Ice and the Ecothriller: Popular Representations of Antarctica in the Anthropocene

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In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh (2016, p. 8) identifies a '[broad] imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis'. Ghosh is concerned specifically with 'serious' or 'literary' fiction, which, he argues, foregrounds the everyday over the improbable, exceptional or catastrophic event. Novels featuring such events, he observes, are automatically banished to the 'generic outhouses' of fantasy, horror and science fiction (p. 24). Ghosh does not mention one of the biggest selling of all popular genres: the thriller. However, this genre – particularly in its geopolitical form – trades on the improbable, with the hero routinely performing spectacular feats of daring to prevent imminent nuclear war, global epidemic outbreak or, more recently, environmental catastrophe.

Ghosh is not alone in overlooking the thriller: literary critics, even those interested in genre fiction, also largely ignore it. In her introduction to *Popular Fiction and Spatiality*, Lisa Fletcher (2016, p. 4) notes that this popular genre has produced less criticism than any other. This is even more true of the thriller's environmentally inflected subgenre, the ecothriller. While the term (sometimes hyphenated or separated into two words) is current in popular discourse – a Google search produces more than a hundred thousand hits – it barely registers in academia. Only two of more than two million entries in the Modern Languages Association bibliography mention 'eco(-)thriller'; none includes the term 'environmental thriller'; only nine can be found from a general search on the combined terms 'thriller' and 'environment(al)'. Richard Kerridge's short article 'Ecothrillers: environmental cliffhangers', published in 2000, remains one of very few critical efforts to directly address the subgenre as a whole. And yet, the thriller, with its tendency to operate across large, often global, spaces, its willingness to deal with the improbable and its emphasis on action, is a

particularly interesting genre to consider in light of Ghosh's observations about the failure of imaginative literature to address the challenges of the Anthropocene.

In this chapter, I therefore examine the relationship between setting, plot and character in a group of thrillers – many of them ecothrillers – that take place in a specific natural environment: the Antarctic icescape. As several other chapters in this volume demonstrate (see particularly those by Salazar, Hemmings, Nielsen and McGee), ice has taken on new cultural salience in the age of the Anthropocene. Even as scientists analyse the gas contained in ice cores in order to predict the future of our planet, warm currents undermine Antarctic glaciers, threatening future icesheet collapse and rising sea levels. Ice's increasing prominence in the social, media and political spheres has brought the attention of critics to its distinct physical properties, as well as to the diverse set of functions and meanings it holds for human communities.¹ Historian Sverker Sörlin, arguing for the recognition of the present as a 'cryo-historical moment', writes that, 'Ice is a probing element, in which civilization is put to the test, and crisis is a core element in narratives of ice, in recent decades reinforced by projections of climate change science' (2015, p. 327). Long relegated to the margins of cultural consciousness, icescapes are currently moving rapidly towards its centre.

Consumed by millions of readers, thrillers offer a revealing insight into how popular culture is currently imagining human relationships with Antarctica and its ice. In an earlier analysis (Leane 2016, pp. 33–37), I briefly examine how the unreliable and unreadable icescapes of Antarctic thrillers can be read as a material metaphor for the large-scale conspiracy at the heart of the thriller narrative. At the same time, I suggest, polar icescapes function as actors in the narrative, forming ambiguous alliances with both the human heroes and villains. Here, I expand on this reading to consider the way in which the icescape, as both metaphor and actor, works to mediate the tension between the local and the global that characterises both environmental and geopolitical thrillers. I will conclude by turning from spatiality to temporality, suggesting that the urgent timeline of the thriller narrative, extrapolated onto real-world scenarios, might be constraining popular understandings of Antarctica's future. The chapter thus aims to provide insight not only into popular perceptions of

Antarctica in the early twentieth-first century but also into the questions of scale that are integral to the literature of the Anthropocene.²

The Rise of the Antarctic (Eco)Thriller

Popular fiction has dominated imaginative written responses to the Antarctic region, forming a barometer of knowledge and perception of the far south, while also reflecting developments in the mass-market novel. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, saw a stream of Antarctic ‘lost world’ novels, which dovetailed into a growing interest in the continent by pulp science fiction writers in the 1920s and 1930s. Their speculative works oscillated between techno-optimistic terraforming tales and cautionary stories of hubristic scientists punished in horrible ways, usually by defrosted aliens. Throughout these periods, the polar imperial adventure tale maintained a fairly steady presence, initially directed at a juvenile readership, then transformed after the Second World War into the adult thriller. Antarctic science fiction, dystopias, horrors and even romance novels also appeared but, since the mid-century, genre writers and readers have engaged with Antarctica primarily through the thriller.

Using online bibliographical resources, it is possible to identify dozens of Antarctic thrillers published over the last seventy years – the number depends on how tightly the genre is defined, how tightly ‘the Antarctic’ is defined and how central to the story world the region needs to be to qualify.³ Historically, the first adult Antarctic thriller is probably British novelist Hammond Innes’s *The White South* (1949), an international bestseller that was subsequently made into a film featuring American Western star, Alan Ladd. Innes returned to the Antarctic setting late in his career, with *Isvik* (1991) and *Target Antarctica* (1993). By this stage, he had been joined by many other authors, with bestselling writers such as Clive Cussler, Matthew Reilly and Michael Crichton publishing thrillers set wholly or partly on Antarctica during the 1990s and early 2000s.⁴

Like other popular novels, thrillers are often dismissed as ‘airport reading’, unworthy of serious discussion, but their potential to both reflect and affect readers’ worldviews is considerable. Critical geopolitics scholar Klaus Dodds raises questions about the

impact of thriller narratives and character stereotypes on the way people understand the contemporary world:

How does the action-thriller reinforce or unsettle particular framings of [political events]? Do these artistic interventions help to constitute public understandings of key actors and places, and are they more significant when watched and engaged with by audiences that are not likely to have any experience of the places cited? ... are there different kinds of geopolitics based on action-thrillers, dramas, horrors, disasters, romance and fantasy? (Dodds 2014, p. 121)

For Dodds, thrillers (and popular texts more generally) do not – or do not only – *represent* geopolitics, but also *produce* a particular geopolitics, when their narrative conventions are applied by political actors to reveal events. And while Dodds, like many critical geopolitics scholars who incorporate analysis of popular culture into their work, concentrates on thriller films, thriller novels have by no means lost traction with readership. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), for example, is among the highest-selling novels of all time. And, as this example suggests, thriller novels form the basis of many of the most successful thriller films. Given that Antarctica is a place that only a minute percentage of humanity ever experiences directly, Antarctic thrillers might well have a disproportionate influence on the way people understand the continent.

While the term 'thriller' suggests a homogenous group, this genre has, like any other, considerable internal variation. In his analysis of the American thriller, Paul Cobley (2000, p. 3, emphasis in original) begins from 'the premise that the notion of the conspiracy is so wide and accommodating that it *enables* an expansive range of diverse texts'. The genre thus divides into numerous subgenres, some of which are better suited to an Antarctic setting than others. While it is possible to find a range of thriller subgenres set on the continent,⁵ the remote, isolated and dangerous icescape lends itself more readily to the action thriller, the technothriller and the ecotriller – genres which often overlap. In addition to the possibilities for danger inherent in the extreme environment, the geopolitics of Antarctica offers an unexpectedly rich resource for thriller writers. Matthew Reilly, author of the bestselling *Ice Station* (1997), has observed that a continent which is unowned and largely unexploited, but

remains the subject of a series of contested national claims, provides ample scope for secret government machinations (Leane 2012, p. 23). Intrigue usually revolves around mineral resources, espionage activity, secret military installations, covert territorial manoeuvres and corporate greed. Thus, the Antarctic thriller frequently involves large-scale – often global – conspiracies.

Australian novelist LA Larkin's *Thirst* (2012) is a good example. Set in the near future, the plot revolves around the Chinese CEO of a global private equity firm who is intent on using explosives to blast off part of an Antarctic glacier to sell ice to a water-short China – an action which could set-off a catastrophic series of ice sheet collapses. It transpires that the CEO is being manipulated by his father, a Chinese military general, who wants to access Antarctica's minerals – specifically, rare earth elements used in weapons construction. The hero is an Australian glaciologist who, once he has defeated the villains, goes on to become the face of a global campaign to address climate change. While the action is largely set near the rapidly retreating Pine Island Glacier in the unclaimed part of Antarctica known as Marie Byrd Land, it also incorporates episodes in Australia and China, as well as the involvement of a Norwegian-led tourist expedition on a Russian icebreaker.

As this summary suggests, *Thirst* can be straightforwardly classed as an ecothriller (and its author is a former climate change consultant). If, as seems to be the case in popular usage, this subgenre is defined as a thriller in which environmental exploitation is a central part of the narrative, then Antarctic fiction is marked by a preponderance of ecothrillers, although some early titles pre-date the term itself. This is not to say that all of these texts can be considered pro-environmental. 'Ecothriller' as popularly used is a loose term applied thematically with little regard to the text's environmental politics (which are not always themselves straightforwardly categorisable). For example, the term is regularly used to describe Michael Crichton's controversial *State of Fear* (2004), which is partly set in Antarctica, although the villains of this novel are environmental activists who manufacture apparent climate-change disasters. However, a number of Antarctic novels (like *Thirst*) can be classed as ecothrillers in the stronger sense that the central threat is directed at the natural environment. In this context, the burgeoning Antarctic thriller genre of the 1980s and 1990s can be read not – or not only – as an artefact of an overall rise in thriller

publication during this period (Anderson 2007, p. 69), but also as a response to the fierce debates about Antarctic mining that arose prior to the (eventually stalled) development of a minerals convention in 1988 and its subsequent replacement by an environmental protection protocol in 1991.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, climate change has become a common issue in Antarctic thrillers, but it is rarely the specific source of threat. As Adam Trexler (2015, p. 14) has observed with respect to ‘chiller’ fiction, ‘condensing the distributed impersonal causes of global warming on to a climate villain’ is difficult. Thus, material resources – including, increasingly, bioprospecting and ice itself – are more often at the heart of the plot, even as the characters operate within a climate-conscious environment and are sometimes themselves climate scientists.

Whether or not they engage with environmental politics, all Antarctic thrillers feature the physical environment – the icescape – as an integral part of their action. As I have observed elsewhere (Leane 2016, p. 31), ‘ice’ is the word most frequently featured in their titles: examples include *Beneath the Ice*, *Beneath the Dark Ice*, *Out of the Ice*, *A Grue of Ice*, *The Icemen*, *Ice Station*, *Ice Reich*, *Ice Wolf*, *IceFire*, *Black Ice*, *Red Ice* and *The Ice*.⁶ This is reinforced by the novels’ covers, which very often feature an icy scene, usually combined with a human figure or a vehicle of some sort to indicate the pace so important to the genre. Given that both titles and covers are paratextual features that are as much about marketing as narrative content, we might conclude that the Antarctic location is simply an exotic draw for the reader. However, as I will argue in the next sections, the icescape’s role in these thrillers can be far more integral.

Global Plot, Local Action

At the heart of many thriller novels lies a tension between the local and the global: the conspiracy against which the hero must fight is often global in scope, but the action through which it is resolved is usually highly localised, in the form of individual combat. This disparity can be symbolically resolved by locating the scene of combat in a place that physically evokes the opacity, complexity and mysteriousness of the conspiracy. In an urban thriller this might be labyrinthine city streets. In the ecothriller it is frequently a natural setting: the subterranean darkness of a cave

system, the dense undergrowth of a jungle or indeed the crevasses of an Antarctic icescape.⁷

A central function of the icescape in the Antarctic thriller, then, is to mediate between the disparate scales at work in the plot. The global scale on which the conspiracy functions contrasts markedly with the action of the narrative, which almost always involves an individual hero and a villain, who at some point take part in combat. While this combat might be remote and technologically mediated, and sidekicks of varying prominence might take part on both sides, the vulnerability of the hero's body is a central element in the narrative. His or (less often) her body must be located in a particular place, which is ideally a dangerous and threatening one that heightens the sense of vulnerability and isolation.⁸ But the icescape does more than this: it also functions analogically, mimicking the human-generated conspiracy plot that the hero must negotiate. Hard and solid, but liable to break, collapse or melt at the wrong moment, ice is unreliable and unpredictable. Antarctic conditions mean that visibility is often low, due to fog, blizzard or the prolonged winter night. Together, these elements act as an excellent metaphor for a labyrinthine plot in which motives are concealed, allegiances are ambiguous and apparent certainties can be undermined in an instant.⁹ The icescape enables a materialisation of a conspiracy that otherwise remains unreadable and opaque, allowing local action and global plot to symbolically meet.

A similar 'downloading' of the global onto the local occurs with the human characters. The disparity between global conspiracy and local combat means that large-scale forces and issues are compressed into individual bodies. Several critics have noted this dynamic in relation to crime fiction generally and the thriller more specifically.¹⁰ David Schmid (2012, p. 19) points to crime fiction's tendency to 'provide accurate diagnoses' of social problems but to be 'much less forthcoming about solutions that are anything except individual'. This becomes more evident, he notes, 'when the genre deals with units of space larger than the city, up to and including the globe' (p. 19). Kerridge (2000, p. 249) identifies the same tendency as a problem with ecothrillers – they condense 'large diffuse issues into short tense dramas between a few individuals', so that 'ecological solutions are replaced by quick,

violent fixes'. In the Antarctic thriller scales are regularly confused in this way, with planetary-level, systemic problems given local, personal resolutions.

A useful exemplar of the projection of global problems onto local action process is Crichton's *State of Fear*. As noted above, the plot of this controversial bestseller sees environmental activists manufacturing a series of climate-related disasters, including the deliberate blasting off of the Ross Ice Shelf, in an attempt to manufacture public concern about climate change. Following its publication, Crichton was famously invited by a Republican senator to testify on climate change issues before a US Senate Committee and also met with President George W. Bush in the White House (White 2011, p. 18). In an 'Author's Message' at the end of the book, Crichton (2005, p. 676) writes that his novel, 'in which so many divergent views are expressed, may lead the reader to wonder where, exactly, the author stands on these issues'. Here, by implying that the novel's politics can be looked for in the explicit yet varied views held by its characters, Crichton disingenuously overlooks the impact of the action: what happens to characters who hold particular views. The narrative certainly provides space for the celebrity environmentalist Ted Bradley to express his climate change activism, but he is punished by being hacked to death by cannibalistic Pacific Islanders. The everyman-hero Peter Evans is also allowed to air his increasingly sceptical views of climate change science, and is rewarded with survival, a job offer and a relationship with an 'extremely beautiful woman' (2005, p. 72). Although the conspiracy at the thriller's centre is shadowy and dispersed and the threat – the inundation of California by a tidal wave – large-scale, the victory and punishment are worked out on a local, indeed bodily, level, leaving little doubt about how the author stands on the issues.¹¹

While few Antarctic ecothrillers share the politics evident in *State of Fear*, the tendency to combat planetary threats with heroic (and usually masculine) individual action is certainly characteristic of these texts. A tagline of *Thirst* asks, 'Can one man stop global disaster?'. In the narrative, multinational capitalist greed and high-level military megalomania are condensed onto the villain and his father, and altruistic science onto the hero and his female sidekick/love interest. In the end, global disaster is only partially averted – although the general's mining plans are exposed, the icesheet is exploded off and the climate catastrophe worsened. However, the hero

physically defeats the villain, so positive closure is achieved at the primary level of the individual.

The process of condensing global forces onto human characters is complicated, however, when the icescape itself becomes part of the action. Its constant movements (both slow and sudden) and its ability to transform states gives ice a unique sense of animate existence. In a number of the thrillers I have examined, the ice advances the plot, as human and nonhuman actors become entangled (Leane 2016, pp. 33–37). In the following section, I expand on the various roles the ice takes on in the Antarctic thriller, and the possibilities they close down or open up for ecocritical readings.

Ice as Nonhuman Actor in the Ecothriller

The weakest sense in which the ice functions as a nonhuman character in the thriller is when it is constructed as a victim – weakest, because this leaves the ice passive, an idealised and vulnerable environment present only to be exploited and saved by humans. The tagline to one Antarctic thriller, *Cold War*, reads ‘Unspoiled, uninhabited, under attack ...!’ (Preisler 2001). The continent is, indeed, under attack in these texts: its (real and imagined) resources – gold, uranium, caesium, oil – are plundered by greedy corporations or sinister nations; it is used as a testing ground for nuclear weapons; its ice shelves are blasted off for various reason; its extremophile organisms are put to nefarious purposes. The hero might explicitly cast him or herself as the champion or saviour of the continent. In *Thirst*, Luke Searle sees his efforts to stop the blasting off of the ice as an extension of his scientific work, asking himself at one particularly desperate moment whether he has ‘lost the battle to save’ the glacier (Larkin 2012, p. 326).

In a number of Antarctic thrillers – particularly technothrillers – this victimisation stretches to forcing the ice to act as a weapon, with villains taking advantage of its huge extent to ratchet up their destructive impact to planetary level. In Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens’ *IceFire* (1998), for example, the villain – another Chinese nationalist – explodes a thermonuclear device above the Ross Ice Shelf, its sudden thrust into the ocean calculated to create an enormous tsunami destined for the Californian coast.¹² Other texts cast the ice in a more actively hostile role, as a nonhuman enemy that the hero must fight alongside the villain. Innes’s novels in

particular tend to be interpreted this way, with the nonhuman environment given higher billing by critics than the human villain. According to his entry in *Twentieth-Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, Innes writes of ‘the conflict of man against man, good against evil, but this is no more than an undercurrent to his main theme, that of man against the overpowering force of implacable nature’ (Hughes 1991, p. 589).

However, these duelling binaries – ‘man against nature’, ‘man against man’ – are too simplistic to describe the action of these thrillers. In an examination of Clive and Dirk Cussler’s climate change ecothriller *Arctic Drift* (2008) – one of very few academic treatments of Cussler’s bestselling novels – Adam Trexler (2012, pp. 305, 302) points to the way in which ‘things exert their agency in conjunction with characters’ in the novel, arguing that this exemplifies a tendency of nonhuman agency to be much more clearly presented in genre fiction than literary fiction. Although Trexler does not discuss the way ice operates in the narrative, his observation transfers well to the Antarctic thrillers discussed here. The relationship between hero, villain and nonhuman environment in the thriller is best described not as two sets of binaries, but as a triad in which the actors enter into complex and shifting alliances and antagonisms. In *The White South* (1949), the villain attempts to use ice as a weapon, orchestrating the shipwreck of the hero and his companions in the path of a series of oncoming bergs. But in the end, the hero effectively befriends the icebergs bearing down upon him and his marooned companions, boarding one berg and setting up camp upon on it. By the time he has to leave it again, to pursue the villain, the iceberg has ‘assumed the friendliness of a home’ (Innes 1949, p. 225). In *A Grue of Ice* (first published in 1962), which centres around an elusive Antarctic island, the hero refutes another character’s attempt to attach malevolence to the place:

‘Some unknown rock sticking out into an icy ocean suddenly becomes a killer and the thing that dominates all our lives! I’m frightened. Something wicked and enormous is building up. Even the sky is ghastly. Look, it’s getting quite dark – ’

‘Your father is building up the evil’, I said. ‘He has got to be stopped’.

(Jenkins 2009, p. 124)

Rather than blaming the icescape, the oceanographer-hero uses his scientific knowledge to enlist its help in defeating the human villain. The latter’s demise occurs when an entire glacier collapses on him – an action started by a warm current

coincidentally arriving at exactly the right time, but accelerated by the hero. Recognising the natural dynamic at work, he contributes to the collapse with a series of torpedoes. It is the hero's ability to work with, as well as for, a nonhuman agent that enables his, or rather their, victory.

This recognition and deployment of the environment's own agency, latent in the structure of early Antarctic thrillers such as *A Grue of Ice*, becomes more obvious as the decades move on and ecothrillers become more common. By the twenty-first century, the environment's role in the action becomes overt. Again, Larkin's *Thirst* provides a useful recent example. The glaciologist-hero sees the Antarctic as a homely, familiar place, at one point patting the threatened glacier 'as if comforting a sick animal' (Larkin 2012, p. 300). Before long, his adeptness in the extreme environment comes to look like the environment's preference for him: 'there was something peculiar about Searle's connection to Antarctica', reflects the frustrated villain, 'It was almost as if this wretched heaving mass of ice was keeping its protector alive. Ridiculous, of course' (p. 308). But it isn't ridiculous: with his exploitative attitude, the villain is unable to enroll the icescape into his plans. Thus, while the novel explicitly casts the glaciologist as the continent's human saviour, there is a sense in which the ice takes an active part in the battle. In the end, while the hero ensures the villain's death, he is unable to stop the explosive fracturing of the glacier. Searle himself only survives by clinging to what has become a berg; in a sense, the ice *saves* him. The final chapter sees him in self-imposed exile from his beloved ice, now a celebrity heading up a foundation for climate-change refugees, and travelling the world to raise awareness, despite his aversion to media appearances. As I have suggested above, this conclusion could be read critically: so long as the hero survives and is personally rewarded, the compulsory happy ending is achieved, the collapsing ice and warming climate notwithstanding. On the other hand, it could be read more positively (in an environmental sense) as a refusal to use individual combat as a narrative solution to a global problem: the hero might have won the physical fight, but he is unable to stop the environmental disaster in this way, and must instead work on a global stage, through advocacy and consciousness raising. The answer to the tagline, 'Can One Man Stop Global Disaster?', turns out to be no – at least, not through local hand-to-hand combat and physical heroics, but possibly through global, mediated activism.

Can the ice have a more active role in the Antarctic thriller than as a weapon brandished by the villain, the hero's 'sidekick' or a victim the hero is trying to save? If the narrative agency of ice in the Antarctic thriller were placed on a continuum, one end would indicate complete passivity (the ice has no active role in the narrative) and the other wholesale activity (the ice ultimately usurps the role of protagonist or antagonist). Formally, it is difficult to imagine this latter end of the continuum. The thriller is usually told from the hero's point of view: a shift to the ice-as-hero would thus require the narrative to be focalised through the nonhuman. This stylistic innovation would be difficult to reconcile with the need for a fast-paced plot and would presumably move the novel out of the thriller (and indeed the genre fiction) category and into the literary register.

An arguable exception is James Follett's novel *Ice* (1978), in which an enormous tabular iceberg breaks off Antarctica and makes its way north through the Atlantic. As the berg has sheared off a mountain top that remains trapped within its ice, increasing its density, it does not float but lurks unseen in the ocean, its top just under the surface, sinking ships and breaking undersea cables. The action occasionally shifts away from the human characters and to give brief descriptions of the iceberg's onward movement, which is highly anthropomorphised and expressed in language usually reserved for human villains:

The ice moved.

It had proved itself. It was unstoppable. Indestructible. It moved very slowly.

Almost as if it was possessed of a blind but certain instinct.

And that instinct was to kill. (Follett 2004, pp. 177–178)

The berg here is both indifferent ('blind') and yet somehow sentient, having if not intention, then at least 'instinct'. Humanity, however, overlooks the nonhuman in its rush to attribute agency. The West thinks the series of destructive maritime incidents are caused by the Soviets, the Soviets think they are caused by the West, and the world sits on the brink of war. It is only when the enemy is finally recognised as natural, not human, that action can be taken. The berg – now approaching Manhattan – is bombarded with nuclear weapons and, after the failure of this assault, towed in the opposite direction by a huge flotilla of vessels, with ships from 'virtually every nation in the world' cooperating in the rescue effort (p. 191). This, then, might be

considered a thriller in which ice is the central villain. However, with the revelation to the human characters of the enemy's identity as natural, the thriller merges into a neighbouring genre, the disaster narrative.

The icescape, then, can function in complex ways in Antarctic ecothrillers, both as a material metaphor for the large-scale conspiracy at the heart of the plot, and an important nonhuman actor within that plot. Sometimes the ice is reduced to victim, weapon or enemy; at other times, villain, hero and icescape become entangled in the action and the outcome depends on human-nonhuman alliances as much as human-to-human combat. These thrillers provide what Ghosh (2016, p. 64) describes, in a very different context, as 'techniques of storytelling [in which] nonhumans ... create the resolutions that allow the narrative to move forward'. This reading might be applied to thrillers set in many remote natural environments. Certainly, Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher (2016, p. 20) make some similar observations in their analysis of subterranean thrillers, noting the tendency for the hero to initially misrecognise the natural environment as an enemy, before realising that this role is actually occupied by a human. However, as I have observed above, ice has a particular salience at the present moment because of its role in preserving climates past (in the gas bubbles in ice), as well as its disconcerting tendency to crack, shift, turn and melt, thereby reminding us of our planet's unpredictability, changeability and liveliness. If, as Ghosh (2016, p. 33) implies, our culture needs to come to terms with the 'uncanny intimacy of our relationship with the nonhuman', then imaginative stories set in icescapes should be at the forefront of our attention.

Deadlines, Countdowns and the Future of Antarctica

I have been focusing thus far on the way in which space works in the Antarctica thriller: the tendency for a global threat to be collapsed onto and worked out through local characters and the way the icescape functions in this process. However, thrillers rely not only on constant action occurring in hostile places, but also on a sense of temporal urgency. Their narratives are, in essence, suspenseful and fast paced, which means that the plot inevitably involves a deadline. In Larkin's *Thirst*, as in many genre thrillers, this is explicit: each chapter is headed 'T minus...' a certain number of days and minutes (in the style of a NASA countdown) – with 'T' indicating the time until the ice shelf is exploded. (Readers are not aware of the exact nature of this

impending cataclysm until some way into the book.) Just as the spatiality of the thriller – its inability to address a global threat except in terms of local action – presents a problem for dealing with the vast scale of the climate change and other challenges of the Anthropocene, so the finite timeline of the thriller – the countdown to midnight – raises issues for the genre’s ability to deal with the extended temporal scale of these planetary challenges.

The increasing anxiety attached to Antarctica in the twenty-first century – around tourism and other human interactions; around geopolitics and resources; and especially around the impact of climate change and resulting sea-level rise – has, I suggest, generated a kind of real-world thriller narrative in which humans see themselves in a race against time. Yet, climate change and many of the other environmental challenges facing the continent lack a firm deadline to match the urgency of the issues. This narrative problem is often solved in public discourse by a focus on the year 2048, the date at which, numerous media articles suggest, the Antarctic Treaty, or at least the associated environmental protection protocol, ‘expires’ or requires renewal.¹³ Already under threat from a warming climate, this argument goes, the continent by mid-century could be subject to a geopolitical free-for-all as nations vie for its mineral resources, which will in turn be rendered more accessible by the melting ice. In actuality, neither the Treaty nor any of its instruments (including the environmental protocol and its mining ban) has an expiry date and this dramatic scenario has been convincingly debunked as a widespread myth (Gilbert & Hemmings 2015, pp. 29, 31). However, in the context of the thriller narrative, it is easy to see why this date has such resonance: we must save Antarctica, and there is a countdown to 2048.¹⁴ This is, I would argue, an illustration of Dodds’s idea of a ‘geopolitics based on action-thrillers’, with fiction providing a narrative template that enables the mistaken idea of a countdown to a precise date to be readily perpetuated. The problem then becomes not so much (to return to Ghosh’s ideas) fiction’s inability to deal with the catastrophic event, but rather its tendency to project the thriller’s focus on the time-bound event onto a planet with no specific deadlines.¹⁵

A corollary of adopting the thriller template as a way to understand environmental crisis is that heroic scientific efforts – such as the ‘race’ to find a million-year ice core (discussed in Alan Hemmings’s chapter in this book)¹⁶ – become particularly

attractive as a symbolic counter to this looming threat. Yet, this idea constrains our imagination as well as enabling it. It suggests that our problems are best solved through heroic individual achievement, rather than collective mundane action, such as reducing the greenhouse gas emissions which are causing climate change. And, coming as part and parcel of the narrative elements of the thriller, it can limit the way in which we imaginatively plot the future.

It is unlikely that thriller narratives are going to lose their glamour through the efforts of literary critics. Nor should we necessarily want them to: as I argue above in regard to Antarctic ecothrillers, they can offer narratives of human/nonhuman alliance that reflect new ways of thinking in the Anthropocene. I suggest, however, that we also remain alert to what their narrative conventions distract us from. Rather than anticipating dramatic deadlines, we must attend to the challenges of the Anthropocene that are here, now, ongoing and cumulative. Rather than focusing attention on villains and heroes who are exceptional and polarised, we should watch for those that are collective, multiple, overlapping and ordinary.

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¹ See for example Dodds 2018; Antonello 2017; and Bjørst 2010.

² For a fascinating discussion of scale and contemporary literature, see Clark (2015), particularly ch. 4 and ch. 5. Clark focuses primarily on literary rather than popular texts, but his observations (pp. 75–78) of ecocritical literary scholars' problematic tendency to treat individual characters as miniaturised versions of large-scale social problems is relevant to my argument here.

³ See Leane 2016, p. 29, for a list of several dozen Antarctic-set thrillers – a list that would be longer if compiled now.

⁴ Cussler, who primarily writes maritime adventure thrillers, has set several novels partly or mostly in the Antarctic region, including *Shock Wave* (1996), *Atlantis Found* (1999) and (with Jack du Brul) *The Silent Sea* (2010). See also Reilly 1998; and Crichton 2005.

⁵ David Mariner's *Symbol of Vengeance* (1975), for example, could be classed as a psychological thriller.

⁶ A word-cloud based on three dozen Antarctic thriller titles can be found in Leane 2016, p. 31: ‘ice’ is by far the dominant term, followed by ‘white’. *A Grue of Ice*, *Ice Station* and *IceFire* are discussed below. For details of the other novels, see the References.

⁷ For example, in an analysis of Jeff Parker and Steve Lieber’s thriller *Underground*, Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher (2016, pp. 9, 11) read ‘the heroine’s blind descent into the uncharted depths of a limestone cave system’ as ‘an analogy for her deep investigation of a labyrinthine conspiracy involving big industry and organized crime’.

⁸ The very evidently gendered nature of both authors and heroes of Antarctic thrillers is beyond the scope of this chapter, but this might be gradually changing. Recent female authors of Antarctic thrillers include Sarah Andrews, Karen Dionne, LA Larkin and Ann Turner. Female heroes are also becoming more common, including in thrillers authored by men. James M Tabor’s *Frozen Solid* (2013) and Matt Dickinson’s *Black Ice* (2002) are examples.

⁹ This is distinct from the ‘pathetic fallacy’ in which the environment simply reflects the protagonist’s emotions.

¹⁰ There is no critical consensus on whether the thriller is a subset of crime fiction, but it seems clear at least that these are closely related genres which overlap in places.

¹¹ The network of villains and heroes in *State of Fear* is complicated. The central villain is Nicholas Drake, the director of the National Environmental Resource Fund, but Bradley functions as a secondary villain, spying on Drake’s enemies. Similarly, the novel is focalised through Evans, but the scientist-cum-secret-agent John Kenner whom he joins with also displays many of the traditional qualities of a thriller hero. The point here is that the conflict between large-scale forces is worked out bodily through their representatives.

¹² The idea of manipulating the natural environment to create planetary-scale weapons has its roots in the Cold War and can be found in Antarctic fiction of that era. See Leane [forthcoming].

¹³ See for example Lockyer 2015; McKie 2017; and Marshall 2009. These are but a few of the numerous examples in the mainstream media.

¹⁴ The factual core in the mythologisation of 2048 lies in a clause in the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty stating that from this date (fifty years after its ratification) any party can call for a review conference at which amendments can be made under certain conditions. However, as Gilbert and Hemmings (2015, p. 29) point out, the Protocol can be modified at present through consensus agreement, and the Antarctic Treaty itself reached a similar deadline – i.e. one after which any party can call for a review – in 1991, without dramatic (or indeed any) consequences.

¹⁵ There are connections here to arguments against the notion of a distinct ‘tipping point’; see for example Clark 2015, pp. 80, 91.

¹⁶ For the framing of this scientific project as a ‘race’, see Denholm 2016.