Aging through Precarious Time: Maintenance and Milling in *The Cost of Living* and *Weather*

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Abstract Changes to working life and retirement are reshaping temporalities of aging. This essay identifies a growing interest by women writers in the narrative possibilities these changes present. Examining the relation between narrative form, aging, and precarious work in Deborah Levy's *The Cost of Living* (2018) and Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020), this essay argues that contemporary narratives of midlife aging offer evidence of new and different conceptions and representations of time, whereby time is shaped by the elongated precarity of care and work. The argument builds on work by Lauren Berlant (2011), Elizabeth Povinelli (2011), and Lisa Baraitser (2017) that claims that the challenges of the twenty-first century demand that we reimagine future time through the lens of endurance and finds a model for endurance in the time frames of maintenance and milling proposed in *The Cost of Living* and *Weather*.

Keywords aging, work, precarity, narrative time, contemporary literature

In Deborah Levy's *The Cost of Living* (2018) and Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020), narrative temporalities of progress mapped onto the life course are replaced by postcrash time frames of economic decline. These postcrash time frames generate a downward trajectory for economic subjects as they age. It is not just that work time is precarious in these texts, but the pro-

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tagonists' hold on time itself is atomized, monetized, and exploited. In the place of progress and productivity, Levy and Offill compose narrative time frames that I term here *maintenance* and *milling*. These diffuse and discontinuous arrangements of narrative time are modeled on the temporal organization of precarity in care and work. In this arrangement, these narrative temporalities not only shed light on time's contemporary regulation, but also restore the possibility of claiming time in its suspension.[1]

To make the case for these authors' articulation of suspension, this article builds on work by Lauren Berlant (2011), Elizabeth Povinelli (2011), and Lisa Baraitser (2017) that claims that the challenges of the twenty-first century presented by postcrash late capitalism demand that we reimagine future time through the lens of *endurance*. I find narrative models for endurance in the time frames of waiting—maintenance and milling—which structure aging in *The Cost of Living* and *Weather*. In temporal formations of maintenance and milling, endurance takes on a meaning that is at odds with the ostensibly positive connotations associated with the concept in a neoliberal economy. Waiting when the future is uncertain—one version of what Baraitser describes as enduring time itself—is a form of continuation devoid of progress, productivity, or growth, and as such, it transforms endurance into a mode of resistance to the exhaustion and exploitation of time.

The generic temporal frameworks of the novel and memoir, often defined by concepts of progress and productivity that affirm the repetitive rhythms of growth and crisis, are being tested in the context of the postcrash economy. There is a recent trend of novels that attend to growth narratives in this context—Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018) and Raven Leilani's *Luster* (2020), for example, which both assemble a critique of precarious work to explore its disruptive relation to the Künstlerroman structure. One strand of this literature deals with what happens when postcrash conditions of casualized work meet the precarious social and economic relations that emerge as we age.[2] This article identifies a growing interest by women writers in the narrative possibilities afforded in representing the reemergence of precarity in midlife and the opportunities that arise in claiming the discursive, futural

1. In its consideration of the restructuring and disciplining of time in the transition from an industrial society to a postindustrial, casualized gig economy, this essay is influenced by E. P. Thompson's "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" (1967) and a conversation about contemporary precarity among Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović in "Precarity Talks" (Puar 2012).
2. As well as Levy's *The Cost of Living* and Offill's *Weather*, I include *Nomadland* by Jessica Bruder (2017) (and its 2021 film adaptation), Barbara Kingsolver's *Unsheltered* (2018), and Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead* (2009) in this category.

space created by longevity. I mean to look to narratological and generic divergences in *The Cost of Living* and *Weather* to explore how changes to working life are reshaping temporalities of aging and yielding new ways of thinking about narrative time.[3]

There are two distinct versions of narrative time elaborated in *The Cost of Living* and *Weather*—maintenance and milling. In *The Cost of Living*, maintenance delivers a temporal structure for narrativizing aging that does not register time through the linear succession of exceptional events or crises—the end of a marriage, the death of a parent, or the publication of a novel—but instead by way of the repetition of acts of care performed around these events. *The Cost of Living*, a memoir documenting the period in which Levy writes the novel *Hot Milk* (Levy 2018: 48), offers a portrait-of-the-artist narrative for midlife in which time is shaped by the precarity of artistic work. The plot takes the reader to a time before the success of *Hot Milk* (2016) and enables Levy to disrupt the temporal relationship between productivity and forward motion by depicting the time of writing as "chronic" time (Baraitser 2017: 14) that requires the "stamina" (Levy 2018: 50) to "stand still," to give time to the unfolding of ideas when the outcome is uncertain (47). Forefronting maintenance in imagery and style to combine time frames of care and writing, Levy challenges the version of productive work defined by the labor market and its concomitant promise of leisure time in retirement. While maintenance and milling are narrative categories I draw from *The Cost of Living* and *Weather*, maintenance is also a theoretical category which aligns with critiques of work advanced in feminist gerontology—such as Nancy Hooyman et al.'s (2008: 8) observation that "work is defined as measurable output and wages rather than nurturing and maintenance"—and Baraitser's (2017: 53) use of the term to describe "chronic" time frames of dependency.

While Levy finds in maintenance a temporality suited to the creation of a new story for modern aging, Offill (2020: 118) establishes "milling" as the mechanical time frame of incredulity which enables continuation amid uncertainty. Temporal milling, in which time is ground down and reduced

3. The diversity in experiences of aging is not represented by the writers or narrative voices under consideration here, who are themselves mostly shielded from the worst excesses of socioeconomic precarity. Levy and Offill are, however, exploring the implications of socioeconomic conditions for formulations of narrative time in which aging is represented: the social expectation for women to combine work and care, the impact of this on traditional concepts of retirement, and the heightened pressure of this arrangement in the contemporary economy. This essay, therefore, reads Levy and Offill as "sophisticated stylists" who are reworking contemporary temporalities, following Jennifer Cooke's (2020: 12) argument that criticism of women's writing often "conflat[es] gender and genre or attempts to understand how women's writing somehow intuitively mirrors their own subjectivity."

to hold off the present and maintain an attachment to the future, disorientates aging. In the face of unruly natural forces, *Weather*, like *The Cost of Living*, pictures the continuation of everyday life through small acts of care. It considers the ways in which commitment to continuation depends on an insecure connection to the future promised by work and asks what it means to have a life and to age under this insecurity. Indexing the crises of the aging population and global warming, *Weather* is preoccupied with the inapposite juncture of aging and futurity. Like Levy, Offill writes a female character for whom the precarity of contemporary working conditions is compounded by the concomitant labor of social reproduction. However, in *Weather* this reproduction does not happen through artists and the fantasy of fulfilment in work that they represent. Offill fragments narrative and form in *Weather* to draw attention to the gendered nature of care and the ways in which it interrupts intellectual work, as she did in her previous novel *Dept. of Speculation* (2015). Further developing this familiar Beauvoirian theme, *Weather* explores the additional contextual pressures of a precarious planetary future, posing questions about the ethics of survival and intergenerational care that extend beyond Levy's version of kinship.

Representing and distorting the temporal dimensions of different forms of socioeconomic, ontological, and affective precarity as they intersect with age and gender, *The Cost of Living* and *Weather* share an experience of what Berlant (2011: 3) calls "economic and intimate contingency," of "how best to live on considering." Isabelle Lorey's (2015: 89) work on insecurity demonstrates how, for many in the postcrash economy, "the anxious worry arising from existential vulnerability is no longer distinguishable from a fear arising from precarization." "There is no longer any reliable protection from what is unforeseeable," Lorey writes, "from what cannot be planned for, from contingency" (89). To use Butler's (2015: vii) words from their forward to Lorey's *State of Insecurity*, precariousness is "a regime, a hegemonic mode of being governed, and governing ourselves."

In recent decades, a lengthening of life expectancy, particularly for women, has been coupled with the deferral of sufficiently resourced retirement, a growing trend of "un-retirement," and increasingly precarious employment or under-employment.[4] As the effects of an aging population

4. In 2020 the number of people over sixty-five worldwide became, for the first time, greater than the number of people under four years old. This demographic shift has initiated conversations around fair taxes, pensions, retirement, and social care. However, this discourse of longevity which is influencing policy and conversations in the media does not correspond with the material reality of aging for many people. Indeed, in this so-called Age of Longevity, the gap in life expectancy between the working class and the more affluent classes in the UK is widening (Bennett et al. 2018). Nevertheless, discourses of longevity have successfully

on political and cultural life become more visible, there is a new urgency to theorize how this presumed longevity—in which "old age" is continually postponed—is already being put to work. Research on aging that dismantles stereotypes of passivity and, in their place, asserts narratives of self-discovery, has tended to focus on representations of old age, the "fourth age" (Gilleard and Higgs 2015), and neglects the material, economic, and lived impact of longevity on women in midlife or approaching retirement who are trying to imagine their futures. This shifting "third age" is, by contrast to old-age stereotypes, often figured as a time of flexibility, autonomy, and fulfilment (Laslett 1987). Such characterizations have, however, become outmoded under the conditions of late capitalism, or perhaps never existed at all, and need to be urgently rethought with attention to gendered inequalities in experiences of work and "postwork" time. Without the promise of retirement, narratives of midlife aging are being restructured.

As Elizabeth Barry and Margery Vibe Skagen (2020: 3) have observed, stories of middle age are replacing the Bildungsroman. In an epochal flip of Edelman's famous thesis, the future now looks old.[5] While Levy and Offill call on Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras, and others to resist narratives of artistic, cognitive, or physical deterioration in aging, their reinvention of narrative aging meets material and political limits that expose the economic decline which has starved the fantasy of a productive, secure working life and retirement. As Shir Shimoni's (2018: 47) analysis of third-age discourse demonstrates, work as an investment in the future has been exchanged for the present-tense moral value of work for work's sake, a tense suited to the unstable conditions of late capitalism. Kathleen Woodward (2020: 38) observes a version of this playing out in Margaret Drabble's *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016), where, she claims, "the experience of aging itself is represented as the middle-class tragedy" in which characters commit to continuation through work. Contemporary policy conversations around "active aging" similarly participate in this orientation to the present and uphold what Shimoni (2018: 45) calls an "ethics of busyness" which functions as the governing imperative in third-age discourse.[6] In this con-

displaced "old age" and led to a continuation of work in various forms long into later life (legislation delaying the pension age for women in the UK, for example).

5. For more on how Lee Edelman's *No Future* is used in age studies, see Port 2012 and Falcus 2020.

6. Amira Paz, Israel Doron, and Aviad Tur-Sinai (2018: 185) examine the gendered aspects of "active aging" policies and draw attention to the compulsion to continue participating in the workforce. "Active aging" has a long history; David Amigoni (2020: 157) establishes this "moral commitment to independence of mind and means" in later life in his work on the Victorian self-help tradition.

text, *The Cost of Living* and *Weather* respond to the vanishing possibility of time that is not defined by work from the perspective of midlife and offer critiques of the culture of work embedded in narrative time.

Weather splinters the narrative to disrupt the telescopic present-tense continuation of milling in work. In *The Cost of Living*, by contrast, Levy employs the repetitive time of maintenance to override narratives of crisis and demonstrate instead the continuation of reproductive work. These competing investments in endurance exist because of the different qualities of precarity explored in the two texts. This essay brings *The Cost of Living* and *Weather* together by identifying a shared chronotope which reaches across their generic differences. Waiting, for these texts, is the chronotope required in the contemporary moment in its positioning of endurance as the untimely counterpoint to the urgency of crisis. Narrative structures of maintenance and milling, Levy and Offill reveal, provide temporalities adapted to, coping with, and challenging the existential rhythms of the postcrash economy and climate crisis.

1. "A Full Professional Life and a Full Mothering Life and a Minor Plumbing Life": Maintenance in *The Cost of Living*

"To unmake a family home is like breaking a clock," Levy tells us (2018: 17). Contemplating time's new structure following the dissolution of Levy's marriage, *The Cost of Living*—the second instalment of Levy's trilogy of memoirs—discards the version of the future that is envisioned for women toward the perceived end of their working or reproductive lives.[7] In the place of a temporality slowing toward retirement and defined by leisure, Levy redirects attention to the undervalued caring work performed by women throughout their lives and across generations in the form of giving time.[8] Care, Levy suggests, has a temporal cost: "To strip the wallpaper off the fairy tale of The Family House in which the comfort and happiness of men and children have been the priority is to find behind it an unthanked, unloved, neglected, exhausted woman. . . . Above all else," she observes, "it is an act of immense generosity to be the architect of everyone else's well-being" (16). *The Cost of Living*, published a decade after the 2008 financial crash, invites readers to attend to time in a period of personal and global

7. *The Cost of Living* conflates the positions of author and narrator, conforming to the generic conventions of memoir. Levy does, however, draw attention to the instability of the first-person *I*; I address this in more detail later in this article.
8. Baraitser defines the temporality of care as "giving time" through "staying, delaying, enduring, returning" (2017: 14).

upheaval and asks us to question who can claim time in the contemporary moment and at what price.

Although Levy is only fifty, she is trying to imagine newness at a time in the life course for which there are few preexisting stories. Released from the "societal story" (2018: 16), Levy explains, "I did not feel safe or unsafe, but somewhere in-between, liminal, passing from one life to another" (56). The narrative begins by departing from the strangely measured image of drowning in an ocean of a marriage where time seemed to collect and moving toward the risky "liminal" temporality of adjustment. "Everything was calm," Levy writes. "I was swimming in the deep. And then, when I surfaced twenty years later, I discovered there was a storm, a whirlpool. . . . At first I wasn't sure I'd make it back to the boat and then I realized I didn't want to make it back to the boat" (7). The vacant, matter-of-fact repetition of "make it back the boat" and the flat, unsentimental affect with which the realization is registered establish the temporality of continuation rather than rupture or transformation at the level of the sentence.

Not pausing for long to dwell on this image of marriage, Levy rapidly shifts to her musings on dismantling a life and unmaking the family home mentioned earlier. This is neither a purely practical nor especially emotional account. Rather it captures the peculiar lucidity that comes with having no other options. She writes, "When I was around fifty and my life was supposed to be slowing down, becoming more stable and predictable, life became faster, unstable, unpredictable" (Levy 2018: 8). The accelerating cadence of the sentence refuses to cooperate, like an underlying current, with the mundane, sedated time of its repetitive language. It is in moments of stylistic precision like this that we glimpse the existence of two competing stories: the giving of time in repetitive acts of care meets the unstable time of precarity in which there is at once no time to occupy the thinned present, to fully picture the past, or to make affective investments in the future. "This action of dismantling and packing up a long life lived together seemed to flip time into a weird shape," writes Levy, "a flashback to leaving South Africa, the country of my birth, when I was nine years old and a flash-forward to an unknown life I was yet to live at fifty" (15).

Following these reflections on unmaking a home, Levy (2018: 19) recounts moving with her teenage daughters into a sixth floor flat: "Apparently a *restoration programme* was due to start in this apartment block, but it never seemed to start." The sentence is sluggish: it lacks direction and stalls in the repetition of the word "start," passively resisting the new beginning it seems to promise. Levy (20) explains that restoration or "repair" is the wrong metaphor for this time in her life: "The impossibility of repairing and rehabilitating a vast old building seemed gloomily appropriate at this

time of disintegration." However, she concludes, "I did not wish to restore the past. What I needed was an entirely new composition" (20). Any notion of time-as-movement appears, nonetheless, to be similarly unsuitable. Instead, the stalling repetition of the word "start" recreates the restive time of working out how to continue.

The present, as Levy describes it, corresponds with Baraitser's (2017: 9) description of the time of caring as "time that is both relentlessly driven and yet refuses to flow." This renunciation of flow is epitomized in the book's episodic structure. It tells the story of an experience Levy cannot yet commit to narrativizing. Levy resists the imposition of a new chronology and, instead, reflects on the prospect of a protracted period of writing without being able to fully invest in a future of outcomes. Flow is not only disrupted in formal and narrative devices but in the content and arrangement of sentences. "Writing a novel," Levy (2018: 47) explains, "requires many hours of sitting still, as if on a long-haul flight, final destination unknown, but [with] a route of sorts mapped out." Despite being told here that the final destination is unknown, the outcome—the novel form—is provided at the start of the sentence. Undermining the flow of the sentence in this way stills the otherwise productive time of writing.

Writing is imagined as a form of maintenance, a way of "unfold[ing] . . . ideas through all the dimensions of time," which might create the conditions in which Levy's new precarity, experienced as a chancy and demanding temporality, might be managed (Levy 2018: 41). In a relatable attempt to find inspiration in this stubborn time frame, Levy attaches two pictures on her fridge, one of Barbara Hepworth, aged sixty, and one of Louise Bourgeois, aged ninety. She then places her own stylistic developments next to theirs: "To my eyes, the particular quality of their attention as they calmly shaped the forms they were inventing gave them beauty without measure. That kind of beauty was all that mattered to me. At this uncertain time, writing was one of the few activities in which I could handle the anxiety of uncertainty, of not knowing what was going to happen next" (40). Probing what a portrait of the artist would look like for a woman at fifty and testing out whether she can fit herself in the same category as women such as Hepworth and Bourgeois, Duras and Beauvoir, Levy takes solace in "the particular quality of their attention," as a promise to give time and care to the shaping of form.[9] Meanwhile, Levy's own writing enacts the strain between this commitment and the ways in which the re-

9. For more on the way author-characters are used by authors to manage their public identity, the use of elderly writer protagonists to lend authors the "authority" of age, and the cultural capital of late style, see Hadar 2018.

emergence of precarity in later life produces a "shortening [of] the past" (Levy 2018: 151) and generates questions "you have no time to ask" (65).

It is clear that Levy feels a sense of duty to represent writing as a form of labor, but when she seeks inspiration in figures whose productivity has endured into later life, she also grasps onto a sense of writing as a force of boundless artistic creation. The economy of literary production—through which Levy embeds herself, giving very little detail, in the scene of the literary institution, "writing and teaching" for money (30)—is in motivational competition with romanticized images of writing as immaterial, intellectual work driven by inspiration. Seeking a more hospitable writing space than the balcony of her flat, Levy is offered the opportunity to rent the shed of the deceased Adrian Mitchell. "Of course I wanted to install a wood-burning stove in the shed," Levy (2018: 49–50) writes, "and live a romantic writer's life—preferably Lord Byron's life, . . . waiting for inspiration to ravish me as the fragrant wood crackled and popped, etc. Alas, at this financially austere time it was not possible." In this account of her fantasy writing room, Levy draws attention to the romanticization of creative labor and to the work involved in the production of an authorial mythology, grounding the notion of "waiting" for creative inspiration with references to financial motivations. In what Levy calls her "living autobiography," there is no sense of the writer-narrator reminiscing from a place of idle time.

Reflections on fantasies of the writing life such as this demonstrate Levy's critical engagement with the devices of memoir, its relation to fiction, and its role in the creation of an authorial persona. "I would go on to write three books in that shed, including the one you are reading now," Levy (2018: 45) explains. "It was there that I would begin to write in the first person, using an *I* that is close to myself and yet is not myself." Muddying the clarity of voice that the first person *I* might otherwise provide for the reader, Levy stresses the obscure boundary between lived experience and storytelling inherent to memoir. While Levy (16) seeks to assemble a new story of freedom and autonomy in aging out of the fragments of a disintegrating and outmoded "societal story," the "*I* that is close to myself and yet is not myself" signals that self-possession and artistic self-determination remain just out of reach. The ambiguous authorial self in *The Cost of Living*, lays bare the entrepreneurial process of self-fashioning associated with memoir.[10] What endures when self-realization is suspended is the ontologi-

10. For more on the ways in which memoir can make visible the conflicts between a neoliberal subject position and the impersonal structures of late capitalism, see Daniel Worden (2017: 164) on Joan Didion and Dave Eggers.

cal precariousness of this narrative *I*; the exposure of precarious subjectification, the contingency of Levy's future working life and working identity, and the social vulnerability of her reality.[11]

In search of illustrations of endurance that might pose a counterweight to this ontological precariousness, the future that Levy imagines is one inspired by older women—not just artists or writers but the women she meets in her day-to-day life. Having successfully escaped a conversation about military biographies with an anonymous man at a party, Levy (2018: 72) tells the story of a sixty-year-old female masseuse "who had recently pummelled my spine as I lay on my stomach with my face shoved into a hole in the massage bed. She had apparently spent the weekend buying soft blankets—very-good-quality mohair and hundred per cent wools—which she had laid over her sofa and chairs. When I asked her, 'Why blankets?,' she said, 'Because the war is over.'" This encounter, Levy clarifies, is followed by unreserved laughter from both women. However, the lack of detail around the masseuse's war, her "undisclosed hurt" (73), nullifies any genuine vulnerability and ultimately reifies Levy's attachment to strength and good humor in aging and work. Levy's counterposing of the soft luxury of the blankets with the physical strength required to "pummel" someone's spine produces a composite image of aging in which strenuous work is characterized as somehow, amusingly, out of place—untimely but revitalizing. Calling on so-called third age representations of fulfilment and autonomy, Levy, like the masseuse, is finding new ways of living beyond war in a time defined by the continuation of work. This time frame exists within, as Povinelli (2011: 32) puts it, "stretched and striated spaces [that] must survive eventfulness that is below the threshold of the catastrophic."

Levy's presentation of herself as uniquely productive and radically self-sufficient—her revelry in fixing her own plumbing and in the independence provided by an electric bike or electric screwdriver stands as only one manifestation among many—is in tension with darkly humorous moments of failure and panic which expose the material and emotional vulnerability of a culture of casualized work. Fantasies about a future as a successful seventy-year-old scriptwriter living in California are swiftly contrasted with the problem of time and substance:

> That night as I cycled up the hill in the pouring rain, my bag split open and out of it spilled a book by Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, the charger to my electric bike battery (instructions: *do not expose to rain*), a lipstick, a

11. Lorey's (2015: 1) conception of ontological precariousness draws out the relationship between precarious labor and precarious life. For more on ontological precariousness in old age see David Lain et al. (2018).

> torch, a screwdriver and five tangerines. The traffic had to stop while I looked for the chicken. It was lying in the road like roadkill near the wheels of the car that had just run it over, flattened but intact, its skin imprinted with the marks of the tyre. (Levy 2018: 91)

This kind of physicality—seen throughout the book in the use of juxtaposing textures, weights, pressures, and scales—informs many of *The Cost of Living*'s comic episodes in which the sharper edges of precarity are smudged by clownish interactions with undisciplined objects or volatile environments. Detailing the reproductive labor underpinning a family meal, this scene appears to demonstrate Levy's investment in the moral force of endurance as a secret woman's war. The strength and strain of zany excess, exemplified here, configures an aesthetic mode from the neoliberal logic that to be a "productive" worker, as Sianne Ngai (2015: 10) explains, "is to put oneself into an exhausting and precarious situation." This image presents Levy as totally alone: the traffic is dehumanized while no one offers to help. The alienation of subject and tone in this passage, however, signals the irony in Levy's zany aesthetic. Ironic zaniness here dramatizes the point at which extreme physical exertion inevitably gives way in the disintegration of progress and presents a critique of time's exhaustion as it returns the narrative to the motif of endurance in precarious aging.

Levy's commitment to an entrepreneurial, self-sufficient aging subjectivity diminishes after this episode: "I was truly exhausted and alone," she writes, "I was alone and I was free. Free to pay the immense service charges for an apartment that had very little service and sometimes not even basic utilities. Free to support my family by writing on a computer that was about to die" (Levy 2018: 91). While there are limits to Levy's socioeconomic precarity, she feels the precariousness of her reality and its foundational fantasies acutely here due to a lack of sustaining networks and a heightened sense of vulnerability. She discovers the freedom and autonomy that she sought in the precarity of creative work—the freedom, as Lorey (2006) describes, to divide wage labor and reproduction differently—cannot provide the conditions for self-realization. Indeed, the kinship care that Levy practiced in the temporality of maintenance has compounded her isolation. Instead, because of this fantasy that the self can be created or renewed through work, she ends up in the position of many "cultural producers" who reproduce life through work and are forced to "bear their living and working conditions eternally" (Lorey 2006).

While for Levy endurance offers an obstruse mode of resistance to repressive social stories of progress and productivity, for Offill such endurance functions less ambiguously as a capitalist trick. The next section attends to the different and overlapping ties to precarity that develop in

Weather. It suggests that Offill's novel forms chronic time frames to expose the impact of insecure working conditions on our ability to address the future whether in personal aging or planetary demise.

2. "I Have to Go to Work, Says He, Says Me, Says Everybody": Milling about in *Weather*

Performing wit to drown out the tragic sounds of the world, *Weather* is composed as a collection of aphoristic posts or vignettes. These vignettes track a period in the life of its narrator, Lizzie, in which rigid political and material limits are pressing visibly against the demand for her to adopt a flexible subject position at home and at work. During the course of the novel, Lizzie turns forty-four, and a colleague smugly assures her that she is now "officially middle-aged" (Offill 2020: 63). Lizzie is too young to have arthritis, her husband Ben assures her (40), even as an X-ray technician assumes she is too old to be pregnant (41). A student whose smartphone was stolen tells Lizzie that "she's been using a really old one instead" and is going "at a slower pace" as a result. "She takes out her phone to demonstrate its obsolescence to me," Lizzie explains, "It's exactly the same kind as mine" (61). "'When you said you were so out of step and living slowly,' Lizzie exclaims, 'did you mean by seconds?'" (62). Trapped in conversation with another young person (a "techno-optimist"), Lizzie admits that she does not use social media: "He looks at me and I can see him calculating all the large and small ways I am trying to prevent the future" (39). Like Levy, Lizzie feels as though life is accelerating even as the societal story of progress no longer applies to her. She anxiously contemplates what this means in relation to her numerous precarious working lives—as a "feral librarian," unofficial research assistant-cum-secretary, and informal carer—while references to "squander[ed] promise" (9) and "discarded ambitions" (160) strain against a creeping sense that her life has been organized around the false promise of upward mobility.

Offill presents a portrait of an atomized workforce, where every worker's preoccupation is how to slot themselves into various industries. Aging, then, develops in part through the figure of the anachronistic worker who trades in a currency that is passé: the owner of the hardware store who is being squeezed out by chain stores (56), or Mr. Jimmy, the taxi driver whose client base is dwindling with the dominance of Uber. As Lizzie describes, "He had to let all his drivers go and is down to one car. He sleeps at work so as to never miss a call" (20). The "doomed adjunct" who has been working on his dissertation for eleven years, is similarly situated as out of time. He looks pale and Lizzie suspects he is "selling his plasma

again" (43). These workers in *Weather* are not elderly, sympathetic characters. Rather they are depicted as just a bit too old to belong to the contemporary current of time.

In place of a linear time fixed by intentional goals, life for all the tragic, transient figures who populate *Weather* is characterized by a kind of waiting described as "milling." Sylvia—Lizzie's old college professor and now a celebrity academic—explains, "There is a period after every disaster in which people wander around trying to figure out if it is truly a disaster. Disaster psychologists use the term 'milling' to describe most people's default actions when they find themselves in a frightening new situation" (Offill 2020: 118). Sylvia prints out her emails "like an old person" (Offill 2020: 27). She is "blurred around the edges" (27) which, for other aging women in the novel, means they are "hardly seen" and have no value to men "out of the context of work" (54). Despite or perhaps because of her out of step connection to modern time, the character of Sylvia functions as the primary vehicle by which the climate crisis is brought into the text. Sylvia has started a series of popular eschatological podcasts interviewing experts such as geologists and disaster psychologists about global warming, civilizational decline, and the limits of the industrial age; and the narrative tracks the podcast's influence on Lizzie's thinking. In the novel, the destruction of climate is a direct result of late capitalism's milling—the precarization and dispossession of workers and a desperate postcrash preoccupation with reinvigorating economic growth. Through time frames shaped to the milling described by Sylvia, *Weather* flirts with the kairotic time that has become a permanent feature of the rhetoric around the climate crisis, in which the moment for action is continually called for and yet further delayed. The opportune or decisive moment implied in crisis never arrives in *Weather.*

Milling seems out of step with the urgency of crisis, but in *Weather* time is out of joint; characters move around without purpose, going through the motions of old routines, as though disaster has not yet occurred. Mr. Jimmy continues his business even though Lizzie suspects she is his only client; the adjunct persists with his research even after his wife has left him; in the library Lizzie notices "people who got fired months ago but still pretend to go to work every day" (Offill 2020: 81). While Sylvia uses milling to explain people's inability to comprehend the imminent disaster of climate change, milling in the novel also characterizes aging in work time. Workers, stuck in chronic post-Fordist time, act according to the routines associated with precarious or anachronistic occupations. As the adjunct explains to Lizzie, "At first, it was unnerving to work somewhere where no one remembers your name, where you have to call security to get into your

own room, but as regular life becomes more fragmented and bewildering, it bothers him less and less" (Offill 2020: 44). Emptied of any reliable protections, life outside of work has adopted the qualities of the modern workplace. Ontological and existential precariousness has forced the adjunct to form an attachment to living on through work, what Berlant would call a relation of cruel optimism.[12]

Milling might at first appear to resemble a purposeless, playful movement able to disrupt the disciplining of time in work. As a mode of delayed realization, however, milling enables the continuation of the day-to-day. Facing a disappearing planetary future, characters in the orbit of midlife continue in the non-advancement of milling, seemingly without the prospect of retirement. The mechanical purposelessness of milling therefore does not counteract the productivist tendencies which support what Kathi Weeks (2011: 13) calls the "sanctification" of work. In *Weather*, milling instead illuminates the problem that the novel has with the temporality of waiting: global warming is not something that will happen in the future but a disaster we are already living through. Offill impels readers to notice that they are distracted, scared into inaction by the insecurity of formal and informal work.

The presence of climate breakdown in the text dislodges the narrative's first-person voice and withdraws Lizzie from her contemporary moment by crossing and confusing several overlapping time frames. Lizzie listens to Sylvia's podcast on the topic of "deep time" in which a geologist "sweep[s] through millions and millions of years in a moment. The Age of Birds has passed, he says. Also of Reptiles. Also of Flowering Plants. Holocene was the name of our age. Holocene, which meant 'now'" (Offill 2020: 31). The "now" seems out of step with the past tense of "meant," observing the present age as it passes, and leaving readers to contemplate their relation to the Holocene as just one age in a list of many. Deep time—the place of the Holocene and the disappearance of collective futurity within it—diminishes the narrator's own human lifespan: her past and experience of the present. Lizzie imagines personal life events being pulled forward into a disappearing future as the degrees of climate departure are mapped onto the life course. She commits to "never going back to that website where you put in the year Eli was born and then watched the numbers go up, up, up"

12. Berlant (2011: 4) describes this optimistic mode of attachment as operating through the "dithering" of impasse in the intensity of an "unforeclosed" and "stretched out" present, a present which similarly produces Offill's milling. Living in impasse enables continued access to fantasies of the good life which Berlant (2011: 3) explains are an obstacle to flourishing in a "precarious public sphere" in which the "ordinary" has become "a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation."

(Offill 2020: 89). This acceleration and consequent contraction of the time frames of Lizzie's aging and her son Eli's growth into adulthood leaves little space for the purposeful shaping of a life story like the one Levy crafts in *The Cost of Living*. The temporalities of acceleration that children represent in the novel do not offer a future. Instead, the future is represented by predictions of "*Old people, in big cities, afraid of the sky*" (Offill 2020: 52) as survival replaces a retirement of relaxation and fulfilment.

In its anxiety around the acceleration of time, *Weather* displays a lack of confidence that time can continue to flow without crunches, losses, and slippages. In a formal structure akin to the episodic time of *The Cost of Living* but more erratic, the novel cuts from one scene to the next with little explanation. Lizzie goes from being in a conference where Sylvia is ruthlessly critiquing anthropocentrism in one moment to being in a totally different environment in the next: "Now I'm on a park bench, noting the scattered lettuce of someone else's sandwich. I clean it up, then resent doing it. On the way back, I don't notice anything underfoot, anything overhead. Possibly there was a light coming greenly through the leaves. Impossible to be sure" (Offill 2020: 47). The solipsistic first-person voice, which validates the anthropocentric viewpoint critiqued by Sylvia, initially situates the narrative in the immediate present as the "Now" demonstrates a vague narratorial awareness of a considerable jump in time. The narrative magnifies the tiny detail of the stray lettuce and lets the reader share both Lizzie's automatic tidying response and her resentment of that response, registering, as it does, a common appreciation of the gendered social reproduction in these tiny acts and a fleeting recognition of the distracted caprices of our attention. This small insight, then, works to connect the labor of social reproduction with the distractions responsible for our inability to act on the climate crisis. Wrenched suddenly from this comic focus on minute detail, the realism of the narrative is uprooted by an unexpected and disorientating shift in tense. The emphasis on uncertain recollection leaves readers stranded in the present they are now rereading through the lens of memory. In a story about the end times, the narrative leaves readers to wonder where future Lizzie could be when she is recalling this scene. This episode marks a readerly insight into the temporal disjunction between reading, aging, and crisis. As we read the present, it seems to suggest, we inscribe it as the past and the "now" vanishes between the simultaneous too late and not yet of climate crisis.

This temporal dislocation occurs at other points in the narrative but there is never a moment of revelation in which these time frames are untangled, a point of insight that might enable the reader to witness Lizzie clearly in her present. This dislocated temporality is distinct from the drawn-out, repeti-

tive present of maintenance in *The Cost of Living*. In passing, Lizzie comments on her "obsession" with books that survive only in fragments, offering an insight into a narrative that seems as though it too has been "recovered in pieces" from a time long in the future (Offill 2020: 50). Though the novel offers no straightforward instance of peripeteia, readers are, nonetheless, put in a position where, as Frank Kermode (1967: 18) puts it, they are "enacting that readjustment of expectations in regard to an end." What appears to be a thick, inescapable present enters the uncertain realm of memory to mock credulous readers for their faith in narrative time.

The closure promised by narrative time collapses into the chronic, open-ended time of continuation marked by "quasi-events," as Povinelli (2011: 13) calls them, which "never quite achieve the status of having occurred or taken place." Unlike events, these quasi-events "neither happen nor not happen" (13). It is this disorientation of tense that characterizes the narrative time frame of milling. In work on the "more-than-human temporalities" of the climate crisis, Marco Caracciolo (2021: 347) observes that typically it is the matching of goals and events that furthers the plot and produces the perception of linearity in a narrative because readers can "establish causal coherence." Planetary or "deep time" undermines this narrative linearity, he contends. Engineering a collision of planetary time with the human story of aging, *Weather*'s portrait of midlife stasis dissolves any straightforward notion of intention and challenges meaning produced by narrative sequence. Societal stories which celebrate linear milestones of personal advancement in aging are inapplicable for Lizzie in the postdisaster timelines of the novel.

In his provocative call for literature to respond to the climate crisis, Amitav Ghosh argues that the modern novel is ill-equipped to deal with the concepts of deep time and human extinction. The novel, Ghosh (2016: 63) asserts, is only comprehensible because of its limitations of scale, size, and place, limitations that prove obstructive when the Anthropocene presents us with "forces of unthinkable magnitude that create unbearably intimate connections over vast gaps in time and space." A novel that alienates literary traditions of scale, place, and character, *Weather* could be considered a reaction to Ghosh's (129) assessment of the "price of conceiving of fiction and politics in terms of individual moral adventures." Lizzie waits, not for the drama of the end of the world—the kairotic time of apocalypse—but inside the slow violence of climate departure which compounds her disorientating sense of midlife stasis.

This waiting for the realization of disaster precludes what Freeman (2010: 4–5) describes in her work on temporal manipulations in a "chronobiological society" as the "goal-oriented, intentional" individualism of epiph-

any which often defines narratives of aging. In the movies Lizzie's brother Henry chooses to watch, Lizzie sarcastically quips, "There is always some great disaster about to happen and only one unlikely person who can stop it" (Offill 2020: 11). Lizzie's wry humor undermines this naive individualism and substitutes it for "enmeshment" (58): a messy ethics of care in which vulnerability and dependency stand in for individual autonomy. As opposed to the generational care and investment in posterity that maintenance provides for Levy, Lizzie is drawn to the metaphor of the "mesh" which Sylvia uses to illustrate how all life is interconnected (Offill 2020: 67). Lizzie gets stuck in stories belonging to other characters—enmeshed in relations of care with Henry, Eli, Mr. Jimmy, and library users such as the woman whose fines Lizzie secretly deletes when she hears that the woman's daughter has overdosed (58). Enmeshment, then, acts as a structure for representing ontological precarity in the novel. It gives shape to Lizzie's struggle to recognize what Emily J. Hogg and Peter Simonsen (2020: 13) describe as "the limits of our own capacity to be secure," a reality which becomes more apparent for Lizzie as she ages without the reliable possibility of an end to insecure formal and informal work.

While laying out Lizzie's status as a precarious worker, the novel intermittently alludes to the other more secure or creative lives she previously lived or might have lived. These residual fragments of Lizzie's mythology around intentional goals and upward mobility in aging expose the false narrative of continuity under capitalism. A "fancy" brochure from the upmarket preschool Eli used to attend arrives unexpectedly in the post, and there is a particularly pertinent moment when Lizzie digs out her dissertation and looks at the title page before putting it back in the box—but the narrative allows her to linger here only fleetingly.

"One morning," Lizzie recalls, "a student tells me failure is not an option and is angered when I laugh. I assume a cheerful manner. I tell her, Hey, me too, I used to have plans! Biggish ones, medium at least. She stares at me. Sorry? She says. After she goes, I slip into the bathroom, make sure I don't have lipstick on my teeth" (Offill 2020: 73).[13] Aging and the teleologies it forecloses or reveals emerge in tandem with the foreclosure of the future in a crisis of climate and Lizzie's precarious position in the marketplace of affective labor. This student's investment in her own individual story of success is doomed in Offill's narrative, where "teleologies of living"—in which what it means to have a life is determined by a "sequence of socioeconomically 'productive' moments" (Freeman 2010: 5)—are presented

13. In *Weather* Offill often omits speech marks in anecdotes, presenting them as self-contained jokes or comic bits.

as outmoded. This moment draws on the other images of lost or unfinished stories in the novel, "the woman who is always on the bench" outside the library, for example. "She has long gray hair, a briefcase filled with papers," Lizzie tells us, "There are various stories about who she used to be. Grad student still working on her dissertation is a popular one. But my boss says she once worked in the cafeteria" (Offill 2020: 51). This image is an echo of Lizzie's own unpacked suitcase (50) and is presented as a possible future for Lizzie. The two women's lives overlap; they are enmeshed even as they are held apart in vignettes separated by ellipses.

Alongside images of non-advancement in recurring examples of perpetual graduate students, Lizzie's perspective as an outsider on the inside of the academic institution foregrounds the infrastructure that supports creative and academic work and transforms creative experience into menial work. Regarding Lizzie as unqualified for her role, her colleagues label her a "feral librarian." A multipronged economic actor, she embodies Ngai's category of the zany as she strains to adapt to different types of work. As a librarian in contemporary New York, her workplace is the setting in which students and less privileged visitors are made "work ready." "The man in the shabby suit does not want his fines lowered," Lizzie tells us. "He is pleased to contribute to our institution. The blond girl whose nails are bitten to the quick stops by after lunch and leaves with a purse full of toilet paper" (Offill 2020: 3). The zany, affective labor involved in "assum[ing] a cheerful manner" (73) when working with the general public and "cranky professors" (8) is heightened when Lizzie takes on a second job, again as an interloper, in the role of impersonating Sylvia in order to reply to emails from "doomers" and "hippies" concerned with the end of the world, and traveling with Sylvia to "help her through the boring bits" (26). Providing answers, however, is a strain on Lizzie who, despite her role as a librarian and conserver of knowledge, reluctantly performs this sagacity. Answers, and the closure they represent, are the anachronistic products of Lizzie's work and present a point of friction with her sense of midlife stasis. Her actual work is the work of waiting, enduring time on behalf of others: the chronic time of caring for Henry, conserving the past as a librarian, and holding her new knowledge of the disappearance of the future.

Straining for humor, *Weather* exposes the work underlying aesthetic experience. Henry, for example, gets a job writing the messages in greeting cards; he is paid by the hour which means messages are "very long and very specific" (Offill 2020: 43). Work in the novel, including care and the possibility of artistic work, cannot disentangle itself from the capitalist logic of "time-as-productiv[ity]," to use Freeman's (2010: 5) formulation, which coincides with the production of surplus value, an accumulation

exposed here as meaningless and destructive in the context of the climate crisis. *Weather*, then, challenges the moralization of work in these circumstances, the idea of work as a source of growth or fulfilment and the "extra-economic" functions of work, like producing "social and political subjects" (Weeks 2011: 8). In its mindlessness, milling draws attention to the primacy of intentionality in the event-driven novelistic structure from which a casualized or self-employed workforce draws to construct the myth of self-making essential to career building. This is the same logic that Levy struggles against in *The Cost of Living*. Bringing attention to the relations of novelistic plot and entrepreneurial subjectivity, *Weather*, by contrast, acts as an antinovel which highlights the role of art, as Jasper Bernes (2016: 764) puts it, in *effecting*, not just reflecting, the renewal of work and the absorption of retirement or nonwork activities by work.

Offill chooses to teach her readers about milling to illuminate the relationship between work today, aging, and climate breakdown. An inherently precarious temporality in its vulnerability to the will of others, waiting or milling implies a connection, albeit unstable, to the future. With Trump in power in the novel and without democratic oversight in workplaces a subtle vision of a sort of tragedy of the commons, a capitalist free-for-all, comes into view. Workers, in *Weather*, are stuck milling about, mistakenly believing that they have no power to act and anxiously wedded to the future promised by the temporalities of precarious work. Lizzie's experience of aging within a crisis of climate is mediated through the suspended temporalities of paid and unpaid work that maintain her state of precarity. Subjectivity, then, is diverted away from the sort of mastery made available in Freeman's accounting, by means of a withholding or delay that challenge institutionalized timelines. Instead, in *Weather*, subjectivity struggles to exist against a precarious temporal context in which the coherence of work as a time structure has disintegrated, and the only form of delay available is the denial of milling about. With workers atomized, the withholding that might provide enough mastery and political agency for them to collectively reset ecological priorities seems a distant possibility. Nonetheless, this precarity—and Lizzie's endurance of formal and informal work without the prospect of advancement or retirement—generates a muted insight into "enmeshment," a renewed appreciation of social relationality which surfaces within the novel's temporal milling.

Conclusion

Faced with a discourse of longevity dominating cultural and policy discussions around aging, Levy and Offill emphasize the various ties to precarity

that this extended time frame produces. In different ways *The Cost of Living* and *Weather* establish an interest in the narrative possibilities of representing aging in formal and informal work as a site in which time is experienced as *protracting*, reversing the temporal logic of contraction which dominates narratives of crisis. In so doing, they raise questions about the significance of literary form in the narrativization of aging through precarity.

The literary forms of the novel and memoir under consideration here adapt a dialectical relationship with the introspective mechanics of self-governing, a relationship that once lent meaning to temporalities of progress and productivity and provided security based on an eventuality of closure. Levy and Offill manipulate these forms to accommodate the length and contingency of waiting in midlife. In the time frames Levy and Offill construct, plot is not fixed to sequential events but emerges instead in the endurance of narrative voices straining against the pull of downward mobility.

Life's precarity, as "traditional infrastructures for reproducing life—at work, in intimacy, politically—are crumbling at a threatening pace" (Berlant 2011: 4–5), increases social dependence on reproductive work. For Levy, writing and the time frame of maintenance afforded in aging contests the distinction between production and reproduction. Nevertheless, Levy's professional status also motivates her attachment to freedom and autonomy in aging. While both writers grapple with the time frames of aging that late capitalism normalizes, Offill's narrator learns to substitute fantasies of self-sufficiency for those of interdependency and survival. This exchange exposes the absurdity of time that is defined by work—and a mode of continuation specified by the future work promises—in the wake of the climate crisis. The progress implied in productivity becomes an inaccessible teleology, at odds with the suspension of time in waiting. It is rather through time's suspension, through dismantling the efficient, linear, Fordist conception of time-as-movement, that Levy and Offill find ways of occupying a thinned present.

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