

Wai Chee DIMOCK, *Weak Planet. Literature and Assisted Survival*, University of Chicago Press, 2020, ISBN 978-0-226-47710-7, 228 p.

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That comparative literature has invested substantial theoretical energy in bearing witness to its own disciplinary dissolution is difficult to argue against when perusing the cardinal debates of its past decades. Following Gayatri Spivak's symptomatic 2003 *Death of a Discipline*, the field seemingly submitted to an increasingly self-reflexive stance, articulated at the intersection of post-critique (Rita Felski) and multidirectional methodological innovation. Augmented by the increasing institutional vulnerability of the humanities, the disciplinary crisis of literary studies has engendered multiple reactions – from proposals of hybridization with adjacent disciplines to radical reassessments of literary historiography and its instruments. Wai Chee Dimock's distinctive theoretical practice epitomizes both; across her recent work, she has explored alternatives to historicism and symptomatic reading by directing her attention towards the fuzzier, critically equivocal, instruments of literary history. Her empirical, rather than prescriptive engagement of literary genre, as well as her commitment to “weak theory” and its disciplinary consequences, are eloquent examples.

The 2020 *Weak Planet. Literature and Assisted Survival* emerges at the convergence of such older theoretical explorations and a newly articulated ethical urgency, engendered by increased ecological devastation. Formulating “an attempt to write literary history as part of the collective run-up to our climate crisis” (1), the volume interrogates whether literature conceived “as a sovereign domain – the home of masterly authors, hegemonic institutions, and dominant ideologies” (4) can withstand the perilous era of the Anthropocene, in which humankind becomes “a newly constituted endangered species [...] a ‘form of life’ taking its place among other endangered life-forms” (4). Dimock contends that it can, but only if radically reimagined as a “crisis-responsive art form” (9), embracing weakness as its resilient core. Expanding upon the central argument of her previous works, the author hones

in on the increasing epistemic fragility of literary studies as directly correlative to the deepening precarity of humankind within the “disabling environment” (3) of the planet. Such fragility is not, however, detrimental to a field which is willing to rethink itself as non-sovereign. On the contrary, at the intersection of disability studies, contemporary sociology, climate pragmatism, and indigenous knowledge, the weakness of the discipline, mirroring the constitutive incompleteness of literature, becomes the guarantee of its resilience, enabling it to “weigh in on those situations where neither the solution nor even the nature of problem is self-evident, and where unexpected input from unexpected quarters could make a significant difference” (6).

The volume opens with a markedly autobiographical introduction, unfolding from the intimate narrative of the author’s own experience of disability. Further linking personal struggle to the all-encompassing narrative of the climate crisis, Dimock argues for the reframing of the latter across a wider historical background – the ecological disruptions caused by European colonialism, she contends, are significant antecedents of the otherwise unprecedented environmental crisis. In hosting such rediscovery of indigenous adaptation, “these past records of similar fears – but also of tenacity and inventiveness” (6-7), literary history is reimagined as an “imperfect and incessant” (7) mediating network, “a nonsovereign field weakly durable because continually crowdsourced,” offering an example “of redress as an incremental process, never finished because never without input” (7). Looking to showcase its fertile inconclusiveness, Dimock selects two (very loosely, if at all normative) categories, namely genres and networks, and exemplifies their evolution across and beyond the widely heterogenous territories of American literary history. Thus, divided in two thematic sections – *Revamped Genres* and *Rebuilt Networks* – the six chapters of the volume follow a common pattern, aiming for the rendition of a singular phenomenon through a sum of (significantly titled) sub-chapters. Short, and often essayistic, these sections constitute the functional units of the volume, allowing for the assembly of a novel methodological landscape which spans visual studies, environmental humanities, disability studies, Native American and African American studies, alongside relevant imports of historical and scientific discourse. Deliberately evasive, but stimulating through their breadth of reference, these analyses engender a formula of theoretical storytelling – evocative, but seemingly irresolute, ultimately stretched towards (intentionally) weak-bodied conclusions.

The first chapter, “Still Hungry. Louise Erdrich and Sherman Alexie edit Mary Rowlandson”, sets the tone for the section’s eclecticism, epitomizing Dimock’s central critical gesture – a deliberate attempt to enrich (the now worlded) American literary history by honouring its “weak ties.” To do so, the author selects one of the most durable genres of the national pantheon, the captivity narrative, as the focal point of her analysis. Inaugurated by Mary Rowlandson’s 1682 *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, it constitutes both an epitome of early capitalism and of “settler colonialism, a stark binary –us versus them– making violence both necessary and legitimate” (15). Formally resistant because of its rigid narrative structure – “involuntary sojourn among non-Europeans, ensuing trials and tribulations, and eventual deliverance” (15) – it is framed, in Dimock’s reading, as a genre resilient not through its consistency, but through its susceptibility to distortion. By linking Rowlandson’s canonical figure to the lesser-known Louise Erdrich and Sherman Alexie and their renditions of the captivity narrative, the chapter showcases its development into a “user-amended genre,” propagating because of its openness to external input (a point which echoes Thomas Greene’s understanding of the “vulnerable text”). The most theoretically energetic section of the chapter is dedicated to “weak history” – born out of the diffuse distinction between what happened and what is said to have happened, it “reclaims the past as an unforclosed field, a subjunctive universe where the virtual isn’t necessarily the antithesis of the actual” (27). A “twilight half-entity”, such history is weakly documented, barely traceable as “network noise,” through patterns of historical interference and distortion, yet traceable, nonetheless. Conceived as a form of weak historiography, this chapter manages to highlight the inherent fuzziness of historical narrative as such, which, when “[r]edescribed as user-generated input eliding supervision,” becomes “an actively cascading network, picking up noise at ever-greater distances from a signal’s point of origin, a competition for bandwidth bound to multiply over time” (28).

Similarly concerned with the survival mechanisms of seemingly inflexible genres, “Almost Extinct. Elegy, Pastoral, and Sounds In and Out of Thoreau” connects “two looming prospects of nonsurvival: the possible nonsurvival of the humanities, and the already demonstrated though not always noticed nonsurvival of many species” (43). Borrowing from the newly emergent field of sound studies, the chapter is (thematically) premised on the loss of biodiversity as a sonic phenomenon. With the sixth extinction underway, contemporary explorations of (literary) formulas of

mourning prompt the rediscovery of the elegy and the pastoral as genres of ecological writing. Less of a lament, and more of a “meditation on nonsurvival” (45), an elegy for the twenty-first century must address systemic loss across species, while also looking towards the future as possible – it must be “a reckoning with the damage done” (46). An elegy so amended would be what Dimock terms the “new pastoral” – an experimental genre which, albeit indebted to the elegiac mode, is simultaneously committed to idyllic description of the world and the strong sense of urgency brought about by its looming disappearance. To assemble the landscape of this new pastoral, the author moves throughout literary history, from Walden as an “eclogue in extremis” (47) and Aesop’s animal fables to the lamentations of the Old Testament prophets and Maya Lin’s *What Is Missing*, a multimedia project which aims to offer a virtual home to extinct species. Returning to one of the salient arguments of the volume, Dimock goes on to frame Thoreau’s reading of natural extinction as correlative of his contact with narratives of Native American peril and resilience. Citing Kyle Powys Whyte, she argues that the “massive disruptions we now associate with climate change – ecosystem collapse, species loss, involuntary relocation, and pandemics – have always been part of the New World colonialism” (63). Hence, a pastoral of the twenty-first century can only be an indigenous pastoral, “a crisis-responsive genre, honed by disaster and able to project hope from that special knowledge” (62). Far from being exclusively literary, it encompasses various strands of cultural and climate activism (from the establishment of indigenous language programs to delays in the construction of the Dakota Access pipeline), thus becoming “a multimedia genre” which “reaches beyond elegy to propose a way forward, keeping extinction a live prospect and a deferred end, always before us but not so close as to silence the future” (64).

“Less Than Tragic. C. L. R. James, Frank Stella, and Amitav Ghosh Dilute Melville”, the section’s final chapter, advances an alternative formula of heteromedial genre survival by looking into the progressive weakening and hybridization of a salient literary form – tragedy. Starting from George Steiner’s 1961 *The Death of Tragedy* and its decisive verdict, Dimock argues that, although formally extinct by the beginning of the seventeenth century,

modern tragedy is beset by comedy and thus moves further and further away from its antecedents but with enough residual connectivity to the Greek plays to remind us of

their nonnegotiable endings. In that form, it's uniquely suited to capture the large-scale harms of modernity, not bowing to them but putting them on the table all the same, highlighting their everyday normalcy and their tendency to spread and spiral, especially when undeserved (68).

Looking at the uneven distribution of harm as correlated to other forms of unequal distribution, the author builds on Zygmunt Bauman's work when identifying the democratization of harm as a symptom of modernity manifesting systemically, irrespective of species. Reading *Moby Dick* as an example of a demographically updated tragedy (the main agent of catastrophe is nonhuman, and it befalls ordinary seamen), Dimock further questions the very finality of Melville's novel, ultimately contending that it is helpful to think as it as "not quite the last word [...] still accepting fresh data and still being tinkered with. What results is a volatile field of second look and second chance, user-amended sequels cascading unpredictably" (70). As Frank Stella's abstract painting demonstrates, when read as an extension of Melville's now weakened narrative, it is only via this process of deliberate dilution that modern tragedy can enact its survival.

It is therefore evident that the first part of the volume echoes Dimock's earlier work through its restoration of genre as an empirically constituted, ever elastic and thus unfailingly flighty, category. While unravelling (and, in a sense, revitalizing) this hegemonic instrument of literary discourse, it also points to literary historiography as a domain no longer sovereign, a field "involuntarily ongoing", "multiplane and continually crowdsourced [...] with emerging vectors at every turn and input bearers always on hand" (5). The second section, "Rebuilt Networks", complements this effort, while also being less resolute in its selection of a functional unit of analysis. The literary-specific genre is replaced with the network – which, albeit instrumental to the sociology of weak ties (as advanced by Manuel Castells and Mark Granovetter), functions here in a very loose sense. Each of the three chapters centres a form of national or religious identity, which is weakened or, rather, stretched out to host, heterogenous *corpi* of (mostly) canonical American literature.

As such, the first chapter, "Contagiously Irish. Colm Tóibín, W. B. Yeats, and Gish Jen Infect Henry James" reimagines literature as contagion site, exploring Irishness as derivative of one's infectious contact with another. In this case, Henry James becomes a "diagnostic object" (99) when being read alongside (or rather, through)

Tóibín, an openly queer Irish author, whose mere semantic proximity makes ethnicity and sexuality “contagious sites in James: open to symptomatic reading, most often as spiraling vulnerabilities but occasionally also as networked resilience” (98). Moving past this epidemiological model (which, albeit vivid, does little beyond providing a metaphorical framework for the associations it hosts), the following chapter, “Vaguely Islamic. Henri Matisse, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and Langston Hughes, with Paul Bowles” targets the weaker forms of one of the world’s strongest religions, Islam. Tracing its “abstract, atmospheric, barely there” (120) echoes in the works of Matisse, Joyce, Pound and Hughes, Dimock acknowledges that these four are not “reliable guides on their own” – “[t]heir vague accounts become significant only through a mediating collectivity” (120). Such a disclaimer is symptomatic for her method at large – reluctant to the totalizing force of grand narratives, Dimock assembles a tentative history of North African modernity, tracing its colonial past in the idealized visions of the Mediterranean which surface in *Ulysses*, or in the constrained palette of Matisse’s Moroccan works. Likewise concerned with historical trauma, but this time involving the promise of redress, “Remotely Japanese. William Faulkner Indigenous and Trans-Pacific”, the final chapter of the volume, looks at Faulkner’s “long-distance atonement” (151) as he “reaches out in apology to Japan” (12) following World War II. Here, Dimock builds on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s binary of reparative versus paranoid reading, taking up her plea for the latter, and submits her own pair of terms: reparative versus punitive justice. Advancing the experimental practice of reparative justice as “an unorthodox but not implausible way of writing literary history” (152), Dimock initiates “a methodological debate—between two investigative procedures and two attendant outcomes: mitigating circumstances versus punishable deed, ongoing contextualization versus terminal verdict” (152). Pulling from recent developments in criminal law (more particularly, the implementation of Alternatives to Incarceration as a form of reparative justice), Dimock considers how such a practice might enter literary studies. A suspension of unchallenged verdicts, she argues, might refashion our historiography, making the strong claims of Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters*, for example, merely alternative to the exploration of the peripheral networks which fall below its radar. Such low-bar networks guide the ensuing analysis of trans-pacific trauma, as explored throughout Faulkner’s 1955 stay in Japan and its nontragic sequels, reimagined by the likes of Jim Barnes and Lucien Stryk. In their poems and photographs, Dimock reads a “peace impossible to achieve

as an absolute outcome. It can take shape slowly and collaboratively, however, as an oblique and incremental arc, a nonlinear process” (170).

Through closing with a richly narrative *Afterword*, Wai Chee Dimock’s *Weak Planet* makes a final point of its embracing weakness – be it literary, bodily, or epistemic – as its most resilient principle. Vastly diverging from most contemporary academic discourse, the 2020 volume excels in vividly reimagining literary history as an ever-regenerating field, yet might leave one wondering whether it can sustain the disciplinary survival it envisions.