

“Anthropocene”

I want to begin today by recognizing that both the university where I’m employed, Princeton University, and the building where I live and where I am now, in upper Manhattan, stand on lands which are part of the ancient homeland and unceded territory of the Lenape peoples. I do so as one step towards paying respect to Lenape peoples past, present, and future both on their traditional territory and within the Lenape diaspora, including but not limited to the three federally recognized Lenape nations in Oklahoma and Wisconsin, the Delaware Tribe of Indians, the Delaware Nation, and the Stockbridge-Munsee Community, and to acknowledge their ongoing efforts to continue in and return to their homeland.¹ I recognize that these acknowledgements need to match words with actions. It’s been an honor to be invited to participate in this collaborative research seminar, and I’ve learned enormously from the seminars I’ve been able to listen to. I’m grateful for the opportunities I’ve had to see where I need to learn and do more, with gratitude to Clara Bosak-Schroeder, for her modelling of land acknowledgement last week, and to the co-founders of the Lenape Center, Joe Baker, Curtis Zunigha, and Hadrien Coumans, for their publicly available guidance for residents of New York City and to Shawn Maxam, the Associate Provost for Diversity and Inclusion at Princeton. I’ve included references in the Word version of my talk.

My hope here in the time I have is to give a few possible ways into the concept of the Anthropocene as a live problem from the angle of a (partially) disciplined “classicist” with training in Comparative Literature. I’ve noticed, with some relief, that other speakers have faced the challenge I’ve felt in preparing for this talk: you’re given a gigantic, consequential concept and an allotment of fifteen to twenty minutes. At the same time, it’s worth starting out by emphasizing

the Anthropocene enfolds the problems of scale and compression within itself. On the one hand, it's become the dominant narrative and conceptual frame for climate change as a process unfolding at the planetary level. On the other hand, the Anthropocene was first introduced in 2000 to describe a break in the stratospheric record between the Holocene, the epoch encompassing all of human history and then some, and a very recent moment, when humans become a geological force. Which historical moment precisely has been a matter of debate, with 1610, the 1800s and the mid twentieth-century as the main contenders. In 2019, scientific consensus settled on the most recent date in the 1950s. Whichever date is chosen to mark epochal origin, however, the term itself is designed to inscribe human agency within geological time and the planet's inscription into the annals of human history.

In recent years, more and more attention has been paid to the alignment of these historical markers of a new geologic era with what Kathryn Yusoff has called "histories of colonial earth-writing."ⁱⁱ Revisiting each of the three major candidate origin-points for the Anthropocene in her 2018 book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Yusoff has shown that each of the three can be reread in terms of geopolitics and historical waves of settler colonialism and genocidal violence in the Americas, the exploitation of enslaved people of African descent, especially on Caribbean sugar plantations, and the displacement and forcible irradiation of Pacific islanders through nuclear arms testing in the last century. It's this convergence of the time of Earth systems scientists with the time of historians of modern imperialism and colonialism that motivates Dipesh Chakrabarty to propose "the planet" as a category of "humanist thought."ⁱⁱⁱ

At the same time, the Anthropocene's claim on universalism has increasingly come under criticism. The critique has been justifiably leveled from one angle at the implication of a universalized responsibility to "we, humans." Many scholars and activists have sought to focus blame

on the escalation of practices of extraction, pollution, and consumption under the rise of capitalism in the early modern period, and the minority of human beings who bear disproportionate responsibility for a damaged planet. Nor is harm equally shared: evidence of environmental racism and the disproportionate harm of climate disasters mounts daily not only in statistics or media images but in the lived experiences of millions of people. These critiques extend to the universalism implied by the figure of the “Anthropos” as the face of species life and the forms of humanism that have been allied to the various projects of European modernity baked into this contemporary moment of climate catastrophe. So decolonial practices of interrogating the notion of the human work together with the narration of the Anthropocene’s beginnings in geopolitical processes of imperial expansion, land dispossession, and extraction. Indeed, they work together with critical assessments of the Anthropocene’s ongoing role as a conceptual and narrative frame for climate change and ecological crisis that, in fronting the Anthropos as a geologic subject, occludes ongoing operations of race, gender, and sexuality in the constructions of a planetary “we” and, as the Métis scholar Zoe Todd has argued, erases Indigenous cosmologies.^{iv} In short, as a narrative frame, the Anthropocene is a narrative frame shapes not only how “we” understand environmental collapse but also the terms on which a “we” is imagined as the subject of collective action or resistance in the face of that collapse. As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson writes in *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*, how we tell stories can open onto “modes of worlding that are more advantageous to life writ large.”^v

So where does Classics or, more broadly, the study of ancient Greece and Rome and/or the wider Mediterranean and/or a globalized “ancient world” fit into all this? One place to start, and here I am following on the work already done in earlier presentations in this series by Mathura Umachandran and Chella Ward, is to examine critically the reception of Greek and Roman authors

in the construction of the humanist subject deployed as a central legitimating fiction for racial enslavement and colonial expansion in the early modern period. We could point here to the use of theories of environmental determinism sourced from Hippocratic texts and the recurrent role of Aristotle's *scala naturae* in Jackson's analysis of what she calls "antiblack animalization" in Enlightenment philosophy.^{vi} Moreover, Jackson reads the making of "black(ened) humanity" through an optics of matter and form that takes up the metaphysics of matter and form especially allied with Aristotle but pervasive in Greek philosophical authors. For Aristotle as well as for many of these authors, one of the organizing, and also confounding, terms in thinking the human qua *anthropos* is "nature"—in Greek, *phusis*.

We loop back to the Anthropocene here via a term that, like the human, has been central to defining its scope—namely, nature/Nature. The stakes of naming the Anthropocene the Anthropocene are, of course, the demarcation of a geological era that begins with what Bill McKibben famously called, in his 1989 book, "the end of nature."^{vii} McKibben was referring at the time to nature as an autonomous system, synonymous with non-human reality, that human agency had come to disrupt in irreversible ways. The prefix *-cene*, moreover, implicitly codes the Anthropocene as a reality primarily legible through academic, institutionalized scientific discourse and ways of knowing. But just as the Anthropocene cannot be parsed as either a claim about geology *or* a claim about narrative, politics, and ethics, the figure of nature, too, stands as both a reference point so many of us use to make sense of a reality we share with humans and non-humans *and* a historically and culturally contingent concept, "perhaps the most complex word in the language," Raymond Williams wrote in his 1976 *Keywords* text (referring to English).^{viii}

Like the human, nature has been subjected to renewed attention in recent years in conjunction with the theorization of the Anthropocene. The idea of nature has come under attack, notably

by Bruno Latour, in favor of alternatives better equipped for environmental politics like ecology and Gaia.^{ix} Anthropologists have sought to demonstrate the ontological parochialism of what Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro have called, albeit with different theoretical commitments, mononaturalism—that is, the belief, usually coded as “Western” and “modern” that a single nature grounds reality.^x A concept of nature is, in this sense, analogous to a concept of the human in being a lure for universalism. Here, too, questions arise regarding the use and abuse of ancient Greek and Roman sources in the early modern period in the service of the epistemic and extractive control of the non-human world together with the exploitation of non-white peoples. That exploitation was justified in part precisely through the proximity of those peoples to a purported state of nature. So the relationship of human and Nature is not simply analogous here. They’re imbricated in one another, and their entanglement is part and parcel of a history of both the *anthropos* and *phusis* as Greek terms that become backbones of a diasporic Hellenism propagated primarily by texts. Early Greek texts within what by the end of the fifth century BCE is called the inquiry into nature foreground the human being as a privileged recipient of *a* nature. The locating of the human *in* nature is a more complicated story to which I’ll return in a moment. Right now, I want to emphasize that the relationship between the human and Nature that the Anthropocene assumes in positing the upending of Nature’s control over the human is also built into the conceptual topology of the Anthropocene through its long genealogies of Man and Nature.

But having made that point, let me loop back to the terrain of *anthropos* and *phusis* as ancient Greek terms to sketch out, in the time remaining, three ways of thinking through these terms’ conjunction with the Anthropocene. I’ve already started to trace the first of these in my preceding remarks that speak to the colonial problematics of Man as imbricated in the reading of Greek and Roman texts as authoritative humanist texts used to legitimate new logics of

racialization and exploitation from the early modern period onwards. Part of this work lies in tracing a reception of *anthropos* qua Man. This reception is inseparable, as I've already said, from the wildly ramifying paths of nature qua translation of *phusis* and *natura* in this period. "Nature" therefore demands the kind of critical work of provincialization that's been summoned to the site of the "human" or Man. This kind of work would attend not only to the contingent and limited specificities of "nature" as part of the process of de-universalizing. It would also surface the work nature does in its very capacity for naturalization, by which I mean the process of embedding bodies and processes in the realm of a world not simply given but given over to the epistemic authority and technical manipulation of those practices that qualify as sciences, including the human sciences.

Now the operation of "the Greeks" as mythologized ancestors in these dynamics is complex. But under the pressures of time, we might chart them along a couple interdependent axes. On the one hand, a number of early modern natural philosophers thread their own thinking through the reading and rereading of texts written in Greek and oriented towards nature as both an object of expert knowledge and an enduring puzzle. The privilege of these texts, especially under the intensifying racialization of science and philosophy as the pinnacle of Man's capacity to know the world, repeatedly shapes Greece as an origin point of Western civilization. On the other hand, waves of Romanticism and other forms of anti-modern modernity position Greece as the pristine landscape of a human nature uncorrupted by alienation from the world, a positioning that, as I've argued elsewhere, continues to haunt biopolitics, also as a regime to resist.^{xi} These plots of modernity speak against any narrative that would see in the Anthropocene a new beginning, *even when it is being declared a historical rupture*. As narrative frame, it encompasses recursive engagements with ancient Greece and Rome in the thinking of the relationship of Man and Nature.

My second point is that for all that ancient Greek and Roman authors, and the civilizations they metonymically represent, are deployed as *figures* to legitimate Man and Nature as the property of modern Europe, perhaps lost but nonetheless its own, ancient texts are being read and used for their working through of these concepts *as problems*. From this perspective, the texts of “classified” authors like Plato, Aristotle, and Galen can function as partners in the provincialization of concepts of Man and Nature precisely because they support the work of defamiliarizing the forms of worldmaking these concepts have helped sustain. At one level, this is about reading ancient texts that have been repeatedly deployed in the *longue durée* “inquiry into nature” to diagnose the different kinds of cosmological and anthropological work they can be seen to condition, in a Foucauldian spirit, as well as the kinds of disruption they can perform. Here I’m thinking, say, of the gendering and racing of the physical body—that is, a body *with a nature*—as it emerges as an object of a medical *techne* in the fifth and fourth century BCE.^{xii} Things are made more complicated by the very need to defamiliarize these texts in their own historical-cultural specificity—to block, that is, the misrecognition of “us” in them, if not in the spirit of a universalist or biological humanism then in the spirit of a “Western” we coded white. The challenge is to refuse both the myth of continuity and the myth of rupture. With that caveat in mind I offer another example, namely the persistent disruption of atomist materialisms within both the ancient inquiry into nature but also the repeated diagnosis in modernity, and especially the past hundred years, of what Louis Althusser calls the underground current of materialism via Lucretius. As such the *De rerum natura* is also available to attempts to challenge imperialist regimes of extraction driven by infinite desire and to articulate an ethics of embodied living-together.

The third point, then, is that acts of reading ancient texts within the “inquiry into nature” are necessarily enfolded within narratives and practices of community and kinship that are

understood as both transhistorical and contemporary and subject to continual remaking. Insofar as it occludes this, classicism is analogous to the Anthropocene as a concept that risks universalism. And, I have suggested, not only analogous, but bound up in the construction of the Anthropocene as, at once, coterminous with modernity in its radical newness *and* entangled in cosmologies of Man and Nature sustained in part through both the reading of ancient texts and strategic affiliating to Greco-Roman ancestors. What this means—and this is my third point—is that there’s no way of disentangling narratives of “classical antiquity” from the narrative of the Anthropocene. So we have to think about what kinds of stories we tell not just of one or the other but of both together.

For this reason I would suggest that we imagine the “inquiry into nature” as a non-linear, diasporic, materialist reception tradition that fans out over millennia through both the engagement with texts and the formation of communities of people making elective affinities at once transhistorical and lived in the present. Both texts and communities of readers speak to a materiality of reception; that materiality can also be seen to work through the serialized decentering of texts in their nomadism through what Emily Greenwood has called the “omni-local,” to evoke the idea that “classic” texts are “cultural composites that result from successive readers and audiences encountering and making sense of these works.”^{xiii} I’m especially interested in rereading the Hellenism of nature through a logic of reception. I wouldn’t want to conflate ideas and texts here; that is, in looking to the increasingly self-conscious tradition of writing “on nature,” I’m not making a claim that this tradition arises *ex nihilo*: it is itself multiply entangled in other Mediterranean cosmologies, as Tom Davies has recently mapped in his dissertation.^{xiv} We can speak more about this but given the shortage of time, I instead want to emphasize two critical parts of embedding the

discourse of the Anthropocene in an ancient reception tradition organized around nature, both of which I develop at length in the book I've nearly finished on ancient sympathy.

First, this approach refuses the Heideggerian vision of nature as an Idea sprung fully formed like Athena as an object of Greek contemplation. Instead it looks, in particular, to discourses of nature as dynamic, and the emergence in the post-classical period of a concept of capital-N Nature to make sense of the relationality between natures within a cosmopolitics being theorized within new networks of power and contact in the Hellenistic and Roman Mediterranean. From this perspective, the discourses of sympathy that emerge in the later fourth and early third centuries BCE help produce what we can call an ontology of the relation within discourses affiliated to Greek *physiologia*.

Second, tracking sympathy also makes more visible the extent to which *physiologia* travels as a site of what I call cosmological experimentation, continually remade through cross-cultural encounter, especially between late Babylonian celestial science, Egyptian cosmology and technics, and Roman political theology. My point is not romanticized multiculturalism. Rather, it's again to disrupt, spatially as well as temporally, the reification of Greek Nature as either forerunner to European modernity or its abandoned home. This seems to me a crucial counterpart to de-reifying and de-universalizing the narrative of the Anthropocene; but also to refusing narratives of Greek origin while holding onto the provincialization of the inquiry into nature. Such a project aligns itself with the spirit of what Tamara Chin has recently defended as contact philology and archaeology as the planks of a post-colonial global antiquity.^{xv} Part of the challenge, I would say, is seeing models of relationality as shot through with power. This seems to me a crucial point in the encounter between the Anthropocene as a narrative frame and indigenous forms of world-making, which is also to say between classics as a field and those who it has co-constituted, with the modern

university itself, as its Others. Nevertheless, I hold out some hope that *physis* shaken loose from both obsolescence and teleology and instead prismatically seen, indeed impossibly compassed, within global networks of relation and reception might help undo the assumed universalisms of the Anthropocene and lend something, too, to the making of different kinds of “we’s” in a planetary chronotope.

ⁱ On the Lenape peoples and Princeton University history, as well as for guidance on this land acknowledgment, see <https://inclusive.princeton.edu/initiatives/building-community/native-american-indigenous-inclusion/land-acknowledgments>. On the traditional territory of the Lenape and the ongoing work of members of the Lenape nations here as well as in the diaspora to continue in and return to their homelands, see <https://thelenapecenter.com/lenapehoking/>; <https://urbanomnibus.net/2020/02/home-in-lenapehoking/>.

ⁱⁱ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2018), 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category,” *Critical Inquiry* 46 (2019): 1-31.

^{iv} Zoe Todd, “Indigenizing the Anthropocene,” in Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (eds.), *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment, and Epistemology*. Open Humanities Press, 2015.

^v Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York: NYU Press, 2020), 34-35.

^{vi} Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 23-26.

^{vii} Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989).

^{viii} Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015 (1976)), 164.

^{ix} Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge and Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2017).

^x Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. J. Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. P. Skafish (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

^{xi} Brooke Holmes, “Bios,” *Political Concepts* (5) 2019. <https://www.politicalconcepts.org/bios-brooke-holmes/>.

^{xii} Brooke Holmes, *The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

^{xiii} Emily Greenwood “Reception Studies: The Cultural Mobility of Classics,” *Daedalus* 145 (2016), 41-49, at 43.

^{xiv} Tom Davies, “Greek Cosmology and Its Bronze Age Background,” Princeton University PhD Dissertation, 2020.

^{xv} Tamara Chin, “The Afro-Asian Silk Road: Chinese Experiments in Postcolonial Premodernity,” *PMLA* 131.1 (2021): 17-38.