

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Katherine Gibson, Deborah Bird Rose and Ruth Fincher (eds)**, *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene*, New York: Punctum Books, 2015. ISBN: 9780988234062 (paper)<sup>1</sup>

The Anthropocene announces a problem—or, rather, a multiplicity of problems—for which there are no readymade solutions. *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene*, edited by Katherine Gibson, Deborah Bird Rose and Ruth Fincher, is a noteworthy collection of voices responding to the many challenges of the Anthropocene by theorizing how life might take hold differently in this new epoch. Witness, for example, global warming, oceanic acidification, biodiversity loss and extinction. These events are not only materially manifest and massively distributed across space and time, they also pose conceptual challenges. They unsettle the idea that the future will unfold according to plan. Moreover, they suggest that the human cannot be posited as an entity apart from the world, but is rather fully and complexly entangled *with* the world. Framed differently, the Anthropocene identifies a crisis not just for the conditions of life *in general*, but also for the conceptual narratives through which “we” produce and derive meaning about this world. And, with this come pressing questions about how humanity might inhabit the 21<sup>st</sup> century environmental condition. How might we meaningfully respond to evidence that the story of progress, for example, appears hollowed out and incapable of delivering ideal futures? How might we develop diverse theories and practices adequate to uncertain or unknown futures? Or, as Donna Haraway (2014) recently put it: “What do we do when human exceptionalism and methodological individualism become literally unthinkable?”

Such questions foreground *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene*. The volume assembles 17 theorists, activists, and academics to offer a variety of strategies for inhabiting, thinking, and researching amidst the immense social, ecological, and economic challenges posed in the Anthropocene. Working against a pessimistic outlook for uncertain futures, *Manifesto for*

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*Living in the Anthropocene* takes a “reparative rather than purely critical” (p.vii) approach to theorizing the Anthropocene. Its call “for new ways of thinking and knowing and for innovative forms of action” (p.i) emerges in the wake of Val Plumwood’s 2008 passing. An influential feminist, philosopher, and ecologist, Plumwood (2007) expressed deep concern for life’s general conditions over the course of her career, writing just before her death:

If our species does not survive the ecological crisis, it will probably be due to our failure to imagine and work out new ways to live with the earth, to rework ourselves and our high energy, high consumption, and hyper-instrumental societies adaptively ... We will go onwards into a different mode of humanity, or not at all.

In taking up Plumwood’s challenge, *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene* opens with a brief framework for rethinking life in the Anthropocene. This is followed by numerous chapters—which are best engaged as “tentative hoverings...scattering germs of ideas that can take root and grow” (p.viii)—organized into three sections: 1. “Thinking With Others”; 2. “Stories Shared”; and 3. “Researching Differently”.

The aim of the first section is to engage modes of thinking that are “in the service of life” (p.i). This entails “giving up preconceptions, and instead listening to the world. This means giving up delusions of mastery and control, and instead seeing the world as uncertain and yet unfolding” (p.i-ii). Thus from the outset, this volume challenges longstanding anthropocentric approaches that seek to produce the world in terms explicitly defined by human values. At work are various strategies for (re)articulating how the world is thought, experienced, and engaged. For example, in providing an approach to an ecological humanities, Rose (Chapter 1) argues for “the need to work across the great divides in knowledge that have enabled us to sustain a faulty

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image of humanity, an image that holds humans apart, and in control” (p.3). As Rose suggests, doing so involves mixing and melding worlds that have often remained conceptually separate, if not at odds. Drawing on Plumwood, Rose lays out two central tasks for thinking life and world in the Anthropocene: “the first is to resituate the human in ecological terms, and the second is to resituate the non-human in ethical terms” (p.3).

“Thinking With Others”, then, requires a willingness to cede territory—actual, conceptual, or otherwise—to the Other. This is done out of recognition that the nature-society divide does not hold up in a world of political, social, economic, and environmental entanglement. In thinking with others, it follows that matters assumed to be uniquely human must necessarily be modified to incorporate nonhuman materialities and processes that for too long remained marginalized. For Rose, the matter of concern is ethics. For Gibson-Graham and Miller (Chapter 2) the matter of concern is economy: “we must begin”, they state, “to rethink and re-enact the relationship between economy and ecology” (p.7) and to resist an idea of economy as a “distinct sphere of human activity” (p.7). For Fincher and Iveson (Chapter 4), the notion of *conviviality*—“the purposeful sharing of activities by individuals who may not be necessarily known to each other” (p.24)—provides similar pathways for thinking with others.

The second section, “Stories Shared”, addresses how telling stories can “communicate the significance of our time” (p.ii). Emphasis is placed on stories that “enact connectivity, entangling us in the lives of others; have the capacity to reach beyond abstractions and move us to concern and action; and enliven moral imagination, drawing us into deeper understandings of responsibilities, reparative possibilities, and alternative futures” (p.ii). Toward this end, van Dooren (Chapter 8), in writing of the plight of vultures in India, suggests:

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Narratives allow us to weave diverse materials—scientific research, ethnography, history and philosophy, amongst others—into a single account ... [These stories] allow us to develop “thick” accounts of the species that we are describing; that is, accounts that draw in diverse voices in a way that might enable an audience to develop a sense of curiosity about them and concern for their futures. (p.54)

Whether with reference to vultures, water, food, graffiti, or flying foxes, this section mirrors the previous in that it stresses the importance of ceding territory to nonhuman others as a kind of experimental ethic. That is, sharing stories requires not just an openness to nonhuman others, but also a willingness, as Instone (Chapter 5) puts it, to “risk attachment” (p.36). Doing so might help us tend to “the possibilities that emerge from acknowledging our entanglements in and with things” (p.31). And doing so, no doubt, changes how stories are told and how narratives unfold. Following Haraway, the Anthropocene does not provide a concrete subject apart from the world—one who can ascertain at a safe distance. How, then, might stories unfold if their protagonists are not subjects, but rather processes, relations, and entanglements? This volume’s call to deconstruct the ostensible boundaries of the self gives us novel ways of telling stories about the contemporary environmental condition. Further, it helps to mark out alternative approaches for framing the complex processes that have brought the Anthropocene into being, in addition to providing strategies for anticipating its possible futures.

Questions of how one might cede territory to the Other are taken up in the final section, “Researching Differently”. The aim of this section is to “forge new research practices to excavate, encounter, and extend reparative possibilities for alternative futures” (p.ii). Toward this end, Cameron (Chapter 15) calls for “more open, even playful, forms of experimentation to try out new ways of living in the Anthropocene” (p.99-100). As Cameron notes, “[s]uch an approach

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would mean setting aside the idea of research as a neutral and objective activity in which there is critical distance between the researcher and the object of study” (p.100). This call to place research in the middle of things opens opportunities for engaging differently with nonhuman others, thereby acknowledging the constitutive role they play in research and writing. For Rose (Chapter 20), a key component of researching differently is to rethink dialogue and to understand it as “a method for opening conversations so that they are inclusive and responsive” (p.128).

As with preceding sections, the final section takes entanglement as a given. If thinking and storytelling must go beyond the limits of the human, then so too must the techniques used to produce meaning. Research, in other words, must become entangled in the world. To maintain an ostensibly objective distance risks ignoring the entanglements we inhabit. It also runs the risk of disavowing the subtler details that make up the world. Instead, following Kato (Chapter 17), we would do well to listen and understand listening as a “critical practice for allowing our senses to awaken and become receptive to Earth Others” (p.111). And, following Instone (Chapter 21), we must learn to walk differently and recognize that “whenever we walk we are walking alongside multiple others, human and nonhuman, and how we move is likewise not only a human achievement, but shaped by the more-than-human worlds through which we step” (p.136).

For a volume with many short chapters, *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene* covers a lot of ground. In it, readers are likely to find many and varied strategies useful for thinking through the challenges the Anthropocene poses for research, writing, and activism. However, despite the appearance of the word “manifesto” in the title, readers are not likely to find a *specific* political platform for the future. At times, political matters and political commitments seem to fade to the margins, displaced by calls for quiet, if not occasionally sequestered, reflection. However, it is important to note that this volume does not aim to provide a concrete and singular foundation for a future politics. Instead, it opens space for reflecting on the

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likelihood that there does not yet exist a language adequate for responding to the manifest problems of the Anthropocene. To be sure, there are scraps of ideas scattered about and from which we might formulate a politics for the future. But, at the moment, it is perhaps wisest to first formulate strategies for gathering these scraps and then develop methods for stitching them together. If *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene* hesitates in its political commitments, it does so strategically. It asks for careful contemplation rather than blind commitment. It emphasizes attentiveness over urgency. And, it asks that we consider learning how to walk again, rather than rush headlong into the future.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Also available as an open access ebook: <https://punctumbooks.com/titles/manifesto-for-living-in-the-anthropocene/>

## References

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