

## GUEST COLUMN

## Indigenous Interruptions in the Anthropocene

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It's dangerous to dream along, to ignore  
 natural disaster. We point the car  
 toward the horizon, wanting to be a point  
 on its line, a place of motion, nothing more.

—Janet McAdams, “Flood”

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When, nearly two years ago, I first conceived the cluster of essays for this issue's Theories and Methodologies section, “Indigenous Literatures and the Anthropocene,” apocalypse was already ordinary: mercurial “natural” disasters, catastrophic weather events, species extinction, threatened water supplies—all had become staggeringly routine results of human hubris and harbingers of our planet's and our species's impending demise. The uncanny relevance of Indigenous cultures was early invoked and deployed, Native peoples' dystopian pasts and ecological prescience comprising a veritable handbook for navigating a haunted future. And yet, the more we have exposed the Anthropocene's insidious engines—settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and the very principles of modern liberalism and its normative conceits of freedom, sovereignty, and humanity itself—the more estranged we have become, riven by seemingly incommensurable histories, epistemologies, and ontologies. The year 2020 introduced new crises and solidified the barriers between us: the ongoing spread of COVID-19, which has already killed well over one million people, limned by a shadow plague in the form of systemic racism and structural injustices that have allowed both violence and the virus to exact much higher death rates among the poor and people of color. Escalating the crisis for many on the West Coast of the United States (including two of the contributors to this collection) was yet another record wildfire season that burned more than five million acres and thousands of buildings and killed

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over two dozen people, as plumes of noxious smoke and ash darkened daytime skies and threatened permanent evacuations from entire neighborhoods (Migliozzi et al). In an overwhelming convergence of epidemiological, sociological, and ecological calamities, we have perhaps never had greater occasion to feel both wedded and isolated in pervasive but unevenly delivered trauma.

If it is increasingly clear that not all members of *Anthropos* are equal drivers of the Anthropocene, and that not all are uniformly compromised by its havoc, how can we begin to manufacture a communal will to redress it? Is the very notion of repair—of either human solidarity or our ruined planet—merely an ethical chimera, given the ousting of human dominance from the hierarchy of species and natural forces? And, for humanities and literary scholars confronting profound material, corporeal, and ecological trauma, what good does it do—as the Cherokee author Marilou Awiakta once put it—to “sling a poem at a dam” (43)? These are the ponderous questions taken up by this cluster’s focus on Indigeneity and the Anthropocene. Some of the contributors weigh in on the various temporal, ontological, and etymological presumptions of the Anthropocene’s canonization, and nearly all judge the concept itself to be an inaccurate, injurious product of normative, hierarchical ideologies.<sup>1</sup> Uniformly, the essayists encourage us to turn back to Indigenous voices, histories, epistemologies, and texts, but they do so in ways that avoid the usual approaches and instead question exclusive rights of access, exceptional modes of discourse, and recourse to custodial vocabularies derived from racial-capitalist economies. Ultimately, they reorient us to the most disarmingly elemental principle of all: that the Anthropocene is a narrative, one cooperatively composed and begging now for crowdsourced revision, with sequels that are not linear or conclusive but alternately recursive and speculative, plodding and precipitous, stale and untried. In these tangled plots, Indigeneity may figure as salient but not singular, as neither the center nor the margin, as neither the beginning nor the end, but as all and none of these things at once—a dynamic dialectic and a heuristic for interruption, interrogation, and innovation.

This is not the typical Anthropocene tale, nor the usual pigeonhole for its Indigenous subjects and actors, but a stark revaluation demanded by its racial-capitalist architecture. Once “a catchy term that [made] for an easy story” (Vergès)<sup>2</sup> turned to a “charismatic mega-category” (Reddy), the Anthropocene now seems like “an Enlightenment horror that strips historical specificity, race, class and gender from the human”—a phenomenon that Timothy Morton deems “violently antique” and “an embarrassing generalization” (19). A parade of alternative rubrics—such as Holocene, Chthulucene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Manthropocene—offer incremental shifts in demarcating both agency and subjection yet are finally piecemeal descriptors for a story so broad, dense, and intersectional that it beggars comprehension. Moreover, these recalibrations can have the unintended consequence of reinscribing exclusive ontologies rather than shattering the systems that produced them, and us. Radical loss invites, indeed requires, radical reworlding—but not in the ways that we in Indigenous studies and our allies have so far attempted, preoccupied as the field is (and must be) with tactical forms of recognition and sovereignty, strategic essentialisms, and pantribal efforts to solidify diverse Indigenous cultures over and against a sweeping settler mainstream, where “disappeared” knowledge is just one among many acts of explicit and figurative violence. Witness the ethical tangles created by the ontological turn, posthumanism, and new materialisms, elaborated by the efforts of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Bruno Latour, Elizabeth Povinelli, Graham Harman, Morton, and others to level the hierarchical distinctions among human, “natural,” and nonhuman elements and objects. We now have an array of rhizomatic, relational concepts of imbricated landscapes (Gan et al.), “kin-making” (Haraway), “ethical mutualism” (Rose), “symbiotic entanglement” (Farrier 13), and an “implosive whole” or “symbiotic real” (Morton). Many of these formulations build explicitly on Indigenous cultural knowledge, sometimes without formally crediting those sources, as Sarah Hunt, Zoe Todd, and others have contended. Some Indigenous thinkers themselves have entered traditional phenomenologies and material

practices fruitfully into mainstream scientific discourse, as the Potawatomi scientist Kyle P. Whyte did by facilitating the Indigenous Climate Change Studies movement. But even consensual partnerships and diligent citations do not forestall further marginalization or misrepresentation, as Indigenous scholars have cautioned and as Stephanie LeMenager, a non-Native contributor to this cluster, worries in her sensitive explication here of the tenuous border between scholarly alliance and theft. In short, the relation between Native phenomenology and science has emerged as a coveted commodity and a battleground—a vexed symbol of both global deliverance and tribal sovereignty.

The privatization of cultural resources is symptomatic of a larger, ironic phenomenon whereby the more we learn about histories of settlement and capitalism, the more distinctive and seemingly incomparable discrete cultural experiences and epistemologies become. Yet as Arturo Arias reminds us in his contribution here, Indigenous communities' intimacy with their biotic environments has been irremediably ruptured by extractive capitalism and its consequences, rendering their ontological distinctiveness in this regard both conceptually and pragmatically frail. Paradoxically, as Morton has argued, insisting on the "incommensurability of cultures" is itself a pernicious artifact of the colonialist constructions themselves "from which one is trying to rescue thinking" (12)—and the planet. Elsewhere, I have described this function of the Indigenous other as a version of what Foucault would term a heterotopia: an uncanny countersite that offers a dense repository for the utopic desires and deferrals of modernity. But the heterotopic, anticapitalist, ecological Indian is a fable burnished by loss, and as the Comanche critic Paul Chaat Smith explains, its appeal is akin to "ideological Vicodin . . . , and because we're the descendants of the greatest holocaust in human history, you can expect most of us to keep getting our prescription refilled for the foreseeable future" (36). Smith's "we" is deliberately inclusive, as is the narcotic allure of both ecological and decolonial reparations, especially those that may be a lever for further self-determination and sovereignty, as Whyte has suggested ("Indigenous Climate Change Studies" and "Indigenous Science

(Fiction)"). Quixotic deployments of Indigenous immunity and precious alterna-cenes are pervasive in both popular and academic discourse, perhaps most vividly in narratives that center on either the paradigmatic Native victim or the ecocultural warrior. For example, in *The Mermaids; or, Aiden in Wonderland* (2018)—a short film directed by the influential anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli and the Indigenous Australian Karrabing Film collective—we learn of a near future where "the world is being poisoned and Europeans are unable to step outside, while Indigenous people are able to" (*Mermaids*).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, at the end of the director Bong Joon-hoo's apocalyptic climate thriller *Snowpiercer*, the earth's two sole survivors are an Inuit girl and an African American boy—fitting symbolic vessels to "spread the human race" (qtd. in Sheldon vii). These are seductive but finally hollow mythologies, wish-fulfilling manifestations of the faith that, as Alan Trachtenberg once put it (invoking a 1934 statement by the Oglala Lakota chief Standing Bear), "America can be revived, rejuvenated, by recognizing a native school of thought. *The Indian can save America*" (307).

These reflexes are not political, ethical, or humanist errors—to the contrary—but simply routes to nowhere new, routes that may unintentionally reboot incoherent essentialisms and dangerous mystifications that undermine their progressive spirit. Critical race theory and expanded understandings of racial capitalism's tyranny have posited more granular accounts of climate change as elaborated viciously by and through the global flows of capital that laid waste to human and natural ecologies together.<sup>4</sup> The Plantationocene has emerged as a compelling rubric for knitting together the global structures of Indigenous removal, bound and coerced labor, extractive capitalism, monocultural devastation, and the permanent effacement of Black humanity and Indigenous value that continues to replicate in modern institutions and labor markets. Indeed, the plantation is now seen not as a time-limited phenomenon but as a "destructive, cellular form that metastasized from the Caribbean across the Global South *after* abolition" and that persists in bedeviling contemporary economies

(Manjapra 363); in Sylvia Wynter's words, we are "still 'enchanted,' imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in [the plantation's] bewitched reality" (95). Somehow, we have largely missed the disturbing ways that the Anthropocene idea extends the elisions of dignity, freedom, community, and humanity itself spawned by plantation logics, and we are only "just now noticing the extinction it has chosen to continually overlook in the making of its modernity and freedom" (Yusoff xiii).

Interlocutors of the Anthropocene must diligently clarify, as a matter of ethical course, "that the Anthropocene is not attributable to all of humanity but only to a small subset of humans clustered mainly in the West" (Baldwin and Erickson 4); likewise, we must confront, as Rob Nixon demonstrates in *Slow Violence*, the inordinate and largely invisible impact of environmental calamity on the world's poor and marginalized, a "compendious" category that crosses "multiple fault lines of ethnicity, gender, race, class, region, religion, and generation" (4). Given the sweeping canvas of such forensics, our work as researchers and critics must compel us finally to ask, with the philosopher Nancy Tuana, "[T]o whom are we speaking and for what purposes?" And in giving voice to history's silenced and illegible, "How can we remain nimble enough to avoid becoming trapped" by the frames that have determined us? (4). As Robert Nichols argues persuasively in *Theft Is Property*, the very idea of Indigeneity—a collective born of heterogeneous cultures and histories—can be traced to the foundational concept of "dispossession," which he identifies not just as a historical act but also as a structuring principle of political consciousness and identity. Reflexively, then, possession—and self-possession—becomes a normative, inalienable right applicable not just to land title but also to Indigenous knowledge and scholarship. Nichols's analysis illuminates this "curious juxtaposition"—one might also say paradox—"of claims that often animate Indigenous politics in the Anglophone world, namely, that the earth is not to be thought of as property at all, and that it has been stolen from its rightful owners" (8). Put another way, claims of dispossession founder if possession itself

is eschewed; but the reverse conceit of Indigenous cultures as fundamentally antiproprietary, anticapitalist bastions—the conceptual fuel that makes the anti-Anthropocene machine hum—is not just juridically ineffectual but ideologically fraught. In his essay here, Benjamin Balthaser documents the ways that anticapitalist, ecological thought developed concurrently with emergent articulations of capitalism's dependence on Indigenous removal and absence, thus permanently trapping Indigeneity within a flat discursive-symbolic framework that continues to haunt our most progressive political moods even today.

Balthaser and the other essayists here encourage us to scrupulously face our hauntedness, to reckon with the discursive and actual violences of colonial-capitalist histories before we attempt to exorcise them. Anna Tsing suggests that if "capitalism is a translation machine for producing capital from all kinds of livelihoods, human and nonhuman" (133), then we need an altogether new methodology attuned both to ethnographic specificity and to the vicissitudes of humanity within and apart from the racialized structures that produce and "translate" them. As Roy Scranton puts it similarly in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, we need "new ideas . . . new myths and new stories, a new conceptual understanding of reality"—indeed, a "collective existence . . . a new vision of who 'we' are" that is distinctly "over and against capitalism" (19). But can such new languages and notions be anything more than intellectual Esperanto, given the tyrannical contours of the nation-states and racialized economies in which we continue to work, speak, write, and struggle to exist? Indeed, if it is increasingly plain that capitalism is the metastatic cancer we cannot kill, then our hopes for surmounting its tautologies can feel hopelessly rhetorical. And yet, we must somehow persist in reimagining who we might be and become, within and beyond its conscriptions. As Morton puts it, drawing on Theodor W. Adorno, "true progress" sometimes "looks like regression" (11). Some of the most promising new thought asks us to turn our expanded ontological sensibilities in directions that may feel politically uncomfortable but that represent auspicious moves in a

moment of diminished pathways. The anthropologist David Graeber, for instance, suggests that while our “respect for [the] otherness” of discrete cultures promotes the illusion of internal homogeneity, such presumptions prevent us from grasping the one thing we all have in common: the world of things that “we cannot know” (22). By embracing instead “an imaginative, *poetic* process to come to terms with a reality” that none of us can ever entirely understand (30; emphasis added), we may find “the opportunity to unsettle one another’s ideas in a way that might prove genuinely dialogic” (28).

To restyle the apocalyptic narrative of our moment, we need such genuinely dialogic innovation, a poetics of decolonial unknowing: one keenly opposed to problematic reembodyments of modern liberalism and racial capitalism, averse to invocations of either the appropriative or the proprietary, and committed instead to complex, convergent, sometimes untidy networks of stewardship. Eric Cheyfitz models such an approach here in his readings of the Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan, and through her sensitive recalibrations of Indigenous worldviews he reminds us that Native literary expression is inherently a reactionary genre intent not on remaking an apocryphal past but on reframing its colonial-capitalist residues. The distinction is critical. Such a quest drives the most innovative work in settler-colonial and racial-capitalist studies that tend rigorously to the unexamined aporia and the overlays—what Lisa Lowe terms the “intimacies”—of continents, peoples, and categories of being and meaning that produced the modern liberal condition. Those spaces must be understood as convergent and compatible rather than artificially asymmetrical, Lowe argues. Her aim is not finally “recovery and recuperation” but the more modest rewards of a wholly “different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss” (41). Likewise, Scranton suggests that the humanist scholar be “the one willing to stop and ask troublesome questions, the one who is willing to interrupt, the one who resonates on other channels and with slower, deeper rhythms” (24). Drawing here and elsewhere on the concept of the philosopher as “interrupter,” Scranton instigates a deceleration

that echoes the late anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose’s “slow writing” and the “still thinking” that Matt Hooley recommends in his contribution here—pauses where we might better hear what history’s aporia and their intimacies might disclose.

Such aspirations can feel proleptic alongside ongoing efforts to unravel the knotted silences of racial capitalism and settler colonialism. As Iyko Day’s essay here reminds us in its turn to the visual culture of “ruin porn,” our preemptive nostalgia for lost futures can produce dissociative disaster-scapes void of their racial capitalist etiologies, indeed rid of human life altogether. The staggering certainty of our annihilation both seduces and derails; the task for humanities scholars may seem especially critical, “given the reflexive access to species self-definition that any humanist scholar holds as a burden and privilege,” as Tobias Boes and Kate Marshall observe (60), and yet we are frequently stymied by contradictory poles of progressive desire and historical reckoning. Indeed, as the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, apprehending humanity’s inequitable complicity in ecological apocalypse demands a bewildering ethics of reflexivity and rapprochement that vexes comprehension and even common sense, an ethics that “calls for a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity” (222). Here perhaps is where Indigenous thought, and especially Indigenous creativity, can contribute to developing not just insights but also a methodology for an ethical humanism rooted in the striations of elemental loss and indomitable salvage simultaneously—one capable of reorienting us to humanity’s unlimited potential for both history and futurity, both horror and hope, without falsely privileging either. As what Wai Chee Dimock terms an inherently “crisis-responsive art form,” literature—and particularly the narratives of the historically violated—offers robust archives of witness and repair, tethered to deep pasts even as they hinge on the efficiencies of survival (9). Diving into such archives, we can perhaps more effectively apprehend Indigenous cultural knowledges and stories as neither incommensurable nor exceptional but as fractional, syncretic, and supplementary—part of both the oldest stories and the newest, and

invitations to dialogue and intimacy rather than tragic foreclosures.

This hopeful inclusivity animates Dimock's *Weak Planet: Literature and Assisted Survival*, which moves purposefully through multiple literary genres, critical theories, cultural geographies, and temporalities in order to tease out suppressed familiarities and cautious optimism for the Anthropocene's as-yet-unwritten futures, both real and imagined, a project that demands textured reading strategies that obliterate expected boundaries in dazzling ways: in one chapter, for instance, she juxtaposes Henry David Thoreau's writings, a Maya Lin installation, Aesop's fables, the Old Testament, and the actions of Indigenous water-rights activists (43–64). Another contrapuntal project, Jessica Hurley's *Infrastructures of Apocalypse*, demonstrates how Indigenous, Black, and queer artists and activists together perceived the cataclysm of nuclear development and detonation not as (literally and metaphorically) explosive but as disturbingly continuous with “existing forms of historical and structural violence” (7). For Hurley, apocalypse is not world-ending but transfiguring, and the emplotments she unravels are vibrantly plural and generative. Other scholarly efforts focus more narrowly on breaking the impasse between anti-Black criticism and Indigenous studies,<sup>5</sup> as a recent anthology does when it suggests that we interpret seemingly incommensurable trauma as itself a “form of relationality,” a coherence derived from “being stuck together” (King et al. 1). Likewise, Mark Rifkin's *Fictions of Land and Flesh* honors the incongruities between Black and Indigenous experiences while also testing their limits in his juxtapositions of speculative fiction from both traditions. Taken together rather than apart, the experimental, futurist art being produced by so many subaltern writers brims with what Françoise Vergès calls “the politics of the possible”: “the freedom to dream other pasts and imagine other futures than those suggested by the racial Capitalocene.”

The essays in this cluster variously survey and amplify such intersectional and intergenerational work, enacting together a procreant diversity of perspectives, modes, and moods. Together, they challenge the prevailing discourses of power and

authority that have so far governed the way we understand and address our current state of emergency and its inequitable deprivations. The contributors recycle, rebuff, and restyle the terms of the debate and affirm the privileged role that narrative, poetry, Indigeneity, and the humanities play in developing fresh approaches to the entrenched structures of calamity within which we battle to survive—some purposefully traditional and some bracingly futurist but all, as Eric Gary Anderson puts it in his contribution, as staggeringly “big” and rich as the Anthropocene itself. These thinkers range over vast geographic and temporal terrain; they conjure an extraordinary array of oral, written, and visual texts; and they themselves write from—and out of—a wide assortment of tribal, non-Native, and disciplinary backgrounds. Collectively, they cultivate a landscape of beginnings rather than endings—ways to urge newness forth from the profundities of loss.

There are no hidden escape hatches here, no shamanic interventions in the tectonics of climate change or of racial capitalism. But there is throughout an abiding refusal to surrender to either the limits or the logics of this ruined world, and a conceptual environment where the dialectic of Indigeneity provides a map of untraveled routes rather than fallow destinations. In a moment of heightened global emergency, these essays are something of an offering—a vibrant response to Donna J. Haraway's call for “stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections” (160). Together, they demonstrate a form of fertile intricacy and intimacy that upends the architecture of negation and separatism haunting Anthropocenic, settler-colonial, and racial-capitalist logics; and from that harrowing place, they interrogate and interrupt the processes that have determined and disconnected us. In these terms—of strategic self-effacement rather than reflexive self-determination—“Indigeneity” may be our most unsettling and propitious rubric for learning together how to die, and to regenerate, in the Anthropocene.

## NOTES

1. In terms of the ongoing debate over when the Anthropocene started, I favor a position similar to that expounded by Arun Saldanha: “Could we not be content with a pluralist approach in which there are multiple Anthropocenes without one exact start date, which would have always in some way accompanied the human species and which have merely intensified with each of these thresholds? If stratigraphy itself requires strict periodization, could ‘Anthropocene’ not mean different things in different discourses, for different political aims?” (16).

2. Vergès follows Moore, who favors *Capitalocene* over *Anthropocene* in order to more pointedly “challenge the naturalized inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production. It is an easy story to tell because it does not ask us to think about these relations at all.”

3. The film has been lauded as “a powerful intervention in contemporary debates about the future present of climate change, extractive capitalism, and industrial toxicity from the point of view of Indigenous worlds” (Synopsis).

4. See Baldwin and Erickson’s special issue of *Environment and Planning D* on race and the Anthropocene, whose essays collectively argue that “any critical pedagogy of the Anthropocene should set for itself the task of dismantling the racial Anthropocene” (9).

5. To summarize (and simplify) a complex theoretical debate, settler-colonial studies, following instigating work by Wolfe, deems settler colonialism a zero-sum operation, ongoing rather than epistemic, contingent on the elimination of Native presence and on the consequent social death of the Indigenous. Conversely, Afro-pessimism and anti-Blackness, expounded by Wilderson, Sharpe, Sexton, and others, focuses on the permanent social death of African Americans instigated by the logic of chattel slavery and racial capitalism. Many of these thinkers categorically consider all non-Black actors (even Indians) “anti-black,” while some Indigenous and settler-colonial scholars likewise class all non-Indigenous actors, including African Americans, as de facto settlers. Scholars such as Day and Coulthard, as well as those discussed here, have begun to encourage more complex, dialectical models for the development of the American nation-state.

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