Ikhtilaf, Journal of Critical Humanities and Social Studies Issue 1- Fall 2017
ISSN 2509-1743 ISSN (Print) 2509-1751
Issue#1, Fall 2017. The environment is us: humanities and the ecological crisis

Lesley Head. *Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene: Re-conceptualising human-nature relations.* Routledge (Routledge Research in the Anthropocene Series), 2016

Review By Nancy Smith

The Anthropocene—as both a newly proposed epoch and a conceptual idea for our current era—has quickly generated significant interest across all fields from the sciences to the humanities. At the heart of ongoing debates are questions that interrogate just what exactly the Anthropocene is, how we should think about it, how it affects our present and our future, and how we can bridge thinking across disciplines to best deal with critical issues such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, and pollution. In *Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene*, Lesley Head tackles many of these issues by articulating the ways in which we might leverage the concepts of grief and hope as ways of acknowledging and shifting our relationship with the Anthropocene as well as generating potential practices and political interventions that aim to change the course of the planet.

Head's notion of grieving is twofold; she argues that it accounts for the loss of the modern self or the sense that we thought the future wasa place of "unlimited positive possibility" and at the same time, there is grief for a stable, pristine, and certain past. Much contemporary environmental thought is grounded on the idea of a stable past, and despite the fact that that past was never truly stable, it is still used as a sort of benchmark to measure environmental progress. Environmental thinking founded in modernism, then, has found itself ill-equipped to deal with the present challenges related to climate change because it still relies on the idea that nature is fragile and needs protection in order to be "saved." However, Head writes, "the fact that past has never been static, and the future has never been assured, is irrelevant to their nostalgic and aspirational power respectively." (p. 6)

Grief, Head argues, should become our companion in the Anthropocene. In other words, as feminists have long argued, emotion is missing from many accounts of the world. Drawing on Sara Ahmed, she argues that feminist analyses of emotion have shown how it is viewed as separate from and "beneath" the faculties of thought and reason. "To be emotional is to have one's judgment affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous." (p. 22) Part of Head's argument rests in the fact that we have a strong tendency towards promoting the positive in any situation, and this is especially true in regards to climate change, which many in the Western world optimistically seem to think is solvable. But, if we are to embrace grief as an integral part of the process of understanding and dealing with the new conditions brought on by the Anthropocene, then we may be able to move beyond this excessive (and problematic) positivity in order to identify spaces of action grounded in more realistic expectations of

change. These spacesinclude the previously mentioned loss of the modern self, but also more concretely, beloved places that have been eliminated as a result of pollution and human activity.

Similarly, Head notes the loss of nonhumans as critical to our conception of grief, and highlights the effects of species extinction that have emerged in the recent past. This is one area of the book that would benefit from further exploration. Head identifies important questions, such as, "Why do we worry more about species than the individual as the unit of grief?" Drawing again from Ahmed, she suggests, the politics of grief constitute "some others as the legitimate objects of emotion. This differentiation is crucial in politics as it works to secure a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate lives." (p. 24) However, Ahmed's idea—of legitimate and illegitimate lives—is never fully explored in the book. This is a common issue throughout the book as Head raises critical questions and offers only a partial explanation, which leaves the reader with further questions around the details of her argument. In the same section, Head mentions the fact that grieving among elephants is well known as is their ability to form close social relationships; this also raises the question of who exactly is grieving? Presumably nonhumans are grieving—in ways similar and dissimilar to humans—for the loss of their fellow species and their habitat as well. Given the critical role that nonhumans play in the Anthropocene and a future that relies on biodiversity to thrive, the book would benefit from a much more in-depth analysis of animal grief and its various expressions and possibilities.

One the flip side of this argument, Head brings forth the idea of hope. Interestingly, she moves away from feelings here and suggests that we should decouple hope from its traditional association with optimism. In order that we move away from this dependence on positive emotions to promote action aimed at change, she suggests that we define hope as something that lies in practice and place, rather than in particular emotions. In elaborating on the ways in which we should "practice hope," Head draws from Ben Anderson's depiction of hope, highlighting four qualities: "1) Hope is understood as a process that creates possibly and potential, or at least opens up spaces in present day reality or things to be done differently. 2) It carries with it melancholy and grief. 3) It risks disappointment and has no guarantees. 4) It is everyday. This provides a starting point for how we might imagine worlds otherwise." (p. 73) Head's goal in decoupling hope from the idea of optimism isnot just to separate emotionfrom hope, but rather to recognize that hope is embodied and there are a much broader range of emotions entangled with hope, including those of pain, loss, and sadness.

In expanding on her conception of hope, Head includes interviews with climate scientists to pinpoint the ways in which hope is often removed from scientific research in an effort towards remaining dispassionate in order to be more "objective" when conducting empirical work. However, Head points towards recent work in STS that argues for the importance of emotion in scientific practice and highlights several studies that show how pervasive emotions are in science. However, the myth of the dispassionate scientist remains dominant within both academic and popular discourse regarding science. Hope, in this case, she argues has an aspect of being able to "go on." Hope then becomes inextricably linked to action. Thinking of hope as practice, Head writes, "has characteristics in common with Annemarie Mol's concept of "tinkering." It is inherently experimental." (p. 78) Mol, she notes, uses active verbs such as loving, tinkering,

doctoring, caring, letting go, as replacements for acting. Mol's work on medical practice in relation to actor-network theory is quoted: "Less strategic in its connotation than "co-ordination," and better at stressing an ongoing effort than "association" … This suggests persistent activity done bit by bit, one step after another, without overall plan. Cathedrals have been built in a tinkering mode, and signallars or aircraft designers also work in this way." (p. 79) Importantly, as Head points out, this is different from more modernist terms such as manage, intervene, and control. A shift towards thinking of hope as a sort of tinkering brings forth the possibly that we will be more effective in promoting political change if we embrace the messiness inherent in the Anthropocene, rather than working under the assumption that we can simply command change through structured, direct human influence.

Near the end of the book, Head presents several case studies, including a particularly intriguing chapter on weeds. Drawing on her native country, Australia, she explores the problem with environmental management and uses weeds as a way to illustrate the contradictions inherent in both humanity and nature. "Different patterns of human ecological practice—growing crops, making roads, city blocks left derelict—encourage different combinations of weeds. Temporal boundaries based on past baselines interact with and intensify spatial bounding practices of belonging—they determine which spaces and species are marked as nature, native and considered to belong, and which are not." (p. 116) The critique of species nativeness opens up questions about the boundaries between nature and culture as well as the implications for shift in those conceptual boundaries. Nativeness is not a robust concept ecologically because so-called "invasive species" often integrate and support ecosystems in unexpected ways, changing the very landscape into something new. Natives, she argues, are simply plants that "arrived first." The chapter on weeds is useful as a way of grounding the previously explored concepts and primarily as a way to demonstrate the new kinds of entanglements that have emerged in the Anthropocene, which require that we learn to understand plants as subjects with bodies with the goal of learning to"live with weeds" rather than trying to separate or purify a landscape. It is what Head calls a "process of living and dying, together. These bodies are not demarcated and separate, but are already and intimately in relation, albeit not always comfortably. Planty perspectives open up new ways of thinking about bodies and their boundaries." (p. 125)

At the end of the book, Head asks what it might mean to inhabit the Anthropocene? What does it mean for us to be citizens of the Anthropocene, both individually and collectively? And how different is that to being a Modern? These are the questions that guide her book from the start, and she notes that a key characteristic of the Enlightenment has been that of a hopeful future, "the possibility of striving for improvement, both individual and collective. Yet, the progressivist view of the future that inspired modernity has helped create the problem." (p. 167)If we can no longer ground our practices in optimism for a better future, we will need better ways to address the future conditions of the Anthropocene. For Head, it is grief that should be inextricably entwined with climate change and hope that should become not a guiding assurance, but a grounded practice that leads to civic engagement and political action. What remains unanswered is how exactly such a shift in thought might happen, and what kinds of actions might foster this new way of thinking in the Anthropocene. One hopes that the last chapter of the book, which briefly outlines the qualities of "The Anthropoceneans," becomes the starting point

for Head's next book, as this is where we might gain more in-depth insight into her vision of the human-nature relationship. Although it left me wanting more,Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene provides a much-needed provocation that reimagines political possibility or the "creative destruction of dismantling the fossil-fuel economy" through realistic human intervention that promotesa reduction in consumption and new kinds of environmental restoration and repair.