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From Global Risk to Private Catastrophe: The Domestic and the Planetary in Daniel Kramb's *From Here* and Susannah Waters' *Cold Comfort*

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Climate change is at the heart of recent critical debates about the role of the global and the local in the critical practice of the environmental humanities. While critics like Ursula K. Heise and Timothy Clark have argued for putting the global at the conceptual centre of inquiry, others have warned that such a wide focus obscures the localized effects of climate change and their connection to histories of colonial and capitalist exploitation. Rather than privileging one side of this argument over the other, this paper seeks to put both perspectives into a productive dialogue that focusses on how literature can connect the local histories and global environmental risks. The paper draws on two relatively unknown novels, Susannah Waters' *Cold Comfort* (2007) and Daniel Kramb's *From Here* (2012), in order to show how the threat of climate change disrupts understandings of scale that structure our social lives by linking global forces to moments of domestic and intimate crisis. *From Here*'s protagonist is a cosmopolitan culture worker, whose perpetual uprootedness becomes the vantage point for her political engagement with the threat of climate change. *Cold Comfort*'s Alaska Native protagonist finds her house literally tilting due to the melting permafrost ground, while domestic violence and sexual abuse make her home uninhabitable. Despite the huge disjuncture in the contexts they portray, the texts share an interest in the disjuncture between awareness and agency, in the impact of climate change on domestic and intimate relationships, and in links between the private, the political and the planetary.

At first glance, scenarios of global risks would seem to make the question of the local either irrelevant or at least drastically reduce its relevance. As the ultimate form of global risk – and perhaps as the defining form of environmental crisis of our time – climate change calls for a critical practice that places the global at the conceptual centre of inquiry, displacing the ethical commitment to the immediate environment that has long been a central aspect of environmentalist discourse generally and ecocriticism in particular. With the emergence of the debate about the Anthropocene, the call for an 'eco-cosmopolitanism' (Heise 2008: 60) has only become more urgent. However, simply privileging the global over the local risks obscuring the localized effects of climate change, which disproportionately fall unto poor and politically disenfranchised populations, and the way climate change damages are connected to histories of colonial and capitalist exploitation. Michael Ziser and Julie Sze, for instance, call for more realist narratives about climate change, which would 'combine individual biography with environmental history in order to provide concrete examples of environmental damage that can become the basis for redress and reform' (Ziser & Sze, 2007: 404).

Rather than pitting these two perspectives – eco-cosmopolitanism and environmental justice – against each other, this paper seeks to connect their critical concerns by exploring a field of tension between the global and the local. I will draw on two relatively unknown anglophone novels, Daniel Kramb's *From Here* (2012) and Susannah Waters' *Cold Comfort* (2006). In many respects, these texts seem antithetical: *Cold Comfort* follows a strictly realist aesthetics and focusses on actual damages that climate change has already caused. *From Here* jettisons realist detail and local colour for a more overtly political and didactic tone. Whereas *Cold Comfort* ends bleakly by foregrounding the helplessness of those most acutely affected by climate change, *From Here* unambiguously espouses activism, public protest and the possibility of political action against global warming. However, when read in juxtaposition, the novels appear complementary rather than antithetical; reading them side by side reveals how each one makes explicit what figures only implicitly in the other one. Moreover, by combining elements of the *Bildungsroman* with a

romantic love plot, narrated or focalized by a female protagonist, both texts chart connections between the private, the political and the planetary in the process of the respective heroines' education about climate change.

Cold Comfort centres on a 14-year old Inupiat girl, Tammy, who lives with her emotionally distant mother and her alcoholic, sexually abusive father Bill in Fairbanks, Alaska. The melting of the permafrost soil due to climate change literally causes the family house to tilt, which has made Tammy anxious about climate change to the point of obsession. While spending her holidays with relatives in Shishmaref, a settlement even more acutely under threat from climate change-induced erosion, Tammy falls in love with her cousin George. Acutely critical of the impact of modern civilization on Alaska Native society, George tries to reclaim a self-sufficient way of life based on Inupiat tradition. Unbeknownst to his family, he has also become part of a network of radical environmentalists fighting oil drilling in the Arctic by acts of sabotage. George eventually follows Tammy to Fairbanks where he rescues her from sexual assault by her father, in a climactic confrontation that also leads to Bill's accidental death. Tammy and George seek refuge with his radical friends, who are preparing to sabotage a drill site in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Their plan ends badly when an accidental explosion kills most members of the group leaving only Tammy and George. The novel closes with them alone, injured and abandoned in the Arctic cold.

While *Cold Comfort* is published by a Penguin Random House imprint, *From Here* is published by a micro-publisher co-founded by Kramb himself, and employs a stylistic autonomy that probably would not be possible with a major publisher. The narrative is mostly stripped of the kind of descriptive detail that makes a realist novel a realist novel. The Western metropolis in which the narrative is set remains unnamed as do the characters, who appear as archetypes with little individual backstory. Instead, the narrative combines lyrical introspection with standalone character dialogue. At the centre of the narrative is a small group of climate activists; their latest member, a young woman the epilogue identifies as 'Anna', is the novel's protagonist and narrator. The group is part of a widespread, decentralized campaign

of civil protests against climate change, a movement that appears to be unaffiliated with established political parties and actors. When the protests move from demonstrations at coal-fuelled power stations to blocking the parliament building, the government cracks down on the protesters, casting doubt on the future and efficiency of the movement. Meanwhile, the protagonist meets and falls in love with a young official from the government's environmental department. Without her knowledge, he becomes involved with her group. In the end, he leads protesters into the parliament building and chains himself to the Speaker's desk where he proclaims the group's political demands. The occupation of parliament reignites public protest and the novel's open end implies, but does not confirm, that the protests may finally break the passivity of political elites and lead to some decisive action against climate change.

As we will see, the novels' contrasting perspectives also allude to one of the contentious points in the contemporary critical debate about climate change (and more generally about global environmental risk): *Cold Comfort* lends itself to an interpretation of climate change as a problem of environmental justice, while *From Here* portrays it as a rallying point of cosmopolitan civil engagement, cutting across social and cultural difference.

Environmental Justice and the Geology of Mankind

One of the significant features of the debate about climate change in literature is the degree to which it undermines central conceptual tenets of environmental literary criticism: 'familiar notions such as setting, place, and nature—mainstays of environmental literary criticism—are being revisited and renovated in response to climate change and climate change fiction' (Trexler & Johns-Putra, 2011: 186). Most prominently, Ursula K. Heise has argued for the need to detach environmental engagement from a sense of rootedness in a particular geographical location. Drawing on theories of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism, she criticizes the association of 'spatial closeness, cognitive understanding, emotional attachment, and an ethics of responsibility' that positions the local as the crucial site of environmentalist engagement in much of American ecocritical thinking (Heise, 2008: 33). According

to Heise, for some crucial environmentalist problems we need a sense of planet, rather than a sense of place – an eco-cosmopolitanism that pays tribute both to global environmental, economic, social and cultural interconnectedness and remains attentive to the culturally specific construction of environmental issues (Heise, 2008: 60). An awareness of global environmental risks like climate change, she adds, constitutes the dark flipside of this interconnectedness (Heise, 2008: 121).

While Heise's specific interest is focussed on climate change as a threat that *potentially* affects everybody, scholarship influenced by the environmental justice movement offers a contrasting perspective. Drawing on critical race theory, US minority studies and postcolonial theory, environmental justice criticism is more concerned with specific cases of environmental destruction and the ways in which existing structures of social inequality determine who suffers from environmental damage. Contesting orthodox constructions of nature as the other of the social, environmental justice criticism regards the environment as integral part of life worlds – as 'the places in which we live, work, play, and worship' (Adamson, Evans & Stein, 2002: 4). Bringing these concerns to bear specifically on climate change, Michael Ziser and Julie Sze have pointed out that current public discourse, by constructing climate change as a universal threat, elide existing and emerging inequalities stemming from climate change (Ziser & Sze, 2007: 387). They call for a critical practice that emphasizes both the disproportionate exposure of poor people to climate change risks and the historical 'climate debt' of advanced Western economies, which have disproportionately contributed to global carbon emissions (Ziser & Sze, 2007: 403). These different outlooks also engender interest in different narrative forms. While Heise regards modernist and postmodernist forms of allegory and collage as the most appropriate literary forms to address global environmental questions (Heise, 2008: 64), Ziser and Sze call for realist narratives that 'combine individual biography with environmental history in order to provide concrete examples of environmental damage that can become the basis for redress and reform' (Ziser & Sze, 2007: 404).

The disjuncture between the perspectives of environmental justice and eco-cosmopolitanism has also emerged in recent debates about the implications

of the Anthropocene for the humanities. As already outlined, the term posits that human impact has altered the planet's climate and topography so thoroughly that it constitutes a geological age in its own right. Chakrabarty argues that the spatial and temporal magnitude of climate change forces us to think of humanity as a geophysical force whose collective impact is independent of social hierarchies and exclusions (Chakrabarty, 2009). Chakrabarty subsequently expands this argument by elaborating its implications for postcolonial studies. He asserts that postcolonial studies needs to acknowledge three disjunctive scales of human agency: as individuals being human rights, as social subject defined by categories of difference and, finally, as a planetary force:

> [Climate change] calls us to visions of the human that neither rights talk nor the critique of the subject ever contemplated. This does not, as I said before, make those earlier critiques irrelevant or redundant, for climate change will produce—and has begun to produce—its own cases of refugees and regime failures. […] The science and politics of climate change have not rendered these moves irrelevant or unnecessary; but they have become insufficient as analytical strategies (Chakrabarty, 2012: 9).

While Chakrabarty's championing of the Anthropocene arguably opens productive avenues for rethinking the temporal horizon of climate change, he implies that the critical practices of postcolonial theory and environmental justice criticism are relegated to the role of a (seemingly slightly antiquated) supplement to the engagement with the longue durée of climate history. Moreover, his disjunctive outlook on human agency engenders a disjunctive understanding of climate change: Locating questions of social difference and environmental justice on a different conceptual plane from the cumulative planetary consequences of human-made climate change fails to account for possible links between the planetary, the political and the personal.

The correlate of Chakrabarty's argument in literary criticism is Timothy Clark's argument that approaching climate change in literary criticism requires a fundamentally new *scale* of criticism (Clark, 2012). Clark differentiates between three

different scales of criticism: the first frames characters in a story in purely individual terms, and a second contextualizes literature in nationally-coded cultural spaces and socio-historical structures. A third option, Clark proposes, would be to locate a text on a planetary scale and through the temporal remove of deep history. Questions of cultural identity and individual agency, Clark contends, would become nearly insignificant on this scale. Instead, analysis on this scale would focus on the text's portrayal of long-term economic and environmental patterns such as infrastructure use, consumption patterns or household size: 'The material infrastructure that surrounds and largely dictates the lives of the people, the houses, the cars, the roads, may partially displace more familiar issues of identity and cultural representation as a focus of significance' (Clark, 2012: 161).

Clark's argument for a literary criticism that takes the planetary scale of environmental risk seriously is certainly compelling. Surely, Clark is right to demand a literary criticism that moves beyond a methodological nationalism and takes seriously the influence of non-human entities – the houses, the cars, the roads – on both environments and culture. But his notion of scale reifies the global instead of analytically complicating it, and it is reasonable to assume that sticking purely to the planetary as the scale of analysis would reveal very little about the difference between individual texts (Clarke, Halpern & Clark, 2015: 5). Incidentally, the very first – hypothetical – passage of Clark's essay illustrates this fallacy:

> You are lost in a small town, late for a vital appointment somewhere in its streets. You stop a friendly-looking stranger and ask the way. Generously, he offers to give you a small map which he happens to have in his briefcase. The whole town is there, he says. You thank him and walk on, opening the map to pinpoint a route. It turns out to be a map of the whole earth. The wrong scale. (Clark, 2012: 149)

Ultimately, Clark's proposed third scale of reading tells us as much about a specific text as the world map about the small town – a very rough orientation, maybe, but very little insight into the text's topography of meaning.

It may therefore be more productive to look at what Clark calls a 'crisis of scale', in which global environmental hazards result in the constant intermingling of different scales of human experience, so that mundane, everyday activities – filling a kettle, buying a car – become charged with global implications (Clark, 2012: 151). The result of this crisis, Clark argues, is a 'general but unfocused sense of delegitimation and uncertainty', as the boundaries of science and politics, state and civil society become unclear and nationally-coded political procedures 'begin to resemble dubious modes of political, ethical and intellectual containment' (Clark, 2012: 151). Clark's diagnosis underlines the disruptive and potentially transformative power implications of climate change as a scenario of global risk; like other forms of risk, climate change is not just 'out there'. It impacts the routines of everyday life and thus questions the integrity of spheres of privacy and domesticity.

Simply claiming that there is a disjuncture between humanity's geophysical agency and localized inequalities and hierarchies thus leads to a conceptual impasse. A more productive understanding of climate change – and, by extension, global risks in general – would posit the disjuncture as merely a shift in scale, not a difference in kind. We might be interested, then, in how we can understand humanity's disastrous impact on the planet not as a singular agency, but as a global network of hierarchical relationships of people, environments and technologies. In such a view, human geophysical agency would then cease to be an ontologically self-evident 'matter-of-fact' and become what Bruno Latour calls a 'matter-of-concern', an assemblage of acts of representation in which different actors speak 'for' the climate from various perspectives and with various frames of reference (Latour, 2005: 9; Potter, 2009). Emphasizing that climate change is not a uniform global endangerment but the assemblage of specific, differentiated vulnerabilities thus opens an interface between the personal, the political and the planetary, between different scales of human agency and between the different temporalities of the climate crisis. My argument in the following discussion is that the juxtaposition of two books with different points of reference – one metropolitan, one peripheral – can provide a productive friction between cosmopolitan and environmental justice perspectives and can

thus contribute towards understanding climate change as a global assemblage of connections.

Habitat Loss in *Cold Comfort*

Cold Comfort centres on a series of spaces that are iconic for current manifest damages caused by climate change. The real-life settlement of Shishmaref, located on a small island off the northern coast of Alaska's Seward Peninsula, has achieved sad fame as one of the places in the world where climate change is observable in its most severe and tangible form. In 2002, the community voted to have the entire village, under threat from coastal erosion and melting permafrost, relocated to the mainland (Kolbert, 2006: 9). The tilting of Tammy's family home in Fairbanks also has well-publicized real-life equivalents (Kolbert, 2006: 16). *Cold Comfort*'s descriptions of houses tilting and sinking into the ground provide the novel's metaphorical core, a stark image of climate change as a palpable, kinetic force that destroys people's established habitat. One of the novel's potent ironies is that Tammy's father earns a living from working at an oil drilling site in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, contributing to the carbon culture whose environmental impact destroys his own home. This may also be read as a synecdoche for the way Alaska Natives are co-opted into Arctic oil drilling. In multiple instances, the novel points out that Inupiat communities have materially profited from money derived from the oil industry. Shishmaref, for example, aside from sinking houses, also has a new school financed by 'oil money' (Waters, 2007: 34f). Those who are economically most dependent on the petro-industry are the first to be victimized by its environmental impact. The central image of the tilted house thus also marks a way of life that is literally 'unsustainable', an economic system that destabilizes the foundations of its own existence. Carbon culture, the novel suggests, is skewed economically and ecologically. At the same time, the tilting house also doubles as a metaphor for the instability of Tammy's home and the disintegration of the family as a protected social space. The novel thus implicitly connects climate change and material poverty to a breakdown of the social that manifests in gendered violence and cultural alienation.

When Tammy first encounters George, he has run away from his family to Nome, on the other side of the Seward Peninsula. She eventually finds out that he hides on the outskirts of the town, where he lives in a self-constructed igloo and attempts to recreate a self-sufficient lifestyle as a hunter and trapper, modelled after traditional Inupiat culture (Waters, 2007: 103). The igloo provides a contrast to Tammy's disintegrating home, both on the personal and on the metaphorical level. Climate change means a subjective habitat loss to her, just as it materially undercuts the life George is trying to lead: George builds the igloo inside a refrigerated container to make it last the Arctic spring (Waters, 2007: 103). The igloo is thus a deeply ironic metaphor. Nevertheless, it offers a sheltered, secluded space and becomes associated with consensual sexual intimacy, while it also offers isolation from modern society: 'This would be a good place to be when the world ends', Tammy comments, 'Right here. No one would suspect. It would be quiet' (Waters, 2007: 125). Tammy's preference for such isolated spaces corresponds to her preference of cold over warmth. Warmth, for her, connotes the destabilizing force of civilization; the cold, on the other hand, signifies a paradoxical comfort in seclusion. Out on the frozen Arctic sea, Tammy senses that '[a]way from the land, the cold feels different: solid, thick. [...] She's known temperatures this low before but never this clean, this pure. [...] This is good cold' (Waters, 2007: 71).

Apart from Tammy's sinking home and George's refrigerated igloo, there is a third kind of 'home' in the novel – the domesticity of white middle-class life. Before the failed sabotage attempt, Tammy and George hide in a cabin owned by a wealthy relative of one of George's friends. Tammy is irritated by this 'white person's cabin' with glass windows and polished veneers – she is used to cabins 'patched together out of scrap plywood and canvas, the holes in the seams sealed up with sod, if anything at all' (Waters, 2007: 263). A few days before they make their escape from Fairbanks, Tammy and George visit the house of one of her former teachers, Mr Dervish. In the Dervishes' bourgeois home, the first thing Tammy notices is 'the evenness of the floor. The ground is so level beneath her feet. It feels unnatural. Everything is laid out in straight lines' (Waters, 2007: 216). Whereas the unevenness of her own home signifies social disintegration, the orderliness of the architecture in the Dervish

house corresponds to the cordial hospitality and soft-spoken nature of Dervish and his pregnant wife. Moreover, their house promises protection from the encroaching warmth of a changing climate:

> These are the people, she thinks, who will somehow adapt themselves, whatever happens; these are the people who will survive what's coming, if anyone does. They will manage to invent something at the last minute, at two seconds to midnight, something that will preserve their calm, flat spaces and they will endure in these spaces, being kind to one another, never raising their voices or their fists, feeling faintly guilty about their good fortune, while everybody and everything else in the world outside their large triple-glazed windows withers and burns (Waters, 2007: 222).

Both the comparison of the 'white person's cabin' to the makeshift Inupiat cabins and the disparity between the Dervish house and Tammy's home emphasize insulation as a luxury that Alaska Natives are unable to afford: their cabins are isolated 'by soot if anything at all', while white people can afford a lifestyle unaffected by their environment, protected by 'triple-glazed windows'. However, Tammy immediately begins to doubt that material wealth will really protect the Dervishes:

> She imagines the house: aluminum [sic] foil-covered cardboard over the windows, to reflect the heat back outside [...] Their unborn child will be most at risk, since children under five are the least able to control their own body temperatures. They may not be able to invent anything to save it (Waters, 2007: 222).

The image of global warming as a cataclysmic heat that the Dervish family desperately tries to shut out suggests a different reading of climate change: not merely as habitat loss for a specific group of people, but as a universal, apocalyptic threat from which even the wealthy will not be able to insulate themselves entirely. In this particular passage, the novel's impetus thus briefly shifts from focussing on climate change as a question of environmental justice to climate change as a cosmopolitan problem.

Climate Change and Social Attrition

As the contrast between different kinds of domestic spaces already indicates, a central preoccupation of *Cold Comfort* is the entanglement of climate injustice within the larger context of the social marginalization of Alaska Natives. The novel frames climate change as part of a barrage of attritional forces eroding Inupiat culture that reach deeply into the realm of the private, the intimate and family life. In other words, the melting of permafrost and sea ice are as corrosive to Inupiat culture as unemployment and material poverty. George sees these forces manifesting in diseases of civilization and domestic violence:

> Mom didn't get cancer because of bad luck. She got cancer because that's what we get now, along with tuberculosis, and heart attacks, and Aids [sic], and diabetes, and every other modern disease you can think of. […] You know what we're getting arrested for? Number one: assaulting one another. Number two: driving drunk. Number three: sexual abuse of our own kids (Waters, 2007: 199).

Sexual abuse is both the novel's most problematic aspect and its most poignant condensation of the social malaise that affects Inupiat culture. The novel implies that the structural marginalization of Inupiat, the alienation from their cultural traditions and the simultaneous exclusion from the mores of consumer society are reflected in manifest acts of violence against each other. Tammy's father embodies all of these social ills. Brief passages focalized by Bill underline past experiences of racial exclusion and cultural alienation that are implied to have led him to alcoholism and violence. The narrative mentions racist harassment by the police (Waters, 2007: 179) and how Bill suffered from the institutionalized violence of colonial educational practices (Waters, 2007: 34). He disdains his cultural heritage as 'Eskimo baggage' (Waters, 2007: 179) – and yet 'it pisses him off' when his relatives 'call him a "city kid", as if he's forgotten how to butcher a seal' (Waters, 2007: 180).

Bill's alcoholism, his violent temperament and the abuse of his family, the novel repeatedly mentions, are typical within urban populations of Alaska Natives sidelined by white society (Waters, 2007: 22, 34). The novel thus problematically constructs

Bill as the representative of modernized, urban Alaska Natives. While there are other urban Alaska Native characters – Tammy's mother Beth, for instance – none of them plays a substantive role in the narrative. Tammy's own perspective is frequently one of victimization, with the sexual abuse at the hands of her father as the ultimate sign of her powerlessness (Waters, 2007: 163, 249). The climactic confrontation in which Bill is killed and Tammy runs away with George does not substantially change that she never develops a sense of her place in society: in the end, what is left for Tammy and George is a fatalistic retreat.

If Bill serves as the problematic stand-in of modern, urban Alaska Natives, George presents an antithetical figure of traditionalism. He reveres Native knowledge and traditional Inupiat codes of behaviour (Waters, 2007: 60) and blames the modernization of Inupiat life for the disintegration of Inupiat society (Waters, 2007: 199). Inasmuch as George appears as a sympathetic figure, the novel seems to adopt his stance on the corruptive influence of modernity on Inupiat society, particularly given the extremely negative terms in which Bill as a representative for modernized urban Inupiats is rendered. However, while the novel seems sympathetic about this view, it never entirely adopts George's view but refracts it through the focalization of Tammy.

Tammy doesn't unquestionably share George's enthusiasm for all things Inupiat. While she admires his sincerity, her perception at times betrays a certain amount of ironical distance, grounded in her position as an uninitiated outsider to her own cultural tradition. Traditional Inupiat life is something that she only knows from museums (Waters, 2007: 149) and on first seeing George 'in full Eskimo gear', she finds that he looks 'like a Native exhibit come to life' (Waters, 2007: 101). On closer inspection, George's nativism appears to be more a prosthetic approximation of authentic Native than genuine tradition: the iconic igloo, for instance, is something Inupiat do not traditionally build (Waters, 2007: 105).

It is uncertain, then, if and how traditions of the past could be utilized or transferred into the future, and consequently, the future remains foreclosed to the protagonists. The final act of sabotage against an Arctic oil drill site would seem to be a desperate grasp for a radical form of agency, but even to some of the activists

it seems doubtful if sabotage is an effective way to combat petro-industry. Tammy once more perceives her surroundings with ironic distance: when she and George depart from the cabin and make their way to the targeted drill site, it feels to her 'like they are a bunch of kids sneaking out of the house to play pranks', (Waters, 2007: 294). While their 'prank' ultimately has fatal consequences, Tammy's comment foregrounds the futility of their actions.

Thus the novel never really offers a sense of how Alaska Native cultural identity and ecological awareness could be integrated with a life in modern society. Tammy is searching for exactly this kind of integrated subjectivity, but her search is ultimately perfunctory; meanwhile Bill serves as a stand-in for an alienated, modernized Inupiat identity caught up in circles of violence and victimization; and George's rediscovery of traditionalism, while portrayed sympathetically, is ultimately the attempt to recreate a way of life that is ecologically and culturally no longer sustainable. The novel's social critique thus foregrounds that social marginalization and environmental despoliation leave no sustainable place for an Inupiat identity in the modern world. But given Waters' position as a metropolitan author writing about a distant and disenfranchised social group, the book's (undoubtedly well-intended) critique is also intensely problematic: its portrayal of a modernized, urban Native life as dysfunctional and alienated, and the veneration of tradition and cultural authenticity, both re-inscribe the same colonial stereotypes that the book has identified as part of the problem. Echoing the fraught question of subaltern representation (Spivak, 1988), the emphasis on the powerlessness of the characters locates political and representational agency in the hands of the metropolitan writer and of the novel's potential Western readership.

Cosmopolitan Engagement in *From Here*

Whereas *Cold Comfort* focusses on specific locales where climate change is already causing both material and social damages, *From Here* is set in a yet-unaffected metropolis. The setting – only referred to as 'the city' (Kramb, 2012: 11) – could be virtually any Western capital, an undefined space of relative privilege and safety that seems 'towering but flat, straight but confused, sprawling yet enclosed' (Kramb,

2012: 11). The novel's setting becomes a placeholder for Western urbanity in general, and the novel, somewhat didactically, invites readers to transfer the narrative to their own context.

The placelessness of *From Here*'s setting is also accentuated by the protagonist's lack of attachment to the city. The archetype of a young, atomized cosmopolitan culture worker, she has been migrating from city to city and from country to country "in the name of a holy principle, flexibility" (Kramb, 2012: 15). Hopping from one temporary job opportunity to the next, the boxes in her room in a shared flat remain perpetually unpacked, symbolic of her lack of personal attachment (Kramb, 2012: 14). The protagonist's own feelings about this cosmopolitan mobility are profoundly mixed. On the one hand, she regards her reluctance to form personal connections as a character trait: 'people like me don't need to be pushed; people like me need to be held back, restrained, chained' (Kramb, 2012: 37). On the other hand, she begins to feel perturbed by an utter lack of a sense of place: 'sometimes, I can't converse with anyone, anymore, because the complex code that comes with a life lived firmly in one environment is alien to me now' (Kramb, 2012: 37). Over the course of the text, her dissatisfaction with her out-of-placeness grows. She begins to feel that her entire life has been 'neither here nor there. As though one part of me is already gone, while the other is still saying hushed goodbyes' (Kramb, 2012: 69). At her most depressed she feels that her decision to turn herself 'into a voluntary migrant, the twenty-first century impersonated' was a big mistake (Kramb, 2012: 99).

However, the text suggests that this kind of uprooted person may be in a better position to grasp climate change as a cosmopolitan political problem because her engagement for the 'environment' does not come from a sense of place, locality or connectedness to nature for her. '[W]hen we're talking about there being no borders and limits and all that, then for me, that's just abstract talk. That's what I mean. For you, it must be so much easier to see this', one of the protagonist's flatmates suggests (Kramb, 2012: 126). Yet despite this explicit celebration of a cosmopolitan point of view, the novel does stress the need to develop some form of attachment – a process that repeats itself on three different levels: the budding romance between

the protagonist and the young government official offsets her desire for emotional self-sufficiency; her involvement in climate change activism increases although she has never regarded herself as political or an environmentalist (Kramb, 2012: 26); and she begins to form an attachment to specific sites in the city. As a ritual, each time she moves to a new city she looks for a hill where she can regularly go to in order to survey the urban sprawl and get away from the streets 'where everything is blocked by people, chocked by fumes'; such a spot becomes for her 'a prerequisite, almost, for feeling at home' (Kramb, 2012: 58).

The protagonist also professes that she is beginning to be fascinated by sights of urban nature: 'It could be a lonely flower in a front garden, a robin hopping on a fence, or a silly old shrub, but mainly, it's trees' (Kramb, 2012: 34). What is interesting to her, however, are not plants or animals per se. Rather, the tree in her backyard becomes a figural model of her thought process for her: 'If I look at the tree the right way, it ceases to be a tree and turns into something more abstract, much closer to my heart. Its branches become part of a larger structure, like ways my mind might travel. Like decisions I made, routes I chose' (Kramb, 2012: 34). The tree becomes one of many network tropes in the novel: networked digital communications, especially the Twitter-like 'stream' play a huge part in the plot and the city itself also repeatedly appears as a network. Moreover, the experience of thinking in networks, of mentally moving along global, even planetary, connections motivated the protagonist to join the activists in the first place. Her first discussion with the group's leader prompts her to spend days mentally retracing the ecological and technological networks of global carbon emissions. She imagines 'travelling' from an individual light in the city through 'inefficient, out-dated power lines' to an 'inefficient, out-dated power station' and into the atmosphere:

I travelled, again and again, until I was locked in, firmly – in the atmosphere – where it wasn't just my station, pushing up the plant's thermostat, of course, but thousands of other stations, and millions of cars and hundreds of planes, too.

Up there, I realised what it was all these have in common: They all lead back down here, to us. They all lead back down here. To me. Sitting at my desk. Living my life (Kramb, 2012: 32).

For the narrator, critical thinking and political action thus begin by envisioning a link from the planetary to the personal. The epiphanic realization also provides one of the resonances of the novel's title: 'from here' is where climate change always begins in so far as it originates partly from us personally, and leads ultimately back to us.

In a conversation with her apolitical flatmates, the protagonist rephrases this idea: the pollution of the planet's atmosphere, she argues, is like smashing the flat's shared kitchen to pieces and then lighting it on fire: 'None of us would tolerate in our own homes what we're tolerating in our shared home […] if I've realised one thing in the last few months then it's that the so-called environment – that's us. Us, right here' (Kramb, 2012: 101). Her allusion to the destruction of their flat by violent force recalls the way climate change manifests as the actual destruction of domestic spaces in *Cold Comfort*. Ultimately, both texts understand the global climate as a common good of livelihood, which provides the basis of domestic life. Despite the ostensibly different significance of space in both novels, and the different ways characters in both novels relate to space, both texts offer an interpretation of climate change as a form of habitat loss.

Subjectivity, Utopianism, Activism

If it is the structural disenfranchisement of Alaska Natives that curtails the agency of the characters in *Cold Comfort*, the characters in *From Here* face quite different obstacles. They encounter manifest physical resistance from police forces and the inertia of a largely unseen political establishment governed by short-term economic interests. But this kind of direct, localized manifestation of power can be defeated, *From Here* suggests, if people overcome their paralysis and demand political action. It is the transition from conviction to active involvement that *From Here* investigates most closely.

The flipside of the cosmopolitanism that is central to the protagonists' subjectivity in *From Here* is an alienation from cultural processes and the atomization of political publics: '[W]e don't think of ourselves as citizens anymore, do we?' one of the narrator's flatmates bemoans. 'Empowered customers, yes, but where's the citizen supposed to come from?' (Kramb, 2012: 122). Political theorists like Colin Crouch or Chantal Mouffe have characterized this sense of political inertia as post-democratic or post-political (Crouch, 2005; Mouffe, 2005). Political antagonisms, they argue, are replaced by a consensus-based, managerial form of governance, and genuine struggles for social equality are subordinated to the maintenance of economic growth as the guarantor of social stability. For critics of post-political governance, the discourse of ecological modernization encapsulates the post-political approach to environmental problems. Instead of regarding environmental crises as structural flaws of capitalism, ecological modernization maintains that continuing economic growth and capitalist accumulation are simultaneously possible and that any ecological crisis can be resolved within the framework of Western capitalism (Swyngedouw, 2011).

It is never quite clear where *From Here* stands on this question, though the novel is quite clear that failure to act on climate change is causing damages elsewhere: 'Aren't those who contributed least to our current situation suffering worst? [...] Isn't our inaction already deepening poverty, spreading disease, fuelling conflict elsewhere?' (Kramb, 2012: 130). Yet the few concrete demands made by the narrator's activist group fail to acknowledge these problems and suggest an uncontroversial program of ecological modernization (Kramb, 2012: 140). The group's (and by implication the novel's) political vista never extends beyond the less than radical maxim of 'making our future okay for everyone, not just a few' (Kramb, 2012: 60). While *From Here* acknowledges climate change as a form of social attrition, its damages feature only as an absence, as something that happens elsewhere. There is, in other words, a *Cold Comfort*-shaped hole in *From Here*'s narrative.

But whatever the politics of 'making our future okay for everyone' are, the notion of changing *anything* about contemporary society already seems outright utopian (a 'Great Turnaround') for the characters: 'It's positively mad; we know that too. [...]

We're imagining the unimaginable: For us to shun what's running out and heating us – *before* it does either for real' (Kramb, 2012: 50; Kramb's italics). The hyperbolic framing of a program of ecological modernization as something 'unimaginable' testifies to the all-pervasive power of discourses of capitalist expansion and short-term gain. Within the post-political 'chosen regime' of *From Here*, the political demand for a future that is 'okay for everyone' already appears as a radical departure.

The central political challenge, *From Here* thus implies, is to overcome the unimaginability of a post-carbon culture. The narrator's flatmates, converted from sceptics to fledgling activists, wonder why no one has yet made a film depicting such a utopian post-carbon society: '[n]ot a story about that world, but one set in it. […] Stories change things, my quiet flatmate said, don't they?' (Kramb, 2012: 122). Climate change activism in *From Here* thus hinges on a moment of utopian imagination which shoots through the present tense narration of Kramb's novel and which gives the novel its title. From the hill to which the narrator occasionally retreats, she imagines looking down on another version of the city:

> From here, I'm seeing what the radical changes we're afraid to make will result in.
>
> Everything that's around me – the sprawling public transport system, the smartly-built homes, the energy that's being produced where it's being used – is sharper than ever before, almost tangible, but it's in their combination that these elements reveal what has happened for them to come into place the way they have. A real rethink.
>
> What seems unlikely now – from here, I'm seeing it for what we will all see it, once we're here: steps so inevitable it would be inconceivable not to take them (Kramb, 2012: 127).

The narrative renders this imaginary vision of a carbon-neutral metropolis in the present-tense, suggesting that it is not so much a future scenario or a prediction as it is an imminent alternative reality. These scenarios of the future are both invisible and

painstakingly obvious, there to be seen for everybody who cares to look, yet occluded by social structures that define what is thought of as possible and probable.

The anaphoric repetition of the phrase 'from here' five times as the narrator reflects about the scene emphasizes how crucial this imagined futurity is to the protagonist's political awakening. The imagined city becomes the vantage point from which the narrator's cosmopolitan detachment becomes a political asset, from where equitable, eco-cosmopolitan future becomes thinkable: 'From here, I'm seeing how we're shaping this world no longer as competitors, but as partners. What used to be others, elsewhere, has become the source for our shared responsibility' (Kramb, 2012: 128). This speculative 'here' also serves as the deictic centre of the novel: having pointedly refused to name a concrete, identifiable setting, the passage cited above instead posits a speculative, utopian future as the narrative's centre, a 'here' from which action proceeds.

Underlying activist politics is a kind of double vision, in which changes in the political reality of the nameless city are grounded in its imagined double, a dialectical interplay of what is and what can be imagined to be. However, by foregrounding the act of 'seeing' an alternative future as a politically enabling epiphany, it also draws attention to the *politics of perspective*. While the protagonist has a clear picture of the future she is advocating for, her perception of the present is much more restricted. Marching on the parliament at the novel's climax, the narrator observes 'The street is a central street, the city my city, and I'm here – on this corner, in this country, of this world – but I'm not sure what it all means any more' (Kramb, 2012: 132). 'Here' in this passage takes on a fundamentally different significance – that of a limited perspective, incomplete information and uncertain position. As Frederic Jameson points out: '[t]he fundamental dynamic of any Utopian politics (or of any political Utopianism) [lies] in the dialectic of Identity and Difference' (Jameson, 2005: xii); in *From Here*, this dialectic manifests in the juxtaposition of an epiphanic, sublime imagination of a sustainable modernity and the disorientingly limited perspective of the protagonist.

This moment of disorientation is structurally built into the novel's narrative discourse: the autodiegetic narration is always limited by the protagonist's

perception and the novel's consistent use of the present tense privileges immediacy over a retroactive sense-making. The namelessness of the characters and the setting, while inviting an allegorical reading of the plot, also underlines the protagonist's disorientation. While the protagonist values the distanced vantage point of 'her' hill overlooking the city to make sense of her surroundings, readers are never afforded a similar moment of distance; instead, one is always right in the middle of events in all their urgency and confusion.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the romance plot between the narrator and the government employee who becomes involved in the group's protest work. The narrative highlights the narrator's subjective responses to their budding relationship and her frustration at her lover's secretiveness, his involvement with the activist group behind her back after she introduced him to them and his one-time infidelity with the group's charismatic leader. In the end, he is arrested for a particularly spectacular protest in parliament, and the couple's future hangs in the balance. The narrative then makes a prolepsis to a postscript dated '2063', which reveals that the government employee eventually married the narrator, thus providing closure to the novel's romance plot, while the political outcomes of the protests remain unclear (Kramb, 2012: 165). The overwhelmingly conventional romance plot could easily be read as a mere sub-plot, a temporary relief from the political didacticism of the novel. But the emphasis on trust and betrayal, on the difficulty to understand a situation based on incomplete information, reiterates the novel's central theme, the question of perspective. Therefore, the romance also serves as a structural analogy of the novel's political message: the disorientation of a limited, subjective perspective gives way to a clarity of understanding from a distance; what seems unfathomable and unthinkable in the present – both in personal and in political terms – will prove self-evident and inevitable in retrospect.

Conclusion

'I had to take an abstract issue – extremely far away, it seemed, both on a map and in my calendar – and bring it down to me', the narrator of *From Here* muses. 'I understand this very well now: Everything had to become personal – deeply and

disturbingly personal – rising temperatures and shrinking glaciers and the every-day reasons for it' (Kramb, 2012: 108). This describes the project of both *From Here* and *Cold Comfort*: both texts strive to 'combine individual biography with environmental history' (Ziser & Sze, 2007: 404) to make climate change personal. Both novels underline that, rather than a merely 'environmental' problem, climate change has far-reaching social and political implications. Moreover, in both cases, these issues are framed through the perspective of a female protagonist and focalizer, whose perspective renders climate change as a threat that cuts across spatial scales and has implications linking the private to the political and the planetary.

But as the example of *Cold Comfort* shows, a naïve realism that effaces its own role in framing and mediating environmental harm risks repeating the very stereotypes and preconceptions it set out to criticize. Its realist aesthetics mask the social distance between its author and its subject matter, a distance that becomes particularly problematic given how the novel, even in criticizing the racist treatment of Alaska Natives, reinforces negative stereotypes of urban Native existence. However, while *Cold Comfort*'s political project is undoubtedly flawed, I think that instead of outrightly dismissing the novel as inauthentic and patronizing, we should pay attention to its place in global mediascapes (see Appadurai, 2005). It functions as an appeal to the political agency of metropolitan readers; its sense of fatalism is a call for engagement to metropolitan audiences. It thus implies a readership like the characters of *From Here*. A novel about activism that is also a novelistic form of activism itself, Kramb's novel foregrounds the crucial role of the imagination in the formation of an eco-cosmopolitan political activism. More important than specific policies is a new political subjectivity that reaches beyond post-political consumer culture and mobilizes civic engagement for a future that is 'okay for everyone, not just a few' (Kramb, 2012: 60). This future is obvious yet discursively concealed, imminent but reachable only by venturing through the disorientation of the present. Yet *From Here*, in advocating for a future that is 'okay for everyone' never reflects on what exactly 'okay' means and who defines it.

Read side by side, *Cold Comfort* and *From Here* point to a field of tension between the global and the local where the interests of eco-cosmopolitanism and environmental justice intersect. Connecting the private, the political and the planetary becomes the basis of a sense of common global endangerment that can, in turn, form the basis of a progressive politics against climate change. However, a careful reading of both texts also underlines the need to question *how* a sense of environmental interconnection can emerge from uneven global mediascapes – and from which perspective. Hence, whether we write climate change in the sublime terms of planetary endangerment or whether we frame it as individual experience of environmental racism and social marginalization, our understanding of climate change must always be supplemented by careful attention to the politics of perspective.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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