

**STORIES OF A COLLAPSING FUTURE.
REPRESENTATIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE EFFECTS
IN MAJA LUNDE'S NOVELS**

LAVINIA TACHE¹

University of Bucharest
Faculty of Letters

Abstract. The article proposes an overview of two novels written by the Norwegian writer Maja Lunde, through notions such as 'dystopia', 'trans-corporeality' (Alaimo 2018) and 'heterotopy' (Foucault 1984) that showcase the presence of various beings and spaces interlinked and existing in a constantly changing environment. *The History of Bees* gathers three stories from separate timelines in order to emphasize the evolution of the relation between people and the environment, while *The End of the Ocean* tackles problems of desertification and dreadful effects of the capitalist system.

Both books are essential for understanding a new type of catastrophe, which has been explained as a "catastrophe without event" (Horn 2014), due to its graduality that is a result of climate transformations generated by various industries and people's harmful attitudes towards their natural surroundings. Memory and objects are also central coordinates in analysing how the future actualizes the past, since the characters rest their survival on a book (*The History of Bees*) and on a boat (*The End of the Ocean*). Moreover, Foucault's concept of 'heterotopy' is illustrative of the liminal state in which the protagonists exist. The catastrophic spatiality encapsulates trauma, the will to transgress time, and the absence of the beloved ones.

Survival is the narrative thread that opens the communication between different generations, and loneliness or death are pivotal elements for recreating the present, which, in Lunde's novels, is seen as unfavourable, but nevertheless having ingrained a sense of hope for the future.

Keywords: climate change; cli-fi; dystopia; trans-corporeality; heterotopy; posthumanism; Maja Lunde.

¹ **Lavinia Tache** is a PhD Candidate at the Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest, Romania. Her research focuses on the various relations between the human and the non-human, different approaches to the notion of intimacy, dystopian literature, contemporary prose; e-mail: laviniatache9@gmail.com.

1. On Catastrophe and Climate Fiction

Potential negative versions of humankind's future are intricately depicted in literature, as dystopian narratives, universes dominated by deleterious forces or through *science fiction* and apocalyptic discourses. Nevertheless, these categories of expressing the stories of a decayed humanity are nowadays crystallising into images of a depleted planet, the result of gradually visible climate changes on a multitude of levels.

Global warming is undoubtedly one of the most ardent topics that imbue both our everyday lives and specialized fields of research. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, communities have witnessed innumerable transformations that lead to the essential interrogation of the means of preserving habitats; the consolidation of theoretical and critical approaches, such as posthumanism, contribute to exploring the various ways in which the capitalist system with its technological progress harms the contemporary world. Due to the exploitation of the natural world and the reorganization of societies, with human beings but surrogates (in virtual terms), the present is represented by a dynamic dialogue between what people can do to prevent the spread of toxicity in the environment, and having sympathy for this vast organism of entities.

As stated above, *science fiction* offers forms of imagining the societal structure of the future, but speculative writing and, more recent, 'climate-fiction' – which is particularly interested in climate disruptions – are signalling the harmful attitudes toward the planet, integrating sociology, psychology, science and many other domains into the creation of a literary text which explores hypothetical scenarios about mass death or drastic diminution of the quality of generic life on Earth. In addition, climatologic problems, embodied now in diverse forms of art, raise awareness about the possibility of regional and global catastrophes, because, although pollution is a stringent preoccupation for environmentalists, there is still a lack of action when it comes to improvising the methods of implementing progress in contemporary society. The communication between various cognitive fields opened up the creation of new categories, such as climate fiction, as the following remark expresses: "The imagination of the authors emerges from history, ecology, geographical location, experience, culture, etc. Observed from

this perspective, '*cli-fi*' enhances the usefulness and reasoning in terms of historical representation and anthropocentric perspectives" (Pandya 2021: 73). Therefore, climate fiction is a relevant lens through which environmental failures can be seen, being as it is more rooted in the present than *science fiction*, since it asserts the link to reality and the possible outcomes of excess.

Climate change is analysed as the process with an intricate network of effects and intersections that gradually generate destruction, as Eva Horn explains: "Climate change is therefore not a catastrophe in the traditional sense of the Greek word *katastrophe*; it is not an abrupt 'downward turn'. Rather, it is the most uncanny version of a catastrophe without event" (Horn 2014: 90). The absence of a visible moment of transgression is symptomatic of what climate means, given the origins of the term, when interpreting geographical disasters related to effects on the environment, since the notion "derives from the Greek *klinein*, 'to incline, bend, slant'" (Horn 2014: 69). Thus, *cli-fi* echoes perishing realities as a recurrent theme in recent narrative texts exploring variants of our world after climate mitigation has failed.

I will comment on the post-apocalyptic parts from the Norwegian writer Maja Lunde's Climate Quartet, namely *The History of the Bees* and *The End of the Ocean*, because they suggest how the presence and the absence of non-human entities – insects, objects, water – make an impact on human's existence. Lunde's accounts on the future are a result of research into the crises that might arise globally, and even though the writer's volumes have been perceived as dystopias, I do not completely agree with this categorization. Dystopias process inner or outer reality through obscuring scenarios to reveal a deficient universe on different levels of existence². Despite that dystopian fiction generally creates a reprehensible ambience, without offering effective alternatives, critics, such as Keith M. Booker (1994)³, have emphasized the relevance of ethical dilemmas that are subtly analysed through criticism related to

² Gregory Claeys (2017: 4) points out in the *Introduction* to his study about dystopic writings: "The word is derived from two Greek words, *dus* and *topos*, meaning a diseased, bad, faulty, or unfavourable place. It first probably appeared in the mid-eighteenth century, but was not widely used until the twentieth".

³ See Booker 1994: 173-177.

societal shortcomings. Furthermore, Robert Philmus (2005: 3) operates with the distinction between ‘dystopia’ – which offers no points of escape through hope –, and ‘anti-utopia’, in which hope is inserted into the deep layers of the narration, and which proves that the utopian spirit it is also directed towards a concept of the non-ideal, since it imposes a categorical order among a given population. Lunde’s novels encompass the idea of hope and cannot be entirely understood as dystopias, but rather as literary instruments of analysing human behaviour and the global effects brought by the lack of beneficial action against pollution and the use of malignant substances.

2. Versions of a Fragmentary Future – ‘Trans-corporeality’

Environmental disasters are represented in literature through different methods, focusing on the individual life, the collective, the artificial, or the natural elements. In every context, however, space has a particularly important role, since it exposes the transformations and it stands as the origin of future forms of existence:

[...] two ways between the 1960s and the turn of the millennium: first, by creating allegorical visions of the global that over the course of time have shifted from a utopian to a more dystopian emphasis; second, by developing a set of perspectives that share an emphasis on the importance of a ‘sense of place’, the attachment to or ‘reinhabitation’ of the local through prolonged residence, intimate familiarity, affective ties, and ethical commitment. (Heise 2008: 50).

This can be observed throughout Lunde’s novels, especially *The History of Bees* – conveying the meaning of a life triad, represented by three countries: England, United States of America, and China – with the characters trying to establish their ‘sense’ of being home in an inscrutable world. The representation of disaster is, therefore, linked to the symbolic power of places that provide people both material and emotional resources in order to survive.

I will now analyse Lunde's novels, through Stacey Alaimo's concept of 'trans-corporeality', which is defined as "a new materialist and posthumanist sense of the human as perpetually interconnected with the flow of substances and the agencies of environments" (Alaimo 2016: 112). This way of understanding the human leads to the perpetual communication between people's actions, their consequences, and the potentially harmful attitudes that are prolonging into the future, with the minutiae of everyday choices through a perpetually evolving world.

The History of Bees focuses on the degradation of family relationships, equal to a search for the beloved family. The first framework, set in 1851, shows William building a new honeycomb model; the second one reflects on George's apiculture passion, while the distant future of 2098 illustrates Tao, a mother starting her journey to Beijing to find his son, Wei-Wen, who had been stung by a bee. The famine in Tao's narrative is a disaster linked to the extinction of bees. Maja Lunde confesses to have been inspired by a documentary, entitled *More than Honey*, from 2013⁴, which showcased how in China, because of the chemicals, bees were no longer alive and people were trying to find animals having a similar role, or methods that could replace them. The following passage illustrates that:

The bees here had disappeared back in the 1980s, long before The Collapse; pesticides had done away with them. A few years later, when the pesticides were no longer in use, the bees returned, but by then hand pollination had already been implemented. (Lunde 2018: 6).

As a consequence, 'trans-corporeality' can be seen in the way people are taking upon themselves the pollinating of trees, since people emerge in a similar state as the animals in a survival context or the need of continuation and mending what has been almost irreparably broken in the nature. The novel begins with the confession:

Like oversize birds, we balanced on our respective branches, each of us with a plastic container in one hand and a feather brush in the other. (Lunde 2018: 5).

⁴ Digital conversation with author Maja Lunde, April 2021, SLU University Library.

The world is constantly trying to overcome the lack of resources and it becomes the place for imitating animal behaviour in order to survive. Similarly, Timothy Morton talks about symbiosis and how it can change the perception of human – non-human relationships, accentuating how “The human body is a historical record of nonhuman evolution” (Morton 2017: 135), with all the microorganisms and bacteria that permanently circulates in our lives and which could become destructive if used in unreasonable implemented solutions for the natural surroundings.

At the same time, the events that are illustrated in the books may not have a graphic impact or a complex presentation, due to the fact that the emphasis is on the relationships between people, as if the author is trying to encapsulate the dilemmas and fears of today’s prescriptions into lives of ordinary people that survive with their connectivity to the others, especially to the lost ones. Thus, ‘trans-corporeality’ suggests the latent interconnectedness of presences, but, more importantly, it

[...] requires a radical rethinking of ontologies and epistemologies; it involves science, science studies, citizen science, feminist theory, environmental theories, critical race studies, disability studies, literature, art and every day activism. (Alaimo 2018: 437).

Correspondingly, the selected novels tackle subjects such as melancholy – in the 1852 narrative, with William carrying the battle of not being fully understood, but being saved by his passion for naturalism which materializes into the construction of a beehive; the impact of the Colony Collapse Disorder in 2007, and Tao – as a mother deprived by her child – fighting an obscure medical system in 2098.

Furthermore, the book that Thomas Savage wrote is found by Tao, years later, and becomes a symbol for the future. The same process of continuity appears in *The End of the Ocean*, when the father and his daughter find the boat that the protagonist sailed with, in the past. These two objects appear as forms of remembering and resilience, as mechanisms for building the trajectory to a renewed world. The idea of forgetfulness appears in *The History of Bees*:

We forget about those who will come after them. While we are also capable of making changes that will have an impact on hundreds of future generations, that will destroy things for everyone who comes after us. (Lunde 2021: 206-207).

Notwithstanding, the perception of disaster is different in each epoch, and while Maurice Blanchot evokes how “The disaster is related to forgetfulness – forgetfulness without memory, the motionless retreat of what has not been treated – the immemorial, perhaps” (Blanchot 1995: 3), Lunde’s novels suggest the idea of a stable entity that carries with it the past and actualizes itself in the future through its instrumentality.

The sheer terror that engulfs the population is conveyed in *The End of the Ocean*, with water being the vital resource, but also the element that is able to cause global disorder gradually, by the melting of the glaciers. The road⁵ the two characters are traversing in *The End of the Ocean* symbolizes a road for recovery and finding solace in the thought of survival and hope. However, the family, the parent-child relationships are essential for understanding how the global disaster is translated at the micro level, in the gestures of the parents to keep their child alive, in the hope for recovery, for return. Essentially, in this book, the child is a major factor of structuring the narrative, a symbol of rebirth now associated with water as primordial liquid, as Michel Serres mentions: “Floods take the world back to disorder, to primal chaos, to time zero, right back to nature, in the sense of things about to be born, in a nascent state” (Serres 1995: 51). Both *The End of the Ocean* and *The History of Bees* emphasize the essential role of the child as the cohesive unit, providing stability for everyone’s future.

The History of Bees encapsulates trauma as pivotal for an entire generation, as Tao’s grief surpasses the present moment and sheds light on the possibility of leaving the crisis state. When the protagonist meets

⁵ The similarity to Cormac McCarthy’s *On the Road* is stated by Rodica Grigore (2020): “Drumul pe care Tao îl întreprinde printr-o țară parcă aflată pe cale de dispariție [...] ne duce pe dată cu gândul la *The Road*, celebrul roman al lui Cormac McCarthy” [“The road that Tao undertakes through a country that seems to be on the verge of extinction [...] immediately reminds us of *The Road*, the famous novel by Cormac McCarthy”, my transl.].

Liao Xiara, after days of searching for her son, she says: “I believe that something has happened to Wei-Wen that has significance for many more people than myself, I said slowly. Or him.” (Lunde 2018: 383).

This is why this type of catastrophe is symbolic, it acts almost like a synecdoche for how people feel the disruption in their private lives but then it spreads in this network of toxic influences that later on are to be seen in the erosive power of our everyday actions that harm nature. In this regard, the child is a sacrificial being bringing new hope, even though the mother feels the indescribable feeling of losing a child. It is a hope that illustrates the paradoxical nature of the contemporary world, filled with alarming aspects that teach the present generations how to take care of their homes, and inner universes, be it a personal home or the general one, the planet. This implies an ethical perspective, because people bear the responsibility of averting a harmful chain of future events: “We are [...] explicitly called on to steward it for a vastly distant future, even as we are reminded of our debt to those in the past; we are thus placed in a grand historical chain of obligations” (Putra 2019: 4).

George’s narrative demonstrates humankind’s awareness of the gravity in which populations find themselves and the lack of managing future perils that come along with excess and progress, so it is this sense of something better coming and changing the whole paradigm of understanding how we are interconnected and bound to destruction at a slowed pace:

But it seemed that wasn’t possible. Insect pests could eat a ripe field down to the ground in one night. There were too many of us, the food prices too low, and everything else too expensive for anyone to take the chance. (Lunde 2018: 193).

Water shortage is described in *The End of the Ocean* through Magnus’s decision of harvesting glaciers, and the anticipation of building a power plant on the place where waterfalls naturally formed over the course of time. Signe also describes the diminution of the ice, thinking how “The glacier has moved, as if trying to escape, get away from humans” (Lunde 2021: 13). This moment is similar to the explanations about the pesticides in *The History of Bees* and mark the ‘pre-impact stage’ – as it is

stated in disaster studies: "A disaster's concentration in time obviously defines three temporal periods – pre-impact, trans-impact, and post-impact" (Lindell 2013: 3). The first stage investigates the means and motifs for the escalation of a catastrophe, that is not an instantaneous one, but a result of a process of destructions that sometimes does not have visible outcomes, but rather latent effects that, corroborated, form an assemblage of an inevitable negative results:

Not only pesticides were to blame. Varroa destructor—a tiny parasite that attacked the bees—was also a cause. The parasitic mite attached itself to the body of the bee like a large ball, sucked the hemolymph out of it and spread a virus which was often not detected until much later. Then there was the extreme weather. (Lunde 2018: 341).

The catastrophe is reflected on in terms of an increase that was felt in different settings, beginning with the micro-universe and continuing with the global phenomenon. The following passage reveals the conditions of people working collectively to reconstruct the world through its own pain, represented by individual stories:

They were testimonies from another time. Worn-out men in worn-out work clothes, coarse facial features, sun-baked skin, banal language, they had nothing to do with me. But now every single person stood out, every single personal catastrophe meant my own. (Lunde 2018: 345).

This transfer of affect, the spreading trauma that can only be cured by acknowledging the past and acting for the future is the core identity of a 'trans-corporeal' presence. In Lunde's books, people are constantly trying to accumulate effective experience in order to restructure hope and continuity.

3. The Surface of Life – Places of Refuge

In Lunde's novels, the resilience is visible in the parents' acts of managing the loss of their child and the will to make a change in the unfortunate course of events. The prospect of the collapsing future is compensated by the means of survival the characters find in their journeys of finding techniques to rebuild connections, equilibrium, and to recover from a catastrophe. Eva Horn affirms that

Disasters thus illuminate society under stress and reveal the collective or individual reactions to this stress, from self-sacrifice and solidarity to the reckless fight for survival. Catastrophes test human beings, their strength and resilience, the sustainability of their bonds, and the ability of their social institutions to withstand a crisis. (Horn 2014: 19).

Accordingly, humanity's capacity of reconstructing depends on multiple factors, including places, which are fundamental for growth and stability, yet they encompass a meaning of transition. Explaining the nineteenth century imaginary, Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopy (Foucault 1984) encapsulates a liminal space, a medium between different presences and absences. In the article *Of Other Places* (1984), the philosopher develops the guiding principles of heterotopias and initiates the series of approaches to space as a factor of differentiation and delimitation by a certain power, following relationships that he also discusses previously in studies, regarding the human subjects and the context in which they find themselves.

For instance, the first principle states that the hospital is a type of heterotopy, but Foucault is referring to the psychiatric one, because it marks deviation (Foucault 1984: 25). In *The History of Bees*, Tao arrives at the hospital only to find out that her son is dead; he becomes the symbol of hope, since the fatal allergic reaction marks the presence of the bees. As a consequence, the hospital is a dual place, and while Lunde embodies through it the hope for the future by researchers finding out about the returning of bees, the institution harbours vestiges from the past:

A centrepiece of dead plants was the first thing I saw. A dim light from a lamp confirmed that the hospital still had electricity. The huge lobby was empty... I found an old check-in machine for family members, it had to be from the time before *The Collapse*. (Lunde 2018: 250).

Moreover, the bee – as part of the environment – is completely associated with the vegetal world, so the garden is another space that encipher the vital force. The garden is the third principle in Foucault's study, a heteronomy as well, and it can be linked to the Chinese population, pollinating in orchards. The image of an ample garden, as the chrysalid for future existence contrast with the notion of disaster, but nonetheless, it engraves the last stage of a catastrophe, which can have a double valence, being either a positive one – represented by hope, or a pessimistic one – in which stagnation and angst guide every action. Naturally, there can be median phases as well, but since the exploration of certain results of our present actions emphasises one side or another, it can be seen if hope is a central coordinate or an adjacent one. In *The History of Bees*, William works on building a beehive following the pattern of the natural world, being inspired during his contemplation of the surroundings:

The straw hive I'd ordered arrived three days later and I had found a location for it in the semi-shade of an aspen on the lower part of the property, in the part of the garden we allowed to grow wild. (Lunde 2018: 163).

The boat is another heterotopy – discussed as the sixth principle, because it encompasses a moveable state, a dynamic 'locus' that not only can lead one from a point to another, but acts as an individual area for living, which, in this regard, is being associated with Noah's Arch, since it helps people survive, but is signifying the non-presence, as David and his daughter, Lou, are searching for stability, in *The End of the Ocean*. Signe's sailboat, from 2017, is found by them during their search for the rest of the family, in 2039:

It was a sailboat. The mast lay on the roof of the cabin. The hull was dark blue, like the ocean in the evening, and there were four windows on each side. (Lunde 2021: 92).

The durability of the boat, as “a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea” (Foucault 1984: 9), contributes to the motivation of reuniting with the lost ones, while navigating ominous environments. The water gives the possibility of discovering, of nurturing, contrasting the artificiality and while it may produce cataclysms in some parts of the world, it is seen as the primary element of continuity on Earth:

All life is water, all life was water, everywhere I turned, there was water. It gushed from the sky as rain or snow, it filled the small lakes in the mountains.” (Lunde 2021: 15).

In *The History of Bees*, the image of a boat is given by the reference to the name of the first man “to sail around the world alone” (Lunde 2018: 105), Joshua Slocum.

4. Conclusions

Summing up, Maja Lunde’s novels present the ambivalence of future, with disastrous sites all over the world, on the one hand, and the glimpse of hope arising from unexpected places, on the other. Catastrophe, as a literary representation, helps the reader understand the speculative dimension of translating reality into narration and renders the polyvalent functions that the collective and the individual have in their journey for survival. The concept of ‘trans-corporeality’ is illustrative of the recent environmental changes observed in both *The History of Bees* and *The End of the Ocean* because it denotes the idea that vulnerability is felt throughout generations and species, which witness altogether the negative effects on the climate. In Maja Lunde’s prose, objects and geographical territories are

described as similar to human bodies, since all these elements share a sense of fragility and the capacity of incapsulating memories in various forms.

REFERENCES

- Alaimo, S., 2018, "Trans-corporeality", in Braidotti, R., M. Hlavajova (eds.), *Posthuman Glossary*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, pp. 435-438.
- Booker, M. K., 1994, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature. Fiction as Social Criticism*, Connecticut, Praeger.
- Blanchot, M., 1995, *The Writing of the Disaster*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press.
- Claeys, G., 2017, *Dystopia. A Natural History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, M., 1984, "Of Other Places", in *Diacritics*, 16 (1), pp. 22-27.
- Grigore, R., 2020, "Despre albine și oameni" ["On Bees and Humans"], in *Viața Românească*, nr. 1, <https://www.viataromaneasca.eu/revista/2020/02/despre-albine-si-oameni/>.
- Heise, U. K., 2008, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet. The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- Horn, E., 2014, *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age*, translated by Valentine A. Pakis, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Lindell, M. K., 2013, "Disaster Studies", in *Current Sociology Review*, 61 (5-6), pp. 797-825.
- Lunde, M., 2018, *The History of Bees*, translated by Diane Oatley, New York, Atria Books.
- Lunde, M., 2021, *The End of the Ocean*, translated by Diane Oatley, New York, Harper Collins Publishers.
- Morton, T., 2017, *Humankind. Solidarity with Nonhuman People*, Brooklyn, Verso Books.
- Pandya, M. J., 2021, "'Climate Fiction Narratives': A Study of Maja Lunde's Novels – *The History of Bees* and *The End of the Ocean*", in *The International Academic Forum: The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2021, Official Conference Proceedings*, Nagoya, The International Academic Forum (IAFOR), pp. 71-80; online: <https://doi.org/10.22492/issn.2188-1111.2021.6>.
- Philmus, R., 2005, *Visions and Re-Visions: (Re)constructing Science Fiction*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press.
- Putra, A., 2019, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Serres, M., 1995, *The Natural Contract*, translated by Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson Ann Arbor, Michigan, The University of Michigan Press.