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Between Optimism and Pessimism: Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene

A REVIEW BY ELINE TABAK

With the rise in popularity of the Anthropocene as a critical concept, so have publications regarding the topic increased in number. In 2005, Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (hereafter *The Future*) was published. In this book, Buell provides an overview of environmental criticism up until its publication, important topics in the field, and examines the possible futures of the discipline. At the time, Buell considered environmental criticism a "wide-open movement," not yet defined and seeking out what it could do (28). The term Anthropocene, which was first introduced in 2000 (Crutzen and Stoermer 17-18), was not yet widely used amongst academics at the time of *The Future*'s publication. Times have changed, of course. The future Buell referred to, or our present, has brought some changes in both the material world and ecocriticism in the form of the Anthropocene. Ten years after Buell's *The Future*, two books were published on the topic of environmental literary criticism and the Anthropocene: Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (2015) and Timothy Clark's *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (2015).

Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions* explores how the Anthropocene has affected and shaped contemporary literature. While Buell does not yet use the term, both Trexler and Clark prefer it to "climate change," indicating an essential break with Buell's environmental criticism from 2005. Trexler explains that he prefers the Anthropocene because it refers to a "geological process reflected in the atmosphere, oceans, ecosystems, and societies" (4). As such, the term situates climate change in the "here and now" rather than the distant future. Following these environmental developments, Trexler argues that novels concerning climate change have partially changed, but still need to introduce new narrative techniques to include all "things" (for instance global warming) of the Anthropocene (13). Whereas Buell still distinguishes between anthropocentric and ecocentric narratives, which either focus on humans or nonhuman nature, the term Anthropocene implies "full" coverage of Earth's many networks. As I will elaborate below, Clark questions the possibility of such a view.

Throughout his book, Trexler argues that contemporary realist fiction is unable to deal with the vast dimensions of the Anthropocene, and claims these novels cannot offer plausible alternatives to our current way of living. Looking at the stylistic and narrative conventions of realist fiction, Trexler concludes that the genre is unable to capture the full extent of the science and politics of climate change. Certain modes of writing such as the realist novel are, according to Trexler, constrained by their literary tradition; they are not yet adapted to fully represent the new networks now playing important roles, including nonhuman agents such as the weather, forests, and insects. Following this, the book concludes that climate change novels cannot simply be restricted to one genre and mode of writing. Instead, a broader range of climate novels develops a more complete understanding of the Anthropocene. Writers, readers, and critics alike need different tools to write and analyse the novel in the Anthropocene. Instead of a single message and truth, the full scale of networks of the Anthropocene needs to be addressed and touched upon in order to represent anthropogenic climate change and its consequences. Here Trexler echoes Buell's call to analyse climate fiction from several perspectives. Nonetheless, he does argue that the genre of speculative fiction plays an important role

in capturing and communicating the Anthropocene. After his reading of Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009), Trexler concludes that speculative fiction allows authors to "conceptualize complex, heterogeneous systems: how national pride, bioengineering, aesthetics, familial love, social resistance, species loss, job loss, local food and flooding might combine to create a way of life in the future" (220). According to Trexler, realist fiction is often limited to the view of the individual, whereas speculative fiction (science fiction in particular) allows for greater analysis of the societies and networks that have led to the Anthropocene and what might come after.

Trexler's concept of the new networks constructed in the Anthropocene is informed by Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and Bruno Latour's model of scientific networks (*Pandora's Hope*). ANT provides a useful explanation as to the workings of climate change discourse and how this is reflected in novels. Using Latour's model, which emphasises the social constructivist nature of science, Trexler shows that while climate novels appear to be best placed within the "public reception" node, they do not really fit anywhere (61). Instead, they pass through Latour's entire model and "instantiate" climate change. Inspired by the material reality of climate change and the scientific discourse explaining it, but only becoming truly effective when received by the public, such novels can become part of the climate change narrative. As part of this model, states Trexler, climate novels could indeed transform the world. With this belief, Trexler drastically differs from both Buell, who acknowledges the polemical nature of ecocriticism yet emphasises its limits in *The Future,* and Clark, as I will show further on.

In the second chapter, Trexler attempts to locate the Anthropocene in the climate change novel and, like Buell did ten years before, argues that environmental criticism should move on from a local to a global understanding of climate change. Like Buell, Trexler emphasises that local place-attachments and literary traditions still largely determine certain aspects of climate novels, such as theme, narrative, and background. As an example both of this attachment to place and the influence of Western climate change discourse, Trexler gives a list of novels that focus on the Arctic and Antarctic. He compares the narrative background of these novels to an Anglo-American tradition

of literature (82). After that, he analyses another literary tradition with deluge and flood narratives, which both come from a larger tradition in European literature, and the regression trope in British literature. Trexler's comparative analyses show that, despite a call for global place-, or rather, space-attachments, the way climate change is presented and perceived in literature is very much situated within the author's own place-attachments and literary history.

Trexler's final chapter focuses on what he terms *eco-nomics*, which includes new dynamics of domesticity (*eco*, which stems from the Greek word οἶκος, as the traditional house), what humans do in order make a living (economy), and how this is situated in the broader context of the world (ecology) (170-73). Unlike traditional economic theories, the three interpretations of eco-nomics are non-anthropocentric and thus complicate these matters, because life during and after climate change is not solely focused on humans anymore. Aware of these changes, a significant amount of climate change fiction also focuses on "world-building" and addresses questions of daily life and where anything, from bread to building materials, comes from. Once more, nonhuman actors play an important role in climate fiction and the local "eco" becomes global. The climate novel not only offers a look into the close and/or distant future and human ecology, but also into the broader network of both human and nonhuman actors.

Timothy Clark's *Ecocriticism on the Edge* goes one step beyond Trexler's argument. Clark claims that the Anthropocene has perhaps reached the threshold or limits of the artistic as well as the human imagination as a whole and our ability to comprehend the extent to which the Anthropocene changes our world. Like Trexler, he states that the Anthropocene asks for new strategies in creating art in order to adequately represent and engage audiences at their present scale, while also exploring the multiplicity of other scales and networks throughout the world. Like art, ecocriticism needs to change before it reaches the limits of what it can do in the Anthropocene.

Unlike Trexler, Clark questions the concept of the Anthropocene and complicates the call for global place-attachments that Buell mentioned in *The Future of Ecocriticism* (96). Clark argues that while the Anthropocene asks for new connections and networks,

one simply cannot have a "global" overview of the world because no one (or thing) is connected to everything at the same time (3-6). He analyses the multiplicity of levels and scales on which things, such as global warming, enfold, change their meaning, and develop discourse in the Anthropocene, and connects this to Timothy Morton's notion of "hyperobjects." Very much like the connections of the Anthropocene, hyperobjects cannot be understood as "traditional" objects with one definition and function. Instead, such objects defy prediction and even understanding at different scales or levels (Morton 8). Hyperobjects exist at both local and planetary scales. With anthropogenic climate change, as Clark argues, this is also the case as more *things* and problems emerge at a planetary scale than before. One example is global sea level rise. It is no longer a question of moving from the local to the global, as the meaning and effect of things change at different scales. In making sense of new actors and networks in the Anthropocene, Clark's focus on hyperobjects and different levels and scales clearly differs from Trexler's use of Latour's model and further complicates the network of "things" in the Anthropocene. Because of this, it is impossible to look at climate change, which blurs the lines between the human and nonhuman, from a single global perspective. A full overview of the Anthropocene, with all its networks, is an anthropocentric illusion.

Clark also criticises the dominant idea in environmental criticism that environmental literature can change human identity and thus the world (20). Following this, he foregrounds environmental criticism's "delusion" that their discipline has a certain agency and more influence than it in fact does. Looking at its take on new networks formed in the Anthropocene, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*'s endeavour is not to solve the current environmental crisis through the arts and analysis, but rather to help its readers and the broader public to "at least comprehend ecological problems" (21). Here, Clark's view on the effect of literature more closely resembles Buell's than Trexler's, as the latter firmly expresses a belief that literature can change people.

The ethico-political scales of climate change, which are often too big to comprehend, remain invisible despite their global effects. Due to our limited situated and embodied experience as humans, these scalar disruptions take place on spatio-temporal levels (Clark 38). For

humans, this affects the ways in which we experience local and global place-attachments as well as our long-term thinking. As an example, Clark uses the 1968 photograph of Earth taken from space. Up until that point nobody had been able to even visualise Earth in global terms and, according to Clark, most people are still unable to think Earth on a global scale. This, too, is an anthropocentric illusion. In order to try and capture Earth even in words, writers must employ several scales, which could possibly counteract each other but still add to a fuller understanding of the *whole*. Scalar disruption does not only affect traditional strategies to read literary texts, but also implies that texts have several contexts and interpretations at once, without one being superior.

Climate change is thus also a scale effect: Individuals' decisions and acts in daily life have influence on a global scale (70-87). What appears to be normal or even rational on one scale, like driving a car to save time, has a destructive effect on another scale, namely global warming. Moreover, climate change has different social, political, and economic effects on different scales. As a result of these scale effects, as Clark elaborates in the seventh and eighth chapters, humanity has lost a sense of spatio-temporal proportion. Many norms of viewing and judging the world have either changed rapidly or fallen away entirely. Because the most evident effects of the Anthropocene happen on a larger scale than individuals perceive, it feels as if climate change is not real. Clark refers to this as "Anthropocene disorder," which entails that the mind can no longer keep up with the Anthropocene and is increasingly spread thin over social, political, ethical, and spatio-temporal scales (140).

To conclude, between all three authors, Trexler is the only one who truly vouches for the agency of literature, as part of the debate around the Anthropocene. Whereas Buell calls for new strategies to represent and analyse the turn to the global, Trexler notes that authors and critics alike should employ new tools and strategies to become part of and *influence* the model of anthropogenic climate change. Clark, however, looking at the different scales of the Anthropocene, expresses doubts as to the possibility of fully understanding the very concept of the Anthropocene, let alone representing it in literature. While Trexler's faith in the novel in a time of climate change seems too optimistic at times, he does make a fair point for the novel as a means to explore

the Anthropocene and the many networks constructed in the epoch. In contrast, Clark comes across as being almost too pessimistic in his criticism on literature. Still, the latter's cynical outlook is a necessary reminder that ecocriticism sorely needs a revival in order to retain the value of its critique in the face of the Anthropocene.

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BIOGRAPHY

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