# Folly: Narrating an Origin of the Anthropocene

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## Summary

*Folly* and its commentary are an effort to respond to the challenges Chakrabarty delineated in his *Four Theses*: that in their present states, neither the humanities nor the social sciences are able to effectively and fully depict and discuss the Anthropocene due to an inability to reconcile human social history with its species history. Or, put another way, to discuss humanity simultaneously as a cultural, social, and political object within its wider place in the natural world and its impacts on physical climate and biodiversity. Through the use of high fantasy fiction and inventive engagement with Anthropocene discourse, *Folly* attempts to articulate a symbolic and mythic retelling of the origins of the Anthropocene – utilising Fantasy's inherently semiotic language to answer Chakrabarty's challenge.

While the thesis is unsuccessful in creating a singular history of the Anthropocene, and in diagnosing an objective, observable character of the epoch, *Folly* manages to articulate and argue for the place of subjectivity and individual expression within Anthropocene discourse.

## Acknowledgements

Where to begin? An author's work may seem solitary but is rarely done in complete isolation. We always lean and rely on those around us, either for support, or because the sheer repeated effort of trying to squeeze words out renders us deaf, dumb, and completely insensible. We are a frequent burden on those around us, and though our loved ones bear us often – I find myself wishing I could thank them more.

First of all – to my wife, Hollie, and to my two sons Hunter and Whittaker. Hollie has been the unfailing, unswerving voice of both firm reason and unerring faith since I first shared my hopes and dreams of writing. She has given and sacrificed more than I can possible recount here to help and support me, and I have no words to express the full weight of my love and gratitude for her. Without her insight, her patience, and her willing to tell me off whenever I felt like giving up, or that I was wasting my time – *Folly* would never have been. Indeed I'm sure I would've packed in this whole writing business years ago without her. She remains all of my joy and all of my reason for forging on. So firstly, and most importantly, Hollie this is for you[1].

Secondly to my supervisor – Matthew de Abaitua. Matthew first taught me as a master's student in 2015 for a novel writing course. Again, he arrived in my life at a point where I was disillusioned with the whole endeavour of writing. At that point I had completed two novels, and more short stories than I could remember, and failed to find a market or an outlet for any of them. Matthew's brilliant, if sometimes scathing, insight into my work rekindled my interest in the craft. It brought confidence and a desire to succeed – but above all the realisation that *maybe* I wasn't quite so terrible as I thought. As a supervisor Matthew remains without peer or parallel. Always supportive, encouraging, and insightful. The kind of supervisor who is happy to put the training wheels on, while you're watching, and then whisk them away when you're not – comfortable in the knowledge that you'll figure it out. Or, at least, won't survive the crash to complain.

Thirdly – to the rest of my supervisory panel: Phillip Terry, James Canton, and Sean Seeger. All of whom were very kind about being subjected to my nonsense once a term. Their support and encouragement, as well as their insight, has been invaluable. Even if we did spend most of those sessions talking about the etymology of swearwords, and something to do with barge poles we're far too polite to repeat in public.

Fourthly – to friends and family. To Tam and Dana, the best friends I don't deserve. To my grandparents, for not only keeping me from starvation and financial ruin, but also for (even before my very modest and limited successes) calling to ask me about my writing, and for their encouragement and support. Lastly to my parents – for the gift (or burden, I've yet to make my mind up) of life. But also for the fateful conversation that clinched my decision to start my PHD:

I had quit my job out of a mixture of despair, frustration, and necessity – with a view to spending time at home, for a few months, to raise my infant son and to finally decide just what I was going to do with my life. It was my parents that mentioned my old, dashed hopes of a PHD – my masters hadn't gone as well as I'd hoped, my own youthful arrogance led to a failing grade which in turn scuppered any hope of a scholarship. Denied flawless, unending achievement and success I left academia (to my mind) in disgrace, for the world of minimum wage work. I recall my mum nodding, looking sympathetic. Dad had been quiet throughout, until he snorted and shook his head.

He looked me in the eye and said: "I can't believe you let that stop you."

[1] SEE? I TOLD YOU I WAS WORKING THE WHOLE TIME!

Thanks dad.

# *Folly*: Critical Commentary

## 1. An Introduction

### 1a. The Word for the Anthropocene is Forest

The intent of this thesis is the Anthropocene and my ongoing attempts to narrate its historic and cultural origins through the form of High Fantasy Fiction. The Anthropocene as setting, concept, and historical epoch stretches and reaches beyond our ability to limit and describe it fully – earning its status as a *hyperobject*. Its 'character' encompasses the beginnings of colonialism in the Americas and its influence on mercantile capitalism, the industrial revolution, the post-war period and so on. It reaches beyond these concerns of human history towards anthropogenic changes to the planet's climate and to biodiversity. It has bearing in the fields of literature, philosophy, history, ecology, climatology, anthropology, geology, the social sciences (collectively), and indeed anything that draws from the vast well of post-enlightenment epistemology – each presenting a single piece or facet of the greater whole, but never able to depict or describe the Anthropocene in its entirety. To discuss it, accurately and precisely, would involve drawing from each of these disparate fields and their varied perspectives, understandings, and narratives pertaining to the Anthropocene. I have no background in science, nor do I have much reliable experience with the social sciences – so naturally my hand turns to the humanities.

Such an effort, if Chakrabarty (2009) is to be believed, would be wasted – reliant as they are on the ontological separation between humanity's social history and its species history, the humanities at present are not capable of truly grasping the Anthropocene. Its tools, adapted as they are to primarily consider humans as social entities, lack scale and scope. It is stuck with the granular of the Anthropocene – the trees and not the forest. The Anthropocene is the forest[2] and we find ourselves lost within it, moving from constituent part to constituent part, hoping that such a survey will reveal the nature of the whole. In trying to grasp it as a concept I have alternately turned to the fields of history, philosophy, political theory, economic theory, and ecology in the hopes of dividing my topic into smaller, easily analysed and discussed parts. But I have found it is indivisible – to separate one aspect of the Anthropocene from its peers engenders a loss of context and significance. What is more: to speak purely of my own experience, delving deeper into the granular particularities of the Anthropocene only leads to a deepening of its status and appearance as a hyperobject.

For instance: this thesis adheres to Lewis & Maslin's 'Orbis Spike' hypothesis – that the Anthropocene began in 1610 following less than 200 years of European colonialism in the Americas, marked by a sharp decline in atmospheric CO2 which in turn caused a global decline in temperatures for the first time since the last ice age. Several questions lurk beyond that statement, each leading in different directions. For instance – the period between the end of the last ice age and the Orbis Spike is an unusually long interglacial (around 11,000 years), due to the long-term consequences of the agricultural revolution and its spread throughout much of the world[3]. As such we'll find ourselves contemplating the entire history of agricultural-dependent civilisation. Or perhaps we turn to the question of *how* such a dramatic CO2 drop occurred and find ourselves delving deep into another conceptual mire – one that demands us to consider and analyse the deaths of between 60 and 120 million indigenous Americans

[2] An image and visual metaphor that I've found increasingly useful after reading Ursula Le Guin's *The Word for the World is Forest* (2014, London: Gollancz) – encompassing both the sense of the aphorism, but also mingling it with the setting of Le Guin's novel to emphasise the pervasive seamlessness of the Anthropocene-as-hyperobject.

[3] Simon L. Lewis & Mark A. Maslin, 2018, p.142)

in less than 200 years. Deaths brought on by a mixture of murder, deliberate starvation, disease, and the rigours of slavery. Even that is not a contained subject as we would then have to delve into the history of bigotry and racist violence, and then to track forward in time in order to grasp the racially exploitative roots of capitalism and how that might explain its current nature and consequence.

Each thread stretches far, and often I have found myself contemplating the very foundations of each constituent discipline I relied upon. The Anthropocene is a geological era marked by the unilateral control of human beings over the physical state and nature of the planet. Our every choice and decision possesses the potential to deepen the damage of vanishing biodiversity or climate change and the variety of disasters borne of them. As such – to delve into the Anthropocene in search of root cause or constituent nature will result endlessly in frustration. We expect the Anthropocene to behave like a conventional temporal object. It must be something we can excise from its context, analyse and discuss in isolation, so that we may define and compartmentalise it. The Anthropocene resists every such effort and instead permeates and pervades any discipline that may be marshalled against it. As a hyperobject, it is *viscous*. It adheres to and colonises anything which attempts to contain or diminish it. It is also, and this is key, *interobjective* or *interrelative*: it cannot be grasped in and of itself but can only be traced by its relations to other objects and subjects[4]. We can capture and grasp a singular aspect of the Anthropocene through looking at its philosophical motifs: how Aristotle's conception of the Natural Slave[5] were brought to bear on, and propped up, racial violence and the practice of slavery in the Americas[6]. But it will not tell us everything about the Anthropocene, nor will it suggest its other parts.

If each of the humanities, on which I would otherwise rely, can only reveal a facet – owing to some limitation in methodology I haven't yet arrived at, then it becomes necessary to reach for a different set of tools. If the Anthropocene cannot be arrived at or understood by the identifying, and assembling, of its constituent parts, then it must be dealt with in its totality. An academic work pursuing such an end would be vast, far beyond the scope of a PHD thesis. So it had to be compressed in some way. The creative work, *Folly*, focuses entirely on trying to capture the *spirit* of the Anthropocene's origins. Not its historical actuality – to do so would require me to dredge up the necessary evidence to prove, comfortably, when the Anthropocene began before I even started to discuss those findings and their significance – but rather the *feel* of it. What ideas, characters, and beliefs were at work in those origins. What kind of actions took place, and what were their significance? Was it the actions of many, that brought about the Anthropocene, or a relative few?

As to what tools to use, I felt that such a vast and weighty concept could only be dealt with metaphorically and symbolically. To conjure the Anthropocene, *exactly*, would be to conjure its full conceptual weight and all of its disparate, scholarly facets. Its nature as a hyperobject would utterly defeat any attempt to depict it mimetically, necessitating a need for abstraction. I turned to the genre of High Fantasy for a number of reasons, some of them purely a matter of taste and inclination, but the most pertinent in this case is the following: "Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better Fantasy will make it … For

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[4] Morton, T., 2013, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

[5] Aristotle, *1959, Politics,* London: William Heineman Ltd., p.21-23

[6] Brian Cummings, 2002, 'Animal Passions and Human Sciences: Shame, Blushing and Nakedness in Early Modern Europe and the New World' in *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies, and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Erica Fudge et al., Basingstoke: PalgraveMacmillan

creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it."[7]

As such concepts such as linear time or bounded, chronological narration, can be discarded in a Fantasy narrative. Hyperobjects transcend their spatiotemporal position to affect our grasp and understanding of time in all linear directions. To depict this mimetically would require a dense and often confusing work. The introduction of magic in a Fantasy narrative is enough to invite the reader to accept any required interruption in the conventional flow and experience of time. In the case of *Folly*, the narrative flows backwards and forwards in time – sometimes making a jump of only a few hours or days, to months, to years, and in some cases even centuries. Characters are subjected to dreams and visions. The narrative follows lines of thematic relation and association, rather than linear chronology – jumping from one perspective to another if the experiences of that character have the potential to speak to the experiences of another. The later addition of Ferdia as an occasional narrator enabled me to draw these disparate strings together and attempt to assemble them into a larger image. Through such devices, eased by the presence of magic and mythical motifs, it is possible to present, if not discuss and analyse, hyperobjects in their entirety without conceptual interference.

*Folly*, and this commentary, form an argument as to how the challenges identified by Chakrabarty can be circumvented through artworks and literary forms that are founded on acts of imagination and the language of myth and metaphor – in this case, High Fantasy fiction. The tone of this commentary, and its handling of its subjects, are an attempt to represent and capture my process and interaction with the material. Due to the inherent difficulties of approaching the Anthropocene and its nature directly, some vagaries and metaphors are required to cross the conceptual gulf. As a writer my concern is also largely with the craft of writing itself – any descriptions or discussions pertaining to theory or ideology are an attempt to reveal the seams to my own work, to point to the ideas I found useful or interesting and which found their home in *Folly*. In which case I hope you will forgive me for occasionally lapsing into a less-than-serious register as I attempt to describe and discuss what is potentially indescribable.

The following section will focus on my initial methodological considerations and some early observations, drawing from the writings of Attebery, Le Guin, Tolkien, and Chu as significant critical voices within the genre. The following chapters, in turn, will discuss the political and philosophical utility of the Fantasy genre, followed by a discussion of agency and the intentionality of history, a third chapter on hyperobjects and strategies of representation, and finally a conclusion of sorts that delineates possible routes forward and how the process I have begun in *Folly* may be continued to touch on other areas of the Anthropocene.

## 1b. "Boiling Roses": Methodological Considerations

The above phrase comes from the following quote in Brian Attebery's *Stories About Stories* (a text I'll be referring to often): "trying to fit [stories] into a strict allegorical scheme [is akin to] boiling roses." (p.88, paraphrasing George MacDonald) With *Folly* I desired to be not only heard but understood – for the argument at the heart of the novel to be made clear, whilst also preserving the pleasure of Fantasy as a genre. I think it's natural, especially when writing within fantastic non-realist genres, to reach for allegory to simplify this process of communication. Borne out of a fear that all the lights and pyrotechnics, the magic and the peril, will distract the audience from what the author is trying to convey. In such cases I often felt compelled to squash, squeeze, and mangle my characters and their world. To write a script, arrange my puppets and pieces, and directly interfere in their every movement to achieve the desired effect. This – I hope you'll be reassured to know – I resisted. *Folly* did not arrive in one

[7] Tolkien,2001, p.55.

neat chunk, but was written quickly, if haltingly. Frequent missteps in direction led to the narrative stalling – as if the sentence I had just committed to the page had cause my characters to pause mid-scene, turn, and give me a scathing, questioning eye.

In such cases I found that, if I reread that sentence, I had tried to control the story directly. To push or force it and the characters in directions I felt would best serve my aim of narrating the origins of the Anthropocene.

That anxiety, I feel, is to be expected. After all: if traditional scholarship in the humanities found itself defeated by the vastness of the Anthropocene, how could I hope to succeed in clarifying matters when all of the *meaning* of the story was being constructed incidentally? Shouldn't I try to take control of the story, to force those comparisons, to establish easily identifiable equivalence?

Such considerations are not alien to the Fantasy genre. In fact they're quite explicit at their very origins (Tolkien, 2001; Carpenter, 2016; Attebery, 2014). It may not be the central concern for those of us committed to the act of mythopoesis, but it is an unavoidable one. Do we trust our readers to understand what we mean, and for our stories to speak for themselves? Or do we circumvent the whole problem and reach for allegory? Do we *force* the comparison between the experiences in the text with the experiences in the reality inhabited by our audience?

This, Ursula Le Guin argued (1982), is the struggle between "symbol (living meaning) and dead equivalence (allegory)." (p.65-66) I am inclined to agree with her. On the spectrum of writers between the disorderly to the orderly, I find myself firmly in the former camp. I write quickly, in a kind of fever, hammering the words out one after the other. My goal is always to write at such a pace that my conscious, fretful mind can't keep up. I want to leave that slower, if more rational, part of myself behind so that I can focus on the needs and the requirements of the story without muddying or mangling it with my own personality, priorities, and judgements. I'm not advocating for a species of 'magical thinking', although it could be expressed in those terms. It feels like magic, or religious rapture – except the only voice heard is those of the characters.

Nor is it an argument for an unconscious mind, exactly. I remain suspicious of Jung and Freud, whose gestures towards some shared psychic field seem part of a broader effort to universalise the human experience in a manner that leaves it dismembered and diminished[8]. I recognise the words I write as my own, I recognise *some* part of me is in control of this process, I haven't disengaged anything. All the lights are on, the circuit breakers of the brain remain untripped. I haven't succumbed to madness. I'm tempted to call it instinct, but to call it anything would limit its meaning and come short of the experience altogether. I do not need to understand this process to use it.

Stories, given free reign and a lot of patience, tend to arrive seemingly full formed. Stephen King likened writing to excavation (2001). At first you are only conscious of a small piece of the wider object: often I begin with a single sentence, or image. These things imply other things. Often the initial image or idea arrives in so large and arresting a form, it hides everything that follows – so that once that first image is translated into type, the rest arrive (seemingly) out of the aether. They don't, of course they don't. But I lack the words or the

[8] Brian Attebery makes a similar point in *Stories about Stories* when discussing Joseph Campbell's 'monomyth': "There is no universal grammar of story that makes all myths into one super-entity, one monomyth. You might as well say that Mayan jaguar carvings and Easter Island colossi and Greek marbles are identical expressions of religious impulse. They are all made of stone; let's call it the *monolith*. If one strips away everything distinctive, then of course all stories become the same." (2014, p.108)

understanding to articulate the experience and am hesitant to even try. What I have typed above will have to suffice.

What I *do* understand is that metaphor occurs, seemingly, by accident. Perhaps each character and event arrives bearing some small piece of a greater puzzle, or a single thread that contributes to a wider pattern. I know I could not have told this story half as well without Abrechan. But Abrechan's nature as a character demanded both disciples and heretics. There needed to be someone close to him, someone lesser and flawed but fundamentally human and sympathetic, who could be seduced by Abrechan's fanaticism and then repelled by it. There also needed to be someone injured by his acts, moulded and malformed by them, to act as a distorted reflection of Abrechan's own nature and actions. This was how I arrived at Fulke and Treithe.

Those three central characters had homes, cultures, neighbours, enemies, vices and virtues, each of them operated within a wider historical context – both in terms of the past that shaped them, but also in terms of a future that they in turn would shape. One object implies another. They are inextricable. Treithe, on his own, would be a lesser facet. A third of a vase – the break in its side crying out for its old companions. But in turn I could not have those three without Mazulkeen. Her actions shaped the world in which all three of them live.

Abrechan is her reflection. An echo of her own desires and wishes, repeated ad nauseum until they achieve fulfilment. Fulke echoes her ostracization and alienation as a child but seems to tread a different path. His origins and nature speak of choice, and alternatives. Treithe is trapped within the world she made, as his father was before him. His identity and status in his own community is a lasting reminder of Mazulkeen's actions.

This is the first time I have presented these characters to myself in this way – and now, looking at it, I see that recurring motif of permeable identity and being: a result of my early conceptual research for the novel and reading Pramod K Nayar's *Posthumanism*. I never deliberately included it into the text. In fact – if I had caught myself doing it, I would have stopped immediately for fear of tainting the narrative. Rendering it a lifeless, vacuous philosophical thought experiment rather than a living, vital narrative.

When I linger on this thought, I see the pattern elsewhere in *Folly*. The central species within the fantasy world (the dragons, the gesælig, the Aos Sí, and the Amunin) intersect repeatedly. The dragons and the gesælig originate from a different reality. They created the world as a biproduct of a pre-existing feud, each exercising their powers to overcome the other. The gesælig invent life as a mockery of the dragons' perfect, sterile order – replacing eternal monism with fleeting disparity. In response the dragons create the Amunin to preserve all that has lived in perfect, unchanging memory. The gesælig pervert this when one of their number, Lorn, seduces the Amunin Mazrineen – with Mazulkeen as their child, who will in turn become the common ancestor of humanity. The Aos Sí were created by a different gesælig, the lady of the moon, to comfort her husband as he pursued a fruitless quest for a trinket she didn't want – in the hopes of staving off his madness.

These species' weave in and out of each other, sharing biological origins, but also history. None are the singular object of any particular will, but birthed into the world to achieve a goal, or an end often independent or alien to that species' interests. It is a world bereft of an orderly will, or natural law. Things simply are as they are – tangled, messy, difficult to trace unless spelled out as above. Humanity, then, is not a separate thing but a product of a long and convoluted process. Lorn did not seduce Mazrineen with the expressed intent to create humanity, but only knowing that whatever child came of that union was liable to create a sufficient amount of chaos and discord – while also, in the mind of the dragons, tainting yet another one of their creations.

Again – I must specify that none of this was deliberate or planned. I began with my central cast of characters, each implied other people or beings in the world around them, and the energy or 'vibrations' that bound and connected them became their shared history. Lorn's nature and personality implied the nature and personality of his peers, which in turn implied their role within the history of the world. Such joyously anarchic beings need an opponent, something orderly and restrained, to strive against – I already knew there were dragons in this world, and that they fulfilled a near 'godlike' role in the world's cosmology, and the gesælig suggested their nature and perspective.

The conclusion I have reached, through reflecting on my approach to writing *Folly*, is this: Allegories are made, metaphors *happen.* A sentiment I was pleased to find echoed in Ray Bradbury's *Zen in the Art of Writing* (1990). In sympathy with Bradbury's methods: when beginning *Folly* I assembled my core characters, placed them in their opening positions, and then fired the starter-pistol. Afterwards it was a case of dashing madly after them, scribbling (or typing) as fast as I could until the race was over.

## 2. Fantasy: Definitions and Utility

### 2a. Fantasy as "fuzzy set"

Fantasy, as a genre, eludes clear and distinct definitions – at least definitions that can be formalised and agreed to. Encapsulated within that genre, you can find the likes of Jeanette Ng's *Under the Pendulum Sun* (2017), Terry Pratchett's *Nightwatch* (2002), NK Jemisin's *The City We Became* (2020), Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* (1967), Susannah Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell (2004),* and Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Last Wish* (1993) existing alongside each other, fitting comfortably with little disagreement. Some of these stories listed blur into other genres: *Nightwatch* (crime), *The City We Became* (Weird/Horror), *Jonathan Strange…* (historical), but all of them retain some integral function or detail which makes them fantasy stories.

Brian Attebery in his *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992) attempted to narrow the problem down – focusing on a key difference preferred by Tolkien and Lewis, between mimesis and poesis. Put simply, mimetic fiction tries to emulate or replicate the real world, albeit within potentially fictional scenarios, while poesis does not – leading to Tolkien coining the term *mythopoesis* to describe his preferred mode of writing. While this distinction can be broadly useful in discussing Fantasy, Attebery noted that most mimetic fiction is not without its elements of poesis, as without it mimetic fiction collapses into journalism, and Fantasy fiction makes use of mimetic qualities and effects to provide grounding and believability to its world (p.4). The distinction remains *broadly* true, if we consider it a distinction in *fundamentals*. Fantasy *fundamentally* situated within poesis, but with liberal use of the mimetic to support it.

Fantasy is also, *fundamentally*, about things that cannot happen (James, Mendlesohn, 2012). It trades in magic, monsters, prophecies, alchemy, gods, and anything remotely esoteric, supernatural, or preternatural. It is not alone in this subject matter and at times often overlaps with the horror genre, although these features and facets are used for different ends and from a different epistemic playbook. Horror, while it may feature gods, monsters, and the like, deprives true and effective knowledge of these things – either to the characters, the reader, or both. The anxiety and fear induced rise from the simultaneous feeling of *not knowing* or *not understanding* and the growing suspicion that such knowledge and understanding may be beyond our grasp, may in fact be impossible. Fantasy does not usually withhold knowledge in this way – although there are some clear examples of this strategy being used[9] - where

[9] The C'Thaeh in Patrick Rothfuss' *The Wise Man's Fear* is a good example of this.

Horror deprives the reader and characters of knowledge to deprive them of power, Fantasy either provides this knowledge or enough clues and suggestions for the reader to construct that knowledge in order to empower them. Put another way: horror diminishes character agency by withholding information, while fantasy empowers character agency by providing it.

From this we can distil two unstable principles of the fantasy genre: it is usually poetic at its core, providing an impossible and invented world, and it strives to provide understanding and knowledge to the reader in order to empower them. There are, however, sizeable caveats to both of these principles which render them unstable, with almost as many counter examples to both statements as there are examples. In the same way we can describe a *typical* fantasy narrative along the lines of a magical world, an orphaned hero prophesied to restore balance/order to the world, a spreading corrupting evil that needs to be banished, a wizened advisor, a kingdom in peril, a sense of decay and dwindling, etc. – and find legions of fantasy novels which have little in common with that same description.

This has given rise to a tendency to refer to the Fantasy genre as a "fuzzy set" (James, Mendlesohn, 2012). Not only for its lack of a clear definition, despite a sense that we understand what fantasy is and can identify it with reasonable precision, but also for its unclear and non-canonical history (p.3). There are no fantasy texts that we *must* include when we consider the genre and its history, as there are no definitive origins. Depending on individual proclivities, some might wish to reach back to *Gilgamesh* or the *Iliad*. Others may gesture to Ovid and Dante, or to Milton and Spencer, or to George MacDonald and Lord Dunsany. Many refer to Tolkien as one possible site of origin and this may be the only account broadly assented to. Tolkien is *one* origin of the fantasy genre as we understand it, certainly in its modern form. Although more contemporary texts such as Tasha Suri's *The Jasmine Throne* (2021) bear little resemblance to the Tolkien model.

It is this lack of a monolithic history, of a clear string of canonical texts to be acknowledged and understood, that lends Fantasy some affinity to the problem of the Anthropocene and its history. Discussing the concerns raised by Chakrabarty's *Four Theses*, Simon (2020) argued that we should avoid constructing singular, hegemonic narratives of the Anthropocene with a view to establishing a seemingly apolitical, science-informed orthodoxy (p.189). By this I understand Simon to be arguing that any attempt to fix a single narrative in place runs the risk of establishing one faction's, or ideological group's, reading of the Anthropocene as an 'objective truth' to which all later texts and interpretations must refer. The Anthropocene, as I will touch on in a later chapter, is a multifaceted, global epoch without a singular, uniform, universal experience. If we consider the three major hypotheses for its origins (colonialism, the industrial revolution, and the rise of globalization), a cursory glance reveals a multitude of differing accounts from a plethora of vantage points. Colonialism was not experienced by the colonisers and the colonized in the same way. The industrial revolution was similarly divided. Globalization, a process or an economic environment we still live within, appears to be growing more complex, and its narratives more diverse, with each passing day. To attempt to collapse that diversity into a single thread, a single perspective, runs the risk of distorting that narrative with the same homogenization that defines the destructive and oppressive aspects of the Anthropocene itself. As such – to tell *one* narrative of the Anthropocene, it seemed a good opportunity to utilise a genre which represents similar characteristics. A genre which is similarly diverse and without a canonical history, where a new contribution functions not as a dissent or a divergence from a previous model, but an addition to a pre-existing multiplicity and complexity that defines the concept itself.

A further compatibility lies in recent shifts in both Anthropocene discourse and fantasy narratives – specifically a heightened awareness that European interests and perspectives are over-prioritised. Speaking broadly, the Fantasy genre (specifically 'epic fantasy') adhered to a Tolkien-esque model for several decades – running quite late into the 20$^{th}$ century – with

authors like David Eddings, Terry Brooks, and Robert Jordan replicating not only features of Middle-Earth but also the ethical binary at the heart of Tolkien's story: good vs evil, light vs dark, etc. The rise of grimdark in the 1980s complicated this trajectory somewhat, replacing prophesied saviours with grizzled antiheroes, albeit in an overenthusiastic manner – evidenced by a growing fascination with the pursuit of 'grittiness' which manifested in hyperviolence and increasing moral ambiguity. While grimdark has failed to enter the mainstream of contemporary fantasy, it has had a lingering impact on those mainstream narratives: with authors like Robin Hobb and George R.R. Martin writing narratives that are epic fantasy in proportions and construction, but whose histories, characters, and narrative events borrow the complexity and ambiguity from grimdark narratives.

NK Jemisin's *Inheritance Trilogy* (2010-11) provides a useful juncture within the history of the fantasy genre, not only for what the narratives themselves achieve, but also for their later influence on the likes of Jeannette Ng, R.F. Kuang, Tasha Suri, and S.A. Chakraborty, whose work directly influenced *Folly.* Jemisin borrowed a great deal from her predecessors but provided an element that was lacking within mainstream fantasy but always had the utmost potential: contextualising Fantasy narratives within the history of European colonial expropriation. She depicted a world, familiar to many readers of fantasy, where humanity had harnessed the power of the gods in the form of magic. This harnessing derives from the gods' enslavement by a single family who have installed themselves as tyrants over the other kingdoms, unleashing the gods as weapons against their political opponents. The family and the way they are described are distinctly European, the gods derive their powers from their function within the cosmic order: night, day, childhood, warfare, etc. *The Inheritance Trilogy* altered the manner in which fantasy narratives are read and understood: Jemisin took a familiar story of characters, coded as European, wielding devastating elemental power and exposed it as a metaphor for European colonialism and enforced cultural homogenization. It introduced a post-colonial context to a fantasy world in such a fundamental and vital way, that it can be retroactively applied to prior narratives. We can return to Tolkien, Eddings, Jordan, etc. and see the cultural fault lines of power laid bare.

In this way, borrowing liberally from Mark Fisher (2016), we can say that Jemisin's narrative cast an eerie eye on the fantasy genre: by providing a previously omitted or discarded context, the fantasy genre which had been thus far largely European in appearance and influence could be viewed from outside of the European lens. Jemisin restored Fantasy to a function identified by Rosemary Jackson, one which she denied to the fantasy genre itself: it could "[trace] the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'." (1981, p.4) The later works of Ng, Kuang, Suri, and Chakraborty have sought to deepen this effect, to make it more pronounced. Ng's novel tackles colonialism directly with the language and tropes of fantasy, where Kuang, Suri, and Chakraborty through striving to write and create fantasy narratives outside of the European cultural hegemony have succeeded in creating worlds and stories that stand apart from prior fantasy narratives while providing critique and comment. Their stories make liberal use of multiple points of view, often with characters from a variety of social and political vantages: soldiers, priests, nobles, the impoverished – flitting back and forth across gender, racial, and economic boundaries to establish a rounded and full sense of the various contexts within which the story itself is occurring.

This serves a dual purpose: not only does it fulfil the contextual quality already discussed, but it also grounds the fantastical world of the narrative itself. Daevabad (Chakraborty, 2017-2020) plays host to seven distinct djinn cultures: the Geziri, the Shafit, the Tukharistani, Daeva, Anivanshi, Sahrayn, and Ayaanle. Each with their own districts, languages, religious and cultural practices. Chakraborty explores and depicts each faithfully and in detail, with each culture represented by distinct characters all of whom provide differing

and often clashing perspectives on the central plot of the trilogy. The city was founded by a subset of Daeva, the Nahid, rewarded for their service to the prophet Suleiman and his cursing of the Djinn. They ruled for uninterrupted centuries, growing gradually more corrupt and oppressive – particularly towards the half-human Shafit who were both required to relocate to Daevabad once the facts of their birth are discovered, but who are also actively scorned and persecuted by Nahid law. The Geziri, ostensibly acting in the interests of the Shafit, pursue a rebellion that sees the Nahid family destroyed – barring a handful of survivors. Their victory comes at the cost of numerous atrocities, and in time their own reign over the city becomes increasingly draconian and repressive. In order to satisfy the traditionalists amongst the Daeva, and keep the other Djinni tribes in line, the Geziri's increasingly target and assault the Shafit population – holding them accountable for every hardship and misfortune the city experiences, going so far as to tolerate an emergent slave trade whereby full-blooded djinn could claim a Shafit child, for instance, is their long-lost niece, pay a small 'finder's fee', and bring that child into their household.

The novels flit along these cultural lines with each new development in the city's political intrigues. We may begin with the Daeva, and grow sympathetic to their cause, only to be provided with clashing Geziri priorities, Ayaanle objections, and be forced to reconcile each of these perspectives with the eventual cost on the Shafit. Chakraborty's world is powered and fuelled by its deep and complex interconnections. The characters do not pass through the world unaffected or without comment. Each culture has its perspective, its reading of its own history, its stories, its priorities. All of which combines to not only ground a fantastical, impossible city, but also to further Chakraborty's aims to speak to generational colonial trauma[10].

This coincidental shift in attentions and objectives within the two disparate fields proved attractive for my own work and reflected my own shift in consciousness and attitude during the early stages of research. Fantasy also has a history of endeavouring to breathe new life and vitality into the world, as discussed in Tolkien's poem *Mythopoeia*[11]. Fantasy invites its readers, by restoring to nature it's pre-Enlightenment mythic vitality, to reconsider the natural world. Through the presence of ents, water nymphs, or guardian spirits, we come to see nature as a vital, living thing. As an agent within its own right, rather than as a backdrop to human endeavour.

In the next section I will be aiming to further this analysis of the political utility of structural elements within the fantasy genre and discussing how I sought to apply these within *Folly*.

## 2b. The Politics of Fantasy

"Fantasy itself is heretical," writes Brian Attebery (1991, p.25), "It denies what everybody knows to be the truth." Put another way – fantasy is built upon a simple but unavoidable dissent. Dissent against the material rules and confines of our reality, dissent against our present political and social organisations, dissent against our presently accepted narratives towards the past. At the heart of every fantasy narrative is a small rebellion. Even Tolkien's work, anchored in his own parochial, conservative worldview though it may be, contains an element of dissent[12].

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[10]S.A Chakraborty interviewed in *Light Speed* Magazine, 2018, https://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/nonfiction/interview-sa-chakraborty/, accessed 03/02/2020

[11] Tolkien, 2001.

[12] "For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it." (Tolkien, 2001, p.55)

*Folly* rests on a dual dissent – one towards the cultural character of the Anthropocene, and the other towards some of the enduring traditions of the fantasy genre which serve to first establish and then perpetuate an idealised and mythologized vision of European history severed from its consequences and broader contexts. My intention was to undertake a superficially similar project in appearance, but one that would dig deeper and wider – borrowing from authors in the post-Jemisin tradition. I strove to write a fantasy narrative that juxtaposed the traditional fantasy narrative of ambitious orphans seeking power to right the wrongs of the world, with a range of narratives informed by post-colonial, Anthropocene, and posthumanist discourse to provide both comment and critique to the former.

This 'traditional' narrative is most clearly expressed through Abrechan and Fulke. Both have childhoods mired in trauma and loss, both have cause to be suspicious (if not outrightly hostile) towards the world as they find it, both seek power – albeit for different reasons. Abrechan ostensibly seeks to give humanity a fighting chance, to provide it with a sense of agency, a way to overcome the hardships of the world and to stand on equal footing with the non-human elements of the world. Fulke seeks belonging and community, a place where he is loved and accepted. These desires are exploited by Abrechan and Fulke is moulded into a soldier and disciple until his own desires are smothered and obscured by Abrechan's designs.

*Folly*'s political counterpoint to the above arises from Treithe, Orlagh, and the range of other non-human perspectives that veer in and out of view. Each scene either overlaps, chronologically, with the human to provide an alternative vantage to the reader, or just afterwards to establish consequence. We see the wolves of Searden first from Fulke's perspective as a slavering rabid mob, and Abrechan as competent saviour. We meet them again through Cynewulf's eyes as he hears their stories, shares in their pain, and tries to lead them towards a better future. In the closing of this scene, Abrechan appears as a deadly horror dropping from the canopy above to slaughter them. A similar image occurring later, through Cinaed the Aos Sí who encounters both Fulke and Farron fighting in a back-alley of Pyllwic and is murdered by Abrechan. His disgust and revulsion at the physical and socio-economic state of Pyllwic is juxtaposed with Fulke's evident awe at the city.

Complicating this further, none of the central characters within *Folly* occupy central positions in their respective communities. Contained within each of them is an element of the outsider. Each one stands on the borders of their own world, able to peer clearly in others – if not always willing. Treithe eschews Amunin traditions repeatedly in pursuit of revenge. Orlagh abuses her magic and entertains small heresies against her father's supposed divinity. Keaton is the child of a wealthy noble family with designs on the throne, but through his parents' mutual disdain for and disinterest in them exists outside of the family political apparatus. Abrechan's narrative begins with him contradicting the orders of the Sin Eater generals and his subsequent exile.

Fantasy's inherent dissent is best served by outsiders. By dissenters and critics within the cultural ranks, an approach that Mendlesohn attributes to Mieville and Swainston. (2008, p.66-67) It is best served by characters born within impossible worlds, worlds whose rules and operations are alien and unfamiliar to us but natural and familiar to them. Rules and operations which they test unto breaking. This function is not only thematic, but also functional – as it is through these small but persistent rebellions that we come to understand the operation of their world. *Star Trek*'s prime directive is knowable and familiar because of the regularity in which it is broken or disregarded. The prejudices and myths that hold Daevabad together become apparent once they are contradicted. Each of *Folly*'s outsiders and dissenters provide similar insights into the workings of their own cultures and societies, weaving a dialectical element into the narrative's structure: thesis, antithesis, and (mediated through the reader's response to both) synthesis.

Synthesis, as a term, represents one of Fantasy's central utilities: the capacity to combine the aesthetics of an historical period, with the challenges, insights, dilemmas, or concerns of the author's contemporary period, in the hopes of arriving at a meta-historical narrative. One that encompasses the past and the present with a view to distinguishing and identifying the processes and ideals that drive it. Kuang's *Poppy War Trilogy* (2018-2020) embodies this process most clearly as it was originally conceived as an attempt to explore and process the events and consequences of the Second Sino-Japanese War and how those factors contributed in Mao Zedong's rise to power and the beginnings of the modern Chinese state. She achieves this by synthesising disparate elements from China's political and cultural history (Second Sino-Japanese War with the Opium wars), as well as its later relationship with the European west. Her novels focus on the experiences of a handful of children initiated into an academy of military officers, preparing them for war and leadership, whose studies are interrupted by foreign invasion. Inexperienced, naïve, and prepared only for conflict and bloodshed they soon find themselves thrust into positions of leadership where their primary concerns become logistical and political – resulting in mismanagement of harvests, grain stores, and appropriating resources for their growing armies, leading to starvation, dissent, betrayal, and further conflict.

That is not to say Fantasy strives for an allegorical function. While some allegorical connections can be drawn in such cases (Rin, in *The Poppy War*, with Mao Zedong), in order for a Fantasy narrative to be successful its world has to be believed in (Mendlesohn, 2008, p.87). The narrative must be, in some way, grounded and internally consistent – its denizens must behave in a manner the audience recognises and accepts. Allegory, for all of its utility and value, can have a stultifying effect. It can reduce a character to a semiotic stand-in for something outside of the text, directing the reader's attention away from itself when it must draw the reader closer into the world of the story. Fantasy, when effective, synthesises recognisable features and facets of our own world into something new and strange. Its disparate components remain traceable, as in the case of Kuang, but the finished product is distinct and individual. It functions as a story independent of its context, it can still communicate its themes without wider associations to events and objects outside of the story. Awareness of that context and of those associations may deepen a reader's understanding of and appreciation for them, but they are not solely dependent on those connections.

Lingering for a moment longer in the realm of symbols and metaphor, Bould and Vint point to further distinct characteristics of Fantasy –namely its capacity for highlighting "the necessary interdependence, and radical contingency" of our own semiotic structures and the manner in which they construct and convey our own reality (2012, p.107). Through the naked and deliberate creation of maps, bestiaries, languages, cultural and military history, by demonstrating the active creation of disjointed and dissenting historical narratives, they draw our attention to the artificiality and the deliberate (if not conscious) construction of our own societies. The act of worldbuilding, and our participation in the act of engaging with narratives produced by worldbuilding, draws us into a dialogue with the contingency of our own cultural knowledge and reality. It can provoke scepticism and challenge towards the political mythologies that surround us and our institutions. To ignore received narratives of what is possible, in order to focus on what we desire for ourselves and for others.

With these characteristics in mind, Fantasy proves itself to be a nimble and effective tool for identifying, depicting, and challenging the 'character' of the Anthropocene and its origins. By reconstructing its functional elements (derived, largely, from Lewis and Maslin's 'Orbis Spike' hypothesis) and its eventual consequences, it became possible to map out the beliefs and ideas, and the acts they inspired that exist between the two. To draw attention to the fact that our present cycles of exploitation (be they within the spheres of the natural or the human) had an origin – they started somewhere. That the epoch we find ourselves in does

not stand eternal. That it can be abandoned or dismantled. A later chapter will discuss, in greater detail, some of the challenges we are faced with when we consider the act of dismantling the Anthropocene.

The next section will persist with our current theme of depicting, and speaking the language of, the possible – and how Fantasy leans towards narratives designed to inspire hope in the reader.

## 2c. Fantasy and the Language of the Possible

*Folly*, for all of its violence and bleakness in tone, still strives to impart some sense of hope or aspiration for the reader. The project – at base – seeks to depict and represent the character of the Anthropocene so that character might be challenged and altered. Within Fantasy that sense of hope usually arrives dressed in a sense of awe, either at the conclusion of a narrative or some fundamental component. Returning to Jemisin's *Inheritance Trilogy*, the first novel (*The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms,* 2010*)* depicts a ruling family glutting on its own power – engaging in a brutal competition of succession which will see two of the possible three heirs killed. Their lives are marred by sadism and hedonism, a sense that their wealth, privilege, and power have so far removed them from true life and experience that cruelty is the only pleasure left to them. The gods are diminished by the conditions of slavery. No longer beautiful, no longer able to inspire awe – their human forms provoke fear, disgust, or pity.

The novel's conclusion sees the gods freed and the destruction of the ruling family and its palace. Its protagonist dies, and in her death she is transformed – fragments of her being absorbed by the goddess hiding and sheltering within her soul. Drawn as she is into the machinations of the gods, she has no hope of asserting her own agency or returning to who she had been before her metamorphosis. The palace is destroyed by a vast tree erupting out of its centre. Thousands die in the confusion, and we are left with suggestions that the world will become a stranger and more dangerous place with the gods free. Yet – contained within the carnage of this ending is hope. That the novel's protagonist is not alone in her changing, the world is being transformed too, and all those that live in it. We are invited into an upper-echelon of the world characterised by greed, despotism, and cruelty. We see the harsh realities of their rule – their victims, the nations deprived of resources and protection because the royal family seeks to humiliate and harm that nations representative or ruler. The world before the cataclysmic finale is a desperate and terrible place, one that is artificially shackled and chained – bent and twisted to suit the requirements and predilections of an empowered minority. Jemisin effectively imparts a sense that change is inevitable, and its effects will be difficult to bear, but for all the hardship that comes with it the world will return to a state of authenticity and balance.

It's a sense of hope that is not anchored in human subjectivity. We know that humanity, within *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, will suffer in the ensuing chaos and political instability. But the world in its entirety will benefit, in the end. There are echoes of this in the conclusion of Kuang's *Poppy War* trilogy – the deaths of the central cast provide the possibility of Nikara turning from its isolationist roots towards a species of international cooperation.

*Folly* pursues a similar ideal. Its conclusion eschews traditional formula – there is no sense of restoration or healing. It concludes with recriminations from Treithe to Morwyn, but also a promise of cooperation. There are no promises that they will succeed – or that either will profit or benefit from the relationship, or if they will succeed in opposing Abrechan. Morwyn is without a court, without an army, or any of the political accoutrements and tools required by someone seeking to claim a throne. Treithe is without a people, a home, and a culture. Through the loss of the Amunin – the world has lost its living historical record. Treithe alone has the capacity to collect and learn from the dead, preserving their experiences and memories. A task far beyond the abilities of a single individual.

In this way – *Folly* seeks to present a possible route forward, out of the Anthropocene, but without denying the present realities and historical and political contexts we find ourselves in. The Anthropocene rose out of European colonialism in the Americas – our present crises serve as the temporally displaced and distributed consequences of those acts, some 500 years after their inception. Morwyn's present powerlessness is a direct result of the actions of her predecessors. She has found herself in a pivotal position, but without the abilities or the tools to rectify the problem before her. Treithe provides the contemporary, post-colonial perspective: he has survived and endured genocide. He embodies the history and the memory of his culture and his people – both physically and symbolically. In Morwyn he finds everything he feels compelled to despise, but also recognises the possibilities cooperation might yield. That by joining his abilities with her privilege, the two may stand a chance at restoring the world – or at least guiding it towards a less destructive path.

The recurrent ideal of 'a new path', in the closing phases of *Folly's* narrative is a deliberate choice on my part. Both Fantasy (Gilman, 2012, p.135) and environmental narratives (Richter, 2016, p.97) and discourse veer towards declension narratives – stories of a lost, but ideal past that must be reclaimed. Both are inclined to look backward for answers to present dilemmas – seeking, not explanations or points of origin or clues at possible process, but rather societal and political models to emulate. In *Folly* those pasts are both lost and unsuitable. Aurora, under *Æ*thelstan, was a place of violence, desperation, and overbearing state censure that focused on its own immediate political dilemmas to the expense of anything and everything else. Amunin society, with its sole focus on respect and caring for the dead, was equally blind to external threats – while also bearing a strong prejudicial at its centre that isolated and alienated dissenters.

Their shared past is one of isolation and separation. For the world of *Folly* to return to a prior state, with humanity stripped of magic again and kept at arm's length by the other species and cultures of the world, would likely lead to a repetition of the same cycle that threatens them at the novel's conclusion in the same way that Abrechan is a repetition or an echo of Mazulkeen. With no clear, surviving, or workable model available in the past – the only remaining option is to arrive at a new way of being in the world. One predicated on cooperation and co-existence – with its character being mediated and constructed between the human and non-human spheres. This was intended as an attempt to address and resolve some of the central dilemmas described by Pramod K. Nayar (2014), which he believed arose out of a persistent pre-occupation with a human subject distinguished by its separateness from the world, the rigidity and impenetrability of its form and being from external forces and factors. Nayar advocated "a discourse of life itself in which interconnections, messy histories, blurred origins, borrowings and adaptations, cross-overs and impurities, dependency and mutuality across species are emphasized…" (p.30).

While I intend to discuss this in greater depth in the chapter on hyperobjects, *Folly's* origin myth and its critical posthumanist influence bear some relevance to our focus here. When Abrechan enters the tower, the first vision he experiences reveals the origins of the world to him. A vast being of immeasurable power arrives from another reality at the moment of its death. It's destruction results in an explosion of raw matter, which is later breathed in by the Arkons who shape it into clouds of dust and stars. The gesælig, seeking an opportunity to antagonise the Arkons, gather the dust and stars and cool them into lumps of earth and physical matter, which they discard. The discarded pile accumulates into a planet. As each lump cools it releases steam that condenses into water, and then rivers and oceans. The new world is messy and contradicts the Arkons in their desire for sterile perfection – even more so when gesælig breathe life into the fledgling planet, producing cycles of birth, growth, and death, and all of the endless fluctuation and movement that entails.

The Arkons attempt to end all life by drawing the heat out of the air, but the flora and fauna of the world struggle through the bitter cold and survive. The gesælig steal the withdrawn heat from the Arkons and return it to the world, ending the extended winter. Cowed, the Arkons try to create some semblance of permanence within the new world by creating the Amunin – who will collect the dead and preserve their stories and memories. One of the gesælig, Lorn, eventually seduces one of the Amunin and together they produce the first human – Mazulkeen. Lorn's motivations are never clearly articulated – I felt to do so would undermine he inscrutable and anarchic nature of the gesælig – but his immediate intentions are clear from the above context: it's another opportunity to interfere with something the Arkons had made. To inject an element of unpredictability and chaos into their desired sterile perfection.

Humanity, then, arises out of a tangled intersection of disparate contexts. The conflict between the Arkons and the gesælig predates humanity's genesis, in fact predates the existence of the reality that serves as *Folly*'s setting. Later Mazulkeen steals Lord Lune's power from his dead body and uses it to force her way out of the Amunin subterranean city. Together with her acolytes she forms the first human settlements, and there humanity establishes itself and (with its newfound power) begins to expand and encroach upon the rest of the world and the other species and cultures that dwell within it.

I will relent from continuing on as I am at risk of recounting the entire story – but the above serves as an illustration of a handful of interconnections, messy history, and blurred origins. In this way, *Folly* not only advocates for a new cultural and political path out of the Anthropocene, but also attempts to demonstrate what that new path might look like. How it might alter and affect the stories we tell, and how these might reconfigure our understanding of ourselves – as a species, as a culture, as a part of a greater more complicated and dynamic whole.

The next, and final, section of this chapter will focus on questions of scale: specifically, Fantasy's capacity for bridging considerable chronological divides to answer Chakrabarty's challenge of reconciling human social history with human species history.

## 2d. Fantasy and Narrative Scale: Zooming and Panning

When envisioning an effective Anthropocene history, Chakrabarty proposed a nimble approach where the narrative was able to 'zoom in' and 'zoom out'. It must be able to capture and communicate the detail of human subjectivity, of our socially and temporally contingent experience of the Anthropocene, while also able to 'zoom out' and situate that social history within the wider context of 'species history'[13]. To put it another way: our new approach to history must be able to situate our social bodies within our biological bodies, to find the connective tissue between our notions of human political and cultural history and society – and the geological and biological history from which it has been excised.

In this way we might situate our present experiences of climate change and dwindling biodiversity[14] within the historical and ecological processes that brought us to this moment. We could examine the far-reaching consequences of our daily actions and see how they affect and potentially contribute to the Anthropocene. Referring back to texts we've previously considered, we can see this technique in play with Chakraborty's *Daevabad Trilogy*, but also in texts like Garner's *Red Shift*, Suri's *The Jasmine Throne*, and (in an albeit limited way) Rothfuss' *Kingkiller Chronicle*.

Rothfuss' approach to 'zooming in' and 'zooming out' takes the form of meta-narrative instances. Fragments or whole retellings of songs and folklore either passed over through

[13] Chakrabarty, D., 2016, p.111; Boscov-Ellen, D., 2020, p.72
[14] Kolbert, E., 2014, p.17-18

dialogue or through third person narration, each of which provide context for Kvothe's story. In particular, when Kvothe encounters the Cthaeh, we have his subjective experience first: couched within the first-person narrative which he is passing on to a biographer, only for it to be interrupted by a separate, third person narrative layer when his apprentice and companion reprimands him. Through this particularly nimble and dynamic form of story-telling, Rothfuss denies the reader confidence in their initial experiences of and reactions to the initial, first-person narrative layer. Instead – what we learn is increasingly subjected to scrutiny, inspired and fed by context and contradiction provided by the third person narrative layer. *Red Shift* achieves a similar effect through its constant leaps backwards and forwards through time, with the characters in the past reacting to or resonating with the emotions and experiences of Tom in the present day, creating an unfamiliar sense of emotive causality.

Early in the novel Tom and his parents argue, and he quickly becomes overwhelmed – leaving the living room where his parents are continuing to fight with Tom's partner, while he moves to the kitchen. There he presses his hands to the kitchen window, the pressure he is exerting increasing as the internal emotional pressure builds, until he shatters the glass and cuts his hands. The narrative quickly travels backwards in time to Macey who, along with his fellow Roman soldiers, have dispatched a number of enemies on the road. We learn Macey entered into a trance, before producing the "stone axe from way back" and setting upon the guards on the road. What little dialogue we have from him is broken, but refers to Tom and his emotional state:

> "Blue and silver – makes me so chickenshit I can't remember whatall next. It was changing. But when – that guy – killed him hereabouts – when I killed him – on the road – blue and silver – I freaked – but I could see him, what I did – but there was two hands – pressing at me – a long way off against my eyes – and then near – and then noplace – big as all there is." (2014, p.26)

Throughout the novel we learn Tom is unaware of both Macey and Thomas – and while the other two are unsure of what they're interacting with or being affected by, they *are* aware. Causality in *Red Shift* is inverted, flowing backwards and then rushing forwards: a sense that Tom sends an emotional signal that tracks backwards in time, where it is altered or enhanced by Macey and Thomas as it progresses forwards in time until it connects with Tom again. It establishes the three characters on a continuum, rather than disparate and disjointed narrative threads. In this way Garner achieves a similar effect to Chakrabarty's proposed method, but through an altered methodology: panning, rather than zooming. I will discuss this further later in this section.

Chakraborty achieves this zooming effect through the use of visions, portents, and also through fragments of history learned by the characters within the narrative. Suri later adopted a similar method. In both cases, the characters through which we experience the world are deeply embedded in their individual historical and cultural contexts. Nahri can be understood both as an individual, and as a representative of and outsider to her Nahid culture and history – and that her later conflicts with the Geziri royal family can be interpreted and grasped both through her personal animosity towards them, and through the historical conflict between the Nahid and Geziri tribes.

When I came to write *Folly*, I intended to make use of this effect – to trace the historical ties between present ecological degradation and past action. It was not my intention to depict the *exact* events, but more to explore the process and to demonstrate the method which Chakrabarty delineated.

With that said, while *Folly* does present some instances of this – the overall effect and method can be better understood as narrative 'panning' or a rotation of perspective. When

*Folly* steps backwards in time, establishing the wider historical context for the present narrative action, it does follow the 'zooming' methodology. We see Abrechan's split and subsequent exile from the Sin Eaters, followed by the beginning of Mazrineen's own rebellion against Amunin society and the strictures of the Listener order several thousand years before. When Fulke joins Abrechan on his journey and begins his training, the narrative skips backwards again to Mazulkeen – joined to Fulke in her status as outsider, who in turn is initiated into Amunin society. Much of this has been borrowed from and inspired by Garner's narrative method but with a difference: while the past events *do* influence the 'present' action, the reverse is not true. *Folly* pursues a more conventional, if distributed, approach to representing causality. Instead, I felt that using emotive resonance as a trigger for shifting from one perspective to another would work well, and took it a step further: aiming for a thematic resonance between scenes. While there is no clear causal relationship between them, the events of each scene resonates with its neighbours: speaking and adding to our understanding of them.

What occurs more frequently within *Folly* is a 'panning' or rotation of perspective, perhaps shifting a few days, weeks, or months temporally, but crossing significant boundaries in social, political, and even biological context. We pass from Fulke, who has survived a violent encounter with a pack of wolves, to Cynewulf, a drihtenwulf trying to unite those same wolves in an effort to resist human expansion only to be killed by Abrechan. We see Abrechan through Fulke's eyes and spend time in his own subjective experience of the world – establishing his personality and motivations. The impression built by the reader based on these experiences is later challenged by scenes from the perspective of an Aos Sí murdered by Abrechan (Cinaed), or from a new acolyte who witness a moment of cruelty (Keaton). Each character is individually viewed through separate prisms of perspective, granting multiple vantages on their personality and character: Cinaed's horror at the town of Pyllwic is distinct from Fulke's awe and Farron's experiences of hardship and deprivation. Abrechan's acolytes may appear human and perhaps even heroic, until seen through Treithe's eyes – where they are rendered violent and aggressive children, misled by a dangerous man.

Since *Folly* is a contemplation on and depiction of beginnings, it seemed inappropriate to switch between the events of the narrative and their later consequences. While to do so might satisfy Chakrabarty's challenge of depicting the Anthropocene as a whole, I felt such a task was outside of the scope of this particular project. Instead I elected to establish the context of those origins, by introducing a detailed and broad account of the consequences stemming from character actions. Mazrineen's rebellion connects to Abrechan's genocide. The persecution of an Aos Sí craftsman in Lamsby bears significance on a civil war that occurs years later and many miles north. Lune's pride, the Arkon's obsession with sterile perfection, and the gesælig's anarchic will all combine and culminate in the events of *Folly*'s narrative.

I wanted to demonstrate that establishing a singular, fixed, definitive beginning is a potentially fruitless and unhelpful task. That to say the Anthropocene began with colonialism, the invention of the steam engine, or the signing of the Breton Woods agreement is to deny the inherent complexity of a concept that is, in many ways, defined by the complexity of its interconnections and causal relationships. Can we meaningfully discuss colonialism without discussing the political and economic conditions that preceded it? Can we then discuss those conditions without considering the origins of feudal power structures, or the origin of the catholic church's political influence? Each of these lines of influence yield some significance and utility in establishing the Anthropocene's character and meaning. By embracing the vast complexity of these relationships, of gesturing to a history that continuously reaches backwards and outwards, *Folly* presents a view of the Anthropocene and its history that embraces multiple, occasionally contradictory, readings and interpretations of the same event.

With that being said, some concessions must be made to the conventions of medium and genre. *Folly* needed to be accessible and engaging, engrossing the reader in its world in order to achieve its thematic aims. As such I *did* have to choose a beginning and an end for the novel: but beginnings and endings that gestured outwards. The action of the novel begins with Abrechan's murder of Reizhe Slovehn, a murder provoked by revenge. The beginning gestures backward in time, suggesting a different starting point: posing questions as to what was the first act, the first movement, that brought the events of this novel into being? In turn, the novel's ending aims at something similar: a gesture towards future events and developments. Plot threads not left dangling, but reaching beyond the narrative's limits. A sense of scale that suggested that, though *Folly* presents a pivotal series of events in the history of its world, the world itself is much larger than is directly shown.

This is a reflection of Chakraborty's direct influence upon my work. Her depiction of the initial civil war between the Nahid Council and the Geziri family features much of the same panning effects, particularly in how it is explored in the present-day narrative. Nahri, as a Nahid, stands as a living symbol of her ancestors tyrannical rule and the suffering caused – but she is frequently ignorant of her own cultural history and the animosity it inspires. Through Dara, who due to his status as an enslaved djinn has achieved a form of immortality, we have the living memory of those events and the atrocities committed. Since these are explored through a singular character's experiences we, as readers, also gain insight into his motivations and the events that inspired his own crimes. From the Geziri's and visions experienced by each of the characters, we pivot to perceptual counterpoints and counterarguments. Rotating again and again until a fuller, more complex perspective emerges.

In this way we can understand Abrechan's acts, not as a novelty but as the latest iteration in a bigoted and oppressive pattern. Abrechan is more successful in his endeavours due to his victory at the tower, and manages to destroy the Amunin and their city – but before him there was Braddock who forced the Aos Si out of Pyllwic, and Seaver who took the Fenlands from the giants. Delving deeper into this we can also understand the connections between living characters: Treithe's experience of the assault on the Amunin is reminiscent of Abrechan's experience of the attack that killed his parents.

By using this particular narrative technique it becomes possible to draw disparate, often contradictory or clashing accounts of the Anthropocene together and bring them into a beneficial coexistence. The anticapitalism of those theorists who are focused on the industrial revolution as the genesis of the Anthropocene can meet the anticolonialism of those who assent to the orbis spike hypothesis. We can embed the experience and history of oppressed first nation peoples into the history of those that oppressed them – clarifying cause and motivation, but firmly contextualising them within context and consequence.

This is, I believe, an effective resolution to Boscov-Ellen's (2020) critique of Chakrabarty's 'zooming' method: that while Chakrabarty may produce an effective critique of the social and economic processes that brought us to this point at the 'zoomed in' level, progressing to the "natural-scientific story" would see much of this jettisoned (p.73). This jettisoning of the contingency of the Anthropocene, the role of capitalism and the economic north, guides us to a universalising, apolitical narrative reminiscent of Simon's 'monolithic narrative'. The collapsing of separate and distinct experiences of both the Anthropocene at present and the processes which brought it into being, into a singular narrative where responsibility and risk are apportioned and experienced equally.

Chakrabarty's proposed method creates a vertical style of narration, where the perspective progresses from the 'ground level' view of human social endeavour and its contributions to and the perpetuation of the Anthropocene, to the 'higher level' view that

focuses on species and natural history. In this way he proposes a hierarchy of perspectives, with one being prized over the other. We already have a detailed and intricate sense of human social history (although by no means complete or perfect), what is needed is the 'zoomed out' perspective. My alternative method, as demonstrated in *Folly*, poses no such hierarchy of perspective – instead preferring a horizontal approach where no singular narrative is posited or presented above the others.

Abrechan's experiences and responses to the world possess the same vividness and vitality as that of Treithe, Orlagh, Fulke, Cinaed, and Mazulkeen. It establishes an equal weighting between the dissenting voices, affording each their input to the narrative. In this way *Folly* stands as a collection of, at times contradictory, metaphoric and symbolic histories, rather than as a single narrative. Ferdia's presence in the narrative facilitates a certain temporo-spacial unmooring for the reader – he acts as the narrative's interlocutor. He frames and contextualizes all we see and provides breathing room outside of the central narrative's course, enabling the reader to process all they have experienced.

This was, in part, a serendipitous development. Ferdia's initial inclusion was a concession to *Folly*'s inherent problems of scale and complexity. As I passed through the various phases of editing I was concerned that the reader might miss some vital significance in the narrative, and would be left feeling lost. Ferdia enabled me to organise the novel's content and provide an opportunity for processing its events and broader themes, while providing additional detail and insight. In the end I think he developed into a fulcrum, of sorts, for the novel's flow.

The next chapter will establish a rough history of the Anthropocene which I used as a model for much of *Folly*, as well as a discussion of the directionality of history, and the impacts and effects my conclusions on that topic had on *Folly*.

## 3. Grand Narratives, Strategies of Representation, and Agency within the Anthropocene

### 3a. Fantasy and Directionality of History: Declension and Eucatastrophe

Contemporary Fantasy's relationship with history has its roots in Tolkien's works: Middle-Earth was conceived as a 'history' for Tolkien's invented languages, intended to provide weight and life to the words[15] - going so far as to argue "languages … are a disease of mythology"[16]. Fantasy's relationship with history is one comparable to reverse-engineering: tracking backwards from the present state of affairs to better understand how its constituent components interact, align, and came to be. Typically, and here I am speaking mainly to the 'epic' or 'high' fantasy traditions, this has taken the form of an altered declension narrative: which Tolkien labelled eucatastrophe. Stated simply, Fantasy in the Tolkien tradition has held a wistful view towards a lost, past golden age, and views history as an inexorable and unavoidable decline as we move further and further away from this lost idyll – as with all declension narratives. Where eucatastrophe differs is it permits the possibility of "sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief."[17] It is an ever downward spiral with occasional moments of respite: fleeting glimpses of vanishing glory and wonder.

[15] Carpenter, 2016.
[16] Tolkien, 2001, p.22.
[17] Tolkien, 2001, p.69

Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* series provides a clear example of later use of the eucatastrophic model. He presents a world broken by tainted magic, after a legendary hero attempted to seal away a great evil which, in turn, retaliated by infecting the male 'half' of the world's magic with a destructive madness. The story's historic past is one of towering legendary figures working miracles, building vast cities and powerful artefacts. A past filled with bountiful knowledge, all tragically lost in the 'breaking of the world'. The eucatastrophic element is most clearly seen in Jordan's use of reincarnation: presenting time and history as a series of reoccurring cycles where not only events reoccur, but the characters and agents of history return also. As such the novels are largely concerned with the exploits of the reincarnation of the legendary hero that brought about the prior catastrophe. A piece of the legendary past, working wonders in the present to once again oppose the great evil in the world. The hero's return brings other elements of the lost legendary past: characters, objects, locations, even the reoccurrence of old battles and events. While the world may not be able to return to its prior, glorious state, the past's presence can be glimpsed between the warp and weft of the present.

Similarly Tolkien's Middle-Earth begins in a form of religious paradise: several clans of Elves once lived in the realm of Valinor among the Valar and Maia – demi-gods and guardian spirits. In the cities of Valinor they learned directly from the Valar and Maia and benefitted from their proximity to Middle-Earth's religious pantheon. Feanor, a legendary elf of the first age, created three gems to capture and hold some of the light of the Two Trees which lit the world. When the trees were destroyed and the Valar wished to break the gems to release the light, Feanor refused only to have the gems stolen by Morgoth – a corrupted Valar. As a result of both the ultimate forces of good and evil trying to claim his work – Feanor took the rest of his clan and left Valinor, severing their connection to the pantheon. From there the rest of Middle-Earth's First Age is an inexorable downward spiral of betrayal, warfare, loss, and death. The era prior to the First Age is depicted as one of boundless beauty, grace, and peace – with Feanor's decision to leave presented as arrogance and greed. Both of these sins are present and central to a great many of the catastrophe's and disasters within Middle-Earth, and act as the catalysts for its history's ever-downward spiral. The eucatastrophic elements come in the form of characters overcoming arrogance and greed: Boromir, once vulnerable to the Ring's corrupting influence, gives his life to protect the Hobbits. Gandalf rallies the exiled Rohirrim to break the siege at Helm's Deep, just as its defenders are preparing to make a final, doomed, attempt at resistance.

Eucatastrophe, then, can be understood or pictured as a coalescing and darkening rain cloud, broken by the occasional shaft of light. Its purpose is to provide "a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth."[18] Driven and informed by Tolkien's Catholicism, it appears to be a gesture to a lost Eden – in the sense that life in the midst of god is 'true' life, that can be glimpsed in moments of euctastrophe. Provoking yearning and inspiring action to return to that life, just as Frodo's journey ends with his travelling to the Undying Lands to live among the elves and the Valar. It is a cyclical view of history, where greed and arrogance draw us further and further from a golden, idyllic past – but the cycles can and often are interrupted, presenting opportunities to return to that idyllic state.

A similar view of history is prevalent in both Anthropocene and sustainability discourse, and I initially encountered it in Daniel Quinn's novel *Ishmael*. In it he describes two distinct cultural lineages within human history: that of the 'Takers' and that of the 'Leavers'. The 'Takers' are agrarian in nature – dissatisfied with the world as they found it, its limits on population growth and resource availability, they sought to change nature, the world, and its laws to suit their own ends. For Quinn, 'Taker' culture is rooted in an ethical relativism that

[18] Tolkien, 2001, p.71

judges ‘goodness’ based on its benefits to humanity, and ‘evil’ is rooted in that which costs or hampers humanity. The ‘Leavers’, meanwhile, were nomadic and existed in a harmonious balance with nature – participating in and obeying its laws and rules.

*Ishmael* refers to the biblical story of Cain and Abel, deeming it an allegorical history that describes the manner in which the ‘Leavers’ were betrayed and destroyed by the ‘Takers’. Quinn’s message is simple: humanity once existed peaceably with nature and can do so again, by undertaking some kind of cultural regression or return to the ‘Leaver’ way of life. Similarly, certain elements within ecological (generally speaking) and climate change (specifically) discourse strive to identify a prior cultural or social organization for humanity that did not put humanity at odds or conflict with the natural world. Much as with the history of private property in both Western European philosophical, economic, and political discourse – it is difficult to ascertain exactly which historical period is being referenced.

Consulting Pierson’s *Just Property* (2013), some of the earliest arguments for the institution of private property (in the exclusive sense i.e ‘this is mine and only mine’) in both Ancient Greece and Rome make use of similar declension narratives. Arguing that private property must be guaranteed, upheld, and defended by the political state because of the ethical degradation of humanity over time. These arguments were made with reference to a prior ‘golden age’ where all things could be easily and comfortably held in common without fear of exploitation or betrayal but following some unspecified event humanity became untrustworthy and it became necessary to establish and provide legal protections for individual property[19].

What becomes apparent through Pierson’s account of the early history of property discourse is the vagueness and the inherent mythical flavour of the concepts historical basis. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca all in turn make reference to an irrevocably lost ‘golden age’ – while later authors seeking to bolster their own writing make reference to the authority of these prior authors, to cement the conceptual history of property as a concept. In other areas, such as the relationship between the early church and private property, such narratives can be constructed or shaped by accidents or misrepresentations as in the case of St Clement’s sermon on the parable of Jesus and the rich young man[20] - whereby the early church’s critical position on private wealth was softened by Clement’s alterations to the exact wording of the parable.

By the same token it’s unclear which human cultural iteration and organization Quinn and other early ecological authors believe to be the ideal point in human history for comfortable coexistence between humanity and the natural world. Fantasy similarly struggles with the same issue – with its frequent use of declension narratives and gestures towards a pastoral and toothless representation of medieval Europe, it often falls afoul of glorifying and venerating a period of history marked by economic exploitation and political and social disenfranchisement of the vast majority of the population. As if the reinstitution of a landed aristocracy would be the solution for our present challenges.

There are, however, signs that the genre is moving away from this narrative trope. Suri’s *The Jasmine Throne* features a declension narrative held by an oppressed cultural underclass, coloured by visions of past glory, that she steadily unpicks and challenges throughout the novel’s course. Shannon’s *The Priory of the Orange Tree* features numerous cultural histories – all of which reference their own past glory while casting a dim gaze on the other society’s origins and past actions. The truth, in Shannon’s novel, exists between these narratives and in the places where they intersect. A warrior saint venerated by one society,

[19] Pierson, 2013, p.10; p.52
[20] Pierson, 2013, p.62

proves to be a mother goddess worshipped by another. The saint's divine husband, rather than the personification of chivalric values, is reduced to a petty tyrant. Jemisin's *Inheritance Trilogy* stands apart from these other two examples in its inherent complexity. Jemisin indulges the declension trope, while complicating it – prior to the enslavement of the gods, the world *was* in balance, it had achieved stability and stasis. What that stability entailed, however, was the vulnerability of humanity to the whims of the gods themselves who were often malicious or mercurial at best. The present state of the world in her novels while it is a kind of downward turn from its prior state – from nature to a world curated to the designs of one powerful family – it has brought its own kind of stability. Neither state, in truth, is ideal – as the difference between the two is determined by the manner in which cost and consequence are distributed:

In the former, the world benefits but humanity is vulnerable.

In the latter, humanity benefits but the world suffers under its control.

With *Folly* I tried to construct a similar argument, but without indulging the same trope. To construct a series of differing histories between a number of communities and cultures, with neither the past or the present being depicted in a more favourable light to the other. Each contained their own hardships. While in the past, before the Schism among the Amunin, the world was free of the existential peril of a magically empowered humanity – it still contained its own forms of hardship and misery, as shown by the alienation and exclusion suffered by Mazulkeen, caused by the Amunin's inherent conservatism and fear of novelty and difference. While the world Abrechan has brought about by the novel's close is one that threatens the safety and stability of the world, and of it's non-human denizens, it is also a world that is more comfortable with difference and strangeness and novelty. It's a world brought into being by a loose organisation of outsiders and outcasts.

In order to further discuss and explain the manner in which *Folly* engages with history, I believe it is necessary to delineate a rough history of the Anthropocene – which I shall do in the next section.

### 3b. Directionality of History and the Anthropocene-as-Process

As previously stated, this thesis follows Lewis and Maslin's 'Orbis Spike' hypothesis as a historical account of the origins of the Anthropocene. There are a number of alternative conceptions and historical narratives, and I do not wish to attempt to appraise the validity of each in turn. Instead I selected the account that I felt provided fertile ground for conceptual and political writing and argument, that allowed me to delve into the complexities of the Anthropocene as a concept and historical era without making or presenting normative claims with an air of 'objectivity'. The Orbis Spike hypothesis put succinctly, where possible:

The Anthropocene began with the 'Orbis Spike' (Lewis and Maslin, 2009 & 2018) in 1610, marked by a drop in global CO2 (Lewis & Maslin, 2009, p.175) levels for the first time since the last ice age some 11,000 years prior – in turn causing a global fall in temperatures. This was the result of almost two hundred years of European colonial rule and interference in the Americas, a geologically insignificant period of time[21], which saw, on average, a population collapse of 95% in the indigenous communities and cultures[22]. The cost was not only in bodies, but also in infrastructure. This was not an uninhabited region of the world, nor were the

[21] As is the case with all of human history: "If you compressed the whole of Earth's unimaginably long history into a single day, the first humans that look like us would appear at less than four seconds to midnight." (Lewis & Maslin, 2018, p.3)

[22] 50 million, according to Lewis and Maslin (2019). Stannard (1992) provides a range of figures, between 80 and 100 million.

indigenous populations (by *any* measure) small in number[23][24], nor were they lacking in architecture, housing, agricultural methods, or anything we would consider to be typical of well-established and functioning agrarian societies. Entire networks of villages, towns, and cities were destroyed. Fields were either abandoned - as their tenders were either dead, enslaved, or fleeing – or deliberately destroyed. Vast irrigation networks, as in the case of eastern California, were likewise destroyed. This left large amounts of uncurated, clear space for the previously thinned forests of America to sweep back in creating vast carbon dioxide sinks. The trees drew in atmospheric carbon, replaced it with oxygen, and global temperatures fell as a result[25].

If we wish to describe the Anthropocene as an event, it needs a locus – in this case the year 1610, in others we could gesture to the late-18th century and the invention of the steam engine, or 1945 and the advent of globalized markets leading to an increasingly interconnected and ecologically homogenous world. Each of these dates bear traces and connections to the others: that the advent of globalized markets were only possible because the world had already, in one way, become organizationally globalized through the Columbian exchange and the rise of mercantile capitalism. The Industrial Revolution and the mechanization of industry was necessitated by the exponential imports of cotton and other raw materials from the Americas, all of which needed to be processed into goods at a pace to compete with demand. And the Orbis Spike itself? It could be seen as an echo of other ecological shocks, spasms, and depletions caused by the arrival of human beings to previous unsettled areas: such as the Megafauna extinctions in the Americas and Australia in 13,000 years ago and 46,000 years ago respectively. (Lewis and Maslin, 2018, Kolbert, 2014)

The Orbis Spike provides us with one beginning, but also with an awareness of other beginnings. If we cannot isolate the contemporary experience of the Anthropocene from its past and history, we also cannot isolate the Anthropocene from its multiple beginnings and diverse and widely distributed history. The Orbis Spike itself has a distributed, causal (if still hypothetical) relationship with a great many events that followed afterwards: namely the rise of radical, revolutionary politics and the social and political upheaval evident in Europe in the 18th and early 19th centuries, stemming from reduced harvests caused by the miniature ice age which put additional strain on the already fractured feudal system – further highlighting gross inequalities as the majority starved through successive harsh winters, while the minority survived. Lewis and Maslin posit (2018) that without the Orbis Spike we would not have our current form of democracy, nor our globalized economic infrastructure. Going one step further, could the Orbis Spike have occurred without the myriad economic, social, and political pressures that first encouraged naval exploration and the colonial practices of Spain and England in the Americas?

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[23] “"Of the seven or eight million Arawaks Cook and Borah estimated to have inhabited pre-conquest Hispaniola ... by 1508 there was less than 100,00, and by the 1540s fewer than 500 … By the middle of the eighteenth century, the population of native Americans had plummeted from the estimated seventy-five to 100 million of pre-conquest days to a mere 250,000." (Arnold, David, 1999, *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd: Oxford, p.78)

[24] “Today, few serious students of the subject would put the hemispheric figure at less than 75,000,000 to 100,000,000 (with approximately 8,000,000 to 12,000,000 north of Mexico), while one of the most well regarded specialists in the field recently has suggested that a more accurate estimate would be around 145,000,000 for the hemisphere as a whole and about 18,000,000 for the area north of Mexico.” (Stannard, 1992, p.11)

[25] “… if, as we think, 50 million people died, each requiring an average of 1.3 hectares of farmland to feed them, this gives a total of 65 million hectares of new forest. Assuming this grew modestly to store just 100 tonnes of carbon per hectare, it would remove 6.5 billion tonnes of carbon from the atmosphere. A more realistic store of 200 tonnes of carbon per hectare would double this to 13 billion tonnes of carbon removed from the atmosphere.” (Lewis & Maslin, 2018, p.180-181)

Stannard's evocation of life in Europe prior to and during the period described by the Orbis Spike (1492-1610) is particularly graphic. Describing a social landscape frequently experiencing epidemic outbreaks that "swept European cities and towns clean of 10 to 20 percent of their population at a single stroke" (1995, p.57), that the majority of European peasants existed in varying degrees of destitution, famine, and hardship, where "the slightest fluctuation in food prices could cause the sudden deaths of additional tens of thousands who lived on the margins in perpetual hunger." Where centuries of frequent warfare depleted rural populations to fill the levies of the nobility, or through pillaging and raiding. Where the catholic church had expanded its political powers into theocratic terrorism through the inquisition.

Colonialism, and the violence that enabled it, arose out of an atmosphere of constant loss, deprivation, violence, suffering, and oppression in Europe. Death and desperation marked every life – in its own way, and in a cyclical and pervasive manner. This is not to paint, by inference, a roseate picture of life in the pre-European Americas. The cultures and tribes that peopled it were as diverse and varying in their attitudes towards violence, social hierarchy, property, and political engagement as those in Europe. But similarities in category do not lead to a similarity in form and consequence.

This particular account runs afoul of some of Chakrabarty's objections to Anthropocene historic narratives and attempts to delineate its genesis and rise through simple, socially derived, causal events. A later chapter will address this same issue through Morton's framework of hyperobjects, but here I will restrict myself to speak specifically to how history 'happens' – that is, what is the engine that propels history forward?

I have already attempted to discuss the Anthropocene as a singular event, albeit one widely distributed in time, as one would discuss the reign of a particular monarch – except, to pursue this particular metaphor to its limit, the Anthropocene more closely resembles that of a dynasty or a political movement in that it possesses a central philosophical character that develops and progresses over time. The Anthropocene passed through a number of iterations, with each manifestation growing in strength as it revealed it's character.

Borrowing again from Lewis and Maslin, let us consider each of the four previously mentioned accounts of origin for the Anthropocene, not as discrete and opposing theories, but as multiple events in the same process. Beginning with the megafauna extinction which ended some 10,000 years ago (Lewis and Maslin, 2018), the planet lost around 4% of its mammals following a series of major human migrations: first to the Americas and then to Australia during the Polynesian expansion. The exact cause is difficult to establish, but it's safe to assume that a mixture of hunting and habitat loss applied too great a pressure on the megafauna populations leading to their collapse. While we can safely discard this event as the origin of the Anthropocene as it lacks in global and ecological impact, we can consider it the first twitch of the Anthropocene, or an 'Anthropocenic' impulse. One where the arrival of human beings to a new environment, to which they are entirely alien, presages an era of rapid consumption and environmental consumption resulting in long term, or permanent damage. What is notable is that following the megafauna extinctions, American and Australian ecology settled into a new state rather than being tested to its breaking point. Both environments adjusted to their new denizens and to the loss of their former inhabitants. Such a lack of long lasting, global consequences rules out this period as the origin of the 'Anthropocene-proper'.

We can then progress to the 'Orbis Spike' as the 'Anthropocene-proper', being the first 'Anthropocenic' event that possessed global and ecological impact. Two later events, the Industrial Revolution, and the Great Acceleration, appear to seize the character of the Orbis Spike (economic exploitation and expansionist violence fuelling prosperity and technological

advancement[26]) and *deepen* it with the Great Acceleration standing for its current iteration. Europe's colonisation of America enabled the rise of international markets and trade, and the Great Acceleration cemented it with the rise of global trade agreements[27].

In some ways this reflects the discourse and thought of speculative historians in the late 18th century through to the 20th century: specifically the writings of Herder, Hegel, Foucault, and Lyotard. Both Herder and Hegel diagnosed history as possessing an *intent* – it moved towards a specified or perceivable goal, progressing through necessary stages until it reached its end.

For Herder, history was a process of divinely organised "progressive realization" that enabled humanity to develop itself morally and socially until it achieved an ideal state centred around reason[28]. The role of the divine, Herder argued, arose from his belief that historical events arose not from the deliberate and informed actions of individuals or from a "few readily identifiable causal factors (as political and military historians often tend to assume), but are instead the results of chance confluences of huge numbers of different causal factors."[29] These chance confluences are beyond the control or even awareness of the historian, and instead speak to some creator or 'artist' arranging events in accordance with a pre-existing plan.

Hegel arrived at a similar conclusion, insisting that history arose from a process of persistent experimentation whereby modes of living are enacted, encounter opposition, and the two synthesize into a more effective or 'greater' version of the initial mode. The direction or intent of this experimentation pursues an underlying principle referred to as the 'World-Mind', or the 'Spirit'[30], with the ultimate aim being to actualize human freedom – that is to establish a political state which the human subject can abide or reconcile itself with peaceably.

Both speak to a specified intent, as if history were pursuing a pre-designed course, and both speak to the *universality* of this course. That the course, nature, 'beat' or 'rhythm' of history is the same for all cultures and all peoples throughout both time and the world – that all cultures progress along the same pathway towards the same ultimate goal.

Neither Foucault nor Lyotard assent to such universality, despite arriving at similar conclusions about the 'process' of history – in that, like with Hegel, History appears to follow a dialectal course whereby core ideas about how we are to live and be in the world are refined and perfected over time. Except for both Foucault and Lyotard those core ideas are intentionally designed and established for the benefit of powerful institutions. What Hegel called the 'World-Mind', Foucault deems an 'episteme' – one among a potentially near limitless number. 'Epistemes' function as acceptable parameters for truth: accounts, ideologies, and theories which abide by certain established rules or bear a resemblance to a pre-established hegemony of assented ideals are permitted to be understood as 'true', anything that falls outside of those parameters becomes either 'false' or 'madness'[31]. Lyotard's 'grand narratives' follow a similar rationale: "great overriding 'stories' or … 'narratives' which are so embedded in a culture's consciousness (via its institutions and its language – i.e., its 'discourse of representations') that they insidiously justify norms and practices to the point where they are regarded as universally 'true' because 'natural' and 'obvious'. However, part of the point of calling them 'metanarratives' is that they are 'stories' which have no external grounding in *fact*.

[26] (Saldanha, 2020, p.13)
[27] Notably the 1944 Bretton Woods agreement (Lewis and Maslin, 2018, p.229-230)
[28] (Forster, 2018, p.239)
[29] (Forster, 2018, p.245)
[30] (Lemon, 2006, p.206)
[31] (Lemon, 2006, p.364)

Moreover, 'narratives' are always constructed and handed down through the telling."[32] For Lyotard, the dismantling of these narratives is essential – Foucault's epistemes, meanwhile, are less of an ethical dilemma or challenge to be overcome, but more of an observation on power relations and knowledge forms.

All four of these accounts for the directionality of history coincide with a term frequently used by Lewis and Maslin for explaining and iterating the course of Anthropocene history, cumulative culture: "a system of social learning where successes are maintained, passed on and continually improved upon."[33] Such a system may help us understand the extensive gap between the first two 'iterations' of the Anthropocene: the megafauna extinctions and the Orbis Spike, as the former occurred during a pre-literary period where knowledge and cultural practices were communicated orally, while the later occurred during both the Renaissance and the early Enlightenment, two periods were literacy expanded considerably. While the relationship between the four previously discussed authors and 'cumulative culture' is tenuous and subject to a great many caveats, establishing a definite and 'closed' argument about that relationship is outside the scope of this thesis. Instead I wish to direct the reader's attention to the conceptual overlap, as an indication of my own considerations regarding Anthropocene history – and more specifically its effect on individual and collective agency,

Cumulative culture considers humanity to be its origin and its agent, but each iteration of a cultural practice narrows the horizons of *likely* human action. As practice transitions into tradition it accumulates social and cultural weight and capital – cementing into something resembling an institution or a physical organisation. Once such a level is reached we have progressed into a 'progress trap', a level development where a return precipitates considerable cost and difficulty. A potent example would be the adoption of fossil fuels in the 19th century, first within industry and then domestically through forms of central heating. New developments precipitate new technologies to best utilise those developments, to harness this new progressive force, which in turn leads to dependence on those technologies. Contemporary attempts to divorce ourselves from fossil fuel usage demonstrate the risks of these progress traps – any possible solution comes at a considerable cost, logistical or economic, or requires a great deal of complexity to counteract possible problems. It is no longer possible for us to simply stop making use of fossil fuels without considerable damage, harm, or risk.

*Folly* stands as an attempt to depict a general narrative of the Anthropocene, informed by what I believe to be its character – a character informed by its origins in colonialism and its continued propensity towards exploitation and oppression both within human and non-human spheres. As such I find myself sympathetic to Lyotard's work and its natural sympathy with Daniel Quinn's novel *Ishmael* (1995), which served as a conceptual starting point for this thesis. Quinn's central contention in *Ishmael* is that our present environmental predicament stems from 'western' cultures[34] acting on a 'story'[35] that pits us in direct competition with our environment. This 'story' has become so imbedded in our daily lives, thoughts, and experiences that it takes on an almost controlling and antagonistic agency which he deemed 'Mother Culture' – an agency that gently, but forcefully, 'corrects' us and guides us away from dissenting thought[36]. Quinn urges his audience to challenge and interrogate Mother Culture

[32] (Lemon, 2006, p.365)

[33] (Lewis and Maslin, 2018, p.81)

[34] "A culture is a people enacting a story." (p.41

[35] "A story is a scenario interrelating man, the world, and the gods." (p.41)

[36] "Mother Culture, whose voice has been in your ear since the day of your birth, has given you an explanation of *how things came to be this way*. You know it well; everyone in your culture knows it well … You assembled it from a million bits of information presented to you in various ways by others who share that explanation … This explanation of *how things came to be this way* is ambient in your culture. Everyone knows it and every accepts it without question." (p.40)

and the story it foists upon is and to pursue its exact opposite: to move away from a 'story' of taking from the world and from conflict towards one of harmony with a pre-existing 'natural' order. Quinn viewed humanity as the first species to achieve sentience, but in achieving sentience we did not bring that evolutionary process to an end – instead he argued we have a responsibility to clear the way for future sentient species, and to act as guides and educators for those that would follow us.

Quinn's portrayal of Mother Culture, and particularly his definitions of 'story' and 'culture', are foundational to my own work and I believe their utility is best understood within the context of Lyotard and Foucault – as Quinn's arguments serve as a synthesis of the two. While there is no inherent conflict between Lyotard and Foucault's arguments regarding the relationships between power and the directionality of history, it is easy to suppose one based on the different emphasis the two authors place on the *origin* of that power and directionality. *Ishmael* highlights the compatibility between the two, and *Folly* acts as an attempt to highlight that compatibility: narratives, of this sort, can arise deliberately as they are useful for the designs and ambitions of certain individuals or institutions[37], but find life and reinforcement through micropolitical repetition and assent. The Anthropocene and its political and cultural climate arose out of colonialism and early exploitative economic practices, both of which were fuelled by various specific readings of Aristotle[38], Aquinas[39], etc. This environment eventually gave rise to an educated, wealthy, and (ultimately) politically empowered middle class who then developed a 'stake' in this fledgling narrative. As such some of its principle values were imbued with an extra air of credibility through certain Enlightenment era philosophical projects that granted these values a species of naturalistic universality[40]. From there the advent of consumerism created the necessary conditions for a more widespread repetition of this 'narrative'.

As such, *Folly* represents the earliest point in this process of the Anthropocene narrative: its creation as justification for and performance of a specific worldview. Abrechan pursues vengeance against House Slovehn for the deaths of his parents and the destruction of his home, which expands into a generalised xenophobia and animosity towards the other non-human denizens of his world. This coalesces into a specific worldview and then a narrative which he communicates to Fulke, Farron, and Keaton at different points in the story: a narrative of a world filled with chaos, ruled by an indifferent and powerful monsters, where humanity must struggle and suffer. The only solution being for Abrechan and his acolytes to seize power of a kind to that of the Amunin and the other non-humans, in order to establish a better order for the world. To what extent Abrechan truly believes in this narrative is deliberately unclear: as I am unable to guess at the true motivations of early colonisers and the extent to which they believed their own rhetoric, I felt it essential to preserve that air of ambiguity. In a sense the veracity of their convictions are unimportant – what is of concern to

[37] Here I'm mindful of Leonard Thompson's conception of political myths: "…tale[s] told about the past to legitimize or discredit a regime," whereas a political mythology is "a cluster of such myths that reinforce one another and jointly constitute the historical element in the ideology of the regime or its rival." (Stannard, 1992, p.13)

[38] Much of Aristotle's arguments regarding rationality and the 'natural slave' in his *Politics* were repurposed during the early colonial period to construct legal arguments regarding the diminished or 'lesser' humanity of indigenous Americans (Stewart, 1999, p.41)

[39] On 'the Great Chain of Being': "…in these murky zones of species overlap … there lived creatures who may have seemed bestial, but who were humans, with souls, and who even … might become the holiest of saints if treated with Christian care. However, in that same indistinct, borderline, substratum of life, there also existed human-like creatures whose function in God's scheme of things was to be nothing more than what Aquinas called "animated instruments of service" to civilized Christian humanity." (Stannard, 1992, p.173)

[40] (Solomon, R.C., 1980, p.xii, p.8, p.10)

both this thesis and the historic course of the Anthropocene are the actions those supposed convictions inspired.

Contained within this early starting point are the seeds of the narratives later development. Once Abrechan has obtained the power contained within the Tower and has seized control of the Sin Eater order, he directs his attention to assaulting and massacring the Amunin – for which he enlists assistance from the nobles he aided in the Auroran civil war, specifically the death of king Æthelstan. This creates the conditions for the military and economic powers within the world to buy into and perpetuate Abrechan's narrative. Their victory in the civil war was made possible by Abrechan's assistance, and the Amunin genocide leaves the obsidian Abrechan's father died to claim free for seizure and sale. Ultimately (although this reaches beyond the limits of *Folly* as a singular narrative), this process would roll outwards through human society: a process whereby the nobility participate in bigoted narratives for political convenience, and then become economically incentivised in perpetuating that same narrative as they pursue further conflicts with and attacks on the Aos Sí[41] and other non-humans. As the non-humans lose land and resources to a rapidly expanding humanity, those outside of the nobility begin to reap the rewards while also suffering reprisals from the non-humans leading to greater animosity and a stronger incentive to participate in Abrechan's original narrative. Combined with the advent and proliferation of human magic – aggressive expansion becomes not only possible but culturally and morally permissible.

The creation of Abrechan's narrative stands in the narrative in a semiotic relationship with the Orbis Spike – but as I have touched on before, the Orbis Spike stands as the first emergence of the 'Anthropocene-proper'. Prior to that we can view the megafauna extinction as the first sign of the potential for such a cultural and ecological environment. The relationship between the Orbis Spike and the megafauna extinctions are explored in the connections between Abrechan and Mazulkeen, whose sections are deliberately often presented side by side. This relationship, however, raises questions around human agency in the face of such narratives, or cumulative culture as a process. To what extent can we attribute these narratives to their supposed authors, if there are signs and flashes of earlier iterations? Could not those same authors be merely repeating and developing pre-existing perspectives and narratives?

The next section will focus on both how I approached depicting this procedural relationship between Mazulkeen and Abrechan and the consequences this holds for agency, both for the characters within the novel and what that might indicate for our agency within the Anthropocene. I will begin by focusing largely on the events of Abrechan's arrival at the Tower

## 3c. Agency in the Anthropocene

Timothy Morton presents the time of 'hyperobjects' and climate change as one of grave humiliation for Western philosophical values – especially the prizing of rationality and our command of technology and Earth's natural forces[42]. Through our own actions we now find ourselves in an epoch that assaults and disassembles our prior models and tools for comprehending history. The Anthropocene erodes the previously firm borders between the spheres of the human and non-human, but also between the socially constructed human and the animal species. The natural world has ceased to be the backdrop to human drama and has become a participant and a character in its own right[43].

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[41] A concept I explored in a short story that follows on from *Folly*'s ending (*Broehain*, BFS Horizons #12, 2020)

[42] "Hyperobjects have dragged humans kicking and screaming … into an *Age of Asymmetry* in which our cognitive powers become self-defeating. The more we know about radiation, global warming, and the other massive objects that show up on our radar, the more enmeshed in them we realize we are." (Morton, 2013, p.160)

[43] Arnold, 1999

This is, however, a perspective and a judgement on our present predicament – to be at one end of a series of actions and decisions culminating in the cascading collapse of various ecological symptoms. It leaves us with a sense of being recipients of history, rather than active participants – threatened by the cumulative consequences of over 500 years of ecological tampering by the economic north. It also suggests that one of the core characteristics of the Anthropocene is a loss, or a change, in our agency.

It is an era marked by human decision, action, and error. The Orbis Spike and the global cooling that resulted were not deliberate events in themselves, but rather unintended consequences stemming from other acts which *were* deliberate. Columbus did not arrive in the Americas with the intention of starting a process that would see the indigenous population collapse by 98%, nor did he intend to foster a period of rapid reforestation, nor did he plan his expedition in the hopes of ushering in a period of homogenous economic practices in the form of Capitalism. Yet these *are* the results of his actions, and of those who supported, funded, and assisted in his efforts.

What I find striking, when considering our contemporary experience at this end of the Anthropocene where our agency has been irrevocably altered within the context of the history of the Anthropocene, is how the acts of prior agents affect and impede our own agency. It is this constraint upon agency, as an act of aggression and asserting dominion, which I feel defines a core trait of the era's character. The motivation may have been profit, but the harm inflicted through the prevailing methods of imperialism, slavery, and other forms of violent and oppressive exploitation is of greater ethical bearing and more instructive as to the underlying rationale of the Anthropocene itself[44].

Abrechan is presented as an embodiment of unbridled individual will. He acts upon his own prejudices and convictions heedless of consequence – whether it be to himself or others. His campaign against the Amunin stems from his own trauma which has grown into a broader, bigoted narrative that treats the world outside the realm of humanity with suspicion and hostility. His pursuit of that narrative limits the horizons of possibility for other characters: Reizhe Slovehn's assassination sees Hild seized by Fol Hollow's leadership and forced to pursue and kill Abrechan which ultimately leads to her own death. That same event also brings about the rift between Treithe and his people leading to his leaving the Undercity in pursuit of aid, and Abrechan's escalating violence prompts similar acts from Treithe as he pursues Abrechan.

In this way Abrechan was designed to follow Thomas Carlyle's conception of 'Great Men' in history. "The missionary of Order … The carpenter finds rough trees; shapes them, constrains them into square fitness, into purpose and use."[45] As one of Carlyle's 'Great Men', Abrechan sees himself as the *only* agent of consequence within the world of *Folly*. He perceives himself to be a kind of unmoved mover, a 'special' agent capable of singlehandedly redirecting the course and flow of history. *Folly*, in its totality, more closely follows Tolstoy's arguments regarding the relationship between individual will and collective history: Abrechan's philosophical and political views are presented without comment and permitted to stand, but they are extensively contextualized by the sheer weight of varied, contradictory accounts and perspectives. We can see that there is an intent to Abrechan's actions, that he is choosing to act in all cases, but when placed alongside *Folly*'s far reaching history we arrive at Tolstoy's 'insoluble contradiction': "[w]hen committing an act I am convinced that I do it by my own freewill, but considering that action in its connection with

[44] Lewis & Maslin, 2018, p.320., Saldanha, 2020, and Erickson, 2020
[45] Carlyle, 2021, p.113

the general life of mankind (in its historical significance), I am convinced that this action was predestined and inevitable."[46]

There is a great deal to be unpacked in the relationship between Treithe and Abrechan, with their respective chapters in *Folly*'s narrative echoing each other. While Treithe is compelled to a certain amount of violence and conflict by his families role within Amunin society, once he has rejected his own culture in order to pursue revenge we see gradual, but increasingly violent and brutal shifts in his actions and behaviour as he comes closer to his quarry – reaching its peak within *Folly* when he investigates the consequences of Abrechan's presence in Pyllwic.

Although not fully explored within the narrative, Abrechan's departure from the town and the manner in which he departs have a number of considerable consequences. First there is the death of Cailean: murdered when he attempted to capture first Fulke and then Abrechan. The presence of a non-human within a northern port town is cause for rumour and suspicion, the death of a previously undiscovered non-human provokes paranoia. Beyond that, the key decision on Abrechan's part (and one committed without due consideration of the consequences) is to allow Keaton to give money to his starving siblings before leaving to travel with Abrechan and Fulke. Keaton's siblings live amongst a network of gangs living cheek by jowl in the subterranean tunnels beneath Pyllwic, existing in an uneasy truce. The presence of a large sum of money creates further suspicion and conflict that erupts not a massacre when Hild arrives later, in pursuit of Abrechan. The violence in the Burrows spills out into the port and the rest of the city creating further unrest. Treithe's growing propensity for violence and wrath reach their peak after he discovers the bodies of Keaton's siblings, and of the others killed in the initial outbreak.

In this way, Abrechan functions as a form of narrative 'gravity well' – his presence and his actions having a distorting effect on the world and the characters around him. Abrechan *acts*, deliberately and unprompted for much of the novel, and the other characters *react*. Their choices limited to whether they will assist or resist his designs. Their roles within the narrative defined by their relation to this one character, as a deliberate reflection of the ways in which colonising societies reorientate and distort the focus of colonised societies[47], and a reflection of the political and economic homogeneity that is characteristic of the Anthropocene.

This, however, only touches on Abrechan's initial appearance within the narrative. Not only does *Folly* attempt to present a semiotic history of the Anthropocene's origins, but it also couches that narrative within a wider context. A context that resists and contradicts that narrative. Abrechan appears to be the sole, 'total' agent within the narrative as his wider context is dispersed. We can trace the causal relationships between Abrechan and the characters around him quite easily, as the constituent events are readily available. Abrechan's own are distributed in both time and physical space. Nowhere is this clearer than when Abrechan reaches the Tower.

Upon his arrival, Abrechan encounters and fights a creature referred to only as the 'Beast'. Initially it possesses a distorted and horrifying form – its upper half resembling an emaciated human lacking in distinct facial features, while its lower half consists of thrashing tentacles. The 'Beast' itself, as the Stranger reveals, has no native form – instead

[46] Tolstoy, 2010, p.1316

[47] "... colonialism is not just any relationship between masters and servants, but one in which an entire society is robbed of its historical line of development, externally manipulated and transformed according to the needs and interests of the colonial rulers." (Osterhammel, 2010, p.15)

it is an empty vessel that reconstitutes itself to resemble and imitate any who would try to climb the tower, leeching their strength as they progress until it consumes them. However, the Tower has been empty for several centuries, leaving the 'Beast' to derive its image and identity from trace impressions and fears left behind by the non-humans that had created it. When Abrechan arrives in the Tower he is confronted by a rendering of humanity, seen through the eyes of its traumatised victims.

As Abrechan progresses through the Tower, the reconstituted 'Beast' begins to imitate his appearance. He sees it first as a boy, then a young man, until it finally resembles him completely. Abrechan's reaction is one of violent loathing and disgust, even when the creature helps him after Abrechan is too weak to resist or continue with his journey. It is a period of forced reflection for Abrechan and is the first and only time the reader sees him consider his own actions from an alternate perspective. It is also intended to be a moment of catharsis for the reader, but one that has been developed for much of the narrative.

Throughout *Folly's* earlier chapters, the narrative pursues a course that is largely metaphorically or thematically associative, rather than chronological, usually the Abrechan acting as a core or anchor that the rest of the narrative revolves around or relates back to. Fulke's initiation is followed by Mazulkeen's own invitation into Amunin society. Abrechan's killing of the drihtenwulf is seen from the creature's own eyes, but with an extended focus on what has come before and brought the two of them together. Abrechan's pursuit of power in the Tower is then reflected back in a scene showing Mazulkeen's own pursuit of magic. The intention was to provide context to the reader, a context that Abrechan is unaware of. The reader sees the cost and consequence of his actions – how his own acts of violence are part of a greater tapestry of bigotry and suspicion and suffering. When Abrechan finally has a moment to experience the full weight of his own actions, to see what his victims have seen in their final moments, the reader has already arrived at that same emotional state. Abrechan's feelings of revulsion overlap with the reader's.

Returning to the third example I provided, the Tower also presents an opportunity for *Folly* to place Abrechan within his own historical context. The Tower was constructed to house and contain Lune's twisted magic, after it was forcefully taken from humanity at the close of a long war that threatened to extinguish all non-human life. As such, progress through the Tower requires Abrechan to endure a series of visions and experiences designed to dissuade him from his goal.

First he is confronted by the very origins of the world. He sees 'the Maker', a god around which Abrechan holds a loose and undefined faith, die in pain and terror – their final wish to keep on living realised in the reconfiguring of its body into the universe that Abrechan lives in. He witnesses the Arkons and the gesǣlig arrive, to shape the world itself (a detail unknown to him). He sees the arrival of the Aos Sí and the Amunin, he sees the world fill up with life and coalesce into being without the presence of humanity. This should be a moment of reckoning and reconciliation for Abrechan, realising that he and his people are not at the heart of things, but rather another (younger) piece of a bigger, older tableau. Instead, Abrechan rejects the vision as a lie. It enrages and offends him, deepening his commitment to his prior narrative and worldview.

Second, Abrechan witnesses Mazulkeen's rise to power. The first human being stealing magic from the cooling body of the Aos Sí's patriarch, pulling the heart from its body and eating it before the horrified Listeners. An act of violence and violation, as well as theft – a symbolic echo of Abrechan's own designs. In her pursuit of this goal, she manipulates two of her own students into helping her, abusing her position as teacher in pursuit of her own ambitions – another echo, this time reflecting Abrechan's own relationship

with Fulke, Farron, and Keaton. She is humanity's common ancestor, and in that one scene reflects some of humanity's worst traits. But again, Abrechan is not dissuaded. We see that he is following an older path, one that leads to violence, death, and disaster but he appears unable to leave that path. The ultimate conclusion of Mazulkeen's actions was an event the Amunin refer to as 'the Schism', a period where Amunin society split into competing factions with some violently separating themselves and following Mazulkeen up into the world above to establish the first human settlements. The Schism ultimately brings about the war that sees humanity cast down, stripped of its stolen magic. Abrechan's own actions lead to a regime change in Auroran society, further rupture and disquiet among non-human societies, and the Amunin genocide.

Finally, Abrechan has to revisit his own origins. Specifically, the moment that set him on his present path: when his father, and the rest of the mining community in Sloughsholm, were killed by Reizhe Slovehn and the Amunin after the former breached the Undercity's borders in pursuit of Amunin obsidian. There are a few things I want to unpack here before we return to Abrechan, but I believe they will be instructive.

House Slovehn were pushed into assuming martial responsibilities for the Undercity as penance for Mazulkeen's actions and the violence that followed. They were forbidden from holding any further ceremonial office, instead it was left to them to both manage and protect the other Amunin from the consequences of Mazulkeen's actions. There is a deliberate displaced tragedy, then, to the destruction of Sloughsholm. Only time, and some small genetic variations, separate the humans at Sloughsholm from the Amunin that attack. Abrechan's father is killed by a distant relative, as an indirect consequence of their shared ancestor's actions. This, however, causes a species of feedback loop that inspires Abrechan to repeat Mazulkeen's original crime (if not in kind, then certainly in nature and meaning). In the same way that Abrechan's killing of Reizhe Slovehn inspires Treithe's pursuit of vengeance. Looking at this one isolated process within *Folly*'s world demonstrates just one of a series of tragic narrative loops that occur throughout the novel – where each narrative loop reaches its end, it creates the conditions for its own repetition. This was a deliberate choice as I felt it was the best possible method for reproducing what I felt to be distinct about Anthropocene history, this sense of it accumulating through repetition and reinforcement where the consequences of one 'Anthropocene event' creates the conditions for the next.

A second detail I wish to highlight, for the sake of establishing wider context, is the motive for mining the Undercity. The Amunin have access to a unique form of obsidian, one excellent for making weapons, armour, and other tools and equipment where physical resilience is essential. Abrechan's father is pursuing it for financial reasons, hoping to create a better life for his wife and son. Their economic status is communicated through the setting, more than any other detail. Sloughsholm is a city of tents, with the ground churned by wagon traffic. It's a community lending itself towards a singular goal, in the hopes of a significant payoff that grants a dramatic change in their fortunes. Abrechan's father only undertakes this project because of his family's poverty. That poverty has arisen out of a form of designed, artificial inequality – one that is alien to the other species and cultures within the world. As nebulous as this is within the narrative itself, and deliberately so, it contributes to a sense of wider context and estranged meaning. Instead of designing events, and designing the world, with singular universalistic truths in mind – I deliberately constructed a web of different contexts, all credible, with a view to preserving what I felt to be the inherent and unavoidable complexity of the Anthropocene.

This vision is the only one of the three which comes close to dissuading Abrechan, if only so that he can remain a while longer in the illusion to see his parents and cling to the

childhood he lost for a moment longer. Here, again, is an opportunity for Abrechan to see his actions within their broader context. To understand the personal traumas that motivate him, especially now that he is equipped to see the Amunin in a clearer, more revealing light. Instead his reaction veers towards the personal and the emotional – rather than addressing the bigger issue at hand, he focuses on the smaller hurts and needs. If the Stranger had not intervened it is conceivable that Abrechan might have succumbed to the vision and remained there, albeit for ignoble reasons.

At the close of Abrechan's experiences in the Tower, he confronts the 'Beast' who has now drained almost all of Abrechan's strength and has completely assumed his identity. Except there is a fundamental difference between the two of them – the 'Beast' is cognisant of alternatives and wider meanings, while Abrechan's focus is internal: his pride, his failure, his ambitions, his designs. The 'Beast' perceives the branching paths that Abrechan ignored, the different lives he could've lived, the different choices he could've made. The 'Beast' chooses to "be better than" Abrechan, returning some of his strength to him. The 'Beast' acts altruistically in the hopes it will inspire Abrechan to abandon his prior path, to change. Instead Abrechan kills it and destroys the tower. He has learned nothing, with each of his experiences deepening his hatred.

Without the presence of the 'Beast', this whole section of *Folly* could be seen as a repudiation of agency within the Anthropocene. Abrechan enters the Tower committed to one course of action, and despite mounting evidence contradicting or challenging that course, he leaves just as committed if not more so. Much in the same way that in spite of persistent discussion of evidence since the 1970s (at the latest) about the existence and threat of climate change, little has still been achieved in addressing that threat. In the economic North we seem committed to a course of ecological exploitation and harm, and no evidence or argument seems capable of persuading us to relent. From this view, we could say that environmental collapse seems inevitable, much in the same way that Abrechan's genocide of the Amunin seems inevitable, or the collapse of Æthelred's reign seems inevitable after 'The Long Nights'. Culturally we have reached a certain terminal velocity carrying us towards a preordained destination, and either stopping or reversing direction seems impossible.

The 'Beast' acts as a counterargument to that. An externalised self that witnesses all that Abrechan has witnessed, that has reexperienced Abrechan's entire life-story in a short space of time, but who has *crucially* reached a different conclusion. The core difference between the two seems to arise out of their level of awareness, in that Abrechan keeps much of his personal, and the world's, history at bay – persisting in a worldview that hangs between ignorance and politically convenient myth. The 'Beast' has embraced the history before them, traced its course and its progress, and recognised its crucial junctures. It recognises the choices Abrechan had, the alternatives he could've considered and pursued. The 'Beast', though it looks like Abrechan, possesses all of his memories and experiences and inclinations, chooses to be merciful – it chooses to act in a way that is completely outside of Abrechan's own personality.

This is *Folly's* central argument about agency within the Anthropocene. As I have said earlier, at this point in time we are at the far end of a long chain of cumulative events that have gathered to create the Anthropocene as we know and experience it. This accumulation of events and decisions, the results of prior agencies, impede our own agency. Resistance to the Anthropocene *is* possible, addressing climate change *is* possible, but neither are easy as both exist as consequences of centuries of cumulative cultural, political, and economic practices. They're an extension and a consequence of colonialism, the industrial revolution, and the great acceleration – three key periods of human social history that have formed the foundation of contemporary life

and experience. As I have also said previously, by considering these three periods together it's possible to trace and identify a gathering momentum – a sense of a final product rushing towards us, gaining strength as it closes the distance. To stop that momentum or reverse it requires a force of equal or greater strength.

The 'Beast' is one of a handful of characters who conduct themselves in a way that I would hesitantly call 'heroic', being that they act selflessly even at their own cost. The 'Beast' helps Abrechan and is murdered as a result. Celyn, the Aos Sí who settles in the human town of Lamsby, and Wemba, the town reeve who decides not to cheat him and gives him advice, are two others. Celyn comes to Lamsby because he seeks adventure, but stays because he becomes aware of the good he can do for the community, and ushers in an artistic and architectural renaissance for Lamsby. Wemba helps Celyn in spite of his cultural environment, one that requires suspicion and hostility towards non-humans. There are other smaller kindnesses here and there, and I deliberately resisted previous Fantasy tropes of crowning violent characters as noble or heroic, or offering apologies for the harms they commit. Treithe is the closest to the classical model of a Fantasy hero, but his motivations are largely personal which he masks to himself and to others as an interest in the survival and safety of other non-humans. These motivations lead him towards greater and greater acts of violence and wrath, but also keep him separated from his own culture at a time when they are most vulnerable.

In this sense, *Folly* follows a more Foucauldian line on the topic of resistance – focusing on the micropolitical. Wemba's decency towards Celyn, as small as it is, represents an act of active resistance against a larger cultural narrative. By choosing not to participate or perpetuate, he dissents. The 'Beast', finding itself caught between Abrechan's narrative and the narrative of its creators, chooses an alternate path – one that horrifies and defies both. The Anthropocene and historical impedes and alters our agency, rendering us not just a sole actor against a backdrop but one actor amongst a plurality, but it does not take it away from us. As environmental conditions worsen, we stand to lose many potential avenues of action and resistance, but that resistance is still possible.

*Folly* gestures towards small, but collective, resistance. To defy and dismantle the Anthropocene at an interpersonal level. While it does not dismiss or discount resistance to the Anthropocene at an institutional level, the narrative displays an enduring scepticism towards dramatic, grandiose visions of revolution and overthrow.

## 4. Hyperobjects Made Flesh: Depicting Anthropocene History

### 4a. Origins, Beginnings, Contexts

Concerned as my creative work is with the origins of the Anthropocene, I strove to evoke a similar environment within the disparate depictions of human life I delineated in section 3b – with shared, individual experiences of loss, trauma, and grief at the root of larger historical tragedy. Whether it was Abrechan's origins in an itinerant mining camp and the violent loss of his parents, Fulke's childhood in rural poverty, Farron's in urban poverty, or Keaton's childhood marred by his parents' political ambitions. In particular I attempted to focus on the intersections between Keaton's family, the Long Nights, and the brewing civil war within the Auroran kingdom as the backdrop to the central narrative:

The Grindonson's have lived at Drugotha for generations, rising to prominence as vintners and wine sellers to the nobility – producing luxury goods for the upper classes in order to enter their good graces, as part of a multi-generational plot to generate enough political weight and influence to take the throne. The Auroran throne itself, as discussed in the novel, passes along a line of hereditary inheritance except when interrupted by assassination or coup – and as such has not rested in many family's hands for longer than two or three generations,

and even then not consistently. Sæwine Grindonson, Keaton's father, believes he is in prime position to depose Æthelred and begins to mobilise his allies. This mobilisation takes form of small raids on rural communities in the south east, in the human territories surrounding Lamsby, as well as the assassination of Lamsby's political leader and close ally of Æthelred.

Æthelred seeks to put an end to the, as yet undeclared, rebellion by bringing the Sin Eaters into Aurora and ordering them to purge the nobility and trade guilds within the city. Arresting and killing anyone who might pose a threat to the king and his family. This event has two consequences: one, it deepens rather than dissipates support from Grindonson along with building resentment against Aethelred – and two, it precipitates Abrechan's rise to leadership within the Sin Eater order after his return, as many Sin Eaters become uncomfortable with their new political role. These two factors converge in the final third of the narrative, with Abrechan leading the Sin Eaters to support Grindonson's regime against Aethelred, in exchange for military and material support once Abrechan attacks the Amunin and the Under City.

The second civil war that brings *Folly* to a close draws on the factors mentioned above, while also evoking some of the details of the period known to Victorian historians as the 'the Anarchy': the war of succession between 1135 and 1153 where Empress Matilda, Henry I's named heir, and Stephen of Blois, the nobility's favourite, competed for control over the English crown. Morwyn stands in for Matilda, in role if not in character, with Sæwine taking the role of Stephen. 'The Anarchy' was marked as a period of prolonged chaos, with the nobility occupied with either warfare or political scheming, leaving their properties and tenants unprotecting – leading to profligate raiding and pillaging. It was also a period of political and cultural rupture, signalling the end of the Norman line and the beginning of the Angevin period – as well as the beginning of what many would think of as *the* Medieval period.

It was essential to choose a liminal period of history, since I endeavoured to depict a different liminal period of history, in order to establish that sense of 'beginning' or birth. Much of the nomenclature of Folly is derived from preceding periods and cultures: human nomenclature follows a distinctly Old-English framework (with some Nordic influence), whereas the Aos Sí borrow from the Goidelic/Gaelic languages, and the Amunin from Ancient Egypt[48] - providing a feeling of context and history. Humanity, in this case, was identified closely with early medieval England in pursuit of a number of different goals – the most salient being England's involvement in and contribution to the Orbis Spike event, while simultaneously being my native culture. This allowed me to pursue the dual purpose of exploring both the origins of the Anthropocene and my own cultural context and background – interrogating my own involvement and place within the Anthropocene. It could be read as a response to Tolkien's project of creating a new English mythology in the post-war period (Carpenter, 2016), but one based upon exploring the wider historical context and consequence of English medieval culture – and its later impact and influence on the colonial era.

On reflection I believe it also speaks to the nature of Hyperobjects: being displaced in both space in time (existing at once everywhere and always), it feels natural to allow any such depiction to gesture to multiple beginnings simultaneously: or, to be more specific, a multi-layered depiction of beginnings. The Orbis Spike is evoked in Abrechan's genocide of the Amunin and its consequences, but it exists alongside the Orbis Spike's own historical context and the events that made it possible, if not inevitable. Different periods of history, all contributing to the same product, exist contemporaneously: colonialism with feudalism,

[48] In part, and I must emphasise this. A great many of the names, such as Treithe, Mazrineen, and Mazulkeen, were written with no particular extant language in mind – instead pursuing an emphasis on certain sounds that I felt suited the characters and both their cultural and ecological contexts. However, later names *do* arise from Ancient Egyptian, but chosen for verisimilitude rather than authenticity.

medieval Europe with pre-medieval cultural aesthetics, and so on. Furthering that goal – the characters also belong to different time periods, with the narrative flitting across temporal distances covering thousands of years. We spend a chapter with Abrechan, only to see his actions as an echo of his ancestors: Mazrineen and her daughter Mazulkeen. Fragments of myths and legends interject, as well as contemporary experiences that exist outside of the narrative itself – such as in the case of Ceyln who provides both an outsider's experience of human civilisation, but also serves as an eyewitness (at some remove) and a case study in the consequences of human politics within the Auroran kingdom when he is wrongly accused for the murder of Lamsby's lord and killed.

The question of how to tie it together proved persistent, with numerous conversations between my supervisor and I on whether the additional perspectives muddied the waters rather than clarifying them. As a way to bring the disparate threads together, my third rewrite introduced the character of Ferdia: acting as an omniscient narrator, but also a participant in the narrative itself. Ferdia in himself also serves as Hyperobject, but one through which we can perceive other Hyperobjects: he exists in all of time, simultaneously, as a disembodied consciousness. That temporal superposition enables him to grasp all of the events of *Folly* at once, to unite them into a single narrative, while providing additional context and personal insight. Ferdia functions as an inverted prism – drawing each narrative thread into a singular, consolidated whole.

It is also through Ferdia that we become cognisant, or *more* cognisant, of the Stranger and its wider role. The Stranger fulfils a variety of functions within the narrative: at once a guide and a trickster to Abrechan, it urges him to the Tower and leads him through it once he arrives. It speaks to him through dreams and visions, and seems to hold greater sway over him until, once Abrechan has summitted the Tower, the Stranger is ejected. In the wider scheme of things – this is a minor role, if a pivotal one, further elaborated by Ferdia in later passages:

> "The Three are now One. Its power greater, its hunger greater still. It is in a place that frets and frays It. Tainting and twisting and moulding its essence. It seems human.
>
> No.
>
> It becomes humanity.
>
> Cumulative-" (*Folly,* p.156-157)

The Stranger is a deliberate attempt to personify a Hyperobject. Its nature, needs, and wants are multifaceted and difficult to delineate. To do so will require me to, briefly, sketch out its role within the wider world, beyond the narrative confines and concern of *Folly*.

### 4b. Grand Designs – *Folly* in narrative context

*Folly* originally existed as a singular image in a different narrative, a piece of history providing context to the events that followed Abrechan's pursuit of the Tower. That original narrative, as yet unnamed, followed Fulke, Farron, and Keaton in the wake of Abrechan's death and the collapse of the Sin Eater order, pursued by Treithe and his allies. Along the way they recruit two boys from a village, one of whom becomes host to the Stranger as it pursues its goals – steering him to become Fulke's protégé and inheritor of Abrechan's legacy.

That narrative would conclude with Fulke's death, and with him the world he had tried to create with Abrechan. His protégé would flee, guided by the Stranger, only to return in the third narrative a decade or so later to pursue his revenge against Treithe. In so doing he would revive the first kingdom of humanity from their enchanted sleep, and destroy both Treithe, and the fragile alliances he had built in Aurora – further severing the human world from the non-human.

It had always been my intention for two further trilogies to follow on from there, with only the second being relevant at this time. The second trilogy would take place some few hundred years following Treithe's death, taking place in a society reflecting Enlightenment-era Europe, with a magical academy at its centre where human and non-human magical practitioners work together. Practice of magic has to be authorised by the state – including education in that magic – with no authorised practitioners being hunted and persecuted. The initial novel would establish that world and setting, and conclude with the rise of an underground network of illegal magic schools (called the Invisible College) assaulting the state academy and bringing about a period of civil war.

From there the trilogy would pursue a series of arms races, with both sides reaching for stranger and more dangerous powers in order to gain the upper hand in the conflict. The ultimate consequence being the creation of the Three by the Invisible College: embodied raw magical energy that can be utilised by human practitioners to enhance their own abilities, taking the form of disembodied porcelain masks, while also able to function independently, albeit at a reduced capacity. The Three begin to develop and form rudimentary personalities and inclinations, increasingly crude imitations of their martial creators, responding to their chaotic and violent environs through imitation. The trilogy would conclude with the Invisible College victorious, having banished both the academy and all semblance of non-human magic and culture from the world, only to be betrayed by the Three who seek to enslave them. The Three are eventually banished, albeit to a reduced distance, existing in a spaciotemporal liminal space – neither in this world or the next. A space freely influenced and changed by human imagination, desire, and thought.

There the Three grow and change, until are inevitably subsumed or consumed by the One – the Stranger. In that liminal space of thought and dream, it absorbs an aspect of humanity – at once its creation, reflection, and embodiment of humanity's abstract nature: a thing of appetites and desire. Its spatiotemporal position enables it to access all of time and space, but in a thin and distributed manner – like a drop of oil hitting the surface of a lake, spreading and spreading to form a layer only one molecule thick. As such its personality and ambitions are present everywhere, but its ability to directly affect the course of history is limited – hence the need to attach itself to specific characters like Abrechan, who are positioned in such a way as to direct history.

I have attempted to communicate its origins in as simple and chronological manner as possible, but its nature and narrative role necessitates a complex relationship with the events of each novel. While it is influencing Abrechan's decisions and actions, it is participating in and ensuring the conditions of its own birth – guaranteeing its own survival. It belongs to and participates in both the time of *Folly* while simultaneously existing in and being personally cognisant of the ultimate historical consequences of *Folly*.

This is due to the unique representational properties of fantastical literature[49]. Borrowing much from Chu's *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep* (2010), I arrived at a number of conclusions about the narrative and representational utility of fantasy. On the one hand, as Chu argues, it is able to represent "cognitively estranging" referents (p.9) – objects, concepts, or effects and processes that defy a strictly mimetic representation. A depiction of a hyperobject in a purely realist narrative would not be possible – it would either, in the case of trauma, make use of the tools, language, and devices of fantastical literature[50] or draw attention to the limits of realist narrative. On the other, Fantasy in particular pushes beyond

[49] In this case I refer to Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror collectively as genre forms that deliberately amend or subvert the accepted physical laws of our own reality.

[50] Chu, Seo-Young, 2010, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?*: A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation, Harvard: Harvard University Press, p.153-54

the purely representational towards both *poesis* and synthesis – in that in pursuit of its representational aims (in this case, depicting the origins of the Anthropcoene) it draws in disparate elements of that representational object and combines them.

In the case of *Folly*, the novel does not repeat the historical narrative of the Orbis Spike, but instead draws out its narrative themes and threads and entangles them with its metaphysical and even mythic constituents – in this case, hyperobjects. The narrative of *Folly* functions as the coherent, representational whole, containing individually cognitively estranging referents. The language of Fantasy enabled me to draw together disparate features and facets that, in my reading, defined the origins of the Anthropocene: trauma, violence, bigotry, and cultural, social, and ecological alienation – and reconfigure or narratively process them to recreate the Anthropocene in nature and significance, if not in literal, mimetic representation.

When pursuing this approach to my craft, I delved into novels I felt pursued a similar project: namely *Annihilation* (2015) and *Authority* (2015) by Jeff Vandermeer, and Alan Garner's *Red Shift* (2014) and *The Owl Service* (2017).

*Annihilation* and *Authority* form the first two parts of the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, and follow the struggles of an American government agency dedicated to monitoring, exploring, and containing an area of 'alien', pristine wilderness that arrived following an unspecified cataclysm – Area X. The expeditions meet varied ends, some violent and deadly, others simply fail to return, or some return changed – cognitively impaired and, in one case, suffering from an aggressive yet inexplicable cancer. Area X is an embodied hyperobject – its origins are unclear, as is its nature. It remains resistant to any attempt to investigate or comprehend it, with the cellular structure of biological samples taken from Area X changing and reconfiguring whenever someone observes them. The wildlife remains wild, unaffected by human beings, but seemingly physically reconfigured by them[51] - particularly in the case of the lightkeeper, remade by Area X into 'the Crawler': a cirrus-propelled scribe of apocalyptic portents written in lichen on the inside of a tunnel reaching deep into the ground. While *Annihilation* focuses on the material nature of Area X-as-Hyperobject, *Authority*'s narrative focus is on depicting our reactions *to* hyperobjects: namely what Vandermeer deems to be the human tendency to respond with confusion and irrationality[52], as in the case of the Southern Reach experiment where hundreds of white rabbits were herded towards the border, only for the majority to die and the remainder to interbreed with the native marsh rabbits, unwittingly creating a new and invasive species in the same act.

Alan Garner's *Red Shift* and *The Owl Service* focus entirely on reconciling the limited temporal experience of humanity with the full width and breadth of time. In *Red Shift*, three characters are narratively connected over the span of over a thousand years with the perspective leaping from one to the other, following a line of thematic, rather than causal, connection. *The Owl Service* depicts three children in a Welsh valley arrested by supernatural forces that force them to re-enact the fourth branch of the Mabinogi: specifically the tragic love triangle of Bloduewedd, Lleu, and Gronw – propelling them towards death and betrayal. In both cases, Garner depicts an experience of time that undermines human deterministic agency – an experience of time where the human protagonists, while still possessing agency

[51] A scene in *Acceptance* involves a pseudo-religious mural dedicated to missing members of past expeditions featuring their photographs at the heads of strange and horrific creatures, some of which appeared in the first novel, *Annihilation*.

[52] Jeff Vandermeer, 'UNLOCKED: Hyperobjects in Mirror May be Closer Than They Appear', interview by Dan Boeckner and Riley Quinn. The Bottlemen, May 05 2021, audio, [time], https://thebottlemen.podbean.com/e/unlocked-hyperobjects-in-mirror-may-be-closer-than-they-appear-ft-jeff-vandermeer/

in terms of wants and desires, are powerless against a truly inhuman conception of time. Namely, a version of time and history that is utterly indifferent to humanity. In the case of *The Owl Service*, the fourth branch of the Mabinogi achieves something akin to the status of the hyperobject – at least in its dimensional proportions – appearing briefly until its cycle is concluded, before fading again. In *Red Shift* the connecting devices, apart from its continuous theme of love fading and disintegrating, are a Neolithic stone axe, the city of Crewe, and a hill called Mow Cop – which again achieves this aspaciotemporal status by virtue of being present in each of its three constituent narratives[53].

At heart, what connects these five narratives – *Folly, Annihilation, Authority, Red Shift,* and *The Owl Service* – is a gesture towards a cyclical view of history, albeit with some caveats on my part. In the case of Vandermeer's novels, we see the same process repeated in the face of an unknown environment: they probe Area X's borders and terrain with an exhibition, only to produce an unexpected and indecipherable reaction, not knowing if they're committing further harm, until Area X breaches its borders and consumes the Southern Reach Agency. In *Red Shift* and *The Owl Service* there is an air of inheritance and legacy, of unfinished narrative business being handed down through time, with characters being propelled by forces beyond their understanding and control to assume specific narrative roles.

In the case of *Folly*, the Stranger depicts those cycles but with a deliberate (if instinctual and unintelligible) mind or purpose behind it. It experiences and affects the events leading up to its own birth repeatedly, altering and amending in minor ways, in pursuit of a better outcome each time. There were some discussions between my supervisor and myself on what the influence and presence of such a character posed to Abrechan's agency. There is a very fine line present in *Folly*, between a preserved sense of agency, and also the sense of a deterministic universe – but the line is there. The characters, ultimately, have choice and control over those choices. While Abrechan's interactions with the Stranger may propel him towards the Tower and eventual genocide, in the same way that his own origins – mired in trauma and violence – also seem to point in the same ultimate direction, we also see him deliberate on his course, and even – eventually – violently eject the Stranger[54]. In the same way that while Fulke begins to walk a similar path to Abrechan, and even idolises him as surrogate father, he arrives at his own destination, defined by his mounting disquiet at what Abrechan has become.

What I have attempted to gesture at here, is that the present appearance of a cycle of ecological destruction, coupled with exploitative practices and violence, does not establish that cyclical process as a fixed, universal truth. Horror and Fantasy are closely aligned genres, often touching on similar subject matter and settings, but with a crucial divergence – the former tends towards a sense of petrified despair, of the human mind seized and gripped by the impossibility of the odds before it, stemming from a deliberate epistemic obfuscation in the narrative. Fantasy is focused on hope – building on the assertion that, contrary to Horror, the monster before you *is* knowable, and if it can be known it can be defeated.

The Stranger appears as an embodied hyperobject, and the central antagonist (albeit at some remove), but one that is rendered knowable through Ferdia's unique narrative perspective. With Ferdia acting as a guide we can perceive the disparate threads of the Stranger's existence as a singular image. It becomes possible to know and understand them.

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[53] Houlbrook, Ceri. 2019. "'The Stone Axe from Way Back': A Mutable Magical Object in Folklore and Fiction." *Folklore (London, UK)* 130 (2): 192–202

[54] A recent re-read of the manuscript has led me to wonder if the connection to Abrechan and the Stranger may run deeper than it presently appears, leaving open the possibility of Abrechan returning in some form or another – even if it is only in an aspect of the Stranger's personality.

The monster you can understand is the monster you can defeat.

## 4c. Mythic Eviction – Lessons learned from *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), and Challenges to Essentialist Definitions of Humanity

Put very briefly, the origins of the world in *Folly* occurred as follows:

> *A being, formless and powerful, arrived from another reality in its final moments. It is suffering and in pain. As it dies – this being makes a final wish 'I do not want to die.' Such is the enormity of its power, that desire becomes reality. The being detonates and the raw materials of its own existence become the raw materials of the world. At this point this viscera is nothing more than energy, potential, and dust. This being is later referred to as 'the Maker'.*
>
> *Then come the Arkons, dragons from another reality, seeking to create a new home for themselves. They desire stability, sterility, and eternity. A fixed and unchanging domain in which to spend the rest of their infinite lives. As they fly through the ether, the Arkons breathe in the dust and potential, heat it with their own fire, and breath it outward. The results of this alchemical process become stars.*
>
> *The Arkons are pursued by the gesælig, old enemies and rivals, who seek to thwart the Arkons at every turn. As those burning stars hurtle outward to their destinations, the gesælig seize them in their hands, cool them with their breath and discard them. The cooled stars become lumps of molten rock that collide and coalesce into a greater, if irregular, sphere. As more and more lumps are added, the sphere cools – the moisture within condenses and settles on the surface to form lakes, rivers, and oceans. The Arkons, trying to salvage what they can, erect mountains and great spires and temples to themselves – reforming the rock to embody their vision of a perfect world.*
>
> *Again, the gesælig intercede – breathing life onto the world. The spires and mountains become swarmed with grasses, lichen, creeper vines, and all manner of things that grow and die. The perfect still oceans are disturbed by thronging fish. Open skies are filled with birds. And all of this is intended to be brief, fleeting. For each life to wink in and out of existence at such a rate as to madden the dragons. The Arkons, trying to gain the upper hand, suck all the warmth and heat out of the world – plunging it into an ice age. The gesælig, stealing upon the dragons as they sleep, tickle them into releasing heat and fire into the world once more.*
>
> *Once their anger abates, the Arkons recognise that their pride got the better of them – that to plunge the world into ice would mean participating in the endless, disparate, and cyclical existence the gesælig had wrought. As such they create the Amunin to collect the memories and experiences of the dead, to preserve them, so that life and existence may continue infinitely.*

*The Arkons are victorious, for the moment.*[55]

Why do it this way?

When I wrote it, I had a sense of its beginning and who was involved. In fact my original perception of this myth came through Abrechan, and his understanding of it which appears on pages 245-249. A singular image of a changing, shifting form far off in a dark void, silhouetted briefly as it explodes. I knew the significance, at the time. Or – at least – the significance of the image that I wanted to impress upon the reader: here is Abrechan's god, the Maker that the humans occasionally refer to. As the name suggests they believe the world was created deliberately and for humanity – bestowing humans with a particular status among the other denizens of the world.

I wanted Abrechan to be faced with the reality of that myth. To see events as they actually happened. But as I wrote *Folly* and approached that crucial scene, I became more and more convinced that Abrechan would remain unmoved by the vision. More than unmoved, he is enraged. The vision is a lie – to his mind. An attempt to manipulate him, to diminish or undermine humanity's divinely appointed place in the world. Knowing this would happen – a great many things, where Abrechan was concerned, took on an air of inevitability – I needed to establish what *really* happened, free of his internal voice and the force of his personality. I wanted the reader's experience of the narrative to depart from Abrechan's, very clearly, and for them to begin to see the character and his ambitions anew.

What is most significant, in my mind, is the arrival of the Amunin. This is the species, or race, humanity originated from after Lorn of the gesælig seduced Mazrineen. That intervention was a furthering of the gesælig's ambitions to further frustrate and offend the Arkons. Impregnating Mazrineen would be seen as a *tainting* act by the Arkons. What happened afterwards? I doubt Lorn thought that far ahead. As is seen later, he is an impulsive and anarchic soul, a weathervane for chaos. He has no great schemes or designs, but rather responds to his most immediate pleasure and delight with little concern for the consequences.

The product of that union was Mazulkeen, the first of the humans. The living intersection between anarchic creativity and pure, objective memory. Or, put more plainly, the first individual to possess a perfect knowledge of the world's history but also with the power and desire to make herself the *centre* or apex of that history. To establish herself as the central event. Later I'll discuss how successful she is and what the wider significance of that endeavour is/will be.

Humanity is born of the intersection between the gesælig and the Amunin. In turn the Amunin were brought about by the intersection between the gesælig and the Arkons – both of which are acting out their parts in a rivalry that predates the existence of this world, and perhaps others.

The idea and intention was to establish humanity, from the very beginning, as being bound up within additional contexts. It would not exist if not for the Amunin, who would in turn not exist if the Arkons and gesælig didn't hate each other quite so intensely. Humanity, later, would not become a destructive force if Lord Lune (the progenitor of the Aos Sí) had not succumbed to madness and been killed by his own children. Humanity is nothing, its nature within *Folly* non-existent, without the actions of the other races within that world. From the very beginning humanity is, as Mark Fisher puts it, "enmeshed in mythic structures."[56] This is a depiction of humanity as borderless, its identity bound up in a myriad of contexts and

[55] The full, *actual*, myth as it appears in *Folly* begins on page 216. I also had the good fortune to deliver a version of the myth, along with a paper exploring my use of Chakrabarty and Nayar, at Eastercon 2021.

[56] Fisher, M., 2016, *The Weird and the Eerie*, London: Repeater Books (p.97)

relationships outside of itself. Borrowing from the anthropologist Nurit Bird-David, humans in *Folly* are not 'individuals' but *'dividuals'*: "persons constitutive of relationships."[57]

This is an extension of my original design for *Folly*: to present the individual, anthropocentric and Eurocentric narrative of the Anthropocene *within* a world that defies that narrative at every turn. The collision between Abrechan's understanding of the world and the understandings and perspectives of the other characters, especially those of the Aos Sí and other non-humans, highlight the distortions within Abrechan's perspective. By removing the central myth and narrative of the Anthropocene from its native environment and couching it in an alien context with a backdrop that is intrinsically opposed to it, I wanted to make the narrative even easier to see, grasp, and critique.

Beyond that I also sought to implement some of the insights from Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), in pursuit of a feeling of discomfort within the reader. Fisher's conception of the 'weird' focuses on an inversion of expectation, couched in the comfortable 'everyday'. It represents a rupture or incursion against predictability and safety. The 'eerie' occurs when the world resists or undermines human agency – it evicts us from our internal narrative and all of its constituent comfortable assumptions and expectations of the world by exposing it to external dissent. It evicts us from our prior beliefs, only to shatter the beliefs themselves – making a return impossible. Vandermeer's *Annihilation* embodies both the 'weird' and the 'eerie' through the literal incursion of pristine nature, indifferent to human agency and struggle. *The Owl Service* presents human agents gripped in a cyclical, mythic power surge that demands said agents fulfil specific roles.

What struck me was how both the weird and eerie rely upon reader expectation to function. In order for the weird to present an inversion of expectation, said expectation must already exist – and the same for the eerie: we need to have a comfortable worldview or internal narrative in order for us to be evicted from it.

To explore how these narrative philosophies could be applied to the Fantasy genre, I turned to Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind*[58] - a high fantasy narrative following the travails of a legendary magician, Kvothe. Kvothe's story is told at several degrees of estrangement, with multiple, distinct narrative layers: the third person omniscient which establishes the initial layer – focused primarily on describing the world, the secondary layer in the form of close third person anchored to the character 'Chronicler' who has tracked down Kvothe in his retirement in order to write his biography, and the first person through which we experience Kvothe's story. Rothfuss' story requires a close reading in order to grasp the full consequences of these multiple narrative layers: namely, that Kvothe is lying to the reader throughout. The novel's worldbuilding is meticulous, and yet Kvothe's first person narrative contradicts itself, or presents inconsistencies: he demonstrates knowledge he shouldn't have, characters refer to him by name upon first meeting, etc. Considering the narrative is largely concerned with Kvothe's efforts to hunt the supernatural entities that murdered his parents, the Chandrian, it lends an unsettling quality to the story. A sense that not only is Kvothe lying, but he is lying with a specific purpose.

The unreliability of the narrator has curious effect on a somewhat conventional Fantasy narrative. Fantasy requires a certain investment from the reader: not only is our protagonist our window into their world, but they also function as our guide and moral barometer. High Fantasy is largely concerned with grand mythic struggles between good and evil, with a clear, distinctive divide between the two – inviting certain assumptions from the reader as to our

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[57] Bird-David, N., '"Animism" Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology' in *Current Anthropology* , Vol. 40, No. S1, (February 1999), p.72

[58] Rothfuss, P., 2007, *The Name of the Wind*, London: Gollancz

narrator-protagonist's trustworthiness. We accept all we are given at face value. Kvothe's dishonesty and deliberate manipulation of the narrative results in a sense of eerie eviction – it permanently affects the way the reader responds to Fantasy narratives, but also invites closer scrutiny of *The Name of the Wind* itself.

Fantasy also relies on identification and nostalgia to be successful: the reader must be able to identify with the characters, to feel at home in the world as it is presented. There has to be a sense of longing, of a desire to press oneself into the page and join the characters in their world and their adventures. To do so in this case would contradict my intent: but also provided an opportunity to play with the genre and with reader expectations. I wanted that initial effect where the reader felt that immediate identification and nostalgia (as in the case of Rothfuss' novel), that sense that this was a world they recognised, the characters pursued roles they thought familiar, and to allow their preconceptions to guide their first, initial experiences of the narrative and its text.

In a sense I wanted them to accept Abrechan's view of the world, and to participate in his personal mythology and his mythologization of the world and its history. Once this was achieved I sought to alienate the reader from that mythology wherever possible, pursuing an effect articulated by Fisher, taking the narrative techniques of the weird to "allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside" (2016, p.10) and to play with and undermine the audiences received notions of agency, not only with fictional characters but also in a much broader, philosophical sense. I wanted the reader comfortable, at their ease, and then to upset them – gradually at first – until the character they had once identified with began to disgust them.

I wanted the reader to see Abrechan as I saw him: someone who, at first glance, occupies the role of the archetypal martial hero – misled by a warped ideology to commit genocide and other atrocities. But with a closer look, and with some hindsight, we realise that was who they always were, and always were *going* to do. That the beliefs he clung to could lead him nowhere else.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

*Folly* as a novel was written quickly – I wrote the first word of the first draft in October of 2019, with that draft concluding in March of the following year. While some sections were added – namely Ferdia's contributions – over the intervening years, and some things were altered or refined over time, it appeared as a monolithic outpouring of all I had read and considered during my initial period of research. My disgust and anger at the horrors described in Stannard's work, and my disbelief at the persistence of the ideologies, philosophies, and socio-economic conditions that lay at their root. Since *Folly*'s conclusion much of my efforts have been focused on trying to understand what I had written and how I had written it.

The preceding chapters reflect my efforts to understand the theoretical frameworks and insights that influenced *Folly*, and my own thinking with regards to the Anthropocene – its nature, its origins, its significance. While I would like to end with some optimistic gesture towards a brighter and braver future, a description of how we might progress and leave the Anthropocene and its inherent ecocidal properties behind – I have no such words or images left to me. Perhaps all that awaits us is the collapse described in Lewis and Maslin. A gradual but inexorable dying away of what we understand to be the 'Western' way of life, to be replaced by a different iteration of human social organisation.

Instead I can only speak to my own thoughts and beliefs at this final terminus. Abrechan has come to embody all of the things I fear in a person. His fanaticism, the violence and casual cruelty of his methods, his twisted but rational and appreciable motivations. That a monster can appear a hero until the final moment, when it's too late to go back. At *Folly's*

conclusion there is some shred of optimism, a hint of how the survivors may move forward – not only continuing to survive but to bring positive change to the world and their own live, but there is no doubt that the road towards those lofty goals will be paved in further death and devastation. It is in the nature of characters like Abrechan to never achieve fulfilment – they always strive for more. Their ambitions and aspirations expand until they engulf the earth.

At this end point, I believe that is my final judgement and diagnosis of the Anthropocene – it is the result and product of very simple human desires, born of desperation, that have grown wild and uncontained. That the ambitions of a powerful and wealthy few have grown without the remotest possibility of fulfilment, until they threaten the rest of us. The Anthropocene is characterised by greed and short-sightedness, fuelled and propelled by past traumas – either experienced directly, or inherited, or externally inflicted.

I appreciate that a PHD must stand as a scholarly piece of work, regardless of its format, and contribute to available knowledge. It must plug a gap somewhere in the academic lexicon. While I attempted to fill such a breach, one identified by Chakrabarty, I feel that the task is fundamentally impossible. We cannot articulate the Anthropocene fully or objectively, because it is a simple thing grown wild and tangled. Because it is borne of vast and varied tangled subjectivities. We can only talk about its nearest aspect, relative to each of us. As we cannot describe climate change directly, only talk of its impacts on weather cycles, ocean levels, water acidity, bio-diversity, threats to natural habitats and so on – the Anthropocene, I believe, can only truly be discussed in a purely subjective register. The gap Chakrabarty identified cannot be bridged through a single project, but rather through a collective effort wrought by agents struggling to communicate their own understanding and experience of the Anthropocene.

Describing the indescribable requires some vague gestures and an inherent variance in the accuracy of one's word choice. Just as *Folly* is not a literal history of the Anthropocene, this commentary is non-specific, often general. This thesis can only make its arguments by communicating a sense, a tactile feeling of an idea, as its subject cannot be described or presented explicitly. To do otherwise would, I feel, represent a disingenuous act towards the reader and would only disrespect the field.

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