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Wellbeing for Whom? Neoliberalism against the Environment in Climate Fiction

by Teja Šosterič



Abstract

The socio-economic environment in which climate fiction novels are produced and read influences their content. The three US novels discussed in this article (Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2011), Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018), and T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of The Earth* (2000)) reflect the neoliberal political and economic agenda, which does not focus on human or planetary wellbeing. Current socioeconomic priorities contradict the possibility of a sustainable future, which is increasingly affecting the daily lives of everyone on the planet, and environmental destruction is at the core of capitalist production. The emergence of cli-fi and neocli-fi parallels the rise of neoliberal ideology, and I explore the influence of that ideology on US and other western societies. As I demonstrate, this extends to novels, the narratives of which either attempt to satirize capitalism or subscribe to the idea that there is no alternative to the system. The ensuing aura of complacency is antithetical to action. However, analysing contemporary climate fiction novels written in the US may provide a framework for understanding the popular attitudes when it comes to the social, economic, and political reality and the potential to address the environmental disaster.

Keywords: neoliberalism, climate fiction, American literature, ideology, wellbeing



About the Author

Teja Šosterič is a doctoral candidate at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich), where she also works as an editor. Her research at the RCC is centered on climate fiction novels and examines how neoliberal ideology shapes contemporary North American literary works that engage with the ecological crisis and its material reality. She aims to combine political sciences, history, and literary studies in an eco-Marxist approach to improve our understanding of human responses to the climate emergency.



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Wellbeing for Whom? Neoliberalism against the Environment in Climate Fiction

Teja Šosterič

“What’s the matter with you two? Why do you hate people?”
“What are you talking about? We’re doing this for people!”
—Richard Powers

In an article from 2016, literary scholar Adeline Johns-Putra explains how climate fiction (also known as cli-fi) can teach us to come to terms with climate change, and how it plays a role in our emotional understanding of the environmental crisis (2016, 266–82). As she and others note, the number of climate fiction works published is increasing every year. As a result, many critics have discussed potential positive effects of climate fiction as a driver for action. However, as Matthew Schneider-Mayerson argues, even though climate fiction novels were and still are praised for their “ecopolitical potential—their presumed ability to persuade and mobilize readers to change their patterns of consumption, become more politically engaged, and support national policies and international agreements to limit greenhouse gas emissions” (2018, 949), this political engagement is not apparent in practice, at least not directly as a result of reading climate fiction. In this article, I argue that at least a partial reason for that is the socio-economic environment in which climate fiction novels are created and read. My focus is on the United States of America and the novels written for a North American audience, and although I acknowledge that the sphere of neoliberal influence is global, this article is therefore limited in scope. Even though these novels concern themselves with the emotional states of people experiencing climate change and environmental destruction, they have little to say about how that might be improved in the future.

Discussing *Freedom* (2010) by Jonathan Franzen, *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) by T.C. Boyle, and *The Overstory* (2018) by Richard Powers, I demonstrate how these novels reflect the mainstream political and economic agenda, in which planetary and human wellbeing are not at the forefront. This need not be intentional; the novels are unavoidably subject

to historical forces and molded by their ideological context. I begin the article with an overview of capitalism as the currently prevalent economic structure and neoliberalism as an ideology and political project that supports it. Then I connect the cultural influence of neoliberalism with literary fiction, using the three novels to illustrate how and why neoliberal ideology is harmful to the wellbeing of individuals and the environment. Wellbeing, as considered in this article, is a combination of personal psychological stability, perceived quality of life, and the objective environment. These factors are interrelated and affect each other.

The US novels covered here are climate fiction because their narratives include the ecological crisis, to a larger or lesser extent. Unlike the majority of climate fiction, they are not science fiction, but are set in our social, economic, and political reality. They represent an emerging trend in cli-fi, which is moving away from science-fiction and speculative narratives to include our temporal and spatial reality. The earliest examples of cli-fi appeared in the 1960s and 1970s. They were science fiction works that commonly took place in the future or on distant planets, but in the last decade, there have been more and more works situated in our world and in the present time. These contemporary novels no longer belong to the genre of science fiction but represent a new sub-genre of cli-fi that I call neocli-fi (Šosterič 2022). This illustrates a shift from seeing climate disaster events as something foreign and distant to a thing *in progress*. While the current, arguably unsustainable, system is criticized and even parodied in many climate fiction novels, the authors and consequently the characters express a certain degree of defeatism and fatalism rather than focusing on hope. The wellbeing of communities is not discussed because the characters do not live in strong communities; the wellbeing of plants and animals is eroded because the lands on which they live are privately owned and exploited for profit. However, that does not mean that there is nothing to be gained from reading and analyzing climate fiction. On the contrary, what can be grasped from contemporary climate fiction narratives is a deeper understanding of our world and our reality.

In her book *The Origin of Capitalism*, political theorist and historian Ellen Meiksins Wood locates the first shoots of capitalism not in the town, but in the field; she argues for an agrarian origin of capitalism, explaining how it was the privatization of land in England through enclosure and the creation of the landless laborers that brought about a new social and economic order (2002). Control over land and natural resources, and their subsequent commodification, are at the root of the Industrial Revolution, which was later propelled by technological advancement. Environmental degradation has only accelerated since, and as Jason Moore explains in *Capitalism and the Web of Life*, the appropriation of “uncapitalized nature as the pedestal of labor productivity” (2015, 17) is

central to the project of capitalism. Moore talks about appropriation and not merely exploitation to explain how unpaid work is channeled into the circuit of capital and how capitalism relies on just such appropriation of both nature and unpaid labor. This indicates the importance of understanding environmental destruction not merely as a consequence, but as an integral component of capitalism and neoliberal ideology.

Neoliberalism is a difficult concept to explain, and many scholars would also contend that it is difficult to define. While I agree that the term has become an academic buzzword which is sometimes considered meaningless, there are good definitions provided by theorists such as economic geographer David Harvey and political theorist Wendy Brown. The difficulty that scholars have in locating a comprehensive definition is perhaps expected, as neoliberalism is an intentional project that prefers to work behind the scenes, and which is effective at incorporating potential resistance into its existing structures. Harvey, who writes extensively on neoliberalism, defines neoliberalization as “a *utopian* project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism or as a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (2007, 26). Harvey’s definition is accurate and straightforward, but does not include the influence of neoliberalism on society and culture. In *The Twilight of Equality*, Lisa Duggan focuses on neoliberalism as a political ideology, and the essays in the collection *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Culture* (Huehls and Greenwald Smith 2017) show the influence of that ideology on culture, demonstrating how market thinking has invaded all aspects of life. Neoliberalism affects not only the political, but also the personal sphere, implicating individuals in previously collective matters. A defining feature of neoliberalism is that it appropriates political and cultural life while outwardly presenting economic matters as separate from the political and the cultural. As Duggan writes, this “rhetorical separation of the economic from the political and cultural arenas disguises the upwardly redistributing goals of neoliberalism—its concerted efforts to concentrate power and resources in the hands of tiny elites” (2003, xiv). In theory, neoliberal practices are supposed to trickle down wealth and provide wellbeing for everyone, fueled by a free, unregulated market that does not need state interference; in practice, state regulations protect those at the very top from the consequences of their errors and promote the “upward redistribution of resources and the reproduction of stark patterns of social inequality” (2003, xiv). This is veiled from the public and complemented by an increasing personal and moral load on individual members of the public, creating an atmosphere of economic difficulty and emotional stress.

Because the focus of neoliberalism is the accumulation of profit, it is unsurprising that the wellbeing of people, animals, and the environment consequently suffers. The project of neoliberalism, as Harvey (2007) explains, is for the ruling class to maintain power; it is a political agenda. For that to be executed without revolt, neoliberalism employs cultural means, including literature, to maintain the status quo. In the introduction to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith explain that neoliberalism's effect on literary fiction—both in terms of content and form—was gradual, and became especially prominent in the 1990s and 2000s (2017, 3). These decades were also a time when climate denialism was gaining traction, supported by right-wing politicians after the would-be deniers “concluded that [drastically lowering global emissions] can be done only by radically reordering our economic and political systems in ways antithetical to their ‘free-market’ belief system,” as Naomi Klein argues in *On Fire* (2019, 69). I believe these parallels are not a coincidence, but an indication of the increased influence of neoliberal ideology on the media and the cultural lives of citizens.

But even though neoliberalism is “routinely reviled as a shorthand for the ideas and practices that have produced growing economic insecurity and inequality” (Rodrik 2017), there is no sign of an effective resistance against it, and that is partially because of the sheer power that those in power possess. Jeffrey Williams writes that the neoliberal creed is that “social problems can be more effectively handled through private means” and that the super-rich are entitled to political power (2013). As will be demonstrated, this fallacy is reflected in neoliberal novels. Another reason for complacency regarding neoliberal ideology is the responsibility placed on the individual for their own wellbeing, commercial success, and even moral autonomy. Wendy Brown posits that neoliberal policies “produce citizens as individual entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’—their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions” (2006, 69). The wellbeing of humans and the environment of which they are a part is a concern of neoliberalism and capitalism only to the extent that life must be maintained so that it can be appropriated and/or exploited. Against the logic of wellbeing, the concept of improvement in capitalism is not used to better the lives of humans or the world we inhabit, but to better exploit resources and to boost the already extravagant financial situation of an increasingly tiny elite. Neoliberalism “calls upon subjects to see themselves as entrepreneurial actors in a competitive system” (Greenwald Smith 2015, 2), with a strong emphasis on individual responsibility. This reasoning is especially damaging when it comes to the issue of environmentalism for it incites guilt in individuals who could only in very special circumstances affect change. As the grassroots movement *Psychologists/*

Psychotherapists for Future states on their website, “continuous references to individual responsibility can jeopardize the successful handling of the climate crisis if the political and regulatory framework is not adapted accordingly.” In reality, and in climate fiction novels, there is little sign of a positive reworking of such frameworks. Furthermore, while there is ample evidence that neoliberalism is bad for the environment, there is also growing concern that it is bad for the psychological wellbeing of people. In fact, “negative consequences that neoliberalism can have for health flow in part from the fact that it promotes a sense of social disconnection, competition, and loneliness” (Becker et al. 2021, 960). Neoliberalism decreases access to public services and increases social inequality; such social factors have a detrimental effect on mental health and wellbeing.

Wellbeing is a combination of factors that create a good life for all involved. It concerns the health of human and non-human life, sentient and non-sentient beings, as well as the natural environment. In 2009, Johan Rockström et al. presented the idea of Planetary Boundaries (see Fig. 1): a “boundaries approach [which] focuses on the biophysical processes of the Earth System that determine the self-regulating capacity of the planet” (2009, 32). In 2017, Kate Raworth built on that concept in her book *Doughnut Economics*, putting forward an economic approach that does not sacrifice either planetary or human wellbeing. Inside the ring of the doughnut is “the space in which we can meet the needs of all within the means of the planet” (2018, 14). In the hole of the doughnut, we can find human deprivation, and outside the ring, planetary degradation (see Fig. 2). The image is simple but compelling; however, it is not an image of our current economic system, which, according to both Rockström and Raworth, has already exceeded many of the proposed boundaries.

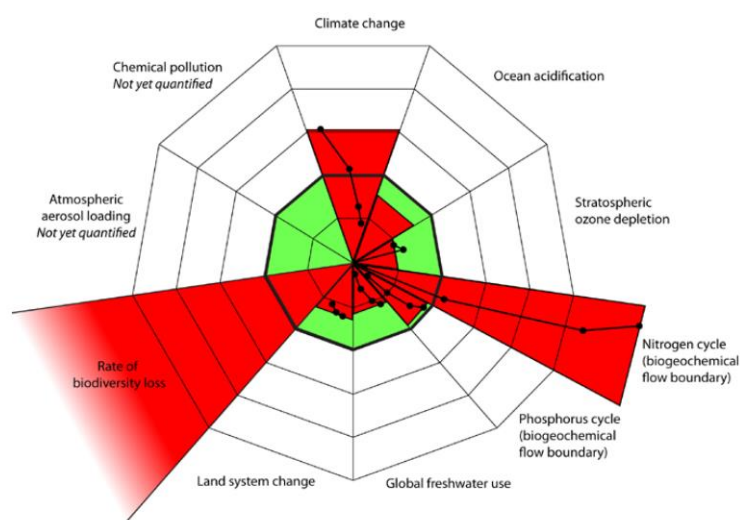


Figure 1: Planetary boundaries as envisioned by Rockström et al.

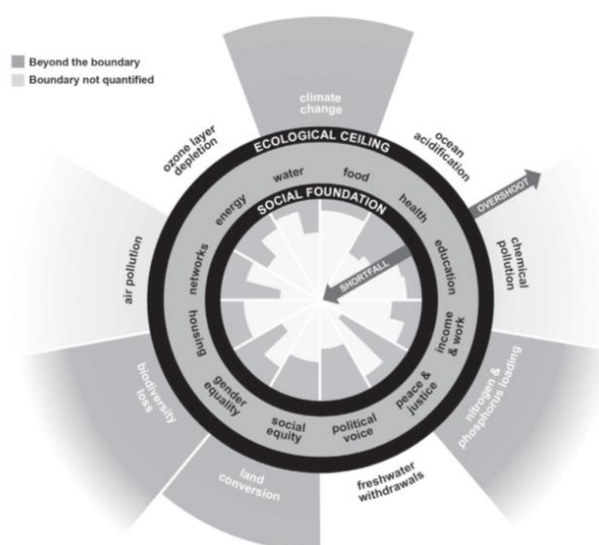


Figure 2: Transgressing both sides of the Doughnut's boundaries, from *Doughnut Economics* by Raworth.

Planetary wellbeing is incompatible with the *modus operandi* of neoliberalism; therefore, systemic change is needed. However, there is no consensus on how this can be achieved, and despite growing calls for change, especially by young activists, many believe that the current economic system cannot or should not be replaced. As Mark Fisher explains in his book on capitalist realism, there is a “widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (2009, 17). This lack of imagination is echoed in a now well-known quote, attributed to both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek; it seems indeed that a lack of imagination is what is at fault. Fisher argues that this is not due to apathy or cynicism, but something he calls “*reflexive impotence*” (2009, 24). This not only amounts to a perception that there is nothing to be done about the state of things, but also functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy. This impotence is also exhibited in climate fiction novels, which satirize the environmental crisis or reproduce the darkest post-apocalyptic scenarios with gusto, but cannot imagine a viable, sustainable future.

Neoliberal ideology, therefore, has mainly negative effects for the majority of the population, the environment, and planetary wellbeing in general. It permeates public and private life, and even organizes extra-economic activities, such as cultural endeavors, along the lines of market competition. Because of its influence on cultural life, one of the ways some of neoliberalism's effects on the human psyche and the environment can be meaningfully analyzed is through novels. The neoliberal novel, as Williams describes it,

“shifts from moral allegory to a resigned realism,” and “displays a world in which wealthy individuals dominate political power” (2013). The three novels considered in this article all fit that brief to an extent, with *Freedom* being the most obviously neoliberal. *Freedom* follows the Berglunds, Patty and Walter, and their children, Joey and Jessica, as well as their rockstar friend Richard, and eventually Lalitha, Walter’s assistant-turned-lover. Spanning from Patty and Walter’s college years to the death of their marriage and eventual reconciliation decades later, it treats the middle-class family in the style of the Great American Novel, as primarily dysfunctional and immersed in its private reality.

Freedom covers a range of topics, including love and marriage, American politics, and environmentalist concerns such as conservationism and overpopulation. Environmentalist topics are not treated head-on but form a partial backdrop for the narrative, serving to give Walter, a traditional liberal, his identity as an old-school environmentalist focusing on nature conservation and the issue of overpopulation. In *A Friend of the Earth*, a part of the narrative takes place in the future, where humans have failed to stop climate changes, which are causing extreme weather events and the extinction of many species. Another part of the narrative concerns events taking place in the late eighties and in the nineties, when climate activists battled to stop giant redwoods from being cut down. Activism and tree-sitting are also an important subject matter in *The Overstory*, a novel that in many ways breaches the human-plant divide, yet does not meaningfully engage with economic issues and the economic reasons that threaten the survival of the trees.

In an interview, Richard Powers, the author of *The Overstory*, explains that in his opinion, the awareness of human destruction of the environment is only now entering American and Western literary (non-science) fiction. As he points out, science fiction never struggled with one of the essential conflicts of capitalism, which he sees as “humans struggling to accommodate a nature hostile to the desires of capitalism and human-centric individualism” (2019). However, novelists are products of their society and subject to its ideology, which influences the narratives they create. Therefore, neoliberal ideological standpoints and individualist tendencies are present in *The Overstory*, as is exemplified with the lines quoted at the very beginning of this article. As Mark Bould (2021) identifies, the strength of *The Overstory* is in its treatment of non-human creatures, trees, and especially how they form connections not only with each other, but with other organisms in the forest. Dr. Patricia Westerford, one of the nine main human protagonists, is laughed out of academia for writing about the interconnectedness of trees, their communication strategies, and for thinking of “forests as enormous spreading, branching, underground super-trees” instead of as individual

organisms (2018, 218). They can also instill a sense of wellbeing in those who experience their proximity, as another character Mimi Ma does when she buries her nose in the ponderosa pines outside her office building (183). For Mimi, the connection is personal, intimate, and decidedly positive.

Bould writes that in *The Overstory*, trees are “sociable entities . . . beings so interwoven it defies sense to even think of them as separate individuals,” calling the system “cellulose socialism” (2021, 127). He does not elaborate on the potential correlation between socialism and critical plant studies, but the most obvious commonality is the focus on the formation of communities. In *The Overstory*, communities of plants are much more interconnected and successful than communities of humans. John Wiseman and Kathleen Brasher stress the importance of community wellbeing, writing that the “wellbeing of communities is . . . an essential precondition for the wellbeing of individuals” (2008, 355). This is at odds with the core neoliberal assumption that wellbeing starts with the individual and grows outwards; a communal view of wellbeing is also exemplified in *The Overstory*, but only as far as it applies to trees.

If the trees are the heroes of *The Overstory*, the loggers are the villains, the “[r]eapers with scythes” (2018, 271) who pursue the tree-sitting activists, pin them down, and cheer as police officers apply methods that can only be described as torture. The activists who protest and are arrested for wanting to protect trees are charged and found guilty of “violence against the public well-being” (2018, 470), even though, arguably, they merely have a different opinion on what public wellbeing is. In *A Friend of the Earth*, the forest service and the deputies use excessive force on the activist trying to stop the logging; there is a clear Us, the good activists who care about the planet, and Them, the bad state representatives or employees of logging corporations who do not share the environmentalists’ concerns. The protagonist, Tyrone Tierwater, once a suburban manager and now an environmentalist and activist, calls the deputies who come and arrest him and his group of activists an “elite force of five hundred paramilitary gun-loving whipcrack Marine Corps rejects” who “had never heard of Thoreau, Muir, Leopold or Abbey” (2001, 63). Tierwater’s frustration is understandable; however, his opinions are also elitist. In these two books, loggers, police officers, and other officials are conflated and presented as the enemy, when in fact they likely have little genuine power; they follow orders from above. I am not likely to advocate for compassion towards a figure of authority who uses excessive force; however, I equally find it misguided to feel moral or class superiority towards the working class, such as employed loggers, whose priority is the wellbeing of themselves and their families. They too are a product of neoliberal ideology, and there is nothing to be benefitted from being classist.

This is also visible in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*. In the novel, Watchman and Maidenhair are a part of a group of tree-sitting activists, who are trying to protect an old-growth giant redwood named Mimas. Shouting from the ground to their platform in the branches, the loggers ask the pair why they “hate people”; to the loggers, putting the wellbeing of trees above their ability to earn a living is misanthropic (2018, 288). Furthermore, their ingrained ideology is neoliberal: when Watchman replies “[w]e’re doing this *for* people!” one of the loggers says “[t]hese trees are going to die and fall over. They should be harvested while they’re ripe, not wasted” (288). This is not merely fiction, but the accurate representation of how logging companies in the US view redwoods; as a representative of the notorious logging company Pacific Lumber said in an article for *Los Angeles Times*, “old-growth forest is dying . . . having wood like that lay on the ground is a waste of a good resource” (Debare 1987). Powers understands these perceived contradictions and maintains them in the narrative.

The point of both fictional and real loggers recalls the writings of John Locke, one of the first apologists for capitalism, who developed an early theory about land use and the value of land that is not in human use. In the words of Meiksins Wood:

Locke’s point, which not coincidentally drips with colonialist contempt, is that unimproved land is waste, so that any man who takes it out of common ownership and appropriates it to himself—he who removes land from the common and encloses it—in order to improve it has given something to humanity, not taken it away. (2002, 134)

Seeing unfelled trees as waste, the loggers live in a reality different from that of the activists. They do not belong to the same community and do not have the same ideas about what constitutes wellbeing. Unfortunately, the gap between the loggers and the activist cannot be bridged while the loggers play the role of the othered oppressor, as is the case in these environmentalist novels. Wellbeing for all should, logically, include everyone. Environmentalist novels, however, are (unsurprisingly) biased towards the activists, and more often than not, they are preaching to the converted. They cover topics such as activism, conservationism, limits to growth, overpopulation, pollution, destruction of forests, and the extinction of species; however, none of the novels included in this article cover meaningful systemic change (other than societal collapse), nor do they touch upon the importance of human communities to promote wellbeing. That is not to say that Franzen, Powers, or Boyle do not have good intentions, if intentions can even be diagnosed, but that the issue of facing and tackling the environmental disaster is incredibly complex. The disillusionment that the activists feel at the end of *The Overstory* shows that solutions are difficult and change is slow.

In *Freedom*, a core environmental concern of the main character, Walter Berglund, is overpopulation. Once he realizes that his conservationist efforts will fall short, he starts working on a campaign to promote childlessness among young people. However, what was once to Walter a serious issue is later revealed to be the misanthropic concern of an embittered man. Walter is supposed to speak at a press conference held by the billionaire Vin Haven, who had promised him land for a conservation resort for the cerulean warbler. It is the preservation of this random species of bird around which the narrative of the novel revolves. Walter and Vin's intention is to put a positive spin on mountain top removal, a particularly damaging way of extracting coal, and explain why rewilding a territory after it has been stripped of coal is beneficial for the warbler. However, Walter, plagued by personal issues of an emotional nature and suffering from side effects of sleep medication, has a breakdown and declares humanity to be a cancer on the planet (Franzen 2011, 609). The press conference is a disaster, but Walter gains popularity among the environmentally minded youth. This gives momentum to his new anti-natalist project called Free Space. However, as Williams writes, "although Walter appears to be progressive, his reasoning follows much of the neoliberal creed" (2013). He puts his faith in the super rich, who "are not only entitled to political power but also make the best political choices." Even when Walter realizes that Haven has been dishonest, he does not condemn him, but rather plots to use Haven's money to promote his own overpopulation cause.

In a review of *Freedom*, Tony Tulathimutte locates one of the key problems with the main characters in *Freedom* to be tolerance: "tolerance as an excuse to avoid confrontation, tolerance as enablement" (2011, 8). He mainly discusses tolerance in interpersonal relationships, such as Walter's minimization of his wife Patty's depression, but there is also excessive tolerance, or *mere* tolerance, as Tulathimutte puts it, in Walter's judgement of mountain top removal. Walter is willing to allow the harmful extraction of coal to secure a safe zone for the cerulean warbler, and he believes that the coal executives might consent, not because they care about the bird, but because "coal companies had reason to fear that the warbler would soon be listed under the Endangered Species Act, with potentially deleterious effects on their freedom to cut down forests and blow-up mountains" (Franzen 2011, 263). This cynical view is exemplary of neoliberal ideology and driven by a sense that everything must be negotiated, as well as the idea that what is good for the market will eventually be good for the environment.

The only evil that Walter cannot tolerate is other people. He cannot imagine forming a community with them; throughout *Freedom*, there is a lack of focus on community wellbeing in general, and a lack of belief that a wellbeing-focused world is possible. I

argue that this is indicative of the influence of neoliberal ideology on the author, which is reflected in neoliberal climate fiction novels through defeatist and/or defeated characters and lost-cause narratives. On the other hand, Caren Irr writes that despite Franzen's somewhat negative reputation, one can also discover a "relatively coherent ethical and ecocritical stance subtending Franzen's narratives [which can] provide a starting point for something like a green politics, even while recognizing that an ethics is not identical to a politics" (2018). But, as Williams points out, "[i]t is not that Franzen advocates neoliberalism, and in fact he exposes some of its dubious values, but, adhering to the conventions of literary realism, he cannot imagine any other possibility" (2013). Literary realism, aiming to be truthful about reality, is subject to the consumptive force of neoliberal ideology: Franzen can therefore be described not only as a literary realist, but a capitalist realist, and the expression of capitalist realism in his novel is in line with my earlier assertions regarding the general sense of a lack of alternative to the current system.

The issue is not without complications but can at least be partially traced back to the general, yet flawed, understanding that people are inherently selfish and should act rationally—an idea that persists even after the abandonment of John Stuart Mill's *homo economicus* by most serious critics and authors in the humanities. As George Monbiot writes, "we have heard the story of our competitive, self-maximising nature so often, and it is told with such panache and persuasive power, that we have accepted it as an account of who we really are" (2017, 20). This, combined with a general pessimism regarding the seemingly indestructible nature of neoliberalism, does not paint a hopeful picture. However, the promise of neoliberal climate fiction is not in its potential to drive change, but in what it can tell us about the current state of things. It is important that in *A Friend of the Earth*, hope is only gleaned at the very end, after society as we know it has become a thing of the past, and the land is periodically battered either by floods or drought. As in many other climate fiction novels, the only way to stop the environmental collapse is to cause societal collapse. I would argue that this betrays an unconscious understanding that human society and the natural environment are not just interconnected, but one. It also shows that in climate fiction novels, human societies are as sick as the ravaged natural environments. Since it is apparent that global wellbeing is not the focus, and that the general sentiment in climate fiction novels is fatalistic, it is now more than ever important to return to the historical roots of capitalism and neoliberal ideology in order to understand why there is still reason for hope. Meiksins Wood concludes her book by emphasizing that "capitalism is not a natural and inevitable consequence of human nature" (2002, 168); therefore, an alternative should be possible. Taking a non-

deterministic view is the first step towards exploring different options for societal arrangement.

Schneider-Mayerson's argument revolves around how contemporary climate fiction fails to stir or include the political resolve needed for resistance to an environmentally-destructive economic system (2018). A reason for this is the social-political-economic structure in which climate fiction novels are produced. While climate fiction novels have the ability to reflect, portray, and satirize the economic reality and the threat it poses to our environment, they do not propose meaningful solutions nor incite action, at least not to the degree that was once expected. Analyzing climate fiction, one gets the impression that not only is pessimism preferred because it is easier: it is unfashionable, even gauche to earnestly propose solutions. Fisher's take on this "realist" tendency in neoliberalism is that it is "analogous to the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion" (2009, 10). While *The Overstory* manages to creatively include non-human characters in the narrative and bring trees as living, communicating creatures closer to the human reader, it still cannot reconcile the class distinctions between the human characters. *A Friend of the Earth* describes disruptive activist action mixed with insights into the future where such action has failed but relies on apocalyptic floods to wipe the slate clean. *Freedom*, the most patently neoliberal novel of the three, also most clearly shows a lack of faith in the potential for meaningful change. Wellbeing is not universal but reserved for those who can pay for it and who can build a fence around their private spaces. That is exactly what Walter does as the story concludes: he fences off a piece of private land as a bird preserve, with access granted only to a select group of people.

Despite the common belief to the contrary, I do not consider the natural and human worlds to be separate, and I agree with Daniel T. Spencer that this is because "human flourishing takes place within the broader context of the flourishing of the earth itself; hence environmental sustainability must form the context of any notions of human flourishing" (2015, 293). The struggle for planetary wellbeing should include humans, plants, animals, landscapes, etc. and provide wellbeing for all its components, as long as the balance is right. However, such an ecotopia is incompatible with the current economic system fueled by neoliberal ideology. Climate fiction novels do not have a specific ability to promote action or to change how the world works; that is their impotence. However, while novels like the ones discussed in this article might not be agents of radicalization, they do reflect our social, economic, and political reality. They provide a framework for understanding the emotional impacts of climate change and they might be able to tell us something new about neoliberalism and its influence on

people and the planet: there is potential in analyzing the stories they tell. Whether or not that can lead to a new way forward is up for debate, but complex problems such as the environmental disaster require complex solutions. To me, this means tackling the issue from as many angles as possible and using as many approaches as are available, one of which is literary criticism.

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