Richard Powers' *Gain* (1998):

Literature and Agency in the Anthropocene

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Abstract in Norwegian

Denne oppgaven utforsker fremstillingen av mennesket i relasjon til dets naturlige og konstruerte omgivelser i Richard Powers' roman *Gain* (1998). Romanen leses i lys av periodens fremvoksende miljøbevegelse og settes i kontekst av det nye feltet «antropocen fiksjon og litterær fremstilling». Som et resultat av Powers' litterære prosjekt føyer romanen seg inn i en rekke tverrfaglige litterære verk og gransker den historiske utviklingen av menneskets relasjon til bedrifter og deres videre utvikling til aksjeselskaper. Overordnet kan romanen sies å omhandle menneskets tap av handlingskraft og frihet i møte med voksende økonomisk makt og press. Jeg benytter meg av både økokritiske og posthumanistiske teorier for best å fange romanens samtidskritiske kommentar på hva jeg velger å kalle antropocene problemstillinger. Blant disse er Cary Wolfes definisjon av post- og transhumanisme sentral. Fremstillingen av romanens menneskelige karakterer illustrerer hvordan menneskets posisjon, væremåte og eksistensielle selvbilde har blitt gradvis styrt og påvirket av teknologiske og juridiske konstruksjoner. Romanen fremstiller selskapet «Clare, Incorporated» som en agerende og selvstendig karakter som opererer og eksisterer på et nivå over menneskelig kontroll og fatteevne. Selskapet er kroppsløst, udødelig og tilpasningsdyktig, tilsynelatende ubundet av materielle begrensninger. Jeg argumenterer for at denne fremstillingen kommenterer på den transhumanistiske illusjonen som underbygger nåværende miljøfiendtlige praksiser innen moderne produksjon og fremskritt. Romanen fremstiller med andre ord den skadelige effekten av menneskets sviktende forståelse av seg selv som en del av, heller enn overlegen til, det økologiske samspillet i den materielle verden.

Det overordnede målet med oppgaven er å skape forståelse for måten samtidslitteraturen deltar i og kommenterer på antropocene utfordringer, spesielt de ontologiske premissene som ligger til grunn for nåværende praksiser og oppfatninger av mennesket i relasjon til omverdenen. En slik forståelse kan øke vår evne til å ta litteraturen til hjelp i formidlingen av behovet for både holdnings- og atferdsendring i møte med klimaendringer og dets sosiale og økonomiske konsekvenser.

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- Vilde

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Introduction

The focus of this thesis is Richard Powers' 1998 novel *Gain,* a story dealing with the complex causes and effects of the invisible pollution found everywhere in the modern consumer society. The novel has previously received praise and critical acclaim for its approach to American corporate history, adding to Powers' ambitious literary project of describing the changing conditions of modern existence. Stephen J. Burn describes Powers as "writing on the fault line between postmodernism and whatever comes after" (Burn, xvii), his work constantly investigating the unlikely intersections between the sciences and the arts. Through the gradual personification and accumulated agency of Clare, Incorporated, Powers explores how corporations came into existence and helped mold modern America. In a parallel narrative strand, the novel traces the story of Laura Body in her fight against ovarian cancer in the late 1990's. The Clare narrative moves fast and furious through roughly two centuries of corporate history, whereas Laura's battle is painfully slow, detailing the agonies of chemotherapy as well as the economic hardships of long-term hospitalization and illness in contemporary America. The novel's conscious use of differences in scale, time and size across its two narratives provides a commentary on the shortcomings of what I will later term "the human scale".

Gain presents the dangers of humanity's failure to conceive themselves as posthuman beings and illustrates the consequences of this misconception. By showing the inability of its human protagonists to grasp their part in larger systems such as the global economy, *Gain* describes how "history heads steadily towards a place where things need not be grasped to be used" (395). Laura's narrative depicts the result of this historical process. In its juxtaposition to the Clare narrative it highlights the thousands of conscious decisions that have created her unconscious reality. I read the novel as a dystopian warning of the

consequences for human agency of the historical processes it depicts. My interpretation draws on but also differs from previous readings of the novel in significant ways. By drawing on posthumanist theory and placing the novel in the context of Anthropocene fiction, I hope to bring new perspectives on Powers' text. My focus on what I perceive as the ultimately comic effect of the posthuman/transhuman discrepancy expressed between the narrative voice and its depicted characters and my reading of Clare as a transhuman agent stand apart from existing scholarly approaches to *Gain*.

As a means of introducing my primary text and preparing the ground for my argument, I believe it is useful to give a brief overview of the existing scholarship on this novel. As we shall see, the scholarship so far tends to place *Gain* in an ecocritical and realist framework due to the novel's obvious comment on the complex systems of invisible pollution and consumer dependency. While my reading builds on this scholarship, it also departs from and attempts to contribute to it by examining the posthuman perspectives of the novel's omniscient narrator. In the interpretations of *Gain* presented below, several critics hint at a posthuman dispersal of agency from the novel's human characters to the corporation itself. However, none of these scholars pursue this interpretation further. I will argue that posthuman theories offer a relevant vantage point from which to read the novel into an Anthropocene literary discourse. It also provides a valuable framework for what I view as the novel's ironic presentation of essentialist deductions based on the binary understanding of human beings and the natural world. This criticism comes across in the juxtaposition of scale, time, and size in Laura and Clare's narratives. It underscores Clare's creation as a disembodied transhuman at the gradual expense of human agency.

Although none of the commentators discussed below say so directly, their treatment and acceptance of Clare as a fully-fledged subject and main protagonist implies the corporation's ability to exert its distinct agency. *Gain* situates itself as a novel in the

Anthropocene discourse of the late nineties through its overt environmental concerns regarding the pollution of human bodies and natural environments. I agree with the ecocritical interpretations of scholars such as Lisa Lynch (2002), and Tom LeClair (1998). Where my argument departs from theirs is in its focus on Clare's gradual animation and the consequential de-animation of the corporation's human constituents. I contend that the early narrative's fundamental dualisms facilitate the construction of the corporation as a transhuman agent, which is a consequence of humanity's failure to imagine themselves as anything but hierarchal superior agents. In the Anthropocene context of this thesis, a posthumanist approach allows us to see the inherent potential for human decentering and the reanimation of non-human beings, constructs, or things. The novel comments on the ontological flaws of current and historical binary understandings of the world, while illustrating how these beliefs have resulted in current systems of capitalist reason and natural depletion.

Critical context and reception

Gain exhibits what has become Powers' most characteristic trait as a novelist; the marrying of supposedly disparate ideas and academic disciplines through two, or more, parallel narrative strands, combining to form a comment on the conditions of life in the twentieth-century (LeClair, 1998). *Gain* deals with the effects and influence of corporations on the everyday life of ordinary people, linking the pursuit of gain and corporate growth to health loss and the uncontrolled spread of cancer; corporate economy affecting corporeal ecology. Powers has received praise and academic recognition from both critics and fellow novelists for his varied oeuvre and characteristic style. His scientifically informed and interdisciplinary novels earned him a MacArthur Grant, known off-the-record as the "genius award" (Sutherland, 2000), as well as several literary awards, including a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his latest novel *The Overstory* (2018). Apart from his literary reception, Powers'

integrative style has resulted in citings in such unlikely places as *Business Week, Annals of Internal Medicine,* and *Review of Anthropology*. This broad impact "is unique amongst contemporary novelists" and stems from Powers' unwillingness to conform to the disciplinary boundaries of fiction (Burn, xix). As will be shown in Chapter One, this crossing of disciplinary boundaries makes Powers' oeuvre especially apt to discussions of Anthropocene fiction.

Despite critical acclaim, Powers faces recurring criticism in regard to his extensive use of scientific data at the supposed expense of character development and other novelistic qualities of his work. Stephen J. Burn addresses this general criticism in the introduction to *Intersections,* a collection of essays on Richard Powers published in 2008. Burn counters charges of the damaging effects of Powers' data-driven narratives, claiming that such criticism is the result of fundamental misinterpretation and misreading of Powers' narrative style as well as his project (Burn, xxviii). Burn further draws on reviews of Powers' earliest works by critical institutions such as *Publishers Weekly, The New York Times* and *London Review of Books*, in order to illustrate what he terms unwarranted criticism. He claims that Powers' use of non-literary data fills several functions and is never present as "mere ornamentations" or the result of a brainy author's academic self-indulgence. Rather, it is a product of his literary project; dissolving the artificial boundaries between academic disciplines in order to more accurately portray "the dense-informational texture that characterizes modern existence" (Burn, xxviii). The interwoven narratives are designed to break the imaginary continuity of the novel and bring the reader awareness of their own narrative reality. Burn states that the novel's purpose is to serve as a parallel map to reality through which we might understand the increasing complexity of our modern existence.

In "The Business of *Gain*" (2008), Paul Maliszewski stresses the importance of Clare's personification and the novel's inclusion and treatment of the corporation in its

literary portrayal of contemporary America. His essay establishes the existence of Clare as a fully-fledged character, the lead protagonist of both of *Gain's* narrative strands. Yet despite the novel's treatment of the corporation as a character, it is important to note the underlying existential premises which separates it from the novel's human protagonists. I concur with Maliszewski's observation that the novel makes a point of never treating the corporation as a person, except through the eyes of its human protagonists. The corporate narrative operates on scales which diminish and obscure the individual, resulting in their commodification and eventual disappearance from the Clare narrative. The corporation cannot feel and possesses no human emotion, it does not care who works for it or who buys its products, it is nothing but a set of purposes designed to make ever more. As the corporation grows, its human constituents increasingly disappear into an abstract mass, largely reduced to numbers or impersonal components of production's ever expanding machinery. Maliszewski comments on the narrative tools which illustrate this shift, and the feat that Clare is presented as an active protagonist without the need for traditional anthropomorphizing.

Maliszewski further points to the distribution of agency in Laura's narrative, the gradual withering of Laura's body in parallel to the deconstruction of her experienced agency. Over the course of Laura's disease, Clare's presence and possible blame become more apparent, as do Laura's regrets and apathy towards the unavoidable reality. The corporation gave her cancer, but she cannot conceive of a life without it. Maliszewski observes the paradoxical reality of *Gain's* human characters; their existence so closely tied to the corporate forces that removing their influence proves impossible despite their known toxicity: "They can't live in the world as they've made it. But given the choice, they do. They have to" (Maliszewski, 183). Maliszewski argues that the novel amounts to a claim that humans have created a world in which they cannot live, a world designed for the benefit of the corporation and economic growth rather than the embodied human being. Extending this argument, I

contend that this establishes Clare, the embodiment of corporate forces and modern capitalism, as the governing agent to which humans must adjust in the modern America of *Gain*.

I argue that Maliszewski's interpretation leans in the direction of a posthumanist reading, though he himself never uses the term. The posthumanist undertone runs through both Maliszewski and Burn's contributions to *Intersections* and speaks of a general tendency in Powers' authorship. On the collection's opening page, Burn states that Powers' use of the specialized language of science and other 'nonliterary' disciplines serves to "transgress the boundaries of the conventional novel in order to connect the routines of ordinary life to deeper existential truths about existence, and humankind's place in the ecosystem" (Burn, xi).

Taking a slightly different perspective, Tom LeClair places *Gain* amongst eco-fiction novels such as Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, which both address ecological pollution and the link between environment and the human body and psyche (LeClair, 1998). LeClair states that *Gain* aims to help its readers understand the link between ecology and economy, the American history of corporate law and the every-day reality of a commodified environment. "The parts-per-billion ways that financial gain leads to health loss" (LeClair, 1998) is illustrated and problematized through the scalar differences of Clare and Laura's narrative portrayals. LeClair stresses the different embodiments of Laura and Clare: "Laura is a body that cannot, like the corporation, employ the 'starfish solution: each severed limb regenerating a whole new viable body'" (LeClair, 1998). Clare represents the governing agency of modern capitalist economics, a force still asserting its power over Laura in her final battle against cancer as she is forced to remortgage her house and quarrel with her HMO. Clare's size, distributed structure and pervasive presence in Laura's life through products make the process of tracing her disease, or even placing blame, impossible. In this way, the novel comments on the toxicity of modern life itself, as it is impossible to

escape. LeClair further sees Powers' agenda as implying that the responsibility of awareness, of determining your own needs and knowingly navigating the corporate reality, rests with the individual. In this he differs from Maliszewski's conclusion, as he implies that the consumer still has a choice. In my opinion, LeClair presents the most overtly environmental reading of *Gain* and also situates it as a novel critical of its own time. My reading builds on the environmentalist perspectives described by LeClair but disagrees with his conclusion of individual responsibility as the novel's main moral.

The last scholarly approach I want to address here is that of Ralph Clare (2013). In his article "Your Loss Is Their Gain", Clare argues that corporate disembodiment comes at the gradual expense of corporal embodiment, and that *Gain* indicates their inverse relationship by contrasting the rise of Clare & Company with the demise and death of Laura (Clare, 2013, 28). As such, the two narratives complement each other in communicating the novel's overall message of the malfunctioning systems of modern America. Ralph Clare presents the interpretation which falls closest to my own reading of the novel as a posthumanist critique of the transhuman corporate agent. He states that *Gain* performs "a thoroughly scientific account of corporate evolution and the simultaneous devolution of the individual, who finds herself instead subject(ified) to the emerging biopolitical regime of the neoliberal era" (Clare, 2013, 28). Though Ralph Clare briefly mentions the novel's posthuman potential, he fails to situate the transhuman corporation in an environmental or Anthropocene context. The article addresses the gradual process of "naturalization" which occurs in regard to corporate presence and influence, in Lacewood as well as the world (Clare, 2013, 29). To Laura, her corporate environment is so natural that she cannot imagine a life without it, it represents the modern norm and stands in opposition to the slow and deadbeat track of the past. However, Laura's cancer proves both the toxic effects of her 'natural environment' and is perceived as a personal betrayal by the corporation she has grown up trusting. Clare's article concludes on a

similar note to that of Maliszewski, viewing *Gain* as a deterministic portrayal meant to "inspire people to change their wasteful habits and/or inspire environmental protectionism in the world" (Clare, 2013, 43).

Ralph Clare reads *Gain* as illustrating the legal implications of the neoliberal age: a logic which commodifies the human body while acquitting the corporation from responsibility for its production (Clare, 2013, 28). He points to the far-reaching effects of privatization and incorporation. With its many shareholders and decentralized structure, the corporation is freed from individual responsibility. This allows for risk-taking and an unhindered pursuit of profit and gain without the personal risks of individual responsibility. In the same move, the mentality of privatization and personal ownership is extended to all aspects of the human existence. Ralph Clare argues that *Gain* describes the inverse relationship between the distributed responsibility of a disembodied corporation and an embodied individual. Laura suffers the economic implications of her 'privatized' body while Clare evades all responsibility (Clare, 2013, 28). Thus, *Gain* presents a reality in which the material body is a liability for which the individual 'owner' is accountable, a liability which the individual subject attempts to evade through the many prosthetic devises provided by modern production. Ralph Clare suggests, through association rather than direct commentary, the posthuman nature of *Gain's* narrative structure and moral (Clare, 2013, 33). The disembodied corporation exists in a network of shared responsibility, gradually evolving out of the reach and control of its human creators. Parallel to the corporate 'evolution', Clare claims that we see a human 'devolution' which forces humanity into becoming 'posthuman' "by adapting to a more fluid and less physically important "world" through technological means" (Clare, 2013, 33). Here I disagree with Clare's use and definition of the 'posthuman' identity of *Gain's* human characters. My further reading will treat the novel's overall ontological presentation as clearly posthuman; however, I see the human characters' material

escape as a result of transhuman aspirations rather than the entangled fluidity described by Ralph Clare (33).

Posthumanist perspectives in Anthropocene context

The majority of reviews and critical discussion concerned with *Gain* agree on the novel's sharp critique of the late capitalist system which has come to define modern America. By assigning Clare the role and function of a main character, the novel makes a close to ironically overstated case, placing the corporation as a major source of nationwide lifestyle epidemics, environmental devastation and the general degrading of individual agency. However, so far scholars have failed to overtly place the novel in a posthumanist context. I will argue that both structurally and thematically, *Gain* expresses the undeniable entanglement of a modern life and the damaging effects of denying this entangled reality. In combination with the agentic fluidity of Clare's rise into agency, the novel installs its human protagonists with a reductionist humanist attitude. This serves to ironically enhance the posthuman perspectives presented to the reader by the third person narrator. Further, my reading aims to emphasize the historical context of the novel's publication and the many sociopolitical tendencies which resulted in both scholarly and social change. I will argue that apart from the novel's overt environmentalism, it is its willingness to discuss and renegotiate the ontological premises of binary humanism which most firmly places it in the Anthropocene discourse.

In order to navigate the broad and diverse field of posthumanism, Chapter One will provide an overview of what I see as the theory's main directions and key scholars. Significant influences such as Cary Wolfe, Bruno Latour, Serpil Opperman and N. Katherine Hayles have informed my reading in this section. I will consider the origin and co-emergence of posthumanism and ecocriticism in the 1990s as well as the inherent environmentalism of

both traditional and recent posthumanist developments. Given my decision to read the novel into an Anthropocene context, the chapter will open with a brief discussion of this newly emerging field of literary studies. The literature of the Anthropocene is characterized by its crossing of disciplinary boundaries and emphasis on environmental entanglement. It thus engages posthuman and ecocritical frameworks and spans a wide variety of genres. The chapter will focus on the importance and significance of binary pairs and dualist perceptions within the Anthropocene literary and critical discourse. It also includes a brief run-through of the traditional humanism Anthropocene discourse seeks to reform.

Chapter Two concerns itself with the fundamental entanglement of *Gain* and the various ways through which the novel conveys its Anthropocene reality by contrasting perceptions of scale, place and time across its two narratives. In my analyses I hope to make clear the novel's apparent compliance with posthumanist doctrines of entanglement and the agentic capabilities of non-human world. The novel's posthuman ontology simultaneously adheres to the general tendencies of Anthropocene fiction, common denominators of which are the genre's experimental relationship to preexisting expectations of narrative framing. The genre aims to dislodge entrenched conceptions of what it means to exist, and thus allows its narration to reach beyond the limits of human expression and conception. In that, they perform a demanding task of imagining a world without and beyond the human gaze. Anthropocene fiction often coincides with posthumanist and ecocritical fiction in striving to reach beyond and within the human. The second part of Chapter Two deals more explicitly with *Gain's* gradual deconstruction of binary constructs, and Laura's slow awakening to her entangled reality. From the evidence collected through these close readings, I draw the conclusion that *Gain* illustrates a human world of undeniable entanglement, yet which caters to a binary idea of transhuman superiority. Through this, the human body suffers and is reduced to fuel for the corporate machinery.

Chapter Three explores the emergence and enactment of Clare, Incorporated as a transhuman agent. I will argue that the novel presents its human protagonists as endorsing and partaking in the traditional ontology of western humanism. In its binary understanding of the world, humanism encourages the continued growth, exploration and domination of humans over the non-human world. The us/them and culture/nature binaries are enforced by the mind/body split, associating humanity with the victory of the disembodied mind over the material body. In *Gain*, the corporation is created in order to facilitate growth and financial expansion beyond the reach and potential of a human merchant or businessman. Through continued expansion, the material costs and risks in business grow too big for the single human agent, and a prosthetic entity is constructed in order to surmount the challenge. Prosthetic enhancers of human potential are no new invention; the spear, the wheel or even clothes could be labeled as such. However, the corporation is created as a fully enabled, legally entitled, yet disembodied entity. It inhabits the qualities which through traditional binaries are perceived as the essence and final objectives of human evolution; it figures yet another victory of the mind over the material limitations of the body. In a final section, I draw on Mark McGurl's concept of "The Posthuman Comedy" (McGurl, 2012) in order to draw out the tragi-comic elements of *Gain's* posthuman vision, which arises from the inability of its human protagonists to act on their entangled awareness. The novel presents its reader with a wide lens of posthuman perception, whereas its humans remains trapped by the human scale of their binary consciousness.

The objective of this thesis is to establish *Gain* as a novel of Anthropocene awareness and importance through an exploration of its posthuman presentation. Through its critique and demonstration of the long-term effects of an anthropocentric ontology, the novel situates itself in the Anthropocene discourse by addressing the ideology behind exploitative human behavior. The death of Laura is caused by the unhindered pursuit of unlimited growth, and the

novel speaks up about the impact of corporations and modern production on national and environmental health. In this, the novel seems to both adhere to and challenge traditional conceptions of the Anthropocene. In 2016, Jason W. Moore coined "the Capitalocene" as an alternative term to the popularized "Anthropocene", stating that "global warming is not the accomplishment of an abstract humanity, the *Anthropos*. Global warming is capital's crowning achievement. Global warming is *capitalogenic"* (Moore, 2016). In Moore's assignment of blame and agency to the previously non-agentic 'capital', I find a striking resemblance to *Gain's* treatment of the agentic corporation. A posthuman understanding of agency and the human nature might provide valuable perspectives on the changing world and how to navigate being human in it.

Chapter One: The Literary Anthropocene

> *At its best, literature is a means by which we know ourselves; at its most provocative, it is the means by which our sense of self is challenged and transformed (*De Cristofaro, D., and Cordle, D. 2018, 5)

Gain was published in 1998; two years before the 'Anthropocene' was officially coined as a scientific term, eight years before Al Gore released "*An Inconvenient Truth"* and five years before Greta Thunberg was born. In several ways, the novel predates the Anthropocene wave of the twenty-first century, yet I will argue that it has earned its place amongst what we shall term Anthropocene fiction. The decades preceding *Gain's* 1998 publication were characterized by a growing environmental movement and the first wave of scientific reports which warned of the irreversible consequences of our continued growth. The nineties also saw the formal consolidation of both ecocriticism and posthumanism as critical schools in literary studies, heirs to the pioneering work of scientists and writers such as Rachel Carson. The nineties were also marked by overall economic stability on the North American continent, and the gradual rise of 'green consumerism' as a somewhat hypocritical response to rising environmental awareness in the consumer base. *Gain* focuses its narrative attention on the gradual formation of a consumer society and the rise of corporations as the economic power-houses of American society. Through a narrative that exceeds the human perspective, the novel asks how far we might go in pursuit of limitless growth and explores the material destruction caused by this undertaking.

Anthropocene literature denotes the literary response to the climatic and social changes which occur as the earth responds to the effects of long-term human exploitation. In doing this, the genre often provokes literary experimentation as authors seek to reanimate the

earth and entice empathic responses from their readers. In *Ecosickness in Contemporary U. S. Fiction* (2014), Heather Houser introduces the term "ecosickness", describing it as a literary trope through which authors make use of a diseased human body to draw attention to the toxicity of its surrounding environment. *Gain* is mentioned as a clear example of this trope but receives no further treatment in Houser's book due to its emphasis on the connection between the human body and its specific material surroundings (Houser, 2014, 2). The trope demonstrates the devastating effects of a disembodied imagination on the material bodies of both humans and non-humans and equals the human and the natural realm. As such it deconstructs one of humanism's most fundamental dualisms; that of human/nature and helps reimagine the human being in relation to the non-human world. Other responses to Anthropocene awareness could be found in the genre's experimentational relationship to the narrative frames of time, place and scale. Anthropocene literature "should be understood as a product of reading as much as it is of writing" and literature of all periods "might usefully be read as engaging it" (De Cristofaro and Cordle, 2018, 5-6). The twenty-first century is a literary site where Anthropocene narratives are particularly densely clustered due to "the emerging self-consciousness between humans, the planet and deep time" (De Cristofaro and Cordle, 2018, 5-6).

This chapter will explore the literary and philosophical movements of ecocriticism, posthumanism and transhumanism. I introduce the transhuman perspective as a means of illustrating the damaging effects of illusory disembodiment through technological prostheses, a process detailed throughout *Gain* and commented on by scholars such as Ralph Clare. Transhumanism has yet to be brought up in the scholarly criticism of *Gain* and offers a valuable addition to the novel's commentary on damaging ontologies of natural depletion and binary illusions. Posthumanism and transhumanism are often confused due to their fleeting and ever-changing definitions, yet as I shall demonstrate later in this chapter, the two should

not be used interchangeably. Ecocriticism comprises the most overtly environmental framework for literary interpretation and will be introduced and discussed due to its later influence on the posthumanist approach. I hope to make clear both differences and similarities between the three approaches, as these frameworks are often at play in Anthropocene critical discourse. However, I will start by providing some historical and philosophical context to the origin of the environmental crisis which inspired the Anthropocene.

Nature and culture:

The starting date of the Anthropocene has been set to the mid 20th century, the term itself coined by Nobel Prize winning physicist Paul Crutzen in 2000. The term has received international attention through the climate movement and has in recent years become a household name also outside of the 'harder' scientific communities. However, climate change, and the environmental movement, predate Crutzen's term by several decades. Officially, we are still living in the Holocene epoch, a geologic epoch dating back to the last ice age. According to Crutzen, the official recognition of the Anthropocene is of high importance to the global management of the environmental crisis. (Crutzen and Shwägerl 2011) Language is a powerful tool and the name is of significance as it derives from our collective understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature, a relationship which has changed dramatically in the time between the last ice age and the present.

"For millennia, humans have behaved as rebels against a superpower we call 'Nature'", and ontologically, this dualist perception of 'us' and 'them' has persisted into modernity (Crutzen and Shwägerl 2011). In the 20th century humanity has all but subdued the once wild nature; from climate to DNA, it is now "we who decide what nature is and what it

will be" (Crutzen and Shwägerl 2011). This reversal of power serves to fulfil the fundamental craving for dominion over nature, a final victory and a hard-won independence proving our supremacy. Val Plumwood is amongst several critics who ascribe the binary fundamentalism of western thought to the ontological assumptions of traditional humanism. She postulates that through a binary ontology we have failed to recognize our own embodiment, and consequentially our entangled and organic preconditions (Plumwood, 2002, 22-25). Climate projections for the next decades unequivocally predict that our newfound natural 'dominance' might be our downfall. Current models of economic growth depend on depleting practices and cannot sustainably sustain the planet's 9 billion people (Randers, 2012). We have reached the end of the humanist paradigm, the earth's carrying limit way overshot by its human management. Humanity's perspective on itself and the planet needs to change, and literature has a role to play in shaping the new narrative of the Anthropocene.

In discussions of the philosophical root of the environmental crisis, most critics return to the general phrasing of a 'Western philosophy', 'Western thought', or 'Western traditions'. In this lies an understanding of our current environmental crisis as the result of the global influence of western ideology, at least as presented in *The Ecocriticism Reader (*Glotfelty, Cheryl, and Fromm, Harold, ed. 1996). In his contribution "The Historical Roots of Our Historical Crisis", Historian Lynn White Jr. argues for an acceptance of the Judeo-Christian influence on our ontological perception of nature and the non-human world. He calls for a rejection of the Christian axiom that "no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image" (White, 1996, 9). White further argues that though a majority of current western thought and philosophy would not define itself as religious, they still carry with them the fundamental dualisms which establishes the human as set apart from and entitled to the natural world (White, 1996, 9). This allocation of cultural, and partly

religious, blame is seconded by Christopher Manes in his essay "Nature and Silence" (1996). He disputes that over the course of history nature has been recast as symbolic, where it was once animistic. The non-human world was robbed of its agentic capacity through the ideological reformation of reason, and the prerogative of being a speaking subject have since been "jealously guarded" by humanity (Manes, 1996, 15). Manes further claims that the idiom left behind by Renaissance humanism, "with its faith in reason, intellect and progress, has created an immense realm of silences, a world of 'not saids' called nature, obscured in global claims of eternal truths and transcendence" (Manes, 1996, 17). In order to reconceptualize our relationship to the 'silenced nature' we require a new language of expression (Manes, 1996, 17). I read both Manes and White as vocally skeptical towards the image of 'man as created in Gods image' and will argue that their essays might profitably be read into a posthuman context.

'Western culture and ideology' are often synonymous with the philosophical stance of humanism. A quick search in Encyclopaedia Britannica reveals humanism to be the renaissance incarnation of western philosophy, and perhaps the longest surviving child of this school of philosophy. The definition emphasizes the centrality of the human, their supreme value, agency and importance, both individually and collectively ("Humanism", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Though the humanist tradition prides itself on its indifference to the religious practices of its time, its anthropocentric perspectives attest to its cultural origins. From the fundamental dualisms of human/nature and man/woman, followed those of reason/emotion and mind/body. Humanism paved the way for the rise of Cartesian rationalism, a view that holds reason as the chief test and source of knowledge and that reality itself has an inherently logical structure ("Wester philosophy", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). As such, only beings capable of adhering to the humanly determined laws of reason could be considered as agentic entities. Harold Fromm presents an interesting perspective on the

historical transition of humanity's relationship to the 'otherly' Nature in his essay "From Transcendence to Obsolescence: a Route Map" (1996). Fromm postulates that through the objective logic of industrial and technological advancements humanity came to exist within the illusion of natural independence. Their superior reason would eventually render them independent of the natural realm. This false illusion creates practices which underscore humanity's own best intentions, destroying the natural support systems upon which all natural beings depend.

In an important comment on the collective state of human responsiveness to the environmental crisis, Val Plumwood points to how a distorted image of culture and reason has led to ecological collapse and the possible endangerment of the human species. Her 2002 book *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* is described to reveal how "our culture's life-destroying practices and ethical and spiritual bankruptcy are closely linked to our failure to situate ourselves as ecological beings" (Hallen, 2002, 181-182). Plumwood traces our ecological crisis to the dual representation of humanity and nature, aligning herself with the views presented by White Jr., Manes and Fromm, in that the western philosophy of reason has led to a false distancing of humanity from its ecological preconditions (Plumwood, 2002, 24). Her further argument leans on ecofeminist notions of the exploitation of the earth through its association with the feminine, establishing our current image of humanity on the rational illusion of the 'white male' (Plumwood, 2002, 22-24 and 42-47). Extending the overt emphasis on reason, as established in the Enlightenment period, Plumwood draws parallels to the mechanization and tailoring of natural systems which took hold through industrialization and the birth of capitalist systems of governance (Plumwood, 2002, 25-26). According to her, contemporary global culture is largely built on these founding principles of western thought, our homogenous cultural values accelerated by globalism, the last remnants of western colonialism (Plumwood, 2002, 20). As such, Plumwood links the rational imaginary of an

ecologically disembodied humanity to the continued growth and acceleration of the ecological crisis, calling for a fundamental shift in our cultural understanding of the human.

The Anthropocene terminology is widely used and popularized in later years and its etymological nuances implies a shared responsibility for the dramatic climatic changes of the last decades. "The Age of Men" denotes the equal share of all humanity in the accumulated consequences of human actions. Sadly, this is not the case and an overwhelming majority of our modern day emissions originate from within the Western world, more precisely, in capital interests which often transcend direct human involvement. In an effort to nuance the use of the "Popular Anthropocene", Jason Moore coined "The Capitalocene" in 2013 (Moore, 2016). He argues that the Anthropocene best serves its function as a term for the geologic epoch defined by an intensified human presence. Yet, its cultural application as a label for the practices that resulted in damaging climatic and ecologic change falls short of its goal. Moore would seem to agree with Plumwood's view of economic reason and the emergence of dominant capitalist systems as a major factor in the provoking of the environmental crisis. The cultural sciences have long been searching to conceptualize the origins and evolution of the ecological crisis. According to Moore, this timeline must be expanded far further back than the 1950's, the suggested starting date of the Anthropocene epoch.

The Capitalocene refers to the long-lasting influence of accumulated capital which resulted in the capitalist consumer society of a modern America. The term borrows from both Marxism and Malthusianism, pointing to the uneven distribution of land, capital, and resources, as well as the longer waves of agricultural stagnation in its meeting with population increase and demographic change (Moore 2016). Compared to the more popular term the Anthropocene, the repositioning implied by the Capitalocene highlights the unjust distribution of both guilt and consequences associated with the modern-day effects of the environmental

crisis on social and geologic demographics. The uneven distribution of environmental consequences, and the importance of capital and financial affluence in evading them, is a topic covered in both fiction and prose. Sadly, it becomes ever more relevant. The Capitalocene will resurface in my later reading of *Gain* and remains relevant throughout this thesis. However, I will be applying the term Anthropocene as this term is widely distributed and recognized as impacting current reimaginations of humanity's relationship with its surrounding environment and creatures.

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism holds a central position in the literary discourse of the Anthropocene era. Environmental literary studies emerged over the course of the late eighties and towards the mid-nineties and was formally consolidated with the establishment of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* in 1993. Cheryl Glofelty, an early and influential pioneer of the movement, gives the following, widely cited, definition:

> Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment […] Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. (Glotfelty, 1996, xix)

Glotfelty thus place ecocriticism in the breaking point between literary and scientific studies, making it appropriate for the Anthropocene context of this thesis. Environmental literary studies emerged at a time of great environmental awareness, the years preceding and predating ISLE's consolidation all scattered with environmental conventions and global calls

for action. However, the origin of ecocriticism as a critical approach predates its 1993 consolidation by more than twenty years. Individual scholars of both literature and culture developed ecologically informed criticism already in the early seventies but failed to organize under a shared critical approach and were thus wrongfully categorized under a variety of disciplinary subject headings (Glotfelty, 1996, xxiii).

The long and scattered history of ecocriticism has resulted in a broad scope of inquiry, its defining questions ranging from portrayals of nature in Shakespearian sonnets to the degree in which the environmental crisis is seeping into contemporary literature and culture (Glotfelty 1996). Generally speaking, early ecocriticism directed its interest towards the tradition of nature writing, taking as its subject the largely male dominated field of romantic poetry, wilderness narratives, and the romantic pastoral traditions following the industrial revolution (Garrard, 2012, 4-5). This early turn of ecocriticism maintained a distinctively literary focus, which sets it apart from more recent developments of cultural and interdisciplinary research stretching across, and outside of, the humanities. In an effort to trace the developments in ecocritical literary criticism, Cheryll Glotfelty identifies three stages: The first stage studies how nature is represented in literature, raising consciousness of stereotypical modes of portrayal, or simply the sheer absence of a natural dimension. The second stage of ecocritical criticism makes an effort to rediscover and recuperate the previously neglected genre of nature writing, highlighting its function as an important transmitter of natural value in an increasingly urban society. The two initial phases are often grouped together in looser accounts of ecocritical development as they are both focused on earlier literary tendencies and traditions. The third phase of ecocritical literary and cultural studies examines the theoretical grounds for a symbolic and hegemonic construction of species within literary discourse. This critique explicitly questions fundamental dualisms present in Western thought such as the ones dividing men from women and separating

humanity from nature and forms a core argument in contemporary ecocritical conversations (Glotfelty, 1996, xxii-xxiv).

As previously stated, ecocriticism as a literary movement was not formally consolidated until 1993. However, many of the movement's central texts and critical theories were formulated already in the late sixties and seventies. It should also be noted that several of the distinguished 'phases' of theoretical development both coexisted and interacted with one another, making any system or categorization suggestive rather than binding (Glotfelty, 1996, xxii). Regardless of names or periodic categorization, all ecocritical work shares a common conviction of the urgency with which we must treat the environmental crisis. The green humanities recognize the current environmental problems as a by-product of a culture rooted in Western philosophy's fundamental human/nature dualism. Historians such as Donald Worster and Lynn White Jr. assign this to a failure of our ethical systems and trace its development all the way back to the Judaeo-Christian view of man as sharing in God's transcendence of nature (see White 1996 or Worster 1993). In this, ecocriticism attempts to renegotiate the relationship between the human and the non-human, creating shared understanding of the interconnectedness which binds all forms of life together. This entails a new understanding of agency and its distribution amongst the organic creatures of the world, decentralising the human subject and viewing it through an interconnected web of life and agentic matter. Further, ecocriticism stands in a special position due to its close relationship with the sciences of ecology, often transgressing disciplinary boundaries in its quest to develop ecological literacy in the general population (Garrard, 2012, 5).

The earliest example of this interdisciplinarity is found in what most cultural and literary critics would agree to be the work which ignited the modern environmental movement. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) depicted the damaging effects of DDT and other pesticides introduced to public and private use in the U.S. after the Second World War.

Carson claimed pesticides were killing not only pests and insects, but animals, ecosystems and humans exposed to it, presenting her scientifically founded criticism in a close to poetic language. The book received harsh criticism from agricultural scientists and the chemical industry. This critique leaned on established distinctions and specialisations of the scientific disciplines, a view of literary or poetic production as unsuited means of communicating scientific findings. Carson's claims were later confirmed by independent scientists, and one might wonder whether her gender, or simply the far-reaching economic and political consequences of her literary presentation, had anything to do with the negative corporate response. Carson represents an early instance of interdisciplinary production across the sciences and the humanities and came to set an example for the dawning ecocritical movement. *Silent Spring* also proves true to what Cheryll Glotfelty held up as the common motivation of most ecocritical work: the shared conviction that we have reached the age of environmental limits and that the consequences of human actions are permanently damaging the earth's life support systems (Glotfelty, 1996, xx).

Silent Spring is a good example of the often critical reception interdisciplinary literary works receives, as it was harshly accused of 'trespassing' into the scientific disciplines. However, criticism might arise from both sides, as illustrated by repeated criticism of Richard Powers' early, and later, work as 'non-literary' in its extensive use of scientific data (Burn, 2008, xxviii). Nonetheless, the nature of ecocriticism encourages interdisciplinarity in all directions, as the interconnectedness of the environmental crisis illustrates the need for a broader narrative understanding of the collaborative "world organism" (Shwagler and Crutzen 2011). In response to such criticism, specifically in the context of the environmental sciences, John Passmore has proposed a distinction in order to mitigate the conflict: a differentiation between the terms "problems in ecology" and "ecological problems" (Garrad, 2012, 6). 'Problems in ecology', he suggests, are scientific problems requiring formulas, the testing of

hypothesises and a clinical laboratory to be solved. 'Ecological problems' on the other hand, are "features of our society, arising out of our dealings with nature" (Garrard, 2012, 6). Passmore's understanding of ecological problems invites a cultural studies approach as it implies a collective societal responsibility, inadvertently calling for cultural change in response to the environmental crisis (Coburn, 1976). This lends credibility to the literary project of renarrating the human reality, inviting the non-human into our ontological understanding of the world.

Ecofeminism and the material turn – towards a posthuman ecocriticism

Ecocriticism owes a great legacy to the critical movement of feminist scholarship, as it borrows from, and coemerged with, prevalent patterns and movements of "un-othering" and renegotiating the affordance of agency. In parallel with the consolidation of ISLE and ecocriticism as a united field of critical analysis, ecofeminism emerged from the feminist movement, highlighting the parallels between natural and gendered exploitation. Ecofeminism performs what I deem a natural extension of the ecological questioning of the humanist subject. By acknowledging how patriarchal thinking often associates nature with women and culture with men, the hegemonic humanist subject authorises similar forms of oppression and exploitation of nature as that of women (Parker, 2008, 359-360). Further developments in ecofeminist thinking extend these parallels to encompass forms of oppression such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species; all deriving from the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature (Gaard, 1993, 1).

Despite many resemblances with feminist theory, early ecocriticism, and the environmental movement at large, relied on patriarchal language in its literary portrayals of place and environment and was, like the majority of political movements of its time, largely

male-dominated (Vance, 1993, 119-120). In the second stage of ecocriticism, the genre of nature writing was promoted in an effort to raise awareness of the delicate beauty and fragility of nature, an image painted and romanticized by predominantly male authors. Metaphors of rape, exploitation and control were common and served to femininely anthropomorphize both land and landscapes. To some second-wave feminists, the image of a female earth, and the idea of women as interconnected and communicating with nature on a deeper and mythical level, had its appeal. However, in later, more constructionist feminist circles, these are seen as condescending, generalist assumptions. Third-wave feminism, alongside contemporary ecofeminism, "reject[s] stable binary oppositions such as women versus men and nature versus culture" (Parker, 2008, 360), thus aligning itself with the values of contemporary ecocriticism.

Present-day ecofeminism challenges ideologies of nature that imagine the human as standing outside of the natural world, comparing this view with Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure and the portrayal of women in cinema and film (Parker, 2008, 360). Mulvey's argument is a formulation of the standard argument regarding female objectification adapted to describe tendencies on the film industry. She claims that the female is viewed and presented through the male gaze; inhabiting no agency of her own and with no ability to direct her own gaze (Parker, 2008, 170). Mulvey's argument is extended to also encompass the largely feminine portrayals of nature; the patriarchal gaze through which it is described and understood, presupposing a passive natural world with no agency. Returning for a moment to Harold Fromm's "From Transcendence to Obsolescence: a Route Map", we understand that this passive vision of nature is still a rather new phenomenon in an historical context. Fromm argues that the industrial revolution affected humanity's conception of its relationship with the natural world. Technology and scientific progress created a false sense of control, removing the once mythical veil of natural transcendence. This stance gains further support

with Christopher Mains' contention that literacy and Christian philosophy have rendered nature silent in Western discourse (Mains 1996). From a similar perspective, ecofeminists "critique the patriarchal ideology that feminizes nature, naturalizes the feminine, and reduces both to their exploitable use value for men" (Parker, 2008, 361). The theory refutes the fundamental *androcentric* (Garrard, 2012, 26) dualisms of Western philosophy and argues for the multiplicity of both the female and the natural subject.

Ecofeminism exemplifies, in its symbiosis with the established tradition of feminism, the inherent ecocritical opposition against binary definitions. Feminism provides a framework for our conceptual understanding of the renegotiated worth and position of a formerly oppressed and objectified subject. As ecocriticism renegotiates the relationship between the human and the non-human, it demands of its readers the imaginative effort of reassessing their ontological reality, accepting new forms of agency while redefining their own 'worth' and function. Over the course of recent decades, scientific literacy has improved our shared understanding of the natural world and our impact on it. In this effort, ecocritical literary perspectives contribute by advocating the introduction of environmental sciences to the cultural sphere. Environmentally oriented authors have developed means of evoking 'environmental affect' in their readers, explicitly utilizing a literary format in the communication of new scientific and cognitive realities. This is explicitly stated by Heather Houser in her book *Ecosickness in Contemporary U. S. Fiction,* as she argues for the relevance of her newly coined trope of ecosickness: "contemporary novels and memoirs deploy affect in narratives of sick bodies to bring readers to environmental consciousness" (Houser, 2014, 2). She explores this phenomenon through the trope of "ecosickness"; a narrative tool expressing the interconnectedness of humans and their environment, utilizing the human body as a barometer for ecosystemic health (Houser, 2014, 2-5). Her approach explores how synthetic replacements, artificial ecosystems or disregard for natural complexity

is affecting the health and psyche of human beings. The trope is also instrumental in reminding readers of their natural dependency as it highlights the relationship between natural and human health, destroying false illusions of the ecologically disembodied human being (Houser, 2014, 3).

Modern societies have created new naturalities, technological instances and services that at increasing rates are replacing those previously provided by ecosystems and natural services. As previously stated, *Gain* exemplifies the complete naturalization of the corporation in Laura's life and narrative (Clare, 2013, 29). The world at large is filled with materiality of varying qualities and with different degrees of organic origin, which all combine into forming the material reality of our modern environment. A recent development in ecocritical theory deals with the increased value and quantity of 'matter' with which we surround ourselves, all of which combines into humanity's new 'post-natural' habitat. Termed "the material turn" in ecocriticism, this development addresses our existential adaptation to a materialist society of intertwined organic and non-organic matter. In this post-natural society non-organic matter is being invested with agency through human acts of construction. Material ecocriticism represents "the search for new conceptual models apt to theorize the connections between matter and agency on the one side, and the intertwining of bodies, natures, and meanings on the other side" (Iovino, S. and Oppermann, S., 2012, 450).

The material turn in ecocriticism represents the theoretical merging of ecocritical and posthuman perspectives in which the distribution of agency plays a central part. As opposed to earlier versions of ecocritical thought, the material turn represents an acknowledgment of the agentic roles assigned to human constructions such as technological devices, artificial intelligences and the globally uniting qualities of these systems. This turn has also been termed the posthuman turn of ecocritical thought, as it expands the realms of agentic distribution beyond previous ecocritical boundaries: "A posthumanist material ecocriticism

begins from the premise of the ecology of collectives and compositionist narratives conserving the new materialist understanding of the nonhuman as already part of the human in the world's becoming" (Oppermann, S., 2016, 283). A depicted in this part of the chapter, I will argue that ecocritical criticism and theory have developed gradually in the direction of an entangled connectedness describing the modern condition of life in the twentieth century. These developments could be seen in connection with the gradually increasing awareness as to the complex problem of climate- and natural change in recent decades. Generally speaking, recent critics seems to be turning towards a posthuman interpretation and approach to questions previously addressed through more traditional formats of ecocritical thought.

Posthumanism

This section will attempt to trace the general outlines of posthumanist thought and literary criticism while relating its emergence to the ontological ambiguity introduced by Anthropocene awareness in the late 20th century. Posthumanist critical discourse carries within it a willingness to renegotiate established notions of the human (Oppermann, 2016, 275). As the appearance of posthumanism correlates with the formal consolidation of ecocriticism, I will argue that the two movements are responses to the same societal changes induced by Anthropocene awareness, both calling for a reevaluation of the humanist paradigms of the past four centuries. Like ecocriticism, posthumanism opposes the fundamental dualisms and ideas of spherical separation which placed humanity at the top of the pyramid of world order. However, posthumanism expands its understanding of the interconnected human being beyond that of ecocritical thinkers. Bruno Latour defines the human being as a hybrid of nature and culture (Latour, 1993, 11), a view which corresponds to that of posthumanist pioneer Cary Wolfe who claims that human and non-human bodies are "networked with each other *and* with technologies, practices, and disciplines" (Wolfe 2013,

34-35, my emphasis). This implies an understanding of both culture and technology as agentic entities which form and inform the human beings through interaction and interchangeability. A further development of this view sees technology as a natural secretion of human activity, one through which we have created new naturalities, no less real, but different, from the one in which we originated (McGurl, 2012, 549-550).

"Posthumanism places the human self in a new conceptual category, fundamentally changing the ambits in which human identity is enacted" (Serpil, 2016, 275). Amongst the theory's core arguments is the illegitimacy of human exceptionalism, a conclusion reached through modern accomplishments in evolutionary biology, biotechnology and deepened knowledge of DNA. The human animal is as ecologically embedded as any other, yet through technoscientific advancements it has gained the power to recreate the very fabric of ecology and biology. This latest move in the sciences, argues N. Katherine Hayles, has joined us together "in a dynamic co-evolutionary spiral with intelligent machines as well as with the other biological species" (Hayles, 2006, 164). Hayles' stand has been characterized by scholars such as Cary Wolfe as tending towards a *transhuman* evolution, rather than the permanent posthuman condition described by Wolfe. Wolfe cites journalist Joel Garreau who states that transhumanism is a movement that is dedicated to:

> the enhancement of human intellectual, physical and emotional capabilities, the elimination of disease and unnecessary suffering, and the dramatic extension of life spans. What this network has in common […] is a belief in the engineered evolution of 'post-humans', defined as beings 'whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to no longer be unambiguously human by our current standards. (Wolfe, 2013, xiii)

Whereas Wolfe's posthumanism understands the posthuman as already integral to the human being, Hayles would seem to see it as a result of technological progress and the consequential co-evolution of humanity and its machines (Wolfe, 2013, xv). My usage aligns with Cary Wolfe's notion of the posthuman: something that comes "both before and after humanism:", "it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world", but it also "names a historical moment in which de decentring of the human by its imbrication in technical, medicinal, informatic and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore" (Wolfe, 2013, xv). These changes both point to, and thrust upon us, the necessity of new theoretical paradigms. Posthumanism engages with technoscientific reconceptualizations of life, blurring the boundaries between humans and machines.

The posthuman imaginary entails the possibility of an ontological crisis as it destabilizes the category of the human. This feature has often been associated with the genres of horror and science fiction, more often than not through the imagery of a transhuman dystopia in which humanity have all but lost to the now more-than-human beings. Mark McGurl observes that in describing the unimaginably large and strong, traditional modes of fiction fall short as their narrative frames are limited by a human scale of experience (McGurl, 2012, 542). This argument resonates strongly with the general tendencies of Anthropocene literature, as this too seeks to narrate events and agencies spanning further than the perspective of a human life. McGurl aims to expose what he terms the comical elements of a posthuman narrative. Here, McGurl employs the concept of "comedy" in its broader, often unfunny sense, associated with canonical texts such as *Le Comédie Humaine* or *Divina Commedia*, hinting at the often thin line separating comedy and horror. His definition of the first and second acts of 'the posthuman comedy of the twentieth century' rests on Henri Bergson's *Laughter* (1911). First comes the act in which humans realize that they can no

longer be understood apart from their technological prostheses (McGurl, 2012, 549). Second comes the further evolution of this mechanical conception, a general acceptation of the mechanical as a natural secretion of human activity (McGurl, 2012, 550). In this, nature reclaims technology, proving itself as the blueprint of all technological innovations, humiliating the most advanced of human designs. Nature proves itself to be the true winner in a posthuman reality, an entity which will outlast human memory and existence despite our best efforts (McGurl, 550).

Posthumanism "does not really mean the end of humanity", but rather "the end of a certain conception of the human" (Hayles, 1999, 286). This turn is evident in McGurl's account of the posthuman comedy, a tale in which the human hubris is dwarfed by the enormity of nature itself. Rather than abandoning the human, posthumanism forces us to reconsider the anthropocentric visions of humanity which have prevailed over the last centuries, taking note of the multiplicity of agentic materialities which unite and interact throughout our experienced reality. The confusion and ambivalence often expressed regarding the consequences of de-centering the humanist subject might stem from what Helena Feder describes as the "two poles of the term": the trans-humanist and the critical posthumanisms (Oppermann, 2016, 277). Both theoretical strands build on the same notion of technology as an intrinsic part of human identity, yet they belong to different traditions and apply disparate perspectives on the nature of the posthuman subject. Transhumanism views the posthuman as an arrival point, past the horizon of our current transhuman phase, a phase in which the human fuses with its technological prostheses and evolves into a new being; the posthuman (Oppermann, 2016, 277). Commenting on this view Cary Wolfe states that transhumanism is in fact an oppositional image to that of critical posthumanism; promoting, in essence, a form of superhuman evolution, adhering to the ideas of anthropocentric humanism (Wolfe, 2009, xv).

Critical posthumanism, or the posthuman philosophy, on the other hand, represents a current phase, an on-going condition which has always been part of our human experience and which recognizes the constructed nature of the 'human' category itself. The posthuman ontology recognizes the multiplicity of existences which combine with and within the human, as well as admitting to earlier humanism's expulsion of this diversity. Rosi Braidotti writes that not all of us can say, with certainty, that we have always been human, nor that this is all we are (Braidotti 2013, 1). I would argue that these statements hint at the movement's established ties with feminism, post-colonial and African American studies, queer studies, ecocriticism and animal studies. Even within the human race, there are groups and factions which have had to fight for their right to be treated as thinking subjects, for their right to be recognized as human. The later turns of ecocritical thought have extended these rights to animals, the planet, and now to the non-organic agentic matter of human creation (Iovino and Oppermann, 2012, 451). Posthumanism opposes the traditional othering against which these movements have made their stand, in essence deconstructing the ethical premises of humanism, and the ideology as a whole.

Serpil Opperman suggests that both posthuman poles; transhumanism and critical posthumanism, intersect in their essential approach to the posthuman subject through an expansion of the term; post-anthropocentric humanism. She argues that "the question here is not to what extent humans are dehumanized in the technological world, but how extensively the nonhuman beings are relentlessly manipulated by the new technologies to meet the demands of global free-markets for foodstuff" (Opperman, 2016, 277). This statement exemplifies the links between posthumanism as a whole, the conservationist movements of the Anthropocene era and recent critiques of the capitalist system to which natural exploitation is largely ascribed. As shown in Val Plumwood's *Ecological Crisis of Reason,* the illusory image of human separation from the natural sphere, the ecological disembodiment

of humanist dualism, has created a system in which humans themselves are manipulated in order to meet the demands of a global free-market (Plumwood, 2002, 22). Attributing cross-species manipulation to the demands of the global free-markets, a posthuman approach might elucidates the agentic nature of capitalist mechanisms in the global system of trade. This creates, from the multitude of human needs and wants, an unchecked agent of capital pursuit, without the ecological considerations of an organic being.

Gain and the Anthropocene

As seen through my presentation of the theoretical schools of ecocriticism and posthumanism, the two movements build on similar foundations of questioning the humanist paradigms ingrained in contemporary conceptions of the human. I have chosen to present the two theories in what I consider to be the most coherent and chronological order, starting with the ecocritical perspectives and moving towards and into the posthuman. This presentation also coheres with the development and emergence of Anthropocene awareness and responses in the literary world. The scholarship cited throughout this chapter displays the general tendency of recent ecocritical thinkers moving into posthuman territory. This "posthuman turn" is described by Serpil Opperman in 2016 as an exploration of "how ecocriticism is becoming more *post*-human and *post*-natural in its questioning of the entrenched notion of the human" (Oppermann, 2016, 273). I argue that the meeting point of the two theories comprise a promising terrain for the Anthropocene literary discourse.

With their parallel emergence in the late 20th century, I see both movements as reactions to geopolitical and societal shifts of this period. Later years have seen a rise in literary interest directed at Anthropocene fiction, with authors and critics alike searching for new conceptualizations of the large-scale environmental changes of which we are a part. Questions of scale, temporality and agency are mentioned as core elements of this genre, furthering the

existential questions posed by traditional dystopian, or horror, literature (Cordle and De Cristofaro, 2018, 2-3). In this context, both ecocriticism and posthumanism are drawn upon for literary insight and reframing of both new and old works of fiction. However, Anthrpocene fiction does not limit itself to these traditionally "subliterary genre forms that have most frequently and flagrantly attempted to cross the threshold into the inhuman and stay there for a while" (McGurl, 2012, 550). In *C21 Literature's* issue on "The Literature of the Anthropocene", scholars draw on a variety of posthuman and ecocritical approaches while commenting on an assortment of literary texts and genres. This collection exhibits the multitude of literary expressions and experimentations which comprise the literary response to the Anthropocene.

Gain's Anthropocene response has a broad reach and could be explored in several distinct directions. The novel exemplifies the consequences ecologically inconsiderate and disembodied capitalist systems in the gradual demise of individual agency. In this vein, a Marxist reading could prove both interesting and valuable as a comment of the role and function of capital in the development of the environmental crisis. The novel's focus on the spread of disease and illness in Laura's body offers grounds for an ecofeminist approach in which the trope of *ecosickness* would be central. I will argue that these and several other approaches all build on the same fundament of an ontologically rooted critique of modernity, and that the novel's core message is that of humanity's journey towards their own demise through collective neglect of their posthuman nature.

The novel's main protagonist is the corporation itself, Clare 'embodies' a disembodied corporate agency, a transhuman dream of both material transcendence and the final victory of reason over emotion. In its disembodied form, the corporation enables its human propriétaires the luxury of growth and capital gains without material and personal consequences. Originally, Clare serves as a prosthetic extension of the human being, yet in time it develops

beyond the comprehension and control of the fundamentally embodied humanity. Through the novel's gradual exposé of corporate history, we witness a dilution of human agency and governance in its continued pursuit of profit, with the corporation eventually operating on scales which outspan both human perspectives and lifespans. In a manner of thought, Clare represents a transhuman fantasy of eternal life and the epitome of human evolution: the corporation may live forever and depends on nothing it cannot produce itself. This echoes humanist conceptions of human nature: dependent on nothing but itself and ignorant of the many ways in which the incredibly small might affect the incredibly large.

Gain's conclusion hinges on a dystopian vision of the future, a world in which nature reclaims the ruins of a human civilization. The novel's continued focus on the disturbed power structures and human alienation from the processes of production as well as the system of which they are a part, comments on grave tendencies of the late 20th century. Further, the novel's structure and emphasis on the entangled nature of its human protagonists' points to the posthuman awareness it strives to install in its readers. The novel presents a dystopian reality in which we already live, unaware and compliant just like Laura. Though the Anthropocene itself was not yet a term at the time of *Gain's* publication, the toxic effects of chemical pollution, natural exploitation and increased synthetization were well known, and play central roles in the novel.

To the best of my understanding, ecocriticism and posthumanism share in their fundamental conclusions, both drawn from the emerging scientific knowledge of biology, ecology and technology; that the human cannot be understood apart from its network of intertwining agencies. From this I will conclude that both the posthuman and the ecocritical movements aim to decentralize the human subject from its anthropocentric reality in an effort to adapt to a new physical reality. In the next chapter I will examine some of the different manifestations of a literary Anthropocene in *Gain*; the representation of scalar inequalities

between Laura and Clare, and the different manifestations of binary deconstructions which take place throughout the novel.

Chapter Two: *Gain* and key features of Anthropocene entanglement

Gain embodies several core features of what recent scholars term Anthropocene fiction (De Cristofaro and Cordle, 2018). Anthropocene fiction encompasses a variety of literary tropes, formats, genres and approaches, which are tied together by their willingness to question the fundamental premises of what it means to exist in and with our changing world. A major thematic and structural feature of Anthropocene fiction is its experimental examination of entangled ontologies as opposed to the fundamental dualisms that inform traditional humanism. In the Anthropocene literary discourse, authors and scholars alike consider how the human being has impacted on its non-human surroundings, and how it must now learn to consider itself in a different context from the previously black and white understanding of 'us' and the non-human 'other'. These explorations are realized through an array of literary expressions and formats, yet we often associate Anthropocene fiction with the theoretical approaches of ecocriticism and posthumanism (De Cristofaro and Cordle, 2018). As established in the previous chapter, these approaches originated within the decade of *Gain's* original publication and have in recent years coevolved into what critics such as Serpil Oppermann designate as posthuman ecocriticism (Oppermann, 2016). Posthuman ecocriticism gives emphasis to the entangled and interconnected nature of all materiality and thus explores "the blurred lines between inorganic and organic matter." (Oppermann, 2016, 273) Similarly, anthropocene fiction engages with questions of entangled ontologies by "troubling our sense of ourselves and of the relation between humans and the planet." (De Cristofaro and Cordle, 1, 2018)

De Cristofaro and Cordle state that a striking aspect of Anthropocene fiction is its literary experimentation and readiness to depart from, or challenge, traditional narrative forms. A compelling example of this is the general tendency towards scalar experimentation,

as writers aim to depict timescales and networks that exceed not only the single individual but the species as a whole. Anthropocene fiction often seems to illustrate the disproportionate relationship between the human being and the planet, both with regard to time, size and current physical impact. Scalar experimentation thus becomes a means of expressing the insignificance and temporality of the human being, a means of both humbling the human ego and contextualizing the ongoing planetary development. In the case of *Gain,* the narrative spans nearly two hundred years of American history, tracking the progress of US capitalism as embodied by Clare, Incorporated. The scalar discrepancy between the narratives of Clare and Laura is immense and the two narratives operate with widely different temporal perceptions and realizations. This is one of two features which most prominently situate *Gain* in the discourse of the fictional Anthropocene.

The novel's scalar discrepancy serves to illustrate the pace and overreaching purpose of modern production and industrial capitalism as far outstripping the temporality and range of action of the human individual. It demonstrates how the combined forces of human creation and activity have grown beyond human comprehension, and how humanity now suffers under its own incomprehension. The capitalist ideals behind modern production result in an unquenchable drive towards expansion, to forever increase and to make "ever more and more elaborate products" (311). This goes on until "the point of progress" (174) can no longer be grasped except by a chosen few, and yet it has become "mankind's sole remaining endeavor." (180) The novel details how the scalar differences between Laura and Clare makes understanding and communication impossible, a fact which causes great distress to Laura as she searches for an explanation to the deterioration of her health and eventual death by cancer. Through its use of scale, *Gain* criticizes the modern human tendency to understand the world uniquely from its own perspective, and the inadequacy of a dualist ontology based in anthropocentric thinking. Scale plays an important role in conveying experiences and

awareness of entangled and interconnected forms of existence, replacing the human perspective with posthuman perceptions.

The dualist ontology expressed by the novel's human characters is harshly criticized throughout the novel as its material consequences grow in size and scope. Laura's narrative demonstrates the repercussions of long term post-natural growth both through its symbolic presentation of chemically produced consumer products and the unnatural growth of her cancer. These consequences are expressed through detailed explorations of the gradually deconstructed dualist perception of objects, commodities and the human 'self' throughout Laura's narrative. The novel is persistent in its listing of modern products of consumption and provides omniscient comments regarding their place and function in Laura's life. Her initial oblivion is contrasted with narrative comments about her utter dependence on products of consumption, and the chemical origin of her surroundings is consistently contrasted with her ideas of an outdated and incomplete past, where the present is the epitome of human ingenuity and the past is merely an evolutionary step to be forgotten. As her condition worsens, however, Laura grows aware of the countless connections which bind her to the material world around her. She learns to reconcile with her material body and thus refutes the fundamental dualist perception of body/mind. Towards the end of the novel, Laura appears to have accepted the entangled state of her post-natural, mechanized world despite her continued inability to reconcile with the scalarly incomprehensible structure of Clare.

Writing in and about the Anthropocene comprises both environmental discussions and a fundamental interrogation of the human and its place within and amongst the non-human world. It is a means of contextualizing and reimagining the human being in a changing world, thus taking on a purpose beyond the aesthetic. Common to both ecocriticism and posthuman approaches are their insistence upon an entangled reality and the deconstruction of the dualist hegemony of traditional humanism. The two theories provide a framework through which

Anthropocene literature has been studied and approached for several years, though the designation of 'Anthropocene' literature itself is more recent. In this chapter I aim to illustrate how *Gain* engages with the Anthropocene tendencies of its time by creating a narrative detailing the long-term effects of unlimited growth. I will argue that the novel exhibits two main realizations of Anthropocene awareness and response through its demonstration of an entangled reality. In the first section, I point to the scalar inequalities of the novel and demonstrate the distinct temporal realities of the two narratives. This supports an understanding of Laura's scalar incomprehension as rooted in a dualist ontology derived from traditional humanism. In the second section I unpack the novel's deconstruction of dualist perceptions throughout Laura's narrative. Special attention is here paid to the presence and altered relationship between Laura and her immediate corporate incarnations such as basic consumer products. I argue that the novel criticizes both the nature and development of a falsely constructed modern condition and presents it as built on the illusion of a binary anthropocentric hegemony. These close readings make up an essential part of *Gain's* textual response to early tendencies of Anthropocene awareness. I wish to establish *Gain* as a valid example of late twentieth century Anthropocene fiction by commenting on its awareness of modes of being and entangled ontologies.

Scale and scalar perception as conveying entangled realities

Gain makes use of the contrasting yet complementary narratives of Laura and Clare in its presentation of scale and time on a level which highlights long-term human impact and development in the modern world. Both stories maintain their narrative integrity if read separately, yet it is in their juxtaposition and complementarity that *Gain* offers its Anthropocene perspectives. The novel describes the relationship between a person and a

corporation and illustrates how one year of human life is connected to and influenced by almost three centuries of corporate development. Between the two narratives, the presentation of scale and time varies widely as they concern two different existential forms. Laura views her existence solely on a human scale and subscribes to a comfortable ontology based on the binary constructs of traditional humanism. The human scale entails a scalar perspective restricted to the immediate presence and surroundings of an individual, rarely expanding past his or her expected lifetime or geographic circumstances. The inadequacy of this scalar understanding is portrayed through *Gain's* historical narrative of Clare's growth and development, from a comprehensible, human scale to an entity beyond human comprehension. Laura expresses a latent awareness of the inadequacy of her human scale yet remains comfortably negligent of her complex and entangled reality. This section demonstrates how the scalar reality of Clare grows beyond the point of human comprehension, and how this is contrasted and problematized through Laura's narrative.

It is important to note the existential premises which are laid out for the novel's Corporate agent. As we shall see, Clare is a non-material entity and exists only in contemplation of the law, its existence is dependent on the shared imagination and cooperation of human beings. However, the non-material corporate structure is reincarnated in its material products, promotional strategies and physical locations. Over time, this creates a dispersed and entangled entity that exists both everywhere and nowhere at the same time, and its structure and scalar reality prove to be incomprehensible to Laura and her contemporaries. The Clare narrative moves outward in its scalar depiction of corporate growth and influence, it expands in accordance with the reach and influence of the corporate agent itself, exceeding the dualist perception of modern human understanding. As such, the novel creates a structure which contrasts the binary 'laws' of a humanist ontology and illustrates an entangled, multifaceted and ductile reality. This points towards a posthuman

ontology. All aspects of corporate structure are interconnected and co-evolving. The corporation mimics a natural ecosystem in its constant recycling of its own by-products and refuses to be pinned down as its existence is both everywhere and nowhere. The novel's treatment of Clare as a character avoids personification, insisting that the corporation is nothing but a set of purposes all marching towards their shared goal; a never ending, self-sufficient machine of eternal growth. Its core purpose is to forever "make more of the same" (311).

Initially, the Clare narrative is presented through the individuals which founded it. The original Clare family and key personalities in the founding phase of the company receive thorough but one-sided attention in the development of their characteristics. The traits, actions and experiences which are emphasized are all of vital importance to the further development of the corporation, and no character is described apart from his or her overarching function within the corporate structure. The early days of Clare's development depended greatly on its constituent individuals for survival, and their personal development was of importance to corporate success and expansion. However, corporate growth reaches a limit beyond which its human founders cannot reach for fear of their own material well-being and economic safety; "The operation had grown too large, profit had gone too wayward for any other solution […] Business now far outstripped the single life's span. Continued competition required a new kind of character" (175). Business has grown larger than a human life, and in order to ensure continued growth, it must be freed from the scalar limitations of the human being, it must become something else. As will be detailed in a later section of this chapter, the early Clares often express a wish for material liberation, a yearning to transcend the limits of a physical existence. These aspirations towards freedom from material bondage, motivated by spirituality, science and economy alike, are fulfilled through the creation of the limited liability corporation. The limited liability corporation allows for individual enrichment

without personal risk by affording the corporation itself the constitutional rights of an individual: “When risks were distributed and liability defrayed, what might collective humanity not accomplish?” (176). The corporation becomes a springboard towards growth past previous limits of material existence. With the legal change to an incorporated business model, the narrative proceeds to do just what incorporation promised; it carries on beyond the lives and generations “of those assembled thousands who would in time, work its engines” (177).

The distributed structure and immense scale of Clare’s present day form is incomprehensible to both Laura and her contemporaries. Its entangled structure and influence are too far removed from the one-dimensional image it paints to its consumers, the human scale through which it communicates with its consumers. From the point of incorporation, the firm undergoes several large scale restructurings in order to adapt and streamline both its production and organization as the world changes around it: “the world had changed immeasurably, and business had changed it” (224). Each of these structural changes moves the corporate structure further away from its human-scale origin, gradually decentralizing and creating a structural web beyond the comprehension or control of even its present day CEO, who views himself as nothing but “the passive agent of collective bidding” (397). Laura fails to understand the distributed and inhuman structure of Clare and wants a personal and human-scale response to her unfortunate fate; she wants someone to sit by her hospital bed and personally apologize for the distress and pain they have caused her (391). Don, her ex-husband, is in many ways Laura’s opposite, the person against whom she has constructed her world-view and dislike of uncomfortable questions and thoughts. During a trip to Clare’s Lacewood headquarters, Don fantasizes about ending it all, dropping a bomb to make the corporation disappear. Yet, when “the imaginary dust settles”, “it dawns on him”:

> How little you'd take out with one erasure, even here. Even if you synchronized the detonations and managed to bring down the whole multi-building installation. One department, one division… one company, for that matter. What difference would it make? A little red ink, a local depreciation, while real commerce went on ebbing and flowing, out there, scattered, pressed thin past finding, in the shape that shared life has taken. (Powers, 292)

Of all the novel's contemporary characters, Don is the only one to arrive at an understanding of the implication of 'shared life'. In his physical experience of the seemingly impressive and substantial Clare headquarters, he realizes its actual insignificance in the larger, disembodied system of a shared global economy. Similarly, Don is able to imagine his own insignificance in a system operating on a transhuman scale, an ability which Laura lacks and which results in her recurring fantasy of the personified Clare during her final days.

The unanimous acceptance of the human scale, which is visible throughout the novel's depiction of its human characters, is rooted in the fundamental dualism of their shared ontology. By organizing the world into 'us' and 'them', or even 'it', everything that is not 'us' becomes foreign, wrong and false. A binary and hierarchal conception of existence thus defends the human scale as the one and true way, and postulates that everything must be understood from and within a human frame of reality. The novel makes use of Laura's fate to illustrate the dangers and consequences of this exclusive use and acceptance of the human scale of perception. Throughout the novel, the narrator serves as a commentator in cases where the human time frame and its anthropocentric perspective fails. The inadequacy of the human scale plays an important part in Laura's final failed attempt at understanding Clare and its role in her sickness and death. Laura's last attempt to reconcile with the corporation which, at the start of her narrative she never thought twice about, is marked by her wish to

understand her fate on human terms of emotion and interaction. She imagines Clare in the following manner:

> . . . a male, in mid-life, handsome, charming, well-built, well-meaning. He comes with armloads of flowers, thoughtful gifts, even a poem. He comes again and again, always finding her at home. But always, the night of romantic dancing turns by evening's end into desperate caresses, a brutal attack, date rape. (391)

Laura's personification of the corporation is understandable given the manner in which Clare is promoted to the consumer, through a strategy intended to induce familiarity and trust. However, Clare is not a human being and does not have the ability to either feel or respond to Laura's emotional requests for human contact. This results in her delusional reinterpretation of her relationship with Clare. In Laura's final moments she imagines Clare as a person she trusts, who then breaks her trust in the most brutal way she can imagine. The chosen metaphor of date rape is telling in its ambiguous ascription of blame; though the blame lies exclusively with the abuser, offenses such as this are often either not reported, or hard to convict due to the element of familiarity and the victim's lack of direct opposition. Laura feels guilt and co-responsibility for her condition and her part in bringing it about, as it was she herself who brought Clare into her home and life, who gave it the position from which it could abuse her trust. Through this last, one-sided 'exchange' between the novel's two main characters, the reader is led to understand Laura's final frustration, yet the greater picture which remained hidden to Laura has also been revealed. Laura and her cancer are both products of a highly entangled world, but this reality is hidden through an insistence upon a binary reality, which wrongfully places the human on top of the hierarchy. What follows will demonstrate how

scale and scalar perception are presented throughout the novel to further establish the novel's theme of entangled existence.

The article by De Cristofaro and Cordle I cited above draws on a term coined by Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland, 'Centennial Blindness', which describes:

> The inability (of humans) to understand future time frames longer than about a hundred years. Many people have its cousin, Decimal Blindness – the inability to think beyond a ten-year span – and some people have the higher speed version, Crastinal Blindness – the inability to think past tomorrow (De Cristofaro and Cordle, 4-5, my parentheses)

Coupland implies that a significant "disjuncture between individual consciousness and self-awareness at a species level" (De Cristofaro and Crodle, 5) is at the root of our environmental crisis. The human being lacks the ability to think beyond the span of its own life expectancy, and in the current economic climate time is rarely spent thinking past the immediate present. Laura's narrative is scattered with examples of this short-term thinking. 'Crastinal Blindness' illustrates the general thought pattern characteristic of her, and our, time. Already in the novel's first introduction of Laura it is stated that she sees "no point in second-guessing yesterday, with today coming on like there's no tomorrow" (6). This early passage states that Laura lives in the absolute present with little to no regard for the past and scarcely any time to think of the future. In a later incident her son throws away a magazine in disgust upon realizing that it is two months old (71). Both of these occurrences assert the symbolic function of Laura's narrative as an account of the general population's ignorance of their relationship to the past. The immediacy of 'today' leads to postponement of 'tomorrow', the promised

land, where all will be solved, and Laura's life "has no problem that five more years couldn't solve" (6). In the end, she didn't get those years and 'today' was all there ever would be.

Where Laura's narrative is anchored in the immediacy of the present moment, the Clare narrative is structured around the quest for continued growth and economic gain, which translates into a vision "of corporal eternity sought by all industry" (60). The corporation seeks immortality and a life beyond the limitations of human embodiment and its purpose is "to beat death" (389). From start to finish, the narrative spans close to three hundred years and details a near infinite increase in both value and turnover when compared to the first sale which ended up causing the company a loss of five cents (39). Over the course of the novel's first half, the Clare narrative traverses half a century and witnesses the complete European conquest of the North American continent; "the rails were down, the wires up, the far ocean reached" (225). The narrative pace surrounding Clare is high and traverse years or even decades in the span of pages, paragraphs and sentences. Its function is not to move the reader, rather it fills the function of an efficient transmitter of information and provides answers and background to the questions posed throughout Laura's narrative. In addition to this, the historical backdrop supplied by Clare provides the reader with both context and knowledge that is clearly missing from Laura's limited perspective on the world. This discrepancy adds to the ironic portrayal of Laura's ignorance, a tragicomic element which is further enhanced by her apparent and semi-conscious awareness.

Laura's personal narrative lacks the historical perspective through which she might understand her own dependency and interconnectedness. As a consequence, the relationship between Clare, her cancer and herself remains a mystery to Laura, and she fails in understanding the larger context of which she is a part. An important theme of Anthropocene literature is this clarification of scalar discrepancies, the act of making the short sightedness of the modern human visible. Laura cannot see beyond the limitations of her human scale, and

neither could the original Clare brothers. The contrasting of Laura and Clare's narrative trajectories makes clear a point foreshadowed in the process of incorporation; the idealistic vision of continued growth and prosperity will prove to be "the nod needed to turn a handful of harmless beans into a beanstalk that, in time, outgrew the world's terrarium […] loosing an unknowable outcome upon its beneficiaries" (180). *Gain* portrays the dangers of a human ontology limited by the human scale of perception. The fundamental anthropocentrism and binary thinking of humanist ideologies are in *Gain* portrayed as a transhuman longing for an improved and further elevated human existence. These aspirations motivate the invention of the limited liability corporation, allowing its beneficiaries to reach beyond former limitations of human unfolding. However, through the narrative contrasts of Laura and Clare, we see how the corporation has grown beyond the scope of a human-scale understanding, and how its growth and rise have come at a cost to its human beneficiaries.

The scalar discrepancy between Laura and Clare is a major actor in the entangled world portrayed in *Gain* and serves to visualize the many invisible connections between the incomprehensibly large and the insignificantly small. Though the novel deals explicitly with the consequences of economic and financial growth, its treatment of the topic echoes Anthropocene awareness in a number of ways. The shortcomings of the human scale are easily transferred to current political debates on the long-term effects of fossil fuels and the limited window in which our combined efforts may still make a positive change. *Gain* problematizes the ignorance of individuals with regard to their shared impact and reciprocal relationship with the governing structures of modern life and their failed ability to reconcile themselves with the materiality of their being. In the following section I will explore how the binary logic of the human perspective hampers the ability of its human protagonists to view themselves in a larger scale of entangled matter and being.

Gain's dualist contradictions and insistent entanglement

Gain communicates the entangled structure of its world in a variety of ways. The novel addresses the many ways in which the human being is entangled with, and connected to, both the natural and the constructed 'post-natural' world, in this it corresponds with the aims of ecocritical posthumanism. The two narratives interact and form a causal relationship across time and place, thus illustrating the interconnectedness of large and dispersed structures such as the modern corporation on the one hand, and the comparatively insignificant life of a suburban real estate agent on the other. Different realizations of entanglement and interconnectedness become visible to the reader through the third-person narration of the novel's omniscient narrator and through different individuals and motifs. I will explore how different realizations of Clare's influence and presence in Laura's life affect her perception of autonomy and the ontological reality she subscribes to. These realizations express entanglement through their deconstruction of the dualist premise of human existential hegemony and are most visible in Laura's relationship with, and perception of, food and other physical substances. Over the course of her disease, Laura's relationship to physical substances and commodities changes because of her growing awareness of her own physicality. As her body deteriorates, Laura grows aware of her own embodiment and the physical factors which have an impact on it. This creates a partial awareness of her own entanglement but leaves her still searching for a 'human purpose' behind her suffering. I want to show that Laura's growing awareness of physical entanglement comments on modernity's narrow understanding of the human being and its physical preconditions. In a wider perspective, the novel can be read as a critique of modern insistence upon the human body as separate from the human mind, problematizing the physical dangers of a neglected posthuman condition. In my reading, I will focus primarily on how the novel traces the development of, and physical awareness connected to, Laura's disease.

The first half of the novel, and Laura's narrative, is characterized by her wilful ignorance of both corporate presence and her own dependency. This is contrasted by a strong narrative emphasis on the actual existence and constant presence of this dependency. The discrepancy between Laura's experienced, or imagined reality, and the narrator's presentation of her situation is significant. From the start, Laura's narrative is connected with the constant presence and influence of Clare, Incorporated. Laura is first introduced to the reader as "a woman who has never thought twice about Clare," yet to whom "the name is second nature" (4). The first part of her narrative demonstrates Laura's limited understanding of her own relationship with the corporation. Simultaneously, it serves to establish the inseparability of Clare and Lacewood, as the town cannot survive without its 'corporate sponsor' (5). The narrator proceeds to list the many ways in which Laura's home is both historically and currently utterly dependent on Clare's favor:

> The town cannot hold a corn boil without its corporate sponsor. The company cuts every other check, writes the headlines, sings the school fight song. It plays the organ at every wedding and packs the rice that rains down on the departing honeymooners. It staffs the hospital and funds the ultrasound sweep of uterine seas where Lacewood's next of kin lie gray and ghostly, asleep in the deep. (5)

The corporation is so constant a part of Laura's reality that it has taken on the invisible quality of 'white noise,' only noticeable in its own absence. This first introduction to Laura provides the reader with all the essential information while simultaneously keeping it to a bare minimum; a description of her love for gardening is cut short by a passage continuing the above-cited listing of corporate influence: "The ballet school sponsor. The ones who pay for the TV that no-body ever watches…" (5). This shortcutting and limitation of Laura's more

individual character foreshadows the novel's core message, all the while establishing a clear precedence for the hierarchical and thematic importance between the two main characters: Laura and Clare. The opening pages serve to illustrate the complete corporate dependency that forms the guiding premise for Laura's immediate existence. She is "a woman who has heard, yet has not heard" (6), who will eventually wake up to find that while she learned to ignore the signals of distress, the problem grew until there was no fixing it.

Throughout the first half of the novel, Laura cannot see herself nor her cancer as a product of her surroundings, rejecting the possibility of corporate blame: "Whatever she's getting by chance or proximity is no more than anyone else in the world is getting" (322). She maintains a belief that if the people in charge knew what was happening, or had anything to do with it, they would do something. It is in Laura's personal journey of rediscovering herself as an entangled being that the novel most vividly communicates its posthuman and Anthropocene complexity. They are visible through what I see as the novel's conscious use of both irony and visual presentations, which contradict Laura's depicted ideas and mode of reasoning. In this way, the novel criticizes the shallow and sometimes contradictory reasoning of the modern mind, and perhaps even the pratfall of both posthuman and Anthropocene aspirations to entangled awareness; when things get too complicated, the human mind ignores them. Laura's wilful neglect of harsh realities or complicated truths is proof of this, especially her continuous wish to "take the world at face value" (182). In fact, her ex-husband's refusal to settle for the "face value" of things is listed as a major factor in their failed relationship. Laura longs for the freedom of unaccountability; "the freedom to breathe, to be ignorant of the worldwide conspiracy, to fuck up sometimes, to say 'fuck up'" (Powers, 183). This is also visible in her choice of an 'uncomplicated' lover, one who doesn't ask any unpleasant questions or queries the status quo. I argue that this presentation of Laura is a critique of modern attitudes and tendencies towards mindless consumption and acceptance of presented

reality. The novel uses Laura to illustrate the dangers of unquestioned consumerism and acceptance of one-sided realities, to demonstrate the importance of critical and constructive coping mechanisms rather than chosen ignorance.

A vivid example of Laura's semi-conscious ignorance occurs as she waits in line at the supermarket. She finds herself behind "two weather-beaten men" with "natural-history skin." They are farmers, "come in from the outlands, like the accidentals that stumble bewildered upon her finch feeder. They've wandered back into town to be hospitalized or die" (26). The particular choice of words paints a clear image of Laura's prejudices towards this segment of the population, a breed marked for extinction by the evolutionary forces of technological progress, so different from her that even simple communication is an impossibility. Her observations of them as 'weather-beaten', and the comment on their 'natural history skin,' further distances them from everything she is and does. They are marked by the elements as their material bodies have responded to the material burden of life outdoors. Not only is this a reminder of the impermanence of bodily virtues such as smooth skin or youth, but it is also the direct opposite of the glossy image of a modern life free of physical troubles or hardships; "Unneeded Suffering is a thing of the past" (207). To Laura, the farmers represent a past unwilling to change, stumbling bewildered into a new world, feeding off it and dying by its graces. The farmers represent what would have happened to Lacewood had the town not been embraced by Clare, Incorporated, and brought forward into modernity.

On the other hand, "farmers always fill her with vague shame. […] the real growers, the only people on earth whose work is indispensable," and this feeling of shame justifies my claim that Laura exists in a frame of semi-conscious denial. Laura judges the farmers and labels them a "scattered Stone Age tribe" (27), effectively marking them for extinction as they are being overtaken by the inevitable "agribiz." Her feeling of shame hints at a hidden insight into the inherent value of these men, representing a past knowledge and an abandoned way of

life. Laura's cart is filled with commodities of altered and entangled natures, chemically mass produced and far removed from the produce they once originated from:

> These boxes of multigrain cereal. The corn dogs that Tim eats unheated, right out of the pouch. Ellen's tubes of fat-free whole wheat chips. The nonstick polyunsaturated maize oil spray. The squeezable enriched vegetable paste. The microwave tortillas. The endangered animal crackers. (27)

The farmers represent the true origin of every product in her cart, "however enhanced and tangled its way here": symbols of a forgotten, or ignored relationship between man and nature (27). This symbolism unsettles Laura, who sees nature and natural engagement as a pleasure and a hobby, its existence susceptible to her will and power. This idea forms from an understanding of the modern human as the binary opposite, and hierarchical superior, to the nature it believes to possess. Yet despite the mastery she experiences when gardening, she knows nothing of the production of food, and her most useful crop is chives. Laura has no knowledge of how things are made. This realization of inability and dependency, half-hidden from her own perception thanks to the fundamental dualism of her ontological reality, is what creates the confusing shame that Laura expresses in this passage. In comparison, she shrinks below those whom she harshly judged lesser than herself.

Laura's shame leads to an early understanding of her learned, yet conflicted, affiliation with the binary world view, which in turn alludes to the true entangled nature of all things. Later passages will illuminate Laura's deeply rooted wish to accept the black and white presentation of the world, which is presented to her by corporations and promotional strategies alike. Though she herself fails to express or acknowledge her own entanglement in these first few sections, the novel itself makes them obvious through its figurative depictions

of the surrounding world. Throughout Laura's narrative, food and modern consumer products play an important role in her reflections surrounding the entangled toxicity of chemically altered products and surroundings. Food and modern consumer products are also repeatedly used to contrast or emphasize symbolic meanings, often in accordance with the tone of the narrator, rather than the sentiment expressed by the current protagonist:

> Two pots in her medicine cabinet bear the logo, one to apply and one to remove. Those jugs under the sink – avoid Contact with Eyes – that never quite work as advertised. Shampoo, antacid, low-fat chips. The weather stripping the grout between the quarry tiles, the nonstick in the nonstick pan, the light coat of deterrent she spreads on her garden. (6)

The above cited paragraph occurs as Laura is first introduced in the narrative and a main point of the scene seems to be her complete unawareness of all and any corporate influence in her life: "she hums the corporate theme song to herself sometimes, without realizing" (6). The passage illustrates the pervasive presence of corporate influence in every aspect of a modern life; "name your life-changing category of substances" (5). The products listed are all chemical in their origin, all far removed from any familiar noun or denomination to inform of its content. During this early demonstration of the chemically entangled components in Laura's life, she is occupied with her gardening, "kneading her fifty square feet of earth" and expressing sentiments of peace while feeling that "no human act can match that of gardening" (5). While harmonically at peace and in tune with her domesticated nature, Laura labors to keep pests and bugs away with an array of chemical weapons assembled from her own kitchen cabinets. Each is toxic only in large quantities, and yet the smallest drop will kill the insects. This scalar relationship between Laura and the insects of her garden will later prove

to mirror the relationship between herself and the corporation, where the scalar discrepancy facilitates the spread of deadly toxins throughout Laura's life.

Harold Fromm, co-editor of "The Ecocriticism Reader" (1996), states that the creation of supermarkets is a major factor to be accounted for in relation to the strengthened perception of the human being as separate from the natural world: "By now, man is scarcely aware that he is eating animals and producing wastes or that the animals come from somewhere and the wastes are headed somewhere" (Fromm, 1996, 35). His argument is easily translated into a critique of modern means of production and distribution, which is the de facto function of the supermarket. He argues that the removal of the individual from the process of production obscures the product's origin to the point of it being unrecognizable and even unsettling to the consumer. This is highly visible in Laura's narrative as it is stated that "her kids do not eat irregularly shaped meals. Her kids would not recognize a roast if one bit them" (92). Whether this refers to the roast as a dish or to the animal from which it originates is hard to tell, nonetheless, the point retains its value. It is hard for the modern person to imagine eating the face of a pig, its intestines or feet, yet this is the contents of most commercially produced hotdogs. Laura's kids would eat fish sticks, but not fish, they are removed from the product they consume, and food has been disassociated from the natural world which produces it. Fromm's point goes further and comments on the easily ignored naturality of the human body itself, as its natural wastes are easily flushed out of sight and its natural odors camouflaged by perfumes and regular washing. As it is, both Laura and her kids appear to be distanced from both their own bodily realities and the natural realities of their consumed products, both edibles and others.

It is important to note that changes in modern production are responsible for the greatest leaps of progress in global human health through the centuries by enabling the production of more food more efficiently and defeating diseases which would otherwise take

millions of lives. The novel comments on this in relation to modern production and distribution of soap:

> Soap is a desperately ordinary substance to us. It is almost as omnipresent as air and water. It is so common that it is difficult to imagine life without it. Yet soap is probably the greatest medical discovery in medical history… Not until modern production came along to demonstrate the virtues of mass production did soap become the property of all people. (21)

Despite the recorded benefits of modern production, the novel points out the negative effects these changes have had on the human perception of its own place and function in the world; the entangled nature of all things living. Fromm's next point supports claims of modernity's reinforcing effects on the binary oppositions between mind/body and human/nature. He states that "in the early days, man had no power over Nature and turned, instead, to his mind and its gods for consolidation" (Fromm, 1996, 35). Meanwhile, the human mind produces a technology that enables his body to be as strong as the gods, which in turn renders god superfluous and subordinates the natural world to human rule. Consequently, "it appears that there is no Nature, and that man has produced virtually everything out of his own ingenuity" (Fromm, 1996, 35). The body is thus associated with the inferiority of nature, to be defeated or conquered by the mind.

The assumed victory of the mind over the body is visible in several instances throughout the novel, most clearly in the treatment of Laura's cancer and the role assigned to her mental defense against the body's production of cancerous cells. Laura's treatment involves several rounds of chemotherapy to break her body down and cleanse it of the cancerous growth in her abdomen. The regimen is presented as a battle against her body, a

chemical cleansing to kill the tumor which is a product of her body's malfunction. In this manner we see the body presented as the 'villain,' a culprit conspiring against Laura's general health, which must now be beaten into obedience in order to save her from herself. During her treatments, and especially her first nights spent at the hospital, Laura's reflections reach new levels of insight, though it is experienced by her as hallucinations. It is only in this half-awake state that Laura seems to truly grasp the complexity of her world and her place in it, a truth too large to be consciously processed. Yet her reflections on this first night of chemotherapy are clear: the body cannot be trusted: "No one really knows their real body […] No one knows what foods really taste like. Wellbeing is nothing but an illusion" (129). Laura thinks these things in the immediate aftermath of her chemotherapy, with her body reacting to smell, taste and feel in new and overwhelming ways. She feels as if she can see through the surface, smell the chemical origin of what she previously thought was a healthy dinner.

Laura's sentiments echo phrases uttered by Benjamin Clare some hundred years before, as he discovered the bodily distortions which to him serve as proof of "the senses' lie" (61). Benjamin is close to death as his ship is surrounded by the treacherous forces of moving pack-ice. In an effort to free the ship and save them all, he disembarks onto the ice and is struck by the absence of smell. After months on board the ship, surrounded at all times by the smells and tastes of a shared life between men and sea, the odor has faded into anonymity. On the ice, in the absence of the ship's constant odor, Benjamin experiences what he believes to be air and scent unpolluted by men: "air before the employment of lungs" (60). This experience proves to him that the sensory experience of the human body cannot be trusted, as the senses will obscure the truth, as they had done to him on the passage towards the South Pole. "The sense's lie" (61) denotes the falsity of a bodily experience and suggests that truth is something to be found beyond the material limitations of the physical body. To Benjamin, this experience would determine his further career as a scientist, eventually leading to his

delusional search for an escape from material existence which culminates in suicide. His attitudes towards the unreliable and untrustworthy nature of the human body are re-enacted in Laura's post-chemotherapy sensations of the hidden reality behind chemically modified foodstuffs (129, 152-153). Ironically, Laura's 'chemical cleansing' makes the chemical nature of her surroundings visible to her and thus starts her journey towards entangled awareness.

There are several instances in which Laura expresses heightened awareness of otherwise ignored and complicated aspects of her reality. These occur under similar circumstances, when Laura is either very sick or tired. The placement of these moments of awareness in periods or situations of extreme fatigue tells of Laura's weakened ability to uphold her semi-conscious denial when under physical pressure, further confirming that her denial is in fact a willed act. Her first round of chemotherapy is the most vividly described of all her treatments as it is also her first encounter with the psychological effects of extreme pain and discomfort. In the following quote, Laura expresses frustration and anguish in face of the never-ending stream of medicines, serums and chemicals which are injected into her body:

> The ingredients multiply without limit, most of them more or less than a month and a half old. How we live now: a new set of doses every day. From experiment to established practice, even before the first round of guinea pigs can sicken or get better. This huge practice, this sacrament, millions of interlocking decisions implemented by tens of thousands of orderlies, each doing his expected turns. An anthill beyond anyone's ability to manage. (128)

In her delusional state, Laura glimpses the inconceivable entanglement of the modern world. Medical science, chemistry, marketing and consumerism are all parts of the same machinery,

in constant search for the next 'new' thing. She uses the anthill as a metaphor for the world's workings; way beyond any single ant's power to change, yet dependent on the upholding of every individual task in synchrony. This is amongst the earliest examples of Laura's awareness of the entangled nature behind the binary corporate façade, though it cannot yet be termed a personal acceptance of her own inherent entanglement. Thus far, her reaction is a response to the impersonal effectiveness of the medical industry, the constant flow of names, pharmaceuticals and diagnoses, a system which dwarfs her perception of 'self' in its insistence on the disease.

Laura's experienced objectification in the eyes of the medical industry takes us back to the fundamental dualism through which the novel's human protagonists frame their reality. Throughout the course of Laura's cancer, she is made aware of her bodily self as opposed to the cognitive self which is emphasized by her surrounding environment and society. In the eyes of the medical industry, the business of 'Medicare', she is distanced from the physical body through their scientific treatment of 'it' as a separate entity rather than as a part of her. Laura reacts to a lack of emotional and personal connection in her relationship with the medical industry and wishes to be recognized as a person rather than a diagnosis, a living being rather than a customer, bordering on a product; "what she needs more than anything at this moment is to talk. Just talk to a real human being who sees she's sick and isn't selling anything" (213). Though her attitude and understanding of herself and the world are highly influenced by these same dualisms that now repel her, she struggles with the sudden backlash as they affect herself: "Laura isn't keen on having her system referred to in the third person while she's still in the room" (82). The body is not recognized as a part of the 'person' and is rather viewed as a malfunctioning shell or vessel. The body is seen as a workable project; a machine sent to maintenance which she will be able to pick back up at a given time and place.

The body's inferiority to the mind calls to mind both humanism's binary constructs and Fromm's argument cited above. Both Laura and her contemporaries place great emphasis on the power of the mind over the imperfections of the body, as did the early Clares and the prodigious Benjamin who sought to transcend material bondage and the bodily limitations of existence. In Laura's narrative, this cognitive emphasis has taken on a new dimension as she rents "cancer tapes" which train her in visualizations meant to aid her recovery: "Surround the tumour in a solid silver casing, and just throw it away…" (156) This belief in the supposed mental victory over a physical disease causes Laura great struggles as her cancer progresses and it becomes apparent to her that she might not survive. Her surroundings keep insisting on life as the only option; the "healthy people hold all the cards" and don't much like sick people being around as they remind them of their own mortality. Death is seen as the final defeat: "Cancer is a mind disease. She has brought this disease on herself by being unhappy […] And now she must fight it mentally" (360). The continuous insistence upon the sovereignty of the mind over the body rings throughout the novel, from all of its human voices. Yet the only example the novel provides of how the species might have "sprung from its waking nightmare of infection and pain," (166) as was the early Clare's objective, is death.

The duality of mind and body places the responsibility of death on a weak mind, both life and death are the private responsibility of the body's material proprietor: "Even now, she (Laura) is responsible for her own ultimate cure. And if she dies, it'll be her own fault" (360-361, my parentheses). This quote plays into the commercialization and privatization of the body which occurs through late-capitalist influence. This was briefly mentioned by Ralph Clare in his article "Your Loss is Their Gain" from 2013: "Your body needs the products developed by science and technology in order for you to control it because it is something that you own, something that requires upkeep, as would a garden or a house" (Clare, 2013, 39). Ralph Clare maintains that the privatization of the body, in economic terms, is what produces

both Laura's experience of social and emotional distance from the medical professionals and her own escapist wish to take things at face value. "The thing to fear, for the patient who "owns" her disease and for the doctor who treats it, is the acceptance of *personal* responsibility – the very thing that the limited liability corporation is able to elude thanks to its clever legal structure" (Clare, 2013, 40). This is visible in *Gain* through several realizations, one of which is its focus on the unreliability of insurances, and the returning question of financing medical treatment: "Jimmy had *in*surance, too. Not that they ended up paying for much of anything. Funny about those people. They're supposed to spread the risks around? But they only want to pay if they know they can win" (214). Laura remortgages her house in order to afford a pain relief 'that actually works', medicine that was not covered by her insurance despite its known beneficial effects. Despite the purpose of an insurance, the corporations will only pay for the cheapest option and accept no responsibility outside of their established terms and conditions. This all serves to further defend the claim of a failed duality in the depicted society's understanding of the human body as separate from, or a lesser part of, the human being as a whole.

Laura is told to fight cancer with the power of her mind, yet the damaging bodily effects of both chemotherapy and cancer affect her cognitive capabilities. She cannot think, move or eat, yet still she is told to "Fight it. Attitude is everything"; "The mind is your best chemo. You have to picture yourself well again, and then you will be" (264). Laura experiences how the mind cannot function without the body. As she decides to stop her last rounds of chemotherapy, life unknowingly returns to her body: "Each day she gets a little strength back, now that the atomic devastation lets up. Her body, not knowing any better, rallies. She's like a science-fair seed planted upside down, spinning, righting itself by the laws built into growing things" (332). The quote echoes a different statement made in Laura's voice at an earlier moment in her narrative; Laura describes the impossible fight of a common

flicker trying to sink a hole in the "polyurethane, simulated-wood-grain" cover material of a newbuild house in a "treeless, bald lot" resembling a "lunar landscape" (31). Laura's body, like the common flicker, does not know how devastated its livelihood truly is and refuses to give up when presented with a convincing illusion of its desired habitat. Despite the obvious impossibility, neither gives up, as "living things never know when to" (31). In this, Laura mirrors the actions of a bird, and more importantly, metaphorically associates her body and self with the unreasonable natural world which never knows when to give up.

Laura's death serves as the final proof of the fallacy of a dualism that separates the human body from the human mind, even though she herself still cannot consciously comprehend the complex entanglement which resulted in her demise. Her battle against cancer and its accompanying practical, economic, social and societal challenges serves to highlight the impossibility of defining any one villain to blame for her disease. Rather, it is the complex entanglement of substances, intentions and beings which results in the cancerous epidemic that Laura and her contemporaries are caught in the middle of. This is perhaps the novel's foremost, and overarching example of entanglement and also its critique of a one-sided mental perspective which inhibits deeper understanding and the necessary perspectives on a changing world. The impossibility of distinguishing a single source of chemical poisoning refers back to "the day's background radiation," the invisible 'white noise' made up of sounds, smells and substances, that for Laura has come to be "a shorthand for freshness" (53). In its constant presence, the combination of influences has become a natural presence in Laura's life, one she relies on as a constant point of reference, and one which, in the end, she realizes that she cannot live without:

> It makes no difference whether this business gave her cancer. They have given her everything else. Taken her life and molded it in every way imaginable, plus six

> degrees beyond imagining. Changed her life so greatly that not even cancer can change it more than halfway back. (364)

The novel makes a point of the impossibility of assigning blame to any one source and in doing so proves the success of the corporate project: "an ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without individual blame" (180). The modern corporate structure is so widely dispersed that even Clare's present CEO sees himself as nothing but "the passive agent of collective bidding" (397). Nobody is in charge and nobody is to blame, "nothing is safe. We are all surrounded […] Life causes cancer" (323). Towards the end, Laura understands the interconnectedness of her surrounding world, and has drawn new lines between the 'us' and 'them' of her existence, finally understanding her own embodiment and its natural preconditions. Yet despite the corporation now embodying the 'other' to her naturally embodied being, her realization also leaves room for an acknowledgement of her own technological entanglement. The role and function filled by corporations is the life and 'self' which she is losing through cancer.

The objective of this chapter has been to show that *Gain* employs key features and techniques of Anthropocene literary presentation in its portrayal of the larger-than-life structure and influence of corporations in modern America. Through this presentation, the human being is shown to be both the culprit and the victim of a new and altered world. Laura partakes in the system which kills her, and she would do it again if given the chance. The system is so integral to her understanding of life that they cannot be separated, despite the consequences. This represents the damaging effects of long-term binary perceptions of the human being, and further symbolizes the paradoxical relationship between humanity and the environmental crisis which ushered in the Anthropocene era. The novel investigates the ideologies and ontological perceptions which led to and continue to strengthen the power

imbalance between consumer and producer, as well as the disappearance of human 'producers' as the corporation evolves to fill this function. I claim that *Gain* demonstrates the fallacy of a human identity based on a binary understanding of mind and body, and thus rejects the founding principles of traditional humanism. The novel seems to suggest that the failure of its characters to situate themselves as posthuman entangled beings result in Laura's determinist and postapocalyptic vision:

> Life is so big, so blameless, so unexpected. Existence lies past price, beyond scarcity. It breaks the law of supply and demand. All things that fail to work will vanish, and life remain. Lovely lichen will manufacture soil on the sunroofs of the World Trade. (391)

Towards the end, Laura grasps at the entangled interconnectedness of all life, yet deems the human project a failure through its binary identity and co-evolution with corporate reasoning of supply and demand. Her vision sees lichen and soil reclaiming the World Trade, a powerful symbol of nature outlasting current systems of human domestication. Once again, this hints at the temporality of human existence, and the underlying, vast timescales of the Earth's geostory which will outlast all human endeavours.

Gain forfeits the human scale in favour of a vaster understanding of entangled life and criticizes the binary understanding of human nature. The novel uses its human protagonists' binary logic to illustrate how humanism, when taken to its extreme, has created a dream of transhuman ascendancy which in turn damages the entangled preconditions of both human and non-human life. Chapter Three will examine how *Gain* realizes this critique by its personification and granting of agency to Clare, Incorporated. I will argue that the corporation

takes on the form of a transhuman agent and grows past both human perception and command thanks to the binary logic of the novel's human characters.

Chapter Three: The transhuman corporate agent

This chapter will argue that the representation of Clare, Incorporated as a transhuman agent suppressing human agency, serves to illuminate the ontologically rooted demise of both human and non-human material bodies through the toxic binary of traditional humanism. *Clare, Incorporated* is constructed as a transhuman agent, immortal, disembodied, and seemingly unbound by material consequences. The novel's chosen means of illustrating this new agent's emergence serves as an impact assessment of the long-lived binary illusions derived from traditional humanism. Imagining themselves as progressively disembodied, humans justify the creation of an entirely disembodied corporate agent, whose production of technological prostheses in turn enforce their illusion of disembodiment. The novel presents its human protagonists trapped in this dualist ontology and alludes to an apocalyptic future. Based on the evidence presented in Chapter Two, I claim that the novel clearly illustrates how the modern world favors a transhuman agent, unbound by material and embodied restrictions, over humanity's embodied reality. Clare's agency transcends that of Laura and her contemporaries, and the power of individuals gradually diminishes throughout the novel's account of American corporate history.

The novel ends with the culmination of Laura's disease, and finally her death. These final scenes exhibit determinist elements and the sensation of inevitability both through Laura's internal monologue and through the use of explicit images of endless chains of chemical, corporate production. In its final sentence, *Gain* confirms its determinism by dictating the repetition of history: Tim, Laura's son, has been working towards a technological solution to the malfunctioning of genes and proteins in the human body, a cure to what once killed his mother. They succeed in creating a formula through which "people might create molecules to do anything. The team found itself staring at a universal chemical assembly plant at the level

of the human cell" (405). As the potential of their discovery settles in, Tim suggests to his group that "it might be time for the little group of them to incorporate" (405). Their invention carries the potential to cure cancer or any other malfunction of proteins or molecules in the human body. At the same time, this entails the potential to permanently alter and improve the human being in ways previously unknown. Clare offered humanity an illusion of transhuman liberation from their material embodiment, carried out through technological prostheses. Tim's invention carries the promise of a permanent solution, yet the aspect of incorporation indicates his lack of understanding of the purpose of the transhuman entity itself. This vision serves as a continuance of the novel's trajectory: a determinist repetition of yesterday's mistakes. Despite his mother's death, Tim sees continued growth as the only solution and thus reengages with the forces that killed her in the first place, seemingly abandoning human agency and control over his creation to reach even further.

The novel demonstrates a modern, technological environment's natural affinity with the disembodied corporate structure through the distinctive presentation of its two main characters. Consequently, embodiment proves deadly in a system that has entirely accepted the binary split of mind and body. *Gain* performs a critique of contemporary practices and capitalist institutions such as the corporation by illustrating how a human subscription to the binary ontology furthers their participation in these damaging systems. Clare, Incorporated arises from the technologically informed and rationalized humanism of the late Enlightenment, a mode of thought through which the human being wishes to transcend "the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether" (Wolfe, 2009, xv). Posthuman thinkers have labeled these tendencies intensifications of humanism, rather than the rejection of all humanist paradigms and a move beyond the human being's previous limitations. Transhumanism, the name of this school of thought, aims to continuously enhance the human experience by further removing it from its animality and natural roots. As such,

transhumanism works against the ideals of constant entanglement and interconnectedness which characterize posthumanist ideas. The evidence gathered in Chapter Two suggests that Clare is constructed in the mental image of a transhuman extension to the human being itself, one that will allow growth and development beyond the limits of material embodiment. However, with the corporation's attainment of constitutional rights, it becomes a legal entity on its own, thus losing its material 'anchor' and developing into true disembodiment beyond the comprehension of its human creators.

Laura's narrative shows her inability to comprehend her own embodiment and the material entanglement of her existence. She lives in an illusory transhuman existence and experiences shameful superiority over farmers that she deems to have refused the transhuman transition. Cancer contributes in various ways to the gradual unveiling of her entangled environment. Laura grows aware of Clare's incomprehensible and inescapable presence in her life through the dismantling of binary constructs and absolute truths. She gradually learns to see herself as part of a larger machinery and thus grows to accept her own posthuman nature. According to Gary Wolfe's definition of the posthuman, Laura, and all human beings have always been posthuman: it is not a point of arrival, nor a transitional phase; it is merely the undeniable entanglement and interdependency of all things. The posthuman derives its meaning from the inherently entangled nature of all beings; the 'post' refers to a forward motion that leaves dualist humanism behind and opens to new configurations of agentic realization rather than the strict anthropocentrism of past times. Posthumanism is thus not the abandonment of the human being, but rather a new way of conceptualizing it. Through humanity's inability to reconcile with this idea, Laura and her contemporaries are trapped in Clare's prosthetic system of transhuman illusion.

Clare as a transhuman agent

As shown in Chapter Two, *Gain* presents its readers with two central characters, one of which is thoroughly at the other's mercy. Laura appears trapped by corporate structures and economic responsibilities, which are both shown to determine her daily choices and influence her sense of 'self.' In her understanding, these are the systems and constructs which distinguish her from the less evolved past and marks her as belonging to the progressive present, the latest step in human evolution. Towards the novel's end, Laura's awareness of the damaging effects of these presences has grown, yet she remains unable to act on or alter her outward demeanor in accordance with this knowledge. This is perhaps the most obvious example of Clare's rise to agency and further demonstrates how the human idea of its own participation in the transhuman evolution has deepened its now inferior position. As discussed in Chapter One, the distinction between transhumanism and posthumanism is fleeting and perhaps less established than humanism. Throughout this chapter, the definitions in play remain those articulated by Cary Wolfe in his influential work "What is Posthumanism" (2010). I understand transhumanism as the continual strive for human improvement through prosthetic devises and structures, all rooted in rationality and critical reason, in essence, an "*intensification* of humanism" (Wolfe, xv). Posthumanism, on the other hand, opposes "the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself" it "names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatics, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore" (Wolfe, xv). *Gain* thus presents us with the posthuman reality of a modern world, all the while illustrating the hazards of humanity's long-lived trans*humanist* fantasy.

From the get-go, the novel establishes that the early Clares view their quest for economic growth and scientific exploration as a defining feature of humanity itself: "No one knew just what was plausible in this world, what laughable, what tragic, what obligatory, what

contemptible. But man possessed the means to find out. Discovery was man's duty, until all the earth's surfaces were lit" (58). A similar utterance is made using Laura's voice as she contemplates how the sun generously and eternally spills its energy on the earth "for no good reason except that it knew we were coming" (5). These uttered perceptions of humanity's relationship to the earth and the natural world speaks of the deeply rooted binary constructs which inform their ontological understanding. They all view the non-human world as instrumental to human flourishing, but without agency or a purpose of its own; a passive counterpart to human agency. This dualist perception opens up the non-human world for intervention and improvement according to human needs and wants: "If Nature were no more than eternal transformation, Man's meet and right pursuit consisted of emulating her" (88).

As described in my discussion of Benjamin Clare's suspicious relationship with his own materiality in Chapter Two, the binary understanding of humanity entails a hierarchal relationship between the mind and body (166). The body is perceived as part of the material reality from which the human wishes to liberate itself through technological inventions and prosthetic devices. The limited liability corporation was invented to function as a prosthetic device facilitating economic growth beyond the reach of a materially bound human being. In the mid-eighteenth century, commerce reached its limit to growth, hindered by personal economic hazards and geographic dispersal of ventures into new territories. The potential material consequences of continued growth proved too great to any individual bound by the human scale and physical embodiment. Business had grown beyond the span of a single life, and "continued competition required a new kind of character" (175). The answer presented itself in the disembodied, statutory enabled, and socially constructed corporation: "the law now declared the Clare Soap and Chemical Company one composite body; a single, whole, and statutory enabled person" (179). The corporation was created with the core purpose of transcending human limitations such as time and space: "an incorporation could live forever.

It carried on beyond the span of any owner's life" (177). As such, the limited liability corporation embodies the transhuman ideal of extended humanism's binary fundament: it allows for individual profit without individual responsibility and extends beyond human lifespans and the material concerns of embodied beings. Throughout the novel, Clare fills the symbolic function of a genuinely disembodied and transhuman being, illustrating in its comparison to Laura the fallacy of her binary and transhumanist conception of the contemporary human being.

The Clare narrative provides several examples of its underlying transhuman conviction, both subtle and more overt, as do both Laura's narrative and the intersecting graphic bytes of text, which appear at infrequent intervals throughout the novel. However, the major promotor of Clare's transformation from prosthetic devise to a governing agent is the human belief in its own transhuman process. Through the binary ontology of humanism, the novel's human protagonists view their growing dependency upon technological prostheses as a final liberation from the restraints of a material world. In this, Clare's core production of soap comes into play as a symbolic remover of dirt and disease because "unneeded suffering is a thing of the past" (207). Soap serves as a 'gateway drug' to other consumer products, and Clare prays on this conviction to engage its customers in a discourse of modern production as the provider of all 'cornerstones of rectified living' (222). By the time of Laura's narrative, consumer products, ultra-processed and pre-packaged, have become symbols signifying both class and social standing. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, Laura believes herself to be so different from her local farmers that even simple conversation is impossible (27). They practically belong to a different species, and their laws of existence are different from hers. In Laura's world, the market rules all, experience tells her that the farmers are "irreplaceable. But not much for the market" (27). From this, we understand that a person's worth is directly derived from his or her ability to conform to the constantly evolving market mechanisms,

which translates into their willingness to accept the transhuman fantasy that drives the modern market.

The transhuman fantasy of disembodiment and material independence is sold by corporations such as Clare through products of promised progress. An early example of promised progress, or the subscription of a large group to the transhuman fantasy, occurs early in the novel. In the novel's opening pages, the reader is presented with the local myth of Lacewood's belief in its own cunning, as it 'tricked' its way to fortune: "At its deciding moment, when the town had to choose between the sleepy past and the tireless nineteenth century, it did not think twice. With the ease of one born to it, Lacewood took to subterfuge" (2). The early inhabitants of Lacewood went to great lengths to imitate what they imagined the prosperous Mr. Clare might appreciate: they mimicked their idea of progress, a charade quickly seen through by the affluent visitors, yet which proved to illustrate their willingness to adapt, accept and change:

> Lacewood decided to doll itself up, to look like what it thought Clare wanted. Weeks before the visit, the town began papering over its crumbling warehouses with false fronts. every boy over ten turned builder. The mayor even had two blocks of plaster edifices erected to fatten out anemic Main Street. (2-3)

When Mr. Clare reluctantly accepted "the massive tax concessions proffered him in perpetuity, and closed the deal" (4), Lacewood praised itself for decades, if not a full century, to come, as their efforts appeared to produce the sought-after result. In reality, the choice came down to pure logistics, the distance between Lacewood and Chicago, and the townspeople's willingness to accept, adapt, and work. Clare came to Lacewood because its inhabitants had already bought into the corporation's most important product: "The place was

determined not to remain a farming hamlet forever. Lacewood knew that what it wouldn't sell, Peoria would cash in on. Those who refused to choose the Gilded Age would be left gelded" (250). They believed in the promise of progress and coming prosperity, to be liberated from the material dependency of agriculture, and brought into the perceived independence of "alchemical transformation" (2).

Gain portrays the corporation as a vendor of the disembodied transhuman illusion. The consumer might approach final transcendence through the corporation's products and services, the technological prostheses, and with a new product never far away, the need to purchase ever more is continuously maintained. The transhuman illusion of obtainable disembodiment through consumer products is firmly established in Clare's consumer base by the start of Laura's timeline. The use and function of commodities have been gradually obscured and are no longer immediately visible to consumers. The very presence of a commodity seems to justify its need, and the consumer now trusts that the system will provide whatever they need, even if they do not yet know it themselves:

> Ellen comes down to inspect the booty. She roots through the sacks, extracts a newly requested commodity. Peanut sheets. Laura is not sure what problem the sheeting of peanuts actually solves. What was wrong with yesterday's peanut concept? The little oblong things? Or butter for that matter? Sheets must be more manageable. More predictable somehow. Flatter. (29)

Laura questions the constant innovation, which leads to the dismissal of yesterday's concepts, yet her doubts are silenced by her more profound conviction of the power and righteousness of progress. Like Lacewood's early inhabitants, Laura is willing to accept the future and its promise of prosperity. She has bought into the idea of eternal growth and clings to her idea of

the prosperous future, despite any present signs of distress or personal quandaries; "Tomorrow" is "the only lever long enough to dislodge today" (83). If the peanuts have changed, it must be for the better, because if not, then why would they have changed at all?

The Clare narrative illustrates the gradual process of affirming its position as a governing force through training its consumers in the mastery of filth and misery (221). In the years following incorporation, Clare did not sell commodities; it offered a whole new way of life; it sold long-trusted and familiar friends, all for the consumer's best (220). This period of Clare's history is the last to be narrated through the Clare family's somewhat personal framing. Peter Clare was an eccentric man, "the last company officer who did not work his way up through the ranks" (219), and the first to grasp the power of promotion. Peter is presented as a visionary, the first one to see that through the combination of direct consumer advertising and the promise of coming prosperity, a new "unlikely but adapting creature" (225) was forming. As a consequence of Peter's 'consumer training program,' the existential premises of the human being are imaginatively shifted from the primary needs of food and shelter towards the need for technological progress and industrial production. Only through continued progress would the race realize its full potential, and the modern man, woman, and child had needs that only industry could meet. In exchange for their working hours, factory workers could now spare themselves the uncertainties of agricultural life by exchanging their salary to cover their basic needs and simultaneously freeing up all the time in the world to self-realization, a new luxury. As such, the human being was 'freed' from its material bondage by accepting the corporation as a mediator of its needs and wants: "An infant industry" would spring up to meet every imaginable human desire, and several arose to meet desires that were not yet human" (330).

In the later sections of the novel, as Laura's condition worsens and Clare grows ever more independent from its human boards and company officers, the corporation's narrative

treatment takes on a new form. Continued growth takes its toll on corporate organization, and comprehensive restructurings occur at key intervals, each resulting in the corporation growing more dispersed until reality presents itself as "nothing but a series of little Clares, each with its own purpose, spreading down the fiscal quarters without end" (397). The choice remains the same at each restructuring: Clare's choice is always "a simple grow or die. As with other creatures in the upper food ranges, its search for more fuel was intermittent but continual […] the higher it rose, the fuller it expanded. And the more the blimp swelled, the smoother it rode" (267). The corporation is founded on a belief in continued growth as the only answer; even in questions of overproduction its founders saw no solution "but to cut costs and become more efficient" (159). Throughout this growth, the laboring forces and production's human constituents grow small in comparison, and the novel affords ever-increasing attention to the logistics of economics and corporate politics. In this, Clare's narrative makes its final shift from a human scale to a transhuman corporate scale.

The late restructurings in Clare's internal organization and operations mark its final transition beyond the human scale. This shift is pivotal in the narrative's overt treatment of the corporation's human constituents as non-agentic as opposed to sentient and contributing parts in the overall operation. The early Clares maintained a business vision determined to change material existence for the better; they sold a transhuman dream: "The promise of a modicum of well-being for anyone who stayed the material course and washed frequently" (284). As the novel approaches its later sections, the long term effects of incorporation on the relationship between human beings and the corporation start emerging:

> Times had changed for business, or rather, business had worked another change upon time. The days of people working for other people were over. The company was no

> longer a band joined together for a common purpose. The company was a structure whose purpose was to make more of the same. (311)

Gain tells of how business changed American history by becoming the main purpose of its social project, a trajectory foreshadowed in the early sections detailing initial incorporation (180). The project which once bound humans together is now shown to separate them: "No person could do his partner's task any longer, or even know what his partner did" (311). In this manner, the novel comments on the increased and intensified specialization which accompanied modernity and the mechanical nature of mass production; "those who hauled the yoke of incorporation began to feel the mechanical servitude that awaited humanity" (285). Thus, one can conclude that restructuring, as an inevitable consequence of incorporation, results in the gradual commodification of the corporation's human constituents, due to the corporation's eternal pursuit of growth and the rational increase of profit at all costs.

By describing the loss of agency experienced by Clare's factory workers, the novel effectively communicates the transferal of agentic power from the human being to the transhuman corporate structure: "Labor had long since come to realize its standing in production. The job position filled the person more than the person filled the job" (311). Clare's narrative clearly communicates that both workers and managers alike have come to realize their insignificance in the corporation's larger structure. A previously cited example is the corporation's present-day CEO, who recognizes his position (397) yet remains fascinated by the structural power that now binds them all together in an efficient yet unconscious network of coordinated purposes. Though separated by specialization, "every hand was bound more tightly than ever into the complex task of making ever more and more elaborate products" (311). Though this explains the part played and understood by the corporation's employees, Laura remains distinct from this group as "she does not work for the corporation

or for anyone the corporation directly owns. Neither does any blood relation, or any loved one" (5). As she has no conscious relationship with the corporation, Laura's awareness of its influence and sovereignty is close to nonexistent at the novel's start; this illustrates the general population's complete seduction and the victory of the transhuman corporate dream. In effect, Laura and her contemporaries are as much part of the corporate machinery as the factory workers; they take part in the "assembled thousands who would, in time, work its engines" (177) through economic exchange and interdependency with the global society.

The corporation's production is presented as increasingly unaffected by material factors and grows to resemble a closed ecosystem in its internal recycling and closed production loops. Corporate production grows in complexity while simultaneously diminishing its external dependency. Thus, the corporation lives up to its transhuman ideal in that it grows independent of the unreliable and 'lesser' Nature, ultimately striving for self-sufficiency. At the same time, corporate existence depends entirely on the willingness and acceptance of its united consumers, and thus the human factor becomes the most important to manipulate to facilitate further growth. The corporation proves to be a disembodied being, independent of the natural materiality from which humanity sought transcendence, but still profoundly dependent on the material beings which created it. The manipulation of its consumers thus becomes the corporation's main objective to ensure further growth. This is visible, amongst other places, in the importance of selling not a product but a way of life. By prodding humanity into accepting a new way of life, the corporation effectively enslaves its former creator, locked in mechanical servitude of the structure which claims to bring material freedom. In reality, the corporation offers only a different approach to the material dependency installed in all embodied beings. Clare's fundamental existential precondition is thus the collective agreement of humanity in its shared life project of corporate preservation.

In the novel's final pages, a collapse of consumer support occurs as new generations discover the devastating consequences of modern production. This departs from previous threats of collapse in the Clare narrative, as it is rooted in the active reflection of large consumer groups rather than 'cold' intentions such as war or economic collapses. This collapse is incomprehensible to the corporate agent, as it has grown to consider its consumers as passive rather than active subjects:

> The Clare brass failed to fight this collapse in reputation, because it couldn't comprehend it. The public had turned not just against Clare but against industry and enterprise. Now that business had delivered people from far worse fates, people turned against the fate of business. Like the careless grantees in fairy tales, they forgot the force that freed them to complain in the first place. (383)

Though the corporation is quick to rebrand under the widespread effects of words such as "global" and "green", the above-cited paragraph serves as a clear reminder of the corporation and its consumers' inert entanglement. This occurrence reframes our conception of the corporate agent and mirrors the ontological development between humanity and its material environment. Bruno Latour describes the 'newly' discovered reciprocal relationship between humanity and the earth as the physical consequences through which humans are now relearning to treat the earth as having agentic potential, rather than as passive objects (Latour, *Agency at the Time of The Anthropocene,* 2014, 3-4). Clare's late discovery of the real power of its human constituents hints at a similar realization, it also suggests the possibility of lasting change. However, as in the case of humanity's relationship with the earth, the transhuman corporation remains locked in established patterns, and humanity's uproar might have come too late.

The transhuman corporate agent remains utterly dependent on its consumers' synergetic movement and attitudes despite its disembodied and largely self-sufficient structure. Its disembodied structure, material independency and transhuman immortality marks it as a clear example of the humanist dream of transhuman disembodiment. Despite visible markers of success, the corporation fails to serve as a valid extension of human potential due to humanity's own failure in situating itself as a part of the shared posthuman existence. A transhuman extension can never be valid due to the posthuman nature of the human race. As such, the corporation evolves in the direction of intensified humanism, a continuous evolution towards the transhuman ideal. In its transhuman disembodiment, the corporation's existence depends entirely upon the human species and its continued belief in limitless growth and its own binary origin. The corporation evolves into a superior position and adopts a view of its constituent human beings as lesser and passive. It perceives itself as a bringer of justice and prosperity and is thus entitled to its consumers' support and loyalty. In this, we see a reversal of humanity's position of power and a possible yet downplayed parallel to the futuristic fictions of cyborg revolutions and the enslavement of humanity. The novel presents a vision of the modern world robbed of humanity's entangled awareness and presents the dangers ahead, given its continued development.

A posthuman comedy?

In "The Posthuman Comedy" from 2012, Mark McGurl describes the posthuman condition in parodic relation to Dante's *Divina Comedia* and *La Comédie humaine* by Honoré de Balzac. By associating the posthuman with these works of, in their time, contemporary commentary, McGurl plays on the "frequently unfunny 'comedy' of the human condition […] associated with various forms of ontological *lowliness*" (McGurl, 549). He suggests that the comedic aspects of the posthuman condition arise in the human subject's failure to situate

itself as part of the posthuman multitude; in other words, the human retainment of humanist anthropocentrism and its binary ontology. *Gain* explores this neglect in detail through its two-fold narration, exemplifying both the visible neglect of its human protagonists and the undeniable entanglement of their true condition through Clare's historical advancement. As demonstrated in the above section, *Gain* presents Clare's gradual realization as a transhuman governing agent and points to the false illusion of binary anthropocentrism as its main facilitator towards further growth and agentic expansion. The novel describes the creation of the transhuman corporate agent and the consequential, unintentional, loss of agency of its human protagonists. Unable to grasp their posthuman reality of global entanglement, the human protagonists are trapped in an 'unfunny' comedy in which we see them falling prey to impersonal forces of their own creation, losing the adaptability and flexibility that humanism perceives as the species birthright (McGurl, 549).

Laura realizes that she cannot understand herself and would not recognize her life without Clare and its all-encompassing influence (364). The corporate agent is so central to her understanding of herself and her reality that even cancer cannot outweigh its defining role in her sense of the world. This mirrors what McGurl terms the first act of his Posthuman comedy: "the act in which we realize that we can no longer be understood apart from our technological prostheses" (McGurl, 549). The posthuman comedy rests on the comic effects of a humanity that suddenly awakens to realize its codependent entanglement with the technological prostheses of its own making. The objects and systems created to ensure continued and improved independence now represent an unbreakable dependency. In *Gain,* the transhuman dream which created Clare is the same that maintains consumer support and posthuman ignorance in the human protagonists. As Laura realizes her dependency in her "weird dream of peace" (364), her destiny is already sealed, and as the novel continuously points out, there is no alternative existence.

The second act of McGurl's posthuman comedy is "a turn (and continual return) to naturalism, one in which nature, far from being dominated by technology, *reclaims* technology as a human *secretion*, something human beings under the right conditions naturally produce and use" (McGurl, 550). The novel shows fewer overt signs of agreement with this second part of McGurl's comedic proposition. Nevertheless, Clare's gradual development into a negative counterpart to natural ecosystems and organic entanglement provides an interesting case for further exploration. The second act emphasizes that the realm of natural mechanism and processes will always enclose, infiltrate, and humiliate even the most complex of human designs (McGurl, 550). Over time, the corporation develops past human comprehension as its structure resembles the organic entanglement of a global ecosystem. The human inability to understand its own entanglement prevents them from comprehending the evolving corporate structure. Much like natural ecosystems that deal in the market of nutrients, chemicals, and ecosystemic services, the corporation exists in an ongoing exchange with countless global counterparts and subsections through the global economy's wide-spanning network. This link between the similarly sounding concepts of economy and ecology has previously been commented on in Tom LeClair's widely cited 1998 review of the novel. LeClair claims that the two concepts complement one another in Powers' literary project of having his readers comprehend "the microscopic relations between economy and ecology […] the parts-per-billion ways that financial gain leads to health loss" (LeClair, 34). In his overall assessment of the novel, LeClair brands it an *ecofiction* written through the lens of "crackpot realism" (35), describing modern life's condition and development in the late twentieth century.

The second act and its return to naturalism is also visible in Laura's late-stage reconciliation with her decaying body, as well as her apocalyptic vision of lichen thriving atop the World Trade Centers, prospering in earth forged from the collapse of modernity: "All

things that fail to work will vanish, and life remain" (Powers, 391). In Laura's death, the novel portrays a final victory of life over modernity's mechanical servitude. Through death, she escapes expectations and limitations, her assigned function in the economic plan:

> She must go before the end of the month. Before whatever new deadline they've set for her signature. She must become as light as she feels. As light as this thought. Cease eating, cease turning nutrient into mass. Start to convert flesh back into air and vapor. Recycle her body, return it to the breath that seeded it. (364)

In a similar vein to Benjamin Clare's self-inflicted death, Laura begins to see her demise as the only true deliverance from her embodied reality, and the only escape from her corporate affiliation. However, I will argue that Laura and Benjamin's final deliverances depart from different conceptions of their embodied origin. Benjamin is locked in the binary idea of material deliverance as the final step towards enlightenment, the ultimate victory of the mind over the "senses' lie" (61). Laura, on the other hand, seems to grasp her own entanglement as she approaches her final days, and sees death and material escape as a sign of the eventual victory of Nature and living things, over the binary ontology of disembodied structures such as Clare.

The posthuman comedy in *Gain* derives from the consumers' conception of the necessity of the corporation as a provider of prosthetic devices, which is further linked to their conception of themselves as transitioning towards a permanent transhuman state. By maintaining and participating in the corporate system, humanity is afforded an illusion of corporal and ecological disembodiment. Prosthetic devices such as preprocessed foods, cars, disinfectant spray and dishwashers afford humanity its long strived for disembodied illusion but does not alter their material reality. Humanity thus maintains its prosthetic facilitator, the

corporation, and engages in materially damaging practices due to their disembodied assurances. This creates the comic effect referred to by McGurl, a negative spiral of neglectful decisions made in the best of interests yet with catastrophic consequences.

The novel emphasizes that the only disembodiment available to its human protagonists is death, a revelation experienced by both Benjamin Clare and Laura in the moments or days preceding their final relief. The only way to accomplish disembodiment is to leave the body behind, to finally reach "a place where nothing costs anything" (392) and where "sickness, sorrow, pain, and death would rule no more" (167). In its final conclusion, the novel presents us with Tim, Laura's son, and his invention which will allow the restructuring of human cells in order to combat sickness. The understood motivation behind this invention is clearly implicated in the description of the first cure "that would roll off their production line", and the sum of money which would allow them to do this: "the sum had been compounding forever, waiting for a chance to revenge its earning" (405). Tim is going to create a cure to the cancer which killed his mother. The irony that emerges from these hopeful statements further underscores the determinism of the novel as Tim proposes that the group incorporate (405). In order to finance the cure which would have saved his mother, Tim recreates the agent which caused her disease in the first place. These last passages echo the initial description given of the reason behind Clare's incorporation: "such pure acts of idealism never know their practical ends" (179).

To conclude, this chapter has argued that *Gain* establish Clare as a transhuman agent by building on the binary ontology of its human protagonists. I employ Cary Wolfe's definition of transhumanism as an extension of humanist paradigms of hierarchal evolution and human superiority and view Clare as the disembodied realization of transhuman ideals. The novel illustrates how Laura and her likes are locked in a world of opposites where the only valid option is to progress and expand or to be left behind, to grow and evolve or to die.

The material body is seen as a liability and disembodiment as the ultimate relief. By subscribing to the transhuman illusion sold by Clare, the belief that material disembodiment is achievable through its technological prostheses, Laura ends up unwillingly polluting her body due to material neglect. Consequently, the novel argues for the dangers of a disembodied and binary perception of the 'self', an argument which connects to the Anthropocene call for entangled awareness. Finally, I comment on the comical effect of *Gain's* posthuman presentation and the novel's deterministic return to the question of incorporation in its last line.

Conclusion

Through a complex and exhaustive narrative, *Gain* raises questions about what it means to exist as an individual in our increasingly collaborative world. Previous scholars have placed *Gain* in an ecocritical context and pointed to the role and function played by the personified capitalist corporation. I have attempted to demonstrate how the novel situates itself in the Anthropocene era's literary discourse through its commentary on the prevailing human ontology of essentialist humanism and transhuman aspirations. Posthumanist theories and the transhuman perspective supplied by Cary Wolfe offer a relevant vantage point from which to understand the novel and its commentary on the trajectory of human agency in the Anthropocene. Narrative techniques such as scale, time, focalization, and narrative voice combine in conveying the Anthropocene perspectives of the novel and juxtapose the limited scope of Laura's restricted human scale. I have discussed the connotations and significance of the novel's gradual deconstruction of binary perceptions such as nature/culture and body/mind in my analyses. Through these deconstructions, *Gain* communicates the existential premises and essentialist humanism which propel Clare towards transhuman agency. The novel's final return to the question of incorporation indicates the deterministic quality of the novel.

Powers indicates that the transhuman illusion has endured too long and that the modern condition is too embedded in damaging prosthetic devises and practices. The novel's omniscient narrator maintains the reader's posthuman perspective by juxtaposing the two narrative strands and the causal lines drawn between them. By such means, the reader's perspective comes into conflict with that of Laura, and her subscription to the transhuman illusion of corporate prosthetics takes on an ironic quality throughout the novel. Accordingly, I argue that Mark McGurl's "Posthuman Comedy" provides an interesting take on the unfunny comedy that is humanity's part in bringing about their own demise. My reading

concludes that *Gain* employs the 'comic' effect of a deterministically trapped humanity in its description of contemporary America. As such, though its conclusion might not appear optimistic regarding the continued progress of humanity, *Gain* delivers an unambiguous diagnosis of how we got here.

Turning to Richard Powers' most recent novel, *The Overstory* (2018), we see that it continues what this thesis has described as an Anthropocene literary discourse. The novel is structured in Powers' well-known style of interwoven narratives but exceeds previous publications in the sheer number of narrative strands at play in the novel's literary conversation. *The Overstory* constitutes nine narrative strands instead of the traditional two or three of previous Powers novels. This complexity is further expanded by the novel's temporal span, which operates on the scale of trees rather than that of humans. As with *Gain's* Clare, *The Overstory* employs narrative means such as scale, time and a suggestive distribution of agency to depict a protagonist that is larger than its constituent parts. Through its twelve main protagonists, the novel describes the protracted process of North American deforestation. All characters are shown to have a special relationship to trees, though the nature of these relationships varies drastically. The novel uses its multitude of human narrators to portray the different existential premises of trees and perhaps nature itself. An unknown communicator emerges as the novel progresses over the course of decades, illustrating the long spanning timescales and perception of trees as opposed to those of humans. In this way, the novel addresses the same core problem as *Gain* and could be seen as a momentary culmination of Powers' literary project.

Recent years have seen a rise in Anthropocene literature and cross-disciplinary experimentation within the literary profession. This thesis has attempted to clarify *Gain's* early assessment of the 'feral' development of modern corporations and human constructions while pointing to the gradual decrease of human agency in the meeting between

humanity and their animated creations. I argue that Powers' novel stands as an early example of the conscious literary effort towards a rise in general awareness regarding human impact and risk associated with continued Anthropocene development. This vein of Anthropocene literature is still visible and relevant in contemporary discussions, perhaps now more than ever. A late but relevant example of the continued tradition of posthuman and Anthropocene tendencies could be found in the recently published *Feral Atlas: The More-Than-Human Anthropocene* (2020). This non-fiction is a digital, interactive presentation of the many 'feral' infrastructures and byproducts of human development, where the word "feral" introduces a parallel to previously domesticated animals now roaming free in an environment far from their natural habitat. The *Feral Atlas* details the unintended consequences and far-reaching ripple effects of human technology and inventions in places beyond our wildest imagination. Though *Gain* and the *Feral Atlas* have no known connection, I see them as part of the same literary current of cross-disciplinary efforts in raising Anthropocene awareness.

Further research on Anthropocene fiction might investigate the multidimensional formats and digital development of current literary productions or consider the many realizations of capitalist blame, which is to be found through detailed analyses of modern production and belief systems. I find the scholarly approach to Anthropocene tendencies in literature to reveal new and challenging perceptions of the modern human. *Gain* problematizes corporations' role and function in a modern reality and paints a grim picture of our possibility to make amends. Nevertheless, Anthropocene fiction plays an important role in communicating the perspectives necessary to achieve lasting change and understanding regarding the interconnected reality of humanity and the environment.

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