

Rachel  
Carson  
Center  
Perspectives

How to cite:

Wilke, Sabine. "Anthropocenic Poetics: Ethics and Aesthetics in a New Geological Age." In: "Anthropocene: Exploring the Future of the Age of Humans," edited by Helmuth Trischler, *RCC Perspectives* 2013, no. 3, 67–74.

All issues of *RCC Perspectives* are available online. To view past issues, and to learn more about the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, please visit [www.rachelcarsoncenter.de](http://www.rachelcarsoncenter.de).

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society  
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087

© Copyright is held by the contributing authors.

SPONSORED BY THE



Federal Ministry  
of Education  
and Research

Deutsches Museum 



Sabine Wilke

### **Anthropocenic Poetics: Ethics and Aesthetics in a New Geological Age**

For over a decade now the idea of the Anthropocene, a new epoch of man, has been migrating from its original context in the geological sciences to other academic disciplines, as well as into the popular imagination via magazines and other venues. While the approach developed in these debates is broad and includes perspectives ranging from the sciences to media and the arts, there have been only rudimentary attempts to develop a critique of the underlying assumptions of such a concept. I would like to outline the parameters for such a critique from the perspective of gender and race, postcolonial studies, and the need for a normative framework for global environmental justice. If humanity is indeed the force behind the changes on our planet, then the humanities are called to explore the new directions ahead of us, for they concern themselves with the study of intellectual creation and the critique of dominant narratives, myths, and ideologies, and the critical engagement with fundamental questions of meaning, value, responsibility, and purpose in a period of escalating crisis.

To begin developing such a critical perspective, we need to acknowledge the fact that the concept of the Anthropocene represents nothing less than a serious challenge to the basic axioms of Western metaphysics, specifically Immanuel Kant's transcendental philosophy (Kant [1781] 1855). Kant distinguished between that which we humans can know and what he calls the "thing in itself" (*das Ding an sich*) which cannot really be known by us. The thing in itself lies before and outside of thought and perception. Human perception is limited to phenomena that become the object of our sensory perception. Kant's emphasis on the role of human subjectivity had an enormous influence on how the relation between humans and the non-human world was perceived and consequently constructed in terms of privileging human existence over the existence of non-humans. If no direct connection can be established between pure ideas and objective experiences, we are left with a position that amounts to a transcendental anthropocentrism where objects are said to conform to the mind of the subject and then and only then have the ability to become products of human cognition. Post-Kantian metaphysics rests on this concept of a human-world correlate and it is this presumption that is radically called into question by the idea of the Anthropocene, for in the age of man all relations between humans and non-humans unfold within the realm of interconnectivity.

The concept of the Anthropocene has interesting ramifications if applied to culture and society, since the Kantian position that objects must conform to the human mind in order to become products of human cognition needs to be reconceived in a more phenomenological fashion, recognizing and giving shape to the fact that not only do humans shape the world of the objects, but that all relations between humans and non-humans alter the parties involved. The idea of the Anthropocene hence incites fruitful, revisionist, and critical readings of the canon of Western metaphysics. This is the project of a new philosophical movement called object-oriented ontology. With a philosophical foundation in the writings of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, object-oriented ontology rejects the Kantian asymmetry that puts human cognition above objective experience and reduces the realm of philosophical investigation to the human-world relation, as though objects were mere props and had nothing to contribute on their own. In the Anthropocene, where the interconnectivity of every part with everything else is an important feature of all world relations and the world of the human and the non-human is profoundly intertwined, a perspective that emphasizes objects, and especially one that foregrounds the idea of an equal footing among object relations, is helpful in order to conceptualize the relationship between humans and their non-human environments.

What does it mean to live in the Anthropocene? To address this question, it is important that we understand the relationship between human beings and place, or embodiment and landscape. Marcel Merleau-Ponty (1964) has explored various ways in which the human body lives in the world in terms of perception and movement. In its pre-reflective state, the perceptual body engages with the world thanks to a certain corporal awareness and through that awareness also transforms this environment. The body as the condition for experience establishes the primacy of perception. If we extend that property to non-human bodies we are able to perceive of worldly engagements in environmental terms as the interconnectivity of humans and non-humans. Such an eco-phenomenological engagement of the human body with the environment is situated in a space that is neither purely objective, because it consists of a multiplicity of lived experiences that motivate the movements of countless organisms, nor purely subjective, because it is nonetheless a field of material relationships between bodies.

One aspect of environmental embodiment in the Anthropocene addresses the fact that we need to engage critically with the predominant mode of relating to nature and the

environment in Western culture, i.e., the culture of looking. Are there alternative ways of embodiment in nature that are not based on the visual gaze that Caspar David Friedrich's canonical figure of the wanderer above the sea of fog enacts so prominently and passionately? Or, phrased differently, can we imagine a multi-sensory dimensional response to landscape that is not automatically enveloped in the paradigm of subjectivity? Such embodied knowledge of landscape has the ability to undercut the visual paradigm. Kant's contemporary, Carl Gustav Carus, may very well have been the first to articulate such a non-visual appropriation of landscape in his concept of "Erdlebensbildkunst" (earth-life painting), a way of painting landscapes in the Romantic tradition influenced by Kant's ideas that not only relies on scientifically accurate observations but also demonstrates knowledge of each object's interrelatedness with its surrounding environment, for example through certain light accents.

More recently, the land art movement, in which artists create art out of the landscape itself, sculpting the soil, rocks, and water into new forms, is an excellent example of a way to explore our embodiment in the environment in the Anthropocene. Such projects combine the dimension of space and environmental location of art with the values of sustainability and an ethics of care and respect toward nature. Land art can draw us toward nature but it can also highlight the artist as shaper of the land, thus emphasizing the geo-engineering qualities of humans in the Anthropocene. It wrestles with a definition of place and it rests on the notion of environmentality of all bodies. The land art movement also reflects a heightened awareness of environmental destruction in the sixties and seventies in line with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), the proclamation of the first Earth Day in 1970, the first Greenpeace protests against nuclear testing in the early seventies, and early examples of efforts to conserve natural environments. In an age when nature and culture together form the totality of our world, art has the ability to explore the conceptual spaces of the Anthropocene.

In the Anthropocene, we revisit and challenge the limitations of Kantian dualism and reconceive of non-human reality not as something subordinate to human perception, but as related to human reality and interacting with it on equal terms. We also call attention to the historical correlation that can be drawn between the time of the beginning of the Anthropocene, i.e., the age of discovery, and the rise of metaphysics in the Enlightenment. In fact, Chakrabarty (2007) sees a connection between human history and geological data and calls for the opening of historical research to planetary dimensions. But it

was not “humans” in general who engaged in the exploration and resulting colonization of the Americas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was European civilization that was driving this process, a process fueled by the need for valued resources. Likewise, it was not “humans” who began depositing carbon into the Earth’s crust in the eighteenth and even more in the nineteenth century, but European civilization engaged in the age of discovery and the industrialization and colonization of India, Africa, parts of Asia, and the Pacific. When we remind ourselves of the fact that the actors in this process are all representatives of European cultures, we quickly realize that the term “Anthropocene” actually disguises the fact that a small part of the world’s population is single-handedly responsible for depositing that thin carbon layer in the Earth’s crust around 1800 and that the values, economic paradigms, and consumption patterns of that one civilization among many now constitute the dominant framework in this new age that we call the Anthropocene.

What is absent from the scientific discourse on the Anthropocene is a postcolonial perspective that points out the fact that we are not talking about generalizable social, economic, and cultural structures and belief systems, but that instead we are describing very specific political, economic, and discursive regimes of power that determined and continue to determine the specific unfolding of world history. The continued existence of these regimes in the Anthropocene necessitates the critique of their basic ideological underpinnings and beliefs. This can be done in a variety of ways, of course, including a critique of the notion of cultural hegemony that is still operative in global culture and institutions today, a critique of state apparatuses, a framework focusing on a discourse analysis of power, a critique of bio-politics, or any other critique following from a critical normative framework. A new critical philosophy in the Anthropocene not only needs to be paired with a postcolonial perspective but also complemented with an environmental justice framework that emphasizes the active role of nature and the environment. In current discussions of the Anthropocene, none of these aspects have been developed in any systematic fashion. A stronger critical framework anchored in a postcolonial and environmental-justice perspective will correct an otherwise rather naïve approach to matters of social and cultural organization in an age where we need to consider networks, global mobility, and the interrelatedness of all objects.

A recent debate published in the newly launched online journal *Environmental Humanities* expressed unease with a conception of the Anthropocene that celebrates the role of technology as part of the solution to creating a sustainable future on Earth in

the age of humans. The discussion participants raised concerns that this could lead to neo-Promethean fantasies that would eclipse disastrous past interventions and establish an ecologically destructive economic system. We should not accept humans as a force of nature uncritically and use science and technology to manage the Earth system as a whole without diligently investigating the discourse of the Anthropocene and uncovering its foundations, implications, worldview, and consequences. These concerns address the need for a critique of the Anthropocene, especially the role of the human as geo-engineer if we choose to uncritically believe in our potential to transform the world with the assistance of technology. In such a vision, nature is no longer thought of as an agency in its own right; instead, it is acted upon by a powerful humankind that is now shaping the Earth and the Earth's future.

An ethics of the Anthropocene must embrace a principle of responsibility as it was developed, for example, by the German philosopher and ethicist Hans Jonas in 1979 in a book in which he reconceived Kant's categorical imperative for an ecological age, proposing an ecological imperative that considers not just the immediate effects of our actions upon other people, but the long-term effects upon the entire living and non-living world. Within such a long-term perspective we are asked to act in such a way that the effects of our actions are sustainable with the idea of the permanence of life on Earth. Jonas's ideas could be the starting point for developing concepts of sustainability for the Anthropocene, especially if we add a postcolonial and more decidedly environmental dimension to this ecological imperative and develop a normative framework for a global environmental justice concept that highlights historical, social, economic, political, and cultural differences, and in particular emphasizing that different groups of people have unequal access to resources and vary wildly in their environmental impact.

Another aspect that is underdeveloped in the current articulation of the Anthropocene is its aesthetics. In a Kantian framework, the aesthetic experience is a state induced in the human mind upon observing an object—that is, once again the human is privileged as an active participant, while “the beautiful” is a mere passive object. What does it mean aesthetically to leave a Kantian framework of dualism behind and move towards a more phenomenological understanding of human-object and object-object relations? In what way does literature, for example, have the ability to model an affective interrelation between humans and the environment? Literature helps us understand that in the Anthropocene human emotions can be attributed to the environment and that people

suffer from environmental degradation. In poetry these imbrications are modeled as a poetic practice that shows how, faced with climate change and other daunting problems, humans and the environment alike are suffering. Such an approach provides a poetic understanding of what it means to live in the Anthropocene that is much more attuned with environmental concerns than the concept of the human geo-engineer and addresses the affective interrelation of human and environment from a critical perspective.

Another angle from which to approach the role of critical philosophy in the Anthropocene is to highlight the correlation between the human impact on Earth and the development of metaphysics. Humanity as a whole did not get us to this point, but rather Western civilization, and not all humans are affected equally by the consequences of environmental degradation. People and environments in the global South are affected on a much greater scale, and only a critical concept of the Anthropocene as an era in which already existing inequalities are widening and intensifying can address such an agenda for postcolonial and global environmental justice.

Such a critical concept can be a radical tool for critiquing the coherent narrative of progress that Western civilization has told over and over again, and it clearly and pointedly puts its finger into the folds and creases where the destructiveness of this project becomes apparent. Such a critical philosophy gives agency to nature and other victims of global economic capitalism but retains a normative postcolonial framework of global environmental justice by foregrounding processes of victimization, identifying the victims of violence, and providing a concept of critique that is interested in more enlightenment, all the while understanding and critically analyzing the social, economic, political, and cultural structures that stand in its way. It also provides an aesthetic framework for this critique by replacing the master narrative of progress and mastery over nature with a poetic practice that models human-nature interconnectivity. It is this combination of ethics (global environmental justice and responsibility for the future) and aesthetics (ecological/textual interrelatedness) that will define poetic practice in the Anthropocene.

## References

- Adorno, Theodor W. (1951) 1974. *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Translated by E. P. Jephcott. London: Verso.
- Alaimo, Stacy. 2010. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Althusser, Louis. 1971. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York and London: Monthly Review Press.
- Brown, Charles, and Ted Toadvine, eds. 2003. *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Bryant, Levi. 2010. "Onticology—A Manifesto for Object-Oriented Ontology, Part I." *Larval Subjects* (blog). <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com>. Accessed 9 January 2013.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2007. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Crutzen, Paul J., and Eugene F. Stoermer. 2000. "The Anthropocene." *Global Change Newsletter* 41: 17–18.
- "Editorial Profiles" at [environmentalhumanities.org](http://environmentalhumanities.org). Accessed 11 September 2012.
- Foucault, Michel. (1975) 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Random House.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Harmann, Graham. 2002. *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Peru, Ill: Open Court.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. (1944) 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Jonas, Hans. (1979) 1984. *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search for an Ethics for a Technological Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



- Kant, Immanuel. (1781) 1855. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by J. M. D. Meiklejohn. Online at Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4280>. Accessed 9 January 2013.
- Lailach, Michael. 2007. *Land Art*. Edited by Uta Grosenick. Cologne: Taschen.
- Merleau-Ponty, Marcel. 1964. *The Primacy of Perception*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Morton, Timothy. 2010. "Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology." *The Oxford Literary Review* 23 (1): 1–17.
- . 2012a. "Ecology without the Present." *The Oxford Literary Review* 34 (2): 229–38.
- . 2012b. "The Oedipal Logic of Ecological Awareness." *Environmental Humanities* 1: 7–21.
- Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Simmel, Georg. (1913) 2007. "The Philosophy of Landscape." *Theory, Culture & Society* 29 (7–8): 20–29.