

Dual Violence of Ecology and Society: A Critical Reading on the Horror of Anthropocene in The Water Knife

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Abstract

Set within a dystopian narrative of water scarcity in a near future America, *The Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi in 2015 can be regarded as a paradigmatic work of climate fiction, which has received much scholarly attention since its publication. In the trend that Anthropocene is the third wave of western ecocriticism (Zhang 1), this essay applies Sarah Dillon's theory of Anthropocene horror based on John Clute's framework of horror narrative structure and Rob Nixon's "slow violence" to analyze how this cli-fi stages ecological collapse as a system-ic horror. By examining its storylines of the characters Angel Velasquez, Lucy Monroe and Maria, this paper argues that *The Water Knife* concretizes Dillon's idea that the Anthropocene as a terror surpasses traditional horror genres with the characters' suffering on their body, gender and race by institutional violence as well as ecological collapse. The analysis reveals that Bacigalupi has applied narrative structure, character development, and symbolic imagery to clarify the intersection of ecological crisis and social violence, thereby the fiction provides a new perspective to comprehend the cultural representation of climate anxiety.

Keywords

Anthropocene; horror; *The Water Knife*; slow violence

1. Introduction

Since its appearance in 2000 as a geological conception by Paul J. Crutzen, the Anthropocene has become a trend for literary scholars and cultural critics who seek to understand the cultural responses to climate crisis. With double characteristics of having an objective description of the extent to which human activities have impacted the Earth and rich humanistic connotations (Jiang & Meng 1), it does not only serve as a response to ecological crisis, but also a comprehensive reconstruction of cognition model, narrative tradition and ethical responsibilities about the relationship between humankind and the Earth. While former studies are mainly eyed on slow violence and ecological grief, Sarah Dillon further explores how people feel in a

global ecological crisis by the anthropogenic climate change. The Horror of the Anthropocene, Sarah Dillon posits that the Anthropocene presents a unique form of horror, one where the planet itself becomes a source of terror due to human-induced environmental degradation (Dillon 7). Characterized by drought, disorder, clash, refugees and horror, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* has the potential to be analyzed by this concept.

In 2016, Bonneuil and Fressoz have initiated four grand narrative patterns related to Anthropocene including naturalist, post-nature, eco-catastrophist and eco-Marxist narrative. *The Water Knife* can be classified into eco-catastrophist narrative, which holds that the Anthropocene implies the infinite proliferation of modernization and it is bound to lead to the deterioration of the natural environment and ecological disasters (Bonneuil & Fressoz 87). In this cli-fi, the Colorado River has become a site of violent territorial conflict set in a future Southwestern United States ravaged by prolonged drought. To present how individuals survive in an extreme drought in near future, Paolo weaves together three storylines: *The Water Knife* Angel Velasquez's executing missions to secure water rights for the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA), the journalist Lucy Monroe's investigating the brutal murder of her friend Jamie Sanderson, and the Texan refugee Maria's struggling to survive by selling water in Phoenix. With their different social class and professions, these characters' living in such uncomfortable ecological surroundings serve as a microcosm of the Anthropocene's dual horrors: the slow, insidious violence of ecological collapse and the abrupt, spectacular violence of societal breakdown. This essay then attempts to analyze the fiction within Dillon's framework of Anthropocene horror, drawing on John Clute's four-stage model of horror narratives and Rob Nixon's "slow violence". By examining how the novel structures terror through ecological collapse, institutional violence, and bodily harm, this analysis commits to demonstrate how *The Water Knife* plays a role as a cultural artifact to reflect and critique humanity's complicity on the environment that they live by.

2. Theory Frameworks for Analysis

Steffen et al have suggested that the Anthropocene threatens to render the planet unfit for human habitation without immediate and concrete moves (757), which calls for a philosophy to touch and guide individuals and communities. While reader's response has been a trend in literary criticism since 1960s, it has not been paid much attention in the criticism of cli-fi or climate change until these days. In 2017, Alexa Weik von Mossner has initiated that reader or audiences may be stimulated by the characters, animals or even lifeless environment to generate empathy when reading a climate change story or watching a film of ecological crisis (Weik von Mossner 3). In Dillon's *The Horror of the Anthropocene*, she explores the profound and specific fastening of horror to the Anthropocene by considering both scientific and philosophical responses to the contemporary moment (Dillon 5). On this con-

text, the Horror is distinct from traditional supernatural or Gothic horror, as it stems from empirical reality rather than imagined threats. Though she does not offer a specific definition of the Horror, Timothy Clark has given a conclusive definition when differentiating Anthropocene Horror from Ecological Grief. According to his conclusion, the Anthropocene Horror is a sense of horror about the changing environment globally, usually as mediated by news reports and expert predictions, and it gives a sense of threats that need not be anchored to any particular place exist both everywhere and anywhere (Clark 1). In *The Water Knife*, this manifests in the physical degradation of the environment represented by dwindling water supplies, dust storms, and collapsing ecosystems as well as the social structures that emerge to exploit this degradation.

Dillon posits that Anthropocene horror is characterized by Rob Nixon's "slow violence", which describes the "invisible" violence of environmental disasters that unfold over time like droughts or sea-level rise (Nixon 2). In Nixon's view, slow violence is often overlooked in favor of spectacular and immediate traumas, but it is no less destructive, particularly for the poor. In the cli-fi, Bacigalupi invites a spectacular counterpart of slow violence: while the drought has been a decades-long crisis as "Big Daddy Drought", the plot focuses on those sudden, violent events such as the bombing of Carver City's water-treatment plant.

According to Dillon, horror is not just the high spots of non-supernatural literature but can be seen to be structuring the entire story (Dillon 5). She then attempts to employ John Clute's four stages of horror narratives to explore a new reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Likewise, Clute's model consists of sighting, thickening, revel and aftermath provides a structural framework for analyzing profound and specific fastening of horror in *The Water Knife*. To put it in short, the sighting stage introduces the protagonist's encountering an initial threat of some crisis; the thickening stage reinforces the threat as its scope and implications turn clearer; the revel stage uncovers the full horror of the situation that often marks the shattering illusions of safety; and finally, the aftermath stage exposes the irreversible consequences of the horror that tells the impossibility of return (Clute, 12). This model may enable to clarify the horror experienced by the victims in the fiction with the character development.

3. The Embodiment of Anthropocene Horror in *The Water Knife*

3.1. Ecological Collapse and Institutional Violence as Systemic Horror

The Water Knife implies the setting of the drought's omnipresence at the very beginning by discussing sweat with some flashing sweating imagery, and moving to the protagonist Angel Velasquez's observing Charles Braxton's sweat: "Sweat was a body's history, compressed into jewels, beaded on the brow, staining shirts with salt" (Bacigalupi 1). Sweat will be noticed when one is thirsty and tiresome, and when it is metaphorized into salty jewels, the problem of water scarcity is emerging.

Reading onwards, Nixon's slow violence would be found: the drought is not a single catastrophic event but a persistent, embodied reality that wears down individuals and societies. The fiction repeatedly mentions the physiological toll of water scarcity such as dehydration, organ failure, and heat exhaustion, which enables readers witness the slow violence of the drought through bodily experience. With such weather condition, the once life-giving Colorado River is now a "black ribbon of water, twisting through desert" (Bacigalupi 10). And its reducing flow from 16 million to 7 million acre-feet annually warns the irreversible damage humans have inflicted on natural systems. Dillon's argument that Anthropocene horror arises from the "realization of planetary-scale change" is evidently exemplified here, as those privileged like Angel and Catherine Case prioritize short-term survival over long-term sustainability even though they acknowledge the river's decline.

While slow violence of draught forms the novel's backdrop, various acts of violence represented by the destruction of Carver City's water infrastructure bring the horror to the foreground. Serving SNWA, Angel leads a military operation to blow up the city's treatment plant with the statement that "This is old-school cease and desist" (Bacigalupi 5). Such act has showcased how institutions transform ecological scarcity into tools of domination and lead to unexpected terror. Thus, it can be noted that Anthropocene horror will be augmented through systemic, institutional violence compared to one's scarcity of water. Besides, the novel's portrayal of legal corruption further deepens the horror. The lawyer Braxton who is supposed to defend the law uses legal injunctions as weapons to make profit, stating, "These are your injunctions. You've got until the courts open tomorrow to enforce our legal rights" (3). And the law that is supposed to be a tool of justice has turned a mechanism for legitimizing violence that blurs the line between legal action and terrorism. This corruption echoes Dillon's point that Anthropocene horror often operates through "the normalization of extreme measures".

3.2. Clute's Horror Stages in *The Water Knife*

3.2.1. Sighting

With three storylines, the horror stage of this fiction will be analyzed from representative characters. In Clute's sighting stage, the characters experience the horror that will dominate the narrative in different way. For Angel, this occurs during his mission to Carver City where he witnesses the desperation of a city relying on "junior water rights" (170). The sight of Simon Yu, Carver City's water manager who is willing to die for his city's water, reveals the stakes of water scarcity: "Yu tore free and bolted back toward his water-treatment plant, stumbling, hands still zip-cuffed behind his back" (17). This moment marks Angel's first real acknowledgment of the human cost of his actions. For Lucy Monroe, the sighting occurs with the discovery of Jamie's body. The description of his torture that his "eyes pried out of his head" and "teeth marks on his tongue" can be taken as a visceral introduction to the vio-

lence underlying water politics (34). Lucy's initial horror at the sight of her friend's mutilated body sets her on a path to uncover the truth, unaware of the depth of the horror she will encounter.

3.2.2. Thickening

The thickening stage is marked by the escalation of both environmental and social threats. As Angel and Lucy are further exploring their respective missions, they uncover layers of corruption and violence. Angel learns that Carver City had "connected investors" represented by Nevada state representatives who had bet on the city's water rights (57). This revelation has made it clear that water scarcity has corrupted all levels of government from local officials to state representatives. Lucy's investigation into Jamie's death brings her to the Apocalypse Now! club and the hydrologist Michael Ratan who is involved in shady water deals. It turns out that Ratan and Jamie were trafficking in illegal water rights but Jamie was too smart to stay stuck and too clever to stay alive (71). Again, it is evidence for the systemic nature of the corruption. The thickening stage here triggers reader's realization that the horror is not isolated but embedded in the very systems that meant to sustain life.

3.2.3. Revel

The revel stage is when the full scope of the horror is revealed. For Angel, this occurs when he confronts Catherine Case about the corruption within SNWA. Case's casual admission that "everyone's hedging these days" and that even state representatives have invested in illegal water schemes shatters Angel's illusion of serving a just cause (276). He comes to realize the fact that he is not defending water rights but rather, enabling a ruthless capitalist system. For Lucy, the revel comes with the discovery that Jamie was murdered because he attempted to manipulate the Colorado River Compact for personal gain. Jamie's final moments are striking: "He was torturing Jamie for information, but Jamie had bitten off his own tongue" (121). This act of self-mutilation bitterly groans the impossibility of speaking truth in a world where water equals power. And it can be noted that truth and morality have no place to stand in such society characterized by ecological chaos.

3.2.4. Aftermath

The aftermath stage witnesses the permanence of the horror. In *The Water Knife*, this can be seen in the destruction of Carver City, the death of Jamie and Ratan and the uncertain ending of Maria's struggling survival. Take Maria for example, that she is captured by unknown assailants after witnessing Ratan's murder echoes the inescapability of the horror. In that moment, she lunged for another knife, but her body was lifted off the ground only to kick air with her legs (203), feeling the bodily horror stemmed from unaware or forgotten ecological collapse desperately. The fiction ends without resolution, but remains a glimmer of light in Maria's seemingly

hearing the growing sound of approaching helicopter in that it hints the return of water abundance.

In Timothy Clark's argument, Anthropocene horror is characterized by a dangerous mismatch between the dynamics of individual personhood and the contemporary context (Clark 4). Based on the analysis of horror structure in *The Water Knife*, it can be found that the characters exist in a world where the past has been a memory and the future is bleak. Even Angel who benefits from the system is left disillusioned: "It's the end of times, Angel thought as more missiles pummeled the water-treatment plant. It's the goddamn end of times" (19). Thus, the encounters of these characters have proved the inescapability of violence in Anthropocene that brings horror to the readers.

3.3. Body and Gender in the Anthropocene

Body is the most immediate sensor to experience the violence in Anthropocene horror by the effects of ecological collapse. Lucy's encounter with Jamie's body is the evidence of the violence inflicted on the human form in the extreme climate. The description of his inhuman torture by electrical burns, sexual assault and mutilation (119) may be taken as a metaphor for the violence humanity inflicts on itself in the name of resource survival. Such physical violence has reduced the body to a mere biological function, stripped of dignity. In addition, this cli-fi also intersects Anthropocene horror with gender violence, particularly in its portrayal of Maria and Sarah. As Texan refugees, they represent the marginalized groups both ecologically and socially exemplified by Sarah's survival through sexual work and Maria's exploitation by local thugs. Their physical identity as women has made them suffer from more dilemma since the dry society prefers higher class to ununified feminism. While the boss Case can order her force to secure water right as she pleases, Maria has to struggle for living by selling water. She is even threatened that Vet will nail her little tits to the wall when accosted by the local enforcer Damien if he catches her capitalizing on water without permission (81). This threat combines sexual violence with economic exploitation, which implies that the ecological scarcity has exacerbated existing power inequalities.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* serves as a powerful cultural artifact that articulates the horror of the Anthropocene through dual violence of ecology and society, narrative structure, and character development. Based on Anthropocene horror, slow violence and horror narrative framework, this essay has made it clear how the novel stages ecological collapse as a systemic, inescapable horror that permeates all respects of life. Through the analysis of horror narrative framework, this essay finds that the characters Angel, Lucy and Maria make their respective responses to the Anthropocene horror, namely, complicity, resistance, and survival.

Their stories intersect to reveal the fact that water scarcity has exacerbated existing inequalities, which is demonstrated in the violence on body and gender by the system and the society that witnesses a Darwinian nightmare. As the present world is confronting the real-life consequences of the Anthropocene, this cli-fi may tell a cautionary tale to warn the descendance of potential violence on anybody that arises when ecological crisis is mismanaged. By depicting the Colorado River as a site of conflict and the body as a casualty, Bacigalupi invites readers to confront their complicity in slow violence and embark on considering the ethical problems of the Anthropocene. In doing so, the novel reinforces Dillon's argument that Anthropocene horror is not just a literary genre but a necessary cultural response to the most pressing challenge of our time.

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