Humans, it is argued, have written themselves into the very strata of the planet. The Anthropocene – literally “Age of Humans” – is the proposed name for this new geological epoch which has seen significant disruption to planetary conditions: upset biochemical cycles, redistribution of living organisms and impacted biodiversity, and material shifts in the stratigraphic record. First proposed in the earth sciences (Crutzen 2002; Crutzen and Stoermer 2000), the idea has more recently become a focus within the social sciences, humanities and arts where the concept’s more-than-material dimensions are interrogated (see, for example, Bonneuil and Fressoz 2017; Davis and Turpin 2015; Hamilton et al. 2015; Klingan et al. 2015).

*Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* contributes to growing intellectual discussion, bringing a literary dimension to Anthropocene analysis. The book is a collection of essays co-edited by two Professors of English, Tobias Menely at the University of California, Davis, and Jesse Oak Taylor at the University of Washington. Contributions were developed from presentations held at the American Comparative Literature Association conferences in 2015 and 2016, with essays being written specifically for the volume, along with an introductory chapter by the editors.

My appraisal of *Anthropocene Reading* is approached by someone outside of literary studies, rather with disciplinary affiliations to geography and creative practice. However, I bring an interest in wider conceptual provocations emanating from Anthropocene debate, and focus on the capacity of the volume and its multiple contributions to provide novel insight and stimulate thinking for researchers or educators across disciplinary boundaries.

While much Anthropocene debate has centred on reading and interrogating geo-physical dimensions and their implications, the book turns to literary attachments. It focuses on exploring
two interconnected imperatives: “to read the Anthropocene as a literary object and at the same
time to recognise the Anthropocene as a geohistorical event that may unsettle our inherited
practices of reading” (p.5). To do this the Anthropocene is introduced in relation to narrative and
storytelling. Stories are indispensable to human apprehension of the world – responding to a
fundamental drive to “understand our place in a dynamic world of water, weather, and rock”
(p.2).

By this token geology is framed as a practice which draws on narrative form and literary
modes – albeit bound to scientific methodology – reading stratigraphic inscriptions and writing
evocative, though incredulous, stories that stretch human imagination across a vast planetary
history. However, the Anthropocene, Menely and Taylor argue, following Dipesh Chakrabarty,
troubles modernist forms of narrativisation, rendering a “momentous phase transition in the
Earth system” (p.5) that exceeds our ability to clearly chronicle. The separation between human
and natural spheres is effectively breached, eroding any objectivity in our ability to discern cause
and effect as social and natural systems become entangled. Scholars are compelled to become
“Earth system humanists”, attending to intimate attachments of the geo-physical to the socio-
cultural. The Anthropocene is therefore a difficult story to tell: it is both unclear and unfinished;
and it is here that the tools and methods of literary studies might be usefully applied.

The 13 chapter contributions collected in *Anthropocene Reading* are more experimental
than expositional, intended to respond to the provocation of, and questions rendered by, the
Anthropocene. Rather than advancing a particular approach or method, each contribution
explores a unique method or practice. In this instance, the editors explain, where the object of
concern is multiform, multiscalar, multicausal, and multitemporal, an attachment to
methodological consistency may be exactly the wrong approach. Reading the Anthropocene, it is
argued, is “an invariably polyglot, salvage practice in which we [must] employ all of our tools to
discover meaning amid the ruins” (p.13).

Having said this, chapters are not intentionally disconnected, but explore shared themes
and in some instances exhibit interconnecting discussion threads. Three key research themes direct investigation. Practices of periodisation – delineating and dividing time – are discussed in relation to stratigraphy but also in regards to literary texts. Marks, traces, and forms through which Anthropocene dimensions may be read shape a representational thread. Additionally, non-representational aspects are considered, teasing out sensory and affective facets rendered by human experience. Contributions are diverse across these themes, and I highlight a few to demonstrate the varied scope and methodological application.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s “Anarky” (Chapter 1), provides a pertinent starting point. Concerned with the scale of deep time, he challenges the impulse to characterise periods as either discrete or stable. Drawing on cataclysmic myth in the form of Noah’s Flood, he argues for a more unsettled temporal outlook, attuned to fluid and tempestuous currents, churn, and whorl of oceanic proportions.

Periodisation and tempestuousness are themes further explored by Steve Mentz in “Enter the Anthropocene, Circa 1610” (Chapter 2). Mentz employs Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, itself attached to the early 17th century and contemporaneous with environmental impacts resulting from the Columbian exchange between Old and New Worlds. He argues the need to read multiple Anthropocenes at the same time, and for attending to marks of punctuation as effective border signals and tools for creating new hybrid stories: “Hybrid possibilities [that] flow out of Anthropocene relistening and retelling [and] that encourage narratives to overflow their bounds” (p.54).

In “Partial Readings: Thoreau’s Studies as Natural History’s Casualties” (Chapter 6), Juliana Chow looks to Henry David Thoreau’s writing, specifically his essay “The Dispersion of Seeds”. Applying a method of critical partiality, she shows that while nature writings may be weighted by local attachments they can additionally provide valuable insight into wider geographical circumstances. Within Anthropocene contexts such analysis is a reminder that singular representations can be read through a relational lens to disclose multiple facets.
Matt Hooley, in “Reading Vulnerability: Indigeneity and the Scale of Harm” (Chapter 10), looks to Indigenous knowledges as alternative forms of representation, arguing that “reading global climate change does not require scaling up to the geologic or planetary but rather revisiting the relationship among vulnerability, agency, and environment” (p.187).

Alternative genres are the focus of Stephanie LeMenager in “Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre” (Chapter 12). Climate fiction (cli-fi) is explored as an alternative representational form that aids us in reading a more commonplace or “everyday” Anthropocene.

Non-representational form is explored within Dana Luciano’s “Romancing the Trace: Edward Hitchcock’s Speculative Ichnology” (Chapter 5). Ichnology is the study of fossil traces in relation to deep time and species extinction. Luciano posits a “spirit” of the Anthropocene, developing a sense of romantic wonder through reading presence and absence which she explores as a humanistic rejoinder to the Anthropocene’s scientific delineation and constitution.

All told, the 13 contributions offer varied and stimulating studies displaying how literary methods can effectively interrogate, reframe, and explicate the multi-faceted qualities and character of the Anthropocene. This volume will be of interest not just to those within literary studies but to researchers and students across disciplines. The catch, however, with such a multiform approach is in failing to provide an overarching framework for the application of literary method, and each study requires a certain amount of analysis to discern the techniques employed. Similarly, this is not a book for the novice – either of literary studies or Anthropocene investigation – and those coming to it would be best to do so with some grounding in Anthropocene themes or literary theory. In my own case, I have the former but not so much the latter, and while I found themes and approaches within contributions highly stimulating, my reading was in some parts impeded by a lack of familiarity with some of the literary figures and ideas employed.

Overall, Anthropocene Reading offers thought-provoking contributions that readers across disciplines – and especially those interested in traversing across disciplinary boundaries –
can employ as stimulus for Anthropocene investigation. The volume shows the utility in contemplating acts of writing and reading at both small and planetary scales. Such acts are infused with subtlety and nuance, and are often far from being either clear-cut or rational, but imbued with ambiguity and feeling. Attending and responding to multifaceted Anthropocene phenomena begins with reading, and this book offers effective prompts for the task.

References


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