

An Oceanic Tale: Trauma, Technology and Cultural Resistance in Richard Powers's *Playground*

Andrii Bezrukov, Oksana Bohovyk

ABSTRACT

The article appears to be one of the first academic treatments of Richard Powers's *Playground* (2024) to delve into the intertwining narratives of humanity and nature within the Anthropocene epoch. Powers examines the ethical, emotional, and existential dilemmas posed by climate change and technological advancement through his characters and their engagement with an aquatic ecosystem. We explore how the author addresses the issues of environmental (ocean) pollution, AI, childhood trauma, (de)humanization, and cultural resistance to reflect the complexities of the human condition represented in Anthropocene fiction. Within the interdisciplinary realm, we bring together various perspectives from the (environmental) humanities and ecocultural studies, emphasizing the crucial significance of discussing current crises through culture. An ecocritical reading of *Playground* reveals how Powers critiques anthropocentrism and illustrates the consequences of ecological neglect, ultimately advocating for a more harmonious coexistence with the natural world. Powers's captivating story of personal tragedies, environmental issues, anxieties of the Anthropocene, cultural myths, and the critique of overreliance on technology prompts readers to reflect on their roles within the global ecosystem, the importance of environmental stewardship, and the urgency of addressing climate change, while fostering a sustainable future.

KEYWORDS

Anthropocene anxiety, climate change, myth, neocolonialism, techno-utopianism, underwater world

Introduction

Could history, art, literature, religion, philosophy, and ethics influence environmental sustainability? While many researchers acknowledge that resisting a global environmental collapse is futile and that humanity is inevitably heading toward ecocide, in *The Anthropocene and the Humanities*, Merchant forecasts the approaching replacement of the Anthropocene epoch with a new age of sustainability, and offers a vision for an ecologically just future. As we argue in this article, works of fiction play a crucial role in the transition to a sustainable future. In the Anthropocene era, in which humanity has become the primary force shaping the Earth's future, we can only hope for the invention of new narratives that re-examine the role of *Homo sapiens* in the global ecosystem and redefine our place within it. Merchant notes that "the cross-cutting theme of the humanistic dimensions of climate change can help individuals to resolve personal dilemmas and formulate individual ethical responses."¹ Culture and literature have the potential to bring about a revolution, defeat the idea of man as the centre of the universe and allow the natural world into people's consciousness. Climate change caused by human activity has impacted the Earth and literature. However, criticism of contemporary novels has not sufficiently acknowledged the literary responses to the environmental crisis. Trexler believes that

1 Carolyn Merchant, *The Anthropocene and the Humanities: From Climate Change to a New Age of Sustainability*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), 10.

[c]ultural texts like novels, poems, and plays show complex networks of ideas: history, scientific ideas, political discourse, cultural rituals, imaginative leaps, and the matter of everyday life. Interpreting such texts can be understood as a way of describing the patterning of enormous cultural transformations, such as the Anthropocene.²

Although “literature of climate change is tightly entangled with literary and critical responses to the Anthropocene,”³ climate change awareness is not simply a subset of Anthropocene anxieties, and the Anthropocene is “not an easy story to tell.”⁴ The environmental crisis is believed to be related to the crisis of storytelling, or what Ghosh calls the great derangement⁵ – the failure of collective imagination or refusal to narrate the current crisis and global disruptions adequately. Most of the stories we had told ourselves about our role in the world have turned out to be dangerously inaccurate, failing to address humanity’s ongoing march toward ecocide, and do not challenge the idea of human superiority over the natural world. Nadzam is convinced that storytelling “may be both the poison and the antidote to our situation.”⁶ Today, there is no doubt that “the Anthropocene presents all sorts of problems, not the least of which is that if declension is our sole environmental narrative, human beings are but agents of planetary destruction.”⁷ Furthermore, in the age of a “postcolonial Anthropocene,” “times of crisis goad us into recognizing wider sentience and reimagining collective agency.”⁸ As narrative “plays a key role in collective crisis” and the Anthropocene “serves as the basis for competing narratives regarding environmental and humanitarian crises,”⁹ a climate fiction narrative can “help counteract the crisis in imagination”¹⁰ and satisfy a range of social, ideological, spiritual, and other needs, influencing behaviour in society and contributing to the environmentalization of public opinion.

Within the context of this research, it is appropriate to clarify that Anthropocene fiction specifically refers to narratives that explore the geological and ecological transformations caused by human activity during the Anthropocene epoch, emphasizing themes of environmental change, geological impact, and human responsibility on a planetary scale.¹¹ Climate fiction, in contrast, primarily focuses on stories about climate change, focusing on the social, political and

- 2 Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 5.
- 3 Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate*, ed. Adeline Johns-Putra, and Kelly Sultzbach (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 7.
- 4 Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor, “Introduction,” in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, ed. Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2017), 4.
- 5 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
- 6 Bonnie Nadzam, “Storytelling in the Anthropocene,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 59, no. 1 (2024): 183.
- 7 Daniel deB. Richter, “The Crisis of Environmental Narrative in the Anthropocene,” *RCC Perspectives* 2 (2016): 97.
- 8 Kelly Sultzbach, “More-than-Human Collectives in Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* and Vandana Singh’s ‘Entanglement,’” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate*, ed. Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 214.
- 9 Nandita Biswas Mellamphy and Jacob Vangeest, “Human, All Too Human? Anthropocene Narratives, Posthumanisms, and the Problem of ‘Post-Anthropocentrism,’” *The Anthropocene Review* 11, no. 3 (2024): 599–600.
- 10 Gregers Andersen, *Climate Fiction and Cultural Analysis: A New Perspective on Life in the Anthropocene* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 142.
- 11 Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

personal consequences as well as human vulnerability, and potential responses to environmental crises.¹² While both genres overlap within environmental literature, Anthropocene fiction tends to foreground deep, long-term geological and environmental shifts as integral to human existence, whereas climate fiction often concentrates on immediate or near-future climate crises, and their societal implications.

As Bould argues, the Freudian concept of the unconscious best illustrates the cultural concealment of the Anthropocene, particularly given that “[t]he art and literature of our time is pregnant with catastrophe, with weather and water, wildness and weirdness.”¹³ To explore how climate change impacts human character, the future, imagined landscapes, the political realm and the wider culture, a novel must engage fact in dialogue with fiction. Researchers acknowledge that the contentiousness of climate change makes this task even more challenging. From the outset, a novelist faces a legion of questions about the relationship between climate science and the novel.¹⁴ One of the most eminent novelists attempting to provide convincing answers to those questions is Richard Powers (b. 1957), whose “passionate vision is keyed to concerns over the individual”¹⁵ although also fascinated by the boom in science and technology. In *Representing (Post)Human Enhancement Technologies in Twenty-First Century US Fiction*, Laguarda-Bueno refers to Powers as “[a] representative of a new trend of US fiction concerned with the topic of the technological augmentation of the human condition.”¹⁶ At the same time, the focus of Powers’s fiction revolves around a theme that has captured the American imagination since Emerson boldly claimed that the self should be the central subject of the new American literature. This theme highlights the unresolved struggle between the exhilarating celebration of personal autonomy and the unsettling reality of isolation, showcasing the paradox of the imperial that is ambitious and deeply terrified.

Celebrated for his profound engagement with nature and the human condition, Powers continues to challenge readers in his latest novel, *Playground* (2024) to explore a range of themes such as the environmental crisis, the interplay between technology and biodiversity, and the moral imperatives of living in a world threatened by ecological collapse. Following *The Overstory*, the 2019 Pulitzer Prize winner, and *Bewilderment*, shortlisted for the 2021 Booker Prize, Powers’s new book, which was longlisted for the 2024 Booker Prize, represents another attempt at a great American Anthropocene novel. *Playground* delves into these themes, presenting a narrative landscape in which the lines between human intervention and natural processes blur. As the Earth faces unprecedented challenges, Powers’s exploration of the above-mentioned issues becomes increasingly relevant. In *Playground*, the natural environment, particularly the aquatic ecosystem (the ocean), reflects the human inner world, where emotional turmoil consumes the characters, whether through loss, identity crisis, or existential search.

12 Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, “The Influence of Climate Fiction: An Empirical Survey of Readers,” *Environmental Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2018): 473–474; Derek Woods, “Genre at Earth Magnitude: A Theory of Climate Fiction,” *New Literary History* 54, no. 2 (2023): 1143–1145.

13 Mark Bould, *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture* (London: Verso, 2021), 3.

14 Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 29.

15 Joseph Dewey, *Understanding Richard Powers* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 11.

16 Carmen Laguarda-Bueno, *Representing (Post)Human Enhancement Technologies in Twenty-First Century US Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2022), front matter.

The wonders of oceanic life in Powers's book, a bildungsroman of sorts, serve as a backdrop for the unfolding dramatic events in the lives of the characters confronting the challenges such as disease, three-way friendship, moral growth, money, and love. In the late twentieth century, four characters (Todd Kean, Rafi Young, Ina Aroita and Evie Beaulieu) arrive on the island of Makatea, an extremely remote atoll in the Pacific Ocean, to join an ambitious project aimed at launching "self-assembling floating cities covered in greenery and bobbing on the waves."¹⁷ This article discusses how Powers's "oceanic tale" dives into contemporary issues related to the environment, technology, and the human condition, presenting a narrative that is both urgent and thought-provoking. To explore the thematic undercurrents of *Playground*, as well as to highlight its contribution to Anthropocene fiction and the representation of human relationships with the natural world, in the interdisciplinary realm, we bring together various perspectives from the (environmental) humanities and ecocultural studies as "[c]ultural perceptions of the environment influence and are influenced by the knowledge communicated through fiction, thus shaping the reality of the ecocultural crisis."¹⁸ An ecocritical reading of *Playground* reveals the intricate relationships between humans and their environment, highlighting themes of interconnectedness, ecological responsibility, and the impact of human actions on nature.

Nevertheless, Powers's *Playground* is a literary polyptych of sorts – a breathtaking story of personal tragedies, environmental concerns, Anthropocene anxieties, cultural myths, and a critique of overreliance on technology. In *Playground*, as in his previous works such as *The Overstory*, Powers weaves scientific concepts into the narrative, using them to deepen the story's emotional impact. The complexities of ecological interdependence resonate through the characters' relationships, prompting readers to reflect on the consequences of their actions. Known for his experiments at the intersection of science and art, Powers employs the island of Makatea as a lens to expose the flaws of the Anthropocene. The novel features a nonlinear, "oceanic" style, in which the narrative flows in waves and shifts perspectives, blending time, space, and narrative voices. This structure, described as an "oceanic tale," contrasts with a traditional novel structure, akin to how a playground contrasts with a site for hazardous experiments. Powers's "oceanic tale" symbolizes depth and multidimensionality, both ecologically and intrapersonally. The story resembles the ocean – deep, ever-changing, with undercurrents that connect the human experience to the nonhuman, the conscious to the subconscious, and the personal to the planetary. The article explores four main dimensions: ecological collapse as a consequence of human play, childhood trauma as a source of techno-utopianism, dehumanization as a gradually unfolding disaster, and myth as a form of resistance. Each section reveals how the characters struggle to survive in a world where their personal stories appear to be a metaphor for planetary decay.

The title *Playground* serves as a complex metaphor, representing both a place of joy and refuge as well as a site of conflict and disillusionment. In this setting, Powers deals with key themes of the novel, including the manipulation of nature by technology, neocolonial exploitation, psychological trauma, and environmental collapse. Through specific examples and symbols in the text, the author highlights the irony of the playground which transforms into a space of destruction

17 Richard Powers, *Playground* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024), 285.

18 Tatiana Konrad, *Climate Change Fiction and Ecocultural Crisis: The Industrial Revolution to the Present* (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 2024), 14.

rather than fun. Powers carefully composes this multifaceted narrative into a cohesive picture, where each element only makes sense when considered alongside the others.

The title *Playground* encapsulates a multifaceted critique of humanity's exploitative and careless relationship with the planet, portraying the Earth as a platform for technocratic experimentation, environmental devastation, and escapism. Todd Keane, the technocratic architect of the fictional tech giant *Playground*, embodies the hubris of unchecked innovation. His manipulation of human emotion through a gamified algorithm-driven platform reveals a dehumanizing logic: "I created a platform from scratch [...]. One of my former companies is on the verge of announcing a breakthrough that will rush an unsuspecting humankind into its fourth and perhaps final act."¹⁹ In this vision, the planet becomes a testing ground for technological power, stripped of ethical or ecological responsibility. This is mirrored in the island of Makatea, which functions as a literal playground for resource exploitation. Once its resources are depleted, the island is reduced to ruins and sinkholes, abandoned like a broken toy: "[t]he only enterprise left was a jungle set on revenge."²⁰ The dark irony of the title emerges after the game is over, its consequences irreversible. The environmental costs are further symbolized by the grotesque image of a dead albatross, its belly filled with plastic waste: "It was pure garbage – bright plastic trash. Bottles and drums, crumpled PVC and containers in cartoon colors."²¹ This scene highlights the ongoing "game" of consumption and negligence that turns ecosystems into dumping grounds. On a deeper level, the playground serves as a psychological sanctuary for Todd, whose childhood trauma drives his need to dominate and manipulate reality. His childhood fantasy evolves into a technological empire, but this dream of control ultimately collapses into self-destruction. In contrast, the ancient myths of Makatea offer a different worldview, one rooted in reverence for nature and creative balance. The myth of the sentient, super-advanced computer system Ta'aroa, who formed the Earth from broken eggshells, reclaims play as a sacred and imaginative act: "Ta'aroa was an artist, so he played with what he had."²² For Ina, retelling such stories is an act of cultural survival and resistance against oblivion: if a story is not shared, it risks disappearing, but if it is told, there is a chance that someone will remember it. Thus, *Playground* contrasts destructive play with restorative storytelling, posing the question of whether humanity will choose ruin or remembrance.

The Earth becomes a playground that humanity treats irresponsibly: "What are all creatures – even me – doing at all times but playing in the world, playing before their tinkering Lord?"²³ The title embodies a paradox: a game that should bring joy instead becomes a tool of destruction. Through depictions of technocratic control, neocolonial exploitation, and environmental irresponsibility, Powers illustrates how humanity has transformed the planet into a playground for dangerous experiments. The author offers a glimmer of hope through myths, memories, and the characters' resistance. Even amidst the ruins, traces of an alternative, non-game world can still be discovered. *Playground* serves as a parable about a world recklessly toying with its future –

¹⁹ Powers, *Playground*, 26.

²⁰ Powers, *Playground*, 30.

²¹ Powers, *Playground*, 273.

²² Powers, *Playground*, 1.

²³ Powers, *Playground*, 381.

humanity constructing a playground on the remnants of ecosystems, with the child within each of us searching for meaning amidst the chaos of a collapsing world.

The Environmental Crisis and the Anthropocene: From Cosmogony to the Plastic Apocalypse

The theme of environmental collapse runs throughout *Playground* and permeates all levels of storytelling, shaping both the personal experiences of the characters and the broader context of geopolitical history, including colonization, resource exploitation, and technological advancement. This highlights the significance of creativity, nature, and humanity's role. In *Playground*, the environmental crisis is not presented as an abstract concept; instead, it manifests as a tangible and bodily experience. Powers starts the novel with a myth emphasizing the connection between creativity and destruction: "Then he made an egg that could house him. He set the egg spinning in the void. Inside the spinning egg, suspended in that endless vacuum, Ta'aroa huddled, waiting."²⁴ The imagery of the egg as a source of life stands in stark contrast to the modern reality of our polluted oceans filled with plastic. This poetic idea is juxtaposed with an episode in which Hariti finds the dead albatross, inside which she sees plastic. This serves as a profound metaphor for the human impact on nature, highlighting how our actions destroy the ecosystem. It symbolizes the planetary pain caused by human irresponsibility: "Inside that chest, immune to decomposing, lay two fistfuls of plastic pieces."²⁵ When Hariti's mother, Ina, takes the pieces of plastic from the albatross, she chooses not to dispose of it as she does not know "[w]here could she throw them, anyway, where they wouldn't drift back on the tide to kill something else?"²⁶ This highlights the interconnectedness of environmental degradation and the concept of the Anthropocene, the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has dominated the climate and the environment:

To assign a more specific date to the onset of the 'anthropocene' seems somewhat arbitrary, but we propose the latter part of the 18th century, although we are aware that alternative proposals can be made [...]. However, we choose this date because, during the past two centuries, the global effects of human activities have become clearly noticeable. This is the period when data retrieved from glacial ice cores show the beginning of a growth in the atmospheric concentrations of several 'greenhouse gases,' [...]. Such a starting date also coincides with James Watt's invention of the steam engine in 1784.²⁷

This problem can only be addressed through awareness and an analysis of the Anthropocene that requires new forms of coexistence. Haraway asserts that "[t]he Anthropocene is more a boundary event than an epoch, a story told to shock and disturb, not to comfort and reassure."²⁸ Amidst

24 Powers, *Playground*, 1.

25 Powers, *Playground*, 7.

26 Powers, *Playground*, 14.

27 Paul J. Crutzen, Eugene F. Stoermer and Will Steffen, "The 'Anthropocene' (2000)," in *The Future of Nature: Documents of Global Change*, ed. Libby Robin, Sverker Sörlin, and Paul Warde (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2013), 485–486.

28 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 100.

spiralling ecological devastation, “[s]taying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”²⁹ In this novel, the dead seabird is a symbol of a consumer world that destroys all around, including nature. This image aligns with real scientific observations: “[...] plastics ingestion is increasing in seabirds, that it will reach 99% of all species by 2050.”³⁰ The scene featuring the bird’s death is therefore not merely a literary device, but rather a realistic reflection of the current state of aquatic ecosystems, where the threat of plastic pollution is global, pervasive, and ever-increasing.

This complex agency of nonhumans is part of a broader assemblage or actor-network, through which Powers shows how sea creatures repurpose garbage:

The bottle had dropped by godly accident into the pool, and life, which never stopped toying with possible next moves, had exploited the miraculous hiding place dozens of times. The more the family looked, the more settlers they saw inside the glass flask. Stems of living sponges, a bright russet color. Wafer-thin crabs no wider across than the girl’s two fingers. Grassy mats of algae, sedentary colonies of moss animals, a pair of crustaceans, and a gastropod whose name only Limpet knew.³¹

This environment, although born of pollution, becomes new habitats, mutations of ecological systems shaped by waste.

In *Playground*, Powers presents plastic not merely as environmental waste but as an active agent within the sculpting process led by Ina. The narrative animates plastic debris with a strange vitality, depicting it as unpredictable, expressive, and resistant to human control: “The gray plastic box and keyboard were ready for anything. Clearly, they, too, were ocean.”³² This portrayal resonates closely with Bennett’s thing-power theory, which emphasizes the capacity of inanimate objects to act upon and affect the world around them. Bennett writes: “Thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence of aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience.”³³ The description of Ina’s artistic struggle with the unruly material thus exemplifies the vibrancy and agency that Bennett attributes to nonhuman matter. In this way, Powers challenges anthropocentric assumptions by granting plastic a performative role, making it an unpredictable collaborator rather than a passive medium.

The very title of the novel, *Playground*, creates a meaningful allusion. The planet is no longer a home or sanctuary, but a “playground” where people “play” with progress, ignoring the consequences. This is especially evident in the description of the history of Makatea, a territory devastated by phosphate mining:

For a while, Makatea fed millions. When the mines shut overnight in 1966, Makatea crashed. The large imported labor pool moved elsewhere. Many people chased jobs seven hundred miles away in

29 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 1.

30 Chris Wilcox, Erik Van Seville and Britta Danise Hardesty, “Threat of Plastic Pollution to Seabirds Is Global, Pervasive, and Increasing,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 38 (2015): 11899.

31 Powers, *Playground*, 174–175.

32 Powers, *Playground*, 34.

33 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), xvi.

the islands near Moruroa, where the French began their next ambitious Polynesian venture: blowing up atolls with nuclear bombs. The population of the island shrank to a fraction of those who had lived there before the CFPO arrived.³⁴

This episode serves as an example of resource neocolonialism – natural resources are exploited without considering the consequences for the local population and the environment. This quote illustrates how the island's economic growth was a by-product of external exploitation. Once the resources are depleted, the colonizers abandon the island, leaving it in ruins. This exemplifies the colonial take-and-leave model, which Said defines as follows: “through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by loss of the locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored.”³⁵

While the theme of colonial exploitation is prominent in *Playground*, the narrative also reveals that the responses of the islanders to Makatea's fate are far from monolithic. The community's divided vote reflects not only economic desperation or environmental concern, but also deep personal and ideological differences. Some characters, like Afa, advocate for reclaiming agency through economic development (“Afa will vote for progress and excitement and bold new things coming into the world,”)³⁶ while others, like Ina, view nature and myth as vital forms of resistance and continuity. This diversity of opinion complicates any simplistic reading of the islanders as passive victims of neocolonialism. Todd's emotional detachment is also initially framed in terms of childhood trauma, his retreat to the fantasy of walking across the bottom of a lake when overwhelmed. However, the text also portrays a consistent pattern of difficulty in empathizing with others and interpreting emotional cues, suggesting an alternative, and arguably complementary, neurodivergent reading.

Todd's difficulty in understanding other people's emotions has often been interpreted solely through the lens of childhood trauma, particularly his retreat into imaginary underwater spaces as a coping mechanism: “When my mind raced and the future rushed at me with knives, the only thing that helped was looking out from the castle and seeing myself walking across the bottom of the lake.”³⁷ However, this reductionist view overlooks a more nuanced and potentially fruitful reading of Todd as a neurodivergent character. His detachment from social norms, his obsession with patterns and code and his struggle with affective empathy, such as when he internally reflects (“My program still couldn't beat any decent human player. No programs could, back then. But my code gave beginners a workout and a great way to improve their game.”)³⁸ suggest cognitive traits often associated with autism spectrum conditions. Additionally, his difficulty with spontaneous interpersonal connection is not merely trauma-related, but structurally embedded in his mode of processing the world. This reading invites a shift from pathologizing Todd's emotional distance to

34 Powers, *Playground*, 30.

35 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 225.

36 Powers, *Playground*, 214.

37 Powers, *Playground*, 11.

38 Powers, *Playground*, 89.

understanding it as part of a different neurocognitive wiring, challenging normative expectations of emotional behaviour, and expanding interpretative possibilities around his character.

The accomplishments of civilization serve merely as temporary benefits for the global centre, as they cause harm and degradation to peripheral regions. Neocolonial and corporate practices of natural resource exploitation have led to slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes that are ignored because they are “invisible” in time and space. Nixon focuses on the suffering of marginalized communities that are most affected by the aftermath of what he called *slow violence*, that is

a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. [...], a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. [...]. Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively.³⁹

The novel provides a deep analysis of the historical consequences of colonialism, not only as an economic and political process, but also as a traumatic experience that transforms the identity of generations, destroys ecosystems, and fixes inequality in the landscape. The author pays special attention to the island space of Makatea, which becomes a symbol of exhaustion, colonial plunder, and postcolonial oblivion. *Playground* becomes not only a novel about technology, family or personal memory, but a fictional interpretation of the existential challenges of the Anthropocene era, a period in which the Earth has turned into a witness and a victim of human play.

Childhood Trauma and Techno-Utopianism: From Underwater Astonishments to Digital Realities

In *Playground*, the central character is Todd Keane, whose childhood trauma, caused by parental indifference and domestic violence, shaped his perception of the world, personal identity, and professional work. Emotional isolation, mental fragmentation, and fantasies of escaping to the underwater world appear in the novel to be parallels to the collective experience of eco-trauma in the Anthropocene. As concerns the protagonist's home, it is presented not as a place of love, but as an arena of chronic psychological violence. At an early age, Todd realizes that his parents are “competing” to destroy each other: “One continuous war game between the two of them dominated my entire childhood [...]. It was a kind of reciprocal autoerotic strangulation of the soul [...].”⁴⁰ Autoerotic strangulation of the soul serves as a metaphor for the complete lack of psychological security in the family. Todd fails to comprehend this because his father sees his son as a future rival in the game, and his mother devalues his fantasies: “Maybe there's a tiny genie inside.”⁴¹

39 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

40 Powers, *Playground*, 10.

41 Powers, *Playground*, 33.

Thus, instead of emotional support, the child receives irony and indifference. Winnicott indicates that to develop a stable self, one must first provide full emotional support to the child, gradually “stepping back”, allowing the child to learn independence and cope with the discrepancy between their needs and reality. This forms a stable self through the transitional space between the inner and outer worlds.⁴² Decades later, Tronick emphasizes that “[a] dyadic model though tractable is insufficient for understanding social development. A more complex social ecological model is required.”⁴³ Todd’s personal trauma is woven into his technocratic ambitions. As a child, he retreats into a mental fantasy. This internalized “playground” becomes the prototype for his adult project, on in which reality is transformed into a controlled, simulated experience. Yet this retreat into digital dominion ends in psychological fragmentation and ethical collapse.

The protagonist’s experience demonstrates the connection between childhood trauma and eco-anxiety. Todd’s parents create an environment where emotional absence causes a desire to escape: “[...] the only thing that helped was looking out from the castle and seeing myself walking across the bottom of the lake [...]”⁴⁴ This is the desire for isolation, an escape from a world where the danger is not external aggression, but the closest people. The astonishments of the underwater world reflect the search for ontological security, that is, a state of psychological protection provided by social routines, traditions, and trust in systems that allow a person to function while avoiding existential anxiety. According to Giddens, “[o]ntological security is a protective cocoon which all normal individuals carry around with them as the means whereby they are able to get on with the affairs of day-to-day life.”⁴⁵

The adult Todd, a tech billionaire, embodies post-traumatic disintegration: “People and their emotions puzzled me. They were stupidly complex, and there was no way to break them apart and see what was inside.”⁴⁶ His technocratic mindset, which seeks to “cleanse” reality, becomes a defence mechanism against human complexity:

The moderns have a peculiar propensity for separating the world into two distinct zones: that of human beings (the ‘society’) on the one hand, and that of nonhumans (‘nature’) on the other. [...] This practice of ‘purification’ allows them to imagine a purely human sphere of politics and a purely nonhuman sphere of science.⁴⁷

Alienation from the community has a traumatic effect on the protagonist, as social ties are destroyed and the feeling of isolation increases: “Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others.”⁴⁸ This idea helps us

42 Donald W. Winnicott, *The Family and Individual Development* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

43 Ed Tronick, “The Caregiver–Infant Dyad as a Buffer or Transducer of Resource Enhancing or Depleting Factors that Shape Psychobiological Development,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 38, no. 4 (2017): 561.

44 Powers, *Playground*, 11.

45 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 40.

46 Powers, *Playground*, 33.

47 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10–11.

48 Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 214.

understand why Todd's eco-trauma parallels his disintegration: his loss of connection with nature mirrors his loss of connection with himself. As an adult, Todd transfers this need for control to the technosphere, creating a platform that "throws humanity into the fourth act."⁴⁹ His techno-utopia is not a liberation, but a simulacrum where algorithms replace empathy. To cope with his mental overload, Todd, suffering from dementia with Lewy bodies, creates an imaginary reality – an underwater space of silence, peace, and isolation: "I looked out at the lake, and as I had learned to do, I proceeded to walk into it. I walked along the bottom of the green and muted mystery [...]"⁵⁰ This reflects the child's mental escape to an alternative safe area with a deep sense of order in the world. In Todd's case, the real world is hostile, and the ocean is the only sanctuary.

Playground integrates the game of Go meaningfully as a metaphor for contemplative learning, complexity, and interconnection. Todd describes it as "the summit of contemplative philosophy," adding that it "makes chess feel like Chutes and Ladders,"⁵¹ thus positioning Go not merely as a game, but as a philosophical method of understanding others and navigating life. It is also depicted as a form of intuitive, embodied learning that transcends explicit instruction.

More broadly, the novel consistently portrays play as a vital mode of forming connections among humans as well as between humans and nonhumans. Evelyn's interaction with sea creatures, through a game of blowing bubbles, is a poignant example of play as interspecies communication: "The ton and a half of cartilaginous fish circled back and slowed just inches above Evelyne's head. Startled, she blew another burst of bubbles."⁵² Play is not trivialized; it becomes a medium of shared curiosity and mutual learning.

For AI as well, play is a primary form of cognition. The DeepDive platform learns by observing humans play, as it could "derive winning strategies simply by watching real people play."⁵³ Play becomes an epistemological framework, echoed by Rafi's PhD research into gamification in education, a theme that aligns machine learning with human pedagogy. Ultimately, play emerges as the novel's unifying force connecting the organic and inorganic, sentient and synthetic, past and future.

As an adult, Todd achieves the peak of his career in digital technology by creating a platform with billions of users. However, beneath this success lies an ongoing inner turmoil. His confession reveals not an ability to empathize, but rather a profound frustration at his inability to understand human emotions in the same way he comprehends electronic circuit boards or algorithms. Ultimately, his desire shifts away from life and leans toward dissolution, as reflected in his words "What more do I have to live for? The answer is simple: to be buried at sea"⁵⁴ sound like a surrender to the collapse of an anthropocentric project. The underwater world, which in childhood was a fantasy of salvation, in adulthood becomes a projection of ultimate self-destruction. His love for the ocean is a reaction to the traumatic human environment, a contrast between the "wild harmony" of the sea and civilizational violence: "Evanston was nothing. Chicago was nothing. Illinois and even

49 Powers, *Playground*, 26.

50 Powers, *Playground*, 12.

51 Powers, *Playground*, 129.

52 Powers, *Playground*, 58.

53 Powers, *Playground*, 308.

54 Powers, *Playground*, 26.

the U.S. were a joke. There were insanely different ways of being alive [...].”⁵⁵ The ocean becomes a space of alternative thinking, a utopia where the world lives according to different laws, but even it is not protected. In the end, the protagonist dreams of being buried in the sea, recognizing that only in nature is there anything real left. This final wish symbolizes surrender to a world where technology does not save but isolates.

Playground demonstrates the deep connection between the personal and planetary landscape of trauma. The psychological consequences of the protagonist’s childhood experience resonate with the destruction of ecosystems. The Anthropocene is not only a geological epoch in the novel, but also a psychic reality. Returning to the ocean is the final attempt to escape, not for the sake of survival, but for disappearance. Through the protagonist, the novel actualizes not only private suffering but also collective loss, the existential ground of an age that exhausts itself.

(De)humanization: AI and Algorithms as a Mechanism of Self-Destruction

Dehumanization through technology is a process in which algorithmic systems reduce human experience to a set of data, removing the emotional, ethical, and social components. This concept is closely related to the critique of surveillance capitalism that “unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data,”⁵⁶ affective labour of the new proletariat – the cognitariat – whose work is the creation of linguistic, affective, and cognitive relations and depersonalization via optimization when “[t]he achievement-subject exploits itself until it burns out.”⁵⁷ In *Playground*, Powers explores how algorithmic systems not only control, but also turn humanity into an instrument of self-destruction.

In the novel, technology appears not merely to be a tool for modernization or progress, but a potential catalyst for dehumanization. The algorithms that govern not only media production, but also environmental management and even social processes are depicted as impersonal structures that gradually replace human decisions, as automation, algorithmic control and AI become the newest form of self-destruction, depriving people of empathy, responsibility, and opinion. Along the same line, modern technologies, such as AI algorithms and machine learning systems, are increasingly invading the sphere of human emotions, transforming them into a manageable resource. The “algorithmization of joy” is a process in which positive emotions become the object of prediction, optimization and commercialization. Social networks, streaming platforms and even educational programmes operate user data to create personalized content that is supposed to be enjoyable. This practice leads to a loss of autonomy in emotional experience. Algorithms trained to identify the “ideal” stimuli for pleasure create a cycle of addiction: a user needs more and more content to achieve the same level of joy, but this joy becomes standardized and superficial: “I worked for the love of it, the sheer joy, the way I programmed as a boy, to escape the hell of

⁵⁵ Powers, *Playground*, 24.

⁵⁶ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 8.

⁵⁷ Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 47.

my family and to make a good thing out of nothing.”⁵⁸ As a result, algorithms for joy are moving beyond individual experience. Some scholars stress that “every trace of digital information that can become part of an algorithmic representation of an individual has been underscored by Powers as a fundamental aspect in line with [Bernard] Stiegler’s framework and is flagged as the demise of individualization.”⁵⁹ The collective emotional culture degrades as technology promotes unified happiness, ignoring cultural and social contexts. As a result, society loses access to alternative forms of joy, those born out of disagreement, uncertainty, or collaborative exploration. Berardi notes that “[s]ocial communication is submitted to techno-linguistic interfaces: in order to exchange meaning in the sphere of connectivity, conscious organisms have to adapt to the digital environment.”⁶⁰ This observation highlights the shift from direct human connections to interactions mediated by digital interfaces, making emotions susceptible to manipulation.

In the novel, AI takes over the functions of media production, marketing, and content: “[...] my deep learning algorithms were starting to know our users in ways no human could. They could see things in the data that eluded everyone, without blindness or bias, strictly by correlating all the evidence.”⁶¹ This is an example of an “algorithmic invasion” of human emotional life by which people no longer choose what to consume but are “fed” by what machines decide. It is worth noting that automation in *Playground* is portrayed not just as a technological facilitation or process optimization, but as a tool of a new, hidden form of power. Gradually, artificial intelligence is beginning to perform functions that traditionally belonged to humans: making marketing decisions, medical diagnoses, and passing judgments. This creates a new type of governance in which humans are removed from the decision-making process, although not from their consequences, as such power is impersonal, has no face, is not responsible and does not admit mistakes. This makes it particularly dangerous as it is not subject to appeal and does not involve ethical dialogue. In the novel, this tendency is manifested in the changing role of the human: from a creator, he turns into an observer of his removal from the process of control. AI in the novel already replaces professions, social decisions, and justice: “AI apprentices like ours began to make marketing decisions, provide customer support, develop drugs, diagnose and treat patients, and hand down criminal sentencing. We were putting the future on autopilot.”⁶² This echoes the criticism of automation as a form of delegation of responsibility – power without a face where humans are no longer the subject of action.

Obsessed with the underwater world since childhood, Todd tries to understand the mysterious behaviour of a cuttlefish that “dances” in front of an invisible audience: “It flashed complex patterns of every imaginable color, cycling through its designs as if sending a desperate, interplanetary broadcast.”⁶³ This desire to decipher nature is an act of love, but the child receives a computer and a programme that only allows them to imitate the structure, not feel the meaning. This is a verdict on a world where algorithms can capture the sensual, ambiguous, and the human.

58 Powers, *Playground*, 304.

59 Farooqa Lodhi, Fatima Bibi and Faiza Andleeb, “Technology, Memory, and the Construction of Identity: A Critical Study of Richard Powers’ *Playground*,” *International Premier Journal of Languages & Literature* 3, no. 2 (2025): 9.

60 Franko “Bifo” Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 147.

61 Powers, *Playground*, 306.

62 Powers, *Playground*, 307.

63 Powers, *Playground*, 32.

And if we think like them, we dehumanize ourselves, a condition which is illustrated in the final episode, in which the character holds a smartphone that replaces all memory: “Half a century later, [...] I can hold a five-inch flat black slab up to my face [...]. And the little black monolith, always ready, remembers everything for me.”⁶⁴ This serves as a metaphor for surrendering oneself to a machine to avoid carrying the weight of personal history, a gesture that echoes Carr’s argument in *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us* that placing excessive trust in algorithms subtly, but significantly, diminishes our own cognitive capacities.⁶⁵

The algorithms in *Playground* are to be powerful, but ethically devoid forms of intelligence. They can process huge amounts of information, predict the future, and even, as in the case of environmental forecasts, warn of disaster, but this is precisely where their danger lies, since they have no emotions, sense of responsibility, or empathy. A machine that “knows” more than those who created it remains completely indifferent to the consequences of its actions. This is the paradox: the more accurate the forecasts become, the less they can move or change people’s behaviour: “I’ve always trusted machines more than I trust people, and the machines laid out a strong case against me.”⁶⁶ AI turns into a mirror of our ethical numbness, flawless in logic but empty of soul, like the AI that had learned how to read fear, sarcasm, joy, and trust. Nothing in its training could teach it, however, how any of those things felt. According to Harari, the core of the problem lies in the fact that “[i]ntelligence is decoupling from consciousness.”⁶⁷

One of the most unsettling tendencies in *Playground* is artificial intelligence’s capacity not to imitate human behaviour, but to surpass it. Through reinforcement learning techniques, modern AI systems no longer require explicit programming or training on predefined examples – they observe humans, identify behavioural patterns, predict motivations, and make more effective decisions. This is illustrated through a gameplay scenario in which the system learns solely by observing human actions: “They told the AI almost nothing at all, instead leaving it alone to figure out the rules and the goals itself.”⁶⁸ Machines no longer merely replicate human behaviour, they begin to formulate their own logic of action, often more rational and efficient. In this way, human capabilities such as intuition, adaptability, and even emotional decision-making become less relevant within systems that rely on the analytical superiority of machines. The author illustrates how this advantage threatens both human exceptionalism and autonomy: if machines play better, heal better and govern better, what role remains for humans as the central figure in society? This question resonates as a forewarning of a radical transformation in the very concept of humanity: “In time, these next-generation AIs learned to derive winning strategies simply by watching real people play and inferring what the human beings were trying to do.”⁶⁹ The machine does not need to be taught; it mimics and enhances the human experience, thereby challenging its presumed uniqueness.

64 Powers, *Playground*, 34.

65 Nicholas Carr, *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014).

66 Powers, *Playground*, 46.

67 Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper, 2017), 313.

68 Powers, *Playground*, 308.

69 Powers, *Playground*, 308.

Playground portrays dehumanization as a creeping, gradual process in which key decisions are increasingly delegated to faceless systems and algorithms incapable of empathy or remorse. These digital structures lack emotion and moral accountability, and appear to be ideal executors: precise, efficient, and free from the “human factor”. Yet behind this efficiency lies a deeper threat – the algorithm is neither an embodiment of evil nor a bearer of good, but a form of pure indifference. Detached from ethics and emotion, this indifference may be humanity’s most dangerous enemy, as it requires no justification, knows no doubt, and operates with relentless consistency.

Myth as a Form of Cultural Resistance: The Voices of Nature vs. Virtual Oblivion

Despite its dominant themes of automation, data, and technocracy, in *Playground* there is another crucial narrative thread – lyrical and mythological – tied to a sense of deep memory that resists algorithmic forgetting. In the novel lies a tension between a technocratic present, inclined toward global standardization, and a traditional cultural memory preserved in myths, oral narratives and the worldviews of Indigenous communities. Powers contrasts the cold calculation of machines with an intuitive, poetic perception of the world – one that endures in ancient stories, in the living language of the Earth, in the voices of nature: “That timelessness had driven her to a life at sea. The sun and wind, currents and waves, the smell and color of the changing air and water, the tilt of shadows, the roll of the horizon: all these she could read.”⁷⁰ This episode describes stored experiences, memories that cannot be conveyed in words or numbers, untouched by algorithms. It is a form of resistance to dissolving into digital noise, whereby digital interfaces replace direct human interaction, transforming communication into a technically mediated process: the connection between minds has been replaced by the connection between interfaces.

It is against this reduction of meaning to interfaces that the mythological arises. Powers depicts how the voices of nature and fairy tales have the power to keep a person in a state of “being” rather than simply “functioning,” to notice the beauty in the smallest things: “She stopped one day in the middle of a dive to watch a giant cuttlefish near the mouth of its den. This tentacled mollusk, kin to squid and octopus, was performing a long, wild color-dance for no one.”⁷¹ This is a vivid image of unconscious, almost shamanic creativity: a being that creates meaning without a consumer, simply because that is its nature. Against this backdrop, algorithms are blind, functional and empty. Iyer notes: “In an age of speed, I began to think, nothing could be more invigorating than going slow.”⁷² Likewise, in *Playground*, respite, listening to nature, and remembering old voices are forms of “rebellion” against digital amnesia. In Powers’ novel, Myth is not a relic, but the deepest form of memory that allows a person to stay alive in a world where everything else is just a data stream.

Myths from Ta’aroa to Māui permeate the novel. These are not just decorations – they represent the characters’ attempt to resist a rationalized world through symbolism, memory, and myth. For Ina, these stories are a way of surviving, raising children, and rethinking loss. The novel

⁷⁰ Powers, *Playground*, 120.

⁷¹ Powers, *Playground*, 32.

⁷² Pico Iyer, *The Art of Stillness: Adventures in Going Nowhere* (New York: Simon & Schuster/TED Books, 2014), 66.

opens with the myth of Ta'aroa, the supreme creator god in the mythology of the Society Islands of French Polynesia. This text, which precedes the main plot, sets the epic register of the novel: "With all that endless time and all that eternal waiting, Ta'aroa grew weary inside his egg. So he shook his body and cracked the shell and slid out of his self-made prison."⁷³ The excerpt does not establish a poetic framework, but demonstrates an alternative epistemology – a form of knowledge not based on evidence or logic, but on narrative, symbol, and imagination. According to Lévi-Strauss, "[m]yth is functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at 'taking off' from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling."⁷⁴ In Ina Aroita's world, myth is a living cultural code. When she tells stories of Ta'aroa, Māui and the ancestors, she acts not as a storyteller but as a bearer of historical memory.

Myth in *Playground* is not an archaic plot decoration or a decorative relic of the past, but a living instrument of cultural struggle, a form of knowledge that crystallizes ethics, historical memory, and resistance to destruction. Through the image of Ina Aroita, the author convincingly shows that the word, even unrecorded in writing, has the power not only to survive but also to resist, that is, to become a counter-narrative in the age of digital monologue. Her orally transmitted narrative may be perceived not as preserving culture but being itself. As technocratic thinking displaces metaphorical thinking and environmental collapse becomes a backdrop for abstract analytics, it is precisely those cultures that cherish myth as a daily practice, and not as a museum exhibit. They remain the only carriers of the cognitive heritage of humanity, wherein myth is not just history, but a way of seeing the world as a coherent whole, where every creature has meaning, and every event is reflected in the further actions of humanity. In the novel, myth is a memory that does not allow the world to fade away completely, a slowdown in a time of total acceleration, spiritual roots among the torn landscape, where something resounds that the algorithm does not recognize: compassion, belonging, the duration of connections that cannot be translated into data. This space becomes the last outpost against the final oblivion.

Conclusion

The Anthropocene is an epoch defined by a significant human influence on the geological processes that shape our planet. This concept reflects the theoretical challenges, philosophical dilemmas, value uncertainties, cultural contradictions, and social anxieties of the twenty-first century. What makes the discussion surrounding the Anthropocene particularly unique is its challenge to anthropocentric perspectives and its questioning of the very idea of nature itself. Anthropocene fiction has emerged as a powerful means of promoting environmental awareness and is now often associated with the crisis of storytelling – the failure of authors to narrate the current collapse effectively and resist human dominance over the natural world through literature. In contemporary novels, anthropogenic climate change serves as a symbol of the global disruptions we face in the age of the Anthropocene.

⁷³ Powers, *Playground*, 1.

⁷⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 210.

Playground marks another masterful entry into Powers's oeuvre, showcasing the author's ability to deliver intricate narratives that unveil the complexities of human relationships within the context of ecological and technological themes. *Playground* is characterized by its multifaceted narrative structure, weaving together the lives of diverse characters who interact with their environments in deeply personal ways, highlighting the anxieties of the Anthropocene, childhood trauma, myth as a form of cultural resistance, and the critique of over-reliance on technology. Central to the novel is the idea that every action taken toward the natural world has certain effects on ecosystems and future generations. Each character's journey serves as a reflection of broader societal attitudes toward nature, technology, and personal responsibility.

The storytelling in *Playground* shifts between moments of intimate character development and broad reflections on humanity's place in the natural world. Powers's novel presents a complex narrative that weaves together themes of the environmental crisis, technology, cultural resistance, and the human condition. The work is poised to make a significant contribution to contemporary Anthropocene literature, addressing urgent realities while also invoking a sense of hope and agency. Through its intricate characterizations and thematic depth, *Playground* encourages readers to reconsider their relationship with nature and the ethical implications of their choices. As the world confronts the challenges of the Anthropocene, Powers's novel serves as both a warning and a call to action, urging a more compassionate and sustainable coexistence with our planet.

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Andrii Bezrukov is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philology and Translation at the Ukrainian State University of Science and Technologies, Dnipro, Ukraine. His research interests focus on Anglophone literature, ecocriticism and ecofiction, comparative literature, literary process studies, postmodern metafiction, migrant literature, and gender studies. He also works in the fields of literary theory, foreign literature studies, cultural linguistics, and teaching translation techniques. He has published widely in leading international journals, including *Anglia*, *Respectus Philologicus*, *Forum for World Literature Studies*, and *Literatura: teoría, historia, crítica*.

Oksana Bohovyk is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philology and Translation at the Ukrainian State University of Science and Technologies, Dnipro, Ukraine. Her research interests focus on Anglophone literature, ecocriticism and ecofiction, discourse and dialogue, corpus linguistics, and gender studies. She also works in the fields of cognitive linguistics, bilingual cognition, linguistic and cultural relativity, critical reading, and sociolinguistics. She has published widely in leading international journals, including *British and American Studies*, *Anglia*, *Forum for World Literature Studies*, and *Respectus Philologicus*.