Embracing the Loss of Nature: Searching for Responsibility in an Age of Crisis

Guest Editors: Jaime Hyatt and Florian Wagner

Introduction

From its inception in the early 1990s, the field of ecocriticism has grown considerably in scope and scholarly impact. Beginning with a narrow geo-limited anglocentric British and American perspective—mostly focusing on non-fiction nature-writing and green poetry—the field later broadened its purview to include cultural texts from multiple ethnic backgrounds and issues of environmental justice, as well as a vast conception of the multifarious—often symbiotic—entanglements of the human and the non-human "Other."

Even though the field did not develop in a linear progression (see, e.g., Lawrence Buell; Scott Slovic; and Serpil Oppermann et al.), there are some fundamental ideas that have considerably shaped it, one of which is what Greg Garrard has called ecocriticism's "avowedly political mode of analysis" (qtd. in Clark 3) which remains its driving force to this day. Ecocriticism can broadly be seen as a response to the environmental destruction brought about by the uncontrolled expansionism of modern civilization on a global scale (Glotfelty xx; Zapf 39). Early ecocritics recuperated US American nature writing by highlighting its earth-centeredness—manifest through the close observation and aestheticization of the non-human world (Zapf 39-40)—which simultaneously propelled environmental activism to the fore. They particularly pinpointed the concept of "wilderness," both a geographical space and a state of mind, as one of the "foundational elements of the U.S. national master-narrative" (Gersdorf 23). This concept, however, was highly aestheticized at the time by predominantly white artists and writers (e.g. from the mid-nineteenth-century writings of Emerson and Thoreau to twentieth-century writers such as Mary Austin, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, and Annie Dillard).

One central aspect of the twentieth-century conceptualization of wilderness was its increasing concern with wilderness preservation in the face of a changing world (i.e. political and economic restructuring and the concomitant environmental damage that occurred throughout the twentieth century); as a result, wilderness became a romanticized space of regeneration and renewal against the ailments of modern industrialization (Gersdorf 158). This implies a perception of wilderness and civilization that is deeply rooted in a narrow anthropocentric nature-culture dualism that endorses a strict division between the human self and the non-human "Other" (Ibid.). However, as "culture" has increasingly overrun "nature," wild spaces have become more and more scarce and have morphed into altered

landscapes so that the very definition of "wild" has taken on new meaning. As Timothy Clark argues, human action has so greatly impacted the earth's ecosystem that in the twenty-first century "old words" such as "wilderness" and "nature" no longer denote the same thing they did one hundred years ago. He maintains, for example, that the oceans are no longer symbols of "a vast, inhuman, pristine and unchangeable force"; rather they are "menacingly damaged entities" having become "vast dumping sites," littered with human waste (11).

Consequently, a key part of ecocritical work today is to conceptually reflect on these altered environments and spaces. Working towards destabilizing earlier anthropocentric norms and avoiding narrow conceptions of a simple return to a romanticized, pristine, pre-capital nature has required ecocritics to rethink the concept of nature in broader planetary terms (see, e.g. DeLoughrey; Alaimo; N. Clark; and Gabrys). In short, ecocritical trajectories today are concerned with how we can broaden our understanding of the contemporary world around us in an age that is characterized by anthropogenic climate change, mass extinction, and foreseeable future ecological and resulting socio-political crises.

In the last two decades, this age has come to be known as "the Anthropocene," i.e., the realization that humans have become a geophysical force collectively altering the planet and the conditions of life at an unprecedented speed. Originally proposed in 2000 by the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and the marine biologist Eugene Stoermer, the term has particularly been taken up in the humanities but has also permeated public discourse (Comos and Rosenthal viii). While we are aware of the critical discourses surrounding its problematic terminology (see, e.g. Moore; Haraway; and Grusin), we believe the term Anthropocene is nonetheless useful for marking an important shift in perception because it constitutes a radical break with previous approaches or rather the crossing of an important threshold. The Anthropocene in this sense encompasses all of the adverse effects of human interventions on the planet, which to a large extent coincide with the global dissemination of what Catherine Walsh and Walter Mignolo term the "colonial matrix of power" or "modernity/coloniality" (4) as a shorthand for the complex history of colonialism, its connection to modernity, and the development of capitalism as the dominant mode of production and its multiple proliferations. By that we mean that "we," as a human species, are not only caught up in historical processes, i.e., the limited timescale of human history, but that now we are also profoundly enmeshed with the deep-time of the planet. In this sense, the Anthropocene marks the entry of the radical alterity of the planet into the sphere of concern, decentering the human and opening up towards uncertain futures of planetary instability and inhospitality. Thus, what is ultimately at stake is nothing short of the future habitability of the planet.

This in return requires us to find new ways of relating to the planet and its inhabitants, as well as finding ways of inhabiting the planet anew. In his recent book *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that we

> need to connect deep and recorded histories and put geological time and the biological time of evolution in conversation with the time of human history and

> experience. And this means telling the story of human empires—of colonial, racial, and gendered oppressions—in tandem with the larger story of how a particular biological species, Homo sapiens, its technosphere, and other species that coevolved with or were dependent on Homo sapiens came to dominate the biosphere, lithosphere, and the atmosphere of this planet. (8)

Given this complex entanglement, Chakrabarty thus advocates a "new anthropology" (14) that rethinks the relationship between the human, the non-human, and the planetary while still taking into consideration divisions and power inequalities across the globe. In *History 4°Celsius: Search for a Method in the Age of the Anthropocene*, which as the title implies looks for a new historiography of the Anthropocene, Ian Baucom suggests that we "hold both, the periods of human history and the epochs of geological time, the dynamics of forces and the operations of forcings, in concert and dialectical interplay" (14), meaning that ultimately understanding the human condition in the Anthropocene requires us to dwell in tensions and conflicts. A planetary historiography thus demands that we open up towards multiple temporalities and pluriversal epistemologies that resist the unifying tendencies of modernity/coloniality while enunciating a position of collective responsibility for the future of all inhabitants on the planet, i.e., human and non-human alike. This inquiry into different imaginaries and different politics of inhabiting the planet was ultimately the starting point for this special issue. We were looking for contributions that try to make sense of the multiple contradictions that we are confronted with while also promoting a rather utopian optimism for the future, namely that it is possible to imagine different ways of inhabiting and of sharing the planet as equitably as possible.

Our call was answered with great enthusiasm and we received a broad variety of contributions that speak to these very concerns. Indeed, from engaging with themes such as care and responsibility while dwelling in crisis, highlighting the voices of silenced others, to examining "other" imaginaries like dark ecologies and the environmental uncanny, the articles in this issue seek to open up ecocritical discourse in American Studies to new planetary imaginaries.

COPAS 22.1 at a Glance

Lena Pfeifer's paper "Is Nature About to (Be) End(ed)? Conceptions of the Environment and Moral Responsibility in the Anthropocene" raises questions about the future habitability of our planet by bringing into conversation three diverse texts from the past—two policy documents, *Our Common Future* (1987) and the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (1992/94), both of which help to critically assess the third non-fiction text, Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1989). In so doing, she examines the role these texts have played in shaping our contemporary conceptions of nature and the environment through their strong emphasis on moral responsibility and their appeal to ethical imperatives. Pfeifer extends the notion of moral responsibility to encompass environmental concerns by drawing from climate justice theories, deep ecology, and material ecocriticism. Applying such a lens,

Pfeifer illustrates how the three texts had already demanded a new ethical framework for the age of the Anthropocene in the late 1980s and early 1990s. By highlighting their discursive qualities and marking them as "threshold texts" (9) that enable readers to think through the Anthropocene in new ways, Pfeifer shows how our "current historical moment" might be "characterized as one of transition" (24) that not only requires "assessing the past or picturing the present," but also "imagining the future" (23).

In her paper "Phenomenally Affective: Kass Morgan's *The 100* and The Apocalyptic Politics of Care", **Hannah Nelson-Teutsch** re-examines the apocalyptic mode as a way of narrating climate change in the Anthropocene that, instead of inviting "apathy and political disengagement," allows for "engagements with the embodied experience of dwelling in crisis" (28). Her paper identifies a specific subset of contemporary apocalyptic writing that she terms "phenomenal apocalyptic narratives" in reference to Karen Barad's new materialist theorization of 'phenomena' as "complex, multi-species entanglements" (33). Taking her cue from affect theory in staking out her claim for the political dimension of these narratives, Nelson-Teutsch presents a reading of Kass Morgan's Young Adult novel *The 100*, wherein "a hundred lucky criminals" (29) are sent to Earth to assess whether the planet has recovered three generations after a thermonuclear apocalypse has rendered the planet uninhabitable. Nelson-Teutsch's reading of *The 100* through the lens of affect and care is keenly attuned to the "embodied experiences of young people [...] on a planet in peril" (36) and ultimately solidifies her claim for the political potential the apocalyptic mode can bring to the fore in the Anthropocene.

Citing the recent upsurge in both scientific and literary publications that engage with "forests, trees, and the human connection to plant life" (48), **Sarah Marak**'s contribution examines forest activism in relation to the 2019 Austrian art installation "For Forest" by Klaus Littmann and the 2018 novel *The Overstory* by American writer Richard Powers. The former is a physical manifestation of a 1970s drawing by Austrian artist Max Peintner which depicts a planted forest in the middle of a stadium, the image effectively rendering trees as an endangered species in an industrialized world. Marak connects Littman's installation, which received critical backlash in the public sphere, to *The Overstory*'s representation of eco-activism surrounding the contentious Timber Wars of the Pacific Northwest in the 1990s. Marak situates both of these works as re-negotiations of the past that offer a way of rethinking our present understanding of the anthropogenic climate crisis in the age of the Anthropocene. Her contribution further shows how adverse responses to such forms of eco-activism serve to obstruct the development of an ecological consciousness.

In her paper, "In Search of a New Cognitive Schema: Unsettling Colonial Epistemologies in Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return*," **Deborah Pomeranz** argues that Dionne Brand's book destabilizes the epistemic foundations of the (Post-)Colonial Anthropocene that tend to foreground linear, binary, and "objective" thinking. Following Sylvia Wynter's argument that adherence to dominant epistemologies requires the reproduction of racist and anthropocentric notions of the human, Pomeranz shows how Brand's work rather

"operates under a recursive space/time and an imaginative, embodied, and polymorphic understanding of knowledge" (79), what Pomeranz terms an anti-colonial, "pluriversal epistemology" (80). She further shows how *A Map to the Door of No Return* is not only an intervention in the realm of knowledge production, but that such an intervention also highlights our intersubjective relations with others, demonstrating that "shifting our epistemology also changes who we are and how we may live 'in an age of crisis'" (80).

Claudia Hachenberger's contribution "How to Return to Nature as Habitat? The Ecocritical, Non-Canonical Voice of the Environmentally Dispossessed in *Waslala: Memorial del Futuro*" reads Gioconda Belli's utopian 1996 novel through an ecocritical and postcolonial lens in order to examine its potential for helping us "imagine alternative convivalist scenarios of how to return to nature as habitat in ethically and ecologically more inclusive terms" (83). Hachenberger's reading strongly focuses on the "underrepresented, non-canonical voices of the environmentally dispossessed" and the different ways it depicts "environmental exploitation and ecological deterioration" (86). What particularly stands out in her reading of the novel, however, is that instead of focusing on the utopian space of Waslala, Hachenberger proposes the bioregion of the river, which the protagonists encounter on their journey through the fictional country of Faguas, "as a promising and convivalist alternative space" (87).

Anouk Aerni's contribution, "A Farewell to Anthropocentrism in American Postbellum Prose: A Reconsideration of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*" identifies the ways in which "nature, humanity, and the relationship between the two" (102) are negotiated in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), a collection of linked short stories about the Vietnam War. Specifically situating O'Brien's work as postmodern, postbellum literature in both form and content, Aerni's ecocritical analysis highlights the themes and narrative techniques of fragmentation, non-linearity, and alienation from the self and US society, and significantly frames them amidst the backdrop of a war that was fought using biological warfare. Aerni's close readings of key passages expose the human/nature dualism as oversimplifying the complex and interconnected relationship between human and other-than-human entities. Her ecocritical insights into postmodern, postwar literature thus serve to unsettle the anthropocentric, hierarchical thinking that is widely regarded to be at the heart of the anthropogenic climate crisis.

Employing a specifically *gothic* ecocritical lens, **Bethany Webster-Parmentier**'s contribution, "'But the storm, this storm, has no apology': Extraction, Ecophobia, and the Ecogothic in Linda Hogan's *Power*," analyzes Linda Hogan's (Chickasaw) 1998 novel, arguing that the use of such a lens to read Indigenous literature in the 21st century destabilizes the static, stereotypical image of the "eco-Indian" as a model for environmental responsibility. Through close readings, she identifies the role of ecophobia in the novel, which she defines as "the motor that propels humans to dominate and exploit the natural world" (124), and in so doing questions the notions of "frontier" and "territory" that divide the Indigenous from the Euro-American perspectives and that have a major impact on the production and

dissemination of knowledge and culture. Webster-Parmentier's paper ultimately raises fundamental questions about the space that Indigenous literature inhabits in the field of ecocriticism.

In "'Like harvest moon, except I ate a guy': *Graveyard Keeper*'s Dark Ecology," **Katie Deane** examines Lazy Bear Games' grotesque take on the genre of farm simulation games, in which the player's avatar wakes up as the keeper of a medieval graveyard after an accident. She puts *Graveyard Keeper* into conversation with genre-defining games such as *Harvest Moon* or *Stardew Valley* and shows how the former's gothic setting and dark gameplay reveal the latter games' extractivist logic: Disguised by the lush greens of their pastoral-idyllic landscapes, they present nature as an endless resource for consumption. Deane fleshes out how *Graveyard Keeper* chips away at this logic by rendering "select hallmarks of the genre and its customary mechanics newly strange" (162). Creating a stark tension between the player's enjoyment and the avatar's unsavory and morally questionable tasks, she argues that the gameplay allows for a "prime moment of ecological awareness" (162) and ultimately points towards a new aesthetic of the Anthropocene.

Acknowledgments

We want to thank all of the contributors for their wonderful and insightful contributions that each in their own right adds to the vibrancy and openness of ecocritical discourse and opens up towards the planet and its human and non-human inhabitants.

Lastly, we also want to thank the *COPAS* editors—Paula von Gleich, Fenja Heisig, Juliann Knaus, Stephen Koetzing, Whit Frazier Peterson, Samira Spatzek, and Gesine Wegner—for their tireless efforts, their patience, and their diligence, without whom this special issue would not have been possible. A special thanks to Samira Spatzek and Stephen Koetzing, the managing editors for this issue, for their flexibility and interest in this project, and to Cedric Essi for his feedback on an early version of our Call for Papers.

Jaime Hyatt and Florian Wagner (Jena)

Works Cited

Alaimo, Stacey. *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. U of Minnesota P, 2016

Baucom, Ian. *History 4°Celsius: Search for a Method in the Age of the Anthropocene*. Duke UP, 2020.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. Blackwell, 2005

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. U of Chicago P, 2021.

Clark, Nigel. "Anthropocene Incitements: Toward a Politics and Ethics of Ex-orbitant Planetarity." *The Politics of Globality Since 1945: Assembling the Planet*. Edited by R. van Munster and R. Sylvest. Routledge, 2016, pp. 126-44.

Clark, Timothy. *The Value of Ecocriticism*. Cambridge UP, 2019.

Comos, Gina, and Caroline Rosenthal. "Introduction." *Anglophone Literature and Culture in the Anthropocene*. Edited by Gina Comos and Caroline Rosenthal, Cambridge Scholars, 2019, pp. viii-xxii.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. "Satellite Planetarity and the Ends of the Earth." *Public Culture*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2014, pp. 257-280.

Gabrys, Jennifer. "Becoming Planetary." *E-flux: Accumulation*, 2 October 2018, www.e-flux.com/architecture/accumulation/217051/becoming-planetary. Accessed 2 May 2021.

Gersdorf, Catrin. *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America*. Rodopi, 2009.

Glotfelty, Cheryll. "Introduction." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, Georgia UP, 1996, pp. xv-xxxvii.

Grusin, Richard, editor. *Anthropocene Feminis*m. U of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Haraway, Donna. *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016.

Mignolo, Walter, and Catherine Walsh. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Duke UP, 2018.

Moore, Jason, editor. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. PM Press, 2016.

Oppermann, Serpil, et al., editors. *The Future of Ecocriticism: New Horizons*. Cambridge Scholars, 2011.

Slovic, Scott. "The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline." *Ecozona*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, pp. 4-10.

Zapf, Hubert. *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.