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Almanac: Anthropocene

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A spectre is haunting the world—the spectre of the Anthropocene. Denominating a fundamental shift of the relationship between humanity and nature, the Anthropocene marks a new geological era in the history of the planet. The eponymous Anthropos, that is, humans as a collective, is said to have become a geophysical force on a planetary scale, crossing multiple boundaries and in doing so affecting the functioning of the Earth system as a whole. Coined by freshwater biologist Eugene Stoermer in the early 1980s in order to signal anthropogenic processes that are acidifying the waters and changing the conditions of life on Earth, it was not until the early 21st century that the term was picked up and popularised by the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen (2002). According to Crutzen, the use of fossilised energy—particularly of coal, oil, and gas—beginning in the late 18th century not only fundamentally changed the shape of societal organisation in the most part of the world but has also altered the atmospheric composition of the planet. Over the last two decades, the Anthropocene has become a buzzword in science, politics, and art likewise. An endless and cross-disciplinary stream of framings, definitions, and critical assessments of the Anthropocene has emerged, discussing its usefulness as a geological, geohistorical and/or geopolitical category.

Despite its ambiguity and manifold contestations, the Anthropocene has become a core signifier of the current historical moment. Nonetheless, it remains controversial who or what is the collective subject that the figure and discourse of the Anthropocene interpellates and subsequently treats as both the causal force and the primary subject

of concern. With its universal gesture, the trope of the Anthropocene invokes a majority that represents no one and speaks for no one. Unsurprisingly, therefore, 'the Anthropos'—the being that according to the ancient Greek meaning of the word ἄνθρωπος looks up at what 'he' sees, that is, looks up to the sky—is not and never was a neutral figure. 'The human' was never a mere descriptive category or an ahistoric fact. On the contrary, the universalised Western notion of 'the human' has always been a racialised, sexualised, and modernist construction naturalising certain privileges embodied by those who gathered under and invented this concept [white men]—thus bringing with it its own constitutional exclusions (see Jackson 2020; Mignolo 2018). To put it bluntly: there is no proper human without the nonhuman and the inhuman. It is for the very same reason that the notion of the posthuman, too, is neither innocent nor necessarily a more inclusive concept (see, for example, Colebrook 2014; Ellis 2018; Haraway 2016).

Two prominent reconfigurings of the Anthropocene can be found in Jason Moore's (2015) concept of the Capitalocene and in the Plantationocene, first introduced by Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway (2019). In both accounts, it is not 'the human' as an abstract collective subject that is responsible for today's ecological devastations but a specific way of organising human life in and with nature. For Moore, the culprit is capital whereas for Haraway and Tsing it is the plantation economy. Reframing capitalism as a global relation and system of putting human and nonhuman nature to work at a very low economic cost, the concept of the Capitalocene refers to a "world-ecology of capital, power, and nature" (Moore 2016: 6). The Plantationocene, on the other hand, highlights the how of putting human and nonhuman nature to work by centring on the plantation as a place of "radical simplification; substitution of peoples, crops, microbes, and life forms; forced labor; and, crucially, the disordering of times of generation across species, including human beings" (Haraway and Tsing 2019: 6).

BIPoC scholars have problematised the concept of the Plantationocene for running the risk of diminishing the complexity of Black plantation life and "the deep history of Black struggles and the ways that attention to slave life can provide guidance for

cultivating worlds that support multispecies well-being" (Davis et al. 2019: 5). Indigenous scholars similarly criticise the dystopian and often apocalyptic narration of the Anthropocene—which also informs the discussion around many of its reformulations—for disregarding the continuities between the past five centuries of colonial violence and contemporary climate injustice (see, for example, Whyte 2018). Notwithstanding such criticism, the notion of the Plantationocene signifies a useful conceptual shift insofar as it serves to develop an understanding of how 'the human' could only be formed through the dehumanising exclusion of the gendered and racialised Other (see Jackson 2020; Weheliye 2014) as well as the naturalised construction of the nonhuman world as another Other of 'the human' (see Braidotti 2017). By reconstructing how coloniality is materially inscribed into categories such as the human and the non/in/more-than-/less-than-human, the Plantationocene underlines the necessity for decolonising Anthropocene thinking and doing. Thus, decolonising the Anthropocene, as Kathryn Yusoff (2018) reminds us, not only requires cutting the ties to colonial geology and origin stories in favour of multiple origin stories that are structured along shared vulnerabilities and hopes. It also means coming to a different understanding of the relationship between "geological forces and social practices" (Yusoff 2017), namely one that allows us to consider how agency is both made possible and constrained "by the forces of the earth itself" (Clark and Yusoff 2017; for a similar argument see also Lorenz-Meyer et al. 2015).

In an important sense, it is precisely the idea that humanity has become a geophysical force just like Nature that might turn out to be part and parcel of the problem rather than its solution. Against this backdrop, a heterogeneous body of work has emerged in recent years that stresses the urgency to shatter the imagined univocality and homogeneity of the Anthropocene by hacking it in order to create "a thousand tiny Anthropocenes" (Colebrook, 2016, p. 449). Engaging in different ways with the origins, temporalities, and the implications of the Anthropocene, these scholars bring to the fore the many ways through which the so-called 'Age of Man' is enacted not only differently but also with different earthly consequences across times, places, and bodies (see, for example, Alaimo 2016; Colebrook 2016; Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedrén 2015; Parikka 2015; Saldanha and Stark 2016; Swyngedouw & Ernstson 2018;

Whyte 2017; Yusoff 2018). Next to these, other scholars argue for abandoning the focus on naming a culprit, focusing, instead, on opening and unfolding spaces to cultivate livable more-than-human futures (see, for example, Haraway 2016; Myers 2017; Tsing 2015). Most noted among these is Donna Haraway's figure of the Chthulucene, which tries to find a position beyond catastrophism on one side, and a naïve faith in technologically fixing the wounds that have been inflicted to the Earth and its inhabitants on the other. The Chthulucene is meant to be "an elsewhere and elsewhen", neither a sacred nor a secular place, but a "thoroughly terran, muddled, and mortal" site where multispecies becomings in the present and future are at stake (Haraway 2016: 55). In light of the multiple and aggravating contemporary social-ecological devastations, such gestures of opening up rather than closing in what the 'Anthropocene' is and might become offer vital impulses for thinking and cultivating a multiplicity of scenes that decentre and decolonise 'the human', in and through which livable futures in more-than-human spaces and temporalities may come to matter.

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