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Editorial

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EDITORIAL

Introduction: The Literature of the Anthropocene

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Diletta De Cristofaro and Daniel Cordle introduce the special issue on the Literature of the Anthropocene. They provide the context for the issue and flesh out the main concerns of the essays included: form, scale, the reckoning of the human with the non-human, time, and the relationship between the Humanities and the Sciences.

Keywords: the Anthropocene; contemporary fiction; form; scale; time; human and non-human

This special edition of *C21 Literature* addresses the pressing contemporary issue of the Anthropocene. Within the last two decades, the Anthropocene has emerged as a powerful term in both the Sciences and the Humanities for understanding the long-term human impact on the Earth through the notion of a potential new geological epoch. The essays, interview and review collected here demonstrate how twenty-first century literature engages this concept, troubling our sense of ourselves and of the relation between humans and the planet.

The special issue originates from an email roundtable published in *Open Library of Humanities* in which the co-editors of this special issue and four other members of Contemporary Studies Network responded to a 2016 *Guardian* article by Robert Macfarlane, 'Generation Anthropocene: How Humans Have Altered the Planet Forever' (Sykes et al, 2017). The roundtable reflected upon the term Anthropocene and its application as a critical tool in different fields of literary and cultural studies, from speculative fiction and utopian/dystopian studies to nuclear fiction, from Marxism to postcolonial literature and criticism, from performance studies to comics

and graphic novels, while also interrogating the political potential of the term. If the Anthropocene Working Group has proposed that the geological era of the Anthropocene dates back to the mid-twentieth century (Media Note: Anthropocene Working Group, 2016), the term was itself popularised in 2000 by Paul Crutzen and has become more and more prominent in the media in the last few years.¹ After the roundtable, it thus became apparent that the twenty-first-century literary response to the Anthropocene deserved further exploration and we wanted to include a range of voices and perspectives on the topic. Our contributors expand our initial discussion in the roundtable in many exciting directions, covering different, mainly prose, forms – novels, short stories, graphic novels, and non-fiction – and national literatures – American, Canadian, British, French, South African, and Norwegian.

It is a striking aspect of the Anthropocene that it often provokes literary experimentation as writers seek forms appropriate to the subject matter, and this is a focus of several of the essays in this special issue. For instance, as Alla Ivanchikova discusses in 'Geomediations in the Anthropocene: Fictions of the Geologic Turn,' A. S. Byatt's short story, 'A Stone Woman' (2003), is a fiction of the 'geologic turn,' its tale of a woman turning into stone following bereavement a means not only to approach grief, but also to explore a 'shift from human time to geological deep time.' Sometimes the formal engagement with the timescales of the Anthropocene is more radical still. Pointing out that our understanding of it is often shaped by visual representations (charts, graphs and so forth) and that even narratives of the Anthropocene draw frequently on 'seeing effects,' in 'Anthroposcenes: Towards an Environmental Graphic Novel' Laura Perry discusses the ways in which works by Lauren Redniss and Richard McGuire exploit opportunities provided by the graphic novel form to engage the Anthropocene and explore how visual phenomena both enable and constrain our understanding.

The move in these stories from individuals to the planet, from a moment in time to the rolling depths of geological time, points to another preoccupation of

¹ See Sarah Dillon's article 'The Horror of the Anthropocene' in this special issue for an excellent history of the term and summary of the scientific debates around it.

Anthropocene fictions: scaling. This poses a special challenge for literature. We are used to narrative trajectories – indeed, we make sense of the world through narrative trajectories – that operate on the human scale, curtailed temporally (usually within the lifetime of a single human being; certainly, only very rarely extending beyond two or three generations), spatially (being focused through one location at any given narrative moment) and existentially (with meaning defined in human terms). The Anthropocene challenges us to think beyond these perspectives, to think beyond the human even though we inevitably cannot escape that subject position. In ‘Belonging to the Human and Non-Human Animals in J. M. Coetzee’s Recent Novels,’ Katarzyna Nowak-McNeice discusses how the idea of ‘entanglement’ might help us understand the ways in which the concept of the human is mediated through complex interactions with animals in J. M. Coetzee’s ‘Jesus’ novels. In ‘Radical Homemaking in Contemporary American Environmental Fiction,’ Kristin J. Jacobson examines broader environmental contexts, showing how narratives of family in works by Barbara Kingsolver, Jonathan Franzen and T. C. Boyle slide between domestic and planetary, human and nonhuman, concerns.

There is a certain ambiguity to the idea of the Anthropocene itself, whereby it is, on the one hand, the culmination of our anthropocentric attitudes as the human-dominated geological epoch and, on the other, an epoch that entails the very palpable risk of humanity’s end and that thus requires a reframing of the role and concept of humanity itself. It is against the anthropocentrism of the Anthropocene that Donna Haraway calls for a new ‘name for the dynamic ongoing sym-chthonic forces and powers of which people are a part,’ the Chthulucene, positing that ‘Maybe, but only maybe, and only with intense commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans, flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages that include people will be possible’ (2015: 160). This reckoning of the human with the non-human and the post-human is central to our contributors’ essays. Sarah Dillon’s ‘The Horror of the Anthropocene’ traces a generic move to horror within the literary mainstream as a response to the ‘planetary fear’ induced by the Anthropocene. Dillon discusses Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) as a ‘terrifying evocation of the world-without-us’ and engages with Haraway’s Chthulucene to foreground the legacies of horror in

the term. Rachele Dini's "'The Problem of This Trash Society": Anthropogenic Waste and the Neoliberal City in *Super-Cannes*, *Millennium People* and *Kingdom Come*' analyses waste, disused spaces, excretions, and surplus entities in J. G. Ballard's post-millennial novels. Dini argues that Ballard's 'myriad waste forms,' through their 'obstruct[ion of] the flow of capital and goods, and [their] pollut[ion of] what are otherwise friction-free environments,' have the potential to undermine the neoliberal system in its complicity with the 'Capitalocene' – Jason Moore's take on the Anthropocene that underlines the role of capitalism in the environmental crises (2016). Through an analysis that bridges non-fiction and fiction, Gib Prettyman's 'Anthropocene Knowledge Practices in McKenzie Wark's *Molecular Red* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Aurora*' argues that the Anthropocene challenge conceptions of what it means to be human, forcing us to 'un-see our traditional perceptions of self-separation from our environment and work to perceive more accurately our intra-active entanglement with matter'.

In exposing how curtailed our understanding is by our anthropocentric perspective, the Anthropocene challenges us to think beyond the human scale, to imagine – limited though such intellectual leaps must be – planetary forces, histories and spaces in the face of which we shrink into insignificance. While our cumulative local actions shape, potentially catastrophically, our planet, the Anthropocene also reminds us how planetary forces may extinguish, and will certainly outlast, us. In particular, because the term originates as a denotation for a geological epoch, the Anthropocene evokes deep time. With deep time comes a problem of perception and representation: how to perceive and represent the network of connections and effects diffused over centuries and millennia, especially when these connections and effects may well go beyond human history. This is the problem highlighted by Dipesh Chakrabarty in 'The Climate of History: Four Theses' (2009), where he points out that climate change challenges our capacity for historical understanding. To put it with the words of Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland, human beings are affected by 'Centennial Blindness,' 'The inability . . . to understand future time frames longer than about a hundred years. Many people have its cousin, Decimal Blindness – the inability to think beyond a ten-year span – and some people have the higher

speed version, Crastinal Blindness – the inability to think past tomorrow' (2011: 219). This inability, and the ensuing 'disjuncture between individual consciousness and self-awareness at species level,' is at the heart of Patricia Malone's 'Less Human, More Ourselves: Michel Houellebecq's Neohumans and the Anthropocene Subject'. Malone deploys the notion of 'shadowtime' to argue that Houellebecq's neohuman future narrators in *The Possibility of an Island* (2005) allow us to bridge the gap between human and deep history and, as 'intermediary figures,' mediate the 'ontological shock of [our] non-existence'.

As will be apparent from this brief introduction, and from the essays themselves, although the term has its origins in the earth sciences, the Anthropocene is something with which contemporary culture is actively engaged. Indeed, the Anthropocene is a powerful concept around which multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary projects might coalesce. Because it involves physical processes, geological change, the history of our species upon the planet, how we organise ourselves in the light of our growing consciousness of the role we play in shaping that planet, and – crucially – how we construct narratives to make sense of all this, the Anthropocene is a fertile site for projects in both the Humanities and the Sciences. Further, it is apparent, as Andrew Hageman's interview with the Norwegian novelist, Berit Ellingsen, makes clear, that some writers are acutely self-conscious – and knowledgeable – about the Anthropocene.

Understanding the Anthropocene is of crucial contemporary importance. As the essays in this collection show, twenty-first century literature provokes important questions about what the Anthropocene is, how we make sense of it and how our sense of what it is to be human – and how we might act in the world – are changed by it. At its best, literature is a means by which we know ourselves; at its most provocative, it is the means by which our sense of self is challenged and transformed. Although the Anthropocene should be understood as a product of reading as much as it is of writing – and hence literature from all periods, not just the contemporary, might usefully be read as engaging it – the emerging self-consciousness about the relations between humans, the planet and deep time makes twenty-first century literature a site where narratives of the Anthropocene are particularly

densely clustered. This collection of essays begins the work of bringing these texts into conversation with one another and with non-literary Anthropocene narratives. We hope that it will provoke further work in this vital field.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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