

The Climate after the Fact

This project critically approaches the subsumption of climate thought and politics under imperatives of sense- and meaning-making within the regime that the anthropologist Elizabeth A. Povinelli terms “late liberalism.” It is tempting, in the face of climate denial and other manifestations of a global, “post-truth” right, to commit to the belief that climate thought ought to “add up,” indeed that raising awareness or consciousness will mend the “metabolic rift” between the rates of industrial production and resource renewal. Yet, as the psychoanalyst Alenka Zupančič notes, this insistence is itself an expression of disavowal on the part of scholars and activists alike, insofar as it brackets, one, that the general population, however we define it, has already been exposed to the challenges of the Anthropocene, and in several manners; and two, that, as proven by our propensity, as individuals and groups, to repeat the same mistakes, we do not do better simply because we know better.

“The Climate after the Fact” heeds advice from the increasingly devalued “linguistic turn” in the humanities (from deconstruction to a certain, language-beholden version of psychoanalysis) in order to locate a radical climate thought within gaps of signification and failures of coherence, which prove far better attuned to the contradictions of late liberal existence than any totality, even the most contingent or plastic. Tracking the betrayal of content by form in a mostly contemporary corpus that spans the literary (e.g., J. M. Coetzee, Jenny Offill, Claire Vaye Watkins, Nell Zink) and cinematic arts (e.g., Charles Burnett, Ryusuke Hamaguchi, Todd Haynes, Dariush Mehrjui, Albert Serra), this project revisits climate politics from the vantage point of what the critic Ian Fleishmann calls the “narrative wound.”

This book’s framework emerges from “Eco-subtraction: Downsizing the Environmental Humanities,” a 2023–26 Insight Development Grant funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The key insight of the “Eco-subtraction” project is that late liberalism patches over the contradictions that industrial and finance capitalism exacerbate within life (e.g., more life, understood as longevity or as optimization, hastens planetary collapse, and thus species extinction) by naturalizing that system as world-making and world-building—in short, as, itself, *the world*. “The Climate after the Fact” extends a critical genealogy, sketched by the critic Rei Terada, of dissatisfaction with a world that, per Kant’s philosophy of self-reconciliation, is given but nevertheless demands assent. Put more forcefully: this book calls on climate thought and politics, as they are synthesized and in turn configured by the environmental humanities, to defect from the imperial and colonial common sense that disguises infinite apocalypses as emergence and possibility. The task, if the world names its own obliteration, is, following the philosophers Claire Colebrook and Sean Gaston, to inaugurate an “extinct theory” or “a philosophy without world.”

“The Climate after the Fact” comprises an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. The first half elaborates an immanent critique of the late liberal management of catastrophe. The second half moves toward a climate thought that is eccentric to that legal–discursive regime.

