Book Review for *Progress in Human Geography*

*Weathered: Cultures of Climate* by Mike Hulme, SAGE, November 2016. Paperback £22.99.

*Weathered: Cultures of Climate* explores, ‘the many ways in which the idea of climate is given shape and meaning in different human cultures – how climates are historicized, known, changed, lived with, blamed, feared, represented, predicted, governed and, at least putatively, re-designed’ (*xiii*). Hulme introduces these ‘many ways’ in an engaging and succinct manner. Put more simply, for Hulme, climate, whether it is an idea or something more, is what allows people to live with their weather. Collectively then, ‘Cultures bear the imprint of the weather in which they exist and to which they respond… cultures… cannot avoid being weathered in some way or another’ (*xv*).

Hulme describes this book as a prequel to his widely cited *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* (CUP, 2009), and it expands on material he has published elsewhere (Hulme, 2015), seeking to deepen our understanding of the idea of climate, and to challenge the dominance of scientific definitions and communications. *Weathered* follows Hulme’s recent six volume set *Climates and Cultures* (2015), a collection of important writing on climate and culture published since the 1980s. As a companion work to those 88 essays, this book appears at a time when interest and investment in the environmental humanities is growing. The accessible and highly readable text is for students (the format is particularly attractive for teaching) and scholars across the humanities and sciences too, a handy guide or synthesis to so many of the sub-themes in cultural climate work, alongside references to the best of recent research from a wide range of disciplines, and examples drawn from popular culture too. *Weathered* has already received praise for humanising climate and for encouraging scholars to see beyond their disciplines. It is part of a growing body of scholarship that serves to demonstrate how ‘notions of climate are and have always been a physical and social phenomenon’ (Offen, 2013: 476).

After an introduction, ‘What is climate?’ the rest of the book is organised into 3 parts: knowledges of climate, powers of climate, and futures of climate, each in turn is divided into several short chapters including boxed sections exploring key concepts or examples.

As an historical geographer undertaking research into extreme weather events I was especially pleased that in PART 1, ‘Knowledges of Climate’, and indeed throughout the book, Hulme emphasises the value and importance of historical and geographical investigations into the connections between climate and culture, explaining that ‘ideas about climate are always situated in a time and a place’ (15). Hulme has also made an active attempt to include perspectives from non-western cultures (drawing on oral as well as written history traditions), and to consider the diversity and changing nature of the meaning of climate for ‘different people in different eras and in different places’ (15).

In describing different categories of climate, Hulme explains how comparison between climates is about knowledge making, but at times has also involved dangerous theories regarding the civilised climates, health and productivity of peoples, and the creation of ‘the other’. Weather observations in private diaries have enabled comparison of climates between places for several hundred years, and the systematic observation of weather using instruments allowed climates to be quantified and subjected to interpretation and analysis on a national scale. Commercial climates are introduced, imported plantation crops among the most lucrative of ‘climate enterprises’ for certain nations. In considering the processes by which climate knowledge becomes known and indeed authoritative, Hulme shares his own memories of extreme weather events in the UK, and encourages the reader to also search their memory for weather references, before considering ‘indigenous’ knowledge and cultural practice. Hulme’s background in meteorology means that he can also speak authoritatively on scientific knowledge, how climate models gain authority, and on the governing of climate through the IPCC. The book takes a long view of ‘Changing Climates’ (Chapter 4) and believed causes or explanations for those changes – from witches, sorcery and the supernatural and natural forcing mechanisms, to human interference over a long time. Cultural beliefs and practices continue to be of the utmost importance as people seek to understand unexpected weather today as they have throughout history.

In PART 2 attention turns to the importance of studying weather and climate in place (where they become meaningful to people), and the power of weather and climate in everyday life. Here cultural change features as much as climatic change, the examples emphasising the importance of properly contextualised research. In Chapter 6 Hulme asks ‘What sort of things can be ‘blamed’ on climate?’ (68), exploring the powerful human desire to construct narratives of blame, and identify those who are accountable. There are also newly emergent (and attractive) meta narratives here, for example those that link climate change, as a moral agent, to the outbreak of war and unrest – climate change forcing people to move into areas of new social and environmental tensions. Yet ‘climate anxiety’ has a long history. Fear was a common reaction to extreme and unexpected meteorological events in the past and one common in the primary sources I have been working with, extreme weather often interpreted as a punishment for wrongdoing or as a sign of foreboding.

Fear of specific, but usually unknown or little known climates as well as of particular events is commonly expressed in the historical record. Fear, or ‘atmosfear’ (Jankovic and Schultz, 2016) is also a common response to anticipated catastrophic climate futures, perhaps too associated with an increase in extreme weather. Hulme refers to the practice of personifying the weather through the naming of storms. The climate, and elements of everyday weather are often awarded human characteristics – particularly relating to behaviour, or more commonly misbehaviour or deviance. At the same time extremes of weather have always and continue to be attractive subjects of fascination and Part 2 of the book also covers attempts to represent climate in maps, images and museum displays, as well as noting its presence in literature – ‘climate fiction’ now a popular literary and film genre.

PART 3 covers climate models, prophecy, prediction and governance. Schemes for modification and efforts to ‘improve’ local climates through altering earth processes illustrate the cultural dimensions of the human desire to redesign climates, or perhaps restore them to a pre-industrial condition. Hulme also shows how climate is objectified and problematized through climate governance (so often centred around global temperature and always broken and unfixable) and international negotiation and agreement. The uncertainty that surrounds future climate makes stories something of a necessity and in working with climate Hulme explains how historians as well as climate modellers have moved into future worlds.

Hulme encourages the reader to think about his or her own idea of climate – highly personalised and based on experienced and importantly, remembered, weather. There is unfortunately little room in this volume for narratives of personal weathering (or the historical sources in which they might be found) either over the short term living through particular weather events, or over lifetimes considering the changing relationship between people and weather as bodies and minds age, always of course interwoven with cultural, historical and geographical context. We should not lose sight of individual relationships with weather, always conditioned by culture but never generalisable.

*Weathered* concludes by asking whether it is possible to live without the idea of climate. The rich content presented suggests not. The book covers a huge variety of themes in just 150 pages and even in uncertain times climate offers comfort to culture, and the desire to know more about it grows. There is certainly plenty here that will have wide appeal and prompt further reading and primary research, investigations of the relationship between climate and culture is a research field that will continue to grow.

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References

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