

Tymon Adamczewski

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9753-3361>

Kazimierz Wielki University

Katarzyna Więckowska

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3408-3695>

Nicolaus Copernicus University

Beyond the Anthropocene: Inheriting a Crisis, Inhabiting a Threshold

In the early twenty-first century, the planetary crisis has become both a measurable reality and a mode of precarious existence. As ecological systems collapse, climate patterns destabilise, and biodiversity wanes, the need to tackle and understand the entangled forces driving these changes has become much more dire. This necessity has also spurred a wave of scientific, cultural, and artistic responses that attempt to make these matters more understandable and thus relatable, or, at least to some extent, manageable. Yet many of the phenomena associated with the current ecological crisis – such as global warming, extinction, or the passing of deep geological time – resist representation. They elude “traditional” modes of world-making, such as narrative linearity or human perceptual scales, and unfold across materialities that are neither readily visible nor easily understood.

The Anthropocene, both as a concept and a provocation, has emerged in this context to designate a moment of unprecedented planetary transformation. It marks a recognition that human activity, *en bloc*, has become a geological force, reshaping climate and earth systems, and provoking disparate biological processes on a planetary scale (see Crutzen and Stoermer). Yet the term does much more than “merely” describe an epoch; it prompts a critical rethinking of how literature, theory, and culture might respond to the crisis of scale, agency, and representation that the Anthropocene reveals. As Timothy Clark states in *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, the Anthropocene entails “a chastening recognition of the limits of cultural representation as a force of change in human affairs, as compared to the numerous economic, meteorological, geographical and microbiological factors [...] that arise from trying to think on a planetary scale” (21). But it is precisely at this limit where representation falters and inherited critical vocabularies collapse – that the new theoretical and aesthetic possibilities begin to emerge.

An influential framework across academic and artistic disciplines, the Anthropocene, however, is not without its critiques. One of the most frequently cited limitations of the term lies in its generalising dimension: its tendency to attribute ecological destruction to “humanity” at large, i.e. in abstract, undifferentiated terms. Such universalising rhetoric masks the uneven histories of colonialism, capitalism, industrialisation, and extraction that have produced the current crisis – as Heather Davis and Zoe Todd convincingly argue, the Anthropocene is a continuation of the colonial practices of displacements and dispossession, while its logic of the universal ultimately works “to sever the relations between mind, body, and land” that are key to Indigenous lives and epistemologies (770–771). Moreover, the notion remains fundamentally oriented around human impact, interests, and modes of making sense of the world, rather than adopting a decentered ecological or multispecies perspective. The very name comes from the Greek word indicating a “human being” (*anthropos*) and inscribes our species as the central actor in Earth’s geohistory. Such a framing has also been subject to extensive debate, not only in the environmental humanities but also in geology, where its status as a formally recognised epoch remains contested and sparks intense debates. Following years of evaluation by the Anthropocene Working Group, in March 2024 these discussions led the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) to reject the proposal of designating the Anthropocene as a formal unit of the geologic time scale (International Commission on Stratigraphy 2024). On a similar terminological note, one might notice how critics also argue that by foregrounding human agency, the term reinforces the same exceptionalism and instrumental logic that contributed to the crisis in the first place. As Jason W. Moore (2017) suggests, the term Anthropocene risks flattening complex histories of ecological degradation into a single species narrative, obscuring the roles of empire, capital, and racialised labor in shaping the present. In response, alternative nomenclatures have been proposed. Terms such as Capitalocene, Plantationocene and the Chthulucene (Haraway 2015) each foreground different genealogies of planetary change – economic, colonial, multispecies, or mythopoetic. These terms highlight the insufficiency of “the human” as a unified historical subject and attempt to shift the focus from human dominance to interwoven systems of exploitation, survival, and relation. Moreover, they also point to the dissolved nature of responsibility in the case of identifying a general, collective culprit. Such questions, it seems, demand not only theoretical revision but ethical and imaginative transformation.

In this vein, scholars have increasingly turned toward disparate post-anthropocentric frameworks that challenge the centrality of the human subject. Thinking along these lines often blurs disciplinary boundaries by drawing from feminist science studies, Indigenous epistemologies, postcolonial studies, speculative design, and media theory. New ways of describing and exploring the encounters with non-human realities, beings and objects include Jane Bennet’s concept of “thing-power,” Donna Haraway’s ideas on storytelling in the Chthulucene, Rosi Braidotti’s critique

of traditional humanism, Graham Harman's rejection of human privilege, Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory, Timothy Morton's hyperobjects, Karen Barad's "agential realism," or Stacy Alaimo's notion of "transcorporeality." Bennett, for instance, offers in *Vibrant Matter* a compelling vision of a world where "humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other," and where agency itself must be understood as distributed across entangled networks of beings, forces, and things (Bennett 31). If, as she argues, the vitality of non-human bodies makes them "quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii), then human culture can no longer be seen as separate from the nonhuman but rather as "inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies" (108). Similarly, Braidotti's posthuman critique of Enlightenment humanism (Braidotti 13–24) emphasises the need for new ways of thinking and creating that focus on what she calls *zoe* – "life in its nonhuman aspects" (66) – and for forms of (posthuman) subjectivity and accountability "based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building" (49). Barad's theory of "agential realism" (Barad 2007, 132–136) presents matter as "an active participant in the world's becoming, in its ongoing 'intra-activity'" (Barad 2018, 224), where "the relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment," so that "matter and meaning are mutually articulated" (2018, 233). Finally, Haraway's call to "stay with the trouble" reflects a growing recognition that the future of thought must be made *with*, rather than *over* or *against*, the more-than-human world, not least because, as she claims, "We become-with each other or not at all" (Haraway 2016, 22).

These perspectives not only complicate the conceptual terrain of the Anthropocene; they also call into question the modes of critique, representation, and engagement long dominant within the humanities. They also prove that the Anthropocene remains a powerful conceptual tool within the arts, humanities, and social sciences, where it continues to shape how we understand humanity's impact on the planet. Its significance, therefore, extends well beyond its disqualified role as a formal geological marker. If human agency is no longer singular or sovereign, how do we understand literature, theory, or politics as forms of world-making? What does it mean to write, to theorise, or to imagine in the wake of human exceptionalism?

This thematic issue responds to such questions by gathering essays that explore a wide array of post-anthropocentric approaches across texts and theory. At the core of this intervention is a conceptual and ethical shift – from anthropocentric humanism to distributed, relational, and decentered models of existence and meaning. The Anthropocene, here, is treated less as a fixed epoch than as a provocation – a conceptual pressure point that compels us to reconsider the scales, agencies, and narratives through which the human and the more-than-human are imagined and entangled. Rather than adhering to a singular theoretical paradigm, the essays in this collection work across a constellation of critical approaches drawn

from posthumanism, ecocriticism, speculative aesthetics, feminist theory, and decolonial thought. They trace new ways of conceiving vulnerability, mourning, and care across species lines; explore how narrative and ritual might foster ecological awareness and cultural renewal; and interrogate how speculative fiction and future imaginaries unsettle inherited ontologies of agency, autonomy, and intelligence. Whether examining rivers as sentient forces, machines as evolving life forms, or art as a collaborative space of ecological speculation, these contributions share a commitment to thinking beyond the human as the sole measure of value or meaning.

While the issue draws from broader traditions such as New Materialism, Object-Oriented Ontology, and environmental humanities, it also gestures toward alternative epistemologies and cosmologies – those grounded in multispecies entanglement, localised ecological knowledge, and pluralistic understandings of life and agency. In doing so, it reflects an ongoing movement in theory away from universal abstractions and toward situated, relational, and often speculative engagements with the world. Crucially, theory, here, is not treated as an external framework imposed upon texts or environments, but rather as a field of experimentation that is itself reshaped by the literary, artistic, and material practices it seeks to understand. Literature, performance, and speculative design are approached as active sites of knowledge production – forms of world-making that articulate, test, and transform post-anthropocentric thought. In this sense, this issue not only participates in current theoretical debates but also proposes new modes of sensing, imagining, and narrating life in the wake of climate crisis and the disturbing affects it might produce.

To this effect, **Aleksandra Kamińska's** reading of grief in extinction plays challenges the tradition of viewing this process as a uniquely human experience. She shows how it can become a site of interspecies ethical encounter and how mourning can extend beyond the human, especially when employing Judith Butler's notion of (un)grievability to affirm the emotional and ontological significance of nonhuman lives. Storytelling, too, emerges as a vehicle for posthuman ethics and for a redefinition of the Anthropocene as a not exclusively human concept. In their examination of the Snow Leopard Conservancy and the role of storytelling in the preservation of endangered species, **Bartłomiej Knosala and Rhodora Magan** argue that narrative – particularly when embedded in Indigenous cultural traditions – has the power to challenge reductionist scientific models. Their case study illustrates how conservation efforts become not just a biological imperative, but a relational and symbolic practice. The theme of more-than-human agency continues in **Anna Maria Karczewska's** hydrocentric analysis of Wade Davis's *Magdalena: River of Dreams*. Reframing the body of water as a gestational force, she draws on new materialist perspectives to show how water shapes history, identity, and possibility, calling for a mode of reading attuned to nonhuman creativity. A different kind of posthuman storytelling is explored in "Intersecting Narratives and Design in Post-Anthropocentric Speculative Art," where **Marta A. Flisykowska and Roksana Zgierska** discuss the *Fossibilities* project as an experiment in ecological

narrative-making. By creating speculative “future fossils” that merge design, literature, and science, the project invites participants to inhabit post-Anthropocenic futures in which art becomes a collaborative practice of imagining coexistence. Technological sentience and the decentering of human intelligence are topics taken up in **Ritu Ranjan Gogoi’s** reading of *Sea of Rust*, a novel depicting a world after human extinction. Rather than mourning humanity’s end, the text explores what it means for machines to evolve agency and interiority, posing profound questions about identity, purpose, and the limits of anthropocentric thought. Finally, a broader ontological reframing is proposed in “Organism-Oriented Ontology Beyond the Anthropocene,” where **Audronė Žukauskaitė** challenges dominant entropic narratives through the lens of autopoiesis. Building on Bernard Stiegler’s Neganthropocene, coupled with Gaia theory, she advocates for an ontology rooted in life’s self-organising complexity, offering a philosophical foundation for understanding post-Anthropocenic modes of existence.

Rather than treating literature as a passive mirror of environmental change or as a moralising voice for human action, the essays collected in the thematic issue “Beyond the Anthropocene: Post-Anthropocentric Approaches Across Texts and Theory” treat literature – and by extension, culture, theory, and art – as an *active zone of contact* with the more-than-human world and more-than-human ways of meaning-making. The notion of text becomes a speculative laboratory, not only reflecting reality but *inventing* new perceptual and ethical configurations. In this understanding of the notion, texts become vehicles for instigating encounters among species, elements, objects, and forces that might otherwise remain occluded in conventional discursive forms. This is especially important given the representational challenges posed by the Anthropocene and its attendant hyperobjects – phenomena so vast and distributed that they elude traditional narration (Morton 2013). In this context, literary and artistic experimentation can offer forms of mediation that move beyond indexicality or mimesis, forging new modes of storytelling, temporality, and material engagement. Whether through speculative fiction, multispecies narrative, environmental horror, documentary poetics, or audio-visual essayism, the creative text becomes a space where human and nonhuman futures are reimagined together.

As the essays in this volume demonstrate, to think *beyond the Anthropocene* is not merely to discard the term, but to trace the limits it reveals and to seek more responsive, situated, and imaginative forms of thought. This special issue takes up that challenge by assembling a constellation of inquiries – textual, theoretical, aesthetic – that refuse to accept anthropocentrism as a default orientation. Instead, the works gathered here invite readers to inhabit the entangled, plural, and precarious conditions of the contemporary moment with attention, care, and critical inventiveness. What unites these essays is not a singular vision of the posthuman or a programmatic rejection of the human, but a shared commitment to *rethinking relationality*: to attuning to the strange agencies of the nonhuman, the porous boundaries of the body, the deep temporalities of ecological change,