



COMMENTARY

Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin

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There is no question that anthropogenic processes have had planetary effects, in inter/intra-action with other processes and species, for as long as our species can be identified (a few tens of thousand years); and agriculture has been huge (a few thousand years). Of course, from the start the greatest planetary terraformers (and reformers) of all have been and still are bacteria and their kin, also in inter/intra-action of myriad kinds (including with people and their practices, technological and otherwise).¹ The spread of seed-dispersing plants millions of years before human agriculture was a planet-changing development, and so were many other revolutionary evolutionary ecological developmental historical events.

People joined the bumptious fray early and dynamically, even before they/we were critters who were later named *Homo sapiens*. But I think the issues about naming relevant to the Anthropocene, Plantationocene, or Capitalocene have to do with scale, rate/speed, synchronicity, and complexity. The constant question when considering systemic phenomena has to be, when do changes in degree become changes in kind, and what are the effects of bioculturally, biotechnically, biopolitically, historically situated people (not Man) relative to, and combined with, the effects of other species assemblages and other biotic/abiotic forces? No species, not even our own arrogant one pretending to be good individuals in so-called modern Western scripts, acts alone; assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too.

But, is there an inflection point of consequence that changes the name of the “game” of life on earth for everybody and everything? It's more than climate change; it's also extraordinary burdens of toxic chemistry, mining, depletion of lakes and rivers under and above ground, ecosystem simplification, vast genocides of people and other critters, etc, etc, in systemically linked patterns that threaten major system collapse after major system collapse after major system collapse. Recursion can be a drag.

Anna Tsing in a recent paper called “Feral Biologies” suggests that the inflection point between the Holocene and the Anthropocene might be the wiping out of most of the refugia from which diverse species assemblages (with or without people) can be reconstituted after major events (like desertification, or clear cutting, or, or, ...).² This is kin to the World-Ecology

Research Network coordinator Jason Moore's arguments that cheap nature is at an end; cheapening nature cannot work much longer to sustain extraction and production in and of the contemporary world because most of the reserves of the earth have been drained, burned, depleted, poisoned, exterminated, and otherwise exhausted.³ Vast investments and hugely creative and destructive technology can drive back the reckoning, but cheap nature really is over. Anna Tsing argues that the Holocene was the long period when refugia, places of refuge, still existed, even abounded, to sustain reworlding in rich cultural and biological diversity. Perhaps the outrage meriting a name like Anthropocene is about the destruction of places and times of refuge for people and other critters. I along with others think the Anthropocene is more a boundary event than an epoch, like the K-Pg boundary between the Cretaceous and the Paleogene.⁴ The Anthropocene marks severe discontinuities; what comes after will not be like what came before. I think our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge.

Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge.

So, I think a big new name, actually more than one name, is warranted. Thus, Anthropocene, Plantationocene,⁵ and Capitalocene (Andreas Malm's and Jason Moore's term before it was mine).⁶ I also insist that we need a name for the dynamic ongoing sym-chthonic forces and powers of which people are a part, within which ongoingness is at stake. Maybe, but only maybe, and only with intense commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans, flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages that include people will be possible. I am calling all this the Chthulucene—past, present, and to come.⁷ These real and possible timespaces are not named after SF writer H.P. Lovecraft's misogynist racial-nightmare monster Cthulhu (note spelling difference), but rather after the diverse earth-wide tentacular powers and forces and collected things with names like Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa (burst from water-full Papa), Terra, Haniyasu-hime, Spider Woman, Pachamama, Oya, Gorgo, Raven, A'akuluujjusi, and many many more. "My" Chthulucene, even burdened with its problematic Greek-ish tendrils, entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus. Even rendered in an American English-language text like this one, Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa, Medusa, Spider Woman, and all their kin are some of the many thousand names proper to a vein of SF that Lovecraft could not have imagined or embraced—namely, the webs of speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction, and scientific fact.⁸ It matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts. Mathematically, visually, and narratively, it matters which figures figure figures, which systems systematize systems.

All the thousand names are too big and too small; all the stories are too big and too small. As Jim Clifford taught me, we need 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.⁹

One way to live and die well as mortal critters in the Chthulucene is to join forces to reconstitute refuges, to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition, which must include mourning irreversible losses. Thom van Dooren and Vinciane Despret taught me that.¹⁰ There are so many losses already, and there will be many more. Renewed generative flourishing cannot grow from

myths of immortality or failure to become-with the dead and the extinct. There is a lot of work for Orson Scott Card's *Speaker for the Dead*.¹¹ And even more for Ursula LeGuin's worlding in *Always Coming Home*.

I am a compost-ist, not a posthuman-ist: we are all compost, not posthuman. The boundary that is the Anthropocene/Capitalocene means many things, including that immense irreversible destruction is really in train, not only for the 11 billion or so people who will be on earth near the end of the 21st century, but for myriads of other critters too. (The incomprehensible but sober number of around 11 billion will only hold if current worldwide birth rates of human babies remain low; if they rise again, all bets are off.) The edge of extinction is not just a metaphor; system collapse is not a thriller. Ask any refugee of any species.

The Chthulucene needs at least one slogan (of course, more than one); still shouting "Cyborgs for Earthly Survival," "Run Fast, Bite Hard," and "Shut Up and Train," I propose "Make Kin Not Babies!" Making kin is perhaps the hardest and most urgent part. Feminists of our time have been leaders in unraveling the supposed natural necessity of ties between sex and gender, race and sex, race and nation, class and race, gender and morphology, sex and reproduction, and reproduction and composing persons (our debts here are due especially to Melanesians, in alliance with Marilyn Strathern and her ethnographer kin).¹² If there is to be multispecies ecojustice, which can also embrace diverse human people, it is high time that feminists exercise leadership in imagination, theory, and action to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species.

Bacteria and fungi abound to give us metaphors; but, metaphors aside (good luck with that!), we have a mammalian job to do, with our biotic and abiotic sym-poietic collaborators, co-laborers. We need to make kin sym-chthonically, sym-poetically. Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with—become-with, compose-with—the earth-bound (thanks for that term, Bruno Latour-in-anglophone-mode).¹³

We, human people everywhere, must address intense, systemic urgencies; yet, so far, as Kim Stanley Robinson put it in *2312*, we are living in times of "The Dithering" (in this SF narrative, lasting from 2005 to 2060—too optimistic?), a "state of indecisive agitation."¹⁴ Perhaps the Dithering is a more apt name than either the Anthropocene or Capitalocene! The Dithering will be written into earth's rocky strata, indeed already is written into earth's mineralized layers. Sym-chthonic ones don't dither; they compose and decompose, which are both dangerous and promising practices. To say the least, human hegemony is not a sym-chthonic affair. As ecosexual artists Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle say, composting is so hot!

My purpose is to make "kin" mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy. The gently defamiliarizing move might seem for a while to be just a mistake, but then (with luck) appear as correct all along. Kin-making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans. I was moved in college by Shakespeare's punning between kin and kind—the kindest were not necessarily kin as family; making kin and making kind (as category, care, relatives without ties by birth, lateral relatives, lots of other echoes) stretch the imagination and can change the story. Marilyn Strathern taught me that relatives in British English were originally "logical relations" and only became "family members" in the 17th

century—this is definitely among the factoids I love.¹⁵ Go outside English, and the wild multiplies.

I think that the stretch and recomposition of kin are allowed by the fact that all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time). Kin is an assembling sort of word. All critters share a common “flesh,” laterally, semiotically, and genealogically. Ancestors turn out to be very interesting strangers; kin are unfamiliar (outside what we thought was family or gens), uncanny, haunting, active.¹⁶

Too much for a tiny slogan, I know! Still, try. Over a couple hundred years from now, maybe the human people of this planet can again be numbered two or three billion or so, while all along the way being part of increasing well being for diverse human beings and other critters as means and not just ends.

So, make kin, not babies! It matters how kin generate kin.¹⁷

¹ Intra-action is a concept given us by Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). I keep using inter-action too in order to remain legible to audiences who do not yet understand the radical change Barad’s analysis demands, but probably out of my linguistically promiscuous habits, as well.

² Anna Tsing, “Feral Biologies,” paper for Anthropological Visions of Sustainable Futures, University College London, February 2015.

³ Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (NY: Verso, 2015). Many of Moore’s essays can be found at <https://jasonwmoore.wordpress.com/>.

⁴ I owe Scott Gilbert for pointing out, during the *Ethnos* conversation and other interactions at Aarhus University in October 2014, that the Anthropocene (and Plantationocene) should be considered a boundary event like the K-Pg boundary, not an epoch. See footnote 5, below.

⁵ In a recorded conversation for *Ethnos* at the University of Aarhus in October, 2014, the participants collectively generated the name Plantationocene for the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor. The transcribed conversation will be published as “Anthropologists Are Talking About the Anthropocene,” in *Ethnos*. See the website for AURA, <http://anthropocene.au.dk/>. Scholars have long understood that the slave plantation system was the model and motor for the carbon-greedy machine-based factory system that is often cited as an inflection point for the Anthropocene. Nurtured in even the harshest circumstances, slave gardens not only provided crucial human food, but also refuges for biodiverse plants, animals, fungi, and soils. Slave gardens are an underexplored world, especially compared to imperial botanical gardens, for the travels and propagations of myriad critters. Moving material semiotic generativity around the world for capital accumulation and profit—the rapid displacement and reformulation of germ plasm, genomes, cuttings, and all other names and forms of part organisms and of deracinated plants, animals, and people—is one defining operation of the Plantationocene, Capitalocene, and Anthropocene taken together. The Plantationocene continues with ever-greater ferocity in globalized factory meat production, monocrop agribusiness, and immense substitutions of crops like oil palm for multispecies forests and their products that sustain human and nonhuman critters alike. The participants in the *Ethnos* conversation included Noboru Ishikawa, Anthropology, Center for South East Asian Studies, Kyoto University; Anna Tsing, Anthropology, University of California at Santa Cruz; Donna Haraway, History of Consciousness, University of California at Santa Cruz; Scott F. Gilbert,

Biology, Swarthmore; Nils Bubandt, Department of Culture and Society, Aarhus University; and Kenneth Olwig, Landscape Architecture, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. Gilbert has adopted the term Plantationocene for key arguments in his Coda to the second edition of the widely used textbook, Scott F. Gilbert and David Epel, *Ecological Developmental Biology* (USA: Sinauer Associates, forthcoming).

⁶ Personal email communications from both Jason Moore and Alf Hornborg in late 2014 told me Malm proposed the term Capitalocene in a seminar in Lund, Sweden, in 2009, when he was still a graduate student. I first used the term independently in public lectures starting in 2012. Moore is editing a book titled *Capitalocene* (Oakland CA: PM Press, forthcoming 2016), which will have essays by Moore, Malm, myself, and Elmar Altvater. Our collaborative webs thicken.

⁷ The suffix “-cene” proliferates! I risk this overabundance because I am in the thrall of the root meanings of -cene/kainos, namely, the temporality of the thick, fibrous, and lumpy “now,” which is ancient and not.

⁸ Os Mil Nomes de Gaia/the Thousand Names of Gaia was the generative international conference organized by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Déborah Danowski, and their collaborators in September 2014 in Rio de Janeiro. Some in Portuguese and some in English, many of the talks from the conference can be watched on <https://www.youtube.com/c/osmilnomesdegaia/videos>. My contribution on the Anthropocene and the Chthulucene was done by Skype, and is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1x0oxUHOIA8>.

⁹ James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). Vinciane Despret, “Ceux qui insistent,” in *Faire Art comme on fait société*, ed. Didier Debaise, et al. (Paris: Réel, 2013). For a wealth of important essays by Vinciane Despret, translated into English, see *Angelaki* 20, no. 2, forthcoming 2015, *Ethology II: Vinciane Despret*, edited by Brett Buchanan, Jeffrey Bussolini, and Matthew Chrulow, preface by Donna Haraway, “A Curious Practice.”

¹¹ Orson Scott Card, *Speaker for the Dead* (NY: Tor Books, 1986).

¹² Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Oakland CA: University of California Press, 1990).

¹³ Bruno Latour, “Facing Gaïa: Six Lectures on the Political Theology of Nature,” Gifford Lectures, 18-28 February, 2013.

¹⁴ Kim Stanley Robinson, *2312* (London: Orbit, 2012). This extraordinary SF narrative won the Nebula Award for best novel.

¹⁵ Marilyn Strathern, “Shifting Relations,” paper for the Emerging Worlds Workshop, University of California at Santa Cruz, 8 February, 2013. Making kin is a surging popular practice, and new names are also proliferating. See Lizzie Skurnick, *That Should Be a Word* (NY: Workman Publishing, 2015) for “kinnovator,” a person who makes family in non-conventional ways, to which I add kinnovation. Skurnick also proposes “clanarchist.” These are not just words; they are clues and prods to earthquakes in kin making that are not limited to Western family apparatuses, heteronormative or not. I think babies should be rare, nurtured, and precious; and kin should be abundant, unexpected, enduring, and precious.

¹⁶ “Gens” is another word, patriarchal by origin, with which feminists are playing. Origins and ends do not determine each other. Kin and gens are littermates in the history of Indo European languages. In hopeful intra-actional communist moments, check out <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/652-gens-a-feminist-manifesto-for-the-study-of-capitalism>, by Laura Bear, Karen Ho, Anna Tsing, and Sylvia Yanagisako. The writing is perhaps too dry (although the summary bullet posts help), and there are no juicy examples to make this Manifesto seduce the spoiled reader; but the references give huge resources to do all that, most the fruit of long-term, intimately engaged, deeply theorized ethnographies. See especially Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: on the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2015). The precision of the methodological approach in “Gens: a Feminist Manifesto for the Study of Capitalism” is in its address to those would-be Marxists or other theorists who resist feminism, and who therefore don’t engage the heterogeneity of real life worlds but stay with categories like Markets, the Economy, and Financialization (or, I would add, Reproduction, Production, and Population—in short, the supposedly

adequate categories of standard liberal and non-feminist socialist political economy). Go, Honolulu's Revolution Books and all your kin!

¹⁷ My experience is that those I hold dear as "our people," on the left or whatever name we can still use without apoplexy, hear neo-imperialism, neo-liberalism, misogyny, and racism (who can blame them?) in the "Not Babies" part of "Make Kin Not Babies." We imagine that the "Make Kin" part is easier and ethically and politically on firmer ground. Not true! "Make Kin" and "Not Babies" are both hard; they both demand our best emotional, intellectual, artistic, and political creativity, individually and collectively, across ideological and regional differences, among other differences. My sense is that "our people" can be partially compared to some Christian climate-change deniers: beliefs and commitments are too deep to allow rethinking and re feeling. For our people to revisit what has been owned by the right and by development professionals as the "population explosion" can feel like going over to the dark side.

But denial will not serve us. I know "population" is a state-making category, the sort of "abstraction" and "discourse" that remake reality for everybody, but not for everybody's benefit. I also think that evidence of many kinds, epistemologically and affectively comparable to the varied evidence for rapid climate change, shows that 7-11 billion human beings make demands that cannot be borne without immense damage to human and nonhuman beings across the earth. This is not a simple causal affair; ecojustice has no allowable one-variable approach to the cascading exterminations, immiserations, and extinctions on today's earth. But blaming Capitalism, Imperialism, Neoliberalism, Modernization, or some other "not us" for ongoing destruction webbed with human numbers will not work either. These issues demand difficult, unrelenting work; but they also demand joy, play, and response-ability to engage with unexpected others. All parts of these issues are much too important for Terra to hand them over to the right or to development professionals or to anybody else in the business-as-usual camps. Here's to Odd Kin—non-natalist and off-category!

We must find ways to celebrate low birth rates and personal, intimate decisions to make flourishing and generous lives (including innovating enduring kin—kinnovating) without making more babies—urgently and especially, but not only, in wealthy high-consumption and misery-exporting regions, nations, communities, families, and social classes. We need to encourage population and other policies that engage scary demographic issues by proliferating other-than-natal kin—including non-racist immigration, environmental, and social support policies for new comers and "native-born" alike (education, housing, health, gender and sexual creativity, agriculture, pedagogies for nurturing other-than-human critters, technologies and social innovations to keep older people healthy and productive, etc etc).

The inalienable personal "right" (what a word for such a mindful bodily matter!) to birth or not to birth a new baby is not in question for me; coercion is wrong at every imaginable level in this matter, and it tends to backfire in any case, even if one can stomach coercive law or custom (I cannot). On the other hand, what if the new normal were to become a cultural expectation that every new child have at least three lifetime committed parents (who are not necessarily each other's lovers and who would birth no more new babies after that, although they might live in multi-child, multi-generational households)? What if serious adoption practices for and by the elderly became common? What if nations that are worried about low birth rates (Denmark, Germany, Japan, Russia, white America, more) acknowledged that fear of immigrants is a big problem, and that racial purity projects and fantasies drive resurgent pronatalism? What if people everywhere looked for non-natalist kinnovations to individuals and collectives in queer, decolonial, and indigenous worlds, instead of to European, Euro-American, Chinese, or Indian rich and wealth-extracting sectors?

As a reminder that racial purity fantasies and refusal to accept immigrants as full citizens actually drive policy now in the "progressive" "developed" world, see Danny Hakim, "Sex Education in Europe Turns to Urging More Births," http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/09/business/international/sex-education-in-europe-turns-to-urging-more-births.html?_r=0. Rusten Hogness wrote in a Facebook post on 9 April, 2015, "What is wrong with our imaginations and with our ability to look out for one another (human and non-human alike) if we can't find ways to address issues raised by changing age distributions without making ever more human babies? We need to find ways to celebrate young folks who decide not to have kids, not add nationalism to the already potent mix of pro-natalist pressures on them."

Pronatalism in all its powerful guises ought to be in question almost everywhere. I keep “almost” as a reminder about the consequences of genocide and displacement for peoples—an ongoing scandal. The “almost” is also a prod to remember contemporary sterilization abuse, shockingly inappropriate and unusable means of contraception, reduction of women and men to ciphers in old and new population control policies, and other misogynist, patriarchal, and ethnicist/racist practices built into business as usual around the world. For example, see Kalpana Wilson, “The ‘New’ Global Population Control Policies: Fueling India’s Sterilization Atrocities,” *Different Takes* Winter 2015, <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/projects/dt/87>.
We need each others’ risk-taking support big time on all these matters.

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