Introduction:

A Threat Personal and Global

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> Our children and grandchildren, seeing how tentative our response has been to global climate disorder . . . have framed already their objections: Why did you not prepare? Why were you so profligate while we still had a chance? Where was your wisdom?
>
> Barry Lopez

With the possible exception of nuclear war, human-engineered climate change is the greatest threat to our species, and all the species of the world, that we have ever faced. "The scientific evidence is unequivocal: climate change is a threat to human wellbeing and the health of the planet," the 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report states, "Any further delay in concerted global action will miss the brief, rapidly closing window to secure a liveable future" (IPCC). Often described as an "existential threat" – a term coined by UN Secretary-General António Guterres in 2018 at the Austrian World Summit – climate change pervades global environmental discourse ("Climate change"). Significant additions to our popular discourse indicate its impact on the individual ("climate anxiety") and its worldwide reach ("Anthropocene"). Glenn Albrecht is credited with introducing the term, "eco-anxiety," often used interchangeably with "climate anxiety" or in conjunction with "solastalgia," "eco-angst," or "environmental distress"; with varying nuance, these terms indicate that a human being suffers mental distress by personally experiencing disturbing changes in the environment (Coffey et al. 1). In a 2017 guide produced jointly by The American Psychological Association, Climate for Health, and ecoAmerica, the authors raise the concern that "Climate change–induced extreme weather, changing weather pat-

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terns, damaged food and water resources, and polluted air impact human mental health," thus "Increased levels of stress and distress from these factors can also put strains on social relationships and even have impacts on physical health, such as memory loss, sleep disorders, immune suppression, and changes in digestion" (Clayton et al.). Climate change has become so ubiquitous that many scientists agree we have moved from the Holocene epoch to a new epoch of human-driven environmental change: the Anthropocene. After fifteen years of debate, the international Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy voted on March 4, 2024, against declaring the Anthropocene. The decision was largely due to a lack of consensus among scientists about its start date and definition (Witze). While the terminology may continue to be debated, however, the Anthropocene "remains a broad cultural concept already used by many to describe the era of accelerating human impacts, such as climate change and biodiversity loss" (Witze). Despite debates in terminology or impact, temperatures continue to rise; the 2023 IPCC Synthesis Report notes with "high confidence" that global temperatures are rising at an accelerating rate (IPCC). Climate change and the subsequent alterations in the environment that come with it present a threat with global implications but one that can be felt on a very personal level. Environmental degradation from rising global temperatures has the potential to touch the human experience in totality.

This special issue of *American Literatures*, *Living and Dying in the Anthropocene: Responses in Contemporary Literature from the Western Hemisphere*, comprises a survey of perspectives from sixteen authors, in some cases presented through four translators, by writers from North America, Central America, and Europe. My introduction is in two parts. The first reflects on the personal nature of climate change, considering environmental changes I have observed in western North Carolina, as an invitation to readers to consider what—if any—environmental changes they have witnessed firsthand. I believe this first section resonates with the personal approaches to the climate issue in the interview with the author, Ron Rash, and the special curated commentary (including first person narrative and poetry) from Central American writers. The second part of the introduction provides a more traditional review of the scholarly essays that round out this special edition of *American Literatures*.

The Personal Reach of Climate Change

I have lived for thirty years in the high mountains of western North Carolina in a house that sits near a pass at an elevation of four thousand feet (1,219.2 meters). Our land is north facing, in the shadow of a steep ridge, and we enjoy a widescreen view of the distant Balsam mountains. Aside from the occasional spring blow or winter snow, this region has long been known for its dependable four seasons: cool summers, beautiful fall colors, winters of relatively light snowfall,

and glorious blooms of wildflowers in the spring. We live in a resort area, with nearby tourist attractions such as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park or quaint country club towns like Highlands. In an era of changing climate, our mountains have been recognized as a haven and lately our towns and the city of Asheville have felt a population surge and the press of gentrification.

Like most places across the globe, however, recent environmental degradation has become hard to ignore. In a short period of time, our wild Eastern Hemlocks have died out, unable to overcome the invasive woolly adelgid and warming temperatures ("Climate Change Connections"). The hemlocks on my property all died within two years. Now the ash trees are dying, killed by another invasive species: the emerald ash borer ("N.C. Forest Service"). Presently I am helplessly monitoring the death of the ash trees on my acreage and the surrounding forest. As Elizabeth Kolbert noted in her 2014 Pulitzer Prize winning bestseller, *The Sixth Extinction*, we are witnessing such a massive diminishment of living things that a human being in a normal lifespan can observe alterations in species diversity that would normally take thousands of years. From a scientist's point of view, she hopes to convey "the excitement of what's being learned as well as the horror of it" (Kolbert 3). She ruefully acknowledges that we are all living in a "truly extraordinary moment" (3).

Along with species decline, unusual extreme weather events add to a sense of unease about the local environment. After a prolonged dry spell in November 2023, a wildfire blew up and my wife and I watched from our deck as it almost topped a ridge nearby. Stunned, we wondered if we should evacuate. On May 9, 2024, just after midnight, an F2 tornado touched down in our yard. We surveyed the damage the next day, amazed by how old trees on our land had been ripped apart, their broken trunks crushing our car in the driveway. Across the road, the forest we used to take long walks in looked like a World War I battlefield. Local people could not believe it had been a tornado—certainly not in our mountains—until official confirmation came from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on June 6, 2024 (Coulter).

The remnant of Hurricane Helene that fell upon the mountains of western North Carolina on Friday, September 27, 2024, hit with a power beyond imagination: a plague of howling winds, sheets of rain, landslides, and flash floods. Helene shook the belief by many people in the region that we might be spared the environmental changes of the Anthropocene. Regarding the destruction caused by the storm, an October 23 CNN report noted: "It's all a far cry from the image that some media outlets, real estate agents and residents painted of Asheville, located hundreds of miles from the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico: a place relatively safe from the climate extremes affecting other parts of the US" (Paddison).

A look beyond the mountains of western North Carolina confirms that disasters such as Helene arrive with dizzying frequency. As I write, wildfires sweep

across Southern California and hurricane-force winds batter Ireland, Scotland, and the northern United Kingdom. We read about recent flooding in Europe and catastrophic wildfires in Canada, Greece, and Russia. Or we discover, from the environmental site Earth.org, that half of the fourteen worst typhoons in Asia in recorded history have occurred in the 21st century—six in the last fifteen years (Lewis). Responding to the World Meteorological Organization's confirmation that 2024 was the hottest year ever recorded, continuing a trend in the last decade, UN Secretary General Guterres said, "Global heating is a cold, hard fact . . . Individual years pushing past the [Paris Accord] 1.5 degree limit [like 2024] do not mean the long-term goal is shot . . . There's still time to avoid the worst of climate catastrophe. But leaders must act—now" ("WMO confirms").

Guterres issued his statement on January 10, 2025. Less than two weeks later, the newly inaugurated President of the United States responded by announcing the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. The policies enacted by the previous administration to curtail carbon emissions and slow the world's race to devastatingly high global temperatures have now been reversed. Each day it becomes more difficult to dismiss the famous first line of David Wallace-Wells' 2019 comprehensive book about climate change, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*: "It is worse, much worse, than you think" (3).

Contemporary Artistic and Scholarly Perspectives of the Climate Change Crisis

This special issue of *American Literatures* begins with an interview of Rash, one of the most celebrated Southern authors in the United States, whose poetry and fiction intertwine environment, people, and culture in ways that reflect the complexity of the climate change crisis. Although some of Rash's works, such as the novels *Serena* or *Saints at the River*, would easily fall in the category of environmental literature, the author strives not to write, as he puts it, "mere propaganda." Rather, as in *Saints at the River*, he creates the most "morally complex" situation possible, one that portrays the vexing conundrums when cultural, economic, and environmental interests compete. "When I write about environmental issues," he notes, "I do not want to simplify them." The attention to place that is one of the chief characteristics of his fiction and poetry invites the reader to consider Nature: what we had, what we have now, and what we stand to lose. As in his novel, *Above the Waterfall*, Rash wishes to leave the reader with a strong appreciation for the natural world—the wonder of it.

From the Southern Appalachians, this issue travels to a special section, curated by Luz Lepe Lira, Rita M Palacios, and Paul M Worley: "The Lands and Languages of Indigenous Futures: Perspectives from Latin America." The section provides a unique opportunity to read, in translation to English, prose, performance, and poetry by Indigenous authors from Mexico and Guatemala. The collection of works here fall outside the discourse of academic essays and, as the curators point

out in their introduction to the section, would not therefore be available to readers of *American Literatures*. "They sing about the relationship between diminishing rainfall and diminishing crop yields; they write poetry about the threat of multinational corporations that exploit spaces inhabited by sacred beings for oil, gas, or mineral wealth" the curators note, adding, "Are these expressions somehow less valid or pressing because they were not originally done for an academic audience?" The voices of the Indigenous authors in this section provide direct witness to the devastating impacts of climate change in North and Central America.

The individual works in this section are introduced by the curators, but I will add that the Indigenous voices represented demonstrate the insidious nature of the Anthropocene's ill effects, creating a picture of intertwined environmental degradation, body toxicity, cultural subjugation, and political oppression. This section, along with the body of Rash's work and his interview, portrays the incredibly complex and hemispheric (if not global) foundations of environmental destruction; for human beings, a systematic pathway to devastation that will prove suicidal to our species if not averted. The tone of urgency throughout the works in this section comes from authors on the ground in the midst of regional crises. There is haunting beauty in the words as well, as in these lines from "Gift" by Mikeas Sánchez (translated from Spanish and Zoque into English by Wendy Call):

> There is no greater gift to the gods
> than the vulture's reverence.
> There is no greater gift to the gods
> than human silence.

The remainder of *Living and Dying in the Anthropocene: Responses in Contemporary Literature from the Western Hemisphere* comprises eight traditional scholarly essays that examine the works of authors from several countries.

Jessica Cory's essay, "Another Apocalypse: Climate Change, the Anthropocene, and Coastal Indigenous Poetry," coheres with the topics of the curated special section as she introduces four Indigenous poets, Craig Santos Perez, dg nanouk okpik, Houston Cypress, and Thomas Parrie. Through her analysis, Cory considers how Indigenous peoples mitigate the effects of climate change by using traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). She writes, "I want to think through the works of these four writers from a variety of coastal regions to better understand how these poets and perhaps their larger Indigenous communities frame climate change and respond to it, especially where these adaptations rely on and engage with land-based knowledges and specific Indigenous histories and lived experiences." Cory's essay examines colonialism's connection with the acceleration of environmental degradation, as she concludes, "Unlike (predominantly white) settlers who often lack the recent layers of disenfranchisement tied to land and landedness, these

poets understand how the effects of climate change are simply one part in a much larger, complicated system and to have any future for *any of us*, these larger systems require collective dismantling."

In "'The Chance to Love Everything': Mary Oliver's Poetry of Affect," Ljubica Matek contemplates the restorative power of literature. The poetry of Mary Oliver, Matek asserts, moves us from the debilitation of climate despair and back to the brighter hues of British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. Oliver's work (like the poetry and fiction of Rash) reminds us to lean on the *wonder* that Nature still provides. "Mary Oliver subscribes to the Romantic aesthetic," Matek writes, "which highlights the beauty and necessity of love for the world as the cure for contemporary eco-maladies." Through Oliver's largely unexplored poetic development of *affect*—one's shifting physical or mental communion with the world—her poetry "*moves* the reader by making them see and feel non-human life as wondrous and therefore also precious." Matek suggests that Oliver's work often asks us to be open to affect and to be drawn to Romantic ideals and contemporary (surviving) natural wonders to navigate, if not endure, the troubling era of the Anthropocene.

Moving into the environment of our bodies, Loredana Flip's essay, "Towards Multisensory Aesthetics: Mundane Materiality in Richard Powers' *Plowing the Dark* and *The Overstory*," argues that visual representations in literature have privileged the visual for centuries, resulting in a limited view of nature and its subsequent commodification, exemplified in our data-driven, mechanical (Cartesian) view of our bodies. What results is a desire to escape or overcome the natural boundaries of our biological bodies with the help of technology. Richard Powers' *Plowing the Dark* suggests a multisensory approach and a reconnection with the material world to return to a natural order. As in Powers' work, authors who draw on all the senses might "blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman experiences, crafting more inclusive and ecologically conscious narratives." Filp concludes that "this kind of writing fosters a deeper connection to the environment, emphasizing the interdependence of all living and nonliving entities and encouraging a more profound awareness of the world's intricate materiality."

Another view of the relation of the human body to toxic environments, and a commentary that directly confronts the perils of fracking, oil extraction, and carbon emissions, is presented in Teresa Botelho's "The Vulnerable Body in Extraction Literature: Eco-sickness in Caridad Svich´s *The Way of Water* and Jennifer Haigh´s *Heat and Light*." Botelho's focus on the two texts, Svich's play and Haigh's novel, highlights the ongoing debate about fracking and oil extraction still raging in the United States (if not around the globe). Botelho examines the narrative strategies in both texts "to make visible the environmental damage caused by these extraction regimes" in a way that expands "the concept of a wounded eco-sphere to include scenarios of human vulnerability, mobilizing the trope of

sickness to signify the interdependency between the natural world and the human body affected by the same toxic threats."

In "The Polymodernity of Planetary Domesticity: Polycrisis, Life, and Form in T.C. Boyle's A *Friend of The Earth* and Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of The Living God*," John Cross considers Boyle's and Erdrich's texts in light of the bewildering cascade of problems arising in the Anthropocene—an era of polycrisis. He examines a reconfiguration of human thought to overcome paralyzing states of despair: a holistic approach recognizing interconnections among the individual, nature, economic and political systems, and even time itself. Cross suggests that the texts in his discussion illustrate a way forward: "In both Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* and Boyle's A *Friend of the Earth*, readers are invited to contemplate entanglements of the cultural, domestic, social, and symbolic with the biological and present literary narratives as sites of cultural repair for a new way of thinking through the current planetary crises and resist falling into despair, cynicism, or unwarranted optimism, and the belief/disbelief discourse of Progress."

The emphasis on new ways of thinking continues in Karoline C. S. Huber's "Coming of Age in Crisis: The Bildungsroman and Resilience in Climate Fiction," which explores Lily Brooks-Dalton's *The Light Pirate* and passages from Jessie Greengrass' *The High House* to illustrate new pathways in the coming-of-age story for children in the Anthropocene. Huber argues that the *Bildungsroman* genre finds new relevancy through reimagined nature to culture stories that exemplify new agency and resilience for children faced with environmental upheaval. "This updated and future-oriented version of the Bildungsroman can endow young people with agency by depicting how they display resilience in overcoming adversities in times of climate crises," Huber writes. Her essay reminds us that coming generations will bear the burden of the Anthropocene, making coming-of-age stories that realistically acknowledge adaptation and resilience in rapidly changing environments more essential than the obsolete nature to culture tales of the past.

This special issue of *American Literatures* concludes with a provocative essay, Sarah Marak's "'Learning to Fight in a World on Fire': Imagining Political Violence in the Anthropocene." As government and capitalistic systems all too slowly work (or not) to abate the climate crisis while peaceful protests and acts of civil disobedience lack sufficient impact, how do we reckon with violent political acts in the name of saving the environment? Marak finds answers through her reflections on the works of Andreas Malm, Herbert Haines, David Klass, and Kim Stanley Robinson. Noting that earlier texts "have portrayed radicalism as detrimental to the environmental movement's goals, and as a phenomenon that needs to be fought both by the state and the movement itself," Marak observes that the selection of works she discusses and others like them support "a radicalization of the climate movement." While her analysis illustrates a more aggressive, or at least urgent, direction for contemporary climate change literature, Marak captures the appre-

hension and even desperation that arises in the arts as more and more it seems our time is running out.

Living and Dying in the Anthropocene: Responses in Contemporary Literature from the Western Hemisphere offers a sweeping view of climate change from authors across one half of the world, as interpreted by commentators living in Croatia, Germany, Guatemala, Mexico, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. In most cases, the literature discussed seeks answers to the gravest threat to our species. How do we overcome deadly apathy or crippling despair? Does the way forward come by recognizing the remaining wonder of Nature, or by completely reimagining our systems of commerce and government, or by turning to the ancient wisdom of Indigenous people, or by reinventing the way we think or the stories we pass on to the next generation, or even by protests that extend to violence? The writing contained here provides many important questions to consider. And we know none of the answers will be easy.

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Biography

Brian Railsback is a Professor of English at Western Carolina University, where he has served as Department Head of English, Founding Dean of The Honors College, and Chair of the Faculty Senate. He teaches creative writing and U.S. literature. He has published *Charles Darwin and the Art of John Steinbeck* (1995), *The Darkest Clearing* (novel, 2004), co-edited with Michael Meyer *A John Steinbeck Encyclopedia* (2006), short stories, and numerous essays (over twenty on John Steinbeck). He has lectured or taught courses in Cuba, Georgia, Hungary, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, and Portugal. A Fiction Participant at the 2022 Bread Loaf Writers Conference, in 2023 he was named the Steve Kemp Writer in Residence at Great Smoky Mountains National Park; his essays about living there are in the Fall 2024 issue of *Smokies Life Journal*. His latest essay, "Searching for 'True Things' with John Steinbeck," is in the book, *Steinbeck's Uneasy America: Rereading Travels with Charley* (2025). In 2025, the Whitehead Family Dr. Brian Railsback Honors College Scholarship was endowed in his honor.