

Book Review

The Challenge of Climate Writing

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Allen Lane, 2016. 206 pp.

Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*. Oxford University Press, 2008. 264 pp.

Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Crisis*. University of Virginia Press, 2015. 260 pp.¹

Christopher J. Armstrong

In a recent long read for *The Guardian* newspaper, journalist Rebecca Solnit calls for the mobilization of culture—specifically story-telling—in the climate struggle. “What the climate crisis is, what we can do about it, and what kind of a world we can have is all about what stories we tell and whose stories are heard,” she writes. Unfortunately, she says our story-telling is not up to the task:

We are hemmed in by stories that prevent us from seeing, or believing in, or acting on the possibilities for change. Some are habits of mind, some are industry propaganda. Sometimes, the situation has changed but the stories haven’t, and people follow the old versions, like outdated maps, into dead ends. (Solnit)

Solnit brings to mind arguments made by Bengali writer Amitav Ghosh, whose 2016 book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* argues that “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (9). For Ghosh, climate change poses challenges for the contemporary writer that “derive ultimately from the grid of literary forms and conventions that came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth” (7). Needless to say, this claim about the causal links between literary narrative and global modernity is far too large for a book of some 200 pages, a book that is wide-ranging and provocative, devoting chapters to history and politics as well as fiction.

It is also important to point out that Ghosh’s wide-ranging book, based on a series of lectures, has a fairly parochial concern. The first part, entitled “Stories”—which will be the focus of my analysis here—clearly states Ghosh’s desire to bring the climate crisis to centre of what he calls “serious” or “literary fiction.” Taking aim at prestigious literary journals, he insists that the “mere mention of the subject [of climate change] is often enough to relegate a novel or short story to the genre of science fiction” (7). The blindness of serious fiction is part of the larger “derangement” that he sees in our (non) response to the crisis—derangement not only because of its denial of an existential threat but also because of the

the fact that the disruptions caused by climate change have now become the norm. In short, literary culture is unable to grapple with the fact that our common reality is now regularly punctuated by the extraordinary—extreme weather events, rising sea-levels, accelerating species extinctions.

The problem begins with the arrival of the modern realist novel. Drawing on the work of Franco Moretti, Ghosh argues that bourgeois culture succeeded in shifting storytelling away from the extraordinary and the fantastic towards a chronicle of the probable and the everyday. Coupled with the 19th century scientific dogma of gradualism, our modern way of thinking has, since then, found itself unable to deal with the exceptional and the extraordinary that are part of the new climate reality, let alone engage the nonhuman forces that have come back to haunt us in the form an “environmental uncanny” (32). Likewise, our ability to create literary works that engage the social collective—essential if art is to help mobilize response and action—has been short-circuited. Ghosh lays blame at what John Updike once called “individual moral adventure” in modern fiction—a focus on the trials of the individual in society. Ghosh calls this a “turn”—rather than “an essential element of the novel as a form”—a trend in the writing of novels occurring “at a certain time in the countries that were then leading the way to the ‘Great Acceleration’ of the late twentieth century” (79). In short, Western individualism has worked to stifle a collective response to the crisis, and as a result, “humanity finds itself in the thrall of a dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics, and literature alike” (80). The modern novel has also worked its influence on our conceptions of place and time. Novels require manageable settings, excluding the larger landscapes, geological forces and systems that structure the locale in which the action, as we say, takes place. Along with a prohibition on representing vast periods of time, the modern novel can be said to be incapable of representing the Anthropocene and its “forces of unthinkable magnitude” (63).

So where is literary fiction headed? Ghosh offers no definite answer, except to contemplate further, in the final pages of the “Stories” section, the relation between the nonhuman and the novel. Drawing on anthropologist Eduardo Kohn and his book *How Forests Think*, he proposes that the Anthropocene is our “interlocutor,” thinking through us to give shape to new hybrid forms of expressions outside of our logocentrism, that is, outside of language (83).

A glance at two recent critical works—published before Ghosh’s intervention—tells a different story. Ursula K. Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008) and Adam Trexler’s *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Crisis* (2015) inform us that a transformation of artistic expression has been long underway. Moreover, they suggest that we cannot declare imaginative failure in contemporary cultural expression nor overlook

innovation in the reshaping of artistic forms to engage the climate crisis. These books adopt different theoretical frameworks and terms of reference, but both are concerned with the question of how modes of cultural expression, including literature, have been, or are being reshaped in order to address human-induced climate change.

i

Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* is significant for its challenge to the assumptions that have underpinned eco-activism and literary eco-criticism. Like Ghosh, Heise is concerned with how contemporary cultural expression negotiates climate change, and like Ghosh, she sees the problem in terms of the limited scope of the major literary genres: "[C]limate change poses a challenge for narrative and lyrical forms that have conventionally focused above all on individuals, families, or nations, since it requires the articulation of connections between events at vastly different scales" (205). Accordingly, Heise's frame of reference is "globalization," and it is work in cultural studies of globalization that informs her stance. Environmental and eco-critical thinking has for too long emphasized "the local as the ground for individual and communal identity and as the site of connections to nature that modern society is perceived to have undone." Acknowledging this as a uniquely American tradition—"where rootedness in place has long been valued as an ideal counterweight to the mobility, restlessness, rootlessness, and nomadism" (9)—she argues that "the increasing connectedness of societies around the globe entails the emergence of new forms of culture that are no longer anchored in place" (10).

For Heise, the concepts of "deterritorialization" and "cosmopolitanism" are key to making this shift from the kind of local connectedness we call "sense of place" to one she calls "sense of planet." "Deterritorialization," she writes, "implies that the average daily life, in the context of globality, is shaped by structures, processes, and products that originate elsewhere" (53).

The challenge that deterritorialization poses for the environmental imagination, therefore, is to envision how ecologically based advocacy on behalf of the nonhuman world as well as on behalf of greater socio-environmental justice might be formulated in terms that are premised no longer primarily on ties to local places but on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole. (10)

Heise offers "eco-cosmopolitanism" as the term for a new kind of environmental world citizenship, one which envisions "individuals and groups as part of planetary 'imagined communities' of both human and nonhuman kinds" (61). Eco-cosmopolitanism "reaches toward what some environmental writers and philosophers have called the 'more-than-human world'—the realm of nonhuman species, but also that of connectedness with both

animate and inanimate networks of influence and exchange” (60). In the chapters that follow, Heise examines environmental discourse and cultural expression, identifying works that offer a “deterritorialized environmental vision” (10). Her ideal is an understanding of “the global that integrates allegory—still a mode that is hard to avoid in representations of the whole planet—into a more complex formal framework able to accommodate social and cultural multiplicity” (21). The two chapters of Part One discuss the emergence of planetary thinking in environmental discourse and in novels (including sci-fi), poems, films, and art installations which adopt what she sees as an eco-cosmopolitan stance. Chapter 1—which I will focus on here—examines the emergence and transformation of allegorical conceptions of a connected ecological system while chapter 2 takes up representations of the population crisis in commentary and cultural discourse.

Marshall McLuhan’s global village, the “Blue Planet” photograph of Earth taken from space, Thomas Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, and Buckminster Fuller’s Spaceship Earth are some of the allegories with which environmentalists and artists conceived a sense of planet in the 1960s and 70s. Environmentalist discourse and nature oriented sci-fi often drew on apocalyptic rhetoric and traditions—with capitalism overtaking totalitarianism as the main global threat in the postwar era—as well as offering up utopian visions. However, the American discourse, as mentioned above, valorized sense of place, associating “closeness, cognitive understanding, emotional attachment and an ethic of responsibility and ‘care’” or as a number of sociologists reckon an ‘ethic of proximity’ (33), giving rise to such movements as bioregionalism and the land ethic. While environmental thought has more recently integrated the global perspective, she tells us, it nonetheless imagines the local as the anchor of identity and eco-awareness. Heise turns to thinkers such as James Clifford who have explored how even the most bounded of places are diasporic, with identities constructed from multiple sources. In contemporary expression, allegory continues to figure in experimentation; however, she suggests that the trope of the network has played an important role in new activist and artistic visions with the “technological connectedness” inspired by the Internet often figuring as a useful correlate for environmental connection (65). Similarly, a new “database aesthetic” (67) informs art installations such as John Kilma’s *Earth* (2002) and Internet applications such as *Earth Viewer*, now Google Earth (2004). Such works transform the allegorical image of the “Blue Planet” into an interactive global icon enabling search and scalar vision.

Part Two of the book “Planet at Risk” includes a valuable account of sociological and cultural research on risk (chapter 4) while chapters 5 and 6 turn to novels, including Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and Richard Powers’ *Gain* as well as two post-Chernobyl narratives published in German. Heise notes that the dispersion of risk across distances and scales is part of the process of deterritorialization at work in the global order. However, a valid

eco-cosmopolitanism must explore notions of “the new transnational forms of solidarity and community on the basis of shared risk exposure” (12) in light of differences of power and cultural conflict (123). Chapter 4 takes up this theme, beginning with an account of trends in risk analysis, which appeared in the 1970s. A reigning psychometric paradigm, she informs us, sought to understand differing perceptions of risk across societies—perceptions among experts and those in various segments of the general public. Not only race and gender are at work here but also trust in institutions charged with management of risk and paranoid visions of fear-mongering as social control. Similarly, culturally-inspired approaches to risk have identified group-based worldviews with certain perceptions of risk along with the ways that perceptions of risk are variably distributed, amplified or muted by social networks and institutions. Unsurprisingly, she points out, environmentalists have been reluctant to adopt the language of risk because risk factors gain as well as harm; likewise, ideas such as “acceptable risk” cede too much to systems that pose serious dangers to life. However, Heise thinks both environmentalists and artists can benefit from an engagement with risk theory—and make important contributions to the field, in particular, how certain traditions of narrative “filter and shape information about risk” in various ways (139). Ulrich Beck’s account of the “world risk society” also informs the discussion here, including the idea that risk is not confined to poor and vulnerable communities. This idea informs Heise’s reading of Don DeLillo’s celebrated novel *White Noise*.

ii

Adam Trexler’s 2015 work of literary criticism *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* embraces the Anthropocene as a shaping influence on contemporary anglophone novels. For Trexler, the term’s emphasis on “a geological process” means it can “indicate the larger, *nonhuman* aspects of climate” and signifies the fact that “climate change is upon us” (Introduction; emphasis in original). Where Ghosh sees literary fiction stalled, Trexler—like Heise—sees “a cultural transformation” that is well underway, changing “the forms and potentialities of art and cultural narrative” (Introduction). Where Heise sees artists and writers making deliberate self-conscious choices in cultural experimentation, Trexler emphasizes fiction’s receptivity to the changes that are taking place around us: “[C]ontemporary fiction is becoming climate fiction, insofar as all fiction mediates the world, has a setting, organizes characters, and also mobilizes things” (Conclusion). Likewise, climate change makes fundamental alterations in story-telling: Not a mere theme of contemporary writing, climate change reshapes “basic narrative operations” (Conclusion). In the four chapters that follow, Trexler surveys major themes in climate writing stretching back to the 1970s while also probing the ways that creative expression and genre figure in

representing the climate crisis.

Trexler works with a large archive of novels dealing with human induced climate change—across all genres—the first, Ursula K. LeGuin’s *The Lathe of Heaven*, published in 1971. A significant number of novels appeared in the 1980s and “sustained, speculative explorations of climate change” came around the time of the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988 and the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The failure of Al Gore’s presidential bid—whose campaign made climate change a central issue—prompted an outpouring of calls for action by the scientific community; and fiction published since then, he tells us, has consistently highlighted our continued failure to act on the crisis (Introduction). Interestingly, Trexler notes that the best writing is not the preserve of writers of serious, literary fiction: a number of important works appeared under the heading of genre fiction. Nonetheless, despite great differences of quality, the stories show surprising breadth and range. In the wake of this upsurge, the critical response of canon-making appears to Trexler as dubious and unhelpful—singling out traditional literary critics such as Harold Bloom for pursuing an aesthetic enterprise that separates readers and writers from society in pursuit of nourishment for the “inward, solitary soul” (Introduction). Hence, it is not only serious fiction that is slow to engage the climate crisis, as Ghosh argues, but also the critical apparatus that interprets and consecrates emerging works of literature.

With his broad knowledge of the archive of climate fiction, Trexler is well grounded to make claims about how contemporary fiction is being reshaped. Trexler’s insights attest to Ghosh’s anxiety about what happens to serious fiction—among other genres—when it is confronted with the climate crisis.

More often than not, the narrative difficulties of the Anthropocene threaten to rupture the defining features of genre: literary novels bleed into science fiction; suspense novels have surprising elements of realism; realist depictions of everyday life involuntarily become biting satire. For these reasons, novels about the Anthropocene cannot be easily placed into discrete generic pigeonholes. Wide reading in this archive indicates recurring challenges to twentieth-century modes of narrative. (Introduction)

Four long chapters provide chronology, cultural and political context and textual analysis grouped around major themes: the representation of science in climate fiction, the portrayal of climate disasters, politics and the climate crisis, and changing forms of domesticity and economy in the Anthropocene era. Each of the four chapters traces transformations in novelistic theme and form, surveying numerous representative texts, followed by close analysis of key works. Chapter 1 looks at the representation of scientific truth in climate novels, exploring how novels “bring fact into dialogue with fiction”—a matter complicated by the long and sometimes bitter public controversies about the validity of the climate change. Trexler’s abiding question is “Are the nuanced evidence

based predictions of climatology altered by being portrayed as fictional facts?” Drawing on Bruno Latour’s account of science studies, Trexler analyzes Michael Crichton’s popular climate conspiracy novel *State of Fear* and Ian McEwan’s satirical *Solar*, showing how what we understand as “science” emerges through a circuit of institutions and social discourses. Chapter 2 argues that most climate fiction has relied on portraying the “immediate, local” effects of disasters as a means of heightening the reality of climate change. Here, Trexler draws on Heise and others to underscore the representational challenges that climate change poses for the novel. Despite the hundreds of climate change novels in the archive, Trexler notes that a small number of disasters are repeatedly taken up in fiction: “direct heat, catastrophic storms, arctic switches, and floods.” Trexler also discusses the problems arising from the “literary” novel and its focus on bourgeois culture, including the limitations that literary realism presents for representing global climate change—two issues that form part of Ghosh’s complaint. And like Ghosh, Trexler points out deficiencies in the literary narrative tradition: novels that explore apocalyptic scenarios typically fall short in portraying the multiple (social, political, atmospheric) factors in climate change. These issues and more lay the groundwork for the chapter’s focus on the trope of the flood, “the dominant literary strategy for locating climate change” in recent decades and readings of “deluge” novels—which describe civilization-wide destruction—by J.G. Ballard and Richard Cowper.

Chapter 3 looks at novels that take up the politics of climate change, starting with those that imagine international responses. Given the plot complexities involved in narrating politics and policy on a global scale, many novels stage interactions between two nations. Unsurprisingly, China and the US—both countries with massive demand for resources—figure in a number of works, including Matthew Glass’ *Ultimatum* (2009), a political thriller. Despairing of progress on climate policy in the US and China, other novels look elsewhere, but few deal with problems in developing countries. Dystopic novels of climate activism are also a focus here. Most scenarios describe activists taking on state and corporate powers, but most imagine failure, including the critical, often satirical *A Friend of the Earth* (2000). Another body of fiction tries to imagine collective responses, that is, what Trexler calls novels of political agency, exemplified by Kim Stanley Robinson’s “Science in the Capital” trilogy. Robinson’s is a work of utopian realism that invests renewed trust in institutions to make change. Not all contemporary writing is about “individual moral adventure,” as Ghosh points out. From politics, Trexler moves on to economics in chapter 4, or rather what he calls “eco-nomics.” These are accounts of the Anthropocene at home, accounts of new modes of living along with new economic realities in the Anthropocene age. While early novels from the 1980s predicted the end of middle-class culture due to scarcity, after the collapse of communism, novels of the 90s and the early 2000s saw capitalism as

the prime agent, for ill or for good: “free markets, individual consumer choice, and global development were responsible for climate change, and climate change could only be addressed on these terms.” More recent fiction provides a more complex picture, he tells us, exploring “complex interactions between a multitude of agents.” The YA novel *The Carbon Diaries 2015* (2008) admirably details the complexities of living in the Anthropocene in the present.

Much about the shape of writing in the age of climate change remains unclear. What can be said is that a cultural transformation is in progress. From their appearance early in the 1970s, novels about human-induced climate change have spread from the realms of science fiction to a wide range of print and electronic media genres—in addition to serious literary fiction. Trexler’s book offers an invaluable survey of the variety of novelistic responses while both he and Ursula K. Heise show that contemporary fiction is rapidly becoming climate fiction. Will this new fiction succeed in creating a wider consciousness—not only an understanding of the crisis itself but also a sense of the complexity of the challenges—mobilizing people and institutions to take concerted and effective action? Or is the climate fiction / cli-fi marketing label merely a convenient way of confining unpalatable (inconvenient) truths? Will the cultural capital of serious literary fiction make a difference? Will the critical standards set for literary fiction shift to accommodate new forms of expression? Trexler’s concluding chapter turns to a discussion of realism in recent fiction, discussing Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* (2010), Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior* (2012) and Robert Edric’s *Salvage* (2011). The arrival of what he calls “Anthropocene realism” suggests that our fiction is facing up to the crisis as a present reality (Conclusion). However, representational challenges remain and imaginative responses will continue to evolve and change. Like the technological, social, and political innovations that now exist to tackle the crisis and those that are yet to come, contemporary fiction *as* climate fiction will fundamentally reshape our modes of story-telling and reading.

NOTES

- 1 The ebook (Kindle) editions of the books were used in the preparation of this review. Where available, page numbers for the print editions have been included. Otherwise, the MLA 9 convention of citing ebook chapters has been adopted.

Works Cited

- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, eBook, U Chicago P, 2016.
- Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, eBook, Oxford UP, 2008.

Solnit, Rebecca. "‘If You Win the Popular Imagination, You Change the Game’: Why We Need New Stories on Climate." *The Guardian Newspaper*, 12 Jan. 2023, www.theguardian.com/news/2023/jan/12/rebecca-solnit-climate-crisis-popular-imagination-why-we-need-new-stories. Accessed 20 January 2023.

Trexler, Adam. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Crisis*, eBook, U Virginia P, 2015.