

Introduction: “Global Weirding”

Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman
Marquette University and Luther College

The optimist says the glass is half full. The pessimist says the glass is half empty. It is only the truth seeker who wonders, why is the glass there? Why is there water all over the floor? Why is it covering every other surface of the house? Who or what is doing this to us? —Cecil Palmer, *Welcome to Night Vale*, episode 18

In the last decade the term *global weirding* briefly rose to prominence as a suggested alternative to both *global warming* and *climate change*, in part through its popularization in the writing of *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. Both *climate change* and *global warming*, as terms, seem to produce a kind of tactical denialism from opponents. *Climate change* seems to invite the slippage between climate and weather that already deforms public debate about the climate, while also allowing naïve and bad-faith comparisons to the well-known large-scale climatological shifts that historically have occurred due to natural cycles, like the ice ages. *Global warming*, in contrast, seems to produce an almost neurotic fixation on empirical measurement of the temperature alone, as if the claim were that in every location on the planet every day will literally be hotter than the previous one—allowing the bizarre but already familiar spectacle of right-wing politicians gathering to gloat whenever it gets cold in winter. *Global weirding* tried to short-circuit this kind of denialist wordplay by focusing instead on the unpredictable disruptions that have been caused and will continue to be caused by the coming years of anthropogenic global warming (AGW), which will be distributed unevenly across the planet and experienced with different intensities by different populations. “I prefer the term ‘global weirding,’ writes Friedman in a 2010 column, “because that is what actually happens as global temperatures rise and the climate changes. The weather gets weird. ... The fact that it has snowed like crazy in Washington—while it has rained at the Winter Olympics in Canada, while Australia is having a record 13-year drought—is right in line with what every major study on climate change predicts: The weather will get weird; some areas will get more precipitation than ever; others will become drier than ever.” Significantly, however, even as Friedman launched the phrase “global weirding” into the social imaginary, he

withdrew from much of its critical potential by recommending the American economy remain structurally unchanged as it gets redirected into growth opportunities newly opened through the very ecological crisis he was ostensibly mourning.

The point of *global weirding* as a cognitive frame was to refocus our attention on the localities within the totality of the global; while global warming is an event the entire planet experiences, it is an event that different locations on the globe will experience in highly variable ways, not only including patterns of floods, droughts, and storms that the human mind has difficulty linking to average global temperatures, but even the off-brand possibility that as a consequence of global warming some places will experience prolonged or even permanent *colder* temperatures, through disruption of the polar vortex (as has already begun to happen in recent U.S. winters, in the Upper Midwest in 2013-2014 and in the Boston metropolitan area in 2015), or even the potential “shutting off” of the Atlantic Ocean Gulf Stream that warms the U.S. East Coast and Europe (as has been speculated in a number of science fictional works, perhaps most notably in Kim Stanley Robinson’s 2004-2006 “Science in the Capital” trilogy and the 2004 global-warming disaster film *The Day After Tomorrow*). While the term never truly took root as a competitor to either global warming or climate change, perhaps because it was located too narrowly within the logic of the pun, what global weirding as a frame was intended to show us is that we are now living in postnormal times: we can no longer depend on the climatological patterns that up till now have more or less reliably structured our behaviors, including our architectural, agricultural, and resource-extractive practices, as well as the life patterns of the plants and animals with which our coexistent surviving and thriving depends. Perhaps global weirding fails, in fact, at the level of life-or-death; *weird* seems fun, quirky, almost cute and gothically cuddly, and relatively innocuous, and in that way woefully inadequate to the scale of a crisis that threatens, for instance, the ongoing, still-unexplained mass death of bees (and with them the system of pollination on which much plant life is dependent), or an ocean that is now predicted by some ecologists to be without fish life altogether by midcentury.

As editors we must confess we initially chose the term as a frame for this special issue of *Paradoxa* somewhat opportunistically, perhaps ourselves operating at the level of the mere pun; we wanted to produce an issue talking about the way the literary genre of the “New Weird” (itself weirdly situated at the intersection of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and surrealism) has taken up situations, speculations, and problems associated with climate change. “The editors of this special

issue of *Paradoxa* on 'Global Weirding' invite contributions that explore the aesthetic, political, ethical, and existential potentials that arise when weird ecological patterns or events converge with weird speculative literature," we wrote in the call for papers. "Jeff Vandermeer's acclaimed 2014 *SOUTHERN REACH TRILOGY* (*Annihilation*, *Authority*, *Acceptance*) cracked open the space for thinking the weird and the ecological together—for experimenting with radical new ways of representing massive and mind-bending things like global warming, geological time, the Anthropocene, the life and afterlife of infrastructures, and so on. This issue invites further analyses of this eco-literary link we're calling 'Global Weirding'—mirroring the term proposed by some climate scientists to register that global warming does not simply mean higher temperatures but a global planetary ecology transformed in radical and sometimes highly unexpected ways." But as we were confronted at our deadline with three or four volumes' worth of excellent material on the ecological weird—much more material, alas, than we could ever use—the term redounded as unexpectedly useful after all as a way of thinking about what unites the specific articles we have decided to publish together as *Paradoxa* 28. Each one is inflected by its confrontation with the category of "the weird." At the same time, each article attempts to think *the global*, both as a spatial endeavor to name a totality without flattening locality or overriding the interaction of distinct localities, and to examine how this or that locality interacts with all the others and with the system as a whole, as a historical endeavor to examine how our idea of globality intersects with ongoing systems of imperial and colonial violence that have not ended in the twentieth century but rather transformed into a force of futurological destructivity that is now so "slow," as Rob Nixon puts it, as to hardly register as "violence" at all. In the end our writers have created textured theoretical explorations of what, for us, originated as a rather simple provocation, inviting us and we hope you as well to consider carefully and creatively the intersections of the global and the weird as productive spaces for literary-cultural analysis.

En route to such new perspectives on global weirding and literary-cultural analysis, though, let us first return to Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny," in which he delineates three kinds of fiction and their relative capacities to conjure up feelings of the uncanny. After all, the uncanny is one thread that runs through nearly all the essays published here as well as all those proposed for the issue—it's a concept fundamental to both the Weird and to increasing ecological awareness. Freud first visits fairy tales and other fictions that explicitly declare their settings to be imaginary. These don't produce the uncanny for readers, however, Freud says, because we accept right away that ghosts, spirits,

and such are expected inhabitants of these worlds. Secondly, he turns to fictions explicitly set in common reality, to use his terminology. The inclusion of ghosts, monsters, chimera, and the like in such realistically set tales, Freud argues, may well produce uncanny feelings, but these will be followed by readerly dissatisfaction for having been deceived beyond the implicit contract of suspended disbelief. Finally, there's a type of fiction that produces uncanny feelings while complicating, maybe even avoiding, the readerly recalcitrance of the second type. The author of the third type "can keep us in the dark for a long time about the precise nature of the presuppositions on which the world he writes about is based, or he can cunningly and ingeniously avoid any definite information on the point to the last" (251).

Freud's third category is where fiction gets weird because the ambiguous status of its world gets weird. Readers discover they've entered zones of radical uncertainty: can this be *real*? Such uncanny fiction-fabricated places create fissures in our presuppositions about both the fictional world and the world we inhabit—the so-called common reality. We wonder: to what extent is this novel or film or video game a mad, grotesque vision of alternative realities, and to what extent could it be that with the unsettling sensation of sea anemone tentacles groping us this fiction produces a logical conclusion in the future of common reality? This third type of fiction cracks open fundamental ontological and epistemological questions as its uncanniness unfolds. Such a description of crafted ambiguity in fictional realities and the ways their weirdness undermines our presumed certainties about the common reality of the biophysical world of Earth seems to resonate profoundly with weird fiction—old weird, new weird, all sorts of speculative weird. Even more specifically, the awful and ambiguous worlds of weird fiction feel eerily similar to our rising ecological awareness, in which the entire world seems to have become uncanny in precisely Freud's sense: we are now, all of us, in the dark about the precise nature of the world in which we live, still waiting for the empirical data, charts, and statistical trend-lines to confirm what we all know, that things just aren't the way they used to be, something has gone *wrong*.

One of the most influential contemporary ecological thinkers, and a major proponent of leveraging Freud's concepts of the uncanny and displacement, Timothy Morton, deploys the phrase global weirding in his most recent book, *Dark Ecology*. Early in the text he writes this poetymological exploration of the word "weird": "What thinks dark ecology? *Ecognosis*, a riddle... *Ecognosis* is like a knowing that knows itself. Knowing in a loop—a *weird* knowing. *Weird* from the Old Norse *urth*, meaning twisted, *in a loop*. The Norns entwine the web of fate

with itself; Urdr is one of the Norns... *Weird*: a turn or twist or loop, a turn of events. The milk turned sour. She had a funny turn. That weather was a strange turn-up for the book. Yet *weird* can also mean *strange of appearance*. That storm cloud looks so weird. She is acting weird. The milk smells weird. Global weirding" (5). More than one of our writers was similarly attracted to the weird's more archaic sense, the one Shakespeare deployed in the famous Weird Sisters of *Macbeth*: *weird, adj.*, "having the power to control destiny." It seems clear that our future now seems fundamentally "weird" in all these senses: strange, looping, tangled, fated, cursed, doomed. Indeed, as our writers wrote and submitted their articles for this issue, none of us had any idea how strange and tangled and doomed our weird future would soon seem; it was only very late in the editing process that we collectively crossed Election Day into a new zone of radical uncertainty, or, if you prefer, our own mad, grotesque alternate reality: Donald Trump had won the November 2016 election, and would become the next president of the United States. This can't be *real*; something has gone very wrong, indeed.

As we began composing this Introduction, the town of Decorah, where Andy lives and works, was continuing to struggle with the complicated demands precipitated by one of the wettest Septembers on record, including 7.58 inches of rain falling in a six-hour span one night. The Upper Iowa River has run outside its banks three times in a five-week span and the water table is so high that he's had to move his office upstairs from his basement-turned-swamp. To borrow an image from the Timothy Morton/Jeff VanderMeer interview in this issue, his house resembles that of Beatrix Potter's Mr. Jeremy Fisher—a porous space that reveals even the idea of inside and outside as fantasy. Andy has been encountering the uncanny, the weird future, on this local and very personal level, as he oscillates between the academic and speculative elements of this special issue on Global Weirding and the actually existing conditions of water damage to farmlands, prairies, homes, schools, and businesses, and the residual contamination of the watershed as it leeches pesticides and other toxins from these croplands and buildings. We assemble here a collection that explores diverse aesthetic experiments in perceiving, imagining, and representing the weird futures shaped by global warming even as that future is already here, springing up through basement concrete, pooling under our feet as we write.

The issue begins with a pair of interviews that try to locate the weird today through the work of two of its most influential writers, China Miéville and Jeff VanderMeer. Mark Bould traces his conversation with Miéville through a series of interruptions and disruptions—most notably the mysterious erasure of the digital recording of the entire original interview—as the two discuss what Miéville sees as the rather brief moment of the New Weird at the turn of the twenty-first century, as well as how Miéville understands his current work as participating in the formation of both new literary and new political coordinates in a time of desolation. Meanwhile, Andrew Hageman convenes a conversation between ecocritic Timothy Morton and author Jeff VanderMeer that sees the weird as utterly infusing contemporary life at all levels, becoming (to butcher Kim Stanley Robinson’s well-known declaration about SF) the surrealism of our time. In their wide-ranging and free-flowing conversation Morton and VanderMeer uncover the strange connections between their work, as each explores and interrogates the development of a global ecological consciousness that produces not bumper-sticker political slogans so much as confusion and discombobulation, and weird, gooey messes.

Siobhan Carroll’s “*The Terror* and the Terroir: The Ecological Uncanny in New Weird Exploration Narratives” links Miéville and VanderMeer (and Morton) with Dan Simmons’ *The Terror* (2007) to produce an exegesis of recent weird fiction that makes inescapable the weird’s roots in colonial thinking. Each of these writers produces the weird at the level of the imperial-scientific expedition into unknown territory, and the failed, incomplete maps they produce. Mindi McMann’s “‘There were endings, but none of them were happy’: Exploitation and Authority in Hanya Yanagihara’s *The People in the Trees*” focuses on Yanagihara’s imaginative deconstruction of one such colonial adventure, which McMann relates to the real-world destruction wreaked upon the island of Nauru as a consequence of the phosphorous trade. Like on Nauru, the ecological and social networks that make life possible on the fictional island chain of U’ivu are destroyed by their contact with the West, a crime for which Yanagihara’s protagonist escapes all moral and legal culpability even as he becomes discredited and disgraced in other ways.

In “Slow Weird Reverse Colonization: Warren Ellis and Jason Howard’s *Trees*,” David M. Higgins similarly links the *weird* to the *global* as he reads Ellis and Howard’s ongoing comics series about gigantic, inscrutable alien trees that colonize the Earth to show both the possibilities and the limits of this sort of politically inverted narrative of slow violence. Invasion and slow violence are likewise linked in Matt Schneider’s “Translating the Unthinkable: Global Weiriding in *A Dark*

Room," which shows how the form of the "idle" game is inextricably bound up with the logic of ceaseless accumulation that characterizes contemporary global capitalism. *A Dark Room* makes that connection formal as it moves from what appear to be innocuous choices—light fire? gather wood?—to the construction of a immense and monstrous inhuman system with the player-character at its center.

Gerry Canavan's "After Humanity: Science Fiction after Extinction in Vonnegut and Simak" takes up the use of the weird as a solution to the problem of the cosmic pessimism implied by evolutionary thinking and the Anthropocene in Kurt Vonnegut's *Galápagos* and Clifford D. Simak's *City*, finding that each novel's recourse to nonhuman utopia belies the possibility of a human (or at least humanistic) value-system that might be able to confront the many intertwined crises (both economic and ecological) currently facing technological civilization. This sense of the Anthropocene not so much as a moment of danger but as an era of chronic suffering to which we must find strategies of resilience and acceptance returns in Alison Sperling's "Second Skins: A Body-Ecology of Jeff VanderMeer's *SOUTHERN REACH TRILOGY*," which uses recent thinking in ecosickness and disability theory to recast the Southern Reach's confrontation with ecological trauma in medical and psychological terms.

Andrew Brown's "Reading Lovecraft at the End of World" takes up the politics of the weird in more temporally immediate terms, focalized through Lovecraft, exploring how Lovecraft's work has been transformed by South American writers (especially in "the end of the world," Chile) who are able to use his terms against-the-grain (and against his own racist preconceptions about difference) to produce politically and aesthetically meaningful documents of resistance. Salma Monani's reading of Cree/Métis filmmaker Danis Goulet's science fiction short film *Wakening*, drawing in part on her interview with Goulet, similarly seeks to see how ecohorror and the weird might be used not simply as a token of disruption and disturbance but as a galvanizing system for mythopoesis in the ongoing struggle of indigenous peoples against neocolonialism and the state. Finally, in "The Weird's World-System: The Long Spiral and Literary-Cultural Studies" Stephen Shapiro deploys a world-systems reading of horror and the weird to explore the weird's unexpected correlation with periods of impending economic disturbance, finding that the weird erupts in our fictions as precognition and premediation of crisis and suggesting that the New Weird, in all its forms, thus registers our own slow transfiguration into a state of liquid flux, where all manner of personal, political, and ontological transformations of the world might once again become possible.

