

Editors' Notes

Climate Change, Scale, and Literary Criticism: A Conversation

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and Timothy Clark

Abstract: This conversation among the editors of *ARIEL* and Timothy Clark addresses his 2012 essay, “Derangements of Scale,” published in *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*. In his essay, Clark suggests that scale effects play an important role in contemporary global politics and climate change, and he proposes a new, larger scale of literary study commensurate with an awareness of these issues. The editors discuss the implications of Clark’s essay for postcolonial studies, the merits of his proposed method of literary interpretation, and the ramifications of his discussion of human agency. Clark takes up all of these issues in his response to the editors’ conversation.

Keywords: climate change, scale, postcolonial theory, literary criticism, human agency

In his recent essay “Derangements of Scale,” Timothy Clark argues that scale effects play an increasingly significant role in contemporary global politics and have important implications for literary studies. Scale effects occur when physical and social structures that might work on a smaller scale fail to work on a larger one: a model of a wooden bridge rebuilt as a full-sized bridge, for example, might fail to support the necessary weight.

The management of global climate change, Clark explains, is undermined by the globally dominant system of political governance, which is based on the nation-state and democratic individualism and thus occurs on the wrong scale. Founded on “institutions of private prop-

erty, market-based economics, individualistic-rights-based notions of personhood and the conception of the state as ‘existing to secure the freedom of individuals on a formally egalitarian basis,’” the modern political system supports “the unmolested use of individual property and exploitation of natural resources” (Clark). The dominant contemporary system of political governance thus exacerbates the problems of global climate change and undermines attempts to address global warming. As these foundations of governance and liberal society are disseminated globally, scale effects have escalating consequences. Clark argues that “progressive social and economic policies designed to disseminate Western levels of prosperity . . . resemble, on another scale, an insane plan to destroy the biosphere.”

The problems of contemporary political governance, Clark suggests, are replicated in contemporary methods of literary criticism, which also occur on the wrong scale. The dominant modes of criticism, including Marxism, feminism, postcolonial theory, queer theory, race studies, and disability studies, pit the rights and privileges of different groups against each other with the aim of achieving equity among the groups. Under this method, a text becomes “an arena for the contestation of individual or collective interests, rights or identity claims” (Clark). Yet the goal of such contestation—the redistribution of social and material resources on a more equitable basis—elides the environmental damage caused by the exploitation of material resources. The attempt to achieve just human arrangements (and to use literary texts to help us think about what those might be or how they might be achieved) looks ideologically suspect on the scale of climate change. What matters at this scale is not human intention but nonhuman agency (e.g., the warming of the planet). The usual aim of literary criticism, as construed by Clark, begins to look pointless. “In sum,” Clark writes, “at the third scale [the scale of climate change], a kind of non-anthropoc irony deranges [literature] as any assimilable object of any given kind of moral/political reading.”

Clark proposes that critics shift the scale of their analysis and demonstrates what this would look like by offering an analysis of Raymond Carver’s short story “Elephant” at three different scales. At an intimate,

personal scale, the story, one might suppose, is about individual domestic heroism—a tale of a lower-middle-class man contriving to support an extended clan who persist in calling on him to give them money. Reading the story at a national scale, critics have suggested that it explores the protagonist's temporary and compromised escape from the consumerism and materialism of United States culture in the late twentieth century and argued that it protests against the economic disenfranchisement of the lower-middle class. At the third, global scale, the story illuminates the carbon footprint of the family as well as the family's entrapment in a culture of dependence on consumption and fossil fuels that is wreaking havoc on the planet. Clark ends his essay by meditating on the relative merits of these three interpretations. He concludes that the third scale does not necessarily invalidate the others. Instead, he proposes that critics strive for “multiple, conflictual” interpretations on various scales.

Michael Tavel Clarke: Clark's essay is provocative not only for the originality of its claims and methodology but also for its implications for postcolonial theory and other contemporary critical methods. The essay raises three primary questions for me: Does criticism engaged with ethical questions of equity across human populations (the standard postcolonial mode) necessarily undermine a global environmental consciousness and consideration of the nonhuman? Does the nationalist mode, with its support of sovereignty, national and cultural autonomy, and equity across nations that, at least until recently, dominated postcolonial criticism, necessarily represent an evasion of global responsibility magnified by recent environmental change? Would a turn to a global politics undermine still-valid arguments about the continuing need for equity across human populations, particularly as climate change exacerbates those inequities?

Addressing just the first question, it strikes me that Clark may pose the dilemma too starkly. Equity- and rights-based criticism has value for thinking about the environment and the nonhuman, for example. This is particularly true when we recognize the environment and nonhuman species as Others; postcolonial and comparable political forms of

criticism have a great deal to say about the processes, consequences, and rectification of Othering. We need not necessarily abandon equity- and rights-based approaches but rather expand them to encompass the earth and its nonhuman occupants. Ecocritical approaches, in fact, often deploy existing methods for the study of human interaction with the environment.

With regard to the second question—the conflict between national and global modes of criticism—it strikes me that the nationalist mode may still have some abiding value as well. Citing Dale Jamieson, Clark argues that “the founding conceptions of the liberal tradition [of political governance] emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ‘in low-population-density and low-technology societies, with seemingly unlimited access to land and other resources.’” In a sense, postcolonial politics and criticism have long challenged this liberal tradition, a fact that becomes apparent when we note Clark’s description of the consequences of this tradition: “Structurally committed to a process of continuous economic growth, modern Western society effectively projected as its material condition an ever-expandable frontier of new land or resources.” Since its inception, postcolonial scholarship has challenged the Western ideology of the ever-expandable frontier. While Clark and other critics have emphasized the border-eroding characteristics of climate change, and while critics today routinely highlight the problems that national borders create, there may be something to be said for the borders that postcolonial theory traditionally celebrated. Borders represent an ideological challenge to the ever-expandable frontier and its culture of continuous growth. Borders are thus symbols of the self-restraint, limitation, and containment that will be necessary if we are to reduce the global consumption of natural resources.

Faye Halpern: But Michael, I’m not entirely sure that national borders act as brakes to fossil fuel consumption in a context of global trade. And even if they do, they are certainly not acting as sufficient ones. Instead of further arguing this point, however, I want to pick up on your interest in thinking about the ramifications of this article for postcolonial theory and other kinds of literary criticism. To what extent does Clark’s call to

perform criticism according to a third or global scale change things? Conventional literary criticism, including postcolonial criticism, has not operated on this scale, with some exceptions; instead, as Clark makes clear, it has operated on the human scale, according to geographies and time frames that do not challenge our normal ways of apprehending the world. According to Clark, analyzing “Elephant” on this global scale makes certain things salient in the story that would otherwise go ignored: the existence of cars and the reproduction of humans—and that they’re American humans is not insignificant. If we imagine for a moment that Carver’s story world is just like our own world, each one of these American humans referenced in the story will use up more than his or her share of the earth’s resources (although thinking in terms of “his or her share” is one of the things that the exigent global warming leads us to question: perhaps, at this point, there are just no shares left) and contribute more than their share to carbon emissions. I’d like to pursue this question of what literary criticism would look like at this third scale when expanded from Carver’s short story to other literary works, as presumably Clark would like it to be.

I wonder how different an analysis of “Elephant” would look from an analysis of Alexander Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock” (1712) or Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007). (I’m deliberately taking very different works from very different periods and traditions.) My suspicion is: not very much. Wouldn’t literary criticism done on this scale produce a lot of very similar readings that all render visible artifacts of the industrial revolution (or glimmerings of it) and/or the existence of children? Close reading, the literary critic’s bread and butter, would be made unnecessary. I suspect literary criticism practiced at this scale would lose the specificity that makes different pieces of literary criticism interesting to at least the small number of people who read such things.

But perhaps the fact that this third scale doesn’t produce particularly interesting readings if read in bulk is not a reason to reject it, especially if its interest inheres not in this third-scale reading in and of itself but in this reading’s juxtaposition with criticism done on more familiar scales. Clark cautions us not to pursue these third-scale readings to the exclusion of more familiar kinds. “In sum,” Clark writes, “reading at several

scales at once cannot be just the abolition of one scale in the great claim of another but a way of enriching, singularizing and yet also creatively deranging the text.”

However, I think that Clark’s article makes literary criticism as it is conventionally done, at the human scale, seem limited, not just in its ignorance of the scale suggested by climate change but on its own terms. Clark wants his portrait of “Elephant” and its criticism to act, in little, as a representation of all literary criticism. It’s not that I think scale effects apply to this miniature model, but I do think that he makes this story and its criticism seem more definitive than they actually are, as he does traditional literary criticism as a whole.¹

In fact, “Elephant” resists a definitive reading at this smaller scale; it breeds uncertainty. At the beginning of the story, the narrator’s impeccable brother asks him for a loan and promises he’ll pay him back soon: “Trust me on this,” the brother says, “I won’t let you down” (38). “Trust me” becomes a refrain in the story, and its very syntax makes the reader distrust the person who utters it and hence distrust the narrator to the extent he does not share the reader’s skepticism. After reading the story, one might even entertain thoughts that the short story form might be, in Carver’s estimation, a sales pitch like the ones that characterize the narrator’s relatives. But Clark does not convey this uncertainty in his description of the story and the criticism of it at the first two scales.

To illustrate what I mean, let me just pick up on a moment in Clark’s essay when he summarizes the plot of “Elephant,” which can be seen as a series of dupings of the narrator by his (perhaps) struggling relatives. According to Clark, the narrator’s brother, “requiring immediate help to pay the mortgage on his house, seems later to be able to forgo more borrowing because his wife might sell some land in her family.” Later, Clark refers to this sister-in-law as a “landowner.” But the story puts the existence of this land in question: the narrator’s family members appear willing to tell him anything to get him to cough up more money, and there seems no reason to believe any of their stories, even if the narrator himself sometimes chooses to do so. If this small plot point is in doubt, then so much more the ending of the story, which Clark, summing up literary criticism on it, characterizes as either “a wry anecdote of per-

sonal heroism” or “a protest against social exclusion.” Yet it can just as easily be taken as the final scamming of a credulous man—and credulous reader.

So what does this uncertainty matter with reference to Clark’s call to change the way we do literary criticism? I think it indicates that we should take one of Clark’s points very seriously, perhaps more so than he does himself. Clark takes pains to say that the third scale should not count as the final word in literary interpretation; neither, he suggests, should it remain deaf to what the first two scales can teach it: “An ecological overview is in danger of feeding a reductive but increasingly familiar green moralism, keen to turn ecological facts into moral imperatives on how to live, blind to the sense of helplessness dominant in ‘Elephant’ at the first scale.” The narrator’s inability to change his situation—what I take Clark to mean by the narrator’s helplessness (his relatives dismiss his threats of moving to Australia as empty)—should cause us to question how effective any individual can be in halting climate change. But this point is one Clark makes throughout the article, as when he gives examples of the “almost nonsensical rhetoric of environmental slogans” like the one that asserts that “[a] motorist buying a slightly less destructive make of car is now ‘saving the planet.’” In other words, this point about helplessness does nothing but reaffirm Clark’s own sense of the way that climate change requires us to change the way we think about human agency.

Yet I think the uncertainty that *my* smaller-scale reading unearths could inflect Clark’s third-scale reading with more force. Without the destabilizing force of uncertainty the story provides at a smaller scale of reading, I think his third reading does not escape being an “assimilable object of any given kind of moral/political reading” (Clark). I fear that Clark’s third-scale reading, protected from the uncertainty produced by the first two, becomes precisely that: an affirmation of the claims presented in Clark’s article, which enjoin us to think about and change our world to slow down global warming even as it resists reassuring us that any individual’s actions could alleviate it.

I think, then, that attending to the uncertainty at the heart of “Elephant,” to how the story resists definitive interpretation, helps

strengthen Clark's argument even as this uncertainty takes the argument to task for making interpretations of "Elephant" look more definitive than they are. This uncertain reading emphasizes the extent to which a large-scale reading cannot do without smaller-scale readings. That is, Clark's article should function as an "and also" intervention in literary criticism rather than a replacement of it in favor of a call for literary critics to do more ethical things with their time, as the ending of his article seems to suggest.²

Of course, "Elephant" is not the only literary text that unsettles our certainty in interpreting the world around us, although it may do so more explicitly than most. "Uncertainty" as a principle in literary criticism: it's hard to see this if we look at any particular article, which will almost always proceed with absolute certainty in regard to its own claim. Yet taken as a whole—at a larger scale—literary criticism has managed to challenge a number of commonsensical ideas that many people hold, and none has done this more so than the political criticism that Clark counsels us to see as inadvertently engaged in a strategy of containment. In emphasizing a reading of "Elephant" that excavates the uncertainty that runs throughout the story (even as I have proceeded with certainty in putting forth this reading), I hope to expose how literary criticism—done at the smaller scales—is able to continue its work of unsettling habitual ways we see the world and paving the way for us to see the value in the disorienting and perhaps revolutionary scale of reading that Clark recommends. But this is true only if this third-scale mode of reading is thought of as an addition to what we already do rather than a replacement of it.

Michael: You offer a really nice reading of Carver's "Elephant" in relation to Clark's essay, and your discussion reassures me about one of the concerns I had regarding the ending of Clark's argument. I agree with you that Clark's article makes literary criticism as it is conventionally done, at the human scale, seem limited. I was disappointed by the end of his article, therefore, which seemed to retreat from its main claim. In concluding that the global scale of criticism does not necessarily invalidate the smaller scales, it seemed to me that Clark was withdrawing

from his more controversial argument about the priority of the large scale analysis. You offer a good defense of the continuing value of the multiple scales of interpretation.

I'd like to pick up on a minor comment you make about Clark's essay—the idea that global warming requires us to change the way we think about human agency. This is a point that Dipesh Chakrabarty has also raised,³ and it involves a fundamental skepticism about traditional conceptions of human agency in an era in which individual contributions to climate change seem insignificant compared to the effects on the planet of humans as a species. It is also, I would argue, a skepticism that has been reinforced by the rise of multinational corporations that make individuals and even entire nations seem insignificant in terms of global governance. In this context, a focus on the individual or the nation (the small or medium scale) seems antiquated. Yet political activism continues to encourage individual changes in behavior, producing, in Clark's estimation, "fantasies of agency." Such "fantasies" suggest, for example, that an individual's choice to buy a fuel-efficient car will "save the planet." As Clark puts it, "[r]eceived concepts of agency, rationality, and responsibility are being strained or even begin to fall apart." For Clark and others, the erosion of an individualist conception of human agency is tied to suspicions about the "value of 'democracy' as the most enlightened way to conduct human affairs" (Clark). Clark doesn't address the alternative, which would seem to be some form of totalitarian politics, yet he implicitly withdraws from the alternative by suggesting that diverse forms of literary criticism continue to have value and no single mode (the third scale) should take precedence over other modes. In other words, he ends up promoting a democratic, individualist free market of ideas despite the overall tack of his essay, which privileges global ecocriticism as the only viable model for contemporary literary studies, a model that is particularly valuable because it abandons a fixation on individual human agency.

I find this interesting because Carver's "Elephant" is similarly preoccupied with questions of human agency. The narrator repeatedly expresses feelings of helplessness. While the story opens with his recognition that he "knew it was a mistake to let [his] brother have the money," he never-

theless feels he has no choice: “[W]hat could I do?” (Carver 38). His belief in his lack of agency takes the linguistic form of a repetitive use of the phrase “I had to”: “I had to keep shelling out” (38); “I had to keep on sending her money” (39); “I had to help her” (40); “I had to get a loan” (40); “I sent him the money. I had to. I felt I had to, at any rate—which amounts to the same thing” (38). As the last quotation suggests, however, the story undercuts the narrator’s sense of his own absent agency, and it seems clear that his abdication of agency does him and his family little good. He does have choices, in part because his family members frequently manipulate and dupe him; he increasingly comes across as an enabler who, at least in some cases (such as his cocaine-using son), facilitates reckless spending and poor decision-making by bankrolling his family. I can’t help but hear echoes of Reaganite hostility toward “welfare queens” here. The story, in fact, verges on a Republican critique of the welfare system—the idea that welfare is a bleeding-heart liberal program to support the lazy and impecunious, and the government (or the narrator) would do better to encourage self-sufficiency through withdrawal of support (or tough love). In such a reading, the elephant of the title might refer to the Republican critique of massive government (it’s no accident that an elephant is also the symbol of the Republican Party). The story retreats somewhat from that hardline position by acknowledging systemic forces that undermine self-sufficiency and restrict human agency. If we take him at his word, for example, the narrator’s brother, through no apparent fault of his own, was laid off with two hundred other employees and lost his health insurance. “[T]hings happen sometimes,” the narrator observes (38). “Just now . . . things were hard for everyone” (45).

But acknowledgement of systemic forces that restrict human agency doesn’t completely evacuate the importance of the narrator’s individual choices, and one can hear elements of the narrator’s resignation and apathy even when he thinks about systemic forces: “[T]hings happen,” he says, as if mentally shrugging. The liberal retort to the Republican critique is that only systemic changes matter, and that in fact systemic forces provide a deceptive illusion of freedom and may actually restrict individuals to a limited set of choices that are ultimately damaging to the

environment and the self. Yet the liberal emphasis on systemic change can promote apathy on the individual level at a time when every contribution makes a difference, even if small-scale differences are difficult to perceive from a global perspective. With regard to global warming, the value of small-scale efforts is magnified, given the current absence of a unified global effort tackling the problem of climate change. Equally troubling, an abandonment of individual agency reflects and promotes a global political system increasingly governed autocratically by institutions of transnational capitalism. In other words, I think the abdication of human agency and the skepticism toward democracy are linked, both for Clark and other contemporary thinkers; both attitudes are symptoms of transnational capitalism rather than definitive arguments about human capabilities in the contemporary world. I don't see why it's necessary to conclude, as Clark seems to do, that a higher-scale reading necessitates a rejection of human agency. Individual agency has always been limited by systemic forces (a fact that lower-scale readings have also acknowledged), but that doesn't eradicate the existence or importance of individual agency. A focus on the global doesn't override continued consideration of the local.

If the narrator's conviction about his lack of agency in Carver's "Elephant" leads to a persistent use of the word "had" as a form of compulsion ("I had to") in the early parts of the story, his change of mindset near the end of the story leads him to re-deploy the word "have." The narrator accepts the burden of his family dependents, gives up his own attachment to material possessions, and feels psychologically unburdened, at least temporarily; this is all signified by new uses of the word "have." "I could skip having milk," he says. "I didn't have anything worth stealing. . . . There was nothing in the house I couldn't live without. I had the TV but I was sick of watching TV. . . . I had time to spare" (44). The narrator disavows his interest in having things, dismisses the value of the things he has, and embraces things that are free and universal (time). The word "have" changes, in other words, from a form of compulsion (arguably an effect of consumer capitalism, which insists on the necessity of having things) to a kind of Buddhist attitude of non-attachment. In exercising the limited form of agency he feels he has access

to—the choice to give up attachments to material objects—the narrator ironically achieves the asceticism that will be necessary among the privileged if the world is to overcome global warming. This is what I meant earlier when I said that borders are important symbols of limits and restraints—on materialism, on consumption, on waste, and so forth. Such symbols are significant on all scales, both the individual and the systemic.

If this sounds like the “green moralism” to which Clark objects, I would reply that one might ask whether Clark’s own third-scale literary criticism transcends individualist green politics. What value does a global, ecocritical perspective have if not to train us in a transnational, environmental way of thinking as a means of preparing us for the mindset that will be necessary for political and social change to combat global warming? As you put it, Faye, “Clark’s article . . . enjoin[s] us to think about and change our world to slow down global warming even as it resists reassuring us that any individual’s actions could alleviate it.” I’m not convinced that Clark’s third-scale reading evacuates politics or moralism any more than it evacuates human agency. Individualist human agency, in fact, is a prerequisite for any form of literary study that purports to offer an original analysis of a text—which is to say, it is a prerequisite for all literary criticism—and Clark’s third-scale reading of Carver is no exception. It is not, as Clark suggests, that the third-scale reading “deranges the short story as any easily assimilable object of . . . moral/political reading”; rather, it is Clark’s insistence on the absence of human agency that deranges the functions of literary criticism—an insistence contradicted by his own essay.

Carver’s “Elephant” exposes its narrator’s abdication of agency as an unproductive form of apathy and a possible effect of consumer capitalism. In exposing its narrator in this way, the story invites renewed attention to the possibilities of individual agency even as it acknowledges systemic limits constraining that agency. I’m wary of Clark’s abdication of human agency because I’m concerned that it may promote an equally unproductive form of apathy and acquiescence to the current global governance by massive economic institutions that is undermining our faith in the possibility of democratic governance. A continued

recognition of individual agency and its limits might have benefits for Clark's third-scale ecocriticism, the planet as a whole, and a rejuvenated democracy in a climate increasingly skeptical of political change from below.

Faye: Yes, I agree you can interpret the story to suppose that it is condemning apathy—and making a distinction between that and Buddhist non-attachment. We've managed to pull many plausible interpretations from the story. This might be a problem: I suspect that we—you, me, Clark—can ingeniously find the kind of interpretations of “Elephant” to support whatever points we're trying to make (and can also find evidence to undermine each other's interpretations). And even if our interpretations of uncertainty or human agency in “Elephant” are unimpeachable, it's still not clear how we should apply them to the problem of climate change.

In terms of my own reading, “Elephant” thematizes uncertainty—of that I'm pretty certain—but does it endorse it as a healthful attitude to take toward the world or condemn it as uncharitable? And even if we could decide how the story evaluates uncertainty, why should that attitude necessarily help us think about climate change? Yet I proceeded as if it would—or at least as if it would provide enough evidence to help us think more deeply about Clark's article.

This finessing might be exactly what Clark is hoping to avoid with his desire to offer a reading that prevents this story from becoming an “assimilable object of any given kind of moral/political reading.” Yet our conversation has made me doubt whether it's possible to avoid it. The ingeniousness of literary critics, combined with the multiplicity of interpretative possibilities that an interesting work of literature offers, is a real problem if we look to these works to guide us in our thinking about climate change. Yes, our ingenious readings can add authority to our claims about climate change and its relationship to literary criticism, but can they lead us to think of something we weren't already inclined to think? That kind of discomfort—adopting a way of thinking that undermines many of the values and beliefs we hold—might be something that's required to combat climate change,

and I'm not certain we're capable, in our guise as literary critics, of embracing it.

I realize that I might seem to be contradicting myself here: in my earlier response I described how literary critics have presented us with usefully counterintuitive ideas about the world, but here I'm doubting the efficacy of literary texts to guide our thinking on an issue like climate change. Clark's article might be proof of both observations: it generates importantly counterintuitive ideas about the flaws in our thinking about climate change, but I'm not convinced that he needed to use "Elephant" to get to them. For all of us, I suspect "Elephant" played the role of heuristic more than incubator. But perhaps Clark can comment on whether he agrees that the multiplicity of interpretive possibilities in a story like "Elephant" presents a problem for using it to think about climate change.

Timothy Clark: I'm delighted that my essay has sparked this intelligent interest, and it's great to have been given this chance to join the discussion. It will be more interesting if I use this space to think more about the arguments rather than spend too much time defending the exact letter of my essay.

I'd most like to take up the understanding in your discussion that the reading of Carver at the large, six-hundred-year scale entails "a rejection of human agency," or that the argument about this scale involves an "abdication of human agency" and that "it is [my] insistence on the absence of human agency that deranges the functions of literary criticism" rather than any view enforced by the expanded spatial and temporal scale.

I think the issues are rather more complex than this. I'd like to go back to the central theme of "scale effects." The editorial summary of the essay suggests that scale effects occur "when physical and social structures that might work on a smaller scale fail to work on a larger one: a model of a wooden bridge rebuilt as a full-sized bridge, for example, might fail to support the necessary weight." This is a good example, but my essay also refers briefly to the now widely used notion of a "carbon footprint." This useful concept relates to the issue of an individual's environmental impact on the atmosphere or, crudely speaking, the at-

mospheric pollution for which he or she could notionally be held responsible. However—and this is where scale effects come in—the size of anyone's carbon footprint could be of no interest or significance *in itself*. After all, if it were just a matter of my own emissions the very concept of a carbon footprint would be otiose. The carbon footprint of my life, or any source, matters in relation to scale effects—that is, the uncertain effect of there being so many billions of other footprints over an uncertain timescale, including multiple, often badly understood human and nonhuman factors each with uncertain thresholds of impact (such as population dynamics, economic growth, the way tundra decays, or the reflectivity of clouds). Scale effects are something beyond my individual horizon, perception, or even calculation. The effect of my individual action in relation to my carbon footprint is caught up in this series in which each impact is of significance only through its opaque relation to the others, now and in the future. So I do not see scale effects as reducing individual human agency to nothing but instead as introducing a perplexing blend of intellectual uncertainty and moral urgency, as taking equations of moral and political accounting and, if I can quote an early part of the essay, dropping into them “both a zero and an infinity: [for] the greater the number of people engaged in modern forms of consumption then the less the relative influence or responsibility of each but the worse the cumulative impact of their insignificance” (Clark).

Michael writes:

I don't see why it's necessary to conclude, as Clark seems to do, that a higher scale reading necessitates a rejection of human agency. Individual agency has always been limited by systemic forces (a fact that lower scale readings have also acknowledged), but that doesn't eradicate the existence or importance of individual agency. A focus on the global doesn't override continued consideration of the local.

The original essay was not meant to deny the existence of human agency, even at the individual level. My aim was to highlight the alarming factors that reduce human agency's possible impact to an unknowable and miniscule level while simultaneously implicating it (and

normal life in a modern context such as Carver's) in environmentally destructive decisions of acquiescence usually not even recognised as such. In this case there is the cruel irony of acts of personal generosity at the individual scale being implicated, however minutely and uncertainly, in the support of modes of life that ultimately entail deprivation and violence on the larger one. Michael writes usefully that the virtue or purpose of the third-scale reading could only be to influence the possible choices for human agency in "preparing us for the mindset that will be necessary for political and social change." I think this last implication is clearly right, but that any emergent mindset is also now caught up in a syndrome that Richard Kerridge has well described: we are becoming more and more aware of the work of nonhuman players in environmental change and of the limits of individual human agency, precisely at a time when human action seems more and more urgent (367). My essay attempted to map out this condition of entrapment in Carver's comic monologue.

Faye and Michael's sense that the essay gives too circumscribed a view of human agency suggests to me that I should have distinguished more clearly between two aspects of the view from a hypothetical and extremely damaged future. The first aspect is Carver's US citizens' awareness of inhabiting what William Ophuls describes as a condition of "energy slavery." The provocative phrase helps stress how much characters like Carver's speaker inhabit an infrastructure and economy in which their choices are not only very constrained but in which most of them, unwittingly or not, have a cumulative and negative environmental impact, and where even what passes as "normal life," along with the psychic conditioning of ideologies such as consumerism and liberal individualism, inhabit the space of possibility created temporarily by fossil fuel use. If this is accepted then there may also be difficult material pressures on the seemingly straightforward moral/political argument that arises out of current inequities, i.e., not abandoning equity- and rights-based approaches but rather seeking to "expand them to encompass the earth and its nonhuman occupants," as Michael suggests. Might the term "expand" be potentially misleading here, suggesting as it does a limitless or at least unconsidered reserve of resources? The larger scale

reading can perhaps be provocative by making it more difficult for a Western critic to argue for an expansion of the rights and conditions that he or she already probably enjoys, rather than thinking that, for example, his or her being a motorist is already morally problematic.

The second aspect of the larger-scale view is that, in the hypothetical late twenty-third century, it will be the real, physical impacts of now-living people that will be felt, regardless of those people's attitudes, voting habits, or intentions when alive. This long-scale, ecological perspective, concerning matters of energy and waste, does not deny individual human agency but simply discounts questions of personhood or past intention in the first place. At this scale the psychological or interpersonal uncertainties suggested for rereading the text at the lower scales are necessarily irrelevant: it would not matter if the speaker were being duped by his relatives or not, or whether the narrator is learning to give up his own material possessions while still bankrolling the lifestyles of the others. The retrospective scenario that emerges is still one of his entrapment on the game board of physical scale effects he does not see. So I want to qualify the editorial summary's assertion that "[w]hat matters at this [largest] scale is not human intention but nonhuman agency." It is rather that individual human agency registers on the same level as nonhuman agency, i.e., in terms of its physical effects, even while the totality of human actions have become a new, quasi-geological entity that produces obscure and unintended and unplanned impacts, while human agency *en masse* is as obscure and implacable as nonhuman agency. To express this, I used the gothic imagery of a malign, parallel "zombie" universe in which the characters, caught up in their personal dramas, are doubled by themselves as merely physical entities. This imagery was meant to express the disjunction between our normal scales and forms of consideration and this purely material one.⁴

To turn to a related issue in the editors' response, Michael writes that "[i]n concluding that the global scale of criticism does not necessarily invalidate the smaller scales, it seemed to me that Clark was withdrawing from his more controversial argument about the priority of the large-scale analysis." Yet it also seemed extremely important not to argue that the demands of the third scale could or should automati-

cally be converted into personal and national imperatives to be realized at once (i.e., leading surely to kinds of eco-fascism), but to also try to keep open, in tension with each other, the individual and group-scale viewpoints of earlier scales. If this sounds evasive, it anticipates a world in which, because current modes of life are already unsustainable, the future becomes the scene of a continuous and, ideally, very informed casuistry, with every significant decision requiring us to weigh current, specific individual or group interests against costs to others—human and nonhuman—not just in the present but in an extrapolated future. The reading on several scales is a way of mapping the contours of the dilemma. We now live in a time in which we know that we cannot *not* consider things on this third scale, even if we have no adequate inherited means of doing so and it produces conflicting values and priorities.

Michael asks if “criticism engaged with ethical questions of equity across human populations (the standard postcolonial mode) necessarily undermine[s] a global environmental consciousness and consideration of the nonhuman.” I’d like to be able to answer “no.” My concern was with pseudo-progressive liberal arguments, often couched in terms of social inclusion, for which the issues were matters of respect and equitable distribution of resources *within the borders of a given nation-state*. In the American context at issue, for example, what might look like material equity between people considered only at the national scale—say in terms of the universalization of car-ownership and use—could never be transferrable to the whole population of the earth without massive environmental destruction. The daily suburban normality is ultimately a complex form of theft. As Robert Savino Oventile remarks, in an exclusively US context a politicised criticism at this social-cultural scale remains tied to narratives of inclusion and “recognition of the other” that also function as the soft face of an expanding US capitalism, for they are based on norms of prosperous, national inclusion structurally in denial of their parasitism on the rest of the world: “Tied to narratives of progress, these critical programs rely on visions of a future that, on inspection, project versions of the present, only cleansed of the contradictions and impasses making the present possible” (328). So ecological arguments about the unsustainable violence of “developed” modes of

life render even this account of life in US suburbia already a kind of “postcolonial” reading.

Thus the issue in reading “Elephant” like this becomes a kind of material/environmental unconsciousness. The narrator has no awareness of the fact that his acts of self-sacrifice and generosity are caught in broader economic and infrastructural systems that, on the planetary scale, are unsustainable, or that, in maintaining the separate households of his relatives in a social context in which these kinds of small separate households with individual luxuries such as cars are taken simply as a respectable norm, he is also reducing the options for future generations of human and nonhuman lives. This may seem like an incongruous juxtaposition of concerns—personal generosity in an ordinary suburb is said to enable or disregard severe ecological damage—and it certainly matches the sense of impropriety and even absurdity that many people feel when confronted with green politics and its seemingly intrusive moral constraints. Yet this is what the thinking on the larger scale uncovers. This also corresponds, I think, with kinds of psychic discomposure currently felt by increasing numbers of people as they become environmentally aware. Consciousness of the way even one’s most trivial actions may be caught up in vast ramifications produces kinds of psychic disorder, a mixture of a contradictory sense of powerlessness, horror, and responsibility that will also seem necessarily “out of proportion” or “over the top” because older norms of proportionality have become anachronistic and one is subject to compelling moral claims that are increasingly at odds with each other.

Faye asked a question that has bothered me a lot in the past few years: “I wonder how different an analysis of ‘Elephant’ would look from an analysis of Alexander Pope’s ‘The Rape of the Lock’ (1712) or Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007). . . . My suspicion is this: not very much.” I think this is where the point about reading on all three scales, not just the planetary one, seems important, with the largest scale not eclipsing the specificity of the lower ones (for instance the humour in “Elephant,” questions of style, or the possible alternative readings of character and motive) but becoming an increasingly unignorable source of awkward questions for more mainstream criticism. What seems set to be devel-

oped, spurred by the demands to think on the scale required by the issues of climate change, would be a new offshoot of postcolonial criticism in which future generations, nonhuman as well as human, are regarded as a significant moral focus and enforce new or revised evaluations of the literary heritage. Such readings work back from the growing likelihood of environmental disaster to consider ways in which modes of action and thought at issue in an object text may or may not be implicated in that future. This is “catachronism” (Srinivas Aravamudan’s neologism, which plays on “anachronism”) or “backcasting”—the rereading of a contemporary or past text in relation to a re-characterization of “the past and the present in terms of a future proclaimed as determined but that is of course not yet fully realized” (Aravamudan 8). Taking up, just off the cuff, the two texts Faye mentioned, such backcasting would touch on the nascent imperialist culture of luxury commodification in Pope’s poem (suggesting a fairly standard postcolonial reading, perhaps, but with an intensified sense of the stakes), while Sinha’s *Animal’s People*, as a contemporary text, could be far more directly related to postcolonial environmental politics, with such evident foci as environmental disaster, international capitalism and its evasions of responsibility, and the human/animal difference. That interpretation seems at least morally straightforward, but if we read “catachronically,” more perplexing issues may also arise: How would it be, for instance, to supplement given readings of *Animal’s People* by rereading the novel as a kind of temporal allegory, with the Indian victims of the industrial disaster depicted in the book (based on the explosion of a US-owned chemical plant at Bhopal but altered by Sinha in name and character to give it a more general significance) also understood as prefiguring future people anywhere? These would be people helplessly removed in time, not geographical distance, from the perpetrators of the harm, and struggling to define what they have become.

I would be worried if, adapting the words of Michael’s further query, “a turn to a global politics [were seen to] undermine still-valid arguments about the continuing need for equity across human populations, particularly as climate change exacerbates those inequities.” Rather, the turn to global politics, especially over an expanded time scale, would un-

derline the injustice of these current inequities and also include within them future human and nonhuman generations. The difficulty with thinking on the third scale, however, could be that, in a finite world rapidly being exhausted, recognising the rights of future generations of lives, human or otherwise, is in tension with the evident claims of the current human population, many of whom must demand a fairer and increased share of current resources. The not-yet-born, then, become a new kind of social victim.⁵

Notes

- 1 Clark seems to equate all literary criticism with political criticism and its urge to use literary texts as occasions to think about rights-based subjects and more equitable social arrangements. This is the kind of criticism this third scale of criticism so unsettles. However, I've been thinking about narratological criticism, which has, at least in many cases, a different aim than political criticism. What is accomplished by Clark's subsuming all criticism into political criticism?
- 2 The article ends: "This [a point about how climate change might cause literary critics to venture into areas outside their expertise] would also suggest that the humanities as currently constituted make up forms of ideological containment that now need to change."
- 3 See Chakrabarty's "The Climate of History: Four Theses" and "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change."
- 4 The salient extract from the essay is:

Characters as 'persons' and responsible agents are now doubled by themselves as mere physical entities. The larger the scale the more thing-like becomes the significance of the person registered on it (even as scale effects have given human beings the status of a geological force). Plots, characters, setting and trivia that seemed normal and harmless on the personal or national scale reappear as destructive doubles of themselves on the third scale, part of a disturbing and encroaching parallel universe, whose malign reality it is becoming impossible to deny. (Clark)
- 5 The material on Carver in the essay has since been significantly reworked as part of a book, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). This reworking takes some issues further, but the current response confines itself to the original version of the essay in *Telemorphosis*.

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