

# “Nothing Before the Sea Was Real”: The Dying World of John Lanchester’s *The Wall*

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## Abstract

This essay argues that John Lanchester’s novel *The Wall* can provide empathetic intelligibility to what might otherwise be an inscrutable future by analyzing crucial aspects of its dying world that resist the exhausted literary conventions found in much post-apocalyptic climate fiction. These conventions are transformed in *The Wall* to emphasize shared humanity, queer

futurity, greater inclusivity, and an uncertain, circuitous climate-changed ending. *The Wall*’s vivid literary experiences can help shape readers’ perceptions toward imagining more ethical presents and alternative futures, making an abstraction like ‘climate emergency’ imaginable, knowable, and actionable.

We are all now living in a climate emergency: whether our local ecosystems are facing devastating drought or flooding, intense storms or fires, biodiversity loss or the effects of rising sea levels, the Earth's climate is changing with nearly unprecedented speed.<sup>1</sup> The tropical cyclones in Madagascar, Malawi and Mozambique; the heatwaves in India, Pakistan, and the UK; the droughts in west and east Africa and western Europe; the flooding in Brazil, KwaZulu-Natal South Africa, Germany, Pakistan, and Nigeria, Niger, and Chad... even this truncated list of extreme weather events occurring in 2022 demonstrates the need for immediate climate mitigation. Yet even so, "You can't prepare for a future you can't imagine," Elizabeth Colbert observes in a recent piece for *The New Yorker*: "The trouble is, it's hard to picture the [climate] future we are creating" (45). Imagining potential climate futures is the specialization of literary fiction, and ecocollapse fiction in particular offers readers opportunities to vividly picture increasingly endangered futures amidst catastrophic climate change. In a review published in *The Guardian* of John Lanchester's novel *The Wall*, Tom Holland says, "As an attempt to dramatise an existential threat that seems impossible for humanity properly to conceptualise, *The Wall* is a signal achievement." Extending from arguments made in *Ecocollapse Fiction and Cultures of Human Extinction*, here I show that *The Wall* can provide empathetic intelligibility to what might otherwise be an inscrutable future by analyzing crucial aspects of its dying world that resist the exhausted literary conventions of post-apocalyptic climate fiction. These conventions—in particular, the use of a singular catastrophic event that demarcates before and after; explicit moral simplicity based on in- and out-groups of survivors and a heartless lack of empathy; reproductive futurity symbolized by pregnancy or children that signal species survival; and a redemptive, hopeful ending—are transformed in *The Wall* to emphasize shared humanity, queer futurity, greater inclusivity, and an uncertain, circuitous climate-changed conclusion. Specifically, I argue that what appear to be hardened social stratifications at the structural level are

<sup>1</sup> Geologic and fossil records indicate vast variability in the Earth's climate over the course of its 4.5-billion-year history, but the current transformation appears to be more rapid than previous fluctuations. See the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "Summary for Policymakers."

instead temporary and transitory categorizations, leading to relational, empathetic accounts of out-group members rather than the concretized tribalisms standard of the genre. I demonstrate that the characters reject reproductive politics in favor of collectivism and non-biological kinship, renegotiating the source of generational futurity in valuable ways. I examine the novel's survivalist tactic, which reveals that persistence in its dying world depends not on aggressive violence but instead, crucially, on kindness and cooperation. Finally, I explore the consequences of the novel's ambiguous ending, which leaves readers uncertain about the characters' futures. Lanchester's novel *The Wall* therefore shapes readers' perceptions toward imagining more ethical presents and alternative futures, making an abstraction like 'climate emergency' imaginable and knowable, and thus perhaps actionable.

## Rejecting Tribalisms

Rather than using a singular catastrophic event that demarcates before and after, *The Wall* is set after 'the Change' steadily transformed the world: rising sea levels, droughts and crop failures, and geopolitical crises led nations to harden their borders, and (almost) everyone is conscripted to serve a two-year stint defending the Wall, built to protect an unspecified island from 'Others' seeking refuge.<sup>2</sup> The novel is narrated by Kavanagh, a new Defender on the Wall, who describes the strict social hierarchy of the Elite, Flight, Guards, Defenders, Help, and citizens, all marked by biometric chips that identify people as belonging within the Wall. Kavanagh's service on the Wall is marked by "No leeway, no space, nothing but black and white, the rulebook or anarchy, nothing but the Wall and the Others and the always waiting, always expectant, entirely unforgiving sea" (Lanchester 46). His twelve-hour shifts guarding the Wall are boring, just "concretewaterskywindcold" (15). Simple acts of kindness that recognize his humanity—a few encouraging words delivered with hot tea to his post, for instance—fill his

<sup>2</sup> Although the novel's island is unnamed, one stretch of the seawall is called Ilfracombe 4, implying it is on the Devon coast and the island is Great Britain.

eyes with tears as “the greatest act of compassion and empathy I had ever encountered” (23).

On the seawall, the Others are a constant threat. Readers learn that “Men and women fled from [the Change], fled from its consequences, tried to make new lives for themselves, to scramble for new shelter, to climb to higher ground, to find a ledge, a cave, a well, an oasis, a place where they could find safety for them and their families. But,” as is to be expected with intensifying climate change, “the Change did not stop. The shelter blew away, the waters rose to the higher ground, the ground baked, the crops died, the ledge crumbled, the well dried up. The safety was an illusion. So the unfortunates must flee again, and they have begun again, in numbers” (105). The places that the Others escape *from* must be so horribly uninhabitable that they desperately risk both the vast indifference of the ocean and the well-defended Wall trying to obtain sanctuary. At first, *The Wall* appears to be a standard post-apocalyptic climate fiction structured with concretized group identities and tribal solidarity, ferocious struggles for survival, and a happy resolution. However, those tropes are problematized in the novel. *The Wall* complicates the moral quagmire of existence in a climate changed future as Kavanagh’s circumstances change over the course of the story. Valuable to these implications, I will show, is the premise that perseverance in the novel’s ecocollapsed world depends on the inclusion of Others and the kindness of strangers.

*The Wall* quickly articulates the distinction between those inside the Wall and the Others outside of it, a distinction framed as the exclusive motivation for the Defenders on the seawall. Crucially, this structure emphasizes climate injustice while transforming xenophobia and exclusion based on nationality or race into shared vulnerability, which complicates the explicit moral simplicity marked by in- and out-groups in post-apocalyptic literary conventions. Who is an ‘Other’ depends, simply enough, on which side of the Wall an individual is on. Others who successfully breach the Wall can be incorporated into the citizenry, in a sense, although they have only three choices: to be euthanized, to become Help (a state-sponsored enslavement), or to be put back out to sea. If an Other manages to break over the Wall, the Defender

responsible for that section of concretewaterskywindcold is put to sea (on a lifeboat with supplies, but it is considered a “death sentence” [162]). A person’s status is therefore fluid and alterable rather than concretized: these are temporary categorizations. The Help are Others, and Others may have once been Defenders, or perhaps other people put to sea, or perhaps people who never lived on the island in the first place. There is a transformative ambiguity that complicates status hierarchies even as the nation’s sociopolitical and economic structures insist on them.

At the Wall, Kavanagh experiences empathy for the Help and Others, explaining “I could just about imagine burning sand, salt water stinging in cuts, the weak being left behind, the bitter tastes of exile and loss, the longing for safety, the incandescent desperation and grief driving you onwards” (77). Valuably, readers are invited to imagine these experiences *as* the Help, *as* the Other, Kavanagh’s empathy and the descriptive narration cueing readers to *feel with* Others. In *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*, Alexa Weik von Mossner describes the process of narrative inhabitation as composed of elements including perceptual and emotional cues and evocations of material conditions. She indicates that “The vivid description of a protagonist’s sensations will help readers imagine *what it is like* to experience that alternative world. However, the emotional and visceral inhabitation of a storyworld is also depended on the vivid evocation of the material conditions that provoke that sensual experience” (27-8). In *The Wall* quoted above, the vivid evocation of “burning sand, salt water stinging” cues readers to feel the physical sensations suffered by climate migrants while experiencing the emotional sensations prompted by imagining abandoning ‘weak’ loved ones, the hopeless despair of knowing there is no returning home, and the fear and grief that motivates the Others onward. The use of second person ‘you’ is also powerful for involving readers, as Magdalena Rembowska-Pluciennik demonstrates. She argues that “second-person narration demands the activation of ‘we-mode thinking,’ or social cognition, which is fundamentally different from self-awareness or mere inferences about another person” (162) and shifts readers into relation with the Others’ experiences, the “*what it is like*” in Weik von Mossner’s words.

Staring out to sea for twelve hours a day, Kavanagh repeatedly articulates what it must be like to seek refuge, further problematizing out-grouping while encouraging readers to feel with vulnerable Others:

They come in rowing boats and rubber dinghies, on inflatable tubes, in groups and in swarms and in couples, in threes, in singles; the smaller the number, often, the harder to detect. They are clever, they are desperate, they are ruthless, they are fighting for their lives, so all of those things had to be true of us as well. We had to be clever and desperate and ruthless and fight for our lives, only more so, or we would switch places. (34)

By incorporating, justifying, and enforcing cutthroat individual self-interest into the defense of the Wall, the government leaders make their anti-refugee policies each Defender's personal responsibility. There is little room for empathy in such a system, yet Kavanagh nonetheless experiences it, prompting readers to align with climate refugees:

I could imagine what it would be like to be an Other, floating in the dark, on some makeshift boat or raft or inflatable, staring at the shoreline, looking at the Wall, at the sprinkling of lights above and the steep black dark below. You would be bobbing up and down with the sea swell. You would hardly be able to remember the last time you were warm or dry or safe. (63)

Alongside various images that readers construct via the insights described by the narrative voice here (Kavanagh's 'I'), the use of second person 'you' in this passage further implicates readers *within* the experience of floating helplessly at sea, nauseously bobbing up and down, soaking wet, cold, and vulnerable.

This trauma becomes even more vividly experiential when Others breach Kavanagh's section of the Wall and he is put to sea—and readers with him. At sea, Kavanagh's experience further expands readers'

imaginations toward climate refugees. More tumultuous and descriptive than “bobbing up and down with the sea swell” are the hallucinations, inculcating a recursive cycle of near despair. Valuably, the reader is again entangled in the experience by the use of ‘you’ in this passage and the prompting of salient physical, emotional, and psychological cues:

You have no physical equilibrium in a small boat, and it can feel as if your mental equilibrium goes too. You can't trust your senses, and you can trust your imagination even less. You try to pin your mind down to the specifics of the moment. But it's hard. You hear things, you see things. The wind carried voices, fragments of song—not music in general, but specifically song, voices in chorus. I often thought I was hearing someone call my name. Clouds in the distance coalesced as land, as hills, before fading back into cloud. (165-6)

Such vivid imagery gives readers insights into the current circumstances of refugees and asylum seekers around the world, beyond cold or wet or hunger or fear: confusion. The brain is a pattern-making organ struggling to make sense of unfamiliar inputs. These sensations prompt readers to wonder: What is real? Is that a light in the distance or a hallucination? Is it danger or sanctuary? The novel's humanization of Others encourages readers to conceptualize the experiences of today's tens of millions of climate refugees,<sup>3</sup> moving from unimaginable data ('millions' is inconceivable) toward greater feelings of shared precarity and a more relational, empathetic response. Mine is a claim consistent with Weik von Mossner's assertion that “narratives that align readers with the victims of environmental injustice” can make readers more aware of suffering and help them “realize that the infliction of this suffering is both immoral and profoundly unfair” (84). While being personally affected should not be necessary to have responsive compassion for people who are suffering, the novel succeeds in conveying personal

<sup>3</sup> 40.5 million people globally were displaced in 2020, according to Abraham Lustgarten's work published in *ProPublica* and the *New York Times Magazine*.

vulnerability through the experiences of its narrative protagonist in crucial ways that undermine in-group tribalisms and the dehumanization of Others in ecocollapsed worlds.

### **Queering Futurity<sup>4</sup>**

Early in the novel, Kavanagh's developing empathy includes recognition that the country lacks a sustainable population, implying that there is room and resources for more climate refugees than the Elite leaders allow. He states that "The country always seems so empty, so underpopulated; even now when we grow all our own food and there's more said about farming and food than ever before, you never actually see any people working on the land" (136). Why build a wall when the population is not self-sustaining? The novel satirizes nonsensical and bigoted political decisions that shift responsibility for survival amidst the Change onto vulnerable scapegoats.<sup>5</sup> Instead of providing climate refugees with sanctuary within the seawall to offset low population numbers and declining birth rates, the government induces "Breeding" by offering special privileges, including privacy, to those who reproduce in spite of the anti-natalism felt by those born after the Change. Young adults resent their parents for birthing them into an ecocollapsed world: "The olds feel they irretrievably fucked up the world, then allowed us to be born into it" (53). The consequences of reproduction are deeply felt by this generation of Defenders, who are relentlessly aware that "there was our parents' world, and now there is our world" (104). Despite benefits like a private room, additional rations, a choice in where on the Wall one serves, the ability to change shifts, and early departure from the Wall, Kavanagh indicates that

<sup>4</sup> Here I'm using 'queer' as a position rather than an identity, following Cherry Smith's description that "queer articulates a radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality, and the family" (qtd. in Sullivan 43), toward identifying how characters in *The Wall* reject reproductive politics in favor of collectivism and non-biological kinship.

<sup>5</sup> This migrant scapegoating is reminiscent of the anti-refugee sentiments and government policies seen in Hungary's barbed-wire borders, Italy's rejection of migrant ships, the UK's Brexit withdrawal from the EU, and the USA's "Build the wall!" anti-immigrant nationalism in recent years.

people don't want to Breed, because the world is such a horrible place. So as an incentive to get people to leave the Wall, if you reproduce, you can leave. You Breed to leave the Wall. Some people say that this isn't fair to the children, who are born into a world where they have to do time on the Wall in their turn. Maybe they won't, though. Maybe all the Others will have died off by then and we won't need the Wall. Who knows? And besides, the children can always Breed in their turn, and get off the Wall that way. Prolonging the life of our species, too, as a side effect. (33)

'Breeding' sounds antiseptic and puts distance between sexual acts and the people who engage in them, and even though it "isn't fair to the children," Kavanagh makes self-serving excuses to justify himself. Children are also dehumanized in this approach, depicted as tools used to leave the Wall or as assets that might secure the survival of the species. Readers can anticipate that Breeding's subsequent familial and intergenerational relationships will be eroded in the structure's recurring depreciation of individuals in the novel with each new generation eventually becoming the "olds" who "fucked up" by bringing more children into a cruel and unsustainable system (53).

Many post-apocalyptic fictions conclude with the figure of a child as symbolic of a survivable future for characters, regardless of whether that desire sits in contrast to the reality of the storyworld. Early in the novel Kavanagh asserts: "We can't feed and look after all the humans there already are, here and now; the humans who are here and now, most of them, are starving and drowning, dying and desperate; so how dare we make more of them?" (33). The repeated use of 'maybe' to signal uncertainty in the passage above, followed by 'besides' to indicate rationalization, hints at the refusal to cope with reality—the psychology of denial. To put this another way: Kavanagh succumbs to the same psychological defense mechanism he reproaches of his parents' generation (paralleled by our own cognitive dissonance about what climate change actually means—the "what things feel like" (3) in Bill McKibben's words that novels like *The Wall* help make real). Accordingly, after an

unsuccessful attack on the Wall by twelve well-trained and highly competent Others that kills three Defenders and wounds many more (123), including Kavanagh and his friend Hifa, they decide to try Breeding. Kavanagh knows their decision is one of avoidance, of the kind of unrealistic escapism through wishful thinking that he criticizes of the older generations who lived in denial about climate catastrophe. They seek a transformation: “There would be a new life, and we would be living a new life. It felt like too much to hope for” (142). Even though “Hope is a mistake” (161), physical and emotional intimacy (and the concomitant benefits provided by the government) comforts them as they grieve and process their traumas. In their article “Sex in Public”, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner point out that

A complex cluster of sexual practices gets confused, in heterosexual culture, with the love plot of intimacy and familialism that signifies belonging to society in a deep and normal way. Community is imagined through scenes of intimacy, coupling, and kinship; a historical relation to futurity is restricted to generational narrative and reproduction. (554)

There is no opportunity for non-generative relational intimacy on the Wall, so even though Kavanagh and Hifa resist the constraints generated by the Breeding model, sex for pleasure is elusive otherwise. “I didn’t actually want to breed,” Hifa later declares, “It was more about wanting sex. And wanting to get off the Wall” (254). They eventually reject Breeding without reproducing, while having gained the psychosocial benefits of physical and emotional intimacy that the private space provided to Breeders enabled them to share.

In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman identifies what he calls ‘reproductive futurism’, illustrated by the privileged form of the Child that “remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” (3). Kavanagh recognizes this conflation of values, stating “It was the closeness of death—that was what did it. We could save ourselves from dying by bringing somebody new into the world. It suddenly seemed like the

only thing to do" (128). "Political discourse," Edelman demonstrates, "conform[s] to the logic of a narrative wherein history unfolds as the future envisioned for a Child who must never grow up" (21), perpetually reconstituting itself in heteronormative structures of parenting. Nicole Seymour applies Edelman's critique to environmentalist rhetoric, demonstrating that many environmental campaigns use "sentimentalized rhetoric" that suggests that "concern for the future qua the planet *can only emerge, or emerges most effectively*, from white, heterosexual, familial reproductivity" (7). By rejecting Breeding, Kavanagh and Hifa leave space to illustrate an alternative to one of several ways in which traditional post-apocalyptic fiction perpetuates futurity within their own devastated storyworlds and step outside of customary literary structures.

Instead of reproductive futurism, Kavanagh imagines living in a shared collective that is not based on genetic relations, discarding the compulsion for biological continuity. His descriptions align with some kinds of queer family units that are based around close and intimate but non-sexual relationships:

I quite liked the idea of going and living with some of my new friends, Hifa and Cooper and Shoonaa and Mary and Hughes, going off together and finding a new way of living, more communal, not family-based but where we could live together and look after each other, and maybe other like-minded people would join us. (113)

This community ideal is not about natalism but prioritizes meaningful relationships and mutually-supportive people. Even when Kavanagh is on the Wall, miserable, terrified, and freezing, he finds a sense of community with his coworkers. Kavanagh has community on the lifeboat: he is with Hifa; their friend Hughes; the Captain of the Defenders who had assisted Others in planning and implementing their breach of the Wall; and James, an Elite politician held responsible for the Others' successful infringement. He finds community when adrift at sea when the lifeboat party discovers—and is welcomed by—floating raft people, and again later when he and Hifa are welcomed onto the oil rig platform

by a mute hermit. In contrast, there is no sense of community with his birth family. He is an ‘other’ within those generational divisions, a result of the deeply-felt intergenerational inequalities and condemnation for climate change. “Who broke the world?” Kavanagh asks, rhetorically, frustrated that older generations refuse to acknowledge their responsibility for the Change; “[a]nd yet it broke on their watch” (141).

### **The Kindness of Strangers**

These observations about tribalism and community lead to what I argue is the overarching message of *The Wall*: that continued survival in its dying world depends less on a vigorous defense of resources or aggression toward others but on integration and compassion toward unrelated but likewise vulnerable and suffering people. The authoritarian hierarchies within the Wall are effective, surely, as a structuring system as long as we ignore their effects on individuals. When the Captain explains why he helped the Others breach the Wall, he says: “The thing we most despise about you, you people, is your hypocrisy. You push children off a life raft and wish to feel good about yourselves for doing it” (178). What does it mean to offer sanctuary instead? The deployment of asylum is somewhat unconventional in post-apocalyptic fiction, where outsiders are traditionally considered threatening and the in-group is fiercely exclusionary.<sup>6</sup> “Maybe, now that I was one of them”, Kavanagh ponders, “they weren’t Others anymore? If I was an Other and they were Others perhaps none of us were Others but instead we were a new Us” (188). An ‘Us’ that, vitally, operates through democratic socialism instead of hierarchical authoritarianism.

*The Wall* most vividly models this kind of inclusivity on the two occasions when Hifa and Kavanagh are taken in by generous Others: when they are welcomed into the floating raft community and later, welcomed onto the oil rig platform. In the first case, the ten flotilla members voted and “all agreed” (192) to allow the former Defenders to tie their lifeboat to the improvised rafts and share in their informal

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Tate’s *Apocalyptic Fiction* examines many examples; see also McFarland.

community's resources—rainwater catchment, animal proteins caught in bird and fish nets, and raw food preservation methods—and the former Defenders share most of their remaining lifeboat provisions. The multinational, multicultural community proves the value of democratic socialism, of equality, consensus, and collective property even in ecocollapsed worlds. And in the second case, after the floating raft community is destroyed by pirates, Kavanagh and Hifa discover an oil rig with “no ladder, no handhold, no dangling ropes, nothing” (230). After rowing around the structure's legs, an invisible person extends a retractable ladder. Kavanagh states, “That meant two things, two very important things, two things so important and so wonderful that I could hardly believe them: that we were not alone, and that somebody was making us welcome” (231). Accordingly, the answer to my earlier question, “What does it mean to offer sanctuary instead?” is experienced by readers' imagined involvement through Kavanagh. Relief. Gratitude. Inclusivity. It means *everything* in a dying world.

The pro-social effects of gratitude are crucial toward reframing ecocollapse scarcity in the direction of inclusive communities. Psychological studies show that the more grateful people are, the more likely they are to help others (DeSteno). David Steindl-Rast teaches that

[Gratitude] can change our world in immensely important ways, because if you're grateful, you're not fearful, and if you're not fearful, you're not violent. If you're grateful, you act out of a sense of enough and not a sense of scarcity, and you are willing to share. If you are grateful, you are enjoying the differences between people, and you are respectful of everybody, and that changes this power pyramid under which we live. (11:31)

If Kavanagh had been treated the way the Defenders on the Wall treated Others, obviously he would be dead, and the contrast between his experiences as a Defender and as an Other enhances his sense of gratitude. “I'm grateful to you for taking us in,” he says to members of the floating community (191). Hifa and Kavanagh repeatedly acknowledge

the hermit's welcome. "Thank you," Kavanagh says, "It was nowhere near a large enough statement for what I felt, but what else was there to say?" (252). Words fail to articulate the feelings of relief and gratitude that readers experience alongside Kavanagh.

For many readers of climate change fiction, novels put into language what is missing from the denial and cognitive dissonance inscribed by sociopolitical and economic forces at work in the world. As Weik von Mossner compellingly demonstrates in *Affective Ecologies*, narratives engage at least two features that permit and encourage readers to experience "non-actual mimetic perception": "one is a vivid account of sensory outcomes, the other the evocation of the material conditions that give rise to those outcomes. In the first case, the text cues readers to empathetically share a character's sensations. [...] The latter is often (though not always) a result of the former" (25). Literary simulations of characters' subjective experiences can lead readers toward empathetic responses and transformed perspectives in relation to complexities like climate change. In *Contemporary Fiction and Climate Uncertainty*, Marco Caracciolo proposes that

Creating an experience of uncertainty through characters and formal devices can help the audience manage real-world uncertainty: it can put into perspective and offer affective distance or intellectual insight. The result is an affective reframing of uncertainty [...] This effect is often accompanied by an acceptance of the more-than-human scale of the current ecological crisis, which not only fosters human responsibility toward the nonhuman but also evokes a sense of sharing uncertainty with an entire planetary system. (17)

Caracciolo's work demonstrates that literary storytelling is uniquely situated to confront the climate emergency in part "by inspiring an interpretive negotiation of uncertainty in audiences" (183). This kind of uncertainty unsettles readers accustomed to stable plot structures and explicit resolutions, as I have shown by exploring the difficulty of exclusionary othering, the replacement of reproductive futurity with shared

community, and modes of survival best epitomized by cooperation rather than competition and violence. By feeling *with* Kavanagh, readers experience the power of a more just and inclusive climate changed world. *The Wall* reveals not only a personal reckoning via readers' transformations alongside Kavanagh's, but also a sociopolitical strategy that scrutinizes governmental failures to adequately address climate change and its effects, including toward climate refugees. "The tendency to lodge images in people's imaginations is the main way you effect change," Lanchester said in an interview published in *Vulture* magazine, "That's how you change people's sensibilities" (qtd. in Delistraty). Using the tools of social scientists, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson has cogently argued that climate fiction

can have a potent impact on the way that readers conceive of anthropogenic climate change. [...] Climate fiction can play a powerful role in influencing the frames that readers perceive, prioritize, adopt, and share with family, friends, coworkers, and others. The novel in particular has great potential to encourage and cultivate transnational empathy for the already-disadvantaged victims of climate change. (961)

What I have called "emphatic empathy" is the "purposeful, intentional practice of resonating with the frequency of other people's suffering from a place of compassionate detachment" (McFarland 126). This empathetic process can follow from the emotive association with a protagonist in a literary text that encourages readers to understand, on a physiological and emotional level, what is at stake. But there are risks to these experiences, as Schneider-Mayerson and other scholars have illustrated: negative emotions can result in denial or repression due to hardened psychological defense mechanisms, or even experiences of climate trauma. W. P. Malecki and coauthors have argued that there is a narrative "sweet spot" that cues negative emotions "without overstimulating and triggering withdrawal" (12), for example.

## Uncertain Endings

*The Wall* hits that sweet spot because in finishing the novel, readers are left with unsatisfied curiosity about what happens next. Kavanagh tells a story to Hifa that returns to the beginning of the novel in perpetual circuitry—“It’s cold on the Wall” (254) is both the first and last sentence of the novel. This is the only story Kavanagh can tell. He does not forecast into a fantasy future or project hopefulness using exhausted literary conventions where everything turns out all right. What occurs next? What do readers conceive in their imagined epilogues? What effect does being left adrift have on readers? Do we construct a happy ending, maintaining our own self-deception about climate catastrophe? Seymour observes that “Since humans cannot always see the consequences of their actions on the environment immediately, nor the intricate interrelationships among all components in an ecosystem, they must be able to imagine them in order to act empathetically and ethically” (12). Crucial to *The Wall*’s message is that the characters find no reparative solutions, which pushes readers to formulate their own imagined solutions today. Kavanagh notes that “Nothing before the sea was real. Nothing before this, here and now, was real” (201). Our present is the past in the timeline of these kinds of narratives; we exist within their history. Our now is not *real*, Kavanagh reminds us: the complex, often invisible transformations marked by climate change enable mass denial of what current forecasts about sea level rise actually *mean*.<sup>7</sup> What might we do today to change the trajectory? To provoke alternative futures to the ones described in ecocollapsed worlds?

Forecasting ecological collapse in literature engages readers’ capacities of empathetic intelligibility regarding the effects of climate catastrophe from multiple perspectives and through differing experiences. Climate change is happening now, not in some speculated future. As Antonio Guterres said in his address to the United Nations in February 2023, consequential sea-level rise is already certain and “Low-lying communities and entire countries could disappear forever. We could witness a mass exodus of entire populations [...] People’s human rights

<sup>7</sup> The NASA Sea Level Projection Tool, based on IPCC data, is available at <https://sealevel.nasa.gov/ipcc-ar6-sea-level-projection-tool>.

do not disappear because their homes do” (qtd. in Carrington). Readers can do something with what their imaginative capacity evokes when reading speculative fictions like *The Wall*. For example, various public officials’ public consternation about declining national birthrates tends to be framed in terms of the ‘harm’ to the Ponzi scheme we call capitalism, an economic system built on the necessity of perpetually-increasing consumption and economic growth that most benefits a small group at the top. Yet the ‘economy’ is a human invention, one that should adapt to human societies, not dictate their expression. Likewise, concern regarding who will pay for pensioners and the elderly demands alternative social structures, taxation systems, and technological advances that increase quality of life, not a higher fertility rate to birth more ‘Help’. Ibrahim Abubakar claims that “If these predictions are even half accurate, migration will become a necessity for all nations and not an option” (qtd. in Gallagher). Does reading a novel like *The Wall* inspire readers to embrace climate asylum and encourage their governments to transform migration policies toward greater inclusivity? The planet cannot sustain endless population growth, and the kinds of changes evoked by *The Wall* can help readers imagine a future amidst unchecked climate change.

Nathaniel Rich notes in an interview with Daniel Drake that “Writers can help us puzzle through what climate change is doing to us. [...] Even more important than changing the way we think, [good writing] can help us to understand why we think what we do.” Such fiction can model more effective methods for transforming despair and feelings of hopelessness toward inclusion, justice, gratitude, and resilience, aiding readers toward a denunciation of sociopolitical forces that encourage xenophobic tribalism, a vigorous rejection of futurity that privileges only generative relationships, and the recognition that meaningful survival depends on systems of shared humanity and genuine, compassionate community without walls. As Elizabeth Kolbert states and *The Wall* makes vividly real, climate change “isn’t going to have a happy ending, or a win-win ending, or, on a human timescale, any ending at all” (47). The question, then, becomes one of how we will face its many uncertainties once we can better imagine them.

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