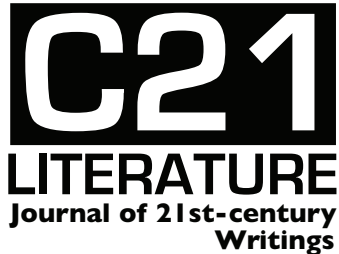




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Review

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REVIEW

Adeline Johns-Putra, *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*. Cambridge University Press, 2019. ISBN 9781108427371, £75.00

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As public awareness of the scale of the climate crisis increases, ecocriticism within the academy gathers momentum and diversifies its lines of enquiry. *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel* is a welcome addition to the growing field, providing both a timely assessment of ecocriticism and an original, rigorous account of how contemporary fiction might play a role in the crisis. Adeline Johns-Putra considers the intergenerational terms of climate change narratives, focusing her critique on an ethics of posterity that dominates and limits current discourse. Echoing the claims of material and feminist eco-critics, Johns-Putra is wary of anthropocentric and normative ethics that 'collapse a web of obligations – primarily, between species – into a single intergenerational strand of time' (4). This anthropocentric ethical schema prioritises parental obligations and characterises relationships via familial bonds. Johns-Putra counters with a sharp analysis of environmental fiction that teases out the logical inconsistencies and ethical problems of such ethics. We cannot be content with the 'comforting frame' it offers (7).

As Johns-Putra points out, the figure of the child has taken centre-stage in environmental discourse. In environmental rhetoric, the child is constructed both as an object of care and as the future inheritor of the planet. This child is simultaneously whom we fail to protect when we do not act on the climate crisis *and* a potential saviour: perhaps our children will do better than we have. This focus on

the figuration of the child in environmental rhetoric and related fiction is useful because it shows that the child has become an over-burdened signifier determined by paradoxical desires. Critics of the deconstructive method working in childhood studies and children's literature have long recognized these paradoxes and problems in cultural constructions of the child, but it seems particularly urgent to point them out in relation to the climate crisis. The 'Fridays for Future' climate strikes and the 'Extinction Rebellion' movement are youth-led, but politicians and the public seem hampered in their ability to respond. I think this is in part because of the constraint that posterity and parental care ethics place on our understanding of the agency of the child, something Johns-Putra astutely reveals. *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel* intervenes in these debates by exploring how far popular and literary climate change fiction interrogates the symbol of the child and arguing that they offer some radical ethical alternatives.

An important line of argument in Johns-Putra's rebuttal of posterity ethics involves interrogating the 'identitarian' politics that underpin it. To this end, Chapter One synthesizes several critical, philosophical and ethical concepts, whilst also providing a thorough history of environmental rhetoric in the academy and society more broadly. Johns-Putra considers different iterations of intergenerational justice models from John Rawls in the 1970s through ideological and critical shifts to Christopher Groves' recent work (2014) on the importance of uncertainty in intergenerational care ethics. Throughout her analysis, Johns-Putra returns to uncertainty and unknowability as key concepts, forging insightful links between moral philosophy, political theology, environmental philosophy and ecofeminism. Her critique of care ethics rests on their grounding in the realm of the private and on exclusionary identity politics. Normative care ethics are inadequate because identity is not stable and the future is unknowable: 'like the contingency of the identity of the future moral patient, the ontological fluidity of the moral agent also has profound implications for conceptualising ethical behaviour' (24). Johns-Putra then turns to the possibilities for an 'ecocentric' rather than an 'anthropocentric' account of posterity, suggesting that some climate change fiction is able to emphasize the non-human

dimension of futurity. She considers the ways in which such forms of art constitute an ethical 'call' and whether something like the novel, bound up as it is in formal conventions, can really challenge dominant conceptions of the self. In this assessment, Johns-Putra is more hopeful than Timothy Clark's anxious analysis in *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (2015), which suspects that the novel ultimately depends on conventional and anthropocentric expectations of readers' identification with characters. In contrast, Johns-Putra argues that some writers aim to destabilise anthropocentric world-views, whilst others manage to destabilise the very idea of coherence altogether.

How is such destabilisation possible? What is it that novels might *do* with and for their readers? This is an urgent question for ecocriticism and Johns-Putra seeks to answer it by developing an 'eudaemonistic' framework from extant work on emotions and empathy in literary studies:

[it] emphasizes the reader's imaginative identification with fictional characters and their conditions, as well as the immersive experience of novelistic worlds, as conducive to the development of sympathetic acknowledgment of shared vulnerability with others and of a eudaemonistic desire to address that common vulnerability and promote a common flourishing. (45)

Johns-Putra is careful in the construction of this framework, and helpfully draws on the work of Martha Nussbaum (1997, 2001, 2013), which argues for the importance of emotion in the production of ethical judgments. Johns-Putra supplements and builds on Nussbaum's work, delineating between notions of sympathy, empathy and identification. She is aware of possible criticism that such a framework is in danger of making utopian claims about the novel. In response, Johns-Putra recognises that the emotional power wielded by art is not necessarily benign, nor is it simple to predict what, if any, ethical action might arise from reading. Nonetheless, I find it refreshing that Johns-Putra is able to locate in the novel the power to mobilise empathy and sympathy as well as the potential to motivate coalitional interactions between humans and non-humans, rather than assuming that identification in the

novel functions to shore up stable and normative identities. Perhaps the potential for the novel to intervene in the climate crisis lies in these moments of empathy and interaction.

Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel has a persuasive structure, tracing an increased critical engagement with ethics through different modern novels. Johns-Putra begins with *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (2006) and *The Ice People* by Maggie Gee (1998), arguing that they shed light on the troubling dynamics of parental and intergenerational care ethics, but also fall into parochialism and exclusionary gender politics. As Johns-Putra points out, parochial and parental care ethics are limited by a tendency to self-interest and by their inability to consider the future as unknowable (59). These limits are revealed in a refreshing and careful reading of *The Road*, a novel that has garnered much critical attention and praise. Here, the blind spots of the novel and its investment in gendered notions of parental care are scrutinized. Importantly, it is the boy who emerges as a potential voice for alternative ethical action, though this voice is not heard by the male parent. Where *The Road* is limited by its focalisation through the father figure, Gee's novel is more promising. Johns-Putra shows that its multivocality invites 'reader sympathy on all sides' (75). *The Ice People* begins to 'peel back the layers of gender norms' that underpin parental care ethics and offers a more active critique than *The Road*.

Maternal care ethics are under consideration in Chapter Three, which continues the discussion of gender by delving into the discourse of ecofeminism. Again, Johns-Putra offers a thorough overview of a complex critical history, evaluating the polemics and paradoxes of ecofeminism. Her reading of Edan Lepucki's *California* (2014) and Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* (2009) then dismantles the idealisation of motherhood that plagues environmental rhetoric. Though Johns-Putra does not make this connection, there is an important dialogue here with Donna Haraway's recent exhortation to 'make kin not babies' in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). Whilst Haraway is characteristically lyrical on this point, Johns-Putra carefully considers the intersection of race, gender and economics involved in advancing such ideas. Hers is an incredibly astute and useful examination of the polemical responses of environmentalism which on

the one hand has sought to address overpopulation as a problem and, on the other, idealised motherhood and maternal care for the environment. Johns-Putra compares these novels showing that posterity-as-motherhood continues to wield significant emotional power. What is needed, she claims, is a more thorough emphasis on the contingency of parental identity.

Where Chapters Two and Three are reserved in their evaluation of the novels' power to mobilise radical ethical action, Chapters Four and Five find more to celebrate in the work of Jeanette Winterson, Sarah Hall and Barbara Kingsolver. In different ways, these writers respond to the climate crisis by rejecting stable identities and viewpoints. Johns-Putra makes fruitful connections between feminist eco-criticism and Karen Barad's text on philosophy-physics, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007), which has been influential in the recent 'material turn' of the humanities. Coalition, collaboration and 'intra-action' are emphasized in Winterson's novel, *The Stone Gods* (2007), which Johns-Putra argues maps queer desire onto 'an ethical openness towards others' (111). Johns-Putra then enfolds aspects of Hannah Arendt's writing on the public disclosure of identity (*The Human Condition*, 1958), which invites a close scrutiny of the performative nature of identity. This in turn dislodges environmental rhetoric 'grounded in domestic and familial care' (125). Relatedly, Sarah Hall's novel *The Carhullan Army* (2007) is seen as an exemplary tale in terms of its interrogation of the ground of identity. Its heroine leaves her home, heading for the Cumbrian hills. Here she is unmade and remade in coalition with a feminist collective who actively fight a totalitarian regime. Finally, Johns-Putra turns to the other-than-human in her reading of Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012). Johns-Putra synthesizes her reading with the concept of 'flourishing' taken from Chris Cuomo's Aristotelian-inflected feminist ecocriticism, *Feminism and Ecological Communities: An Ethic of Flourishing* (1998), imbricating humans with non-human species. There is a distinct turn away from the human here, both in Kingsolver's novel and in Johns-Putra's own writing, as she dwells on the revelation of the 'insignificance' of the human within a wider ecosystem (164).

Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel is both enjoyable and rigorous as it traces possible journeys of identification and empathy that readers might take through contemporary fiction. The focus on the potential for disruption of identity and the essential unknowability of the future emphasizes the value of unfinished, disjunctive or ambiguous endings. Indeed, Johns-Putra is actively critical of the comforting desire for happy endings, which is an unproductive response to the so-called Anthropocene. This is a powerful work of literary critique that combines sophisticated and fresh close reading with an explicit political and ethical project. The climate crisis has made an always uncertain future even more unknowable and our current environmental rhetoric is ill-equipped for ethical action. Care ethics that focus on parental relationships, posterity and parochialism objectify the child, grounding this objectification in an exclusionary form of subjectivity. Urgent work is needed to dismantle these norms and paradigms. Johns-Putra shows us how the novel might help.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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