

5-28-2018

## Introduction: Shake-scene

Craig Dionne

Lowell Duckert

Follow this and additional works at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc>

---

### Recommended Citation

Craig Dionne and Lowell Duckert (2018) "Introduction: Shake-scene," *Early Modern Culture*: Vol. 13 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol13/iss1/5>

This Seminar Essay is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in Early Modern Culture by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).

# Introduction: Shake-scene

CRAIG DIONNE and LOWELL DUCKERT

In *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, Jeremy Davies argues that “[m]ore than anything else, the Anthropocene is a way of thinking with deep time,” meaning that the epoch of our environmental crisis is merely the “latest turning point within . . . swirling history.”<sup>1</sup> Eschewing “clean breaks,” his neocatastrophic take on stratigraphic science prefers the “jerky crossing[s]” between humans and nature throughout “the turbulent flow of geohistory.”<sup>2</sup> This “generalized disruption” in which human agency now plays a part presents certain challenges to the environmental humanities. We are just as prone to pronounce births of genres and to name transitional periods as geologists are to pound golden spikes into stone. While the indisputable atmospheric and biospheric evidence stacks up—it is here, we are “in” it—a singular, teleological cause awaits definition: whether William Ruddiman’s agricultural hypothesis (approximately eight thousand years ago), James Watt’s patent for the steam engine (1781), or the Trinity nuclear bomb test (1945). The setting of time, in other words, is too often privileged over its turns. Thinking with William Shakespeare (1554-1616) is a case in point; the geologists Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin (2015) recently identify the start of the Anthropocene with what they call the “Orbis Spike” of 1610: a dip in global carbon dioxide coinciding with the commingling of peoples of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, they locate the playwright in an epoch of human influence upon geology, spotlighting an author who arguably birthed the Anthropocene (the “Age of Man”) by virtue of “inventing” the human (the *anthro-*) itself.<sup>4</sup> Maybe Robert Greene (1558-92) was right in his *Goats-Worth of Wit* (1592): it was, and still is, the “Shakes-scene.”<sup>5</sup>

Such Bloomian benchmarks must be fostered, however, then preserved: Jan Zalasiewicz’s famous thought experiment about aliens visiting earth a hundred million years from now worries over whether they could “capture anything that one might describe as embodying the essence of humanity.”<sup>6</sup> It would seem that Shakespeare’s mystical, essential “humanity” is one of those great achievements of human art at risk of disappearing in the far distant future of earth’s unfolding geology, his genius lost on these extraterrestrial viewers who can only observe the binding of the First Folio (1623) as a string of chemical compounds. The plaintive exercise of imagining a future geologist puzzling through the remnants and pulverized traces of his titanic authorship in the future tide of time acknowledges Shakespeare as a “hyperobject.”<sup>7</sup> In this story, the “discovery” of Shakespeare’s trans-temporal importance to the cultural history of humanity’s brief existence on earth would be evinced (it is hoped) in the shards of countless rune stones of all the dead languages that were transformed by his poetic vagility—phrases from his

## Introduction

plays and allusions to his works scattered throughout the flotsam of lost cultures and languages around the planet. Not unlike that iconic apocalyptic image in *Planet of the Apes* (1968) of Charlton Heston's astronaut out of time, George Taylor, finding the shattered remnants of the colossal Statue of Liberty on the beach, Shakespeare assumes the shape of a collapsed colossus, mournfully expressed in Cleopatra's hyperbole:

His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm  
Crested the world. His voice was propertied  
As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends,  
But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,  
He was as rattling thunder.  
[. . .] In his livery  
Walked crowns and crownets. Realms and islands were  
As plates dropped from his pocket.  
(*Antony and Cleopatra* [1606-7] 5.2.81-91)

In *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011), the scientist who cares for the newly born Caesar presents the future simian leader saying, "But as for Caesar— / Kneel down, kneel down, and wonder" (3.2.18-19). Shakespeare was there in front of George Taylor all along, an early modern Ozymandias, already the "future past" of the anthropogenic apocalypse.

Reading for Shakespearean strata on this strand of our imagination is a grim enterprise—but it is a task that crucially reframes the question of his cultural importance to and in the Anthropocene. To his credit, Davies cites the legacy of "Shakespeare" in order to counter Zalasiewicz's metaphysical anxiety and support his own point about humanity's embeddedness within an array of nonhuman geological traces and forces: "What the aliens would lack is just the *illusion* of a transcendent human essence."<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare is one dis-anthropocentric historical-geological agent out of many in a messy and material world, collapsing the ecological spaces of G/g/lobe. That same hypothetical geologist might notice, for example, that Shakespeare was a commodity who circulated the transnational trade routes with cotton and sugar, that his language infused itself into the Western expansionist imaginary which fueled the Great Acceleration in the mid-twentieth century. What will be the golden spike that accounts for Shakespeare's participation within global capitalism's encircling of the earth? (Scenes from *Julius Caesar* [1599] were implanted in the Caribbean in the British Royal Reader textbooks—the subtext to the Mas rituals that stage oratory from the play. Shakespeare was there in that festive mask worn by the dancers.) Shakespeare is a cultural biomass according to this—our—version of the anthropocenic story, one inextricably bound to the legacies of colonial relations and the mercantile products and people that circled the earth throughout the Holocene's semi-stable seasons, carried by gulf streams that made pregnant the sails of global exchange, the dusty sediment who was digested in humanity's imaginary capacity to think metaphorically. Davies' choice of Shakespeare as an emblem of human impress, then, helps him make a rhetorical argument about memory and cultural loss

## Shake-scene

through the corrosion of long stretches of geological history to which all ecosystems are susceptible. (Not even the Bard escapes the dimming of this deep gulf of time: an apt fate for someone who sonneted its swirling “sickle’s compass come.”) Just like the lines of plastic bottles that litter our beaches, the recreated Tudor village of “little” Stratford-upon-Avon being built in China, or the repurposed shipping containers soon to form “The Container Globe” outside Detroit (Fig. 1), it is uncertain how long Will *will* last.<sup>10</sup>



**Fig 1: The Container Globe. Image courtesy of Angus Vail.**

As “Shakespeare in the Anthropocene” seminar leaders at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Atlanta, we were attracted to the promises of Davies’ positivist science, in that it allowed us to suspend our theoretical skepticism over representation as baseless ideology and talk facts—albeit as conjectural “calculations”—while locating ourselves in the ecological fabric of the early modern as well as present-day world. Recognizing that, at a certain level, the idea of a geological “epoch” is—like the historian’s idea of “period”—just an abstraction that allows for certain assumptions, comparisons, and biases, we asked two scholars who have addressed these very challenges of periodization through similar means—storms, ships (arks), wrecks—to serve as respondents. We knew that Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Steve Mentz would importantly query temporal fixity, thereby expanding our session’s early modern ambit as well as the *scenic* scope of the Anthropocene. Building upon the idea of a stratigraphic, geologically-mediated and materially-layered Shakespeare, our goal was to play with concepts and metaphors of strata and dispersed evidence while keeping with how historicist scholarship of reception and appropriation has perceived Shakespeare’s role in shaping generations of writers and thinkers on different shores throughout neoliberalism’s slow burn of natural resources for accumulated capital. In short, we conceived of Shakespeare less of a starting point—a period—and more of a question mark. Why invent “in” here, with him,

## Introduction

and at present? Our original seminar proposal invited potential participants to follow multiple lines of inquiry: what does it mean to experience Shakespeare in the context of the Anthropocene? How do his genres express themes associated with anthropogenic existence? What role did he play in shaping post-human awareness of interconnected eco-aesthetics? How does his art react to, and potentially alter, our uncertain geopolitical scene?

The range of replies that constitute this volume prove that Greene's *shaky* pronunciation was right in a different sense; recognized as a verb rather than a noun, the "Shake-scene" truly shakes up the ecological *now*: from stewardship (Crover), to tragic prophesy (Garner-Balandrin), to intergenerational justice (Whitney). Shakespeare is "not of an age, but for all time" so long as that "time" is the deep time of flux instead of a static and segmented "age": what philosopher Michel Serres calls "*le temps*," the turbulent tangle of weather and time, and what anthropologist Tim Ingold deems a "weather-world."<sup>11</sup> Davies' book reminds us how difficult it is to define the term "Anthropocene," let alone be "in" its shakes: non-teleological and non-linear, it is a historical period of protracted duration without a detectable beginning. Shakespeare and his contemporaries could not depend on clocked progressions of time tidily advancing from age to age (Borlik). Chronology "in" the Anthropocene ruptures.

Speculating over shuddery origins feels oddly similar to inferring the required stage directions for populating Shakespeare's bare stage. We feel like the audience who must discern the "scene" merely with the effects of cues offered in the actor's language. Consider the point in *Titus Andronicus* (1592-3) when Tamora's description of nature goes from "sweet shade" where "birds chant melody on every bush" to—and in a matter of a few lines—"detested vale" where "nothing breeds" (2.3.12-16; 93-6). Scholars of Shakespeare in the Anthropocene feel the same sense of bewilderment: what kind of forest is this? Where are we standing right now? What are we "in"? What time is it? Here is Shakespeare's cynical environmental moment—when nature flips the switch from pastoral to tragedy, darkening the early modern stratigraphic shift and negating its possibilities. Shakespeare is a prosthetic we use to think the Anthropocene: we cut tree limbs to use as dead signifiers, writing in the dust how we got here (Mitchell), employing our conservationist tools (Borlik) and intersectional artifacts (Seremet). But we also know that there is no going back to the pastoral: it is all ruined nature—decay (Kolb), de/growth (O'Dair), and dead air (Swarbrick)—from here on out. *Hamlet's* (1600-1) shock "in" the Anthropocene is also "of" it: the "thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to" (3.1.61-2).<sup>12</sup> What is the "natural," whose "flesh," and whether or not we are able "shuffl[e] off" the "mortal coil[s]" of trauma *are* the questions. Yet if this is what "learning to die" in the Anthropocene looks like,<sup>13</sup> inhabiting the "Shake-scene" might also teach us how to live, how to learn from the shocks of the past to better the future, to forge temporal commitments (Sowhrawdy) that cannot erase anthropogenic signatures already written (Rose) but may ensure that the co-signings to come are more capacious and just.

We hope the "Shakes-scene" that tremulously unfolds does not merely add to the proliferation of *-cenes* but significantly shakes up ontological,

## Shake-scene

epistemological, and ethical categories: veering humans from their ecological centers (of anthropocentricity), spiraling new techniques to story the complexities of the “in” (-cene comes from the Greek *kainos*, “new”), and even sponsoring shocks of empathy (the frisson of touch). The structure of this volume adheres to our seminar’s original outline: from in- and describing anthropological scenes (followed by Mentz’s response), to ecomaterial stories and the lessons in growth, decay, and sustainability they tell (followed by Cohen’s). But there is a remaining twist to the geological time-storm known as the “Shake-scene.” On April 5, 2017, a few days before our seminar was set to convene, seven tornados touched down in the greater Atlanta area. Two of our participants could not attend the conference as a result; many others were delayed. The storm bore the Twitter hashtag #shakenado,<sup>14</sup> an online forum in which conference members posted their frustrated status updates. While we were able (that time) to adapt to the weather, the physical flux surrounding our seminar exemplifies the precarity of living within the Anthropocene, signaling how Shakespeare was—and how Shakespeare studies still is—caught in the world’s unpredictable vortices. “Shake-scene” is #shakenado by another name; Shakespeare is not *the* start of the Anthropocene (ca. 1610) but part of its swirls. What is to be done, to be proverbialized, as it were? How are we to stay with the turbulence? We feel disoriented but not indifferent. Do we merely hold onto Shakespeare in this long wistful moment—making his narratives parables of contingency—or mine his work as past generations have done to make him a commonplace book for survival and “[b]y indirections find direction out” (*Hamlet*, 2.1.63)? “If it be, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now” (5.2.192-3). Since we began this introduction pondering the creation of epochs and the cessation of others, we will conclude with the charge of “living and dying well”—in the words of Donna J. Haraway—through a Shakespearean source, *Pericles* (1607-8): “Did you not name a tempest / A birth, and death?” (5.3.33-4). Thaisa’s meditation is one we wish to extend to you before reading, so that afterwards you may feel an unsettled urge to “spea[k] resurgence to despair,”<sup>15</sup> as she does, in troubled times.



Fig. 2: Detroit Book Depository. Image courtesy of Jonathan Haeber.

## Introduction

### Notes

1. Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 12, 15.
2. Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, 8, 6, 11.
3. Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene," *Nature* 519 (2015): 171-80.
4. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008).
5. Robert Greene, *Greene's Groats-Worth of Wit* (London: J. Wolfe and J. Danter, 1592).
6. Quoted in Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, 82.
7. As defined by Timothy Morton in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013): "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (1).
8. Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, 83.
9. Sonnet 116 (1609), 10. All quotations are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016).
10. See <http://www.stratford-herald.com/69969-work-stratford-replica-china-begins.html>, for instance, and <http://www.thecontainerglobe.com>.
11. Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 58; Timothy Ingold, "Landscape or Weather-World?" in *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge, and Description* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 126-35.
12. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2015).
13. Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015).
14. Browse tweets from the conference: <https://twitter.com/hashtag/shakenado?lang=en>.
15. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 29, 71.

---

**Craig Dionne** is Professor of Literary and Cultural Theory at Eastern Michigan University. He specializes in Shakespeare and early modern cultural studies. He is author of *Posthuman Lear: Reading Shakespeare in the Anthropocene* (punctum 2016). He has co-edited *Rogues and Early Modern English Culture* (with Steve Mentz, University of Michigan Press 2005), *Native Shakespeares: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage* (with Parmita Kapadia, Ashgate 2008), and *Bollywood Shakespeares* (with Parmita Kapadia, Palgrave, 2014). He is currently working on a book, *Shakespeare's Instincts: Ethology and Geological Time in the Early Modern Imagination*.

**Lowell Duckert** is Associate Professor of English at West Virginia University, where he specializes in early modern literature, environmental criticism, and new materialisms. He has published on various topics such as glaciers, polar bears, the color maroon, rain, fleece, mining, and lagoons. With Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, he is the editor of "Ecomaterialism" (*postmedieval* 4:1 [2013]); *Elemental Ecocriticism*:

## Shake-scene

*Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (2015); and *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking* (2017). His book *For All Waters: Finding Ourselves in Early Modern Wetscapes* was published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2017.