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Climate Change and the Metamorphosis of Memory: A Response to Stef Craps

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In his essay 'Climate Change and the Art of Anticipatory Memory', Stef Craps proposes to '[think] through the implications of the Anthropocene for memory and the field of memory studies' by exploring future-history Cli-Fi and its use of anticipatory memory. Focusing on three texts that feature a historian, archivist or geologist who looks back on the present from the perspective of a dystopian future marked by climate change, Craps' is a surprisingly humanist discourse in the context of this volume on Memory after Humanism. For as he contends, in the face of the Anthropocene (which is indeed an anthropocentric term), memory studies is confronted with the challenge to scale up remembrance without discounting the human subject. In contrast to feminist theoretical physicist and philosopher of science Karen Barad, for instance, who argues that 'there’s a sense in which even molecules and particles remember what has happened to them', Craps maintains that ‘memory risks becoming a mere metaphor when conceived in strictly non-human terms, outside of human modes of experience and representation’.

In this response, I want to challenge his fundamental assumption and tweak the discourse on memory to include the post- and nonhuman. To do so, I will discuss climate change as cultural memory, explore its relation to the material turn in memory studies, and retrieve and rescale the concept of the memory environment in an effort to recalibrate memory after humanism.

The Metamorphosis of Memory

‘Perhaps the universe is a memory of our mistakes’, Jeanette Winterson writes in The Stone Gods (2007). ‘Everything is imprinted for ever with what it once was.’ Like the Cli-Fi texts that Craps discusses, Winterson’s novel is a cautionary tale about climate change that aims to engender critical reflection on our contemporary ways of living. More interestingly still, it seeks to materialize the Anthropocene in writing, giving narrative and textual form to the stratigraphic signals in the Earth system resulting from human activity – as Damien Gibson points out, the Anthropocene can be regarded as ‘storied matter expressing itself on a global scale’. As such, The Stone Gods probes ‘humans as biosphere-altering geologic agent’ and, in the words of Nicole Merola, '[o]ffers us the chance to scrutinize in advance a geological record that will be legible only to the future'.

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Winterson’s Anthropocene novel finds an echo in sociologist Ulrich Beck’s posthumously published book *The Metamorphosis of the World* (2016), in which he writes:

> The global risk of climate change is a kind of compulsive, collective memory – in the sense that past decisions and mistakes are contained in what we find ourselves exposed to, and that even the highest degree of institutional reification is nothing but a reification that can be revoked, a borrowed mode of action which can, and must, be changed if it leads to self-jeopardization. Climate change is the embodiment of the mistakes of a whole epoch of ongoing industrialization [...] .”

Climate change as memory and the embodiment – indeed, as the material, embodied memory – of past decisions and mistakes: the vocabulary is the same in Winterson’s fiction and Beck’s non-fictional account of climate change as an agent of metamorphosis. No ‘mere metaphor’, obviously, Winterson’s and Beck’s uses of the term suggest a conception of (human) memory as entangled with nonhuman things and environments and as having material dimensions. Winterson and Beck, each in their own way, do not ask ‘What can we do against climate change?’ to follow the path of activism, but pose the more analytical and probing question: ‘What does climate change do to us, and how does it alter the order of society and politics?’ Just as Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* tells stories of future (and past) worlds that are already ours, so does Beck’s *The Metamorphosis of the World* explore how climate change ‘has already altered our way of being in the world – the way we live in the world, think about the world, and seek to act upon the world through social action and politics’. In the space that remains, I want to pursue the idea that climate change similarly has already altered how we remember and how we conceive of memory and probe the ways in which this calls for new or renewed concepts.

Climate change, indeed, would seem to play a significant role in the development of and growing consensus on expanded views of memory; the view, that is, that remembering is a material-neural process, relational, cultural and environmental and, as such, involving things: settings, attributes. As Chandra Mukerji argues, addressing the importance of material forces and regimes to social practices and systems of power, the so-called material turn is an emerging trend with roots in, among other factors, ‘the growing interest (in part because of climate change) in how the natural world is entangled with social practices’.

Suggesting, much like Beck does in his *Metamorphosis of the World*, a connection between climate change and the way we think about the world and the concepts we use to make sense of it, Mukerji paves the way for understanding the material turn in memory studies and the attention the field pays to materiality to be similarly influenced by climate change.
According to Beck, ‘more than a problem of measures of carbon dioxide and the production of pollution . . . global climate risk signals new ways of being, looking, hearing and acting in the world – highly ambivalent, open-ended, without any foreseeable outcome’.13 This new way of being in the world entails new ways of relating to the present, the past and the future. In Beck’s words, ‘Metamorphosis then also means that the past is reproblematized through the imagination of a threatening future’.14 It also entails wider temporal and spatial scales than the ones with which we are wont to think.

As Craps justly points out, one of the challenges of the Anthropocene is that of scales – to consider human and nonhuman scales in relation to one another. Literally scaling up our vision, global climate change invites us to think beyond what Merola calls ‘our usual anthropocentric scales: the embodied/personal and the historical/national-cultural’.15 The Anthropocene, as Rosanne Kennedy and Maria Nugent argue, ‘pushes the question of scalarity . . . away from the horizontal plane registered by cultural and human flows across borders to the vertical scales of geology, earth and deep time’.16 To conceptualize memory as ‘operating at multiple, interlocking scales’,17 memory studies might retrieve an older and largely neglected term: Pierre Nora’s ‘milieu de mémoire’, the environment of memory, a term that the French historian paired and contrasted with the ‘lieu de mémoire’, the site of memory. As he writes, ‘There are lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory’.18 While his argument made sense in the French context of the wake of the mid-1970s economic crisis that swept France into a renewed awareness of its past – in fact, his project inaugurated a whole series of studies of lieux de mémoire across the globe – might there not be a sense in which climate change is creating a new environment of memory on another (geographical and temporal) scale – planetary/global, climatological/ecological and anticipatory? A nonanthropocentric memory environment, then, where the human and the geological commingle; a milieu de mémoire now extended to include not just human but also nonhuman actors? Rather than merely looking at the social milieu de mémoire, Memory Studies could upscale the concept for a posthumanist understanding of memory and reconceive it to be about the environment at large; a true memory environment of which humans are (but) a part, that is lived (not just by humans) in the anticipation of the materialization of past mistakes, a future memory of ‘catastrophes yet to come’19 that already metamorphoses memory, how and what ‘we’20 remember. As such, looking beyond ‘the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history’,21 the memory environment is a useful concept that serves the imaginative effort of telling a new geostory22 necessary to understand the metamorphoses of the world and of memory in the Anthropocene.
Notes

2 Winterson, Stone Gods, 87.
3 Ibid., 86.
4 Gibson, “From Master(y) Narratives to Matter Narratives.”
5 Merola, “Materializing,” 125.
6 Ibid., 126.
7 Beck, Metamorphosis, 36.
8 This vocabulary also resonates with the work of Karen Barad, who maintains that ‘the universe itself holds a memory of each event […]. Or to put it a bit more precisely, the universe does not have memory, it is the memory of iterative materializations’. Barad, “Intra-active Entanglements,” 20–21.
9 Beck, Metamorphosis, 36.
10 Ibid., 4.
11 Cf. Brown and Reavey, Vital Memory. Similar understandings of memory as involving entanglements of people and things can be found in, among others, Olsen, In Defense of Things and Munteán, Plate and Smelik, “Things to Remember.”
12 Mukerji, “Material Turn,” 1. See also Bill Brown, who introduces his influential ‘Thing Theory’ in a video on YouTube by stating that we care so much about things today because ‘our most precious object, the earth, is dying’. Brown, “Big Think Interview.”
13 Beck, Metamorphosis, 125. See also Bauman, Retrotopia.
14 Beck, Metamorphosis, 125.
17 De Cesari and Rigney, Transnational Memory, 6.
18 Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 7–8.
19 I borrow the expression from Ben Highmore’s highly evocative and provocative essay “Memories of Catastrophes Yet to Come.”
20 I use the scare quotes advisedly, to signal this subject of remembrance is (re)constructed to include both human and nonhuman agents of memory.

Bibliography


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