

“Who knows the true definition of real?”: Exploring the Material Boundaries of the Anthropocene in YA Dystopias

Timothy Clark, in his book *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* explains that the Anthropocene is the geological age in which humans have more control over the environment than natural forces. As humans, we manipulate our surroundings to fit our needs and wants, often without considering the environmental repercussion of those modifications. As Jennifer Gabrys explains in her book, *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics*, “E-waste—trashed electronic hardware, from personal computers and monitors to mobile phones, DVD players, and television sets—is, like the electronics industry, growing at an explosive rate” (2). This e-waste becomes a major part of the environmental backdrop of the Anthropocene. With the current trend of dystopia in young adult novels, it is no surprise to see speculations on what the environment will become even in novels that do not strictly focus on environmental issues. This paper is particularly interested in representation of virtual reality as it relates to the Anthropocene and considers the material, environmental side-effects of the technology in four young adult novels—Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One*, James Dashner’s *The Eye of Minds*, M.T. Anderson’s *Feed*, and Sean McGinty’s *The End of FUN*. This paper interprets the conference theme of “Refreshing Waters/Turbulent Waters” in a broad, environmental way. It takes an ecocritical approach to examine the futuristic environments that both sustain and become the virtual realities in these two novels. In these futuristic settings our already unprecedented impact on the environment is pushed further as the characters attempt to escape the real altogether. These novels explore the Anthropocene to its extremes to show the disturbance of unseen relationships between humans and nature that are at the heart of the environmental degradation. This paper argues that these books offer a very real possibility of the environmental future, one where technology destabilizes reality and the resulting e-waste continues to further degrade the environment in the Anthropocene.