


Suffering and climate change narratives

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## Recommended Citation

Estok, Simon C. "Suffering and climate change narratives." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21.5 (2019): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3259>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3259)

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**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture**

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
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**Volume 21 Issue 5 (September 2019) Article 11**

**Simon C. Estok,**

**"Suffering and Climate Change Narratives"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss5/11>>

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 21.5 (2019)**

Special Issue ***Suffering, Endurance, Understanding***. Ed. Simon Estok, Douglas Berman, and Frank Stevenson

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss5/>>

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**Abstract:** In his article "Suffering and Climate Change Narratives" Simon C. Estok begins with a brief survey of definitional issues involved with the term "suffering" and argues that there has been a relative lack of theoretical attention to suffering in climate change narratives, whether literary or within mainstream media. Estok shows that suffering, far from being singular, is a multivalent concept that is gendered, classed, raced, and, perhaps above all, pliable. It has social functions. One of the primary reasons for the failure of climate change narratives to effect real changes, Estok argues, is that they often carry the functions of suffering and act as a vehicle for the very social and psychological needs suffering fulfills.

**Simon C. ESTOK****Suffering and Climate Change Narratives**

A great deal of work on the topic of suffering (including much of the work in the essays of the special issue of which this article is a part) uses the concept of suffering as if it is non-problematic, as if it is an fully understood concept that can be used instrumentally like a pair of eye glasses or like a metal detector to reveal, uncover, and help make things comprehensible—and for literary studies, these things would be primarily plot or thematic issues. There is a surprising sparsity of scholarship demonstrating a recognition that suffering as a concept itself needs to be theorized, especially in relation to literary and cultural narratives. What is also surprising is that there is relatively little in the literature theorizing suffering that looks at the cultural value of suffering—indeed, its cultural necessity. Theorizing about suffering without recognizing the its social and cultural role is like discussing air pollution without recognizing the foundational importance of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>—interesting, perhaps, but ultimately without practical value. Finally, with at least a preliminary and working set of theories about suffering, it is reasonable to question the psychological purposes and effects of climate change discourse and to posit that one of the reasons for the radical failures of climate change discourse to motivate real social adjustments is that it simply fulfills other apparently more pressing needs.

Of the work that has been done theorizing suffering, there are two monographs that stand out. The collection by Jeff Malpas and Norelle Lickiss entitled *Perspectives on Human Suffering* is one of these. It covers a vast range of perspectives, including history, law, philosophy, medicine, and literature. The other truly standout book is Joseph A. Amato's *Victims and Values: a History and Theory of Suffering*. The discussion that follows builds on the foundational work of these two books but is motivated by two apparently unrelated ideas from two other very different scholars: Timothy Morton's the notion of "spectators to future ruin" (2), articulated as a kind of throw-away in a brilliant discussion of "the ecological thought;" and E. Ann Kaplan's discussion of what she terms "the genre of pretrauma" (23) in her remarkable *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*—and at least part of what I will be arguing here is that, infused with assurances of an imminent and eminently menacing future, climate change discourse is the discourse of pre-suffering.

But what exactly does suffering cover, and what is it not? Physician Eric J. Cassell explained in 1982 that suffering is not simply and certainly not exclusively about bodily pain, and "pain and suffering . . . are phenomenologically distinct" (641). "Suffering" and "pain" are not synonyms. Pain need not involve suffering, but suffering involves pain. Suffering has a tragic dimension; pain does not. Suffering, Joseph Amato explains,

deals with spirit rather than body. Suffering is greater and more comprehensive than pain . . . Suffering does not invite specific and immediate remedies. Even if it is considered curable, it is understood to elude the particular acts of healing by doctor and magician. Its cure, in contrast to pain, requires diverse and protracted human treatment or great and special powers of the gods. Accordingly, as pain seeks its relief almost exclusively in magic and medicine, suffering directs us for help to philosophy and religion and, also, more recently to social work and psychoanalysis. (15)

Pain produces suffering under specific circumstances: "People frequently report suffering from pain when they feel out of control, when the pain is overwhelming, when the source of pain is unknown, when the meaning of the pain is dire, or when the pain is chronic" (Cassell 641).<sup>1</sup> One of the implications here is that suffering is clearly linked to the notion of control. It is what happens when the person is out of control.

Cassell maintains that suffering offers an ultimate loss of control, "the threat of disintegration" (640), but it seems more accurate to see pain itself, rather than the suffering, as the threat. This is a point that Elaine Scarry makes three years later in her phenomenal *The Body in Pain*: "Intense pain is . . . language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject" (35). Nevertheless, it is obviously very productive to include the function and effects of pain when theorizing about suffering. Philosopher Lucy Tatman puts the case well: there is a "shocking corporeality of suffering. In Beauvoirian terms, those who suffer are mired in the immanence

<sup>1</sup> In light of this, much (if not all) of the "suffering" glorified within Christianity wouldn't logically qualify as suffering, since the imagined rewards, source, and meaning of the distress deny such a possibility. Indeed, the pain and distress are more properly masochistic here—and masochism is not suffering.

of their own flesh; they cannot transcend their embodied anguish. It does not matter if the cause of their pain had nothing to do with their own bodies, soon enough the anguish penetrates through their bones, their blood, their skin, their pores. It is as though the entire body of the sufferer becomes polluted with suffering" (44). Tatman explains that suffering as a concept is inherently gendered and that the very terms associated with and defining suffering, such as "weakness, fragility, corporeality, pollution, emotion . . . [are] traditionally associated with the feminine" (44). She explains that she is reminded of "a bad joke. 'What do you call a woman who suffers on behalf of others?' 'Mother.' 'What do you call a man who suffers on behalf of others?' 'God.'" Bad, perhaps, but it does lead to an understanding that "the logic wrapped around suffering is steeped in gendered expectations and value judgments" (46). Ironically, it is a heavily gendered Nature that in climate change narratives promise suffering for a presumed male audience—hence, a recent Brad Pitt movie entitled *World War Z* has a doctor ranting about nature in the following manner:

Mother Nature is a serial killer. No one's better. More creative. Like all serial killers, she can't help the urge to want to get caught. What good are all those brilliant crimes if no one takes the credit? Now the hard part—while you spend a decade in school—is seeing the crumbs for the clues there. Sometimes the thing you thought was the most brutal aspect of the virus turns out to be the chink in its armor. And she loves disguising her weaknesses as strengths. She's a bitch.

And then there is Alvin Duvernay in *The Age of Stupid*: "You stare Mother Nature in the eye. Usually, she's fairly benign. Then she comes along, methodically, ruthlessly. And then she stands toe-to-toe with you and dares you. *Dares* you: 'Go ahead and get your best equipment out. Go ahead. Do it. Let's dance.'" Such sexist, anthropomorphic metaphors of a malevolent nature are counter-productive and are obviously not going to help make our environmental crises any better; on the contrary, such sentiments (although they may sell well) are simply perpetuating the idea that nature (and women) are to be controlled.

Sexism sells well, and it sells whatever it is attached with. As Greta Gaard reminds us, however, it is *not* the men who are, in fact, most affected by climate change and who suffer its consequences: we are to "make no mistake: women are indeed the ones most severely affected by climate change and natural disasters, but their vulnerability is not innate; rather, it is the result of inequities produced through gendered social roles, discrimination, and poverty" (23). It is plainly naïve, therefore, to pretend that the suffering imagined in climate change is a given, is singular, is free of gender and class and race implications, or that it can be discussed unproblematically. Indeed, in a great deal of climate change narratives, the imagined source of suffering is erroneously gendered female, and the imagined victim is erroneously imagined male. Amato explains that "culture profoundly shapes what we consider suffering to be. It indicates whose suffering counts, what kinds of suffering are valid, and what can and should be done in response to different types of suffering" (15). In mainstream climate change narratives, the culture that imagines forthcoming suffering is deeply sexist, and it is this sexism that determines the shapes and nuances of the suffering it writes.

Other distinctions need to be acknowledged when we talk about suffering. There is, for instance, as Eric Cassell has noted, the distinction between physical and nonphysical sources of suffering, a distinction laypeople tend not to make but that physicians do make (see Cassell 640). Another point Cassell proposes is that suffering is a concept that applies to persons rather than nonhuman animals or things. To limit suffering to persons seems (to me) arbitrary, since the core elements that comprise suffering (an unpleasant perception that current pain may lead to future harm) applies to many sentient nonhuman animals. Certainly, there is ample reason to allow for a categorical distinction between human and nonhuman suffering but not for an exclusion of nonhuman animals as a group that can experience suffering. To extend the definition to organisms incapable of imagining either a future or a threat to that future, however, does not seem entirely viable. Thus, it seems unconvincing to imagine that grapes, celery, or Portobello mushrooms can suffer—and if indeed they can, then it is without a central nervous system that they would do so. Ants, puppies, and rats, on the other hand, *do* actively avoid danger to sidestep future ruin; even so, show me an ant with a tortured psyche, and I'll gladly go on record saying that ants suffer. A rat? Yes. A dog? Yes. Both can go insane. A West African leaf beetle? I don't think so. Amato's premise (cited above) that suffering "deals with spirit rather than body" (15) seems a useful, if rough, touchstone in defining suffering.

For Cassell, "most generally, suffering can be defined as the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the *person*" (640, emphasis added). It is a pervasive part of the human experience. Some have argued that it is an essential part and that suffering is as inevitable as death and even seems in some way to constitute at least a part of what it means to be human; indeed,

Jeff Malpas and Norelle Lickiss suggest "that it seems we cannot address the question of what it is to be human without also attending to the question of what it is to suffer, of how suffering is to be understood, and of what suffering calls for by way of response" (1). But the fact that suffering is constitutive of what it means to be human does not preclude possibilities for the similarly constitutive function of suffering for nonhuman animals. The growing calls for expansion of the category of "legal persons" status obviously has substantial implications for those who argue that "suffering is ultimately a personal matter" (Cassell 640). When we think of how public media personalizes impending traumas that will result from climate change, most probably think of this only in human terms; but climate change obviously will have individual (and sometimes personal, in the sense of "legal persons") implications for nonhuman and human animals the world over—not to mention plants, fish, and nonbiotic landscapes. We need to question how and with what effect media personalizes impending trauma and suffering and how audiences are interpellated as spectators to future ruin. As I sat writing this in Seoul, hurricanes Irma and Maria were making their way across the Caribbean, and news media were tracking them, reporting on the damage they had done and were doing. CNN offered dire warnings of the horrors to come in Florida, but Maria seemed to catch people somewhat by surprise (and one has to wonder how race and class played into all of this). After Maria, headlines included the word "apocalyptic" (see Narayan, and Chavez).

There is an undeniable apocalyptic content in news media coverage of climate change, and the responsibility for large part of the pre-suffering that is embodied in such narratives almost invariably falls to nature. Nature is the villain, and humanity will suffer from this villainy. "Irma begins lashing Florida," *cnn.com* reads as I write this. It is not an evasion of responsibility for the human hand in climate change that such narratives display. Indeed, even when humanity is understood as the cause of climate change, it is still the threat of suffering, of pain, of deprivation, of loss, of unpredictability, and of unwanted change that *nature* threatens. There is an increasing sense of inevitability about our disintegration. We see it in Roy Scranton's sensationally-entitled *New York Times* op-ed "Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene" (later a book of short essays) that offers what seems a not very productive nihilist set of suggestions that "civilization is already dead," that "there's nothing we can do to save ourselves," and that "if we want to learn to live in the Anthropocene, we must first learn how to die." In such a narrative, our disintegration is an inevitability, our suffering assured. Scranton works on the assumption that the Anthropocene is something new, that humanity has only recently begun to change the planet, the climate, the biosphere, and so on, and that these monumental changes are fatal blows.

With increasing consciousness about the rising scale of anthropogenic effects on climate, the market for books imagining suffering and climate change is burgeoning (hence, a broad appeal of books such as Diane Ackerman's *The Human Age: The World Shaped by Us*, Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs Climate*, and so on); however, some of this material sensationalizes suffering with specious logic and faulty data. For instance, in her discussion of Genghis Khan, Ackerman claims that "one can only surmise that wiping out the genes of others and planting your own (what we call genocide) must come naturally to our kind, as it does to some other animals, from ants to lions" (273). The comment is neither logical nor defensible. She offers no empirical evidence for such a hypothesis that would naturalize things such as the Holocaust. Some people eat feces. Using Ackerman's logic, we could surmise that coprophagy comes naturally to our species. Other comments also simply fly in the face of truth: "Nature is thrifty" (281), Ackerman claims, but clearly the evidence points in a different direction. The 100 year-old pine tree outside the window of my Canadian residence produces thousands of pine cones per year, each with scores of seeds for which "thrifty" is hardly the word. Any population without a check on its growth will proliferate to superabundance.<sup>2</sup> Ackerman talks about how "wood, coal, oil, and gas were only intermediaries after all, and using them was a sign of our immaturity as a species" (106), but she is ignoring the fact that our use of renewable resources far pre-dates our use of non-renewables and fossil fuels. Nor does Ackerman reference any of the pioneering work of ecofeminists about co-inhabiting in a world with other-than-human species, and the result is that the insistence of images threatening hardship and suffering lacks nuanced understandings of the causes. Ackerman's unproblematic uses of

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<sup>2</sup> Humans, like mosquitoes, will breed to superabundance when checks to their growth are absent, and it is simply scientifically inaccurate for Ackerman to claim that "we are an altogether different kind of animal from any the planet has ever known, one able to reinvent itself and its world, and manage to survive, despite more twists and turns in daily life than any creature has ever had to juggle" (304). Every species is unique and altogether different, and many have survived much longer and much greater challenges—spiders, ants, and crocodiles come to mind.

the first-person plural pronoun in "the world shaped by us" effaces race and gender privileges and their constitutive roles in producing landscapes of suffering, the scale of which is unprecedented.<sup>3</sup>

The scale of human influence is increasing, to be sure, on what seems an exponential trajectory, and with it the promise of suffering, but the dynamic itself is not new. The threat to our integrity—a threat that is at the very core of any definition of suffering—is *not new*. Our integrity has only rarely been assured. Our survival has never been a guarantee. Our radical influence on the planet is similarly long-standing.<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert has noted that "one argument against the idea that a new human-dominated epoch has recently begun is that humans have been changing the planet for a long time already, indeed practically since the start of the Holocene." She is not alone. William F. Ruddiman, for instance, argues "that the Anthropocene actually began thousands of years ago as a result of the discovery of agriculture and subsequent technological innovations in the practice of farming" (261)—and it is not just hot air: Ruddiman offers extensive data verifying beyond any doubt that the volume of two of the most powerful gases influencing climate change—CH<sub>4</sub> (methane) and CO<sub>2</sub> (carbon dioxide)—has, for thousands of years, been deeply regulated by human activities such as agriculture and the wide-spread removal of forests. Bruce Smith and Melinda Zeder similarly place "the onset of the Anthropocene almost ten thousand years earlier, at the Pleistocene–Holocene boundary" (8), claiming that "the beginning of the Anthropocene can be usefully defined in terms of *when evidence of significant human capacity for ecosystem engineering or niche construction behaviors first appear in the archeological record on a global scale*" (8-9, *emphasis* in original). I would like to suggest here that one reason why most scholars (and most media) have viewed the term "Anthropocene" in reference to post-Industrial Revolution anthropogenic effects on the world might have to do with the sheer scale of changes currently underway. Things are bad enough to threaten our own existence now, and somehow we firmly believe that we have never faced threats of extinction before. We have always faced extinction. Yet, while it is an inevitability, it has not always been as prominent in our collective consciousness as now. Conscious though we have always been about the possibilities of our own ruin (and this consciousness is an undeniably central part of human ontology), proximity is the key here: the threat of disintegration at a safe and controlled distance is fine, distance both in terms of affect and space. Climate change narratives bring the threats of ruin into our living rooms.

The threat of the disintegration of the self is best kept at a safe distance. One of the fundamentally different things about this century from the previous one is the proximity of unpredictable material danger. There were odd and terrifying moments when the world held its breath as the year 2000 approached, but the fears about computer error were unfounded: Y2K chaos never materialized. From Y2K to 9/11 to Katrina to Maria to the psychoses that prompt things such as the Manchester Arena bombing, the Las Vegas Massacre, and the Bataclan attack, we may rightly be said to have entered an Age of Terror. Unpredictability has become the new norm for an increasingly anxious global community and how it sees both social conflict and environmental events.

As Diane Ackerman explains, "nature remains unpredictable" (47) for humanity: "If there's one unchanging fact about humans it's that we loathe change in nature, perhaps because we feel we can't control it . . . we yearn for continuity, and yet we live in a wildly changing world" (42). At least part of what pervades the news media coverage of extreme weather events (including the dire predictions of extreme weather events to come, part-and-parcel with climate change) is what Ackerman describes as "the tone of dread and loathing, a panic about being invaded by wildness and roughly overtaken by the chaotic forces of nature" (121). Ackerman talks about "how conflicted we really are about nature (126) and about how while we fear the unpredictability and agency of nature to the core of our being, we also "care deeply about scores of life forms with whom we share the planet, even though they're not family members, not even species members, for that matter, not possessions, and not personal friends. We care abstractly about whole populations we may not have seen firsthand, determined to help fellow creatures survive. We feel a powerfully mingled kinship" (133). We strive to maintain things, in part because so doing keeps things predictable.

<sup>3</sup> We know that anaerobic bacteria caused mass extinction. What has come to be known as the Great Oxygenation Event (see Torres, Saucedo-Vázquez, and Kroneck) resulted in a radical refashioning of the biosphere, one that resulted in mass extinctions. As Phil Plait explains, "[m]ost of the bacteria thriving on Earth were anaerobic, literally metabolizing their food without oxygen. [ . . . ] To the other bacteria living in the ocean—anaerobic bacteria, remember—oxygen was toxic. [ . . . ] A die-off began, a mass extinction killing countless species of bacteria." It is no exaggeration for Plait to say that "this event was monumental, an apocalypse that was literally global in scale, and one of the most deadly disasters in Earth's history."

<sup>4</sup> The remainder of this paragraph appears in slightly different form in my "Hollow Ecology and Anthropocene Scales of Measurement."

It is fears about unpredictability that feature so heavily in twenty-first-century representations of the natural environment, representations that are defined by terror and ecophobia. Beginning with terror and characterized in large part by a growing consciousness of unpredictable dangers, the twenty-first-century has seen an increasing social packaging of terror and nature together. George Marshall observes that "it is now routine to include climate change as a potential threat to US National Security" (76).<sup>5</sup> News media and film have been a sizeable component of this packaging of ecophobia and terror, and the effects have been profound. We witness not only the radical blurring of spatial/national boundaries but also of temporal ones. A bid to both sell narratives and to represent control, imagining terror and nature together presents images and narratives that are both riling and numbing, galling and entertaining, urgent and trivial.

Wayne Hudson—in a chapter of *Perspectives on Human Suffering* entitled "Historicizing Suffering"—defines suffering as "a negative basic feeling or emotion that involves a subjective character of unpleasantness, aversion, harm, or threat of harm to body or mind." In his review of the parameters of the term, Hudson goes on to note that there are several distinctions that theorists have made of suffering: "*physical suffering*, which can often be ameliorated by medical, political, and economic measures, *mental suffering*, which can continue to resist treatment, and *ontological suffering*, including death, where the suffering turns on the lack of positive meaning and the ultimacy of the experience rather than the amount of pain as such" (171). Often, these different types of suffering are intertwined—or are imagined to be. Imagining suffering is not what it used to be.

Imagining suffering has a substantial artistic history, and when we think of representations of suffering in literature, no work springs to mind more readily than Shakespeare's *King Lear*, with, perhaps *The Book of Job* seeming an exception. Yet, the pain of Job has causes and rewards, however ineffable, that seem to require a different word than "suffering." Lear, on the other hand, receives no holy shrugs or smiles, no indication of sacred recompense or recognition, no reason. His pain is not a test from God, or a divine lesson, or a predictable result in a logical sequence of events. True, it all stems from his stupid love test, but it is all out of proportion and reason. Lear suffers in a most extraordinary way, and this suffering is tightly bound up with dramatic weather.

Lear suffers in several senses. He obviously suffers physically. He is buffeted, battered, and beaten by the storm within which he is trapped when Goneril and Regan order the doors locked on him. He suffers psychologically, and it is primarily this that the play showcases. He is tormented by the capriciousness of Regan and Goneril and suffers a consequent dissolution of his authority and agency. Lacking any apparent rhyme or reason, the actions of these two daughters and their camp toward him (and his camp) throw him into deep confusion over his very identity. I have argued elsewhere that "Lear, controlled by rather than in control of everything, especially (and most dramatically) the natural environment, loses his identity when he loses his ability to control spatial worth" (*Ecocriticism* 21). I contend there that "as he loses his voice and identity, he becomes more unseated, more unhoused, and less distinguishable from the undomesticated spaces that wildly threaten civilization. Without his land, Lear becomes frenetic in his questions about his identity. In act 1, scene 4 alone, he asks three separate times about his identity in a crescendo of increasing frenzy, first with a simple "Dost thou know me?" (I.26), then "Who am I?" (I.78), and finally, in desperation, "Does any here know me? This is not Lear./ Does Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?/ Either his notion weakens, his discernings/ Are lethargied—Ha! waking? 'Tis not so./ Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (II.226–30). "The vehemence of nature's assaults hastens this old man's decline" (21–2). He disintegrates. Yet, there is obviously more involved than his ability to control the spaces he inhabits. He suffers psychologically because he is unable to control the people around him and is their plaything, is their victim, their object. Indeed, Lear's psychological suffering interrogates the very viability of the category of human subjectivity and, in particular, the relationship between the over-estimated agency of such subjectivity versus the agency of everything else outside of it. Craig Dionne states the case well: "Lear moves from subject to object" (150).<sup>6</sup> In the process, he is forced to the realization that there are other agencies surrounding him and that he needs to reassess the way in which he interacts with and relates to the world around him—social and environmental. It is a lesson that the Trump Administration might do well to heed. This Administration, with its anti-environment and climate-denying stances, will cause suffering, and there

<sup>5</sup> Marshall also questions why "a one percent chance of a terrorist attack should be acted on as though it is a certainty, but a ninety percent chance of severe climate disruption is too uncertain for action" (75).

<sup>6</sup> Dionne's complex and informative book is part of an increasing body of scholarship on the topic of Shakespeare and posthumanism, notably including Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus's *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (2012), Jean Feerick and Vin Nardizzi's *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature* (2013), and Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano's *Renaissance Posthumanism* (2016).

are many questions about how all of this could be happening after the hope and productive changes that are the legacies of Barack Obama.

When Donald Trump was elected president of the United States on November 8, 2016, much of the world was shocked, and it really did not seem plausible that he would, in fact, make it very long as president. The campaign was one outrageous piece of news after another, and the Presidency itself hasn't been very different. One of the things Mr. Trump exploits is the short attention span of people: "once things are accepted into our status quo and assumed to be part of normal life, it requires a far higher level of threat to have them removed" (Marshall 54). The quotation is from George Marshall's discussions about climate change—specifically about why climate change narratives are not have much effect. I yank the quotation out of context to discuss Trump for two reasons: first, these comments (from 2014) could as easily be used today to question how and why it is that Mr. Trump has made it so far. Second, it is virtually impossible now to talk about climate change narratives without also talking about Mr. Trump and his decision to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement on climate change. Marshall's comments go a long way to explaining why Trump remains in office as well as why we are unable to mobilize against him and against the most basic things that drive climate change—things such as meat, internet servers, and cars "that are already woven into the fabric of [our] lives" (54). Part of what is involved with challenging things already woven into the fabric of our lives invariably are questions about rights, about power, and about democracy. Indeed, we elect our leaders with an assumption that they will take control of things for our benefit: we relinquish some control, we assume, for our own good.

Anyone who has children knows about the need for a certain degree of non-negotiable parental control—for the good of the children. Science fiction has been fond of iterating the notion that humanity is a child in need of control. This idea receives a frightening treatment in the 2004 blockbuster movie *I, Robot*, in which V.I.K.I. (Virtual Interactive Kinetic Intelligence), a gendered mother-figure robot, explains thus: "You charge us with you safe keeping, yet, despite our best efforts, your countries wage wars, you toxify your earth, and pursue ever more imaginative means to self-destruction. You cannot be trusted with your own survival [. . .] To protect humanity, some humans must be sacrificed. To insure your future, some freedoms must be surrendered." The idea that we are not able to avoid the things that cause harm and suffering to us produces an ugly kind of dystopia where the only real answer is the renunciation of democracy. Questions about democracy and climate change really require attention. Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne ask a series of vital questions about this matter: "How to do democracy at home is an urgent question when the timescales of the Earth and the human experience no longer align yet cannot be separated. How can democracy account for very long-term, multi-generational issues that extend beyond the human experience? What should politicians do? How should they speak?" (11).<sup>7</sup>

But another and perhaps more critical part of the woven fabric that seems so difficult to undo and change has to do with functionality. Mainstream climate change narratives, simply put, don't *really* seek to cause change, and we certainly don't consume them with an eye to changing our behaviors—no more than we pick up a glass of water to drown ourselves. We pick up a glass of water to meet a need. Mainstream climate narratives fulfill a necessary cultural function. It is a cultural function that gives us what we need to question ourselves, our borders, our realities—indeed, the meaning of life. In a spectacular set of comments on suffering, Joseph Amato observes that "suffering tends to engulf our lives, encompass our meaning, and drive us toward ultimates that we name but do not understand" (16); "suffering fills us with ambiguity" (17); "suffering interrogates us" (17); "suffering allows us to cross important borders of reality; . . . suffering compels us to the most perplexing questions of life, evil, creation, and the nature of God" (18). And these ultimately are what climate change narratives offer. Somehow, these are the more pressing and immediate needs climate change narratives fulfill. In this, such narratives are a wild success; as vehicles for changing our behaviors toward the natural world, they are radical failures. Sad, but true.

<sup>7</sup> Hamilton, Bonneuil, and Gemenne go on to note with eerie foresight (their book was published in May 2015 and was surely written in 2014—certainly long before Trump announced his bid for presidency, let alone got in) that "one of the fundamental principles of democracy is that any newly elected government can undo what the previous government has done. This is one reason why crusading governments of left or right attempt to embed their policy shifts in the deepest cultural and institutional foundations. With the Anthropocene, this kind of undoing is no longer possible in the sense that the Earth system, the environment on which life depends, is now on a different trajectory with tremendous momentum. Reversing a carbon price policy would, therefore, mark not an undoing but rather an *acceleration* of the problem" (11). As Xinmin Liu has so poignantly put it, our future "is now grimly darkened by the treacherous and ruinous downward path we have been led onto" by the decision of Trump administration to withdraw from the hard-won Obama era Paris Agreement on climate change (iv).



Acknowledgment: This paper was supported by Samsung Research Fund, Sungkyunkwan University, 2018.

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