

*To Receive the Wolf:
The Essay in the
Anthropocene*

Introduction

On Being Impelled¹

The title of this exegesis, *To Receive the Wolf: the Essay in the Anthropocene*, describes the relationship between exegesis and creative and the notion of receiving or reception as applied to abundance, attention, distraction and human agency in the geographic and literary fields. The primary research tool for the creative output of this PhD is the personal literary essay, realised through a set of fourteen essays exploring abundance in the Anthropocene.² Researching the essay has allowed me to build upon and extend ideas from my previous work, which include two books of literary non-fiction published by Saraband.³

The original contribution of this research results from the deployment of four major structural devices.

The Greek word for ‘unwritten’ - ‘agrapha’ - is more usually employed to describe the sayings of Jesus not found in the gospels. In its original meaning ‘agrapha’ represents the bringing of chiefly good news; a form of consolation. In this way, the ‘agrapha’ not only manifests as the underpinning structural force, but also in my approach of invoking landscapes and ideas that exist mostly outside the contemporary canon of British nature writing. As a recurring leitmotif, the ‘agrapha’ allows me to contextualise the ‘good news’ of abundance in the natural world, and simultaneously situates the literary essay as a form of consolation in troubled environmental times. In this way the ‘agrapha’

¹ I have deliberately used the traditional historic title mode for the essay, as used by Seneca, Montaigne, Hazlitt et al to orientate myself and the reader in this exegesis, and as demonstrated in Phillip Lopate’s *The Art of the Personal Essay; An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* (Anchor Books, 1995).

² The International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS), the professional body charged with defining Earth’s time scale asserts that the current era, the Holocene, began 11,700 years ago after the last major ice age and persists today. Some experts though, argue for the more updated term of “Anthropocene” —‘from anthropo, for “man,” and cene, for “new” —because human-kind has caused mass extinctions of plant and animal species, polluted the oceans and altered the atmosphere, among other lasting impacts.’ The atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen popularized the term in 2000, and in 2013 the IUGS convened a group of scholars to decide by 2016 whether the Holocene is officially over and the new era of the Anthropocene has begun. The science of stratigraphy (the study of rock layers) criticises the notion insisting that definitive evidence for a new epoch simply does not exist. The stratigrapher Whitney Autin suggests ‘Anthropocene’ is more about pop culture than hard science. Andrew Revkin, a New York Times reporter suggested it is significant that the issue is being debated at all. For the purposes of this PhD, it was important to me to use the term Anthropocene because it has entered the mainstream discourse as identifying the culpability of human behaviours upon the planet – something that is deeply embedded in my creative output. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-is-the-anthropocene-and-are-we-in-it-164801414/> accessed 19.01.2021.

³ Karen Lloyd, *The Gathering Tide; A Journey Around the Edgelands of Morecambe Bay* (Saraband, 2015), and *The Blackbird Diaries*, (Saraband, 2017). In July 2020 my poetry pamphlet *Self Portrait as Ornithologist* was published by Wayleave Press. In 2016 I edited and published the Curlew Calling Anthology, (Numenius Press) to raise funds for curlew conservation. <https://www.bto.org/understanding-birds/book-reviews/curlew-calling-anthology-poetry-nature-writing-and-images>

manifests as a wolf running along a suburban street in the Netherlands, Imperial eagles returned to Hungary's fields of 'brutalist agriculture,' and is also invoked through discussions of familiar places, the Lake District, for example, but in arguments that are contrary to more conventional narratives.

The concept of the 'agrapha' works in tandem with my three other structural devices. These are, attention (the essay as 'activism,' or 'environmental justice action,'⁴ distraction (what happens when humans turn their backs or pay the wrong kind of attention) and the linear use of memoir (the self as the connecting force in the work, but always in relation to the world around me).

In my research the writing shuttles along a continuum from field research to exploring and making sense of the literary essay, in developing 'composite articulations of place'⁵ and from embodied experiences and representations of those experiences. As a book my research will be made available for a generalist readership, published by Bloomsbury in September 2021 in the UK and November in the USA, under the title of *Abundance; Nature in Recovery*. As my research travels out into the world therefore, its circularity of influence extends widely beyond academia, carrying with it the element of memoir where the writer is in conversation with and reflects upon, her unfolding narrative, together with the 'agrapha' as primarily good news of the unreported world.

Snyder attests that in human connection to the cultural landscape of flora and fauna has all but dissolved through dominant systems of politics and economics.⁶ The essays written for this PhD are a way of re-establishing that connection; a way of seeing myself in relation to the world.⁷ Like this I avoid a self-centric 'nature recovery' type memoir and instead align myself towards that great progenitor of the modern essay, Michel de Montaigne, who wrote about his interior and exterior worlds, the domestic and private. In talking about myself in this way, I am also talking about all of us⁸ – or at least those of us in the developed North and West.⁹ As Franzen asserts, rather than run away, the essayist runs *towards* the flames¹⁰ - whether it is the self or the world that is under scrutiny.

⁴ This is the term I have decided to use to describe the kind of writing I am doing in this PhD, influenced by Nicole Walker's term 'social justice action' in 'The Essay as Social Justice Action:' *Journal of Creative Nonfiction*, Issue 64, Adaptation. (11th August, 2017). <https://www.creativenonfiction.org/online-reading/braided-essay-social-justice-action> accessed 12.07.2020.

⁵ Daniel Weston, *Contemporary Literary Landscapes: The Poetics of Experience*, (Routledge; 1st edition, May 2017) p.1

⁶ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, (Counterpoint, 1990), p.40-41.

⁷ Similar to and aligned towards the essays of Nicole Walker in *Sustainability; a Love Story*, (Mad Creek Books, imprint of Ohio State University, 2018).

⁸ Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay; An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. (Anchor Books, 1995). p. xxiii

⁹ It is important to note here that although climate change has been driven by developed nations, its effects are being and will continue to be experienced by the less developed South and West.

¹⁰ Jonathan Franzen, *To The End of the End of the Earth* (4th Estate, 2018), p.18.

Rebecca Solnit has used literature as a force for lending coherence to activism. In *Hope in the Dark; Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*¹¹ she explores the ‘spots of time’¹² that shaped impelling moments where authoritarian and political administrations were challenged through public discourse, and where ‘hope’ and its pursuance provided a potent stimulus. As an environmental activist *and* writer, I wanted my book to be ‘a little machine’¹³ where writing occupies the territorial fluidity between literature, activism, consolation and distraction in an uncertain world. Whilst the initial impelling force was to research *only* positive news, the unfolding climate crisis necessitated situating consolation and activism alongside forces of destruction; one does not exist without the other. My preferred identifying term therefore, for the kind of writing I am doing is ‘environmental literature,’ although for clarity I will use the more familiar ‘nature writing’ throughout this exegesis.

The essay then, became the literary tool for navigating between attention and distraction, where joy in language is the metaphysical force for communication, and the essay is an act of attention, love and care in the field of the ‘agrapha.’ As Solnit writes, “Activism itself can generate hope because it already constitutes an alternative.”¹⁴

On Methodology

In *The Great Derangement; Climate Change and the Unthinkable*,¹⁵ Amitav Ghosh explores how literature, politics and history have failed to address the subject of climate chaos. He further argues that such failure ‘will have to be counted as an aspect of the broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis.’¹⁶ I intended that my research engage directly with environmental issues and avoided manifesting merely as nature as consolation. My essays are an act of imaginative and cultural engagement with climate chaos, where attention and love manifest as pivotal counterweights to the loss of connection between humans and the natural world. They are a literary method for illuminating the sacredness of the natural world. Indeed, part of my research’s original contribution is in using the essay as a probing instrument for mapping arguments and ideas under my central theme of abundance in the Anthropocene. The writing shuttles between the

¹¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Canongate, 2016).

¹² William Wordsworth, ‘The Prelude XVII’ (Ernest de Sélincourt, 1926) line 208.

¹³ Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *Thousand Plateaus*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lancaster/detail.action?docID=742364>. P4. Created from Lancaster on 2021-02-05 08:00:02.

¹⁴ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark; Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Cannongate,2016), p.24.

¹⁵ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement; Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

¹⁶ Amitav Ghosh, ‘Where is the Fiction about Climate Change’ *The Guardian* (26th October, 2016).

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/28/amitav-ghosh-where-is-the-fiction-about-climate-change>- accessed 06. 01. 2021

numinous, or ‘sacred’¹⁷ experiences of nature, and destructive forces. It is an ‘*act of reciprocity with the world*,¹⁸ something I can give in return, where the ‘agrapa’ is a willow warbler held in the hand or walking in the boreal forests of Romania. Each essay is also a metaphorical ‘viewing station’ for situating the tenacious commitment of conservationists and others against my own embodied and philosophical experiences of the natural and human worlds.

This research, however, was to be no ‘boldly going.’¹⁹ There was to be no imposing of the self onto the landscapes under question, where the writing is a vehicle for a more self-centric ‘I’. Rather, my intention was to write ‘toward’²⁰ the targets of the essays showing myself in relation to the world around me. Through memoir then, I am a fallible, self-deprecating narrator, an interpreter and a geeky purveyor of information where the writing itself is the *bridge for communication*. In this way I lead the reader into a theatre of ideas where the essay’s generosities facilitate the pursuance of thoughts and arguments. The term ‘Innenwelt’ - the mapping of the self to a world of objects²¹ - provided another means of conceptual engagement across the whole book. ‘Innenwelt’ is myself in relation to the world, but as a writer, it also manifests in my relationship with language as I map myself onto the developing manuscript. These intertwined approaches underpin my process, allowing me to move ‘toward’ an understanding of how this research achieves differently through the deployment of imaginative language and a developing sense of rhetorical authority. In combination these approaches constitute part of my research’s original contribution to the genre of literary nonfiction.

In 1994 Phillip Lopate wrote ‘the personal essay’s suitability for experimental method and self-reflective process, its tolerance for the fragmentary and irresolution, make it uniquely appropriate to the present era.’²² The idea of the essay as a genre feels even more urgent in 2021 where the future of

¹⁷ Daniel Weston, *Contemporary Literary Landscapes: The Poetics of Experience* (Routledge, 2016), p.130.

¹⁸ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Milkweed Editions, 2013 Walker), p.152.

¹⁹ Kathleen Jamie, ‘A Lone Enraptured Male,’ *London Review of Books*, No.5 (6th March 2008). Review of Robert McFarlane’s *The Wild Places*, (Granta, 2008) in which Jamie questions the south-centric ‘quelling’; voice of the southern, white male gaze on Scottish landscape.

²⁰ Daniel Weston, *Contemporary Literary Landscapes: The Poetics of Experience* (Routledge, 2016), p.130.

²¹ Uexküll, Thure von ‘The sign theory of Jakob von Uexküll,’ (1987), in Krampen; et al. (eds.). *Classics of Semiotics*. New York: Plenum. (pp. 147–179).

²² Phillip Lopate, *The Essay: Exploration or Argument?* Author(s), *Creative Nonfiction*, No. 41 (SPRING 2011), (pp. 58-59) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44346151> Accessed: 16-08-2019.

life on Earth is ‘at a juncture that feels orders of magnitude more atomized and uncertain,’²³ shown in both the inability of capitalist forces to respond and acts of resistance to that inaction.²⁴

In the online version of the ‘New Networks for Nature’²⁵ conference 2020, a nature writing discussion panel titled ‘New Perspectives on Nature Writing’ featuring nature writer Jessica J. Lee, poet Mona Arshi and writer Jean McNeil failed entirely to address how the genre currently engages with biodiversity loss and climate breakdown. This does indeed suggest a profound sense of disconnection and possible denial amongst a cohort of writers who might usefully engage with the problems at hand,²⁶ suggesting philosopher Timothy Morton’s argument that global warming (‘global heating’ in George Monbiot’s preferred terminology),²⁷ and biodiversity loss are objects of such immense scale – or ‘hyperobjects’ - that society is unable to begin to address them. ‘Shifting baseline syndrome,’²⁸ first explained by marine biologist Daniel Pauly, shows that declines in the natural world go unnoticed, and therefore our perceptions of change are out of kilter with the actual rate of change in the environment. My intention, therefore, was to establish a baseline for communicating environmental issues through the literary essay; to approach the ‘hyperobject’. To do this I researched in a number of countries, meeting ecologists, ornithologists, activists, farmers, philanthropists, forest rangers, volunteers, writers and guides.²⁹ I also researched through my supporting bibliography, scientific literature, digital data, field notes, memories, photographs, paintings, objects, film, online research, eyewitness testimonies and anecdote. Through these diverse methods I was able to pay attention in the field of each individual essay and later across the entire collection.

In Chapter 1, I will explore the essay’s diverse and formal opportunities and show that the essay itself is an abundant form allowing numerous styles of engagement. I will discuss how various writers

²³ <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/interview/an-interview-with-phillip-lopate/> accessed 15.11.2020

²⁴ The development of ‘Extinction Rebellion’ – a major international pressure group using disruptive direct and peaceful action to provoke government-level action, and ‘Fridays for Future’ movement together with the rise in international reputation of Greta Thunberg.

²⁵ An informal alliance of scientists, ecologists, writers and artists, ‘New Networks for Nature’ Conference, November 2020.

²⁶ I will go into more detail on this area in Q.3.

²⁷ Instructions to contributors; The Ecologist magazine.

²⁸ Aylin Ullman and Daniel Pauly, ‘Making history count: The shifting baselines of Turkish fisheries,’ *Fisheries Research*, Volume 183, (November 2016), (pp.74-79).

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0165783616301503> accessed 22.03.2021.

²⁹ Prior to research visits my research plans - especially my use of interview as a research method - was scrutinised and approved by the university’s Research Ethics Committee. All interviewees were asked to read and sign a consent form and were made aware of how the data collected during the interview would be used and published. I have all forms and signatures on file.

engage with the essay, illustrate the way my research blends form and content and how content sometimes dictated a particular form.

In Chapter 2, I show how field research, language and other material are co-dependent and consider how language itself can manifest as a form of abundance. I investigate some of the ways other writers have engaged with language and why their work was either of influence.

In Chapter 3, I consider an ecosystem of contemporary nature writing to examine how writers occupy specific niches within the genre. I discuss why some approaches have been useful and others more problematic. I position myself in a specific niche in the genre, clarifying how my work differs from some, but leans towards others. I explore a small number of writers whose work was of significant influence due to their particular ways of 'seeing' in the world and in the writing.

In Chapter 4, I will draw conclusions from the research, discuss sequencing and through-lines and show how I navigated toward my end point.

Chapter 1

How have I used the literary essay and its diverse and formal opportunities to explore abundance in the Anthropocene?

In this chapter I will explore some of the diverse and formal opportunities of the literary essay, compare some of my approaches to key writers of the genre to establish alliances and divergences. I will concentrate on the following topics; orientating myself as a new writer of the essay; ‘seeing’ in the field of the essay; rhetorical authority; the use of structural forms.

On Orientation

“Imagine a type of writing so hard to define its very name should be something like: an effort, an attempt, a trial.”¹ Brian Dillon invites the reader to consider a form of writing that is unfixed, exploratory and diverse. If the definition of ‘essay’ is to *essai*; to attempt or to make sense of, then the form itself is slippery; difficult to pin down. This though, is the essay’s generosity. As a new writer of the genre, my intention was to invite the reader to be grateful to the natural world; the adage that we cannot save what we do not know or love. Consequently, the particular styles of ‘essaying’ I undertook merged form and content as a way of allowing the reader to make sense of each of my philosophical and literary journeys.

Michael Hamburger states that ‘the essay is not a form, it has no form; it is a game that creates its own rules.’² The essay’s formal rules, it could be argued, are there to be perpetually broken and reinvented. The essay adventures, surprises, has certain freedoms but simultaneously, constraints. This becomes apparent in D’Agata’s *The Lost Origins of the Essay*,³ an anthology which illustrates the diverse nature of the form from ancient to contemporary times, from the list (aphorisms) of Ziusudra⁴ to Kamau Braithwaite’s ‘performative’⁵ ‘Trench Town Rock,’⁶ ‘an illocutionary act’⁷ written using patois, different fonts, font sizes and layout to address social and legal injustices.

¹ Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (Fitzcaraldo Editions. 2017), p.12.

² Michael Hamburger, quoted in Brian Dillon *Essayism*, (Fitzcaraldo Editions, 2017), p.13.

³ John D’Agata, *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (Graywolf Press, 2009).

⁴ *Ibid* p.7.

⁵ *Ibid* p.599.

⁶ Kamau Braithwaite, ‘Trench Town Rock’, in John D’Agata, *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (Graywolf Press, 2009), pp. 601-644.

⁷ *Ibid* p.599.

Barthes described the essay as ‘an ambiguous genre in which analysis vies with writing.’⁸ The essay borrows from journalism and travel writing but is neither. It is a performative, belletristic form where literature approaches fine art and the writer entwines aesthetic considerations, elegance of style, discordant materials and ‘contrarian positions’⁹ to make sense. At the point of departure however, the writer may not know where the writing will lead. As Dillon states, ‘I want obliquity, essays that approach their targets, for there must be targets, slantwise.’¹⁰ The essay achieves through the strategic placing of one idea against another, allowing the writing to develop in unanticipated ways and gently nudging its arguments towards their final shape. Norman asserts ‘diversity is the essay’s reason for being, and its principal theme;’¹¹ that every essay has an original approach to show the writer thinking aloud on the page. Further, Norman asserts that the essay is a response to a writerly itch, something that needs to be got out.¹² As an amateur naturalist and writer whose gaze has been increasingly focussed on the natural world my equivalent ‘itch’ was to communicate love and gratitude towards natural or human-induced abundance, and for the reader to recognise this as a form of activism. In this way my particular style of memoir allows me to make sense of how human behaviours can be restorative or ruinous, and to reconnoitre the ‘agrapha’ that exists between the two.

If a poem is a ‘small packet of language,’¹³ then the essay is a small linguistic laboratory for testing the positioning of ideas against language. The poet and essayist Rachel DuPlessis (an influential feminist critic and emeritus professor, writing from the 1960’s to the present day) asserts that the essay is ‘Less of a map – more of a disturbance.’¹⁴ My research navigates the disturbed territory between image, information, ways of seeing, experience and opinion, far removed from Cocker’s nature writing as ‘blind consolation.’¹⁵ Of course, consolation is present in my research; writing as a form of love that manifests in image, argument and seeing the self in relation to the world.

⁸ Roland Barthes, ‘Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology,’ Collège de France, January 7th, 1977. P.1.

⁹ Taylor, Anita Darcel and Phillip Lopate. "Interview with Phillip Lopate." *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*, vol. 8 no. 1, 2006, p. 125-137. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/fge.2006.0021](https://doi.org/10.1353/fge.2006.0021). Accessed 26th January 2021. p.129.

¹⁰ Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (Fitzcaraldo Editions. 2017), p.14

¹¹ <https://www.publicbooks.org/what-essays-are-and-what-essayists-do/> p.2. Accessed 17.11.2020.

¹² Ibid p.3

¹³ Simon Armitage in ‘Simon Stephens meets Simon Armitage,’ *Only Artists*, BBC Radio 4, 6th February, 2020.

¹⁴ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, ‘f-Words: An Essay on the Essay.’ *American Literature*, vol. 68, no. 1, 1996, pp. 15–45. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2927538. Accessed 3 Feb. 2021.

¹⁵ Mark Cocker, ‘Death of a Naturalist: Why New Nature Writing is so Tame.’ *New Statesman*, 17th June 2015. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/06/death-naturalist-why-new-nature-writing-so-tame> accessed 02.12.2020.

My research then, investigates the essay as a form that affords a multiplicity of modes – one where the reader is able to follow the writer into an amphitheatre of imaginative ideas. By making consistent use of structural devices (the ‘agrapha,’ attention, distraction, memoir), I navigated towards points of insight, but have not always arrived at definitive conclusions. I began to view each essay - and the whole collection - as a ‘cabinet of curiosities’ where the ‘agrapha’ was realised through imaginative ideas that I hoped would resonate with and inform the reader’s own experience of the natural world. ‘Beavergeddon,’¹⁶ (p) for example, not only explores opposing attitudes towards wild beavers in Scotland, but also pursues narratives of greater global environmental concerns, such as more frequent wildfires in Canada and the effects of these on human health.

On Seeing

John Berger writes of the primacy of seeing, the sense which ‘establishes our place in the surrounding world,’¹⁷ but adds ‘The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.’¹⁸ It was not in my remit then, to describe exhaustively but rather, to do so selectively and to account for my own responses to the things I encountered. In a television interview David Foster-Wallace suggests that the essay is ‘an enormous eyeball floating around something, reporting what it sees.’¹⁹ This imaginative framing of the essay reminded me of the gimbal camera-mount suspended from a helicopter in wildlife documentary making. That ‘eye’ then, is me the essayist, contouring above an evolving stratigraphy of research, a hunter-gatherer of data, an interpreter, an information analyst. Through the combination of essaying, responding to the supervisory process and my ongoing reflection, as a ‘producer’ managing different kinds of reality my task was to forge discordant materials into coherent narratives where the ‘agrapha’, attention, distraction, activism, consolation and memoir are different ways of seeing in the field of the essay.

As I negotiated with the world through my material, one of my choices was to adopt a rhizomatic²⁰ approach, where the writing operates within ‘a more multiple, lateral, and circular system,’²¹ allowing me to meander purposefully - like a rhizome operating ‘on one of its old lines, or on new lines,’²² following the threads of certain arguments across numbers of essays. This technique provided a

¹⁶ The recent success of beaver releases in the UK and the reporting of has become emblematic of their role in restoring biodiversity and building flood resilience.

¹⁷ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin, 1972). p.7.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.7.

¹⁹ David Foster-Wallace quoted in Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (Fitzcarraldo Editions. 2017). The phrase originates in a tv interview with David Foster-Wallace by Charlie Rose, 1997.

²⁰ Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *Thousand Plateaus*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lancaster/detail.action?docID=742364>.

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²¹ *Ibid*. p.5

²² *Ibid*. p.9.

uniting force in the work, where various ways of looking at and managing the land, for example in relation to Storm Desmond and flooding, meander through various essays and lines of rhetorical thought. As in nature, as in the essay, everything is connected; as an essayist then, part of the work is to notice the effect of placing image against idea, testing and where necessary, repositioning. In this way my arguments and ideas develop, converge and cohere.

On Rhetorical Authority

Lopate shows how the essay is ‘doing some journalistic things but assert(s)’ its ‘own voice.’²³ My early PhD writing tended towards over-use of the lyric eye, was too polemical and lacked a sense of adventuring in the territory of the essay itself. Subsequently I was able to refine and enact a more structural approach to voice and rhetorical engagement, allowing me to get at different, more nuanced modes. As work progressed in redrafting and shaping the manuscript, I asserted my own developing voice upon the ‘journalistic things’ I did as research.

If a poem offers a ‘pause of life’²⁴ where the reader is invited to be still, and fiction invites the reader to keep moving forwards through a narrative, then an essay exists somewhere in between, borrowing from both. Jamie has written of the idea of writing ‘toward’ the natural world,²⁵ implying the attempt in motion, the setting out of lines of argument but suggesting that the essayist is unable to provide a definitive version - or to reach definitive conclusions.

Whilst the essay may not draw conclusions or present definitive versions of a subjective truth, it borrows from the lyric ‘I’ in poetry and the omniscient voice in prose narrative novels where the writer acts with authority. In the essay I become the authority on the subjects under exploration. I enter the writing process – and each consecutive essay - governed by a developing ability to find and exploit the fissures (arguments, the ‘agrapha’, idealised views of landscape), that exist between ecological considerations (land-use, species loss, species return), and climate breakdown, (the natural world in the Anthropocene), and use those fissures – those points of tension – to place the writing under pressure. Through the expedient of argument, the writing pours into those fissures building knowledge as a way of communicating with the reader. Simultaneously, my own knowledge is widened. In the ‘Bear’ essay, for example, I explore the illegal logging of virgin forests against the difficulties of re-planting in a drying climate. I show how intact forests are a major force in the fight against climate change, against the illegal export of timber and the legal import of wooden ‘tat’ to the West. (p.139-

²³ Taylor, Anita Darcel and Phillip Lopate. "Interview with Phillip Lopate." *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*, vol. 8 no. 1, 2006, p. 125-137. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/fge.2006.0021](https://doi.org/10.1353/fge.2006.0021). Accessed 28th January 2021. P.129.

²⁴ Jonathon Bate, *Radical Wordsworth: the Poet who Changed the World* (William Collins, 2020) p. 97.

²⁵ Kathleen Jamie, (Author Statement for the British Council), in Daniel Weston, *Contemporary Literary Landscapes: The Poetics of Experience* (Routledge, 2016). p. 130.

161) In this way, navigating pacing and time shifts, I build lines of rhetorical argument and nudge the essay towards its targets and eventual dénouement.

Another essay, 'Viewing Stations'²⁶ is divided into six inter-related 'stations' for viewing different arguments that subvert the more prosaic view of the Lake District. As Charlie Gere has written, 'I...hate the 'Lake District,' and the way it's fetishized and sacralised as some kind of 'unspoilt' paradise, a consolatory Eden'.²⁷ Whilst I did indeed have something to get off my chest (flooding and failing biodiversity in the Lake District), the first iteration of this essay was too overtly polemical. Phillip Lopate's asserts 'The essay is an 'open ended adventure, an invitation to doubt and self-surprise.'²⁸ With this in mind, I redrafted to blend unusual ways of 'seeing' the land, lyrical nature writing and humour, (Wordsworth, Potter and West at a literature festival), and 'self-surprise' where the process and choice of approach allowed me to change *my* mind. Using this revitalised set of skills, a more nuanced sense of curiosity entered the work where more self-doubt could be expressed and thus achieve a more complex sense of authority.²⁹

Lopate also states that it is hard to teach the kinds of rhetorical techniques used in his own essays because he doesn't always know how to 'name or describe them, except in fumbling, mumbling ways,'³⁰ or that if the writer knew everything before sitting down to write, the piece is 'likely to be dead on arrival.'³¹ This sense of fumbling might find its authority through entertainment (Potter et al at the literary festival), intrigue (the list that opens 'Mrs Janossy,') distraction (the structure and imagery of 'Circumspect Dancing,') As Lopate reminds us, these are all legitimate devices employed by Montaigne.³² My essays then, are sometimes vehicles for asking more questions than are answered, where the writing 'feels more like balancing two sides of an equation;' ³³ 'a site of resistance'³⁴ or 'a wound of perception;'³⁵ the essay as unfinished space between literature, life and art.

²⁶ The title is derived from Thomas West's tour of and subsequent *Guide to the Lakes of Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire* (Unipress Cumbria, Cumbria, 2008) in which he establishes dozens of 'viewing stations' from which visitors should look at the vista using a Claude, or 'landscape mirror,' and are thus directed to 'see' in a very specific way.

²⁷ Charlie Gere, *I Hate the lake District* (Goldsmiths Press, 2019). p.1.

²⁸ Lopate, Phillip, 'The Essay: Exploration or Argument?' *Creative Nonfiction*, No. 41 (SPRING 2011), (pp. 58-59) Published by: Creative Nonfiction Foundation Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44346151> Accessed: 16-08-2019 13:24 UTC

²⁹ Just as each essay is a rhetorical viewing station, so I now view the whole book as a viewing station for exploring my key themes under the larger concept of the Anthropocene.

³⁰ Lopate, Phillip, 'The Essay: Exploration or Argument?' *Creative Nonfiction*, No. 41 (SPRING 2011), (pp. 58-59) Published by: Creative Nonfiction Foundation Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44346151> Accessed: 16-08-2019 13:24 UTC p.107.

³¹ Ibid p.107.

³² Ibid. p.108.

³³ Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*, (Jonathan Cape, 2009), p75.

³⁴ David Lazar 'Queering the Essay,' in Margot Singer and Nicole Walker (ed). *Bending Genre* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.19.

³⁵ Ibid, Kazim Ali, 'Genre-Queer,' p.32.

The essay's rhetorical freedom then, is found in maintaining the notion that both essay and essayist are imperfect. Through Lopate's 'fumbling ways' writ large in my own fallibility on the page, I am only able to arrive at whatever degree of rhetorical authority arises out of my process.

On Braiding

Nicole Walker³⁶ adopts the braided essay as 'social justice action';³⁷ a way of negotiating the personal and the environmental. The braided essay allows Walker to 'pop in and out of different realities, not so much manipulating the facts as pacing them.'³⁸ In Walker's book,³⁹ that popping in and out of various modes or voices allows the personal and memoir to align with climate breakdown, science and the metaphysical. By pressing two or more themes close against each other like this Walker asserts that the effect, or the sum of knowledge, is increased.⁴⁰ The braided form I use in 'Circumspect Dancing in Fields' allows me to pop in and out of various threads including the abundant birdlife in Extremadura, sound recordings, observations, wind turbines, the consuming habits of humans and my attempts to process them. The boundaries, therefore, remain uncertain, difficult to pin down; an essay on distraction may only attempt to make sense.

Braiding also allows me to deploy memoir as a force for exploration. In Cathedral Thinking (p.162), memoir allows me to explore predicted levels of sea-level rise together with human vulnerability/ resilience and empathy for nature. By exposing my dread at what scientists are predicting, I am able to blend or braid empathy for the reader with my wider theme of abundance as a form of attention, (Hatidze; 'the bees are her children; she will not abandon them,' (p.174), or the notion of rivers as 'people,' (p.171).

My essay 'Human Resilience Training' is a braiding of several different kinds of reality or ways of seeing; it is a 'rhizomatic'⁴¹ approach where many 'stems' or images and lines of argument exist in close proximity; are all interconnected. The particular target of this essay is about how humans choose to see and encounter, or to *describe*, as opposed say, to a chemical in the eyes of swans that allows them to see and experience the world utterly otherwise.

³⁶ Walker invited me to co-create a piece for The Essay Daily on the relationship between subject matter and the essay. Available here; <https://www.essaydaily.org/2020/02/bridges-unlike-rules-are-better.html>

³⁷ Nicole Walker, 'The Essay as Social Justice Action,' *Journal of Creative Nonfiction*, Issue 64, Adaptation. (11th August, 2017). <https://www.creativenonfiction.org/online-reading/braided-essay-social-justice-action> accessed 12.07.2020.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Nicole Walker, *Sustainability: A Love Story* (Mad Creek Books, 2018).

⁴⁰ Nicole Walker, 'Braided Essays' www.nikwalk.com 15th September, 2017. <https://nikwalk.com/2017/09/15/braided-essays/> accessed 22.11.2020

⁴¹ Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001). pp.i-v. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lancaster/detail.action?docID=742364>. Accessed 24th January, 2021.

I adopt this more informal braiding elsewhere, for example in ‘The Bear,’ essay where I jump in and out of different chronological and thematic zones; the narration of the journey in the mountains, the end and aftermath of Communism, the destruction and repair of forests. This methodology allows a sequence of ideas and images to accrue in the reader’s mind, keeps the reader actively making connections as they follow my lines of argument. I chose to use this approach rather foreground myself explicitly as Bellamy does in ‘When the Sick Rule the World,’⁴² a braiding of the writer’s mother’s cancer and the film E.T. examining themes of love, death and dying. As I shall continue to explore, rather than foreground the self in the same way, my intention was for the reader to follow me, the guide, into the ‘agrapha,’ to ‘see’ through me where memoir is the binding force in a broader balance of approaches. (There is though, no way of ever determining that what I as writer intend, and the reader experiences will be the same thing).

Through considering a number of approaches to the braided form, through ‘essaying towards’ I was able to recognise an emerging personal and adapted variation of the form. Many of the essays in *Abundance* are similar to the style Jamie uses in her essay ‘Lek,’⁴³ where section breaks create a pause in the narrative and the reader follows Jamie’s digressions into other ‘theatres of ideas’ on land management. In my ‘Wolf’ essay I use time-jumps indicated by section breaks as a structural device. This technique keeps the reader moving forwards into the unfolding sequence of ideas, with myself as a ‘weatherglass’ for testing ideas on reception and receptivity.

On Fragmentation

Dillon states that a fragmented essay provides ‘a kind of conglomerate; an aggregate ... of diverse materials,’⁴⁴ that there is ‘rhyme’ between fragments and that in ‘correct compositing or constellation...one (fragment) calls to the other.’⁴⁵ Each fragment presents a new ‘thesis’ or sliver of information and each of these is the shuttle that passes backwards and forwards in sequence between the writer and the reader’s imagination. As a collective assemblage, fragments constellate around one another rhizomatically, accruing a sense of something being developed and built.

⁴² Dodie Bellamy, *When the Sick Rule the World* (MIT Press, 2015).

⁴³ Kathleen Jamie, ‘Lek,’ *New Nature Writing*, ‘Four Talks for Spring,’ Wednesday 11 April 2007 (BBC Radio 3).

⁴⁴ Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (Fitzcaraldo Editions, 2017). p.68.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 69.

'80 Fragments on the Pelican' began as an unpacking of a visit to Northern Greece amidst a mass of material. First attempts felt like wedging material into place and lacked cohesion and control. Later, when I found evidence of the pelican having been resident in the British Isles, together with images of pelican bones (another kind of fragment) and discussion of bone structure online, I was able to establish a metaphorical connection between archaeological specimen, habitat and species. Thus, I was able to step into new metaphorical and literary territory to develop my imaginings of both pelican and the Prespa wetlands. The accumulative effect of these individual 'theses' allowed me to see and think differently in the field of the essay. Influenced by Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*,⁴⁶ (a book-length series of numbered fragments linked by the themes of grief and the colour blue), my approach to sequencing and numbering of sections reflected a review of Nelson's book, where 'propositions pose questions, then answer them in analogies and parables – an antiphonal, rhythmic reflection on art, literature and emotion.'⁴⁷ Nelson has said that her final arrangement was arrived at through countless shufflings and from her own sense of logic and chronology.⁴⁸ In 'Pelican' it was valuable to observe my own sense of logic beginning to accrue, and to experiment by shuffling the pieces around. By beginning the essay in historic time and establishing various ideas and facts (the 'struts' of my arguments), and in the counterpoint of real and metaphorical 'sickness,' I was able to situate Prespa's natural abundance against the folly and subsequent dynamism of human behaviours. Through these various techniques and by incorporating measured lyrical nature writing (another form of abundance), I was able to build an accumulative sense of experience in the geographic and essayistic fields. This essay also redeploys palimpsests from those earlier and other redundant first drafts, where I recognised that the writing possessed 'a flash of illumination,'⁴⁹ for example, the conceit of birdwatching in the painting 'The Garden of Earthly Delights', (p.111).

I was also drawn to the way that sequencing and/or numbering of the fragmented form provides a different aesthetic experience for the reader. Moore asserts that the white space on the page also invites the reader to make 'The energy of the jump,'⁵⁰ from piece to collaged piece. That antiphonal, rhythmic method of working is at work in my 'Pelican' essay as I placed one idea against the next, cutting, rearranging - recognising and creating 'missing' sections as essential links in the chain.

⁴⁶ Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*, (Penguin Random House, 2009).

⁴⁷ Gavin Francis, 'Bluets by Maggie Nelson, Review' *The Guardian*, 8th June, 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/08/bluets-maggie-nelson-review-heartbreak-sex> accessed 23.02.2021.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Clive James, 'Little Low Heavens' in *Poetry Notebook*, (Picador 2014). p.36.

⁵⁰ Dinty W Moore, 'Positively Negative' in *Bending Genre; Essays on Creative Nonfiction* (Ed) Margot Singer and Nicole Walker, (Bloomsbury 2013). p.185.

Steve Fuller argues that in a fragmented essay ‘You have no time to go anywhere other than forwards,’⁵¹ and yet in my essay I assert that digressions are interwoven, guided throughout by situating the pelican as the central image around which everything else flows. Each fragment and its thesis journeys towards the essay’s target, a celebration of pelicans and Prespa’s wider abundance, protected since the unanticipated attention of a military dictatorship. Each fragment also coheres as a set of related cells. Similarly, the whole collection of essays is a set of related cells, each one able to function separately and in relation to the rest.

In conclusion

The essay’s formal opportunities allowed me to contextualise and make sense of discordant materials, make links between thematic targets and stylistic forms, adapting and changing as the material demanded. Essays then, are iterations of something bodged, re-assessed, refined, but may never be the final word. They are malleable – a way of writing without defined edges, approaching the reader as if speaking directly to them alone. The essay leans towards a rhizomatic methodology where numerous entry and exit points help to orientate the writer and provide an imaginative bridge between writer and reader, establishing important links between subject and experience and realised through rhetorical persuasion and agency.

⁵¹ Steve Fuller, ‘On Fragmentation’ in *Bending Genre; Essays on Creative Nonfiction* (Ed) Margot Singer and Nicole Walker, (Bloomsbury 2013), p.177.

Chapter 2

What kinds of literary techniques have helped to shape this collection of essays as a means of encountering abundance against a backdrop of global warming and failing biodiversity?

Using Snyder's 'testing stories and theories against experience,'¹ in this chapter the territory under exploration shows how I used literary technique as a way of 'making sense of the world in language, to keep the relation going'² between writer and reader. I will explore some of the linguistic choices or approaches undertaken and how these considerations allowed me to shape meaning from experience.

On Voice

Pursuing this research has brought about a fundamental developmental shift in my approach as a writer. The objective difference between this and my previous work is the way the use of voice has developed into a more fully realised enabling technique; a uniting force that facilitates the exerting of control in the writing. The chief development arises from the positioning of voice alongside memoir, where, as has been discussed, rather than a 'self-centred' memoir style, it is instead a means of showing myself in relation to the world *and* my material. Voice and memoir are thus the connective dynamic in the work, realised fully through the attendant literary techniques of imagination, lyrical description, probing, translating the metaphysical, using digression, (distraction?) questioning and the use of structure. Combining the three strands of consolation (to show the natural world as beautiful but fragile), activism (to suggest that change is possible and imperative), and distraction (what happens when humans look away), my intention is to elicit a change in myself through the writing process and in the reader through the published book.

Part of my creative decision making was to deploy a different weight and tone of voice according to what was being discussed on the page; a way of exploring diverse habitats and niches through subject and written response. I wanted the book to open with a very immediate sense of connection to the natural world. The first essay therefore opens with an encounter with a small migratory bird. This lyrical passage establishes an emotional engagement with the environment, with abundance and loss through the metaphor of the bird battering against a window and asserts the imperative of 'seeing' as a primary conceptual theme. Alongside my own ways of seeing, I also consider those of artists,

¹ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, (Counterpoint, 1990). p.61.

² Kathleen Jamie, in Daniel Weston, *Contemporary Literary Landscapes: The Poetics of Experience* (Routledge, 2016), p.142.

philosophers and scientists to illustrate ‘seeing’ as a fundamental way of creating and sustaining relationships with the natural world.

In this essay I establish myself as a character entering imaginative, sometimes idiosyncratic or provocative terrain. First person voice enables me to broadcast ‘news of the larger world,’³ where reportage and experience converge. Rather than impose or foreground the ‘self, my intention was to develop a narrator who could show curiosity about the interior and exterior worlds. Lopate asserted that he needed to ‘peel back some of those layers of the personal ‘*because* of all other layers that are at work.’⁴ I have therefore used memoir strategically, not in an egotistical way, but rather to implicate the self so that the narrative could be enacted on a human level in the reader’s experience. Similar to Lopate’s ‘wind-up doll – Phillip Lopate,’⁵ I considered the version of ‘Karen Lloyd’ I wanted my readers to meet. My character is therefore implicated in a number of ways; as a ‘non-expert,’ a ‘nature guide’ and mediator of the ‘agrapha,’ a provocateur and a mother deeply concerned about the future lives of her sons on a degrading planet. By exposing and working through some of my inner contradictions, the writing self remains fallible and has the capacity to be changed by what is experienced. For example, (p.10), exposing my inner feelings about the environmental crisis by ‘talking’ to the Granny Scots pine. I have also considered how ‘present’ my voice needs to be in the text. In some places it is entirely evident for example, ‘When I turn on the news or read a newspaper...’ (p.), or more withdrawn, as in my examinations of Newcomb, Berger, Clare and Akroyd, (p.10-11).

In ‘Human Resilience Training’ (p.75) various aspects of memoir are at work; a childhood crisis, falling off my bike, learning the ‘arts’ of shouting and silence - and the restorative power of swimming. In this way memoir is the binding force through which the essay’s target is approached – to explore what resilience might look like in the Anthropocene. Implicating the self, writing honestly, authoritatively but with humility, being a non-expert and a fallible individual, I was able to ‘groped towards’⁶ a method of working that avoided the terrain of polemic. It was important to also show that much of the world can’t, in fact, be ‘known,’ in the way that experts and polemicists might sometimes imply. Here the essay’s capacity for open ended exploration allowed me to avoid drawing final conclusions or making final sense. Sometimes resolution is approached through asking more questions, for example, (p.74), where the essay concludes with a question on the value of returning the Imperial eagle to its natural habitats.

³ Phillip Lopate, *To Show and to Tell; the Craft of Literary Nonfiction* (Free Press, 2013). P.25

⁴ Taylor, Anita Darcel and Phillip Lopate. ‘Interview with Phillip Lopate.’ *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*, vol. 8 no. 1, 2006, p. 125-137. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/fge.2006.0021. Accessed 28th January 2021. P.128.

⁵ *Ibid* p.128.

⁶ Mark Doty, ‘Souls on Ice,’ *Academy of American Poets*, July 18th, 2000, p. 1. <https://poets.org/text/souls-ice> accessed 23.03.2021.

In places I made strategic use of second person voice. I was interested in how this creates a different kind of dynamic – where the writing addresses or implicates the reader. Kathleen Jamie’s essay ‘Links of Noltland III’⁷ was useful evidence.

‘You suffer painful joints and toothache. You die in childbirth, lose children to infections. You cough and cough. Despite that, generations pass, the Links becomes home.’

Jamie’s ‘you’ addresses the humans who once inhabited the site simultaneously with ‘you’ the reader. The technique’s circularity of influence brings the *punctum* back to *us, here, now*; an unambiguous transmuted version of our future selves.

I was also drawn to second person because of the way it allows the writer to inhabit different realities. I use it to express empathy towards the ‘you’ of Romanian’s post-Communist communities and their right to improved living standards, (p.159). In the final short essay, second person sets up a conscious switch of register; a particular mode of ‘seeing.’ It infers that you/we (in the wealthy North and West) have at least some choices about which future direction to take (p.178-9).

‘You understand that to continue in the wrong direction is to take you somewhere you really don’t want to go. And you change your bearings. Of course, you do. Wouldn’t we all, given the knowledge, the choice and the ability to act?’ In this way ‘you’ is a provocation to think differently about how humans implicate ourselves in our future lives and the life of the planet.

Lopate asserts that ‘In personal essays and memoirs, we must rely on the subjective voice of the first-person narrator to guide us, and if that voice never explains, summarises, interprets, or provides a larger sociological or historical context for the material, we are in big trouble’⁸ Part of the task, therefore, was to notice places where the writing showed resistance to self-reflection. Jenny Odell’s ‘How to do Nothing’⁹ and Mark O’Connell’s *Notes from an Apocalypse; A Personal Journey*¹⁰ provided important context on this. I was able to observe how both writers explore the dynamic between material and self, allowing me in places to steer towards rather than away from argument and persuasion - as I might have done previously. For example (p.173) discussing my restlessness under lockdown in relation to the concept of ‘*zugenruhe*.’

⁷ Kathleen Jamie, ‘Links of Noltland III’ in *Surfacing*, (Sort of Books, 2019), p.171.

⁸ Phillip Lopate, *To Show and To Tell; The Craft of Literary Non-Fiction* (Free Press, 2013), p.29.

⁹ Jenny Odell, *How to do Nothing; Resisting the Attention Economy*, (Melville House publishing, 2019).

¹⁰ Mark O’Connell, *Notes from an Apocalypse* (Granta, 2020).

Odell's book also served as context for writing about film. I examine two films, one in particular, *Honeyland*,¹¹ allowed me to situate individual human agency – that of a traditional Macedonian beekeeper - as a way of 'seeing,' or being in relation to, the natural world. The film allows me to juxtapose the kinds of political inaction that is effectively abandoning *all* children to a challenging future, against the main protagonist, Hatidze. I position a quotation from an interview about the film, (p.174), 'The bees are her children; she will not abandon them,' followed by, 'Indeed, how could any of us abandon our children? Thus, the essay's target – of thinking about the future in the short term to effect longer-term change - is writ large.

On Language and Structure

Jamie asserts that 'language is what we do as human beings, that's where we're at home, that's our means of negotiating with the world. So it doesn't get in the way, it enables. We do language like spiders do webs.'¹² In my work, 'negotiating with the world' had to accommodate a continuum from the metaphysical or numinous in nature to despair at political and human distraction. This was partly achieved through the conscious decision to adopt the kinds of formal language appropriate for describing climate breakdown as cited by 'The Ecologist' magazine's editorial team;¹³ not 'global warming,' but 'global heating;' not 'climate change,' but 'climate breakdown/chaos': not 'ecosystem services,' but 'life support systems.' I was also careful to avoid using the term 'rewilding' – a word that has entered the lexicon of landscape repair but carries many negative connotations, including that there is a time to which the landscape can be 'put back.' My linguistic decision was to show the push and pull of tensions around land use - without subscribing to any pre-conceived notions.

By pursuing the essay's 'rhetorical amble,'¹⁴ (the essay as walkabout), I was able to assume the position of an 'accidental philosopher'¹⁵ making sense of human behaviours; mine included. In 'Dancehalls of Desire,' for example, I return to the idea of education as a force for connection in the way the Gaelic alphabet was founded on nouns from natural world; 'The letter *Geanais* is gean.' Elsewhere I borrow techniques from poetry, where language behaves as 'wattage' or 'particle

¹¹ *Honeyland*, dir. Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov, (2019).

¹² Interview with Kathleen Jamie by Rosemary Goring, *Scottish Review of Books*, (8th June, 2016).

<https://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/2012/06/the-srb-interview-kathleen-jamie/>

¹³ https://theecologist.org/style_guide Accessed 23.03.2021.

¹⁴ Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay; An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. (Anchor Books, 1995), p.xli.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.xlii

physics.’¹⁶ On p.23, the Milky Way is ‘an etiolated, vaporous entity that braids one forest-lined hemisphere to the next,’ and on p.38, a vulture is ‘Laurence Olivier got up as Richard III.’ Juxtaposition allows me to situate the beaver as ‘the bringer of reason to a skewed world’ against beaver killers whose incomplete actions result in a family on holiday watching a dying beaver being swept out to sea. (p.84). My intention here – and the essay’s target - is to abrade the reader’s experience through the cultural ecological chasm that exists between a wild animal, man’s inhumanity and the loss of connexion to the natural world.

I have used moments of fiction and imaginative interventions to communicate particular ideas, as in ‘Viewing Stations,’ where Wordsworth, Beatrix Potter and Thomas West appear at a Lake District Literary Festival (p.125-6). Through their imagined voices I am able to make political points with a degree of polemic, moderated though through the device of invention. This imaginative ‘seeing’ allows me to offer a more nuanced view of the fetishised landscape of the Lake District, using wry humour to imagine how these illustrious former residents would react to recent changes in land use.

In ‘Beavergeddon,’ in a nod to CS Lewis and Narnia I invent beavers as eco-warriors on the run, but lighten the moment with humour in ‘(p.93). ‘I’m not leaving the sewing machine this time.’

In ‘Circumspect Dancing’ (p. 35) I use distraction as a device to lead the reader into a succession of geographic and metaphorical fields, realised though the contrast between the great abundance in Extremadura - making it impossible to concentrate on any one thing – with the UK’s dangerously diminished wild support systems. Juxtaposition allows me to examine the motives of Trump and Putin for eschewing wind power, against an imagined instruction from Leonardo – a useful means of framing alternative visions of attention and distraction, (p.45). Through metaphor I present common cranes as festival ‘clean up’ gangs, vultures as agents for seeing, and human food with pressure on landscape. The essay concludes with a moment that Kathleen Jamie might call ‘noticing’ as a kind of prayer, implying recuperation in the relationship between writer and natural world,¹⁷ by deploying a moment of total attentiveness towards the metaphysical beauty and awe - or ‘sacredness’ - of nature in a marsh harrier roost site. (p.46-7).

Time-shifts were often used to mark changes in mood and pace. In the ‘Bear’ essay (pp.139-161) I braid sequences in the mountains with analytical passages, allowing the essay’s target to unfold - how

¹⁶ Clive James, ‘Little Low Heavens’ in *Poetry Notebook*, (Picador 2014), p. 36-7.

¹⁷ Kathleen Jamie, quoted in Daniel Weston, *Contemporary Literary Landscapes; the Poetics of Experience*, (Routledge, 2015), p.140.

the forest was destroyed and is now undergoing difficult, long-term repair amidst the developing economic and cultural fortunes of Romania.

In 'Human Resilience Training' (p.75) I use digressions to pursue a number of different ways of seeing or sensing; my swimming self, how swans see, my parent's relationship and its corrosive effect on me, the way authorities play down the toxic effects of algal bloom, before moving into flood narratives. Damselflies are the key in the essay's lock, the image to which the narrative returns in a circularity of influence. I use the layout of poetry to suggest a synthesis of image and word to describe the habits of damselflies. It is through building all these digressions that I was able to pursue the essay's target, which is how ways of 'seeing' can either assist or hinder our abilities to respond to extreme weather events, the way flooding divides communities, and how communities and individuals might build 'resilience' – a word often appropriated to imply that humans have the capacity to resist the effects of climate breakdown. Whilst Storm Desmond presented humans with the 'witless indifference'¹⁸ of climate chaos, in contrast, the essay allows me to interrogate both inner and outer landscapes and to exert control on the writing and material. Part of my exploration of resilience was to show how some communities remained divided for many years (Pooley Bridge; five and a half years to replace), whilst others exerted their own form of control; the man in the Post Office and a business owner in Staveley, (p.82). In contrasting water as both a restorative *and* destructive force, my intention was to show that it is possible to write about nature in a way that is more adapted to climate issues than mere lyricism.

Doty asserts that 'description is an inexact, loving art, and a reflexive one; when we describe the world we come closer to saying what we are.'¹⁹ My use of descriptive, lyrical writing is a way to make my own meanings out of a multitude of materials. I wanted the writing to perform appropriately in different situations, in other words to be imbued with its own kind of resilience. Elsewhere Doty refers to writing as 'something to serve as a container for emotion and idea, a vessel that can hold what's too slippery or charged or difficult to touch.'²⁰ Allied to this idea, in my research imaginative language is a container for aligning slippery or charged subjects. Contrast, for example, me stabbing the 'big pregnant swag' of rainwater above the sitting room window, (p.80), and the ensuing sense of relief, with capercaillie 'strutting around the lek-site like hedge-fund managers high on profit,' (p.101), or the closing fragment of the Prespa essay, 'the tenebrous shade of diminishing night' in the underwings of a pelican, (p.119). This synergy between material and descriptive response was an adaptation made over time, where the 'scaffolding' of early drafts and the rejection of some earlier essays enabled me

¹⁸ Kathleen Jamie, *Sightlines*, (Sort of Books, 2012), p. 10.

¹⁹ Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemons* (Beacon Press, 2001), p.6.

²⁰ Mark Doty, 'Souls on Ice,' *Academy of American Poets*, July 18th, 2000, p.1. <https://poets.org/text/souls-ice> accessed 23.03.2021.

to ‘see’ what was needed across the collection; a superstructure achieved through a developing sense of cause and effect realised through language itself.

In three essays subheadings are used as a way of signposting the reader’s attention; a metaphorical probing of related information that also breaks a long essay into smaller packages of material. I was interested in experimenting with the aesthetic effect of subheadings on the page and how they draw the reader towards the resolution of arguments. The penultimate essay, ‘Cathedral Thinking,’ thus moves through a series of ‘rooms of thought’ on the nature of abundance, allowing me to journey through a sequence of ideas on the possibility of restoration and repair, on ways of seeing and on the transformative potential of the human mind; a way of bringing together everything that has gone before in the book. The essay closes with a poem that segues deliberately into the final essay in the sequence.

On Character

Throughout the book I am the main character. Accompanied by expert witnesses, I see myself as an outsider looking in; an active listener who then frames *their* experiences. Through me as character *and* writer, the people I meet communicate their own thoughts and ideas.

Journeying deeper into forest and the ‘Bear’ essay, I used a shuttling of voices; myself as witness, then Liviu, Bogdan, Mihai and Callum as characters whose presence enlivens the narrative. Liviu is deployed as a major character - a guiding force who allows me to translate his experience and knowledge into language. There is, for example, his knowledge of wildflowers (p.141), and his forthright advice on bears; don’t bother climbing a tree – they can do it faster, (p.140).

The target of the essay ‘Dust’ is to reveal the complexities around ‘extinction confirmation,’ and how human attention is a force for both destruction *and* repair. Szabi Kókay is a major character – my guide to the bird life of Hungary. He also embodies the experience of seeing one of the very last of a species; the slender-billed curlew. Szabi’s ‘extinction pilgrimage’ (p.51) and the painting he made as a response opens up this particular aspect of the narrative to ekphrastic scrutiny, where imagination and language engage with the act implicit within the painting, amplifying its meaning. Szabi’s character then, manifests as a bridge between existence and loss, foreshadowing Merwin’s ‘illumination of a consciousness’²¹ and the responsibility of humans for the loss of ‘an awareness much older than our own.’²²

²¹ Forward by ES Merwin in Fred Boswell, *Last of the Curlews* (Counterpoint, 1954).

²² *Ibid.* ix

The target of the ‘Pelican’ essay is a metaphorical exploration of fragmentation of habitat and wildlife realised in a fragmented written form, incorporating historical, cultural and ecological fragments, using the ‘self’ as a fallible character by showing how I became ill whilst on the trip. There was a useful alliance here between the idea of being made ill by such unfamiliar abundance *and* by the kinds of destructive forces that humans inflict on the natural world. By juxtaposing a series of ‘rooms of thought,’ (vessels/theses) this essay combined imaginative language with metaphorical developments where nature is beautiful and inspirational, but also an unwitting victim of human witlessness.

On Fairy Story

Maitland asserts, ‘fairy stories .. are .. training grounds for resilience’ from ‘Terrible, terrible dangers’ – from abusive parents to wolves and witches, and yet, at the same time, ‘everyone knows that forests are magical.’²³ Fairy story manifests in my book in a small number of places, as a way for human experience and thought to rebound in the contemporary imagination. Thus, when I encounter the ruined farmhouse in the wood in Hungary (p.63) I was able to use this trope to illustrate the vast changes in agricultural production in Hungary, and how ‘other’ the lives of those previous farmers now seem. I was interested in how Maitland’s *Gossip from the Forest*, reframes fairy stories into contemporary narratives. For example, her reinvention has Gretel living in isolation and possibly experiencing PTSD.²⁴ Influenced by this approach, the duality of resilience and danger, ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ helped me to assimilate a similar repurposing, manifest in my situating Romania’s abandoned rural villages, the taxi driver’s twist on bearbaiting, and in rangers murdered for carrying out their job of protecting virgin forest. Fairy story allows me to imaginatively resituate destruction and repair; to show that we have a choice – either to view the forest as a lucrative extraction industry – or to scare bears away with light.

In ‘Beavergeddon,’ the themes of ‘good’ and evil’ translate into an imagining of a beaver family having been shot and other beavers escaping. When beavers recur in ‘Cathedral Thinking,’ the reader enters the section with that previous passage in mind, enabling the beavers to manifest as sentient; humanistic even. Like us, they live, breathe, feed - and die.

On Barthes

To close this chapter, I will briefly discuss my assimilation of *studium* and *punctum* from Barthes *Camera Lucida*. In a Guardian article, Brian Dillon explores Barthes intention in looking at

²³ Sara Maitland’s *Gossip from the Forest* (Granta, 2012), p.101.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p.108-114.

photographs.²⁵ ‘.. he elaborates a distinction between two planes of the image. The first, which he calls the ‘studium,’ is the manifest subject, meaning and context of the photograph: everything that belongs to history, culture, even to art;’²⁶ here the ‘studium’ is a wider education. The ‘punctum,’ meanwhile, is ‘that aspect (often a detail) of a photograph that holds our gaze without condescending to mere meaning or beauty.’²⁷ Although *Camera Lucida* is a book about photography, I have adopted Barthe’s concepts to consider the essay as ‘studium,’ the broader ‘education,’ but where particular moments interpret the ‘punctum’ to reveal greater detail, to make a specific point.

In the ‘Wolf’ essay I present an image of the first wolf seen in the Netherlands for 150 years, (p.29). This bewildered-looking animal is captured on film running adjacent to an industrial complex, a railway, a windfarm, tarmacked roads.

‘And when it has cleared the junction, the wolf begins to run, but not in the confident lope of a wild thing in its element; the wolf appears distracted, bewildered even by our modernity. What I see as I watch is how the wolf might have just been delivered through a portal from another age into a place and time where nothing is as it should be.’

My intention here is to illustrate ‘seeing’ differently, and very specifically. ‘Here, the ‘studium’ reveals the essay’s target – that of challenging outmoded perceptions of the world and to enable people to ‘see’ and think differently. The ‘punctum’ in this particular scene is less the strangeness of the animal and more in fact, the strangeness of industrial modernity. Similarly, in ‘Cathedral Thinking,’ Pan is the ‘punctum’ that allows the reader to ‘see’ the abundant nature of wildness against the manicured desolation of a golf course. (p.167).

In places I employ particular images or sets of images as imaginative force-fields that add agency to a particular essay. In ‘Wolf,’ for example, the moon rising above the forest (p.27-8), and the subsequent strange orange glow morph into crepuscular theatre lights. The way the light acted upon my imagination became a metaphor for being open to all kinds of possibilities,²⁸ an arena for imagining animals and predators and human responses to those animals and predators. Here, the ‘punctum’ provides an opportunity to question received knowledge, cultural morays and myths in

²⁵ Brian Dillon, ‘Rereading; Camera Lucida by Roland Barthes,’ *The Guardian*, 26th March 2011.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/26/roland-barthes-camera-lucida-rereading> Accessed 25.02.2021.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ As indeed the Dutch people have shown themselves to be, not only in respect of the return of predators, but in being widely and readily socially inclusive, also in their acceptance, for example, of refugees, making our separated British psyche appear neurotic, incapable of rational discussion, and above all, anachronistic.

animal/human relationships. Amongst the larger 'studium' of the whole book then, the 'punctum' of these events approach ideas of activism through the writing; an opportunity to reimagine cultural and ecological norms.

Chapter 3

Which contemporary writers have been of influence and how have I contextualised my own work amongst an ecosystem of nature writing?

On Ecosystems

The origins of nature writing lie beyond the remit of this project; I will however briefly set out a chronological timeline of influence. I have at various stages referred to Pliny The Elder,¹ from AD77, Gilbert White, mid-eighteenth century² and Thoreau,³ one of the Transcendentalists in the first half of the nineteenth century, amongst the first groups to engage with ideas on the relationship between humans and nature. During the 1940's, '50's, and '60's Rachel Carson produced ground-breaking literature that blended lyrical language, the environment and science for a general readership in books such as *The Sea Around Us*⁴ and *Silent Spring*.⁵ Published in 1967 on the cusp of agricultural industrialisation, JA Baker's *The Peregrine*⁶ remains for some the apotheosis of the British genre, but continues to divide between those who believe the writing is a verbatim, imaginative account or a blend of fiction and non-fiction.

My research has centred emphatically on a more contemporary cohort of writers from Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder in the later twentieth century to very recent publications such as Mark O'Connell's *Notes from an Apocalypse*⁷ and Andri Snær Magnason's *On Time and Water*,⁸ both of which engage deliberately with the climate emergency.

In 2008 Granta coined the term 'New Nature Writing'⁹ as a conscious attempt to show how as human conception of nature changes, certain writers have adjusted their approaches.¹⁰ An example from this new orientation is Kathleen Jamie's essay 'Pathologies' which investigates disease, death, genetics

¹ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection* (Penguin 2004).

² Gilbert White, *Natural History of Selborne*, (Wordsworth, 1989).

³ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Oxford World Classics, 2008).

⁴ Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us* (Open Road Media, 2011).

⁵ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New Edition Penguin, 2020).

⁶ JA Baker, *The Peregrine* (William Collins, 2017).

⁷ Mark O'Connell, *Field Notes from an Apocalypse* (Granta, 2020).

⁸ Andri Snær Magnason, *On Time and Water* (Profile Books 2020).

⁹ 'The New Nature Writing,' *Granta*, Edition 102, Summer 2008.

¹⁰ Nature writing is a field generally dominated by men; this issue of Granta is no exception, posing the question of how new is new in terms of gender equality.

and biology. Jamie has written elsewhere how this re-animation of the genre was necessary - after 40 years of blind neglect - to reframe a 'new kind of work that renegotiated our place in the natural world.'¹¹ The AHRC *Land Lines* project¹² (2017–2019) was a collaboration between researchers from the Universities of Leeds, Sussex and St Andrews. Part of its work was a study of British nature writing from White's *The Natural History of Selbourne* (1789) to Macdonald's *H is for Hawk* in 2014. 'Between the two,' the researchers found 'lies the jagged history of a genre that emerges under the sign of a triple crisis: the crisis of the environment; the crisis of representation; and the crisis of modernity itself.'¹³ Researchers found that the genre of non-fiction exemplified the tensions that exist between attempts to replicate or mimic relationships with the natural world, and an awareness of the impossibility of doing so, where 'nature' is always other to what we imagine it to be, even though humans are part of the Earth's natural systems.

In contrast, a recent major trend in the genre finds a significant number of books described and marketed as 'nature writing' as a way of foregrounding the human beings whose stories are central to these narratives, and where the natural world is useful only as a form of 'wellness commodity;' Cocker's 'nature relegated to the background as an attractive green wash.'¹⁴ Two examples of this approach are found in Raynor Winn's *The Salt Path*¹⁵ and Helen MacDonald's *H is for Hawk*.¹⁶ Both are highly successful, both chart personal recovery, the former from financial ruin and illness, the latter from grief. In Winn, nature is walked through, and strength is gained from this, but any sense of relationship with 'it' is limited; the sea is usually blue and a bird over the sea is a 'seagull'. Macdonald's book has been described as a classic of the genre, and yet a huge question looms; there are no wild goshawks in the book. Indeed, it could be argued that the book reinforces the notion that the exploitation of a wild creature *is* nature, or that 'love' for this form of attachment trumps 'nature.' There is plenty of purple prose, and as one reviewer wrote, 'H is for hawk, but also for Helen, and there is far more Helen ... than hawk.'¹⁷ The interwoven narrative of TH White's attempt to train a

¹¹ Sarah Crown, 'A Life in Writing,' Kathleen Jamie interview with Kathleen Jamie, *The Guardian*, 6th April, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/apr/06/kathleen-jamie-life-in-writing> accessed 20th January 2021

¹² <https://landlinesproject.wordpress.com>

¹³ *Land Lines; Modern British Nature Writing, 1789-2014*, essay published on The Clearing website, (<https://www.littletoller.co.uk/the-clearing/land-lines-modern-british-nature-writing-1789-2014>) discussing the state of British nature writing. The Land Lines project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and was a collaboration between researchers at the Universities of Leeds, Sussex and St Andrews.

¹⁴ Mark Cocker, 'Death of a Naturalist: Why New Nature Writing is so Tame.' *New Statesman*, 17th June 2015. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/06/death-naturalist-why-new-nature-writing-so-tame> [accessed 02.12.2020]

¹⁵ Raynor Winn, *The Salt Path*, (Penguin, 2018).

¹⁶ Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk* (Vintage, 2015).

¹⁷ Eileen Battersby, 'Bird Tale that Fails to Fly,' review of *H is for Hawk*, *Irish Times*, 6th September 2014. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/bird-tale-that-fails-to-fly-h-is-for-hawk-by-helen-macdonald-1.1917840> accessed 4th February, 2021.

goshawk is also reduced and simplified – and as such has been deemed ‘outrageously unfair’ because it is simply too reductive.¹⁸ An example perhaps of Jamie’s ‘not serving us well’¹⁹ and the ‘jagged history’ of the ‘crisis’ in representation and environment. Placing Winn’s book in the ‘nature writing’ category presupposes that any book set outdoors is nature writing. A more appropriate categorisation, I suggest, is simply memoir.

Given the escalating climate crisis, I did not want to foreground the self, but to work differently, where memoir is deployed through a fallible, curious leading character; a sense of ‘living here intellectually, imaginatively .. morally.’²⁰ Allied to this, my use of consolation (to show the natural world as beautiful but fragile), activism (to suggest that change is possible and imperative), and distraction (what happens when humans look away), are a literary way of calling for a renegotiation with our terms of engagement with the natural world; what have we done, what could we do; how we might yet see.

Cocker suggests that nature memoir is nothing more than a form of consolation in a nature depleted world, and that the real danger in ‘nature writing as consolation distracts us from the truth of our fallen countryside, or – just as bad – that it becomes a space for us to talk about ourselves.’²¹ Nature, such as it is, is subjugated to second place – or, worse, is barely noticed. The underlying question is whether or indeed how many British nature writers are actually *interested* in nature. Horatio Clare’s *Orison for a Curlew*,²² is an account of going in search of a bird believed extinct, except that by the end of this slim volume, the reader has gleaned little of the landscapes visited and nothing whatsoever of the species’ appearance.

In sharp contrast to narratives that foreground the self, Snyder’s *The Practice of the Wild*²³ contains a blend of Buddhism, respect for wildlife and environment and a deep fascination with language and mythic traditions. It is a meditation not only on what it means to be human but follows scholarly, literary arguments for concepts like restoring ‘the Commons,’ where, in their lost sense of connection, Americans ‘are not actually living here intellectually, imaginatively, or morally.’²⁴

¹⁸ Eileen Battersby, ‘Bird Tale that Fails to Fly,’ review of *H is for Hawk*, *Irish Times*, 6th September 2014. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/bird-tale-that-fails-to-fly-h-is-for-hawk-by-helen-macdonald-1.1917840> accessed 4th February, 2021.

¹⁹ Patrick Barkham, ‘Nature writing has been colonised by white men,’ Kathleen Jamie interview, *Guardian* 17th October, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/17/kathleen-jamie-surfacing-interview-nature-writing-colonised-by-white-men> accessed 4th February, 2021.

²⁰ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, (Counterpoint, 1990). p. 43.

²¹ Mark Cocker, *Death of a Naturalist: Why New Nature Writing is so Tame*, *New Statesman*, 17th June 2015. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/06/death-naturalist-why-new-nature-writing-so-tame> [accessed 02.12.2020]

²² Horatio Clare, *Orison for a Curlew* (Little Toller, 2015).

²³ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, (Counterpoint, 1990).

²⁴ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, (Counterpoint, 1990), p.43.

Similarly, Wendell Berry's *Agrarian Essays*²⁵ have helped me to contextualise the combination of writing self, landscape and environment, where the self is a force for examining both interior and exterior worlds. Like Berry and Snyder therefore, my braiding of literature with consolation, activism and distraction allow me to see and write in a way that engages fundamentally with both internal and external worlds very differently to 'nature recovery' type memoirs.

Gary Budden has made a strong critique of the 'nature as background' trend. In *Awake, Awake, Sweet England: Why We Need Landscape Punk*,²⁶ Budden references cultural and political tropes such as fascism, landscape fiction and film to question what is meant by 'home;' 'home to me is a bastard place, multi-cultural, and multi-layered, mixed, impure. No-one belongs, or everyone does. A place could be home, but it wasn't ever mine in an exclusionary way.'²⁷ This idea of what home is, who defines it, who is permitted to write about it and in what kinds of ways, is writ large in Kathleen Jamie's review of Robert MacFarlane's *The Old Ways*, titled somewhat bruisingly, 'A Lone Enraptured Male.'²⁸ Jamie places a particular form of white male gaze under scrutiny, admitting to a 'huge and unpleasant prejudice' when a Southern white male (MacFarlane), heads North 'quelling our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with his civilised lyrical words.'²⁹ Jamie's self-confessed prejudice runs thus; When a 'highly educated young man jumps on the sleeper train and heads this way, with the declared intention of seeking 'wild places', my first reaction is to groan.'³⁰

I am interested, then, in what is at stake here, and whether being 'an indigene,'³¹ as Jamie describes herself, implicates some form of ownership or entitlement. Doubtless the word would meet Budden's disapproval, whose 'bastard place' rightly assumes that the gaze of possession should be questioned, though I doubt that this is what Jamie is getting at. Whilst she admits that her frustration is partly born of a 'horrible mix of class, gender and ethnic tension,'³² the real problem of course, is less that Macfarlane is 'not from round here,' but more that his particular way of seeing is communicated through the prism of 'telling,' where the 'I' voice assumes – albeit unconsciously – possession, and where activism is relegated to a less nuanced experience far less likely to affect change in the reader. In using the term 'indigene' therefore, I understand that what Jamie is calling for is a degree of humility. Weston asserts that her work uses an 'authorial presence ... made via a carefully honed

²⁵ Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Common-place: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Counterpoint, 2002).

²⁶ Gary Budden, 'Awake, Awake Sweet England; Why We Need Landscape Punk' *The Quietus*, (October 24th 2017), accessed 12.02.2021.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Kathleen Jamie, 'A Lone Enraptured Male,' review of *The Wild Places*, Robert MacFarlane, *London Review of Books*, 6th March 2008, Volume 30 No. 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

colloquial modesty.³³ In this way she is able to defer to the knowledge and experience of others - who do belong – who are indigene, whether First Nation Alaskans or Tibetans or neighbours. In ‘In Quinhagak,’ for example, she writes, ‘We’d often hear John make remarks of wonderment and of sadness for the culture which was passed.

‘There are no Eskimos anymore,’ he’d say. All gone.’

John could remember sealskin-covered kayaks on the river. ‘All gone now.’

And dog teams, and dog sleds.’³⁴

It is important to acknowledge that nature writing is dominated by white writers. In an attempt to redress this state of affairs the ‘Willowherb Review,’ an online platform for emerging writers of colour, was initiated recently by Jessica J. Lee, author of *Two Trees Make a Forest*.³⁵ Anita Sethi’s book *I Belong Here*,³⁶ was written as an act of resistance by a brown woman walking the Pennine chain in the North of England, reclaiming the idea of home after a racist attack. Sethi is indeed ‘indigene’ but is clearly not always considered so. Thus the ‘bastard place’ is also a place where a ‘brown woman’ might be received differently to a ‘white man,’ and where, for example, the word ‘indigene’ is suggestive of inclusivity - or exclusivity, where the activism of walking and writing results in a form of consolation for black or Asian readers and wider.

Navigating this bumpy continuum, part of the work was to notice the way certain writers deployed the use of the self, to reject certain approaches and find literary alliances that allowed me to situate my own work in an appropriate niche in the ecosystem. As a researcher travelling to other countries and being highly aware of the points of tension above, I wanted to make sure that the writing was not only imaginative but fair, respectful, honest and useful. It was also centrally important to position myself as a consumer whose habits contribute to the climate degradation through the positioning of a fallible, human narrator.³⁷ As Lopate describes in relation to Michel de Montaigne, in talking about myself, I am also talking about all of us.³⁸ (Or rather, all of us in the developed West and North who have unassailably, if unwittingly brought about the climate catastrophe and its damaging effects on

³³ David Matless, ‘Nature Voices,’ *Journal of Historical Geography* Number 35 (2009), p. 168, in Daniel Weston, *Contemporary Literary Landscapes: The Poetics of Experience* (Routledge, 2016).

³⁴ Kathleen Jamie, *Surfacing* (Sort of Books, 2019), p.47.

³⁵ Jessica J. Lee, *Two Trees Make a Forest; on Memory, Migration and Taiwan* (Virago, 2019).

³⁶ Anita Sethi, *I Belong Here* (Bloomsbury, 2021).

³⁷ Similar to and aligned towards the essays of Nicole Walker in *Sustainability; a Love Story*, (Mad Creek Books, imprint of Ohio State University, 2018).

³⁸ Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay; An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. (Anchor Books, 1995), p.xxiii

less developed nations and regions). In writing about myself however, I was not merely turning the gaze inward for the sake of introspection, but to direct attention to the world outside. In this way I navigated between climate crisis, metaphysical joy, despair and was also able to communicate what might have changed in me as a result of the process of writing.

In *Nature Cure*³⁹ Richard Mabey similarly engages deeply with the relationship between inner and outer landscapes; how one affects the other and brings about change in the writer themselves. It is Mabey's relationship *with* or *toward* the natural world that tilts him in the direction of recovery from deep depression. Shifting along an 'axis between culture – land practice, or literature, science, the visual arts, sculpture, whatever – and nature,'⁴⁰ Mabey's oeuvre emerges from living things themselves, resulting in work that presents hope for the natural world - *and* for humans.

On Influence

I will now examine four texts more closely.

Kathleen Jamie was an early influence in my writing career. I was drawn to how her essays navigate the uncertain boundaries of the nature genre, including 'outer' landscapes where icebergs smell of 'nothing but colossal, witless indifference,'⁴¹ or her husband seriously ill in hospital, or human organs under the microscope, (the deltas and estuaries inside us), the self in relation to the world. In 'Magpie Moth'⁴² a bodged attempt to rescue a drowning moth - a moth with its foot in its eye – Jamie holds up a mirror to her own behaviour, exhorting, 'It's all happening out there, and all you have to do, girl, is get your foot out of your eye.'⁴³ Here; fragile nature is in direct relation to our human flaws. Jamie asserts 'If I write for anything, it's to bring order out of chaos, but not too much. A wee bit of disorder never did any harm.'⁴⁴

Similarly, I was writing towards something of Snyder's 'ecological and cultural value,'⁴⁵ 'a point of honesty'⁴⁶ achieved through a sense of tempered wonder, synaptic attention, humility and authorial

³⁹ Richard Mabey; *Nature Cure*, (Penguin, 2015).

⁴⁰ Mark Cocker, *Death of a Naturalist: Why New Nature Writing is so Tame*. New Statesman, 17th June 2015. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/06/death-naturalist-why-new-nature-writing-so-tame> [accessed 02.12.2020]

⁴¹ Kathleen Jamie, *Sightlines*, (Sort of Books, 2012), p.10.

⁴² Kathleen Jamie, *Sightlines*, (Sort of Books, 2012), p.173-176.

⁴³ Ibid p.176.

⁴⁴ Kathleen Jamie, 'Seven Lessons for Writers from Kathleen Jamie', *Quartz*, 22nd February 2015.

<https://qz.com/346452/seven-lessons-for-writers-from-scottish-poet-kathleen-jamie> accessed 03/09/2019

⁴⁵ Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, (Counterpoint, 1990), p.40.

⁴⁶ Taylor, Anita Darcel and Phillip Lopate. 'Interview with Phillip Lopate.' *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*, vol. 8 no. 1, 2006, p. 125-137. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/fge.2006.0021](https://doi.org/10.1353/fge.2006.0021). Accessed 28th January 2021.p.136.

voice. I want to draw the reader in as if talking to them alone; Lopate's confiding 'everything from 'gossip to wisdom' again.⁴⁷

Jamie's imagery provides measured bursts of synaptic attention, or 'lightning strike,'⁴⁸ and her sentence structure and ordering, the assembling of one idea against another is achieved through diligent control. In 'Darkness and Light,' 'Generations lived and died. We invented electric light, the internal combustion engine, we exploited oilfields, developed telephones and TVs, to dispel the winter dark-and now at solstice we come, as no one has done for 5000 years, to witness a little beam of sunlight creeping through the darkness onto a stone wall.'⁴⁹ This close synaptic attention was a technique I made use of through my research. I did not however, choose to overload the text, but to use it sparingly, as small sparks of linguistic responsiveness. In my essay 'Dust,' for example, I situate the bizarre, discomfiting sight of birds during and after surgery, 'as if in recovery from the mother of all hangovers,' describing an avian prosthetic as 'a mash-up between a red wellington boot and something for clearing a blocked sink.' (p.54).

Situating modernity against the 5,000-year-old Neolithic tomb of Maes Howe, Jamie thinks aloud on the page, 'What, if the world lasts, would people 5,000 years hence find worth saving of our age? They could scarce avoid all our plastic and junk, but what would they want?'⁵⁰ Time and modernity rub alongside each other, and the reader is drawn into a world of potent and surprising metaphorical gestures. 'I don't know if the 25 or so people who crept into Maes Howe for the solstice were rewarded with a beam of sunlight. And if it came, did they part to let it through, like a doctor as an accident?'⁵¹ A Neolithic tomb becomes a metaphor for measuring impermanence, for plotting our vulnerability and arrogance, our disconnection and vulnerability. 'And, if it all goes to hell in a hand cart, we have the data, we can build a replica.'⁵² True to the essay's rhetorical opportunities, the point is made without overt moralising, and more a sense of what if?

Jamie's informal approach, her blend of observation, imagery, commentary, dialogue, timelines, reference, the domestic, have all provided useful context for my research. Reflecting on this I was able to make writing that did not draw attention to itself, and to assimilate my own observations and thoughts respectfully into the lives of others.

⁴⁷ Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay ; An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. (Anchor Books, 1995), p.xviii

⁴⁸ Clive James, *Poetry Notebook*, (Picador, 2014), p.36.

⁴⁹ Kathleen Jamie, *Findings* (Sort of Books, 2005), p.16.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p.21-22.

⁵¹ Kathleen Jamie, *Findings* (Sort of Books, 2005), p.27.

⁵² *Ibid.* p.25.

In ‘The Essay in Dark Times,’⁵³ Jonathan Franzen braids a discussion of his own behaviours with a discussion of the contemporary essay. By subjecting both essay and inner landscape to scrutiny, he establishes a direct link to Montaigne’s use of the essay as a place to reveal the ‘domestic and private.’⁵⁴ As Montaigne himself wrote, referencing Pliny, ‘each man is a good education to himself, provided he has the capacity to spy on himself from close up.’⁵⁵ Like Montaigne then, Franzen adopts the essayist’s role of fallible narrator. In a discussion on smoking, for example, Franzen voices the kinds of inner conflicts the essay form engenders; ‘My state of mind was like a quantum wave function in which I could be totally a smoker but also totally not a smoker, so long as I never took measure of myself.’⁵⁶ and “For the writer an essay is a mirror, and I didn’t like what I was seeing in this one.”⁵⁷ Rather than ‘an expert certified by the proper authorities’⁵⁸ Franzen tells us he is a bit of a nerd; a keen birder, *and* a ‘lister;’ someone who ticks off species and goes in search of them. He is both that outwardly ‘roving eye,’ but also looking inwards in critical self-reflection.

From Henry Finder (his editor at the New Yorker) Franzen learns about the essay’s ability to persuade, ‘Henry nudged me toward framing the essay not as a denunciation but as a question: how do we find meaning in our actions when the world seems to be coming to an end?’⁵⁹ Here Franzen illustrates how the essay’s facility – its generosity – is in deriving meaning through argument rather than fighting for the truth through polemic. Here the contemporary essay allows the non-expert to probe information and experience, self-exposure and doubt to find the fissures in arguments from which meaning can arise in both writer and reader. Elsewhere in the collection a species of seabird is saved from extinction by the human act of noticing and paying attention. Here Franzen manifests as an activist through showing what is possible – a technique I adopted throughout my research. As Henry Finder asserts in the essay and in the world – ‘this follows *from* that.’⁶⁰

One of my own essays – ‘Viewing Stations’ - did indeed begin life as a polemic but was subsequently later redrafted using rhetorical argument as the means of engagement. Franzen’s writing

⁵³ Jonathan Franzen, ‘The Essay in Dark Times,’ in *To The End of the End of the Earth* (4th Estate, 2018), p. 3-22.

⁵⁴ Anne Hartle, ‘The bonds of our society;’ Montaigne and the transformation of virtue.’ *ABD Religion and Ethics*, (24th June, 2019). <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/montaigne-and-the-transformation-of-virtue/11240746> accessed 28.04.2021.

⁵⁵ Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live; A Life of Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer* (Vintage, 2011), p.32.

⁵⁶ Jonathan Franzen, ‘The Essay in Dark Times,’ in *The End of the End of the Earth* (4th Estate, 2018), p.5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p.17.

⁵⁸ Edward Said, ‘Professionals and Amateurs,’ in *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) pp.73-83.

⁵⁹ Jonathan Franzen, ‘The Essay in Dark Times,’ in *The End of the End of the Earth* (4th Estate, 2018), p.19.

⁶⁰ Jonathan Franzen, ‘The Essay in Dark Times,’ in *The End of the End of the Earth* (4th Estate, 2018), p.8.

therefore influenced me to make use of the essay's discursive, slantwise and digressive facilities to examine the natural world in the Anthropocene, where the capacity for self-examination (memoir) is the connective thread. Reflecting upon Franzen's approach I was able to utilise the essay's curious intellectual freedoms to show that humans can indeed affect positive change. In this way the essay manifests as a form of literary activism through the changes negotiated and experienced during its development.

Nicole Walker's *Sustainability: A Love Story*⁶¹ was highly influential in my research. Essays that braid memoir with climate change, Walker's technique is also one of examining her own behaviour, its impact upon her family and on the planet, thereby allowing the reader to also examine their behaviours similarly. Describing herself on the dust jacket as 'a short blonde woman who is mostly a hypocrite anyway, the reader understands that the book is unlikely to sermonise; that Walker's 'I' is also Montaigne's 'I;' a way of examining all human behaviours on the environment without resorting to polemic.

Sustainability helped me to finely tune my literary methodology, to make use of the interplay between informative non-fiction, embodied and experiential writing and lyrical nature writing. Walker's marshalling of the personal, the scientific and the philosophical was also influential in developing my own thread of literary activism.

Like Franzen, Walker does not present herself as an expert, but dangles herself, along with us all, on and off the hook. 'climate change comes and climate change goes and, speaking about aeons, there's not much we can do about it. I am off the hook. Climate is not my problem.'⁶² All of us are implicated, guilty, fallible; Walker's fallible narrator shows that there are various ways to 'do activism' through writing without resorting to more conventional fact-driven narratives. Her thread of activism invites me as the reader to change my own thinking and behaviours. I had not known for example, that concentrates of sunscreen are bleaching coral reefs. If I was ever to swim above a reef therefore, this awareness would change my behaviour around sunscreen use. After reading Walker I wrote 'Human Resilience Training' to experiment with a braided structure where a number of ideas flow through each other: my relationship with the natural world, the psycho-social landscape and to explore 'resilience' in both humans and landscapes. Applying the technique elsewhere, for example in 'Viewing Stations,' I was able to position in the reader's mind the contrast between say, the effects of regenerative farming on climate amelioration, as opposed to the more damaging effects of

⁶¹ Nicole Walker, *Sustainability: A Love Story* (Mad Creek Books, 2018).

⁶² Ibid p.80-81.

traditional sheep farming in the Lakes. Nudging my arguments forward like this, rather than resorting to polemic, I pose the question of what exactly a ‘cultural landscape’ *should* look like in the Anthropocene.

I was drawn to Walker’s method of creating a web of recurring images and ideas across the collection: the rain in Portland, fire-risk in Arizona, carbon, forensic scrutiny of the self. This structural cross-referencing invites the reader to make connections, to understand how this follows from that. This technique – one I chose to replicate in my book in a similar imagistic and linguistic ‘rhyme scheme,’ allows new and surprising connections to occur through themes such as rain, water and flooding in ‘Human Resilience Training,’ ‘Beavergeddon’ and ‘Viewing Stations.’ These kinds of images and themes circulate inside the book, helping to achieve a blended and resonant narrative where each essay began to float more readily against another. From these insights the whole collection began to acquire a greater degree of coherence and coalescence.

Sustainability does feel over-long, and therefore as a reader I began to be less active because of what feels like the re-iteration of similar ideas. I wanted a little bit less.

*On Time and Water*⁶³ by Icelandic writer and activist Andri Snær Magnason is both polemic and literary narrative. In a world where we have forgotten to, or choose not to imagine the future, where the world’s leaders continue to do nothing meaningful to engage with climate amelioration, Magnason enters the fray. Situating the speed of disappearance of Iceland’s glaciers against the past lives of his grandparents (one of whom was a glaciologist) he projects the effects of climate breakdown into the future lives of his, and all our children. Magnason is asked to write a memorial for the Oksjökull glacier - the first of hundreds that Iceland will lose in the coming two hundred years. ‘It took quite some time. I wondered who I was addressing... I wondered at the absurdity of the task. How do you say goodbye to a glacier?’⁶⁴ There are parallels here with ‘Viewing Stations,’ for example, where I ask what exactly we should be prioritising, the restoration of soils and biodiversity in a flood prone and biodiversity-dead landscape – and across the Earth - or continue as we are.

Magnason’s chosen epigraph is from Senegalese ecologist Baba Dioum.⁶⁵ I had already made use of this quotation in my essay ‘Cathedral Thinking’ (p.172), as a way of foregrounding the crucial

⁶³ Andri Snær Magnason, *On Time and Water* (Profile Books, 2020).

⁶⁴ Ibid. p.176.

⁶⁵ Baba Dioum, ‘In the end, we will only conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.’ From a paper presented in 1968 in New Delhi at the triennial meeting of the General Assembly of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN).

position of knowledge as the driver of protection. That shared sense of awareness and love for the world and our families is ultimately the motivating force in both mine and Magnason's work.

Magnason borrows from both the essay and narrative non-fiction; there is a sense of 'essaying' at work, of chronological and related sequencing, of an elegance in the braiding together of fact and story, and a clear sense of the author's 'wind-up doll' walking us through the material evidence. Frankly, this is not bedtime reading; it is exactly the book I did not want to write. Much of the content is direct and terrifying, but powerfully delivered, but demands a place in this discussion precisely because of this more direct approach. Magnason's rage though, is measured, justified. Despite the polemic, he is not shouting but presenting what we in the West know but are not comfortable in the presence of; the 'hyperobject' of climate is the elephant in the book in the room. 'When the glaciers are gone, what is Iceland?' he asks, 'Land?'⁶⁶

'When a system collapses,' Magnason writes, 'language is released from its moorings.'⁶⁷ The language we have been handed to describe the climate crisis is, we know, and Magnason's book emphasises, insufficient for communicating the scale of the problem and the tasks that lie ahead. This language, he says, relegates the situation to fairy tale. In this dilution, both metaphorically and actually, our language does nothing to prevent the glaciers from melting away. This book forced me to question how I have foregrounded techniques of argument and persuasion over polemic. Given the state of the world, the activist in me now asks, is my approach sufficient? Ought I not be angrier? For all this, I return to the essay's elegance and generousities in order to approach the work in a way that primarily engenders hope; anger is not my primary motivating force.

Whilst Magnason's book poses love against despair, mine infers that we can be consoled by reading about landscapes where repair is actually taking place. This approach is a very different form of consolation from 'nature recovery' narratives,' and is a reinvigorated way of being at home in the world. This being at 'home' though, manifests in a number of ways. Despite an undercurrent of fear that runs through the book (how could there not be?) my work attempts to make sense of my sons' futures, and to understand what home is/was to a slender billed curlew, a Hungarian Meadow adder, a forester, a bear. What kinds of forces have disengaged us from 'home,' my work asks, when film clips show birds exploding on contact with cheap electrical infrastructure? Or the veneer of World Heritage against the urgent need for landscape restoration in the Lake District, witnessed by an indigene who is also an essayist, and who does not want to resort to polemic? My essays show what can happen when humans are distracted, but also constitutes what happens when the scales fall from our eyes. Set in Northern Greece (the original 'home' of the 'agrapha') '80 Fragments on the Pelican' blends observation of super-abundant wetlands with the agents of destruction - who later become

⁶⁶Andri Snær Magnason, *On Time and Water* (Profile Books, 2020), p.173.

⁶⁷ Ibid. p.8

agents of repair. 'Prespa' I write, 'it's hidden pelican colonies and its whole of cavalcade of natural life - is a mirror.' (p.118); here, the essay is both exposé and act of repair.

There is room in the world for *The Salt Path* and *H is for Hawk*, and for consolation through nature writing. At this time in the Earth's history and through Covid-19 there is a great need for consolation, for stories that show the potential for recovery of world and self. In the nature genre however, there is a danger that consolation might assume apex position precisely because books like *On Time and Water* are simply not consolatory. Where memoir is used to distract us from the larger world, its ability to console is limited. But my particular use of memoir, as practiced by Walker and Franzen, is a form of looking that is both consoling and provoking, inviting activism as a force for change in a way that polemic cannot, where polemic can crush us into despair and apathy.

As readers we will continue to negotiate the continuum between writing as consolation and provocation; all I am able to say is that the essay provides a means of operating between the two positions. In the meantime, what distinguishes my book as a force of activism from a more self-centric memoir is to continue noticing where essaying begins and memoir ends, that the work is not always about me but about showing myself in relation to the worlds of interior and exterior landscapes. From a non-expert point of view, the essay enables me to be curious, and like Jamie to show humility, to follow digressions and pursue arguments because after all, much of the world cannot actually be 'written' or 'known.'

Chapter 4

What kinds of considerations have I given to assembling the collection from individual essays, and what conclusions have been drawn from the research process?

In this final question I will discuss my research as parts and wholes and my methods of transforming individual essays into a collection and completed book. I will draw conclusions from the research, where the conceptual framework of the ‘agrapha’ has been transformed from ‘unwritten’ to ‘news’ from the natural world.

On Reflection

Rachel DuPlessis asserts ‘The contemporary essay occurs in the seam between sociality and textuality.’¹ If sociality is the act of living together as society in an organised way and textuality constitutes the presentation of text through interpretation, then the combined elements of this PhD have allowed me to show myself in relation to the natural and human worlds *and* the world of the literary essay. My expertise has developed from nervousness about what exactly an essay is to noticing how it achieves differently to other forms of narrative non-fiction. The supervisory process was an invaluable part of the process. It allowed me to ‘get my eye in’ and to ‘see’ a whole suite of developing considerations including accessing the kind of voice I wanted to deploy, to see through the eyes of other writers and pin everything down across the collection. As another kind of ‘viewing station,’ accumulatively, supervision enabled me to gain a more highly developed sense of the ‘heft’ of the project, where ‘heft’ is to understand my place in the landscape of the essay and this process of reflection.

Duplessis also asserts that the essay can claim a feminised space in various ways; of which, interruption, beginning again and again, fragmentation, distrust of system, ‘the thing changeable, the viewer changeable too,’² are parts of the whole. Achieving something approaching expertise has meant consistently practising, redrafting and beginning again - many times. Beginning again helped me to avoid ‘obstacles’ (the Boids in my opening essay), such as passive voice, over-reliance on lyrical description, lack of rhetorical argument, authority and insufficient reflection on my material. Each redraft allowed me to more robustly ‘dissect my own motives.’³ This manifest in observing myself moving through the material, (the element of memoir), through the bringing of ‘news,’

¹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, ‘f-Words: An Essay on the Essay.’ *American Literature*, vol. 68, no. 1, 1996, pp. 15–45. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2927538. Accessed 3 Feb. 2021. p.23.

² *Ibid.* p.34

³ Phillip Lopate, *To Show and To Tell; The Craft of Literary Non-Fiction* (Free Press, 2013), p.97.

(activism through the paying of close attention) polemic, (testing information against rhetorical argument to gain authority), and cause and effect where the essay follows novelistic devices, (the twists and turns of plot). In addition, my research contributes to scholarly debates on both the environment and the essay, situating the genre as a highly relevant literature of place. Through the threads of news, activism, attention and distraction my research rejects the simpler idea of nature memoir as consolation, instead positioning it firmly as ‘environmental justice action.’ Deploying memoir as the central thread – showing the self in relationship to the world – is the unifying principle throughout.

By continuously mapping myself onto the demands of the writing and the essay, I have maintained a sense of hope, because I do not know how to live without hope, and I do not believe any of us do. Despite this, and although my original intention was to only focus on hope, I have shown how my research adapted through time. My larger themes and arguments allowed me to restate in each new essay the various manifestations from political inaction to audacious individual actions as a way of illustrating hope and consolation as major forces at work. With the arrival of Covid-19, for example, I was able to react in real time, showing that nature *is* a form of consolation in dark times, and how in the absence of ‘Anthropophony,’⁴ humans were able to tune in to bird song for the first time in decades. At the same time, we humans wanted nothing more than to get back to ‘normal;’ to drown out the birdsong and the abilities of whales to feed unimpeded by human machines, (p.164-5). My penultimate essay ‘Cathedral Thinking’ began as a response to Covid-19 and was written through the first lockdown. Again, it develops to situate positive change; a continuum from ‘tuning-in’ to bird song, land abandonment (the golf course) the self, (Hatidze) and political will, (rivers as people).

Through such diverse means, my essays acquired a greater degree of resolution and began to exist in relation to the previous, the next and the whole. As that cohesion occurred a strengthened sense of ‘through lines’ evolved centred on my major themes of memoir, abundance, news, attention and distraction. Interweaving those themes provided a web of conceptual alliances across the collection and consequently therefore, the ‘unwritten’ became manifest within the book’s greater superstructure. Each new essay opens those themes to scrutiny in a new geographic field (rhyme again) and sometimes in a recurring field (Storm Desmond for example). Another rhyme is that of human influence and agency on landscape and species, where I reveal the natural world as beautiful, fragile, dynamic, at risk from the greater threats of climate breakdown, but where I also situate the dynamic possibility of repair against distraction and inattention.

⁴ The Term ‘Anthrophony’ was first used by Bernie Krause to describe all human generated sound – natural or mechanical. *Voices of the Wild: Animal Songs, Human Din, and the Call to Save Natural Soundscapes*, (Yale University Press, 2015).

Nicole Walker writes, ‘Sustainability is easy enough to define ... Tucked inside the word are other good words: sustenance, maintain, able — something we are doing and can keep doing.’⁵ As my research moves into a world where a fifth of countries’ ecosystems are in danger of collapse,⁶ my hope is that through its own transformative processes the book provides the consolation of activism - the essay as ‘environmental justice action’ - a way of showing that restoration is indeed possible. As part of its circularity of influence, my intention is that it exists as a form of literary consolation through an alignment towards hope.

On Assembling

In the third year I recognised the need for orientating essay; a point of departure from which everything else flows. Titled ‘A Primer for Abundance and Loss’ this essay establishes my particular ways of seeing and thinking. It opens to the reader the ways in which artists and writers have ‘seen’ the natural world, establishing ‘seeing’ as a strategic recurring metaphor. I also use subheadings as another form of orientation in this essay. Influenced by Sinead Gleeson⁷ and Jenn Ashworth,⁸ subheadings create a particular aesthetic structure where sections are individual containers of rhetorical argument within the superstructure of the larger essay.

Each essay moved through a sequence of dreaming and scaffolding, as if ‘packing my suitcase like Didion.’⁹ The opening sequence of ‘Mrs Janossy’ (p.61), is a list; a means of drawing the reader into the essay with ‘profusion and corruption.’¹⁰ In early drafts, language, tone and voice were slippery, requiring resolution through numbers of edits but by moving through the process and seeing how what occurred in one essay might resonate in another and eventually the whole, I was able to reach a point of resolution. What sometimes began as polemic was fashioned into something gentler, more excursive and adventurous and this – together with refining language helped each essay to move towards its target.

I purged two very early essays that were not of sufficient standard, and one that did not fit sufficiently well. Two other planned essays remained unwritten. One, on the reintroduction of bison to the Netherlands however, provided some pivotal context for the ‘Wolf’ essay. Having concluded

⁵ Nicole Walker, ‘Sustainability; Towards a Definition,’ *Waxwing*

(undated). <http://waxwingmag.org/archive/03/writing.php?item=117> accessed 19th February 2021.

⁶ Damian Carrington, ‘A Fifth of Nations at Risk of Environmental Collapse,’ *The Guardian*, (12th October, 2020). <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/12/fifth-of-nations-at-risk-of-ecosystem-collapse-analysis-finds> Accessed 13th March, 2021).

⁷ ‘Blue Hills and Chalk Bones’ in Sinéad Gleeson, *Constellations; Reflections from Life* (Picador, 2019), pp.1-18.

⁸ ‘A Lecture on Influence’ in Jenn Ashworth, *Notes Made Whilst Falling* (Goldsmiths Press, 2019), pp.65-93.

⁹ Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), p.27.

¹⁰ William Gass, quoted in Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), p.25.

that four essays on Hungary would be just too many, my field visit to Przewalski's Wild Horses remains as the literal 'agrapha' - unwritten in the PhD.¹¹

Through Covid-19 I lost a research visit to Maine, USA, to research a fishing community restoring the ocean food chain for ecological and economic benefits. Rather than a missed opportunity however, this presented an opportunity to 'see' differently in the field of the essay. I subsequently composed two very short essays, 'Ecdysis' and 'Incoming,' influenced by Jamie's 'Magpie Moth'¹² and 'Voice of the Wood'¹³ and I also restructured 'Pelican' (an essay that was dead on its feet) into the fragmented form.

The writing of those essays demanded a different method of control; that of concision and compression. 'Ecdysis' grants the reader a pause between much longer essays, engaging imaginatively with meadow adders' eyesight against the sights of agri-business, (p.136). In 'Pelican' I use individual images (theses), cultural materials and ordering to focus attention in particular ways, drawing the narrative into shape. In this way, the fragmented form was very enabling, allowing me to experiment imaginatively and enabling both myself and the reader to 'see' differently. My closing essay 'Incoming' is a quieter moment, allowing the book to close on uncertainty, but drawing together my major themes through the final lines, 'So there we are; you realise you're headed in the wrong direction, you recalibrate the trajectory....' etc, (p.178-9). In this way human behaviour is located directly alongside the natural world in a concluding metaphor that calls for change. In combination, these three essays add a different written aesthetic that would not otherwise have occurred.

Late in the PhD process I read Mark O'Connell's *Notes from an Apocalypse, A Personal Journey to the End of the World and Back*.¹⁴ O'Connell uses the memoir form to connect the individual essays and his research journeys, including the first year of new fatherhood, and drawing together a diverse array of subjects. There are both similarities and differences in our working methods. Rather than investigate hope, O'Connell is an 'investigative philosopher'¹⁵ of the world's end, exploring some of the strategies that various people are developing as insurance against the apocalypse. He questions whether having children 'a statement of hope or an act of sacrifice?' Or both?¹⁶

¹¹ Subsequently commissioned by BBC Wildlife magazine; 'Steppe back in Time; Przewalski's Wild Horse,' BBC *Wildlife*, March 2019, Vol. 37. Number 03.

¹² Kathleen Jamie, *Sightlines* (Sort of Books, 2012), pp.173-176.

¹³ Kathleen Jamie, *Surfacing* (Sort of Books, 2019), pp.243-245.

¹⁴ Mark O'Connell, *Notes from an Apocalypse; A Personal Journey to the End of the World and Back* (Granta, 2020).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.83.

¹⁶ Mark O'Connell, *Notes from an Apocalypse; A Personal Journey to the End of the World and Back* (Granta, 2020), p.241.

In the essay 'Under the Hide' describing O'Connell's wilderness retreat in the Scottish glen,¹⁷ faced with the challenge of being alone in a tent on a hillside and instructed to 'do nothing' for twenty-four hours, he has the following realisation: 'the word landscape felt *wrong* to me. It was a visual term' more to do with how we 'imposed our aesthetic categories on nature.'¹⁸ It was useful then, for me to reflect upon and find similarities in O'Connell's methods of situating memoir as an 'attempt' at making sense of human action and inaction, and to understand how in my own work I explore nature as its own thing, navigating a clear path away from 'nature recovery' memoir and instead choosing to ask questions about human connectedness or distractedness with the natural world. Perhaps the only certainty I can arrive at therefore, is to continue paying the world careful attention.

O'Connell's memoir operates on two levels. It provides a plot (the self under investigation in relation to what is seen) and a chronology for the separate journeys he undertakes. He visits apocalypse 'preppers,' land-grabbers, Mars colonists, spends a week in a luxury highland lodge (to undertake philosophical preparations) to the *actual* apocalypse of Chernobyl, and a return home to family, to therapy, and to ask whether 'or not 'Are we fucked.'¹⁹ (We are, apparently). Like me, O'Connell's fallible narrator travels inwardly, (Lopate's 'dissecting motives' again),²⁰ but his use of memoir – how the writer is affected by what is seen - is much more overt. This raises a question on styles of memoir and clearly, O'Connell's varies hugely from say, that of Kathleen Jamie. Observing both writers, my creative decision was to work more like Jamie, where the self is less overtly stated, and ideas are allowed to arise from the writing itself.

To arrive at the final sequence I needed to observe how each essay behaved against the previous, the next and in relation to the whole. Part of my creative decision was to consider geographic spread and to forge natural alliances, thus the two longer Hungarian essays are placed together as are the two in Scotland. (To have three essays on the same country in such close proximity however, felt too dense. Ecdysis was therefore positioned further along). My original, somewhat naive thinking was to sequence in such a way as to build a head of steam; a kind of 'climax' essaying,' because both 'Wolf' and 'Bear' contain big animals and big themes. Subsequently, by laying the printed essays on the floor, I was able to experiment and reflect on the dynamics across the whole. I then understood that the 'Wolf' essay needed to be placed much earlier on precisely because of its target of 'reception.' Having established 'ways of seeing' in 'Primer,' by placing the 'Wolf' essay next in the sequence, I was able to challenge reader's preconceptions of exactly what wolf territory is and ways in which

¹⁷ Mark O'Connell, *Notes from an Apocalypse; A Personal Journey to the End of the World and Back* (Granta, 2020), p.241.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.177.

¹⁹ *Ibid*. p.224.

²⁰ Phillip Lopate, *To Show and To Tell; The Craft of Literary Non-Fiction* (Free Press, 2013). p.97.

human and wild species can and do intersect. These ideas subsequently resonate with everything that follows. ‘Circumspect Dancing’ examines agricultural abundance in contrast to the British agri-wastelands discussed in the first essay. My ‘indigene’ essay on the Lake District (‘Viewing Stations’) follows the fragmented ‘Pelican’ essay to contrast levels of abundance in both landscapes. ‘Human Resilience Training,’ ‘Beavergeddon,’ ‘Viewing Stations’ and ‘Cathedral Thinking’ all contain human experiences of water, rainfall and flooding but did not necessarily need to be adjacent. The task was more to notice how rhymes could recur in the reader’s mind, like a rhizome sending out shoots, or a web of interrelated ideas across the book.

I originally envisioned the ‘Bear’ essay as a long, central essay around which everything else flows. I am less clear about this now; this is less ‘climax essay’ and more about a developed sense of exactly what needed to align with what, the effects of this in my own and the reader’s mind, and importantly as part of the framework of attention, distraction, self and the ‘agrapha.’ Whilst I was writing the ‘Bear’ essay I saw an opportunity to further develop Hansjoerg Wyss’ conceptual notion of ‘cathedral thinking’ – or long-term landscape thinking. The two essays therefore coexist because of this shared target. ‘Cathedral Thinking’ also enabled me to react in real time to the pandemic, and to pay attention to the silencing of ‘anthropophony,’ using memoir to recall specific moments from childhood as a way of exploring human ‘tuning in or out’ of attention. Closing this essay with Roseanne Watt’s poem ‘Flightpaths,’ enables the writing to segue into the final essay through the subject of geese.

In my final essay, and as a fallible memoirist, I am unable to draw final conclusions or give specific answers to the matter of climate breakdown - or indeed alternative scenarios. Rather, I maintain the idea that the only conclusion is to continue the sense of enquiry. Indeed, my closing sentence invokes Montaigne’s habit of appending uncertain codas to almost everything he wrote,²¹ a sense of ‘I can’t say or know for sure.’

In conclusion, my research has enabled me to develop a significantly greater sense of how the essay achieves differently to other forms of non-fiction, and I am excited to develop my practice further. Rather than approach the work as an expert, the research has allowed me to be myself ‘in the largeness of something else,’²² observing, attempting to make sense of discordant materials and persuading myself and others through the pursuit of rhetorical argument. The thread of memoir, and in particular my use of a fallible narrator, operates within a well-established essayistic practice extending from Montaigne to Foster Wallace, (‘One reason for my unwillingness to speak publicly

²¹ Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live; A Life of Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer* (Vintage, 2011), p.51.

²² Rachel Blau DuPlessis, ‘f-Words: An Essay on the Essay.’ *American Literature*, vol. 68, no. 1, 1996, p.32. www.jstor.org/stable/2927538. Accessed 3 Feb. 2021.

on a subject for which I am direly underqualified...')²³ and beyond. Finally then, all I am really able to do is to make an attempt; to *essai* into the finding of meaning. To reveal, after all, that nothing can be truly known - except my own processes - and that they in turn, can only be understood through the act of reflection.

²³ David Foster Wallace, 'Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed,' in *Consider the Lobster* (Abacus, 2005), p.60.

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Appendix

Reimagining the Lake District Uplands and Beyond

Over the past eighteen months, based on an original idea of mine Professor Charlie Gere and I have been developing a new project with colleagues at the University of Cumbria. Originally titled *Reimagining the Lake District Uplands* we wanted to find ways to make meaningful engagement with climate chaos and biodiversity loss in the Lake District landscapes. This project has close associations with my essay ‘Viewing Stations,’ in which I investigate and situate traditional land use in the Lakes and the World Heritage designation (which enshrines the preservation of a ‘beautiful’ ‘cultural’ but degraded landscape) over the precedent for restoration of soils and biodiversity in a time of climate breakdown.

In October 2019 we invited over 20 NGO’s and individuals including Natural England, the Woodland Trust, photographer Ashley Cooper, (*Images from a Warming Planet*), farmers, land managers and climate activists to a meeting kindly hosted by University of Cumbria. Our aim was to remind ourselves of the impacts of Storm Desmond on the Lake District and its wider communities together with the ongoing costs associated with this, and to begin framing the kinds of questions that need to be asked to begin building resilience in the landscape. We ran the meeting as a search conference – where the aim is not to find solutions but to concentrate on finding the right questions; it was very clear that those working here feel that change is desperately needed.

After the meeting we continued to build a network, working with Professor Ian Convery at University of Cumbria, Christopher Loynes and (Environment and Society), Penny Bradshaw (English Literature Programme Leader) to find ways to take the project forward. When Covid-19 hit, conversations continued and the network continued to grow but we have not been able to convene the symposium we had planned. Our intentions are to provoke conversations and actions to achieve wider sustainability, working with diverse partners including The John Muir Trust.

Together with Simon Stainer of Natural England (lead ecologist for Cumbria), Profs Gere and Convery and I co-wrote a piece calling for change in the Lakes published by Goldsmiths Press, titled ‘Covid-19 and Reimagining the Lake District.’¹

A shorter version of this was published in *The Ecologist* titled ‘Reimagining the Lake District.’²

The way the Lake District is represented and fetishized – perpetuated by the World Heritage designation, (which designation was deeply opposed by conservationists and ecologists) is extremely concerning in this time of climate crisis. Our concerns are of course replicated elsewhere in the wider

¹ <https://www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-press/features/covid-19-and-reimagining-the-lake-district/>

² <https://theecologist.org/2020/jul/27/reimagining-lake-district>

world and meanwhile the WH team fail to grasp the seriousness of the situation. Thus, tourist numbers are unsustainable and problems such as flooding and biodiversity loss are hindered from achieving the kinds of change required. WH literature cites the Romantics and Beatrix Potter as part of a raft of reasons for preserving' this 'cultural' landscape. The question then, is what a cultural landscape is or looks like in the Anthropocene. (This question worked its way into my PhD research in the essay 'Viewing Stations.')

I approached Prof Gere with the idea of a new Lake District Environmental Literary Prize for poetry and essay writing. We then approached Tim Smidt at Eden Centre who agreed to fund prize money of £1500. The plan has now developed into a partnership between Lancaster's Future Places Project, Eden Centre and Kendal Mountain Festival and will take place in 2021, titled the Future Places prize.

As the project crept along under Covid restrictions I began to understand how a UK Centre for Environment and Writing, based at Lancaster, would allow us to approach various related subjects from a central base. Such a base would facilitate inter-disciplinary working amongst writers, researchers, scientists, students and academics and enable individuals, groups and institutions to collaborate in the field and in the academy. The overarching aim of such a project would be to facilitate communication on climate and biodiversity issues within academia, but importantly, amongst the wider public, through events and communications that foster wider understanding of the possibilities of change.