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# The ‘Others’ in John Lanchester’s *The Wall*

Gregory White<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

John Lanchester’s *The Wall* was released in 2019 to great acclaim.<sup>2</sup> Reviews invariably praised the quality of Lanchester’s writing and his imaginative prowess, especially concerning the climate crisis. One review claimed, ‘[t]his novel is necessary reading for citizens of the new normal’.<sup>3</sup> Another added, ‘*The Wall* is a harrowing but beautifully written novel that speaks not only to the uncertainties of life in the Anthropocene but also to recent discourses surrounding racial and economic divisions, nationalism, and immigration’.<sup>4</sup> A third called it a ‘topical and deftly satirical novel’.<sup>5</sup> Michael Lewis’ back cover blurb proclaimed the novel as a ‘*1984* for our times’. Other book jacket praise put Lanchester on par with prominent climate fiction (or ‘cli-fi’) writers such as Margaret Atwood and Kim Stanley Robinson.<sup>6</sup> *The Wall* was longlisted for the UK’s prestigious Booker Prize and shortlisted for the 2020 Orwell Prize.

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<sup>1</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges the critical comments of the editors, as well as Malcolm Sen, Ally Tutay, and Sydney White.

<sup>2</sup> John Lanchester, *The Wall* (London, Faber & Faber 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Nick Pyenson, Book Review of *The Wall* (2021) *Harvard Review*, available at [perma.cc/B5KR-3MBF](https://perma.cc/B5KR-3MBF).

<sup>4</sup> Amy Brady, ‘In “*The Wall*,” Climate Change Pushes us Further Apart’ (2019) *Chicago Review of Books*, available at [perma.cc/3SZK-SZ8J](https://perma.cc/3SZK-SZ8J).

<sup>5</sup> Anna Mundow, ‘“*The Wall*” Review: We Shall Defend our Island’ (*The Wall Street Journal*, 1 March 2019), available at [perma.cc/T2D3-LH58](https://perma.cc/T2D3-LH58).

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam* (Canada, McClelland & Stewart 2013); Kim S Robinson, *Ministry for the Future* (London, Orbit 2020).

*The Wall* is a dystopian novel set in the near future. In the aftermath of a climate event known as ‘the Change’, a massive wall has been constructed around a fictional island country. While the countryside inside the ‘National Coastal Defence Structure’ is depicted as quaint and bucolic, beaches have been obliterated to build a 16-foot-high concrete structure. National conscription requires every citizen to spend two years of their life as a ‘Defender’—patrolling the concrete battlement and defending against the seaborne onslaughts of desperate ‘Others’.

The Others arrive by boat and are cunning; there are even rumours of disloyal Defenders who collaborate with the threatening outsiders. The Wall, for its part, is cold and grim. Time passes achingly slow. But a Defender has to be alert. The punishment for failure is banishment and exile to the water as an Other, almost a certain death sentence. The state is depicted as a surveillance behemoth, too, with biochips implanted in citizens to monitor their movements. The ultimate goal is to sustain security against the broken, watery world beyond the Wall—a world filled with desperate hordes of climate refugees and migrants.

The protagonist and first-person narrator is a young man named Kavanagh beginning his two-year service. He quickly becomes involved with a woman in his battalion, Hifa, and wonders about the prospect of becoming a ‘Breeder’ with her. Since the population is so low, some members are matched into couples and obligated to procreate to replenish society. In addition, Defenders and Breeders also rely on ‘Help’. The Help are Others who made it across the Wall, but were apprehended and sentenced to provide labour to support the system.

While Kavanagh’s overriding ambition is to become a member of the protected elite, in the novel’s third and final act—after a group of Others succeed in breaching the Wall against his battalion—he is put to sea in a boat with Hifa, along with a traitor from their Defender ranks and an elite politician. They then have to fight for their survival.

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This chapter endeavours to examine this work of climate fiction as an act of political imagination. Above all, the main goal is to highlight the ways in which the novel imagines—or, rather, profoundly *under-imagines*—the ‘climate migrants’ known as ‘Others’, who have been shut out of society since the Change. Although the Others are invoked repeatedly and are central to the

novel, as entities they are largely blank and empty. Should the reader sympathise with them? How many are there? How are they racialised? Where are they from? Moreover, throughout the novel the Wall is strangely *not* besieged. Serving on the Wall as a Defender is portrayed as agonising monotony; the Others are a threat who, in fact, do not appear very often at all. And when Joseph and Hifa are banished in the novel's final act, they do not encounter hordes of Others over the horizon—only relatively few. So, what purpose is the Wall really serving?

This chapter argues that *The Wall* merits engagement for several reasons. First, there are few cli-fi books that imagine 'climate migration' to any great extent. Typically, in the now voluminous genre of cli-fi, climate migration is a background theme or a mood setter. Climate migration is, perhaps, invoked as a sign of turmoil, chaos, and disorder. By contrast, Lanchester's *The Wall* is one of the few cli-fi works that positions climate migration as a central theme.<sup>7</sup>

Second, although the work is set in the future, it has a very '2019' feel to it. In that year Donald Trump was still in the White House, having been elected in 2016 as President of the United States with the explicit promise to 'build a wall' on the border with Mexico. For its part, the UK was struggling to implement its 2016 decision to exit the European Union (EU) in a manner that did not harden the land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland—an action feared for its potential to reignite the Troubles. Lanchester is British, and the analogies in the novel are abundantly clear. The cruel irony is that the fictional island in *The Wall* would be analogous to Great Britain, and thus would include England, Wales, and Scotland—but exclude Northern Ireland. In other words, a wall around Great Britain would be far more harmful to Northern Ireland's status in the UK than the customs border in the Irish Sea put in place by the Northern Ireland Protocol as part of Brexit. As examined more fully below, in *The Wall* there is simply no intimation of a nearby landmass. In its world, the island of Ireland does not exist. Europe certainly does not.

An additional point with respect to the novel's year of publication is that the Covid-19 pandemic had not yet been experienced. In retrospect the novel possesses a quaintness; citizens

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<sup>7</sup> Another novel that engages with climate migration, set in the far distant and deeply fantastic future, is Sam J Miller, *Blackfish City* (New York, Harper Collins 2018).

within the rustic countryside are certainly not besieged by a pandemic virus. It is hard to know for sure, but if *The Wall* were written after 2020 it would likely have incorporated epidemiological concerns. The bottom line is that *The Wall* was released in a broader political and social milieu that was highly praising of the work for its political and social importance. Perhaps the book may hold up for the reader a decade after its publication, but it is hard to know.

Most of all, beyond the centrality of climate migration and the 2019 publication, the novel's treatment of climate migration is oddly apolitical. On the one hand, *The Wall* is a quick read suitable for the beach and probably easily adaptable as a film or TV series. On the other hand, its view of climate migration is also dreamlike and esoteric. It operates at a level of surreality that attenuates its political and emotional impact. The 'future imprecise tense' seems to undermine any clear insights into climate migration as a potential phenomenon. Climate migration is a harbinger: the threat that will come (even though, as discussed below, it does not really do so in the novel).

In this regard, it mirrors the many problems associated with so much of the climate migration discourse. Using the 'climate' adjective to modify the 'migration' noun is a deeply depoliticising move. It not only simplifies power, but shortens the analysis of the complicated factors that push migratory movements and refugee flows. The anxiety and fear climate migration engenders, along with the enormity of the looming spectre of multitudes of desperate peoples, more often undermines political or policy action. The focus in the novel is on the 2019 aspect of 'The Wall', within the context of Trump's demagogic proposal to build a wall or the Brexiteers scoring an 'own goal' on themselves in breaking up the UK. But it is not really about climate migration or the Others themselves.

To deepen the argumentative point, *The Wall* illuminates something that has been the case for several decades now: not only has the climate migration discourse largely failed, but so have critics of the concept, too. The discourse itself has a number of failings. Warnings about climate migration have long been introduced with a kind of breathlessness—as if the reader or listener had never thought about the prospect before.<sup>8</sup> Such warnings are invoked with the direct suggestion

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<sup>8</sup> Gregory White, "'Climate Refugees': A Useful Concept?" (2019) 19(4) *Global Environmental Politics* 133, available at [doi.org/10.1162/glep\\_a\\_00530](https://doi.org/10.1162/glep_a_00530).

that there is a new, looming or threat that has not yet been considered as climate change continues to worsen. It is often introduced as the ‘new normal’, as one reviewer puts it.<sup>9</sup> Yet, since the climate migration discourse’s emergence in the 1980s, it has *not* galvanised actors on the ‘green Left’ to leap to action to ‘take climate change seriously’. Nor does it really prompt the fear and anxiety that actors on the ‘security Right’ wish to nurture. At least not yet, although this remains a growing concern, with hard-right populist parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Freedom Party of Austria, and the Sweden Democrats pointing to climate migration as a concern.<sup>10</sup> Across the political spectrum, climate migration is invoked as a harbinger of a monster yet to come and a reason to be concerned about climate change and borders.

In response to the climate migration discourse, scholars of migration and environmental studies—who pursue a more nuanced approach to the impact of climatic change on human populations—have also been unsuccessful. Countless efforts in the empirical literature have acknowledged that climate change and environmental stress certainly affect human society and contribute to complicated migration patterns. Yet the vast bulk of that impact is within national borders or at a subregional level. The literature has also pointed to a lack of precision and the fundamental fact that environmental change (both gradual onset and sudden events) does *not* induce major cross-border migration. Human migration is much knottier than the phrases ‘climate migration’ or ‘climate refugees’ suggest.<sup>11</sup>

Whether it be the challenges of conveying scientific understanding to a wider audience, or the fact that the audience may not be receptive to nuance, the bottom line is that criticisms do not seem to have gained traction. The climate migration premise remains persistently evergreen and

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<sup>9</sup> Pyenson (n 3).

<sup>10</sup> Kate Aronoff, ‘The European Far Right’s Environmental Turn’ (*Dissent*, 31 May 2019), available at [perma.cc/JX34-H8TM](https://perma.cc/JX34-H8TM); Sam Moore and Alex Roberts, ‘The Threat of Ecofascism’ (*Ecologist*, 25 June 2021), available at [perma.cc/UX4Z-KZ4E](https://perma.cc/UX4Z-KZ4E).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Ingrid Boas and others, ‘Climate Migration Myths’ (2019) 9 *Nature Climate Change* 898, available at [doi.org/10.1038/s41558-019-0633-3](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-019-0633-3); Sonja Ayeb-Karlsson, Andrew W Baldwin, and Dominic Kniveton, ‘Who Is the Climate-Induced Trapped Figure’ (2022) 13(6) *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews Climate Change* 1, available at [doi.org/10.1002/wcc.803](https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.803).

infatuating. Despite the findings of scientific studies—which are clear that climate change is neither (and will not likely become) the primary driver of displacement, nor does it displace people great distances—there remains the chronic seduction of the topic’s logic.

An alarm bell keeps getting rung. It is demonstrated that the alarm is false, misguided, and even counterproductive. Yet it still keeps getting rung.

In *The Wall*, for its part, the threat of the Others does not fully materialise. Once Kavanagh and Hifa are at sea, on the watery side of the wall, they and their companions do not meet with large numbers of people after all. So why did Lanchester feel a need to write such a novel? Why did he not engage more carefully with (or know about) the natural and social scientific literature that would provide a more nuanced understanding of climate migration? Perhaps he did, and the relative lack of Others on the outside is part of his point. But if that is the case, he certainly did not make that central or clear. Why not?

To explore these matters, this chapter is structured as follows: section II details the novel’s plot and its key themes. Section III then offers a more detailed appraisal, focusing on the striking and curious lack of Others on the far side of The Wall. Finally, section IV considers, in light of the critical praise the novel received, not so much what the novel could have been, but rather how a climate fiction novel would have to be different in order to avoid using climate migration as a convenient foil or scapegoat. Specifically, it suggests the need for a novel that would not be grounded in the cruel premise of structural violence: a wall around an entire country designed to keep ‘Others’ out.

## II. Race, Simplistic Classes, Generational Thinking, and a Concrete Wall

*The Wall* has three sections or acts, with Kavanagh as the first-person narrator. The plot is also largely linear, although at the very end there is a crucial loop back to the beginning of the novel. In the first act, Kavanagh is assigned to defend the Wall against the Others. At the end of the second act, he and his battalion fail and, as a result, are exiled to sea to become Others themselves. The third act details their survival; ultimately Kavanagh and Hifa are stranded on an abandoned oil rig. The novel concludes with Kavanagh beginning to tell the story of his assignment to defend the Wall.

The opening chapter begins with Kavanagh on his first day as a Defender. Kavanagh is resigned to his duty. Hardly looking forward to his mandatory two-year conscription, he quickly comes to term with the bad food, the bone-chilling coastal air, and the boring 12-hour shifts. He also dreads the prospect of an attack by the Others. A Defender's job is to shoot to kill. Failure is not an option.

As is often the case with dystopian stories—by Orwell, Huxley, Atwood—the worst has already happened.<sup>12</sup> In *The Wall*, the 'Change' happened in the recent past. Not only was it cataclysmic, but Kavanagh's generation holds his parents' cohort responsible. Interestingly, however, not much detail is given about the Change. It is left vague and uncertain; it is ambiguous about whether it was precipitous or gradual or even whether it was really that devastating for people on the island. There is no intimation of the trauma of mass casualties, nor do citizens appear to suffer any climatic or environmental hardship in their day-to-day lives. They ride bicycles, the food is fresh, and the countryside is lovely. It is a surreal cataclysm: dreadful, yes, and yet not really *that* bad.

On the Wall, Kavanagh becomes acquainted with other Defenders, most notably Hifa and the Captain. Unfortunately, Hifa's character is rather underwritten, receiving little development throughout the story. Nevertheless, she and Kavanagh quickly become an intimate couple, even as they try to be discrete within their battalion.

The Captain's character is initially mysterious, but Kavanagh quickly learns his extraordinary backstory. A secondary character named Sarge provides the explanation while on a nighttime shift:

'I'll tell you something about the Captain. It's not a secret, but it's something he prefers to tell people for himself. When he does tell you, do me a favor and act like it's a surprise.' [Sarge] looked around, as if he was worried about eavesdroppers, and he lowered his voice so that I could barely hear him over the wind. 'The Captain was an Other. He got here ten years ago, before the laws changed. That's why he's so hardcore. That's why he's so strict. He knows what it's like out there. He knows he's not going back. He's done four turns on the wall because he's obsessed with

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<sup>12</sup> Mundow (n 5).



keeping them out and proving he is worth being allowed to stay.’ He let it sink in then hissed:  
‘The captain was an Other!’<sup>13</sup>

Kavanagh uses the revelation of the Captain’s past as an Other to provide further narrative exposition.

Until about ten years previously, Others who showed they had valuable skills could stay, at the cost of exchanging places with the Defenders who had failed to keep them out. The law was changed because this fact became known to Others and started to act as a ‘pull factor’—a reason they came to the island. Now, today, Others who get over the Wall have to choose between being euthanised, becoming Help, or being put back to sea.<sup>14</sup>

It is further revealed that, with the introduction of implanted microchips within the last ten years, there is no way that Others could avoid detection if they were to get over the Wall.

There is so much to unpack here about the Captain and the Others, not least the suggestion that Others had previously engaged in a micro-level rational calculation (ie a premeditated decision to respond to a ‘pull’ factor). But what is especially intriguing about the Captain is that he appears to be the only main character who is Black. It is true, when we meet Hifa’s mother in the second act, she is described as having ‘the same caramel skin tone as Hifa’ and is wearing a ‘turban wrapped complicatedly around her head’.<sup>15</sup> ‘Complicatedly’ is an exoticising adverb, and Hifa is a name common in Urdu, Arabic, Hebrew, and Swahili. But Hifa’s character is not explicitly racialised. For the Captain, by contrast, there is repeated reference to ‘tribal scars on his face’ and, of course, his origin from beyond the Wall.

This is the first key theme to highlight in *The Wall*: race and the racialisation of characters on this and the other side of the Wall. Racial difference and non-whiteness is most often associated with Others, or with Help who are former Others. Perhaps it helps to exoticise and make the categories different and stark.

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<sup>13</sup> Lanchester (n 2) 44.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid* 45.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* 137.

To add to this bluntness, the Help (and the Captain, too) are nameless. In chapter nine (still in the first act), Kavanagh, Hifa and a few comrades from their battalion go on a camping trip during a leave from service on the Wall. The group takes two Help to carry equipment and prepare the campground. Leisure camping. With servants! Kavanagh muses that the Help are ‘a couple I think, from their familiarity with each other and the way they hardly spoke. I didn’t ask them their story and they didn’t have to tell it, which is perfect too. He did the cooking and she did everything else.’<sup>16</sup> At the end of the chapter, the reader still does not know the couple’s names. And Kavanagh admits that something is bothering him.

I’d never really thought about Help before, either having it or being it, and the linked questions of what their lives had been like before and after the Change, and the journeys they had made to get here, and how they had got over the Wall, and what it had been like to be among the Others and now to be Help.<sup>17</sup>

He then adds an odd musing:

I can just about imagine burning sand, a huge yellow sun close overhead, salt water stinging in cuts, the weak being left behind, the bitter tastes of exile and loss, the longing for safety, the incandescent desperation and grief driving you onwards ... no, I couldn’t really imagine. And yet here they were.<sup>18</sup>

This seems peculiar because it has a certain naiveté to it. Rather than a civil society inundated with images and accounts of climate migration—in order to depict their desperate situation and intent to overwhelm the security provided by the Wall—Kavanagh confesses that he had never really thought about them before. People are apparently largely oblivious to the Others? Once again, there is not much thought put into climate migration discourses. They seem to be accepted uncritically—a means to express urgency about climate change without offering any detail or requiring any action to mitigate climate change’s causes, adapt to its effects, or even repair its damage.

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid* 68.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid* 77.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*.

With further respect to processes of racialisation, the camping trip concludes with Kavanagh turning to the Help and asking the man:

‘What happened to the world; we here have a name for it, we call it the Change. But what I’ve been wondering is what other people call it, if there’s a word for the same thing, or if it’s just something that happened. I hope you don’t mind me asking, but is there a word for the Change, what we call the Change, in your language?’<sup>19</sup>

The clear implication, of course, is that English is not the man’s first language. The man abruptly responds, ‘Coo-ee-shee-a’, and walks away without saying goodbye. Kavanagh looks the word up on his smart phone, but initially does not tell the reader what he finds. But a few pages later the chapter ends with the sentence: ‘*Kuishia* is a Swahili word. It means “the ending”’.<sup>20</sup> That is it. There is no exposition about the realisation that the two Help are likely from somewhere in East Africa—from a former British colony such as Kenya, Tanzania, or Uganda. Only that Swahili is their language.

All of the above matters, again, because a common factor in climate migration discourse is its racial dimension.<sup>21</sup> Whether ostensible climate migrants themselves are portrayed as victims (the ‘human face of climate change’) or security threats, the vast bulk of images conveyed in photos, websites, and documentary films display people of colour.<sup>22</sup> Andrew Baldwin has persuasively demonstrated that such racialised representations in climate migration discourse are part of a North Atlantic construction of ‘whiteness’—a projection onto the non-white world of

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid* 78.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid* 79.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Neel Ahuja, *Planetary Specters: Race, Migration and Climate Change in the Twenty-First Century* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press 2021); Andrew Baldwin, *The Other of Climate Change: Racial Futurism, Migration, and Humanism* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield 2022). See also Reece Jones, *White Borders: The History of Race and Immigration in the United States from Chinese Exclusion to the Border Wall* (Boston, Beacon Press 2021).

<sup>22</sup> For documentary films see, for example, Michael Nash, ‘Climate Refugees: The Global Human Impact of Climate Change’ (*The Video Project*, 29 January 2010), available at [perma.cc/SH43-2264](https://perma.cc/SH43-2264); Jared P Scott, ‘Age of Consequences’ (*The Environmental Film Festival in the Nation’s Capital*, 2016), available at [perma.cc/CS3C-RWXX](https://perma.cc/CS3C-RWXX).

difference and otherisation in order to augment an ideological effort to craft a white ethnonational space.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to race, a second major theme in the novel is the role of classes. As in Plato's *Republic*, people are sorted into starkly different classes according to their capacities and virtues.<sup>24</sup> In the *Republic* Socrates imagines a perfectly-ordered society (or *kallipolis*) that is filled with classes that align with the 'myth of the metals'. Philosopher kings are of gold; warriors and artisans have silver and bronze qualities, respectively. Socrates also uses these classes to illuminate the importance of respective virtues in the body politic. The philosopher kings possess reason and wisdom. Warriors have spirited qualities (or *thumos*) such as courage. Artisans (and other labourers and farmers) have appetites and desires that, of course, must be moderated. For Socrates, justice is achieved when the classes in the *kallipolis*—and the virtues in individual's souls—are in balance.

In *The Wall*, the Defenders, the Breeders, and the Help provide crucial roles that strike a balance within the walled-in society. In this instance, however, there is no analogy to philosopher kings. Indeed, politicians in *The Wall* are held in low regard, and society does not seem to be particularly well-governed—perhaps reflecting the novel's distinct allusion to Brexit. Moreover, defenders like Kavanagh are not especially preoccupied with justice: they just want to get through their service, even if it means having to shoot Others. In the end, unlike Socrates' classic thought experiment, the classes in *The Wall* are blunt and feel 'off' in their presentation.

A third theme, as noted above, is the prevalence of deeply-clichéd generational thinking: Kavanagh sharply resents his parents' generation. Here the story does not assign responsibility for the Change in a nuanced fashion. There is no class-analysis, sectoral-analysis, or country-specific attribution for the causes of climate change. In other words, there is no effort to hold affluent classes responsible for their outsized contribution to the emissions that cause climate change. Nor

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<sup>23</sup> Baldwin (n 21); Andrew Baldwin, 'Racialisation and the Figure of the Climate-Change Migrant' (2013) 45(6) *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 1474, available at doi:10.1068/a45388.

<sup>24</sup> Plato, *The Republic* (Benjamin Jowett trans, Arcturus Publishing 2018). For an example from young adult literature with a similar dystopic conceit of sorting a population by capacities, see Veronica Roth, *Divergent* (New York, Katherine Tegan Books 2014).

are the fossil fuel, automotive, transportation, or agriculture industries held to account. Nor are the richest countries in the Global North acknowledged as emitters of the vast bulk of greenhouse gases. Instead, Kavanagh's younger generation is wholesale in a blunt, simplistic condemnation of their parents' entire generation—and not prior generations. Perhaps it stands to reason, in part, because the Change is implied to be a precise moment. It may have built over time as a process, it is suggested.<sup>25</sup> But it still happened recently and seems to be over. Kavanagh narrates:

None of us can talk to our parents. By 'us' I mean my generation, people born after the change. You know that thing where you break up with someone and say, *It's not you it's me*? This is the opposite. It's not us, it's them. Everyone knows what the problem is. The diagnosis isn't hard—the diagnosis isn't even controversial. It's guilt: mass guilt, generational guilt. The olds feel they irretrievably fucked up the world, then allowed us to be born into it. You know what? It's true. That's exactly what they did. They know it, we know it. Everybody knows it.<sup>26</sup>

This also affects the younger generation's burden. Kavanagh adds:

To make things worse, the olds didn't do time on the Wall, because there was no Wall, because there had been no Change so the Wall wasn't needed. This means that the single most important formative experience in the lives of my generation—the big thing we all have in common—is something about which the olds have exactly no clue. The life advice, them knowing better, the back-in-our-day wisdom which, according to books and films, was a big part of the whole-deal between parents and children, just doesn't work. Want to put me straight about what I'm doing wrong in my life, Granddad? No thanks. Why don't you just travel back in time and un-fuckup the world and then travel back here and maybe then we can talk.<sup>27</sup>

As the 'okay, boomer' Internet meme suggests, such generational 'analysis' is all-too common. It feels intuitively appealing. To be sure, as Stephen Gardiner persuasively argued, intergenerational justice is obviously a crucial piece of moral reasoning in the context of climate change.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Lanchester (n 2) 104–05.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid* 53.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid* 54.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen M Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Global Environmental Tragedy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2011).

Nevertheless, despite the ubiquity of artificial categories such as ‘baby boomers’ or ‘generation X’, there is no denying that the distinctions are clunky and lack analytical precision. In *The Wall*, too, there is an awkward and totalising categorisation of generations. How can an entire ‘generation’ be held responsible for something when not all members of a purported generation are equally culpable? And where should the line be drawn between generations? Is a generation twenty years in length? Twenty-five? Where and how do they overlap? When does one start, apart from an empirical event such as the end of a war or the turn of a decade or century? Above all, were not the ecological forces that led to the Change the product of decades (and even a century or more) of dynamism? The end result in *The Wall* and too often in climate change discourse in general is the ubiquitous and apolitical notions of ‘we are all to blame’ or ‘what are we doing that will affect *our* children and grandchildren?’ or ‘why didn’t (or don’t) we do more?’<sup>29</sup> The fact is that some individuals and entities are far more culpable than others, and articulations of collectivised responsibility are false.

Put differently, there is no denying that young people may feel resentment toward older generation(s) for the world they have inherited. But the wisest of young people also understand that they might not have acted differently were they alive earlier. Above all, culpability is simply not equally spread among ‘the ancestors’. And *The Wall* fails to capture this nuance.

Before turning to the fourth and final theme—the Wall itself—the character of the elite politician merits mention, as it also ties into the roughshod generational categories. The politician is Kavanagh’s age and described as a ‘short shiny young man with a mop of blond hair’.<sup>30</sup> It is easy to imagine an opportunistic, dissembling Boris Johnson fresh out of Eton College. We ultimately learn that the politician’s name is James, and he first appears at a daily briefing to the Defenders where he expounds insincerely. Kavanagh describes the eye-rolling and the utter contempt that Defenders feel toward politicians.

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<sup>29</sup> For a vivid example of this totalisation of responsibility for climate change—a thoroughgoing first-person-plural examination of the 1980s and how ‘we’ (all of us!) did not act, rather than fossil fuel corporations or the US government or affluent classes—see Nathaniel Rich, ‘Losing Earth: The Decade we Almost Stopped Climate Change’ (*New York Times*, 1 August 1 2018), available at [perma.cc/9HNL-RRU7](https://perma.cc/9HNL-RRU7).

<sup>30</sup> Lanchester (n 2) 103.

He was a baby politician, an infant member of the elite. He still had his training wheels. I may have been sleep deprived, I might possibly still have been a bit drunk, but I fell for a moment into a reverie, a kind of guided dream, in which I imagine baby members of the elite being born from chrysalises, already wearing their shiny suits, their ties pre-knotted, their first clichés already on their lips, being wiped down of cocoon matter and pushed towards a podium, ready to make their first speech, spout their first platitude, lose their virginity at lying. They'd be made to do that before they were given any food or drink or comfort, just to make sure it was the thing they knew first and best, the thing which came most naturally. They tell us that everyone goes to the Wall, no exceptions. Somehow, though, when I saw the baby politician, I knew for the first time that couldn't be true. This man had clearly never been on the Wall. He had never been a Defender. You could smell it on him.<sup>31</sup>

Once again, Kavanagh seems to be noticing things for the first time. He has not encountered members of the political class in his life before? Not on TV? Perhaps Kavanagh's insight is borne of the time that he has now spent in service as a Defender, but it seems late and clueless.

In his speech to the Defenders, James provides three crucial pieces of exposition. First, he simplistically emphasises the culpability of the entire older generation: 'There was our parents' world, and now there is our world'.<sup>32</sup> Second, although the interior of the island appears to be just fine, the politician quickly emphasises that it is getting profoundly worse on the outside. And more Others will come!

'In many hotter places of the world, in particular, the Change is still continuing, still reshaping landscapes, still impacting people's lives. Men and women fled from it, fled from its consequences, tried to make new lives for themselves, to scramble for new shelter, to climb to higher ground, to find a ledge, cave, well, an oasis, a place where they could find safety for them and their families. But,' he said, his tone changing again, and now he really did sound like a member of the elite, a man used to giving orders and breaking bad news, 'the Change did not stop. The shelter blew away, the waters rose to the higher ground, the ground baked, the crops died, the ledge crumbled, the well dried up. The safety was an illusion. So the unfortunates must flee again and they have begun, again, in numbers, like the numbers from many years ago when the Change

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *ibid* 104.

first struck. Big numbers, dangerous numbers. So that is the first thing I'm here to tell you. The Others are coming. We have had years of relative peace and calm, but the time is now over. You will be busy.'<sup>33</sup>

Here we see a dynamic common in so much of the climate migration and border security discourse: the invocation by state security/defence actors of the looming threat of enormous (and imprecise) numbers of desperate climate migrants. As James menaces, '[b]ig numbers, dangerous numbers'. Estimates from venerable international organisations and NGOs are often similarly enormous and rounded. As the Nobel prize-winning Polish poet Wisława Szymborska wrote: 'History counts its skeletons in round numbers. A thousand and one remains a thousand, as though the one had never existed'.<sup>34</sup> Such 'round numbers' are ever common in climate migration discourse.

Curiously, too, the novel never seems to suggest that the climate is worsening on the island; again, the environment seems perfectly fine within the Wall. It is only on the outside that the climate is horrible. And Others will come.

This ties into the third piece of the young politician's discourse: there is a security threat not only from the Others but more worryingly from people on the *inside* of the Wall who are either sympathetic to the plight of climate migrants or, worse, collaborating and helping them.

'They are taking the side, not of the ordinary decent people of this country, the people you Defenders guard and protect, the people for whom you spend your long nights and days on the Wall, the people whose security is the meaning and purpose of what you do—no, they don't take their side.' He was getting into it now. He dropped his voice to a loud, histrionic whisper. 'They take the side of the Others!'<sup>35</sup>

A discourse of securitisation typically has an external dimension. Entrepreneurial and demagogic actors such as politicians or media personalities accentuate that there is an external threat. One

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid* 105.

<sup>34</sup> Wisława Szymborska, 'Hunger Camp at Jaslo' (Grazyna Drabik and Austin Flint trans, *Poetry nook*, 13 January 2003), available at [perma.cc/MDT7-A58T](http://perma.cc/MDT7-A58T).

<sup>35</sup> Lanchester (n 2) 106.



must beware of communists, immigrants, Muslims, terrorists. Even zombies are a threat!<sup>36</sup> Such outsiders are coming to take jobs, terrorize society, and threaten cultural identity. But the *real* threat, especially with ethnonationalism, is when an external regard is turned inward and the polity questions itself: ‘Are you loyal? Are you really part of us? Are you undermining the nation from within?’ And this quickly devolves into a question of authenticity: ‘Are you white enough? Man enough? Christian enough? Straight enough?’ Once citizens within a securitised polity are made aware of an external threat (and they are reminded repeatedly) they need to be loyal and be watchful for those who might be abetting the threat—which is far worse.

This raises the fourth and final theme to explicate: the Wall itself. It is a character in the novel in its own right, one borne of an emphasis on security—inward and outward. It is inanimate: cold, concrete, and monolithic. It is at once impossible to imagine *and* yet also plausible. How could a wall be built on an undulating and uneven coastline? Rocky cliffs? Sandy beaches? Estuaries? No way that could be done! And yet, before long, the reader and, apparently, citizens on the fictional island succumb to the conceit. It becomes possible to imagine that a barrier might entirely wall off an island citizenry from the outside.

Relatedly, the Wall possesses an external dimension at the same time that it offers an interiority. Citizens internalise its attributes; they acquiesce to and reinforce its presence. It is an artifice *and* deeply real. And citizens embrace it, in significant part, because of the threat of outside Others. As Pink Floyd sang, we are just bricks in the wall.<sup>37</sup>

The Wall also has an implacability and immutability as a character. There are intimations that it needs maintenance and reconstruction as it has been built over time, especially with respect to the mouths of rivers. Nevertheless, it is not going anywhere. Its solidity imprisons Kavanagh and other characters within the novel. Erected to protect and provide security, the Wall quickly becomes a sentence that chokes people’s humanity. It gives them the illusion of protection, but it also isolates and makes them even more miserable.

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<sup>36</sup> Daniel W Drezner, *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> Pink Floyd, ‘Another Brick in the Wall’ (Harvest and Columbia, 1979).

It is hard to know how the author, Lanchester, really imagined the character of the Wall in the novel—whether it was an analogy to Trump’s infamous pledge to build a wall and make Mexico pay for it, or if Lanchester intended the story to align with the fact that there has been a proliferation of security barriers put into place around the world in the last several decades.<sup>38</sup> What is striking, of course, is that such walls are often crafted against an external counterpart, usually a neighbouring country or two. For example, in a real-world maritime context relevant to the novel’s watery setting, Spain’s Integrated System for Vigilance of the Strait of Gibraltar (Sistema Integrado de Vigilancia del Exterior, or SIVE) is arrayed against Morocco and Algeria. The EU’s border agency Frontex’s implementation of the European Border Surveillance system (EUROSUR) in Italian or Greek waters is similarly arrayed against Tunisia, Libya, and Turkey. In other words, in those instances, surveillance mechanisms such as radar, sonar, and satellite technologies are constructed *against* migrants from nearby sovereign powers.

In *The Wall*, by contrast, there is no sovereign nation-state identified *against which* the island conducts relations. Climate migration discourses often have the tendency of nationalising an issue that is inherently global in nature. In *The Wall* there is no intimation of diplomacy. No sovereign counterpart. The country in *The Wall* is an *island* that seems utterly alone. There are no adjacent or nearby ‘transit states’ to cajole and/or browbeat into cooperation. International relations do not exist.

In the referendum held in 2016, Northern Ireland voted for the UK to remain in the EU by a majority of 56 per cent.<sup>39</sup> The Northern Irish majority vote (along with Scotland’s) could not overcome the majorities in England and Wales that voted to leave. The point is that the Brexiteers in Northern Ireland’s minority—those who wanted to leave the EU but of course remain in the UK—would likely read Lanchester’s thought experiment as a wholesale negation of their country’s very existence. For that matter, as noted at the outset, the entire island of Ireland seems to be completely effaced in the novel’s imagination. There are also no sovereign entities with

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<sup>38</sup> The Data Team, ‘More Neighbours Make More Fences: Boundary Fences Worldwide’ (*The Economist*, 7 January 2016), available at [perma.cc/LE4V-43PK](https://perma.cc/LE4V-43PK).

<sup>39</sup> ‘EU Referendum: Northern Ireland Votes to Remain’ (*BBC News*, 24 June 2016), available at [perma.cc/NB8J-W677](https://perma.cc/NB8J-W677).

which to collaborate, perhaps, on the ‘externalisation’ of border security—à la US policymakers enjoining Mexico to stop migration on its borders with Guatemala and Belize, or EU officials providing financial ‘assistance’ to Morocco or Turkey in exchange for draconian efforts to keep migrants out the EU.

The bottom line is that The Wall in *The Wall* is not a wall of state sovereignty. There are no other nations against which to construct a norm of conventional international sovereignty. Instead, it is a wall entirely *against* climate migration.

### III. Exile, the Realization That There Are Very Few ‘Others’, and Violent Imaginaries

At the end of the second act, a small group of Others attack while Kavanagh and Hifa are on a shift. Initially, the Captain appears to be mortally wounded in the assault. But when Kavanagh, Hifa, James the politician, and a comrade Hughes are banished to sea as punishment for the failure to stop the invaders, they find the Captain semiconscious in the small boat and recovering from his wounds.

What is striking about the exile at sea is that Kavanagh and his boat actually encounter few Others. At night they see a boat in the distance with lights, but it becomes apparent before long that it is a pirate ship. In time, too, they join a small group of Others, a flotilla of rafts and boats tied up together off of an uninhabited island. But the flotilla only has eight boats and two rafts—and only a few dozen migrants. After a brief period of gentle cooperation with the other boats in the flotilla, the pirate ship suddenly reappears and attacks. After a dramatic escape, Kavanagh and Hifa move off on their own and eventually find an oil rig that has one catatonic occupant. Again, there is the intimation that there are Others in far-off lands. But they are never encountered.

This raises again the central paradox of the novel. The island nation has constructed the Wall against an external threat that never fully materialises. Yes, there are assaults on the Wall. And Kavanagh and his group are banished because one occurs while they were on a shift on the battlement. But the Wall seems to be constructed against a threat that does not exist. One might argue that the threat does not materialise often because of the Wall’s intimidation; Others are not

endeavouring to approach the island because they know its defences are robust. But it also seems to suggest that the Wall itself may not really be justified.

So much of the cli-fi genre is situated around the imagining of a profoundly violent, dystopian future.<sup>40</sup> In this case, it is an implacable concrete barrier that is, by definition, at the heart of systemic and structural violence. A fortified wall is essential for border control, incarceration, and gated communities. Johannes Galtung's seminal work in the late 1960s examines how structural violence is different than individual or personal violence.<sup>41</sup> As Benner and others observe in their superb report, *Violent Climate Imaginaries: Science-Fiction-Politics*, Galtung's structural violence is, by definition:

An impersonal form of violence that results from unequal power relations and structural injustices ... In fact, an increasing number of scholars are now discussing climate change—present and future—as a form of structural violence ... Considering that the exposure to environmental risks is highly unequally distributed and depends on the race, gender, class, and geographic location of affected populations, a structural notion of violence directly links up with questions of inequality and climate justice.<sup>42</sup>

The point is that Galtung's insights into a structuralist analysis were crafted in the late 1960s—well before climate change became a profound concern. It pertained more to cold war politics, colonial legacies, and/or unjust economic systems. More to the point, his framework also lacked a treatment of individual agency. Perpetrators were not fully held accountable as individuals since they are situated in a macro-structural class or national-level analyses. The victims of violence, for their part, are passive receptors. There is no overt struggle.

The point is that if novelists and social science analysts craft future climate imaginaries as violent—and cast 'climate migrants' as desperate, faceless hordes—then the apocalyptic framing

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<sup>40</sup> See Daniel Kramb, *From Here* (London, Lonely Coot 2012); Atwood, *MaddAddam* (n 6); Marcel Theroux, *Far North* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2009); Emmi Itäranta, *Memory of Water* (New York, Harper Voyager 2014); Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife* (New York, Vintage Books 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research' (1969) 6(3) *Journal of Peace Research* 167.

<sup>42</sup> Ann-Kathrin Benner and others, *Violent Climate Imaginaries: Science-Fiction-Politics* (Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg 2019) 9, available at [perma.cc/6ZGJ-VU2K](https://perma.cc/6ZGJ-VU2K).

can foment and nurture an ideological acquiescence to current (and future) violence. Such ‘anticipatory regimes’ offer a future vision that seems imminent and therefore demanding a posture.<sup>43</sup> The emergency has already happened—in the future’s past—so the present requires an acceptance of violent action. Surely, there are going to be Others who will want to invade an isolated island nation. And surely building a coastal barrier makes great sense!

Here the Captain’s anger and lack of remorse becomes central. In chapter nineteen (early in the third act), the exiled group in the boat confronts the Captain for his betrayal. It is revealed that he had abetted the group of Others on the night of the attack. (It turns out that James the politician was right in his frenzied concern about collaborators within the Wall.) For his part, the Captain not only refuses to apologise, but he criticises a ‘lifeboat ethics’ mentality redolent of Garrett Hardin’s gallingly influential work. In the aftermath of his seminal 1968 ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ article, Hardin further deepened his white ethnonationalist (and ecofascist) arguments in the early 1970s.<sup>44</sup> Specifically, Hardin argued for the importance for rich countries to save themselves from immigration—even at the expense of poorer countries.<sup>45</sup> The Captain (rightly) rejects this kind of immoral thinking in pointing to society’s hypocrisy in building a Wall around itself.

‘The thing we most despised about you, you people, is your hypocrisy. You push children off a life raft and wish to feel good about yourselves for doing it. OK, fine, if that’s what you want to do, but you can’t expect the people you push off the side of the raft to think the same. To admire

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<sup>43</sup> Vincanne Adams, Michelle Murphy, and Adele E Clarke, ‘Anticipation: Technoscience, Life, Affect, Temporality’ (2009) 28 *Subjectivity* 246, available at [doi.org/10.1057/sub.2009.18](https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2009.18).

<sup>44</sup> For a critique of Hardin’s seminal essay, as well as the damage the ubiquitous metaphor has done, see Matto Mildemberger ‘The Tragedy of the Tragedy of the Commons’ (*Scientific American*, 23 April 2019), available at [perma.cc/6LVD-94XB](https://perma.cc/6LVD-94XB). See also Garrett Hardin, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’ (1968) 162(3859) *Science* 1243, available at [www.jstor.org/stable/1724745](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1724745).

<sup>45</sup> Garrett Hardin, ‘Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor’ (1974) 5 *The Hastings Center* 4, available at [doi.org/10.2307/3560937](https://doi.org/10.2307/3560937).

your virtue and principal while we drown. So, no, I'm not going to be like you. I'm not going to lie, I'm not going to be a hypocrite, and I'm not going to say I'm sorry.<sup>46</sup>

In turn, the Captain makes a persuasive case that they should 'head south'. Lanchester does not capitalise 'south' in the novel, although it is used as a vague, totalising category.

[The Captain] said there were islands and stretches of coast where we could find somewhere to stay. He said we would never be able to get back over the wall but there are other places to live. He said he was the only one among us to have made a long journey in a boat and he knew how to do it and he could do it again. He said that because we came from an island we thought the whole world had a Wall around it, but that wasn't true and there were places, not many but some, where we could get to safety.<sup>47</sup>

Kavanagh wants to kill the Captain out of his own anger at the betrayal. James the politician does, too. But upon reflection they decide to let the Captain live. More than that, they even decide to follow his leadership. The Captain's argument that there are safe places beyond the Wall to the South seems to blow the minds of the group. To a considerable extent, actually, it should blow the mind of the reader, too. Wait, there are safe places out there?

Importantly, in both *The Wall* and Miller's *Blackfish City*—two cli-fi novels that feature climate migration directly—'the South' takes on a distinctly Conradian vibe, a 'heart of darkness' locale where disorder and mayhem reign, and from where migrants come.<sup>48</sup> Antonio Gramsci famously wrote about 'the Southern question' within the context of an analysis of the regional differences in Italy's class struggle.<sup>49</sup> At the global scale, there is a similar spatiality to the North versus the South. The South features prominently in the recurrent 'uninhabitable' trope in analyses

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<sup>46</sup> Lanchester (n 2) 178.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid* 179.

<sup>48</sup> Miller (n 7); Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London, Penguin Books 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question* (Pasquale Verdicchio trans, Bordighera Press 1995).

of the future impact of climate change on entire regions of the world.<sup>50</sup> It also factors into a crafting of the South as a (or perhaps *the*) source of environmental insecurity.<sup>51</sup>

A reader of *The Wall* could plausibly conclude that Kavanagh's failure as a Defender and exile as an Other might make the deeper point that 'we are all Others'. Perhaps. One might also find themselves in sympathy with the Captain and his moral authority.

But there may be something else at work here. The novel has an innovative ending. As suggested earlier, the plot is linear, but at the end it does circle back to the beginning. In the final paragraph, Hifa asks Kavanagh to tell her a story. To pass the time. To relieve boredom. To come to grips with their new exile on the desolate oil rig. Kavanagh complies, recognising the importance of 'storytelling'. Kavanagh muses:

I said this to myself over and over again, that's what a story is, something that turns out all right, and then it came to me, and what I said out loud began like this: 'It's cold on the Wall'.<sup>52</sup>

The last sentence of the novel—'[i]t's cold on the Wall'—is the same as the novel's first sentence. Of course, it is not clear whether the author, Lanchester, is seeking to point to the circularity of the Wall's existence. Are citizens on the island—are we readers—caught in an inevitable time loop, trapped behind a Wall, with life seemingly same as it ever was? Is there a futility to trying to write a different story, a different narrative of the past, a different imagining of what could be in an

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<sup>50</sup> See Gaia Vince, 'Where We'll End up Living as the Planet Burns' (*Time*, 31 August 2022), available at [perma.cc/PFN7-LXJ6](https://perma.cc/PFN7-LXJ6); David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming* (New York, Tim Duggan Books 2019). See also Andrew Jeong, 'Extreme Heat Could Make Parts of Asia, Africa Uninhabitable in Decades' (*The Washington Post*, 11 October 2022), available at [perma.cc/P355-E4VC](https://perma.cc/P355-E4VC). To its credit, the *Washington Post* article does not slip into the simplistic assumption that extreme heat would prompt people to migrate long distances. Wallace-Wells' book does, as he writes that people will be 'turned outward to wander through hostile territories in search of a new one', at page 9.

<sup>51</sup> Harry Verhoeven, 'Gardens of Eden or Hearts of Darkness? The Genealogy of Discourses on Environmental Insecurity and Climate Wars in Africa' (2014) 19(4) *Geopolitics* 784, available at [doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2014.896794](https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2014.896794).

<sup>52</sup> Lanchester (n 2) 254.

alternative future? Is being marooned with one's lover on a soulless and abandoned oil rig in a wrecked world a story that 'turns out all right'!

But there is a deeper problem at work and that needs to be plumbed. Again, for decades now there have been alarmist threats (and social imaginaries) of a world overrun with enormous numbers of climate migrants and refugees.<sup>53</sup> Warnings since the 1980s have suggested that there will be millions, hundreds of millions, and even a billion people pushed to move because of climate change. We are told it will occur soon, or within a matter of a few decades, or by mid-century, or by the end of the century. Climate change will work as a threat multiplier (for the security-minded) or a 'vulnerability multiplier' (for the more sympathetic).

Such predications have been sharply challenged and questioned by scholars and analysts. Predictions have been put to empirical tests, with an attention to the complicated interplay of climate change, demography, and migration. Researchers have challenged the imprecision of the estimates and their tendency to be inflated; no one wants to underestimate a potential concern, so circular citations and repetition of ranges of estimates leads to inflation.<sup>54</sup> The agendas of speakers have also been challenged, too. Not only are the xenophobic, racist, and anti-immigrant agendas noted (as done above with respect to Garrett Hardin)—or simplistic acceptance of neo-Malthusian assumptions challenged<sup>55</sup>—but even those who acknowledge that while climate change may not

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<sup>53</sup> See Gregory White, *Climate Change and Migration: Security and Borders in a Warming World* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2011).

<sup>54</sup> For an analogous take on the innumeracy associated with human trafficking data, see David A Feingold, 'Trafficking in Numbers: The Social Construction of Human Trafficking Data' in Peter Andreas and Kelly M Greenhill (eds), *Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict* (New York, Cornell University Press 2011) 46.

<sup>55</sup> See Larry Lohmann, 'Malthusianism and the Terror of Scarcity' in Betsy Hartmann, Ranu Subramaniam, and Charles Zerner (eds), *Making Threats: Biofears and Environmental Anxieties* (Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield 2005) 81; Betsy Hartmann, 'Converging on Disaster: Climate Security and the Malthusian Anticipatory Regime for Africa' (2014) 19(4) *Geopolitics* 757.



induce enormous migration and refugee flows it is still a good way to mobilise support for mitigation, adaptation, and even reparation.<sup>56</sup>

More than ‘merely’ criticising the climate migration discourse others have pointed to the *material* interests inherent in such alarmism, too.<sup>57</sup> This is not to minimise the power of discursive fields, but only to point to the dialectical interactions between such ideological frameworks and material interests. For example, the EU’s Frontex has used the threat of climate migration as a pretence to justify the purchase and deployment of expensive remote-sensing technologies. In its *2022 Strategic Risk Analysis*, Frontex offers language that is striking in its use of neo-Malthusian assumptions as a justification for Europe’s robust spending on border security.

Climate change is the megatrend that will possibly have the greatest effects on border security in the future. Climate change will affect other megatrends in varied degrees, exerting socioeconomic pressures—especially on low-income countries and the most vulnerable and deprived communities—and deepening structural inequalities around the world. The increasing frequency of extreme weather phenomena and the resultant environmental degradation, resource scarcity and lack of access to basic goods such as food and water will have a great impact upon health, economies, security, migration and competition over limited resources.<sup>58</sup>

The Frontex report is a sustained call for enhanced expenditures not only for border control—the agency’s *raison d’être*—but also for the use of remote-sensing satellite technology, Sentinel 2 (S2), ostensibly to gather data on migration movements associated with environmental change.

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<sup>56</sup> See François Gemenne, ‘One Good Reason to Speak of “Climate Refugees”’ (2015) 49 *Forced Migration Review* 70, available at [www.fmreview.org/climatechange-disasters/gemenne](http://www.fmreview.org/climatechange-disasters/gemenne); Benoit Mayer, ‘Who are “Climate Refugees”?’ Academic Engagement in the Post-Truth Era’ in Simon Behrman and Avidan Kent (eds), *Climate Refugees: Beyond the Legal Impasse?* (Abingdon, Routledge 2018) 89.

<sup>57</sup> See Elizabeth Vallet and Charles-Philippe David, ‘Walls of Money: Securitization of Border Discourse and Militarization of Markets’ in Elizabeth Vallet (ed), *Borders, Fences and Walls: State of Insecurity?* (Ashgate Publishing 2014) 143; Martin Lemberg-Pedersen, ‘Private Security Companies and the European Borderscapes’ in Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen and Ninna N Sorensen (eds), *The Migration Industry and the Commercialization of International Migration* (Abingdon, Routledge 2013) 152.

<sup>58</sup> The European Border and Coast Guard Agency, *Strategic Risk Analysis 2022* (SAMD/RAU/SFALEM/7782/2022, 2022) 9, available at [perma.cc/43Z9-U96G](https://perma.cc/43Z9-U96G).

The S2 fleet of satellites is part of the EU Commission's Copernicus programme, which is a collaboration between the European Space Agency and the private sector.<sup>59</sup> The takeaway is that there are mixed public-private interests that are profiting from such expenditures; they almost certainly will seek to continue to do so. And they almost certainly will continue to emphasise the threat of rampant climate migration.

#### IV. Critical Praise and What *The Wall* Could (Should?) Have Been

Given the empirical, conceptual, and ideological challenges to the concept of climate migration, why then does it continue to persist? Why would a novel like *The Wall* deploy climate migration as a central conceit? Is it because cli-fi novelists are unfamiliar with the social and natural science evidence? Is it because scholars and experts have been unpersuasive in their criticisms? Or is it because violent imaginaries of a climate change future with rampant climate migration are so compelling and fearful? The 'world-making' of a novel such as *The Wall* is enthralling to readers and critics, perhaps, because it coincides with the real-world dynamics of Trump's wall against Mexico, or Brexit's 'middle finger' to the EU.

This is not to put an author like Lanchester on the hot seat and unduly criticise him for sliding into comfortable assumptions that do not accurately reflect the realities of climate migration or that accept the structural violence of the Wall as fundamentally legitimate. Well, actually, maybe it is. Amitav Ghosh has contended that there is a crisis of imagination in climate change discourses: *The Great Derangement* argued that fiction authors have fundamentally evaded the responsibility about writing about climate change and called for more.<sup>60</sup>

But what are we to do with the failure to convey the complexities of climate migration? Or the usage of blunt class categories, simplistic generational thinking, and (at best, clumsy)

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<sup>59</sup> Kathrin M Walter, 'Migration as a Security Threat in our Warming World? Frontex and the Securitisation of Climate Change-Induced Migration through Practices and Speech Acts' (LLM thesis, King's College London 2022).

<sup>60</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2017); Aaron Matz, 'Flaubert's Planet: Do Novelists, and their Readers, Bear Some Responsibility for the Climate Crisis?' (*The New York Review*, 21 July 2022) available at [perma.cc/7QTC-XC4Z](https://perma.cc/7QTC-XC4Z).

racialisation? Are we to be more critical of authors? What are we to do when they seem oblivious to the long-demonstrated problems with climate migration as an ‘overwhelming horde’ thesis? Why would Lanchester not ‘do his homework’ and get the social and natural scientific knowledge pertaining to climate migration correct?

Novelists often bone up on a subject to deepen the veracity of their writing and to convey nuance. Consider recently published novels. Geraldine Brooks’ *Horse* is replete with compelling historical detail about horse racing in Kentucky in the 1850s and the complicated interplay with slavery: horses, grooms, and jockeys were all owned by white slave masters.<sup>61</sup> Although her characterisations of the novel’s main figures are somewhat clichéd and certainly criticisable, the book nevertheless displays a clear attention to the historical record. It has a multipage afterword that acknowledges the resources and people she engaged with as she wrote about horseracing in the context of the antebellum South. David Santos Donaldson’s *Greenland* also carefully plumbs history—with a plotline pertaining to EM Forster’s pre-World War I relationship with his young, Egyptian lover, Mohammed El Adl.<sup>62</sup> For an example from cli-fi, Kim Stanley Robinson’s magisterial *Ministry for the Future* is replete with careful, deeply-informed research about Earth science, public policy, and political sociology.<sup>63</sup>

For his part, by contrast, Lanchester clearly (and unfortunately) eschewed such careful preparation. Nevertheless, as stated at the outset, *The Wall* was praised in reviews and marketing. Laila Lalami is a marvellous fiction and non-fiction author who has written extensively about immigration and othering.<sup>64</sup> She offered praise for *The Wall*, for ‘telling a story of climate change

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<sup>61</sup> Geraldine Brooks, *Horse* (New York, Viking 2022).

<sup>62</sup> David S Donaldson, *Greenland* (New York, Amistad 2022).

<sup>63</sup> Robinson (n 6).

<sup>64</sup> See especially Laila Lalami, *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (New York, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill 2005); Laila Lalami, *The Other Americans* (New York, Pantheon Books 2019). For non-fiction, see Laila Lalami, *Conditional Citizens: On Belonging in America* (New York, Pantheon 2020).

and migration in the speculative mode at a time when reality itself can seem like a dystopia'.<sup>65</sup> She appeared to praise the novel above all because of its focus on migration. Lalami writes:

In 2018, for example the Trump administration announced a zero-tolerance policy on undocumented immigration. Almost immediately, US Customs and Border Protection began separating migrant and asylum-seeking children from their parents, placing them in detention facilities or in foster care, without the necessary paperwork to keep track of them. We may not yet have the Wall as Lanchester (or Trump) has imagined it, but new horrors are revealed every day: a five-year-old child persuaded to sign papers forgoing her right to a bond hearing, a two-year-old girl forced to appear in federal immigration court alone, detained siblings being told they are not permitted to hug each other. And yet we all seem to carry on as if this were acceptable.<sup>66</sup>

This political contextualisation of Lanchester's novel is perfectly reasonable given the Trump Administration's family separation policy. But Lalami's praise seems off. After all, how does *The Wall* really reveal anything insightful about Trump's border policies? Forcibly separating children from their parents is one of the most chilling and pernicious displays of sovereign power imaginable—certainly on par with the 'extraordinary rendition' of individuals to CIA 'black sites'. But Lanchester's *The Wall* does not really come close to depicting this kind of structural violence. Not at all. Lalami's praise, in fact, suggests that Lanchester does an act of worldbuilding in *The Wall* that downplays the actual violence of a real-world wall. It is too preoccupied with climate migration, even as its treatment of it is so flawed.

Put differently, as Benner and colleagues observe, there is a tendency for cli-fi to be violent and catastrophist, to pit humanity against nature, to embrace violent narratives, and to implement anticipatory frameworks that imagine collapse and apocalypse.<sup>67</sup> If fiction writers are imagining a future that is ferocious and bordered, one overrun by climate migration—even when we know that the climate migration discourse is so flawed—then we can criticise it as unproductively dystopian. A constructive or useful imagining of a dystopia, by contrast, would be the kind that offers a

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<sup>65</sup> Laila Lalami, 'Walled Off: John Lanchester's Speculative New Novel about our Not-So-Distant Future' (*The Nation*, 3 June 2019), available at [perma.cc/Y2H6-XVQ3](https://perma.cc/Y2H6-XVQ3).

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Benner and others (n 42).

cautionary tale. It might offer a ‘recipe’, perhaps, for *avoiding* getting to that state. But if fiction writers are falling into cliché and acquiescing to an imagined violent and bordered world, then they should not be praised.

Put differently, why didn’t Lanchester write a novel about the Change that did not have the threat of overwhelming climate migration? If he is seeking to make a political commentary, then shouldn’t he be criticised for the message of the novel? As Granjou, Walker, and Salazer observe:

Anticipation has become a common, lived affect-state of daily life, shaping regimes of self, health, spirituality, but also our relations and technological entanglement with non-human nature. In other words, anticipation takes on epistemic and normative value as a politics of temporality and affect; ‘a virtue emerging through actuarial saturation as science of the actual are displaced by speculative forecast’.<sup>68</sup>

Science and knowledge of the actual—what is really happening and observable—is being displaced by a fearful ‘speculative forecast’. The fear of climate migration far outstrips the actual empirics. It informs policy decisions, public imaginaries, and, in this case, a deeply British novel.

The problem with such a misrepresentation of present and future climate migration is clear: the assumption that climate migration will be an expected outgrowth of future climate change already crafts present stances towards refugees and migrants. Jacket blurbs for *The Wall* pronounced the novel as ‘brilliant’, ‘relevant’, ‘chillingly real’, ‘all too real’, and ‘essential reading for anyone who cares about the planet’s future’. It quotes *Washington Post* reviewer, Stephen Dyson: ‘It’s not clear what it will take to finally convince us that it’s time to panic about climate change, but works of fiction such as *The Wall* have an important role to play’.

Dyson and others are wrong. The goal should not be to persuade ‘us’ that ‘it’s time to panic’. When it comes to this kind of depiction of climate migration, works of fiction do *not* have an important role to play if they are going to do so in a slipshod and counterproductive manner.

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<sup>68</sup> Celine Granjou, Jeremy Walker, and Juan F Salazar, ‘The Politics of Anticipation: On Knowing and Governing Environmental Futures’ (2017) 92 *Futures* 5, available at [doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2017.05.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2017.05.007).

## V. Conclusion

Imagine a cli-fi novel that would tell a story that is not violent. That would tell a future in which adaptation, mitigation, and justice go hand in hand. That would not fall into unreflective and simplistic neo-Malthusianism. Imagine, instead, a novel that would point to the essential importance of equitable, nonviolent, and sustainable use of resources and emissions. That would envision policies by local, provincial, national, and international-level policymakers that would move in a constructive direction. Imagine, too, a novel that would treat creatively the need for small-‘r’ reparations—not money transfers to individuals, but systematic projects that would address and alleviate past injustices.<sup>69</sup>

Imagine a cli-fi novel that would also get at the complicated interaction of climate change on humans and Earth’s ecosystems in a manner consistent with natural and social scientific knowledge. Above all, imagine a novel that would not use climate migration as a scare tactic. That would not imagine ‘Others’ as an affective strategy to implicate the reader in the story and suggest that ‘it’s time to panic about climate change’.

Fundamentally, how do scholars and experts who are keen on studying climate migration—for a variety of political and normative reasons—convey the complexity of the topic? How can we nurture a productive appreciation in the humanities and natural and social sciences, such that others who step into the knowledge domain do so and evade the clichés and hackneyed assumptions that are so fraught?

The ultimate frustration with *The Wall* is that if there were a dreadful political conflagration over the horizon, or people fleeing broken economies or authoritarian regimes and seeking to gain refuge, it would be easy, perhaps, to imagine a dystopian island nation building a wall and saying: ‘not my problem’ or ‘sorry not sorry’. And if the island has a deep imperial history and the conflagrations on the horizon are closely tied to that imperial legacy—as is certainly the case with the UK (including Northern Ireland)—then one could imagine a process of accountability and responsibility for that country.

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<sup>69</sup> Olúfémi O Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations* (New York, Oxford University Press 2022).

But still, there is a sense that Lanchester (and so many cli-fi authors, as well as journalists and critics) are *using* climate change—the ‘Change’—as a hook on which to hang their analyses of walls and border security. Ultimately, it is a deeply cynical amalgamation of policy and a *misunderstanding* of the actual impact of climate change on human migration.

*The Wall* may not be read widely enough to seep into full public consciousness, but it is nonetheless reflective of the ongoing construction of ‘climate migration’ and ‘climate refugees’ as phenomena that require a society to respond, if they are to be kept out. As such, we must hope that we are spared an adaptation of *The Wall* for the big or indeed the small screen—either would only further normalise the assumptions at the heart of the story. But in the event it is adapted, there will be all the more reason for the story to be met with a deep critical appreciation of its fundamental flaws.