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Ecological Recentering in William Gibson's *The Peripheral*

Abstract: William Gibson's response to the rise of computing established him as a pioneering voice in twentieth-century science fiction, his finger not just on but shaping the pulse of his time. Gibson's novel *The Peripheral* (2014) is no different. It responds to current, rising anxieties pertaining to climate change, shifting from his earlier ecoperipheral cyberpunk purview to a more holistic one, in which ecology is at least as much at the forefront of the future as is technology. This article draws on and expands Bakhtin's chronotope to investigate how Gibson uses ecological time, particularly plant time, to reorient the trajectory of future imaginings. In doing so, he enmeshes that which had previously been relegated to the margins in his work, both socially and environmentally.

Keywords: ecology, plant-time, Anthropocene, ecotope, *The Peripheral*

The way we map the world maps us. We project ourselves into nations, communities, identities, boxing ourselves in with our lines and others out. Paradoxically, the more concrete and precise our efforts in this regard become, the more we give up to fit within their (our) neat delineations. Robert T. Tally and Christine M. Battista argue that in producing geospatial maps, human subjects have alienated themselves from "the natural ecosystems that are their conditions of possibility," an alienation which in turn has "exacerbated the environmental crises" of our present (3). In *The Peripheral* (2014), a dual temporal novel that anticipates both our future and our future's future, William Gibson confronts these "conditions of possibility" alongside ecological alienation, juxtaposing a near future grounded in naturalist detail battling a further future in which the natural has become simulacra. These alternative futures are separated by seventyish years and a massive extinction event. For Gibson, this catastrophe fulfills the promise of the Anthropocene, the labeling of our current epoch as one indelibly marked by humanity. The textual shadow it casts is all the more horrifying for its real-life inevitability; like global warming, Styrofoam, and nuclear weapons, it becomes what Timothy Morton calls a hyperobject, a phenomenon "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" and thus one that challenges comprehension (*Hyperobjects* 1). Lovecraftianly complex, horrifying, and indescribable, "[h]yperobjects don't just burn a hole in the world; they burn a hole in your mind," Morton explains; they "invoke a terror beyond the sublime, cutting

deeper than conventional religious fear” (*Ecological Thought* 130-31). Hyperobjects describe—and litter the landscapes of—Gibson’s imagined futures. Yet they have a habit of fading into the background: “there be monsters” becomes an accepted inscription of mapped futures. Their imminent threats are often banalized into an ever-mutating sense of what is “normal.”

Frequently, this banalization is exacerbated by what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. has termed the future flu, “a sense of invasion by technoscientific futurity,” as Veronica Hollinger describes it (454), “in which a time further in the future than the one in which we exist and choose infects the host present, reproducing itself in simulacra, until it destroys all the original chronocytes of the host imagination” (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 26). This “future flu” creates a “sense that the shape of things to come has already been determined, undermining in the process a morale and freedom necessary to create an open ‘conditional future’” (33). The outcome of all of this is akin to the “neganthropocene,” Bernard Stiegler’s word for the belief that we cannot prevent our present epoch from spiraling into disaster: Stiegler argues it “is a negative performativity that brings dejection, stupefaction and neglect (of which denial is a specific and cowardly form): it is paralysis” (35). All suggest a failure of imagination giving rise to viral, destructive self-fulfilling prophecies pressing toward an inevitably apocalyptic future.

The Peripheral suggests a revisionary impulse toward not just the social but also the ecological periphery, overturning (or at least remapping) a vision of the future that Gibson himself helped establish. Much of Gibson’s influential cyberpunk oeuvre occurs in a world rife with decay, the protagonists alienated by and from a “banal, corrupt, and homogenizing post-industrial society” from which they then escape via cyberspace (Sponsler, “Beyond the Ruins” 261). For Claire Sponsler, this type of escape into technology is coupled with a passive acquiescence to environmental destruction; salvation of the ecological is rendered moot in the virtual, a construct with limited potential for shaping our real, material conditions of possibility (“Beyond the Ruins”). Gibson’s immensely popular and influential novels have been similarly maligned as “politically irresponsible” and accused of “harbor[ing] no utopian impulses, offer[ing] no blueprint for progressive social change, and generally evad[ing] the responsibility to imagine futures that will be more democratic than the present” (Ross 150).¹ Indeed, Sponsler writes that in Gibson’s earlier works technology had become so perniciously pervasive “that it has altered human perception of the natural world, making that world describable and indeed even visible only within a frame” it provides (“Cyberpunk” 628).

Real greenery is rarely part of Gibson’s scenery. While the cyberpunk *Sprawl* of *Neuromancer’s* trilogy thoroughly erased natural ecosystems (and the cures to future flu they might provide), its cast of augmented misfits and sentient AIs brought

1 Countering this negativity, Graham Murphy cogently considers Gibson’s penchant toward the “glorification of possibility” in his works in “Post/Humanity and the Interstitial: A Glorification of Possibility in Gibson’s Bridge Sequence” (qtd. in Murphy 73).

a new conceptualization of space-time to bear upon the novels, their now-and-then plots, their eruptive, virtual settings, their spatiotemporal *how*. We can still describe the color of the sky, even if only as “the color of television tuned to a dead channel” (*Neuromancer* 3).² Where for some this signals a failure of the ecological imaginary, for Gibson it marks new conditions of possibility for the tech-savvy protagonist, the hacker-hero who can tune out or out-tune corporate adversaries in the telescoping time of mediated space. Cyberpunk, which is enjoying renewed interest (*Altered Carbon*, *Blade Runner 2049*, *Cyberpunk 2077*, etc.), spawned a host of reconceptions of the relationships between narrative time and space: the city, the cyber, the cipher.

This rebooting proved so popular that Gibson himself wearied of it. He sought a return to the natural and refuge from the hegemony of convention, explaining in a 2011 interview with David Wallace-Wells for the *Paris Review* that “midcentury mainstream American science fiction had often been triumphalist and militaristic, a sort of folk propaganda for American exceptionalism” (317). Encapsulating the zeitgeist of the second decade of the twenty-first century he elaborates, “I was tired of America-as-the-future, the world as a white monoculture, the protagonist as a good guy from the middle class or above. I wanted there to be more elbow room. I wanted to make room for antiheroes.” In *The Peripheral* he creates this elbow room by revealing the nooks and crannies, the back spaces, like Appalachia, bringing them into the same plane—and the same, flattened, simultaneous “time”—as the bright lights of poshest future London. Borders between worlds come down and the future loses its grip on the past. Poor, rural, disenfranchised veterans take control of their own future, first by imagining it, then by inhabiting their imagined paths, rather than following one set before them. Their embodiment of the posthuman unfurls with the action in a Bakhtinian chronotope, a unique lens that provides the “means to explore the complex, indirect and always mediated relation between art and life” (Holquist 109).

While making room for the humans pushed to the edges of the periphery, Gibson also maps space for the non-human and the ecologically decentered, particularly plants, those living things so often overlooked in what biologists James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler have termed plant blindness.³ Gibson reported to Wallace-Wells that he “wanted science fiction to be more naturalistic,” calling its elision one of the great failings of the genre (317). “There had been a poverty of

2 A prime and oft-quoted example from *Neuromancer* (1984), this line and others like it reveal that for the residents of their pages, and perhaps for their readers, “television, tuned to a dead channel” modifies “sky” in a way that renders it understandable, even in its alienation from type.

3 Despite Gibson’s attention to the non-technocentric world (and his proclivity toward luminous descriptions) little mention is made of the effect of the jackpot on insect or plant populations, except for the extinction of bees; as Gibson is noted for his detailed world building, and as climatic change will affect all species, it is presumable that those kingdoms suffered fates similar to those of the vertebrates on which he focuses but were elided due to their lower charisma and our general cultural “plant blindness,” as is so commonly the case. See Matthew Hall for a rounded commentary on this phenomenon.

description in much of it,” he explains, elaborating that “[t]he technology depicted was so slick and clean that it was practically invisible. What would any given SF favorite look like if we could crank up the resolution? As it was then, much of it was like video games before the invention of fractal dirt. I wanted to see dirt in the corners.” So he “cranked up the resolution” and with it the revolution in *The Peripheral* casting it with protagonists akin to what David Harvey calls “insurgent architects.” Post-geographical heroes who acknowledge the spatiotemporal processes inherent to their own construction and stand in response to this alienation, from the macro global level to the micro level of the body, insurgent architects overcome alienation by mapping a “privileged site of political resistance and emancipatory politics,” arguing that we must be “prepared to take an equally speculative plunge into some unknown” to ascend above “the objects of historical geography” (Harvey 15, 255). Their plunge out of the static now and never of dystopian human-centered time to more ecocentric time shifts the familiar narrative and mobilizes life at the margins to challenge the neganthropic imaginary. They compost the hyperobjective dread of environmental collapse, moving toward renewal instead. They veer away from seeing the present as already past, already the history of a sky tuned to a dead future, and instead posit a means to a generative futurity, shifting from Gibson’s earlier ecoperipheral cyberpunk purview to a more holistic one in which ecology is at least as much at the forefront of the future as is technology, enmeshing that which had previously been relegated to the margins in his work, both socially and environmentally.

The Dead-Ended Future

The characters in *The Peripheral*’s near future timeline are hurtling toward annihilation, a sense not lost on its privileged survivors of tomorrow’s tomorrow. These far future denizens have given up on creating anything new, merely co-opting and rewriting the narratives of others in a barren, almost deathless future, caught in a never-ending cycle of melancholic nostalgia and consumption, flattening culture upon itself. Their London is peopled by the rich, those who work for them, human and robotic, and their peripheral bodies—to the extent that it is peopled: about seventy years prior, a series of climactic events, “with no particular beginning and no end, known as the jackpot by those who survived and profited from them devastated human and animal populations [killing] eighty percent of human life” and a good deal of non-human life (319):

No comets crashing, nothing you could really call a nuclear war. Just everything else, tangled in the changing climate: droughts, water shortages, crop failures, honeybees gone like they almost were now, collapse of other keystone species, every last alpha predator gone, antibiotics doing even less than they already did, diseases that were never quite the one big pandemic but big enough to be historical events in themselves. And all of

it around people: how people were, how many of them there were, how they'd changed things just by being there. (321)

The jackpot is known to be androgenic, or caused by humans, and unending: it “got worse and never better and was just expected to, ongoing” (320). Death and the guilt of having caused it preside. How can the post-apocalyptic survivors mark and move through time when all the markers of time beyond “the end” have been erased?—seasons, crops, migrations, it's all out of whack. *That* is the future vision of the far future at the crux of the novel. Against this backdrop we find a ruminating society, its streets filled with time-dead homages to Victoriana, mechanical and genetically modified refurbishments of bygone people and species, and sundry other *memento mori*; enthusiasts try to repurchase their pasts from purveyors of antiquities. It is quite far afield from the protean future as imagined in Gibson's earlier work *Pattern Recognition* (2003), in which protagonist Cayce and the Blue Ant trilogy's namesake Hubertus Bigend discuss futurity unimaginable not because of its “cancellation” but because of its unpredictability. Bigend postulates:

In that sense, we have no future. Not in the sense that our grandparents had a future, or thought they did. Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which ‘now’ was of some greater duration. For us, of course, things can change, so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents’ have insufficient ‘now’ to stand on. (*Pattern* 57)

The sort of change Bigend is talking about happens only once the action of *The Peripheral* catalyzes, shifting both the near and far futures out of their stasis. The “now” of *The Peripheral* is not that of Bigend's grandparents either—its sense of the future is foregone, its sense of the past is avaricious—it is there to consume.

The far future is so nostalgic for a facade of history that it has become surreal, down to the skin. The aptly-named Ash, a polymath personal assistant, whose sepulchral epidermis is “overloaded” with the skins of the reanimated, is netted in this melancholia. Her mourning overtakes all of her surfaces, skinning her, her body an homage to the dead. She is covered in roving black-inked tattoos of animals that largely died out in the period between the first and second timelines of the novel, mired in extinction: “Her hand quite black with tattoos, a riot of wings and horns, every bird and beast of the Anthropocene extinction, overlapping line drawings of a simple yet touching precision,” though without proportion (50). Her tattoos seem a sort of a pointless penance for the ecological wreckage humankind has wrought upon the earth, allusive if ineffectual at best: “the line drawing of a sole albatross, slowly and as if in distant flight, circling her white neck,” an overt allusion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famed albatross from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798) (52). Coleridge's albatross is hung around a mariner's neck after he shoots it, an ill-omened event that leads to the death of all surrounding him on his ship—he is

blamed for bad stewardship and lives to stand among the ashes of its consequences, just as Ash and the others from her time must.

This sense of faked ecological time can also be seen in the garden of the main far future's setting, at the home of a kleptocrat named Lev Zubov, where even the hostas have "artificial-looking leaves" (288). The real plants appear to be artifice, as anachronistic as their fertilizers, a pair of thylacines Lev had reconstituted from a slurry of DNA, Jurassic Park-style, an imagined act in 2014 when *The Peripheral* was written but a nearer possibility at the time of this writing.⁴ These dog-like marsupials roamed the southern hemisphere for four million years until wiped out by intentional human intervention and the after effects of rapacious colonization in 1936. In recent years they have become, much like the dodo, a stand-in for avoidable erasure. As novelist Richard Flanagan puts it, they have come to stand for "a lost object of awe, one more symbol of our feckless ignorance and stupidity" (qtd. in Jarvis 45).

Lev's undead companion animals perhaps best typify the far future's "untimeliness" both in their beings and in their aestheticization; they are described as "[c]arnivorous kangaroos, in wolf outfits with Cubist stripes" (392). This description may seem a throwaway line, but it illuminates much of the aesthetic thrust of the text: this devolving description loses precision as it winds on, the reference to Cubism alluding to the modernist aesthetic form that flattens three-dimensional objects into two-dimensional ones, reduced to simplified, geometrical shapes, to provide all-at-once perspectives, showing things as they are, at the same time.⁵ For early Cubists, the sense of a fourth dimension connected and democratized spaces, moving away from the accepted patterns and representations of reality, bringing both darkness and light, the seen and typically unseen, to the foreground. But in this novel of conjoined timelines the fourth dimension itself is only an accessorizing illusion. It is paraded as an "outfit," as tattoos, its depth and dimensions replaced by oxymoronic simulacra. If thylacines can be reconstituted or albatrosses reanimated on the human body, what, then, is extinction? If there is no death, what is life?

4 Just recently, scientists farmed stable DNA from a thylacine joey that had been preserved in alcohol, allowing them to sequence its genome, if not, yet, make pets of them. See Charles Feigin et al., "Genome of the Tasmanian Tiger Provides Insights into the Evolution and Demography of an Extinct Marsupial Carnivore" in *Nature Ecology & Evolution* (2018).

5 This is particularly true as some early modernists, including Guillaume Apollinaire, connected the experiments in form to the fourth dimension, either in terms of an unseen theoretical fourth spatial dimension, postulated in the mid-1770s by Joseph-Louis Lagrange, or, more applicably here, as the space-time continuum formulated by Einstein's math professor Hermann Minkowski, which predated Einstein's own theories of relativity. For commentary on early Modernists' conceptions of the fourth dimension see Linda Dalrymple Henderson's body of scholarship, including the representative "The Image and Imagination of the Fourth Dimension in Twentieth-Century Art and Culture", and Chiara Ambrosio's "Cubism and the Fourth Dimension."

Instead of this “cubism” freeing them, it creates an atmosphere of uncanny facades with little depth; there is no there there.

For Ash and those in her timeline, the past is a constant companion that has wiped out imaginings of a future beyond melancholic, two-dimensional looping, a carnivalesque grotesquerie, or a plaything. Her animated bodily space, like that of the thylacines, reflects the simultaneity of ecological catastrophe on her lived present as well as the impossibility of seeing its “hyperobjectification” all at once, the shifting lines fusing the past and present and holding her in that liminal phase. This is somewhat akin to the “literary cubism” Graham Harman finds infusing the language of Lovecraft’s horror: “language is overloaded by a gluttonous excess of surfaces and aspects of the thing” with “such a multitude of surfaces that it can no longer be identified with any mere summation of them” (25, 241). Though Gibson’s “literary cubism” functions more through ekphrasis than narrative style, it demonstrates a similarly overwhelmed sense of incoherent ecological time now beyond human control.

Stubbed Time

The novel opens in an ambiguous, small town in the United States in our near future, the mid-twenty-first century, teetering on the edge of the sixth massive extinction, populated by the disenfranchised of the now, including poor, rural individuals such as Flynne and Burton Fisher. Before she interacts with, and thereby inoculates herself against, the “dead channel” of her alternative future, Flynne, like those on a trajectory for the decayed futures of cyberpunk, cannot imagine a present outside her own and accepts the specter of personal and environmental annihilation by default. She is caught in what Mark Fisher (after Franco “Bifo” Berardi) calls “the slow cancellation of the future” rather than a vision of tomorrow.⁶ For Fisher, as for the novel’s far-future kleptocrats, “we’ve become increasingly incapable of producing the ‘new,’ the ‘now’ and postulating the ‘next.’ At the end of history, all that is left is an endless return of dead forms and failed futures, haunting us from a grave we keep digging up,” as Andrew Broaks puts it. This “cancellation of the future” by the future and for the future resonates in its rejection of the natural in favor of a flattening of space and time that allows everything to be seen and controlled at once.

The lotus-eaters of the early twenty-second century with whom she collides cannot imagine any other present or past. They enter Flynne’s world, seventy-odd years in their past, for a lark, uncoupling it from their own time and rendering it a “stub,” an alternate timeline accessible via a shadowy “server” based in China. As one far-future character points out, the term “stub” “sounds short. Nasty. Brutish,”

6 See *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2014) for a lengthier discussion of “hauntology.” Fisher discusses his borrowing and use of the phrase “the slow cancellation of the new” in a conversation with Berardi in *Frieze* magazine.

asking, “Wouldn’t one expect the fork’s new branch to continue to grow?” Another answers that their interfering is, to put it baldly, imperialism. Ash explains, “We’re third-worlding alternate continua. Calling them stubs makes that a bit easier” (103).⁷ Much in the same way the “developed” world tends to view the “developing” world as peripheral to its own centrality, the far futurists see the past timeline as there to manipulate, commodify, and dispose of, past tense even in their present due to their socioeconomic status, non-central locations, and vulnerability.⁸ Calling them stubs connotes a futurelessness that renders them harvestable, or whimsies, as more than one far futurian finds. And yet, due to its temporal disjunction, this ‘stub’ is a flurry of time and space, it is where the future and its past meet, abut, and ultimately intertwine, eventually extricating themselves from their temporal rigor mortis. At first the far futurians’ influence on their once-past exerts a mapping, controlling force. The stubs they create have expiration dates like or before their own. The far future’s sense of torpor haunts the earlier timeline, obscuring alternate paths—but, in the end, it does not account for the power of the ecological imaginary. As such, it fails to ultimately paralyze the actors from the penetrated past it calls poltergeists, a name that gestures to their imagined holistic impotence.

At first, despite the fecundity around them, the disenfranchised of the past (like so many of our present) feel they live in a place time forgot, trapped in the resin of history and unable to move forward, except toward inevitable destruction. As focalized through Flynnne at the start of the novel, we see the world as static, held in place, unable to move or evolve. An early passage focuses on Flynnne’s brother Burton’s antique 1977 Airstream trailer on the property where her family has lived for generations, the inside of which was “the color of Vaseline, LEDs buried in it, bedded in Hefty Mart amber” with variable treasures including “stubs of burnt matches,” “a rusty jeweler’s screwdriver,” and “a 2009 quarter” frozen in it. There is even a cigarette. Yet for all these things as we see them, it’s an ecological shrine. It holds petroleum in the Vaseline, mineable and mined metal in the coin as well as the tool, and its rust, phosphorous and wood and spent fire in the matches, dried tobacco and

7 Gibson has stated his debt to Bruce Sterling and Lewis Shiner’s 1985 short story “Mozart in Mirrorshades” in the construction of *The Peripheral*. It is about the present (or a version thereof) colonizing, looting, and ultimately destabilizing the seventeenth century, featuring Mozart and Marie Antoinette. In it, the protagonist sleeps with and is betrayed by Marie Antoinette; Mozart gets in on the looting of his time in order to give up the past for a stab at profiting in the future. Sterling himself refers to it as “aggressive political satire” in the story’s preface in the 1986 anthology *Mirrorshades* (223). René T. A. Lysloff provides an in-depth analysis of “the often adversarial relationship between technology and culture” within the short story in “Mozart in Mirrorshades: Ethnomusicology, Technology, and the Politics of Representation” (208).

8 This comment would not have been made possible without the work of Mary Louise Pratt, whose theorizations of the contact zone seminally expanded conceptualizations of the “center” and “periphery.” See especially *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

pulped trees in the cigarette—altered nature has been caught in resin by the humans who mutated it and rendered it into stalled objects, just as they themselves were stuck being seen, and discarded as, a dead past by their future (and by themselves) before they were gone. It is, at first, this sense of generalized stasis that leaves those in the near future vulnerable to the machinations of the far future. Space and time are held in place. There is no adventuring nor growth and none is possible, pinned as they are by their projected non-future.

Skinning Time

How then to avoid paralysis in the face of the seemingly inevitable crush of environmental collapse? What shakes Flynne and the rest of the near futurians from deer-in-the-headlights petrification? From becoming flattened in time as those in their no-longer future were? One answer posited by the novel is through mindfulness of time and the environment, through the shaping and tracing of an ecotope, emphasized here through plant time. Common use of “ecotope” refers to the smallest spatial unit of landscape, sometimes called a “patch,” but here I use it as a play on the chronotope, Mikhail Bakhtin’s term for the time-space of narrative. Chronotopes do not just reflect but “shape plot by shaping time and space” (Chambers 77). As James Gleick points out, “spacetime is just what it is, whereas chronotopes admit as many possibilities as our imaginations allow” (277). I use ecotope to emphasize an ecological dimension to space and time, following Timo Müller’s vision for an ecologically-invested chronotope. He argues that an environmental approach would emphasize relationships with the natural environment to “recover a historically specific perception of the environment that had a considerable cultural influence in its time and can help disseminate an ecologically viable perception of space today” (602). If, during the spatiotemporal expression of the chronotope, “[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history”—we must consider the flesh it takes on (Bakhtin 84). According to Bakhtin, “the image of man [sic] is always intrinsically chronotopic” (85) but does that mean that the chronotope must be in the “image of man [sic]”?

The ecotope arises in the text before Flynne acknowledges it—or its conditions of possibility—but it is visible to the reader. When she rides along to view the corpses of her family’s would-have-been assassins, the far future’s attempt to pause her arc forever, Flynne verbalizes the location as a previous no-place that had suddenly become a someplace to her because of human interventions (including murder, tent building, forensics). According to the far future’s narrative, this site of intersection should be about the far future’s intervention on her time, its insatiable chronophageousness. But the text itself privileges the natural; the passage begins with and emphasizes the Queen Anne’s lace covering the area, only ending with the murder scene, an afterthought in ecological time. The flowers even cover over the

human-cut ditch; much like Carl Sandburg's 1926 anti-war poem "Grass," they would soon "cover all" the marks of the murders, carrying on no matter what the humans did to one another, how little they remembered of their atrocities, or what shape the future took.

There was Queen Anne's lace grown up flat and level, a carpet of flowers, from the bottom of the roadside ditch, hiding the fact that there was a ditch at all. She must have walked past this spot hundreds of times, going to school, then coming back, but it hadn't been a place. Now, she thought, looking at the lights, the square white tent, it looked like they were making a commercial, but really it was a murder scene. (*Peripheral* 113)

The murder scene shows a cancelled human future or two, sure, but also a continuous present, awash in botanical reproductive organs that had been there before the carnage and would be there long after the temporary white tent and the bodies were all swept away.

The markers for reimagined mapping are there, but Flynnne has not yet realized them, still caught in her thanatotic vision. The reader, however, is able to recognize the ecotope's potential through the machinations of the narrative. (This stands in contrast to the escapist cyberspace of Gibson's earlier works.) The reader, too, takes on the role of insurgent architect, moving between the technocentric lens of the self-stubbed future and the ecocentric lens of the initially-suppressed future's past.

We discover the possibilities for action exist in her past: it has yet to be "tuned to a dead channel"; one simply has to recognize them. Instead of its metallic form taking over the landscape, Burton's trailer is described as a "giant grub" on the first page, the aluminum casing suddenly filled with the potential to change; Flynnne translates the mindboggling nanobot contraption that disassembles a woman from the future as "the black egg case of an almost-extinct animal called a skate, that she'd seen on a beach in South Carolina," though her mother had wondrously called it "a mermaid's purse"; and she describes her brother's war-torn comrade Conner not as someone who had been touched by the unfathomable abyss of war but as "a boy who was half a machine, like a centaur made out of motorcycle," turning his loss of limbs into a heroic, mythic trait that makes him a liminal, untamed figure in a time of corporate construction, demechanizing him through a return to his mammalian self (1, 45, 85). But these ecocentric visions and their potentialities, visible to the reader cued for technocentric visions, escape Flynnne until she is confronted with the jarring reality of the far-future's engineered landscape of stopped-time trees. This key moment turns her toward her own conditions of possibility.

The trees of the far future have been blasted of their own individuality and shaped into playhouses for the survivors of the jackpot. Instead of standing as monuments to time, they are bastions of timelessness. When Flynnne reenters the future in her peripheral body, she sees that the trees have been grown into houses, their unnatural forms only overshadowed by their unnatural temporality. This is

shocking, coming from a world less alienated from itself than she had realized until faced with the future.⁹

‘Holy shit,’ she said, ‘is that a house, or trees?’

[Wilf] looked over his shoulder, toward the greenway. ‘A house grown from trees. A sort of playhouse, actually. Public.’

‘Those trees look old.’

‘They aren’t. Their growth was augmented by assemblers. Sped up, then stabilized. They were that size when I was a child.’

‘Doors, windows—’

‘They grew that way, directed by assemblers.’ (343)

Flynn is shocked by the untimeliness of the trees. She realizes here how out of sync and simulated, how short on stories, the far future has become. In replacing the malls along the high street with such timeless beasts, Gibson shows nature fabricated, just a skin for the street without substance, a playhouse rather than a home, a neganthropic future waiting for the harvest.

It has long been acknowledged that plants occupy a sense of time somewhere between deep time, geological time and human time. It is their sessile nature, the lack of observable movement in most plants, *mimosa pudica* et al. aside, which has been the bedrock upon which human dismissal of plant intelligence has been laid, reports Anthony Trewavas (10-11). John Charles Ryan, with a nod to ecophilosopher Michael Marder, suggests, “a conception of time as announced by vegetal events—of plants being in service to human temporality” as are these treehouses, “risks minimizing ‘the time of the plants themselves,’ defined as the endemic seasons, rhythms, pulsations, and scales of vegetal nature” (173). In *Plant-Thinking* (2013), Marder reminds us that “vegetal time passes in qualitatively distinct modes and rhythms” compared to human time (107), a truism widely observed, particularly in indigenous populations, yet we try to master it (through agriculture, domestication, etc.) because to control temporality is to control everything. “Mastery over an entity’s time is immediately translatable into mastery over its being,” he writes, finding:

The only effective resistance imaginable would be one that insists on the non-synchronicity, the asymmetry, and the non-contemporaneity of human and vegetal temporalities and that releases the time of plants back to the contingency of the other, spelling out its meaning, time and again,

9 Trees are still trees in Flynn’s time, where nearly every important conversation seems to happen under one, a silent third party, marking time rather than mocking it. She is able to visualize herself more clearly because of them: in one early scene she reflects, “And it was like she could see herself there, on the gray gravel in front of Jimmy’s, and the tall old cottonwoods on either side of the lot, trees older than her mother, older than anybody” (85). Gibson begins the sentence with a conjunction which textually underscores the continuity of Flynn’s vantage and those who came before her, including her mother, through the “tall old cottonwoods.”

according to the singular context of its embeddedness. Hence, the locus of resistance would be the time of plants not measurable in human terms, that is to say, in terms of the movements proper to human beings and their kind of soul. (Marder 102-103)

This resistance can move humans away from not just their domination of vegetation but also their own thralldom, stemming from rigid Enlightenment paradigms or self-erased futurity.¹⁰

Trees are innate timekeepers, recording the weather, human events, telling us truths with their rings about what and how the world has changed; they exist in their own timescapes at a remove from the human.¹¹ What happens to the time tales trees grow when they are artificially accelerated, as are these assembler-augmented examples? Their details blur and we lose their stories, as tree farms today increasingly report: lumber milled from old growth trees is more stable, stronger, and more rot-resistant than that from farmed trees because of the heartwood developed at their cores and the density of their rings. Farmed trees have widely spaced rings that provide little support—or phytophographic narratives. Assembled trees might have none at all. According to Marder, “[t]he commodification of the plant’s time, nearly nullifying the wait for its development toward ripeness, parasitically exploits the heteronomy of vegetal temporality when commodity logic turns into the plant’s other, and finally into the source of its meaning” (101). Faced by these manifestations of the future’s ecological wreckage and the distortion of the trees’ self-narrating abilities, Flynne can no longer glibly accept the similar non-future of her (and their) future. It was a human-centric perspective that facilitated the so-called jackpot extinction event; seeing only themselves led to a world where only humans (and the occasional assembled tree, thylacine, and tattooed bird) were left. Their stories turned to stubs, ending in an abyss. Acknowledging the lived experiences and alternative timescales of other lives resists impotent neganthropic ruminations. Is it enough to shift the trajectory of the human species from the fate of the far future? Gibson refuses to answer. But it is enough to change Flynne’s flattened-by-hyperobjects perspective, allowing her to see the world around herself differently, able to move forward at least, rather than accepting stagnation.

10 For excellent discussions of the roles of colonial visions of temporality and ways in which non-Western delineations of seasons such as “sprinter” create counter-colonial temporalities in Australian thought and culture, see John Charles Ryan’s *Plants in Contemporary Poetry* (2018), Mike Donaldson’s “The End of Time? Aboriginal Temporality and the British Invasion of Australia” (1996), and Timothy John Entwisle’s *Sprinter and Sprummer: Australia’s Changing Seasons* (2014).

11 Patrícia Vieira writes compellingly of phytography in “Phytographia: Literature as Plant Writing” and elsewhere, though, it is worth noting, the term did not originate with her use.

Ecocentric Insurgency

Gibson's envirocentric lens even shapes Flynn's syntax at times into a multiplicitous purview, more like William Dean Howells's "photographic school of fiction," as exemplified in *London Films* (1905), than Harman's literary cubism.¹² She takes on the role of his earlier hacker hero. Instead of exploring coded cyberspace, she traverses her present and future on branching data, bridging the seemingly distant future and her "stubbed" present through a new ecological purview. Back in her own time after spending a spell in an art gallery in the future, Flynn begins to see what she has where she is, of what her home is composed. Sitting in an outhouse she pauses, "[l]istened. Sound of bugs. Creek rushing. Wind in the trees. Went into the toilet, the spring on the door twanging. Undid her jeans, sat there in the dark, a universe away from Picasso. Remembered to toss some sawdust down into the hole when she was done," interacting with her ecosystem on a bricolage of levels (216). She is able to see the present as a multidimensional possibility, her description like an aspect-to-aspect transition in comics, pulsing across the senses and pausing across planes instead of forcing them all together.

Here Gibson synthesizes romantic and realist paradigms, much as Mark Twain does in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), creating a sense of wonder that dissolves the disaffected apathy pushing the near future to the sixth great extinction and presents the hope of a Possibly Ever After. While Wilf explains the environmental ruin between their timelines via a robotic peripheral in her time, Flynn "looked across the silver lawn... to where moon shadows lay, past stunted boxwoods and the stump of a concrete birdbath they'd pretended was a dragon's castle," her ability to see the fantastic of her present pressing her to question "if it could mean anything, really, when somebody told you something like that. When it was his past and your future" rather than accepting that her signed and sealed doom was being described (320). She sees Wilf's ominous future as both real and unreal, perhaps a trick of the light, her transformatory imagination reenvisioning his cataclysmic presagements: "The shadows on the lawn were black holes, bottomless, or like velvet had been spread, perfectly flat" (321). This scene is at once telescoped through Eden, the stars, and domestic place. Limitless space and time merge together in her yard, a cartographic symbiosis of possibility. Unlike the negatively leveled future, in part through her immersion in a plant-time framed future, Flynn cycles and digests the elements surrounding her, processing them, deriving nutrition from them, and then moving on from them, rather than allowing her system to become blocked as it has in the machinic peripheral body she wears when projecting into the far future. It cannot even eat. Through this perspectival mindfulness, she composts her surroundings, part of a symbiotic system rather than holding herself outside of

12 In *London Films* Howells creates a filmic, shimmering, moving path built of words rather than images, which he called "the photographic school of fiction."

it, abstracted, or trying to distance herself from it, similar to Donna Haraway's call to enrich the future by composting the past in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.

Much like Flynne and her cohort before their catalyzing realizations, most readers have simply accepted *The Peripheral* as an alternative history novel even though all of its temporalities are tied to the future. It feels like one. And when the timelines meet and break off, technically, Flynne's time does become an alternative history for Wilf's future. Yet this term privileges the future in a way unbecoming of a split time novel. Besides, as Karen Hellekson writes, alternative histories typically explain the world "as it might be, as it could have been, or even as it should have been" (30). *The Peripheral* deals less with the standard "what ifs" of alternate history than the rarer "if thens" of alternative futurity, for *both* branching timelines. By the end of the novel Flynne has reoriented to the ecotopic spacetime of her narrative through her abutment with the un-lived vegetal lives before her, cutting herself and her time free of the crushing bounds of her once-projected future and, in doing so, looking toward an alternate future instead of seeing her present as always-already-past.

In *The Peripheral*, William Gibson makes a shift from his usual technocentric lens, instead emphasizing ecological time and space. In doing so, he bridges social and environmental peripheries as a potential "cure" for the neganthropocenic future flu and creates an insurgent architect hero who is able to "hack" time, finding an alternative future for her once doomed present. This is not to read William Gibson's *The Peripheral* as utterly anti-technological, dystopian nor utopian. In fact, Gibson has been adamant that to read *The Peripheral's* ending as "happy" is to misread it, suggesting to Jonathan Sturgeon in an online interview with *Flavorwire* that it may even be "a litmus test for sociopolitical sophistication." It is, however, somewhat hopeful: the two timelines end up merged together in a fecund stub, neither a clean, dead future nor a dirty, fertile past but a symbiotic temporal environment, separate yet mutually supportive, made more visible to themselves and to one another through a remapping of time's potentialities, and able to look past themselves to the wider ecological space-times in which they are enmeshed.

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