

# STAGGERED TIME: CATASTROPHE, EXTINCTION AND UNSTEADY TEMPORALITIES IN JENNIFER MILLS' DYSCHRONIA (2018)

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## Abstract

There is a tendency in certain spheres—academic and otherwise—to defer ecological catastrophe to an apocalyptic future. According to this logic, a "climatic end-game" is approaching, in which it is the responsibility of "global citizens" now to maintain the relatively stable and safe present against a monstrous future. The constant imagining of the future is troubling for many reasons, partly because it defers the reality of the crisis from the now; the upshot of this is that it minimises the crisis' of the present. For instance, the idea that a mass animal die-off is symptomatic of an *emerging* climate crisis, rather than a disaster in its own right, posits the idea that present extinction rates fall into the realm of acceptable loss. More problematically, however, is that this desire to imagine the future as catastrophic necessarily erases the catastrophes of the past. In conversation with Jennifer Mills' 2018 novel *Dyschronia*, I argue for what I tentatively call *staggered time* here, an unsettled temporality that is neither apocalyptic or certain but rather something 'in-between'. In this in-between, the trauma of extinction—human, non-human and more-than-human is repeated to collapse future, present, and past into a simultaneous co-happening extinction.

Keywords: climate change, Jennifer Mills, Dyschronia

There is a tendency in certain spheres—academic and otherwise—to defer ecological catastrophe to an apocalyptic future. According to this logic, a "climatic end-game" is approaching, in which it is the responsibility of "global citizens" now to maintain the relatively stable and safe present against a monstrous future. Many theorists have speculated on this deferral, or imagining of the future; Shinichiro Asayama has gone as far to divide the thinking into two competing narratives as *apocalyptic catastrophism* (think geoengineering, technical measures) and what Ulrich Bech has called

*emancipatory catastrophism* (a new-global cosmopolitanism brought about by crisis) (2015, p. 90). While the finer details of these concepts exceed my discussion here, what is essential is that both Asayama and Bech highlight the impulse to narrativise climate change as an emerging disaster, one which will upset global societies in the near to distant future.

This constant imagining of the future is problematic because it defers the reality of the crisis from the now. The upshot of this is that it minimises the catastrophes of the present; for instance, the idea that a mass animal die-off is symptomatic of an emerging climate catastrophe, rather than a disaster in its own right, posits the idea that present extinction rates fall into the realm of acceptable loss. More problematically, however, is that this desire to imagine the future as catastrophic necessarily erases the catastrophes of the past. The issue with this frame is how it draws a direct line from the perceived health of the past to a sick and apocalyptic future; a kind of history of anti-progress that works to create a universalised experience of ecological or climate catastrophe.

Linear accountings of crisis works to obfuscate the historical and geological ways in which crisis is generated in the present. Climate crisis is by nature both immediate and delayed: the time lag between carbon dioxide emissions and warming being the most obvious example. Put simply, the temporal dimensions of any catastrophe of the present are infused with the past and future. For instance, a coal mine that contaminates groundwater in the present, will displace (and possibly result in the extinction) of many human and non-humans in both the short and long term, perhaps in unpredictable ways. Coal dust that affects respiratory systems in the present will ultimately carry financial burdens of medical care that are cross-generational.

Similarly, to situate climate crisis in an emergent present or coming future is to deny that for many, climate crisis - or at least something sufficiently similar - has already occurred. As Kyle Whyte has argued, 'the [climate] hardships many non Indigenous people dread most ... are ones that Indigenous peoples have endured already due to different forms of colonialism: ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration' (2018). With this in mind, it remains critical to interrogate what is being written over in emergent discourses of 'the first climate refugees' or 'the first species to go extinct due to climate change' in the present.

Several speculative literary texts in recent years have sought to resist this futurising of catastrophe through by experimenting with narrative temporality. Examples include Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007), in which climate catastrophe repeats through three linked novellas; Rita Indiana's *Tentacle* (2015), in which characters experience a dystopian future, capitalist excess, and 17<sup>th</sup> century colonial tragedy

simultaneously; and Jennifer Mills' *Dyschronia* (2018)<sup>1</sup>. It is this last text that I want to pay attention to here, for its generative possibilities in thinking how narrative might *stagger* linear accountings of extinction. It is necessary, however, to briefly consider how theorists have sought to trouble linear time, before pivoting toward textual analysis.

That ecological crisis poses a challenge to linear concepts of time is a familiar refrain in the environmental humanities (Bonnail and Fressoz, 2017, p. 32) (Sloterdijk, 2009, p. 107) (Morton, 2012, p. 1). Common to many of these arguments is that progressive time breaks down as it comes into contact with the ecological realities of the present. Deborah Bird Rose, for instance, has argued that the Anthropocene explodes what she calls messianic time (following Benjamin)—the elastic horizon of always more progress, more of a good life, in which the messiah never arrives to speak (2013, p. 212). She claims:

The Anthropocene ... is forcing the truth upon us. The Anthropocene is something of a mirror, and the image it is giving of human agency is grotesque — an agency that outstrips its capacity to manage itself, that wrecks, pillages, loots and destroys, that has very little idea what it is doing, and that carries with it, in contradiction to all reason, an expectation of immunity. (2013-2014, p. 210)

By framing the Anthropocene as a geological prophet, Bird Rose suggests that crisis on a planetary scale compels a kind of ontological reckoning, in which the terms of western futurity become not only impossible but monstrous. The geological features of the Anthropocene in this formulation—soil erosion, rising sea levels, species extinction and more—are both signifiers of those sins of the past but also prophetic of future annihilations. Of course, just because ecological crisis contains the potential to reflect the Anthropocene's monstrosity, it does not mean that people are attuned to recognise it. Kate Rigby has stressed the need for writing, and art more broadly, to hold up this mirror; to take up a mode of 'ecoprophetic witness' to rise over what she calls 'idle chatter' (2009). She argues this mode of writing is:

'inspired by the imaginative capacity to see through and beyond those conventional attitudes, assumptions and patterns of behaviour that engender or support oppression and wrongdoing; and it is propelled by the hunger for justice, underpinned by compassion, that cannot tolerate complacency in the face of another's suffering ... the prophet speaks with the voice of grief; but also, implicitly or explicitly, of hope. Prophetic speech incites lamentation to

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<sup>1</sup> Curiously, both *Tentacle* and *Dyschronia* heavily feature cephalopod as non-human mascots for extinction.

engender transformation, at the same time that it warns of what will ensue if the people fail to heed the call. (Rigby 2009)

Rigby argues that the prophet, who is a speaker for end-times, could provide useful for conceptualising a poetics that draws attention to the ontological reckoning that Bird Rose sees as generative. While I admire the utopian promise of these formulations, both are too optimistic in their narrative of the expected (repentant) response. What I would venture, counter to Bird Rose's claims that the Anthropocene is 'forcing the truth upon us' (p. 212), is that "the truth" has been known for at least decades, if not centuries. Moreover, the conditions that have foreclosed the conditions of the Anthropocene—colonialism, capitalism, modernity, mono-crop agriculture and more—have always operated by generating crisis through precarity in order to exploit human (and nonhuman) labour<sup>2</sup>. As Naomi Klein argued famously in *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), capitalism has often used crisis to expand its reach, by normalising it and rendering it banal.

Climate crisis is nothing new; it is a coded feature of colonial capitalism. What makes the present distinct is that as climate crisis escalates, these crisis' will accelerate in both frequency and scale to a point in which the habitability for non-human and human life is made increasingly precarious. Nevertheless, precarity does not foreclose awareness; this would suppose that humans and political organisations are rational. It is also to ignore what crisis *is*. Crisis is a state of flux, in which extinction and futurity become equally possible. In other words, crisis is an explosion of the catastrophic into linear time. When, or if, crisis passes, however, the catastrophic may be forgotten; the norm, or at least a version of it, might resume. In other words, encountering the reality of climate crisis might not break down linear time; it may merely throw it into a state of flux, in which cataclysm staggers messianic time, rendering it fragile.

Facing extinction may be similar to a crisis of faith. Flashes of awareness, swiftly forgotten; like any good belief structure, the myth of progress will not be easily broken. This staggered state, which might last a few seconds or take over a subject's life, is worthy of attention. When staggered, the future becomes unsteady, as does the meaning of the present—temporarily becomes neither predictable, progressive nor apocalyptic, but something in-between. For instance, realising the rapid decline of insect populations could bring about societal collapse might void activities undertaken in the present of their meaning —property accumulation, child rearing, etcetera. However, if this event does not directly threaten the subject's immediate livelihood, the chances are that the majority of people know they must continue to live their life as if extinction were not

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<sup>2</sup> This is also to insist that climate crisis has and will be experienced unevenly in both a temporal and geographic sense.

underway in order to survive in a late capitalist economy, *even if they know it forecloses future catastrophes*. Apart from highlighting the deep anthropocentrism of contemporary culture and economy, this system necessitates that the subject act, if not believe, that the present rate of extinction is permissible by behaving as if the catastrophes around us did not occur.

Jennifer Mills near-future dystopia, *Dyschronia* resists a reification of “normal existence” by formulating a narrative in linear time is continuously exploded by the repeated experience of human and non-human extinction. Multiplicities of crisis layer Mills novel; the fictional South-Australian Coastal small town in which is set, Clapstone is beset by increasing financial precarity following the closure of the town’s asphalt plant, and then extreme debt following a failed rejuvenation project. These events are linked to human and non-human extinction—the asphalt plant closes after a series of suicides that are suggested to be chemically induced; the town's rejuvenation fails due to the inexplicable retreat of the sea from the town, leaving a graveyard of rotting sea-life. All these events are backgrounded by a myriad of ongoing animal extinctions of birds (p. 110), giant squids (p. 53), and most importantly, the Australian Giant Cuttlefish (p. 231).

Emily Potter, reflecting on novels, has helpfully articulated how the form is a product of modernity, stating that it, ‘most commonly, reproduces chronology, while the narrative’s containment by an opening and a conclusion reinforce linear temporality and episodic, containable time’ (2019, p. 8). *Dyschronia* works to try and queer this format, by slipping erratically through time and across tenses, sometimes within the same chapter. The novel's narrative arc defies easy summary; chapters focalise through Sam—a mid-twenties woman who receives visions of the future—before and after the novel's central catastrophe, being the sea’s inexplicable retreat. Additionally, a chorus of townsfolk narrates a series of events that run parallel to the post-catastrophe Sam narrative. This multilayered temporal structure creates a narrative context in which the novel’s catastrophes *have* and *has* happened at all points in the text; a point emphasised by the recounting of the novel's central catastrophe in the second chapter. Sam shares this temporal unsteadiness. Trying to make sense of her place in time, she reflects,

‘Nothing will feel entirely present, not for her ... There is no being, only escape and returning, moving forward, moving back. Other people have stories. She has repetition, regression. Fate, which is the same as being dead’ (p. 220)

Consequently, all times in Mills’ novel are rendered catastrophic and inevitable; the disasters of the past and present operate simultaneously with the banal and are infused with each-other.

Sam operates as an oracle in the text; this is not conjecture—the novel's epigraph is taken of Pythia's Last Oracle at Delphi (Mills 2018, n. p)<sup>3</sup>. This is not to suggest however that Mills text works in a clear mode of deliverance, as per Rigby's formulation of ecoprophetic writing. Like the prophets of the ancient world, Sam's visions are infrequently coherent, and often incomplete. Sam's visions emerge from debilitating migraines and are suggested to be brought about by undetected toxicity in the air (p. 48). Sam's ability to perceive into the future, rather than being categorised as a gift, is viewed as an illness, *Dyschronia*.

Sam's ability to perceive the future does not liberate her; instead, it is an infliction that renders her physically fragile, and temporally incoherent. This is to say, Sam's visions do not grant her a complete view that enables mastery of the future. For example, when Sam foretells the unlikely flooding of Clapstone, she assumes that this is the result of a natural event. As it transpires, however, her mother's partner Ed, convinces the town to take out flood insurance—when the rain arrives and does not entirely flood the town, it is the actions of the townsfolk, who clog drains and run their hoses, that pushes it over the edge (p. 165). As a result, it becomes unclear as to if the future was inevitable or actualised through collective belief, while also suggesting that Sam's knowledge of the future does not grant her agency over it.

Just as Sam's experience of the future is incomplete, so is her experience of the present. Her migraines ostracise her from typical ways of marking time and belonging: she misses school due to the pain; unable to provide a conventional diagnosis, Medicare will not fund her care (p. 65); and after foretelling a series of suicides, she is labelled a witch (p. 86), further isolating her. Only when Sam's ability is identified for its capacity to generate capital, as discussed in the flood mentioned above, is Sam welcomed back into the community. However, this welcoming back is undercut by the reader's knowledge that Sam stands apart from the community following the retreat of the sea.

Two chelopod's face extinction in the text, the giant squid and the Australian Giant cuttlefish. Of particular importance to Sam is the Australian Giant Cuttlefish<sup>4</sup>, which is drawn into kinship via her prophetic illness. Early in the text, Sam reads a book on

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<sup>3</sup> The link to Greek tragedy is further heightened by the collective narrator of the townsfolk, who operate as a kind of Greek chorus.

<sup>4</sup> Unique to Southern coasts of Australia, the chelopod is the world's largest cuttlefish. It lives for one to two years, mating only at the end of their life, the physical toll of which—in both the production of reproductive material and fasting during the mating season—results in death shortly after. During this period, thousands of cuttlefish come together, where the males attempt to attract the female of the species by rapidly shifting through bright colours. In recent years, the species faces have faced an increased risk of extinction. It has not been listed as such because it is not considered taxonomically distinct from *Sepia apama* (Australian Government: Department of the Environment and Energy, 2011).

Cuttlefish at a doctor's appointment, while the doctor cruelly suggests to her mother Ivy, that Sam's 'acting up' might be the result of her coming from a single-parent family (p. 53). Sam's cuttlefish facts and the doctor's words are dichotomised. As Sam draws the book from the toy crate in the corner of the office, the doctor says, 'perhaps we need to cast a wider net' (p. 52), establishing a dialectic that positions an enlightenment desire to capture and master against the concealed natural and supernatural forces at play. When the doctor asks Ivy, 'does [Sam] have trouble discerning what's real, and what's imaginary?', Sam reads that the 'cuttlefish keeps its shell on the inside' (p. 52); similarly, when Sam recalls watching cuttlefish, 'pulsing blue and purple' off Clapstone's jetty and how 'looking down like that had made her feel seasick', the doctor says, 'Perhaps something else is at work under the surface' (p. 53). The scene culminates with the nonhuman world poetically colliding: Sam thinks, 'under the carpet, tentacles shimmered' (p. 54).

The fate of the cuttlefish, Sam, and Clapstone are drawn together in the novel's second half, drawing attention to the tentacular ways in which human and non-human extinctions are linked<sup>5</sup>. Emboldened by the financial boom that comes from money made off flood insurance, Ed convinces the town to invest its newfound capital in transforming the town into a tourist haven by building over the ruins of the town's extractivist past. In a migraine, Sam sees the revitalisation as incomplete and in ruins (p. 192), but upon questioning by Ed, she decides to 'invent around the edges' (p. 193). Sam justifies this invention as an effort to take control of time, and become a master of the future, thinking that: "[s]he might not have to watch the future coming, passive to it ... her vision would become transforming' (p. 194). In doing so, Sam resists the staggering of linear time by reinvesting in the promise in progress by attempting to master her visions.

Awareness of impending extinction does not produce a response that might help. Instead, it reproduces an imaginary of transcendence through innovation, a delusion further emphasised by Sam's denial of a premonition that follows soon after in which the sea has impossibly disappeared, stating: 'This wasn't fate at all. It had to be a warning' (p. 218), a thought that repeats when Sam (p. 230) insists that the town should build a giant statue of a cuttlefish, rather than the giant squid she has seen in her vision (p. 231). Justifying the decision, given the impending extinction of the cuttlefish, Ed

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<sup>5</sup> The link between extractivist and cuttlefish precarity has been contested in South Australia for some time. In 2012, a report commissioned by BHP Billiton found that giant cuttlefish populations had decreased by 78% in the area of their operations (Hall, p. 71). At the time, BHP was seeking to build a desalination plant—an effort assisted by changes in environmental regulation so to lessen the risk of incurring prosecution for the company (*The Advertiser*, 2012). Fortunately for many of the species in the area, due to considerable resistance, and financial difficulties, the project did not go ahead.

says, the less cuttlefish we get, the more attention. So maybe it's about how you tell the story ... a statement of custodial intentions moving forward. Or if it comes down to it, a memorial. (p. 209).

To which Sam agrees, thinking it as a 'memorial to the other future', that would hide behind her misremembered 'camouflage' (p. 209). The use of camouflage binds Sam and the cuttlefish; both can transform to keep safe.

Mills' novel does not allow for such investments in safety, however. The future is fixed; refusing to face it only renders its subjects more vulnerable to extinction. When a giant squid washes ashore, great excitement erupts in the town as it appears to possess the ability to self-generate oil (p. 287). In response, a decision is made to transform the cuttlefish statue into a squid. Watching the statue find its 'proper shape', Sam remarks to Jill, 'I tried to make it different, but it's turning out the same.' (p. 284). The desire to resist the future is represented in the giant squid itself—when the specimen is taken for examination, it is revealed that the animal was not trying to produce oil but digest it. Like Sam, this creature encounters the futility of trying to adapt to resist the expanding catastrophe. The sea retreats from Clapstone shortly after, destroying both the town's potential for rejuvenation and also the cuttlefish's habitat.

## CONCLUSION

*Dyschronia* could be read as a reflection of the contradiction in which a coming into awareness of a destructive practice coincides with its re-inscription. Counter to this claim, however, I would suggest that Mills' novel *reminds* us that knowing extinction and its attending catastrophes is not enough. Mills highlights the imperative of resisting the allure of messianic time when we become staggered; only by acknowledging the catastrophes of the future and past *as if they are now* can prevent the escalating of catastrophe. To collapse extinctions into the present might confuse us, make us fragile. For many in the world, however, cuttlefish included, this fragility is already a daily reality. In becoming fragile, there is the possibility to encounter new kinships on an increasingly embattled earth.

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