

Re-Storying the Anthropocene: No Golden Spike, No Silver Bullet

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Rosemary-Claire Collard's Geography 389W course, *Nature and Society*. The assignment asked students to take a position on an issue of human-nature relations covered in class, including the Anthropocene. The paper uses APA citation style.

Humans are the dominant force shaping Earth today, fuelling calls for the International Geological Congress to declare the current Epoch “the Anthropocene.” There is intense debate over what the start date of the Anthropocene should be, with proposals ranging from the onset of colonization to the advent of the Industrial Revolution to the Great Acceleration of the mid-twentieth century. In parallel, scholars also contest the very conceptualization of the Anthropocene. While some assert that Indigenous Knowledge should inform the start date decision to advance decolonization, others argue decolonization is not possible within the scientific frameworks that justified colonization in the first place. In this paper, I argue that formalizing the Anthropocene would perpetuate colonialism by uprooting Indigenous Knowledges, erasing ongoing resistance against the systems that caused the Anthropocene, and universalizing multispecies realities to fit a single date. Rather, widening the lens of the Anthropocene discourse beyond the date debate would cultivate generative dialogue about causes and solutions to today's socio-ecological crises and foster new possibilities for abundant futures for all.

Acknowledgement

As a white settler living on the ancestral, unceded territories of the hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ and Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh speaking peoples, I would like to acknowledge that the Anthropocene Epoch is an intentional outcome of the colonial and capitalist systems that I continue to benefit from today. This paper is part of my ongoing reckoning with the settler-colonial legacy that I inherited (Whyte, 2018).

The term “Anthropocene” unofficially describes the current geological epoch in which humans are the dominant force shaping Earth systems (Lewis and Maslin, 2015). As the arbiter of geological time, the International Geological Congress (IGC) has the power to officially demarcate the Anthropocene from the Holocene, the current epoch that started 11,700 years ago, and determine when the Anthropocene begins (Lewis and Maslin, 2015). There is intense debate over the start date, or “golden spike,” of the Anthropocene given the scientific and socio-ecological implications of the choice (Lewis and Maslin, 2015; Davis and Todd, 2017). At the same time, there is consensus on the threat the Anthropocene poses, especially to Indigenous and racialized communities on the frontlines of climate impacts (Nixon, 2014; Klein, 2016). With the colonial devaluation of land and those living closest to it responsible for the Anthropocene’s socio-ecological crises, “decolonization of the biosphere itself” is the necessary crisis response (Sze, 2015, p. 104; Davis and Todd, 2017). But while the Anthropocene is useful as an analytic for structuring discourse about and intervention in today’s crises, I argue that decolonization cannot happen within the IGC’s golden spike framework. Inaugurating the Anthropocene to the Geological Time Scale would perpetuate colonial violence by uprooting Indigenous Knowledges (IK), erasing ongoing resistance against the systems that caused the Anthropocene, and universalizing multispecies realities to fit a single date (McGregor, 2018; Davis et al., 2019). Instead, keeping the dialogue open would pluralize the dominant Anthropocene narrative and foster new decolonial possibilities for abundant socio-ecological futures (Nixon, 2014; Collard et al., 2015). In this paper, I call for widening the lens of the Anthropocene discourse from solidifying its start date toward collectively envisioning its end and enacting a future of mutual flourishing for humans and nature.

A Scientific Debate for the Ages

Proponents of the Anthropocene recognize humans as the dominant agent of environmental change today, including unprecedented and irreversible climate changes, extinction levels 100 to 1,000 times baseline levels, and other changes reordering life on Earth (Lewis and Maslin, 2015). Importantly, human influence is not just biological but geological, with evidence embedded in the stratigraphic record (Lewis and Maslin, 2015). Established by the IGC in 2009, the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) is evaluating that evidence to date the Anthropocene (AWG, 2020). Under the IGC process, establishing a new epoch’s

“golden spike” (officially called a Global Stratotype Section and Point) requires evidence of instantaneous changes to the Earth system discernible in a single stratigraphic layer with supplementary markers worldwide (Lewis and Maslin, 2015). Lewis and Maslin (2015) describe several candidate golden spikes: a dip in carbon dioxide from European colonization of the Americas and genocide of Indigenous peoples; rising carbon dioxide from the adoption of fossil-fuelled technologies beginning during the Industrial Revolution; and the sudden appearance of radionuclides and other novel materials during the mid-twentieth century Great Acceleration and associated expansion of human populations and activities such as nuclear testing. In 2019, the AWG voted in favour of a mid-twentieth century start date (AWG, 2019), upholding the dominant narrative of the Anthropocene as a crisis of unsustainable development and overconsumption (Lewis and Maslin, 2015).

Limits of Western Science

The AWG’s decision reveals western science’s inability to address colonialism and recognize diverse human-nature relationships (McGregor, 2018). In selecting a golden spike highlighting the environmental “horrors of the twentieth century,” the AWG perpetuates the colonial project of universalization by erasing the globally uneven complicity in, experiences of, and resistance to these horrors (Davis and Todd, 2017, p. 765). Conversely, dating the Anthropocene to 1610, or the onset of European colonization of the Americas, would appropriately reframe today’s socio-ecological crises as a product of white supremacy – not human rapacity – and facilitate decolonization (Davis and Todd, 2017). But while some scholars claim the AWG’s inclusion of IK would advance decolonization (e.g., Davis and Todd, 2017), others argue decolonization is not possible within the scientific frameworks that justified colonialism in the first place (e.g., McGregor, 2018). Here, I do not call on the AWG to reconsider the evidence for instituting a 1610 Anthropocene. Rather, the IGC’s procedural and epistemic inequities reveal that the Anthropocene’s formalization is unlikely to “generate an alternative path,” regardless of the start date (McGregor, 2018, p. 16).

Indicative of the “unmarked whiteness and Eurocentricity of Anthropocene discourses” (Davis et al., 2019, p. 3), only two of the AWG’s 22 voting members are based outside the Global North (AWG, 2020). If “what counts as epochal change is a matter of perspective” (as cited in Davis et al., 2019, p. 2), the AWG excludes the perspectives of those most affected by the Anthropocene – those with the biggest stake in the start date decision. Beyond representation disparities, there are irreconcilable epistemological differences between western science and IK (McGregor, 2018). There is no space for pluralistic, fleshy, place-based IK (Davis and Todd, 2017) in the universal, inanimate, technocratic evidence objectively analysed by the AWG (Lewis and Maslin, 2015). Indeed, western attempts to document IK “lock its interpretation in a cognitive box delineated by [a] language that evolved to communicate the worldview of the colonizers” (Simpson, 2004, p. 380). Given that “epistemic violence of European colonialism [...] caused the Anthropocene” (Davis and Todd, 2017, p. 769), the epistemic universality embedded in the IGC process will perpetuate, not undo, the violence of the Anthropocene Epoch through its formalization.

Having spent the last decade closing in on an official start date (AWG, 2019), the AWG’s lengthy debate is lending weight to Haraway’s remark that “perhaps the Dithering is a more apt name” for this epoch of inaction (2016, p. 104). Meanwhile, the crises that define this moment in time intensify. Climate change and biodiversity loss continue to accelerate, with British Columbia’s 2021 heat dome among the most lethal weather events in Canadian history and deforestation making deadly pandemics like COVID-19 more likely (Henderson et al., 2021; Tollefson, 2020). While “our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible” (Haraway, 2016, p. 100), the golden spike debate and the inaction it prolongs reinforce the “imperial, universal logic” responsible for the Anthropocene (Davis and Todd, 2017, p. 776). Instead of finalizing the debate, I argue for multispecies re-storying of the Anthropocene to support decolonial dialogue and action.

Re-storying the Anthropocene

Whereas debate provokes delay, pluralistic dialogue that “examines the coexistence, contradictions, and consequences of different ontologies” generates new possibilities for the future (Burow et al., 2018, p. 58). The current Anthropocene debate is one-sided and risks “[reproducing] the hierarchies embedded in the world we want to change” (as cited in Ranganathan, 2017, p. 1).

However, there is no single story, start date, or even name that can explain this epoch of crises (indeed, a full discussion of potential dates and names is beyond the scope of this paper). Resisting the dominant Anthropocene narrative of human greed and impending apocalypse (Klein, 2016; Page, 2021), Nixon (2014) calls for “[countering] the centripetal force of that dominant story with centrifugal stories that acknowledge immense disparities in human agency, impacts, and vulnerability” (para. 5). Indeed, apocalypse is not new for Indigenous peoples, who have been resisting colonialism and genocide for centuries (Davis and Todd, 2017). Through a “web of liberation strategies” such as land defence, legal action, and cultural revitalization, Indigenous resistance to colonization is responsible for preserving much of Earth’s remaining biocultural diversity (Simpson, 2004, p. 373; Maffi, 2005; Temper, 2019). Therefore, “stories, tenderness, and care [are] required to address the realities of [Indigenous peoples as] post-apocalyptic survivors” and support Indigenous-led efforts to deconstruct the discursive and material colonialism of the Anthropocene (Davis and Todd, 2017, p. 773).

To Nixon’s call, I would add that the Anthropocene involves not just humans but also more-than-humans, an understanding core to Indigenous epistemologies and wellbeing (McGregor, 2018). As Haraway (2016) emphasizes, no species acts alone, and it will take making and remaking kin with other beings and the land to engender an end to the Anthropocene. Thus, “ontological hybridity” and “multi-epistemic literacy” (Burow et al., 2018, p. 57, 65) are required to decentre the Anthropocene’s anthropocentric, Eurocentric narrative and make space for Indigenous peoples and other communities to imagine and enact self-determined futures in relationship with their more-than-human counterparts (Haraway, 2016; McGregor, 2018). Instead of confining multispecies realities to a layer of rock, opening the Anthropocene discourse has revolutionary potential to cultivate generative dialogue about desirable socio-ecological futures and how to achieve them.

Abundant Futures, or the End of the Anthropocene

Despite the AWG’s focus on fossilized evidence of human enterprise, the future will look nothing like the past given irreversible climatic and ecological changes. Instead of returning to a romanticized historical normal (Page, 2021), we must embark on “a journey toward futures different than pasts” (Kramvig and Gomez, 2019, p. 322), futures of “flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages” (Haraway, 2016, p. 101). Formalizing the Anthropocene Epoch would enforce Eurocentric scripts of human domination over natural others for millions of years into the

future – the typical length of epochs in the Geological Time Scale (Lewis and Maslin, 2015). Conversely, making space for dialogue about diverse histories, realities, and dreams for the future would “keep the edges open” to decolonial possibilities for an Age of Abundance, where abundance means wellbeing for all, not profit for some (Haraway, 2016, p. 101; Collard et al., 2015).

As Nixon (2014) observes, “in Anthropocene metrics and modelling, we are seeing considerable attention directed at what kind of stratigraphic record drowned megacities will leave” (para. 11). The AWG continues debating and dithering over layers of rock while the Anthropocene takes lives, re-enacting epistemological and environmental violence ongoing since colonization (Sze, 2015; Haraway, 2016). I assert that officially establishing the Anthropocene—irrespective of the date—would inhibit decolonization by melting down pluralistic IK systems, stories of resistance, and multispecies experiences into a single golden spike. Instead, the Anthropocene discourse should move beyond one-sided debate toward pluralistic dialogue about how to “tend to the ruptures and cleavages between land and flesh” produced by the Anthropocene (Davis and Todd, 2017, p. 775) and transform dialogue into action. Multi-epistemic, multispecies re-storying of the Anthropocene is the “spark that will light a fire in our imaginaries” (Collard et al., 2015, p. 326) to envision and pursue flourishing futures for all.

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