

Recherche littéraire Literary Research





Contributeur·rice·s | Contributors

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|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Franca Bellarsi | Gerald Gillespie | Danielle Perrot-Corpet |
| Olga Beloborodova | Stefan Helgesson | Yannick Preumont |
| Lidia Morales Benito | Yvon Houssais | E.V. Ramakrishnan |
| Jean Bessière | Višnja Krstić | Hubert Roland |
| Eury Colin Chang | Marie Laureillard | Karen-Margrethe Simonsen |
| Véronique Corinus | Marc Maufort | Vijaya Singh |
| Santanu Das | Yana Meerzon | Daria Tunca |
| Subhraleena Deka | Kai Mikkonen | Dirk Van Hulle |
| Elke D'hoker | Florian Mussgnug | Roberto Vecchi |
| Brahim El Guabli | Anzazi Joan Mwangovya | Cyril Vettorato |
| Marlene Hansen Esplin | Birgit Neumann | Luke Walker |
| Massimo Fusillo | Wen-chin Ouyang | Jenny Webb |
| Claudio Gigante | Daniel-Henri Pageaux | Robert J.C. Young |
| | Yolaine Parisot | |



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Marc Maufort, Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB)

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To propose book reviews and review essays, and for inquiries about back issues, please contact the Editor.

Inquiries and submissions:

Marc Maufort, Rédacteur/Editor, *RL/LR*
Email: mmaufort@ulb.ac.be
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Renseignements et soumissions :

Marc Maufort, Rédacteur/Editor, *RL/LR*
Email: mmaufort@ulb.ac.be
ISSN: 0849-0570

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World Literature and the Self-Conscious Anthropocene

FLORIAN MUSSGNUG

f.mussgnug@ucl.ac.uk

UCL University College London

Anthropocene discourse depicts the historical present as a moment of world-shattering rupture. My article explores this assumption and calls attention to the ways in which debates in the sciences and humanities have focused on perceived turning points, stories of origin and stratigraphic “golden spikes” (Yusoff 23–64). Since its inception in 2009, the multidisciplinary Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) has considered three possible beginnings for the “Age of Man”: the Columbian exchange (Lewis and Maslin), the Industrial Revolution and the so-called “Great Acceleration” since 1945 (Thomas, Williams and Zalasiewicz). From the perspective of literary and cultural studies, these hypotheses are less interesting than the idea of a new Anthropocenic *cultural dominant*: the claim that our cultural logic has been re-shaped, since approximately 2000, by a collective, growing awareness of catastrophic environmental degradation, and that new forms, genres and themes have emerged in response to the anthropogenic violation and destruction of non-human species and more-than-human habitats.

For two decades, the concept of the Anthropocene has reverberated powerfully across the arts and humanities (Bonneuil and Fressoz). Faced with the gravity of the unfolding planetary environmental crisis, scholars and artists have turned their attention to Paul Crutzen’s and Eugene Stoermer’s influential neologism (Crutzen and Stoermer). An inspiration for creative practice, the Anthropocene has also served as a transdisciplinary vector for the emergent framework that links comparative literature, critical theory and the modern languages (DeLoughrey, Didur and Carrigan; Heise, Christensen and Niemann). It marks a conspicuous challenge to the traditional humanities, but also serves as “a useful

trigger for a variety of approaches that are interested in the nonhuman and post-human” (Parikka 52). Earth scientists and bioscientists have become increasingly attentive to political, economic and cultural structures, in a manner that cuts across established disciplinary boundaries. Similarly, artists have focused on natural processes that are affected by human activities and impinge upon them: extreme weather events, rising sea levels, pollution, mass extinction, and so on (Trexler; Johns-Putra). In the literary domain, this includes a flurry of new genres and modes: eco-poetry, climate elegy, environmental satire (Seymour), the New Weird, the *cartonera* movement and, of course, cli-fi, which has gained popularity as a commercial genre since 2013. As novelist Amitav Ghosh has famously pointed out, “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (Ghosh 9).

Borrowing from North American literary scholar Lynn Keller, I call these two most recent decades of cultural and literary history “the self-conscious Anthropocene” (Keller). This historiographic term serves to display, but also to displace anxieties over geological origin stories. It focuses critical attention on the period when the Anthropocene comes into view as an influential generative concept. As Keller explains, “the phrase acknowledges that, whatever the status of the Anthropocene as a geological category [...], [the term] signals a powerful cultural phenomenon tied to the reflexive, critical, and often anxious awareness of the scale and severity of human effects on the planet” (Keller 1–2). My understanding of the self-conscious Anthropocene, moreover, builds on the work of philosopher Donna Haraway and literary critics Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Steve Mentz. It embraces the sense of extreme urgency that typically characterizes debates about climate change but questions the teleological structures of thought that have shaped many contemporary accounts of the “Age of Man.” Instead of focusing on “the apocalyptic story in which Old Man Anthropos destroys the world” (Mentz 1), I call attention to the vulnerability and value of human and non-human life on a warming planet, and suggest that the climate emergency must be understood as a dynamic opening: an invitation to re-think categories of place and space, not in terms of eschatological closure, but as a state of protracted uncertainty that necessitates and activates new political, artistic and epistemic modes (Mussgnug “Planetary Figurations”; “Species at War?”; Dell’Aversano and Mussgnug).

As a historical and cultural period, the self-conscious Anthropocene is precisely coextensive with the years when world literature has come to

be understood as the global production, translation and cross-cultural reception of genres and texts. The study of world literature, in this emergent sense, is coeval with advanced capitalist globalization, but many of its practitioners have been critical of the totalizing perspectives that are commonly associated with the latter. The transnational circulation of goods and ideas, from the perspective of world literature, has enabled new forms of cosmopolitan belonging that are diametrically opposed to the political and cultural aberrations of narrowly bounded nationalism. “Contemporary globalization,” writes Pheng Cheah, “has created a genuinely transcultural zone that undermines the territorial borders of cultural and literary production, thereby leading to the emergence of a global consciousness” (Cheah 23). But the growing interconnectedness brought about by global markets has also perpetuated and enhanced inequalities between and within nations, cemented regimes of coercion and constraint, and erased meaningful cultural diversity. Attention to these negative trends, and to a wide variety of diverse geopolitical, cultural and temporal contexts has established world literature as an important, dynamic site of transdisciplinary inquiry and cultural and political activism. Beyond the universalistic and Eurocentric inflections of mid-twentieth-century literary scholarship, comparatists have propagated new coordinates of spatial and political belonging.

The contemporaneous emergence of world literature and the Anthropocene, both as objects of transdisciplinary study and as practices of scholarly inquiry, is not coincidental. Recent definitions of world literature and debates about the Anthropocene are similarly attentive to transnational chains of ecological, political and cultural interdependence. Researchers have employed the two terms in analogous ways to advance a decolonial critique of capitalist globalization. In the field of literary studies, Emily Apter, Pheng Cheah and Aamir Mufti, among others, have pressed the attack against naively celebratory visions of cultural globalization. Cheah, for instance, points out that “contemporary flows of money, especially humanitarianism and environmental and world preservation funds [...] violently destroy worlds despite their humanizing claims” (Cheah 13). Similarly, Mufti has criticized scholars of world literature for clinging naively to the utopian ideal of a borderless world instead of addressing the harsh realities of growing inequality (Mufti). Apter, meanwhile, contends that transnational chains of economic, cultural and political connectedness are not sufficient conditions for social justice, and that “translatability” – one of the ideals of an earlier generation of world

literature scholars – has become associated, in the twenty-first century, with an “entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world’s cultural resources” (Apter 3).

At the dawn of the self-conscious Anthropocene, world literature criticism was characterized by a growing attention to international markets and by “a renewed appetite for addressing the question of literary totality” (Etherington and Zimbler 4). Inquiries into the transnational circulation of literary texts – by Franco Moretti (2000), David Damrosch (2003) and Pascale Casanova (2004), among others – notoriously emphasized the importance of globalization as a socially and culturally unifying force. Such totalizing methodologies quickly came under attack from critics, who questioned their usefulness as a way of navigating and highlighting cultural diversity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s influential idea of the planetary, for example, was conceived in direct, polemical response to the lingering Eurocentrism of comparative literature programmes (Spivak). Where Casanova, Damrosch and Moretti focused on the characteristically modern and Western conflict between nationalism and liberal cosmopolitanism, Spivak demanded greater attention to “demographic, rather than territorial, frontiers that predate and are larger than capitalism” (Spivak 15). In this manner, her planetary approach sought to foreground latent, historical temporalities that run counter to Eurocentric, teleological narratives of the modern emergence of the global.

Similar political concerns have been voiced by researchers in the environmental humanities. Beyond the specific expertise of Earth Scientists, the Anthropocene has become a staging ground for controversies about environmental justice and crisis of global capitalism. Elizabeth DeLoughrey, for example, contends that a “lack of engagement with postcolonial and Indigenous perspectives has shaped Anthropocene discourse to claim the novelty of crisis rather than being attentive to the historical continuity of dispossession and disaster caused by empire” (DeLoughrey *Allegories* 2). While conventional Anthropocene discourse periodizes the present as a unique break in the human relation to the planet, De Loughrey reaches out for perspectives that can revitalize and reformulate the bonds between seemingly disconnected and incompatible categories: present and past; the global and the local; human and non-human nature. This is particularly evident from the author’s attention to decolonial knowledge practices which, in her work, serve as a reminder that “catastrophic ruptures to social and ecological systems have already been experienced through the violent processes of empire. In other words, the

apocalypse has already happened; it continues because empire is a process" (DeLoughrey *Allegories* 2).

In summary, Anthropocene discourse and twenty-first century world literature studies are best understood as closely related fields of inquiry, which are similarly rooted in a common political and ethical critique of advanced globalization and colonial slow violence. Beyond their immediate concern, respectively, with anthropogenic environmental degradation and global cartographies of cultural production, they share a specific concern with spatial and temporal knowledge production. In light of such similarities and shared orientations, a more intensive dialogue between the two subject areas appears desirable and long overdue. In comparative literature, this challenge has been taken up with considerable vigour by Ursula Heise, whose numerous contributions map the growing transdisciplinary significance of environmental history, environmental philosophy and cultural geography, and their direct relevance to cultural and literary production (Heise *Sense of Place; Imagining Extinction*). Following Heise's lead, Alexander Beecroft, Michael Cronin and Jennifer Wenzel, among others, have similarly explored the methodological and political influence of ecological thinking on world literature. This growing interest from literary scholars, however, has not, until now, been fully reciprocated by environmental researchers in other disciplines, who have paid relatively little attention to world literature. The emergence of the Anthropocene as a distinctive reference point for cross-disciplinary dialogue therefore marks a particular challenge for comparatists, whose contribution, in Heise's words, "arrived belatedly" and who have done little, until now, to prove the specific relevance "of their multilingual and cross-cultural research" (Heise "Comparative Literature" 6–7) to Anthropocene studies at large. In the fast-moving cultural landscape of the self-conscious Anthropocene, this challenge needs to be addressed as a matter of considerable urgency.

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