Review Essay

It's the End of the World and We Know It

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Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-capitalist World.
By Jonathan Crary. London: Verso, 2022. 134 pp. Cited as *SE*.

Saving Time: Discovering a Life beyond the Clock. By Jenny Odell.
New York: Random House, 2023. xxx + 364 pp. Cited as *ST*.

Climate Change, Interrupted: Representation and the Remaking of Time.
By Barbara Leckie. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022.
xvii + 253 pp. Cited as *CC*.

The other day I was in the bleachers at a University of Mississippi base-ball game on a beautiful sunny weekend afternoon. In front of me sat two women in their sixties, side by side, who did not get off their phones for the entire game. I don't think they even glanced up. Hours of scrolling—social media, restaurant websites, even maps. (I have a strict no-phones policy at public events, so I was trying to avoid looking, but the glowing screens were right in my line of sight and I am also a dis-tractible human citizen of the twenty-first century.) At one point there was a collision at first base, followed by a questionable call, followed by a review. The call went against us, at which point Phone Woman on the left yelled out—while still staring at her tiny screen—some boilerplate "Screw the ump/You're blind!" rhetoric. I have no idea how she even knew what was happening on the field, since as far as I could tell she never looked up for a second.

I was in the middle of reading and thinking about the three books for this review when this rather unremarkable incident occurred, and I couldn't help but see it through the eyes of the three authors. For

Jonathan Crary, whose magisterial screed *Scorched Earth* builds on the argument of his earlier magisterial screed *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013), the women's single-minded focus on their phones is a symptom of a generalized "tech literacy" that is a "euphemism for shopping, gaming, binge watching and other monetized and addictive behaviors" that fuel and are fueled by the "new techno-colonization" of the "internet complex" (*SE*, 19). For Jenny Odell, author of the bestseller *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019) and now *Saving Time*, the women's failure to attend to the field and appreciate the slow rhythms of a ball game, the gorgeous sunny day, and each other's company was a missed opportunity to step outside the commodified grid of "Western human clock" time (*ST*, 135). Barbara Leckie, whose *Climate Change, Interrupted* takes a more traditionally scholarly approach to the history of Western temporalities, would argue that mindless phone use is one of the myriad ways we are diverted from the full scope and urgency of the climate crisis: "In our digital age, interruptions often are aligned with the distractions that prevent sustained thinking" (*CC*, 178–79).

All three books aim to diagnose—and to a greater or lesser extent remedy—what we have come to understand as our current terrible predicament. The earth is on fire, our economies are on life support, democracy is hanging by a thread, and yet denizens of the global North are sleepwalking toward disaster, stupefied and seemingly incapable of concerted action. The symptoms are irrefutable, but the diagnosis and treatment differ depending on what part of the body politic is placed inside the scanner. All three authors are deeply concerned by the climate crisis and other threats to continued human and other-than-human flourishing on planet Earth, and taken together their treatises complement and buttress one another. Yet their presumed audiences—ranging from educated lay readers for Odell to academics for Leckie to somewhere in between for Crary—and their presumed generational differences shape both their descriptions of our current crisis and their prescriptions for the future.

For Crary, the internet itself—all of it—is both a symptom and a cause of the death throes of the neoliberal world order. He wastes no time getting to the heart of his argument: "If there is to be a livable and shared future on our planet, it will be a future offline, uncoupled from the world-destroying systems and operations of 24/7 capitalism. In

whatever endures of the world, the grid, as we live within it today, will have become a fractured and peripheral part of the ruins on which new communities and interhuman projects may possibly arise" (*SE*, 1). In case you missed the words *offline* and *grid* in those opening sentences, Crary lays out his thesis even more starkly on the next page: "The internet complex is the implacable engine of addiction, loneliness, false hopes, cruelty, psychosis, indebtedness, squandered life, the corrosion of memory, and social disintegration. All of its touted benefits are rendered irrelevant or secondary by its injurious and sociocidal impacts" (*SE*, 2). Obviously, the extent to which readers are already on board with this argument will determine whether they are inclined to continue reading; Crary has no interest in persuasion. If you disagree with his thesis and you maybe kind of like X (formerly Twitter) or Instagram, then you are clearly "one of those who benefit from the perpetuation of the way things are, who thrive on the uninterrupted functioning of a capitalist world . . . anyone with a professional, financial, or narcissistic stake in the ascendancy and expansion of the internet complex" (*SE*, 3). Ouch.

If, on the other hand, you are like me and eat up this kind of fulmination with a spoon, then you are in for a real treat, because it doesn't let up for the next 124 pages. The book is divided into three untitled sections whose unifying themes the reader is left to infer. (I hereby present my own inference.) The first section lays out the problem as Crary sees it, tracing the intertwined histories of neoliberalism and the growth of the internet in the second half of the twentieth century. The second section is loosely organized around environmental concerns and what Crary sees as the West's problematic worship of science, and the third focuses on (to borrow an earlier phrase from Crary [1990] himself) "techniques of the observer," examining how online life undermines the somatic bases of human relationships and community: vision, face-to-face encounter, voice, and touch.

Crary's story begins in the 1990s, when the transformation of the internet from a military and research tool into the ubiquitous arbiter of quotidian life began apace. The shift occurred simultaneously with, and was a crucial part of, a "massive reorganization of capital flows," the "widespread introduction of informal, flexible, and decentralized forms of labor" (*SE*, 9), and the burst of "end-of-history" enthusiasm following

the breakup of the Soviet empire. As Crary notes, the result was a "phase of naïve idealism" in which "the internet complex was promoted as inherently democratic, decentralizing, and antihierarchical" (*SE*, 9). This illusory period was short-lived: "By the mid-1990s, the destabilization of work, intensifying economic inequality, dismantling of public services, structural creation of indebtedness, and many other factors required new ways of maintaining political docility. Limitless digital diversions were a deterrent to the rise of anti-systemic mass movements" (*SE*, 10). Thus several tendencies coincided and reinforced each other: the hollowing out of public infrastructures and governmental aid; the tranquilization of political subjects through addictive online distraction; the creation of new radically individualistic subjectivities; and the entrenchment of the fantasy that the internet is "something immutable installed onto the planet" (*SE*, 7).

The navel of the argument to which Crary repeatedly returns is the purportedly mistaken idea that the internet complex can be disentangled from our current economic system: "The notion that the internet could function independently of the catastrophic operations of global capitalism is one of the stupefying delusions of the moment" (*SE*, 5). This pitiless thesis is undoubtedly the aspect of Crary's argument that will lose the most readers; even fellow left-leaning firebrand intellectuals and Trotskyites *manqués* who agree with him about everything else might balk at the notion of not taking the internet with us into our brave new socialist future. Indeed, a review of the book in *Jacobin* complains that "the tools provided through the internet are not inherently profit-seeking or fatalistic, and Crary's stubborn dedication to this thesis limits possibilities rather than expanding them" (Pitre 2022).

I am more sympathetic to Crary's argument, but I do think that it needs to be disaggregated into two separate questions (something he does not explicitly do) for its full force to be felt: (*a*) *Could* we figure out a way to keep the internet as part of an "eco-socialist" or "no-growth postcapitalist" future (*SE*, 4)? (*b*) Would we *want* to? It takes the entire book for Crary to demonstrate that the answer to both questions is no. Toward the end of the first section he begins to lay out the case against the long-term environmental sustainability of the internet. Contrary to our mass delusion that storing all our data in "the cloud" is somehow greener and more environmentally responsible than all that paper we used to use,

digital technologies are voracious consumers of minerals and rare metals. These nonrenewable resources are ripped violently from the earth, causing "irremediable harm to land, water, and human lives," while most American "smartphone owners, social media users and Netflix addicts" (*SE*, 31) remain oblivious to the environmental costs of their digital dependencies. Furthermore, as Crary notes, the internet complex "struggles to conceal its fatal dependence on the rapidly deteriorating built world of industrial capitalism" (*SE*, 63). Our planet cannot indefinitely support the infrastructure necessary to sustain our shiny new digital world.

The answer to the second question—would we even want the internet as part of a postcapitalist future?—is more diffuse. Crary's answer boils down to a claim that the internet complex produces undesirable subjects "incapable of imagining goals or outcomes other than private, individual ones" (*SE*, 14). By now we are all familiar with warnings that social media, smartphones, and other digital technologies are literally (and deliberately) addictive and that the internet disseminates misinformation and fosters interpersonal aggressivity. Airing such anxieties has become mainstream. As Crary notes, the internet complex even indulges a certain amount of repressive desublimation in the form of self-help to assist us in overcoming our digital addictions and reclaiming our ability to focus (all couched, of course, in terms of competitive individualism) (*SE*, 83–84).

But Crary's argument runs deeper. The internet also creates—and here is where he slips into his most Foucauldian mode—subjects uninterested in, and unequal to, revolution: "As long as one panics at the idea of sharing and cooperating with others as a way of life, one is incapable of revolt and remains dependent on existing institutions" (*SE*, 14). He draws a bleak picture—with which it is hard to quibble—of a culture of zombies who "may abstractly deplore the millions of lives and species rendered disposable by capitalism or the devastation of ecosystems on which we depend" but still cling "to disembodied routines and to the illusion that the internet complex is somehow not a primary agent of this catastrophe" (*SE*, 126).

Crary's description, in the third section, of the mechanisms by which this zombification is effected is the most persuasive and exciting part of the book. It is here that he is at his *least* Foucauldian—in his encomiums

to a life lived offline, in the presence of other creatures, in the natural world. He begins with an analysis of biometrics, eye tracking, and other "attention gathering" techniques. For Crary, the disturbing nature of such technologies has "less to do with surveillance and privacy than with the devaluation and routinization of vision" (*SE*, 99). Vision is central to a Buberian ethics of face-to-face encounter, and screen time not only bypasses the crucial tactile aspects of such encounters but also coarsens and dulls our ability to see the more muted qualities of the natural world. In a fascinating excursus on dyes and other artificial pigments, Crary reminds us that "the proliferation of manufactured color is part of a larger relocation of sensory experience into the needs and values of a capitalist economy" (*SE*, 107). (This section also contains the most unintentionally hilarious sentence I've read in academic criticism in a good long time: "Many overlook the fateful consequences of the rapid discovery of what is generally accepted today as the electromagnetic spectrum" [*SE*, 102]. I understand what he's getting at, but it still reads like a declaration one might come across on a QAnon website.)

This is a brilliant, blazing, scorching book that pulls not a single punch. I am pretty much completely on board with every aspect of Crary's argument—I also remember life before the internet, a life of neighborhood kickball games in the gloaming and tangled Princess phone cords—yet I still found myself gasping at the audacity of his formulations on nearly every page. This is a book that could only have been written by a baby boomer, and it has an air of both fist shaking and not-so-faint desperation about it. Time is running out, not just for the planet but also for our collective memory. It is up to boomers, Gen Xers, and older millennials to remember life before catfishing and doxing, and before superstorms and multiple heatwaves pummeled us every summer. The phenomenon alternately termed "shifting base-line syndrome" or "environmental generational amnesia" underscores the urgency of listening to our cranky older people shouting from the street corners—soon enough our in-person, flesh-and-blood, off-screen repositories of memory will be gone. The most subtle, and to my mind pressing, aspect of Crary's book is his demystification of the per-manence and intractability of the internet complex, his urgent remin-der that it hasn't always been this way—and it doesn't need to stay this way, either.

Odell is the youngest of the three authors whose books are reviewed here—young enough to be Crary's daughter—and I couldn't help but notice that she looks at her phone a lot: "It was a dead grebe, and it was not the only washed-up seabird I would see that day. . . . With the one bar of reception on my phone, I looked up '2021 Pescadero dead seabirds' and scrolled through articles about seabird die-off across the country"—right there on the beach, the dead bird at her feet, "overcome by grief" (*ST*, 105). It was a jarring moment for this Gen X reader, less because she pulled out her phone (see the opening to this essay) than because she seemed utterly unconscious of the incongruity of doing so in that moment. I can imagine researching dead birds on my phone on the beach, and even writing about it later, but I would fall all over myself apologizing and pointing out the irony. This seems like a perfect test case of Crary's thesis that most Americans do not connect their digital usage, even remotely, to our ongoing environmental catastrophe.

Odell's main target in her new book, however, is not digital distraction or the evils of the internet complex—topics she tackled head-on in *How to Do Nothing*—but the "painful experiences of time" that stem from "an inability to recognize or access that fundamental uncertainty that lives at the heart of every single moment" (*ST*, xviii). She claims that she wrote this book as a kind of therapy for her own sense of time pressure, climate nihilism, and fear of death and that she intends it "as a future shelter for any reader who feels the same heartbreak" (*ST*, xxix). It is also a book begun, and largely composed, during the pandemic lockdown, when a very large percentage of people on this planet experienced a radical shift in their experience of time.

Saving Time begins with a historical overview tracing the origin of regimented, scheduled time back to the growth of capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—labor time as fungible commodity—and in the second chapter follows the internalization and development of this concept of time in the productivity and self-improvement literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Odell's critique of "productivity bros" literature is particularly salient (*ST*, 000): she returns throughout the book to the claim that solutions to time dread must be sought at the collective level, in community, not through individualistic bootstrapping with watches and apps. (Crary makes a similar point in noting that the spate of articles purporting

to help us with our digital distraction constitutes "a barely veiled warning that the internet complex, like every sphere of activity in late capitalism, is a competitive space occupied by a few winners and a great host of losers" [*SE*, 84].)

But perhaps the most thought-provoking part of the opening chapters is Odell's discussion of a hypothetical burnout victim named Linda, who appears in an article by the sociologist Hartmut Rosa: "an overwhelmed professor who rushes through her day, never having enough time to fulfill all her obligations to students, coworkers, family, and friends; expected to be always available, answerable to everyone; with the feeling that she's always falling short and running behind" (*ST*, 65). Of course, Linda's situation is self-inflicted; she is overspending "discretionary time" rather than working brutal hours at a minimum-wage job to feed her young children. But she and the precarious worker are operating within "the same system, one in which time can be only a means of profit and where someone else can appear only as your competition" (*ST*, 76).

One of Odell's prescriptions for the Lindas of the world is to simply stop. Odell acknowledges that "if Linda does not participate, she will be judged and have to pay a cost, whether it is social or financial" but also claims that Linda "should consider paying that cost" and "experimenting with what looks like mediocrity" (*ST*, 76, 77). Such renunciation is a communal act, in which those with structural privilege recognize that deciding not to squander discretionary time striving and achieving and earning more and more actually makes life better for everyone and opens a door "to an important recognition: not of shared consequences, but of a shared cause" (*ST*, 76). Anyone who recognizes herself in Linda will also need to undertake "an honest and possibly painful reckoning with [her] privilege" and choose a life with less ambition (*ST*, 77). Yet as Odell frames the problem, it is an ethical duty for us Lindas to do so—to turn the dial down on the cruel pressure cooker of our competitive and consumerist social order.

The third chapter rounds out the introductory part in which Odell lays out where we are and how we got here. Her discussion of leisure time extends and sharpens her critique of productivity culture by taking aim at its shadowy obverse: so-called slowness movements that double down on individualistic solutions to a social problem. Here is a subtle warning

to the Lindas of the world who may be tempted to treat their burn-out with a spa day or a weekend getaway: "The same individual who is encouraged to buy time from others instead of having a mutual support network is also encouraged to consume periodic experiences of slow-ness instead of acting in ways that might reclaim her time—or help others reclaim theirs" (*ST*, 90). Again, just as with books and magazine columns about digital distraction that act as a socially sanctioned release, so denizens of late capitalism are encouraged to "slow down" and engage in "selfcare" as a diversion from the deeper causes of burnout culture: alienation and exploitation.

The second part of the book—which consists of the last four chapters and conclusion, somewhat more than half its length—reads like a series of gentle prescriptions for addressing the ailments described in the first. In chapter 4, "Putting Time Back in Its Place," Odell begins to sketch out alternative conceptions of temporality. She opens with a brief description of Henri Bergson's conception of time as duration (*la durée*)—a notoriously tricky concept that he develops over the course of his career. Bergson's work helps us understand the necessity of disaggregating time and space—of no longer treating time as an abstract substance that can be carved up into identical units. Odell uses this Bergsonian challenge to homogeneous time to introduce possible temporalities other than Western, capitalist clock time: those of Indigenous peoples, the rhythms of the natural world, even engagement in different forms of attention, such as birding or an observation writing exercise.

In chapter 5, which centers on temporalities of climate change, Odell's book comes into closest contact with Crary's and Leckie's theses. Odell acknowledges the psychological pull of declinism, the belief that one's society is doomed, calling it "probably one of the more dangerous forms of linear, deterministic time reckoning there is," which "makes struggle and contingency invisible and produces nihilism, nostalgia, and ultimately paralysis" (*ST*, 157). Her way into this question is through a consideration of forest fires. As a resident of California, she has been increasingly anxious about the intensity of wildfire season over the past several years. Yet she comes to learn that we have actually been in a fire *deficit* for the past half century, due to overzealous attempts to control fires for the convenience of human-built environments. "Even entering my thirties, I hadn't made much progress past 'trees=good; fires=bad,'"

Odell admits. "I was not aware of how closely the local ecology had coevolved with periodic fire, nor the extent to which indigenous people worldwide had used fire, nor how or when such practices were banned. In other words, I thought I was looking at natural history, not political or cultural history" (*ST*, 158). I found this section of the book one of the most fascinating and enlightening:

> Far from immemorial, the forests I saw were memory materialized: created, marked, and later endangered by different fire regimes. Those regimes, in turn, reflected contests of power and different visions of what the land was. Initial bans on burning—by the Spanish in the eighteenth century and the incipient state of California in the nineteenth—were exercises of colonial power against indigenous tribes, tied up with other laws enabling subjugation, forced labor, and family separation. (*ST*, 160)

Odell handles this material deftly and with subtlety; there is a danger of romanticizing Indigenous land practices and hence wildfire—no thinking person would deny that climate change is causing more intense and dangerous fires or that they will continue to pose an enormous challenge for humanity. Odell traces how anthropogenic climate change, which causes hotter, drier conditions as well as drought, interacts with centuries of colonialist-capitalist fire regimes: the fires are *also* worse because they have been suppressed for so long. Yet rather than take Pollyannaish comfort in the notion that recent devastating fires are somehow "natural," Odell walks the fine line between challenging her own nihilism and paralysis and tipping over into complacency (or even denialism). This section strikes me as a model for how to perform this tricky dance.

One way to dance this dance is to contextualize one's own climate grief (and I am referring to white, privileged, middle-class North American subjects here) by placing it alongside that of Indigenous and other marginalized peoples:

> To the nihilist who cannot imagine the future, I am highlighting a perspective that has survived, and continues to survive, the long-ago end of the world. There are many people and places that could accept neither Enlightenment Man's march of progress nor the billiard ball declinism of the Anthropocene. . . . For those people and places, the historical past can never be an object of nostalgia, and the future has always been in jeopardy. (*ST*, 179–80)

As Odell hastens to explain, she invokes the perspective of people whose lifeworlds have long been impacted by colonial-capitalist rapine not to shame those of us whose environments are only now threatened but to point out that "shifting [our] temporal center of gravity" (*ST*, 178) helps us challenge the tendency toward paralysis that can stem from nihilism and despair.

The final two chapters develop Odell's imagination of temporal landscapes other than the culturally dominant one that sees time as units of exchange and the future as an inexorable march toward doom. She discusses several examples of communal temporalities, since "without them it's too easy to read history as a linear story of the encroachment of capitalist time into all locales and areas of life" (*ST*, 205). The bulk of chapter 6, however, circles back to a central theme introduced in the opening sections of the book, discussing several radical challenges posed by workers to the regime of capitalist labor time: the 1980s Marxist zine *Processed World*, the Wages for Housework movement, and organizing attempts by gig workers at Uber and elsewhere.

Chapter 7 is a companion piece to the previous chapter; it also harks back to the opening section, this time by taking up internalized demands for productivity in the form of bids for longevity and "health." Odell discusses the temporalities and experiences of people who have a structurally complicated relationship to biohacking, "wellness," and other strivings for immortality: disabled people and those living in prison. "Crip time," a concept popularized by the disability theorists Irving Zola and Carol J. Gill, describes "the tension between a disabled person's temporality and the clock-based industrialized timetables of modern-day society" (*ST*, 233). The incarcerated, along with their families and loved ones, also experience temporality differently: time becomes even stretchier as certain experiences are slowed down, others sped up, and life is marked by a "phenomenology of waiting." By attending to these alternative temporalities, we can aim for "a robust countervailing understanding of personhood and contribution and community in it, human values that are alive and operational outside the logic of the market and its insistent clock" (Sara Hendren [2020: 182], quoted on 250–51]).

Saving Time is, like Odell's previous offering, a gently meandering series of meditations on pressing current topics; the act of reading it

engenders the experience of time that its author wants to endorse. The voice is personal and intimate, and the reader has the impression of hitching alongside Odell on an exploratory journey as she puzzles, ponders, researches, and mildly exhorts. (This is a very different voice from Crary's—more life coach and less tent revival preacher.) Certain aspects of Odell's explorations will feel like well-trod ground to academics; as a nineteenth-century scholar, I found the material on railroad schedules, time zone standardization, and the clashing temporalities of colonial encounter, for example, familiar territory. Of course, academics—at least in our professional capacities—are not Odell's target audience. Like the other two books reviewed here, *Saving Time* stakes out a spot in that liminal space between "scholarly" and "popular." This is a space that more and more academics are visiting as we attempt to make our scholarly work relevant to mass audiences in a time of crisis for the academy—indeed, for the entire planet. Of these three books, Odell's is nearest the "popular" end of the spectrum, yet it has much to teach even scholars familiar with the questions she pursues.

Leckie's *Climate Change, Interrupted* is the only one of the three that is published by a traditional academic press. Yet Leckie is also clearly trying to reach a broader audience. "I didn't think—don't think—the world needs another theory book," she worries, while immediately acknowledging that she seems to be writing a theory book (*CC*, 96). Yet this is a theory book with a twist. Organized as a series of meditations on modes and experiences of time, it addresses a feeling of temporal disjunct similar to what Odell targets, but it brings to bear a robust apparatus of scholarly research, academic citation, and, well, theory. It essays that tricky high-wire act of engaging mostly fellow academics yet demanding of its readers a personal, political, even emotional reaction outside the parameters of normal scholarly discourse.

Leckie's book is organized into three sections (the third of which, at seven pages, is really more of a coda). The first section consists of three "beginnings," but it is preceded by a preface that is the real beginning of the book. From the outset, then, Leckie establishes that this is a volume that is going to play with our expectations of a scholarly treatise. The preface lays out the central problem of the study (indeed, of our current historical moment): why do we seem paralyzed in the face of the climate crisis? Leckie suggests (as do Odell and, more obliquely, Crary) that part

of the problem has to do with our experience of time as linear, progressive, fungible, and homogeneous. She invites those of us in the global North to reflect on our "temporal mode—linearity and its accompanying commitment to progress" (*CC*, xiv) by considering moments of break or rupture, what she variously terms "interruption" and "post-time." The gambit is that by loosening our grip on teleological and apocalyptic ways of thinking, we may, paradoxically, make ourselves better equipped to act in response to urgency.

The first full chapter, "Interruption," turns to the work of Walter Benjamin as a model for the reconsideration of linearity Leckie proposes; his interest in the material conditions of knowledge have led him to introduce "many alternatives to teleological and linear form: montage, quotation, layering, constellation, superimposition, and interruption, among others" (*CC*, 9). Interruption, for Benjamin, can imply a state of emergency (the famous image of the human race grabbing for the emergency brake on the runaway train of capitalism) but also a "doubling down on thinking" that is the opposite of distraction (*CC*, 12). If there is a guiding genie of this study, it is Benjamin: in the rest of the book Leckie performs her own series of formal experiments in an attempt to twist and tweak the linearity and implied teleology of the academic monograph. She also makes a case for the nineteenth century as a starting point: her study will proceed by "returning to the period of industrial modernity in which linear time took decisive hold and considering different approaches to temporality . . . that emerged in the nineteenth century and resonate again in our own" (*CC*, 23).

The second chapter dives into those different approaches by analyzing an emblematic Victorian text—Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851)—alongside two contemporary photographic exhibitions by Richard Mosse, *Incoming* and *Heat Maps* (2017). All are works of documentary realism, broadly construed, and all "make mediation legible" through "multivoiced delivery and departure from linearity," demonstrating how "new temporal modes emerge through interruption" (*CC*, 30). The chapter opens, however, with a brief excursus on George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), the text from which Leckie takes her notion of "post-time," the "periodicity of sensations" inaugurated by the regularity of postal delivery (several times a day in the nineteenth century), which supplanted the slower rhythms of agricultural time

characterized by "Old Leisure" (Eliot 1996: 513). Leckie begins with Eliot's novel, a text of high Victorian realism that is set sixty years before its composition and itself reflects on shifts in temporality from that time to the 1850s, in order to think through shifts in temporality and representational strategies from that later period to now. It's all a little vertiginous and *mise en abyme*–like, but the recursiveness of the argument has a payoff: revisiting a historical moment characterized by enormous representational challenges helps us see more clearly the challenges of our own moment.

The third "beginning" chapter raises the vexed problem of why humanity has been so laggard in its response to the existential threat of climate change. It opens with Greta Thunberg's now-famous 2019 speech at Davos, in which she warned the assembled billionaires that "our house is on fire." Leckie uses Thunberg's phrase as the jumping-off point for a meditation on the functions of the warning as outlined by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*. Warnings are a special class of speech act, in that they are successful only insofar as they prompt action in response. In the case of an unsuccessful warning, the interlocutor will not act and the warning will only produce anxiety. As Leckie points out, the difference between the two cases can often be the result of "too many exclamation marks, figurative or actual," which can "blunt, or undercut entirely, the effectiveness of the warning" (*CC*, 58). She then analyzes, with great adroitness and subtlety, why recent climate-change alarms have too many exclamation marks after them, why "inflammatory, panic-inspiring warnings may be ill advised" (*CC*, 68). Leckie turns again to the work of Benjamin, particularly his discussion of the interruption: he "divides the potential work of the alarm" between a panicky call to action, a sense of tension and anxiety, and "a *real* state of emergency" that, through the interruption, "locates action in forms of response that reconfigure existing temporal models in new ways" (*CC*, 69). This patient, layered analysis (the chapter includes a running marginal commentary that nicely performs the kind of diglossia it is analyzing) explaining how and why warnings become less effectual over time, and suggesting ways to break this impasse, is simultaneously informative and heartening.

The second part of the book is devoted to four "experiments" that challenge formal conventions in an attempt to break the temporal linearity associated with traditional scholarship (and narrative). These are

thought-provoking and often illuminating chapters, by turns produc-
tively discomfiting and moving—and the ones I found most successful
were not the ones I expected. The first experiment, "Layering," consists
of six bands of text, each with a particular thematic focus, superimposed
on one another vertically on the page. From top to bottom, they are
dedicated to epigraphs about grass (this top band is only one line thick,
like a slender blade laid sideways); Percy Bysshe Shelley and boats; Jac-
ques Derrida; Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*; geology and rocks;
and epigraphs about sand. The format thus echoes a natural formation,
with sand on the bottom, grass on top, and sedimented geographic strata
in between. As Leckie notes, there are theoretically two ways to read this
chapter: either following each band on its own across all forty pages of
the chapter and then returning to the beginning to read the next band,
or reading each page in a traditional manner from top to bottom, thus
taking in a small chunk of all six bands sequentially and then turning the
page to read the next six chunks. Although Leckie fears that the former
method will replicate a traditional reading experience and therefore
circumvent the defamiliarization and interruption she was aiming for, I
found that the six bands resonated with one another in productive ways
even when read separately. Leckie's aim here is to "[push] the bound-
aries of the academic essay" (*CC*, 83) in order to address the question of
"how the Anthropocene might require us to read differently" (Menely
and Taylor 2017: 12), and for me it was a lyrical, stimulating reading
experience.

The second and third experimental chapters were intriguing but
somewhat less successful as provocative theoretical interventions. "In the
Idiom of the Self-Help Guide" compares the situation of Casaubon in
Eliot's *Middlemarch*, unable to finish his monumental scholarly project,
to that of people living with the threat of climate change yet unable to
act. The voice of Eliot's narrator furnishes a "self-help" commentary on
Casaubon's procrastination that Leckie applies to our own existential
crisis. My reservation with this chapter is not that it trivializes climate
catastrophe (or *Middlemarch*) but rather that *procrastination* doesn't
strike me as the right term either for Casaubon's problem or for cli-
mate inaction—something like *block* seems more apropos. The third
short experiment is a "'found chapter' composed of questions excised
from their contexts and put into conversation with other questions"
(*CC*, 145). This is a beautifully poetic experiment, but without the

theoretical heft of the other experiments; at a mere eleven pages, it functions primarily as an amuse-bouche for the final full experiment.

That chapter, "FrankenClimate," is the focal point of the book. It performs a compelling reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a novel that trades in formal experimentation and acts of narrative interruption while presenting an early reflection on climate change. As Leckie notes at the outset, first-time readers of the novel often overlook the nesting frame narratives of the novel's three narrators: Walton, Frankenstein, and the creature. She asks, "Can a better comprehension of framing offer a more robust response to the climate crisis?," in order to consider how we "often subdue the disorder that subtends any attempt to confront issues for which existing conceptual frameworks are inadequate" (*CC*, 157). She claims that *Frankenstein* has a "hole" or blank at the very center of its narrative in the form of the creature, but rather than read the monster as "about the impossibility of meaning," she instead argues that it "touches the very nerve of meaning" (*CC*, 168). She reads the blank of the creature alongside another blank that the novel both invokes and elides: the weather, which is the material occasion both for Shelley's writing (the famous ghost-story contest) and for Walton's writing (the letters he composes to his sister when he is held up in Saint Petersburg, waiting to sail). Weather is an interruptive force, but it is also underrepresented, taken for granted—one of the implicit questions of this chapter is what happens when weather is reframed as the center rather than the background. It is difficult to do justice here to the complexity, richness, and fascination of this multilayered reading, which beautifully weaves together at the end of the book the many threads running in and out of its chapters: interruption, pause, representation, warning, and climate.

Leckie's book, as much as it attempts to strike a path away from the traditional academic monograph, will be fully accessible, I think, only to fellow scholars. It is deeply indebted to theoretical modes of thinking, even if it is not, strictly speaking, a "theory book." It also struck me, along with Crary's and Odell's offerings, as very much the product of a particular generation. Those of us who attended graduate school in the 1990s are indelibly marked by a belief in the importance—indeed, efficacy—of high theory that is not so easily shaken off. I found some of the most moving passages in this book to be Leckie's engagements with

the work of Benjamin and Derrida, thinkers whom she greatly admires and whose work clearly animates her own. It was a pleasure to follow the unfolding of her thoughts alongside those of these two writers from earlier generations—whose thoughts about the climate crisis we might very much like to have known—and to trace the lines and tracks of influence they have left behind in very different soil.

All three of these books also feel like the products of a particular—and strange—historical moment. We are in a state of suspended animation, caught in a paralyzing web of exigency and alarm, feeling powerless, and waiting for what comes next. All three authors address this feeling of paralysis in different ways: Crary more or less shouts in an attempt to wake us up; Odell tries to help us twist into a new psychological posture; Leckie invites us to think our way out of an impasse. In that sense, all three offerings strike me as relatively reactive—and that is not at all a criticism. We need help with our reactions, for it is our reactions—or rather, our *lack* of reaction—that is at issue.

All three books also have a strong, if implicit, utopian streak. As Crary writes: "A crucial layer of the struggle for an equitable society in the years ahead is the creation of social and personal arrangements that abandon the dominance of the market and money over our lives together. This means resisting our digital isolation, reclaiming time as lived time, rediscovering collective needs, and resisting mounting levels of barbarism" (*SE*, 4). In other words, "a crucial layer of the struggle" will be utopian thinking—the imagination of fair and environmentally sustainable postcapitalist futures. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of utopianism, however, at least in our current predicament, is not sketching blueprints for the future but conceiving a new way of being. All three authors implicitly argue for the necessity of the "education of desire," a concept first articulated by Miguel Abensour in his work on William Morris. One of the most helpful analyses of Abensour's thought remains a long essay that E. P. Thompson published in the *New Left Review* before Abensour's work was available in English. Thompson (1976: 97), translating a passage of Abensour's unpublished dissertation, characterizes the education of desire as "not the same as 'a moral education' towards a given end; it is, rather, to open a way to aspiration, to 'teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way.'" As Philip E. Wegner (2021: 173) glosses this concept, the

most fundamental principle of utopia is "the emergence of a responsibility for others."

Of our three authors, Crary engages with this injunction the most explicitly and directly: "Socialism cannot simply be implemented on the level of governmentality and economic policies. . . . Building toward it requires changes in consciousness and everyday activity" (*SE*, 13). Our survival will demand that we recognize the necessity of "becoming new kinds of subjects, of making the difficult transition to prioritizing responsibility to others over the mirage of individual autonomy" (*SE*, 14). Yet all three authors wrestle with a similar imperative. As Odell writes, "The most realistic and expansive version of time management has to be collective: it has to entail a different distribution of power and security" (*ST*, 62). And Leckie begins: "In this book I don't seek repairs or retreats. . . . I seek, instead, something that is more like a makeshift tent: provisional, conversational, unexpected, unfolded, and open to all" (*CC*, xvii).

If we are to imagine alternative future models of social organization beyond both capitalist rapine and postapocalyptic hellscapes in which we all boil one another in cast-iron pots, we will need to imagine at the same time a different kind of subject. Can we become the people such a society will require? Can our children, or our children's children? On a broader level, such an imagined future will move beyond practical blueprints for actual social organizations to encourage a fundamental questioning about the type of society we want. As the current doyen of utopian studies, Fredric Jameson (2005: 416), once put it, "Utopia is not the representation of radical alternatives; it is rather simply the imperative to imagine them." The three books reviewed here open a conversation about that pressing, crucial, unavoidable imperative.

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