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AN ELEMENTAL ANTHROPOCENE

Introduction: An Elemental Anthropocene

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Did the idea to explore elemental thinking come first, or the thinkers? It is hard for us to tell in hindsight. This collection has one clear origin point, amongst others, which is the Anthropocene Campus Melbourne (ACM18) event held at Deakin University, on Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung Country, in September 2018. This event was organised by a dispersed collective including ourselves, Courtney Addison, Jessica Cattelino, Aadita Chaudhary, Eben Kirksey, Matthew Kearnes, Manuel Tironi, Alex Zahara, David Kelly, Juan Francisco Salazar, Georgina Drew, and Ruth Morgan. During the four days of ACM18, over a hundred scholars from universities in the Pacific, North America, East Asia and South America were divided into four curriculum streams based around different elemental themes: earth, fire, water, and air/flesh. Participants were allotted two streams to follow through the first two days, encountering these classical elements in new and familiar contexts under the guidance of stream leaders. They imagined ‘water flourishing’ with and without the Anthropos.¹ They spent time with pyrophilic trees in landscapes engineered by private consultants for ‘climate resilience’. Some participants visited Melbourne Water’s Western Treatment Plant, also known as ‘the poo farm’, to encounter novel strata stockpiled from over a century of urban dwelling and consumption. Others went to the city’s Royal Botanical Gardens, learning about plants that have been fostered by Aboriginal peoples for tens of millennia and plants that are being fostered for the climates ahead. Throughout the event, participants were encouraged to ‘stay with the trouble’ of their specific material surrounds.²

There are other biographical stories to tell. Several of the organisers behind this experiment had first met at the Anthropocene Campus Philadelphia held at Drexel University in October 2017, which itself had personal links and common personnel to the Anthropocene Campus events that took place in Berlin in 2014 and 2016.³ At the same time, many networks were

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formed for and through the ACM18 event itself, as is demonstrated by the articles in this collection. Cattelino, Drew and Morgan had not met prior to ACM18, and their article stems not only from their collaboration leading the water stream but also, as they explain, from participants' understandings of how to 'move away from pervasive narratives of water crisis without, at the same time, romancing water'.⁴ Meanwhile, Neale, Smith and Zahara's contribution emerged from their leadership of the fire stream, though the article's central interest in temporal scales owe a lot to that stream's engagement with those intimately involved in managing landscape combustion today including Wurundjeri elder Uncle David Wandin, who spoke to the long history of Aboriginal peoples' co-constitutive relationship with fire, as well as an emergency manager and a climate forecaster. Kenner, one of the leaders of the air/flesh stream, writes with two participants from that stream, Aftab Mirzaei and Christy Spackman, about air as an 'interscalar vehicle'. The productive sociality of the stream curriculum, thinking and doing elementality together, forged unexpected and creative connections that enable them to examine how air contains the consumption practices of some humans.

But even these interpersonal genealogies do not tell a comprehensive or even adequate account of this collection of essays. ACM18, and now this publication, is undoubtedly riding a much broader surge of interest in the Anthropocene and the elemental. The first of these terms likely needs no introduction. The emergence of the stratigraphic 'age of the human' amongst geologists and globetrotting 'geo-crats' is well-described by others elsewhere.⁵ What is worth clarifying is that the Anthropocene names both a geological epoch, laden with political baggage, and a moment of feverish theorising. This 'charismatic mega-category',⁶ as Beth Reddy notes, has made rousing fodder for many, inspiring large volumes of academic texts outside the physical sciences that variously explain, debate and parse the possible meaning and significance of geological typologies and their constitutive terms. Viewed together, and as Margaret Jolly reminds us in her essay, this diverse and unfolding field has sometimes neglected to question the abstract and colonialist character of these same typologies and terms.⁷ For some, the concept is too compromised to sustain, arguing instead that 'we'—people concerned with disastrous human impacts on our planetary surrounds—should instead think in terms of other epochal terms such as the diagnostic 'Capitalocene' or prognostic 'Chthulucene'.⁸ Nonetheless, this charismatic category is here to stay. One danger, as Neale has argued elsewhere, is that the Anthropocene 'will become an entity without a demos, or public, particularly if we—humanities scholars, social scientists, artists, activists, and others—fail to articulate our geological entanglements and stony fate'.⁹

Depending on your timeline, the elemental is both a more ancient and recent inspiration for theorising. On the one hand, legion philosophical traditions have been interested in whether 'there are forces or forms from which all else is derived, but which are not themselves derivative'.¹⁰ The four humours and five elements of traditional Chinese medicine, the classical Greek discourses of four elements and their exchanges, and the scientific schematization of chemical elements according to their atomic weight, amongst many other conceptual schemes, each stake a claim about the conditions of possibility of being and matter themselves. On the other hand, the humanities evidently have a renewed interest in 'elemental thinking', whether in terms of elemental ecocriticism, elemental philosophy, elemental media, or earth elements.¹¹ This may be, in part, because of curious resonances between our key terms. In a recent essay, Engelman and McCormack note that 'the elemental is alluring because it both captures something tangible about the world and also remains excessive of human agency or intervention'.¹² Thinking elementally means thinking in terms of specific materials and

components, situating human life in terms of fundamental chemical or physical components that are, in themselves, neither wholly defined by or dependent upon human life. ‘You are never out of your element,’ as Cohen and Duckert state, but the elemental does not need us.¹³ Similarly, Colebrook has written in depth about how the Anthropocene concept ‘pulls in contrary directions’.¹⁴ This is because it places attention on the efficacy of anthropogenic activities, to the point that it can rest on some impossible category called ‘the human’, but within the context of the human species’ inevitable end. The Anthropocene, Colebrook states, ‘seems to arrive just as a whole new series of materialisms, vitalisms, realisms, and inhuman turns require us to think about what has definite and forceful existence regardless of our sense of world.’¹⁵

The elemental and the Anthropocene combined therefore push our attention in two directions, at once suggesting the need to consider what is elemental, or essential, about present anthropogenic predicaments (whatever we take those to be) and, also, what is beyond them. This line of thought differs from kindred others more focused upon environment, materiality or infrastructure. The elemental, to quote Macauley’s summary, provides a different conceptual framework to the ‘abstract, elusive, and often overdetermined concept of nature... generating an alternative kind of environmental sensibility’ that is not confined to the generic binaries of the built and unbuilt, industrial and non-industrial, rural and urban, and so on.¹⁶ Similarly, it arguably builds upon but differs from scholarship on infrastructure, using physical processes and entities as ‘interscalar vehicles’ to travel outside the typical temporal and spatial envelopes of human life while nonetheless ‘keeping the planet and all of its humans in the same conceptual frame’.¹⁷ Finally, as Neale, Zahara and Smith argue in their contribution, the ‘distinction between the fundamental and its other’ makes elemental thinking different to materialism. ‘As against the generalised vibrancy of matter in new materialism,’ they write, ‘an elemental philosophy gambles that some matter is not contingent; it wagers that some matter, following Braun, is “determined to be determined”’.¹⁸

To think an elemental Anthropocene, we propose, might then mean both ‘staying with the trouble’ of specific matters in all their contingency and determination and also, more riskily, actually making claims about what is essential to the terrible ecological predicaments on this planet. This would mean looking for and analysing the ‘forces or forms from which all else is derived’—including the planetary wasting which diverse more-than-human worlds now find themselves differently exposed—but without indulging in the universalising and totalising endemic to other elemental philosophies. To think an elemental Anthropocene would thereby require us to both ‘recognize the irreducibility of relationality,’ as Cattellino et al. state, and give an account of who is in relation, how, and under what conditions. This would be ‘staying with the trouble’ in a fuller sense than conceptual awkwardness and existential anxiety, because it requires naming its constitutive components. Enervating as the vital debates regarding the Anthropocene’s nomenclature, categorisation and temporal boundaries have been, they have sometimes sidelined tricky practical questions; namely, questions about what should be done now. Arguably, the emergence of the Anthropocene concept reveals not only the extremity of damage inflicted upon Earth’s lifeworlds, but also the ongoing need to critically reconsider how knowledge of those lifeworlds’ ecologies and geologies (and much more) is produced and reproduced. What forms of critique, knowledge-making and collaboration are needed to meet the challenges of the present? And how might those forms be fostered in more socially just ways? We hope that this collection offer readers some inspiring leads and directions.

Before closing this introduction, other elements and advents of this particular venture deserve some attention. First, we encourage readers to investigate the other writing projects that have emerged from ACM18, including: the ‘Anthropogenic Table of Elements’ published by the Social for Cultural Anthropology; essays on the *Anthropocene Curriculum* by Cameron McKean, Elizabeth Lara, and David Kelly; and, essays published by the Committee for the Anthropology of Science, Technology & Computing (CASTAC) blog by Lauren Rickards, Ruth Morgan, Adam Bobbette, Briony Doyle, and Aftab Mirzaei.¹⁹ This is still by no means an exhaustive list of what has appeared and may yet still surface. Second, those within academic institutions probably do not need reminding that the financial and institutional conditions for this kind of experimentation and conviviality are tightening still. ACM18 was only possible due to the financial support supplied by the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation and Deakin Science and Society Network at Deakin University, the University of New South Wales Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Centro de Investigación para la Gestión del Riesgo de Desastres (CIGIDEN). Other partners who supplied venues and helped develop this sprawling endeavour included, in Melbourne, the University of Melbourne, Melbourne Water, Museums Victoria, CERES, Royal Botanical Gardens, and National Gallery of Victoria, as well as, from a distance, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science. Third, and finally, we would like to thank Chris Healy and *Cultural Studies Review* for supporting this project and allowing it to be part of the journal’s final issue. Even as this publication ends, we are, like many others, convinced that Open Access is the necessary future of academic publishing.

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