

## Editorial *Ecozon@* Issue 11.1

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We have had a wake-up call over the last few weeks and months: the threat to society from pandemics has been systematically underestimated. Across the world, political leaders are now focused on slowing the rate of infection from the coronavirus, to avoid health systems from being overwhelmed and minimise the death rate. The consequences for our daily lives have been immediate and dramatic. Yet the shutdown of the economy may be short-lived, and the long-term impact on our way of life may be negligible in comparison with that of climate change. In the short term, the coronavirus is shifting attention and resources away from addressing climate change. However, it could serve as an opportunity for cultural change. Out of the crisis may come a realisation that there is considerable potential to change working practices and lifestyles. Putting our daily lives on pause gives us a chance to think how we may live more sustainably. The response to the coronavirus is an enforced experiment in behavioural change, as increasing numbers work from home and discover new modes of sociality. We may learn to travel less, to conduct more of our meetings virtually, and to eat more local food. It could also be a catalyst for restructuring the economy, if businesses shorten their supply chains, and government stimulus packages to prop up the world economy include funding low carbon infrastructure and strengthening the social safety net. We cannot simply return to business as usual. COVID-19 has been described as anthropogenic global warming on speed. It has burst the bubble of normalcy in which we have dwelled, and made unthinkable government actions thinkable: if we perceive a survival-level threat, we can, it seems, move in unprecedented ways. Of course, the rapid spread of the virus has focused attention in a way that is more challenging for the slow-moving, diffuse and varied phenomena of climate disruption. Nonetheless, it may open doors, psychologically and politically, for human society to consider the scale and scope of changes we need to adequately address the climate crisis. It may teach us the value of knowledge and science, and the imperative for international collaboration. The pandemic underscores the importance of building a resilient and sustainable society, and its most lasting lesson may be the urgency of taking swift action.

In this sense, the subject of the themed section of this issue of *Ecozon@*, 'Cultures of Climate. On Bodies and Atmospheres in Modern Fiction', is timely. The editors, Eva Horn and Solvejg Nitzke, note in their introduction how the disconnect between nature and culture which has resulted in part from the objectification, abstraction and numerification of modern science has made it difficult for individuals and societies to relate to climate change. To effect the reconnection with the natural environment which is needed at a time when, as Chakrabarty has put it, the distinction between natural and

human history has collapsed, they argue that we need to adopt a cultural approach to climate, understanding it not just as a *natural* fact, but also as a *social* and *cultural* one. This can be done by setting current debates on climate change in the historical context of the long tradition of thinking about climate as an experience connecting bodies, places, cultures and social institutions. What is required is a critical review of the many different ways in which individuals and communities have perceived the weather, lived with it, and imagined alternatives, drawing on everyday practices, individual accounts, fictions and visual representations, as well as theories and narratives on the effects of climate on human bodies, mentalities and societies. Literature is the prime medium for close observation of the political, social and psychological consequences of climate change. The six essays which Horn and Nitzke present (by Johannes Ungelenk, Urs Büttner, Emanuel Herold, Brad Tabas, Michael Boyden and Solvejg Nitzke) contribute to the growing body of humanities and social sciences research into the imaginaries connected to climate and weather phenomena. Examining narratives, metaphors and images in French, American and Austrian writing from the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century which make palpable the abstraction that atmosphere has become in modern science, and probing the intellectual, social and political functions performed by the concept of climate over time, they reinstate climate as “a mediating framework that links the local to the planetary, the short-term acts of human consumption and technology to long-term consequences in the atmosphere and the earth system, and the course of human civilization to that of a nature understood as a unified, self-regulating system”.

The General Section of the issue opens with an essay by Judith Rauscher analysing the American poet Sharon Doubiago’s epic *Hard Country* (1982) from the perspectives of ecocriticism and mobility studies. Rauscher describes *Hard Country* as a proletarian eco-epic that rethinks human-nature relations from a working-class perspective shaped by experiences of mobility and stasis. It revises the American epic tradition by foregrounding working-class people’s desire for meaningful relationships to place against a background of environmental injustice and displacement. However, settler colonialism involved the violent dispossession of the indigenous population. Doubiago’s acknowledgement that white working-class people in the United States have always been perpetrators as well as victims of environmental and mobility injustice has wider implications for American identity.

The other two articles in the section are concerned with Latin American culture. Nancy Madsen examines ecology and human rights in the Nicaraguan author Gioconda Belli’s novel *Waslala* (2006). *Waslala* holds up to scrutiny the tensions that arise when human rights (including the right to access to and control of resources) are considered in the context of planetary ecological crisis. Madsen argues that although the novel purports to privilege human rights over ecological concerns, it highlights the impossibility of separating the two, and prompts a rethinking of the definition and practice of human rights within the context of global ecology.

In his article on two essay films directed by the Chilean Patricio Guzmán in 2010 and 2015, Sebastián Figueroa discusses the director’s use of a blend of realism and

symbolic abstraction to convey the processes of capitalist extraction which have degraded the environment, and been associated with brutal political oppression. Guzmán's representation of the historical, archaeological, and cosmological past through images of the landscape in the Atacama Desert and Patagonia infers that capitalism is progressing from the human scale to the planetary, leaving the extinction of all life on Earth as the logical future. He suggests that Guzmán intends the memories of past processes of extraction and extinction inscribed in these landscapes as a warning, prompting us to change the way we structure society and relate to nature.

In his introduction to the Creative Writing and Art Section, Damiano Benvegnù writes of the long history of the use of 'climate' as a tool facilitating forms of domination and exploitation: it is a far from innocent concept. While its ideological deconstruction is primarily the task of ecocritics, he argues that it is the job of artists and writers above all to "bring back a sense of experiencing this atmospheric layer that is so close to us by rendering it visible," and thereby promote alternative perceptions of climate. Contemporary art can similarly help us understand climate and our connection with the atmosphere by articulating the "hopes, polemics, anxieties and antagonisms that emerge from a crisis that often seems beyond representation". In *Nimbus*, a series of images of clouds in relation to architectural environments, the Dutch artist Berndnaut Smilde documents an imagined embodied encounter with the air we breathe. Smilde's striking digital collages are followed by four short texts by the German author and poet Alex Dreppec. Under the heading *Periodic Poetry*, these cleverly arrange chemical symbols from the periodic table in sentences evoking an atmosphere characterized by pollution and environmental degradation. Contrasting with these, two poems by the American poet, Karen Poppy, speak of the ephemeral nature of human life, the beauty of nature, and its endangerment. The section ends with a nod to the impact of the coronavirus. 'More Virulent Than Disease' is a chapter from a novel by Stephanie Gage set in the early twentieth century, in which a young man recalls how going for long walks, drawing and taking photographs helped him overcome depression during his isolation in a sanatorium, when he was convalescing from tuberculosis. Daily exercise and artistic expression are "great physicians": guiding "our sensibilities towards the world around us, the fount of the purest and most refreshing pleasures", they may "free us from our own virulent ideas, sometimes more dangerous than disease itself".

Two of the seven titles reviewed in the Book Reviews Section directly address the focus of the issue: Leonardo Nolé discusses Adeline Johns-Putra's edited volume *Climate and Literature*, and Jessica Maufort reads Ben Holgate's *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse*. Three further titles relate to it, examining aspects of the Anthropocene: Giulia Champion presents Elizabeth DeLoughrey's *Allegories of the Anthropocene*; Solvejg Nitzke reviews the edited volume *Future Remains: A Cabinet of Curiosities for the Anthropocene*; and Başak Ağın reviews David Lombard's *Techno-Thoreau: Aesthetics, Ecology and the Capitalocene*. The section also contains a review essay "New Directions in African-American Ecocriticism" by Matthias Klestil, examining recent studies by Sonya Posmentier, Lindgren Johnson, and John Claborn. Last but not

least, Katie Ritson discusses Nicole Seymour's provocative book, *Bad Environmentalism. Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*.

With regards to the history and progress of *Ecozon@*, 2020 marks two major events. Firstly, we have reached our tenth year without having missed an issue or deadline and with a great variety of topics and articles always on hand. Our thanks to our contributors and readers and to the different members of the editorial board who have made this possible. Our next issue, Vol. 11.2 will be a special anniversary issue, revisiting the structure of our first issue, with essays written by notable ecocritics. We hope to celebrate this event at the next EASLCE conference, scheduled for November 2020 in Granada. And secondly, but importantly, *Ecozon@* now has a DOI assigned. The University of Alcalá has carried out the needed steps to make this possible. This issue is the first to have a DOI assigned to all submissions, both on the web and on the pdfs of every submission. We have also backtracked and have been able to assign a DOI to all past submissions on the web, although it does not appear in the pdfs themselves. This should help all our contributors to identify their submissions and have them easily located by potential readers. Our thanks to the University and to our wonderful Editorial Assistant, Beatriz Lindo, who did all the tedious and technical work of assigning each submission its corresponding DOI.