

# Local Disasters: More-Than-Human Places in Fiction Narratives of Hamilton, ON

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## Abstract

Lucy Lippard describes “place” as the environment “as seen from the inside,” where the viewer’s affective experiences of land constitute their understanding of the space (9). Hamilton authors are, in different but fundamentally coherent ways, concerned with place. Whether in the form of encroaching floods or the topographies of human social life, literature of Hamilton, Ontario attends to the increasingly precarious ecologies of the future and present. This project explores Melanie Hobson’s novel *Summer Cannibals* and Marissa Slaven’s YA novel *Code Blue* as examples of local fiction concerned with social and environmental conflict. I suggest that fiction offers a particularly fruitful site for cultivating an ethical orientation toward the environment and work to address my central research question: how do selected novels concerning Hamilton ON attend to the social and political implications of place?

## Introduction

- Hamilton, ON is situated in an ecologically significant valley between an escarpment and the western point of Lake Ontario on Indigenous territory protected by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Agreement.
- Hamilton authors or literature are for the purposes of this project as both authors who are current residents or those with a strong connection to this place and works that are set in Hamilton, ON.

- “More-than-human” accounts for the ways in which non-human lives, with their own forms of intimacy and complex ecologies, exceed the limits of human understanding (Abram).



## Summary

### Summer Cannibals

- *Summer Cannibals* by Melanie Hobson chronicles a garden tour at the grand Blackford family house overlooking Hamilton’s escarpment, which reveals the long-standing fissures within the family as characters lose control over the human and more-than-human.
- The novel situates itself in Hamilton early on through “the monstrous flickering shadows of the steel mills on the shore of Lake Ontario” (6).

## Code Blue

- Written by Hamilton-based physician and writer Marissa Slaven, *Code Blue* is a young adult book dystopian “cli-fi” (climate science fiction) novel.
- Concerns a future in which North America faces the existential threat of flooding and environmental catastrophe and a teenager called Tic who leaves her home on a small farm to attend a boarding school focused on preparing students to “solve the problem of the Change” (Hobson 88).

## Common Themes

### Socio-political implications of environmental change

- *Code Blue* as YA “Cli-Fi”: Dystopian fiction augments the conventions of YA, which charts the movement from childhood to adulthood, with the existential threat of environmental disaster, resource scarcity, parentlessness, socio-political collapse, and death (Hanssen 43-7).
- *Summer Cannibals* and “more-than-human” revolt: to the family, the vast gardens are “nothing less than what they deserve” and must be maintained (4); however, the garden tries to restore itself with “legions of invading dock and chickweed” (10).
  - By the end of the novel internal conflict drives each member of the family from the home and into the more-than-human.

## Ways of Viewing

- Two “views”: above and below. Typically the view from above is a divine or removed gaze or a cultural critique, while the view from below is often associated with the particular or the mundane (Hume 634-5).
- View from below: after a storm floods her town Tic ventures out on a canoe to her now submerged home (Slaven 201). *Code Blue*’s view from below disorients the reader through the “hostile” flooding (Dobraszczyk 876).
- View from above: In *Summer Cannibals*, the Blackford house sits overlooking the city, which mimics the commonly used ‘bird’s eye’ depiction of climate change (Dobraszczyk 876). *Summer Cannibals* complicates this view as the family ultimately moves downward.

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