

Media for the Anthropocene

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In current geological debates, the Anthropocene is emerging as a proposed term to characterize an epoch, dating back to the Industrial Revolution, that has as its primary characteristic the fact that human activity on the earth's ecological systems has become *the* dominant global geophysical force. As many geologists contend, the human enterprise is evolving, and in the process bringing the earth's ecological systems to a critical juncture. With a decision two years away as to whether or not we are indeed living in the Anthropocene, in what follows I ask how and by what means we can prepare ourselves for the geological epoch to come.

Dans les débats actuels entre géologues, on a vu émerger la notion de « l'Anthropocène » pour désigner une époque qui a commencé avec la Révolution industrielle et dont la caractéristique principale est que l'effet de l'activité humaine sur les systèmes écologiques de la Terre est devenu « la » force géophysique globale dominante. Beaucoup de géologues affirment que dans la mesure où l'activité humaine se développe, ce processus va amener le système écologique de la Terre à un point critique. Le *Working Group on the Anthropocene* s'est fixé comme objectif pour l'année 2016 de déterminer si nous vivons bel et bien dans l'Anthropocène. C'est dans cette perspective que j'étudie dans mon article les moyens par lesquels nous pourrions nous préparer à affronter cette nouvelle époque géologique.

If something is going to happen to me, I want to be there.

Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (1942)

The Anthropocene seems to be a cultural figuration at present that is getting a lot of attention. With the Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy and its working group still deliberating, the possibility of the earth entering a human-made geological epoch is approaching. As with so many efforts to make human activity on the environment legible, from Rachel Carson's seminal *Silent Spring* (1962) to Al Gore and David Guggenheim's extraordinarily popular if vapid *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), the relationship between media of communication and forms of environmental documentation is a long and complex one characterized equally by economies of attention, politicization, and moralization. In this reading, the geological record of our common material past, and, in the case of the Anthropocene, its futural projected composition, are themselves media that have to register environmental change. Our shared practices of delimitating and defining "age" as a conceptual event are fraught and difficult territory as age can be both conceptualized and lived; it can be just as much a sweep of delimited time as a state of biological evolution, or an active act of judgment that parses past, present, and future, encompassing both human and non-human actors.

It is worthwhile to recall here how that ever-vexing question of periodization is a mode of operation that does its work not only across disciplines, but also across bodies, cultural artefacts, geologies, and any number of knowledge formations within a given social reality. In the case of the Anthropocene, in order for its periodicity to occur, there must be a scientific basis for the nomenclature; that is, "the 'geological signal' currently

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being produced in strata now forming must be sufficiently large, clear, and distinctive.”¹ For us to move from the Holocene to the Anthropocene on the Geological Time Scale, there seems to be a certain calculable mapping of the present that has to take place. In my own thinking on age as an eventual condition, it leads to the problem of delimiting the present as a geography and not necessarily an evidentiary “science.” In this spatialization of time, the present, as a term, could be substituted by that of “Earth System.” While this might seem like a terribly political ecological practice of periodizing as well, it is rather an attempt to get at the relational natures we experience. If the “term *Earth System* refers to the suite of interacting physical, chemical and biological global-scale cycles and energy fluxes that provide the life-support system for life at the surface of the planet,”² then it could follow that our subjective presents are made common, one anthropogenic present, in that we always already collectively contribute to its evolutionary making. This recognition of a co-production of the present is a valuable one as it allows us to ask: who in fact is indigenous to the Anthropocene?

This question of an indigenous ontology for the Anthropocene may be a controversial one. And it is indeed an indigeneity “for” rather than “of,” as it is a constructive agency that is implicated in the geological record itself—unlike those conditional repositories such as an archive or bank, we contribute to the present by living in it. It might be tempting to reinvoke Vladimir Vernadsky

¹ “Working Group on the Anthropocene,” Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, www.quaternary.stratigraphy.org/workinggroups/anthropocene/ (accessed January 30, 2014).

² Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature,” *AMBIO: Journal of the Human Environment* 36(8) (2007), 615.

and Teilhard de Chardin's "nöosphere,"³ society's collective world of thought, as a potential first arena of intervention for the Anthropocene. This is of course tantamount to saying "First let's change how we think, then we can change how we act." Yet it is also not all that different from the ways in which the Anthropocene as a term is itself circulating in our world. It is not (yet) a formal geological unit, and so this leaves it free to be "useful to the global change research community."⁴ As such, the Anthropocene is a circulating cultural figuration, a shorthand to help us see that the human impact on the environment is nearly inexorable. How to inhabit this cultural figuration? How to become its indigenes in order to not only create the appropriate epistemological frameworks to come to understand it better, but also to live it fully via critical ontologies all its own? In human geography, "indigeneity" is a concept with a long and fragmented history, from early twentieth century engagements that predictably and problematically equated indigenous realities with nature, to, later on in the century, a division between constructivist and realist interpretations of the concept:

On the one hand are researchers sympathetic with post-structuralist challenges to essential identities and truths and with postcolonial challenges to "pure" Indigenous figures. These scholars tend to challenge and deconstruct invocations of indigeneity. On the other hand are researchers who either identify as engaging in social justice projects or as feeling compelled by the moral rightness and political necessity of claims to "being" Indigenous. Human geographers in this latter grouping are more inclined to address the social, cultural, economic, and political concerns of Indigenous peoples than to devote their energies to more theoretical questions of just what "Indigenous"

³ Vladimir Vernadski, *The Biosphere*, trans. David B. Langmuir (New York: Copernicus, 1998).

⁴ "Working Group on the Anthropocene."

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might mean.⁵

From the perspective of the Anthropocene, asking us to adopt an indigenous ontology is not an act of substitution, displacement, or appropriation, rather it is a fundamental accounting of a relational affiliation. In this reading, we are a collective geologic settler colony, imperializing anew. My intention here is not to diminish what could be thought of as the first relation in a chain of human inhabitation. Rather, it is to recognize the myriad pathways that are bringing indigeneity, settler indigeneity, and anthropogenic indigeneity together yet apart as subject positions in a collective form of accounting that can genuinely learn from the forms of de-colonizing knowledge production that indigenous peoples have lived through and with. In part, the Anthropogenic “moment,”⁶ that is, its time as a cultural figuration rather than a confirmed geological epoch, could be similar in kind rather than degree to “the colonial ‘moment’,” that is an always emerging “transaction of forces, a relationship—unequal, certainly—but a relationship nonetheless.”⁷

This transactional present is, as is so often the case, one that is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated, equally across ecologies as epistemologies. The process of de-colonization, or, here, the reversal or attenuation of anthropogenesis, is one that indigenous peoples are trying to make a part of the knowledges both produced by them and relating to them. One example of such an active process is Isuma TV’s Digital Indigenous Democracy (DID)

⁵ Emilie Cameron, Sarah de Leeuw, and Margo Greenwood, “Indigeneity,” in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 5th Edition, eds. Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (London: Elsevier, 2009), 353.

⁶ The Working Group on the Anthropocene has set a deadline of 2016 to make its decision.

⁷ Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson, “Settler Colonies,” in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 369.

network. Founded by Norman Cohn and Zacharias Kunuk, the latter best known as the director of *Atanarjuat* (2001), DID is a networked media platform designed to foster Inuit-forms of consensus building in the Arctic, though largely operating at present in the Canadian territory of Nunavut. The project was launched in response to an Environmental Review (ER) of the proposed Baffinland Iron Mine at Mary's River, Baffin Island, which, if approved, would become one of the largest open-pit iron ore mines in the world. In order to facilitate the timely and transparent undertaking of the ER and the necessary sharing of information that this entails amongst the communities affected by the mine, Isuma launched the DID as part of its Angiqatiginigiq Internet Network (AIN), a media platform operating across community radio, local television, DIY filmmaking, and two-way high-speed internet. With typically low and costly speeds of broadband access in the majority of these communities, DID installs mediaplayers in each of the seven communities impacted by the ER that then stream Inuktitut-language Isuma TV content, facilitate the uploading of user-generated content, and, across its other media platforms, informs the collective process of community consultation. The ultimate goal of the consensus process is a "multimedia Human Rights Impact Assessment" that will determine, in part, the benefits and costs of the Baffinland Mine for and to the residents around Mary's River.⁸ While, presumably, the AIN will continue to operate beyond the completion of the ER process, the work of the network raises some important questions around the relationships between resource extraction and community-appropriate norms of consultation; the instrumentalization of new media technologies and the existential stakes of certain cultural formations; as

⁸ "About," Digital Indigenous Democracy, www.isuma.tv/en/DID/About (accessed January 30, 2014).

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well as that between the impossibility of “transparent” communication and local forms of governance. In many ways, the DID and the AIN mark the typically gray ethical shapes that certain forms of de-colonizing knowledge production can take: preserving and disseminating knowledges of longevity and situation while mediating new relationships with one’s land-as-territory, as well as the adaptable ontologies and futural markets that it contains.

Living, genuinely making decisions for the Anthropocene is part of our political ecology of the Earth System. Before, or if, it becomes concretized as a geological epoch, with yet another golden spike marking its stratigraphic place, to live it as a cultural figuration is to recognize the diverse relationalities that it brings us to inhabit—to recognize the media through which we have come to apprehend human activity on the environment. Some media scholars, such as Mark Hansen and W.J.T. Mitchell, contend that a medium “designates a minimal relationality, a minimal openness to alterity, a minimal environmental coupling (in the terminology of contemporary ethological cognitive science), that appears somehow central to our understanding of ourselves as ‘essentially’ prosthetic beings.”⁹ In this sense, “media” constitute our relations to wordly becoming, and as such account for an inevitable focus on relationality, emergence, and mediation as important concepts for that process. This understanding of “medium” also seems to suggest that human being and that always problematically singular anthropogenic “environment,” with or without a human precedent, are somehow conflated, originally one medial substance in which all life does its living. Such an understanding is in line with much environmental historical scholarship that debunks the myth of a “nature” that is neatly divided off from

⁹ Mark Hansen and W.J.T. Mitchell, “Introduction” in *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), xii.

human incursion and influence. However, thinking about the relationship between human beings and the environment as one of ongoing mediation and co-emergence can also establish closer ties between supposedly “human” and “natural” systems that can be taken apart and made distinguishable. In other words, for scholars, becoming indigenous to the Anthropocene could mean thinking through this interface as a genuine “field” of social scientific and humanistic inquiry, as well as one that incorporates insights from the natural sciences as their potentially common empirical ground.

While the question of what forms of representation this interface can work at and through is one that is in formation, for me it brings to mind Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel’s *Leviathan* (2013). Their documentary film, partly an extension of work undertaken at Harvard University’s Sensory Ethnography Lab, makes present the world of a groundfish trawler sailing out of New Bedford, Massachusetts, by following this single boat and its crew. The viewer here is set adrift by location-specific cameras, and in the process becomes an extension of the chain of production and its worlds of violence, fish, wind, labour, and water. As perhaps befits representations for the Anthropocene, it does not make for leisurely or staid viewing. The documentary acts as a visual funnel, pouring us down into the realities of the meeting point between humans and their environment. That it is a fundamental media environment is precisely its authorial point. It can perhaps make us feel like Derrida reading Camus’ *The Stranger* in his adolescence, enabling “an almost miraculous encounter between French literature, ‘the expression of a world without any tangible continuity with the one in which we lived,’ and his own concrete environment.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 28.

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