Abstract
This article argues that the museum is a significant trope in contemporary literature that engages with the climate crisis. With its destabilisation of relations between human communities and the nonhuman world, the Anthropocene—Paul Crutzen’s influential (if controversial) name for the current geological period—troubles conceptual binaries and epistemological categories that are central to Western modernity. Through two case studies, Flights (2007), by Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk, and The Octopus Museum (2019), by American poet Brenda Shaughnessy, I explore how these works use the space of the museum to chart the intellectual, affective, and ethical tensions that underlie our climate-changed times. In these literary figurations of the museum, the things on display—whether they are anatomical parts (in Flights) or textual fragments (in The Octopus Museum)—become the site of radical uncertainty, as well as a probe into the agential efficacy of the nonhuman world. This approach destabilises anthropocentric hierarchies and pushes back against a widespread perception of the post-Enlightenment museum as an institution imparting stable, taxonomically organised knowledge. A comparison with the Museum of Civilisation featured in Emily St. John Mandel’s postapocalyptic novel Station Eleven (2014) allows me to bring into view the originality of Tokarczuk’s and Shaughnessy’s experimentation.

Introduction
The plot of Emily St. John Mandel’s postapocalyptic novel Station Eleven (2014) straddles a devastating pandemic known as the Georgia Flu. A famous theatre actor named Arthur Leander brings the novel’s vast cast of characters together, post-mortem: all of the main characters are, in one way or another, connected to Arthur. Shortly before a dramatic on-stage death, Arthur gives two issues of the science fiction comic book Dr Eleven to a child actor, Kirsten. A creation of Arthur’s first wife, Dr Eleven revolves around a scientist—the titular Dr Eleven—who ends up stranded on a far-off planet, from where he tries “to forget the sweetness of life on Earth.” Indeed, life on Earth loses much of its sweetness after the outbreak causes the collapse of society as we know it in the developed world. Kirsten survives the deadly disease and joins a theatre company, the Traveling Symphony. As Kirsten—now an adult—and her companions roam the waste land that North America has become, the comic book is still with her, a relic of a time that the character barely remembers.

Towards the end of the novel, the Symphony joins a group of survivors who have settled down in an abandoned airport. One of the highlights of this Severn City Airport is a “Museum of Civilisation” curated by Clark, Arthur’s long-time friend. The collection started, many years before Kirsten’s arrival, with “Clark [placing] his useless iPhone on the top shelf.” As the Severn City Airport community grows, so does the collection: it consists of a large number of objects rendered unusable by the collapse: “impractical shoes, stilettos mostly, beautiful and strange,” car engines, stamps, coins, passports, and so. Severed from the preapocalyptic world that produced them—a world with which the novel’s readers are, unlike Kirsten, closely familiar—these mundane things warrant aesthetic attention. This
new significance is the result of the complex affect that surrounds the collapse, that mixture of nostalgia and wonder at (past) civilisation encapsulated by Dr Eleven’s attempts to forget “the sweetness of life on Earth.” The mundane things on display at the Museum of Civilisation are also subject to what Svetlana Alpers has labelled “museum effect”: “Museums turn cultural materials into art objects. The products of other cultures are made into something that we can look at.”5 By entering a museum display, an artefact is uncoupled from its context and becomes caught up in a quintessentially Western dichotomy between subject and object—a dichotomy evoked by the physical distance between the observer and the exhibit. Ultimately, the artefact is objectified by being understood through the grid of existing cultural assumptions about museums and art.

Seen in this light, the Museum of Civilisation of Station Eleven represents something of a paradox. By showing iPhones and high-heel shoes in a new and unfamiliar light, it labels them as belonging to “another culture”—the prepandemic one. But on the other hand, the logic of the collection, with its objectification of everyday things, appears to be in continuity with prepandemic culture. As Western civilisation collapses, its traces linger in this museum’s objectifying effects. The Museum of Civilisation plays a central role in the narrative economy of St. John Mandel’s novel. The plot of Station Eleven is multilinear and forces the reader to juggle different timelines, before and after the pandemic. However, the objects on display at the Museum provide stability; they become a material anchor for the tension between preapocalyptic and postapocalyptic time on which the novel is founded.6 The Museum also serves as a spatial hub for the plot, since the Traveling Symphony has been headed there from early on. When the protagonists leave it behind, the plot can end, ambiguously, with a vision of an “awakening world” and “countries on the other side” of the sea.7

Perhaps most importantly, the Museum’s collection foregrounds an objectified materiality that is both uncoupled from utilitarian needs and subservient to human affects: when decontextualised from the practices of consumerism, iPhones and high-heel shoes highlight, nostalgically, what human communities have lost. The novel captures how the Museum’s founder and curator, Clark, “stood by the case and found himself moved by every object he saw there, by the human enterprise each object had required.”8 Clark’s celebration of “human enterprise” throws into sharper relief the paradox I have already mentioned: even as the pandemic has brought Western modernity to an end, some of its anthropocentric practices continue within the space of the museum.9 The objectification performed by the Severn City Airport collection goes against the grain of contemporary thinking on nonhuman materiality as a site of subversion of human hierarchies and ontological binaries that loom large in Western modernity. St. John Mandel’s Museum of Civilisation does not afford insight into the “agency” of material things—the kind of nonhuman agency influentially theorised by Bruno Latour in the context of actor-network theory.10 Likewise, the museum effect is objectifying insofar as it erases what Jane Bennett calls, interchangeably, the “vibrant” quality of matter and its “thing-power,” its capacity to shape reality independently of human intervention.11 Thus, the Museum of Civilisation reaffirms human mastery over material objects, via a nostalgic celebration of technological ingenuity.

Yet St. John Mandel is not alone in struggling with nonhuman materiality within the institution of the museum, which has long been associated—in the wake of the Enlightenment—with practices of cataloguing reality and thereby imposing on it an anthropocentric order.12 A case in point are recent curatorial attempts surrounding the “Anthropocene,” a term popularised by Earth scientist Paul Crutzen for the current geological epoch, which Crutzen defines by pointing to the long-term impact of industrial activities on the planet.13 Writing about an exhibition on the Anthropocene at the Deutsches Museum in
Munich (2014–2016), Nina Möllers notes that “the quality of uncertainty that surrounds the Anthropocene particularly challenges the traditional perception of museums as agencies and meditators [sic] of knowledge where people can learn how things ‘really are’ and ‘how they work.’”

It is hardly a coincidence that Gregg Mitman, Marco Armiero, and Robert Emmett, the editors of a collection titled *Future Remains*, invoke the pre-modern cabinet of curiosities, not the Enlightenment museum, as a useful model for their attempt to curate the Anthropocene for the benefit of a future audience. Drawing inspiration from an “Anthropocene Slam” hosted in 2014 by the University of Wisconsin-Madison in collaboration with the Rachel Carson Centre for Environment and Society (Munich) and the Environmental Humanities Laboratory at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology (Stockholm), the editors explain that material objects are uniquely suited to destabilise anthropocentric assumptions. However, this destabilisation requires giving up the rigid objectifying practices of the Enlightenment museum and embracing the fluid metaphysics of the cabinet of curiosities. In the book’s afterword, Libby Robin argues that “museums and artists of the present are returning to cabinets almost like those of the pre-Enlightenment era, as they seek to make sense of the chaotic changes of our present ‘strange times.’ 

Wunderkammern juxtapose unlikely things.” If the Enlightenment museum aims to reinforce scientific taxonomies, objectifying the material world and depriving it of its “vibrant” quality, the cabinet of curiosities operates by way of surprising parallels that rewrite, at least potentially, the rigid templates of modern Western thinking.

The instability that results from these resonances is at the root of the “quality of uncertainty” evoked by Möllers. Such elusive uncertainty concerns, first and foremost, a future that appears illegible and impervious to prediction, with optimistic and pessimistic climate scenarios diverging widely. The uncertainty also reflects the moral tangles of the climate crisis, which is seemingly the product of an abstract, invisible, distributed causality, and yet implicates the daily actions of all individuals in the developed world: no one in particular is responsible for climate change in the sense that he or she single-handedly “caused” it, and yet were are all implicated in extractive and greenhouse gas-emitting practices (through, for instance, our travel or consumerist habits). Because of this fundamental uncertainty, which is both factual and ethical, the Anthropocene becomes a challenging starting point for an exhibition: the museum has to reinvent itself beyond its long-standing reputation as a “classifying house,” to quote P. J. P. Whitehead’s apt description of the museum in the post-Enlightenment tradition.

More specifically, Möllers argues that rising to Anthropocenic challenges in a museum environment requires a reconsideration of the status of things as the building block of an exhibition. The “traditionally retrospective perspective” of museums has to give way to a more nuanced framing of artefacts as “simultaneously close and remote, present in the here and now while also anchored in the past, and embedded in a global network of things while being charged with personal and local meaning.” No longer objectified and caught up in Western dichotomies, the museum artefact thus becomes a material stand-in for the complexity of the Anthropocene, with its enmeshment of human agency, historically specific responsibilities, and nonhuman materiality (“vibrant matter”). As I argue in more detail in *Narrating the Mesh*, the interaction of human and nonhuman factors in times of climate crisis is a source of considerable conceptual and ethical complexity, which means (among other things) that the Anthropocene cannot be fully encapsulated by linear, teleological narratives. The complexity of the Anthropocene also brings in a great deal of uncertainty, in that we cannot fully know or predict the consequences of our actions—and we are on thin moral ice when we make decisions that may impact the future of human societies and nonhuman species. The Anthropocene museum as Möllers imagines it serves as a productive space for staging these tensions.
My goal in this article is to explore contemporary literature that embraces a similarly innovative approach to the museum as an institution. In the next section, I start by contrasting the museum with another trope identified by Pieter Vermeulen in a discussion of Anthropocene fiction, the “future reader” who looks back on the mistakes and planetary impact of present-day societies. Both the future reader and the Anthropocene museum illustrate the challenges involved in capturing the climate crisis in literary form. I then turn to two contemporary works that deploy the museum trope effectively: Flights (2007), by Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk, and The Octopus Museum (2019), by American poet Brenda Shaughnessy. These are experimental works that feature a plurality of independent narrative strands (in Flights) or a narrative frame (in The Octopus Museum), while cross-fertilising story with essayistic and poetic writing, respectively.

Both works represent a response to influential arguments on the novel’s inability to come to terms with the spatiotemporal scale and moral intricacies of the climate crisis. In The Great Derangement, Amitav Ghosh discusses “the peculiar forms of resistance that climate change presents to what is now regarded as serious fiction.” However, as scholars have noted, Ghosh bases his claims on an unreasonably narrow definition of serious fiction, coinciding largely with the realist novel. If we look beyond literary realism, we encounter a variety of forms of writing that engage productively with the climate crisis by drawing on the vocabulary and affective registers of science, weird, or dystopian fiction. Tokarczuk’s and Shaughnessy’s works exemplify an alternative way of confronting the Anthropocene through literary form, one based primarily on the cross-fertilisation of narrative with non-narrative genres such as the essay and poetry. Tokarczuk and Shaughnessy are not alone in this respect: experimental works by other contemporary writers such as Ben Marcus (e.g., The Age of Wire and String [1995]) and Thalia Field (whose Bird Lovers, Backyard [2010] features a natural history museum) also address the climate crisis via an amalgam of genres that resists novelistic templates. In this way, these writings show that disrupting the linearity of narrative—particularly as the realist novel has practiced it—is instrumental in coming to grips with Anthropocene.

It is worth stressing that St. John Mandel’s Station Eleven also deploys a significant degree of nonlinearity, through frequent flashbacks to the preapocalyptic period. My criticism focuses on the Museum of Civilisation and how its nostalgic affect objectifies the nonhuman and affirms anthropocentric hierarchies. Other aspects of St. John Mandel’s novel may well work against this celebration of technological society, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this essay, which engages primarily with the museum trope. As we shall see, Flights and The Octopus Museum appeal to a wider range of affects than the Museum of Civilisation in Station Eleven does; they do not objectify museum items but rather reveal their thing-power. In doing so, I argue, these works offer a highly sophisticated account of the complexities and uncertainties that define our Anthropocenic moment.

A Tale of Two Tropes
Also contending with contemporary literature’s figurations of the Anthropocene, Pieter Vermeulen explores a trope that intersects with my discussion of Anthropocene museums: that of the “future reader.” Commenting on Max Brooks’s novel World War Z and The Collapse of Western Civilization, a fictional thought experiment by two historians of science, Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, Vermeulen argues that both works adopt an “affectively overdetermined posthumous dimension”: they imagine a survivor who looks back on the present and particularly on humanity’s shocking inability to avoid climate catastrophe. This survivor is also a “reader,” of diaries and other textual materials (in World War Z) and
of the nonverbal traces left by humanity in the geological record (in *The Collapse of Western Civilization*). Of course, as Vermeulen also notes, this posthuman narrative by a human figure has a distinctly paradoxical quality, in that humanity is both erased and implicated by the act of storytelling. The Anthropocene museum trope shares the retrospective set-up of the future reader: it is a collection of artefacts (which may well include textual artefacts) that provide an affective perspective on human society as we—contemporary literature’s flesh-and-blood readers—know it.

Yet the Anthropocene museum differs from the future reader trope in significant ways, which account for the intense formal experimentation of the works I will consider below. First, if the future reader foregrounds and problematises human subjectivity through the narrator’s anthropomorphic voice, the museum is situated at the crossroads of human subjectivity and nonhuman materiality. A museum is, of course, a collection of things that may reflect, more or less explicitly, human categories and taxonomies, particularly those of Western modernity, from which the museum developed as an institution. In *Station Eleven*, this set-up is clearly illustrated by the objectification of the collected items, which take on nostalgic value—by elevating human ingenuity—as soon as they lose their utilitarian function. But material things can also push in the opposite direction, away from an anthropocentric mindset and towards an insight into the deep entanglement of human cultures and nonhuman realities—an entanglement within which nonhuman things can display autonomy and efficacy.

Thinkers affiliated with New Materialism and object-oriented ontology—including Jane Bennett, Timothy Morton, and Graham Harman—have written extensively about the ways in which things, including quotidian things such as those on display at St. John Mandel’s Museum of Civilisation, elude human grasp and destabilise dichotomies between human agency and the passivity of “mere” matter. In the first chapter of *Vibrant Matter*, for instance, Bennett reflects on the materiality of the debris she sees clogging a storm drain in Baltimore: a plastic glove, a dead rat, and a bottle cap among other things. This collection exerts a strange attraction on her. It evokes “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.” Ecocritics Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann have translated this insight into an approach to literature attuned to agency as “intermingling [nonhuman] agencies and forces that persist and change over eons, producing new forms, bodies, and natures.” Visions of the Anthropocene museum in contemporary literature can deploy and probe objects against the grain of their instrumental function, thus bringing out the more-than-human “forms, bodies, and nature” highlighted by Iovino and Oppermann. The exhibits elude or challenge the curator’s taxonomical principles, revealing new conceptual and affective connections beyond the human-scale world—connections that speak to the autonomy of matter. In this article’s case studies, this revelation is brought home either by turning the human body into a museum display that is transcorporeally connected to external reality (*Flights*) or by treating the physical space of the text as a record of human emotions apprehended through a nonhuman vantage point (*The Octopus Museum*). While the latter strategy has a good deal in common with Vermeulen’s future reader trope, Shaughnessy makes clear that the “reader” in question is anything but a human or even anthropomorphic reader, thus complicating the retrospection of the museum.

Another important difference is that, if the future reader refers to a narrative situation that favours posthuman temporality, the Anthropocene museum has a more marked spatial footprint: within the museum, a particular temporal relationship between the visitor and the collected items is grounded in physical space. However, while traditional ways of thinking about museum collections—indebted to a nineteenth-century epistememe—aimed to “fix” the visitor’s spatiotemporal understanding of the exhibits
along rigidly taxonomical lines, the challenge of putting together a collection on the Anthropocene (as highlighted by Möllers and the Future Remains volume) has to do with conveying the instability of human-nonhuman relations in times of anthropogenic climate change. Timothy Morton’s frequently cited concept of “hyperobject” is pertinent here. Ubiquitous materials such as plastic will survive us and become physically embedded in the Earth’s landscape, for example in an oceanic garbage patch thousands of miles away from where it was discarded. A simple plastic bottle is thus a hyperobject implicated in spatiotemporal scales that far transcend the manageable, mundane associations of the word “thing.” This strange conflation of the everyday life of human communities and their long-term impact on the planet destabilises the spatiotemporal set-up of the museum, calling for new ways of visualising the entanglement of the individual items on display, the visitor, and the planetary scale. In contemporary literature, the Anthropocene museum trope exposes this entanglement by using the imagined setting of the museum as a canvas to trace more abstract relations in space and time. The following passage about the snow globe on display at St. John Mandel’s Museum of Civilisation is exemplary:

Consider the snow globe. Consider the mind that invented those miniature storms, the factory worker who turned sheets of plastic into white flakes of snow, the hand that drew the plan for the miniature Severn City with its church steeple and city hall, the assembly-line worker who watched the globe glide past on a conveyer belt somewhere in China. Consider the white gloves on the hands of the woman who inserted the snow globes into boxes, to be packed into larger boxes, crates, shipping containers. Consider the card games played belowdecks in the evenings on the ship carrying the containers across the ocean. (255)

Adopting a descriptive pace, the passage marks an abrupt shift in space and time from the setting of the Museum of Civilisation to the many agents involved in designing and producing this simple object associated with childlike wonder. St. John Mandel displaces that wonder from the object itself to its material history, which straddles continents and the temporality of catastrophe (because the snowball is a relic of prepandemic times). The snowball thus becomes something akin to a hyperobject existing on multiple scales of reality within a globally connected world. As already discussed in the introduction, St. John Mandel’s focus remains on the human intentions and actions involved in the snowball’s history: the excerpt only mentions in passing, but does not foreground, the way in which the human-scale world is shaped by things such as “sheets of plastic,” “conveyer belts,” and the transoceanic routes of container ships. But the descriptive passage nevertheless succeeds in connecting the local setting of the Museum of Civilisation to the planetary stage of this snowball’s history, via a zooming-out effect. This strategic use of museum space and the material items embedded within it recalls what video game scholars discuss under the heading of “environmental storytelling”: the player’s interactions with the game environment enrich and extend the plot through letters, audio tapes, and other narratively significant objects. While there can be no direct interaction with St. John Mandel’s snowball, the passage succeeds in evoking the way in which material things, including the snowball, branch out into global connections. This is an example of how literary form can employ the space of the museum to stage Anthropocenic relations in a globalized world. However, if St. John Mandel’s Museum of Civilisation remains mostly within anthropocentric confines, Tokarczuk’s and Shaughnessy’s experiments unsettle the centrality of the human by foregrounding things that are fundamentally elusive, unknowable, and inherently active.
The Anthropocene museum trope also creates a tension between narrative and conceptual categories that are not narratively organised. Museum collections are brought together by specific knowledge practices (a natural history museum) or particular value attributions (an art museum)—not, or at least not primarily, by the temporal, causal, and psychological sequentiality of story. Thus, writing about museums in American culture, Steven Conn argues that the “ideal museum builders hoped to achieve was both to impose a stability and order on bodies of knowledge and to produce changes in that knowledge.” That “order” is of a systematic, synchronic nature—not the affective sequencing that comes with story. This synchronic organisation is reminiscent of textual forms such as the list or the catalogue, and indeed the work of curating and presenting a museum collection involves a large number of list-like documents (catalogues, archival records, etc.) that are fundamentally non-narrative.

Writing about species extinction, Ursula Heise also opposes the enumerative form of biodiversity databases (such as the IUCN’s Red List of Threatened Species) to the more centralised, teleological organisation of narrative. The database, arguably, inherits the Enlightenment museum’s taxonomic ambitions, but may be traversed by subtle strands of narrative, as Heise shows.

As a space of tension between cataloguing and narrativity, the Anthropocene museum promises to disrupt the central role narrative currently plays in literary practices (largely, through the hegemony of the novel—a quintessentially narrative genre—within the contemporary literary marketplace). In St. John Mandel’s Station Eleven, that disruption is short-lived and coincides with a descriptive digression reconstructing the history of one of the items on display, the snowball. The challenge to narrativity becomes more radical in Tokarczuk’s and Shaughnessy’s works, which are defined by their dialogue with two non-narrative genres, the essay and lyric poetry. Through this dialogue, Tokarczuk and Shaughnessy are able to fully leverage the Anthropocene museum trope towards insight into humanity’s affective condition in highly unstable times.

“The Human Body Joining within Itself Everything with Everything”: Olga Tokarczuk’s Flights

“I realized that—in spite of all the risks involved—a thing in motion will always be better than a thing at rest.” This line, lifted from the early pages of Flights, captures perfectly the philosophy behind the book’s composition. Flights is not a novel with a clear-cut plotline: rather, the textual focus is in itself a “thing in motion.” This is not to say that story plays no role at all in Tokarczuk’s work: some of the sections pick up where previous ones left off, creating a handful of self-contained narrative arcs. For instance, a number of sections entitled “Kunicki” chronicle the eponymous character’s ordeal when his wife and son disappear, all of a sudden, during a holiday in Croatia. Other fragments are essayistic in tone, the narratorial I fusing with an authorial persona. At first glance, this instability in voice and focus could be said to recreate what William James famously called the “flights and perchings” of consciousness, with the meandering form of the essay channelling the vagaries of a mind perpetually “in motion.” This reference to the philosophy of mind is certainly not irrelevant, given Tokarczuk’s training as a psychologist and considering also that several of the book’s sections develop, with more than a hint of irony, a discipline known as “travel psychology.”

Yet the “things in motion” in Tokarczuk’s Flights are not just human subjects. The text invites readers to take the word “thing” in this section’s opening line in a very literal sense. Some of the things that circulate in the book are material artefacts: a short insert titled “Things Not Made by Human Hands” discusses “sarira” (Buddhist) relics that allegedly materialise out of nothing, without human intervention.
(a rather radical form of nonhuman agency). Mostly, however, the text foregrounds anatomical “things” that originated in a living human body and acquired autonomy through careful preservation efforts. The book’s obsession with anatomical parts ranges from seventeenth-century Flemish physician Philip Verheyen to the contemporary plastination techniques of the fictional Dr Blau (the protagonist of another narrative strand in Tokarczuk’s work). Anatomical museums are a constant presence: an appendix, titled “Itinerarium,” lists all the museums mentioned, often in passing, in the text, and they trace an imaginary geography linking Vienna to Philadelphia, Leiden to Saint Petersburg.

The human body is thus turned into a museum exhibit, but this is no straightforward objectification of the body, at least if we take the word “objectification” as implying a Cartesian binary of perceiving (human) subject and perceived (inanimate) object. Rather, the preserved body involves the living subject through an insistent affect of enchantment and mystery—hence the uncertainty that surrounds these anatomical objects: “The body is something absolutely mysterious,” writes Verheyen. Further, the preserved body isn’t monolithic and lifeless but rather retains the patterned complexity and suppleness of the original, as in a scene in which Dr Blau compares an embalmed cat to a “fragile piece of origami” and notes with surprise that its eyelid “was soft and gave under his finger.” Read in this light, the anatomical exhibitions that punctuate the pages of *Flights* are more closely reminiscent of the early modern cabinets of curiosities invoked by the editors of *Future Remains* than of nineteenth-century museums. These exhibitions do not impose a top-down, taxonomical order, but rather evoke a Renaissance episteme based on unstable metaphysical correspondences between the nonhuman and the human world. Discussing the logic of the early modern Wunderkammer in contradistinction to the post-Enlightenment museum, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill writes that the function of the former “was to enable the interpretation and reinterpretation of the similitudes, made manifest in the collections, which demonstrated how Art and Nature echoed each other.” Tokarczuk’s metaphorical language is the main conduit for these similitudes in *Flights*.

On the one hand, the human body is brought out in the open, turned into a visible landscape. The protagonist of one of the book’s narrative arcs, a Polish biologist based in Australia, watches an in-flight “movie about the fantastic voyage of several brave scientists . . . headed into a patient’s body. She watches the screen without headphones, loves the spectacular photography—settings that resemble the bottom of the ocean, the crimson corridors of blood vessels, the pulse of constricting arteries, and inside these the bellicose lymphocytes like visitors from outer space.” This science fiction cliché of the voyage into the human body is revitalised by metaphors that flow in the opposite direction: instead of “scaling up” the microcosm of the human body, they zoom out to portray the planet itself as a macroscopic body of sorts. In another essayistic passage, travellers are presented as “the individual nerve impulses of the world,” as if the displacement of human beings served the same function as synaptic connections in the brain. The geography of the Peloponnese is compared to “the shape of a great maternal hand, not a human one, that is dipping into the water to check if the temperature is right for a bath.” These metaphors and similes work toward stitching together the human body and nonhuman realities that appear distant from the domain of visible bodies, and yet share their deep-rooted, affective materiality: the physical connectivity of movement, the “great maternal hand, not a human one,” caring for its unidentified child.

Tokarczuk’s metaphorical language thus bridges the gap between the lived, phenomenology body and what Daisy Hildyard has called the “second body.” An extension of the “carbon footprint” metaphor, Hildyard’s second body captures how our daily actions and decisions have an indirect, but potentially
devastating, effect on the global scale, coalescing into a planetary body.\textsuperscript{50} However, if our primary body is directly available in experience, the second body tends to remain phenomenologically distant and inaccessible. By exposing the normally invisible \textit{interior} of the human body through recurrent patterns of metaphors and similes, Tokarczuk connects it to the abstract reality of our planetary impact. Through this interplay of the inner and the outer, the second body acquires experiential substance: we see ourselves as “things in motion” on a planetary body with which our physical bodies are intimately, if secretly, interlinked. It cannot be a coincidence, in this sense, that the biologist who watches the science fiction film is also an environmental activist and that during a mid-flight reverie she envisions how “life on the planet gets developed by some powerful force contained in every atom of organic matter.”\textsuperscript{51} Yet the “force” remains uncertain and unknowable, like the preserved body parts through which it finds expression in the book.

Central to the metaphorical meshing together of first and second body is a particular trope, which as noted above recurs throughout \textit{Flights}: the premodern cabinet of curiosity. Through the correspondences it establishes between the nonhuman world, human artefacts, and the body, the cabinet sidesteps the “classifying house” of modernity and becomes a template for the Anthropocene museum. The cabinet’s logic of corporeal interconnection is clearly articulated by the narrator when she asks: “Maybe there exists some sort of reflection of the great and the small, the human body joining within itself everything with everything—stories and heroes, gods and animals, the order of plants and the harmony of minerals?”\textsuperscript{52} Experiencing the interior of the body (“within itself”) becomes a means of intuiting the linkage (“joining . . . everything with everything”) of cultural practices and nonhuman entities, the divine and the material. That linkage has to do, primarily, with the way in which the displacement of human bodies (including, of course, their embodied imagination) reflects the flux of reality: everything moves in Tokarczuk’s work, and movement becomes the very foundation for materiality (recall the “thing in motion” from which I took my cue). The cabinet of curiosities creates a metaphorical traffic in which the human body is transcorporeally extended into the nonhuman world, but the exact nature of their entanglement is shrouded in mystery and clashes with scientific claims to absolute certainty.\textsuperscript{53}

One of the manifestations of this mystery is that, in \textit{Flights}, the body becomes the site of a paradoxical tension, which mirrors the formal workings of Tokarczuk’s prose. The body is an element that “joins,” but it is also deeply fragmented and thus requires careful work of preservation. The book itself is divided into a plurality of figures and voices that are “flawed, defective, broken,” like the body itself.\textsuperscript{54} Tokarczuk writes in fragments but is also drawn to completeness, like the Flemish scientist Verheyen who, experiencing phantom pain after the loss of his left leg, wonders: “Why do I feel this lack, sense this absence? Are we perhaps condemned to wholeness, and every fragmentation, every quartering, will only be a pretence, will happen on the surface, underneath which, however, the plan remains intact, unalterable? Does even the smallest fragment still belong to the whole?”\textsuperscript{55} The “whole” remains out of sight in \textit{Flights}, at least in the sense of narratively satisfying teleology and closure. And yet, the fragmented form of the book—divided as it is between narrative and essayistic aspirations—manages to channel the gaps of our Anthropocenic reality more effectively than the focused geometry of a novel. Like Verheyen, the scientists we encounter experience metaphysical longings that can only be addressed through the observation and preservation of materiality, including—but not limited to—the materiality of the human body. These are, in other words, scientists-curators of an Anthropocene museum that dwells in the disconnect between personal and planetary scales of reality, even as it attempts to bring
them together by way of bodily resonances. Tokarczuk’s experimental language employs literary form to perform a similarly attentive curation of a fragmented, uncertain reality. The breakdown of narrative linearity is essential to that operation.

“I Didn’t Think We Wrote Much Poetry Anymore”: The Octopus Museum

The curators of Shaughnessy’s titular “octopus museum” are not scientists, at least not in the usual sense of the word. One of the many ironies of Shaughnessy’s collection is that octopi are not the centrepiece of the exhibit, as the title might suggest at first glance, but the curators of the exhibition. The inspiration of Shaughnessy’s collection is postapocalyptic, and the apocalypse is plainly environmental in origin: the world has been taken over by octopi, or more accurately by Cephalopod Octopoid Overlords (COO in short), who “came ashore” when their “vast home of millions of years [was] destroyed,” with a clear reference to the devastating impact of human activities on the Earth’s oceans. This postapocalyptic world frames Shaughnessy’s poems—many of them in prose—and evokes a tangible setting and cast of characters, such as the “family on the run” of the volume’s last poem (and other poems including “Nest” and “Blueberries for Cal”). This setup lends The Octopus Museum an unusual degree of narrativity for a poetry collection. In the acknowledgments that close the volume, Shaughnessy even refers to St. John Mandel’s Station Eleven as a source of inspiration. Yet, if St. John Mandel’s Museum of Civilization reaffirms a sense of wonder, tinged by nostalgia, at human ingenuity, Shaughnessy’s octopus museum is a much stranger creature. First, the octopus museum is less a physical space than a metaphorical template for thinking about the formal organisation and textual materials of the volume. A “Visitor’s Guide to the OM [octopus museum] Exhibits,” which prefaces the poems, doubles as a table of contents. After the introductory poem “Identity & Community (There is No ‘I’ in ‘Sea’),” the Visitor’s Guide announces five “exhibition spaces”: “Gallery of a Dreaming Species,” a “Special Collection” titled “As They Were,” “‘To Serve Man’: Rituals of the Late Anthropocene Colony,” “Found Objects/Lost Subjects: A Retrospective,” and, finally, the “Permanent Collection: Archive of Pre-Existing Conditions.” A note prefixed to this last section spells out what many of the poems had suggested obliquely: while the voices represented throughout the collection are—mostly—human ones, the work of collecting and curating these disparate “exhibits” was carried out by the “Department of Human Studies” of an octopus community or “Cephalo-Octopodal Pod” (COP). Thus, if Shaughnessy’s Anthropocene museum implicates a “future reader” in Vermeulen’s sense, this reader isn’t aligned with a human mind but with a nonhuman one. Still, the curators hasten to point out in the same note to the “Permanent Collection” that they “worked within [human] language and wielded [human] tools in order to better understand [our species’] mysteries.” The ironic inversion of perspective is inescapable here: octopi look at humans with the same mix of respect for their intelligence and mystery that we associate with these invertebrates.

Where human beings clearly fall short of their “overlords,” however, is in the latter’s strong sense of community: “Individual Octopodes don’t live long (between six months and two years) but as a species we have extensive, meshed, intergenerational memories. Humans live longer but each generation forgets what was previously learned.” This emphasis on collectivity stands in stark contrast to the alienation that emerges from the collection’s first poem, aptly titled “Identity & Community,” which centres on a human I aspiring, but finding herself unable, to join a group of women swimming in the ocean. “They splash away from me—they’re their pod. People are alien,” is the lyric I’s laconic comment. The poem closes with the words: “Don’t try to remember this. Don’t document it.” Yet the
octopi obviously ignore that injunction, because the whole collection represents an attempt to catalogue—tentatively and unsystematically—the anxieties and hesitations of a society approaching a climate tipping point. In that way, the octopi sever the link between cataloguing and anthropocentrism that has long defined curatorial practices after the Enlightenment.

Some of the feelings on display overturn the conventional affective repertoire of postapocalyptic fiction, including St. John Mandel’s nostalgic longing for a preapocalyptic time. In a poem titled “There Was No Before,” Shaughnessy hints at the “black children . . . killed in broad daylight, in parks and streets and in houses and churches and cars” and adds, wryly, “This was Before, and we’re almost certain it is the same now as Before.”64 The past, which would be the present for the book’s readers, turns out to be as apocalyptic as the octopus-dominated “now.” The distinction before pre- and postapocalyptic time collapses, suggesting that media attention to spectacular catastrophes (like St. John Mandel’s pandemic) oversimplifies the pace and scope of both social inequalities and environmental devastation, which are already at work in today’s world. Equally revealing are the “Letters from the Elders” in the section “Found Objects/Lost Subjects.” Here Ned Grimley-Groves, who introduces himself as the mayor of a small town in New Hampshire, starts by lamenting: “We thought we were throwing [plastic] ‘away’ until ‘away’ threw itself back at us.”65 In a later letter, he points out that “most species evolve to live; we devolved to evil.” Yet he goes on to explain that “hope for this earth to go on after we’re gone is the only kind of love left.”66 The letter concludes:

That some form of hope can stay, with or without us. And if not, maybe the Octopodes will care to find some form to remember us by. In case that is the case, I am collecting fragments—scraps I find here and there in script or print, among the debris, mostly anonymous ephemera and some poetry, which surprises me. I didn’t think we wrote much poetry anymore.67

That passage provides a key for reading Shaughnessy’s collection. The repetition of the word “form” in the quotation’s first two sentences implies that the patterns of textuality—literary style and genre—might be central to the task of remembering, and being remembered, in Anthropocenic times. The form the character singles out is the fragment, in a self-reflexive commentary on the anonymous “debris” of sensations and emotions collected in this Octopus Museum. The contrast with the Museum of Civilisation couldn’t be sharper: while St. John Mandel’s museum offers a nostalgic celebration of Western society, the Octopus Museum diminishes the human by way of humorous modesty (“I didn’t think we wrote much poetry anymore”).68 Only by displaying fragile and uncertain fragments of humanity can the collection draw closer to a hopeful outlook on the future, “with or without us.”

Shaughnessy’s success in diminishing humanity is tied to a pointed denial of traditional lyric form, through a plurality of characters and agencies (including, of course, the octopi’s curation of this collection) that significantly trouble the relationship between the reader and the lyric I. Besides the narrative framing, Shaughnessy’s work, like Tokarczuk’s, is rich in essayistic and satirical echoes, from the endless series of questions in “ Queries: How Do We Define People?” to the mock green marketing in “Our Beloved Infinite Crapulence”: “I . . . I love this local company, especially because for every order—and this is so cool—they make a tax-deductible contribution to honor and support the world-famous Pacific Garbage Patch, in your name.”69 Even the aphorism makes its way into the collection, in a two-line poem titled “Map of Itself”: “The idea of travel. / The very idea.”70 If the fragments of this Octopus
Museum offer a portrayal of contemporary society, it is a deeply uneven picture traversed by multiple rifts and tensions, as the mingling of genres and affective registers suggests.

This diversity complicates, and enriches, both the lyric form and the narrative inspiration of the collection. In “Our Family on the Run,” one of the book’s most obviously postapocalyptic poems, the speaker mentions that “If you read the stories, you’re supposed to find abandoned photo albums, suitcases, babies. The useless things cut out by survival’s swift knife. Dead weight, long gone.” The scraps collected in The Octopus Museum are emphatically no survivalist’s material, either. In “stories” (by which Shaughnessy presumably refers to conventional postapocalyptic fictions), there is no room for the rich repertoire of styles and affects we encounter in these pages, no time or patience for irony or a belittled humanity. All of the Octopus Museum’s exhibits would be “dead weight,” and yet—Shaughnessy intimates—their value lies in their ability to capture the strange mixture of despair and vivacity that defines our Anthropocenic times. If Flights revolves around the mysterious uncertainty of the human body—how it disrupts dichotomies between living matter and the inanimate world—The Octopus Museum uses a collage of textual materials to locate precariousness within an affective realm.

More specifically, the materiality that comes most forcefully to the fore in Shaughnessy’s work isn’t that of the human body, but the experiential and affective thickness of language itself in its numerous forms and uses. A great deal of uncertainty surrounds the choice and juxtaposition of these textual fragments, which reflect the elusive octopus curators’ attempts to “work within [human] language.” In this Octopus Museum, no definite knowledge of our species (or of octopus alterity) is imparted: instead, only unanswerable questions, longings, and grievances are voiced. Mostly, we end up where we started: “people,” not unlike octopi, “are alien,” as the book’s first poem submits. But even that tenuous conclusion can yield insight into humanity’s affective predicament as we face climate devastation. This unsystematic Anthropocene museum, which shapes the book’s organisation from its very title and table of contents, uses the resources of form to offer perspective on the uncertain affectivity of the contemporary world. In that process, language itself takes on more-than-human agency, since the octopus-curated fragments display a mosaic of human emotions without embracing individuality. After all, as Ned Grimley-Groves notes in one of the Letters from the Elders, octopi are “an ink species. They overwrote us.” The second part of that characterisation may not be entirely fair, because humanity does come through in these pages. But it is a diminished humanity, and it is filtered through intense engagement with nonhuman life.

Conclusion
Throughout this article, the Museum of Civilisation in St. John Mandel’s Station Eleven has served as a foil to Tokarczuk’s and Shaughnessy’s more experimental engagement with the museum as a space to stage anxieties surrounding the climate crisis. The Museum of Civilisation elevates technological society by investing its objects with an affective value (primarily, nostalgia) that tends to elide the efficacy of nonhuman things. By contrast, Tokarczuk’s cabinets of curiosities and Shaughnessy’s Octopus Museum present a more complex image of human-nonhuman entanglement, one that ultimately constitutes a more effective response to the crises of the present than the one contained in St. John Mandel’s Museum. Tokarczuk explores the materiality of the human body through multiple strands of metaphorical language, which create a sense of enchantment as well as transcorporeal linkage between human life and nonhuman environments. Tokarczuk’s treatment of the body steers clear of objectification: the body is neither turned into an inert object nor held up for aesthetic contemplation;
on the contrary, it remains hypnotically vibrant and epistemologically uncertain even after biological death. The preservation activities in which the book’s scientists engage do not aim to “fix” the body into lifeless matter, but rather to retain its fluidity, which undermines the binaries of Western thinking (particularly subject vs. object, but also animate vs. inanimate, alive vs. dead, etc.). Harking back to the experimentations of the early modern period, these scientists are turned into curators of interconnections that defy conceptual dichotomies between human life and “mere” matter. The cabinet of curiosity thus becomes a blueprint for an Anthropocene museum in which the exhibits do not reinforce existing structures of knowledge but rather reveal the uncertainties and physical as well as moral entanglements of living in times of altered relationality between the human and the nonhuman. Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker have argued that “To bring climate change home . . . entails reconfiguring our spatial and temporal relations to the weather-world and cultivating an imaginary where our bodies are makers [sic], transfer points, and sensors of the ‘climate change’ from which we might otherwise feel to distant.”

By revisiting a Renaissance episteme of correspondences across the human-nonhuman divide, Tokarczuk takes concrete steps towards this new imaginary of the body.

Shaughnessy’s Octopus Museum also seeks to avoid the systematic categories that museum culture inherited from Enlightenment thinking. Thematically, the Anthropocene and climate change loom even larger here than in Tokarczuk’s work: in the postapocalyptic frame, humanity gets its comeuppance for mismanaging the planet when octopi emerge from the oceans and become the Earth’s dominant species. The things collected in this octopus-curated museum are textual ones: narrative, lyric, and essayistic fragments that document the complicities of contemporary culture—including “green” culture—as well as the anxieties of a species facing a radically uncertain future. This “debris” of civilisation as we know it complicates standard postapocalyptic narratives, with their neat distinction between a time before and a time after the catastrophe, instead exposing the social and political rifts that underlie the climate crisis. The encounter between the human quality of these fragments and the nonhuman perspective brought to bear on them by their curators refracts the Anthropocene—that grand narrative of human mastery—into a multiplicity of affects ranging from despair to irony and cautious hope. Shaughnessy’s fragments refuse to project a coherent image of humanity, instead probing the many hesitations and moral lapses but also compassionate gestures that define the present moment. Through the octopi’s nonhuman agency, which is implicated in the curation of these textual objects, humanity comes out faded and diminished, its epistemological pretentions—including the knowledge at the heart of museum institutions—rendered parochial in the face of uncertainty.

Both works represent sophisticated commentaries on the status of the object in contemporary culture, its hovering between consumerist impulses, human desires and fantasies of technological control, and a nonhuman materiality that—as influentially argued by scholars like Morton and Bennett—transcends the human. The Anthropocene museum trope is well positioned to stage these tensions. Whether it serves as a tool for unsettling anthropocentric assumptions depends, largely, on how it is deployed by individual authors. Tokarczuk’s and Shaughnessy’s formal innovations—particularly the cross-fertilisation of narrative, poetry, and essayistic writing—bring about a profound rethinking of museum collections: they present the museum as a space capable of blurring ontological boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. In this way, Flights and The Octopus Museum resonate with arguments that contemporary literature has to look beyond the realist novel to develop formal solutions that can probe the complexities of the climate crisis.
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254.

258.


5 Station Eleven, 334.


9 This does not imply that all catalogues and taxonomies are anthropocentric, of course. However, in Western archival practices, taxonomic and anthropocentric tendencies have tended to go hand in hand. See Gaskell, “Museums and Philosophy,” 77: “Westerners have distinguished, named, sorted, grouped, gathered, and subsequently deployed many tangible things in order to make knowledge claims about both the things themselves and the emergent concepts their users have associated with them. These activities are the basis of much Western methodical thinking since classical antiquity.”

10 Paul J. Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” Nature 415, no. 6867 (2002): 23. This description of our geological epoch has ignited extensive debates within both the natural sciences and the humanities and social sciences. Many of these debates centre on the term itself: whether it should be considered a loose label or enter geology’s official nomenclature, and whether its emphasis on a generalising “anthropos” doesn’t downplay moral and factual responsibilities that are specific to Western capitalism. See, e.g., Eileen Crist, “On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature,” Environmental Humanities 3, no. 1 (2013): 129–47.


17 Möllers, “Cur(at)ing the Planet,” 58 and 61.

18 The metaphor of the “mesh” for human-nonhuman interconnection was introduced by Timothy Morton. See Morton’s The Ecological Thought (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).


For more on literary form and the Anthropocene, see Pieter Vermeulen’s *Literature and the Anthropocene* and Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh*.

Importantly, the novel’s multilinear plot tracks a material object, the Dr. Eleven comic book. For more on this “object-oriented” style of plotting, see Marco Caracciolo, “Object-Oriented Plotting and Nonhuman Realities in DeLillo’s *Underworld* and Iñárritu’s *Babel,*” in *Environment and Narrative: New Directions in Econarratology*, ed. Erin James and Eric Morel (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2020), 45–64.

Vermeulen, “Future Readers.”


Morton, *Hyperobjects*.


Of course, there are exceptions: history museums display artefacts that point to temporally and causally organized events, so the audience may understand their experience as narrative-like (and the text accompanying the exhibition may even highlight these narrative qualities).


Tokarczuk, *Flights*, 272–73.

Tokarczuk, 216.

Tokarczuk, 163.


See Michel Foucault’s seminal discussion in chapter 2 of *The Order of Things* for an articulation of this Renaissance worldview. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).


Tokarczuk, *Flights*, 284.

Tokarczuk, 185.

Tokarczuk, 372.

49 For more on how metaphorical language can bridge scales of reality, see also Caracciolo, *Narrating the Mesh*, chap. 6.


Tokarczuk, *Flights*, 289 and 293.

Tokarczuk, 194.

51 “Transcorporeality” is Stacy Alaimo’s term for phenomena, such as environmental disease, that challenge clear boundaries between the body and the seemingly external world. See Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).
54 Tokarczuk, Flights, 22.
55 Tokarczuk, 219.
56 For more on scalar thinking and the Anthropocene, see Derek Woods, “Scale Critique for the Anthropocene,” Minnesota Review 83 (2014): 133–42.
58 This, of course, assumes a privileged link between poetry and the lyric, which is in some ways a problematic generalisation. For more on narrative in poetry, see Brian McHale, “Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry,” Narrative 17, no. 1 (2009): 11–27.
59 Shaughnessy, The Octopus Museum, ix–xi.
60 Shaughnessy, 57.
61 Shaughnessy, 49.
62 Shaughnessy, 3.
63 Shaughnessy, 3.
64 Shaughnessy, 13.
65 Shaughnessy, 46.
66 Shaughnessy, 51.
67 Shaughnessy, 51.
69 Shaughnessy, The Octopus Museum, 45.
70 Shaughnessy, 39.
71 Shaughnessy, 68.
72 Shaughnessy, 3.
73 Shaughnessy, 50.