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STATE OF THE ART: LITERARY STUDIES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

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Abstract: Literary studies are well acquainted with the worlding powers of storytelling. Worlding is the generative process that is transformative enough to integrate the dysfunctionalities of the present and imagine what futures might still be possible (Cheng). As Haraway suggests, worlding also implies entangled histories of human and non-human agencies. For this reason, literary studies are well equipped to appreciate the different ways in which *speculative fabulation* emerges as a core component of current modes of conceptualising the Anthropocene (Stengers, Braidotti, Haraway, Tsing). At once an ethics, a theory of history and a practice of worlding, speculative fabulation is about imagining other ways of living on a damaged planet and taking active (and reflexive) responsibility for the future. The present article is a survey of the challenges and affordances in literary studies in the Anthropocene. It explores literary practices that go beyond symptomatic reading (Best, Marcus), an approach that interprets texts at hand as symptoms for a deeper, unconscious meaning. Instead, it argues that we are witnessing an abundance of topological fabulations, against "depth", and aware of the limits of interpretation, as well as increasing attention to different modes of scaling, in order to respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Anthropocene, speculative fabulation, more-than-human, worlding, scales, symptomatic and surface reading.

Why the Anthropocene?

The Anthropocene is the proposed term for a new geological era in which human impact on the Earth's geological strata and systems is constant and irrevocable

(Hamilton et al. 1). The term is not perfect; it raises reasonable suspicions for anyone familiar with knowledge production at the intersection of the social and the natural. Composed of *anthropos* (gr. ant. ἄνθρωπος) and *-cen* (*kainos*, καινός), the Anthropocene can be translated as “(the) new age of man.” Besides the gesture of naming an era after the human species at its most vulnerable moment, the name also entails a valid criticism: who is this Anthropos of the Anthropocene? A uniform semantic block designating the species by flattening asymmetries between individuals (Bonneuil 17-31)? A desiring machine (in a Deleuzian sense) of the industrial humanist subject?

The term initially carried a descriptive intention, a state of planetary affairs in geological time, while later iterations insist on the active role of the researcher “to make the Anthropocene as short/ thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge” (Haraway, *Trouble* 100). It is worth noting that, as of this writing, no international geological organization has approved the proposal made by the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy in May 2019 to recommend the Anthropocene epoch as a subdivision of geological time (see Subramanian).

While acknowledging these criticisms and points of departure, I would like to open the horizon of expectations and point out the merit of this term, Anthropocene, which I have chosen for the purpose of this article at the expense of others, simultaneously more fabulating and more precise, such as Gaia (Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour), Capitalocene (Andreas Malm, Jason Moore, Donna Haraway), Plantationocene (Anna Tsing, Donna Haraway), Chtulucen (Donna Haraway), Negantropocene (Bernard Stiegler), Plasticen (Ted Schettler) or Technocene (Helmuth Trischler, Fabienne Will). Imperfect, the Anthropocene nevertheless has the merit of proliferating into discourses and practices as varied as anthropological investigations and cartographies (see Subramanian), artistic installations and performative acts or political propositions.

It is an easily recognisable umbrella term “in the wild”, in diverse fields and practices, opening discussions under a kind of ecological imperative: what kind of worlds can we still create in the Anthropocene, in what way, with whom? In this sense, the term only partially overlaps with “global warming” and “climate change”, terms that in their attempt to be objective lose all trace of agency – they do not allow themselves to err as much as the “Anthropocene”, which points the finger at humans:

“global warming” and “climate change” seem more like natural evolution than an assumption of human impact on the ecosystems shared with other non-human beings.

The Anthropocene brings together a field of practices and references in which I place my research. I invoke these proliferations of the Anthropocene as multiple and necessary fabulations insofar as they imagine, offer images that illustrate complexities. These complexities can be temporal (deep time or, in Latour’s case, the posthuman as pre-modern), spatial (asymmetries of development, colonial relations, asymmetrical distributions of natural resources and the impact of their extraction), and onto-epistemic complexities of the nature-culture kind, which for Haraway show entangled multispecies histories, a way of thinking that considers the complex interaction between human and non-human agents. In the examples here, Gaia (Latour, Stengers) and Chtulucene (Haraway), the shift in meaning from the human agent (*anthropos*) to a more-than-human entity reminiscent of archaic chthonic figures is evident. The reason for this shift is to train a different kind of attention, of response-ability (Isabelle Stengers’ preferred spelling to suggest that the ability to respond, responsibility, needs to be trained, in other words, that we need to take care of our modes of abstraction). The return to a chthonic figure is neither esoteric nor ecumenical: it is a mode of *fabulation*.

Speculative Fabulation

Indeed, fabulation seems to be the core “method” of a specific branch of Anthropocene studies. Not even inadvertently would I want to feed denialist discourses on anthropogenic change. Fabulation is nothing more or less than the way (and medium) in which these studies unfold narratives about the co-existence of beings and inert elements in the midst of or on the verge of an asynchronously unfolding catastrophe. Gaia for Isabelle Stengers is such a fabulation, a model for situating oneself in the world. Gaia derives from Earth systems studies, an interdisciplinary branch of the natural sciences that examines the dynamic interaction between the Earth’s spheres: atmosphere, hydrosphere, geosphere and biosphere. Through Gaia’s figuration, Stengers does not aim to anthropomorphize “Nature” as a benign figure with utopian potentials, but only to shift the focus from “Man” to a more-than-human world in which humans (historically and biologically located, not “Man”) negotiate access to resources and the power to shape their

environment (terraforming) alongside other located beings. For Stengers, Gaia is a self-regulating (living) system. In this sense, Joanna Zylińska, in “A Feminist Counterapocalypse”, suggests that Gaia could be seen as an alternative to the “masculine” Anthropocene, which was named after the impulse of man who, “standing up on his hind legs and learning to decipher the laws of nature, understands that he is the master of his own fate, free from any transcendence” (119-120).

Elsewhere, Isabelle Stengers takes on the figure of Dostoevsky’s idiot (via Deleuze’s conceptual character): an individual who slows down those around them and their modes of representation-abstraction, someone who resists consensus on the situation presented, slows down conclusions in order to create space for other voices to be heard. The idiot does not have the power to articulate a political proposal, his role is simply to produce interstices, spaces where knowledge is no longer in the possession of individuals, but can emerge at the encounter between them. Stengers’ COSMOPOLITICAL proposal, then, is that in the presence of this figure, the idiot, we stage, with art and technique, other figures that reflect a broader idea of politics than simply gathering around things to be discussed – an ecological politics, which would also include how we can gather artistically around things to be discussed. Stengers thus sets up the figures of experts, diplomats, victims, and, because victims need witnesses, witnesses also enter the scene. Because politics is art and art is not a suitable terrain for conformity, Stengers resorts to fabulation: “Designing a scene is an art of staging. It is not naked citizens who are participating, each defending an opinion. It is a matter of roles distribution, of artfully taking part in the staging of the issue” (Stengers 241).

The effort to stage actors who participate in worlding ecological concerns and worries, the artistic gesture of thinking of the Anthropocene as a stage where the end of the world (of a world?) is played out, is shared by Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Vinciane Despret, and Anna Tsing, among others – a suite described by Haraway in the documentary film *Donna Haraway: Stories for Earthly Survival* as a network of “figures with strings.” They share not just concerns but “methods”: fabulation, slowing down, creating *artificial* manners.

Perhaps another useful concept to think about this artistry/ *artificiality* belongs to Rosi Braidotti, namely *figuration*. „A figuration is a living map, a transformative account of the self; it’s no metaphor” (Braidotti 11). Braidotti’s

posthuman is such a figuration, an alternative subjectivity that questions whether it is indeed man who occupies the central place in the “new age of man,” the Anthropocene. Based on the idea that “figuration is a transformative account of the self,” a figuration such as that of the nomad/ cyborg/ posthuman is closely linked to a type of subjectivity that seeks to respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene. The instrumental-exploitative relationship with animals, forests, rivers, oceans and the pervasion of a geo-centric world leads to the confrontation of the human subject with more-than-human worlds in which he or she does not feel comfortable, which are not man-made and which have their own projects and terraforming movements. At the meeting of human historical time and geological time, the posthuman or cyborg are hybrid subjectivities, composed of animal, machine, Earth, human and non-human.

It is worth emphasising that these fabulations are not metaphors. The spectrum of more-than-human forms of existence – contagions, mutations, interdependencies and interconnections within and beyond the bodies that make up these assemblages – have become increasingly interesting to researchers, while bringing together theories and practices from the natural and social sciences and (post)humanities. The most studied assemblages are those between organisms, each organism being part of an ecosystem and, moreover, each organism being an ecosystem in itself (Gilbert 27-36), and techno-organic, the idea that our very evolution as a human species is indispensably linked to *techne*, technique, craft and language as tool and art, so that without these intertwining, man as we know him would no longer exist (Clark 17-18). Such thinking (which can be called posthumanist) not only destabilises the hierarchy between the human and the non-human and criticises the notion of human exceptionality that has been conceived either by appeal to reason or by other exclusionary mechanisms, but undermines the very idea that we can think of the human as an autonomous and self-determining entity.

Take for example philosopher and biologist Donna Haraway’s account for symbiotic assemblages, honouring the legacy of biologist Lynn Margulis:

Critters do not precede their relatings; they make each other through semiotic material involution, out of the beings of previous such entanglements. Lynn Margulis knew a great deal about “the intimacy of strangers,” a phrase she proposed to describe the most fundamental practices of critters becoming-with each other at every node of intra-action in earth history (Haraway, *Staying*, 60).

As such, a fabulation is a speculative gesture that offers a more fine-grained description of new affordances, affects and ethical challenges that synchronous developments in natural sciences, (post)humanities and everything in between make possible. There is a great deal of imagination involved, which is not to say that the reality described is imagined. It is *worlding* in the sense of rendering the future as a confrontational cultural object for different kinds of agents, such as the movements of the Earth systems and those of the human culture, the *matsutake* mushroom “at the end of the world”, which is reshaping forests in northern areas (See Tsing, *The Mushroom* 1-9), the gatherers, the entrepreneurs, the animals it nourishes, the anthropologists. How can we carry such sensibility, attentive to different layers of terraforming – material, social, semiotic –, bubbling across the fields, into our literary practices?

Reading in the Anthropocene: Challenges and Affordances

Firstly, practising modesty is due. Recent literary scholarship no longer claims access to a metalanguage (a code) traversing all knowledge production, to deconstruct its hidden meanings, what Paul Ricoeur called the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” In 2009, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus published an article called “Surface Reading: An Introduction”, where they diagnosed the condition of literary studies since the linguistic turn such as “symptomatic reading”, which is taking the text at hand as a symptom for a much deeper, unconscious or unacknowledged meaning. Psychoanalysis and Marxist theory became metalanguages that put the literary theorist into dialogue with other knowledge practitioners. Uncovering the text’s inherent contradictions between what it says and what it actually “means”, plumbing into the depths of the “political unconscious” (Fredric Jameson), equated literary theory with a form of activism. The extent of how much literary texts and criticism work as activism, in *this* sense of rendering visible class or political identity struggles, is questionable, seeing that since the ‘80s there has been rather an acceleration of than a rupture with these conflicts, culminating with an ongoing multispecies extinction. However, the rise of *climate fiction* and the abundant criticism reading the works as protest signs (“raising awareness” crosses my mind as I am writing this) seems to fall into the same pattern of identifying a “hidden” ecological conflict and deconstructing it.

What is the trouble with this generic axis organising syntagmatic (or symptomatic) structures around itself? The most compelling critique of linguistic-psychoanalytical readings I found is still *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, with its rich imagery of trees, maps and rhizomes:

In linguistics as in psychoanalysis, its object is an unconscious that is itself representative, crystallized into codified complexes, laid out along a genetic axis and distributed within a syntagmatic structure. Its goal is to describe a de facto state, to maintain balance in intersubjective relations, or to explore an unconscious that is already there from the start, lurking in the dark recesses of memory and language. It consists of tracing, on the basis of an overcoding structure or supporting axis, something that comes ready-made. The tree articulates and hierarchizes tracings; tracings are like the leaves of a tree (Deleuze and Guattari 12).

This passage comes in the same breath that critiques the way Freud and Melanie Klein cancelled possible lines of flight (of becoming) in treating children patients, such as the famous case of little Hans and of little Richard, by rooting their expression in the same familiar, arborescent way, along the lines of the Father and the Mother. In both cases, the psychiatrist produces ready-made traces and ignores the “cartography” and “performance” laid out by the child (13).

The praxis of “uncovering” such ready-made unconscious is becoming obvious in queer symptomatic readings that always take ghosts and “closets” for a repressed deeper truth about sexual identity (Best and Marcus, 3) that somehow precedes the text’s unfolding, or, in reading “between the lines” friendships between married women in Victorian novels:

Because critics assume that novels ending in marriage eliminate lesbian desire, they have also assumed that courtship plots exile female friendship to the narrative margins. In fact, Marcus shows, female friends rarely lose their centrality in novels with marriage plots, but critics have overlooked this out of an insistence on reading female friendship as something other than it is. Taking friendship in novels to signify friendship is thus not mere tautology; it highlights something true and visible on the text’s surface that symptomatic reading had ironically rendered invisible (12).

However, this is not to say that psychoanalytical, queer or Marxist readings are

always walking over the same overcoded footprints, producing the same reading, as long as, to paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari, we put the tracing back on the map (13), as in, we take these entry points, and despite them, we imaginatively register what is being performed, laid out visibly on the surface of the text. As long as we do not “break the rhizome” and “blotch the map.”

In light of this, perhaps it comes as no surprise that we are witnessing an abundance of topological fabulations, against “depth” and aware of the limits of interpretation. There are flat ontologies (a rather more telling name than the object-oriented) and ways of doing anthropology with “landscapes.” The latter belongs to Anna Tsing, and, as flat ontologies aim to do, offers ways of revealing relationships that do not necessarily begin with humans and do not necessarily end with them.

A landscape is the sediment of human and non-human activities, biotic and abiotic, both meaningful and constructed without intent. Landscapes are active life worlds, held by material traces and legacies, but yet open to emerging forms and possibilities. I follow ecologists in making difference a key property of my “landscapes”: a landscape can be at any scale, but it always involves a diversity of patches. A patchwork of farms and forests is a landscape, but so too is a leaf on which insects and fungi have created micro-ecologies. Thinking with landscapes opens analysis to a constrained multiplicity (Tsing, *Things* 21).

Moreover, there is multiplicity in surfaces and a care for scales. Anna Tsing, Andrew Matheus and Nils Bubandt talk about the “patchy Anthropocene”, that is, “the uneven conditions of more-than-human livability in landscapes increasingly dominated by industrial forms” (Tsing, *Landscape* 1). Once again, “a landscape can be at any scale, but it always involves a diversity of patches” (Tsing, *Things* 21).¹ Against depth but aware of multiplicity, *Feral Atlas*, an online book project coordinated by Anna Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Saxena Keleman and Feifei Zhou, is ultimately a collection of unusual *maps* that artistically, by use of intelligent artifices (remembering Isabelle Stenger’s care for artistry in political matters) brings together agents from different scales and patches.

¹ In a lecture hosted by the University of Edinburgh in May 2021 called “What Scale is the Anthropocene?”, she elaborates on a few tools she and her team developed for the online book *Feral Atlas*, to better understand the Anthropocene at different scales. The Anthropocene is apparently made of collocations, patches, collaborations (including transdisciplinarity and indisciplinaryity), and detonators (or historical conjunctions, a foucauldian way of doing temporality).

Quite literally, distant readers make use of maps, but also computer-generated thematic “landscapes” (see Jänicke et al.), along with other computational and visualisation tools, to be able to get specific answers, if not to “read” the “great unread” (Franco Moretti, borrowing Margaret Cohen’s term), which is big chunks of literature that does not make it to the “canon” and thus remains unknown. The extent to which these tools can be put to analyse different forms of eco-fiction with meaningful insights is still unknown to me, but perhaps interesting for future research. The main challenge I see is in selecting the literature that provides the data, since invariably any meaningful conclusion will be a conclusion about literature that is already tagged as ecological, or that uses specific keywords related to ecology. While acknowledging these limitations, I would like to point out the merit of “Nature in the Romanian Novel (1845-1947),” which convincingly mixes quantitative and qualitative reading strategies to show how “nature,” animals, catastrophes and extractivism come into play in novels spreading over the period.

Another tendency that I see, specific to literary studies that engage with the Anthropocene, is a care for scales. Franco Moretti has articulated his own version of distant reading, but within scholarship that practices close reading, new ways of scaling, from close and localised, to distant, perspectival, geo-statistical and back again, are developing. A very recent moment in the literature of reference (2021) is *Close Reading the Anthropocene*, edited by Helena Feder. The book aims to develop, in parallel with attempts in anthropology, and without these being a direct influence, ways of thinking together with the text, at different scales. Helena Feder argues that this kind of granulation “is already part of the varied, multifarious ecology of close reading” (Feder 4). The attention to scales is developing in the readings along with different modes of attention, reminiscent of Stengers’ idea of ecology that we brought earlier, highlighting the core quality of close reading, which is slowing down:

And here we come to a convergence of close reading and scientific ecology – both prioritize slowing down and looking around to apprehend similarities and differences, to recognize and value interconnections. Here “close” suggests careful attention to *both* the reading subject and read “object.” If attention is a form of love, then ecology is, as Snyder has written, “a problem of love”. And while the Sixth Mass Extinction isn’t a problem that may be solved by close reading, I can’t imagine it is one that will be meaningfully addressed without it (Feder 4).

In literary studies, a field is constituting around the Anthropocene, beginning with Adam Trexler's 2015 study *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. Trexler acknowledges the influence of the ecological crisis associated with the Anthropocene on literary production, and has the merit of opening up discussion in the literary sphere of some of the themes that already dominated the discourse around the Anthropocene in studies of society and culture. These include the idea of agency – who has the power to act, to manifest themselves in action, and is this power recognised? – (119-170) and the idea of co construction of truth at the intersection of science and culture, of data and fiction (29-75). Trexler is also strategic, positional: by adopting the term “Anthropocene,” his study is part of an interdisciplinary network of references that, theoretically, should make use of the novelties that come with Anthropocene studies, especially issues of scalability between human time and the time of geological and planetary system changes. Trexler accelerates and transforms the literary discussions usually associated with ecocriticism, but remains overly indebted to this tradition, and more recent studies will complement this piece-length work on temporality in *Anthropocene: Narratives of Scale in the Anthropocene: Imagining Human Responsibility in an Age of Scalar Complexity* (2021) engages transdisciplinary issues from the already well-established field called Anthropocene studies, such as complexity and scalability, with a focus on mediality and narrativity. Just two years earlier, David Farrier writes *Anthropocene Poetics. Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, Extinction*, starting from the idea that humanity has radically entered deep time (the vast time that shapes Earth's systems and the life forms those systems enable) (Farrier 17). He finds three characteristics of Anthropocene poetics: thickened time, poetics of relatedness (alongside Evelyn Rully) and multispecies “kinship” (building on Haraway's pursuit of multispecies kin-making).

In his most recent landmark work, *Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene*, J. Parham (editor) notes that literature could “create a cumulative movement in ‘anthropos’ towards understanding that humans are rooted on Earth” if it adapted to include different experiences and perspectives, including those of other species, and if it reconnected human experience with “exponentially larger scales: deep history, planet Earth, the distant future” (Parham 12-13). In other words, literature (adapted to the complexities) of the Anthropocene can talk about unusual agents and solve the problem of scalability: how can we meaningfully perceive and

integrate into our stories realities that happen at more-than-human scales?

Not everyone agrees that the Anthropocene can really be narrated. In *Dark Ecology. For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, Timothy Morton writes about anthropogenic change from the perspective of object-oriented ontology (and with a dose of fabulation). For him, the Anthropocene is a hyperobject: the whole is “less” than the sum of its parts, it is massively distributed, and places contain multitudes, like a Tardis (Morton 12). A hyperobject is an object that is real and yet constitutively withdrawn from experience – a flood, for example, can be an isolated event or part of climate change, and the difference in scale between the two “objects” can be hard to grasp, yet alone to represent. Or, as Timothy Morton puts it, “when you feel raindrops, you are experiencing climate change, in some sense. (...) But you are never directly experiencing global warming as such” (48).

But how does this argument translate to fiction? You can write about raindrops, yet you can never write about global warming – is the argument that classical narratology puts forward (see Bergthaller n.p.). Narration, as we know, misrepresents a reality in which cause and effect relations are frequently ambiguous and non-linear, as it happens with more-than-human stories of ecological instability. Yet my intuition, to be tested and explored further in the future, is that fiction as a worlding practice is *more* than its parts and works intimately with paradigmatic examples. A novel can be capacious enough to hold raindrops, floods, the dispossessed (not all, perhaps only one is enough, say Rachel from *Borne* by Jeff Vandermeer), the ruins, perhaps fragments of news and research from the “old world” (as in *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood). A novel can hold all this in particular, powerful relations, to invoke a reality bigger than its parts. This consideration is, however, at odds with both classical narratology and scholarship related to narration and the Anthropocene, such as *The Great Derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable* by Amitav Gosh.

Finally, there is the question of genres. A story like Octavia Butler’s *Bloodchild* – a story that imagines forms of coexistence with non-human beings on a planet where humans are no longer the dominant species or the colonisers – will not be found on climate fiction lists or even in the broader category of ecological fiction. Rather, the ecology on display here is about the relationality of beings from different solar systems, with their own biological and social constitutions, negotiating their space but at the same time intermingling through contamination, hybridisation, and

radical mutation. Octavia Butler's books are assimilated to the science fiction shelf; I find, however, that this relationality makes her literature fundamentally different from *Star Trek*. In the "Afterword" to her story, she insists on this difference:

I tried to write a story about paying the rent – a story about an isolated colony of human beings on an uninhabited, extrasolar world. (...) It wouldn't be the British Empire in space and it wouldn't be *Star Trek*. Sooner or later, the humans would have made some kind of accommodation with their um... hosts. Chances are this would be an unusual accommodation. Who knows what we humans have that others might be willing to take in trade for a liveable space on a world not our own? (337).

This type of sci-fi bookshelf literature seems to transcend the usual practices associated with the genre. In *Savage Perils: Racial Frontiers and Nuclear Apocalypse in American Culture*, Patrick Sharp articulates a powerful critique of contemporary sci-fi: American science fiction often recreates a scenario of racial and political conflict and Cold War tensions in a technologically advanced setting, rewriting the same nuclear frontier apocalyptic narratives. In "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Time", Kate Marshall links "the novels of the Anthropocene" to narratives of modernity: oil extraction and consumption, steam engines, and carbon dioxide emissions. Certainly, these are recurring motifs and narrative drivers in contemporary (American) literature concerned with climate change, and Kate Marshall's literary analysis, like many others along these lines, is compelling.

Looping with the beginning of the article, I would like to point to yet another way of thinking about the Anthropocene, and perhaps looking for subtler literature, along the lines of Haraway-Stengers. To reconstruct worlds from the ruins of extractive, extinctionist, anthropogenic modernity constituted as a single world, to disrupt the modern, violent separation between nature and culture, to articulate a distributive agency and create a special kind of care for what is still possible (to paraphrase Deleuze in Anthropocene) is the paradigmatic achievement – in the sense of producing a model of perceptivity and attunement to the world around – of literature in the Anthropocene. *The World Keeps Ending and the World Goes On* is the title of the recently published book (November 2022) by poet and performer Franny Choi. I find the title as powerful today as the famous opening of Charles

Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* was for the Victorian Age, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." *The World Keeps Ending and the World Goes On* is an exercise in containing multitudes.

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