
The Anthropocene

A Critical Exploration

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The Anthropocene is everywhere in academia. There are Anthropocene journals, Anthropocene courses, Anthropocene conferences, Anthropocene panels, Anthropocene podcasts, and more. It is very safe to say that the Anthropocene is having a moment. But is this just a case of fifteen minutes of fame, name recognition, and bandwagon style publishing? The authors in this issue of ARES think not, and we would like to help lend a critical sensibility to the anthropological consideration of the concept and its dissemination.

We recognize that the Anthropocene is an epoch in formation. As a category and as a concept, the term inspires fear, revelations, skepticism, and all manner of predictions and projects. In other words, the Anthropocene is as generative as it is contested. And as global anthropogenic change becomes an increasingly defining feature of contemporary life, the authors in this issue of ARES look beyond the kneejerk censure of the Anthropocene as an academic fad in order to locate the social and political significance of the idea while it congeals around the world.

What do we mean by the Anthropocene? This issue does not attempt to over-determine what the term might mean for different people in different places at different times. Each of the authors offers their own definition and orientation for the idea, and we find the juxtaposition informative. For some of the authors the Anthropocene is a complex time period of accelerated, human-dominated global change, for others it is a specific narrative framing of contemporary life and futures. For some it is a lens through which to view multispecies worlds in formation, for others it is a spatial and material manifestation of specific economic, scientific, and political practices. For all the authors, the term represents another way to have a conversation about the breakdown of the division between Nature and Culture that has historically shaped the Western worldview, though each author approaches the possibilities this breakdown inspires in a different fashion with different stakes in mind. From the social role of political responsibility to the refashioning of American education to the negotiation of planetary boundaries, this issue leaves us with multiple Anthropocenes to grapple with.

As a format for critical literature reviews, ARES offers a platform wherein each author discusses existing conversations surrounding their chosen subject. The essays in this issue provide a wealth of literature with which to think the Anthropocene. In this issue we present reviews of the recent literature on the expansion of anthropological ontologies to include the nonhuman, the planetary scaling of environmental thought and politics, the rhetoric of blame surrounding global climate change, popular conceptions of Anthropocene futures, the use of the Anthropocene idea within the field of biodiversity conservation, the environmental and social science of New Conservation and Big Data Ecology, and the political ecology of education in an era of



global change. We also have a review of a recent series of meetings based on the Anthropocene idea, an analysis of “conference performances.” In other words, the authors in this issue recognize that we must utilize far more than scholarship that is only explicitly about the Anthropocene to help understand the significance of the Anthropocene.

Why should we care about the Anthropocene? Again, a single case cannot be made about the relevance of the term for our contemporary moment. Readers may not agree or identify with each approach presented here. We think that it is important to consider why that might be. However, each author shows us how Anthropocene materialities and imaginaries manifest in their own areas of research. The thirteen authors spread over eight articles in this issue celebrate the Anthropocene as fuel for thought and as a catalyst for critical engagement.

Gibson and Venkateswar offer an exploration of the way anthropology has approached Anthropocene-inspired ontologies and materializations. Examining literature on fieldwork beyond the human and transdisciplinary research, they show how Anthropocene realities become tools for political intervention. They argue that the Anthropocene can become an opportunity for breaking down problematic conceptual and discursive boundaries that have been prominent in the West since the Enlightenment.

Olson and Messeri discuss the environmental, spatial, and planetary narratives that have resulted in the Earthward orientation, boundaries, and macroscaling of Anthropocene discourse. Like Gibson and Venkateswar, they see the Anthropocene as a “new physical and conceptual space with which to know and act on the future of human being, dwelling, and relating” (p. 28). They ask, what would happen if we stepped out of the Earthbound focus of current narratives and brought “outer environments” and the extraterrestrial into the conversation? What would a more open cosmology allow?

Rudiak-Gould presents other narrative forms enacted around global climate change, investigating the various ways that blame has been deployed in Anthropocene arguments. Using climate change as a “metonym” for the Anthropocene, he explores how arguments about crisis, responsibility, and consequence alter people’s lives in material ways. He contends that there is no one moral reading of the Anthropocene, though the attempt to frame blame in an era of global change is laden with powerful attempts to limit possibilities for political intervention.

Thornton and Thornton also attend to narratives, arguing for a popular conception of the future that can move beyond “managerialist” plans for controlling populations and environments. Drawing on indigenous folklore from the Pacific Northwest and East Asia they present the notion of the “Ravencene” as an alternative vision of the future wherein humanity is in a continual state of adaptation to changing circumstances. Thinking through the differences between narratives driven by a sense of crisis and narratives driven by a sense of change, they argue for the creation of future imaginaries based on “a moral ecology of interdependence, creative adaptation, and resilience through practical knowledge” (p. 66).

Holmes specifically tackles the use of Anthropocene arguments in selected biodiversity conservation literature. He asks, are there new approaches to conservation stemming from an awareness of anthropogenic global change? Looking specifically at articles that have undergone peer review, he discovers a range of ethical values and contradictory positions. His suggestion for the future of conservation involves a greater attention to the humanities beyond just the social sciences in interdisciplinary research, and a reevaluation of the norms and values of “successful” conservation.

Hare more generally follows what she sees as the creativity of Anthropocene knowledge and technologies in the fields of New Conservation and Big Data Ecology. She contends that the Anthropocene is a “threshold moment” for new scientific innovation, allowing for the creation of a “trading zone” for interdisciplinary collaboration between disciplines. Beyond an explo-

ration of this scientific acceptance and adaptation to certain forms of anthropogenesis within “natural” systems, Hare also offers a caution against the continued use of economic metaphors and neoliberal categories within New Conservation.

Lloro-Bidart gives us a political ecology of a specific aspect of American education, reviewing the presences and absences of Anthropocene arguments in the *Framework for K–12 Science Education*. She critiques the “persistent humanism” of formal education, calling instead for a greater appreciation of human–environmental relations in educational practice, especially in the form of ecofeminist and posthumanist ideas. Like Hare, Lloro-Bidart critiques what she sees as the neoliberalization of education that prevents “alternative ontological arrangements with the nonhuman and material world” (p. 141).

Lastly, Swanson, Bubandt, and Tsing provide an atypical analysis of five recent conferences on the Anthropocene, examining a scholarly field in formation. They argue that while the Anthropocene is a science fiction concept that challenges the existing framings of the present and future state of the world, it is still “a field in search of itself” (p. 150). Through an examination of conference figurations, genres, and practices, they attempt to map out the parameters of an emergent realm of thought and action. They conclude that the field of Anthropocene scholarship is “less than one but more than many,” meaning that there may never be any one Anthropocene narrative or reality, but at the same time, there are an infinite number of ways to approach the Anthropocene.

The time is right for this issue of ARES on the Anthropocene. In an era where there are several well-known voices who have lent their celebrity towards generating widespread interest in the idea (perhaps most notably Dipesh Chakrabarty and Bruno Latour), we need to continue to maintain spaces for other conversations. This is important so as not to foreclose possibilities for understanding the significance of the idea or to unnecessarily limit the methods, language, and concepts we use to approach the study of the Anthropocene. We hope readers will find much that provokes and inspires as they explore these pages.