

“FRAGMENTED AND BEWILDERING:” THE NEW RISK SOCIETY IN JENNY OFFILL’S *WEATHER*

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ABSTRACT:

US author Jenny Offill’s *Weather* (2020) shows her idiosyncratic take on the notion of risk society. In the novel and its accompanying website, Offill develops a type of anxious fragmentation as an answer to the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. A multiple text characterized by compulsive quotation and the formal influence of digital media, *Weather* is held together by a first-person confessional voice. Eventually, Offill manages to achieve a sense of interconnection through an aesthetics of the fragment thanks to a double movement: she favors a critical posthumanist perspective that understands the interrelational subject as constituted by interaction with multiple others, and she explicitly calls for collective action. Therefore, I conclude that *Weather* represents Offill’s both aesthetic and political quest, as she distinctly aspires to elicit an answer from readers in the form of social activism.

RESUMEN:

Clima (2020) muestra el idiosincrásico acercamiento de la autora estadounidense Jenny Offill a la noción de sociedad del riesgo. Tanto en la novela como en su página web asociada, Offill desarrolla una fragmentación ansiosa como respuesta a los desafíos de la Cuarta Revolución Industrial. *Clima* es un texto múltiple caracterizado por la cita compulsiva y la influencia formal de los medios digitales, en el

que la primera persona confesional otorga unidad al conjunto. La autora logra un sentido de interconexión a través de una estética del fragmento gracias a un doble movimiento: por un lado, promueve una perspectiva posthumanista crítica según la cual el sujeto interrelacional se constituye en constante interacción con otros; por otro, realiza una llamada directa a la acción. De esta manera, *Clima* representa una búsqueda tanto estética como política, en la que Offill aspira a provocar una respuesta en sus lectores en forma de activismo social.

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication in 2014 of *Dept. of Speculation*, US novelist Jenny Offill has been at the forefront of a trend in contemporary first-person writing in English by female authors. Novels such as Olivia Sudjic's *Sympathy* (2017), Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), Kate Zambreno's *Drifts* (2020), or Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021), are characterized by compressed and fragmentary forms that evoke the distracted nature and the energy of the Internet, as well as the communication patterns of social media. In Offill's most recent novel, *Weather* (2020), set in New York City around the time of Trump's election, the autodiegetic narrator, Lizzie, strives to come to terms with what she labels as "twenty-first-century everything," (159) her name for the coming chaos humorously summarized as "dentistry, humiliation, scarcity." (160) Married to Ben, a Classics scholar turned computer games designer, and mother of the young boy Eli, Lizzie combines her work as a university librarian with her role as a personal assistant to Sylvia, the host of *Hell and High Water*, a podcast about the imminent climate catastrophe that attracts listeners obsessed with religion and environmental issues. Meanwhile, Lizzie becomes increasingly involved—or 'enmeshed,' as her meditation teacher calls it—in the life of her brother, a recovering drug addict about to become a father.

Lizzie's idiosyncratic take on the notion of risk society highlights the interconnectedness of climate emergency, political and economic crises, family tensions, and emotional and psychological distress. The narrative reflects many of the anxieties resulting from the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a paradigm shift stemming from the digital revolution. Surveyed by authors such as World Economic Forum founder, Klaus Schwab, and scholar Jon-Arild Johannessen,

this age is defined by the evolution and interaction of technologies; the contemporary seen as a perplexing, complex reality of networks; or the insecurity in work relations. This is the context in which Offill's narrative explores the individual's search for meaningful connection. Her work shows that the unique ways in which we communicate, interact, and gather information in the digital age determine how we face disaster. The tension between the enormity of the challenges faced and the agency of the individual fuels a narrative that needs to be analyzed as part of a wider project. *Weather*, the novel, is supplemented by its accompanying website, "Obligatory Note of Hope," in which Offill exhorts readers to "get involved" and become "part of the collective." In the present article, I offer two interrelated arguments. The first, developed in the sections "*Weather* as a fragmented novel" and "Twenty-first-century everything," is that throughout *Weather*¹ Offill employs a specific type of fragmentary writing as an answer to the anxieties of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. My second argument, developed in the sections "Critical Posthumanism" and "Resilience, collective action, and hope," is that *Weather* manages to achieve a sense of interconnection through an aesthetics of the fragment thanks to a double movement: it favors a critical posthumanist perspective that understands the interrelational subject as constituted by interaction with multiple others, and explicitly calls for collective action. Therefore, I contend that Offill's is not only an aesthetic quest, but a political one as well, with which she wishes to elicit an answer from readers in the form of social activism.

WEATHER AS A FRAGMENTED NOVEL

Literary fragmentation is hardly a univocal, new phenomenon. From the perfectly completed maxims and aphorisms of Michel de Montaigne, Blaise Pascal, and François de La Rochefoucauld to the more open Romantic fragment regarded as the finite and discreet form more suitable to capture a truth beyond human perception, examples abound of authors projecting a vision of the fragment in contradistinction to current associations with loss or lack.² The evocations of fracture and absence seem to be a salient feature of

¹ Unless specified otherwise, I will use '*Weather*' to refer to the continuum 'novel + website.'

² For a historical overview of the fragment in western literature, see the Introduction in Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drag.

literary fragmentation of the last century. The crises of completeness, totality, genre, the subject, and meaning—all of them central to the experience of Modernism—materialize in the primacy of the fragment. The most enduring aesthetic solution proposed by modernist writers is the use of myth as a way “to compensate for the dissatisfying fragmentation of the modern world” while facilitating the connection of subjects via the collective unconscious (Childs 198). This way, modernist dislocation is offset by a desire for reconstruction. With the death of the autonomous subject certified by mid- and late-twentieth century postmodernist thought, experimental writers dealing with fragments, such as William Burroughs, Kathy Acker, or David Markson, dispense with the idea of connectivity and the search for continuity and coherence, cultivating instead the random, as exemplified by the cut-up method.

In recent years, a number of contemporary critics, scholars, and authors identify a new trend of fragmented fiction inseparable from online and digital ways of communication. According to novelist Olivia Sudjic, “The dominant trend is to tell a story through fragments,” regardless of whether social media plays an obvious role in the plot. Her further description of the novel shaped by the Internet deserves quoting at length, as it nicely captures *Weather’s* defining features:

Sometimes [fragments] make a point of concision—only a paragraph, or even one line, which of course makes social media comparison easy, while others may be the length of a blog. Each fragment possesses no obvious bearing on the next, juxtaposing random facts with news articles, wry observation of a stranger on a commute followed by an unrelated emotional confession, in the manner of one individual’s Twitter timeline.

For writer Ted Gioia the new fragmented novel is an artefact that “resists disunity, even as it appears to embody it.” To convey this, he chooses the image of the jigsaw puzzle, with individual elements coalescing to create sprawling, multivalent stories. His preferred examples are multi-character novels without a unified prose style and voice, such as Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* or Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, in which apparently unconnected stories and disparate subjects eventually commingle. Gioia shares the view of writer and editor Guy Patrick Cunningham that “Fragmentary writing is (or at least feels) like the one avant-garde literary approach that best

fits our particular moment," as it effectively "captures the tension between 'digital' and 'analog' reading." As we read online, we read in pieces more than ever. This applies to our way of dealing with short texts, but also with long online texts broken up by a number of interactive elements (e.g., hyperlinks, banners), encouraging distracted, fragmented reading. Understanding literary fragmentation as a direct consequence of cultural and technological change, as Sudjic, Gioia, and Cunningham do, invites us to consider phenomena such as the current primacy of digital media, or the increasingly rapid pace of audiovisual products such as music videos. Nevertheless, none of them address how those topics which are not necessarily connected to online communication also potentially determine the form of the texts produced by current writers of the fragment. My analysis of *Weather* in this section and the next will tackle this issue.

Weather is structured around vignettes, fragments often no longer than a paragraph, loosely connected through similar moods or recurring themes despite the apparently arbitrary juxtaposition of events or thoughts. Offill claims that the consequent narrative leaps force readers to produce their "own chain of associations while reading" (Fries). Not only that: as individual fragments invoke one type of anxiety or another, a sense of paratactical accumulation ensues, similar to how social media conveys information as a succession of posts. Sudjic's assertion that social media does not always feature prominently in the plot of digital-age novels is of relevance for the study of *Weather*, whose main character is quite vocal about her refusal to use social network services, the addictive nature of which makes her feel "like a rat who can't stop pushing a lever" (Offill 39). But even the need to verbalize that rejection speaks volumes about the ubiquity of digital platforms and their impact on our eroded concentration spans and meandering thought processes.

The boundary between sections is typographically established by the ellipsis sign, while other conventions—whole paragraphs in italics or surrounded by dashed-line boxes—are equally used to further divide sections, with the effect of giving blank space free reign on the page—which reviewers such as Adam Mars-Jones take as an important element of the visual hierarchy in the novel. It feels as if the repeated interruption of reading produced by switching between tabs in a browser were given a visual representation. After all, the dichotomy between digital and analog reading alluded to by Cunningham informs *Weather*, the novel, to the extent that it gives it its particular form, but also the project as a whole, which literally

offers an exclusively digital side in which the novel's fragmentary form reaches a new platform.

Even though Offill's work also feeds on the tension between resisting and embracing disunity mentioned by Gioia, she navigates it in a different way. For one thing, *Weather* does not have much of a main plot (let alone significant subplots). From a narrative point of view, it is the confessional first-person voice that holds the fragments together—which is listed by Sudjic as another feature of the social media inflected novel. Inconsistent as she may be, Lizzie is behind all the information we receive,³ and her voice is a reflection of her anxieties, most of which stem from contemporary phenomena, as shown in the following section. Crucially, it is not only the quality of the information processed by Lizzie that affects her, but also the quantity. The impossibility to offer a coherent, unbroken narrative is the by-product of the abundance of information in the digital society and its concomitant poverty of attention and sense of disembodiment of experiences. This is all the more damaging as it takes place during what Stefana Broadbent and Claire Lobet-Maris (111-5), alluding to T. H. Eriksen, call the 'hegemony of fragments:' a context where algorithmic classifications create volatile consumer profiles at the expense of significant social environments.

In *Weather*, the first-person narrative is interspersed with fragments from magazines, diaries, e-mail correspondence, podcast episodes, signs, overheard conversations, greeting cards, jokes, interviews, articles on disaster psychology, or political speeches. If Cubist collage techniques helped Modernists to emphasize the composite nature of narrative and character (Childs 114), these extracts allow Offill to approach an overwhelming reality that a single perspective would not manage to apprehend. This anxious fragmentation, materialized in the compulsive quotation that reflects the many worries of the main character, produces a text that is "multiple, fragmented and made of the foreign" (appropriately, Pramod Nayar's (89) definition of the posthuman self). An assortment of sources provides the support needed to face the countless challenges of the new risk society. At the same time, the juxtaposition of disparate elements hints at the banalization of information as communicated via social media: a meme or a YouTube video provide distraction and temporary relief in the face of political and social anxieties, such as

³ This assertion will be problematized in the analysis of *Weather's* accompanying website.

those discussed in the following section. As many of these fragments keep their place of enunciation—that is, the reader is usually able to discern their origin, with the assistance of a “Notes” section—, putting one sample of these textual genres next to another contributes to a sense of polyphony, while building up a vision of complexity that counteracts the apparently unstable architecture of the book. Arguably, Offill’s vision of the fragment is not that of the portion derived from a lost totality to be recovered—theorists such as Pilar Carrera convincingly claim that such a totality is no more than an *illusion* of totality. Rather, she uses the fragment as a way to zero in on a specific element—be it an anecdote, a state of mind, or an idea—that might have remained inaccessible had a more traditional authorial voice established a homogeneous, clear hierarchy of information.

The novel is divided into six chapters. While the first two account for more than 50% of the text, the last two are considerably shorter than the rest—less than 20 pages in the 201-page long 2020 Vintage edition. Chapters 5 and 6 are also made up of shorter fragments, many of which are short quotations whose origin becomes increasingly difficult to identify, mirroring the ontological uncertainties of the main character. Fragmentation becomes as relevant thematically as it is formally. Lizzie has “always had an obsession with lost books, all the ones half written or recovered in pieces” (Offill 50). Aware of this, Ben leaves for her notes with quotations from Democritus, who “wrote seventy books. Only fragments survive” (50). The fact that Lizzie wrote “half a dissertation once” (59) hints at her unsatisfied expectations, and when the bigger picture is accounted for, Lizzie’s fixation on shattered or incomplete artefacts seems to be plenty justified: *Weather* offers a catalog of the worries and anxieties, as well as the forms of human and environmental vulnerabilities, generated in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Granted, feeling fear, dread, or despair is anything but new, but complying with character limits to express those feelings, or having the chance to convey them instantly in a network consisting of both friends and strangers, inevitably changes the way we deal with and communicate our concerns. As Johanna Thomas-Corr puts it, Lizzie is confronted with “the familiar late capitalist doomsday checklist: the climate crisis, rising fascism, precarious socio-economic circumstances” (48)—matters that, as suggested by *Weather*’s structure, can only be addressed one at a time and in small doses. This is Offill’s “twenty-first-century everything,”

an updated version of the risk society theorized by Ulrich Beck for an era, as described by Lizzie, in which “regular life becomes more fragmented and bewildering” (Offill 44), in which major and minor catastrophes, personal and public dilemmas, feedback into each other to the point of preventing a healthy engagement with one’s environment. In the following section, the preoccupations of *Weather’s* characters will be addressed vis-à-vis the backdrop of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and its attendant expectations, challenges, and vulnerabilities.

“TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY EVERYTHING”

Weather can be described as an anxious text, and Offill’s fragmentary approach plays no small part in this. According to Emily Donaldson, “Lizzie and almost everyone around here are in a near-constant state of anxiety,” the origins of which are varied but interrelated. The title of the book first brings to mind the climate anxiety on which the podcast *Hell and High Water* thrives. The certainty that things cannot go on like this forever is primarily based on an unprecedented awareness of climate change and its consequences. This makes it different from twentieth-century risks such as nuclear annihilation: in Cold War America, a foreign, external enemy embodied a threat that could be unleashed suddenly; nowadays, every individual citizen is seen as part of the environmental problem, a notion reinforced by the discourse of personal resilience and responsibility according to which the subject is first of all a consumer making his or her own choices. To this discourse, Offill opposes a narrative focused on community action, in which the individual becomes an agent of social change when working with others. Before such a narrative is explicitly articulated in the final sections of the project, throughout *Weather*, climate anxiety is portrayed as inadvertently entering quotidian scenes:

Eli is at the kitchen table, trying all his markers one by one to see which still work. Ben brings him a bowl of water so he can dip them in to test. According to the current trajectory, New York City will begin to experience dramatic, life-altering temperatures by 2047. (106)

Here and elsewhere, the narrative voice seems to proceed with the operation ‘one fragment = one shock.’ The lack of commentary—the above paragraph marks the end of a section, without explicit

connection with the following—makes this intrusion of doom all the more unexpected. As a consequence of Offill's fragmentary writing, we share the unease and uncertainty experienced by characters as we wonder how the two events are connected: is contemplating the boy what makes the narrator consider the future? Or is it his careless use of water, a resource the predicted life-altering temperatures may make more precious than currently envisioned by him? These omnipresent climate concerns make Lizzie lose herself into a virtual rabbit hole. A particular section begins: "There are fewer and fewer birds these days. This is the hole I tumbled down an hour ago. I finally stop clicking when my mother calls" (95). Needless to say, no bird had been mentioned in the previous pages. Here, doomscrolling⁴ is identified as a practice inherent in our digital era. That the saturation of information makes Lizzie and those around her aware of the oncoming climate disaster does not make it any less terrifying—as she puts it, "you can expect something and still get the breath knocked out of you by it" (176), nicely summing up the book's sense of anxiety about extinction. However, that saturation of negative information provokes a particular response in Lizzie's way of conveying her experience, which finds formal expression in Offill's preference for the paratactical over the hypotactical.

In an environment in which "becom[ing] rich, very, very rich" (Offill 127) seems to be the only effective way of keeping your loved ones protected, a sense of economic anxiety is found everywhere. Nowhere is this clearer than in the figure of the "doomed adjunct" (3) at Lizzie's college. He embodies the fragmented and precarious existence of the "academic precariat," the focus of increasing attention both inside and outside the academy—from monographs (Johannessen, Reyes) to Special Issues (Burton and Bowman) and even Twitter accounts (@acaprecariat). A subcategory of that precariat characterized by labor uncertainty, insecure social income, and lack of occupational identity (Standing 12), the academic precariat is a phenomenon understood "as a social and cultural 'condition of being'" in the context of a careless and hostile academy (Burton and Bowman 500). In *Weather*, the nameless adjunct has to sell plasma to make ends meet (Offill 43), while his wife passive-aggressively asks him to consider whether what he is doing right now makes any money (3). After seeing him paler than usual and unable to speak in complete

⁴ Defined by Wikipedia as "the act of spending an excessive amount of screen time devoted to the absorption of negative news."

sentences, Lizzie recalls that “when you’re lonely you start to lose words” (168), interpreting his fragmentary speech as a very real ontological consequence of unremitting economic hardships.

With anxiety as the default mode of delivery, the perplexing complexity of networks typical of the Fourth Industrial Revolution finds expression in references to a number of significant contemporary phenomena, many of which have become buzzwords in recent years. “Do we live in the Anthropocene?” (170), *Hell and High Water* listeners want to know, and indeed the vision of the human as “a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet” (Braidotti, *Posthuman* 5) is very much present in the novel. “What is surveillance capitalism?” (170), other listeners wonder, and a useful answer is provided by Lizzie’s paranoia when she begins to worry about her book-ordering history: “Lots and lots of books about Vichy France and the French Resistance and more books than any civilian could possibly need about spy craft and fascism” (117). The “evil government algorithm” (117) becomes the panopticon of the digital age: a most effective tool to keep track of (potentially troublesome) citizens. This is just one of the several cases in which concerns born out of the digital era, a consequence of the unprecedented means of surveillance and social control, affect both the behavior of Lizzie and (importantly for the development of Offill’s fragmentary style) her way of communicating with the reader. The short sections on the pages following the last quoted paragraph are paradigmatic of Offill’s approach: if the rise of fascism is too overwhelming a topic, then it forces us to abruptly shift our attention to dental health; if dentistry scares us, we insert a joke about it to which no origin or reaction is provided. Once again, the abundance of informational resources results in a diminished capacity to focus, powerfully conveyed via juxtaposition and blank spaces in Offill’s text, mirroring also the fragmentation of experiences typical of the digital age (Broadbent and Lobet-Maris 114).

Commentators such as Johannessen and Schwab hold no doubts as to the impact of automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence on current and future societies. In *Weather*, Lizzie witnesses with growing preoccupation her son’s fascination with machines. Neither the innocent book *How to Draw Robots* nor the YouTube material about crablike things learning to avoid obstacles seem to quench his curiosity. Eli’s initial interest in a robot named Samantha (Offill 134-5)—which can be switched from family to sex mode—allows Offill to hint at the dangers of social media in the hands of the underage, stressing at the same time that technological progress

does not imply the overcoming of a patriarchal mindset. When we read that Samantha "was heavily soiled and had two broken fingers" after too many male attendants at a tech conference tried to test her (156), we become aware of the gender politics of robotics in the wider context of the commodification of the female body.

Although, as is often the case with Offill's fragments, there is no further comment on this news, the idea of the gendered robot as sex worker reinforces the posthuman notion of female alliances beyond the human species. Rosi Braidotti acknowledges that her situated position as a female makes her "structurally serviceable and thus closer to the organisms that are willing or unwilling providers of organs or cells than to any notion of the inviolability and integrity of the human species" (*Posthuman* 80). In a similar vein, Donna Haraway recalls the experiences of herself, an aging woman, and her elder dog, Cayenne, in which "woman and dog find themselves in histories of veterinary research, Big Pharma, horse farming for estrogen, zoos, DES feminist activism, interrelated animal rights and women's health actions" ("Staying" 7). These positions help us recognize the essential embedded embodiment conceptualized by critical posthumanism, according to which "the human body is located in an environment that consists of plants, animals and machines" (Nayar 20). The next section of this article is devoted to showing the ways in which this posthumanist perspective contributes to a sense of interdependence in Offill's fiction.

CRITICAL POSTHUMANISM

A few pages after a comic episode in which a group of technoeuphoric Silicon Valley types are ridiculed for their uncritical faith in progress, we are confronted with the following statement: "There is no higher or lower. [...] Everything is equally evolved" (46). This belief, which would not be out of place in any text penned by Braidotti or Haraway, belongs in fact to a lecture given by Sylvia in *Weather*, about a book called *Nature and Silence*. Sylvia seems to be discussing the work of Christopher Manes, author of the 1992 article "Nature and Silence," who in his *Green Rage* wrote that "in the vast web of life there is no first or second, higher or lower, superior and inferior. All life has made the same journey of organic evolution, over billions of years, and those that survive, whether worm or human, are equally, if differently, evolved" (161). Regardless of its sources, Sylvia's talk communicates a view of the contemporary as a complex reality of networks where

human and non-human, nature and technology, are interconnected. Therefore, it fits the notion of critical posthumanism as formulated by Nayar: “the radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines” (11). Since Sylvia largely represents the moral compass of *Weather* (she is, all things considered, the character who most consistently shows not only a comprehensive awareness of the need to tackle the climate emergency, but also a determined disposition to make a difference), the critical posthumanist ethos she embraces becomes also the project’s preferred set of ideas and attitudes. With its emphasis on assemblages and associations, posthumanism provides Offill with a way to balance out thematically the formal fragmentation of her text, and to anticipate the principled commitment fully explored in the accompanying website. In *Weather*, Sylvia patiently demolishes the alleged superiority of the human being, in a reasoning akin to the posthuman interrogation of the hierarchic ordering of life forms: “if we privileged the sense of smell, dogs would be deemed more evolved. [...] If we privileged longevity, it would be bristlecone pines, which can live for several thousand years” (46-7). When asked about the message of the *Hell and High Water* shows, Lizzie rewrites Martin Niemöller’s famous words, in Offill’s characteristic tone, half wisecrack, half denunciation of exploitative practices: “First, they came for the coral, but I did not say anything because I was not a coral...” (41).

The ethical corollary of human entanglement with non-humans is a call for personal responsibility and accountability, implied in *Weather* by the Epictetus quote pinned above Lizzie’s husband’s desk: “You are not some disinterested bystander/Exert yourself” (195). This is intended as a wake-up call to Lizzie, in the face of her neglected family duties and her enmeshment with her brother, who depends excessively on her for both practical assistance and emotional support. However, the words of the pre-Socratic thinker evoke larger themes of the novel. Braidotti’s ‘assemblage’ of human and non-human actors, together with Haraway’s ideas of tentacularity, making-with, thinking-with, and becoming-with as a way to account for the dynamic subject’s entanglement in technologies, relations, and changes, provide key frameworks to account for the world depicted in *Weather*. The relationship between Americans and the (their?) land is problematized even before the narrative begins. Right after the book’s dedication and before chapter

1, the following quotation—under the title “Notes from a Town Meeting in Milford, Connecticut, 1640”—serves as epigraph to the novel:

Voted, that the earth is the Lord's
and the fullness thereof; voted,
that the earth is given to the Saints;
voted, that we are the Saints.

The political (what is voted at a town meeting) and the theological (what is expressed in Psalm 24:1) work hand in hand to facilitate the exploitation of the land. Thus, this paratextual fragment already signals the unhealthy, centuries-old relationship of dominion towards the natural world that leads to the frightening situation in which the novel's characters are caught up. Just as Braidotti emphasizes what female humans, oncomice, and the sheep Dolly have in common (*Posthuman* 75); and Haraway talks about “interrelated animal rights and women's health actions” (“Staying” 7); Offill suggests the shared sense of vulnerability between human and non-human actors in *Weather's* most humorous passages:

My brother tells me a story about his NA meeting. A woman stood up and started ranting about antidepressants. What upset her most was that people were not disposing of them properly. They tested worms in the city sewers and found they contained high concentrations of Paxil and Prozac.

When birds ate these worms, they stayed closer to home, made more elaborate nests, but appeared unmotivated to mate. “But were they happier?” I ask him. “Did they get more done in a given day?” (5-6)

In this case, the complexity of the contemporary is emphasized by the continuum ‘narcotics + human animals + non-human animals.’ This reads like a critique of the medicalization of depression, which pursues the protection of hyper-capitalist production and consumption. As the narrative progresses, the notions of productive assemblage and healthy involvement of human and non-human actors contrast with the challenges posed by insularity and negative connections. The former is best represented by those podcast listeners interested only in “what's going to happen to the American weather” (73). The latter, by Lizzie's enmeshment in her brother's life, a relation of mutual dependence that prevents their individual growth and threatens to fracture her marriage. Meanwhile, a good number of images contribute to showing the myriad ways in which we are all “connected into one

system, which makes us all interdependent, vulnerable and responsible for the Earth as an indivisible living community” (Onega and Ganteau 12). In the most accomplished sections of the novel, the fragmentary style and the themes of relationality and interdependence end up producing something similar to what Rodríguez Magda calls a narrative of fracture (26): one that favors complexity over totalization. That is the case with the opening of chapter 2 (71): via the family dog’s saliva, the first two paragraphs connect the animal’s nervousness (a consequence of someone setting firecrackers off; is it the Fourth of July? Maybe the announcement of Trump’s nomination?) with the “bright pink” antibacterial soap Lizzie feels bad about having bought because of its chemical content. The result is a mini *tour de force* which, in less than 100 words, portrays political and ecological concerns, all the while suggesting the need to strive for an ethical relation to fellow species. This is, in sum, an example of writing compressed as if a character limit were in effect.

Other examples might be less showy but nevertheless instrumental for the novel’s pervasive sense of polyphonic interconnectedness: a man in the library is convinced that his deceased wife manifested “as a small whirlwind that swept the papers off his desk” (16-7); Lizzie’s son and his schoolmates “sing that their lives are like a drop of water, no more, in an endless sea” (99); a test in a magazine encourages readers to become aware of their surroundings by tracing the water they drink or naming five resident and five migratory birds in their area (105); an ecologist describes a moth that drinks bird tears as an example of interconnection (67); fragments from the fundamental vows of the Zen Buddhist path affirm the equal importance of all sentient creatures (125); and a Buddhist monk explains to a visitor on a YouTube video: “We have died and we are in love with everything” (200). Interestingly, these passages highlight two of the most distinctive peculiarities of *Weather’s* posthumanist approach: first, its decidedly ironic, when not outright comic nature, and second, the spiritual perspective, most visible in the passages where Offill’s interest in Buddhism filters the narrative.⁵

The final paragraph of the novel, which perfectly encapsulates Offill’s approach, is worth citing in full:

⁵ Although the relationship between posthumanism, transhumanism, and Buddhism sparks academic interest (see, for example, Ahamed et al. and Cook), its exploration in *Weather* is beyond the scope of this article.

The dentist gave me something so I won't grind my teeth in my sleep. I consider putting it in, decide against it. My husband is under the covers reading a long book about an ancient war. He turns out the light, arranges the blankets so we'll stay warm. The dog twitches her paws softly against the bed. Dreams of running, of other animals. I wake to the sound of gunshots. Walnuts on the roof, Ben says. The core delusion is that I am here and you are there. (201)

The paragraph opens with the promising image of Lizzie as a kind of low-grade cyborg creature, enhanced by the technology of the night guard. However, in the second sentence her refusal to wear it hints at her technophobia. Meanwhile, the family's technophile, Ben, reads a book "about an ancient war," staying in touch with his Classics education. They share their bedroom with their dog, and the communion between the three is such that Lizzie ventures to interpret the twitches of her paws as indication of her "Dreams of running, of other animals." It is this understanding of the dog on her own terms that evokes Haraway's perception of dogs as companion species, "a species in obligatory, constitutive, historical, protean relationship with human beings" ("Companion" 11-2). In Lizzie's bedroom, dogs and people, "bonded in significant otherness," are neither wholes nor parts, but elements in a pattern of relationality (Haraway, "Companion" 16). It is in this union that Lizzie falls asleep, but the narrative resorting to an ellipsis accentuates the seamless transition from sleep to wakefulness. What might have been threatening human-produced sounds ("gunshots") are revealed to be harmless and natural ("Walnuts on the roof"). And then, the final sentence, which carries us back to the first page of chapter 6, where the question posed by Lizzie's meditation teacher lingered unanswered: "What is the core delusion?" (193). Now, in a rather mystical statement not clearly addressed to any particular narratee—so most probably to the implied reader—Lizzie confidently asserts that "The core delusion is that I am here and you are there." Once any artificial barrier between here and there has been demolished, otherness is exposed as an illusion, showing, in posthuman fashion, "alterity as constitutive of subjectivity" (Nayar 77). The valuable lesson in transversal interconnection learned by Lizzie calls to mind Judith Butler's declaration: "we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us" (64). Lizzie begins to realize what Sylvia has been preaching since the beginning of the story—i.e., what Braidotti summarizes as "'we' are in this together" (*Nomadic*

85)—: that even though we are operating in a fast-changing, complex context of fragmented realities (to which Offill reacts with her fragmentary approach), it is crucial to attend to the bond of vital interconnections between threats and possibilities, between challenges and hopes, and ultimately, between actors (human or otherwise).

RESILIENCE, COLLECTIVE ACTION, AND HOPE

Having explored Offill's characters' anxieties and consequent vulnerabilities, and how a posthumanist ethos appears in stark contrast to visions of disunity, we turn our attention to *Weather's* movement towards collective action. I suggest an analysis of the types of resilience portrayed in *Weather* as a useful approach to this topic. Mark Neocleous discusses the current omnipresence of resilience as "the basis of *subjectively* dealing with the uncertainty and instability of contemporary capitalism as well as the insecurity of the national security state" (5). For him, "Resilience both engages and encourages a culture of preparedness" (4), which in *Weather* informs the culture of doomers and preppers. As hazards can no longer be prevented, we are forced to be prepared to confront them. Drawing on Neocleous, Sarah Bracke extends the meaning and social function of resilience in our neoliberal political economy: "resilience resurrects a form of self-sufficiency, and hence a fantasy of mastery, and it does so when climate change, the War on Terror, and economic crises (to name but a few systemic 'risks' and hazards of our times) increasingly affect livelihoods around the world" (58-9). In *Weather*, Lizzie spends precious time preparing for the worst without hoping for the best, much to the irritation of her husband. Her prepper obsession includes googling tips ("What to Do If You Run Out of Candles," 148), printing out acronyms ("DTA = Don't Trust Anyone," 162), and mulling over the most effective ways of building a doomstead, i.e., a place where she and her family could hide in order to survive disaster.

Since resilience implies an inability to imagine alternatives to these neoliberal times, Bracke argues that, instead of embracing it, we should resist it, refusing the "neoliberal social ontology that revolves around the individual" and shifting "to a social ontology centered in relationality and interdependence" (72). This resistance to mainstream interpretations of resilience in the face of impending doom can be linked to a crucial tension in *Weather*, which reinforces my argument that the project's ultimate goal is to promote collective action and

social change. Behind Lizzie's misguided attempts at self-preservation, or the solipsistic self-care represented by Lizzie's brother's wife—boiled down to going outside more, eating better food, and stepping away from the computer (79)—, a more politically oriented current runs through the novel. "I keep wondering how we might channel all of this dread into action" (137), confesses Lizzie, who, as we reach the two final chapters (adequately, the shortest and most radically fragmentary), is still a puzzled character struggling to navigate our complex reality—and all the more relatable for that. The narrative seems to acknowledge the obstacles faced by any contemporary collective movement willing to counteract "the extreme individualization of our digital lives" (Broadbent and Lobet-Maris 121). I contend that Offill's project strives to convince us that working together is the solution: after the concluding paragraph, a page with the message www.obligatorynoteofhope.com leads us to the novel's accompanying website, where the author offers her most explicit attempt at counteracting the "all talk, no action ways" (Offill 173) of her main character.

The name "obligatory notes of hope" originally refers to the notes Sylvia feels required to include in her correspondence with her podcast listeners, often about some actual or potential catastrophe. In Offill's website, the notes also mirror the main composition technique of the novel, therefore contributing to the "exemplary wholeness" to which contemporary fractured works aspire (Gioia). The website's home page presents, in four paragraphs written in the first person, a narrative of personal awakening that stems from the question: "How can we imagine and create a future we want to live in?" ("Obligatory"). After reading about ordinary people "refusing to give into fatalism," the 'I' leaves behind her disengaged position and sees "collective action as the antidote to my dithering and despair." The text closes with an appeal to the reader: "Aren't you tired of all this fear and dread?" ("Obligatory").

Surprisingly, nowhere in the website is the name of Jenny Offill to be found, and obligatorynoteofhope.com does not feature in the author's professional domain, www.jennyoffill.com. Therefore, the novel itself, either in its physical or digital version, provides the only obvious entry to these 'notes,' which further problematizes the identity behind that personal narrative. Is it Offill's or Lizzie's? This digital side of the project seems to invite a reading of *Weather* as a text located at the same time outside and inside literature, in which the distinction between reality and fiction is of little significance. When entering the

space of “Obligatory Note of Hope,” we do not know whether we are reading a fictitious voice, but more importantly, this does not change our approach to a text in which the conative—rather than the poetic—function of language predominates. I contend that this quite explicit change of function does not automatically disqualify *Weather* as a literary project: if anything, it proves the capacious nature of even Offill’s fragmented version of the novel. Just like *Weather* is able to contain a multitude of voices as a response to the myriad challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, it also refuses to be limited to one function. With its accompanying website, *Weather* also grows into a transmedia narrative that enhances the reading experience across different platforms. The very notion of transmedia storytelling—multiplatform, enhanced content that crosses media (Jenkins)—carries with it an implicit celebration of dialogue and exchange that fits with the novel’s quest for interconnection and relationality, noticeable in the website’s obvious social function: the “Get Involved: Becoming part of the collective” section offers detailed information regarding three ways to participate in climate activism: the Sunrise Movement, Transition Towns, and Extinction Rebellion.

If the political concerns of *Weather* are more clearly addressed here, the section entitled “Tips for Trying Times: Surviving dark moments of history” clearly evokes the novel’s aesthetic concerns. The 45 ‘tips’ gather aphorisms and short pieces of wisdom from a variety of authors, which with titles like “Cultivate Modest Hopes,” “Notice What You Have,” or “Be Like a Plant” read like a how-to book for good living in challenging times. Were it not for the political dimension provided by the “Get Involved” section, some of these tips would in fact conjure up the vision of resilience as self-help mocked in the novel. As a result of the techniques of collage and juxtaposition, the words of intellectuals, philosophers, and canonical literary authors such as James Baldwin, Natalia Ginzburg, Emmanuel Levinas, or Simone Weil stand side by side with excerpts from the Army Survival Training Guide, an advice booklet published by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, or the testimony of a Bosnian War survivor. Here we find, again, the aesthetics of the fragment as the basis for a holistic project, with multiple sources building a sense of wholeness. Furthermore, the novel’s affirmation of the nature-culture and life-death continua is highlighted in tips such as “Observe the Weather,” in which the theologian Thomas Merton reminds himself: “I myself am part of the weather and part of the climate and part of the place;” or “Look at the Sky,” in which Herman Hesse recommends: “Accustom yourself every

morning to look for a moment at the sky and suddenly you will be aware of the air around you" and have "a touch of coexistence with nature" ("Obligatory"). Offill's appropriation and juxtaposition of these various fragments incites readers to return to the novel and appreciate the different ways in which 'we' (and this pronoun clearly encompasses also those who are no longer with us) are in this together.

CONCLUSION

"Obligatory Note of Hope" not only expands the reading experience, but also recapitulates Offill's project for us. *Weather* presents a fragmentary narrative that reflects digital forms of communication and accounts for the epistemological crisis of a main character unable to apprehend an overwhelming reality. In order to counteract the sense of isolation and disengagement that such fragmentation could prompt, Offill, on the one hand, favors a critical posthumanism oriented towards relationality and connectivity, and on the other, urges readers to participate in grassroot community projects and global environmental movements, which represent an antidote to dominant views of resilience as self-sufficiency and individualism. As a result, *Weather* typifies the contemporary fragmented novel that resists disunity. Through structures that underscore the fragility—yet also the persistence—of connections, narrative fiction becomes an attempt to write the contemporary, a comment on the current climate, an alternative to the incredulity response, a celebration of moving and acting instead of freezing. How can we be so sure that Offill wants *Weather* to propose a solution for contemporary problems? Because she straightforwardly tells us that much in her "Obligatory Note of Hope," and her appeal resonates with the novel's persistent concern with social commitment.

Therefore, I understand the website as a manifest signal of Offill's ambition to have a direct impact on reality, so much so that her choice to expand the text across more than one medium while resorting to different linguistic functions could lay the foundations for a discussion of the potential and limitations of literary creation as a tool to effect positive social change. Is the responsibility of the writer as public figure in a digital world not to limit her message—assuming she wishes to convey a message, as is the case with Offill—to the boundaries of the literary text? Upon first reading the fragments Offill presents in her "Obligatory Note of Hope," in contrast to my experience of the novel, I often found myself more interested in what was conveyed

than in how it was conveyed, despite the obvious formal parallelisms between both parts of the project. To me, that does not necessarily render the website as less aesthetically satisfying than the novel. Rather, I understand my initial doubtful approach to the website as a reflection of my own reading habits and expectations: the printed novel *must* be the literary work, the online text *must* contain something else. Even though subsequent readings of *Weather* have changed my way of understanding Offill's project, I still find myself struggling with certain questions: Is the role of the literary critic or scholar to attend to these extensions of a narrative project, as organic or artificial as they may be? If so, which new skills and analytical tools are required? These are some of the issues that may enrich our future understanding of Jenny Offill as an author concerned with addressing the complexities of our "twenty-first-century everything."

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