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Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth: *The Gothic Anthropocene*, edited by Justin D. Edwards, Rune Graulund, and Johan Höglund. University of Minnesota Press, 2022, 346 pp.

David Franklin

In February 2024, the International Commission on Stratigraphy, the geological body responsible for overseeing the International Chronostratigraphic Chart, a timeline of Earth's deep geological history, voted against introducing a new epoch, the Anthropocene, to that timeline. The decision was controversial both within the geological community and outside of it, and seemed to hinge in part on preserving the methodological integrity of the discipline; if human activity really was of geological significance as proponents of the Anthropocene claimed, there existed strict procedures within the governing organisation to determine if this was the case. More fundamentally, the rejection came down to the understanding that when placed against the immense timescales of other geologic epochs and eras, typically measured in millions and billions of years, even the entirety of human history was momentary, and that, when compared with previous planetary upheavals, the current climate crisis may not be so extraordinary. The implication seemed to be that while human-caused climate change was clearly at crisis levels, the geological unit of measurement was inappropriate, and a different yardstick might be more apt.

In many ways the decision was of little practical relevance, as the idea of the Anthropocene had long before escaped the boundaries of any one scientific discipline. The term has entered popular culture after a rapid gestation period in academia, and any strict scientific definition seems to be increasingly beside the point. The original idea—proposed in 2000 by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and ecologist Eugene Stoermer—that we have entered a new geological epoch defined by human impact on the environment that is visible in the geological record (Thomas et al., 931–32), has morphed into a more general-purpose concept of anthropogenic destruction, and the term has proven useful in diverse academic fields of study such as postcolonialism and various branches of critical theory.

However, the tension between rigorous scientific methodology and terminology on the one hand, and a more expansive framing of issues related to anthropogenic climate change on the other persists. *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth*: *The Gothic Anthropocene* offers a range of perspectives on the Anthropocene viewed through the lens of the Gothic, while also introducing further conceptual subsets of the Anthropocene that attempt to respond to the perceived shortcomings of the term itself. Within this collection of essays, the Anthropocene is presented as insufficient in accounting for the horrors of anthropogenic misery, due to its "inability to make

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plain the long material history of the violence that has brought on a notably unequal climate crisis" (ix). Throughout the book there is little agreement on what the Anthropocene is or what it potentially might encompass. Some writers suggest that it is, ironically, built on a hubristic anthropocentric perspective that emphasises a human/non-human division it claims to criticise, a narcissism summarised by Astrida Meimanis as "less a plea for curbing the Human, and more an insistence that we do matter, and always will" (xxii). Similarly, for Rebecca Duncan the very concept of the Anthropocene—"interpreting climate emergency as the effect of collective human actions *on* nature"—amounts to a dualist mode of thinking that helped engender the problem in the first place (185–86).

In any case the term is employed from the beginning as something of a catch-all, which is where a trio of additional terms—the Plantationocene, the Capitalocene, and the Cthulucene—come into play. Along with the Anthropocene, each forms the title of one of the four sections that make up this book, with the concepts outlined by the editors in short section introductions. This reliance on scientific-sounding terminology through the suffix "-cene", frequently used in geologic naming, is interesting given the ambivalence to science demonstrated by some of the contributors to *Dark Scenes*. Furthermore, an impression of reductive categorisation surrounds these theories, a sense that complex, multi-disciplinary fields of knowledge are being filleted and shrink-wrapped to fit inflexible academic boxes. The editors acknowledge the limitations of these designations (106), and, in his chapter "Monstrocene", Fred Botting suggests that acquiescing to such a panoply of similarly named frameworks deflects blame, obscures interests and agendas, creates factions, and ultimately provokes a generalised fear that can "paralyse all thought, all imagination, all response" (319).

Within these four sections, the book's sixteen chapters explore the intersection of the Gothic and the Anthropocene, via a range of media including television (Dawn Kettle's "*True Detective*'s Folk Gothic"; Timothy Morton and Rune Graulund's "Got a Light? The Dark Currents of Energy in *Twin Peaks: The Return*") and literature (Barry Murnane's "Digging Up Dirt: Reading the Anthropocene through German Romanticism"). A clear highlight is Jennifer Schell's "Monstrous Megalodons of the Anthropocene: Extinction and Adaptation in Prehistoric Shark Fiction, 1974–2018", which looks at the sub-genre of giant shark, or megalodon, novels that have proliferated in the wake of Peter Benchley's *Jaws* (1974). Schell dissects this niche but established genre, which is typically built around macho (male) scientists hunting down enormous prehistoric sharks (often female). Her examination makes surgical use of biology, palaeontology, and evolutionary theory to expose the themes of misogyny and domination lurking below the surface of stories that initially seem so outlandish as to be beyond analysis. Schell is critical of a commonly deployed tactic, the use of "plausible scientific rhetoric to advance an unrealistic vision of the evolutionary process" (74), and counters with a clear, coherently constructed, and convincing revelation of the ugly messages these seemingly disposable adventure stories incorporate. While her target is a specific subset of monster fiction, it is considered within the wider contexts of Anthropocene and gothic media, and Schell tags megalodon novels as portents of how "certain gothic tropes can be appropriated for antienvironmentalist purposes" (77).

Esthie Hugo's "A Violence 'Just below the Skin': Atmospheric Terror and Racial Ecologies from the African Anthropocene", examines air pollution, asphyxiation, and the African "airpocalypse" (82). Hugo looks at the "atmospheric terror" (85) of Ben Okri's "In the City of Red

Dust" (1989). Set in a Nigerian city choked by clouds of pollution, Okri's story employs a "petro-magic-realism" spin on vampirism to explore the inequalities resulting from oil industry exploitation in Nigeria (87), hinting at how "the global oil economy draw[s] both on the life energies of African labour power and the potential energies of the extrahuman through its extraction of oil from the literal 'veins' of the earth" (88). Hugo also looks at Beninese photographer Fabrice Monteiro's extraordinary sculpture-photographs, which depict mythical beings reborn from the garbage and waste of Senegal's vast Mbeubeuss dump, one of the largest in the world. Monteiro's work skilfully weaves together legacies of colonial and ecological destruction, and expresses how "Black bodies disproportionately bear the bodily burden of industrial waste through gothic modes of representation" (90). Ultimately Hugo sees Monteiro's gothic monstrosities as positive, presenting a path forward, a reimagining of the body that, while recording previous harms, permits the possibility of "new genres of the human" (96–97).

Justin D. Edwards's "Beyond the Slaughterhouse: Anthropocene, Animals, and Gothic" is another example in this collection of an effort to locate a constructive conceptual path forward. Edwards, also one of the publication's three editors, attempts to understand the contextualised thinking behind some of the frameworks typically applied to both the Gothic and the Anthropocene—the "binaristic narratives that pit the human animal against the environment" (153)—which he suggests are rooted in "the human animal's belief that we can improve on environments that pose threats to us" (153). Connecting innate human propensity for environmental destruction with Gothic ideas of consumption, specifically of meat, Edwards proposes that the Gothic may be instructive in how we manage the Anthropocene, and could encourage a genuine non-anthropocentric, multi-species perspective focused on "human-animal relationality" rather than hierarchical structures of dominance (154). Exploring these ideas further leads him through biopower, industrialised animal farming, and the violence of the meat industry on both non-human and human participants. Edwards then turns to Julia Ducournau's debut feature film *Raw* (2016), a queasy tale about a vegetarian student whose inner cannibal is awoken following a university hazing ritual. Edwards's engagement with *Raw* is nuanced, and in general his approach is notable for its tone of openness and consideration, and little of the rigid dogmatic adherence exhibited elsewhere in this collection.

A less successful approach, present in some of these texts, involves a prose style that moves away from clear and constructive analysis and towards a distractingly sententious tone. Rune Graulund's "Lovecraft vs. Vandermeer" begins with the assertion that "[t]he Anthropocene is a waking nightmare" (45), and the hysteria escalates from there to a kind of grandiloquence that sits uneasily alongside more carefully formed and persuasive discourse. This strain of indulgent nihilism weaves its way through several chapters in the book, a tone which harmonises with cynical fantasies found in post-apocalyptic and dystopian sci-fi. Fred Botting is critical of such cosy miserabilism, and warns against writers wallowing in "guilty abjection and self-loathing" (322), as jaded expressions of despair "not only prompt anxious recoil, paralysis, or defensive reaction but display a huge failure of imagination: closing off, in horror, any consideration of a future different from the projection of one's own present" (330). The editors themselves on the other hand (who include Graulund) seem to believe that any constructive action is pointless, informing readers that "advocates of such a [dark] philosophy should find encouragement in the fact that the world as we now know it is not worth living in" (170). It's hard to tell if this statement is ironic cynicism

or if it's the editors' genuine considered opinion; if the latter, it's morally bankrupt, and encourages the kind of intellectual paralysis Botting warns against.

These stylistic excesses are compounded by a more serious disregard for science that bubbles below the surface throughout *Dark Scenes*. It is most clearly given voice in one of the book's rhetorical low points, in Johan Höglund's "The Anthropocene Within: Love and Extinction in M. R. Carey's *The Girl With all the Gifts* and *The Boy on the Bridge*":

> In the conventional imagery of Darwinian evolution of *Homo sapiens*, a swarthy, crumpled primate grows more erect and pale the farther right (into the future) the eye travels, until a tall white male with a spear in his hand emerges. This figure walks into an empty void that represents a future that does not require or even allow for further evolutionary change. Normative evolutionary history thus tells a story about the becoming of a being that is not simply white and male but also bounded by the limits of his own white body. The spear symbolises both his ability to create and manipulate tools and the fact that he has reached this ultimate evolutionary stage through the struggle with all other species, rising above and beyond them. Although still dressed in animal skins, he is discernible as an individual with a clear gender and racial identity. (255)

Here Höglund—also one of the book's editors—through a clumsily executed sleight of hand, confuses a cartoon with one of the most successful scientific theories in human history, to stake out a dogmatic argument built on a sequence of illogical leaps and assumptions. This gross misrepresentation of evolution, how it works, and the ideas it enshrines is fatal not only to the rest of Höglund's chapter, but also undermines the editorial integrity of the book. It goes without saying that evolutionary theory is not about apes turning step by step into white men with spears, nor does it celebrate "the centrality of the individual" (257), nor does it allow for some "ultimate evolutionary stage"; and it is worth noting that evolutionary theory is in fact a persuasive argument against exactly the kind of human exceptionalism Höglund is attempting to attribute to it. Seemingly unaware that altruism and cooperation are evolutionary traits, Höglund avers that it is Gothic thinking alone that allows us to comprehend the complexity of multi-species relations, as Enlightenment-era "normative realism bars humans from comprehending the complexity of life and how the climate crisis is destroying it" (254). This bad-faith science scepticism is indicative of a tiresome perspective present at points throughout *Dark Scenes*, one that is perhaps influenced by Gothic literature's general anti-Enlightenment stance (Wester and Aldana Reyes, 7). Without much elaboration beyond Höglund's wholly invented "normative evolutionary paradigm" however (257), the reader is left with the impression of a present-day discourse on global climate and ecology that sneers at science because of supposed Enlightenment-era ideas, a frankly bewildering position akin to dismissing present-day medicine because doctors were more brutal in the medieval era. If the editors' proposal of looking at the Anthropocene through the lens of the Gothic requires distortions of science more typical of creationists and climate change deniers, then the endeavour represents a dead end. With scientific data and research on climate change having been ignored, ridiculed, and distorted for decades, Höglund's lazy misrepresentation of science sees academics rather ironically merge lanes with far right "anti-elites" conspiracy theorists, while revealing intellectual prejudices that hinder genuine discussion.

Nevertheless, Rebecca Duncan elsewhere offers a concise account of the connections that can be drawn between Enlightenment thinking, human dominance over the non-human, capitalist extraction, and how concepts of Nature permit racist exploitation (179–80). However this general position presents only a partial explanation of anthropogenic destruction, as do suggestions that racism or colonialism are the ultimate causes of said ills. The frequently mentioned Human-Nature dichotomy is conceived throughout *Dark Scenes* as fundamentally Western and borne of the Enlightenment, which not only hints at the hard borders of some of these authors' fields of study, but implies an essentialist view of non-Western cultures and civilisations as being somehow more connected to or in balance with nature, particularly if considering perceptions of Asia (Hudson 944–45, 951). While present day writers may see Europe as clearly leading the charge on environmental destruction, Europeans during the Industrial Revolution would have pointed at China as the most obvious culprit, had concepts of nature, the environment, and our relationship with the non-human been the same then as they are now (Hudson 945). In any case, who started first is surely a moot point when looked at on the enormous scales of geological epochs, deep time, and planetary change—the steam engine was huffing and puffing across Asia just a few decades after Europe, an insignificant sliver of time compared to the millions and billions of years the Anthropocene is supposedly catalogued beside (Hudson 946). Similarly, just as coal was an important source of fuel in China as early as the Neolithic, deforestation in Asia and the Americas was well-established before the arrival of Europeans (Hudson 946, 947), despite proponents of the Plantationocene claiming the 1600s as the starting point for anthropogenic destruction (105). Even the mass extinction we are currently shepherding is, as Michael Fuchs discusses, difficult to frame from a paleontological perspective (28–29). Human-caused mass extinction can be traced back to our earliest exploits as soon as our species began migrating, hunting to extinction megafauna such as mammoths that had dominated through the last glacial period and into the Holocene (Hudson 947–48; Brannen, "Anthropocene"). Justin D. Edwards discusses this species-wide propensity to violence and domination, and calls for a widening of the lens on how the Anthropocene is framed (153–54). Such a non-anthropocentric, multi-species perspective, the supposed goal of the Cthulucene, would surely be unable to ignore the impact the rise of plant-life during the Palaeozoic had on the entirety of the planet, over a prolonged period of change that lasted tens of millions of years, and which dwarfed the destruction humans have wrought (Brannen, "What"). But such considerations are seemingly beyond the scope of *Dark Scenes*, a book that is reluctant to engage with the deep geologic time and scientific theory at the heart of so much of what it purports to be examining.

These inconsistencies, and the rigid academic frameworks often applied to such a global and multi-disciplinary topic, highlight some curious oversights in the book's discourse. With so much pointing of "the accusatory finger" throughout *Dark Scenes* (169), the complete absence of religion is notable. The relevance of religion to Gothic thinking would seem obvious, as would the looming presence of the apocalypse in Christian thought, but religion is essentially invisible in this collection. Ideologies, philosophies (typically from the Enlightenment), institutions, and structures of power, are all legitimate targets for criticism and blame within the discourse of this book. It thus seems strange that there is no mention of the role of religion (and more specifically the Catholic Church) in virtually every one of the toxic processes of corruption and destruction analysed across the various fields of research presented in *Dark Scenes*. With Enlightenment-era scientific "paradigms" considered a credible scapegoat, and with so much talk of colonial dominance, gender and racial violence, overpopulation (in Timothy Clark's chapter), and of "Queering the Weird" (in

Sara Wasson's chapter), the near-total absence of this line of enquiry highlights a disappointing uniformity in the intellectual perspectives sometimes evident in this book.

The intention here is not to deny the value of the conceptual approaches that are put forward in this collection, but to emphasise the sometimes narrow, even dogmatic, positions from which they are elaborated. The repetitive citation of the same core texts, the parochial conformity, and the lack of editorial oversight of some of the book's less disciplined proclamations, become redolent of intellectual orthodoxy and conservatism. The homogeneity of the artworks and art forms referenced and discussed suggests a disinclination to wade out of shallow waters. Animation for example—which both in its material form and its content encapsulates many of the theoretical strands that preoccupy this book—is nowhere to be found, despite a fluid boundary between the human and the non-human being a tenet of the art form. With a few notable exceptions, most of the art and literature discussed in this book is either European or North American, and for a field of enquiry so global in scope, the Eurocentrism of some of the writing is notable. Even within the framework of the Gothic, tethered originally but no longer to the Enlightenment, the lack of international perspectives is disappointing, given the more expansive views explored in volumes such as Glennis Byron's *Globalgothic* (2013).

For patient readers there are islands of illumination to be encountered in *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth*. They are however dispersed across a somewhat unvarying landscape. Reaching them requires a tolerance for some feverish moralising that obfuscates rhetorical and logical inconsistencies. The relative paucity of perspectives at times invokes a sense of academic hermeticism, and readers may long for a broader discursive vista. Nevertheless, for those who make the journey, original and engaging ideas are to be found, and the intersection of the Anthropocene with the Gothic proposed by this book suggests fertile ground for further exploration, even if the potential is not fully realised here.

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