



Storytelling in the Anthropocene

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This article examines the 2015 book *Love in the Anthropocene* and storytelling in relation to ecological collapse. Climate fiction may engage elements of craft, in particular Enlightenment iterations of selfhood, that may contribute, regardless of a story's content, to destructive dynamics of the Anthropocene. This article proposes that writing fiction is both an act of bearing witness and of creating reality. It explores how the "post-development" (Kothari et al. 2019) framework of the Pluriverse might inform the way fiction is told and consumed in the twenty-first century, and to what ends. Stories that offer humans hope and justice, and help us navigate ecological collapse, may have less to do with realistic and cautionary apocalyptic and dystopian fictional worlds than with a view of the world the Pluriverse helps describe: one that emphasizes relationality (as is fundamental among many Indigenous and Zen Buddhist worldviews, for example) and understands reality as constituted by many worlds, kinds of worlds, and ways of being.



The nature of climate change—its relative invisibility, abstractness, and enormity—makes it hard for humans to grasp (Jamieson 2014). Generally, most “cli-fi”—climate fiction, or stories about a climate change world—aim to give humans a scaled sense of what graphs and charts might actually look like in our neighborhoods, on our shorelines, and in our backyards. Presumably, the hope behind much but not all cli-fi is that glimpses of a world altered by climate change will be sufficiently frightening or awful that humans may be able to appreciate what the species is up against and take action now to avoid rushing headlong into the worlds that climate fiction describes. When Dale Jamieson and I started talking about writing *Love in the Anthropocene* (2015), our aim was a little different.

Here is the essence of one of our early conversations: imagine how a nineteenth-century person might feel if they knew that in the future, they would have to visit a special place—a sort of special park—in order to be among trees and animals. What would they think if they were told that in 150 years, most Americans would have to go to these special parks for a night under the stars or to experience the fragrance of a coniferous forest? With the exception of perhaps some relief regarding predators such as wolves and grizzly bears, we imagined this nineteenth-century person would be fairly horrified to learn of these special parks. What, they might wonder, happened to all of the *other* trees and animals and visible stars that used to be *everywhere*? *What happened to the trees and stars?*

But, in fact, here in the twenty-first century, Dale and I think these special parks—we call them state parks and national parks—are pretty great. We are among many American and international travelers who love these parks. Many people plan all year for annual visits to them, have special gear for these visits, put stickers of these special parks’ names on water bottles, and wear t-shirts with the parks’ names on them. Visits to these parks, and the kinds of recreation done in them, can even be indicators of wealth and social status.

So, what happened inside the hearts and minds of twenty-first century Dale and Bonnie that we are in fact so *un*-perturbed by the idea of visiting a special park—and paying money—to be among trees and animals for one or two weeks of the year?

Perhaps in a hundred years more, conservationists in state and national forests that have all but burned down in forest fires will somehow manage to restore a few trees. And though it might freak out some people to imagine it, our great grandchildren may well be pretty stoked about going to see, say, the Three Trees of Northwest Wyoming or the Last Tree Standing in Arizona.

They will pay a lot of money and plan vacations around going to see those trees; they will wait in line for days and take pictures.

This is what had my attention, and Dale’s. We felt that the climate fiction we had seen and read neglected this aspect of our future selves’ interiority. A lot of

apocalyptic cli-fi goes something like this: the main character is someone a lot like many “developed world” contemporaries, both inside and out (living in an industrialized country, usually the United States, relatively wealthy, healthy, and educated), except that they are somehow navigating life in an unrecognizable dystopia punctuated by crisis. In much of this cli-fi, it is as though a nineteenth-century person is dropped into a disorienting, heartbreaking “special park,” and all of the readers or moviegoers, and the characters themselves, are horrified by it. But in fact, generally, most travelers, to mine and Dale’s knowledge, do not experience these national and state parks as horrifying and depressing or panic inducing. Generally, we might tell nineteenth-century folks, if we could, that we are only too happy to visit special tree parks on our vacations—and our stories about such visits would read not like apocalyptic literature at all but like any other human drama.

Furthermore, a lot of cli-fi—both in books and on screen—seems to feature protagonists who are also, in some measure, superheroes, or, at the very least, the sort of unique, essentialized individuals for whom redemption and victory are both possible and necessary.

We are not superheros—neither me and Dale nor our typical readers—and we do not particularly believe in American stories of redemption, seductive though they may be. In terms of climate victories, we are skeptical and uncertain, and generally pessimistic. So, the aim of our stories was not to stir people to action, exactly.

In *Love in the Anthropocene*, Dale and I wrote: “We may once may have thought of nature as the backdrop against which we lived our lives—pretty scenery to be sometimes plundered for its resources, or to write songs about—but the Anthropocene throws into stark relief that nature is not a ‘background’ and never has been. It has always been a part of our lives—a part of us as we are part of it” (Jamieson and Nadzam 2015).

This is something that has been underscored by the pandemic and the grim realities of climate change. In our coda on love, we articulate that it is perceiving the self as separate, as “in here” and everything else as “out there,” that has led to the ecological collapse we are experiencing. This fundamental delusion of separation is at the very core of feeling entitled to and untroubled by the plunder, commodification, and exploitation what so many humans in mainstream Western cultures perceive as “other”—be they other humans, animals, rivers, forests, or ecosystems (Jamieson and Nadzam 2015).

Dale and I also noted, and while writing kept a hard, imaginative eye on, the so-called banality of evil and how it is that obviously morally reprehensible realities—such as misogyny or racism—can be so normalized that they do not register as wrong, or even as existing, for whole swaths of the population.

It is as if so many of us are agreeing, without quite being conscious of it, to a “normal” that really does look to Dale and me like evil: “So we can only visit

the woods in a special park? Because no other woods remain? Cool. Let's buy a tent." "We can only see wild animals in cages? Because there's nowhere else left for them to live? Cool. Let's get an annual zoo pass."

We set to writing stories about worlds of last-remaining-tree parks. We began, for example, with "Fly-Fishing," a story in which a father who remembers wilder fishing experiences takes his daughter to a national park where the riverbed is made of no-slip turf, the flora has been painstakingly restored to resemble that native to the eighteenth-century century, all invasive weeds have been eradicated, and everyone is guaranteed a certain number of fish depending on how much they have paid. (Sort of like farmed-game hunting in Texas).

We wanted to write not about a world so transformed that everyone in it is horrified and afraid but a world in which everyone is themselves so transformed that the transformations of the world hardly bother them at all. Think, for example, of the millions of young children who did not know it was odd or unusual to wear N95 masks to school (and indeed everywhere outside the home) during a pandemic, and who think nothing of putting them back on or staying inside on a summer's day when the wildfire smoke is bad (however much we might feel grief or loss on their behalf). Once, as the "economy was reopening" post-Covid, I had my masked children in a wagon inside our local co-op, and an older woman shook her head and with tears in her eyes told me she was so sorry and that she just could not bear it, seeing such little ones in masks. My children, then five years old, were curious about the woman's behavior. Did she think they should not "get to have" masks?

As writing fiction goes, it was tricky to thread this needle. We needed the father in the fly-fishing story to remember fishing as a child in the 1990s, say, and his daughter, who had never seen a wild river or a live fish, to find nothing amiss with the gorgeously, painstakingly restored and human-engineered landscape. If anything was amiss in this new park, if her father was distraught, she was not aware of it and could never understand why. She was just a teenager on an excursion with her dad.

Every story we wrote needed a little bit of this double vision: world and interiority as humans once knew it, world and interiority as it might become. It was like narrative calculus, trying to take a picture of the rate of change of the human heart to gauge not only what such change might mean years from now, but also what it *already* means about us. In some places in the book, we pulled this off; in others, not so much.

We gave a reading at the New York Institute for the Humanities, for example, and an unimpressed critic said of the stories: "But these aren't about the future. All of this is happening now." To which a more enthusiastic reader responded: "Right! Because it is a horror movie, and *the caller is inside the house.*"

Furthermore, we had to be careful in assessing these generational differences (such as between the father and daughter in "Fly-Fishing") not to immediately

assume that the past or present generations will always be better and that every tomorrow and increasingly futurized generation will be progressively worse.

In the first place, for many of us, and for many reasons, even amid accelerating, existential climate change, life in the 2020s is much preferable to life in 1950.

In the second place, maybe it is better for our children and grandchildren if they think nothing of wearing masks more and more often, or all the time. If you live in a world where the only trees are in a park, maybe it is better to think that is pretty cool and to be happy about your tree-park visits than to always be deeply troubled and disturbed by them. For better or worse, humans can adapt to unimaginable conditions.

So ultimately, Dale and I were not exactly trying to write stories that would inspire fear or action. The questions we wanted to hold in mind were: What matters to us, and why? And does it matter to us if sometime in the near future, it no longer matters to us? More precisely, what might our loving relationships look like in a world that is almost entirely human designed? Are we altering not only landscapes, ecosystems, the animal kingdom, and the tilt of the earth but also, thereby, what human love is? If we are really not separate from so-called nature, such a level of wholesale change, inside and out, seems inevitable.

In our stories, for example, there are real and perhaps very sad limits to the way a father can connect with his daughter outside on a river. In another story, a romantic relationship is simultaneously long-term, intimate, and entirely non-committal; it is not clear—in such a world, it need not be stated—whether the relationship occurs entirely or mostly via virtual reality or IRL (in real life). There are highly personalized, robotic prostitutes that can be designed and used in a mall, then throw away. Is there anything wrong with such scenarios? The characters in the book do not really think so, even though some of our contemporary readers might, and do.

Is it disturbing to imagine our grandchildren or great grandchildren would find not only nothing wrong with the Last Tree Standing Park but that they might also feel nothing particularly had been lost?

And if these things are indeed troubling, ought humanity do something now—what could it possibly be?—to avert such a reality? Finally, what does it really mean for a respected scholar in philosophy and a Zen priest/novelist to suggest love is the answer? That is not a practicable solution. That is not mitigation.

And besides, despite the aphorism that love wins, it is generally appreciated that love is not trying to win, that love is not only or ever for superheroes and victory fables but for ordinary people who suffer and who are stricken by some measure of disbelief regarding the impermanence of absolutely everything. Sometimes, it seems the point of being here is to be as grief-stricken and heartbroken as possible—what other, better measure that one has loved hard and well?

Loss is sacred, however much it hurts, and those of us with a spiritual practice or in recovery of any kind—we know this. We know that our practices are ways of shedding, of dropping away. And that, at best, such practices entail loss: loss of habits of thought and action, the loss of a sense of self so brittle and fixed that your face meets every moment of the day like a clenched fist. To know the self, said thirteenth-century Eihei Dogen Zenji, is to forget the self.

One of my Zen teachers and I joked in a conversation recently that if the practice were really advertised for what it is, Zen centers would put up signs that read something like: “Come here to lose everything you have, all you think you know, everything you are.” Our ancestor Mazu Daoyi, or Ma, an initiator of the koan tradition in eighth century China when the empire was falling apart in a spectacular ruin of starvation, disease, and war once said of his monastery: “Oh, it’s just the place where you let go of your body and your life” (Sutherland 2018). And this was at a time when people were already losing everything, living precariously, barely surviving.

In the New Testament, Jesus told his disciples, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24 KJV), and “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 10:39 KJV).

Tibetan siddha Milarepa famously said: All worldly pursuits have but one unavoidable and inevitable end, which is sorrow. Acquisitions end in dispersion. Buildings end in destruction. Meetings in separation. Births in death.

The Quran reads: “If God wants to do good to somebody, He afflicts him with trials” (al-Almany 2009), and “Every self will be tasting of death” (Surah 29:57–66).

Not only can our notion of “love wins” be informed by this kind of sacred loss *and* love— apparently a package deal for us humans—it is also central to another and important way that storytelling is both giving rise to and could also help us navigate accelerating and existential climate change. Storytelling— depending on the kind of story—may be both the poison and the antidote to our situation.

Since Dale and I published our book, I have continued to write fiction—not cli-fi, per se, but fiction—and some of my thinking and strategies on the page, amid ongoing personal conversation and reflections on our lives, have led Dale and I to conclude that we need to write one more story. One that pushes a little harder on the interiority of a character, and the illusion of separation, in a very particular way. To explain how and why this is so, I am going to borrow some language from what scholars call the Pluriverse. Pluriversalists are from many fields and work across disciplines including anthropology, international relations, environmental law, particularly Rights of Nature, and history.

First—and this is the foremost tenet of the Pluriverse—different worlds and ways of being coexist (Kothari et al. 2019; Querejazu 2016; Hutchings 2019).

Not just different ways and worlds for, say, a muskrat versus a person or a fish as opposed to a gull, but different worlds and ways of being among humans. Not just different ways of knowing, not just different cultures or points of view, but different ways of being (Querejazu 2016). This is an ontological, not epistemological, claim. For this reason, it can be unsettling to entertain, and downright baffling or even infuriating to some.

In one conference during which I shared some of the basic tenets of the Pluriverse, an accomplished attendee remarked that those who “believe in other ontologies” are “mentally ill.” In another context, in response to my curiosity about and wanting to engage in a serious discussion about the literature of the Pluriverse, a colleague and successful philosopher made a face and said that there is only one ontology, and observations about it are made empirically.

As remarkably, upon being introduced to the Pluriverse, the majority of attendees from across disciplines at the aforementioned conference, as well as during a public lecture at the University of Cambridge in 2023—expressed something like relief (“I knew it!”) and openhanded, if sometimes skeptical, dialogue. Their questions—and some of mine—went something like this: Different ways of being and worlds exist? How can this possibly be true? Are we not all here on the same planet? What other world? What other way? Are we really allowed to talk about this?

Let us imagine two women standing on a city street.

One of these women experiences herself as an individual looking out on the city, observing other people, buildings, a river, animals, trees. She is independent and autonomous; from her vantage point, much of the world can be explained, measured, and described via rational resources and means. She can subtract herself from the street and the city she is observing in order to comprehend it. She is here, in her body, perceiving, assessing, and judging reality with increasing accuracy per the tools of her culture, and reality is “out there.”

While some may already see the flaws in this kind of view, and may already believe this way of being has its dark side, it is important to acknowledge that it took centuries of revolution—political, cultural, socioeconomic, scientific—for this woman to get here. Her apparent autonomy and the tools she uses to describe her world rationally have proven powerfully liberatory for many humans. Hers is also likely the conventional way of being for most people, most of the time—and this is remarkable. Much of humanity has come a long way. And, really, questioning the universality of her way of being—standing here, assessing reality out there—is very difficult for most, even if the spiritually woke among us say the words “interdependence” and “oneness.” To question the universality of this woman’s sense of the world around her might be to unravel one’s entire understanding of self, the cosmos, the real, and the possible.

For the other woman on the street, there is no Archimedean point from which she can view the city, its buildings, people, river, or animals as “out

there.” She cannot subtract herself from anything she is seeing. Nothing exists extrinsically or independently; everything is mutually constituted, so much so that there is no subject or object, no independent “self” looking out a “city.” This woman does not experience herself as the center of anything, neither the street nor the scene around her. If asked, she might state that the river, animals, other people, trees, and community garden all have the same fundamental ontological value, like so many parts of a single body. In fact, increasingly in environmental law, Rights of Nature arise from just this understanding, whereby communities resist the idea of human separation from nature and mobilize “on behalf of mountains, rivers, and ecosystems,” arguing that each is a being with “rights” and are not mere objects or resources to be used (Kothari et al. 2019).

The way of being in the world of the first woman, who experiences herself as separate and for whom reality is “out there,” can be called the euromodern ontology (Querejazu 2016). Critically, this ontology is unique in its insistence on being universal, or the only true one. Here are some other characteristics of the euromodern ontology (Hutchings 2019):

- It is the dominant worldview that has been emerging in Europe since the Renaissance transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern period and took its position as universal towards the end of the eighteenth century (Kothari et al. 2019).
- It considers humans the center of the world (Blaser 2012).
- It presupposes a fundamental separation between humans and nature and, indeed, between and among all humans as well (Hutchings 2019; Shiva 2019).
- It is defined by linear time that moves only forward and backward (Kothari et al. 2019; Blaser 2012).
- Efficiency is its most fundamental measure of success, and “success” is highly valued (Malghan 2019).
- All other ways of being in the world are dismissed, discredited and/or delegitimized (Querejazu 2016).
- Other realities or ways of being exist only as myths or untraditional beliefs within the euromodern ontology (Blaser 2012).

Readers may find they take issue with some, but not all, of these tenets of the euromodern ontology. It is important to note that people who describe the euromodern ontology this way are not saying that modernity is bad and tradition is good. It may be easy to slip into that kind of dualistic thinking, but it should be avoided as it is simply not true, and a list of compelling counterexamples could be generated very quickly.

The underlying ethic of this euromodern ontology—grounded in dualistic thinking, including a fundamental separation between humans and nature—is the heart of a way of being that has allowed for the commodification and exploitation of nature, animals, children, and other humans, and for the kind and degree of extractivism that has led to climate change and massive species extinction (Querejazu 2016; Law 2015; Jamieson and Nadzam 2015).

This second woman's way of being in the city is not of the euromodern ontology but is instead relational and more in line with certain Indigenous cosmovisions, for example, and with Buddhism, Taoism, and certain feminist and ecological movements (Querejazu 2016). It is also in line with quantum physics's and complexity theory's presentation of the observed existing in dependence of the observer and of the physical world as emerging, open ended, and evolving—as ever and unpredictably arising (Theise 2023; Querejazu 2016).

One need not disavow modernity, nor be an Andean mountain dweller, quantum physicist, or practitioner of an Eastern spiritual tradition to feel and experience resonances with a more relational way of being. In fact, many even across mainstream Western culture seems to be feeling it. Kothari et al. (2019) suggest that many humans, especially in industrialized countries, may feel, even if they do not ask outright:

- What has gone so terribly wrong with this way of living (Kothari et al. 2019)?
- Who is responsible for it (Kothari et al. 2019)?
- How am I responsible for it (Kothari et al. 2019)?
- What would a better life look like, and how do we get there (Kothari et al. 2019)?
- How can I minimize the harm I am doing (Kothari et al. 2019)?
- What is a life worth living (Kothari et al. 2019)?
- How can conditions that allow such a life to happen even begin to be met (Kothari et al. 2019)?
- How is it that so much legitimate human progress seems to be “betraying its promise” (McMichael 2019)?
- Why do I feel so “ill at ease” (McMichael 2019)?
- What is an alternative? What kind of world do we want to create, and how do we do it (Querejazu 2016)?

The first broad response I will give to these questions comes from one of my Zen teachers, John Daishin Buksbazen. He used to say to me, “We're not *in* this all together, we *are* this all together.” Everything we do—every word, thought, action, motive, fear, sneeze, fart, howl, slice of toast, pile of dog shit, forest fire, mendacious lie, horrible politician, and desperate prayer—is part of a single fabric called *this*.

There is a lot of hope and agency in this, as well as enormous responsibility. If you do not like the fabric of “this,” change the threads you are using. Most appreciate that there are endless opportunities in a single hour alone to choose which threads we are going to weave with: good intentions? A pack of lies? Irritation? Follow through? Attention? Distraction? Despair? Joy? A hard, hard, hard-won moment of patience?

Relational ways of being are creative practices and always in revision. There is no final resting point of ultimate comprehension. Relational ways of being cannot be known or assessed as if from aside in any satisfactory way; they can only be practiced and experienced (Kothari et al. 2019).

So, what does it look like to practice and experience more relational ways of being?

The stakes are fairly high because people create reality by the stories they tell (Blaser 2012). For some, this might seem obvious, and for others, like a wild and abstract claim: we create reality by the stories we tell? Sounds a little woo. To appreciate this idea, it helps to broaden the understanding of what a story is.

Here is a rough definition: a story explains phenomena and experience using language and symbols. Today, while writing, I am using English. For example, “Noah was 600 years old when the floodwaters came on the earth” is a story. So is: “Little Red tucked her basket under her arm and headed into the dark wood.” So is: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife . . .”; and so is: “Last week an atmospheric river dumped several feet of snow on the Sierras in California.” But so are these:

“I am a human being on planet earth.”

“I am revising this paper in my car.”

“I am up here, and you are over there.”

Whether myth, fiction, or news media, people do act on these narratives when they believe in their respective truths, sometimes without recognizing them as narratives, sometimes without even recognizing them. If I tell myself the story—consciously, unconsciously, or subconsciously—and from all directions hear and see it confirmed that I am separate from each and all others, separate from the floor on which I stand, separate from the boulders on the shore and the cries of seagulls, this will inform the kinds of actions I take, the virtues I either cultivate or dispense with, and the extent to which I prioritize and even define something like “self-interest.” In this way, collectively, profoundly rooted in the stories we tell ourselves, our many, many actions strung together over time do indeed create a world. There is nothing new age or “woo” about it; it is simply a matter of cause and effect.

Most of the stories I consume—nonfiction, fiction, news media, film—generally arise from and assume the aforementioned universalism of the euromodern ontology. There are some wonderful and weird exceptions. But generally, without ever explicitly announcing itself, but with absolute authority, this ontology describes the world and my place in it in relation to everything else, including all of you, readers. The extent to which it shapes and prescribes one's actions is enormous, and most of the time, it does so invisibly.

On the page, a work of character-driven formal realism—the dominant novelistic aesthetic that “resolved” so many ontological and epistemic questions of the Enlightenment—usually adheres to a particular formula, no matter how radical or weird or sci-fi the subject matter or point of view. I have an acronym for the formula: EPiC MAP. Exposition (or backstory) informs a person's Psychological state, from which their Character arises (including their various virtues, flaws, and so forth). And this character, which does sometimes shift in a story or novel, drives their Motives, either consciously or unconsciously. Based upon these motives, the character takes various Actions. All these actions strung together create a Plot. A rough and ready (and bad) example is the serial killer movie: the killer is abused as a child, which gives rise to a profoundly unstable if not characterologically “flawed” personality, which gives rise to hateful, violent, destructive motives, which culminate in serial killing. An only slightly more complex plot would braid this same string with those of a few other characters—the detective and their love interest, say. This is fairly reliably the convention no matter how wild or strange the sci-fi world or historical setting.

But what if this entire conception of selfhood—that the so-called Euromodern ontology is continually reinforcing—is wrong? The students I have had who want to “be writers” intuit this aforementioned formula or have it directly described to them and more or less diligently set to work writing stories and novel drafts. The artists in the class—the spirits with the mortal wound, as it were—look at me skeptically. Can we break those rules? Can we not do it differently? Or even: that does not really jibe with my experience or with what is calling me to create art.

I, too, find so many of the “answers” to so many ontological and epistemic questions—as they are presented in many stories, novels, and films—to be hollow and unsatisfying, if captivating and seductive. While this formulation of selfhood may significantly if not completely free me from many sociopolitical prisons, it does not really describe my experience of being in a body or in a world. I almost never feel like a clear, focused, wholly rational being but more like a flux of call and response, and a pretty inattentive, confused flux on most days and in most moments. If I am really paying attention, I rarely find the world a measurable, describable background distinct from this body, whatever it is.

Let us go back to the two women on the city street. There is one more critical difference between these two women's experiences.

A fundamental question of Western philosophy asks: Am I one? Or am I many? The first woman would answer that question with: "I am one. I am myself. Just as you are one. You are yourself." The second woman would not answer with: "I am many." She would answer with: "Yes. Both. I am one *and* many."

While a person can experience being one and many—and I trust many of you, readers, have done so—it is practically impossible to grasp this nonduality with a rational mind. A rational mind is precisely the wrong tool for to understand this. A rational mind sorts and categorizes dualistically. There is nothing wrong with this. It is the rational mind's job, and it is an exquisite tool to have. It is just not the right tool for every job, including this one. Nonduality can be experienced but never grasped intellectually.

So, the body is a better tool for the job. The whole body. With its goosebumps and shaking sobs, with its laughter and ravenous hunger and need to pee. And with its apparently distant trees and leaves and rats and roaches and stars. Am I one, or am I many? It is a question that I can only contemplate with my whole body. And that whole body is perhaps bigger than can be understood.

How, aside from dancing, chopping onions, painting, or washing dishes with one's body, can a person engage their body, or this whole body, to experience nonduality? Experiencing or appreciating art is a wonderful tool for the job. Contemplating quantum and complexity theory may be a good tool for the job. Reading poetry is a great tool for the job.

Stories? A little trickier. Mainstream Western culture does not have a lot of stories that shift a conception of selfhood, in part because aesthetically, and for many good and important reasons, Western culture has so valued character-driven fiction. How can a person or group of people now begin to tell and share stories that shift or rattle an Enlightenment sense of selfhood in such a way that actually prompts behaving differently in the world and towards so-called others?

A question like this is a bit upside down. Because if a person should, and must, and can only write what they know, then they must first experience a bit of the flux of self, then share these experiences. If I want to write these stories, I must taste the self momentarily dropping away. Most of us do indeed taste this from time to time—before a sunset, in the split second of comprehending a poem, in ecstasy, in shock before the deceased body of a loved one, perhaps even while raking leaves, or—as the transformative magic of so many fairytales suggests—while engaged in seemingly endless, repetitive, unsurmountable tasks like sorting heaps of lentils from ashes.

But suddenly, almost accidentally, happening upon these experiences is not enough; if I want this way of being to be part of the stories I tell and the worlds I create, I have to cultivate it. I have to be willing to stay in these liminal spaces,

however uncomfortable or disorienting they may be, for however many hours of sorting lentils from ashes it might take. I have to practice being present when I experience hiccups or glitches in the Euromodern “tape” that I may be otherwise conditioned to ignore, dismiss, or pathologize and unapologetically share my experiences from and of them. I—and Dale and I—need to tell stories that originate in experiences—however fighting—that may be discounted by the dominant, Euromodern ontology but that, as artists creating the world, we are willing to play with to test out both in our lives then on the page.

It does not take that much of a shift or rattling away from entrenched thinking to see that there are other ways of presenting character or self that may be more aligned with a relational ontology. Not in a radical, jarring way but slightly, lightly, and in a way that really resonates. Here is one experiment in its entirety by Lydia Davis (1991).

It is called, perhaps a bit tongue in cheek:

Trying to Learn

I am trying to learn that this playful man who teases me is the same as that serious man talking money to me so seriously he does not even see me anymore and that patient man offering me advice in times of trouble and that angry man slamming the door as he leaves the house. I have often wanted the playful man to be more serious, and the serious man to be less serious, and the patient man to be more playful. As for the angry man, he is a stranger to me and I do not feel it is wrong to hate him. Now I am learning that if I say bitter words to the angry man as he leaves the house, I am at the same time wounding the others, the ones I do not want to wound, the playful man teasing, the serious man talking money, and the patient man offering advice. Yet I look at the patient man, for instance, whom I would want above all to protect from such bitter words as mine, and though I tell myself he is the same man as the others, I can only believe I said those words, not to him, but to another, my enemy, who deserved all my anger.

Both on and off the page, as any in relationships can attest, the stakes are fairly high if we do not allow that there may be something authentic and important about the way Lydia Davis’s “protagonist” begins to break down her understanding of personhood or self as essentialized.

Lydia Davis is of course a wonder, a MacArthur Genius, a brilliant light—what about the rest of us? How can anyone begin to tell the story of a self that is a flux in continual relationship with everyone and everything around it?

You can try it on, right now (you can always try it on right now). Let us say, as Dale and I suggest in our introduction to *Love in the Anthropocene*, that there is no “backdrop” to our human lives. Imagine that from above, if it were possible, a huge set of fingers were to descend, pinch me by the back of the neck wherever I might be while you are reading this (washing dishes or chopping

onions), then pull me upward toward the sky. If I am not separate from you, or from the houses, trees, cities, landfills, factory farms, or wars being waged between us, then all of it—houses, trees, cities, landfills, the battlefields, and all of their living and dead would be pulled up together, like a single fabric, a single cloth. And part of the fabric would be you—all humans, actually, including our many eyeballs and everything they are seeing. It would be the germs under our fingernails, the lunch digesting in our guts, the thoughts in our minds, and indeed even our intentions and motivations, our memories and suspicions and fears, however conscious or unconscious we may be of them. Everything. No separation.

And now, if you can, hold this presumed reality for a moment, drop the large set of fingers (which we had to use as our beginning Archimedean point). No external set of fingers but all still the same fabric. You can wiggle it—the whole fabric—the whole universe—by wiggling your toes inside your shoes. This is not a metaphor.

The implications for telling stories from such ground are myriad and, in my opinion, as reasonable as they are fascinating. Say for a moment that I am the protagonist of a story in which the author presumes no separation. Since, according to such a premise, we—author, character (whether fictional or not), reader—are all part of the same fabric, since there is not a hairsbreadth separation among any of us—it is reasonable to suppose that some of “your” thoughts might somehow be accessible to “me,” perhaps not verbally but in some other manner. And not in a supernatural or shocking way, not in a way that pathologizes or imbues me with magical powers, but as a matter of course.

It might even be possible for two or more of us to communicate without speaking. Even across long distances. Even in dreams. And if one of you readers were to suddenly feel a sharp pain in “your” back, or unbearable heartache, I too might register that pain. Synchronicities or powerfully intuitive and even somatic empathy would be not Dickensian coincidences to be avoided when writing a story or magical realism attributed only to certain charming demographics but totally reasonable and important experiences for beginning to describe the mysteries of being.

Let us extend the neck-pinching experiment further, pulling higher and higher on the “cloth.” Eventually, everything would be drawn up. Everything. In a deeply relational ontology according to which everything is mutually constituted and profoundly interdependent, where everything is “one,” that means *everything*, including what is called “yesterday” or “January 24, 1532.” Pull on the cloth and you pull on the day you were born. You pull on last Christmas. And so, without any exaggeration or metaphor, the protagonist of a story might sit in a fast-food restaurant in Chicago, sensible of the so-called past—of everyone who had ever entered the restaurant, say, and the thoughts

in their heads and the aches and pains in their bodies. Of all the nonhuman animals that fly over or scamper through the restaurant, or who once lived on the same patch of land long, long before it was a restaurant, or a city, or even had a name.

I will add too, because it bears so impressively on one's willingness to tolerate, explore, and share the experiences we have before we write them into stories, that records of such experiences could also reasonably be categorized as nonfiction. Certainly, such a suggestion revives ongoing Enlightenment questions about the differences among truth, lies, fiction, myth, fantasy, and fact, and returning to these questions again and again would, in my view, not only be welcome but may be urgent.

In the next and likely last story Dale and I are writing, these are some of the ways of being we are experimenting with. It requires us to live between worlds a bit, then take a note on it, then live between worlds a bit, then take another note on it.

As the literature of the Pluriverse posits, there are millions of people who live in-between worlds in their daily lives—caregivers, people who speak multiple languages, spiritual practitioners, people who live in borderlands of all kinds, geographical and otherwise (Bernstein 2005).

I would suggest that almost everyone lives and shift between worlds and ways of being, for moments, for split seconds of the day, from time to time—out of the Euromodern ontology and into another way of being just for a second. A moment of so-called transcendence—as soon as you recognize it, reify it, try to pin it down as anything other than unpredictable emergence, it is gone.

In practice, in politics and across the world stage, there are many difficulties conceiving of political solutions and pragmatic agreements among groups with different ways of being (Hutchings 2019). It may even be practically impossible—as many sense and dread—to come to any meaningful solutions in time to preserve what we recognize or care about as human, as life on Earth. It may be indeed that we will hurt and hurt those we love, that we will suffer, that we will lose everything. Clearly, we have a long way to go toward replacing competition with cooperation, toward appreciating our moral obligations to all sentient beings, which includes ecosystems and rivers, and toward replacing “winning arguments” with deeply unflinching ethical investigation (Hutchings 2019).

But I think at the very least we can all agree that at this point, 2024, human beings are affecting virtually every living thing on the planet, and this means we have broad, deep moral obligations—more so perhaps than we are prepared to accept and more than we thought the word “love” covered. It is easy and understandable that we might be defensive about a way of being that has given us our identity and many things we cherish about ourselves and being human. But one can learn little if anything from a defensive posture. And if, in an experiment, a person drops such defensiveness for a few minutes, I can tell you

it is very easy to just pick it back up again. It is a worthy experiment, and there are many, many opportunities each day to try it out.

Of course, we cannot function responsibly in a political world or in a family or in a relationship without identity—without a particular form, an apparently distinct body—that is accountable for particular thoughts, speech, and action. But love in the Anthropocene, it seems to me, entails that we do so while regularly checking each human identity against the breathtaking mystery of existence. Dropping what we think we know of ourselves as separate or distinctive and unique beings does not mean anyone is aiming to resolve everyone and all species and forms into a homogenous “we” or “one.” What it does entail is a willingness to sit in the place of not knowing what it really means to be human, or alive; this is a place from which empathy and compassion—caring about the experiences and fates of others—arise quite naturally. It is a place from which we can navigate our lives, not in accordance with a list of “Ten Ways to Fight Climate Change” or “How to Survive the Apocalypse,” but with awareness of the many unforeseeable consequences of even an unarticulated intention. Awareness that the effects of a sloppy task, or a selfish act, or an intuition ignored, become part of the fabric of whatever this mystery is and what we consequently become and must live in. One need not wake up tomorrow enlightened to understand how to face and exist in the world in 2024 or 2025 or to suddenly conceive of some solution to climate change or its effects. One need only wake up acknowledging how incomplete our knowledge is, how little each of us can really perceive—especially of our interconnectedness but even of our own bodies and orientation in space and time—to proceed more gently, erring, when we invariably do, toward causing the least possible amount of harm.

And this next story Dale and I are co-writing? It is arising, as all stories do, in our shared experience—in this case, grounded in a deliberate, oft-articulated intention to practice and cultivate love and friendship across many seasons, miles, projects, personal discoveries, and even conflict and hurt as we age and as our hearts are broken by the world.

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