3

Ageing in the Anthropocene: The View From and Beyond Margaret Drabble's The Dark Flood Rises[1]

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> It's a losing battle, you know; the fight against the ageing process.
> – Fran thinking about her life as a seventy-some-year-old (Drabble, 298)

> If we want to learn to live in the Anthropocene, we must first learn to die.
> Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, stressing that we need to accept the coming death of our civilization (27)

Fran's First Thoughts

Imagine: you are a woman "well-turned seventy," white, British, living alone and independently in London.[2] You are divorced and widowed, in that order. A mother of two. You are in good health, solidly middle-class, and employed by a charitable trust that supports research on housing for the elderly. Your name is Francesca Stubbs (such a glamorous name, but you're actually known as Fran) and you are the primary fictional character in Margaret Drabble's *The Dark Flood Rises*, a novel about ageing set in England after the turn of the millennium and published in 2016. The novel opens with your point of view, offering us your frame of mind – your thoughts and feelings, your restlessness, your apprehensiveness about ageing, all delivered in a kind of stream of consciousness steadied by the author's unobtrusive omniscience.

Here you are, driving by yourself (you do many things by yourself, and you like to drive). Off to a conference outside of London. To what

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2 Drabble, *The Dark Flood Rises*, 19.

do your thoughts turn? The first two paragraphs of *The Dark Flood Rises* are devoted to your musing – perhaps fixating would be a more accurate word – on the different forms your death might take. There are three.

One: you imagine you're driving too fast and crash head-on into a tree. Or that the furnace in your flat, not having been properly maintained, has sparked a lethal fire in which you are engulfed. This kind of death is both brutally accidental and satisfyingly expeditious. We accord special meaning to a person's final words by virtue of their being last. What are Fran's last words? "You bloody old fool," Fran thinks, addressing herself. Or stronger, "you fucking idiot," bluntly indicting herself as the cause of her imprudent death, internalizing responsibility for what is an accident (1). Moreover, at the imaginary scene of her death, Fran pictures herself alone, speaking only to herself, not to family or friends.

In the first paragraph of *The Dark Flood Rises*, Fran is thus presented as fantasizing – and, as we will see, essentially preferring – a violent, solitary, and accidental death of her own making to one that is old age-related and connected to the life around her. What is the nature of this kind of accidental death? It is commonplace. A car accident. An accident at home. The experience of ageing itself is represented as the middle-class tragedy that Fran must confront in twenty-first-century England.[3] Best to avoid, she thinks to herself, "all the inconveniences of old age" (1).

Two: ageing-to-death. This is the second form Fran imagines her death might take. In her view, the effect, if not the very purpose of such an accidental death, is to avoid ageing-to-death with its life-threatening and ultimately mortal collateral damage, either of the slow but decisive overall weakening of the body or of a terminal disease to be suffered, a death by disease like that of her second husband being "more insidious, less violent, more cruelly protracted" than an accidental death (3). Ominously, she is feeling the signs of invading old age. For as we learn in the second paragraph from the narrator, "Fran herself is already too old to die young, and too old to avoid bunions and arthritis, moles and blebs, weakening wrists, incipient but not yet treatable cataracts, and encroaching weariness" (1).

[3] Drabble closes her deft first paragraph by contrasting the ordinary middle-classness of Fran Stubbs, and her fantasized banal if brutal death, with the heroic tragedy of Antigone whose death by her own hand followed in the wake of honouring her brother's body in death. "Antigone," she concludes, "had rejoiced to die young, and in a good (if to us pointless) cause, thereby avoiding all the inconveniences of old age" (1).

These physical deficits Fran calls *inconveniences*. The almost casual vocabulary Fran chooses to describe her situation may at first seem to diminish the threat of ageing, rendering the physical accompaniments of old age as somehow prosaic, mundane, *ordinary.* But in the very contemplation of the accumulation of the inconveniences of ageing, the overwhelming effect of the mortal prospect of ageing-to-death asserts itself in the second sentence of the second paragraph of the novel: "She can see that in time (and perhaps in not a very long time) all these annoyances will become so annoying that she will be willing to embark on one of those acts of reckless folly that will bring the whole thing to a rapid, perhaps a sensational ending" (1–2).

What? As a reader, I was jolted by Fran's pre-empting the process of ageing by an act "of reckless folly"! As she imagines the physical irritations and frustrations of ageing increasing, they become a cascade, reaching a psychological tipping point.

Three: with breathtaking speed she turns to contemplating suicide. Ageing-to-death is something to be avoided at literally all costs, including the cost of her life in the embrace of suicide.[4]

Do her thoughts strike you as obsessive? As extreme? As too dark?

They get darker.

If the first phase is characterized by annoyances and inconveniences, the second phase, in Fran's view, is altogether dismaying: you find yourself (if you can!) "senseless, incontinent, demented, medicated into amnesia, aphasia, indignity" (29). Thus from the very beginning of the novel, Drabble offers us an imaginative world, much like that lived by many people today in neoliberal societies, where ageing is divided into two phases, or temporalities. Drawing on the vocabulary if not the precise distinction made almost fifty years ago by social gerontologist Bernice Neugarten between the 'young-old' and the 'old-old,'[5] we might char-

[4] See my essay on literary critic and writer Carolyn Heilbrun who by all accounts committed suicide in order to avoid what I am calling old ageing; for Heilbrun, "physical ageing seems to have been defined as inescapable, unremitting, and unredeemed decline" as well as a disabling illness (289). See also my essay on frailty and disability under the title "Feeling Frail and National Statistical Panic." In *The Dark Flood Rises*, one of the minor characters, an accomplished actress who lives alone in London – I take her to be in her early eighties – does in fact commit suicide. Another has in his possession "a Magic Pill" for that very purpose (108).

[5] For Neugarten, the young-old comprised the chronological age group of fifty-five to seventy-five, individuals who are, in her words, "relatively healthy, relatively affluent, relatively free from traditional responsibilities of work and

acterize these phases as 'young ageing' and 'old ageing,'[6] categories that resonate with the pervasive use of the terms the 'third age' and the 'fourth age' but place the emphasis on process and change rather than on a state of being.[7] Distinctions between these two phases of ageing have become commonplace in contemporary culture, with the final phase contemplated by many with fear, a fear that seems altogether reasonable.

The Dark Flood Rises invites us to ask: do you – do I – think of ageing this way?

As Fran thinks to herself, "We can all expect to live longer, but it's recently been claimed that the majority of us can expect to spend the last six years of our prolonged lives suffering from a serious illness, in some form of pain and ill health." The narrator adds: "Fran found this statistic, true or false, infuriating. Longevity has fucked up our pensions, our work-life balance, our health services, our housing, our happiness. It's fucked up old age itself" (44). In Fran's view it is not social institutions or attitudes that are to blame – for example, our society's regard, or disregard, for its older members. Fran indicts longevity itself, understanding it first and foremost as a negative biological fact. The additional years of life that constitute what is in Robert Butler's wise view a revolution in longevity to be embraced are for Fran to be feared as a virtually inevi-

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family and who are increasingly well educated and politically active" (187); for her, it was the social event of retirement that first and foremost marked the 'young-old,' not the relatively benign biological markers of ageing as envisioned by Drabble (cataracts, arthritis, etc.). People over seventy-five, the old-old, were marked largely by the status of their health; it is only "at the very end of life," Neugarten writes, that "there will be a shorter or longer period of dependency and that increased numbers of the old-old will need special care" (198).

[6] In a recent opinion piece for *The New York Times* the geriatrician Louise Aronson uses the terms the 'young old' and the 'old old,' drawing on the medical procedure of vaccination as a case in point to show that members of these subgroups "don't just differ in how they look and spend their days; they also differ biologically." She suggests we use the term 'oldhood,' associating this phase with biological ageing and differentiating it from 'adulthood'; "With good luck," she writes, "some people don't move from adulthood to what we might call 'oldhood' until their 70s, and occasionally later still."

[7] The unease with which critical age scholars, including myself, regard such homogenizing terms is signalled by Stephen Katz's use of scare quotes in referencing the fourth age at the same time as he acknowledges the regrettable "academic tendency to neglect older and vulnerable 'fourth age' bodies, along with general ageist assumptions in the literature that loss of physical control symbolizes a passage into status decline" (125); his point is that contradictions are inevitably at work, with people experiencing "embodiments of ageing as a fractured process of resisting, accepting, denying and recreating ageing" (126).

table catastrophe.[8] As age studies scholars, we have devoted ourselves to elaborating how ageing is not a solely physical or biological phenomenon and underscoring how the experience of ageing is inflected by multiple dimensions of our lives, including gender, race, and class. But in *The Dark Flood Rises* human ageing is presented first and foremost in terms of the biological process of growing older. And Fran devotes herself to developing strategies she hopes will deflect the second phase, keeping it at bay.[9] She walks, she swims, she drives, she texts, she keeps moving. "If you keep moving, you don't get stuck," she insists to herself (195), bringing to mind Samuel Beckett's memorable character Winnie who, in the first act of his two-act play *Happy Days*, is stuck up to her waist in sand.

Today the third age is typically associated with 'productive' ageing or 'successful' ageing, normative notions that are problematic in and of themselves. But in her portrayal of Fran, Drabble gives the third age a dark twist: Fran is trying to prevent old ageing, to outrun it as she restlessly drives to conferences and housing complexes around England, learning about new technologies to assist the elderly and inspecting care homes. She does not so much regard these years as an opportunity but as a period of incrementally increasing biological annoyances, one that foreshadows the certain catastrophe to come. Relentlessly she broods on ageing, thinking about Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Simone de Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse*, both brilliant texts but texts that lead us into a dark vision of ageing. To compound matters, haunting the novel is a premonition of devastating climate change to come, registered by Fran as she listens to the local TV news in her hotel room and learns of earthquakes in the area, small, yes, but *unpredictable.*

I have lingered on these opening pages for several reasons, not least of which is that Fran is the central character of the novel and it is pre-

[8] In "History of Longevity Discourses," Margaret Gullette captures perfectly the focus of contemporary popular discourses on the risks to the individual of living longer lives – that is, lives understood to be too long.

[9] In "'Third Age' under Neoliberalism," Shir Shimoni traces the changes in England from the mid-1980s to the mid-2010s in the meaning attributed to the third age, arguing that the third age – "a temporal-normative framework for making decisions about how to live one's life" – has shifted from being associated with risks to be avoided so as to maintain one's health to being linked with an individual's cultivation of themselves as an entrepreneurial subject who embraces the possibility of life-changing adventures and flourishes in risk-taking (40). The beginning of 'young ageing' or the 'third age' varies of course, but it would be safe to say Fran is portrayed as beyond the beginning; Fran falls into the category of those who are active and avoid risks (although she does drive too fast!).

dominantly through her that Drabble introduces us to the other major characters (three of them are in their mid-seventies, and, like Fran, they regularly reflect on ageing, the central preoccupation of their lives). The opening pages also constitute the longest section in the novel, running to thirty-two pages in my edition. The rest of *The Dark Flood Rises* shifts, quasi-cinematically, from the point of view of one character to another (sometimes two at a time), with sections of much smaller length, some just a few pages long, a few as little as a paragraph. As a first-time reader of the novel, this narrative strategy created for me the illusion of a vast swath of characters, in great part because I couldn't keep them straight or rightly remember them. But looking back, in fact there aren't so many. And their stories, as they unfold over the two-month period of the novel, largely confirm – and thus amplify and intensify – the preoccupation with ageing-to-death as a senseless and inevitable bodily vulnerability that consumes Fran Stubbs.

If at first the world of *The Dark Flood Rises* appears panoramic with its cast of hundreds, it is in fact not only small, it is homogeneous. This is not the London of a Zadie Smith or a Salman Rushdie. In effect Drabble has highlighted the salience of the biological definition of ageing and old age by bracketing multiple markers of identity and meaning. All the main characters in their mid-seventies are white, and thus the experience of racism, for these characters, is not an issue. They are also sturdily – some of them even comfortably – middle-class, and therefore financial precarity is not a chief concern. With one major exception, religious faith is also not a core element of their lives. And, crucially, with the exception of a gay couple (Sir Carpenter Bennett and his long-time partner Ivor live on Lanzarote, one of the Canary Islands), all live alone in London and its environs. (Some members of the younger generation also live very much alone, with Fran's daughter Poppet being a notable case in point.) During the greater part of the novel, these characters in their seventies lead predominantly independent lives, inhabiting the phase of young ageing, related to each other by family, friendship, and chains of association (so-and-so knew so-and-so's husband), but functioning more as nodes in networks than in terms of meaningful relations of intimacy, preferring largely anonymous spaces and detached relationships with other people.

The attachments of Fran in particular are minimal, strangely so. She has, for example, developed the habit of delivering meals to her first husband who is virtually housebound, confined by a serious chronic illness to his bed in his up-scale flat. But the two of them aren't at all close. She typically doesn't even stay to eat with him. And for his part, he ungenerously appraises Fran as "withered and skinny and relentless

now" (106). When Fran is travelling and finds herself stranded because of flooding, she is reluctant – seriously! – to contact her only daughter who lives in the vicinity. Fran has few cherished memories. Her parents do not constitute an important part of her psychic life; in fact, her mind turns to them only twice during the entire length of this 325-page novel, the first when she notes to herself that neither of them had suffered from dementia, providing her with genetic hope. And her grandchildren? They too do not play a valued role in her life; her son acknowledges that she has been "fairly hopeless and absent and inattentive" as a grandmother (77). As she confesses to herself toward the end of *The Dark Flood Rises*, her loneliness is "terminal" (320). When the narrator offers us a glimpse of her feeling with full force, "a grief for all things," it comes as a surprise both to her and to me as a reader:

> Fran feels a great tearfulness rising up in her, a grief for all things, a grief for her daughter and thence, from that grief, a grief for all things. She had feared that she would outlive such grief, that her heart would grow thick and cold, that grief would ebb from her as sexual hope and desire and much (though not yet all) of her social optimism had ebbed from her.… She had thought that ageing would bring calm and indifference and impersonality. (227)

Later in the novel I was grateful to learn that she felt the dull thud of knowledge in learning that one of her two close friends – but how close? not very – had died, casting in stark relief the basic superficiality of her emotional life, its essential hollowness. Her mind is busy with all matter of details and thoughts. But her life is virtually evacuated of vitality, meaningful connections to others, and a seriousness of purpose, although she does feel she is doing good work with regard to housing for the elderly (as a reader, I confess I don't find Fran's work in housing for the elderly compelling as a key aspect of her life; rather, it seems to have been chosen by Drabble as a logical choice for her character, that is, for resonating with the focus of the novel on ageing).

In *The Dark Flood Rises* Drabble makes an illuminating distinction between a *comfort*, which is heartening on a prosaic level and is predominantly a bodily sensation of a lack of anxiety as well as a feeling of low-level pleasure, and *solace*, which offers consolation and meaning on another plane altogether. What does Fran look forward to? The reassurance of the impersonal regularity and anonymity of a middle-class hotel chain; it is "safe and familiar" (319). Small pleasures. A few glasses of wine (she thinks frequently about wine). A soft-boiled egg prepared by the hotel chain precisely as she

prefers it. These are her comforts. They are often experienced when she is alone, eating breakfast, for example, at her preferred middle-class hotel after "a good night, comfortable, pain-free in a big white wide premier bed" (22).

Solace, for instance, is experienced by Teresa Quinn, Fran's close friend from childhood.[10] Teresa is dying of mesothelioma. She is suffering and in pain. She is old ageing, close to death.[11] Teresa's faith – she is Catholic – and her despair lend her life meaning as does her strong love for her son Luke, who lives in Mozambique. He arrives at her bedside. Her deathbed. As they hold hands, Teresa's last words recount – for the final time – the story of his birth. It is a moving scene, resonant with meaning and a moral temporality, a striking contrast with the empty secular time in which Fran and her former husband live, one that is fundamentally devoid of higher aspirations. As the middlebrow Fran thinks, pragmatically, ironically, of herself, she "doesn't mind platitudes. A few platitudes, every now and then, are restful" (38).

This deathbed scene stands in blunt contrast to the everyday world of the novel. My point is that the world of ageing and the elderly in *The Dark Flood Rises* is populated primarily by individuals in the neoliberal sense. They are not bound together by a cohesive sense of an imagined community, whether national, religious, or otherwise. There is no collective affect of solidarity. Fran understands clearly that there are no valued social roles for the old and that the elderly are not venerable; she epitomizes the older person for whom life has largely been reduced to work (and we might add that she is lucky to have that). She equates the second phase of ageing with "uselessness" (16). Nor do there appear to be major obligations to the elderly on the part of the state. I'm reminded of Britain's Margaret Thatcher who famously said, inaugurating a neoliberal order in 1987, "there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are *families*." In the case of *The Dark Flood Rises* it is barely clear there are families.

[10] Solace – provided by faith and by literature – is experienced by two other characters. Ivor finds that his being is uplifted by praying, secretly and without words, in a small and empty chapel on Lanzarote; understanding that such solace may be false, he finds "there's more truth in it than in the endless discussions about doctors, diets, symptoms and medications" (75). Jo Drummond experiences "the surviving force and power" and "solace" in poems, plays, and novels (123).

[11] Close childhood friends who lost track of each other, Fran and Teresa have recently discovered they are both living in London and working in the caring professions. With Teresa, Fran is, as Drabble puts it in the opening section of the novel, "enjoying a curious last fling of intimacy. Teresa is dying, but she is dying with such style and commitment that Fran is deeply impressed and encouraged by this last passage" (21). It is telling that intimacy is something "curious" to Fran.

Indeed to me the novel underscores the Foucauldian argument that power is administered in Western societies in terms of populations, with demographic categories (the young, the sick, and the imprisoned, for example) central to managing society. Add to this that in neoliberal societies, such as Fran's, the state has progressively withdrawn from assuming responsibility for the care of its citizens, thus producing the relative isolation of ageing individuals who find themselves largely responsible for their own well-being, care, and even death (remember the ominous opening of the novel). Housing for the elderly – that is, the cordoning off of a segment of the population – is emblematic of this. Remember: Fran's job entails housing for the elderly. And in fact at dinner the night before Fran's conference on sheltered housing begins (this is the conference she is driving to as the novel opens), one of the people at Fran's table launches into a story about having recently visited a housing project where the elderly are trapped in a high rise, the building itself described as "ageing," one "which boasted (as do so many) the highest proportion of trapped and isolated old folk in Europe – the usual story, non-functioning lifts, unlit stairwells, disabilities, gangrene, graffiti: children, grandchildren and great grandchildren all in jail: gangs in the shopping precinct, carers who didn't care and didn't show or wouldn't stay more than five minutes" (18). It is a horrifying vision. As Fran notes, "cohabitation is forced upon the ill and the elderly, but more and more of the able-bodied in their mid-life choose to live alone" (3). Under these conditions, who wouldn't prefer to live alone! I hope I will not be stretching a point if, echoing anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli's work on precarity and economies of abandonment (a key focus of her book is Australian aboriginal communities), I call the practice of cordoning off of the elderly in housing specifically for them *ordinary abandonment*. Sociality and belonging have been hollowed out in those high rises and, by extension, in other housing for the old as well. This form of abandonment is so ordinary that it recedes from view, scarcely recognizable as producing the aloneness and isolation of the elderly, a category of people in part as a very result of this process.

Ultimately how peculiar and empty and white is the vision of ageing in the novel. It may appear 'normal,' with its division of ageing into two predominantly biological phases that are presented as essentially neutral and objective – from the inconveniences of bunioned feet to the cross-to-bear that is mesothelioma. It may seem altogether familiar to many of her readers, that is to say, a commonsensical way of regarding biological ageing. Young (biological) ageing: surgery for cataracts, medication for hypertension, hip replacement, exercises for balance, endless appoint-

ments with doctors, altogether an accumulation of annoyances and inconveniences. Followed by a period of acute debility and grave health crises: old (biological) ageing. Yet for the seventy-plus-year-old characters we meet in *The Dark Flood Rises*, the distinction does seems to be a logical outgrowth of the neoliberal society in which they – and we – are immersed, one in which the subjectivities associated with health and illness are an all-consuming preoccupation, ageism is pervasive, and values that bind people together in meaningful and intimate ways are largely absent. And, we cannot forget, suffering at the hands of biological decline and ultimate death *is* an existential threat that will necessarily come, as Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard insist.[12] It is compounded by the collapse of care on the part of the state, rendering it altogether reasonable to fear old ageing.

Ironically, the division of ageing into two phases is a result of a certain middle-class white privilege (and of course upper-class too), with the gains in longevity implicitly understood to be a birthright, even if the final years are to be feared, a 'gift' one would like to return. 'Good ageing' is succeeded by 'bad ageing.' Margaret Drabble's novel provides us with an imaginative space to think our way, feelingly, through this normative sequencing of bodily time at the end of life.[13]

The Narrator's Last Words

The opening of *The Dark Flood Rises*, which establishes Fran as its central character with ageing her preoccupation, primes us to wonder about her final words and the manner of her death. In fact, answering these questions could be said to be the very plot of the novel. Near its end Fran reflects on her experience over the past two months and is forced to acknowledge that she has

[12] I agree with Higgs and Gilleard who argue that ageism is too totalizing a concept – they maintain it has risen in contemporary culture to the mistaken status of an ideology – with which to understand in particular the specific bodily experiences of old age. They endorse the vocabulary and basic distinctions of the third age and the fourth age – the third age associated with agency and self-expression, the fourth age with existential fears about ageing and decline, including frailty and the need for care, and death. "Put at the centre of analysis," they write, "this bifurcation between an 'aspirational' and a 'feared' later life avoids some of the more obvious contradictions that have beset the 'ageism as ideology' approach" (3).

[13] At the same time, Drabble does not focus at length on characters in the second phase of ageing who suffer from extreme bodily insults over a long period of time (we learn of the stroke of Sir Bennett for instance, but not much more than that); chronicling a long-term chronic illness over a period of time in a novel presents a much more difficult challenge than portraying an acute crisis.

aged significantly. "She'd been a lot younger," she thinks, "two months ago. She'd been walking steadily on a plateau, for years, through her sixties into her seventies, but now she's suddenly taken a step down. That's what happens. She knows all about it. She's been warned many times about this downward step, the lower shelf" (319). We know that her friend Teresa has died. As the novel draws to a close we also learn that her friend Jo Drummond has passed away unexpectedly in her sleep – of cardiac arrhythmia. And Fran?

Brilliantly, Drabble withholds from us knowledge of Fran's last days, months, years. We don't learn how much time she had left and how she lived it. Nor do we know Fran's last words, a genre that had fascinated her from an early age, or the manner of her death. The final two pages of the novel are entitled "Envoi," which, as the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it, is "the usually explanatory or commendatory concluding remarks to a poem, essay, or book." Instead of Fran's last words we are offered those of the narrator. In these two pages Fran does not even figure as a main character. We learn that Fran has died in a paragraph cast primarily from the point of view of a minor character *and* in a single sentence filled with other characters who too have died, including one whom we might only dimly recall or not even recognize: "Owen England outlived Bennett Carpenter and Fran Stubbs and Claude Stubbs and Simon Aguilera. They are all dead now." The narrator adds, deploying an annoying Olympian 'we': "We won't stand upon the order or the manner of their going" (325). I am tempted to call it a neoliberal 'we.' These people, reduced to names, are of no real importance now. If we cared deeply for Fran as a character, we might even indict the narrator for abandoning her.

As a reader I had lived through pages of Fran's thoughts and feelings and, while not captivated completely by her as a character, I had come to be curious about her fate and to enjoy her. She has a headstrong quality and gift for candour with herself that I admire. She had become a kind of intimate. But at the novel's end the narrator has surgically removed Fran from the landscape of the living as definitively as if she had been isolated in sheltered housing for the elderly, deemed 'useless' by society, receding from view – and from care. Once the central character, Fran is suddenly – and altogether impersonally – grouped with three other people, all now dead, with nothing to differentiate them but the fact that they are gone. As readers, we are thus denied the experience of mourning her, of feeling a sharp grief or the dull thud of knowledge, of contemplating what caring about her has meant to us. And we can't know whether she died instantly in a violent accident, of a slow but ultimately overwhelming cascade of biological insults, or by her own suicidal hand.

Drabble made the decision to neither confirm nor deny her character's forebodings about ageing-to-death. Drabble avoids – or, we might say, refuses – to give Fran's individual experience too much weight by

showcasing it in the end, concluding – I am of course speculating – that offering us Fran's last words would have bestowed upon them far too much import. Drabble understands that while a literary portrait of an individual can illuminate and expand our understanding of the experience of others and ourselves, we can't generalize from it. This is one of the reasons, I suspect, that even in the homogeneous orbit of *The Dark Flood Rises* Drabble has given her characters vastly different experiences of young ageing and old ageing.[14] But the way Drabble has structured her novel assures that Fran's fears – and the categorizing of ageing into 'young ageing' and 'old ageing' – carry the weight of the narrative. What emerges in *The Dark Flood Rises* as 'normal' in terms of ageing in relation to the human life course is a phase of benign ageing in the form of the accumulation of *inconveniences* followed by a phase of pain and ill health. At the same time, this normative view of ageing – its emphasis on the neoliberal individual's biological experience of ageing as divided into two phases – is in fact decidedly singular. For as I have stressed, the world of the characters in *The Dark Flood Rises* is small and homogeneous, a network of white middle-class English citizens who, in addition, share intellectual interests.

Ageing in the Anthropocene

Ageing in Drabble's novel is circumscribed by the constricting values of neoliberal society. Ageing in England is haunted by another prospect too, one that is planetary in nature. The ominous title of the novel, we remember, is *The Dark Flood Rises.* One of its singular achievements is the dramatic juxtaposition of the temporality of human ageing, as experienced in the small and homogeneous world of its characters, and the long duration of geological time.[15] It surprises me to realize that in addition to Fran's fate as a character, what I remember most vividly from the novel is not the everyday travails of the main characters as they live into ageing but rather the increasing threat of apocalyptic flooding, catastrophic earthquakes,

[14] We also see this embodied in exceptions that prove the rule. Fran, for instance, considers Dorothy, a woman who has suffered from dementia for years and lives in a group home, as "truly old," although she is in fact Fran's chronological age (44).

[15] Wayne Hope reserves the term 'temporality' for human existence: temporality for him "is the ground for thinking about the relationalities that connect past, present and future. Temporality thus involves memory, expectation and attention to the present" (22).

and volcanic eruptions, threats that seem at several points in the novel to be imminent, only to recede. I found the most powerful effect – an affect, really – of the novel to be the fearful feeling of the recognition of the impersonal and explosive force to come of tectonic planetary shifts, the earth cracking, the human species to be extinguished perhaps in the process. I was worried for Fran when she became stranded on a flooded highway, wondering if this was to be a titanic catastrophe. Would she be killed in tumultuous floods?[16] A few pages later Drabble returns to the thread of Fran's story as if nothing had happened. I was afraid for Bennett and Ivor on the island of Lanzarote as a cascade of small earthquakes nearby appeared to be radiating outward, coming closer to their home. Would the two of them be lost?

With the exception of Fran's daughter Poppet, the characters are virtually oblivious to the import of these threats on the planetary level. In her mid-forties, allergic to multiple substances, living alone, and working from her cottage in the countryside (she does statistical work), Poppet cares deeply about the planet and tracks extreme weather events through the internet website Climate Crisis (she can follow tornadoes in Texas, forest fires in Sumatra, earthquakes in the Canary Islands). But if the other characters are not concerned with climate change, we as readers, along with the author and the narrator, can fathom and feel with fear what they can't. Midway through the novel the omniscient narrator tells us that the crack in the earth beneath the Atlantic Ocean and near the Canary Islands is widening, creating an atmosphere for the reader of imminent catastrophe (174). And here Fran proves prescient in an ironic sense. I have neglected to mention until now that in the first thirty-two pages of the novel (remember, they are devoted to her point of view), she imagines a fourth way she might die – in a cataclysm of earthquakes, an extraordinary event, not an ordinary accident.[17] Planetary apocalypse haunts her psyche but seldom rises to the surface.

[16] The extreme flooding that England experienced in November 2000 was associated with climate change.

[17] The narrator takes care to insist that Fran has in fact always been interested in earthquakes – a planetary event – albeit in a manic posthuman way: in the opening pages of the novel we learn that Fran "has often thought it would be fun to be in at the end, and no blame attached. One wouldn't want to be *responsible* for the end, but one might like to be there and know it was all over, the whole bang stupid pointless unnecessarily painful experiment. An asteroid could do it, or an earthquake, or any other impartial inhuman violent act of the earth or the universe. She can't understand the human race's desire to perpetuate itself, to go on living at all costs" (10).

The well-known Indian author Amitav Ghosh has indicted novelists for not engaging with the urgent and momentous problem of climate change.[18] He argues suggestively that the aesthetic form of the modern novel itself, embedded as it is in the regularity of the ordinary and the small scale of the mundane, militates against it, given that climate change is characterized by wild, outsized, and unpredictable events. For me the triumph of *The Dark Flood Rises* is precisely that Drabble imagines the collision of ordinary human time experienced in terms of the orderly expectations of middle-class life regarding longevity (as phobic as the fourth age might be regarded), with the *longue durée* of geological time, time punctuated by inevitable if unpredictable large-scale catastrophe. Drabble renders this *longue durée* of geological time palpable without having to borrow from the genres of science fiction and fantasy, genres that Ghosh argues are more conducive to representing the dangers of climate change. If Drabble does not share with us the final days, or months, or years of Fran's life, whether it takes the form of steady incremental decline or acute deterioration and disease (or both, in that order), Drabble does write climate change into her novel. Ostensibly serving as a kind of background in *The Dark Flood Rises*, planetary-scale phenomena rise to the surface.

Indeed, as I worried for several of the characters threatened by floods and earthquakes as individuals, my mind turned to the coming potential consequences of climate change on the level of the collective human species. A dark truth about the future hit me with the thud of understanding. Through *The Dark Flood Rises* we glimpse the momentous transition in which we find ourselves in regard to ageing and longevity: we are moving from a century characterized by unprecedented gains in longevity, a kind of golden age of ageing, albeit only for certain people, and entering an era that will, I have no doubt, be characterized by losses in longevity. The scientists Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin assert in the very third sentence of *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene*, the "Earth now supports 7.5 billion people living, on average, longer and physically healthier lives than at any time in our history" (3). How could living longer and physically healthier lives ever be sustained into the ever-coming-closer future characterized by climate change? Imagine: fears regarding ageing such as

[18] See Stephanie LeMenager's essay on climate change and genre in which she identifies "the weather section of the *New York Times*" as presenting us with a new Anthropocene genre, an anti-obituary that brings news of "de-individualized bodies arrayed amid story-fallen trees and flooded streets," "news without the therapeutic structuring of plot, the obituary denied the familiar arc of an individual life" (221).

those Fran experiences as she visualizes ageing into her eighties could well be regarded as quaint in the future. In his recent book *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* the French philosopher Bruno Latour argues that rising inequality, increasing migration, and climate change constitute a single global phenomenon, "*one and the same threat*" (9). Margaret Drabble too understands climate change as a threat-multiplier, driving this point home with a subplot about present and imminent waves of immigration from Africa and the Middle East, people fleeing famine as well as war, possibly casualties of climate change. If Foucault understood the work of the modern state as managing populations, now the prospect is the crashing of populations from other countries on the shore.

Methodologically, I began this essay focusing on the opening pages of Drabble's novel and then pivoted to consider the concluding pages, tying the two together. Attention to first and last words, close reading: it is a time-honoured mode of literary criticism, one I especially love because it anchors us to the imaginative world of the text. But *The Dark Flood Rises* has also spun me surprisingly loose from the text, inviting me – as one of its readers – to open up the question of the relationship between ageing and the Anthropocene, or more pointedly, about ageing *in* the Anthropocene. As I have already suggested, scales of time are central to thinking about the Anthropocene. We might refer to the ground-breaking work of the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, for instance, who helpfully distinguishes among three different timescales – geological time, the time of the evolution of life on the planet, and the time of world history or human history (with the history of capitalism a prime narrative). He argues that our epoch is distinguished by the imbrication – the entanglement – of these three timescales for the first time.[19] To these timescales I want to add a composite fourth, the smallest of the four: human life expectancy and human lifespan.

How can we bring together the fields of critical age studies and humanistic studies of climate change, fields that to my knowledge have not been in conversation with each other?[20] Assemble two piles of recent books

[19] In "The Human Condition in the Anthropocene," Chakrabarty, drawing on the phenomenology of Heidegger, begins to develop the idea of how the experience of the affect of falling (he calls it a mood in the ontological, not psychological sense), of falling into deep time, discloses to us in a flash of understanding the crisis that is climate change – and that is our radical decentring.

[20] I'm inspired not only by Drabble's novel but also by recent essays focused on the relationship between critical age studies and postcolonial studies. See Rüdiger Kunow and Silke van Dyke.

intended for an educated general reading public for each of them: you will find no entries in the indexes of either pile that refer to the other.[21] What lines of inquiry might we follow? What might we do? Here are some questions we might pose:

- How do imaginative worlds and works – in literature, theatre, cinema and new media – disclose to us multiple dimensions of the possible relationships between ageing and climate change?
- Drawing on what has come to be called the new materialism as well as other fields, how might we design research projects to study the differing concepts of ageing, longevity, death, and extinction throughout human history and across objects (a planet, for example), species, and organisms of different scales and times?[22]
- Considering that the complex matter of climate justice is often raised on behalf of the poor and people of colour, as well as primarily in terms of uneven impacts on nations (so-called developed nations and their others, including India and China), how might we pose questions of climate justice – and climate refugees – in relation to ageing and the elderly?[23]

[21] Consider the recently published books on climate change intended for an educated public audience by Naomi Klein, Elizabeth Kolbert, Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, and David Wallace-Wells (see Works Cited for further details); in the indexes you will find no references to ageing. Similarly, in the recently published books on ageing intended for an educated public readership by Robert Butler, Margaret Gullette, Ashton Applewhite, and Louise Aronson (see Works Cited), there are no entries in the indexes for climate change or global warming. The only publication I have found that addresses this conjunction is a special issue of *Generations* on ageing and the environment (climate change is specifically mentioned), edited by Kathy Sykes and Karl Pillemer; they name climate change as "the biggest global health threat of the twenty-first century" (7) and point out that research in public health "suggests that environmental problems disproportionally compromise the health of the older population" (8). For more informal work on disaster and ageing, see the four postings on the blog of the Association for Anthropology, Gerontology, and the Life Course under the title of "Aging in an Age of Climate Change": https://anthropologyandgerontology.com/aging-in-an-age-of-climate-change-part-1/.

[22] We might consider, for instance, the evocation of "forest time" in Richard Powers's magnificent novel *The Overstory* (255).

[23] In the literature on climate change, the demographic and geographical categories generally evoked are the poor, people of colour, and the Global South, not the elderly. More unusual is a reference to a particular person. See Stephanie LeMenager's essay "Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre"; as she notes, Ta-Nehisi Coates concludes his eloquent memoir, written as a letter to his son

- What core principles should guide our inquiries? Collaboration among disciplines? Consultation across sectors? A respect for long spans of time as embodied in the subjects and objects of inquiry?
- What do elders in indigenous nations, societies, and cultures have to teach others about how they have conceptualized and lived their relationship to the Earth and to each other, and how do they understand their place in the world today, especially in connection with climate change?[24]
- Is there a way to draw on the potential power of the old to resist the denial of climate change and to advocate for social practices at all levels – local, regional, national, and global – to combat climate change? Would this require imagining a new role for the old (or some of the old) that recognizes their – our – unique place in world history as demographically the largest old age cohort that has ever existed and at a time of catastrophic threat to the human species?[25]
- And finally, how can we deploy the categories of young and old, and the heuristic of generational time with its affective power, to deepen our understanding of the gravity of climate change and the peril we – and others in the biosphere – face?

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about the danger of being black in America, on the note of climate change. In terms of ageing, Ghosh, in *The Great Derangement*, briefly relates the story of his elderly mother's inviolable attachment to her family home in Kolkata – to place – notwithstanding the extreme risk she faces from climate change (53).

[24] In "Cli-fi, Petroculture, and the Environmental Humanities," Stephanie LeMenager reminds us that given the history of settler colonialism, the domains of environmental humanities and indigenous studies are difficult to reconcile; she counsels care in not appropriating or simplifying indigenous ideas, pointing out that it needs to be recognized "that some aspects of the post-human thought which has been so revelatory for those of us coming from a settler perspective only begins to approach the never-humanist thought systems of indigenous philosophers" (162).

[25] As reported in the *New York Times* by Sharon Jayson, the number of grandparents as a percentage of the population in the United States has soared, reaching 69.5 million in 2014, an increase of 24 per cent since 2001. See historian Gerald Gruman's far-reaching essay on "The Cultural Origins of Present-Day 'Age-ism'" in which he argues that the development of an older demographic – or what is called population ageing – is a salutary mark of modernity and that, contrary to an ageist prejudice that sees old people as having no future, "*the ageing population does have a future, as it becomes re-engaged at the frontier of modern cultural adaptation and realization through historical time*" (380). If Gruman were to write his essay today he might well consider such engagement as related to climate change. Elders Climate Action is the name of an organization devoted to the issue of climate change.

Allow me to pursue briefly the latter question, one that in great part has to do with the rhetoric of persuasion regarding climate change, and one that will return us to *The Dark Flood Rises*.

In discussions of climate change it is common to encounter the assertion that it is impossible for human beings to grasp the magnitude of the scale of geological time. Why? Because, it is argued, we are constitutionally incapable of stretching our imagination beyond two or three or four generations, a critical constraint that, when compounded by the thickets of political processes, renders it virtually impossible to address the coming catastrophe of climate change. As Chakrabarty writes in "Anthropocene Time," "if we do not take into account Earth-history processes that outscale our very human sense of time, we do not quite see the depth of the predicament that confronts humans today" (6). In *The Long Thaw: How Humans Are Changing the Next 100,000 Years of Earth's Climate*, computational ocean chemist David Archer lays out the science of climate change in matter-of-fact prose, explaining events in the planet's geological past and rehearsing scenarios for the future in terms of carbon cycle feedbacks. "Looking forward, a century is about how far I can really imagine," he acknowledges, thinking in terms of generations. "Sixty years is grandchildren. One hundred is great grandchildren or great, great grandchildren" (5). He does not, however, pursue the interweaving of the two – climate change and generational thinking, or, perhaps better, generational imagination. And as the narrator of *The Dark Flood Rises* comments toward the end of the book, referring to global warming, "Although it's a hot topic, paradoxically, it simultaneously lacks urgency. People can't get their minds around the time spans involved" (299).

I want to suggest, on the contrary, that we can draw on what I am calling generational time as a strength or capacity of imagination rather than a crippling constraint, embracing it rather than considering it a limitation to press home the urgency presented by climate change. Importantly, generational time involves us affectively as well as cognitively.[26] Entailing two, three, and four generations, perhaps even more, generational time is our singular way of understanding future time, linking us in altogether meaningful ways to others whose futures we care about deeply. I am convinced in fact that the most influential way to frame the dangers of climate change is precisely in terms of the future of generations who are our intimates or whom we *feel* to be our intimates – our children and our grandchildren, and by extension,

[26] See Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino's collection of original essays on affect theory and ecocriticism.

children and grandchildren around the globe.[27] Invoking children is a familiar rhetorical strategy in arguments for policy change in virtually all domains.[28] It can be a cynical and manipulative strategy. But it certainly need not be. Our children are profoundly important to us. But my stipulation – it is a hope – is this: we need to take care to represent generational time in terms of entire lives. We need to imagine not just children as young children but as adults living into old age – that is, *growing up and growing old* in a world defined by climate change to come. We need to envision the members of the generations who will follow us living out the full measure of their days and lives, with the crucial timescale being human life expectancy and the lifespan.[29] We need to write old people – elders – into arguments and narratives about climate change, valuing them – and our own future – as we value children, and insisting on the worth of longevity as a human good.[30] I have long been taken with the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott's understanding – so deftly put – that there is no such thing as a baby, meaning that a baby cannot exist in isolation but depends upon the love and care of a parental figure to thrive, as elders depend on those younger. We need to embrace interdependencies across the life course, understanding that whole lives and generational reciprocity are at stake.

[27] Some may object that this understanding of generations – with a focus on generational continuity – privileges and protects the idea of the family; it does. At this point in time, when the survival of the human species is at stake, we need to imagine a future in terms of biological reproduction. I agree with Ian Baucom who argues that "the function of engaged critique must pivot from one focused on infra-human concerns for the struggle of freedom to one focused on the trans-human category of species" (3–4). In this essay I am unable to consider the important matter of the lives of non-human animals.

[28] See, for example, Sarah Ensor's "Terminal Regions: Queer Ecocriticism at the End." "Children," she points out, "traditionally serve as the trump card in the pocket of mainstream environmental thought" (53).

[29] Here we might consider the arguments – specifically their rhetorical posture in relation to generations, youth and age, and the full course of human life – in *Juliana v. United States* (2015), a landmark lawsuit against the United States on behalf of children who are aggrieved by the concrete effects of climate change as well as by its future threats. "By 2100, these Youth Plaintiffs (many of whom should still be alive), and future generations, would live in a climate system that is no longer conducive to their survival," the lawsuit states, calling attention, albeit briefly, to the consequences of climate change on the ability to enjoy long lives (36).

[30] In *Restoring the Quality of Our Environment*, a US White House Report issued by the Environmental Pollution Panel in 1956, longevity was specifically mentioned as being threatened by anthropogenic pollutants, including carbon dioxide. See https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b4116127;view=1up;seq=9.

The philosopher Samuel Scheffler, addressing generational questions in relation to climate change, calls attention to what he terms our worrisome 'temporal parochialism.' Even as we have become more cosmopolitan geographically, with interdependencies proliferating around the globe, we have become, he argues, more parochial in relation to those who came before us and will come after us. As he writes, "our sense of the connections among different human generations has become increasingly impoverished, as compared, say, with more traditional societies, which often had rich and vivid conceptions of the importance of *ancestors* and *descendants* and of the continuity of the generations" (3). It strikes me that Fran exemplifies this poverty of generational imagination.[31]

Consider, for example, the recently published book *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming* by the American writer David Wallace-Wells. He is unsparing in terms of what he foresees as catastrophic climate change. He also tells us in passing – it is a very important remark – that in 2018 he and his wife had a baby girl while he was writing his book. When the twenty-first century comes to an end, he says, his daughter will be old. As a reader, I couldn't help but calculate precisely how old his young daughter would be in 2100 and I found myself struggling to imagine the bleak if not horrific environment in which this old woman, today a child, would find herself. In *The Uninhabitable Earth*, Wallace-Wells holds in tension the virtually certain experience of "climate suffering" in the too-near future (153) and "the ready optimism" that a child represents (135). Reading his book, I register the urgency of climate change today. As Wallace-Wells says elsewhere, "Climate change isn't a reason not to have kids. Kids are a reason to stop climate change" (Twitter, 20 December 2018, 10:40 am).

We might consider as well the altogether wise book on climate change by psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton. Writing after he had turned ninety, Lifton concludes his meditation on the affective twin threats to the human

[31] In his moving and intelligent memoir *My Father's Keeper: The Story of a Gay Son and His Aging Parents*, Jonathan Silin tells us he has come to understand that his parents, so absorbed by their incapacities and the demands of everyday life in their old age, are unable to attach themselves in meaningful ways to the past or the future, suggesting to me that psychic connections to the past and the future or, as I've called it, generational imagination, may very well be lost to us in periods of deep biological distress compounded by everyday stress. He writes, "Caring for my parents, I see what it is like to be locked in the moment, devoid of all connections backward or forward. They can only think from day to day, their calendar marked by visits to the various doctors and visits from other healthcare personnel …. They don't look forward …. The future is filled with anxiety" (27). Elsewhere he writes, "the unyielding demands of the body imprison my parents in the present" (50).

species of annihilation from nuclear war and climate change by invoking generational time – or what we might call generational attachment. I quote his last words, the inspiring last paragraph of his book:

> Why does this all matter to a ninety-year-old man who will not himself experience the worst climate disasters that might await our species? For me it is simply a matter of that larger human connectedness. Whatever our age, we are part of a bond much greater than ourselves, part of a flow of endless generations that include forbears as well as children and grandchildren. The bond is not only biological but is related to all we do and experience in the world. This principle of the great chain of being – and I speak as a secular person – takes on special importance as we approach the end of individual life. The human chain has never been more aware of the mind's capacity for attending to our species by renewing and enhancing our habitat. Of course it is very late in the game, but at the same time far from too late. (*The Climate Swerve: Reflections on Mind, Hope, and Survival*, 155–6)

I take his words as my own: whatever our age, we are part of a bond much greater than ourselves, part of a flow of endless generations that include forebears as well as children and grandchildren. But are we part of a flow of endless generations?

On the level of everyday life, closer to my own home, literally, I can point to one of my neighbours, a woman my age. She wakes up in the middle of the night fearing for her children (she has two) and grandchildren (she has three) because of the horrific prospects of climate change (she wants her son to move away from New York's coast). What is she doing besides worrying? She has campaigned for Jay Inslee, Washington State's governor and in 2019 a candidate for president of the United States; his primary political issue was climate change. (I contributed to his campaign.) It bothers me that Fran in *The Dark Flood Rises* isn't worrying for her daughter – and her daughter *studies* climate change. I find myself wishing she had a capacity for generational attachment.

Finally, I am convinced that it is completely unnecessary to fully comprehend the scale of geological time in order to wake up to the threat of climate change. In fact, the future could be said to be here, now, in embryo. As Ursula Heise writes in *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*, the very power of the concept of the word 'Anthropocene,' "resides not in its scientific definition of a geological epoch, but in its capacity to cast the present as a future that has already arrived" (67). As Roy Scranton astutely writes in his

book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, by which he means learning to accept that civilization as we know it will necessarily change, "*Everybody already knows*" (68). If we have associated climate change in the past with geological time, the *longue durée*, and small incremental differences, recent events – the floods, the cyclones, the earthquakes – have transformed our relationship to the time of climate change. The future has moved into the present. As Ghosh has written in *The Great Derangement*, "we have entered a time when the wild is the norm" (8).

A Final Portrait

Rhetorically, books on global warming, climate change, and the Anthropocene close on a note of hope. And interestingly, toward the very end of *The Dark Flood Rises*, Drabble offers a measure of hope to Fran, alleviating, at least for the moment, her anxieties about old ageing-to-death. The scene is a closing party reminiscent of those found in novels by Virginia Woolf, a reception following the memorial for Jo Drummond. Quite by accident Fran meets an old woman nearing ninety in the powder room. It turns out they had met before. Here is the final paragraph of this section of the novel:

> There is something extraordinarily gallant and moving about Betty, the survivor, the noble atheist of the left. She is nearing ninety, and yet she shines with an undiminished, with an increasing radiance …. Fran could not have said, will not be able to say, what it is that speaks to her through Betty Figueroa, who has travelled the oceans of the wide world and come home to Cambridge to rest. It is a light from another world, from another shore, from a distant mountain … for a while, sitting amidst the chatter and the crumbs and the growing debris with Betty, in the same haven, she is almost at peace. (313)

Whatever you may think about the prose of this passage (I find the tone overly sentimental), the import is clear: simply being with this lovely woman who is a generation older provides solace to Fran. Betty also represents for Fran an ideal old woman, a "self-contained, undemanding, fortifying" woman who has lived an adventurous and inspiring life and whose aura is magnetic and enigmatic (122). In this novel devoted to ageing, she embodies a good old age, having remained in good health and, so far at least, escaped what Shir Shimoni calls the 'temporal-normative framework' of ageing that has guided Fran's life as an older woman, ageing divided into young ageing and old ageing. She represents the ardent desire to live to an old age characterized by a long health span,

a large number of years when one is illness-free, avoiding the misery of being "incontinent, demented, and medicated into amnesia" (29).[32]

This is not the first time Drabble has deployed the narrative strategy of staging a meeting between women of different generations. Her novel *A Natural Curiosity*, published in 1989, also concludes by offering a positive model for older women. At its end, three middle-class white women in their mid-fifties set off to see an older woman, a woman of wealth and wit whom I imagine to be in her mid-seventies. Like *The Dark Flood Rises*, *A Natural Curiosity* is quite long and introduces us to a panoramic world of characters of many ages. It concludes by giving this older woman the closing paragraphs, the last word, the final line of the narrative, one that promises a meeting of generations in a mode of "pleasurable anticipation" (309). I take the ending of *A Natural Curiosity* as a warm invitation to women to invent ways of being older – positively – given the virtual absence of compelling models for older women at the time it was published. I also take the ending of the novel as an invitation to middle-aged women to take time with older women, developing a strong sense of generational time and establishing attachments across generations at the farther end of age. I am drawn to the idea of creating connections between generations in the service of modelling ageing in a positive vein for older women. In truth, to me it is more than an idea, it is an *ideal.*

But what are the implications for ageing – and future generations – in the epoch of the Anthropocene? As a thought experiment, we might ask an impolite question, drawing on the knowledge that Drabble was seventy-seven when *The Dark Flood Rises* was published (she was born in 1939). Can we imagine Drabble writing, twenty years from now, a novel that concludes with a near one-hundred year-old woman visiting a woman a generation older? The answer is assuredly no. If the longevity revolution has increased life expectancy for many over the course of the last century, climate change will take an enormous and sobering toll on what has come to seem for many a birthright – living into one's nineties and beyond. Life expectancy will diminish, perhaps plummet. Perhaps the human lifespan itself will shrink.[33] Thus as the human population

[32] Early in the novel Drabble offers her readers a glimpse of an ideal figure of an old man; he is indigenous to Lanzarote, tending a garden: "A stocky old man, naked, his broad back and shoulders towards them, was trundling a wheelbarrow full of weeds towards a small smoking bonfire. His back was the burned red brown of red clay, he was Adam, he was the first and last man in Paradise. The red sun was setting, tingeing his solid elderly ruddy flesh with its radiance" (56).

[33] The important distinction between life expectancy and the lifespan is often

grows more vulnerable in the epoch of the Anthropocene, one of the losses we may very well have to anticipate and bear is the loss of years as older adults – of age. In fact, life expectancy has recently decreased for the first time in the history of modern Britain. It has also decreased in the United States.[34] Today our challenge is not to invent role models of older women, as it was in great part twenty years ago. In the face of climate change, that seems trivial.[35] We need to turn our face to a future longer than that of our individual lives. I want to say to Fran: stop obsessing about ageing, there is work to do!

The Posthuman and Dieback

I return briefly to the immense frame of geological time. If we think about human life expectancy and the lifespan not in relation to previous and future generations but in relation to the cataclysmic cracking of the earth, the scale of human life expectancy and the lifespan shrinks even further in the epoch of the Anthropocene – not just literally in terms of the count of human years, but in terms of significance in the large order of the universe. The import of human life expectancy in Drabble's England is diminished as the measure of things in the enormity of the face and frame of the non-human. What this allows us to glimpse is that as age studies scholars we have understood the coming of old age – existentially and socially – as limned by historical conditions, with the historical implicitly conceptualized as the history of the human. As Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor write in *Anthropocene Reading*, "In the Anthropocene all scholars are called upon to become Earth system humanists, which involves thinking about how these systems interrelate with, internalize, and destabilize one another" (4).

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misunderstood. The human lifespan refers to the upper limit of years of life of the human species, generally understood to be 115 years. Life expectancy, on the other hand, is dependent upon many factors, including biological insults, such as serious disease and a toxic environment. Lewis and Maslin make this mistake when they observe that there has been "impressive recent progress in human lifespans" (369).

[34] Stephen Castle in *The New York Times.*

[35] Twenty years ago we did not have a capacious living archive of models of vital old women. What we did have – it was an auspicious moment historically – was a developing feminist consciousness of older women as a group, what I called in "Inventing Generational Models" a *generational consciousness* of older women. I argued then that we need to think beyond the Freudian familial model of two generations to three generations and that we needed ourselves to create models of old women attached to other generations, models that do not necessarily depend on identification. Here I am arguing that we think in terms of three to four generations (or more) but for another reason altogether – climate change.

For me *The Dark Flood Rises* opened up a space of reflection about climate change, attesting to the power of the literary imagination. The scholarly world, with its conferences and the editing of books, gave me deadlines to articulate my thoughts. I've attended scholarly colloquia and conferences about the Anthropocene and have read widely about climate change (unlike close reading, this is what I would call ordinary reading). But it was *The Dark Flood Rises* that led me to climate change through critical age studies and in the process disclosed to me – and I hope to others – a facet of how a posthuman age studies might begin to take shape. It led me to consider the relevance of the catastrophic event of forest dieback – recently in the news because of fires in the Amazon rain forest – to the possible future fate of the human species. Once a tipping point has been reached because of the consequences of climate change, a forest can self-destruct. That may well be the fate of the human species intertwined as we are with the lives and deaths of other species.

Envoi

I want to close on the last scene in *The Dark Flood Rises* that features Fran and is told from her point of view. We find her in her favoured middle-class hotel resolving to soldier on, to put one foot in front of the other, even as she registers her "despair" and "terminal loneliness" (320). The very last we see of her she is having dinner (curry and merlot), alone. This hotel and this meal: they offer her comfort. But we also see her taking a moment of pleasure in the grandmother with her four-year-old grandson at a table nearby. "It's a small moment," comments the narrator, reminding us of the stake we have in generational attachment, "but it will see her more cheerfully on her way, in the morning, to the unknown destination. Seeing it through, that's the best she can do" (323).[36] If this small moment doesn't rise to the level of solace, it does take her out of the sphere of her solitude. I like to think that perhaps, even at this late date, Francesca Stubbs is practising generational thinking, stretching her capacity to imagine generational time into the future.

[36] I commented earlier on my use of close reading as a methodology as well as what I call invitational reading and ordinary reading. Here, methodologically, I am mirroring the structure of the text as a way of giving my commentary form that takes inspiration from the art of the novel itself.

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