"Holmes, that's some Santa Claus *shit*": Reading Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* as an Ecological Crime Fiction Hybrid

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Admittedly, Lydia Millet's 2020 National Book Award-nominated novel, *A Children's Bible*, is not a work of crime fiction. The novel's genre is just one facet of this book that is incredibly overdetermined: the generic status is unclear, borrowing as it does from many kinds of literature. This phenomenon of overdetermination is not simply a way to describe the work, it is also a methodology Millet uses to introduce her readers to a series of larger questions concerning the climate crisis, the nature of intergenerational guilt (and sympathy), and what forms of thinking are still available to us in the Anthropocene. Given that secondary literature on this book is still nascent, we wish to utilize an exploratory mode, a mode that will attend very closely to the text itself in the hopes of laying out some territory to be traversed in the future. First, we wish to extract out a very key "crime fiction" element running through the novel that we call the "Oedipal detective game." Second, we will trace the larger theological allegory within Millet's novel, which functions as its own kind of "detective game." Third, we read these two games through a key essay by Gilles Deleuze, "The Philosophy of Crime Novels," which lays out two quite divergent kinds of "detective fiction" that we link to the two games. We will conclude with some potential implications for thinking about ways to read the interweaving of these different perspectives as they converge on larger environmental concerns in the novel.

1. Of Environmental Devastation and an Oedipal Detective Game

A Children's Bible begins by deceptively playing into the incipient aspect of the book's title: "Once we lived in a summer country …" (1). Like any classic fairytale, there is a callback

to the past, to some distant time that would allow for the contents of the story. To our narrator, this earlier time included countless elements of nature: a lake, the ocean, a marsh, a stream, a river, the beach, sand, etc. Of course, each of these things still exist in one form or another, but there is no doubt that their forms and frequency have been altered and continue to change as the climate crisis worsens. The fairy tale-esque atmosphere seems apropos given the state of the world in the book. The novel chronicles the vacation of twelve teenagers and younger children whose families join together to rent a mansion ("built by robber barons in the nineteenth century," the narrator, Eve, tells us very early [3]) somewhere on the East Coast of the US. At the time of its building it was "a palatial retreat for the green months," but those green months now seem to be far fewer in number—and certainly the events of the narrative do not occur during such idyllic months as the children slowly watch the world fall to pieces around them, beginning with an incredibly destructive storm that "[floods] the subway tunnels in New York" and causes "the river in Boston to [overflow] its banks" (96). The world outside is nothing short of a nightmare: "Downed power lines electrocuted drivers, and cars and garbage cans and pets had been swept away down streets that looked like rushing rivers. We watched video of collapsing houses. … Riots, they said. Looting. States of emergency. The president had promised some money" (96). Such a world has no doubt become part and parcel for so many of us; Millet's fiction blurs too closely with this reality where one's normality seems equivalent to a world falling apart due to environmental devastation and a profound incompetence and ineptitude on the part of policy makers who can do little more than "promise some money" in order to potentially forestall the slow crawl towards death of a collapsing capitalist system, and much more (96).The recourse to the fairy tale genre is just one of the medicinal remedies that the characters in this novel try out, but it is not, for us, the most significant one. Rather, it is the

invention of what we would like to call an "Oedipal detective game" that provides one of the most salient coping strategies within the novel. This game is first mentioned on just the fifth page of the novel, where the narrator describes the children's "[h]iding [their] parentage as a leisure pursuit, but one [they] took seriously" (5). Indeed, each of the children are tasked with hiding who their parents are, making a competition of who can last the longest in this state of concealment; the parents, unaware of the game in its entirety, play along anyway—this serves as an early sign of their lack of care toward much of anything, but especially their children.

The origin of this Oedipal detective game as the desire to create distance between the children and their parents naturally follows a question that many young people ask themselves amidst a true climate crisis: who did this to our world? These thoughts naturally lead to disgust and anguish towards older generations, those who had countless chances to avoid these circumstances but chose not to. This generational apathy serves as a basis for the beginning of the book, as the children all navigate ways to both physically and emotionally disconnect from their absent-minded parents. Evident from the very inception of this novel is an attitude of repugnance from the children to their parents, who most notably "liked to drink" (3). The parents are dismissive and selfish in the eyes of the children and while the narrator describes this activity as something that the children do to add fun to their summer, there is also an underlying severity to the game, marked by Eve's incredibly detailed descriptions when each of the children "reveal [their] origins":

> Jen's eleven-year-old brother was a gentle, deaf kid named Shel who wanted to be a veterinarian when he grew up. He suffered a bout of food poisoning just one week in and had to be tended by their parents, so that ID was made. The mother had adult braces and

> droopy shoulders, the father a greasy ponytail. He picked his nose while talking. He talked and picked, picked and talked. (15)

The children's allegiance to this game may have something to do with an idea proffered by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in his "Noah's Arkive" essay, which explores connections between the story of Noah and the climate crisis. This text synthesizes stories of modern climate disasters with the experience of Noah in the Bible and relies on several refrains, the most important one reading, "In the wake of catastrophe suffering is unequally distributed," to emphasize the direness of what he calls environmental injustice: "The flood makes evident a lack of affective connection already present, the everyday inability of sympathy to cross boundaries of nation, race, species, class" and, in the case of this novel, generations. While the children struggle to cope with a world that seems on the edge of ending, the parents spend their days drinking to the brink of their own demise. According to Eve and all the other children, the parents are to blame for this—thus necessitating the distance created by playing this game. An interesting point of contention to note is that the parents are explicitly liberals who hardly resemble the typical punching bag for those looking for an outlet to release their climate-based frustrations. Almost every scene captures the parents' left-leaning remarks about whatever situation they face; for example, several fathers bemoan the true cause of the weather disaster they experience near the middle of the book: "They crossed their legs and expressed some thoughts about a workers' paradise. It would have saved us, said one. If anything could, said another. Capitalism had been the nail in the coffin, said a third" (67). It is clear that the parents are not necessarily blind to their circumstances and the children certainly pull no punches when it comes down to figuring out the true cause of the climate crisis. This makes the nascence of the detective game a bit of a

mystery itself, as many young people can only yearn for parents who can understand their anguish at the current state of the world.

Although the origins of the game are somewhat mysterious, our concept of the "Oedipal detective game" is hopefully not so mysterious as we wish to have it work in a couple of different ways and is synthesized most strongly through a careful attentiveness to Timothy Morton's work. His essay, "The Oedipal Logic of Ecological Awareness," provides a great starting point for understanding this game that plays out in the novel. In terms of environmental and climate concerns, the name of Oedipus is strongly linked by Morton to what he terms "agrilogistics," a term meant to denote the ways in which early agricultural humanity related to the nonhuman realm by constantly striving to "delete" this region of being. Offering another word for the last roughly 11,000 years differing slightly from the more common ones of either the Holocene or the Anthropocene, Morton's work not only connects Oedipus and the agricultural society he is "charged with saving" to questions of climate and criminality, but also to the "noir detective story" in particular ("Oedipal Logic" 16, 15). Furthermore, this intervention puts forward Oedipus as the main exemplar of a form of thinking that marshals a "deletion" of the nonhuman in service of a picture of humanity as itself autochthonic, as purely *causa sui*, and thus reads Sophocles' titular character as the first of many "climate criminals." Moreover, Morton draws an intimate connection to questions of genealogy and origin: "There is nothing but Oedipus and his parents, Oedipus who thinks he acts autonomously, exemplifying the agrilogistic meme *We came from ourselves*" (*Dark Ecology* 62). This triangulation of Oedipus, questions of climate and criminality, and genealogy give us sufficient warrant to speak of this "Oedipal detective game" as perfectly operative in the novel as a whole. Not only that, but it also makes possible a perspective on the novel that can uncover this game's function: as the

children work so hard to conceal their identities and relations, they are only further revealed; the children are themselves caught in this Oedipal contradiction where they act as both the detectives and the criminals; the detective game acts as their coping mechanism and distraction from realizing their very real roles in the climate crisis–roles that may even match the ones their parents play.

Although Morton's account of Oedipus here gives us some justification for our term, his treatment of the crime fiction/criminality point of the triangle needs a bit of tweaking. *Dark Ecology* is quite content to pull out what it claims is the quintessential "noir fiction" element:

> I am a responsible member of this species [humanity] for the Anthropocene. Of course I am formally responsible to the extent that I understand global warming. That's all you need to be responsible for something. You understand that this truck is going to hit that man? You are responsible for that man. Yet in this case formal responsibility is strongly reinforced by causal responsibility. I am the criminal. And I discover this via scientific forensics. Just like in noir fiction: I'm the detective and the criminal! I'm a person. I'm also part of an entity that is now a *geophysical force on a planetary scale.* (8-9)

We cannot help but wonder if Morton doesn't beg the question here with regards to the role of one's "knowledge" and whether such a thing is somehow sufficient for anything beyond one's awareness that they too "are the criminal." As we noted already, the children and their parents are deeply aware of their role in the climate crisis—knowledge here in Millet's novel does not seem to be the major issue. Now, to be fair to Morton, there are spots in *Dark Ecology* where he seems to grant that there is something deeply "unconscious" about this knowledge (58). Furthermore, Morton's mention of methods of rationality and science do quite nicely link back

up with standard treatments of Oedipus—as he notes: "Oedipus' *hamartia* is his reason, and his hubris is to use his wits to command everything, as if reason could shrink-wrap the universe" (62)—so where exactly would we like to do our tweaking? The context of all of this within Millet's novel forces one to question whether all (or, frankly, any) of these methods and tools of rationality are functioning within the noir universe. As Jo Lindsay Walton and Samantha Walton have also very insightfully noted, the entangled nature of our ecological being has repercussions for how we might mobilize the detective fiction genre: "The premise of separation and transcendence of the social field, on which the nineteenth century detective was partly based, may also prove incongruous" (3). however, the leap here from Oedipus to the "noir novel" strikes us as too quick—and we would like to turn now to a somewhat little-known text by Gilles Deleuze to help show that while Oedipus and his use of reason and rationality certainly can work for one particular strain of detective fiction, the noir genre in particular is a somewhat different quarry. We would like to thus further tease out this potential incongruity by turning to Gilles Deleuze.

Deleuze's essay, "The Philosophy of Crime Novels," specifically explores two subsections of the crime genre that we have seen Morton slightly conflate: one that he calls the "old detective novel" (81, 83) and another referred to by the name of *La Serie Noire*, a collection of noir novels under the editorship of Marcel Duhamel. As Millet's work seems to prove its malleability over and over, we find aspects of both types within the novel, each playing an important role. Deleuze explicitly mentions the more classical detective novel's precedents, which reach all the way back to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*—a claim shared with Morton. This well-known exemplar is germane for the reasons already mentioned and which push one to prefer it over another perspective that would link it to something more on the order of a "game of

genealogy" or something more akin to the standard trope found so often in YA Literature where the parents need to vacate a space for an autonomous child to then inhabit. It seems quite unobjectionable to say that Millet's novel utilizes the Oedipal detective game motif to serve a function that diverges from the way one might think of how this structure functions in the "old detective" genre. Deleuze, for his part, locates a quite paradoxical connection between a criminal and detective as a mirror of sorts in *La Serie Noire* type of novel, where they "[are] double[s] of [each other], they have the same destiny, the same pain, the same quest for the truth" (82). When the children act as detectives in the novel, they unknowingly admit to their proximity to their parents; from both a relational standpoint and also when it comes to the crime of destroying the planet. This proximity is unbearable to the children, as they lack any and all respect for their parents who self-medicate and are overly negligent through what seems to be the end of the world. As we argued earlier, this game is an attempt on the childrens' part to create some distance between them and the people who bred them—and frequently it serves to further reveal that the two groups might not be so different after all; but the true reality of the game is that it reveals something the parents always knew: they lack connections with their children. While the children ridicule their parents and their vices, they cannot help but fall victim to those same habits by the end of the novel: they play games with the parents to keep their spirits up and the children always elect for their prizes to be beer and liquor (209). It hardly takes the end of the book for these desires to manifest, though, because the children are known to steal weed and alcohol from their parents from the very beginning of the summer. By denying all relation to their parents and hiding who they came from, the children can feign a lack of similarity between the two groups, only to have these congruences revealed as the story unfolds. This reality makes the crime even more difficult to investigate. This constant displacement of responsibility for the

climate crisis onto older generations does nothing to alleviate the guilt of younger people; in truth, no one is immune from contributing to the increasingly precarious situation that is climate change. This fact makes the distinction between criminal and cop in this book even more blurry, which is why the game ultimately ends without all the pomp and circumstance that one might have expected.

The *Serie Noire*-logic seems to play a different role in the story, contributing to the overall resolution: that is, there is *no* resolution. The "old detective novel" for Deleuze—who is thinking here of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Émile Gaboriau's Père Tabaret and Monsieur Lecoq, and Gaton Leroux's Rouletabille—utilizes a methodology that Russell Ford describes as parallel[ing] the metaphysics of platonism" (61); in contrast, the *Serie Noire* genre suggests that there is no Truth to be found at the end of the detective's investigation, nor is the finding of that Truth the main point of the genre. As Deleuze articulates it: "This is because the truth is in no way the ambient element of the investigation: not for a moment does one believe that this compensation of errors aims for the discovery of the truth as its final objective" (83). *A Children's Bible* ends rather mysteriously, with Eve reassuring her younger brother, Jack, that others will be around to experience what happens after they are gone, only leaving the reader to assume that Jack will soon pass away. This scene hardly provides any sort of revelation to work off of. For Deleuze, *La Series Noire* detective novel relies on situations that have no firm answer, no truth to be found or told, no clear lines. This is true of the novel as well, which only becomes more and more convoluted with the turn of each page. As the children experience more of the harshness of the new and old world, the prospect of finding a clear cut, happy ending becomes less a reality and more what one might only dream of. Does this vagueness work? Is there a way that one can spin such an open-ended, question-posing conclusion to be positive? While many

may go into a novel about the climate crisis hoping for an answer, Millet suggests that a definite answer is impossible here.

The detective game traverses the first half of the novel, often functioning in the background and revealed to the reader as the discoveries are made chronologically. The children "lose" the game for a variety of reasons; some are directly outed by their parents, others are far too excited to boast their elite status to a group of "yacht kids" that the group stumbles upon in Chapter 2. Such anticlimactic endings lend great credence to our claim that the logic of the *Serie Noire* is working here: the mystery is not at all "framed in terms of truth"—rather, the "resolution" of the game comes about through what one could call, modifying Deleuze's language just slightly, an enormous cavalcade of errors (82-83). Ultimately, the game ends with Rafe as the winner, but "he barely had the heart to celebrate his victory. The game was done, but its ending hadn't left any of us happy" (101). The children are unhappy about both the circumstances of the game ending and the fact that their tactic to create distance between themselves and the true criminals, in their eyes, was over. Now everyone has to face the reality that they had a connection to the crisis at hand in one way or another and that the parents needed to be taken care of—literally, as they all seemed only to know how to bring the bottle to their lips.

The end of the game marks a transition in the novel. The children now take a more serious approach to handling the storm in response to their parents' seeming apathy. Those who once competed to win a game they did not want to end must now work together to survive. The stakes in this new game are much higher and that feeling is not lost amongst any of the young people.

2. Decoding the Biblical Narrative Threads

Although Millet's novel was very well-received, critical work has been somewhat slow in catching up. Aside from a tiny mention in Matt Bell's essay contained within Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Stephanie Foote's edited collection, *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities*, scholarly literature devoted to this novel is still emerging at this point in time (109). Numerous reviews, however, have done well in noticing the theological motifs, allusions, and intertextual connections to the Old and New Testaments—fitting, no doubt, given the book's title. Jonathan Dee's treatment in particular, "An Epic Storm Turns a Summer Holiday Into Potent Allegory," featured in the *New York Times*, correctly notes many of these hints and suggestions—many coming from young Jack:

> Jack keeps noticing—and duly pointing out, to the uninterested others—parallels between current events and the stories in "my book." There are more, even, than he catches: There's a birth in a barn, a plague, a Moses, a Cain and an Abel, even a crucifixion. But part of the novel's genius is that these allusions never really lead anywhere — they don't coalesce into some superstructure of metaphor. The baby born in the manger is just a baby. The allusions aren't symbols or clues; they're just faint echoes, like puzzle pieces too few to fit together. They don't mean what we're used to them meaning.

We wish to expand and further flesh-out the theological narrative within Millet's novel; taking Dee's review as a starting point, we argue that the multilayered nature of the theological allegory provides us with not only another perspective from which to understand the Oedipal allegory of the book, but with another lens through which to think through the climate crisis in the story. In slight contrast to Dee's reading, we would like to argue that it is not quite so clear that "all of these allusions aren't symbols or clues"—indeed, we would like to read all of these theological

parallels as very much functioning like clues, at least as far as some of the characters are concerned. That said, Dee does quite correctly note that while Jack's "decoding" of Biblical messages do not "exactly hit the other characters with the force of a revelation," they certainly hit Jack in precisely that way. A suitable attentiveness to how the theological allegory functions for Jack and Shel suggests that the Biblical resonances in the story do greatly impact how readers receive and understand the novel as a whole. Moreover, the combination of the theological layer of the book—which is a layer that seems to be utilized almost exclusively by Jack and Shel and not by any of the older kids—gives us a unique position from which to notice the convergence of concerns about climate change and those that are so typical of the crime fiction genre more generally.

As already noted, the book begins with a tone that instantly reminds one of a fairy tale. Eve makes clear why such a genre might be made to order for the world she inhabits:

> At that time in my personal life, I was coming to grips with the end of the world.
>
> …
>
> Scientists said it was ending now, philosophers said it had always been ending.
>
> Historians said there'd been dark ages before. It all came out in the wash, because eventually, if you were patient, enlightenment arrived and then a wide array of Apple devices.
>
> That was how we could tell it was serious. Because they were obviously lying.
>
> We knew who was responsible, of course: it had been a done deal before we were born. (27)

Eve goes on to tell us that she "wasn't sure how to break it to Jack. He was a sensitive little guy,

sweet-natured. Brimming with hope and fear. He often had nightmares, and I would comfort him when he woke up from them—dreams of hurt bunnies or friends being mean. He woke up whimpering 'Bunny Bunny!' Or 'Donny! Sam!' ". Eve is understandably wary of breaking the news to Jack, concerned that the reality would end up looking much like the palliative narratives parents so often feed children: "The end of the world, I didn't think he'd take it so well. But it was a Santa Claus situation. One day he'd find out the truth. And if it didn't come from me, I'd end up looking like a politician" (27). How exactly is one to save someone all the detective work here; how is one to protect someone from the true state of the world, someone who, as Eve admits, "still couldn't tell time on a clock that had hands" (28)? In strong contrast to the rules of the Oedipal detective game, Eve decides that in Jack's case, the point is not to learn the "trick" of "hiding" the traces of a crime (48). She must tell Jack of the perpetrators of the climate crimes—and she says that she must tell him a story that is not like those of *George and Martha* nor those in his *Frog and Toad Treasury*. She must, instead, "tell [him] a new story … a real one. A story of the future …" (42).

The morning after Eve tells Jack this tale—the story of "polar bears and penguins," as she and Jack both put it—we learn that Jack has been given *A Child's Bible: Stories from the Old and New Testaments* by one of the parents, known to Eve as the "peasant mother" ("I'd been been reading a book about medieval society I'd found in the great house library," she confesses, "[t]here were peasants in the book: serfs, I guess. Using the filter of that history, and with reference to her flowing-dress wardrobe, I'd come to see her as the peasantry" [21]). Perhaps finding Eve's "story of the future" somewhat insufficient—or, more simply, maybe because the *Child's Bible* has "stories with pictures in it," perfect for a lover of *George and Martha* and *Frog and Toad*—Jack immediately vibes and resonates with this text by beginning his process of

decoding, deductively drawing numerous parallels and analogies between him and his world and that of the Bible—all for his youthful companions for whom, as Eve adds, "religious education [had not been a priority]" (43). Starting with something as simple as noticing there's a character that shares Eve's name, these connections, as Dee correctly notes in his review, resonate, multiply, and proliferate over the course of the novel. The allusions seem to speed up in frequency once Jack befriends Shel (younger brother of Jen), who bows out of the Oedipal detective game very early. Shel does arguably play Watson to Jack's Holmes on the level of the theological detective game. That said, Millet's method of overdetermination also has him plays Moses to Jack's Aaron, where the former's trademark stammering and noticeable paucity of linguistic and rhetorical prowess (Exodus 4:10) gets translated into Shel's near complete and total lack of speaking. (Indeed, Jack-as-Aaron is further borne out by the way in which he is the main interpreter of Shel's sign language, which the former has taught the latter [56].) In fact, one must wait almost one-hundred-and-fifty pages before hearing Shel speak—and when he does, he opens his mouth in response to Juicy's comment about how the "Bible was written like two thousand years ago … Science wasn't even *invented* then." "'You're very ignorant,' said Shel. Out loud" (145).

As one might expect from a work of "climate fiction," the story of Noah and his ark is profoundly utilized here. Jack and Shel draw parallels between stories in the Bible and current events occurring in their world. The most salient of parallels is indeed the ark as they attempt—while the world unravels—to save a fair number of animals from the storm that wreaks havoc on the mansion everyone is summering in over the course of the book. Curiously, Millet's narrative zeroes-in on animals that would appear to be quite "incompatible" with one another. A good deal of this storyline deals with Jack and Shel's desire to save a barn owl with a busted

wing placed right alongside that animal's key prey, a rabbit (as David tries to tell Jack and Shel, " 'You realize rabbits and owls don't really chill together, right?' said David. 'It's not like picture books where woodland creatures put on dresses and square-dance at picnics.' "). The story of Noah's ark no doubt possesses a quite special place within ecological thinking—certainly this has been the case ever since Holmes Rolston III described it as being the "the first Endangered Species Project" (48). As previously mentioned, Cohen has argued that the key aspect of this story for us may be wholly ethical in nature. Ken Stone, in his *Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies*, wonders in the final chapter of that text what it might "mean to read the Bible in an age of extinction?" Indeed, as he goes on to say: "The question might seem improper. On the one hand, species extinctions are a natural part of evolutionary life. Thus one could ask whether the Bible has ever been read in a time when extinction was not taking place" (164). Reading Cohen and Stone together, it is difficult not to notice the ways in which "God's judgment in the story falls upon both humans and animals (who are included together in the category of all flesh at several points), so too humans and animals are saved together on the ark that Noah builds at God's command" (158). Jack and Shel clearly intuit this necessity for care and concern to reach not simply across the boundaries between species, but also across the lines between predator and prey. Not only do the pair help to save the barn owl with a broken wing and the rabbit, but also an entire hive of bees, carrying the entirety of the hive out of the torrential rainstorm and into the basement of the mansion. As Jack responds to Eve's shocked incredulity at their bringing it in out of the rain, "One raindrop can *kill* a bee" (61). Indeed, the world of nature in the novel seems to conspire to make it easier for Shel and Jack to save the bees: "See, they came *out* of the hive! We didn't know they would do that" (62). For Jack and Shel and their profoundly Noah-esque impulse to have their sympathy extend to the nonhuman tenants of the world, it is not quite the

case that things do not, as Dee contends, "coalesce into some superstructure of metaphor"—we would like to argue that although the narrative may not cohere into a all-cohesive metaphor," it is the case that the theological allegory thread of the book does result in something like an ethical imperative to care for the nonhuman elements of the world. Not only do the bees and their hive survive the storm, Jack and Shel manage to transplant them all back outside of the mansion, where all of the bees then return to the hive, safe and sound.

Perhaps the most intriguing theological parallel comes in the form of "an old woman"—we get no more significant details—who is rich and "a hobby farmer"; one of the itinerant groundskeepers for the robber baron mansion, Burl, suggests to the kids that, as the storm gets worse and worse, they pack up and leave the mansion to travel to the farm because "it doesn't feel right here. I know this place. We need to get away," (87). In a moment of what could be read as profound sympathy for their parents, the children do attempt to convince them of the rightness of their decision to leave. But the parents are stubborn, saying that they had indeed "damaged" the mansion and property and therefore worry that they "'won't get back [their] deposit,' said a mother.' 'If the management company hires their *own* contractors, the surcharge will be highway robbery,' said a father. 'Then there's the breach of the lease agreement. What was the penalty again?' 'Seventy thousand, I believe.' 'At least.' 'Leaving right now is, frankly, unacceptable' " (89-90). No doubt Millet wants one to wonder here about this line of thinking—is a "breach of the lease agreement" the most pertinent priority and concern when the world is quite literally going to hell? That said, we can again notice Millet's method of overdetermination with regards to a multiplicity of potential Biblical analogues here. Is it best to read this as another version of the "hardened heart" of Pharaoh, who continually watches the God of Moses lay waste to the land of Egypt while stubbornly and obstinately persisting in his

refusal to let the Israelites go from slavery? Or are we to simply fashion potential connections with Noah and the Flood itself—setting aside just for the moment that the Hebrew text does not explicitly ever say that Noah directly attempts to save all the flesh of the earth from the calamity that he knows is coming?[1] Not surprisingly, the parents do not accompany the children in their Exodus away from the mansion, ultimately finding their way to the hobby farmer's place—an incredibly fortuitous destination as the farm has goats, rich soil for growing vegetables, and a very large silo with all kinds of food and provisions in it, enough to sustain (like the manna in the desert) Burl, the children, and a small cadre of folks who cross their path and who Burl identifies as "trail angels," the term for people who place food and supplies for those who are hiking the Appalachian Trail (110).

Here on the farm the kids and angels begin to reconstitute a world, a society different from the one they had been part of earlier in the summer. Eve says that all the kids "liked the angels. They hadn't brought us into the world—they hadn't brought anyone into it—and in that fact we felt a bond. In that fact we were equals" (147). This degree of equality and trust quickly metamorphoses into the group's setting up a kind of school, where the trail angels—with all kinds of different areas of expertise—start running classes in poetry, history, biology, science. Eve very wistfully describes "[c]hildren who sat there learning from their teachers, full of trust. Secure in the knowledge that an orderly future stretched out ahead of them" (136). As is par for the course in this novel, the somewhat idyllic time at the farm does not last for long. The children

[1] All good readers of the Christian Scriptures know that although the Hebrew text omits any such attempt on Noah's part (although, as Cohen correctly notes in a footnote, it does appear in the Midrash tradition), the New Testament does explicitly draw the conclusion that Noah does attempt to save people given that he is a man of "righteousness." Would a person of righteousness known to "walk with God" really not reach out to all of the others facing such a horrific fate? The key textual warrants for this reasoning are certainly Christ's own description of his own "coming" as akin to that of Noah's time: "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be." (Matthew 24:37-39)—further substantiation is readable from 2 Peter 2:5 as well.

had a “custom of keeping watch” from the very tall silo, but the rains return and just at the moment when they give up this habit of watching the borders of the farm—“[s]ocked in the way we were, enclosed by low clouds, … no visibility from the silo” (147)—a group of men with guns materialize. The men—“[r]edneck soldiers,” Rafe says derogatorily—proceed to ransack the house, “stuffing food in their mouths,” spilling “the contents of drawers and cabinets … all over the floor. The aftermath of a burglary,” as Eve describes it (149). The children and angels are legitimately and understandably concerned about these men finding all of the food locked away in the silo behind a door with a passcode that Burl happens to know. The leader of the group of men, referred to only as “the governor” (with potentially a reference to the character of the same title to that well-known post-apocalyptic TV show, *The Walking Dead*), proceeds to torture Burl and others for the passcode. The governor gives everyone until sunup one day to reveal it—noncompliance will end with Burl’s death. As the sun rises, a number of parents manage to show up at the farm—hearkening back to the Oedipal detective game even though it has long been over, the children spend some time determining who leaked their location—Sukey ultimately emerges as the main culprit here (174-175). The parents attempt to handle the situation by recourse to what they seem to know best—and what they know best is what Terry calls an outright “fantasy,” their plan: “ ‘We’re going to sue the pants off these bastards,’ muttered another father. ‘When things get back to normal’ ” (176). The kids’ plan to forestall Burl’s death sentence also reaches back to the prior world as they offer to bribe the governor with their parent’s money and wealth: “ ‘We don’t have exact figures yet,’ said Terry. ‘But we’ll find out. There are some ETFs, sir. And money-market funds’ ” (179). The narrative leaves the reader with some uncertainty here about whether or not this ploy works—as Eve is aware that all through this conversation the governor was “[v]ery stoned.”

The real resolution of this entire situation is pure *deus ex machina* as the children catch a "[b]linding" flash of lights from a helicopter. "Guys in black, like a SWAT team" leap out of the helicopter and proceed to root out the governor and all of his vigilantes. Stepping out of the helicopter after all the soldiers is "[a] woman. In the light I saw her face was calm. She was slight and old" (182-183). This woman happens to be the owner of the farm and she justifies the fatal response to the governor and his group by saying that she was "afraid they broke the rules" (183). Earlier in the narrative, when the kids first arrive at the farm, Burl and Val together relay to the children that the owner of the farm has a set of rules they must abide by: "First rules. Uh. She's the owner. So we gotta do what she says. And also respect her," Val says (102); there is to be no noise on the weekend; tenants are to "respect [their] elders"; "[n]o breaking the law"; finally, "no sex," Val says,[2] and concludes with: "'The other ones are, don't steal her stuff, tell her what's up if she checks in, and don't try to hook up with the neighbors' kids. Or steal the neighbors' stuff" (102).

Not only are the rules of the theology game clear, but the one overseeing the game appears to have perfect knowledge of the situation. She knows everyone's name—Eve herself observes that the owner calls Jack by his name and wonders if she somehow let that slip without noticing she did so (184). When Eve tries to tell her there are kids trapped in the barn with the angels and that "[t]hey haven't done anything wrong," she replies, "I know" (183). Moreover, this knowledge seems to come with a great deal of authority as well: when she asks Eve to bring her an ashtray at one point, Eve confesses that "[s]he had a way about her. I didn't consider disobeying" (185). But this degree of support and authority do not last long as the owner of the farm does not stay with her tenants—as soon as the vigilante group is disposed of, she vanishes

[2] The responses this "no sex" rule ("commandment" would certainly be better) receives from some of the teens is humorous all on its own: "'*What?*' squealed Jen. 'Puritanical,' said Terry. 'Frigid,' said Juicy. 'Disrespect. You already broke rule two,' said Jen" (102).

in the night without a word—taking Burl and all of the other "trail angels" with her. Jack narrates that night: "'We went to sleep,' he said. 'Beside the heaters. That lady was nice. She made us hot chocolate on a little stove and sat there in her chair smiling. She told us stories in sign language. So Shel could listen too. Then we fell asleep. When we woke up she wasn't there'" (189).

On the surface, a farm that is rid of the governor and his men would seem to give this part of the narrative an air of a world operating according to the same logic that Deleuze locates in the old detective novel form: the perpetrators have been caught, justice has been meted out. Befitting a world run by the God of covenants and contracts, those who do not abide by those contracts are punished. There is a Truth here that the owner appears to follow—and yet, this restoration certainly does not undo what happened nor do any of the children ever forget what was done to the angels and themselves. One might argue that although it might appear that we are far away from the structures of logic we located within *La Serie Noire*, there is no handling "the problem" here. However, the owner can tackle "a problem" and achieve some kind of resolution. Although the reader feels some degree of satisfaction here, things are ultimately not all that clear for those still hanging onto the older Platonic metaphysics that drives the classical detective genre—and this is especially true for young Jack.

3. Weaving Together Inconsistent Threads

Having excavated the Oedipal and theological detective games—it falls to us to suggest how one might conceive of them together. One could easily say, as a start, that the old detective style and *Serie Noire* work together in this novel to highlight the multitudes of nuance that come with any discussion regarding climate change. On the one hand, it can be incredibly easy to launch a fully deductive investigation and point at the found culprit—and in the eyes of many,

including some of the fathers, capitalism would be the answer here (a conclusion that the children find to be quite lacking). But as soon as any sort of conclusion is reached, these answers immediately become murky. How can one point to a system as the cause of real, material struggle, then try to think of solutions to those problems? There is no Truth to seek here.

Although there may be no Truth here, it is significant to think through the fact that there are potential "solutions." We find it quite tantalizing to read the heavy use of indefinite articles—which Dee takes as signaling the novel's fairy-tale genre quality (we willingly grant this as *prima facie* accurate)—throughout the novel to point to a larger theme related to the paths taken to "solve" this climate crime, coming through this strong overall desire for anonymity that many characters articulate frequently. The parents are always referred to with the help of an indefinite article: "a mother" or "a father." This makes perfect sense when paired with the fact that all of the children strive to keep their identities hidden from each other and the reader. However, as the story progresses, the parents only become less and less individual and distinct from one another, even as their relationships to the children are revealed. In fact, by the end of the story, they are all so indistinguishable from one another that their collective actions can be described with just a single plural and definite pronoun: "They stopped trying to entertain each other with so-called wit. They didn't talk much or laugh, even when they were drinking. And they drank less and less, shocking us. They went to bed early and slept late saying they liked their dreams" (219). In the end, the parents are left with no personality, no uniqueness, no singularity—every one of the parents is just like every other one; additionally, as the novel progresses, what seems to be easy answers or solutions to what the children are looking for becomes far more complicated and nuanced, just as the parents reveal that perhaps the creation of the game as a coping mechanism was hardly the answer at all. The end of the novel might

leave a reader grasping at straws, trying to reach some conclusion that will help them understand what they have read and how to fix it, but Millet leaves this rather open-ended, implying that there cannot be a straightforward answer to all the problems explored here.

Given the Oedipal detective structure and this recourse to indefiniteness, the clearest implication of this is for thinking about culpability. Does the use of the indefinite article to talk about a particular parent manage to diffuse their responsibility for what the children take to be the crime that is the climate crisis? The indefinite article does open things up to a larger multiplicity; there is no doubt that these articles pick some *thing* or some *one* out, but the way in which it picks that thing out can be difficult to grasp. Perhaps all this suggests is that any metaphysical system that relies on the "old detective fiction" of Deleuze's theorization—and which thus relies on a kind of hidden Platonism—will quickly show the limits of such a model when applied to climate change, precisely because the Platonic cannot quite handle a conception of truth that is not fundamentally unitary and one. If the multiplicity that comes from this indefiniteness also unsettles the very distinction between criminal and non-criminal, then the question of who gets to mete out punishment and how this all gets adjudicated becomes more significant. Millet's novel leaves readers with two—again, competing—pictures. In one, we get the sense that the children would love to punish, but Eve admits that it is difficult to pin down the specific crimes—as this becomes even more true as the parents lose all their qualities. Moreover, when thinking of the parents, she willingly notes that "[e]ach person, fully grown, was sick or sad, with problems attached to them like broken limbs. Each one had special needs. . . . What people wanted to be, but never could, traveled alongside beside them. Company" (140). The other picture is the owner's, whose perfectly contractual logic is quite sharp, unflinchingly unambiguous: "*Everyone* knows the rules" (186).

It is tempting to read this second picture as the ultimate outcome of the theological game that Jack and Shel play—like the old detective novel's desire for Truth, it is possible to find it through proper decoding of the ancient biblical texts. However, it is curious that the greatest adherent to this mode of detection finds the owner's judiciousness unsatisfying—not to mention the fact that he is quite peeved when she refuses to tell him how the Bible ends. Indeed, Jack's theological decoding game even further reveals his proximity and allegiance to the Holmesian method of thinking—and its underlying Platonism—when he voices his distaste for both of the "solutions" provided to him by the owner and Eve for "how the story will end." He appears to have a distinct attachment to the deductive reasoning he employed to figure out the mystery of the Bible, so much so that he rebuffs answers that present any sort of abstraction. What the novel demonstrates, though, is that this old detective style is not the most effective when it comes to analyzing the future of the world amidst climate change. There is no Truth that can be found and there is no *the* Truth that can be formed, leaving us with the melancholy of *La Serie Noire* genre. Jack struggles to see the point of a world without any human beings around: "But we won't be there to see them. We won't be here. It hurts not to know. We won't be here to see!"; however, this sort of open-ended conclusion may have the potential to leave some readers hopeful (223). Indeed, it may be a sort of comfort to know that no matter all the horrible damage humans do, there will still be a planet here after we take ourselves off it. Yes, the story lacks a definite solution that many climate-motivated readers may seek, but Millet posits there cannot be a Truth here. Where every "truth" about climate change is discovered, there seems to be something to muddy the waters around the next bend. Although not the fairytale ending a reader may have expected from the first sentence of the book, the real view of what to do in a world facing climate change is important.

Although such a situation—operating according to two quite different logics—might appear quite paradoxical given that these two kinds of detective fiction Deleuze extrapolates seem to be in stark contradiction with one another, it might not be all that nonsensical given the novel's focus on the climate crisis. We might note once again that the two different games produce very different ethical engagements: the Oedipal game makes legible profound degrees of disconnection, between child and parent, between human being and world; the theological narrative produces the exact opposite: more connection, more care for both the human and nonhuman other. In a world where there are no clear-cut answers, we might find this to be expected in a work that engages with the climate crisis—precisely because, as Adam Trexler has argued in *Anthropocene Fictions*, "... the narrative difficulties of the Anthropocene threaten to rupture the defining features of genre: literary novels bleed into science fiction: suspense novels have surprising elements of realism; realist depictions of everyday life involuntarily become biting satire." It should also be clear that this situation does reflect back upon the crime fiction genre as well. It is true that Deleuze's theorization of the genre seems to rely on a setup that supposes *a* single criminal that—although they may be difficult to discover and the methodology used to find them is no longer a movement of Truth but is instead one long cavalcade of errors—is, at the end of the day, still a single individual. But what occurs when one no longer assumes a single criminal, but, instead, engages an entire world that is somehow guilty? How should things change if that paradigmatic figure in the classical detective story of Sophocles' had to finger everyone who had any part to play at all in Thebes as accomplices to his own crime?

Jack wants the conclusions drawn from theological parallels to be clear, but the narrative is rather sanguine, suggesting that in a world under the rather desolate-looking and gathering storm clouds of climate change, it is necessary for the Holmesian/Oedipal metaphysics to be

opened up to profound heterogeneities and multiplicities—starting first and foremost with the *La Serie Noire*-logic and structure present within the book and our world. What may be needed is multiplicities of logic, heterogeneities of multiple genres, multiple kinds of metaphysics, differing traditions of thinking. Juicy complains that the theological detective game of Shel and Jack is nothing more than "Santa Claus *shit*"—kid's stuff at best, pure make-believe at worst. Despite this, the necessity of being open to the make-believe seems required for hope—a hope that the novel would seem to signal in its very title—a title that already invokes this opening-up through its very own change from the definiteness of "*The* Bible" into a realm of the indefinite: "*A* Children's Bible."

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