

**Reimagining Nature Writing: Trauma, Healing, and the Aesthetic of  
Relinquishment in Richard Powers' *Bewilderment* and  
Shelby Van Pelt's *Remarkably Bright Creatures***

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**Abstract**

Drawing upon Lawrence Buell's concept of the "aesthetic of relinquishment" (1995), this article examines the legacy of nature writing in Richard Powers' *Bewilderment* (2021) and Shelby Van Pelt's *Remarkably Bright Creatures* (2022). I position these contemporary fictions of sci-fi and magical realism within the narrative prose tradition and extend criticism of nature writing beyond the traditional autobiographical framework. My analysis reveals that three core elements of nature writing—natural history, spiritual autobiography and travel writing (Scheese, 2002)—form the foundation of the protagonists' journeys, particularly their processes of relinquishing material possessions and egocentric selves. In *Bewilderment*, the protagonist's trauma, ecological knowledge and engagement with Buddhist philosophy enable his gradual relinquishment of the egocentric self. Similarly, *Remarkably Bright Creatures* portrays a protagonist whose extended sense of self—fostered by her bond with Marcellus, a giant Pacific octopus—facilitates her emotional healing. Ultimately, I contend that both protagonists' transformations into ecocentric selves prompts actions which safeguard the natural world, thereby rendering the abstract concept of the "aesthetic of relinquishment" concrete. As a whole, my analysis underscores how contemporary narrative prose not only inherits but also reinvents the legacy of nature writing, illustrating its relevance to trauma, environmental consciousness and personal healing.

*Keywords:* ecocriticism, nature writing, Richard Powers, Shelby Van Pelt, contemporary American literature

In Lawrence Buell's seminal work, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), the author analyzes Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) as the epitome of nature writing. Through this examination, Buell (1995) posits Thoreau's profound

influence on the development of “green American thinking” (p. 2). Furthermore, Buell illustrates that nature writing serves as a foundational element in the emergence of ecocriticism—an ecological-oriented approach to literary studies and culture (Glotfelty, 1996). A central focus of Buell’s (1995) analysis lies in the “form” of nature writing as “carriers or agents of ecocentricity” (Buell, 1995, p. 143), and he achieves this by employing the concept of “the aesthetics of relinquishment” (Buell, 1995, p. 143), which encompasses two distinct forms of relinquishment: the material possession and the human’s egocentricity: a conviction of how the self exists independently from the nonhuman world (Buell, 1995, p. 144).

Indeed, the underlying theme of the “aesthetic of relinquishment” in nature writing faces limitations in its exclusivity within the nonfiction genre. To clarify, Buell exclusively privileges the nonfiction mode in nature writing, thereby restricting the possibilities for other narrative genres, including fiction itself, to capture “the aesthetic of relinquishment”. He asserts that environmental nonfiction “tends to deny itself some of the most basic aesthetic pleasures of homocentrism: plot, characterization, lyric pathos, dialogue, intersocial events and so on” (Buell, 1995, p. 168). For Buell, the fictional elements are inherently anthropocentric as they are the source of “aesthetic pleasure”. For example, in his analysis of *Walden*, Buell demonstrates how Thoreau employs the pronoun “I” as a narrator to represent himself, thereby rendering the narrator’s transformation of his “ecocentric” self more substantial and visible: “[T]his alteration signifies a process of relinquishment and that the vacillations should be interpreted as a meditation on the question of the appropriateness of self-assertion in a mode of existence” (Buell, 1995, p. 168). Buell’s discussions of the “I” narrator in nature writing indeed renders the impact of the narrator’s self-relinquishment more concrete by relying on the non-fiction element, using “I” to signify the narrator.

Nevertheless, Buell’s prioritization of nonfiction diminishes possibilities for other narrative genres including fiction itself to include the “form” of environmental-related themes like that of nonfiction. This gap provides the exigency for this research. I seek to extend “the aesthetic of relinquishment” in fictional prose in order to argue that the continuing legacy of the traditional “nature writing” lives on in narrative prose as well. Specifically, I aim to extend the tradition of “the aesthetic of relinquishment” to encompass narrative prose in fiction and I posit “the aesthetic of relinquishment” as a pivotal legacy of nature writing. In particular, I argue that this “aesthetic of relinquishment” is subtly embedded in contemporary American fiction, namely through sci-fi and magical realist narratives of healing in Richard Powers’ *Bewilderment* (2021), and Shelby Van Pelt’s *Remarkable Bright Creatures* (2022). As this research will discuss, the novels, despite being fictional prose, can still encapsulate the protagonists’ relinquishment of the material possession and ultimately, their egocentric self—

ultimately leading to their re-construction of the self and, in turn, the process of self-healing.

This article comprises five main sections. Firstly, I detail the theoretical framework informing my study, focusing on the three elements of nature writing (Scheese, 2002) and the “aesthetic of relinquishment” (Buell, 1995). Secondly, I identify existing gaps in existing criticism on the selected novels. Thirdly, I situate the texts within the historical and cultural context of the climate crisis, followed by a presentation of the research questions and main argument. Finally, I present my analysis of the novels as contemporary nature writing for ecological consciousness and emotional resilience.

### Theoretical Framework

Three foundational issues in nature writing orient my analysis of *Bewilderment* and *Remarkably Bright Creatures*: 1) The origins of nature writing, 2) Elements of nature writing, and 3) The aesthetic of relinquishment.

In his seminal work, *Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in America*, Don Scheese (2002) examines the origins of the narrative genre, illustrating how it is deeply ingrained in the concept of pastoralism. Through his analysis of landscape painting, Scheese (2002) illustrates that this landscape aesthetic establishes rigid dualisms, such as light versus dark, civilization versus wilderness and rural versus wild landscapes (p. 3). These oppositions, derived from human visual perceptions of the paintings, foreground nature writing; the visual perceptions of the paintings signifying a temporary retreat to the life of a shepherd from the time of Ancient Greece (Scheese, 2002, p. 4). The refuge in nature underscores the advantages of rural living over urban existence, Scheese contends. In this vein, Scheese postulates that “all nature writers are capable of discovering and celebrating wildness: the presence of nonhuman elements, whether geological, botanical, or zoological, despite the forces of modernity” (Scheese, 2002, p. 7). In particular, Scheese situates his analysis of “wildness” by distinguishing it from the human sphere which encompasses rural, urban and suburban spaces (Scheese, 2002, p. 7). Furthermore, the passage emphasizes the sociohistorical context of American history, where industrialization first emerged in the nineteenth century. Scheese (2002) thus focuses on how nature writing can be considered a “response to the industrial revolution” (p. 11). Essentially, he claims that the “*pastoral impulse*” of early American nature writers emerged from their aspirations to “celebrate a return to a simpler, more harmonious way of life ‘closer to nature’” (Scheese, 2002, p. 6) since the dawn of industrialization. Similar to Gifford (2020), Scheese’s notion of the “pastoral” accentuates the escapist element of pastoral as a reaction against the urban (p 2).

What is more, Scheese (2002) posits three components of nature writing: I) *natural history*, a scientific explanation of nature that aims to encapsulate its physicality; II) *spiritual autobiography*, a subjective experience with a place that

emphasizes spiritual growth<sup>1</sup>; and III) *travel writing*, which emphasizes exploration, discovery and movement from one place to another<sup>2</sup> (p. 6). Integrating these three parts, Scheese (2002) defines a form of nature writing as:

[A] first-person, nonfiction account of an exploration, both physical (outward) and mental (inward), of a predominantly human environment, as the protagonist follows the spatial movement of pastoralism from civilization to nature. (p. 6)

To elaborate, nature writing highlights not only descriptions of nature's physicality but also one's inward experience with a particular environment. The *spiritual autobiography* hints at the possibility for a human to re-construct one's sense of self after *traveling* and being immersed in nature.

It is noteworthy that this spiritual transformation is what Buell (1995) observes as the "aesthetic of relinquishment". Here, he discusses two forms of relinquishment and how they shape American environmental writers. The first level is the material: "relinquishment of goods, of material trophies" (Buell, 1995, p. 144). The other more profound level of relinquishment is "to give up individual autonomy itself, to forgo the illusion of mental and even bodily apartness from one's environment" (Buell, 1995, p. 144). Buell (1995) concludes these two forms of relinquishment, in turn, contribute to "the possibility of a more ecocentric state of being" (p. 145). Essentially, this self-transformation signifies the legacy of nature writing which lives on, even in fictional narrative. Therefore, Scheese's and Buell's notions of nature writing—which privilege nonfiction—can be extended to include fictional prose as well<sup>3</sup>.

To properly situate Buell's concept of the "aesthetic of relinquishment" as a framework to analyze the primary texts, its origin and contemporary relevance must be clarified. Initially, the "aesthetic of relinquishment" was developed in the 1990s, a time when environmental thought was influenced by postmodern skepticism toward "the grand narrative" of human progress (see Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiii). In this context, early ecocriticism, including Buell's work, aims to

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<sup>1</sup> According to Geaves (2006), "spirituality" involves "a deep connection with the sacred, marked by intense emotional experiences such as unity, joy, loss, gratitude, and altered states of consciousness achieved through prayer, meditation, reflection, or remembrance" (p. 98). This definition highlights how individuals forge a profound bond with the sacred, which often leads to a humbler view of the self, recognizing its relative insignificance.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson (2011) argues that travel writing can be defined as "the negotiation between self and other that is brought about by movement in space" (p. 9). In other words, a travel in space can induce one's transformation in sense of self.

<sup>3</sup> Some literary scholars have probed into the blurred boundary between fiction and nonfiction, arguing there are some fictional elements even in nonfiction narrative (Heyne 1987, 2001; Roorda 1997). Patrick D. Murphy (2000), among others, argues that there is "the nonfictional prejudice" that, in the process, diminishes a fictional prose (p. 22): "[Such prejudice] also arises from the idea that fiction somehow is incapable of conveying facts and real experience" (Murphy, 2000, p. 27).

challenge human supremacy in response to an early awareness of climate change. However, given the contemporary ecological crisis—marked by the climate emergency and mass extinction among others—the ethical implications of “relinquishment” have also changed. Instead of signifying a quiet retreat into nature as it might have in the 1990s, “relinquishment” in the contemporary context signals an ethical stance: a rethinking of human agency, interdependence and ecological responsibility. This article approaches Buell’s “aesthetic of relinquishment” under this evolving framework to highlight how the notion is reimagined as a response to the contemporary ecological impediments.

### Literature Review

To discuss existing criticism of Powers’ novels, scholars have examined them from diverse perspectives. One article that encapsulates themes in Powers’ works is Kathryn Hume’s “Moral Problematics in the Novels of Richard Powers” (2013). Probing into a pattern shared among Powers’ fictions, Hume argues that there is one opposing force at play. One is the theme of observing the world to appreciate interconnections in science and nature. (Hume, 2013, p. 1). The other is a tendency for the plot to emphasize helping out people in need (Hume, 2013, p. 1). In balancing these two aspects, Hume (2013) argues that Powers’ novels signify a possibility “to free ourselves from our consumerist-oriented patterns”—pointing to the novels’ ethical potential to improve the world (p. 1). Hume (2013) then summarizes the recurring themes among his fictions such as technology, memory, “the mutual inter-development of humans and computers; the posthuman; nonlinear science; the nature of imagination and consciousness; the value of literature” (p. 2). Hume’s article then gives an overview of Powers’ themes that mostly are scientific-environmental oriented.

Apart from the emphasis on the theme of science, scholars are also intrigued by Powers’ portrayal of the relationship between human and the environment. In Powers’ interview with Bradford Morrow (Morrow & Powers, 2018), the writer reveals his deep interest in trees—the inspiration for him to write *The Overstory* (2018). Powers (2018) explained how he appreciated walking in the forest to see trees, one that cannot be just experienced through photos or films (p. 54). He also explained his witness of the shaved mountain for urbanization and became interested in the connection between uncut trees and history (Powers, 2018, p. 55). Power’s interview then discloses his source of inspiration for his environmental fiction.

Taking an ecocritical approach, Marco Caracciolo (2020) scrutinizes the use of “we” in Powers’ *The Over Story* (2018). Caracciolo interprets “we” to include “nonhuman assemblages (animals, plants, material objects, etc.)” (p. 86). He posits how the “human I” promotes human exceptionalism and argues that “this anti-anthropocentric call should also be heeded in narratological approaches to social groups in narrative” (Powers, 2018, p. 86). To differentiate Caracciolo’s

approach of “we” from Buell’s analysis of “I” in nonfiction narrative, it should be noted that Caracciolo’s emphasis on “we” applies to the context of fictional narrative, whereas Buell’s discussion of the “aesthetic of relinquishment” focuses on the use of “I” in nonfiction to convey an authentic persona. Thus, Caracciolo’s “we-narrative” does not contradict Buell’s analysis of “I” in nonfiction.

Despite these advances, existing criticism of Powers’ *Bewilderment* (2021) is still an uncharted one. A book review by Narayana and Dasai (2022) argues that the novel “focuses on the impact of environmental crisis on children” (p. 131). They also add the novel deploys the planetary ecological crisis through human inability to cope with climate crisis, “dwelling upon the toll it takes on the minds of the young as they encounter the severity of climate apocalypse” (Narayana & Dasai, 2022, p. 132). This book review thus focuses on the novel’s depiction of the climate crisis through the younger generation by promoting the idea of human experience in wilderness.

On the other hand, there has yet to be published scholarly criticism of Shelby Van Pelt’s *Remarkably Bright Creatures* (2022). Comprehensive searches in major academic databases in humanities such as JSTOR and Taylor & Francis have yielded no results, indicating an important limitation in contemporary criticism.

Seeking to mend the current gaps in ecocriticism—in particular, the conception of nature writing, I analyze Powers’ *Bewilderment* (2021) and Van Pelt’s *Remarkably Bright Creatures* (2022) from an ecocritical perspective—particularly the shift of narrative form in nature writing. In doing so, I hope to extend the existing scholarly conception of nature writing in prose fiction to lay bare the “aesthetic of relinquishment” in contemporary American literature.

### Significance of the Texts

I begin my analysis of the novel by contextualizing my interpretation within contemporary concerns over the climate crisis<sup>4</sup> and how these concerns are taken up in *Bewilderment* (2021) and *Remarkably Bright Creatures* (2022).

Climate change, driven largely by greenhouse gas emissions—with the U.S. being a major contributor (Horwitz, 2004)—has become a central concern in public discourse. Recent terminology such as “global boiling” (Thomas, 2023) underscores the intensifying urgency for a resolution. Alongside environmental degradation, scholars have identified the rise of “ecoanxiety<sup>5</sup>”, a psychological response to ecological crisis that now finds expression in literature (Thomas, 2023, p. 797).

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<sup>4</sup> This climate crisis induced by globally green gas emissions leading to the incalculable fluctuation of the world’s temperature (Bee, 2007, p. 17).

<sup>5</sup> Clayton and Karazsia (2020) define ecoanxiety as “a chronic fear of environmental doom” (p. 29)

Engaging these concerns, ecocritics such as Adam Trexler (2013) have noted that climate change has become a significant subject in contemporary fiction, giving rise to a growing body of climate-oriented literature (p. 222). Both Powers' and Van Pelt's novels emerge from current anxieties over climate degradation; writers embed ecological issues into their plots and characters.

Notably, *Bewilderment* and *Remarkably Bright Creatures* reflect a transformation in American nature writing. They incorporate the three classical elements defined by Scheese (2002): scientific observation (natural history), reflective personal experience (spiritual autobiography) and interior as well as exterior journeys (travel writing). These elements shape the characters' evolving relationships with the nonhuman world.

Collectively, both novels focus on trauma and healing. Their protagonists undergo a process of emotional restoration through relinquishment—letting go of anthropocentric worldviews to embrace more ecocentric identities. Despite their generic differences, these shared themes and contexts position both texts as contemporary reinterpretations of nature writing.

### Research Questions and Main Argument

To bridge the gap between nonfictional nature writing and fictional prose, my research questions include:

- 1) How do the selected novels portray the three key elements of nature writing in the narratives?
- 2) How do the texts depict the characters' two levels of relinquishment and their healing process?
- 3) How does the characters' relinquishment of their isolated egocentric self ultimately lead to their healing self?

Drawing on Lawrence Buell's concept of the "*aesthetic of relinquishment*" (1995), this article explores how *Bewilderment* and *Remarkably Bright Creatures* extend the legacy of American nature writing into new narrative genres—science fiction and magical realism. Both works incorporate Scheese's (2002) elements of *natural history*, *spiritual autobiography* and *travel writing* to depict characters who move from trauma toward healing. In *Bewilderment*, the protagonist's grief, ecological awareness and Buddhist influences foster his gradual relinquishment of control and materialism. In *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, the protagonist's bond with Marcellus the octopus induces emotional healing and environmental sensitivity. Both characters' transformations reflect a shift from an egocentric to ecocentric self. Ultimately, this research highlights how contemporary fiction reimagines nature writing to engage with current ecological crises, demonstrating literature's role in fostering ecological consciousness and emotional resilience.

### Textual Analysis

This section is divided into three subsections. Firstly, I begin by exploring how Powers' *Bewilderment* and Van Pelt's *Remarkably Bright Creatures* embody the three core elements of nature writing defined by Scheese (2002)—natural history, spiritual autobiography and travel writing—which underscore their connection to the genre's tradition. The second subsection focuses on how these elements ground the protagonists' journeys, as their relinquishment of material attachments and egocentric selves becomes a crucial step in their healing process. Finally, the analysis demonstrates how the protagonists' healing leads to tangible actions, illustrating the practical impact of their transformation.

### Elements of Nature Writing in Contemporary Narratives

This first section examines the three elements of nature writing in *Bewilderment* and *Remarkably Bright Creatures*. My analysis suggests that both novels retain the core components of nature writing while incorporating other narrative genres, namely science fiction and magical realism. In *Bewilderment*, Powers integrates the three elements of nature writing with “cognitive estrangement<sup>6</sup>” (Suvin, 1988)—a foundational part of a sci-fi narrative. This amalgamation harmonizes the nature/culture binary opposition as well as the secular and the spiritual, encapsulated in the novel's emphasis on scientific knowledge and Buddhism. Similarly, in *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, Van Pelt (2022) employs magical realism to anthropomorphize Marcellus, an octopus endowed with the intellectual capacity to understand human language and thoughts. Van Pelt's use of magical realism complicates the human/nonhuman dichotomy by uniting the mundane and the fantastic. Therefore, the traces of nature writing in these contemporary narratives highlights the genre's enduring legacy. It demonstrates that nature writing as a genre is able to transcend traditional boundaries and extend beyond nonfiction.

Indeed, Power's *Bewilderment* combines nature writing with sci-fi elements. Firstly, the sci-fi narrative aligns very well with the first component of nature writing: natural history—scientific description of nature. Theo, an astrobiologist, usually takes a trip with his son, Robin, to a forest where he explains the physical description of the flora and fauna: “Six different kinds of

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<sup>6</sup> In his seminal work “Darko Suvin's Science Fiction” (1988), Suvin posits that sci-fi narratives are centered around the interplay between “estrangement” and “cognition.” He defines sci-fi as a literary genre characterized by the presence and interaction of these two elements. Sci-fi's primary device is an imaginative framework that serves as an alternative to the author's empirical environment. Suvin distinguishes between “estrangement” (non-existent elements in the real world) and “cognition” (physical reality). He emphasizes the necessity of the co-presence of these two elements in sci-fi narratives. In Powers' *Bewilderment*, sci-fi elements are integral to the narrative, particularly through the depiction of a contemporary era where advanced technology enables the creation of a simulation—based on bio-astrological research—of intergalactic space adventure. “estrang[es]” the reader from the physical reality.

forest all around us. Seventeen hundred flowering plants. More tree species than in all of Europe” (Powers, 2021, p. 21). Among others, this scene demonstrates how the scientific description of nature—natural history—underlies this novel’s narrative. The passage simultaneously points to Theo’s attentiveness to nature through his observant skill and keen interest on the environment.

Moreover, it is important to note that the element of natural history in *Bewilderment* serves a purpose beyond mere physical description as the novel highlights the evolving ecologies across various planets. To elaborate, Powers’ reference to species diversity across forests galvanizes the reader to understand biodiversity through the characters’ intergalactic journey. The protagonists’ encounters with these profound ecological transformations thus reveals how flora and fauna are intertwined with the human characters’ psychological development. In this light, the natural history in *Bewilderment* is not simply atmospheric. Rather, such interplanetary natural history aligns with the protagonists’ development of ecological awareness and sense of interdependence, highlighting the correspondence between the narrative form and environmental theme.

In addition, spiritual autobiography, one’s subjective/aestheticized experience with the environment, is also embedded in *Bewilderment*. For example, Theo describes his experience when coming into contact with a stream in a forest: “Wedged into a new scoop of rocks, I inhaled the percolating foam—all the negative ions broken by the churn of air and water. The play of sensation elated me: the frothed-up air, the biting current [...]” (Powers, 2021, p. 23) In this excerpt, Powers emphasizes Theo’s personal connection with the environment, as manifested in the characters’ aestheticized olfactory and tactile perceptions of the air and water. This sensory experience then brings him a sense of tranquility. The inclusion of the “spiritual autobiographical” element in this fiction implies that nature transcends its physicality; it infiltrates and, in the process, impacts Theo’s psyche. This spirituality thus serves as a pivotal aspect of Theo’s development of an ecocentric self.

The last element of nature writing that appears in *Bewilderment* is that of travel writing. The novel portrays Theo’s and his son’s virtual intergalactic journey to learn about the possibility of other planets’ flora and fauna including their living organisms. The journey is not only just the physical commuting from one place to another. Rather, it paves the way for a spiritual journey, enabled by the action and experience of the trip. For Theo, this intergalactic journey allows him to learn more about the human place in the world because he comes to realize that the organisms on other planets share an essential quality with humans. He points out, “[The research] would simply answer the thing we humans had been asking since we came down from the trees: Was the mind of God inclined toward life, or did we Earthlings have no business being here?” (Powers, 2021, p. 203). Theo’s quest to seek the answer to this scientific curiosity then can thus be seen as a borrowing of convention from the travel writing trope. Exactly how this travel

writing element plays a crucial role in the characters' epiphany will be examined in the next section.

On the other hand, in *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, the narrative combines *magical realism*<sup>7</sup> with three components of nature writing; all of which cohere to underscore the protagonist's healing process. In particular, the element of natural history is embedded in the scientific description of Marcellus, a giant octopus who lives in an aquarium<sup>8</sup>. A description of the octopus is engraved on a metal plate to yield scientific information. As the octopus itself observes, "The plaque states other facts: my size, preferred diet, and where I might live were I not a prisoner here. It mentions my intellectual prowess and penchant for cleverness" (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 1). The inclusion of natural history or a scientific account of the nonhuman world here is deployed to critique the human conception of the nonhuman as scientific data. The first-person point of view, that of the octopus, thus suggests that the scientific account alone is not sufficient to yield an accurate representation of the nonhuman being.

Additionally, the representation of Marcellus as an intelligent being reflects the concept of species evolution, derived from the concept of natural history in nature writing. By endowing this nonhuman character with human-like cognitive capability, the novel thus encourages the reader to empathize with the nonhuman being through Marcellus' inner thoughts, monologue and interactions with the human characters. In this sense, the natural history functions not merely as a physical description of the octopus but also as a means of instilling into the reader emotional engagement with the nonhuman being.

Similar to Powers, Van Pelt borrows "spiritual autobiography" from nature writing to capture the protagonist's relinquishment of her egocentric self, initially enabled by her encounter with Marcellus. This beginning of the protagonist's healing process also expands on the notion of natural history, which accentuates the physical aspect of the nonhuman world. For instance, Tova, the protagonist, explains how she perceives Marcellus as actually comprehending human language when she talks about her late brother: "Not that she doesn't always say hello to the creatures here, as fond of them as she is, but this is different. This is *talking*. But, good heavens, if it doesn't feel like the creature is actually *listening*" (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 63). The focus on Tova's ability to discern Marcellus as "listening" to her indicates her defamiliarized perception of the

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<sup>7</sup> *Magical realism* is the combination between the mundane and the fantastical elements without really demarcating the two worlds (Warnes, 2009). This narrative genre was deployed in postcolonial narrative to avoid censorship and at the same time critique the colonization. By extension, the subversive nature of magical realism then can be used to challenge the human-oriented approach to the environment as well.

<sup>8</sup> The novel challenges the anthropocentric notion of the aquarium setting by depicting Marcellus' criticism of humans. While the author does not rigidly defy the human/nonhuman dichotomy, Van Pelt (2022) later portrays the octopus' development to bond with the protagonist, resolving this conflict.

being as human-like in its ability to talk and listen to discourse. The similarity between the human/nonhuman attributes becomes a foundation for her to develop an ecocentric self, ultimately inducing her to make peace with her trauma. This spiritual autobiographical approach to the representation of the nonhuman other serves as one of the core elements in Van Pelt's fictional prose.

Moreover, Van Pelt also deploys the trope of travel writing to capture Tova's exterior and interior journey to self-healing. Tova, an old, retired woman, decides to work in an aquarium as a janitor to distract herself from the memory of her late husband and son. This decision alone is a significant steppingstone for Tova's healing process; it enables her to come into contact with Marcellus. The beginning of her new job then can be read as an aspect of travel writing; it resembles a physical journey.

It is worth noting that while Tova's commute to the aquarium might not conform to conventional notions of travel in the traditional sense, her "travel" matches a broader sense of what travel represents in travel writing. Travel represents one's transformation through spatial and emotional changes. According to Scheese (2002), the travel writing element in nature writing includes both the physical and inward journey. Similarly, Thompson (2011) defines travel writing as narratives constructed by "movement through space" (p. 9), which can profoundly affect one's identity. In this sense, Tova's regular movement from home to the aquarium reflects a constant "movement" that eventually stirs her emotions. In other words, her encounter with Marcellus induces her introspection, thereby reflecting a type of travel, one which simultaneously paves the way for a spatial and spiritual journey.

In sum, both Powers and Van Pelt integrate elements in nature writing into their contemporary fictions by incorporating sci-fi and magical realism. The similarities and differences shared between the two narratives evidently highlight the presence and influence of the legacy of nature writing, blurring the demarcation between fiction and nonfiction.

### ***Relinquishment and the Healing Process***

Seeing that the elements of nature writing are ingrained in *Bewilderment* and *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, in this section, I contend that the presence of the nature writing trope in the two novels becomes a solid foundation for the novels' portrayal of "the aesthetic of relinquishment" (Buell, 1995), encapsulated in the characters' healing process. Buell posits that nature writing captures two levels of relinquishment: the material and the egocentric self. Focusing on Theo, a widowed astrobiologist coping with the loss of his wife and a single father raising a nine-year-old son named Robin, I argue that the narrative encapsulates Theo's two levels of relinquishment through his frequent excursions to the forest. The excursion is motivated by his trauma, knowledge of science and Buddhism. Furthermore, I argue that Theo's more profound level of relinquishment is

depicted in his extended self, one which galvanizes him to perceive Aly's memory in the physical environment and his self-perception as "*Earthling*". All of which pave the way for his healing process.

Relatedly, I show that *Remarkably Bright Creatures* portrays material relinquishment through Tova's decision to sell her house. The second level of relinquishment is represented in Tova's extended self, one which embraces Marcellus, the octopus. This is demonstrated in her profound empathy for the octopus as a sentient being, which ultimately prompts her healing process. Reflecting magical realism, the novel shows that Marcellus also relinquishes its egocentric self, which consequently enables it to cede its pride; it is thus able to embrace Tova. The aesthetic of relinquishment in this novel then does not simply reinforce the human/nonhuman dualism. Rather, Marcellus' acceptance of Tova points to the dissolution of bifurcation, as evidenced in the interspecies bonding.

Specifically, in *Bewilderment*, understanding how Theo's retreat to the forest represents a form of material relinquishment to stimulate his healing process requires examining three key aspects of his background: his trauma of losing his wife, his scientific and ecological knowledge, and his understanding of the Buddhist concept of "The Four Immeasurables<sup>9</sup>," or the *brahmavihārā*.

Theo's trauma of losing his wife is deeply tied to the forest he often visits with his son. The memory of her death in a car crash continues to haunt him and, because they frequently traveled together in the forest, his recollections of her are closely linked to the natural world. During a trip with Robin, his wife's presence resurfaces vividly: "I smelled the trees respiring and heard the river where Alyssa and I first swam together, polishing its boulders even in darkness" (Powers, 2021, p. 34). This passage illustrates how the natural sounds and images of the river abruptly remind Theo of Alyssa. Furthermore, Theo struggles with the challenges of raising his son, who has Asperger, as a single parent. Reflecting on his difficulties, he admits, "[w]ithout her, [he] was flailing" (Powers, 2021, p. 34). These reflections reveal the enduring impact of Aly's absence on Theo's emotional state and his relationship with the natural world.

Nevertheless, Alyssa's passion for ecology and deep connection to nature inspire Theo's return to the forest. During her lifetime, Aly worked as a legislator advocating nonhuman rights (Powers, 2021, p. 154). She presented factual evidence about the "total animals killed in statewide" and the "effects of lost animals on ravaged ecosystems" (Powers, 2021, p. 63). Theo elaborates on her efforts:

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<sup>9</sup> Gomez (1978) explains this notion as being composed of "benevolence, compassion, gladness, and equanimity" (p. 40). This notion encompasses not only fellow humans but also that of the nonhuman to be treated in the same light. This particular Buddhist teaching is thus aligned with the notion of ecology that focuses on the harmonious relationship among beings as well.

[Aly] said how this bill would restore tradition and dignity to hunting. She said how ninety-eight percent weight of animals left on Earth were either Homo sapiens or their industrially harvested food. Only two percent were wild. Didn't the few wild things left need a little break? (Powers, 2021, p. 64)

Aly's argument reflects her deep ecological awareness and highlights the dire state of nonhuman populations. Her advocacy for nonhuman rights not only underscores her commitment to environmental well-being but also influences Theo's and Robin's environmental sensibilities. Through their excursions into the forest, Theo and Robin carry forward Aly's legacy, further deepening their connection to nature.

Another aspect that shapes Theo's relationship with nature is his wife's belief in Buddhism, particularly her emphasis on "The Four Immeasurables." In one scene, Theo and Robin encounter a bird struggling to fly, prompting them to pray together: "May all sentient beings... [...] *be free from needless suffering*" (Powers, 2021, p. 28). Theo explains this teaching to Robin, saying, "There are four good things worth practicing. Being kind toward everything alive. Staying level and steady. Feeling happy for any creature anywhere that is happy" (Powers, 2021, p. 28). This Buddhist principle expands empathy to include nonhuman beings, aligning closely with Aly's advocacy of nonhuman rights. As Gomez (1978) notes in "Karunabhavana: Notes on the Meaning of Buddhist Compassion," true happiness is "not self-oriented," and "the weal of others is also accepted as an important consideration" (p. 40). Aly's Buddhist teachings inspire Theo to adopt a compassionate worldview, reinforcing his sensitivity to the interconnectedness of all living beings.

By examining Theo's trauma, ecological knowledge and Buddhist principles, it becomes clear how these elements enable him to bond with the physical environment. Together, they foreground his relinquishment of material possessions as he finds refuge in nature during his healing process. One scene in which Theo recalls a cherished memory of his wife shows his transformation:

I drove to the other trailhead [...] The one my wife and I had hiked on our honeymoon a decade before that. I'd seduced her, as we walked, with stories of the thousands of exoplanets popping up all over, where there had been none for all of human history. (Powers, 2021, p. 307)

Here, Theo's memory shifts from emphasizing trauma to cherishing how the discovery of the nonhuman world, such as exoplanets, brought him and Alyssa closer. Additionally, the fact that the absence of "human history" bonds Theo and Aly together emphasizes the role of the environment in uniting them. The intertwining of memory and the environment here serves to strengthen the

character's attachment to nature, transforming nature into a sanctuary for his grief. Most significantly, Theo's temporary retreats from home to the forest signify the beginning of his relinquishment, reflecting his "pastoral impulse" (Scheese, 2002). These excursions become a crucial part in Theo's healing process.

This motif of retreat also echoes Thoreau's practice in *Walden* (Thoreau, 2008), where he sought refuge in the woods to discover the meaning of life. Powers directly alludes to a passage in Thoreau's *Walden* when depicting Theo's belief, "The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels" (Thoreau, 2008, as cited in Powers, 2021, p. 116). Thoreau's reference here suggests that exterior and interior journeys are interconnected. It also demonstrates that Theo's trips to the forest are both physical and spiritual.

Ultimately, Theo's retreats symbolize more than physical escapes. They represent his material relinquishment and, most importantly, a transformative journey toward healing and self-discovery. Much like Thoreau's retreat in *Walden*, Theo's excursions reflect a "pastoral impulse" to reconnect with nature and embrace its simplicity. Through this process, he reconciles with his grief and gains a deeper understanding of his place in the natural world.

Apart from the material relinquishment, the novel portrays Theo's second level of self-relinquishment—closely intertwined with the first—through his recognition of his wife's continued presence in nature. For example, when his son asks about his late mother's whereabouts, Theo explains: "[Aly] went back into the system. She became other creatures. All the good things in her came into us. Now we keep her alive, with whatever we can remember" (Powers, 2021, p. 67). This response reveals Theo's ecological perspective. He views Aly as becoming part of the natural cycle and existing through "other creatures." It also highlights Aly's legacy, as her ecological knowledge is passed on to Theo. More significantly, this cyclical view of human life as interconnected with nature reflects how Theo begins to see himself as one with ecology.

Likewise, in *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, Tova's journey of healing is symbolized by her material relinquishment, culminating in her decision to sell her house. Similar to *Bewilderment*, letting go reflects Tova's emotional transformation, shaped by the unresolved trauma of losing her son, her heightened sensitivity to the nonhuman world—particularly through her bond with Marcellus, the giant Pacific octopus—and the communal support she finds in the Knit-Wit Club. To fully understand Tova's material relinquishment and hence healing process, we must first examine the factors that contribute to it.

The first factor underpinning Tova's material relinquishment is her unresolved grief over losing her son, Erik, who drowned at sea. The inability to recover his body left her without closure, and her grief remains deeply tied to the sea. A poignant moment illustrates this connection when, after work, Tova

reflects on Erik: “Moonlight shimmies across the water, a thousand candles bobbing on its surface. Tova closes her eyes, imagining him underneath the surface, holding the candles for her. Erik. Her only child” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 11). Here, the sea symbolizes both pain and yearning for connection. Despite the persistent sorrow, Tova finds solace in her work at the aquarium, which becomes a refuge from her loneliness. Her dedication is captured in the routine of maintaining the space: “Each night, she mops the floors, wipes down the glass, and empties the trash bins” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 4). This routine, though contrasting with the emptiness she feels after work, highlights how her trauma in turn fosters a heightened sensitivity to the physical surroundings through the daily routine at work.

It is worth noting that Tova’s night shift then leads to her connection with the nonhuman being, serving as a pivotal element in Tova’s healing and her eventual ability to relinquish material possessions. Her attentiveness is evident in her habit of addressing the aquarium’s inhabitants: “Half-dazed, she finishes the evening’s tasks, then makes her usual last round of the building to say good night. *Good night, bluegills, eels [...] Good night, sharks, you poor things*” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 9). This daily practice reflects her empathy and deepening bond with the nonhuman world, particularly with Marcellus. Their relationship begins when she discovers the octopus outside its tank and gently reassures him: “‘My friend,’ she says softly. ‘I’m going to reach around you. [...] I won’t hurt you, dear’” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 8). Referring to Marcellus as her “friend” underscores her recognition of him as a fellow being. The vivid description of their interaction foreshadows the emotional depth of their bond through Tova’s defamiliarized tactile perception of the octopus’ “arms” in lieu of “tentacles”: “In seconds, it winds around her forearm, then twists around her elbow and bicep like a maypole ribbon. She can feel each individual sucker clinging to her” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 8). Evidently, the human and nonhuman have become connected.

Another essential factor contributing to Tova’s transformation is the support she finds in the Knit-Wit Club, which represents female camaraderie and the significance of community. Initially formed as a knitting group, the club evolved into “a refuge for [the members] to escape empty homes, bittersweet voids left by children grown and moved on” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 18). This description bespeaks the group’s role in fostering emotional connections, symbolized by the act of “knitting” or tying together. Tova acknowledges the group’s importance in her life, admitting, “Going to Knit-Wits is a well-worn habit” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 125). This sense of routine reflects how the club becomes one of the cornerstones of her healing journey, complementing her material relinquishment.

Ultimately, Tova’s decision to let go of her material possessions is shaped by her trauma, her sensitivity to the nonhuman and the Knit-Wit Club’s support. Initially, she was hesitant about selling her house as a practical step toward

moving into a nursing village where she can receive care (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 128). However, her strengthened bonds with both the nonhuman world and her community empower her to make the leap. In the latter part of the novel, Tova firmly resolves to sell the house, even as she bids it farewell. While reflecting in her kitchen, she observes: “Its lacquered top gleams, avocado green against the black coils, polished last night. Spotless. Could it possibly matter? It will almost certainly be ripped out” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 341). This moment signifies her acceptance of impermanence and readiness to start anew. Notably, the first people Tova contacts after this decision are her Knit-Wit friends, Janey and Barbara, who offer her a temporary place to stay (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 342). This gesture demonstrates how her friends have become her chosen family, underscoring the importance of communal bonds in her transformation.

Apart from the portrayal of Tova’s material relinquishment, the novel also captures the protagonist’s deeper level of relinquishment of the human isolated self. That is, Tova gradually embraces an extended self that encompasses both Marcellus and her community. During Marcellus’ final days, Tova’s fear of losing the nonhuman fellow reflects the depth of their bond. She wonders: “How long does she remain in this state of unmitigated grief? [...] ‘What am I going to do without [Marcellus]?’” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 332). This sorrow underscores her shift from isolation to interdependence. Her inclusive sense of self is further illustrated in her farewell to Marcellus, whom she releases back to the sea: “It’s unfair that you spent your life in a tank. [...] We must say goodbye, friend” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 333). Her deepened empathy—demonstrated by her ability to put herself in Marcellus’ shoes—affirms Tova’s more profound level of relinquishment: She frees herself from an isolated, egocentric existence to embrace an ecocentric self instead.

All in all, my analysis of *Bewilderment* and *Remarkably Bright Creatures* reveals that both novels embody the two levels of relinquishment foundational to traditional American nature writing. Since Thoreau’s *Walden*, the enduring legacy of the nature writing tradition continues to evolve, as demonstrated through the blending of sci-fi and magical realism elements in *Bewilderment* and *Remarkably Bright Creatures*. Most importantly, the protagonists’ journeys highlight how their acts of relinquishment are deeply intertwined with their healing processes, emphasizing the transformative power of one’s development of an ecocentric self.

### ***The Healing Self***

In this section, I explore how the protagonists’ relinquishment of material possessions and their egocentric selves enables them to come to terms with their trauma. Their transformation into ecologically-oriented individuals further motivates them to give back to the environment, signifying a deeper connection between people and the nonhuman world.

In *Bewilderment*, Theo's concept of an "extended self" drives his ecological awareness and inspires him to protect the environment. This is exemplified in the scene where Theo and his son encounter a stream disrupted by human-made cairns. Explaining their destructive impact, Theo remarks: "[The cairns] destroy homes of everything in the river. Imagine creatures from another world materializing in our airspace and tearing up our neighborhoods, again and again. [...] We demolished the towers within our reach" (Powers, 2021, p. 312). This moment demonstrates Theo's empathy and ability to imagine the world from the perspective of nonhuman creatures. His actions reflect a mindset rooted in an ecological worldview, where he and his son are inseparable from the natural world.

Ultimately, such a shift from an egocentric to an ecocentric self enables Theo to reconcile with his grief and move toward healing. In the final scene of the novel, Theo's inclusive sense of self allows him to cope with the loss of his son. Seeing how Robin resembles Aly through Theo's dream, Theo reflects: "The universe is a living thing. [...] Oh, this planet was a good one. And we, too, were good, as good as the burn of the sun and the rain's sting and the smell of living soil" (Powers, 2021, p. 326). Here, Theo's perception of the universe as a sentient entity signifies a spiritual awakening. By equating human life with the natural elements—"the burn of the sun," "the rain's sting" and "the smell of living soil"—Theo embraces his interconnectedness with the natural world. This epiphany diminishes his egocentric self, laying the foundation for his emotional healing and reconciliation with loss.

In *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, Tova's healing journey parallels Theo's, particularly through her relationship with Marcellus, the octopus. Her bond with him enables her to confront her grief over her son's death, which occurred at the same Sowell Bay where he drowned. In a pivotal scene, Tova releases Marcellus back into the sea, reflecting: "For a moment that seems extended in time [...] Just as she's about to be pulled down with him, he releases, and lands with a heavy splash in the night-black water" (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 334). This act of letting go is both literal and symbolic. Releasing Marcellus not only signifies Tova's farewell to her dear friend but also her acceptance of Erik's loss. The act allows her to move forward with her life. Later, when her grandson asks how she managed to recover, Tova responds: "You don't recover. Not all the way. But you do move on. You have to" (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 346). This acknowledgment underscores Tova's ability to make peace with her trauma since she can now press on.

Finally, Tova's healing is further reflected in her decision to honor Marcellus by educating others about the sea and its creatures. Alongside her "hefty donation" (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 354) to the aquarium, Tova volunteers to share her knowledge, "passing out pamphlets and standing in front of the giant Pacific octopus tank, helping visitors understand the creature" (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 354). Her actions exemplify her extended sense of self, one that connects her to

both the natural world and her community. Through her efforts, Tova ensures that her ecological awareness and newfound purpose will leave a lasting impact on others, solidifying her transformation from a traumatized individual to an educator.

### **Conclusion**

As a whole, my analysis has demonstrated how Powers' *Bewilderment* (2021) and Van Pelt's *Remarkably Bright Creatures* (2022) retain key elements of nature writing (Scheese, 2002) through their portrayal of what Buell (1995) describes as the "aesthetic of relinquishment".

Ultimately, my analysis posits that traditional American nature writing continues to influence contemporary narrative prose. The enduring legacy of the genre is evident in contemporary literature such as *Bewilderment* and *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, which reflect a creative fusing of sci-fi and magical realism. Altogether, the analysis underscores that one's relationship with the environment can serve as a steppingstone for personal transformation, fostering a healing process that extends outward to influence one's treatment of the natural world. In this way, the physical impact on the environment makes concrete the otherwise abstract concept of the "aesthetic of relinquishment," reaffirming its relevance in contemporary fiction.

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