On Climate Justice: An Interview with Professor Stef Craps

By August Vermeire

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights – Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet, when it comes to the effects of climate change, there has been nothing but chronic injustice and the corrosion of human rights. As the impacts of climate change become more evident every day, from the displacement of climate refugees through the tragic loss of lives and homes, the unequal burden on communities and nations is obvious. Those least responsible for climate change often bear the brunt of its most devastating consequences. But how will the concept of climate justice address this unequal burden upon both developing nations and the younger generation and guarantee fundamental human rights?

> *Welcome, Professor Craps. As you are specialized in a field called memory studies, what does it entail specifically? And how does this connect to the impacts of climate change?*

Memory studies is an interdisciplinary field that studies how the past is culturally remembered in the present. As a literary scholar, I'm particularly interested in the role played by literature and the arts more broadly in mediating memory.

My current research is at the intersection of memory studies and the environmental humanities. There has recently been a surge of interest in environmental issues among memory scholars. That's unsurprising: after all, our dire environmental predicament continues to deteriorate and hence is becoming harder and harder to ignore, as you indicated in your introduction just now.

However, for a long time that's exactly what happened. The focus in memory studies was on people and sudden, violent events. However, in order for the field to become more attuned to environmental issues, it has to break with anthropocentrism and take account of slow-moving and dispersed processes. It has to start thinking ecologically, you might say, instead of merely socially, as it has tended to do.

Climate change is one such process. It has been called a form of “slow violence”: it is gradual, often invisible, and it occurs over an extended period. Its complexity and vast spatio-temporal scales make it hard to grasp, perceive, and hence remember.

I’m interested, for example, in how literary and artistic responses to climate change often feature a fictional future historian who looks back on our present moment from a distant vantage point in a future ravaged by climate change. These characters can be seen to mourn future losses proleptically in order for these losses not to come to pass in the first place. The idea is to sensitize readers or viewers in the present so that they might be galvanized to take action to prevent the apocalyptic outcome depicted from actually coming about. I call this phenomenon “anticipatory memory”.

I've also done a fair amount of work on ecological mourning, by which I mean the process of coming to terms with various kinds of environmental loss. I'm interested in environmental commemoration: texts, artworks, monuments, rituals, and other types of mnemonic practices that memorialize the losses caused by environmental degradation and destruction.

> *How do you think we witness the interaction between non-human entities such as climate change and the human experiences and rights of those impacted by the consequences?*

To many people living in the Global North, in particular, climate change still seems rather abstract, theoretical, distant, and hard to grasp as an actual danger. The risk feels non-personal, and it mostly concerns the future, other places, other people, and other species: distant polar bears or tiny, low-lying Pacific islands. This is beginning to change, of course: clearly the Global North is not immune to extreme climate events, as we've seen in recent years—just think of the devastating floods that hit Belgium and Germany in 2021.

But still: this perception of the threat posed by climate change as abstract and distant is what generally allows us to carry on with our lives as if it weren't quite real. In our everyday lives we tend to tune out this inconvenient and uncomfortable background information. And when we are confronted with extreme weather phenomena in which people actually die, we often fail to connect the dots: we prefer to ignore the fact that anthropogenic climate change is what caused those deaths.

> *As we speak of climate change as a non-human aspect of human life, how do you see the mitigation of the impact of climate change on non-human entities?*

I think the climate debate has largely tended to ignore the impact of climate change on the non-human or the more-than-human world, except insofar as that impact also poses a threat to humans.

Take the example of honey bees. We all know that climate change is threatening bees around the world. The reason we care about this is that we actually need these creatures to pollinate our crops. In a world without bees, we risk starving. So we don't actually care about bees for their own sake but only because we can't survive without them. Ultimately it's all about us. There is a very selfish reason behind our ostensible concern for bee health.

I think that anthropocentric mindset, which values nature only as a necessary element in human domination and survival, is very problematic. This mechanistic and dualistic worldview is what got us into this mess. It's what caused the climate and ecological crisis. We urgently need to shift towards a more ecocentric paradigm that recognizes and respects the intrinsic value of nature.

Literature and art have a role to play here. They can help effect such a profound culture change. They can help us reject anthropocentrism, acknowledge non-human agency, and recognize our interdependence, our entanglement with the natural world. Think of *The Overstory*, a novel by Richard Powers that gets the reader to look at the world with fresh eyes. The main characters are not people but trees: the novel zeroes in on the perspective of non-human nature. The human is decentred as the background becomes the foreground. Texts like *The Overstory* facilitate the perspective shifts and the new ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling that the current era of climate and ecological crisis demands.

How do you think art and literature affect the way we see climate justice?

I think literature and the arts have a vital contribution to make to the climate justice conversation because of their ability to generate empathy for people across time, including future generations, but also for people in different national, social, economic, and ethnic contexts in the present.

Literature can shake us out of our stupour, our state of socially organized denial, by exposing and challenging what Naomi Klein has called the “sacrifice zone mentality”, the production of sacrifice zones and disposable people through various othering mechanisms, and by encouraging and cultivating empathy for the victims of climate change. It can reveal the personal dimensions of climate injustice in a way that emission graphs, facts, and figures cannot. It adds an important affective, experiential, embodied aspect to merely cognitive knowledge about differential vulnerability to and responsibility for climate change.

However, that potential is not always fully realized. Climate justice concerns do not feature very prominently in climate fiction produced in the Global North. Many writers shy away from depicting in detail the violence of climate injustice. They tend to centre the experiences of white, wealthy Westerners; the consequences of climate change for other human beings are but a secondary concern. You might say that there is a narcissistic tendency there.

How do you think that the fields like arts and literature can promote these fundamental human rights in the context of climate justice? What do you think is the role of academics in promoting this awareness on climate justice?

As I said just now, I think literature and the arts more generally can cultivate a sensitivity to questions of climate justice. But they can't do this all by themselves. As engaged ecocritics and teachers of climate fiction, we have a responsibility to study and to assign literary texts that call attention to the plight of those who are most vulnerable to the consequences of climate change.

For example, in my course on the literary imagination of the climate crisis, I make sure to teach several texts by non-Western and Indigenous writers that illustrate the devastating impact of climate change on marginalized communities. And when questions of climate justice are not thematized in particular texts—which, as I said, is often the case in climate fiction from the Global North—I highlight and critically interrogate the apparent absence of such a concern.

Besides, I took the initiative to convene a thematic stream on climate justice at the upcoming conference marking the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, together with two colleagues from the Law Faculty. That's another way in which as an academic you can help put climate justice higher on the agenda and raise awareness about it: by giving a platform to scholarship on the issue.

As you said earlier, climate change is mostly a phenomenon that is stretched out over several years. How do you think this and the way that the impacts of climate change become way more visible will also change the way that we see climate change itself?

I used to think everything would change once people in the Global North started to experience the consequences of climate change themselves, in the form of more frequent and extreme weather events. Surely once you're confronted with the reality of climate change, I thought, you have no choice but to acknowledge that this is not an abstract, theoretical, and distant threat anymore. However, I've changed my mind about that. I've been astounded by people's talent for deluding themselves and others about the reality of what is going on: we and our political and business leaders are extremely good at persisting in denial, coming up with alternative explanations, or thinking of reasons why it's okay to delay meaningful climate action.

Of course, there is a high emotional cost involved in facing up to the full extent of what we have already lost and what we are in the process of losing—a habitable planet, let's say. It's very overwhelming, and the fact that we are responsible for the destruction—some of us more than others—makes it even harder to acknowledge the facts.

Moreover, people tend to resist radical change. It's just too hard, too disruptive, too scary to even contemplate. So I'm not convinced anymore that the situation getting worse will suffice to wake people up. It will have to get a whole lot worse, I think, for it to have that kind of impact.

Which reminds me of a novel by the American science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future*. *The Ministry for the Future* , which came out in 2020, describes a plausible best-case scenario in which the world manages to solve the climate crisis by the middle of the 21st century. The book became an international bestseller, and it even earned the author an invitation to address the UN climate summit in Glasgow.

The reason it comes to mind is that, in the novel, the inciting incident that shakes the world out of its stupour and propels it towards impactful climate action is a terrible climate catastrophe. In 2025 a heat wave of unsurvivable wet-bulb temperatures strikes India and kills 20 million people in just two weeks. And that's just the first in a series of horrible climate-related disasters on a scale unlike anything we've seen before. So the only plausible way Robinson can envisage a sustainable future is by imagining that things will get a lot worse before they will start to get better. I think he may be right, at least about the first part: things will definitely get a lot worse. Whether they will get better afterwards remains to be seen, but let's hope so.

Indeed, let's hope so. Thank you for this conversation, Professor Craps.