perspective (Shu and Pease) on an interdisciplinary field (also see Chakrabarty 215) which challenges scholars to manage microscopic scrutiny just as well as a globe-embracing perspective.

**Cli-Fi and Petrofiction: Questioning Genre in the Anthropocene**

**Hannes Bergthaller**

Around the same time that ‘cli-fi’ started to make the headlines of popular online magazines, a loose group of scholars across the Anglophone world began to coalesce around a project that was designed to galvanize the smaller field of literary and cultural studies in equal measure. The title of Patricia Yaeger’s editorial for the 2011 *PMLA* issue devoted to this subject is in itself already a succinct summary of their ambitions: “Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources.” “[W]hat happens,” Yaeger asked, if we ditch the familiar categories of literary history and instead “sort texts according to the energy sources that made them possible?” (305). By casting the question of the relationship between energy and literature in terms of periodization, Yaeger was in fact taking a stance within a debate that had been, and remains, central to this emergent field of study. An important point d’appui for this debate is Amitav Ghosh’s 1992 review essay “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel,” where Ghosh, discussing Abdelrahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt* novels, noted the strange incongruity between the omnipresence of oil in U.S. everyday life and its almost complete absence from the realm of cultural expression. Ghosh explained this apparent contradiction as the effect of an unwillingness on the part of Americans to confront the unsavory political dependencies that an honest literary treatment of the subject would have to expose and of the profoundly transnational and heteroglossic character of the world the oil industry had created. In the end, he argued, this was a subject which simply overtaxed the capacities of the genre of the novel as conventionally practiced: “[T]he truth is we do not yet possess the form that can give the Oil Encounter a literary expression” (31).

As critics began to take up Ghosh’s challenge over the following decade, their efforts generally went in the direction of trying to prove him wrong: On the one hand, they began reappraising literary texts which had in fact tackled the subject either head-on (such as Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!*) or obliquely (e.g., Kerouac’s *On the Road* or Nabokov’s *Lolita*) while broadening the view to a wider range of media, such as film, photography, the graphic novel, or the museum exhibit. On the other hand, they argued that oil (and, by extension, other energy carriers) had a deeply formative impact on culture that required its very own version of a hermeneutics of suspicion. Thus Yaeger invokes Pierre Macherey’s idea that tell-tale absences
are constitutive of a text’s meaning (306), and Peter Hitchcock suggests that, rather than understanding oil as mere subject matter, critics ought to think of it as “a cultural logic that dares any writer to express its real, not as some character or passing reference, but as a very mode of referentiality, a texture in the way stories get told” (86). In her 2014 *Living Oil*, the first monograph on the subject in American Studies, Stephanie LeMenager takes a similar tack when she argues that oil is “psychologically ultradeep,” a matter of “the affects and emotions lodged in gasoline fuel, cars, and the thousands of everyday items made from petroleum feedstock, from lip balms to tampon applicators, dental polymers, and aspirin tablets” (13). The upshot of such arguments is that literary texts and other cultural artifacts can be ‘about’ oil even, and perhaps especially, when they don’t explicitly address the subject. Rather than petrofiction, understood as a distinctive genre, the proper object of study would therefore be something variously designated as “oil culture” (Barrett and Worden), “petroculture” (Szeman 148), or “petromodernity” (LeMenager 71).

Strikingly, the course which this debate on petrofiction took is in a sense almost the inverse of the one that unfolded around cli-fi. In this case, too, one can pinpoint a moment of origin of sorts. In 2005, Bill McKibben and Robert Macfarlane independently published essays in which they noted what the latter called a “cultural absence.” Even though climate change constitutes the greatest political challenge and the direst existential threat of our time, they argued, it has not registered fully in the popular imagination. Both challenged writers of all stripes to step up to the plate: “Where are the books? The poems? The plays? The goddamn operas?” McKibben asked. Macfarlane chimed in: “Where are the novels, the plays, the poems, the songs, the libretti, of this massive contemporary anxiety?” Both assessed the specific difficulties which the topic poses for literary representation in very similar terms, pointing to the scale of climate change, its spatial and temporal diffusiveness, and the complex causal pathways it involves—suggesting, much as Ghosh had with regard to petrofiction, that the rules of established genres would need to be bent, if not broken, if writers were to find a language adequate to the phenomenon.

More than one journalist has framed the emergence of cli-fi over the past few years by saying that it shows how contemporary writers are finally rising to the challenge (e.g., Bloom; Tuhus-Dubrow). At the same time, however, it is obvious that the majority of the texts filed under this rubric are not exactly genre-benders—perhaps the pithiest expression of this fact is a remark Margaret Atwood tweeted in 2012: “Here’s a new term: ‘Cli-Fi’=SF about climate change” (qtd. in Johns-Putra). Now, given Atwood’s published views on this matter (*In Other Worlds* 6; see also “It’s Not Climate Change,” Atwood’s 2015 piece in the online journal *Matter*, where she explicitly argues that cli-fi ought to be seen as speculative fiction rather than science fiction), one must assume that “SF” here was meant to stand for what she calls “speculative fiction,” rather than “science fiction”—a distinction which hinges on the realism and probability of the fictional world depicted in a given text: While the latter supposedly deals in “things that could not possibly happen” (e.g., “an invasion by tentacled, blood-sucking Martians shot to Earth in metal canisters,” as in H. G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds*), the former is con-
cerned with “things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books” (as in “Jules Verne’s books about submarines and balloon travel” [Atwood, In Other Worlds 6]).

Idiosyncratic though this distinction may be (after all, extrapolation from scientifically established knowledge is usually considered a hallmark of science fiction; see also Paweł Frelik’s contribution in this extended forum), it does point to the problems that are raised if we classify cli-fi as simply yet another subgenre of science fiction: Science fiction often continues to be associated with the fantastic and the improbable (albeit scientifically plausible). By contrast, proponents of cli-fi frequently insist that the fictional worlds it depicts merely take “climate predictions to their logical conclusions,” as Shara Tonn puts it in an editorial in Wired. In much the same vein, Piers Torday, a British author of young adult novels, admonishes readers not to “make the mistake of confusing [cli-fi] with sci-fi. If you think stories showing the effects of climate change are still only futuristic fantasies, think again.” He goes on to list the already ongoing developments (mass extinction, mega-drought, ocean acidification) which, not long ago, might have been viewed as “standard dystopian world-building fare” but must now be considered as inevitable parts of any conceivable future reality. The difference between science fiction proper and cli-fi, then, according to writers like Atwood and Torday, lies not so much in the kind of material authors address, or the manner in which they do so, but rather in how the audience is meant to read them. It is perfectly consistent with this view that perhaps the largest share of self-identified cli-fi texts are in fact young adult fiction and have an expressly didactic agenda. Thus Dan Bloom insists that the success of cli-fi is to be gauged by its integration into institutional pedagogy (rather than, say, by such elusive metrics as aesthetic merit or intellectual sophistication): “Classes about cli-fi for teenagers and young adults have been set up around the world this year, from Norway to India. This is big. This is global. This is for young people who will inherit the future.”

Now, on one level, all of this could hardly be more different from the development of petrocriticism as I have sketched it above. Starting with a thematic definition of petrofiction as, quite simply, fiction about oil, petrocriticism has moved towards an understanding of its subject in the broadest possible terms, as a matter of periodization rather than genre, of socio-historical context more than explicit subject matter. The debate on cli-fi, by contrast, began with the question of how fiction in the broadest sense could speak to the issue of climate change as a contemporary reality. If one takes the most vocal popularizers of the term as representative, it seems to have arrived now at a narrowly literalist (and in many cases rather naïve) construal of the thematic which is supposed to define the genre. Often cli-fi is cast as the artistic handmaiden of climate science, putting a human face on issues whose abstractness might otherwise fail to elicit the proper emotional response (Ullrich). The differences between the two discourses are, of course, to a large extent attributable to the fact that in the first case we are dealing with an emergent academic field and in the second with something that might be better characterized as a pop-cultural phenomenon, where the lines between authors who produce cli-fi and those who write about it are often blurred. The first, one might add, is concerned with the entire social formation which produced climate
change in the first place; the second with anticipating the latter’s consequences and making them a matter of personal concern for the audience. And yet their basic parameters are fundamentally similar: Both grapple with what might, very broadly, be described as a shift in the relation between text and relevant context, which renders traditional protocols for reading fiction somehow inadequate. Both seek new ways of conceptualizing what Peter Hitchcock, as mentioned above, calls “modes of referentiality” or the connections between fictional worlds and lived realities (86).

There is a name for the historical situation, or the set of anxieties, which drives such efforts, and that name is, of course, the Anthropocene. Yet another buzzword which captured the popular imagination at the turn of the decade, this term has come to stand for the belated, but for that same reason all the more urgent, recognition of the vast scope at which humanity has altered the planet, a growing awareness of the far-reaching consequences of these changes for the biosphere, and the attendant realization that this throws into question many of the categories we use to think about history and the position of humankind in the larger scheme of things. One can question, as Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz suggest we ought to, whether the narrative of our sudden awakening to the new realities of the Anthropocene is not a self-exculpatory fable (and this concern speaks, I think, to Paweł Frelik’s reservations regarding the cli-fi moniker voiced in this extended forum). But there is no reason to doubt that the sense that we find ourselves in an unprecedented situation is widely shared, sincerely felt, and in many ways perfectly justified.

Now genre theorists generally agree that attempts to define genres in terms of distinct sets of formal or thematic features fail to capture their fluid and dynamic nature. Genres, they argue, should be seen not primarily as a matter of taxonomy but rather, to quote the title of Carolyn Miller’s seminal article, as forms of “social action”—they are, she writes, “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (159). Their roots lie in the tacit knowledge of a community that particular situations are ‘of a kind,’ and they provide a template for the respective roles the speaker/writer and the audience are to take in the event. They codify presuppositions about the intention and purpose of a given speech act, as well as about the socially appropriate response. Thus we know what to expect from a sermon, an inaugural address, an advertisement, a joke, or a Western—and we are able to recognize significant deviations from the formula. With this in mind, it is not in the least surprising that the Anthropocene disturbs not only weather patterns or ecological equilibria but also established genre conventions. It confronts us with a situation for which there is no precedent in recorded history. It calls for a collective response, yet there is no community of speakers which would share an understanding of what kind of a situation it really is or what would constitute an appropriate response. Borrowing the terms of Miller’s definition, one could say that since climate change, as the most prominent manifestation of the Anthropocene, is not a “recurrent situation,” neither can there be a corresponding genre.

This, broadly speaking, is also the conclusion at which Amitav Ghosh arrives in his recent Berlin Family lectures (about to be published under the title The Great Derangement and excerpted by the online magazine Scroll). Just as he had
in his review of *Cities of Salt* more than two decades earlier, Ghosh points to the limits of literary representation and asks how the novel must change if is to tackle a subject which seems to overtax its capacities. The whole enterprise of literary realism, Ghosh writes, rested on implicit assumptions about what constituted the ordinary and probable course of events. It was on this basis that the modern novel was enshrined as a medium uniquely able to reveal complex truths about individual psychology and social relationships. Writers who violated these assumptions were relegated to the “generic outhouses” of fantasy, horror, or science fiction. Insofar as climate change upends beliefs about the orderliness and predictability of nature and forces us to entertain the likelihood of futures wildly at odds with the lived reality of our contemporaneous present, it should also prompt writers to relinquish outdated notions of stylistic decorum. Here, Ghosh’s argument converges with Mark McGurl’s call for a critical reappraisal of “those literary forms willing to risk artistic ludicrousness in their representation of the inhumanly large and long” (539). If we are looking for texts which most eloquently speak to our ecological predicament, we should train our gaze at the pulpy margins of cultural production (and, one might add, there is no reason why one should confine oneself to literature, although this is the focus of both Ghosh and McGurl). McGurl also points out that the vastness of the temporal and spatial scales which come into play once we attempt to think of literature in relation to biological evolution and geology renders problematic the kinds of historicization that are at the heart of much of American Studies as it is currently practiced. From such a vantage point, even the “deep time” Wai Chee Dimock has invoked as a way of pulling the canonical works of American literature into the “denationalized space” of a transcultural heritage common to all of humanity appears like an evasion (28).

All of this would lead to the conclusion that, as Timothy Clark has argued so forcefully, a critical engagement with cli-fi and other forms of cultural expression which address climate change would require us to ditch the “methodological nationalism” that remains such an indispensable component of American Studies (54), even after the transnationalist turn. But while Clark is surely correct that interpretive practices which position their objects primarily in relation to national histories of “self-idealization” will inevitably fail to note many of the ironies and tensions that are most relevant if we take the idea of the Anthropocene seriously (55), it seems to me that petrocritical scholarship offers a way for Americanists to take on this challenge without giving up on concerns which define their field of study. After all, the United States was the first nation to shift to a petroleum-based infrastructure. As Stephanie LeMenager has pointed out, “the American Century” is in an important sense coextensive with the century of oil (4)—the energy source which quite literally fueled not only the nation’s geopolitical aspirations but also the efflorescence of popular culture which underlay its unrivaled ability to project soft power. The geographer Matthew Huber has shown that the popularization of the ‘American Dream’ as a form of life centered on automobility and self-sufficient single-family homes is inseparable from the rise of the petrochemical industry during World War II. Oil enabled the materialization of a vision of empowered individuality that had been an important part of the national imaginary from the outset but had until then remained unattainable to most
Americans (Huber xiv). The undiminished global appeal of an energy-intensive ‘American way of life’ poses one of the most potent obstacles to current efforts at decarbonization. Quintessentially ‘American’ genres such as the Western, the space opera, or the road movie both reflected and informed mental habits which, even if they did not set us on the path to climate change, play an important role in how we deal with its consequences. Thus global ecological transformations are linked with national imaginaries that shape consumption patterns and the geography of everyday life, and the inhuman scales of deep time stand in tension with expectations for individual self-realization that are likewise fueled by distinctive national traditions. If Americanists wish their discipline to respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene, these are the connections they should attend to.

‘On Not Calling a Spade a Spade’:
Climate Fiction as Science Fiction

Paweł Frelik

My brief argument here may at first look like splitting taxonomic hairs, but it really is not. I don’t want to appear oversensitive either, but I do think that what I note has far-reaching consequences for how we actually talk about climate crisis as well as its cultural representations in both the field of American Studies and American culture at large. As Susanne Leikam and Julia Leyda point out in the introduction to this extended forum, the act of naming is always highly ideological, and as a discipline American Studies has a long history of this awareness that reaches back at least to Janice Radway’s critical look at the field’s very name in her presidential address during the 1998 American Studies Association conference. Naming is both a categorization, always dearly needed in academe for a number of reasons, and an act of cultural appropriation, whose underlying cultural, political, economic, and affective assumptions are often obscured from the view of those engaged in the very act. Naming something is often—if not always—an act of the simultaneous un-naming of something else, which removes the latter from discourse and from memory. This is very much the case with climate fiction.

Whether labeled climate fiction, fiction of the Anthropocene, eco-fiction, or any other of a handful of names in circulation, the prominent majority of texts dealing with climate change, anthropogenic warming, and catastrophic weather are really science fiction (SF). Certainly, not all texts quite fit this taxonomic qualification, and one can always find exceptions, but, by and large, climate fiction is science fiction. There are, of course, reasons behind most critics’ unwillingness to admit just that. The most immediate of these is the overly narrow understanding of what science fiction is, which limits it to stories about aliens, apocalypses, and time machines. Margaret Atwood’s narrow-minded insistence on the distinction