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Project title: *Flooded Futures: the Anthropocene in 21st-Century British Fiction*

Results of fellowship period: Peer-reviewed journal article; book proposal

Project description

In its most recent report, the IPCC predicts more frequent and more severe flooding for most areas around the world due to climate crisis. In Britain, anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions will lead to an increased flood risk of more than 20%, in some predictions even 90%. Floods are not only literal but also figurative symbols of climate change. The image of the flood captures the psychological overwhelm of climate crisis and the fear of sudden rather than gradual environmental collapse when the moment of no return has been passed.

Twenty-first-century British flood fictions are essential imaginative tools that foster discussion about flooded futures and inspire changes in readers' attitudes and values. My project is the first to define twenty-first-century flood fictions as a major response to anthropogenic climate change. The aim of the project is to enhance our understanding of life in the Anthropocene by examining a set of under-explored novels. As I argue, these novels - that I term flood fictions - tackle the temporal and spatial challenges that scholars often identify as obstacles to imagining climate crisis. Flood fictions stretch backwards and forwards in time to ancient flood myths lodged in many cultures' collective memory, while prefiguring the face of climate crisis in the near future. As such, flood fictions engage with the temporal dimension of climate crisis, encompassing past and present. At the same time, flood fictions localise global crisis, addressing the spatial dimension of climate crisis. The flooded landscape is intensely local, as infrastructures have been damaged and socio-political structures have collapsed. In these constricted spaces issues of blame, privilege and survival so central to climate change are magnified.

The project's first objective is to define the genre of flood fiction and place it in a wider social and cultural context (including flooding in Britain and beyond, and the prevalence of the flood as environmental image, such as in the 2016 documentary *Before the Flood*). Floods constitute a major vein of the British imagination of climate change in fiction. The increased threat of floods in Britain combined with an older tradition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century flood novels, make flood fictions a particularly interesting genre to study in a British context. The project's second objective is to use novels such as Maggie Gee's *The Flood* (2004), Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2007), Antonia Honeywell's *The Ship* (2015), Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From* (2017) and Clare Morrall's *When the Floods Came* (2015) as a lens through which to explore climate crisis.

In this project, I define flood fictions as novels that, firstly, depict climate crisis through floods. These are major destabilising events, leading to and coinciding with the large-scale collapse of societal, political and economic structures. Secondly, flood fictions internalise the effect of climate crisis on cultures and societies through narrative fragmentation and language erosion. Such breaking apart of narrative and language reflects the novels' concern with the role that narratives and knowledge play in the Anthropocene.

While a body of work is emerging that focuses on climate crisis in literature, scholars such as Adeline Johns-Putra and Adam Trexler have tended to engage with climate change broadly, and an extensive and detailed exploration of one specific effect of climate crisis as I provide it in this project is still lacking. A majority of criticism in the field is concerned with establishing which texts and genres most adequately address what literature can do in a time of environmental change. Richard Kerridge, Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren and others hence suggest that if we were to better imagine climate crisis we might be better equipped to forestall it. As such, they approach climate change as what Lawrence Buell and Greg Garrard have termed a "crisis of the imagination" as much as an environmental, scientific and political crisis. Another group of scholars, most notably Timothy Morton and Claire Colebrook, take this crisis of the imagination further to such an extent that they discount the role that narratives might play in productively engaging with climate change altogether. They argue that instead we need to look beyond conventional narrative if we are ever to depict climate crisis in such a way that the depiction does justice to its temporal and spatial scale.

This project takes a different approach that is neither largely normative, as that of the first group of scholars, nor discounts conventional narrative as a whole. In line with emerging research on ecocriticism and narratology (econarratology), my project focuses on the way in which narratives shape the discourses that surround climate crisis, and are affected by it in turn, as demonstrated in the work of Erin James, Pieter Vermeulen and others. My project confronts the crisis of the imagination by focusing on a climate crisis scenario that is tangible, part of the cultural imagination and able to make global issues local.

In its concern with floods as sites of climate crisis, the project provides a form of immediate engagement rarely captured in descriptions and analyses of climate crisis, and equally rarely explored in existing scholarship. As such, it contributes to scholarship done in the environmental humanities, in which the role that narratives play in our understanding of and response to climate crisis is a central concern. The approach that I take is furthermore grounded in econarratology, and continues the work that I have hitherto done in this field. The readership of a forthcoming collection on econarratology (*Ecocriticism and Narrative Theory: Essays at a Critical Confluence*) to which I contributed, as well as readers of my recent monograph on climate crisis and twenty-first-century British fiction will likely be interested in the products resulting from this project. Moreover, the project will appeal to scholars working on contemporary literature and climate fictions in general.