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Climate Justice and the Literary Imagination

Questions of climate justice tend not to play a prominent role in international political discussions such as UN climate summits, which are usually dominated by economic and technical measures for mitigation and adaptation. The adjective *global* in the term *global warming* implies that the entire world is affected by climate change, and scientific reports such as the ones periodically released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change focus on average increases in global temperatures. We are all in the same boat, it seems.

But in truth, of course, we are not: there are major inequalities in the global distribution of responsibility for and vulnerability to climate change. Those least responsible for climate change tend to be hit the hardest by its impacts. The West, which is responsible, historically, for most greenhouse gas emissions, is least vulnerable; the Global South is most vulnerable. In addition to geographical location, vulnerability to climate change is determined by factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status: people of color, women, and poor communities are more likely to be affected than white people, men, and rich communities.

Insofar as it buys into the Anthropocene narrative, climate change scholarship in the humanities and social sciences risks participating in the

tendency to depict global warming as if it affected all humans equally, regardless of race, gender, class, or national differences. The Anthropocene is a hypothesis advanced in 2000 by the chemist Paul Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Stoermer, who argued that the Holocene—the postglacial epoch that began approximately 11,700 years ago—was over and that the earth had entered a new geological epoch driven by human activity. A common criticism of this popular idea is that it obscures questions of climate justice. As the postcolonial ecocritic Rob Nixon puts it, "[T]he Anthropocene's grand species perspective on the human . . . risk[s] suppressing—historically and in the present—unequal human impacts, unequal human agency, and unequal human vulnerabilities" ("Anthropocene"). Nixon speaks of the need to counter "the centripetal force" of the dominant story of the Anthropocene as a grand species narrative with "centrifugal stories" that acknowledge these immense disparities.

That is why some critics of the Anthropocene have coined alternative terms such as *Capitalocene* (Malm; Moore) and *Plantationocene* (Haraway et al.; Tsing). They blame the climate crisis and the broader ecological crisis not on an abstract humanity but on the capitalist mode of production or the plantation system and the specific societies adopting it. The Indigenous scholar Kyle Whyte, citing Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, declares that "the Anthropocene is rooted in colonization" and that climate change is basically "an intensification of colonialism" ("Indigenous Climate Change Studies" 159, 156). Discussions of climate change should be informed, then, by a postcolonial sensibility: we need to "decolonize" the Anthropocene, in the parlance of the day (also used by Whyte, as well as by Davis and Todd), lest we forget the historical processes that got us into this mess and that account for the uneven distribution of climate change impacts and the unequal conditions of life in the current era.

This view is articulated very clearly and eloquently by Naomi Klein, one of the most prominent voices in the climate movement, in an essay titled "Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering in a Warming World." She argues that insights from postcolonial theory, and particularly the work of Edward Said, are highly relevant for understanding climate change and can help us respond to it. Klein finds Said's concept of othering, which he defined as "disregarding, essentialising, denuding the humanity of another culture, people or geographical region," especially inspiring. She contends that othering is inherent to the kinds of exploitation of resources and people that have led to the climate crisis:

> [T]he thing about fossil fuels is that they are so inherently dirty and toxic that they require sacrificial people and places: people whose lungs and bodies can be sacrificed to work in the coal mines, people whose lands and water can be sacrificed to open-pit mining and oil spills. . . . There must be theories of othering to justify sacrificing an entire geography—theories about the people who lived there being so poor and backward that their lives and culture don't deserve protection.

Among the theories of othering that Klein mentions are Manifest Destiny, Terra Nullius, and Orientalism. Adamant that the climate crisis is not a crisis of human nature, Klein is wary of the notion of the Anthropocene insofar as it seems to suggest just that and lets systems such as capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy off the hook. Klein points out that the process of othering also facilitates the waging of wars for oil in regions like the Middle East, since othering nations and peoples effectively deprives them of the right to control their own oil in their own interests. Moreover, according to Klein, othering explains why Western countries have no qualms about carrying out drone strikes in conflict zones along the aridity line in the Middle East and North Africa. And if the inhabitants of these places become refugees, they are dehumanized yet again: "their need for security" is cast as "a threat to ours" and "their desperate flight" as "some sort of invading army."

Once we understand the connections between the various systems of othering that sustain our present-day reality, we can tackle the climate crisis more efficaciously. Klein argues that, while climate change acts as "an accelerant to many of our social ills," it can also be "an accelerant for the opposite"—that is, for the forces working for justice: "[T]he climate crisis . . . might just be the catalyst we need to knit together a great many powerful movements, bound together by a belief in the inherent worth and value of all people and united by a rejection of the sacrifice zone mentality, whether it applies to peoples or places." Climate change is not only a pressing problem but also an opportunity to create a more just and sustainable world.

Two scholars who have recently looked at literary engagements with issues of climate justice, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and Antonia Mehnert, share the view that literature has a vital contribution to make to the climate justice conversation because of its ability to generate empathy for "people across time, and thus future generations, as well as with people in different social, economic, and ethnic contexts" in the present (Mehnert,

qtd. in Schneider-Mayerson 948). Literature can expose and challenge Klein's sacrifice zone mentality by making visible and promoting empathy with the different perspectives of silenced others. Schneider-Mayerson writes that "climate fiction can play a powerful role in influencing the frames that readers perceive, prioritize, adopt, and share with family, friends, coworkers, and others. The novel in particular has great potential to encourage and cultivate transnational empathy for the already-disadvantaged victims of climate change" (961). Mehnert concurs that "[c]ultural productions such as films or literature can . . . serve as key sites that contest universalizing GHG narratives because they provide 'insider perspectives' on the struggle for climate justice and reveal what otherwise remains hidden in emission graphs—that is, the intra-national, social, and ultimately personal dimensions of environmental injustice" (189).

It is striking, though, that as yet there appear to be very few studies of climate change literature that actually focus on climate justice or even just pay attention to it. Schneider-Mayerson notes that "surveys of the genre or category of 'cli-fi' rarely include a mention of climate justice" (962 n2). In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon observes that the relationship between environmentalism and postcolonialism "has been, until very recently, dominated by reciprocal indifference or mistrust," despite the fact that both fields—which emerged around the same time and are among the most dynamic in literary studies—"have both exhibited an often-activist dimension that connects their priorities to movements for social change" (233). He attributes the lack of interaction to "four main schisms . . . between the dominant concerns of postcolonialists and ecocritics": an attachment to hybridity and cross-culturation versus purity, a concern with displacement versus place, a preference for the cosmopolitan and transnational versus the national, and an interest in history versus timeless transcendentalism (236). While ecocriticism, in particular, has gradually moved away from these early priorities in recent decades, and postcolonial ecocriticism is now one of its most thriving subfields, the aforementioned lack of attention to issues of climate justice in scholarship on climate change literature could be a lingering symptom of the historically fraught relationship between the two fields.

Schneider-Mayerson proposes an alternative explanation in the subtitle of his article "Whose Odds? The Absence of Climate Justice in American Climate Fiction Novels." Indeed, he claims that climate justice concerns are all but absent in recent American climate fiction and that that is why they hardly feature in literary-critical responses to it: there is nothing much to report to begin with. He acknowledges that writers like Octavia E. Butler and Paolo Bacigalupi have produced literary texts that focus on climate justice—some of which Mehnert discusses under that rubric in her book *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature*. However, he argues that these works constitute only "a small minority" of recent American climate fiction. According to Schneider-Mayerson, in the early twenty-first century, "[W]ell-known authors generally shied away from depicting in detail the violence (both slow and spectacular) of climate injustice" (958). They chose to depict climate change "in specific, limited, and surprisingly problematic ways," portraying it as "a problem for white, wealthy, educated Americans" and "secondarily gestur[ing] toward its consequences for human beings in general—the monolithic and flattened 'we' of *homo sapiens*" (945). Thus, they effectively "ignored climate justice, . . . reflect[ing] and potentially reif[ying] a narcissistic tendency among many white American readers" (945).

Schneider-Mayerson makes his case through a close reading—which takes up most of the article—of what he considers to be "two representative texts that have been widely reviewed, assigned, and analyzed and are therefore likely to have reached a large number of readers" (945): Nathaniel Rich's *Odds against Tomorrow* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capitol* trilogy. He is convinced that, small though this sample may be, "we would come to a similar conclusion by examining the vast majority of climate fiction published during this period" (958).

I agree with Schneider-Mayerson that it is "critical to keep justice firmly in mind" and that "readers, critics, publishers, scholars, and teachers" therefore "ought to ask of every climate change narrative, in literature and other media: whither climate justice?" (961). In fact, that is exactly what I try to do myself when teaching climate change fiction, which I have been doing for the last several years. At Ghent University, I teach a graduate course on the literary imagination of the climate crisis in which we concern ourselves with issues of climate justice as they manifest themselves (or hide themselves, as the case may be) in the literary and other artistic works under discussion. One of the guiding questions throughout the course is whether race, gender, socioeconomic status, and geographical location factor into these works' engagement with climate change or are obscured. I try to cultivate a sensitivity to questions of climate justice and, when such questions are not thematized, which is indeed often the case, to highlight and critically interrogate the apparent absence of such a concern.

For example, in a class on humorous climate change literature that focuses on Ian McEwan's novel *Solar*, we consider the implications of the fact that a wealthy, white Englishman who incarnates everything that is reprehensible about modern man acts as an allegorical Everyman figure, through whom the novel suggests that "human nature" is responsible for the climate crisis and our inaction in the face of it. Moreover, we reflect on the question of whether climate change humor is enabled by privilege, and, if so, whether this should give us pause. After all, comedic treatments of climate change—besides *Solar*, we also discuss the title story from Helen Simpson's short story collection *In-Flight Entertainment* (3–23)—tend to be focalized through characters who are privileged in every way; there would appear to be less humor to be found in narratives from the perspectives of poor, nonwhite, non-Western, or female characters for whom climate change is no laughing matter, as they bear the brunt of it.

In another class, we discuss climate anxiety in relation to Jeff Nichols's film *Take Shelter* and—albeit less extensively—Paul Schrader's film *First Reformed*. Both films feature leading characters who are overwhelmed with dread about climate change; in fact, they appear to be suffering from pretraumatic stress disorder: they are traumatized, it seems, by imagining future climate catastrophe. In this case, too, I make a point of highlighting the fact that the victims of pretraumatic stress disorder in these fictional examples are all white, male Americans, which raises the question of how race, gender, and geopolitical location factor into this diagnosis. Pretraumatic stress disorder would appear to be associated with a position of privilege that has thus far provided physical protection from the disastrous consequences of climate change that are already being experienced by many less fortunate people around the world. Indeed, as Whyte argues, "Climate injustice, for Indigenous peoples, is less about the spectre of a new future and more like the experience of déjà vu" ("Is It Colonial Déjà Vu?" 88). Davis and Todd describe a "seismic shockwave of colonial earth-rending" that

> has rolled through and across space and time and is now hitting those nations, legal systems, and structures that brought about the rending and disruption of lifeways and life-worlds in the first place. The Anthropocene—or at least all of the anxiety produced around these realities for those in Euro-Western contexts—is really the arrival of the reverberations of that seismic shockwave into the nations who introduced colonial, capitalist processes across the globe in the last half-millennium in the first place. (774)

Perhaps, then, worrying about the future impact of climate change is a luxury affordable only to those who are lucky enough not to be living in that future already.

While I agree with Schneider-Mayerson about the need to raise these kinds of questions in relation to texts written from a narrow, privileged perspective that may elide climate justice, I do have a problem with his seeming acquiescence in and perpetuation of the dominance of such perspectives. After all, he may find fault with Rich and Robinson, but by devoting the bulk of his article to a close reading of their novels, he ironically ends up cementing their reputation as writers of climate change fiction worthy of critical attention and misses an opportunity to foreground literary texts (whether American or not) that do engage with issues of climate justice. Insofar as he presents himself as a detached outside observer, he fails to acknowledge and take responsibility for his own de facto role as a gatekeeper, an active agent in the constitution of what counts as valuable or "serious" climate change literature. By limiting the scope of his inquiry to fiction produced by white, male Americans, he himself seems to me to fall into the trap of "superpower parochialism" and "imperial narcissism" that he proposes as a possible explanation for the alleged paucity of literature dealing with issues of climate justice (960).

As a scholar and teacher of such literature myself, I make a conscious effort to assign and study often noncanonical texts from around the world that call attention to the plight of those most vulnerable to global warming. For example, I devote a class to *The Swan Book*, a novel by the Indigenous Australian writer Alexis Wright that illustrates the devastating impact of climate change on the Aboriginal community, which I ask students to read alongside Klein's essay about the production of sacrifice zones and disposable people through various othering mechanisms. I also assign "An Athabasca Story," a short story about oil extraction in the Alberta tar sands (an iconic sacrifice zone) by the Indigenous Canadian writer Warren Cariou that critiques the logic of settler-colonial petromodernity by highlighting its environmental and human cost. I teach this story alongside "Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet," a breathtakingly ambitious flash fiction story by Margaret Atwood that traces the entire history of humanity. I try to show how Cariou's narrative breaks up the homogeneous "we" of Atwood's story, revealing heterogeneity and difference.

Another example of Indigenous climate change storytelling that articulates climate justice claims, and which I also like to discuss with my students, is a six-minute video poem called "Rise" by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner

and Aka Niviâna, Indigenous poets from the Marshall Islands and Greenland respectively. The poem results from an expedition undertaken by two islanders that connects their realities of melting glaciers and rising sea levels. Niviâna's way of life is disappearing as her country thaws, while the subsequent meltwater threatens Jetñil-Kijiner and her fellow Marshall Islanders thousands of miles away. Without mentioning any names, the two poets indict not human nature or people in general but "colonizing monsters" (00:03:38) for the violence, suffering, and pollution inflicted on their islands, of which the climate crisis is but the latest instance, and call on people to rise up in protest.

It seems to me that, as engaged scholars and teachers, we have a responsibility to amplify these kinds of unheard or scarcely heard voices, or, at the very minimum, to avoid perpetuating their silencing and thereby becoming actively complicit in climate injustice.

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