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Introduction

Cymene Howe and Anand Pandian

Another big storm knocking on the shoreline, or the harbinger of an everyday chaos to come. A plastic bottle cap bobbing in a puddle, or a cipher for the look of the Earth's crust in a time beyond the human. A few weedy tendrils unfurling from a sidewalk crack, or a muse for resistance in a time when life itself seems to have become a political act. The evidence at hand carries heady challenges of perception and interpretation. Is it alarmism, the tendency to find signs of ecological crisis in every small instance of perturbation and decay? Or does our sense of the ordinary in fact depend on a massive bout of climate denial, a "great derangement," as the novelist Amitav Ghosh (2016) has put it? Making sense of a fraught moment begins with the simple matter of what there is to see. With this lexicon, we hope to provide a resource helpful for this task: a catalog of ways of living out the ecological consequences of the present as a means of grappling with the deep uncertainty they bring to quotidian moments of life.

We write in the midst of a dramatic reevaluation of the time at hand, as geological scientists weigh whether to identify this epoch with the deeds and tracks of the human species as an Anthropocene. This idea of an Anthropocene, famously proposed by the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and the fresh-water ecologist Eugene Stoermer (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000), has

spread with astonishing speed far beyond the domain of the natural sciences, dislodging familiar terms like *nature* and *environment* from their customary preeminence as signs of the world beyond ourselves. Thinkers of so many kinds — artists, poets, critics, writers, activists, and academics, too — seem to have seized on this neologism as an emblem for this time. The questions at stake here are indeed profound. How might our political and cultural discourses change if we were really to become collectively and critically aware of the conditions that the Anthropocene represents: the human deformation of the Earth?

We live in an accelerated world. Amid faster resource use, manufacture, and trade and faster communication and travel, speed has become a habit. It should therefore not surprise us that terminology can also move rapidly, blazing through media conduits. In a theoretical sense, speed is an essential condition of the Anthropocene as a concept. Many of its proponents cite the Great Acceleration following the Second World War — the quickened pace of fossil-fueled production, transportation, and unleashed consumption — as the crucial temporal phase that gave rise to the defining features of this epoch. What would it take, we wonder, to see this time, its agents, and their momentum otherwise? For, as the political theorist William Connolly (2017, 149) has noted, this is also a moment in the “acceleration of differential suffering, forced migrations, and violent conflicts,” even as “in a world of tragic possibility there is no guarantee that the need to act will be matched in fact by timely action.”

Much of the time, the Anthropocene augurs an affective sense of overwhelmed abjection or apathy. It appears as a set of circumstances that counterpose individual human actors against seemingly impossible odds. Climate change is, as Timothy Morton (2013) has signaled with the idea of “hyperobjects,” effectively beyond human comprehension in its massive scale, generational effects and widely distributed impacts. Even hyperobjects, however, are made up of myriad judgments, acts, and deferrals of action. And there is much at stake in how we read and interpret these incipient vectors and tendencies, how we de-

scribe what is happening now and how we plot potential paths from this present to other, hopefully less troubling futures.

This book is committed to the value of smaller scales of analysis and to confounding perspectives. We recognize the gravity of the global forecasts that invest the present with its widespread air of crisis, urgency, and apocalyptic possibility. All the same, we hold that climate change and other expressions of threat and uncertainty at a worldwide scale demand a bifocal perspective, in which global optics like the Anthropocene are matched with careful reflection on the potentials, both positive and negative, of intimate forms of life and circumstance.

For the Anthropocene is, in fact, an image — an arresting and persuasive one — an image of the Earth as captive to the machinations of a single species. The figure of the human towers in this new discourse at a gargantuan scale hardly fathomable from the ground worked so diligently by those of us in the human sciences and arts. Critics (e.g., Malm and Hornborg 2014) have found the term itself too anthropocentric and misleadingly general in scope, too keen on evidence of Man and “our” collective imprint on the globe to the exclusion of profound differences in responsibility and vulnerability with regard to contemporary ecological crises. Pronouncing an epoch in our own name does seem to be the ultimate act of apex species self-aggrandizement, a picture of the world as dominated by ourselves. With this lexicon, we are less interested in an authoritative redefinition of the term and its totality than in helping to propel its radicalization, to the point where it might speak more effectively to the experience of a wider range of contemporary human societies and circumstances, including their relationships with non-human others. Whether as anthropologists, humanists, or artists, we share a commitment to wrestling with *anthrōpos* and its limits.

This project began as a roundtable at the 2015 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Although it has since evolved into an exchange between many disciplines and fields of practice, there remains a unique and important place for anthropology in these conversations. *Anthrōpos* now appears to be a being and a problem on everyone’s mind (La-

tour 2014). But here it is worth recalling that anthropology as a discipline has dedicated itself quite doggedly to an investigation of the human as a problem and a horizon. Anthropology has always been a speculative enterprise, wagered on the possibility of surpassing a fixed picture of the human and its limits, an intellectual practice of taking the human beyond itself. There has always been an ecological dimension to anthropological thinking and writing, as figures like Gregory Bateson (2000) and Tim Ingold (2011) have shown, anchored in close and careful attention to the material circumstances of life and their ecological entailments. Humanity for anthropology is an emergent and imaginative collectivity, grounded in many disparate worlds and the possibility of thinking and passing between them (Pandian 2019). With this project, we hope to show that these legacies can be enlisted in the project of reconceiving the Anthropocene, for this is a discourse that tends to take the human and its world as givens all too quickly and easily.

Alternative ways of inhabiting a moment can bring a halt to habitual action, opening a space for slantwise movements through the shock of an unexpected perception. Each small essay in this lexicon is meant to do just this: offer a way of pluralizing perception and thereby open up the range of possible action. Each entry proposes a different way of seeing this Earth from some grounded place, but in a manner that aims to provoke a different imagination of the Anthropocene as a whole. What would happen if the destruction of forests for mineral resources was conceived from the standpoint of enduring indigenous **Relationships** with the land, or the **Ecopolitics** of those who insist on collaborating with the forest as a sentient being? How would our sense of human **Power** shift if we acknowledged the animals and other living beings from whom we borrow our capacities, or the **Photosynthesis** that imbues the planet with so much of its available energy? Lodged in such terms are fables that narrate the fearsome domain of human agency in unexpected ways. We aim, in the company of these many little stories, to avoid the perils of pessimism and panic that characterize so much An-

thropocene discourse, and to generate new ways of apprehending this unprecedented moment.

Heat and Wildness, Rivers and Models, Shit and Flatulence: in thinking with such terms and their imaginative possibilities, we seek to confront the challenges of vision and sensibility, to find new means of conceiving, engaging, and expressing the felt impasses of the ecological present. There are those who have found the name “Anthropocene” itself too straightjacketed a term, floating many provocative alters: Anthrobscene (Parikka 2015), Eurocene (Grove 2016), Misanthropocene (Clover and Spahr 2014), and so on, with many such others — Plasticene, Prometheocene, Simulocene — to come, even in the pages that follow. “The unfinished Chthulucene must collect up the trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures,” Donna Haraway (2016, 57) has recently declared with gusto. Maybe all of this comes down to the flickering promise of what we might call, with a nod to software junkies everywhere, a Betacene: a time to test, engage, and experiment with new ways of being in and with the world. We may yet have the chance to reverse-engineer ourselves toward a less imperfect humanity.

This lexicon is meant as a site to imagine and explore what human beings can do — have already been doing — differently with this time and its sense of a shared peril. As with any moment of intense movement and dynamism, the energy swirling around the Anthropocene idea cannot be contained or domesticated by any one dominant understanding (Howe 2019). There is no conceit here of being exhaustive or comprehensive. With the terms that make up this lexicon, we explore the Anthropocene as an opening to imagine the present in contrary terms and to engage creatively with this opening in lending force or momentum to more heterodox imaginations and movements. The Holocene may have been the age in which we learned our letters, but we are faced now with circumstances that demand more experimental plasticity. Given the feral geographies (see Tsing 2015) and disrupted grounds that compose more and more

of our world, there is something crucial to be gleaned from the workings of this improvisational spirit.

For there is no doubt that new dreams are necessary, germinating unexpected ideas and novel forms of realization. The Anthropocene is a world-engulfing concept, drawing every thing and being imaginable into its purview, both in terms of geographic scale and temporal duration. Climate crisis, fueled by predatory capitalism, has the potential to embolden the powers that be to exert draconian controls over far-flung populations, unprecedented in nature and scope. Can we instead learn new ways of being in the face of this challenge, approaching the transmogrification of the ecosphere in a spirit of experimentation rather than catastrophic risk and existential dismay? It is this crucial question that weaves its way throughout the pages that follow.

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