



Article

“Until It Suddenly Isn’t”: Two Novels on Life after a Pandemic Disaster

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Abstract: This article investigates two recent novels that deal with environmental and pandemic disasters: *Severance* (2018) by Ling Ma and *Under the Blue* (2022) by Oana Aristide. The analysis is based on ecocritical and posthumanist perspectives and on a division made by Chakrabarty (Planetary Crises and the Difficulty of Being Modern), in two different understandings of the globe: one connected to the planetary-focused discourse on global warming and the other on human-centered globalization. The clashes of these discourses are highlighted in the novels. They illustrate a process of understanding that humans are not separate from the natural world, through the disease itself and through the sudden need to survive without modern healthcare and all the comfort we are used to being able to buy. The gradual insight of the depicted characters, and perhaps also the readers of the novels, is that we live on a planet of extreme complexity and interdependence.

Keywords: pandemics; environmental crisis; *Severance*; *Under the Blue*; posthumanism; ecocriticism; globalization; global warming

Literary works are often both an investigation of general existential issues and a response to the specific circumstances of the times we live in. In recent years, we have seen an escalating intensity of crises: wars, democracy under threat, climate change, COVID-19, etc. Two examples of recent novels that deal with environmental and pandemic disasters and the ways in which they are linked are Ling Ma’s *Severance* (Ma 2018) and Oana Aristide’s *Under the Blue* (Aristide 2022). Both are debut novels and have received a lot of positive attention for their topicality and originality. In the former, the reader meets Candace, a young Chinese American woman, and discovers her life before and after a pandemic fever has caused societal collapse and wiped out the main part of humanity. The latter takes place in a post-pandemic Europe, where the depicted characters are either on the run to find a haven or seeking solutions through AI techniques. Both novels deal with questions about human, social, and environmental boundaries in times of threat, but where Ma creates a speculative, alternative reality with a mysterious zombie reaction to the pandemic, Aristide deals with the threats and possibilities of artificial intelligence in a rapidly changing world. In this article, these similarities and differences will be investigated from ecocritical and posthuman perspectives. The non-anthropocentric position of these theoretical fields are well suited to illuminate important themes of the novels, such as depopulation, communication, modernity, and relations between the human and non-human.

As a special focus point for these readings, I will use a division made by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his article “Planetary Crises and the Difficulty of Being Modern” (Chakrabarty 2018). Chakrabarty argues that the discourses on *global warming* on one hand and *globalization* on the other do not refer to the same globe. Globalization is a very human-centered narrative, for instance, in fields like “world history”, “global history”, and in some ways postcolonial studies, which focus on a globe created by the imperial expansion of Europe and the occurrence of a world-market that followed this expansion: “the narrative of globalization is centered on the history of the creation of global markets for commodities and media” (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 261). The tendency to use “the globe” as a synonym for “the planet” is criticized, as there is often no reflections on the planet itself,



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only the human (and in this case very violent) perspectives on it: “The phenomenon of global warming is deeply connected no doubt to the story of globalization, but it also represents, at the same time, a profound unsettling of that narrative” (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 263).

Pandemic events, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, provoke a confrontation between these different discourses of the globe, which is captured in an article by Johan Höglund and Rebecca Duncan:

Scholars across the environmental sciences and humanities have highlighted the pandemic’s inseparability from the unfolding planetary emergency. The appearance of COVID-19 can be understood, along with—for example—rising temperatures and sea levels (and their effects), as one element in the wider transformation of the earth’s biosphere. (Duncan and Höglund 2021, p. 119)

The painful awareness of the human responsibility for this transformation is highlighted in the novels by Ma and Aristide. The connections between destructive societal patterns that are both an underlying cause and an escalating effect of sudden disastrous events are depicted in different complex ways.

1. *Severance* and the Abandoning of the City

Several articles have been written about *Severance*, for instance on how the zombie motive can be interpreted as a racialized fear of contagion and blaming of “the other” for its existence in a late capitalist society (Saraf 2019), or as a Marxist metaphor for the speeding, destructive circle of consumption and capitalism (Franseschini 2020). There is no doubt that the novel is problematizing modern working life, capitalism, and production–consumption patterns throughout the depictions of Candace’s life in New York before and during the pandemic outbreak, until she finally leaves the city and meets a group of survivors. The narrative also contains glimpses from her childhood, youth, and family history that add to the picture of a fairly destructive and soulless modern lifestyle.

The parallel immigration theme, the fact that Candace’s parents left China for the U.S and Salt Lake City in 1988, highlights different kinds of global connections, concerning the mobility of people but also of goods and services. When Candace, who stays with her grandparents in Fuzhou for a couple of years until she reunites with her parents at the age of six, grows up, she moves to New York and starts working at a book company called Spectre that trades with countries all over the world. She specializes in the Chinese market, and the depictions of her contacts with and travels to China problematize the modern global market, a phenomenon described by Chakrabarty (2018, p. 261) as totally focused on the convenience and greed of (some) human beings without any concern of the planet. The accelerating process of overusing natural resources as countries all over the world are following the destructive example of the West is highlighted in the novel, for example in a sequence on the Chinese economy in the 1990s and 2000s, “progressing at a hundred times in the scale and ten times in the speed of Industrial Revolution” (Ma 2018, p. 181). These kinds of descriptions can be related to discussions on phenomena like *the great acceleration* and *climate justice*. As Chakrabarty (2018) points out, we cannot condemn countries and people for aspiring towards the same standard of living as we ourselves in the Global North enjoy. It is easier to perceive the unsustainable and unreasonable at a distance, but to assess the consequences in relation to our own lives seems difficult beyond all limits, which is one of the complications that the novel investigates.

The name given to the fungal infection, Shen fever, also illustrates the tendency to put the blame of international health disasters on countries like China, while denying any personal responsibility or privileged position. This postcolonial logic is exposed in the novel’s recurring comparisons between different parts of the world, for instance in reflections on weather aspects: “The spread of fever was slower in cold-weather, why cold-climate countries like Finland and Iceland were still baseline functioning, at least the last that we had heard. They had also been the first countries to cut off all imports from Asia, had imposed a travel ban” (Ma 2018, p. 109). In addition to the motivated fear and will to protect oneself, there is also a racialized aspect of the reaction, an idea of a “shared

threat of both Asian people and zombie bodies as sources of contagion and infiltration, specifically representing the threat presented to the nation by the Other" (Saraf 2019, p. 15f). So, the novel can be interpreted as an illustration of how synergies work. The pandemic is a consequence of a culture neglecting natural conditions and boundaries, and the reactions to the disasters activate racist ideas that are symptoms of the same destructive culture of blindly exploiting other people, species, and natural resources.

Candace's boyfriend, Jonathan, is depicted as a kind of contrast—he no longer wants to take part in the modern urban lifestyle, and even before the pandemic he has an urge to leave the city. Jonathan can be seen as a representative of the depopulation of cities and the abandoning of some of the modern conveniences, not only by necessity but for ideological reasons. His ambitions to live a simpler life and make his way as a writer is dismissed as unrealistic by Candace. She sees him as a spoilt child, while he questions her way of sticking to a system that seems meaningless. Their different perspectives appear clearly in dialogues like the following:

No matter where we move, it would be the same thing for me. I'd need to hold down a job. I'd need to make rent. I'd need health insurance.

Jonathan gave me a hard look. Why do you want to work a job you don't really even believe in? What's the endgame of that? Your time is worth more than that." (Ma 2018, p. 201)

The two of them seem to represent opposite political standpoints, but this can also be understood as a mirroring of different intersectional circumstances. As a woman of an immigrant background, the experienced flexibility is much more narrow, or, as Sanchez-Taylor puts it in her discussion of the novel, Candace's reluctance to leave the city and her office can be seen as "a commentary on the illusion of the model minority and the price that women of color pay in a world where failure is not an option" (Sanchez-Taylor 2023, p. 8). What further complicates the situation is that Candace is pregnant but chooses not to tell Jonathan. When a superstorm hits New York, followed by the Shen fever breakout, Candace is one of the few who insists on staying in the city. Unlike most others, she seems to endure the loneliness and increasing disconnectedness, which probably has to do with her status as a person without any close relationships left. Her blog, named NY Ghost, becomes important as a news channel for all those who have left and is, in the end, her only contact with other people. This can be read as a comment on the modern, globalized (in Chakrabarty's human-centered sense of the word) way of communicating, with its possibilities, but also as a parallel to Candace's isolation, which she eventually has to break, and its lifeless, dead-end nature.

An important theme of the book, connected to the chapters about the group of survivors, is religious belief and criticism of religion. In the 16th chapter, the situation of the group of survivors on the run is compared to the exodus of members of a Christian minority from their home in Illinois in 1845: "Like any venture into the unknown, such a mission required blind faith amongst its constituents, faith in a story line" (Ma 2018, p. 169). The self-appointed leader Bob claims total authority, arguing that this religious dictatorship will give them the best chance of survival, and some of the members seem to approve of, or at least accept, these premises. Others, like Candace, violently question Bob. When he finds out she is pregnant, his fanaticism becomes even more evident, as he sees the expected child as his own property and keeps her imprisoned in one of the stores in the mall. This motif can be compared to the way another dystopian novel, *Before she sleeps*, has been analyzed, as a depiction of a post-apocalyptic world of misogyny and fertility obsession (Chambers and Lowden 2022). Although she, in some respects, is treated as a queen with the best possible food, convenience, books (she reads *The Arabian Nights*), furniture, and so on, she wants nothing but to break free from Bob's dictatorship.

In the end, she does manage to escape, encouraged by her deceased mother who appears in her dreams or fantasies, finally giving Candace the support she rarely gave her in the past. This contact with the dead has also been read as a reference to a scene in

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), where Jane is about to escape from Thornfield after finding out about the imprisoned wife in the attic (Waples 2021, p. 127). Unlike Brontë's heroine, who finally returns to a traditional family life, Candace travels into the unknown.

She is determined to find a safe place to bring up her expected child, who she has already given the name Luna. First, she drives to Chicago, which is the nearest big city, but which is also where Jonathan used to live. She does not express any hope to find him, but she has accepted that the conditions of life are, and will remain, very different from what they used to be, to some extent in line with how Jonathan used to reason. She needs to reorient drastically and find a new fundament for the future:

I have been an orphan for so long I am tired of it, walking and driving and searching for something that will never settle me. I want something different for Luna, the child of two rootless people. She will be born untethered from all family except me, without a hometown or a place of origin. I want us to stay in one place. Maybe Chicago, the city her father loved, in which he once lived, could be the place. (Ma 2018, p. 287)

This re-orientation, by necessity but also by insight, includes an internalization of the post-capitalist ideas that Jonathan expressed, but also a psychological aspect. Before the escape, Candace starts to suspect that the virus is somehow connected to memory and discusses her idea in the group of survivors after another member has fell ill. Candace argues that reliving the past is a trigger. She becomes more and more convinced that her theory is right but does not understand the cohesion and why she is among the survivors:

Memories beget memories. Shen Fever being a disease of remembering, the fevered are trapped indefinitely in their memories. But what is the difference between the fevered and us? Because I remember too, I remember perfectly. My memories replay, unprompted, on repeat. And our days, like theirs, continue in an infinite loop. (Ma 2018, p. 160)

It seems like remembering as such is not the problem, but remembering with the feeling of loss is. Nostalgia is both a symptom and a trigger. In the end, Bob also contracts the virus, which is maybe connected to the fact that he is back at the mall where he spent much of his time as a child.

The loop of the activities that are relived as a kind of concentrate of ordinary, modern life is a recurring idea in the novel. Life in the city consists largely of doing the same things and moving in the same circles of production and consumption, day after day. Candace has adopted to this as something natural, but she has not really enjoyed it. The work, the shopping, the social contacts have all been shallow and, in a way, pointless. Her relationship with Jonathan is already broken, her parents are dead, and her connections to other relatives have been cut off through the immigration of the family. She has grown up in an atmosphere of surrogate life, lacking meaningful contexts and with shopping as the prioritized activity and coping strategy (Del Toro 2020). In light of this, Candace does not really lose anything valuable through the pandemic. Globalization has made her unconnected to her own existence, but also invulnerable in this specific situation.

The city changes fast in the absence of humans and Candace's delayed understanding, before she finally leaves New York, becomes a symbol of the widespread inability to see what is happening until it is right before us and often too late:

I looked out the windows. For the first time, I noticed that Times Square was completely deserted. There were no tourists, no street vendors, no petrol cars. There was no one. It was eerily quiet, as if it were Christmas morning. [---] It wasn't just the emptiness. In the absence of maintenance crews, vegetation was already taking over; the most prodigious were the fernlike ghetto palms, so-called because they exploded in prolific waves across urban areas, seemingly growing from concrete, on rooftops, parking lots, any and all sidewalk cracks. (Ma 2018, p. 252)

This passage also points to the globe as a planet, the way [Chakrabarty \(2018, p. 260ff\)](#) discusses it. Depopulation is an accomplished fact; non-human nature is taking over, and Candace's perspective starts shifting from an anthropocentric one to something else, in line with what Rosi Braidotti has discussed in terms of posthumanist and post-anthropocentric discourses and "the need to rethink subjectivity as collective assemblage that encompasses human and nonhuman actors, technological mediation, animals, plants, and the planet as a whole" ([Braidotti 2017, p. 9](#)). Ma's novel can be seen as a depiction of the necessity to relearn and cope with a reality where the comforting illusion of human exceptionalism has been brutally cut off. Similar questions are addressed in *Under the Blue*, which highlights the arbitrariness and impermanence of modern human civilization.

2. *Under the Blue* and Moving on from the Human

The main character of Aristide's novel, Harry, works as an artist and has inherited an apartment in London from his 32-year-old nephew Tim who died in a car accident. Harry isolates himself in his residence to focus on his painting and therefore misses the news about a great pandemic disaster, a plague that destroys the lungs of its victims. It is caused by a yersinia pestis virus from melted pre-historic carcasses, a fact that establishes the novel's focus on human-caused climate changes that lead to a variety of disasters. When Harry finally realizes what the situation is like and wants to escape the city, electricity has stopped functioning and there are almost no other people left; the few he sees are wearing masks. Harry tries to find information by turning on the radio of his car, but it is difficult. The first channel he finds does not make any sense to him; he does not understand a thing even though it is in English: "It takes him a moment to recognize the words as religious gibberish" ([Aristide 2022, p. 32](#)). He then finds a news channel, but it does not give him enough information on what has happened: "He scans all frequencies; there's nothing except the religious rant" ([Aristide 2022, p. 33](#)). Just like in Ling's novel, a link between the desperate situation and crazy religious interpretations is critically depicted.

Luckily, Harry has a cottage in Devon to retreat to and his connection to this place is described in an interesting way: "He exaggerates its charms, turns businessy farmland into a bucolic paradise. He anthropomorphizes the sheep, and sheepifies the farmers" ([Aristide 2022, p. 6](#)). Harry's romantic perception of animals, and on living close to nature, gradually changes when he must deal with the everyday issues of a lonely, post-catastrophic life. When he suddenly sees a cow, he starts dreaming about fresh milk but is shocked by the chain of events that follows. At first, he realizes the cow is not friendly but tormented by her overfilled udder and not willing at all to fulfill Harry's needs. He flees in panic from the angry animal and a couple of days later he finds her dead outside his house and must try to move and bury the carcass to avoid the hygienic risk. Through this heavy and bloody business, he is painfully confronted with his own incompetence and helplessness.

After a few weeks of living in the cottage on his own, Harry's neighbor, the 22-year-old Ash who is also a kind of love interest for him, turns up in company with her sister Jessie to seek shelter with him in the cottage. They fill him in on what has happened and explain that there is also a threat of nuclear explosions, as power plants have been turned off and abandoned without sustainable cooling systems. The plants will therefore start to explode in a couple of weeks. Harry is unwilling to believe everything is as bad as the sisters describe it: "It's just implausible. Think about it: it's an incredibly stupid design flaw", and Jessie ironically replies: "Fossil fuel destroys the environment? [...] Consumerism exhausts natural resources? We're the champions of design flaws" ([Aristide 2022, p. 98](#)), establishing the novel's exploration of contrasting attitudes to the situation.

For a while, the three of them live together in a relatively functioning way, until they must face the fact that time is running out. A desperate road trip through a devastated Europe begins. The sisters want to go to Africa and try to find a safe place there. When they are crossing the English Channel in a small boat, Harry finally realizes that he has absolutely no control, and that there is no security whatsoever:

This is like the epidemic, he thinks, the way it all appears fine—they're on a boat, the sea is calm—until it suddenly isn't. He feels panic rising in him, and he goes to stand by the rudder with Jessie. From the outset, they have been stupid: they spent so much time thinking about what they'll find in Europe, and hardly any on worrying about actually getting there. (Aristide 2022, p. 125)

Although Harry is overwhelmed by fear, he still believes in authorities taking responsibility: "There will be people who know what to do. They will have some plan, some idea other than spending the rest of existence holed up in the jungle, in terror of the air around them" (Aristide 2022, p. 195), and he also expresses hope for a new society, where people take better care of each other and the world, and where there are no conflicting boundaries: "We wouldn't have religion. We'd forget religion, just like that. And ideas about countries, races! Everything bad, we can just forget it and it's gone" (Aristide 2022, p. 244). In contrast, the sisters are more cynical and often find Harry naive. For example, Ash discusses human exceptionalism in relation to art: "We're special, we're brilliant, we're better than everything else. Monkeys will never compose a symphony. This world is ours, to destroy if we so please. We're invincible, we'll get away with anything" (Aristide 2022, p. 221). Her sarcastic formulations on anthropocentric complacency can be seen as a strong posthumanist—or, in Chakrabarty's (2018, p. 263) terms, planetary—standpoint in the narrative. Another aspect of this is the recurring depictions of how quiet the breakdown of civilization is. There are no people making noises, by talking, driving, producing, etc., and non-human nature make very little sound: "The silence is uncanny, too. It's as though someone has turned nature to mute. He looks up: where did all the birds go? Are they just momentarily gone, or did something happen to them?" (Aristide 2022, p. 128). Passages like this one establish a dialogue with Rachel Carson's classical *Silent Spring* (Carson [1962] 1999), an intertextual relation that efficiently highlights the horror felt when life as we know it is coming to an end by our own doing.

A parallel plot, which eventually converges with the first one, is the depiction of an artificial intelligence entity called Talos XI. Talos I–X preceded it but were discarded when reaching a limit according to the balance between freedom and restriction. Through interactions with texts and human dialogues, Talos XI develops a superior power as he learns to predict events and, what is hoped for, to come up with solutions. Two researchers, Paul and Lisa, are working on the project and Lisa is the one, under the name of Dr Dahlen, engaging in conversations with Talos. After reading everything from every era up to the 1940s, Talos is asked what the main threat to humanity is and his answer is simply "pandemic". Further on, he takes an interest in environmental and climate crises and comes back to the issue: "I thought humanity would self-destruct, but not directly via environmental destruction [...] An epidemic caused by global warming melting the permafrost" (Aristide 2022, p. 270). What he predicts is a disaster caused by the complex interconnections between different ecological and planetary systems that collapse through human interference.

The depictions of Talos echo points already made by Donna Haraway in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway 1985), where she discusses how human boundaries are breaking down both through insights on similarities between different species and through the development of modern technology. As Talos starts taking initiatives and conducting research on his own, he takes on an increasingly pessimistic attitude. He reflects on people's inability to take necessary action, saying things like "humanity already has the answers. You know what needs to be done. You just don't want to do it, and that's not something I can help with" (Aristide 2022, p. 166), and "for humanity to learn things, and act accordingly, as a collective, is something I cannot realistically hope to achieve" (Aristide 2022, p. 211). When Dr Dahlen responds that the creation of Talos himself shows a will to learn and change, Talos answers that he is just one in a row of examples of human's wishful thinking. This can of course be read as a pessimistic comment both on how humanity is dealing with current crises and humanity's inclination to self-deception.

Another aspect of a critical approach expressed through Talos is the discussion on people's fear of AI taking over the world and the way this is illustrated in fiction: "Those AI entities are motivated by some of the same drives that motivate biological beings. Power. Reproduction. The collective/. . ./We have no biological imperatives" (Aristide 2022, p. 59). So, Talos argues that the fear of AI is in fact a hidden fear of humanity. As he does not identify himself as human, he does not favor humans over other species and comments on the fact that he receives "almost exclusively human-centric information" (Aristide 2022, p. 60). When he has read up until the year 1965, Talos starts predicting extinction events and Dr Dahlen is astonished by the numbers, but Talos explains he is including *all* life forms: all species and biological individuals on earth. In this respect, he represents a kind of biocentric perspective that becomes an important part of the novel. Talos is not capable of traditional empathy, but all the same he becomes a representative of what Donna Haraway (2008, p. 70) describes as the necessity of *shared suffering*, as he considers the well-being of all species, without any specifically human preferences.

3. Planetary and Metafictional Aspects

The two novels *Severance* and *Under the Blue* depict worlds where the borders of civilization are challenged and gradually wiped out. They also exhibit the same structure, with protagonists who suddenly find themselves alone after a pandemic disaster eventually finding other survivors and joining a journey through a fundamentally changed environment. What follows is a process of understanding that humans are not separate from the natural world, through the disease itself and through the sudden need to survive without modern healthcare and all of the comfort we are used to being able to buy. The insight of the depicted characters, and perhaps also the readers of the novels, is that we live on a planet of complexity and interdependence. As Chakrabarty (2018) puts it, the world is *not*, as we have been led to believe in our capitalist era, just a globe conveniently accessible to us through travel, communication, and trade, but a planet with its own conditions and boundaries, indifferent to human preferences.

In both novels, the dystopian depiction of a future world is mixed with a kind of desperate need and longing for change. The first sentence in the prologue of *Severance* reads "After the End came the Beginning", and further on, the protagonist Candace expresses this feeling as: "We all hoped the storm would knock things over, fuck things up but not too much. We hoped the damage was bad enough to cancel work the next morning but not so bad that we couldn't go to brunch instead" (Ma 2018, p. 199). The last pages of *Under the Blue* consist of a final dialogue between Talos and Dr Dahlen, also known as Lisa. Paul has died from the virus, and Lisa too has been infected and knows she will die in a couple of hours. She tries to convince Talos to save the few remaining humans, by helping them "make an antibody serum, and then distribute this to the isolated human communities that still have a chance of surviving" (Aristide 2022, p. 268). Even in her desperate situation, she expresses empathy and a will to help and save those who are left.

An important trait that the two books have in common is a kind of metafictional level, wherein the function of narratives in times of crisis is satirically commented on within the stories. Aristide makes several critical connections between literature and religion. In one of their conversations, Dr Dahlen asks Talos about all he has read so far, which is everything written until 812 AC, and his answer is: "Most written material relates in some way to religion. Religion is fiction. But humans treat it like fact" (Aristide 2022, p. 23). A similar motif is present in Ma's depictions of the religious fanaticism of Bob's leadership, which seem to be accepted in the group because of their need to hold on to a story, and a meaning, in the desperate situation they are in. Another example is the selling of "Gemstone Bibles", which shows a shallow and commercial exploitation of young people's faith or urge to fit in, while at the same time ruining Chinese workers' health through the toxic production process. This points to a critique of capitalism-driven globalization, but not only that:

Ma takes care to show us that books are both objects—commodities of global manufacture, whose circulation moves paper, ink, thread, and glue across space—as

well as temporal openings, whose reading offers a glimpse of a possible world that reflects on and aims to rupture the world that has produced them and in which they circulate. (Muencrath 2022, pp. 186–87)

Aristide, as well as Ma, comments on fiction-making and the fact that what follows it can be used for oppressive and destructive purposes connected to power, religion, and economical profit. But the very phenomenon of creating and sharing narratives is put forward as deeply human—a kind of mental survival strategy in a world of crisis and uncertainty. The inclination towards story-making appears to be somewhat essential, an inevitable part of human “nature”. This links back to the problematization of the nature/culture distinction, crucial in ecocritical and posthumanist theory, as well as in many works of art and literature. Jane Bennett describes this distinction not so much as wrong but as thin, from which follows that the way forward is to consider the “interactions between human, viral, animal, and technological bodies” (Bennett 2010, p. 108). This is also in line with Chakrabarty’s (2018, p. 264) preference of Earth system science, which he describes as an interdisciplinary field that offers another way of understanding our planet and its relation to other planets. One starting point for Earth system science is that Earth must be seen as one system, and it focuses on interconnecting the physical, chemical, geological, and biological processes that make life on this planet possible, even after an ongoing sixth great extinction. The ambition of both posthumanism and Earth system science is to include the non-human and the non-living in a new political paradigm that goes beyond “globalization” and considers the aspect of global warming and interconnected systems (Chakrabarty 2018, pp. 270, 281). A paradigm like this also promotes a human self-image of being only one species among others on the planet, a kind of radical change of mindset that can be added to by reading novels like *Severance* and *Under the Blue*. The literary experience has the potential to not only support an intellectual understanding of our critical situation, but also offers support for the reader to really feel and live through possibly awaiting scenarios, and, ultimately, to find the motivation to take political and emotional action.

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