



Review of *The Birth of the Anthropocene* by Jeremy Davies. 2016. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. 248 pages, ISBN 978-0520289987 Paper (\$27.95)

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The word ‘Anthropocene’ has caught on amidst a frenzied panic to name a new geological epoch wherein Anthropos or Man as an undifferentiated whole is acting in the scale of a geological force, altering entire climate systems and the planet’s biosphere in unprecedented ways. While geologists are still debating the official adoption of the term, the discursive construction of the Anthropocene has spread widely across academic, activist and popular spaces. Jeremy Davies’ *The Birth of the Anthropocene* is a book about how to take the measure of a crisis by providing a stratigrapher’s way of seeing the contemporary moment in its place in deep space and deep time. Davies takes the reader on a breathtaking tour of the planet’s geohistory in the past millions of years, “to read the strata of the Earth as an autobiography of revolutions, decay and restoration” (27), cultivating an appreciation for how the Earth’s layers can be peeled and read as an archive even by a non-specialist. Davies invites us to consider a geological way of seeing as something political and spiritual.

While the word Anthropocene is apocalyptic, simultaneously terrifying and paralyzing, its multiple and contradictory uses are also arguably confusing. Davies therefore clarifies in his book what he thinks the Anthropocene is *not*: it is not a rhetorical device or a shock tactic to expose the horrors of human destructive capacity; it is not a break from the earth’s natural history but is



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instead one epoch among many; paradoxically, it is not an anthropocentric epoch which places human agency in the centre of the physical world; and most importantly, the Anthropocene must not imply that all human beings as a species have acted in unison and are collectively responsible for the current state of affairs. It is Davies' commitment to politicizing the geological approach that I find most fruitful to engage with in this review.

It matters what origin stories one tells about the time we inhabit today: how one understands the nature of the crisis informs what one does to survive and transform it. As is clear from the book's title, Davies labors to date the geological present. Does it begin with the discovery of agriculture thousands of years ago, the colonization of the New World in 1492, or the long sixteenth century, as Marxist scholar Jason Moore (2015) argues is the beginning of the Capitalocene? Does the Anthropocene begin with fossil-fueled industrialization in Britain in the 1800s, the Great Acceleration across the postcolonial world in 1945, or perhaps in the year 1952 with the rise of global plutonium concentrations due to the United States's nuclear tests prior to Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Davies concludes that we are currently standing in an ongoing transition between two geological epochs: the Holocene has been coming to an end with the emergence of the capitalist world order, while the Anthropocene is being born amid postwar high modernism and decolonization (106-107). Engaging with both Marxist and postcolonial thought, Davies refers to the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty to surface the limits of an only anti-capitalist critique and to foreground the force of empire in the continuing production of global inequalities. Just as Chakrabarty argues for the need to link a critique of capitalist globalization to a longer history of humans as a species, Davies agrees that both a radical social critique and species thinking need to be united, as "biological and geological phenomena are not two different kinds of being upon which two different regimes of politics might be founded" (58). The political ecological concept of *neocatastrophism* is therefore central to Davies' project, an analysis put forward by new geology that the planet's history is full of chaotic and dramatic transformations, "making nonhuman history as contingent and chaotic as the history of kingdoms and empires" (9). The natural is always political: soil erosion, droughts, super typhoons and social violence are all deeply interlinked (see Taylor 2014 and Robbins 2011); hence, Davies' geohistorical project is inherently political as well.

With today's widespread discourse on the grim facts of global warming and the Sixth Great Extinction underway, Davies asks, "Why was a period of time usually left peacefully to geologists, paleontologists, and evolutionary biologists suddenly everybody's concern?" (18). Davies acknowledges that the Anthropocene has become hegemonic, a discourse wielded by both climate skeptics and environmentalists alike, and his book serves to unpack the dominant discussions and responses to climate change. He argues that the present-day environmental catastrophe has politicized deep time, and therefore responding to social and climate injustice requires an ability

to think of ourselves as subjects of a geological time scale. Those who can read the Earth's strata and see kin among trilobites, mountain pine beetles and Ediacaran organisms, and ultimately challenge the Cartesian binary that has split 'Man' from 'Nature' since the Enlightenment period, can engage in what Davies calls a truly emancipatory green politics. He contends that the stratigraphic approach offers a productive way of thinking about power relations as they exist both among human beings and between all kinds of geophysical forces (42).

Davies is not alone in this argument; posthuman feminist scholars (Tsing, Bubandt, Gan and Swanson 2017), most notably through the work of multispecies feminist theorist Donna Haraway (2016), have been arguing for de-centering the Anthropos in the Anthropocene. They argue that practices promoting symbiosis, 'coflourishing', and making 'oddkin' among the non- and more-than-human are necessary for survival in a dangerously troubled world. Taking his readers on a tour of the ancient past, including the various millennia of the Holocene, Davies invites us to stretch our mind's imagination in curiously uncomfortable ways—a willingness to encounter Colorado beetles, chlorine atoms, gray squirrels and kudzu to be among the powers of the Anthropocene (73). While human agency is certainly a primary driver of changes in global systems, Davies reminds his readers that by no means are we its masters. I am reminded of *The Great Derangement* (2016) by Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh, who blames the climate crisis on what he calls a crisis of imagination: modernist habits of mind that deny intelligence and agency in the non-human, thereby perpetuating an ever-deepening gulf between 'Culture' and 'Nature.' While Ghosh invites his readers to see the sentient force of cyclones, monsoons and Bengali tigers in the flooded Sundarbans, Davies similarly initiates us into a creative thought experiment with future alien geologists who will see that plastics, grasses, humans, plankton, and carbon dioxide molecules were all bundled together in the earth's present-day strata (83).

This postmodern call to produce ourselves differently, however, mis-assumes and perpetuates the existence of a universal subject or a singular human species. While Davies recognizes global inequalities, colonial histories, climate justice politics, and the dangers of Eurocentrism in Anthropocene writing, his own geological text simultaneously performs a planetary optic that glosses over the existence of multiple ontologies. Davies is successful in elaborating on the intricate webs of relationships between human beings, nonhuman animals, plants, metals and so on—a view that Bruno Latour and scholars of Actor Network Theory are similarly committed to. However, as Metis scholar Zoe Todd (2016: 16) elaborates, Indigenous philosophies have taught multiple expressions of ecological interbeing for millennia: "So it is important to think, deeply, about how the Ontological Turn—with its breathless 'realizations' that animals, the climate, water, 'atmospheres' and non-human presences like ancestors and spirits are *sentient* and *possess agency*, that 'nature' and 'culture', 'human' and 'animal' may not be so separate after all—is itself

perpetuating the exploitation of Indigenous peoples.” If it is indeed histories of empire, capitalist expansion and global inequality which spur the ongoing crisis, I found Davies’ lack of direct engagement with the work of decolonial and postcolonial scholars crucial to underscore. I ask: How would Davies’ posthumanist geological writing read differently if he drew at greater lengths from the work of feminist, postcolonial and Indigenous scholars (see Sundberg 2014; Caluya 2014; DeLoughrey, Didur and Carrigan 2015)? How would scholarly writings on the Anthropocene be different if they were not singularly authored, but a fruit of interdisciplinary collaborations and collective activism?

To conclude Davies writes that he does not offer a manifesto but instead a geological understanding of ourselves as members of deep time. The book ends with a call to action, which the activist reader may have waited impatiently for: he writes that we are departing a twelve-thousand-year period of relative ecological stability, and that the birth of the Anthropocene should be attended by vigilant struggles to work for the survival of complex plural ecologies. Davies’ project hangs on a delicate balance between inspiring awe in the planet’s magnificent geohistory while asking the reader to take a hard look at the tremendous loss in our midst and to stay fiercely motivated in doing transformative work without being defeated by apathy, despair or nihilism. How successful can Davies, or anyone, be in this undertaking?

This is a challenging assessment to make; after all, Davies writes that the turbulence we are witnessing in the present time is also generated by the very impossibility of witnessing the transition we are in between two geological epochs. I believe that while Davies’ challenge to industrial agriculture, extractive industries, and fossil fuels are all crucial interventions, the book’s very own call to ensure the survival of complex pluralistic ecosystems in itself requires a stronger self-reflexive scholarly practice to draw from and build with decolonial and feminist intellectual contributions, activisms and praxis. I believe that the reader must also listen to many other stories alongside Davies’ astonishing writing of a multi-millennial geohistory, including those from the Global South heard in Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) and Indigenous-led movements worldwide where spiritual-political ontologies of deep space and deep time inform everyday struggles to survive the violence of multiple Anthropocenes.

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