By now the concept of the Anthropocene is sufficiently well established in cultural critique; it needs little or no contextualizing, which speaks at once perhaps to its obvious usefulness as a response to our moment of escalating ecological crisis but also to a diminishment in the specificity and theoretical cohesion of the original intervention as it has begun to circulate as common currency. Where once the Anthropocene was a concept keyed to a particular set of scholarly interventions in a particular set of discourses with a particular material history, perhaps now it more essentially signifies the overall badness of the present—the immense size and scale of a planetary emergency whose origins lie before our births and whose terrible extensions blight our common future, a sinister and unsolvable omnicrisis whose effects are obvious to all but about which, nevertheless, nothing can be done.

Patrick Whitmarsh’s timely and inventive *Writing Our Extinction: Anthropocene Fiction and Vertical Science*, new in the Post*45 series at Stanford University Press, resists the critical flattening of the Anthropocene into mere shibboleth, in every sense. The deceptively simple observation that organizes much of the book is the recognition that the cultural episteme that shapes and has been shaped by the Anthropocene is preoccupied with verticality, especially its most extreme forms, from the famous “overview effect” caused by images and video of the earth from outer space to the parallel “underview” of mineshafts, oil rigs, landfills, fallout shelters, and the like. Indeed, the very assertion of the Anthropocene itself originates in a claim about one such site of underview, the visibility of human activity in the climatological record as registered by geologic stratigraphy and ice cores—drilling down, in a sense, to excavate ourselves—and of course humanist, artistic, and activist responses to the crisis of the Anthropocene have frequently zeroed in on the concept of deep time, the stretching out of the past and the future long past the scale of any individual life, society, or civilization into the millions of years. Whitmarsh’s elaborations on the Anthropocene’s vertical spaces, and the importance of verticality
in the modes of thinking it nurtures and produces, link the concept to the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ larger preoccupation with verticality in art, architecture, energy and communication infrastructure, and warfare. Verticality, as form, thus becomes the unexpected cable that tethers the Anthropocene to everything else, an interpretative framework that, in this book, moves nimbly from the specter of human extinction that haunts Don DeLillo’s fictions to figurations of deep-earth drilling in Kim Stanley Robinson, Karen Tei Yamashita, and Reza Negarestani to vertical encounters with the spectacle of the atom bomb in Tim O’Brien and Thomas Pynchon.

In demonstrating that the concept of the Anthropocene has such key continuities with wider cultural forces that seem to belie its supposed origins in objective scientific observation of the natural world, Whitmarsh dares the reader to consider the social construction of science in bold new terms. Whitmarsh is quite willing to take this provocation to its limit point, arguing, ultimately, that “much Anthropocene is not ostensibly about climate change at all” but rather “works to focalize vertically the geophysical mesh in which climate change occurs and in which human actors conceptualize the sensitivity of their action (or inaction)” —a notion that may well come to enshrine “the vertical” as the spatial logic of late capitalism (p. 21).

The second half of the book seeks to think through a different aspect of the Anthropocene, its assertion of an anthropos, a universal human subject, which in his own title (as Whitmarsh notes) becomes instanced as the problematic pronoun “our.” Here the book follows other recent work in the ecological humanities in its attempt to unflatten the Anthropocene in a different sense, by reasserting the differences in race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, dis(ability), and Indigeneity (to say nothing of species) that cause the Anthropocene to weigh on different populations in very different ways. Reading the Anthropocene against whiteness—there is a reason, after all, that one of the many proposed alternative names for the emergency we find ourselves in is “the Anglocene” —brings Whitmarsh’s work into conversation with alternative formulations of planetarity that do not elide the difference in power between the rich and the poor and the colonizer and the colonized, a mode of thinking registered in the encounter between the Anthropocene and writers like Colson Whitehead, Hari Kunzru, Jesmyn Ward, and Octavia E. Butler, structured across these authors and their texts again through key figurations of verticality. For Whitmarsh, these authors call on us to think about what is underground, what is unburied, and what aspects of our lives today might yet be Earthseeds.

What unites the two halves of the book, and Whitmarsh’s approach to the Anthropocene from the very high up to the very deep down, is his commitment to human agency and creative capacity in the face of what has already proved to be an extremely challenging era for mankind. For many contemporary theorists “the Anthropocene” names an era of sadness: a grim accounting of humanity’s many crimes against the planet, a kind of curse to which we have all unhappily been condemned. Whitmarsh, in contrast, understands “the Anthropocene” as a mode of thought that has been built up (and which therefore might be built differently, or even unbuilt altogether). The book’s smart and focused blurring of the boundaries between what counts as realism and what counts as science fiction and speculative fiction—especially in texts that attempt to think an absolutely unthinkable concept like human extinction—returns us to this question of the social construction of knowledge and the ways that narrative and spatial form structure art and science alike, as well as demonstrate how better apprehension and more careful intervention in these forms might help us think at least a little bit better about what has happened and is happening to our shared world. The book’s brief coda on Butler’s Parables duology, with its ambiguous articulation of outer space as
simultaneously a site of hope, terror, life, and death, calls on the reader to embrace their own agency in the face of situations that seem too large, too deep, and too well ensconced to talk or act against (the abiding pessimism of humanities academics not least among these targets). The verticality of the Anthropocene—its flattening of an impossibly complex multivalent living network to a “pale blue dot” whose ape inhabitants are always already dead— simultaneously instills in us both intensely useful cognitive tools for theorizing our situation and what Whitmarsh calls, on the last page of the book, “the temptation to flee” (p. 164). Our challenge then is to keep our feet planted; for an ecological humanism characteristically prone to deep despair (on the one hand) and deluded self-aggrandizement (on the other), Writing Our Extinction is an exemplary model for how to do this hard work right.

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