Virtual Catastrophe:
The Ecologically-Oriented Ethics of Jeff Noon's *Pollen*

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Jeff Noon's “Vurt” novels—*Vurt, Pollen, Automated Alice,* and *Nymphomation*—occupy an unusual niche within the science fiction subgenre of cyberpunk.¹ Typically, cyberpunk texts are set in near-future dystopian worlds, which are dominated by advanced virtual technologies and powerful corporations, and against this backdrop the skilled computer hacker uncovers conspiracies (often for financial profit). While Noon’s “Vurt” novels certainly include these broad aspects of cyberpunk, their execution of this “formula” differs from the typical cyberpunk mould. In these novels, the action is restricted to Manchester rather than the more cyberpunk-esque urban sprawl settings of North America or Japan, their featured “vurt” technology has an organic rather than mechanistic basis,² and, furthermore, they are about “looking reality in the face” rather than fleeing the messiness of the material world to the sterile safety of cyberspace.³ For Val Gough, this last peculiarity sees Noon's novels constituting an instance of feminist cyberpunk fiction because “for Noon … the meat world constitutes an ethical challenge and a promise of redemption every bit as important as those of virtual reality or cyberspace.”⁴ On the other hand, I see in all three cyberpunk-oddities of Noon's novels the promise of an ecologically-aware cyberpunk fiction: Manchester's history of industrialism and redevelopment as a haven for
“yuppie” consumers situate it squarely in the environmentalist discourses on pollution and mass consumerism; the depiction of technology as grounded in material reality acknowledges the dependency of all technology on the earth’s resources; and, registering our inability to fully escape our bodies or our world nods to the importance of accepting the existence of a material reality that supports all life.

These points are especially salient in Noon’s second novel *Pollen* (1995), which will be the focus of this discussion. In *Pollen*, Manchester is being attacked by virtual pollen spores that have entered the city from the “Vurt” world: the Vurt realm is a kind of cyberspace where characters can interact with each other’s recorded dream stories. This attack has a twofold effect: environmentally, the pollen spores propagate flowers and vines which overrun the city’s streets and kill its citizens, and, ontologically, the pollen spores blur the boundaries between the real and the virtual—the pollen attack is designed to make the stories and characters of the virtual realm “real.” In this way, *Pollen* does something that, according to Brian McHale, is typical of cyberpunk, that is, it “tends to ‘literalise’ or ‘actualise’ what in postmodernist fiction occurs as metaphor.” Indeed, as Fredric Jameson suggests, cyberpunk itself can be seen as the “supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism.” The metaphor of postmodern fiction that the virtual pollen spore attack literalises is the dissolution of distinctions between reality and fiction, real and imaginary, substance and sign; that is, the Vurt realm and its intrusion into the “real” Manchester function as a “metafictional reflection by the text on its own ontological procedures.”

Read from an ecocritical perspective, the way the novel plays out this ontological uncertainty (depicting it as causing environmental destruction) can be seen as a critical exploration of the environmental effect of (over)emphasising reality as a cultural construction—a notion which some ecocritics have argued conceals the material reality of a rapidly deteriorating environment. By adopting such an ecocritical perspective, I hope to elucidate *Pollen’s* ecological dimension, which I read as promoting an ecologically-oriented ethics that insists on both acknowledging the primacy of an extra-discursive Reality, and the importance of mediating this Reality via discourses that emphasise humans’ connections to it.

In an attempt to elaborate these points and introduce key elements of the text, I will first offer a brief summary of *Pollen*. The novel is set in a future that is tangentially related to the Manchester of the mid-1990s, but which exists in “Singland”—“a land formerly known as England” (*P* 4). The trajectories of England and Singland bifurcate with the invention of Vurt
technology, which enabled dreams to be recorded and shared. Vurt allows users an immersive virtual experience akin to the “consensual hallucination” featured in William Gibson's seminal cyberpunk work *Neuromancer* (1984). However, *Pollen* traces the roots of its simulated reality not to the technologies of Silicon Valley, but the traditions of storytelling: “Stories were told and then they vanished. … From the gulp of wine flowed the books and the pictures, the cinema, the television—all the ways of capture. And … the Vurt” (P 319-20).

The characters of John Barleycorn, Persephone, and Demeter want to escape from this Vurt world, so they too can inhabit the Real world. Barleycorn attempts to overtake Reality by introducing Vurt-pollen spores into Manchester via the Xcab system, which is a taxi cab service run by a (post)human character named Columbus. The Xcab system provides patrons with fast and efficient transport because of its use of a Vurt-map of Manchester's streets that enables Columbus to successfully navigate his Xcab fleet. Barleycorn hopes that the Vurt-pollen will allow the simulated world of the Vurt-reality to become indistinguishable from the Real world of Manchester so that his Vurt-wife, Persephone, can live there for two-thirds of the year (as per the Greek myth from which her character derives). However, the side-effect of the Vurt-pollen’s introduction is the aforementioned environmental havoc. In this way, fictional stories (characters from Greek mythology) and Vurt-technology (the Xcab system) are represented quite literally as co-conspirators in the novel's environmental catastrophe.

However, Barleycorn's attack is thwarted primarily by police officer Sibyl Jones who is helped by an array of other characters: her daughter Belinda, taxi driver Coyote, hippy radio announcer Gumbo YaYa, and fellow police officer Tom Dove. Most of these characters represent a myriad of hybridised posthuman states; but most noteworthy for this analysis is Sibyl and Belinda's “dodo-ness” which makes them unable to access the Vurt realm. As I will discuss in detail below, this inability to access the Vurt realm makes them immune to the Vurt-pollen infection and is the means by which Sibyl reverses the climate catastrophe. That is, Sibyl's secure grounding in the Real allows her to right the environmental wrongs of the Vurt (storytelling) technology.

**Dodo Insect: the Real and the Vurt**

Environmentalist and ecocritical discourses often note that many of us living affluent Western lifestyles lack the motivation to change our comfortable mass-consumer ways for the benefit of environmental
sustainability because we do not recognise our dependence upon the environment for our survival. Ecocritics have argued that this dependence is hidden in at least two ways: in everyday life technology seemingly renders it obsolete\(^\text{14}\); and, in postmodern and poststructuralist discourse, the material existence of the environment is called into question by the notion that reality is a cultural construction.\(^\text{15}\) Attending to these concerns, an ecologically-oriented ethics must be founded in part upon an acknowledgment of our dependence upon a material environment\(^\text{16}\) and its existence prior to linguistic constructions.\(^\text{17}\) While the latter has been associated with deterministic notions of Reality, which according to poststructuralism naturalise and legitimate oppressive social and gender norms, Kate Soper argues that adopting a realist position is the “only responsible basis from which to argue for any kind of political change whether in our dealings with nature or anything else.”\(^\text{18}\) Soper advocates a reconciliation between the two perspectives that, on the one hand, takes into account the ways reality is constructed by dominant groups to maintain power, and, on the other hand, still recognises the objective existence of its materiality: Soper maintains that “there is no reference to that which is independent of discourse except in discourse, but [she] dissent[s] from any position which appeals to this truth as a basis for denying the extra-discursive reality of nature.”\(^\text{19}\)

In his discussion of Noon’s “Vurt” novels, Andrew M. Butler argues that unlike other cyberpunk texts where the journey into the “paraspace of cyberspace … strips the traveller of a fixed physical body … [for Noon this journey] is also an insistence on the importance of the physical body”\(^\text{20}\)—a point which highlights the dependence of the mind on the body. Yet Butler’s claim that in Pollen “the virtual realm becomes indistinguishable from the (fictional) actual one” seems to imply that the novel denies the kind of (fictional) extra-discursive reality Soper identifies as the necessary foundation for ecologically-oriented decisions.\(^\text{21}\) Blurring the lines between the real and the virtual undermines readers’ ability to know whether the events of the story actually occurred in the narrative's time and space or whether the events were fabricated, only having occurred in a particular character's imagination. Such narrative ontological uncertainty parallels the trap of radical postmodern skepticism from which Soper dissents—if we cannot know reality objectively, that is, without it being distorted and transformed by language, then how can we be certain of its objective existence at all?\(^\text{22}\) Contrary to Butler, I argue that Pollen does indeed maintain a distinction between the Real and the Vurt; and this is achieved through the entity of the “dodo insect,” which acts as a symbol of the existence of a material reality in the text, and the characters’ dependence
upon this material reality for survival. The dodo insect is a manifestation of the “genetic lack” that prevents certain characters, who are derogatorily called Dodos, from accessing the Vurt (P 7). It appears as either a “beetle,” “worm,” or “insect” that “eats” Vurt-dreams causing “moments of blindness in the stories” (P 7, 328). The dodo insect ensures that the Vurt does not penetrate the Real which would make the two categories indistinguishable. The dodo insect therefore maintains the distinction between material reality and virtuality in the novel by marking the boundary between a socially constructed reality that the Vurt helps to shape and transform, and an immutable material reality that exists beyond the reach of the Vurt.

The Vurt's encroachment on the Real can be understood as literalising the poststructuralist notion that presents “nature as a purely discursive construction … [thereby playing] into the enemy's hand by obfuscating the material reality of environmental degradation.” In this understanding, the Vurt is a symbol of “discursive constructions of reality,” which is suggested by the Vurt's origins in storytelling rather than computer technology. The Vurt, however, rather than helping to liberate marginalised groups by unmasking the discursive rather than objective foundation of their oppressors—the emancipatory promise of postmodernism and poststructuralism—is itself instead the oppressive force which is shown to be increasingly masking the presence of an objective reality. This is emblematically presented through the alignment of the deterioration of the city's ecology with the establishment of the presence of the Vurt in the Real: as the Vurt-pollen and the Vurt-flowers proliferate, the city and its citizens decline. This situation is corrected, however, by the dodo insects' ability to eat holes and cause moments of blindness in the Vurt. That is, if the Vurt is to be successful at making itself indistinguishable from material reality, it must do so by seeming to be a flawless, timeless reflection of the way the characters experience reality. In other words, it must be mistaken for “truth” in the same way that ideologies are. Ruptures and exceptions to this veneer of “reality” and “truth,” such as the holes and moments of blindness created by the dodo insects, disrupt the coherence of the Vurt-reality and reveal it to be a distorted construction of the Real. The ruptures caused by the dodo insects, then, are instances of material reality that do not seamlessly fit into the Vurt-construction of reality, and in doing so point to the “holes” in the notion that reality is nothing but a discursive construction.

Importantly, the dodo insect, which stands as the symbol of material reality, is deployed strategically to reverse the climate catastrophe only after Sibyl has recognised its extra-discursive status:

I saw a flower that was being eaten away at the roots by a viral
worm of great appetite; the worm’s name was Black Dodo. I realised then that the Dodo insect inside my stomach—once upon a time, my curse—could now be my saviour. … I leached a tiny portion of my shadow into my internal Dodo beetle. There a small part of my soul rested, hopefully cut off from Barleycorn’s province. (P 328)

This action gives Sibyl the ability to have private thoughts, which allows her to develop the plan that convinces Barleycorn to repeal the Vurt-pollen from the Real. Here the dodo insect not only maintains the border between the Real and the Vurt, but also represents the existence of a Reality that is external to Vurt’s discursively constructed reality. Sibyl's recourse to the dodo insect and strategic use of it to stop the Vurt-pollen literalises the characters' dependence on a Reality external to the Vurt for survival.

While the existence of material reality and our dependence on it for survival are central to the novel's resolution, Pollen nonetheless offers a nuanced representation of the relationship between material reality and discursively constructed reality that reveals Sibyl to be a biologically underdetermined character. Soper argues that humans are biologically underdetermined because while we have organs and physiology that endow us with particular sexual organs or skin pigmentation, we also have an awareness of our sexuality and race that is expressed through language, social norms, and conventions of sexual and racial identity.24 We are therefore subject to two kinds of construction. Firstly, we are constructed from biological materials such as DNA, hormones, organic cellular material, and so on, that exist prior to social interventions; and secondly, we are culturally constructed following norms of class, race, gender, and so on, that institute social roles that can be resisted.25 Soper is careful to distinguish between these two senses of construction to highlight the importance of recognising the material (body) as an entity that is necessarily prior to and reciprocally involved in discursive constructions of reality, which, as already noted, have been de-emphasised in poststructuralist theory.

Sibyl's avatar demonstrates these two senses of construction, and in doing so highlights the novel's insistence on the centrality of a material reality that informs and places limits upon discursive conventions. Sibyl's avatar becomes apparent at the climax of the novel when she has managed to circumvent her inability to access the Vurt to confront Barleycorn. Characters and objects in the Vurt realm are not constrained by the limitations of biology or the physics of material reality; rather, their appearance, movement, etc. are constrained only by the limits of imagination—it is a technology of recorded dreams, after all. Sibyl's avatar, however, which is literally constructed for her by Barleycorn, is not
particularly imaginative or transgressive. Instead, it mirrors the markers of her actual biological sex: “I took the chance to examine this body of Smoke Barleycorn had fashioned for me. I was a random map of shadows formed into grey shapes: hips and breasts, neckline and stomach worlds” (P 327). Of all the shapes the random map of smoke could possibly have formed, Barleycorn has foremostly selected the breasts and hips of a “younger woman's body … ripe and lovely in her curves” (P 325). Breasts and hips mark the avatar as biologically female, but significantly they are also predominantly associated with the feminine social roles of sexual object and mother. Barleycorn's construction of Sibyl's avatar is informed by both the reality of her biological sex and also the cultural discourses of heterosexuality and patriarchy.

However, also part of Sibyl's avatar is a dodo insect:

“in the pit of my stomach there rested a glistening black beetle of carefully folded wings, waving legs and antennae, crunching jaws: the Dodo insect. The dream eater. That presence within me that stopped the dream from entering my system. (P 327)

As a genetic lack, Sibyl's dodo-ness is as much a part of her biological construction as her breasts and hips. Yet in Reality, Sibyl's dodo-ness is not outwardly apparent in the way her breasts and hips are physical manifestations of her biological sex; rather it is Sibyl herself who chooses to express her experience of dodo-ness as taking the form of an insect: “Often, in my youth, I would envision the Dodo part of my body as a … black, hungry beetle [that] seemed to be alive in my stomach, gorging himself on my just-born dreams” (P 7). Despite Barleycorn fearing and hating Sibyl's dodo-ness, as with her breasts and hips he cannot construct an image of her without it. So even in the Vurt, where Sibyl's body is literally brought into being through Barleycorn's imagination, her biology still imposes limitations on the extent to which she can be transformed. Whereas Barleycorn's construction of Sibyl's body is informed by cultural gender norms that align women with sexual objectivity and reproduction, her dodo-ness and biological sex seem to manifest in her avatar because they exist prior to or independently of the discursive conventions imposed on them.

Maps and Myths: Pollen’s Ecologically-Oriented Ethics

Having established how Pollen asserts the existence of a material reality through the entity of the dodo insect, I wish to discuss the ecologically-oriented ethics that the novel encourages. Self-consciously a mediation of
reality, *Pollen* suggests that some discursive constructions of nature are better than others at emphasising our responsibility towards and reliance upon Reality. In particular, the text identifies ancient Greek myths as superior to techno-scientific maps as a way of representing nature that promotes ecological sustainability. As I noted in my précis of *Pollen*, maps and myths are represented as mediations of nature that are equally implicated in the novel's environmental catastrophe—Barleycorn attempts to transport his Vurt-wife Persephone (myth) into the Real via Columbus' Xcab system (maps). Initially they are allies using their dominion over representations of the Real to conceal Reality and bring about climate catastrophe. However, once Sibyl recognises that the dodo insect maintains the boundary between an extra-discursive reality and a discursively constructed Vurt reality, myths and maps are shown to be oppositional representational models: where maps symbolise science and technology and myths symbolise pre-scientific and earth-centred ways of knowing reality and nature. *Pollen*'s resolution suggests that sustainable ecological conditions are brought about by (re-)emphasising a relation to nature via myths and de-emphasising the understanding of nature via science and technology. With *Pollen*'s revaluation of myth, the novel's ecologically-oriented ethics emerges in full outline: stories or representations of nature should (1) stress the importance of recognising the materiality of nature outside of textuality (as discussed above), and (2) promote particular representations of nature as better suited to highlighting its materiality.

In *Pollen*, the Vurt map and the techno-scientific knowledge it symbolises is salient for most of the novel, causing a situation which is detrimental to Manchester's environment and denizens. The Vurt map and Xcab system construct a version of Manchester through the scientific discourse of maps, and, as J. B. Harley argues, maps are commonly associated with the discourse of scientific positivism: “cartography is, and can be, objective, detached, neutral … and transparent…. The accuracy of maps consists of mirroring their subject matter.” The Xcab system is a virtual map of Manchester City. It is used by the aptly named Columbus to direct his Xcab staff to and from pick-up and drop-off points by tracking their movements on the virtual map. However, unlike the objective realism to which cartography is commonly held to have aspired, the Xcab map is shown to distort rather than reflect the reality it represents in accordance with the characters' desires: “‘This is the Hive-map up and running. The yellow dots are the cabs, the black web is the roads.’ Gumbo works the controls so that the whole map tilts through 180 degrees. 'Isn't that beautiful? We can view it from any angle, any position’” (P 184). Gumbo is
able to manipulate the simulated map of the city at angles, which may or may not bear any resemblance to the material landscape it represents. It is a reality that bends to the will of humans, rather than the other way around. Interestingly, Gumbo borrows the nature terms “hive” and “web” to describe the map, which seem to be deployed to naturalise the techno-scientific basis of the map, concealing its constructedness.  

Unlike the Xcab system, the Vurt map does not attempt a realistic representation of reality at all. It is, as Butler notes, “an apocalyptic reversal of the infamous dictum, the map creates the territory.” The Vurt map and its implications for Manchester’s material reality are described by detective Tom Dove:

Each pollen grain is a new road. If this new maps succeeds, there will be no freedom in the city. The city will change to suit the map. Reality following the dream, rather than visa versa. … The dream will come through this new map. The dream will take us over. We will be like lost children. … I fear for Manchester, for the world. I fear that reality is doomed. (P 214-8)

Harold Fromm notes that modern technology in general has the effect of concealing our dependence on nature: “Nature, whose effects on man were formerly immediate, is now mediated by technology so that it appears that technology and not Nature is actually responsible for everything.” Pollen aligns maps, science and technology with the concealment of material reality, and the result of this alignment is environmental catastrophe.

The novel’s representation of mythical ways of knowing nature, on the other hand, can be read as promoting the kind of understanding of nature and reality which are necessary to mitigate climate catastrophe. The central myth that Noon appropriates in Pollen is that of Persephone’s descent and rise from Hade’s Underworld realm (Hade’s is one of the many pseudonyms attributed to Barleycorn in the novel). Noon also (unwittingly) deploys the related myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in his first novel Vurt (1993). Butler reads the roles of these “underworld” myths as symbolic of the fact that the journey into cyberspace is akin to mythical representations of the journey into death: it is a journey into no-space where the body must be left behind. However, because of the “exchange rates”—a feature of Noon’s Vurt universe that requires Vurt-objects and real-objects of equal value to be exchanged in order for an object’s permanent migration between realms to occur—Butler argues that Noon’s cyberpunk novels resist such escapes from the body.

However, I wish to consider the environmental aspect of the Persephone myth, which, for the ancient Greek culture in which it emerged,
represented an explanation of the duration and cycles of the changing seasons: Persephone’s emergence from the underworld inaugurating spring, and her return bringing autumn and winter. Claude Levi-Strauss suggests that such myths emerge from speculations about nature, and are the source of humans’ earliest attempts to understand how nature works.\textsuperscript{33} Yet he contends that myths do more than simply explain nature; they in fact help humans to maintain a connection with it. In his study of the depiction of the porcupine in the myths of native Canadian peoples of the Algonkian linguistic family, Levi-Strauss noticed that, in the myths of the group that lived in close proximity to the porcupine, the animal appeared as an ordinary and troublesome rodent; whereas for a group which had migrated to an area where there were no porcupines, it appeared as the coveted embodiment of the moon.\textsuperscript{34} Levi-Strauss maintains that the appearance of the porcupine as a supernatural figure in the myth of the second group emerges from an “obscure wish \textsuperscript{sic} to maintain the coherent relationships conceived by men in a previous environment.”\textsuperscript{35} In this sense, myths are representational bridges between culture and place; they are cultural constructions of nature that are intimately tied to the material reality from which they arose.

In \textit{Pollen} this desire to maintain such a coherent relationship between humans and their environment initially appears to be defunct, that is, the continuum between humans and their environment via myth is ruptured. When giving his reasons for attacking the humans, Barleycorn takes Sibyl to see a sick Alice in Wonderland who is in fact acting as an avatar of Persephone:


“Alice is dying,” John Barleycorn answered.

“Alice in Wonderland? But surely…”

“This is what happens when the dream [that is, story] withers.”

“You told me that the dream couldn't die.”

“A dream undreamt is a dying fantasy and nobody, it seems, these days, wants to dream about dear, sweet Alice. … The only way I can keep Alice alive is by transporting her to reality through the new map.” (\textit{P} 331)

The myth of Persephone is no longer being told: it is a defunct explication of nature that has been replaced by the techno-scientific understandings of the Xcab system. It becomes apparent that this break between humans and their environment is the cause of the environmental disaster, as Barleycorn has instigated the climate catastrophe precisely to ensure the survival of Persephone, that is, to reassert the importance of the
Virtual Catastrophe: Jeff Noon's *Pollen*

Persephone myth. Certainly, Barleycorn's method of reviving myths promotes a kind of environmental awareness through its prolific plant growth and soaring pollen count, both of which are so intrusive and deadly that they cannot be ignored. However, if this were the catastrophic outcome of the novel, the reader would not be presented with much more than a cautionary tale about the dangers of not maintaining a coherent representational relationship with nature. However, *Pollen* does not end on such a catastrophic note.

At the climax of the novel, the Persephone myth is disassociated from its initial function as environmental “retribution” for being ignored, and is instead reinscribed as the gateway to alleviating environmental problems. Barleycorn's first method of transporting the Vurt map into reality required Columbus' Xcab system to take the pollen from the Vurt to the Real, and like the Xcab system it relied on, this Vurt map attempted to impose its Vurt version of reality onto Reality. The failure of this method, due to the insistence of the Real on disrupting the Persephone-myth construction of reality, results in Barleycorn's plan to bring the Vurt to the Real by impregnating Sibyl's daughter Belinda. This alternative way of introducing the Vurt to Manchester is not presented as having disastrous effects on the city's ecology. Instead, the pregnant Belinda’s re-entry into the real is accompanied by the correction of Manchester’s Vurt-pollen pollution problems. This positive outcome is associated with the Vurt's differing method of entry to the Real, which is through the identification of Sibyl with Persephone's earth-mother Demeter and not a (scientific) Xcab.

Sibyl realises that her desire to stop Barleycorn and the environmental destruction of Manchester is motivated by an innate, motherly urge to prolong the life of her son Jewel. “'[Sibyl] was becoming desperate. 'Cure my Jewel.' … 'This is what humans want, Barleycorn.' [Sibyl] said it coldly. 'They live on in their children. Your stories are children. Our children are our stories'” (P 321). Sibyl's motherly entreaties to protect her child are paralleled with those of Persephone's mother, Demeter:

But there was no rain in the forest, so that wetness must have been tears. The weeping woods. And [Sibyl] knew that pain, then, for what it was. A mother's pain. This forest was Persephone's mother. Demeter. … And then she spoke to me, that forest, in words made out of leaves: “I will not allow this. Persephone is my only child. She is my life. She must have air. She must breathe again, the breath of Earth. Do you hear me? Do you care to? You call yourself a mother, and yet you allow your children to die. What nature is this?” (P 343)

Sibyl's realisation that her desires and feelings are the same as those of
the mythical earth-mother Demeter reestablishes the continuity between myth (representation), Nature-Reality and human; and Sibyl rises from the Vurt underworld to find:

   Home. Manchester. The new map turning into the old as I travelled backwards. The fever coming to rest against the edges of love. The black cab travelling into St Ann's Square where the people were already dancing on air at the lessening of the fever. (P 346-7)

So when imposed on Manchester through the Xcab system, the myth of Persephone wreaks havoc; but when introduced through an understanding of the shared reproduction and life-sustaining role of women and nature, the myth of Persephone brings about the reversal of environmental damage.

Reading the novel in this way is not to suggest that it advocates replacing scientific understandings of nature with mythological understandings of nature. Rather it is to suggest that a positivist techno-scientific understanding of reality should not be the only discourse through which to know the environment. Moreover, it also suggests that mythical ways of knowing nature do more than simply explain events in nature, they also establish connections between humans and the material environments in which they live. To claim that *Pollen* mandates replacing science with myth would be to suggest that the novel reproduces some of the problematic arguments of “radical ecofeminism.” Underpinning this movement is the notion that current environmental problems are the result of patriarchal power alignments, where man-culture-rationality-mind is the empowered master, and woman-nature-reproduction-embodiment is the denigrated slave. These binary oppositions have legitimated the systematic oppression and exploitation of women and nature in the service of Man. The way to challenge them, radical ecofeminists suggest, is to invert them: “exalting nature, irrationality, emotion and the human or non-human body as against culture, reason and the mind.” The problem with this move is that it presents the “essence of woman” as biologically determined by her reproductivity and its associated “nurturing nature,” which in turn imposes limits on what social roles are acceptable for her to play, whether or not they are socially valued. Dualisms construct difference hierarchically, and, as Val Plumwood argues, this is the root of the problem: one that is not simply corrected by reversing the binary. It is oppositional thinking itself that must be overcome to vanquish the oppressive master-slave relationships engendered by dualisms.

*Pollen* begins this process of overcoming such hierarchical dualisms through the construction of the newly impregnated Belinda. While Belinda's
pregnancy links her to the novel's positive valuation of the woman-mother-earth alignment, the tattoo of the Xcab map on her head—a relic of her time as one of Columbus' Xcabbers and symbolic of the man-technology-rationality alignment—is integral to leading the characters out of the Vurt realm and inaugurating Manchester's improved climate: “The map of Manchester on my daughter's head was turning into the map of the maze. … I was reading the tangled passages as they filtered down through Belinda's body” (P 338). Contained in this image of Belinda's female body is both nature-reproduction-embodiment and culture-rationality-mind. She is not nature or culture, nor body or mind; rather she is nature and culture, body and mind. Belinda’s enceinte and mapped body goes some way toward realising Plumwood's notion of an affirmative identity that eschews radical ecofeminism’s inversion of dualisms or poststructuralism's dissolution of dualisms:

A better route to subversion than that of poststructuralism would treat woman's identity as an important if problematic tradition which requires critical reconstruction, a potential source of strength as well as a problem, and a ground of both continuity and difference with traditional ideals. Such a critical reconstruction can correct the distortions of western culture through the affirmation and empowerment of the areas of culture and life associated with the feminine and with nature, and hence continue the concerns of earlier feminism and ecological feminism in a modified form. Belinda's embodied map provides the “new way” for the Vurt to exist in the Real in a way that can support sustainable ecological conditions for both Manchester's environment and its citizens (P 344).

Activism, Urgency and Change: Framing Pollen's Ecologically-Oriented Ethics

The urgency and gravity of this ecologically-oriented ethics is highlighted in Pollen through its apocalyptic narrative and depiction of a toxic post-natural landscape. The apocalypse has been central to the environmental movement—"capable of galvanising activists, converting the undecided and ultimately, perhaps, of influencing government and commercial policy." As Greg Garrard notes, the rhetorical strategies of apocalyptic narratives have "provided the green movement with some of its most striking successes." Yet while apocalyptic visions of environmental catastrophe are a good way to whip up political fervour, projections that predict the inevitable extinction of humans undermine the impetus for environmental activism: if a future
earth inhabited by humans is an impossibility, why concern ourselves with attempts to forestall it? Pollen circumvents this conundrum because it is an example, following the work of Stephen O'Leary, of an apocalyptic narrative framed by the “comic” mode. In a “tragic” apocalypse, time is represented as finite and ending in catastrophe—the death of the hero—because evil is shown to be grounded in human guilt which can only be purged by the hero’s sacrifice. In an apocalypse shaped by the “comic” mode, on the other hand, time is represented as open-ended and cyclical because evil is revealed as grounded in human error, and redemption is sought in the acknowledgment of this error. Time in Pollen is represented in such an episodic manner. This is announced clearly in the novel's prologue which claims that the events of the story are taken from a historical event called the “Pollination”—a “series of battles we now call the ‘Looking Glass Wars’” (P 3-4). In other words, as the story is written retrospectively, the environmental catastrophe does not eventuate in the annihilation of humans. Moreover, as the crisis is ongoing, the disaster itself is curtailed through the efforts of the main characters. By using the “comic” apocalyptic mode, Pollen promotes the notion that environmental crisis can be mitigated through human action.

The characters are compelled to resist the apocalypse, however, because they believe the “danger is not only imminent, but already underway”—a notion common to apocalyptic rhetoric. In Pollen the land outside Manchester's walls have been made barren by a pollutant aptly named Thanatos: “the black air of Thanatos, a plague of sterility that had covered England years and years before [Sibyl] was born” (P 115). The cause of the Thanatos had been unknown, but Barleycorn reveals to Sibyl that, like the pollen attack, it had entered Manchester city from the Vurt world—it was released by Demeter to spite Barleycorn for taking Persephone from the earth to the underworld (P 323). This reworking of the myth sees the onset of a seasonal winter replaced by the onset of a toxic, ongoing winter. Again, the suggestion is that the absence of Nature from our stories—represented by Persephone's literal disappearance from the earth's surface—brings about climate catastrophe. The pollen attack, then, is another instance of the environmentally devastating Thanatos.

Importantly, the novel's toxic post-natural landscapes function to suggest that environmental catastrophe is already underway in our own world as well. Cynthia Deitering notes that, beginning in novels published in the 1980s, toxic waste came to function as a metaphor for (1) fears about our collective future, and (2) the rupture between humans and their knowledge of the Real. The barren lands of Pollen's Thanatos-affected Limbo are littered with the waste of the present; the “crashed cars” and a
“burnt out train carriage” (P 69) make a bridge between the fantastic environment of Pollen and the world with which we are familiar. This serves to electrify our fears of a future dystopia caused by our current destructive environmental practices. Deitering argues that this shift to the representation of nature as toxic waste reflects a cultural anxiety that nature is “already-used up.”\(^{45}\) She develops her argument by way of contrasting Martin Heidegger’s notion of the Real in the nineteenth and twentieth century as a “standing reserve”—Nature is either used as a site for spiritual healing away from the influence of the corrupting city, or an economic resource used to aid the expansion of the nation-state—with the twenty-first century response to Nature as superfluous: “what we call the Real is now represented not as a standing reserve but as the already-used up. The tract of land is now represented as a possible site of contaminated waste, left over from coal mining operations.”\(^{46}\) This is precisely the nature reflected in Pollen.

Despite the fact that “[n]othing can grow in such germ-ridden, festering soil” as surrounds Manchester (P 16), the people do not go without victuals; rather, provisions are transported into the city from an unspecified place by the “big monster trucks of Vaz International” (P 14). Nature is thus seemingly unnecessary as a resource for survival. Nor is it a source of spiritual healing. Fleeing the city after the murder of Coyote and the attempted murder of herself, Belinda escapes to Limbo. Yet her encounter with the toxic wilderness does not offer reprieve from the corrupt city; instead she feels equally trapped by the chaos of the landscape whose silences amplify her guilt, loneliness, and fear (P 70-1). In short, the threat of the apocalypse prompts the characters to confront the cause of the environmental catastrophe, and the representation of toxic post-natural landscapes encourages readers to see future environmental devastation as a consequence of our current attitudes towards the environment as being obsolete.

**Concluding remarks**

“What was the nature of this world?” Sibyl muses. “I was moving through Barleycorn's mind, visiting through the Shadow, the dream of a dream?” (P 327). I have suggested that central to Pollen's ecologically-oriented ethics is that the nature of even the most textually mediated world is an external material reality that must be acknowledged and attended to for the survival of humanity. This message is driven home by the threat of an apocalyptic environmental catastrophe, the seeds of which can be seen in the toxicity of our own world. However, this end can be averted by embracing an
ontology that “acknowledges our constitutive embeddedness in subtle bodily, ecological, and cosmological processes” (like the Persephone myth), and that also engages with techno-scientific understandings of the material world (like maps). Tony Keen writes that *Pollen* is “a novel about stories and the power dreams have.” As a story itself, *Pollen* attempts to galvanise the power of stories to shape the ways we think about reality in the service of laying some of the conceptual groundwork necessary for the development of ecologically sustainable living practices.

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**NOTES**

1. Andrew M. Butler argues that Noon’s science fiction should more properly be called “cyberpunk-flavoured” fiction because of its differences from canonical cyberpunk. *The Pocket Essentials: Cyberpunk* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2000), 17.


6. Jeff Noon, *Pollen*, 3rd ed. (London: Pan, 2001). All references will be of this edition and will follow parenthetically in text, with the abbreviation *P*. The novel was originally published in 1995 by Ringpull Press.


11. I make a distinction between ecology, on the one hand, and environment and environmentalism on the other. The latter tend to be terms associated with an interest in protecting or returning environments to their “natural” states,
environments which exist “over-there” in wilderness spaces unspoiled or unfortunately spoiled by human activity; ecology, alternatively, emphasises the interrelationship and interdependence between humans and non-humans, or organic and inorganic entities, within a particular environment or place. Discussing Pollen’s ecologically-oriented ethics rather than environmentally-oriented ethics is to suggest that the novel represents the relationships between its various (post)natural landscapes and (post)human characters as dynamic—apt to change and able to be changed—but does not espouse a desire to see the return to a pristine wilderness.

Poststructuralism emphasises the ontological status of “reality” and “nature” as discursive constructions, while ecocriticism (and, I argue, Pollen) tends to be concerned with the interplay between the textual mediation of “reality” and “nature,” and its consequences on extra-discursive Reality and Nature. As a shorthand for these two notions of “reality” and “nature,” I have used lower case reality and nature to refer to their poststructuralist sense as discursive constructions, and upper case Reality and Nature (or extra-discursive reality and material reality) to refer to their material existence outside of discourse.

Here and elsewhere in the discussion, text which has been omitted from Pollen has been indicated by ellipsis enclosed in square brackets to clearly differentiate it from the (frequent) use of ellipsis by Noon.

Harold Fromm, “From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map,” Georgia Review 32, no. 3 (Fall 1978): 544–5. The notion that technology makes nature obsolete is emphatically captured in cyberpunk’s mantra “beat the meat” that sees computer hackers escape their bodies and worldly troubles by either jacking-in to cyberspace and leaving the physical limitations of their bodies behind, or by augmenting their physical bodies through prosthetic implants or ability-enhancing drugs (McHale, Constructing Postmodernism, 256). Noon’s iteration of cyberpunk, I will argue, resists eschewing the physical body and reality in this way.


Ibid., 68. Butler’s comment refers to both Vurt, Noon’s first novel, and Pollen, but while I think the comment is valid for Vurt, which frequently plays with multiple metafictional and meta-metafictional worlds, I think it is less convincing for Pollen for reasons that will become clear in the following discussion.

Claims such as Jean Baudrillard’s infamous argument that signs have “no relation to any reality whatsoever” (Precession to Simulacra) give rise to such characterisations of postmodern theory as casting doubt over the existence of material reality; however, it is difficult to argue that postmodern theory generally
harbours such ontological uncertainty. A more reasonable charge against postmodern theory is that its emphasis on the semiotics of representation marginalises objective reality and our dependence upon it. See Heise, “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism.”


25 Ibid., 136-7.


27 Such appeals to nature are often employed in car advertising campaigns where four-wheel drives are seen to “prowl” jungle, desert, and mountain terrains like wild animals. This naturalises the car in these environments, eliding the environmental damage they cause.

28 Butler, “Journeys Beyond Being,” 73.

29 Fromm, “From Transcendence to Obsolescence,” 548.


32 Ibid., 71. Keen similarly argues that Noon’s imagining of cyberspace does not background the importance of an embodied mind, however, rather than the Vurt representing a non-space, Keen suggests that the passage of the physical body between spaces is more like the separate worlds of Narnia. See Keen, “Feathers Into an Underworld,” 101.


34 Ibid., 113.

35 Ibid., 115.


37 Plumwood, Feminism and the Mastery of Nature. Plumwood develops this argument in Chapter Two: “Dualism: the Logic of Colonisation.”

38 Ibid., 60.

39 Plumood, Feminism and the Mastery of Nature, 64.

40 Garrard, Ecocriticism, 104.

41 Ibid., 85.


43 Ibid., 204.

44 Cynthia Deitering, “The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the


46 Ibid., 199.


48 Keen, “Feathers Into an Underworld,” 103.