



Walton, S. (2018) 'Framing the crisis', *Green Letters*, 22 (3), pp. 231-235.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *Green Letters* on 13/03/18 available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2019.1571739>

ResearchSPAce

<http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/>

This pre-published version is made available in accordance with publisher policies.

Please cite only the published version using the reference above.

Your access and use of this document is based on your acceptance of the ResearchSPAce Metadata and Data Policies, as well as applicable law:-

<https://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/policies.html>

Unless you accept the terms of these Policies in full, you do not have permission to download this document.

This cover sheet may not be removed from the document.

Please scroll down to view the document.

EDITORIAL – Framing the Crisis

Samantha Walton

In the future, we might look back on 2018 as the year in which the imminence, and presence, of climate change reached new levels of public consciousness, at least in the UK and Ireland. In March, a disordered polar vortex pushed a band of freezing weather from the Arctic in a westward arc around Europe. The thrillingly named ‘Beast from the East’ froze transportation and stranded villages as it dumped drifts of snow (in some places thirteen feet deep) from Kent to the Cairngorms. At the same time, the popular media reported a peculiar warming at the pole. ‘Wacky weather makes Arctic warmer than parts of Europe,’ wrote reporters at Reuters, while in Carbon Brief, Robert McSweeney noted that temperatures in Siberia had been as much as 35°C above average in February and March. At the Danish Metrological Weather Institute, climate scientist Dr Ruth Mottram observed temperatures of or exceeding 0°C for ten consecutive days—the third time this has happened on record (the other times were 2011 and 2017) (Sweeney 2018). It wasn’t so much the extreme weather itself, but the intensity, frequency and unpredictability of these events that caused the greatest concern.

A few months later, the UK and Ireland would bake in 30°C heat, as a period of hot weather lasting from June to August broke average temperature records previously set in 1979. Nostalgic comparisons with the 1970s heat wave quickly evaporated as the media circulated images, based on NASA climate modelling, which demonstrated that the heat wave wasn’t a freak event localised in northern Europe, but consistent with the globally disrupted climate of a warming planet (Badshah 2018). Fires broke out on Saddleworth Moor, Greater Manchester, and across Northwestern Europe, as parks and moorland turned brown under the sun (a phenomenon captured from space by NASA’s Terra satellite, see Patel 2018).

Each day, as I watched and listened to the BBC report on the relentless heat wave, I asked, along with many others glued to their screens in concern: why aren’t they talking about climate change? ‘Balanced’ reports showed UK wine growers speculating about fabulous harvests, while sun cream industry representatives rubbed well-oiled hands together as they announced record trade. The media seemed to favour this narrative of losses and gains, as some industries and species were dubbed ‘winners’, and others (like butterflies, caterpillars, and most of the UK’s temperate crops), ‘losers’ (BBC News). Framed as generous benefactor or unwitting opponent, nature (here meaning ‘weather’) rose like a *deus ex machina*, spreading rewards or punishments seemingly at random. Paradoxically, intertwined with this aura of unpredictability was a counter fantasy of absolute predictability and control. Framing the heat wave as a check-list of calculable losses and

gains helped to reinforce an ideology of absolute control that was inherently ecophobic. With such information, so the good news story went, next year we can plan better and capitalise on the hot, dry weather. But, as Simon Estok has pointed out, 'the more control we seem to have over the natural environment, the less we actually have' (Estok 6).

Failing to tether these events to climate change might have been an act of scientific caution, journalistic restraint, political tactfulness or public panic management. From the perspective of a panicked ecocritic, it seemed a terribly wasted—and intentionally ignored—opportunity to think beyond simplistic binary models of win/lose, and to more boldly conceptualise humanity's agency and vulnerability in our rapidly changing climate. While it is the work of climate scientists to articulate precisely how these relatively localised weather events are mapped onto wider atmospheric and ecological change, cultural critics are well placed to track changes in how extreme weather events are perceived, experienced and understood. While climate change has been described as the ideal hyperobject, impossible to sense or conceptualise, these fatal extremes suggested otherwise. This, they seemed to say, is what climate change looks like.

In October 2018, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released their Special Report on Global Warming above 1.5°C. Its headline statements, geared to policy-makers, confirmed the IPCC's position that 'Global warming is likely to reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052 if it continues to increase at the current rate (high confidence)' (IPCC). Trends in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events had been observed, while warming higher than average had been seen, and could be expected, over land and in the Arctic zones (IPCC). The consequences of a 1.5°C predicted rise include drought, extreme heat, famine, and rising sea levels. To stave off the worst of predicted warming, nothing less than a steep reduction in fossil fuel use to net zero by 2050 will be enough. 'It's a line in the sand and what it says to our species is that this is the moment and we must act now,' said Debra Roberts, co-chair of the IPCC's working group on impacts (Watts 2018).

But the questions—what form should action take, and how can we ensure that actions are efficacious?—remain open. In November, following the IPCC report, the newly formed protest group 'Extinction Rebellion' held their first demonstrations in London. Activists occupied city bridges, blocked traffic, and glued themselves to the gates of Downing Street. These actions were accompanied by a series of talks, work-shops, preparatory meetings and media engagements. Spray-paint and stickers showing the XR logo appeared on footpaths and streetlamps around the country. Thousands of people, many of them 'novice' activists, stood up to announce that they were willing to go to prison in order to protest the government's inaction on climate change. Evoking protests from the Campaign for Women's Suffrage to sit-ins and occupations against the Vietnam War, Extinction Rebellion invited the public to participate in 'low level and higher risk acts of civil disobedience' (Extinction Rebellion) in the expectation that mass arrest and possible incarceration of sympathetic protesters would have 'cultural resonance' sufficient to shock an apathetic

state and media out of their business as usual approach to climate crisis (see Rinvoluceri et al, 2018).

In 2018, another group of activists were put on trial. The so-called Stansted 15 were arrested in 2017 after cutting through perimeter fencing and attempting to stop a plane departing 60 people to countries in West Africa. In the wake of the trial and guilty conviction of the fifteen under the 1990 Aviation and Maritime Security Act (designed to prosecute terrorists), Extinction Rebellion's expectation that their volunteers will be treated fairly before the law—or indeed, that the legal system is an appropriate mechanism for bringing about social and structural change—might be seen as naïve. Their conviction that XR activists will be able to navigate the criminal justice system with relative ease and impunity rests on assumptions of class and racial privilege not enjoyed by working class and Black citizens (in the UK, for example, Black men are 3 times more likely to be arrested than white men; see UK Government). Contrary to XR's approach, seasoned climate change and social justice protesters have become highly adept at helping activists avoid arrest and imprisonment, precisely because arrest as a tactic has such catastrophic, and unfairly distributed, impacts on those entangled in the legal system.

Extinction Rebellion's understanding of the political value of arrest and imprisonment might be idealistic at best, and underpinned by ignorance and unexamined privilege at worst. However, the group has brought much-needed focus and clarity in their response to climate change. Their three demands, if adopted, would offer a transformative politics of transparency, action and responsibility, which has so evidently been lacking in social and political responses to climate change. Firstly, they demand that 'the Government must tell the truth about the climate and wider ecological emergency, reverse inconsistent policies and work alongside the media to communicate with citizens.' Secondly, 'the Government must enact legally binding policy measures to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2025 and to reduce consumption levels.' And finally, that a national Citizen's Assembly should be instituted to oversee the changes, 'as part of creating a democracy fit for purpose' (Extinction Rebellion). They certainly have a point. Since 2016, media busy reporting on Britain's negotiations to leave the European Union have been curiously silent on the issue of environmental emergency and climate change. The New Statesman's first edition of 2019 ran with a front page listing 'The Big Questions' of the upcoming year: financial crisis, Brexit, the future of television, Trump's military pretensions. Environmental crisis, predictably, despairingly, was not even at the bottom of the list (New Statesman). In a political climate in which short-term sensationalism sells, climate change is altogether too horrific, too sprawling, and too manifold in its ecological and social ramifications to contain and convey as a single entry in a bullet point list. Rather than fitting neatly in the frame, it threatens to shatter or melt it.

In this context of mind-boggling inaction and ever-increasing stakes, it is vital to focus on the contemporary. In their articles on modern popular media and culture, John Parham and

Alexa Weik von Mossner both explore how new modes of cultural and cognitive framing might bring about radical shifts in green narratives capable of shaping mass responses to climate change. However, other articles collected in this open edition of *Green Letters* demonstrate the value of shifting in scales of time and locality. Unearthing the cultural roots of our ecological problems, and challenging them from diverse perspectives, the articles collected in this edition demonstrate the value of the many theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches now grouped under the umbrella of ecocriticism.

Ways of seeing, framing, imagining and understanding ecological entanglement and interdependency are often at the forefront of these diverse critical contributions. In 'With parted eye: A Midsummer Night's Dream, Richard Powers' Orfeo, and Biosemiotics,' Timothy Ryan Day interweaves writing about Chicago's Theatre on the Lake—previously a clinic for children with Tuberculosis—with analysis of modern fiction and early modern theatre performed at this transformed medico-cultural venue. After Donna Haraway, Day states that 'our perspective is always contingent on a host of others who are often invisible', and in his article, the 'parted eye' of Hermia is turned to new awareness of the cultural-bacterial nexus that constitutes the human *umwelt*, unsettling the fantasy of discrete selfhood on which modern subjecthood rests.

Looking back to a little-known sermon by the brothers Joseph and Thomas Warton, and the analogising philosophy of the British theologian Joseph Butler, Brian Glover disrupts the binary between Enlightenment thinking and 'new' advances in ecological philosophy. Evoking Bruno Latour's contention that we have never been modern, Glover discovers precursors to object-oriented ontology in eighteenth-century theology and philosophy. These writers, he claims, offer alternative accounts of the usefulness of immediate perception in assessing risk and pursuing 'whole' understanding of 'any one thing', offering a counter narrative to dominant and destructive modes of Enlightenment perception.

Daniel Eltringham's article 'Growing food on the Green World' offers a similar blend of transhistorical literary comparison, in this case exploring British late-modernist poet J.H. Prynne's readings of William Wordsworth. In Prynne's allusions to Wordsworth, Eltringham traces a poetic and critical lineage as part of Prynne's contribution to a long English environmentalist tradition. Debating New Historicist and ecocritical angles on Wordsworth, Eltringham navigates the Romantic and post-Romantic pastoral by drawing attention to the suppression human and extra-human costs of agriculture and commodity production, from the Vale of Tintern to modern agro-chemistry and high-yield monocrops.

Ayo Adeduntan's article on 'Yoruba Imaginary in the Ecocinema of Tunde Kelani' shifts focus to West Africa. In *Ti Olúwa N'Ilẹ* (1995), Adeduntan explains, the filmmaker Tunde Kelani adopts Yoruba ecological perception as a means of addressing the environmental, social and cultural transgressions of the development industry. In postcolonial Nigeria, Yoruba cosmology offers a vital ethical and ontological framework for critiquing individual and collective violence against an interrelated human-natural universe. Adeduntan's explication

of Yoruba consciousness in dialogue with canonical texts in Anglo-American ecocriticism will be of particular value to readers who are keen to expand their knowledge of non-dualistic frameworks for imagining the more than human. Read in dialogue with Parham's and von Mossner's articles, Adeduntan's contribution further proves the value of looking to popular and mass-market forms—from filmmaking to song—to track the emergence of new and hybrid forms of eco-consciousness.

Finally, Claudia Rosenhan offers a welcome phenomenological reading of nature/culture in E.M. Forster's Cambridge novels. While critical responses tend to foreground the redemptive social qualities of these rarefied spaces, Rosenhan suggests that we attend to Forster's ethical framing of nature, and to the inherence of the mind in more-than-human materiality. Seeing the world 'as it is', 'without blinkers', as Rosenhan puts it, allows Forster's characters to free themselves from oppressive and externally imposed identities and social norms. Nature—or more precisely, the lens through which we see the other-than-human world—becomes a transformative environment, not merely as a backdrop to human existential drama, but as an 'active world' to which they 'surrender their being.'

The essays in this volume seek to reassess, reconsider, and reimagine how we perceive an emerging anthro-nature. They do this in many exciting ways: engaging with an eclectic range of literary forms, narratives, and film; straddling and working within the borders between disciplines; crossing geographical borders; challenging outdated modes of thinking and behaving, as well as ontological and epistemological categories; and revealing the now not-so-hidden costs of industrial-capitalism. At a moment in which our immanence in an active world is becoming ever more apparent, these diverse critical responses offer new ways of seeing and living with more-than-human otherness, which will be of relevance to literary scholars, and anyone concerned with 'stretching and bending the frame'.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Michelle Poland (Editorial Assistant at Green Letters) for her helpful and astute comments and additions to this introduction.

References

Badshah, N. "UK heatwave forecast to reach 36C before torrential downpours." *The Guardian*, July 24 2018. [Accessed 17 December 2018]. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jul/24/temperatures-to-rise-even-higher-this-week-says-met-office>.

BBC News. 2018. "Hot weather boost for cider and wine producers." *BBC News*, July 8 2018. [Accessed 17 December 2018]. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-44740152>.

BBC News. 2018. "UK Heatwave 2018: The Winners and Losers." BBC News, July 21 2018. [Accessed 17 December 2018]. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-44900794>.

Doyle, A. 2018. "'Wacky' weather makes Arctic warmer than parts of Europe." Reuters, February 26, 2018. [Accessed 17 December 2018]. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-weather/wacky-weather-makes-arctic-warmer-than-parts-of-europe-idUSKCN1GA2AD>.

Estok, S. 2009 "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia." ISLE 16 (2): 203–225.

Extinction Rebellion. 2018. "Who we are." Extinction Rebellion. [Accessed 17 December 2018]. <https://rebellion.earth/who-we-are/>.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 2018. 'Summary for Policy Makers.' Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5 °C. [Accessed 17 December 2018]. <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/summary-for-policy-makers/>.

McSweeney, R. 2018. "Explainer: The Polar Vortex, Climate Change and the 'Beast from the East.'" Carbon Brief, March 1 2018. [Accessed 17 December 2018]. <https://www.carbonbrief.org/explainer-polar-vortex-climate-change-and-beast-from-the-east>.

New Statesman. 2018. "2019: The Big Questions." New Statesman, January 4 2018. Front page.

Patel, K. 2018. "Heatwave Turns Europe Brown." NASA Earth Observatory, July 30 2018. [Accessed 17 December 2018]. <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/92490/heatwave-turns-europebrown>.

Rivoluceri, B, I. Baqué, C. Cherry, A. Sich and K. Lamborn. 2018. "We can't get arrested quick enough: life inside Extinction Rebellion – video." The Guardian, November 22 2018. [Accessed 17 December 2018]. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2018/nov/22/we-cant-getarrested-quick-enough-life-inside-extinction-rebellion-video>.

UK Government. 2018. "Ethnicity Facts and Figures: Arrests." UK Government., October 10 2018. [Accessed 17 December 2018]. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justiceand-the-law/policing/number-of-arrests/latest>.

Watts, Jonathan. 2018 "We have 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe, warns UN." The Guardian, October 8 2018. [Accessed 17 December 2018]. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report>.