

Richard Grusin (editor)

Anthropocene Feminism

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017 (ISBN 9781517900618)

Reviewed by Samantha Noll, 2018

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What do you think of when you hear the word “Anthropocene”? Common themes that may come to mind include mass extinctions, starving megafauna (such as polar bears), climate-induced migrations, forest fires, both human and nonhuman animal starvation, or rising tides engulfing coastal cities. Each of these images captures a facet of what the Anthropocene has come to mean, yet they are but partial manifestations of the concept. The “Anthropocene” has come to signify Earth’s current geological epoch, where human beings are conceived as a “blind” planetary force affecting Earth’s geology, biodiversity, and ecosystems on a massive scale. In contrast to previous time periods, human activities (such as industrialization, urbanization, colonization, and resource extraction) are irreparably changing the world in ways that permanently mark the planet. This rise of human exceptionalism as a destructive force independent of reason, desire, and belief led Eugene F. Stoermer to coin the term “Anthropocene” in the early 1980s. However, other scholars, such as chemist Paul J. Crutzen, were responsible for popularizing the term and bringing it to public attention. Although the International Commission on Stratigraphy has not officially designated the Anthropocene as a geological time period, both scholarly and popular work on it has exploded in the last ten years. This explosion, coupled with a noticeable lack of feminist voices, led to the creation of this volume.

More specifically, the purpose of *Anthropocene Feminism* is to respond to the hyper-masculinist and techno-focused strategies currently employed to address problems of the Anthropocene, while creating the groundwork for more robust feminist ecologies. Born out of the 2014 conference held by the Center for 21st Century Studies (C21) at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, the chapters of this book attempt to address these two questions: “What does feminism have to say about the Anthropocene? [and] how does the concept of the Anthropocene

impact feminism?” (4). The connections among scholarly work on these two topics are not as esoteric as some readers may at first think. Indeed, the concept of the Anthropocene is evident in feminist and queer theory. In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway powerfully articulated key aspects of the Anthropocene (such as the intersections among the social, technological, and ecological) and clearly situated these in feminist and posthumanist literature (in Haraway 1991). In addition, ecofeminism has a robust history of exploring how larger social forces compel logics of domination that harm historically oppressed groups and the larger feminized Nature that is objectified to the point where “it” is seen as only raw materials that can be used to further “Man’s interests.” Even with this cursory treatment, feminism appears to have been discussing themes encapsulated by the Anthropocene well before the rise of the public popularity of the topic.

Yet, as Richard Grusin argues at the beginning of the volume, much of the current work relies on the same human-centered, techno-focused, and masculinist logics that created the negative environmental impacts we’re experiencing today. Like posthumanist literature in the 1990s (see Wolfe 1995), work on the Anthropocene may also be attempting to move away from the feminist arguments that made the birth of this field possible, as this work often provides some of the most radical and transformative critiques. The scholars highlighted in *Anthropocene Feminism* attempt to recenter the conversation, not only by bringing attention to the feminist roots of work on the Anthropocene, but also by highlighting insights and alternative solutions that feminism and queer theory can bring to the conversation. Indeed, the authors’ collective work can be seen as a justification for the claims at the beginning of this volume: namely, that “we need an Anthropocene feminism” and that “thinking about the Anthropocene must come from feminism” (5). Each chapter takes up these key themes and provides a unique contribution to both feminism and the varied literatures on the Anthropocene.

In particular, the chapters engage a wide range of feminist thinkers, such as Judith Butler, Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, and Claire Colebrook. Building on her work on extinction, Colebrook opens the volume with a poignant essay that explores what she calls the “new human exceptionalism” in Anthropocene literature, or the conceptualization of humans as a unique destructive force on a planetary scale. Rather than moving away from the humanist privileging of “man,” humans are instead recreating the very type of exceptionalism that has historically been used to justify the domination of marginalized groups and nature. When coupled with dreams of the “good Anthropocene,” where masculinist and humanist logics provide solutions to the problems caused by these very logics, this new form of difference can be used to justify countless injustices to human communities and the ecosystems we profess to be helping.

Like Colebrook, in “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism,” Rosi Braidotti continues to thicken or complicate the connections between feminism and the Anthropocene. Specifically, she puts forth four positions, beginning with the argument that “feminism is not a humanism,” as it is resoundingly anti-Eurocentric and antihumanist. Her second thesis is that the *Anthropos* is off-centered. She then offers a “*zoe*-centric relational ontology,” including a feminist politics of locations, that critiques humanism from within. Her third thesis proclaims the eminence of the principle of *zoe* and urges feminists to embrace it, as life is not human-centered but geocentered

or *zoe*-driven. She ends by shifting the conversation to sexuality, reconceptualizing it as both a human and nonhuman force. For Braidotti, if we shift our ontological understanding in this manner, then we can free ourselves from thinking of sexuality as a matter of identity. Throughout her four theses, Braidotti insists on accepting a definition of Anthropocene feminism that includes ontological relationality.

In “The Three Figures of Geontology,” Elizabeth Povinelli presents another ontological argument, re-envisioning Foucault’s biopolitics for the age of the Anthropocene and introducing us to what she calls geontological power. Lynne Huffer also utilizes Foucault’s conception of biopower in her chapter, where she actively imagines what an Anthropocene feminism could look like. Of all the chapters, Huffer’s most directly addresses the volume’s theme, as she thinks through what insights feminism could provide and what new forms of geopower would look like after the twin projects of feminist denaturalization and renaturalization. Similar to those of Povinelli and Huffer, Stacy Alaimo’s chapter, “Your Shell on Acid: Material Immersion, Anthropocene Dissolves,” focuses on fleshing out ontological themes. In particular, Alaimo breaks down conceptions of humans as biological entities, which are often understood to be central figures of the Anthropocene, and replaces this mode of thinking with her notion of “trans-corporeality,” which she conceptualizes as a way to connect to our engagements with larger geological forces. Alaimo asks us to tarry with and embrace “a paradoxical ecodelic expansion and dissolution of the human” in order to shift toward a feminist mode of engagement with the world around us.

Myra Hird and Alexander Zahara’s chapter offers their own mode of engagement, as they explore new ways of thinking about the Anthropocene as a method of subverting the separation of *techné*, humans, and nature. They utilize waste as a touchstone, as they analyze the ongoing colonialism in the Canadian Arctic from an Anthropocene feminist lens. In the next chapters, Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr use poetry and allegory to reconnect to and trace these historical patterns of development, and Jill Schneiderman tarry with the controversies of naming. The volume ends with a conversation between Natalie Jeremijenko and Dehlia Hannah, on the former’s scientific work performed at the crossroads of nature, society, technology, and art. This last chapter provides interesting insights into what an Anthropocene feminism looks like in practice.

Anthropocene Feminism accomplishes its twin goals of offering a counterpoint to the hyper-masculinist and techno-focused strategies currently employed and to seeding the ground for a more robust feminist ecology. It resituates the conversation, helping to ensure that the feminist roots of this literature are not overlooked. Additionally, the volume boasts a wide range of responses to the questions discussed above, concerning what feminism has to say about the Anthropocene and how the Anthropocene affects feminism. Indeed, Grusin has compiled an impressive array of methodologically diverse voices in this volume, from the geologist Jill Schneiderman to the artist and engineer Natalie Jeremijenko. However, I agree with Catriona Sandilands’s critique that what is not included in the volume is as important as what is included (Sandilands 2017): namely, although some authors draw on Indigenous postcolonial theory (Myra Hird and Alexander Zahara) and Black feminist thought (Stacy Alaimo), the scant

engagement with these rich perspectives is noticeable and highly problematic. In the end, *Anthropocene Feminism* provides a strong foundation for further work at the crossroads of the Anthropocene and feminist theory, but it is by no means definitive. It is the beginning of a much larger conversation that will be ongoing (and, indeed, *must* be ongoing) in this age of mass extinctions and climate change: in the age of the Anthropocene.

References

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