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A Review by Larsen of *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, Edited by Tobias Menley and Jesse Oak Taylor

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Reviewed by Thomas Barclay Larsen

**Introduction**

1. The Anthropocene is an informal epoch which tries to account for the human imprint on the geological record (see Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). Broken down, the word has two root meanings: *Anthropos* (humans) and *cene* (age or epoch). The Anthropocene reflects the idea that humans have changed the Earth’s system to the point where the species has a distinct presence in the geological strata—different layers of rock and sediment which build up, shift around, and erode over time. If formalized, the ‘Age of Humans’ would become an official part of the geological timescale, which extends beyond the most recent Holocene Epoch to the Hadean Eon over four billion years ago. Perhaps more significantly, the question of how to define the Anthropocene has led to a rising tide of noteworthy debates in unexpected circles, including the humanities.

2. *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* (Menely and Taylor 2017; hereafter cited *Anthropocene Reading*) confirms emerging sentiments that the Anthropocene is multifarious, more than just the scientific search for human traces in the lithosphere. *Anthropocene Reading* is a collection of thirteen essays and one introductory chapter edited by Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (2017). I review this book from the angle of a geographer who is interested in different ways of characterizing the Anthropocene. With that said, I make no claim to critique with authority about each essayist’s employment of literary method and theory. I evaluate the book’s suitability for researchers and educators belonging inside and outside the realm of literary studies.

**Objectives and Contributions**

3. The thirteen essays satisfy the book’s overall objective: consider how the Anthropocene might apply to literary history, and vice versa. The essayists do an excellent job to recast, deconstruct, historicize, and interrogate the idea. The book chapters have an experimental character to them, affording a diverse array of literary perspectives for the Anthropocene. Literary historians may find it beneficial to know that each essay is explicit about outlining the specific literary theory and method. Examples of theoretical foundations identified in the essays include formalism, new materialism, and post-
humanism, among others. Another feature of this book is that the chapters ‘talk to one another.’ The authors incorporate and comment on insights from other chapters, an aspect which clearly indicates how the essays interconnect.

4. *Anthropocene Reading* seems to produce more questions than it does answers, a quality which I interpret as stimulation for future inquiries into the subject. For what the book gains in diversity of perspectives, it is diminished in its ability to cultivate a big-picture understanding of how literature may contribute toward the broader study of the Anthropocene. The book tries to accomplish a lot in 258 pages and entails some background knowledge of two literatures: the Anthropocene and literary studies. At the very least, the reader would benefit from a firm comprehension of one and a working knowledge of the other. To mitigate potential knowledge gaps, I have provided a selection of recommended Anthropocene resources at the end of this review.

5. Readers of this book may find difficulty in discerning how each of the essays contribute to an overarching theme, big idea, or question. To navigate this issue, I have divided *Anthropocene Reading* into three dominant research themes, each of which were also mentioned by Menely and Taylor in their introduction—periodizing the Anthropocene, representing the Anthropocene, and experiencing the Anthropocene. Chapters overlap significantly among these themes, but I focus on the essays which I believe resemble each theme most directly.

**Theme I - Periodizing the Anthropocene**

6. *Anthropocene Reading* makes an important contribution to how scholars think about periodization. Periodization is the process of grouping similar events together to form periods, epochs, and eons. Because the Anthropocene is an informal epoch, the writers challenge the ways in which it might be periodized. The final chapter, “Ungiving Time: Reading Lyric by the Light of the Anthropocene,” characterizes why literature and period go together when discussing the Anthropocene. The author pairs the lyric and rhythm of poetry with the Anthropocene discourse to shed light how the epoch, “humanity’s last cigarette,” signifies a disruptive pulse in deep time (François 2017, 244).

7. In “The Anthropocene Reads Buffon; or, Reading like Geology,” Heringman (2017) expands upon the association between narrative and epoch. The author exposes the unintentional romantic storyline behind both early and contemporary creations of geological periods. More precisely, the author discusses critiques of narratives emerging from Enlightenment geochronology, especially the work of Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, as well as the resurgence of thought about periodization by Anthropocene scholars like Elizabeth Kolbert and Jan Zalasiewicz.

8. Morgan (2017) focuses on what happens to periods when time changes scales. This writer’s chapter, “Scale as Form: Thomas Hardy’s Rocks and Stars,” shows how time scales, both human and geological, are difficult for people to conceive in relation to each other. Morgan applies literary formalism to draw some important distinctions between the human timescale—shorter periods that humans can conceive—and the deep time of the geological timescale. Morgan relies on the books of
Thomas Hardy to examine how this novelist implements narrative shifts in timing and perspective to more effectively navigate between the two scales.

9. Cohen (2017) approaches the period quite differently. The chapter, “Anarky,” challenges the relationship between a period and deep time. The author does not view time as linear, but as a metaphorical Great Flood of biblical proportions—a vast and chaotic ocean of whorls which allow events to eddy and circle back. By contrast, a conventional period is similar to Noah’s Ark, a structured arrangement (boat) that is infinitesimally smaller than the surrounding waters. Cohen argues for ‘Anarky,’ the commitment to jump ship and plunge into the complexities and circularities of time.

10. Mentz’s (2017) “Enter Anthropocene, circa 1610” makes room for accepting and appreciating multiple Anthropocene periodizations at the same time. Mentz deviates from Cohen by finding value in maintaining some sense of order out of the chaos. He situates his own discussion of periodization on Shakespeare’s ([1610] 2011) The Tempest, a “hypercanonical play” (46) which he argues, like the Anthropocene, is the maker of a genre, not a marker. The year 1610 corresponds with both The Tempest and the culmination of environmental changes resulting from the Columbian Exchange between the Old and New Worlds. The chapter proposes reading the Anthropocenes all at once from the standpoint of four words followed by the progression of three punctuation marks: It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault! It’s all my fault? Punctuation, according to Mentz, can not only separate time periods, but they may also ascribe a tone of human experience and perception of the Anthropocene. Using these phrases, Mentz introduces three critical types of stories which can emerge from the pluralized periods of Anthropos.

**Theme II - Representing the Anthropocene**

11. Along with periodization, *Anthropocene Reading* does an effective job of representing the Anthropocene in unconventional ways. This particular theme is based on the book’s assertion that the Anthropocene may consist of more dimensions than just a human byproduct on the geological stratigraphy. Five chapters provide examples of how the epoch may be represented through literature.

12. To begin, the literary slant to representing the Anthropocene may lead to an improved understanding of the dynamic interrelations between regional and local processes. In “Partial Readings: Thoreau’s Studies as Natural History’s Casualties,” Chow (2017) examines the work of Henry David Thoreau, notably the essay “Dispersion of Seeds” ([1860-1861] 1993). Chow explores Thoreau’s work from the outlook of critical partiality—a method which recognizes that while nature writings have their local biases, they can nevertheless provide valuable links to greater regional contexts. The outcome of this viewpoint is to reconcile the disjuncture between singular representations of life, such as Thoreau’s “Dispersion of Seeds,” to a ‘total relations’ representation.

13. Indigenous knowledges are also a compelling way of representing the Anthropocene. Hooley’s (2017) “Reading Vulnerability: Indigeneity and the Scale of Harm” proposes the act of ‘reading vulnerability,’ which determines the degree to which “vulnerability to environmental harm is understood to be legible and scalable” (188). Using the work of Inupiaq-Inuit poet, d. g. nanouk okpik, on the narwhal, Hooley explores why it is important to recognize how indigenous knowledges are lost, forgotten, or erased from the context of global environmental change.
14. The Anthropocene may be represented through the development of new literary genres. The chapter, “Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre,” details the interest of academics and non-academics in developing the Anthropocene as a genre of literature (LeMenager 2017). Climate fiction (cli-fi) signifies one such avenue in which people might find alternative forms of expression and perhaps come to terms with the realities of global climatic change and other systemic problems of the Anthropocene.

15. The dramatization of the Anthropocene is another form of representation. In “Stratigraphy and Empire: Waiting for the Barbarians, Reading Under Duress,” Wenzel (2017) reflects upon how reading J.M. Coetzee’s (1980) Waiting for the Barbarians can enact a sense of ‘reading under duress,’ the process of interpreting the dramatic conflict of human and natural forces on different timescales. Duress refers to being politically coerced or repressed. Its root meaning can also embody the enduring hardness of Earth’s geological stratigraphy.

16. The representation of the Anthropocene is subjected to the literary context in which it emerged, a time of an exponential acceleration in literature, scholarly and otherwise. In “Accelerated Reading: Fossil Fuels, Infowhelm, and Archival Life,” Woods (2017) notes a correlation between the rapid decrease in biodiversity (one symptom of the Anthropocene) and the overwhelming (‘infowhelming’) stimulation of scholarship and writings on life forms, termed the ‘Great Unread.’ According to Woods, the act of reading, itself, may be a form of excavating and representing humanity’s ecological footprint. Woods envisions a kind of ‘morphospace,’ an archive which houses fragments of any references to biological life found in literary and audiovisual historical record.

Theme III - Experiencing the Anthropocene

17. Three chapters clearly embody how literature may contribute toward the human experience of the Anthropocene. This final theme concerns how literary studies might comprehend the assorted sensory and emotional dimensions which unite the epoch and human experience.

18. Ford’s (2017) “Punctuating History Circa 1800: The Air of Jane Eyre” emphasizes the importance how aesthetics and the sensory experiences change with shifting meanings of metaphor and punctuation. Using Jane Eyre (Brontë 1847) as an example, Ford illustrates how atmospheric and climatic experience is represented through the last name Eyre (non-distinguishable from ‘Aire’ or air), as well as through punctuation (such as the colon-dash:– which historically meant a pause for thought or for breath). Ford counteracts the detachment of climatology and atmospheric science by fostering an experiential and sensory literary history of the Anthropocene.

19. Along with aesthetics and the senses, an inherent sense of wonder may also be experienced. In “Romancing the Trace: Edward Hitchcock’s Speculative Ichnology,” Luciano (2017) interprets the writings of Edward Hitchcock on fossil tracks in the Connecticut Valley from the lens of new materialism. Hitchcock was a nineteenth-century professor of chemistry and natural history at Amherst College and director of the Massachusetts Geological Survey. The professor, along with his colleagues, were influential figures in developing the study of fossils in relation to deep time and species extinctions. Through the words of Hitchcock and others, Luciano establishes a romantic element to presence and absence in the geological record, or what might be called the “spirit of the
Anthropocene” (113). This ‘spirit’ provides a humanistic contrast to the dull objectivity of placing measured boundaries to create a geological epoch.

20. Finally, literature may provide an imaginative way of placing readers in various historical settings to get a sense of how the Anthropocene emerged. In “Anthropocene Interruptions: Energy Recognition Scenes and the Global Cooling Myth,” Neuman (2017) coins the term ‘energy recognition scene,’ the situation in which writers and artists represent in their work a potent awareness of how the stuff of technology (planes, trains, and automobiles) connect to human dependence on energy systems. The author applies the ‘energy recognition scene’ primarily to the writings of Henry Adams, an American historian who incorrectly predicted in 1910 that the planet was unavoidably and irreversibly going to cool. Neuman reiterates the importance of accounting for the historical contexts of perceptions (and misconceptions) toward how the environment, technology, and energy systems are intertwined.

Implications of Anthropocene Reading

21. In sum, Anthropocene Reading may contribute valuable insights for research into how the Anthropocene is periodized, represented, and experienced through the lens of literary history. The three themes prove that the collection of essays casts a wide net of possibilities between literature and the Anthropocene. Outside of the humanities, other scholars may find this book useful, such as historians, geographers, and other social scientists who make a point to peer over the walls of disciplinary boundaries to see how other folks might think about a pertinent issue.

22. Pedagogically, this edited collection could be used in conjunction with other weekly readings in a graduate seminar class. The book is best suited for graduates and perhaps a selection of promising undergraduate students. It could also be an ideal text for an independent study on literary histories of the human-environment relationship.

23. The concluding question I would like to answer for readers is: what is the relevance of this book if the Anthropocene falls out of fashion? If such a scenario were the case, I would not declare the book obsolete. Anthropocene Reading could be used for research and teaching which address literary viewpoints on related topics, such as environmental thought, global change, or human impacts on the environment. The book is an impressive example for how a big idea may be cannibalized in dynamic, imaginative, and expressive ways.

Recommended Resources Related to the Anthropocene

Journals


Readings


Castree, N. 2015a. **Changing the Anthropo(s)cene.** *Dialogues in Human Geography* 5:301-316.


References


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