

AMITAV GHOSH, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2016), 176 pp.

STEPHEN SIPERSTEIN, SHANE HALL, and STEPHANIE LEMENAGER, eds., *Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), 294 pp.

Despite its grave threat, climate change continues to be treated as a myth by a number of people. Yet there are also those who understand the serious nature of the issue. Many scientists, scholars, activists, and volunteers take action to minimize the danger of climate change. The work on understanding and preventing the deadly ramifications of climate change is hard and demands the involvement of people with various backgrounds. Among them are scholars from the environmental humanities who doubtlessly help understand the complex concept of climate change, elucidate the role of cultural representations of the issue, as well as spread ecological awareness. Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* and Stephen Siperstein, Shane Hall, and Stephanie LeMenager's (ed.) *Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities* demonstrate the importance of acknowledging the role of the humanities and numerous authors and scholars who produce and examine the cultural artifacts that explicitly or implicitly deal with climate change.

One might wonder what the cultural representations of climate change and their interpretations tell us about this intricate issue. Many people remain skeptical about the ability of environmental humanities scholars to contribute anything that is worth attention to the study of climate change. Even more doubt the power of fiction to deal with such a serious issue. Amitav Ghosh laments:

When the subject of climate change occurs in these publications [literary journals and book reviews], it is almost always in relation to nonfiction; novels and short stories are very rarely to be glimpsed within this horizon. Indeed, it could even be said that fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals: the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction. It is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow

akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel. (7)

In raising this question, Ghosh attempts to understand what makes the audiences perceive the fictional literary texts that to various degrees deal with climate change so skeptically. He explains the existing skepticism with the apt term “[i]mprobability” (17; italics in original), inevitably foregrounding another important problem related to the cultural imaginings of climate change, namely the inability of the audiences to understand the seriousness of the portrayals of climate change. In making this argument, Ghosh obviously does not try to undermine the importance of cultural representations of climate change. Rather, he makes his readers ponder over the following question: *Why* is humanity unable to *understand* and *imagine* the danger of climate change? The other term that Ghosh uses to characterize climate change and its representations is “*uncanny*” (30; italics in original), which, along with the term “improbability,” reinforces the bewilderment that characterizes the reactions of audiences worldwide to climate change and its manifestations. Only briefly referring to or providing more detailed analyses of various literary texts, from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* to Paul Kingsnorth's *The Wake* to his own novels, including *The Hungry Tide* and *The Glass Palace*, and beyond, Ghosh meticulously examines the power of fiction to represent climate change and the failure of the readers to take these representations seriously.

He ultimately turns to history and politics and argues that, just like literature, they fail to construct the issue of climate change as *imaginable*, thus only intensifying the collective confusion with regard to climate change and never truly aiding in understanding the issue. Ghosh's conclusion draws our attention to the importance of the problem and the role of every human being, every discipline, every country in helping solve the problem of climate change and give hope for a better life for future generations: “When future generations look back upon the Great Derangement they will certainly blame the leaders and politicians of this time for their failure to address the climate crisis. But they may well hold artists and writers to be equally culpable—for the imagining of possibilities is not, after all, the job of politicians and bureaucrats” (135). Ghosh insists that only when we realize both

our individual and collective responsibility for the preservation of life on the Earth, will we be able to effectively deal with the ramifications of the ecological decline that we are already witnessing today.

The problem of climate change can be solved only when we unite our intellectual forces. While the humanities, or rather the environmental humanities that focus explicitly on the questions of ecology and the environment and their place in history, cultural studies, and other disciplines, are considered by some as the disciplines that are incapable of contributing to the study of climate change, this view is evidently wrong. Environmental humanities scholars not only strive to understand the concept of climate change, trace the history of the issue, and interpret its representations; many of them also make an invaluable contribution to the study of climate change—they teach climate change, thus spreading ecological awareness among the representatives of younger generations, sharing the knowledge about climate change that we currently have with the youth, making sure that climate change is perceived as a dangerous and complex issue that demands immediate actions. *Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities* vividly illustrates the role of teaching and learning when it comes to climate change.

Climate change is, indeed, the issue that is now taught by a number of scholars and instructors in various disciplines, including the humanities: “Increasingly across the humanities, climate change has moved to the forefront of the agenda. This movement has been formalized under the label Environmental Humanities, which covers and contains a wide range of innovative approaches within history and literary and cultural studies concerned with re-centering the environment within the humanities” (Riede et al. 126). Teaching climate change from the perspective of the environmental humanities, “an emergent disciplinary formation at the interface between the humanities, social sciences and environmental practice” (Kearnes 38), is a difficult yet rewarding task to perform. Siperstein, Hall, and LeMenager’s edited collection foregrounds these two factors in the process of teaching climate change in the humanities.

It is true that “[i]n the humanities classroom, it is not uncommon for those of us who teach ideologically-motivated topics (e.g. race, class, gender, environment) to struggle to reach those students who feel we are over-

reaching when we conduct close readings of texts that do not overtly represent such topics” (Rust 224). The humanities include the academic disciplines that focus on various important issues; yet these issues are studied through non-empirical methods. These approaches thus frequently do not allow the teacher to give a specific, single-valued answer/solution to a certain question/problem. In turn, students might feel that what they are studying does not have any value, which is obviously not true.

While climate change, just like all other issues taught and studied in the humanities, is a serious and, indeed, complex problem, environmental humanists do not focus on the scientific (whether chemical, geological, or any other) nature of climate change, but instead pay much attention to the cultural, literary, cinematic, historical, political, and other productions and interpretations of climate change, striving to understand *them* and their value. Therefore, teaching climate change from the perspective of the environmental humanities might turn into a very difficult task, particularly when the intended audience does not major in the humanities. Such was the experience of one of the contributors to the volume, Greg Garrard:

I envisaged the course as incorporating reflection of the place of science in contemporary culture, as well as justifying the humanities to those who will not continue to study them. I also talked a lot about narrative technique and the fictionality of fiction—its complex, ambiguous relationship to the non-fictional world we think we inhabit. Despite my efforts, many essays treated the fictions as unmediated sources of information about such extratextual realities as the relationship of gender and climate change. (123)

Yet, as the essays in the edited collection demonstrate, teachers find ways to deal with such problems, meticulously searching for materials and carefully selecting texts that would help their students from a wide range of study programs understand the humanities’ approach to the issue of climate change and appreciate the value of cultural, historical, and other perspectives on this complex issue.

The edited collection accentuates the importance of educating younger generations and explaining what climate change is and how humanity can reduce its drastic ramifications. Just like Ghosh’s book, it insists on the role that

we all play, both individually and collectively, in addressing the issue. The unity of various spheres is key here: “The great transition that must occur in the next few decades, weaning humanity off fossil fuels and establishing low-to-zero carbon economies, requires an unprecedented coordination of science, politics, international relations, culture, technology, the arts, religious stewardship, and education” (Engell 24). It is not only crucial to try to predict and minimize the consequences of climate change now but also to educate younger generations to make sure that the hard and long-term work on solving the ecological crisis will continue in the future. Nicholas Lawrence comments on the complicated conditions that younger people find themselves in today: “Our students, who face historic levels of personal debt while tracking the new-normal turbulence of extreme weather and endemic joblessness as a matter of course, grasp the implications of this relation far better than their administrators” (62). The cooperation with younger generations, care for the future of humanity and all the living on our planet, and active work on solving the current ecological problems can minimize the deadly ramifications of climate change.

Tackling the issue of climate change from the perspective of the humanities is important. Both *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* and *Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities* attempt to reveal the complexity of climate change as a cultural issue as well as the advantages and disadvantages of dealing with climate change from the perspective of the environmental humanities. Both books point out a dangerous and terrifying tendency: on the one hand, the representations of climate change are scarce, random, and often not persuasive, on the other hand, audiences tend to disregard such images, considering them just fictional. This inability to clearly think of and imagine climate change and its ramifications makes it harder to teach climate change using a non-empirical approach. The two books, thus, foreground the problems that surround the study of climate change in the humanities; but they also actively engage humanists to solve these problems now in order to be able to move further in the research of such an intricate issue as climate change.

Tatiana Prorokova (Vienna)