

## A NEW CRITICAL CLIMATE

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*The environment today is replete with invisible, elusive, fearful, yet wholly “real” entities revealed to us by science: acid rain, ozone depletion, pesticide tolerance, carrying capacity, overpopulation, species loss and, most recently, climate change.*

—Sheila Jasanoff (2010, 235)

We all know about climate change. We know that it is happening, if only because scientific consensus (though not certainty) has been translated into and accepted as general consensus. We know this—we specialist and non-specialist consenters to this consensus—on the basis of an agglomerate of evidence, including measurements of rapidly rising sea levels, shrinking ice sheets, diminishing Arctic ice thickness, accelerating global temperatures on both land and sea, and increasing ocean acidification. We thus *know* about climate change as a cluster of scientific facts. These facts—what Bruno Latour would call the “things” of science—have arrived through several layers of mediation (1990; 25-6). We encounter climate change most often as news or popular science sound-bites, usually exegeses of information reported by a body such as the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC), itself an attempt to collate and condense a vast amount of data from an array of scientific disciplines as reported in specialist journals. Those reported conclusions are themselves the subject of a considerable and convention-laden process: observation; experimentation; information gathering; statistical analysis; and interrogative (even combative) peer review. And so, simultaneously, we know and don’t know about climate change.

Climate change is invisible, suggests Sheila Jasanoff, as far as our feeling, talking, sensing, seeing selves are concerned, and yet is it real as far as our rational, knowing,

scientific egos tell us. We encounter climate change as a discursive phenomenon and never a purely material one. Going further than Jasanoff, we should say that, in its discursive ubiquity and urgency (we all know about it, after all), it is unlike any *thing* we have encountered before. This is the impulse behind the naming of the Anthropocene and the enshrining of its status as the sixth mass extinction event. We have never seen anything like this.

Or have we? Around the problem of climate change as *thing*—around this issue of its experiential elusiveness and its scientific factuality—a critical project is emerging.

Sometimes called “critical climate change,” this project announces two important, seemingly conflicting questions.<sup>1</sup> Does the radically unprecedented phenomenon of climate change herald a new critical climate, in which our collective theoretical and critical faculties, long used to carry out humanist cultural analysis, are rendered fit for purpose for an age of human and nonhuman catastrophe? Or, conversely, does climate change in and of itself evoke familiar lines of enquiry, as it so coincidentally and (one has to say) uncannily conjures up old habits of critique? In its simultaneous unknowability and ubiquity, climate change is something (or some *thing*) we have been describing in the annals of critical theory all along: an aporia, the Lacanian “real,” the postmodern unrepresentable, and so on. Thus, Timothy Clark is prompted to note wryly that, “if asked to respond to the challenge of an issue such as climate change never considered by Derrida, for many the reflex would be to argue, somehow, how well he had covered it already” (2010, 132). Always already, perhaps.

And yet, the two possibilities marked out by critical climate change are not necessarily contradictory. Clark is at pains to point out that the absence of environmental issues in Derrida’s writing, considered in the light of the odd appositeness of those issues to his mode of questioning, means that a “kind of invention” (2010, 132) of deconstruction is necessary if one is to bring it to bear on climate change. The critical project is therefore a

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<sup>1</sup> McKee notes these two tendencies but does not emphasise the radical uncanniness that they announce.

reorientation, an application of existing theoretical protocols to a subject never yet attempted because never yet seen.

At one level, it is a matter of readjusting the strongly humanist tendencies of critical theory in order to interrogate the new faultlines of human and nonhuman interaction now being revealed (McKee, 309-11). The effects of such a recalibration are discernible not just in terms of an environmental turn in critical theory—which is one way of describing critical climate change—but also in terms of the critical turn in environmental criticism. Simon Estok (203-25) and Dana Phillips (2008, 38), among others, have bemoaned the historical lack of theoretical and terminological rigor in this field, and sketched ways forward for a critical ecocriticism.<sup>2</sup>

At another level, this reorientation of critical approaches involves a more radical shift. Sure, climate change seems to belong with other hyperobjects, other monstrous hybridities, other *things* of science, all these old kinds of entities with new names that we have long been able to apprehend via our postmodern and poststructuralist ways of seeing.<sup>3</sup> So Timothy Morton's "object-oriented ontology," the mode in which one interrogates his hyperobjects, is the mode by which we should always have interrogated our environment, although we may not have known it. And yet, for Morton, "OOO is timely in giving us concepts with which to address the feedback we are receiving from Earth" (166). It is timely, that is, in abjuring us to reapply philosophical tools we already had to the global environment. Put another way, what Morton calls OOO and Clark calls "deconstructive environmental criticism" (2008, 45-68) is a radical upscaling of critical insights. This, then, is why both Clark and Jasanoff preoccupy themselves with what is, for them, an utterly unimaginable unprecedented scale of mode and object of enquiry. For Jasanoff, the hugely expanded time and space scales of climate change (eternity? the world?) is what enables it to drive "sharp wedges between society's fact-

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<sup>2</sup> See also Phillips 2003.

<sup>3</sup> See Morton: "Nature has disappeared; no—we are realizing we never had it in the first place" (166)

making and meaning-making faculties” (243), that is, to render climate change an invisible discursive object. For Clark, “Scale effects impose unprecedented difficulties of interpretation and imagination which seem to exceed anything envisaged by Derrida” (2010, 136). In other words, critical climate change engages in the ultimate deconstructive turn that deconstruction could possibly take.

The essays in this volume address the ways in which the intellectual milieu demanded by climate change is nothing less than a recalibration of theoretical knowledge. The essays by Clark, Morton, Jeffrey Di Leo, and Claire Colebrook serve to remind us that—among other things—questions of ethics and aesthetics, the political and the cultural, are part of one and the same problematic when it comes to critical climate change. Subsequent essays in this volume offer perspectives that emphasize, to varying degrees, the radical aesthetics and the radical ethics enabled by our new critical climate. Thomas H. Ford and Matthew Griffiths approach the artistic challenges posed by climate change in the present via the lens of the past. Then, Deborah Lilley and Maggie Kainulainen offer discussions of the unrepresentability of climate change that nudge us back towards questions of ethics. Ethical concerns are at stake in my essay and in the essays by Gregers Andersen, Gert Goeminne and Matt Spencer. These considerations open up to analyses of what might be described as Anthropocene economics, by John Miller, Brian Lennon, Karen Pinkus, and Adam Trexler. In short, all the essays in this volume index the many layers of interrogation—ethical, aesthetic, political—that comprise this startlingly new critical climate.

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks are due to the contributors to this volume, as well as to Ian Buchanan, Sharae Deckard, Axel Goodbody, Alex Murray, and Kate Rigby. The time and space to prepare this volume were enabled by a Visiting Fellowship at the Australian National University’s Humanities Research Centre in 2012.

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