a pivotal role in helping to defend the family home in a moment which marks the emergence of his ecological consciousness as he understands how his own wellbeing is interconnected with that of others and the environment. His transformation from a guilt-stricken, ineffective and conflicted member of the upper middle class to a vital and active member of his community's engagement with the climate catastrophe is the central narrative concern of the novel.

This kind of Marxist reading of *Closing Down* reveals several clever ways in which Abbott explores the entanglements of personal and systemic issues in the face of environmental and economic crises. She depicts the consequences of unchecked consumption and the Anthropocene, taking great care to make sure that the connections between the climate crisis and its root causes in the economics of ecological overshoot are present in the lives of her characters. They constantly grapple with the perverse logic underpinning neoliberal structures and find solace in community and collective action. Roberto's journey exemplifies the false consciousness of the middle class; held hostage by consumer culture, unable to confront the ethical implications of their actions. Ultimately, *Closing Down* underscores the pressing need

for a collective response to the interconnected challenges of economic ideology, environmental crises and personal values, challenging readers to envision change beyond the confines of dominant ideologies.

Some potential strategies for authors

While writers aiming to explore the relationship between climate change, economics and consumer culture can draw valuable insights from *Echolalia* and *Closing Down*, we also wish to emphasise that as Ghosh, Trexler, Fisher and others have argued, the risks of complicity with dominant ideologies or concealment of the causes of the climate crisis are ever present for writers. Realism as a mode of writing is particularly susceptible here, as it attempts to recreate, as Fisher said, the “very subjects and objects that the mode claims to document” and therefore recreates its politics, meaning we must accept that “[a]ll realism is already capitalist” (quoted in Shonkwiler & La Berge, p. 1). But the kind of realism Fisher outlines is not merely “a representational mode or aesthetic”: it is best understood as “a general ideological formation in which capitalism is the most real of our horizons, the market-dominant present that forms the limits of our imaginaries” (Shonkwiler & La Berge, p. 2). This is why Fisher’s suggestion of searching for ways to disrupt the mental framework of “apparent reality” by invoking “the underlying realities that capitalism presents to us” is such useful, practical advice for writers (2009, p. 14). Furthermore, as Trexler argues, it is not only possible but essential for authors to continue to seek ways to effectively represent the global scale of the disaster, even if “climate novels must change the parameters of storytelling” to find effective writing strategies (p. 14). Likewise, Xausa is careful to stress that “literary studies can play an important role in understanding, if not solving, this crisis”, because fundamentally, it is a crisis of the imagination (2021, p. 100). We believe that many of the strategies adopted by Abbott and Doyle offer effective ways to disrupt the neoliberal imaginary.

As our analysis has shown, weaving personal narratives into the broader context of environmental and economic crises is one useful approach to take. Characters that embody the complexities and contradictions individuals face in navigating a world dominated by consumer culture and market-based thinking can make some of these concealed ideologies visible to readers. Illustrating the economic impacts on a character or their community is also a useful way to embed these themes into a text. Exploring how economic structures, including neoliberal capitalism, contribute to climate change and influence characters’ consciousness, relationships and daily lives is one of the most successful aspects of these novels. A key part of this process is developing characters with evolving ecological consciousness. As a narrative progression, the journey from initial resistance or lack of awareness to a deeper understanding of the environmental implications of personal choices and societal structures is satisfying for readers and effective at depicting how macro-economic realities effect people on a personal level. A story progression where characters grapple with conflicting values and behaviours that contradict their long-term interests and the wellbeing of the planet, reflect on their lives and find reasons to change is already a common narrative structure in Australian climate fiction and offers possibilities as the genre further evolves.

Further, clearly articulating the connections between climate change and economic systems is essential if we are to move the genre beyond complicit concealment of the causes of the climate crisis. Demonstrating how economic forces contribute to environmental crises fosters a holistic depiction of the intertwined nature of these issues. One strategy that both Abbott and Doyle used was to examine the ethical dilemmas faced by characters, especially those in the middle class, torn between personal desires moulded by consumer culture and the collective need for sustainable practices. Showcasing the tensions arising from individual choices within a system that encourages detachment from social and environmental consequences provides both narrative tension and an effective tool for revealing the inconsistencies in the field of “apparent reality”, to use Fisher’s term. A focus on these generative tensions also helped both Doyle and Abbott to avoid clear-cut solutions within the narrative, which may be unrealistic given the complex nature of the crisis, instead emphasising the challenges of envisioning change beyond dominant ideologies.

Conclusion

As writers grapple with the complexities of climate change, economics and social justice, the integration of ecological themes into the novel will continue to present writers with an ethical hazard: how do we expose the underlying political and economic mechanisms of climate change through fiction? Within an anti-capitalist framework such as that proposed by Fisher, Ghosh and others, it becomes evident that a depiction of the developing ecological consciousness of a protagonist offers a pathway for writers. It provides a lens through which to peel away the layers of our contemporary crises and contemplate a more sustainable and just future. Abbott’s characters navigate a world on the brink of collapse due to climate catastrophe and economic upheaval, prompting readers to confront the consequences of unchecked consumer culture and capitalist ideologies. Doyle’s characters journey from malaise to ecological consciousness in a poignant exploration of false consciousness, revealing the entanglement of personal suffering with larger ideological frameworks, ultimately challenging readers to confront the complexities of the Anthropocene. Both novels shed light on the complexities and consequences of these interconnected factors rather than concealing or downplaying them. They seem to prompt readers to critically examine the root causes of the climate crisis rather than perpetuating a complicit stance. This represents an important development in the emerging genre of climate fiction.

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