

translates them or narrativizes them. If writing is what occurs in these moments, it is a kind of writing in denial, a writing that takes cues and departures from known genres even when—especially when—the genres are “climate change related.” The shell—patterns of narrative, use of language, modes of address—could not be more comforting. For that, we can either be grateful or we can somehow struggle against it with the greatest discomfort.

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How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Term *Anthropocene*

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Not a day goes by in the 2010s without some humanities scholars becoming quite exercised about the term Anthropocene. In case we need reminding, Anthropocene names the geological period starting in the later eighteenth century when, after the invention of the steam engine, humans began to deposit layers of carbon in Earth's crust. Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer's term has been current since 2000.¹ In 1945, there occurred “The Great Acceleration,” a huge data spike in the graph of human involvement in Earth systems. (The title's Kubrick joke stems from the crustal deposition of radioactive materials since 1945.) Like Marx, Crutzen sees the

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1 Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, “The Anthropocene,” *Global Change Newsletter* 41.1 (2000): 17–18.

steam engine as iconic. As this is written, geologists such as Jan Zalasiewicz are convincing the Royal Society of Geologists to make the term official.

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The term is remarkable: it names the intersection of human history with geological time, as Baucom argues. *Anthropocene* ends the concept *nature*: a stable, nonhuman background to (human) history. Should this not be welcome for scholars rightly wary of setting artificial boundaries around history's reach?

The term has arisen at a most inconvenient moment. *Anthropocene* might sound to post-humanists like an anthropocentric symptom of a sclerotic era. Taking their cue from the anti-humanism of Foucault and to some extent Derrida, others may readily recall the close of Foucault's *The Order of Things*: "man" is like a face drawn in sand, eventually wiped away by the ocean tides.² Foucault, grandfather of post-humanism, appears less upset than the Matthew Arnold of "Dover Beach" at the prospect of this construct's obliteration.

What a weirdly prescient image of global warming, with its rising sea levels and underwater government meetings.³ But how ironic, given that humans evidently created global warming, an entity massively distributed in both time and space, an entity persisting for one hundred thousand years.⁴ There we were, happily getting on with the obliteration business, when this term shows up. Within it, the human returns at a far deeper geological level than mere sand.

Moreover, *global warming's* erasure of the human by Earth systems such as the water cycle happens in a grittier way than the "discourse of man," which is what Foucault meant. It is more than a semiotic obliteration. Gladly to use *Anthropocene* is not simply to talk of power-knowledge institutions disposing humans, nor even of *dispositifs* that include nonhumans. What *Anthropocene* names is *mass extinction*—the sixth one in the four-and-a-half-billion-year history of life on Earth. This is indeed an inconvenient truth for scholars convinced that any hint of talk about reality smacks of reactionary fantasy.

The Sixth Mass Extinction Event, caused by humans—not jellyfish, not dolphins, not coral. The panic seems more than a little disingenuous, given what we know about global warming, and given what we humanities scholars think we like to say about the role of humans in creating it, as opposed to, say, Pat Robertson or UKIP (the UK Independence Party). A Fredric Jameson would perhaps smile somewhat ruefully at the dialectic of scholars who refuse the very concept of reality and totalization, while global mega-corporations frack in their backyards.

One simply cannot just palm off global warming on other beings or even on a particular group of humans, or argue that the Sixth Mass Extinction Event doesn't

2 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1994), 387.

3 I refer to the action performed by the government of the Maldives in 2009.

4 I call such entities hyperobjects. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

really exist. The humanities have often argued via Foucault via Heidegger via Kant that there are no accessible things in themselves, only thing-positings, or thingings of Da-sein, or thing discourses. Only things insofar as they correlate to some version of the (human) subject. The blank screen on which these fantasies are projected turns out not to be blank at all, but rather to consist of unique, discrete entities (a new philosophical movement, derived from the obverse of Heidegger, calls them *objects*) with a “life” of their own no matter whether a (human) subject has opened the epistemological refrigerator door to see whether they are lit up in the clearing. And some entities formerly known as blank screens (and violently treated as such) are overwhelming human beings.

Foucault’s image of the sandy face is a metaphor for what some now call *correlationism*.⁵ Correlationism asserts that reality cannot be seen directly, but can only be correlated with something like a (human) subject. The “man” episteme begins for Foucault in 1800. To say the least, this is ecologically uncanny. The year 1800 is the moment of the steam engine—the veritable engine of the Anthropocene; it is also the moment of Hume and Kant, whose thought inaugurated correlationism: Hume by arguing that cause and effect was a construct based on a congeries of associations, Kant by grounding this argument in synthetic judgments a priori in a transcendental subject (a subject that isn’t “little me”). At the very moment at which philosophy says you can’t directly access the real, humans are drilling down ever deeper into it.

But what is this “human”? Evidently the term as used here is not essentialist, if *essentialist* means metaphysically present—here I do align myself with Kant and his subsequent lineage holders, including Heidegger, who inspired Lacan, who taught Foucault. This presence derives ultimately from a persistent default ontology in the long moment in which the Anthropocene is a rather disturbing fluctuation. This is the ten-thousand-year “present” I call *agrilogistics*, the time of a certain logistics of agriculture that arose in the Fertile Crescent and went viral, eventually requiring steam engines and industry to endure.⁶ The algorithm of Fertile Crescent agriculture consists of numerous subroutines: eliminate contradiction and anomaly, establish boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, maximize existence over and above any quality of existing. Now that agrilogistics covers most of Earth’s surface, we can see its effects as in a polymerase chain reaction: they are catastrophic.

Social space is in a sense physical, lived philosophy. So it might be important to get at what is driving the Anthropocene and its global warming. The metaphysics of presence is intimately caught in the history of global warming. Derrida and Heidegger were rightly determined to perform some form of *Destruktion* upon it. Reverse engineering agrilogistics, one discovers its occluded inner logic. A piece of that logic asserts that to exist is to be constantly present. Here is the field, I can plough it, sow it with this or that, or nothing, yet it remains, constantly. The entire system is construed as constantly present, rigidly bounded, separated from nonhuman systems—despite the obvious existence of nonhumans to maintain it (try to ignore the cats). To achieve constant presence, not just in thought but also in social and physical space requires

5 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2009), 5.

6 Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

persistent acts of violence, and such an achievement is itself violence.⁷ Why? Because it goes against the grain of (ecological) reality, which consists of porous boundaries and interlinked loops, rather like Derrida's arche-writing, subtending the very scripts that underwrite agrilogistical space, with its neatly ploughed lines of words, many of their first lines pertaining to cattle—a one-size-fits-all term for anything a (male) human owns. Patriarchy, rigid social hierarchies, and general conditions approaching near death (Agamben's *bare life* or Derek Parfit's *bad level*) were the almost immediate consequence, yet the virus persisted, like an earworm or a chair, no matter how destructive to the humans who had devised it.⁸

Humans, not lemons, generated the logistics of agriculture that now covers most of Earth and is responsible for an alarming amount of global warming emissions all by itself. Its generation had unintentional or unconscious dimensions. No one likes having their unconscious pointed out, and ecological awareness is all about having it pointed out. That alone explains some negative reactions to *Anthropocene*.

That I claim humans exist and made the Anthropocene by literally drilling into rock does indeed make me a kind of essentialist. Because my essentialism is without a metaphysics of presence, however, I am a *weird essentialist*, in the lineage of Irigaray, an avatar of this line of (non-agrilogistical) thought: to exist is to flicker with nothingness, defying the supposed law of noncontradiction hardwired into agrilogistical space.

Such a thought seems as ridiculous as the idea that I might be suggesting that we regress to a pre-agrilogistical time. One of the rituals of theory class is that as a condition of inclusion one is expected to convey something like “Well, I’m not an *essentialist*”; “Well, I’m not endorsing that French feminist *biological essentialism*.” Inert as that characterization is—of Irigaray, Cixous, and essentialism—this is something that comes out of our mouths as easily as things come out of an Easy Bake Oven.

Likewise, the ridicule with which the idea of social spaces that are not agrilogistical (hence not traditionally capitalist, communist, or feudal, or any manner of formations over its ten-thousand-year span) is greeted, as is the inverse variant, the insistence that humans should exert enough violence to “return” themselves to a pre-agrilogistical existence (John Zerzan, archivist of the Unabomber Ted Kaczinski). Such reactions are *both symptoms* of agrilogistical space as such—both assume that to have a politics is to have an enormous, overarching, Easy Think concept. So one is derided as a primitivist or an anarchist. The editing of laughter out of thought is curious and should be studied. “Of course, I’m not advocating that we *actually* try a social space that includes nonhumans in a noncoercive and nonutilitarian mode. That would be loopy.” Or “Eliminate the evil loops of the human stain. Anyone with prosthetic devices such as glasses is suspect. Return to year zero.” A taboo against loops operates in both cases. This is significant because loops characterize ecological systems—and ecological awareness, which takes an uncanny noir form as the detective with the fancy gizmos finds out that he is the criminal—having used the fancy gizmos to make fancy gizmos to perceive that very thing.

7 Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 79–153.

8 Jared Diamond, “The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race,” *Discover Magazine* (May 1987), 64–66. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 381–390, 419–441.

Aside from claims of anthropocentrism and essentialism, let us examine more closely the modes in which denial of the Anthropocene speaks.

First of all, colonialism: the Anthropocene is the product of Western humans, mostly Americans; the term unjustly lumps together the whole human race.

Although the desire for it emerged in America first, chronologically, it turns out that everyone wants air-conditioning. On this issue, I am in perfect accord with Dipesh Chakrabarty.⁹ Likewise, obesity is not simply American, for the same reason. Desire is the logical structure of consumerism, and desire is logically prior to whatever “need” is (as Lacan argues)—histories of consumerism notwithstanding, histories that tend to repeat fall narratives not unrelated to ecology: “First we needed things, then at point *x* we wanted things, and that put us into an evil loop.” Neanderthals would have loved Coca Cola Zero.

Secondly, *racism*: the term implies that humans altogether are responsible. Yet the term really means white humans, and they go unmarked: blaming all people for a white problem whose whiteness is suppressed.

Yet *human* need not be something that is ontically given: we can’t see or touch or designate it as present in some way (as whiteness, or not-blackness, and so on). There is no positive content to the human that one can directly perceive. So *Anthropocene* isn’t racist. Racism exists when one fills in the gap between what one can see (all kinds of beings starting car engines and shoveling coal into steam engines) and what these entities are with some kind of aesthetic putty, such as whiteness. Racism effectively erases the gap, implicitly reacting against what Hume and Kant did to reality (hence Heidegger hence Derrida and so on). Since Kant, there has been some kind of irreducible rift between what an entity is and how it appears, such that science handles data, not actual things.

It should now be evident that I am myself a correlationist. I do not believe that the finitude of the human–world correlate is incorrect; I do not claim that it can be burst asunder, for instance by mathematics.¹⁰ I merely hold that we should release the anthropocentric copyright control on correlationism, allowing nonhumans like fish (and perhaps even fish forks) the fun of being incapable of accessing the in-itself, whether by knowledge or by perception or by some other means, such as physical proximity.

Anthropocene may not be colonialist or racist, but surely it must be a blatant example of speciesism? Is it not claiming that humans are special and different in having created it?

Indeed, humans and not dolphins invented steam engines and drilled for oil, but this is not a sufficient reason to suppose them special or different. Etymology notwithstanding, *species* and *specialness* sharply differ. Darwin’s *Origin of Species* is ironically titled. There are no species—and yet there are. They have no origin—and yet they do. A human consists of nonhuman components and is directly related to nonhumans. Yet a human is not a fish. A swim bladder, from which lungs derive, is not a lung in waiting. There is nothing remotely lunglike about it.¹¹ A life-form is what

9 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 197–222.

10 Meillassoux and Ray Brassier hold this position.

11 Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 160.

Derrida calls *arrivant*, or what I call *strange stranger*: it is itself, yet uncannily not itself at the same time.¹²

The Darwinian concept is precisely not the Easy Think, Aristotelian tool for telling telologically what species are for: ducks are for swimming, Greeks are for enslaving barbarians. . . . Marx adored Darwin for that.¹³ Because *species* in this sense does not coincide with me, an actual human being as opposed to a pencil or a duck, it is not speciesist. Like the racist, the speciesist fills the gap between phenomenon and thing with a kind of paste, an easy-to-identify content. That is precisely what one is incapable of seeing, yet there are ducks and spoonbills, which are not humans.

Species appears superficially easy to think: after all, contemporary texts from *Sesame Street* (“We Are All Earthlings”) to Live Aid’s “We Are the World” seem to convey it, along with racism and speciesism.¹⁴ Yet for me to know, through the very reasoning with which I discern the transcendental gap between phenomenon and thing, the being that manifests this reasoning, might be like a serpent swallowing its own tail, putting itself in a loop. What appears to be superficially the nearest—my existence qua this actual entity—is phenomenologically the most distant thing in the universe. The Muppets and so on *inhibit* the necessary ecological thought—the uncanny realization that every time I turned my car ignition key I was contributing to global warming and yet was performing actions that are statistically meaningless. When I think myself as a member of the human species, I lose “little me”—yet it wasn’t tortoises that caused global warming.

Fourthly, there is the idea that *Anthropocene* is hubristic. Yet the term deploys the concept *species* as something unconscious, not as some entity that can ever be totally explicit. Humans did it, but they did it with the aid of prostheses and nonhumans such as engines, factories, and cows—let alone viral ideas about agricultural logistics living rent-free in minds. So *Anthropocene* is not hubristic at all. It means humans—already a mess of lungs and bacteria and nonhuman ancestors and so on—along with their agents such as cows and factories and thoughts, agents that can’t be reduced to their merely human use or exchange value. For instance, these assemblages can violently disrupt both use and exchange value in unanticipated (unconscious) ways: one cannot eat a California lemon in a drought.

So *the Anthropocene is the first truly anti-anthropocentric concept*. The fact that it is far from hubristic is also why geoengineers are incorrect, if they think it means we now have carte blanche to put gigantic mirrors in space or flood the ocean with iron filings. Earth is not just a blank sheet for the projection of human desire: this desire loop is predicated on entities (Earth, coral, clouds) that also exist in loop form, in relation to one another and in relation to humans. The argument for geoengineering goes like this: “We have always been terraforming, so let’s do it consciously from now on.”¹⁵ Yet making

12 Jacques Derrida, “Hospitality,” *Angelaki*, trans. Barry Stocker with Forbes Matlock, 5.3 (December 2000): 3–18; Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 14–15, 17–19, 38–50.

13 Gillian Beer, “Introduction,” in Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, vii–xxviii (xxvii–xxviii).

14 Sesame Street, “We Are All Earthlings,” *Sesame Street Platinum All-Time Favorites* (Sony, 1995); USA for Africa, “We Are the World” (Columbia, 1985).

15 See for instance Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars* (New York: Random House, 1993); *Green Mars* (New York: Random House, 1995); *Blue Mars* (New York: Random House, 1997).

something conscious doesn't mean it's nice. We have always been murdering people. How is deliberate murder more moral? Psychopaths are exquisitely aware of the suffering they consciously inflict. In relation to life-forms and Earth systems, humans have often played the role of the Walrus concerning the oysters:

“I weep for you,” the Walrus said:
 “I deeply sympathize.”
 With sobs and tears he sorted out
 Those of the largest size,
 Holding his pocket-handkerchief
 Before his streaming eyes.¹⁶

Consider the Freudian-slip absurdity of James Lovelock's analogy of Jekyll and Hyde for science and engineering: “Only big science can save us. We know big science has been like Mr. Hyde for the last two centuries, but please know, we have a kindly inner doctor Jekyll. Let us be Jekyll. Please. Please trust us, *trust us*.”¹⁷ Unaware of its tone, Lovelock's sentences sound exactly like Mr. Hyde, as does Jekyll's own self-justification in the eponymous novel. Moreover, one can't get rid of the unconscious that easily. Here is an example: “I know I'm an addict so now I'm going to drink fully aware of that fact.” And being aware of “unconscious biases” is a contradiction in terms.

The concept *unconscious* is profoundly related to the notion of interdependence, the ecological fact par excellence. It is weird, which is to say, in a loop: *weird* derives from the Old Norse, *urth*, meaning twisted or entwined.¹⁸ Be nice to bunnies and you are not being nice to bunny parasites. I am far from asserting that we should not care because we cannot get ecological action perfect: quite the opposite. In an ecological age, cynical reason collapses into just another form of hypocrisy. Ecological awareness is about becoming friendly with hypocrisy, not because one doesn't care but because one does.¹⁹

There are some substitutes. For instance, why not call it Homogenocene? This is just a euphemism. The substitute is true insofar as the logistics driving the Anthropocene depend upon an implicit ontology of the Easy Think Substance. In a more urgent sense, however, the concept is false and truly anthropocentric. The iron deposits in Earth's crust made by bacteria are also homogeneous. Oxygen, caused by an unintended consequence of bacterial respiration, is a homogenous part of the air. Humans are not the only homogenizers.

Having attuned to an Anthropocene we humanities scholars might accept, let us consider some significant aspects of the Anthropocene that are highly congruent with the humanities.

Crutzen himself is now having cold feet about 1784, his initial dating. He sees the data spike of 1945 called The Great Acceleration, and believes, like most good scientists, in the law of non-contradiction. The data spike looks present and self-evident

16 Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking Glass* in *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*, ed. Martin Gardner (New York: Norton, 2000), 187.

17 James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 6–7, my paraphrase.

18 *Oxford English Dictionary*, *weird*, adj. www.oed.com, accessed April 9, 2014.

19 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 134–158.

in that metaphysical way objected to previously. The boundary between this true beginning and what came before must be rigid and thin. There cannot be two boundaries at once, or a fuzzy boundary, but mathematicians, philosophers, literature scholars, and artists are not bound by this law. (Nor indeed are contemporary young quantum theorists, who are beginning to assume that there is not a boundary between the classical and quantum levels.)²⁰

One could imagine The Great Acceleration differently. One could see it as a catastrophic yet logical extension of the smooth-seeming periodicity of agrilogistics. In the humanities we have been thinking for a while about how historical moments are never rigidly bounded. Yet feudalism is not capitalism. The Renaissance is not post-modernism. Rather, they exist but are retroactively posited and necessarily contested, and not thin and easy to identify. More fundamentally, time as such cannot be established as an Easy Think Substance, as a linear succession of atomic now-points, no matter how large or small; otherwise Zeno's paradoxes arise. The present can be defined to arbitrary size: one nanosecond, a billion years. We are living "in" a present moment that includes, to name a few, the Anthropocene and agrilogistics and the catastrophe (if you are anaerobic) called *oxygen*: an ever-widening set of concentric temporalities. The reader will immediately note the congruence with Baucom's essay.

There is a finite *already*, a sort of *longtime-already* (as opposed to an always-already). Agrilogistics began as a smooth wave that lurched into the Anthropocene. Earth systems were in a harmonious-seeming periodic cycle for ten thousand years.²¹ We have become accustomed to call the periodic cycling of Earth systems *nature*; the term's ecological value is dangerously overrated. Nature as such is a ten-thousand-year-old human product—not just a discursive product, but also a geological one. Its wavy elegance was simply revealed as inherently violent, as when in an epileptic fit one's brainwaves become smooth right up until one goes into seizure.

Yet alongside the longtime-already, there may indeed be an always-already. How did humans fall for agrilogistics in the first place? There must be something in the structure of thought that locks onto the human desire to abolish anxiety and know where the next meal is coming from. Humanities scholars, supposed experts in what *human being* might be, need to examine the structure of thought. How did human minds get behind a scheme now known as both cockamamie and seemingly incontestable?

20 See for instance Aaron O'Connell et al., "Quantum Ground State and Single Phonon Control of a Mechanical Ground Resonator," *Nature* 464 (March 17, 2010): 697–703.

21 Jan Zalasiewicz, presentation at "History and Politics of the Anthropocene," University of Chicago, May 2013.