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REVIEW ESSAY

Imagination, Geopolitics, and the Anthropocene

Ecocritical Geopolitics: Popular Culture and Environmental Discourse, by Elena dell'Agnese, London and New York, Routledge, 2021. ix, 217pp. $48.95 paperback..

The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture, by Mark Bould, London and New York, Verso Books, 2021, xii, 160pp. $19.95 hardback.

Imagining Apocalyptic Politics in the Anthropocene, edited by Earl T. Harper and Doug Specht, London and New York, Routledge, 2022, vi, 240pp. $160.00 hardback.

Despite the centrality of the Earth qua a space of power being the most basic conceptual foundation of geopolitics, environmental issues have hitherto played only the most marginal of roles in the field; yet, change is afoot. Across the discipline, scholars of geopolitics are cautiously engaging with the impact of global warming, calamitous weather events, toxification of the oceans, mass extinctions, invasive species, and other manifestations of the New Human Epoch. While many earth systems scientists remain sceptical about declaring an end to the Holocene, the humanities and social sciences have begun to embrace the notion that we have entered a new epoch, one defined by humanity's transformation from being simply a *geographic* agent into a *geological* one. Taking their lead from philosophy and the environmental humanities, scholars in the field of geopolitics – which itself straddles the disciplines of International Relations (IR) and political geography – have begun to put the *geos* in geopolitics. This effort to better incorporate the natural world – animals, plants, insects, elemental forces – and the Earth itself – via spatial politics conducted at the planetary level – is a most welcome one for the field. However, as the philosopher of ecology Timothy Morton (2013) has pointed out, the sheer vastness of climate change, with its seemingly unbounded temporal and spatial dimensions, challenges traditional ideas of what we experience as residents of the planet. So then, how do we as researchers of geopolitics begin to integrate that which is beyond our current understanding, namely planetary-level changes? Three recent texts offer some compelling suggestions: political geographer Elena dell'Agnese's *Ecocritical Geopolitics: Popular Culture and Environmental Discourse*; screen scholar Mark Bould's *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture*; and an edited collection entitled *Imagining Apocalyptic Politics in the Anthropocene*, curated by the geographer Earl T. Harper and media studies scholar Doug Specht. The common thread across these contributions is that imagination is the indispensable element required as scholars of global politics embrace the already-in-progress and looming environmental catastrophes of the Anthropocene.

Building on her work on geographical representations of borders and peripheries, dell'Agnese's monograph provides a wide-ranging exploration of ecocritical novels, films, television, and other forms of popular culture. The first quarter of the text establishes her theoretical framework. Employing the cultural resonance of Katniss Everdeen and Greta Thunberg, dell'Agnese introduces the reader to popular and critical geopolitics, before counterposing these subfields with environmental discourse analysis to ground her

approach to the various artefacts she interrogates in the body of the text. She labels this modus as 'ecocritical geopolitics', an approach that unpacks popular culture's spatial, political, and environmental fields of meanings to better understand how the planetary ecosystem and human beings' interactions with it are inextricably bound together (p. 4). Meant to complicate and contest the well-established anthropocentrism of political geography, Chapter 2 runs through a panoply of -isms which will gird the subsequent analyses, from posthumanism and ecofeminism, to speciesism and deep ecology. In the third chapter, dell'Agnese assembles her 'toolkit' for geopolitically-inclined scholars of the Anthropocene, pointing us to potential research questions, analytical approaches, and methods for engaging with genre, narrative, discourse, landscape, and audience(s). Part II moves towards empirical analysis, specifically dystopian and apocalyptic landscapes as spaces of fear, or the landscape as a 'corpse' (p. 93). In her choice of texts, English-language works are most prevalent, ranging from Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) up to *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022); however, dell'Agnese includes analyses of French and Italian popular culture as well, such as Marie Darrieussecg's novel *Truismes* (1996) and Italo Calvino's collection of short stories *Ultimo viene il corvo* (1946). Viewed through an explicitly ecofeminist lens, issues of race and gender remain at the fore of these mini-essays, which tend to focus on one or two prominent case studies (e.g. *The Drowned World, The Road, Wall-E*), peppered by references to lesser-known exemplars. In the short concluding essay, she contrasts the dominant tropes of geographically-inflected popular culture – that is, the explorer (Gulliver) versus the protector ([Mad] Max) – to highlight how such representation historically marginalises girls/women and Indigenous populations through environmental clichés. Informed by the work of Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, Part III focuses on three posthuman 'worlds': the first defined by the cyborg, the second by the dog, and the third by the monster. Here, the text occasionally lingers from its implied promise of ecocritical geopolitics, retreating into more familiar areas of inquiry for scholars of IR/geopolitics, from *Blade Runner*'s metaphorical hierarchies of power based on race/class, to the eugenics debates of *Gattaca*, to the policing of non-normate bodies by the state in *The Shape of Water*. Here, we see the environment playing a role, though not necessarily a central one. However, dell'Agnese rights the ship with her highly original interpretation of canine worlds, some of which show us how to get to outside our anthropocentrism, while others reinforce it (particularly Disney's *Lady and the Tramp*). The final part of the book takes on the topic of carnism, or the 'belief system in which eating certain animals is considered ethical and appropriate' (p. 167). Like the earlier chapter on dog worlds, dell'Agnese's provocative analysis helps us to estrange our everyday understandings of the environment and our place within it. Moreover, this section brings together a more diverse set of artefacts, across both space, time, and (original) language, to make a case for questioning carnonormativity and its (geo)politics. Unfortunately, the book comes to a rather abrupt coda here; indeed, the reader would have been better served with a proper conclusion (however brief).

In his short and briskly-written intervention, Bould delivers an emphatic rebuke to Amitav Ghosh's claim in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) that contemporary authors have failed to properly grapple with the climate crisis. From the opening pages – which provide a surprisingly resonant unpacking of the geopolitics of the spoof horror sci-fi film series *Sharknado*, to its closing remarks on the hyper-masculine petroculture of the *Fast & Furious* franchise – *The Anthropocene Unconscious* delivers a wide-ranging and ultimately withering attack on Ghosh's 'stunning literal-mindedness about what it means for a text to be "about" climate change' (p. 50). Employing an eclectic assemblage of popular cultural artefacts, including documentaries, autobiographies, novels, and comic books (in addition to cinema) and drawing on

Morton's concept of the hyperobject, Bould makes a convincing case for interrogating the symbolic, metaphorical, and oblique representations of our Anthropocene lives, provocatively identifying this form of 'unconscious' as the driving force behind contemporary art and literature (p. 15). While primarily a work of literary criticism, *The Anthropocene Unconscious* is scaffolded by numerous geopolitical concepts and happenings, from the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea (1956) to the role of drought in the Syrian Civil War to the promise of geoengineered techno-fixes to avoid impending sea-level rise. The book begins with a brief interrogation of the Anthropocene as a concept, including a two-page list of competing terms (Chthulucene, Phagocene, Urbocene, etc.), before shifting to a critique of supposed 'silence' surrounding the climate crisis in the mundane novel. Here, Bould's selections – from Paul Auster's *4 3 2 1: A Novel* (2017) to Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle* series (2009–2011) – may seem arbitrary at first blush, but when counterpoised against Ghosh's claim, Bould's choices are ample to make his case. The subsequent chapter takes on the 'life aquatic' by examining a series of texts that employ the trope of fluidity to interrogate pollution, resource exploitation, and glacial melt. In the penultimate chapter, 'We Are Groot' (a reference to the intelligent tree-like Marvel superhero), Bould goes ashore to find the 'environmental uncanny', or that space where our past deeds return to haunt us, leaving humans powerless in an environment that has turned against its purported master (p. 103). He does so by examining an array of subjects including the obvious choice of Richard Power's *The Overstory* (2018) alongside the less-environmentally explicit Zvyagintsev film *The Banishment* (2007). By the author's own admission, *The Anthropocene Unconscious* is 'fractured' by the choice of texts (p. 16), and offers a 'less coherent' approach to the subject matter than would be expected in a more academic exploration; however, it nonetheless has much to offer the student of critical/popular geopolitics, for example in its fecund analysis of the DC Comics' environmental avenger Swamp-Thing as something 'unfixed, fluid, endlessly becoming' (p. 108). Here is where Bould shines. As Squire recently argued in a retrospective on critical geopolitics/*Critical Geopolitics*, scholars need to 'rewild' the field to 'account for the ways in which questions of power and space intersect with animal and non-human life' (Koopman et al. 2021, 5). While occasionally meandering and unflinchingly idiosyncratic, Bould's treatise on climate catastrophe culture offers us a preliminary sketch of how to do so.

Sparked by a session of the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers Annual Conference in London in August 2019, *Imagining Apocalyptic Politics in the Anthropocene* encompasses thirteen essays from multiple disciplinary perspectives with the aim of interrogating the politics at the end of all things. Refracting the 'apocalyptic tropes of toxicity, destruction, disease, and decimat[ed] landscapes' (p. 5), the collection brings ecocriticism into conversation with political subjectivities that arise in the face of ecological Armageddon, specifically those world-endings associated with the effects of the Anthropocene Epoch. While works of science fiction/scientific prediction serve as the predominate lens through which the contributors examine the politics of environmental catastrophe, other essays engage imaginaries of surprisingly diverse provenance, from Indigenous cosmologies (Chapter 3) to the global phenomenon of selfie-taking (Chapter 9). In this vein, Harper and Specht's volume shares with those of Bould and dell'Agnese the increasingly profound mission of establishing how geopolitical imagination/imaginaries serve as interventions that can help us arrive at solutions to the multivalent political, ecological, and social crises being faced by (more-than)human communities around the globe. Channelling the shared ethos of all three texts, *Imagining Apocalyptic Politics* opens with the following passage:

> Everyday the world gets closer to ending. Everywhere, the harbingers of the apocalypse appear: our water, air, and soil are polluted and dying; our own bodies harbour the micro-plastics that seemingly every commodity now sheds; new viruses sweep across the globe, changing the way we relate to one another and our daily work; new mines and oil pipelines are approved as climate and environmental scientists watch helplessly from the side-lines; the bees are going extinct and taking most floral and fruiting life with them; acoustic pollution of the oceans is driving whales and dolphins to beach themselves; and the rise of fascist and right-wing politics across Europe and North America seems to bring no promise of relief from the economic and political shit we find ourselves in. (p. 1)

In Harper and Specht's invocation of faeces, we are witness to the scatological worldview that scholars of the Anthropocene naturally sink to as things seem to get worse by the day, with little to nothing happening at the appropriate geopolitical/intergovernmental levels. Foaming-at-the-mouth politicians, rotting cetaceans, unpollinated fields, extractive over-reach, pandemic pandemonium, plastic in our blood, and polluted wastelands of our own-making – this is indeed a world that has gone to 'shit'. Yet, we – that is the 'human' (*Anthropos*) – continue to imagine an even worse one.

The first chapter by Huijbens and Gren employs the oft-mentioned turn of phrase 'our house is on fire' to set the stage for the volume, explicating how this rather simple imaginary places humanity 'under the murky spell of climate and ecological emergency' – a collective psychological state that 'evokes all kinds of existential, emotional, and cognitive dissonances and reactions' (p. 19). Connecting the epic cli-fi film *Interstellar* (2014) to Dylan Thomas' poem 'Do not go gentle into that good night' (1947), Tornel and Lunden seek to excavate what they see as the ultimate challenge of the Anthropocene: winning the 'war of the imaginary' (p. 52). This can only be done by deftly navigating between utopian panacea and dystopian nihilism, which requires encouraging us to *think with* the planet as a living organism. Reyes-Carranza's 'The End of Worlding' focuses on *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* (2013), an Indigenous telling of a world's end in the Amazon Basin, providing a welcome Amerindian worldview that expands our gaze beyond the narrow perspective that the only thing on the planet that is human is the *Homo sapiens*. Reflecting the etymological origins of the original Greek *apokaluptein* 'uncover' or 'reveal', the next four chapters examine specific textual imaginings of environmental apocalypse: Lancaster interrogates George Turner's depiction of a dystopian Australia in *The Sea and Summer* (1987); Travis examines the literary geographies of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), Byron's *Darkness* (1816), Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004); Jones' chapter pivots to the poetry of Jorie Graham to demonstrate how *Fast* (2019) invokes the geotrauma of 'loss and mourning' that result from various 'uprootings' that disrupt the 'communal relations of societies, species, and biota' (p. 110); and lastly, Tyner revisits Nolan and Johnson's iconic novel *Logan's Run* (1967) as a meditation on how to die in times of 'impending or actual apocalypse' (p, 124). While less coherent with the whole and sometimes delving too deeply into psychoanalysis for readers of *Geopolitics*, the second half of the collection offers some compelling insights and innovative methodologies for engaging Anthropo(s)cenic geopolitical cultures (see Matless 2016), with Castro Vargas and Barquero Pérez's haunting analysis of chemically-altered seascapes representing the former, and Wakefield's chapter on Miami's troubling futures doing so for the latter.

Despite Bould's critique of Ghosh, the Indian writer's contribution to the discipline of geopolitics should not be overshadowed. Indeed, we should take heed of his maxim that the crisis in human-environment relations is first and foremost a 'crisis of culture, and thus a crisis of imagination' (2016, 9). Recent work on the 'Anthropocenic imaginary' (cf. Chandler and Reid 2019; Lövbrand, Mobjörk, and Söder 2020; Mostafanezhad and Norum 2019), as well as the three books reviewed here, demonstrate a growing fellowship whose charge is to explore how imaginaries associated with the climate catastrophes shape geopolitical cultures. While it is increasingly apparent that we – as a species – have passed a 'point of no return' with regards to the planet's ability to sustain us as is, it seems we in the field are just starting to come to grips with this epiphenomenon as an everyday reality. Indubitably, a shift in geopolitics towards the earthly realm is now underway, with increasing scholarship on the ways in which ecological, environmental, and planetary factors (i.e. the *geos*) impact the ways in which geography and IR are intertwined. However, more needs to be done in flagging up how today's burgeoning diversity of authorship and creativity (women, persons of colour, voices from the Global South, animal *Umwelts*) contribute to more nuanced ways of understanding ecological apocalypse and fomenting useful imaginaries which can support action, which in turn prompts behaviours that will promote greater resiliency in the face of further Anthropocenic outcomes.

Disclosure Statement

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