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The Anthropocene Reviewed



It would be sacrilegious to publish a collection of essays about random objects without first talking about the book that inspired it all. I was introduced to John Green's *The Anthropocene Reviewed* in a nonfiction writing class senior year of high school. We were asked to choose a passage in the book and make a presentation summarizing it in just a couple slides. We then wrote a short piece in the style of the book, analyzing any person or object or feeling we wanted.

While I wasn't fond of the presentation, everything else stuck with me. I quickly devoured the rest of the book, savoring John's thoughts on CNN, scratch n' sniff stickers, air conditioning, and Diet Dr. Pepper. I loved how he had such profound stories to tell about these innocuous objects, and now I think about the book whenever I see some of them in my day-to-day life. The book is sitting on my desk as I write this, and the

essay I wrote for the class about Monster Energy is in the book you're reading right now.

The Anthropocene Reviewed sparked my love of overanalyzing small, seemingly uninspiring objects. Or, not overanalyzing in my opinion—just analyzing. Each object holds a thousand stories; the scope of human achievement has widened so large that even objects you interact with without a second thought have a rich tapestry of humans that shaped it. Sometimes, when I'm bored, I look at an object and try to imagine the scene in which that item was conceived, when it was ripped out of synapses in a brain and thrust into the real world.

I can almost see it: tired designers in some drab meeting room, huddled around a whiteboard containing scribbles and crude drawings and X's all over the place, each person weighing in on a seemingly minute detail—a detail that will affect the lives of millions of people, whether they know it or not. Or it could be a student, pacing around their cramped dorm room, penciling a doodle into a wrinkled piece of lined paper as their roommate lounges on the bed. Or it could just be bits of ones and zeroes sitting on a computer somewhere which will eventually be lost to time. Every one of these will be lost to time.

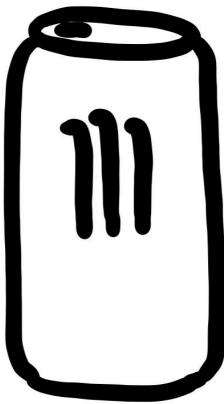
I want to experience it all. I want to see the product designers work on their little scale models, analyzing how the object imposes itself in space. I want to see the modeler hunched over a computer, dragging nodes around and etching chamfers and notches out of a gray block piece by piece. I want to see the graphic designers argue over whether the Helvetica on the packaging is too dry or too imposing or just right. I want to see the machine inject plastic into molds, spitting out one of many components that will eventually be joined to make the finished product. I want to see the worker stock the shelves with each identical item, all lined up to appear perfect and neat, because any self-respecting store is gonna have neat shelves. I even want to see myself, stopped in the aisle, feeling the weight of it in my own hands, and eventually placing it in my cart to take home with me, forever.

So much work, so much effort and angst and happiness and love and tears were spent just for this object to reach its final destination on my desk, or balanced on a shelf, or Kobe'd haphazardly into the trash

bin. By looking at an object, I see a cross section of humanity, each person lending just a little bit of their energy to make this thing exist. It's beautiful, but sad, too. Because there's so many of these little objects, little stories, surrounding me that I won't be able to appreciate them all. But what I can do is write about some of them, so at least one person loves them enough to immortalize them as words on a page. And one person is more than zero.

The Anthropocene Reviewed: 10/10.

Monster Energy



Monster Energy is as close to battery acid as a drink will ever get. Even the can it comes in screams raw electricity, like they harnessed the power of a bunch of Energizer double-A batteries and stuffed it into a can for your convenient consumption. Once you finally crack the top open, the stuff that comes out resembles a weird green toxic sludge. It's the last thing any sane person would put in their body, and yet I do it every time without a second thought. Why is that?

Well, the first sip hits harder than any beverage I've tried before. It tries to resemble at least somewhat like green apple, hence the green branding on the can, but with the amount of vitamins, caffeine, and sugar they pack into the can, it ends up punching you in the face with a flavor so pungent you have to psych yourself out again to take another sip.

And another sip you take. And another. And another, until you finally get to the bottom and wish you bought one of the big ones with the cool resealable metal caps on them. It has no business being this addictive; sometimes, I don't even want the caffeine, I just want the taste.

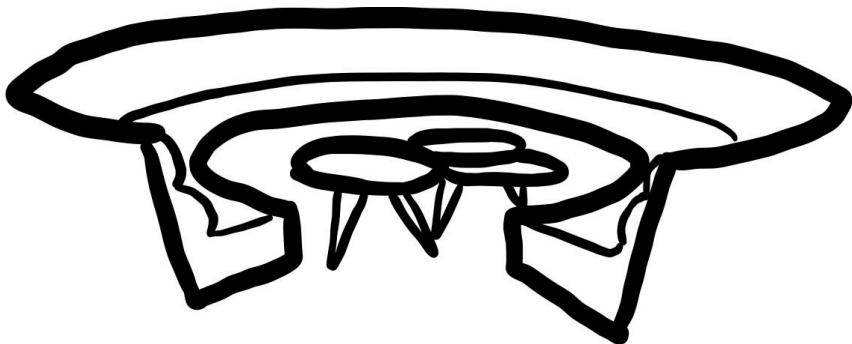
But for all the praise Monster gets, it gets just as much scrutiny. Many berate the drink for its high sugar content, excess of caffeine, and tons of vitamins that do nothing but serve as marketing fodder, and they're probably right—it does have 54 grams of sugar and two cups of coffee's worth of caffeine. Monster isn't trying to be healthy, though. It isn't trying to be a replacement for your cup of coffee in the morning, and it isn't trying to be an everyday drink.

Instead, Monster is the crutch you fall back on when you need to pull an all-nighter for school, or when you promised your swim coach you'll beat your PB this meet. When you take a sip, you don't care about the heaps of sugar or the vitamins that are 200% of your daily intake. All

you care about is the surprisingly addictive vaguely green apple taste and the burst of energy that makes your heart palpitate like you're at death's door. And isn't that exactly what Monster is meant to be?

Monster Energy: **7/10.**

the conversation pit



The conversation pit is a hallmark of 1950s mid-century modern interior design. Brought on by a desire for a simpler, cleaner, and more spacious living room, it aims to sidestep the clutter of furniture entirely by moving the living room's most established unit to a plane below that of the other pieces. It's a centerpiece not by the way it imposes itself on the room, but by the way it aims to transcend it.

Or that's what designers in the 1950s thought. In reality, the conversation pit was a rather clunky and sometimes dangerous part of mid-century living rooms, concisely outlined by a TIME article published in 1963; drunk party goers would meet their demise on the unforgiving sunken floor, those lounging would get a front row seat to a sea of ankles, and women would shy away from the pit's edge in fear of any inconspicuous wandering eyes. As tastes in style changed and the living room adapted itself as the prime television watching area, conversation pits soon started to get filled in, collapsing the living room onto a single plane once again.

However, like many other mid-century designs, conversation pits have experienced a resurgence as a trendy and unorthodox living room layout. This trend emerged from a desire to take the living room back from the iron grip of technology, and instead make it serve as a "nucleation site" for deep conversation to blossom. Those who advocate for its return praise the conversation pit for putting human

interaction at the forefront instead of pushing it off to the side in lieu of a fancy schmancy TV and sound system. They encapsulate a time where the joys of connecting with your friends and loved ones through conversation were abundant.

But do they really? A quick Google search of "conversation pit" yields hundreds upon hundreds of photos of sleek, modern conversation pits, but a vast majority of these results lack one important element: the people. Instead of fostering community, they instead stand motionless as a sort of virtue signal, showing guests that its owner is above the idea of staring at a big screen for entertainment. Its primary purpose is to be stared at, not to be used.

And even then, conversation pits are still less achievable than ever before. With the rising costs of homeownership, more and more people are forced to rent smaller spaces, spaces that are hopelessly unequipped for the kind of transformation that a conversation pit requires. And thus, those who can't afford it are left to ogle over sterile social media posts, fantasizing about having one in their own homes. The only ones who can afford it are those who already have an abundance of conversation-focused living spaces. The problem isn't that everyone is too overworked to have the energy to talk to each other, or that predatory advertising and short-form media have hijacked our dopamine receptors, no! It's because we can't afford to stick a cushioned pit in our 100-square foot living room.

Well, how do we actually create an environment that sparks conversation, just like the conversation pit aims to do? The answer is a bit more complicated. Many try hard to cultivate a place ripe for conversation, delicately curating comfortable seating, inspiring centerpieces, and "effortless" style. However, conversations actually happen in places that seem otherwise unfit for them. Some of my best talks have occurred when sitting on a hard granite countertop, standing cross-legged in a dorm hallway, or curled up on a set of uncomfortable wooden stairs. There is a disconnect between the places we *think* would be good for conversation and the places that actually are.

However, there is a common link between all of these settings: everyone came to them naturally, not prescriptively. Everyone just happened to have lunch, head downstairs for a morning coffee, or

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trudge through the hallway en route to the shared bathrooms at the same time. Small talk began, and that talk erupted into a deep conversation. Sure, a comfortable living room might be good to move to after the conversation gets started, but rarely does the conversation start in the room itself. Members of the same shared spaces have different ideas of what makes a shared space special, so there isn't really a one-size-fits-all solution for sparking conversation. So the key to getting conversation started is to not try to cultivate a space for conversation and conversation alone. Instead, spend time making your other shared spaces pleasant to be in, so those living with you are encouraged to spend as much time in those places as possible.

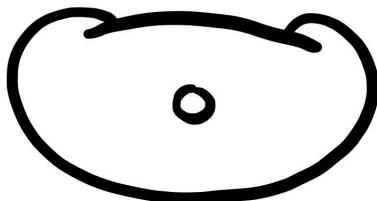
While the *idea* of a conversation pit lives on, its actual use is mostly a relic of the past. It serves as a reminder that genuine, raw human interaction is a lot more complicated than initially thought. We can't just slap an appealing couch in the middle of our room and expect interaction to materialize out of thin air. Our schedules are too busy, or our social circles are too disjointed and decentralized, or our phone's siren call is too alluring to push us out the door. What actually makes conversation happen is not trying to cultivate a "conversation" place, but instead incentivizing shared living in general.

However, this all rests on the assumption that you have people around to be in those places in the first place—and I can't really help you with that.

The conversation pit: **3/10**.

The *idea* of a conversation pit: **7/10**.

the crimp



To a rock climber just getting introduced to the sport, the crimp seems like the quintessential anti-hold, reserved for only the most experienced of climbers. It juts out of the wall just enough to rear its ugly, sharp, tiny head, providing a safe haven for no more than a pad of a finger. Big holds bring comfort and security; crimps rely on raw strength and blind faith. And yet, as I progressed as a climber and clawed my way up the V grades, I found the crimp to be my favorite hold. Why is that?

The crimp doesn't try to be anything it isn't. Some slopers, while appearing large and welcoming, are nothing more than a slimy ball of smooth plastic. They promise so much, but deliver on none of it. Pinches often disguise themselves as juggy or crimpy, only to reveal their true sloper tendencies. Jugs are too easy—it might be the saving grace from an otherwise brutal and unrelenting climb, but there's always a part of you that says, "do I really need this?"

Crimps, on the other hand, are just what they promise to be. They take up exactly as much space as they need, providing you with the most fundamental surfaces to claw your way to climbing nirvana. And the sharper the crimp is, the more forgiving it becomes. What it lacks in comfort it gains in security, allowing you to put all 110% of your energy into hanging on for dear life.

What you put into a crimp is exactly what you get out of it. If a crimp is easy, approaching a jug, you can haphazardly three-finger drag it without the fear of it slipping out of your grasp. If it's a bit harder but still manageable, half crimping it will suffice. But on the crimpiest of crimps, you can sacrifice some skin and tendon health by clamping your thumb around your pointer finger and giving it all you got. Pure strength, grit, and determination alone can get you through the gnarliest of credit card crimps.

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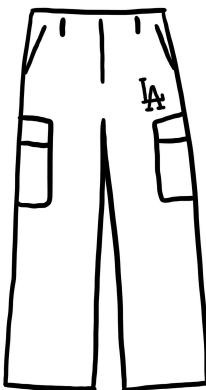
While varied in hold type, crimps are incredibly straightforward. Slopers and pinches offer many different varieties in how you hold them. There's no guarantee that the first method you pick will be the one that sticks. And sometimes, this variability is what makes climbing so much fun; you can climb way above your pay grade if you are thoughtful enough with your micro-beta, body positioning, and foot placement. But some days, all I crave is predictability. I don't want to try relentlessly to get near the end of a climb, only for a slimy sloper to stop me in my tracks. If my feet are right and I can't hit a crimp, all I can do is sesh the hangboard a little more, period.

Sure, crimps can be terrible. They can require you to dig your fingernails into them to gain every last ounce of purchase. They can sometimes let you down even if you pour your soul into them. But at their heart, the crimp is an old tried and true hold, appreciated and loathed by everyone. It is the true equalizer.

The crimp: **9/10.**

the survival fit

For the style-inclined folks out there, picking out an outfit can be hard sometimes! Even those with the most hardened and color-matched capsule collections have to stare blankly at their wardrobe until something sticks out at them. Fashion is as much of an art form as any, and thus, it is plagued by the paralyzing force of writer's block. So much choice, and for what? So I am 2% more likely to be complimented as I walk from my door to my car parked on the side of the road? Malarkey.



The survival fit is the admission that sometimes, dressing up is overrated. Spending twenty minutes pulling on an outfit to go to the Price Chopper isn't just creatively draining, it's flat out a waste of time. I don't even like efficiency all that much, either—I despise self help gurus telling young men to spend all their time doing nothing but advancing their careers. But even I know that when the endeavors get short enough, fashion eventually hits the point of diminishing returns.

The survival fit can embody a wide range of outfits, depending on how far down the fashion rabbit hole you go. If you rock mostly activewear, sweats, and Nike techs, the survival fit can be a pair of flannel pajama pants and an ugly shirt gifted to you for Christmas. If you wear casual slacks, layer with sweaters, and color-match your socks, the survival fit can be a tracksuit and a pair of trainers. Avant-garde Rick Owens baddies can wear comfy cargos, broken-in boots, and a shirt with "INCEL" on it. Don't take this as gospel, though; anyone can wear anything as a survival fit.

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The survival fit is incredibly versatile, molding to fit the occasion like a cat curling up in a bowl. You can bundle up, adding a black puffer jacket and flannel lined jeans during the colder months. You can strip it down into running shorts and a white tank top during the summer. You can dress it up with some leather shoes and a suede jacket. As long as you maintain its essence—just getting through the day with your ego intact—the survival fit can be anything you want it to be.

Some weeks I feel the creative spark to put on a new outfit for every excursion, and other weeks I just want to slap on a shirt and pants and get through the day. No matter how much inspiration I feel, I know that the survival fit still has my back whenever I need it.

The survival fit: **8/10**.

the lefty spatula

Left-handedness in the United States has hung around 12% for the past few decades, and it doesn't seem to be going anywhere. While that number may seem small, it accounts to about 40 million people.

Despite that, lefties today have to constantly deal with design that wasn't made with them in mind. Can openers force you to twist with your weaker right hand. Scissors feel like they jut into your skin, with contours shaped opposite the way you need them. Keyboards and mice have to swap places, and even then, a mouse's side buttons are all but useless. Keybindings in games and programs have to be painstakingly remapped.

Even things not designed specifically for righties in mind can still cause pain for lefties. The English writing system goes from left to right, meaning lefties have to push a pen or pencil across the page instead of pulling it. Your hand soon swipes past the newly lain letters, leaving a black smudge on your outer palm. When writing for others, your hand immediately blocks the letters you just wrote. All of these little challenges add up to a whole lot of frustration to a lefty.

I sometimes wonder why lefty products haven't gained much traction in the modern day. I think it's because lefties have silently 'given up' in a way. Up against Big Righty pumping out uncomfortable tool after uncomfortable tool, lefties learned not to resist it, but to adapt to it. Lefties are so used to putting up with bad ergonomics that the idea of a pair of scissors or a mouse tailored to them feels like needless coddling. But I resist this idea—lefties deserve to open a can and use a mouse with comfort and dignity. We are 40 million deep in this country after all.

This is why I was so happy when I stumbled across a lefty spatula. I was meandering through the stands at an arts and crafts fair in my town and came across a stall selling kitchen utensils hand-carved out of wood. There the spatula sat in all its glory. The second I laid my eyes



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upon it, the seller smirked and nodded in a way that said *yeah, that really is what you think it is.*

Unlike other kitchen appliances, spatulas are begging to be ambidextrous; lefties can simply flip it over, yielding a perfect mirror image. However, this spatula was different: unlike its rubber counterparts, this one was long and slender, with a round handle gradually tapering to a thin, flat body and a sharp edge. It was curved upwards and leaned slightly to the right, resembling just as much like a wooden spoon as it did a spatula. It was the jack of all trades in the kitchen and my go-to when cooking up meals.

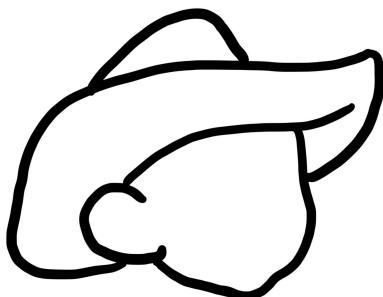
It stood as a big fuck you to the world of right-hand domination. It had no business being shaped only for lefties, and yet it was, providing a tad more comfort and ergonomics than its straight-as-a-pencil counterparts. Each time I use it, a tiny sense of pride washes over me, like the spatula itself is telling me, *you earned this.*

But alas, all good things must come to an end. With four out of five people in my house being proud lefties, the spatula got a lot of use, and its slender body made it ill-equipped to handle the battering of a college kitchen. One day, an overzealous mixing session left a chunk of the spatula in a batch of oatmeal raisin cookies. This wasn't discovered, however, until one roommate bit into a freshly baked cookie, spitting out a bit of chipped wood.

While a bit of the spatula's dignity was lost that day, it still gets tons of use. It is *that* good that even though a chunk of wood is missing from the end, it is still our favorite. It goes to show how much ergonomic design means to us.

The lefty spatula: **10/10.**

Little Joel



I have been a fan of the YouTube creator Big Joel ever since he released Twitter and Empathy 4 years ago. He brings this sort of humility to political content and media criticism that makes him feel more approachable than the grand, high-brow “video essayists” on YouTube. And like many others before him, he started an offshoot channel called Little Joel about a year and a half ago where he posts shorter, more varied content.

But this second channel isn’t a cash grab effort to expand into a different market or a place to repackaging content into another form factor. At its heart, Little Joel is a shitpost channel. Few videos eclipse five minutes, and most are filmed in one take on a smartphone camera with little to no editing. Some of the videos are bite-sized takes reminiscent of Big Joel’s longer main channel videos, while others like “Gay Steamboat Willie” are there just to make himself laugh. It’s clear that most of these videos aren’t meant to be taken very seriously; every comment section contains the same irony and lightheartedness of a Hivemind or TheNeedleDrop comment section.

Little Joel has become quite popular despite appearing as a “no effort” channel. It has a quarter of the following of Big Joel despite being 5 years younger, and some established creators appear regularly in Little Joel comment sections. While you would assume this new fame has breathed more life into Little Joel, it might have done the opposite. In a video titled “the heat death of little joel”, he explains how the channel’s popularity has put more pressure on himself to post higher quality content on the channel, even though the channel was made specifically as a home for low effort videos. Instead of being a place to dump his stream of consciousness, it has become yet another source of pressure.

But I think Little Joel has grown so popular because the content is low effort. Little Joel videos feel less like video essays and more like live

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tweets. They feel personal in a way video essays can't be, like a friend passionately ranting about something that really doesn't matter that much. It's reminiscent of the early years of YouTube, free from the grip of the algorithm. While new age YouTube's precisely engineered techno-crack is great sometimes, periodically escaping it is necessary.

And creators also benefit from this ability to put whatever's rattling in their brain out into the ether. This was the prime motivator for Internet Shaquille to start his own Little Joel-style second channel called Extranet Shaquille, where he posts one shot monologues against a plain background. The act of writing is a beautiful way to sort out your own thoughts, and battle testing these ideas against an unrelenting audience is a great indicator that they hold their ground. In that sense, shitpost second channels are an inherently personal outlet that just happens to be entertaining to others.

Shitpost channels are an antidote to an era where channels are pressured to monetize every ounce of creative output. They help creators lose the shackles of self-imposed quality standards and become more confident in their own ideas and writing. I hope other creators follow in Little Joel's footsteps, and Little Joel, if you're reading this, the people need more Gay Steamboat Willie.

Little Joel: **8/10.**