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Matthew S. Henry's *Hydronarratives* ends on a story about the future. Henry's conclusion describes a project in which environmental humanities faculty at the University of Wyoming, the author included, put out a call for high school students to tell stories about how they imagine the future of Wyoming in 2030. The storytelling contest asked young people to envision climate action that could bring about a just energy transition in the state. What is striking about the winners of the contest is both their optimism and their belief in the power of change to begin at local and even micro scales, rippling out from their communities, their homes, their desks, to reshape the world. “Wyoming adapts,” one contest winner writes, “from oil and coal to thorium and uranium.... This state may no longer be so carbon based, but we remain the bona fide battery of America.”[1] Belief in the land, the local, and the spirit of community is presented by *Hydronarratives* as the stuff of the American cultural imaginary that can be reshaped and redirected to enact a just transition in which land and water are protected and the country's economy and intellectual capital thrive.

This optimism also structures the argument of Henry's project, which demonstrates that water is a key element in just transition discourse, separable neither from the ravages of fossil fuel industries nor from the imperative to shape a better future defined by climate justice. Henry builds this argument on two fronts: first, by using literature, film, and policy analysis to direct readers to the fraught historical relationship between water and social injustice in the United States; and second, by sharing grassroots storytelling about different relationships to water that can be found in pockets of community-driven art activism across the racialized terrains of US extractive colonialism and capitalist ruin. Throughout, *Hydronarratives* is a fierce defense of the power of storytelling as key to activist imaginaries and political change. Following the findings of empirical ecocritics, Henry argues that climate fatalism does not translate easily into climate action. Instead, in the tradition of recent works in literary ecocriticism, including...
Shelley Streeby’s *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making through Science Fiction and Activism* (2018) and Min Hyoung Song’s *Climate Lyricism* (2022), and Indigenous resurgence projects, including Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (2017) and Nick Estes’s *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (2019), *Hydronarratives* argues that another world is possible and that the stories we tell about this world—decolonized, decarbonized, abundant—are key to bringing it into being.

It is activist visions of a better world, written, painted, crafted, curated, and realized by community stakeholders, that Henry designates as hydronarratives, “stories and cultural representations that imagine just water futures” and, in so doing, “support a politics of resistance and resilience to water injustice” (pp. 6, 19). The project understands both “hydro” and “narrative” in expansive senses. Each chapter moves from focusing on well-recognized and theorized narrative forms, such as novels and films, to less easily recognizable storytelling projects. Chapter 1, “Decolonizing Drought,” for example, begins with an analysis of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) and concludes with the long history of Hohokam water management in the traditional territories of the Pueblo peoples via readings of water-based exhibits—from murals to gardens—that highlight Hohokam irrigation and land stewardship practices in Phoenix, Arizona. Chapter 2, “Freedom Dreams for Flint,” uses a combination of policy analysis, the critical theory of familiar scholars of racial capitalism, José Casa’s 2019 documentary play, *Flint*, and Michigan-based community art and fashion projects to persuasively tell the story of the long history of environmental racism and intergenerational water toxicity trauma experienced by the Black community of Flint, Michigan. Following the waterways of Flint, Henry demonstrates, uncovers a history of environmental racial capitalism that “is frequently misrecognized as a product of the very recent past” but that stretches back much further than the first news stories reporting contaminated water in Flint in 2014 (p. 59). Just as “narrative” may mean “garden,” water is never “just” water in *Hydronarratives* but rather a liquid carrier of histories of racial capitalist modernity and the toxic relations of production that sacrifice economically marginalized communities and communities of color to the logic of extraction.

*Hydronarratives* is at its strongest when it is deep in the histories of toxic entanglements that bring water, fossil fuels, and racism into such close and devastating relationality in US environmental and economic history. These entanglements run so deep that at times, as in chapter 3, “Extractive Fictions and Post-Extraction Futurisms,” it can become difficult to find pathways out of coal slurry mudslides, natural gas fracking, and ever-worsening seasonal floods. The chapter, which focuses on Appalachian coal country, evocatively describes how water is weaponized by the fossil fuel industries; however, it is difficult to draw just transition imaginaries out of the chapter’s extractive fictions. From Ann Pancake’s *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (2007) to Jennifer Haigh’s *Heat and Light* (2015), rural Appalachia appears as a landscape of exhaustion being preyed on by extractive industries that leverage the area’s poverty and cultural conservatism to keep the gears of its dated market logic grinding forward. And while Henry argues that these works “render visible long-standing patterns of social and ecological violence” to “make space for the articulation of a just transition,” the counterexamples of “post-extraction futurisms” that fill this space—activist art produced from AMD (acid mine drainage)—are arguably no less grim (p. 105). The grassroots art activism about just water transition futures contained in the conclusions to each chapter sometimes struggle to make Henry’s point about the value of such advocacy, as the scale on which these counterexamples unfold can
feel dwarfed by the size of the crisis described so well in the rest of the chapter.

If the encounters between mainstream narrative climate pessimisms and local, land-based activism are somewhat uneven in *Hydronarratives*, the focus in “The Wrong Side of the Levee” on a Green New Deal (GND) concludes the book’s major chapters with one of its best demonstrations of the relationship between storytelling and social change, or as Henry puts it, the stakes inherent in “who controls the narrative around climate policy” (p. 115). The analysis in chapter 4 centers on the GND first put forward as a nonbinding House of Representatives resolution in 2018. Through the concept of “racial coastal formation,” Henry explores how a GND can contribute to a just transition for coastal communities faced with inundation due to sea level rise. The close readings in this chapter center on the video *A Message from the Future with Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez* (2019), the post-Katrina film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* (2017). Henry’s reading of *New York 2140* is a highlight of *Hydronarratives*, calling the novel to account for its color-blind workers’ revolution, in which the “GND scenario is ultimately diminished by an endemic inattention to the historically produced racial contours of climate inequality” (p. 126). While 2018’s GND is attentive to the concerns and precarity of marginalized communities of color and to the need to draw on Indigenous land stewardship practices in a just transition, Henry argues that future iterations, like the one imagined in *New York 2140*, run the risk of being stripped of these commitments. Narratives like *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, on the other hand, which keep racial coastal formation at the forefront of the public imaginary, are positioned as crucial reminders that for a GND to support a just water transition, it must be “truly reparative, anti-racist, [and] decolonial” (p. 116).

*Hydronarratives* is one of the first sustained engagements with the presence of just transition imaginaries in literary studies. And it takes seriously the need to think just transition, as does its archive, through the imperative of racial justice. It is also, in its commitments, an unapologetically Americanist project. It is focused on the need for a just transition for US workers and most urgently for poor communities and communities of color living in and on the edges of US “sacrifice zones” where the demands of extractive racial capitalism turn water into a world-destroying threat. But in the vein of American exceptionalism, it is invested, as are the conclusions of the Wyoming high schoolers, in a prosperous future built on American ingenuity and economic recovery. There is little talk of an end to capitalism, environmental revolutionary struggle, or global coalition building here. *Hydronarratives* is replete with visions of community but reluctant to talk communism. And as Kai Heron and Jodi Dean have suggested, without an absolute rejection of “the wage-relation, the value-form, private property, the state, and racialized and gendered regimes of systems-sustaining violence,” which requires not only a just but a revolutionary transition, the capitalist system that has produced our current climate crisis continues.[2]

The desire of *Hydronarratives* to see Wyoming 2030 thrive speaks to Henry’s commitment to advocating for “place-based, community-driven policy responsive to histories of violence and exclusion” (p. 116). This is not a book that claims to be looking out at the rest of the planet. However, this approach does narrow the project’s focus in a critical moment when Marxist, Indigenous, post-colonial, and critical ethnic studies conversations privilege the capaciousness of benchmark projects like Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2013), Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2021), and Kathryn Yusoff’s *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018), which encourage us to think at the scale of global coalition when it comes to storying climate crisis, decolonization, and ex-
tractive capitalism. However, the project’s somewhat countercurrent focus on local and profoundly American histories will be valuable to researchers engaged with environmental justice issues and educators seeking strong classroom examples of structural racism in situ. Henry accomplishes this, moreover, through an interdisciplinary approach to the study of narrative that will resonate strongly with contemporary American literature and cultural studies ecocritics. *Hydronarratives* is, above all, an argument for the urgent need to look for, identify, and produce future-looking stories about a just transition as a key metric to calling this future into being. The book may advocate for a survivable American future rather than bloody revolution, but it also makes the point that the window for choosing pathways forward is rapidly closing and the work needs to happen at multiple scales. As Henry writes, “the seas are rising, and there is little time to waste” (p. 144).

Notes


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